

Global Art Forum 9

Sheyma Buali in conversation with Turi Munthe and Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi

Sheyma Buali



Cécile B. Evans, *What A Feeling*, 2014.
Courtesy the artist.

Turi Munthe and Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, Co-directors of the 2015 Global Art Forum 9 (GAF) 'Download: Update?', are like yin and yang when reflecting on technology and interconnectivity. Munthe, a London-based tech advisor and entrepreneur presents a more ominous, wearier concept of a phenomenon that seems to be accelerating so fast it may be leaving humanity behind. While Al-Qassemi, a UAE-based Middle East commentator on politics and culture, has an assuredness that with this tech-wave, a well-deserved momentum is gained. In this interview, they discuss their intentions to generate a debate on how technology has affected the development of art and culture in the Gulf region and beyond.

[ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY: TURI MUNTHE](#)

Sheyma Buali: How did you get involved with the Global Art Forum?

Turi Munthe: I suppose the thing that interests me most is the politics of technology. I think that that really does have an impact on nearly everything. I suppose it does make sense to bring that element of the conversation into the Global Art Forum.

Sh.B: Regarding the title, 'Download: Update?' Why is it a question?

TM: There were a series of ideas. One of the interesting things about 'Download: Update' is where it is happening. Are we just trying to understand the state of tech? Or are we trying to understand whether we have been taken over by tech? How ready are we for the tech around us? That is what the question is for me. This is an overview of where all the various different kinds of trends around us are right now, and how they impact our daily lives. This relates to a suggestion I have had in my head for the longest time: once, the things that we could conceive of could not get built. But now it seems like things might've reversed: it seems like the things which exist already, we can't quite conceive of. So the technology that is available to us today, is already more advanced than we are able to conceptualize; it is sort of waiting for us to catch up. I am interested in that pool, and that is probably why our question is about looking at whether we are catching up with technology, or if technology is catching up with us. My concern is that it is the former.

Sh.B: You are quoted as saying that 'most symposia that tackle the theme of technology believe in the technology. We know it exists. We just don't worship it.'

TM: I may be oversensitive, but my feeling has been that there has not been an enormous amount of critical approach to technology. I think for most people technology means progress. There is a history to that: at the beginning, the internet was a profoundly idealistic anarchic project about this free sharing of information; a kind of republic of letters of sorts. And I think that probably informed a lot of the early companies that ended up building the web. I think that is shifting. We are starting to wonder if the companies that are running the web now are as wonderful as the Internet was initially supposed to be. And there are a couple of trends there, it starts with an explosion of different approaches and then ends up quite rapidly with consolidation. That happened with the railway industry in the U.S., it happened in the last period of the industrial revolution, it happened with print, radio, television. It has happened amazingly quickly with the Internet, partly because it is an accelerator, everything happens much faster. That wonderful republic of letters that it started off with means that you have economies of scale and a capacity for scale to achieve things at a much, much faster rate.

This consolidation across the industry should make us nervous about where the power is. It's not diffuse; it's very centralized. But also, there is a cultural shift in the approaches of many of the people who are engaged in this world, which in large part is informed by venture capital and the need for massive exits, and the fact that it has become an extraordinarily successful, financial field. By now, we have gotten used to technology a little bit more. I have a feeling the last year or two have been pivotal in the way technology works, with the NSA, what's happened with Snowden, the collaboration between government and corporations regarding surveillance and so on. Perhaps a little bit less worshipful, to go back to that word.

Sh.B: Going back to how much things have accelerated, the GAF will touch on media, and you have a long background in journalism. In terms of the interaction, production, and perhaps, once again, the libertarian aspect of the web, even the existence of certain web-practices has accelerated. How do you think the difference between the passive and active user on the web has, or will continue to, change?

