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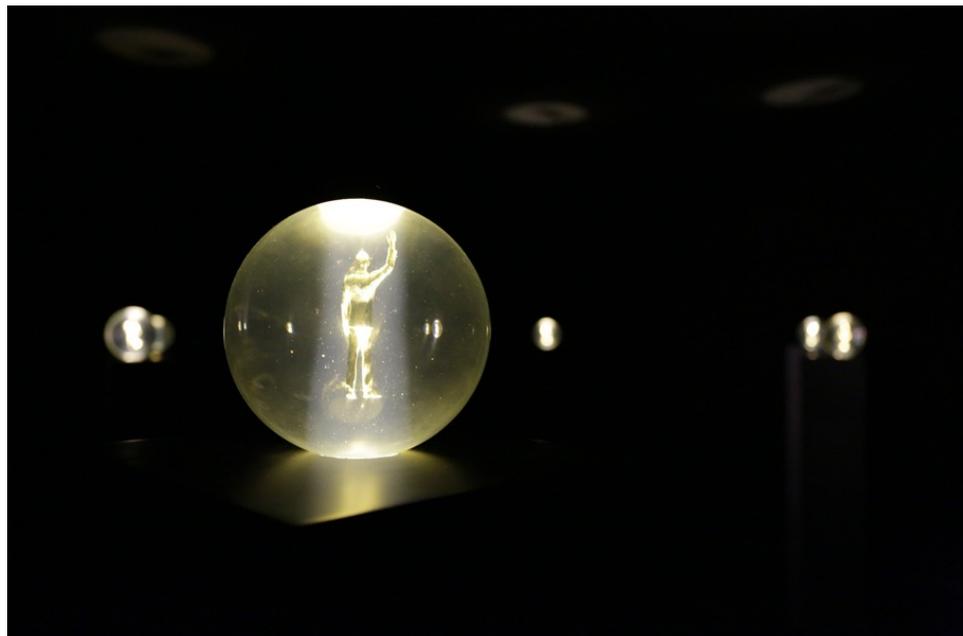
Platform 007

INTERVIEWS

A Hybrid Model

Antonia Carver in conversation with Omar Kholeif

In this interview, Omar Kholeif and Antonia Carver discuss the changing nature of institutional infrastructures in the Gulf. Focusing specifically on Dubai, the conversation considers the relationship between the market and the art fair as a unique institutional infrastructure. Has the art fair become the social context of the art world and if so, how does it enable different perspectives on modernization in the context of an increasingly global art world?



Vartan Avakian, *A Very Short History of Tall Men* (2013). Gold and Synthetic Glass, dimensions variable. Courtesy Abraaj Group Art Prize 2013.

Omar Kholeif: I'd like to start by asking you about the role that you think Art Dubai has played as an institution, not only in Dubai, but in the region, more broadly speaking?

Antonia Carver: You're right to ask this, as we discuss and debate the role of the fair and the role of the institution – and where the two might meet – all the time. One of the most exciting things about working in the Gulf, and specifically Dubai, is having the opportunity to rethink the model. The development of the arts scene here has been quite 'postmodern' – in a jumbled timeline of the market, artists, galleries, then education, studios, and so on. The infrastructure is young, and we're all in it together, nurturing a scene. At the same time, Dubai is at a crossroads, a hub between Africa, the Middle East and Asia – its rise as a centre for communications and travel has been quite dramatic and the city is now the connector between these regions, and between these regions and Europe and the USA. This is a practicality but it has affected how the city sees itself, and how its arts scene has developed, too.

The commercial side of the fair is of course of crucial importance, but over the years we've also developed a strong not-for-profit programme of residencies, commissioned site-specific works, film, radio, the Global Art Forum with accompanying research and projects, the Abraaj Group Art Prize, plus a series of educational initiatives, for children through to post-graduates and young professionals.

For all these reasons, the fair has organically become a hybrid model – and this is something we've developed strategically, too. Over the past two years, we've looked particularly at what we can do through the year to nurture the local scene, and engage the community of curators, critics, gallerists and artists that exist around the fair in the local community in a meaningful way. Campus Art Dubai, our Saturday art school, is now going into its third six-month term.

