



HOME WORKSPACE: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN CHRISTINE TOHME AND ANTHONY DOWNEY

Anthony Downey

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Since its inception in 1994, Ashkal Alwan has become an international platform for the creation and exchange of ideas around artistic practices and educational processes. Having initially committed its resources to introducing the work of artists who were working within, and following on from the events of post-war Lebanon, the organisation has since developed residencies, a research hub, public and civic projects, and an extensive education programme. One of these projects, Home Works Forum (HWF), launched in 2002, has since evolved into a pre-eminent platform for research on cultural practices within the region and beyond. Another project, launched last year under the name Home Workspace (HW), is a multipurpose facility dedicated to research, production and education in the context of contemporary artistic practices and debate. Housing production and editing studios, performance spaces, auditoriums, and Lebanon's first multimedia library for contemporary arts, Home Workspace is dedicated to developing an interdisciplinary approach to arts education in the Arab world.

In this conversation with Anthony Downey, Christine Tohme, founder and Director of Ashkal Alwan, talks about the ideas behind the organisation and the gestation period leading up to the launch of Home Workspace last year. Focusing on its approach to issues around education – specifically, the introduction of pedagogic models that refute traditional educational paradigms – and collaborative artistic practices, Tohme notes how the organisation as a whole is an 'accumulation of ideas and people' dedicated to collective projects and, in turn, an engagement with the 'intersection between the artistic and the civic'. Noting that the current crisis in our ideas of Modernism are not just based in financial concerns, Tohme observes that as producers we can revisit the meaning of Modernism and 'contest the uses of public space and civic consciousness to no other end than profit'.

Anthony Downey: Ashkal Alwan launched a new cultural and educational initiative, the Home Workspace Program, which is a ten-month programme run under the direction of a different resident professor. It seems that this is continuing the ideas and ideals behind Ashkal Alwan in its multidisciplinary focus on arts education and a relatively informal series of approaches to thinking about art as a practice. Could you talk a little bit about the launch of this project – bearing in mind that it has been only up and running for a short period.

Christine Tohme: Of course, but when you talk about the launch of Home Workspace (HW), you are talking about a time that precedes 2011. The development of this project took about five years of work and preparation. If I wanted to mark the conceptual timeline, however, I would never be able to mark it. It is something that I consider to have been a continuous concern and questioning of what is Home Works Forum (HWF), what is it that we do, what is collectivity, what is institutionalisation, what is education, what is collaboration, not only in Beirut or the Arab World, but as general concerns. For me, the Home Workspace project began when Ashkal Alwan (AA) began. This is an accumulation of ideas and people. If I look back and think about the inception of AA in 1993, it has been a process of unfolding of both different and yet very connected chapters. Each chapter has been populated by different people and ideas at different times, yes, but there was also a continuity that led up to the launch of Home Workspace. Along the way we developed the Home Works Forum, which is a project that came out of a public space project that we initiated in Beirut. Even Home Works was an educational programme in a sense, where artists, scholars, intellectuals and activists came from all over the world and stayed together for almost ten days starting from breakfast in the morning and finishing in a bar at three or four am. A lot of ideas came out of that too. So, when we talk about Home Workspace, as a school rather than a forum, we must acknowledge the people and the history of Ashkal Alwan and the way in which the Workspace has been nourished by what has come from both AA and the Home Works Forum. We should also acknowledge those who gave us the actual space (the Philippe Jabre Association) in which we now meet and work and the Lebanese community who committed themselves to be donors. The only other way I could describe the development of Home Workspace, apart from it being a form of accumulation, is that it is also a process of deconstruction, a process of going back and revisiting each project and seeing what could be conflated into another project and what needed to be let go.



View of Home Workspace, 2011. Photograph by Houssam Mchalemch. Courtesy of Home Workspace, Beirut.

AD: The one thing that seems to provide a thread here, however, is that the space itself seems to provide a way to develop the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to education and how these organisations think about how we think about art as a practice – would you agree with that?

