

## Return to the Former Middle East Ibraaz 5th Year Anniversary Editorial

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In June 2011, *Ibraaz* launched its inaugural Platform, 001, with a relatively straightforward question: what do we need to know about the MENA region today? There was, of course, a degree of naïve optimism inherent to such a query; a sense that we might be able to glean some higher understanding if we could only ask the right question. We knew from the outset that whatever we actually needed to know about the MENA region was not going to be answered in the space of a platform. But it seemed, at the time and even more so now, that a focussed series of research questions needed to be posed and an extended period of time, six months to be precise, given over to discussing them.



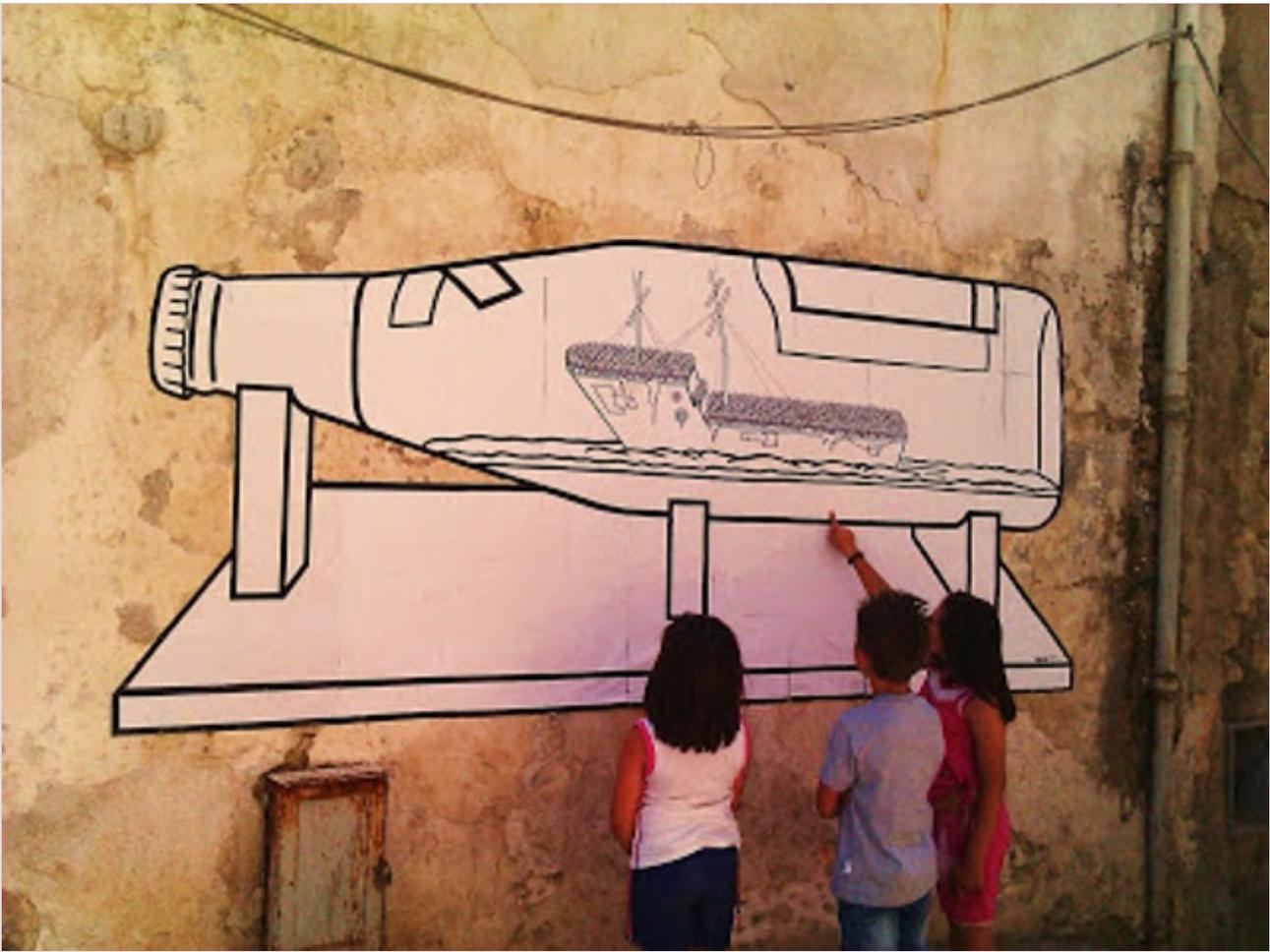
Mario Rizzi, *Al Intithar*, 2013, film still.  
Courtesy the Artist & Sharjah Art Foundation.