I think Art Dubai has focussed international attention on artists and arts scenes in the Middle East and South Asia, while also encouraging regional audiences to take pride in and involve themselves in contemporary art, year-round. I also hope it has helped shift an understanding of what 'globalization' (if we can still use this term) in the art world means, and also of what a fair can be.

OK: At this year's fair it became clear, perhaps more so than ever before, that the art fair has become 'the social context' of the art world. I had never seen so many international museum directors, collectors, patrons, and artists from around the world at the same time in the Middle East. On the one hand, this is fascinating as it suggests willingness for a conversation about the region – whether about the site or the artists who live there. However, it is perplexing that so many (not-for-profit) organizations gravitate more to the art fair than say, the biennial circuit. Do you think this is an illustration of a new kind of institutional openness/building, across sectors? Are we naïve to assume that the non-profit sector has nothing to gain from being at an art fair?

AC: The not-for-profit world also goes to the biennials and museum exhibitions, and so they should, or rather, everyone should. I do think there is a recognition that fairs can serve a particular function as meeting points, because all sectors of the art world are interconnected and many fairs nowadays have a 360-degree

view. Perhaps at Art Dubai, because of the diversity of the galleries/artists represented and because we're trying to ask urgent questions through the talks and the commissions, being at the fair is particularly vital. We're also aware that there is a particular pressure on museum directors and curators to understand their institutions as relevant to a domestic audience while having a global relevance; if they can come to Art Dubai and not only see a wide diversity of work by both emerging and established artists, but also meet all the key players, then they can gain a sense of what's happening beyond their borders. Whether we like it or not, these key art world-movers are time-poor; increasingly they see Art Dubai as a 'one-stop-shop' that enables them to connect with works, ideas, trends, conversations, as well as people.

And the not-for-profit sector has everything to gain from being at Art Dubai, even if they don't necessarily see themselves as part of fairs elsewhere! It's hard to talk of this sector as if it is one block – there is of course huge divergence within. But we're proud of our connections with the not-for-profit sector – more than half of Art Dubai's work is in this sector. We work in partnership with locally based institutions and foundations and these curators/administrators need access to artists, ideas, works, debate, as well as potential support for their projects from the many patrons and foundations that attend the fair.



Sara Al Haddad, *Therefore, Thereafter* (2014).
Courtesy Getty Images for Art Dubai 2014.

OK: You often talk about the multiplicity of projects, programmes and educational activities of Art Dubai. Indeed, one could even argue that some of the principles of how you run the fair are those of a not-for-profit organization. Four days of selling and in return you put on a yearlong arts programme. Do you think that the art fair context enables a different kind of agency when programming as such? Do you think an art fair can embody broader cultural tendencies versus the historic notion that this debate was reserved for biennials and museums?

AC: Of course, we're out there all year meeting institutions and collectors as well, to draw them into the fair, to benefit the galleries. Regarding programming

within this context, I think it's important to recognize the context of the fair and, indeed, to see it as a particular environment – one that throws open interesting questions about context, the market, the art world, as well as the UAE's place within that. Hence, we ask artists to create ephemeral or gestural projects that interact with the fair, its theatricality, and its environment (as part of Art Dubai Projects). The context of commerce and exchange of a fair is a particularly rich one for an artist to investigate, and I don't think it's something we should be squeamish about or seek to avoid. The very act of all these people converging on one space, looking at work together and talking to each other, is definitely one that encourages an investigation of broader cultural tendencies. Dubai's context as a hub forces us to reconsider the notion of centre/periphery – these days we tend to think a lot more about the threads that connect us with nearby neighbours and those within a broader geography across south-south and east-east.

OK: Have you or has anyone ever discussed what it might mean to structure the organization as a not-for-profit or perhaps have any not-for-profits developed from the context of Art Dubai, or do you think it is impossible to maintain investment and sustained interest without a commercial impetus for some of the investors?

AC: Our current structure seems to work for us: we're mindful of how to keep strong curatorial principles and a sense of investigation and independence within the talks/projects/not-for-profit side of the fair, while keeping the 'security' of the commercial structure. And the spark between everyone working at Art Dubai gives rise to good ideas and a dynamic spirit. The division between commercial and non-commercial can be exaggerated, especially in a context such as the Gulf where some commercial galleries act more like small, community-minded institutions while some foundations have a more commercial make-up. Some non-commercial organizations have far bigger budgets than the (apparently flashy) commercial. Likewise, the nature of public/private, state/independent in life, generally, can be somewhat blurred.