CT: The space is a dream come true, but not only because it is a space as such. The space gives us a physicality and we know that physicality affects practice. It is where you have the possibility of having many collective projects that are happening in Beirut to come and take place in this space. So, this is about a form of collectivity in a space that is, yes, a way of bringing together many different disciplines into a lab of sorts or an incubator. You go into the space and you go into a room and you find somebody working inside. In another room you find someone working on something completely different. This physicality, this spaciousness, attracts practices whereas before we had many projects that we wanted to do but there was a

complete absence of spaces for thinking, spaces for facilitation and collaboration. I also consider the space not to be a physical space but to be a space for the future, we are building spaces for thinking for the future and this is what Home Workspace is.

AD: To a certain extent then, this is about tapping into a potentiality that may have been latent for want of space but also a horizon; it's about figuring a horizon which you are working towards as an ongoing project?

CT: Yes. It is a horizon and a challenge but it is also a space; which, as I have mentioned, affects your way of thinking and also leads you to think of certain possibilities and future projects. You can plan but also imagine. And that is why spaces affect your practice and train of thought because once you are in a space, you understand that it leads you towards something – and this is what happened with Home Workspace. In many instances we had set ideas about the space and how we were going to use it and these got changed over time; they became more fluid. We decided that the space was going to be used for artistic projects and it would be also used as a social hub – a space for people to get together, eat together, drink together, play ping pong together, cook together, party together ... This is why a space leads you. You live with a space and you live through a space. The actual refurbishing was conceived by Youssef Tohme (no relation) who was also responsible for the new campus of Beirut's Saint Joseph University. The organisation of space itself has allowed us to continue thinking about how we engage with the idea of education – although I am very critical about this word 'education' because I don't believe in educating people.



Home Workspace Program participants during a workshop with artist Alfredo Jaar, 2011. Photograph by Emily Jacir. Courtesy of Home Workspace, Beirut.

AD: Could you elaborate upon that? When you say you don't believe in educating people, you obviously don't mean that people should remain uneducated.

CT: I think that you give people possibilities and in that moment you give them the means to take these possibilities and concentrate and facilitate further ideas inside of an environment. Space, in that sense, is a situation for furthering the production of ideas, but I don't believe that you could 'educate' people because it holds within it the ideal of changing people, or improving them, which has become a recurrent gesture in our time.

AD: So this is more a question of pedagogy – or a statement on forms of pedagogical methodology and how they are currently deployed in a system whereby the teacher is understood to be the giver of knowledge, a system which has been under attack since it was first formulated and yet is nevertheless the dominant system today.

CT: Yes, because the teacher can be the student and the student can be the teacher depending on the situation.

AD: We could push that idea into a discussion of books such as Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant School Master: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, 1991.

CT: We could talk of Rancière of course, but also of Bruno Latour.

AD: I was thinking here of Joseph Jacotot, the 18th century educational philosopher that Rancière draws upon in *The Ignorant School Master* and the idea that education should take the notion of equality as a starting point rather than a goal to be worked towards – a goal that is ultimately self-defeating inasmuch as the teacher always has a privileged access to knowledge. I note that with Home Workspace there is a considerable amount of delegation and an emphasis upon participative workshops – do these formats answer to the ideal of rethinking how and why we educate?



Home Workspace Program participants at their landing seminar, September 2011. Courtesy of Home Workspace, Beirut.

CT: To a certain extent yes, but it also depends on the variety of approaches: sometimes you have a workshop, sometimes you have a visit, sometimes you have a master class (which is speaker-led), sometimes you have a tour, sometimes you have a walk, sometimes there is an open studio. Those events, those situations, those gestures create a whole world and this world, for me, is about rethinking the model of educating and how we approach education today.

AD: Obviously, this variety of formats is not about voiding any structure because within the space you have a public library, a continuum programme and not-profit-in-resident programme, alongside a local community programme. Could you talk a little bit about the continuum programme and how that operates within the context of the Home Workspace?

CT: We have not really started on that yet; up until now we have only created one technical workshop and in two weeks we have a workshop with Laurence Leblanc who is a French photographer, which is a workshop for the local community. This is something which is specifically for the local community but instead of fully embarking on this programme we decided to present it as a possibility for collectives to work with it. For example having a collaboration with Sada (Echo) and with Iraqi participants, and having collectives working on their own initiatives in the civic and artistic spheres. We are having a music workshop with Omar Dewachi and Sam Shalabi that is about experimentation in Arabic music and how it converses with specific models of western music. This is how the continuum programme evolved. We thought about it in the beginning as courses that would be given but then we went into something that is more meaningful - it is about giving spaces to collectives, so that something else can happen that might be unexpected or indeed totally different

to what we imagined to begin with. The continuum programme is also about long-term projects that could last for one week and others that could span over one year. The temporal side of it as a project is flexible to allow processes to begin and thoughts to evolve.