In line with this ambition, the formal components of Platform 001, and subsequent Platforms, was structurally simple: we would commission and present critical responses, essays, explorative interviews, and online projects so as to garner answers to the question in hand from as wide a variety of contributors as possible. We would then publish these and see where the discussion took us in relation to further questions and how these contributions informed our broader editorial. Needless to say, each question merely provoked another, and Platform 001 effectively instantiated a research project that has remained thematically durable and, we hope, conceptually central to developing a framework for a critically engaged debate about the pivotal role of cultural production within and about the region. This research and publishing initiative, which was always intended to take the region as a starting point but not necessarily as an end point for discussion, has reached its fifth consecutive year of production. As such, it needs to be reflected upon, not only for its perceived successes but, perhaps more importantly, to expand upon what else needs to be done and, essentially, where we need to go from here.

In terms of interpretive analysis and critical engagement, at the outset it seemed crucial, despite the efforts of individuals and institutions elsewhere (and often in partnership with them), to develop an online space that was progressive, collaborative and inclusive. We needed to develop a research platform for contributors to informally and formally declare a stance or position on a given area of interest that could, in turn, produce a non-formulaic and speculative space for knowledge production. The intention was to avoid, where possible, the usual prescriptive and reductive frames of reference that have long stultified discussions about cultural production from within and beyond the region. It was important that this initiative attracted emerging writers and artists alongside internationally renowned academics, curators, activists, filmmakers and other independent cultural practitioners. It was also important that we supported first-time researchers and explored the potential inherent in publishing artists' projects and screening films and performances online. To date, as I look across the extraordinary number of contributors to each Platform and the dialogue they have initiated, I think that a significant degree of momentum has been achieved when it comes to rethinking how we produce cultural knowledge about North Africa and the Middle East and, perhaps more importantly, who produces it.

It was all the more vital that *Ibraaz* remained and continues to remain representative of the region. To this end, the majority of our contributors are based in the region, as are the majority of our editorial correspondents. Our core editorial team are likewise split between Europe and North Africa and the Middle East. This has been logistically challenging at times; but, given our online presence, we have utilized technology to its fullest to attract, we hope, a broad range of editorial viewpoints and voices. The contributors we sought out were those who worked within or about the region, but were not solely defined by it. Artistic practices are events and acts that exist beyond the prescription of arbitrary borders. The objective, however ambitious, was to more fully understand what was happening to art practices on the ground, so to speak. What is involved, we sought to ask, when it comes to producing work under certain political, social, economic, and cultural conditions and how does this relate to global developments? What, moreover, is it to experience forms of unrest as real economic, social, historical and political facts of life, rather than abstract ideals partially understood through theoretical frameworks? This led us to another question: what can the politics of contemporary cultural production in the Middle East tell us about the politics of global cultural production?

