

Clare Davies on the three opening exhibition catalogs for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha: *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* by Nada Shabout, Deena Chalabi and Wassan al-Khudhairi; *Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the Contemporary* by Nada Shabout; *Told/Untold/Retold: 23 Stories of Journeys Through Time and Space* by Sam Bardaouil and Tim Fellrath (All three published by Skira, 2010).

While Abu Dhabi's Louvre and Guggenheim museums continue to loom, immaterial, on the horizon, the opening of Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art last May represented something of a coup. Facing down these more costly, widely publicized and, at times, controversial projects, Mathaf seemed possessed of a certain nimbleness. Mathaf's versatility in this respect was signaled by the choice, for example, to house the museum's three inaugural exhibitions in **two** temporary structures (a former school in Education City and a new, hastily built space on the grounds of Doha's landmark Museum of Islamic Art, respectively), rather than commission architectural monuments of the type designed by Frank Gehry and Jean Nouvel, respectively, for its Emirati neighbor. Opening ahead of the curve and without the negative press garnered by accusations of unjust labor practices (currently besetting the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi¹), the debates spurred by the fear of watching Europe's artistic patrimony leach into the desert sands (as is the case with the Louvre Abu Dhabi²) or protests against museum-franchising, Mathaf chose to acknowledge the contingencies and conflicting interests that threaten to disrupt the putative coherency underlying any major art institution, but especially one occupying the role of an "Arab museum of modern art".

Mathaf's ability to speak to audiences with differing, sometimes opposing perspectives regarding which political, ideological and cultural affiliations such a museum should embody, and what statements it should make concerning the nature of modern Arab art represents the true test of its willingness to engage rather than avoid the challenges faced by any new regional arts

¹ For an account in context of a recently aired petition by artists on this issue see Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Abu Dhabi Guggenheim Faces Protest," *The New York Times* (Mar. 17, 2011). <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/guggenheim-threatened-with-boycott-over-abu-dhabi-project.html>. Last accessed April 9, 2011.

² For a brief overview of initial responses to the Louvre's announcement of its Abu Dhabi project see Associated Press, "Louvre to Build Branch in Abu Dhabi," *msnbc.com* (Mar. 6, 2007) http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/17482641/ns/travel-destination_travel/from/toolbar. Last accessed April 9, 2011.

institution. If nothing else, Mathaf's tour of Middle Eastern cities a few months ahead of the museum's opening helped highlight the diversity of the publics that the museum hoped to court and confirmed the often fractious nature of their relationships to one another.

In a scene ripe for satire, the simmering antagonisms and conflicted alliances of various art world factions surfaced at a discussion between artist Hassan Khan and curator Sarah Rifky hosted by Mathaf at Cairo's upscale Four Seasons Hotel. An old guard with a chokehold on official cultural institutions and policies felt that their traditional authority had been slighted by the choice of younger speakers not beholden to their networks of influence. Ambitious, up-and-coming, state-employed arts professionals kept one eye on these potentially dangerous players and the other on the corridor chatter of an emerging collectors' circle of wealthy local elites. Egypt's leading business magnate Naguib Sawiris was in attendance, perhaps the most influential of this new class of collectors and gallerists interested in hewing a path between the rhetoric and power base of long-standing local arts institutions and professional circles, and those audiences outside of Egypt capable of bestowing a different kind of prestige and greater financial reward. The so-called independent contingent, associated with the event by dint of the speakers enjoyed a familiarity with others in attendance while observing a certain animosity towards their presence at the event.

The gathering of a fragmented and often physically dispersed art scene, and the forced interaction of various groups were, at times, tense. The evening demonstrated how deeply the issue of audience must inform some of the most fundamental choices made by any emerging arts institution in the region. In seeking not to alienate any one group, Mathaf's knowing inclusion of these many voices was perhaps inevitable. However, the museum's decision to face the issue head on, if not entirely successful, suggested an unorthodox approach. Rather than striking deals behind closed doors, Mathaf brought potential audiences together on a public stage.