AD: Effectively, I see here a built-in sustainability of engagement and discourse in these HW initiatives which lends itself to forms of devolving authority. When I was at the launch of HW last year, I met with Emily Jacir who spoke about how you had given over the curriculum to her for one year. Could you talk a little bit more about the idea behind that?

CT: We have a committee that invites an artist every year to be the resident professor, and this resident professor puts forward the theamatics for the year's curriculum and invites artists, scholars, writers and philosophers to be with the participants in Beirut. For example, this year we have received Franco Berardi, Kamran Rastegar, Hassan Khan and Alfredo Jaar. Additionally, we have visiting artists who pass through the city and we ask them to meet with the participants.

We also have mentors, who are artists based in Beirut, and they work closely with each participant on their projects. Joana Hadjithomas has done this as have a number of other artists, such as Lina Saneh, Lamia Joreige, Akram Zaatari, Walid Sadek, Tony Chakar, Tarek Atoui, and Mirene Arsanios among others. Next year, the theatre director and dramaturge Matthias Lilienthal will oversee the program. We have a theme that is on the website and he is inviting visual artists, performers and theorists, which we will announce shortly. The program will be focusing on formats, and will include Lilienthal's *X-Apartments* project, which he plans to realise in Beirut in collaboration with participants. Each professor or artist or practitioner who comes is therefore like the architect of the programme.

AD: Moving away from Home Workspace, the original Home Work Forum on Cultural Practices is still going ahead in June of next year is it?

CT: I am not sure. If it will happen, it will be in April 2013 and I will not be the curator, but will invite someone from outside Ashkal Alwan to work on it. I want to invite two curators – although one may not be art-world based – because I am interested in this intersection between the artistic and the civic.

AD: This is interesting because this brings us to what is perhaps a core element of Ashkal Alwan, Home Workspace and the Forum itself and that it is the use of artistic practice, education, collaboration and participation to reach out into civic society. Would you agree with that statement?



Home Workspace Program participants and professors at a critique session, April 2012. Courtesy of Home Workspace, Beirut.

CT: Of course. I am interested in creating civic pockets. We have lost our public spaces today because the control over such spaces is unfortunately decided by the victor – the victor always dominates public space. It is always the winner who controls the space. I am interested in these small pockets that exist outside of the system and outside of the public spaces where national discourses dominate; where you find a seepage between the artistic and the civic.

AD: This sense of seepage is quite interesting because it seems that it is about producing knowledge that seeps into the consciousness and this consciousness is a civic consciousness, not a political or necessarily aesthetic consciousness.

CT: It is not aesthetic as such; rather, it is poetic consciousness. I am very interested in a poetic consciousness and its engagement with the civic order because the more we think about public and civic space, the more we think about authority or power, or even authorship. And this authority is increasingly hegemonic. We are not just talking about hegemony in the context of the Arab world, there are fundamentalist trends across the world and they can often control both public discourse and civic space. There is also a crisis that transcends the financial one in 2008 and that is the crisis of our modernism, a bankruptcy of ideas in the west and elsewhere too. As producers we can revisit the meaning of Modernism and perhaps contest the uses of public space and civic consciousness to no other end than profit. This is not only a big challenge for the Arab World, it is a big challenge everywhere.



Home Workspace Program participant Joe Namy at critique sessions, April 2012. Courtesy of Home Workspace, Beirut.

AD: You see the practices that emerge out of HW as a way of re-thinking the parameters of this challenge.

CT: I really don't know what to tell you. I really don't have an answer. We are still at the beginning of the road in this programme and it is still too early to say where we are or what we are going to change. I am sure that through this process we as an organisation are already changing – and perhaps that is what this process is about, change – but it is too early to say what the future process of change will bring and where it will ultimately direct itself.