To answer these questions it is crucial that we begin with practice in all of its iterations and whilst much of our research has been directed towards the present, there has always been a coextensive engagement with understanding how cultural developments across the region have their own independent agency and



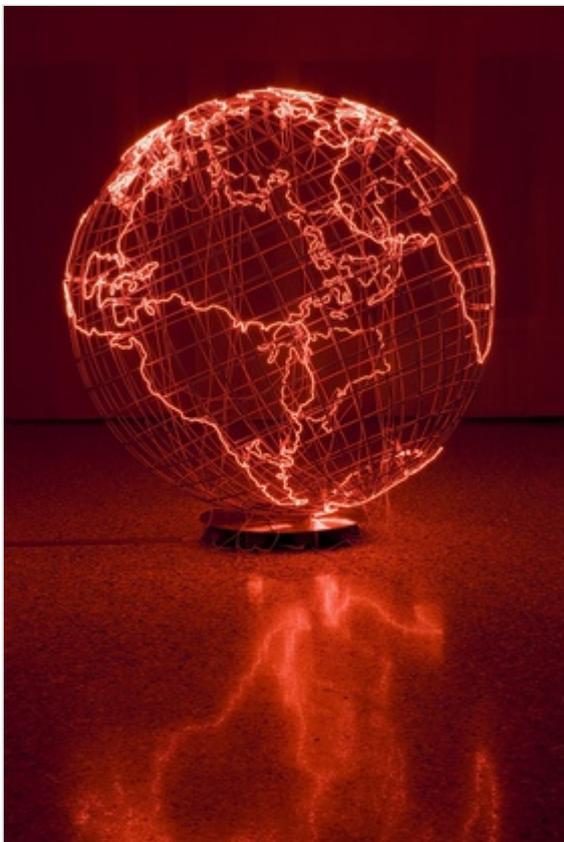
Gec, 'The raft of Lampedusa'- homage to Gericault, 2011 Favara, Sicily, Italy.  
*Courtesy the artist.*

genealogies in relation to both local and global historical events. Again, however, this focus on practice across the region suggests a further enquiry: how do you critically analyse and productively interpret the present of cultural production in the historically defined contexts of the past and the all too imminent exigencies of the present? And if this was not complicated enough, how do you understand and productively respond to art practices as historical events when it is obvious that the past is invariably open to plural interpretations, whilst the present is indelibly subject to radical forms of flux?

To these conundrums, which raise hermeneutic and heuristic concerns in equal measure, we sought to open up a space for sustainable debate. Our first platform, in its nascent optimism, attracted not just a multiplicity of responses, but a logic for future engagement and a profound sense that we had entered a brave new world. Five years later, much has happened and, arguably, the innate promise of political and social transformation has foundered whilst forms of internecine violence and political distrust have become widespread. The events of 2010 and their complex unfolding are still being played out across the region and, with the advent of the so-called migrant crisis, within Europe and beyond. Revolution, uprisings, and unrest, in our globalized age, can only ever have an extended geopolitical reach and the shock waves are still resounding and will do for some time. One of the more positive elements to emerge from this period, albeit one that needs qualification, was an unprecedented upsurge in cultural activity. These activities continue to make a significant impact on political and social debates within and beyond the region.



Mohamed Ali Fadlabi, *The Prediction Machine*, 2013, painting installations, dimensions variable.  
Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation.



We are, of course, still in the very early stages of what has been a seismic historical shift in terms of cultural production within the region but the one thing that I hope *Ibraaz* has demonstrated, in its capacity as a readily available archive of cultural production within the region, is the sheer variety, intensity and durability of cultural activity. The one element that is recurrent and central to this has been the role of cultural practices and their engagement with issues around historical consciousness, artistic movements, political and social debates, cultural narratives, new media, digital archiving, activism, civil society, public space, globalization, and institution building. Underwriting these considerations, we have observed an attendant concern with how North Africa and the Middle East, as a diverse political, social and cultural entity, can be potentially more fully understood in terms of its relationships to the Global South rather than the often opaque prism of an East/West dichotomy. This has led to other research questions, not least an enquiry into how a globalized cultural economy has affected the production of contemporary visual culture in North Africa and the Middle

Mona Hatoum, *Hot Spot III*, 2009. Stainless steel and neon tube, 92 1/8 x 8 13/16 x 87 13/16 in. (234 x 223 x 223 cm)

© Mona Hatoum. Photo: Agostino Osio. Courtesy Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice.