Likewise the publications accompanying Mathaf's inaugural exhibitions emphasize the

institution's proclaimed interest in soliciting the perspectives of others, rather than in pushing its own agenda or even taking sides—a commitment to contingency, which hovers like those invisible quotation marks inflecting the beleaguered terms comprising the museum's very name: "arab + museum + modern + art."³ This self-reflexive stance is indicated in the publications' hyperbolic use of the lowercase in titles and headings. Likewise, the museum's loose, looping calligraphic-style logo puns on cultural and linguistic duality. A stand-in for the second "a" in the English transliteration of the Arabic word for museum, *mathaf* resembles the soft "h", turned on its side, which appears in the original Arabic script.

Yet the catalogues' down-style impulse remains constrained to the textual design, and lush, high-quality reproductions of art works fill the greater part of the pages in all three publications, echoing the museum's commitment to the art object as manifested in the white-cube style hangings on display at the opening. The simple gesture of offering a discrete space (whether in the gallery or in the one-dimensional framework of a book) within which to view works should not be underestimated. A significant segment of the region's modern artistic heritage remains inaccessible, secluded in private collections or left to languish in public storehouses. When displayed, the same works have suffered regularly from distracting exhibition conditions, and illustrated publications generally offer only low-resolution reproductions.⁴

Mathaf clearly positions itself against these *bêtes-noires* of the art historian, offering a rare accessibility to works of art from the region and a standard gallery context for presentation. This stance represents one of the few unifying elements among the three publications whose

³ The subtitle of Deena Chalabi's essay "Articulating Mathaf: Arab + Museum + Modern + Art" (Milan: Skira, 2010): 25-29.

⁴ Ibid., p. 27. Mathaf Head of Strategy Deena Chalabi elaborates the point persuasively in the context of an essay that seeks to contextualize the museum and its mission: "With a few exceptions, museums in the Arab world often house and promote a specific sense of national identity: a single coherent narrative told through the display of their objects, about each country and its history. Public museums of modern art in the region are few, but also tend towards collective expressions of national pride, rather than emphasizing individual creations within wider artistic and social frameworks. The buildings and their physical contents often function as containers of memory, with limited opportunities for creating new intellectual assets, or for looking critically at the work and presenting a variety of perspectives."

differences in tone reflect the irregularities in vision produced by a largely interim staff, hired to kick-start institutional programming and develop an identity standard for what had originally been a private pursuit of H.E. Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani. A self-identified artist, Sheikh Hassan began acquiring works of art in the mid-1980s. However it was not until 1994 that he moved to cultivate his personal collection with the aim of creating a museum capable of representing some two hundred years of art from the Middle East, Persian Gulf, North African and the Arab diaspora.⁵

The Qatar Foundation (established in 1995) and the Qatar Museums Authority (established in 2005, and for which Sheikh Hassan serves as Vice Chairman of the Board) facilitated the institutionalization of the collection. In one sense, Mathaf's opening represents an important collaborative effort amongst emerging Qatari institutions of approximately the same generation as Sheikh Hassan's original collection. However, Mathaf stands apart in its apparent willingness to encourage a conception of itself as an institution-in-process, embracing this moment in the history of the country's institution-building. The museum's staff was brought in at a relatively late date to realize the final, if crucial stages of this project. Perhaps as a result of the curatorial freedom they seem to have enjoyed, their late entrance into the process of transforming the collection into an institution, and this attitude of open-endedness towards the project of institution-building, multiple visions of Mathaf compete across the texts. There is some irony in achieving a slick design concept for an institution that, at least at this stage, admits to a productive state of transition and irresolution. The texts reflect a truer image of the latter: the quality of writing is uneven, and lacking a thorough copyediting, it appears slightly raw on the page.

In offering Arabic and English renditions of each text, these catalogues also raise familiar

⁵ Sheikh Hassan bin Mohammed bin Ali Al Thani, "Shining a Light: Sheikh Hassan Al-Thani on Qatar's First Museum of Modern Arab Art". Interview with Renaud Siegmann. *Diptyk* 8 (December 2010). <http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/36609/shining-a-light-sheikh-hassan-al-thani-on-qatars-first-museum-of-modern-arab-art/>

issues around the slippages and gaps that occur in the process of translation. For example, while some of the texts excerpted from existing sources and republished in the *Interventions* catalogue sound somewhat stilted in English, their discursive references are clearer in Arabic. In other instances, the acknowledged translation of a term such as “modernity” (or *hadatha* in Arabic) may in fact obscure the way in which each functions differently, and according to different histories of usage, in their respective language of origin.