TM: Just to give a little history: you start off with a whole bunch of existing practices, which are just translated onto the web, and then the web takes them over. In media, newspapers went online slowly and kept on producing in the same kind of way. In parallel, everybody and their dog realized the web gave them a platform for expression. So when the blog first arrived, everyone got involved. In fact it was most picked up in countries where there wasn't necessarily a huge amount of freedom of expression. I believe at the beginning of the blogging craze, the second most common language was Farsi. So there was this explosion of citizen engagement, self-publishing essentially, but then people realized that to keep on writing you need to keep on

reading. And so it massively shrank back again. And we ended up teasing out the place that we like best, the citizen, the great public gets to get engaged with media. And its in the correction, its in comments, its in tweeting, liking, pushing, it's the social network affect. That is the role that the public now plays in media. Again, without being too despondent about it, this promised utopia of everybody's engagement has settled into something quite interesting which is a hybrid model of professional curators, editors and parses of social media and the rest of us who contribute as witnesses or offer opinions to what happens around us. And we have all kinds of different tools to do that. I suppose one of the key things that emerge out of this is that destination sites don't exist anymore. Very few people go to BBC.co.uk or *The New York Times* webpage. Mostly, they come to these sites via their Facebook stories, or their Twitter feed. Which has given a huge amount of power to us: the great public. Rather than content creators, we are the distribution channels for other people's content. But of course, there has been this shift in the last five to ten years: conceptions around people formerly known as 'audience' and people formerly known as 'professionals' continue to change.

Sh.B: Yes, the power of choice should give us the power to eliminate.

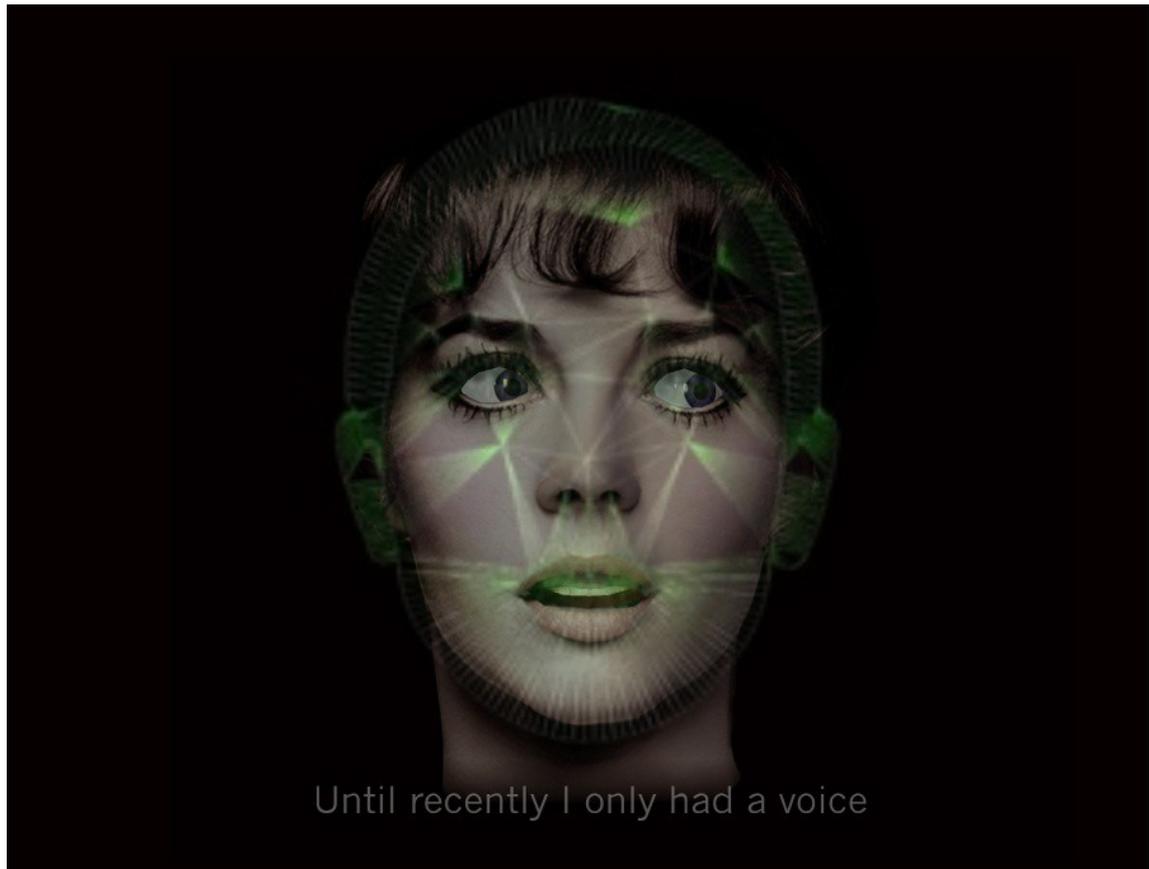
TM: You would have thought that because we have that power we can weave things out and have extraordinary quality of work. But it turns out, of course, that we are as vulgar as the producers of vulgar stuff. There is a very peculiar phenomena, which is that the more choice we have, the more likely we are to turn to a listicle about teeth whitening rather than a deep investigative piece about torture.