East. Again, this is a decisive consideration if we are to blast open historically ossified and interpretively reductive paradigms of interpretive analysis and further re-consider how we might productively map the historical and contemporary relationships that exist between North Africa,

the Middle East and the Global South. This strand of *Ibraaz's* project has begun, over the last five years, to form a significant congregation of ideas for research that will no doubt emerge in future platforms.

In terms of research strands and continuities over the last five years, it is notable that some of the earlier Platform questions did solidify, with a significant degree of durability, into specific research clusters. Each platform has had a different outcome with a number resulting in conferences and published books, including *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* (Sternberg, 2016), which stemmed from the *Future Imperfect: Cultural Propositions and Global Perspectives* conference that was held at Tate Modern, London, in late 2013. *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Art and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, published in 2015, found its kernel in Platform 007 (which was launched the previous year); whereas *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practice in North Africa and the Middle East*, published in 2014, began its development in Platform 004, the latter having been initiated in 2013. Our current Platform 010, *'Where to Now? Shifting Regional Dynamics and Cultural Production in North Africa and the Middle East'* was imminent in a panel discussion held at the National Museum of Carthage, Tunis, in 2012, and revisits elements from all previous platforms whilst also looking forward to future concerns.

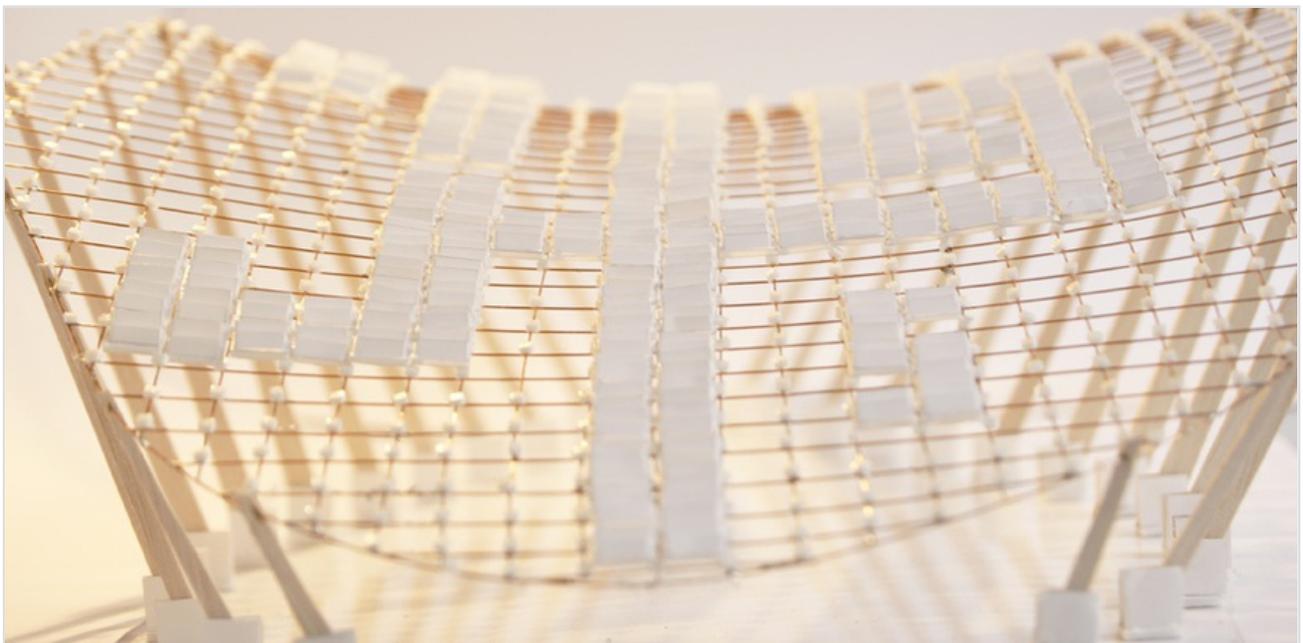


Tapes from a partial digitization project initiated by INA in the 1990s.

