

Interviews

Curating the Revolution: Meeting Points 7

WHW in conversation with
Omar Kholeif

Operating since 2000, the Young Arab Theatre Fund (YATF) is an organization that, despite its name, largely supports visual artists who hold a connection to the Arab world. One of YATF's most significant projects is Meeting Points – a biennial platform that roves from city to city. Historically, the event has sought to elicit dialogue around shared themes but from different contexts. It was started, according to its director Tarek Abou El Fetouh, from a desire to exchange ideas around Arab visual culture at a time when mass communication and exchange were more limited. The seventh edition was curated by the curatorial collective WHW (What, How and for Whom?). The second stop on their tour was at MuKHA in Antwerp, where the collective presented an expansive exhibition entitled, *Ten Thousand Wiles & A Hundred Thousand*

Tricks – a name adopted from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The exhibition brought together new commissions, works from MuHKA's collection and a launch programme that sought to consider contemporary social and political 'change' in both Europe and the Arab world. Here, Ibraaz's Senior Editor Omar Kholeif discusses the second stop of their exhibition tour in Antwerp before Meeting Points 7 continues onto Hong Kong, Cairo, and Beirut, among other cities.



Installation view, *Meeting Points 7*, 2013-2014.

Courtesy of MuKHA.

Omar Kholeif: This iteration of Meeting Points has arguably shifted its focus from the Arab World. Perhaps one can argue that this is an attempt to de-regionalize or de-territorialize. With this in mind, can you give me a sense of how you might define the notion of territory?

WHW: Territory is a mental terrain that initially departs from geopolitical and geo-cultural delineations, understood as imposed and often interiorized barriers or obstacles, even traps, from which it abandons geographies and temporal linearity. It looks for nodes,

or sets of problems or challenges that are in some way condensed in those barriers and that exist – or could exist – in different times and places. As such, it is definitely a very provisional terrain, constructed so as to be useful in addressing present situations and questions that we try to look at with a particular project in mind. In the particular instance of Meeting Points, it was about the Arab world and also about the Arab world of today, in the moment after the momentum of the Arab revolutions was contained and its process presented as 'over'. It was also about how these movements of revolution and counter-revolution reverberated in other collective struggles across the world, but also through the time, recalling anti-colonial liberation struggles, ideas of socialism and just societies, and their results, victories, failures and visions.

OK: You mentioned that the research began in the context of Arab world as a kind of jumping off point to think about broader concerns and intersections in the global art scene. Can you give me a sense of how these associations developed? Was it artists leading you to other artists? How did you map out the terrain that you would explore?

WHW: It was more about broader concerns and the intersections of different protest movements that question legitimacy and try to influence the changes of the global capitalist system than about art scenes in particular. We started by looking into how political mobilizations and collective movements influenced political and social changes, how hopes were raised, optimism sustained, betrayals and frustrations negotiated, and how lives of people operating within the art world were affected. By trying to understand the life cycles of the Arab revolutions, we also looked into emancipative protest movements that sprung up across the world as a reaction to how the financial crisis was handled, and thought about what we could learn by looking at them now, a few short years after, when such movements exhausted as the

capitalist crisis was normalized. We tried to understand those cycles from a perspective that considers the trajectories of the twentieth century's great revolutions, always keeping in mind the liberation struggles against the colonial powers and postcolonial normalization. This approach very much delineated terrain that we wanted to explore, but at the same time our work is always governed by an attempt to situate and understand our own experiences, both collective and individual, of the collapse of socialism, of the disintegration of Yugoslavia, of war and postwar normalization in the 1990s, and the simplified interpretation of these events that reflected post-'89 western ideological hegemony. With this in mind, we were receptive and respectful to a kind of resistance in these constellations in terms of what is expected from artists; what they are expected to expose and explain, for instance, as well as to the time lag necessary to artistically deal with experiences of great political drama. We tried to make a puzzle of associations and clues that leave some things blank and unspoken, or point to them in an oblique way, hoping that the exhibition as a whole would convey a sense of urgency, compassion, solidarity and a need to persist and resist forces trying to shut down multiple voices of dissent.

OK: Meeting Points is unique. It is not really a biennial but a platform or 'manifestation' as you and Tarek Abou El Fetouh, its director, have both called it. Obviously, the forms the event takes in each location changes. It roves and roams across multiple cities. Thinking about this, I am curious about how you negotiate the concerns of different sites and how you consider the works will speak to audiences in different contexts.