Seen together, the texts offer a take on the field of contemporary critical and art historical writing on art in the Middle East. An array of energetic if unsynchronized voices speaking in different languages and idioms struggle to contend with unwieldy, sometimes already exhausted questions; they are most compelling when focused on the specificities of art practice and patronage. In reading through the catalogues, one senses that a working consensus regarding the place of language in relation to art criticism or art history doesn't seem to exist. And this is perhaps as it should be, especially in relation to a “field” whose most basic contours remain contested. At the same time, many of the texts are connected by a will to unpack and explain meta-narratives regarding art practices in the Middle East, which seem to lurch at us from every corner. Readers may find themselves entangled in a web of broad-strokes argumentation that, at times, lacks specificity and loses track of the works of art at hand. And while the catalogues explain concerns that are clearly central to the curators' engagement with the works of art, it is not always clear how the exhibitions ultimately manifest or intersect with these more abstract concerns. Ultimately, many of the texts reflect a broader tendency in arts writing to either enforce or contest the positioning of art from the Middle East as a cipher for “identity”, whether religious, ethnic, national or gendered. Mathaf's exhibition catalogues clearly seek to challenge this legacy of simplistic mappings, yet in doing so, remain tied to a series of already familiar and circumscribed questions and propositions that can no longer move us beyond the existing debate and often return us, despite ourselves, to a reliance on “identity” as the basis for a critical or art

historical discourse.

The primary catalogue texts largely exclude topics related to the original conditions of artistic production such as political context, intended audience, related practices in other media, issues of technique and material, and the intricacies of those conversations tying together individual works and artists across time and space. At the same time, the high-quality reproduction of works within the catalogues draws these areas of inquiry into relief. In a sense, Mathaf represents a renewed call for a shift in focus towards such concerns. Perhaps due to the scarcity of available resources and time, this approach must rely on the fruits of future and ongoing research, demanding a quantity of time and funds perhaps currently outside the scope of the museum's own catalogues. Thus while the texts reflect a desire to surpass established narratives, they are constrained by familiar blind spots.

Nada Shabout, guest curator and professor of art history at the University of North Texas, contributes two essays in her capacities as curator of *Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the Contemporary* and co-curator of *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*. Her involvement reserves, both metaphorically and in practical terms, a space for the art historian in Mathaf's collection. She contributes two essays in her capacities as curator of *Interventions: A Dialogue Between the Modern and the Contemporary* and co-curator of *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*. Both grapple with the specter of identity politics necessarily raised by a museum devoted to modern art from the Arab world; both are careful to include multiple voices reflecting a range of perspectives.

Shabout's essay in the *Sajjil* catalogue acknowledges the role of "Arab" identity politics (summoning here a Nasserist concept of pan-Arabism) in informing regional art practices, while discussing the term's more recent, ghettoizing potential within a "globalized" art world. Ultimately, Shabout argues, the term "Arab" cannot simply be discarded but rather should be

rethought: “it is time to re-evaluate the role of identity in the arts from a global perspective.”⁶

The subsequent account references Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of the “altermodern”, as well as Foucauldian understanding of history in order to make a case for re-imagining the global art world from the perspective of a “polyglot” and “hybrid” modernity capable of challenging a culturally hegemonic model that has insisted on banishing all non-Western cultural forms to a position of marginality.