Copyright and courtesy Mariam Ghani.

The more recent continuities of research and knowledge production, reflected in *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, have brought together a number of our contributors to discuss an ongoing and, to my mind, singularly pressing concern: what is the condition and future of cultural institutions in North Africa and the Middle East today? When we first posed that question in 2012, and despite the upheavals across the region, the future seemed more secure and graspable as an entity, nowhere more so than when we considered the proliferation of voices and practices that were coming to the fore in support of cultural freedoms and alternative forms of expression. Now, for a variety of reasons, that sureness seems less realistic and possibly redundant. Since launching in 2011, something fundamental has occurred across the Middle East and North Africa, and it may not be entirely obvious what that is precisely, especially given the attention focused on on-going conflicts and the legacy of the so-called Arab Spring. That something, and I will call it out for what it is, involves a *de facto* war on culture; an ongoing, prolonged, self-interested, and, in large part, fully intentional and yet incoherent assault on the very fabric of cultural institutions and those who support and work in them.

The effect of this assault is far-reaching and has produced a veritable and verifiable crisis in cultural production across the region which has had both negative and, as we will see, occasionally positive ramifications. The immediate effect of it, specifically on contemporary visual culture and its institutions, be they private galleries, public museums, foundations, magazines (and publishing in general), educational initiatives, workshops, seminars, artistic practice, freedom of speech, civil and public spaces, is a gradual undermining of the edifices of cultural institutions and their ability to independently produce and disseminate visual culture. It may seem dramatic to suggest that there is a war on culture afoot across such a diverse region, and perhaps it is, but the point here is that there is a steady erosion of certain rights around freedom of expression that is having a significant impact on institutions and cultural producers in the region.



AMBS Architects, Baghdad Library, 2013, process model for the roof.

© AMBS Architects.

Whilst there has always been specific socio-political pressures placed upon culture as a form of expression in the region, in collusion with the abject political failure to fund cultural production (a situation that has been all

the more acerbated by the absence of private sector funding), the last five years have seen government offices and the apparatus of the state emboldened in their contempt for cultural producers and the institutions they represent. To this, we need to observe two following points: there is, firstly, a wilful and frankly counter-productive lack of legislation fit for the purpose of nurturing institutions and ensuring their growth and sustainability. There remains, secondly, a profound under-funding of cultural institutions, notable even in some of the richer Gulf States (who seem largely obsessed with statist forms of cultural management and building sepulchral testaments to the expansionist policies of western institutions). None of this has changed since 2011, and in fact has become more accentuated on the ground and elsewhere. The on-going level of distrust in the edifices and ambitions of culture and programmes of underfunding that border on intentional neglect, speaks to the decades of governmental suspicion across the region as to what artists and the institutions that support them actually do.

Why is this of interest? As Iraq continues to crumble as a state, with Libya not far behind, and Syria enters the fifth year of an infernal civil war (which, at the time of writing, shows no prospect of imminent resolution), and the so-called 'migrant' or 'refugee' crisis has reached endemic proportions that threatens to destabilize the entire region, all this talk of cultural institutions, artistic production, and critical practices might seem both ill advised and, for some, perhaps distasteful. When confronted with the parlous state of cultural institutions in the region, the weary response is that, under the current conditions, support for culture and its institutions is not only relative but needs to be relegated in favour of social, economic and political institutions. This is a frankly catastrophic and disingenuous misnomer inasmuch as a bias in governmental support for strategic economic and political development continues to deny countries and the region as a whole the very building blocks upon which political and social cohesion are based: the sense of community, that is to note, that culture, in all its forms, fosters, encourages and sustains.