Sh.B: It's true, I'm easily distracted by the sidebar: notorious #belfies and botched plastic surgeries...Can you tell me more about the metaphorical search engine you are working on: technology with something of a philosophical edge?

TM: There are bits of technology that, as we were saying before, if we have the smarts and the imagination can create real magic. So the idea of a metaphorical search engine is quite spectacular. But that is a conceptual leap rather than a technological leap; of language processing and crowd sourced human work and thinking. That combination is really fascinating. And there are lots of these instances around the internet, the world and technology. The core thing is that you hear about them less because the world of tech that we read about is a world of business.

Sh.B: What are you looking forward to most at the Forum?

TM: The couple of times that I have been there before, the Forum has always been as special because a lot of really smart people with nothing to prove to each other, from very varied fields, just enjoying gratuitous conversation. As a participant that feels extremely privileged. There is nothing utilitarian going on there. Everyone is outside their natural field, they are talking to people with life experiences and practices that are miles from where they are. All kinds of fabulous things emerge out of that. It's kind of wonderful. So if that happens among the participants and we can make it happen on stage, it's a special environment. I like the feeling of GAF as much as the particular ideas that are being discussed.



Cécile B. Evans, *Suddenly The Human Voice - La Voix Humaine*, 2014.

Courtesy the artist.

[ON THE PRACTICE OF THE WWW: SULTAN SOUD AL-QASSEMI](#)

Sh.B: Dubai is home ground for the GAF, what will Kuwait offer that's new this year?

Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi: We decided to take the GAF to Kuwait this year as a way of acknowledging and recognizing Kuwait 's pioneering role as a launch pad for the globalization of Gulf culture. The proliferation of culture and art that is coming out of the Gulf today had its roots in the 1950's and 60's in Kuwait. Historically, Kuwait has always been the most globalized city in the Gulf. It attracted a lot of artists and galleries, it attracted theatre, and films were being made there.

Sh.B: The title, 'Download: Update?' Why is it a question?

S.Q: The title of the forum is '*tahmeel tahdith*?', or 'Download: Update.' Which is the question you get when you have your laptop on and there's a new update. It's a question mark: do you want to download the update? Do you want to refresh your computer and bring in the newer software? In Arabic the actual message would be *tahmeel tahdith*? So that is our forum theme.

Sh.B: There is going to be a panel on communication technologies in the Gulf – what is unique about communication technologies in the Gulf?

S.Q: What makes Gulf communication technologies special is that for the last few decades, the Gulf people have been disconnected people from the rest of the world. They used to just be the receivers of information. In the beginning, you had radio channels, movies, music coming from India, Africa, the rest of the Arab world. It came from BBC Arabic, RadioBerlin Arabic, from Cairo *Sawt Alarab* – so it was always on a receiving end of the spectrum. The Gulf Arabs have turned this upside down and started becoming broadcasters, not only locally but regionally and now internationally. So they have really taken this technology, adopted it and used it to their own advantage. They have globalized their own culture. This really sets the Gulf apart from other parts of the world.

Sh.B: What can the world learn from that?

S.Q: I think the world can learn not to underestimate the downtrodden, not to underestimate the people who are disconnected, the people who don't have a voice; because within a decade or two, they can make their voice and not only broadcast it but help others broadcast their own voices. Now, there is a lot of production in the Gulf; Bollywood movies are being filmed in Dubai, artists from the Middle East, Iran and other parts of the Arab world are all based in the region. There are art fairs, Art Dubai and others, as well as biennials, exhibitions, galleries; there has been a major proliferation of art and culture that has not only benefited people from the Gulf, but

from the region as a whole. If you want to buy Indian, Turkish, Arab or Middle Eastern art in general, you really have to come to the Gulf to do. That was unimaginable two decades ago.

Sh.B: And what can the world learn from that in technological terms?