WHW: This approach has to do with what is possible in certain places, not only in terms of material conditions and realization where of course there are huge discrepancies, but also in terms of urgencies and agendas of certain places, and political pressures

and needs. We opened Meeting Points in Zagreb, in Gallery Nova, a small non-profit space that we have been running since 2003, with a modest exhibition of seven women artists and collectives: Filipa César, Iman Issa, Sanja Iveković, Rajkamal Kahlon, *Kayfata*, Maha Maamoun and Jumana Manna, in which the feminist agenda, in multiple ways, underlined the project as the whole, though it was not explicitly feminist. Rather, we looked into the question of representation, be it national, ethnic, or racial, and took gender representation as something that cuts through these concerns and that framed the perspective the exhibition tried to offer. Next to this, we also organized a panel discussion, *Sketches for New Feminist Activism*, with local participants, where feminist movements in post-socialist contexts were discussed. Sanja Iveković, an artist who, since the 1970s, has explored and politicized regimes of representations and ideological positions underlying them from the perspective of feminist critique, presented a performance with the title *Why an Artist Cannot Represent a Nation*.



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Courtesy of MuKHA.

In this particular constellation of artists, theorists and activists, artworks, discussions, talks and performances, what was addressed was the local context in which culture is still understood as the realm of identity representation, especially national identity, and in which feminism, long reduced to identity politics, in the practice of younger generations powerfully reaches out to emancipatory activist movements that put class struggle at the core of its praxis. We understood the project as addressing local context by not delivering on what was expected. Feminism was not **proposed** as something concerning the plight of women in the Arab world, but as something central to understanding a reconfigured class struggle within geo-cultural power relations.

For the Antwerp, Belgium, edition of Meeting Points in 2013, we were of course more interested in the postcolonial context. Thinking about Belgium's involvement in the Congo played a huge role, but we also thought of Antwerp as one of the historical cradles of capitalism, whose fate was closely linked to the religious wars in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It is also a city with a tradition of labour organization and labour struggles. With these general thoughts in the background, we developed the exhibition for the MuHKA, a museum inscribed in Antwerp's tourist itinerary, like its cathedral, the Rubenshuis and the Fashion Museum. As such, the exhibition considered the city's new economy in which culture plays a huge role. In this broader context, we found it important to undermine the expectations of a timely and polite presentation of artists from the Arab world, and rather, we worked on the themes, questions, proposals, observations, obsessions or concerns addressed through their works, reflected and worked out by artists from other places and other generations. This approach was also accentuated by our decision to include works from the MuHKA (Museum of Modern Art, Antwerp) collection, which grew parallel to the so-called internationalization of the art world, with all the contradictions entailed in this process,

where power relations are certainly smoothed over and political correctness is a norm, but they are there nevertheless.



Installation view, *Meeting Points 7*, 2013-2014.

Courtesy of MuKHA.

General concerns delineated from these projects in Zagreb and Antwerp will be retained for other cities, with shifts more towards, for example, a closer look into The Arab Uprisings in Moscow, or the role of middle class in Hong Kong. In 1935, in his famous text *Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth*, Bertolt Brecht wrote that many things that could not be said about Germany in Germany could be said about Austria. This is a strategy we adopted in many of our previous projects, and we will try to pursue it for the future stations of Meeting Points.

OK: The Meeting Points exhibition at MuKHA, *Ten Thousand Whiles and a Hundred Thousand Tricks* (2013) evokes Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The exhibition considers the postcolonial body as part of its centre and it seems to develop a thesis about the state of things, here and now. Here, we have a world agitated by the rush of anguish and enthusiasm, the

dissidence associated with uprising and the potential for imagination. This is obviously a challenging position to speak to or from; almost an impossible one. What were your motivations? You said you wanted to make a 'statement' – what is this statement and how do you want the public to respond to it?

WHW: There is no predetermined response from the public we want to instigate. We simply want to offer the clues for the audience to make their own conclusions. And as the project it is very much about the notion of revolution and how to think about revolutions historically and politically, from their life cycles to the effects they have on the lives of people actively involved or exposed to them, we really did not try to elicit one definitive response. But the statement that we are putting forward is exactly the need to think about the revolutions, not to interpret them, but to understand them, to know them. This certainly means to look beyond any romantic idea of elevated moments of collective movements, as revolutions are commonly perceived in post '68 popular imagination, but also to resist conservative impulses disguised as a common sense interested only in keeping changes at bay. In Antwerp, we tried to make an exhibition that affects bodies through images but also sounds; an exhibition that we hope functions on several layers. The aim was to enable viewers to delve deeper into the works (of which many are films, and as such durational experiences) if they so choose, to walk through images and sounds so as to collect fleeting impressions that hopefully still compose a meaningful whole. The intention was not to offer answers or prescriptions, but invoke feelings that affect people differently. (And feelings are facts, as Raymond Williams argued).