In June 2011, I published my first essay for *Ibraaz*: 'Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society, and the Politics of Representation'. It broadly suggested the following: a country deprived of culture exists in an ahistorical vacuum. With no sense of ontology, a degree of insight into where we are coming from, and the nature of our being as a result, there can be no teleology. There can be, in sum, no development towards an end, whatever the latter may consist of in the long term and however deferred and problematic it may turn out to be, or a resolution of internecine and civil conflict. Without culture, people are at best unmoored from the very co-ordinates of history needed to articulate a consistent and yet contestable narrative, be it social or political, in the present and, crucially, the future. Culture, in sum, coheres and assuages the immoderation of political, social and historical certainties. I proposed this more in hope than despair, insofar as everything still seemed possible at the time. Today, I would stick by the sentiments expressed in that essay. Only this time around I would emphasize the absolute urgency involved in supporting, through whatever means necessary, cultural institutions from across the region and those who work in and support them, from artists to administrators, critics to curators, directors to docents.

Before we point the finger at governments, funding bodies, and statist cultural policies not fit for purpose, we need to also acknowledge the extent to which other issues need to be addressed from within the practice of contemporary art. For one, there is a profound level of cynicism, made manifest in the forms of curatorial opportunism – where better to start a career than to show art from a conflict zone – and the avid marketization of artists from the region. Revolution, uprisings, internecine warfare, civil conflict, and human rights, all of these points of reference have been deployed in an intensification of interest in the region and the coextensive demand that culture either condemns or defends such notions. Within these contexts, institutions often co-opt the radicality of practice and, through embedding it within institutional concerns, effectively mollify its potential as a transformative act or event. If artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events, and who is to say they should not, we should nevertheless remain alert to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices for institutions, critics and the market alike.

Again, this is an international rather than regional concern, inasmuch as there remains the ever-present interpretive danger that visual culture from the region is legitimized through the media-friendly symbolism of conflict – the latter rubric being redolent of colonial ambitions to prescribe the culture of the Middle East to a set of problems that revolve around atavistic conflict and extremist ideology. Add to this the globally-inclined market-driven interest in artistic production, which serves the minority of an already rarefied minority (or the 0.0001 per cent of a global populace who can afford to buy art from galleries purporting to represent the Middle East), and we can see how the market for art from the region is imbricated within the contemporary art industrial complex that is at ease with forms of capital accrual, gentrification, tax avoidance, and outright financial speculation. There exists, alongside these processes, programmes of investment that seek to gentrify – or, in places, produce – destinations through the overt deployment of cultural institutions and the value system associated with them.

To this we must also note that there is an insistent neoliberal ascendant order that, in its advocacy of deregulation, withdrawal of government, and competitiveness, has produced nothing more than the abject



February 14 Coalition banners call people to a march to mark the two year anniversary of the February 14 2011 'Day of Rage', here you can see their logo featuring the Pearl monument and a clenched fist.

*Photograph by Amal Khalaf.*

instrumentalization of culture so that it answers to (rather than opposes or negotiates) political agendas. There exists an overt move towards the privatization of culture that goes hand in hand with the erosion of public space and access to modes of production, reception and dissemination – and that is visible across the region, from Istanbul to Cairo, Doha to downtown Beirut and Baghdad, to Abu Dhabi. And yet, despite an obvious need, there is a general unwillingness to address these issues as issues in their own right and, thereafter, any conscious political effort to consider potentials and alternatives to developing and supporting cultural institutions so that they can counter such globalizing tendencies, the rapaciousness of the market and the short-termism associated with neoliberal doctrine. This, again, is a global concern that has been playing out with an acute and often intemperate intensity across the region.