AD: I am going to wrap things up by asking you what your current priorities are?

CT: The priority is to continue the project of Home Workspace, because for me this is a very important project not only for Beirut, Lebanon or the Arab World, its intention is to take participants from all over the world based on merit. In turn, the product of this discourse will become an open source for reference worldwide. This is a model that is very important and we really want it to be about openness and fluidity, which is why we insist it is not only for participants from the Arab world. This is a political position.



AD: Finally, are you putting together residencies for people dealing with the notion of cultural translation, which seems to me to be quite a priority not only for the Middle East but also for the western world. How do we translate cultures? Is that in any of your thought processes at the moment?

CT: I don't believe in cultural translation.

AD: Can you explain?

CT: There is a specificity for each given space, a dynamic for each social structure and if you want to translate that it means there is an inherent redundancy or something that is always left out. You need to travel and when you travel you can live that experience but I do not think of cultural translation as a model.

AD: But you have thought about the translation of Arabic texts into English, English into Arabic? Texts that deal specifically with visual culture?

CT: Yes, we do that all the time. We have just released a bilingual book of Rabih Mroué's performance piece *How Nancy Wished That Everything Was an April Fool's Joke*. The piece, which is about four characters/combatants who recount their experiences in Lebanon's civil wars, was co-produced by Ashkal Alwan in 2007, and was banned initially by the General Security censors in Lebanon for fear of 'rekindling civil strife'. The play was eventually granted permission to be presented uncensored, after considerable campaigning from the Lebanese press and the intervention of the then-Minister of Culture Tarek Mitri who submitted it to the Council of Ministers' itinerary. The book includes the original script in Arabic co-written by Mroué and Fadi Toufiq, and a translation into English by Amal Issa, as well as the posters by Samar Maakaron that appeared in the original production. It was very important for us to include the story of the play as a text that passed through the censors – what happens to a text when it goes through this journey, and also within the context of the possibility for national histories or historical narratives. The play contains several references, accurate and inaccurate, to actual events and battles, and it is this impossibility or freedom from presenting an accurate or authoritative account that make this such a strong play for me. Likewise with the translation, it was the impossibility or freedom from presenting a true translation that was the point of departure: translation is impossible and it's something you have to travel with, and this is what we aim for when we work with translation.

Christine Tohme is an independent curator, cultural producer, and founder/director of The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan – a non-profit arts organization established in 1994. Since its inception, the association has committed itself to the production, facilitation and circulation of artistic practices across a wide range of disciplines and media. Ashkal Alwan's platforms include the Home Works Forum on Cultural Practices, curated projects in Lebanon and abroad, the publication of literary works and artists' books, residency programs, art production grants, and a monthly newsletter. Ashkal Alwan has also supported the documentation of an unprecedented archival record of contemporary intellectual and creative endeavors, available through its public research archive. Through these initiatives and others, the association has established itself as a reference within the cultural landscape of the region and beyond.



In 2011, Ashkal Alwan launched Home Workspace, a multipurpose facility in Beirut dedicated to promoting an interdisciplinary approach to arts education and production in the Arab world. Home Workspace houses Lebanon's first public library for contemporary arts, as well as the HWP, an international arts program admitting 15 participants/year to study with some of the world's leading artists, filmmakers, curators, thinkers and academics.

In 2006, Tohme received the Prince Claus Award for her dedication to the development of critical culture in post-war Lebanon.

About the author

Anthony Downey is the Director of the Masters Programme in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art. He holds a Ph.D from Goldsmiths College, London, is the Editor of Ibraaz, sits on the editorial board of *Third Text*, and is a Consulting Editor for *Open Space* (Vienna).

As part of the 54th Venice Biennale, he co-edited *The Future of a Promise* catalogue and has written essays for *Representing Islam: Comparative Perspectives* (2011); *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art* (2009); *Iran Inside Out* (2009); *Art and Patronage in the Near and Middle East* (2010); *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Potentialities* (2013); *Conspiracy Dwellings: Surveillance in Contemporary Art* (2010); *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings* (revised edition, forthcoming 2011); *Cultural Theory*, edited by David Oswell (2010); and *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (2012). He is currently researching a book on politics and aesthetics (Thames and Hudson, 2013).