OK: It is difficult for me to imagine how the curatorial process develops from this standpoint. Is it ongoing? Is the project still forming for the various iterations of the project?

WHW: Yes, it is ongoing, and it keeps changing in relation to shifting circumstances in the cities where it will take place. Partners for each city are decided, but in some cases we are still looking for venues and are also looking for people to work more closely with on different aspects of the project. We are still in the process of researching: at the moment we are planning a trip to Latin America, with the hope of bringing these experiences, and of course artists, into the project. Here, we are thinking about the the kind of social changes towards more just societies taking place there, which from our European perspective, certainly looks optimistic, and could be put into fruitful dialogue with the constellation we started in Zagreb and Antwerp. Also in a broader sense, we don't want to close the process and just tour the exhibition in different cities, but also look for ways to respond to local situations and how to keep the process open.



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Courtesy of MuKHA.

OK: You've mentioned that this project developed from your research for the 11th Istanbul Biennial, which you curated

according to a quote from Brecht that essentially asks what keeps mankind alive. How has this developed theoretically in Meeting Points? Are you more hopeful or is the puzzle even more complicated now in terms of its construction?

WHW: Brecht's approach to art and its relation to politics informed our work before we evoked him as the starting point for the 11th Istanbul Biennial, and it stayed with us. What at the moment seems to be the most important for us is Brecht's pedagogy, directed not only to viewers, but also to participants in the process, and of course his dialectic that governed his artistic production as learning by teaching and teaching by learning. Today, the puzzle indeed seems to be even more complicated. The contradictions of capitalism obviously have not resulted in capitalism's collapse from its own top-heaviness, but on the contrary, in a kind of consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. This situation of consolidated capitalism asks for an effort to sustain that old Gramscian adage about the pessimism of reason and the optimism of will.

OK: Can you talk me through which artists you decided to commission to make new works and why?

WHW: We primarily tried to provide new productions for the artists from the Arab world, since part of the mission of Meeting Points is to foster artistic production in the region. We felt it was important to keep a modest counter-balance to the production coming from the western world and increasingly from the Gulf States. Lawrence Abu Hamdan, DAAR, Marwa Arsanios, Maha Maamoun, *Kayfata* and Haytham El-Wardany were invited to develop new works or reassess existing works. We also invited some other artists, whose works we thought add an important dimension to the overall ambition of the exhibition in Antwerp and to the project as a whole. For example, Tom Nicholson, an Australian artist who, together

with Andrew Byrne, developed a sound piece as a companion to his work *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* that deals with monuments to Australian soldiers fallen in Palestine in WW1, which he first showed in *The Jerusalem Show* in Palestine in 2012.



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Courtesy of MuKHA.

The new commissions in Antwerp often focus on the notion of 'listening' – something that is elaborated in the audio essay *Language Gulf In the Shouting Valley* by Lawrence Abu Hamdan, which looks into the politics of language and voice in the specific conditions of the Druze community living between Palestine, Israel and Syria, or in Maha Maamoun's explorations of the act of listening and the status of the listener in her new video piece *Shooting Stars Remind Me of Eavesdroppers*. For us, the sound piece by Nicholson and Byrne also digs deeper into these ideas. Obviously, there was not one principle that governed our choices, but many elements came together in answering the 'what, how and for whom', which is of course the title our collective and what motivates everything we do.

About the author

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Omar Kholeif is Senior Editor of *Ibraaz*. He is an Egyptian-born, UK curator, writer and editor. Most recently, he was Curator at FACT, Liverpool, the UK's national centre for film and new media, and carries on as senior curatorial associate. He is also a Visiting Curator at Cornerhouse, Manchester, Curator at the Arab British Centre, London and founding Director of the UK's Arab Film Festival - a touring programme, which occurs annually. He is a Curator for the Abandon Normal Devices Festival, formerly a Curator for the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art, Impakt Festival in the Netherlands, and Werkleitz Festival, among others. Kholeif has curated projects and events, which have occurred at the Whitechapel Gallery, London; ICA, London; The International Film Festival Rotterdam; 'Beirut' in Cairo, Rhizome, New York, and Art Dubai, to name but a few.

Omar writes for the international press and was a founding editor of Portal 9, the only bi-lingual (Arabic/English) journal of art, literature, and architecture, published in Beirut. His most recent edited/co-edited collections include, *Vision, Memory and Media* (Liverpool University Press 2010), *Far and Wide: Nam June Paik* (Leonardo, 2013), and he is working on two new collections of essays. As of 2013, Kholeif will co-direct the residency and media programme for SPACE, London and its new cultural centre, The White Building. Kholeif holds degrees from the University of Glasgow, Screen Academy Scotland and the Royal College of Art, London. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.