All of which returns us to the robust and durable forms of artistic practices that continue to tackle these issues with a level of rationalized intent that belies the fact of the innate creativity that defines such processes. This became all the more evident in Platform 009, which inaugurated our move to extend our research platforms to 12 months rather than six, and our research into the genealogy of performance art in the region. Throughout Platform 009, the transient and contingent nature of the performative gesture in contemporary visual culture consistently emerged as a foil to the perilous social and political conditions that are in evidence across an increasingly destabilized region. More specifically, Platform 009 defined the degree to which performance art engages with the social politics of activist practices, to the extent that the two have become, in some cases, productively indiscernible.



Marwa Arsanios, *OLGA's NOTES, all those restless bodies*, 2015. Video, 28 mins.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Primarily driven by artists and cultural practitioners who are working across diverse media within the region, Platform 009 also mapped the historical range of practices and theories associated with the labels 'performance', 'performance art' and 'performativity' in the Arab world today and, in turn, provided a critical overview of their contemporary relevance. One of the key aims here was to not only understand and consider the localized, imminent factors affecting performance as a gesture but also the global and historical contexts that continue to inform such events and acts. In posing this line of enquiry, contributions to Platform 009, alongside newly commissioned work, will be published in print form in 2018 and will examine the occluded and overt histories of performance art in the Arab world and suggest that a performative ethics has emerged in the last decade that openly questions the apparatus of the state and the often autocratic categories of state control that accompany the use of public space, the means of social interaction, and the role of women, in particular, in modes of transformative politics.

Over the last five years, *Ibraaz* has become a major resource for researchers and students with an interest in visual culture across the regions of the Middle East, and our essays are usually lengthy and our interviews invariably in-depth. We have also, in short, become an archive for anyone with an interest in visual culture and the politics of cultural production within, beyond, and about the region. The fact that we have become an archive brings with it a significant degree of responsibility, not least when it comes to ensuring that information remains accessible and accountable. What role, we have asked, can art criticism play in producing a more rigorous system for analyzing, critiquing and archiving cultural production



across the region? Against this backdrop, we need to understand how a 'knowledge economy' has emerged as a key component of any consideration of art as a practice and the production of archived information. Who, we need to ask, benefits from the production of cultural and critical knowledge?

Discarded frames from prints of the feature *Gunah* [<https://pad.ma/BVA/player/A>] and a newsreel on the 1978 coup d'état [<https://pad.ma/BSU/player/00:06:42.480>].

*Copyright and courtesy Mariam Ghani.*

The virtual archive has enabled forms of manipulation that have offered, moreover, a salutary reminder of the power systems knowledge can harness. In this moment, the archive has offered artists and cultural practitioners a considerable resource for exploring and interrogating precisely how knowledge is utilized and instrumentalized and begs a further question: can contemporary art practices produce forms of speculative knowledge to counter the instrumentalized, often monetized and politicized forms of knowledge that drive the neoliberal will towards global hegemony? Has culture, in this sinuous matrix of value, become increasingly sidelined or, conversely, all the more instrumentalized by political and economic forces. Furthermore, if cultural production has become complicit in the accumulation of capital – be it cultural, private, economic, or social – as a result of neoliberalism, global forms of gentrification, and the relative absence of state and private funding, how might we explore the potential for productive cultural alliances that can effectively address these concerns?



Sandra Ceballos, *Forever*, 1999.

*Copyright Sandra Ceballos.*

A central tenet to this enquiry is a reflexive consideration of *Ibraaz's* role in these processes. When we apply critical thinking, we must ask what assumptions we are making with those forms of critique. In proposing as

much, I am alluding to the words of Samuel Weber and his view that any form of critique that does not consider the conflictual structure of its own discursive operations – its models of production, dissemination and reception – will only produce the constraints it is seeking to displace. Is there, we will ask going forward, a neutral position for critique and how do we rethink the institutionalization, instrumentalization, and commercialization of cultural production whilst also critiquing our own complicity, as cultural producers, in this process? Apart from epistemological questions on the subject of knowledge production, this question proposes to a broader field of research around pedagogy: can knowledge production, encapsulated in art practices, art criticism, theoretical analysis and historical reflection, be directed into a pedagogy that will, on some level, provide a framework of cultural engagement for future generations?