Shabout’s definition allows her to extend the Middle East’s “modern” era forward so as to have it conclude towards the end of the 1990s “when the dynamics of creativity, the market, and social concerns shifted dramatically.”⁷ She pegs the beginning of modernity in the Middle East to the early 20th century when, “individual modernism manifests itself in technique and production in diverse points within the region.”⁸ The issue of periodization is a critical one for art historical inquiry addressing practices located outside the established canon of a Western modernity. However, Shabout sketches the lifespan of Arab modernity in vague terms and without supporting arguments. As a result, the reader might be encouraged to return to her earlier invocation of hybridity as a more concretely defensible point of reference for the establishment of a new logic of periodization. Drawing on the text’s broader argument one might hypothesize, for instance, a relationship between the development of modernity in the Arab world and a specific paradigm of hybridity, whose relevance can subsequently be seen to recede in the 1990s. The exhibition’s division of works according to promiscuously open-ended themes of nature, city, individualism, society, family, and history and myth allows a highly diverse range of works to occupy the same gallery space and conceptual field. Might this strategy be interpreted as being in dialogue with the curator’s discussion of a hybrid and polyglot modernity? Without disclosing the specific conditions or historical contexts informing this choice of themes or an in-depth

⁶ Nada Shabout, “Record, Or Arab Art Again,” *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Milan: Skira, 2010): 33.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Ibid.

perspective on the inclusion of works within them, this relationship between exhibition and text remains tenuous.

Shabout's model of a hybrid modernity is of course explored through the lens of an Arab experience, which, the author reminds us, is itself a relatively recent construct papering over the historically cosmopolitan nature of life in the Middle East and, which has ultimately constrained the space of art-making.⁹ In delineating an Arab identity so as to move beyond it, the author is forced to navigate a tricky conceptual terrain that inevitably includes contradictions and gaps in argumentation. Within the framework of this discussion, Shabout presents a series of provocative claims, which invite serious reflection but also suggest as many questions as they do answers. Towards the end of the essay, for example, the reader encounters a passage that begins with the claim that "Arab artists soon realized that this lack of an art historical tradition in the Middle East was rooted in the historical conditions of the region, which did not necessitate categorization and genres, and they grasped that the so-called Western canon, itself a historical product, cannot be Arabized."¹⁰ The same paragraph ends with the contention that Arab artists understood modernity as "a moment of renewed energy and creativity," rather than a moment in the teleological progression of history.¹¹

Shabout's phrasing may be understood to align modernity in the arts with the concept of *nahda* (literally "renaissance" or "renewal") tied to a rhetoric of national and cultural uplift that consciously drew on the activation of tradition in manifesting change. Still, many questions linger in the spaces between: When and in what terms was an art historical "lack" identified in the Middle East? What are the historical conditions that established the grounds for an art practice rejecting the work of art historical classification as Other? Where can traces of this rejection be located? Finally, the reader is asked to think about how modernity might exist as a

⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ Ibid.

recurrent phenomenon possessed of a cyclical rather than a singular existence in relation to this rejection of categories by artists. What are the points of fixity, for instance, that allow for such an eternal recurrence? And how might the works displayed in the catalogue or on display in the exhibition support or refute such an argument?

Shabout's "New Spaces for Intervention" is an introductory text that frames the five participating artists of *Interventions* as transitional figures capable of negotiating and, indeed, producing the modern and its contemporary. Texts taken in large part from past exhibition catalogues and monographs and dating from between 1998 to 2010 accompany the entries on each of these five artists, offering a window onto the field of art history implicitly addressed in Shabout's reflections on the historiography of the concepts of "modern Arab" art. These texts tend to celebrate the artist as a heroic figure rendered in nationalist terms: an approach positioned squarely in the camp of identity politics. The artist's status as hero derives from their pioneering efforts in producing the terms of a viable language of artistic modernity through their practices while claiming solid roots in the pre-modern and even prehistoric art of their homelands. While the exhibition *Interventions* provides a rare opportunity to glimpse the weight of this intellectual history on art practice and the critical literature that responds to and shapes it, the catalogue itself offers limited guidance in suggesting alternative readings to the "pioneer" or "hero" paradigm. As the author of "New Spaces", Shabout's commitment to offering a space for reflection rather than presenting "answers" seems, on this occasion, to restrain rather than facilitate an expanded debate around the significance of these artists.

Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath articulate a rather more opaque vision of their roles as curators of contemporary art from the Middle East. Curators of Mathaf's *Told/Untold/Retold*, a contemporary art exhibition comprised of new commissions by twenty-three artists, Bardaouil and Fellrath are partners in Art Reoriented, a design-savvy, internationally-based curatorial and arts consulting practice. Bardaouil's meandering thirty-six page essay unfolds under the sign of

the “transmodern artist”—a term not fully defined until the concluding paragraphs in terms that serve to bewilder as much as clarify:

From the pit of an existential fissure, the [TRANSMODERN] artists featured here have wrought themselves a malleable identity based on a modus operandi of liquidity instead of rigidity, multiple incarnations instead of one Immaculate Conception, and the distant ability to negotiate and inhabit forms.¹²

Loosely worked accounts of local art histories, idiosyncratic readings of the participating artists’ work, and a comparison of the renaming of Paris’s Place de la Revolution to Place de la Concorde with the opening of Mathaf in Doha some two-hundred years later may raise some eyebrows. At the same time, Fellrath’s essay entitled “Contemporary Arab Art: A Case of Identity Theft?” takes on the unenviable task of mapping in fourteen pages how the “global political climate, the influence of the mass media, the commoditization of contemporary art, and the dominance of Western curatorial practice”¹³ have distorted the reception and perception of Arab art. Ultimately, the patient reader can distill a series of important points concerning the positioning of so-called Arab art and artists in the art world. However, the arc of an argument and the consistency of Bardaouil and Fellrath’s own curatorial vision for *Told/Untold/Retold* remain illegible.

In contrast, contributions that delve into processes of art-making are more immediately accessible and offer tangible insights into the commissioned works. The intention informing the *Told/Untold/Retold* catalogue, although unevenly realized, was to capture a snapshot of the artists’ commissioned works in progress. Too often artists have ceded this opportunity, providing instead images of fully executed works and a blurb-like meditation on the piece or their general interests. Yet the conceit, when followed, offers a rare glimpse of the ephemera and logic of contemporary artists’ working methods and suggests that the curators are more successful in

¹² Sam Bardaouil, “The Transmodern Artist,” *Told/Untold/Retold* (Milan: Skira, 2010): 51.

¹³ Till Fellrath, “Contemporary Arab Art: A Case of Identity Theft?” *Told/Untold/Retold* (Milan: Skira, 2010): 55.

facilitating the creation of a space for artists' voices and their projects than in parsing the discursive context.

Likewise, in *Sajjil*, Sophia al-Maria's brief first-person account of her forays into Mathaf's archive offers the reader a rather poetically rendered perspective on the museum's pre-history under the patronage of Sheikh Hassan, and provides some tantalizing insights into the life of a collection built on personal relationships, individual drive and a now old-fashioned seeming style of patronage that remains a blind spot in the record of contemporary art from the region. In a more conventionally celebratory register, Chief Curator and Acting Director Wassan al-Khudhairi's account of Sheikh Hassan's role in the realization of Mathaf and his vision of "building support in his society for living artists"¹⁴ sheds light on a history of collecting in the region with special relevance today.

Al-Maria claims that if the archetypal Gulfi museum "has grown conceptually from the rudimentary and problematic museum-as-ethnographic-curiosity-cabinet...to something more in line with the global movement of the twenty-first century 'post-museum'...a fledgling term for transparent, interaction-oriented museum models", then Mathaf is an "*accidental* post-museum."¹⁵ If Mathaf is a post-museum in the sense al-Maria describes, it doesn't seem to be accidentally so. Those accidents that do exist are a by-product of the disjointedness that the museum seems willing to accept in order to remain inclusive while transforming itself into an internationally recognized institution. As shaky as it may seem now, I see this as a productive basis for cultivating experiments in listening and speaking in new ways, an ambition which should be central to any project that seeks to fill the role of "an Arab museum of modern art" and engage a field that is equally in flux.

The museum's three inaugural publications do not set new standards but succeed in

¹⁴ Wassan al-Khudhairi, "From Intuition to Institution: Sheikh Hassan and the Development of Mathaf, *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Milan: Skira, 2010): 21.

¹⁵ Sophia al-Maria, "A History of Mathaf," *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Milan: Skira, 2010): 43; 49.

offering points of departure from which to consider the state of arts writing in the context of a fast-changing and highly charged field. It is perhaps only in situating these texts in relation to the contemporary fields of arts writing and institution-building that we are best able to appreciate Mathaf's inaugural publications. We might take heed of the ways in which they offer up an open invitation to write.

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