OK: I am really keen to further unfold the idea of arts education and institution-building in Dubai and more broadly, across the UAE and the Gulf. What role do you think the art fair should play in arts education and, indeed, how do the forms of education you have developed differ from more conventional arts education infrastructures across the UAE?

AC: I think the fair can play a vital role. The expansion of our educational programming came at the request of young people attending and volunteering at the fair each March, who asked us to fill (at that time) a vacuum that existed outside of major events. We thought, 'we can, we have the ideas, we're in constant dialogue with great artists and curators, so why not?' And hence Campus Art Dubai was created – now going into its third term – and is as much about community and support as learning. (This is a Saturday school that has a core class of 15 artists/curators/writers, who meet each week, plus a membership of 200, who attend monthly lectures. The 2014–15 lead tutor was Tirdad Zolghadr and we took 'mediation' as our topic, working through workshops, lectures, group projects, including producing a small publication.) A side-product of Campus is that working on this model with a brilliant cast of artists, curators, anthropologists and others has sparked a long-term

investigation about the nature of arts education, in a place like Dubai, where we have a chance to think anew.



Baya, *Joueuse de mandore* (1986), Watercolor and gouache on paper, Dimensions 65x50 cm.
Courtesy Elmarsa.

OK: While on the point of educating – this year's Art Dubai hosted its first focus on Middle Eastern modernist masters, Art Dubai Modern. Do you feel that it is possible to use the fair as a site to ignite conversations about alternative modernisms? Do you think it is the local or international audience who really responded to this context?

AC: Absolutely. We discussed this a lot with the curatorial committee (Kristine Khouri, Catherine David, Nada Shabout and Savita Apte) and it was a challenge when beginning the research – just how little documentation is out there. We're discussing some ideas for 2015, to cast the net wider, beyond art, to create

context through literature and music. The regional audiences were particularly responsive – history has either moved very fast (i.e. in the Gulf), or been stalled or fragmented in some way (i.e. in Lebanon or Pakistan), so to 'take stock' was a privilege. And then we had an overwhelming response from international museum curators in particular, many of whom are looking to connect anew with the modern period, having only 'become international' in the past decade, and through the contemporary. Modern allows them to trace lines of influence back through the twentieth century – which was, of course, always 'global', before 'globalization' was coined.

Antonia Carver is the director of Art Dubai (www.artdubai.ae), the leading international fair for the Middle East and South Asia, and home to the Global Art Forum and Art Dubai Projects. Based in the UAE for the past decade, she has written extensively on Middle Eastern art and film, as a correspondent for *The Art Newspaper* and *Screen International*, among other publications, and edited books and journals. She joined *Bidoun* as an editor in 2004 and later became director of the Middle Eastern arts organization's projects division, co-curating educational workshops, film and video series, the touring Bidoun Library, artists' commissions and talks, among other projects. Antonia is on the Arab film programming committee for the Dubai International Film Festival. Before moving to Dubai in 2001, she was based in London and worked at Phaidon, the Institute of International Visual Arts and G+B Arts International.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Omar Kholeif

Omar Kholeif is an Egyptian-born, UK curator, writer and editor. He is Curator at The Whitechapel Gallery, London, Curator at Large at Cornerhouse and HOME, Manchester and Senior Editor of *Ibraaz*. Previously he was Head of Art and Technology at SPACE, London and Curator at FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool. Kholeif has also been Artistic Director at the Arab British Centre and founding director of the UK's Arab Film Festival. In 2012, he was a co-curator of the Liverpool Biennial.

Omar writes for the international press and was a founding editor of Portal 9, an Arabic-English journal of urbanism and architecture. His most recent publications include, *Vision, Memory and Media* (Liverpool University Press, 2010), *Far and Wide: Nam June Paik* (Leonardo, 2013) and *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* (Cornerhouse Books, 2014). Kholeif holds degrees from the University of Glasgow and the Royal College of Art, London. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a member of AICA, the International Association of Art Critics.