Five years after the launch of the research and publishing initiative that is *Ibraaz*, it is all the more germane to offer thanks to everyone who has contributed to the growth of our critical platform and their elucidations on these most pressing of concerns. None of this would have been possible without the generous support of the **Kamel Lazaar Foundation** and its continued dedication to *Ibraaz* and other associated projects. In terms of our immediate editorial staff and the move forward with this project, a special thanks needs to go to Stephanie Bailey, Ala Younis, Aimee Dawson, Amira Gad, Amal Khalaf, Sheyma Buali, Ajay Hothi, Reema Salha Fadda, and Helen Gale, alongside our editorial correspondents, Haig Aivazian, Monira Al Qadiri, Marwa Arsanios, Laura Cugusi, Walter D. Mignolo, Tania El Khoury, Wafa Gabsi, Aleya Hamza, Shuruq Harb, Samah Hijawi, Natasha Hoare, Fawz Kabra, Göksu Kunak, Nat Muller, Daniella Rose King, Basak Senova and Tom Snow. A particular debt of gratitude is, of course, owed to our extended network of contributors, all of whom are listed below.

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98weeks // Ahd // L'Anonyme // Pio Abad // Basel Abbas // Jumana Emil Abboud // Salma Abdel Salam // Myriam Abdelaziz // Mohamed Abdelkarim // Lida Abdul // Adel Abidin // Ruanne Abou-Rahme // Sarah Abu Abdallah // Lawrence Abu Hamdan // Mahmoud Abu Hashhash // Tara Aghdashloo // Leeza Ahmady // Rahel Aima // Haig Aivazian // Garine Aivazian // Abbas Akhavan // John Akomfrah // Sulayman Al Bassam // Nujoom Al Ghanem // Sophia Al Maria // Monira Al Qadiri // Sultan Soud Al Qassemi // Mounira Al Solh // Basma Al Sharif // Rani al Rajji // Jananne Al-Ani // Tarek Al-Ghoussein // Liane Al-Ghusain // Diana Al-Hadid // Hisham Al-Madhloum // Nahrain Al-Mousawi // Abdullah Al-Mutairi // Hoor Al-Qasimi // Lidia Al-Qattan // Anas Al-Shaikh // Adesola Alabi // Nevin Aladağ // Rita Alaoui // Meriç Algün Ringborg // Khaled Alhamzah // Rheim Alkadhi // Laura Allsop // Ian Almond // The Arab Digital Expression Foundation // Noura Alsager // Sama Alshaibi // Basma Alsharif // Can Altay // Anahi Alviso-Marino // Doa Aly // Barrak Alzaid // Héla Ammar // Cecilia Andersson // Nazgol Ansarinia // Ziad Antar // Naira Antoun // Seth Anziska // Caline Aoun // Reza Aramesh // Firat Arapoğlu // AMBS Architects // Zeina Arida // Burak Arikan // Mirene Arsanios // Selçuk Artut // Oreet Ashery // Nancy Atakan // Lara Atallah // Kutluğ Ataman // Iason Athanasiadis // Tarek Atoui // Vahap Avşar // Nadia Ayari // Seth Ayyaz // Zeigam Azizov // Ariella Azoulay // Sussan Babaie // Rayya Badran // Fayçal Baghriche // Stephanie Bailey // Lara Baladi // Shiva Balaghi // Charlotte Bank // Anne Barlow // Yogesh Barve // Shumon Basar // Taysir Batniji // Eric Baudelaire // Ayah Bdeir // Negar Behbahani // Beirut Art Center // Pryle Behrman // Neïl Beloufa // Myriam Ben Salah // Ali Benmakhlof // Meriem Bennani // Franco "Bifo" Berardi // Isak Berbic // Daniel Berndt // Omar Berrada // Atef

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