S.Q: In terms of technology, imagine that today, Riyadh is among the top ten cities for Twitter globally. This is a city that was seen as isolated; people had the impression that it was disconnected from the rest of the world. But it is actually among the most connected. So this is just an example of the wrong impressions people have about the Gulf. Technologies are being used by people not only to speak to each other, but to communicate with politicians, to communicate with writers and publications, and to produce art. So many artists in the Gulf are using Instagram to sell their work. They don't have gallery representation, yet they are selling internationally and I think this is more common in the Gulf than anywhere else in the world. It's amazing. So many Saudis started their comedy careers by producing and uploading 20-second short videos on to YouTube. A lot of them now make a lot of money out of it.

Sh.B: Absolutely, instagram shops are creating a whole new hipster digital souq scene in Bahrain. But the use of YouTube in Saudi is very much instigated by overcoming censorship and bureaucracy.

S.Q: Bureaucracy is one of the biggest barriers to finding talent in the Gulf. A lot of people were making their work and uploading, sure it was raw, but it was accessible. After they get hundreds of thousands of hits, old media channels had no choice but to hire them and make them mainstream. Of course, this has its advantages and disadvantages: their works starts to go through a lot of layers and edits, for example, and it may lose its freshness – but still they are able of make a living out of this.

Sh.B: Is the Kuwaiti leg of the GAF organized to be as international as the Dubai sessions?

S.Q: Actually, we have speakers from Saudi, Bahrain, America, Palestine, Lebanon – it's pretty regional. In reaching out to Kuwait, we wanted to highlight diverse practices as well as the rich culture emanating from Kuwait itself. This is a decision me consciously made. It wasn't by accident that we have a diverse group of Kuwait-based people. Since this is the first GAF in Kuwait, we really wanted to highlight that.

[Sh.B: Last year's Kuwait session in Dubai, which included Farah Al-Nakib, Christine Khoury and Sulayman Al-Bassam talking about architecture, art and theatre in the 1970's, was among my favourites.](#)

S.Q: This will be that times 10.

Sh.B: There haven't been that many sessions announced yet – is there anything you want to sneak preview for us, either from Kuwait or Dubai?

S.Q: We have a session on technology and the identity of women. This will be chaired by Alanoud Alsharekh, who is one of the greatest scholars on Gulf sociology and women; she will be joined by two speakers from Saudi, the academic Dr. May Al-Dabbagh, and artist Manal Al-Dowayan; they will be speaking together because they are working on a project together which they will be announcing for the first time at the Global Art Forum. Another session is on young writers, which will be moderated Taleb Rifai, a Kuwaiti author and undersecretary in the government who was a very active in the cultural and academic worlds in Kuwait. The session will include Lana Shamma, who is a Palestinian American working at Bloomsbury Qatar. They will discuss how they use technology to reach out to writers and how they publish young writers from the Gulf, and how these publishers get globalized and published in English. Kuwaiti writer Mai Al-Nakib will join them to speak about her experience publishing in English for the first time. The session will acknowledge the globalization of young writers from the Gulf.

Sh.B: What are you really looking forward to at the GAF?

S.Q: We've been working on this for months, it's like asking me to choose between my kids! But to be honest with you, I have a keen interest in two of the sessions, one of which I am moderating myself, with Dr. Sulaiman Al-Askari, who is a pioneer in the Gulf: he published *Al Arabi* magazine back in 1957. Now in his his seventies, he'll be telling us about how *Al Arabi* became the first globalised Gulf publication. It was the first answer from the Gulf to the rest of the world and included a lot of Gulfie and Kuwaiti writers but also the best writers from Syria, Palestine, Egypt and Morocco. So even though I am moderating this, I am very excited about it. I feel I'm going to have to keep my voice to a minimum. The other session I am really keen on is the breakdown of the entire two days of sessions by the Kuwaiti collective, Nuqat. They will be giving us a round up. All the sessions will be interesting and that is really the truth.

Turi Munthe is a media and journalism entrepreneur, with an interest in social enterprise, politics and the Middle East. In 2007, he founded Demotix, the multi-award winning citizen newswire. He advises, works with and invests in new media start-ups.

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi is a commentator on political, social and economic issues in the Middle East. His columns appear in the *Financial Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *the Independent* and *the Guardian*. Al Qassemi is an MIT Media Lab Director's Fellow and the Founder of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

For more information on 'Download Update?' Global Art Forum 9, follow this link:
<http://artdubai.ae/global-art-forum/2015>.

About the author

[Sheyma Buali](#)

[Sheyma Buali](#) is Commissioning Editor (Ibraaz Channel) for Ibraaz.