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WHAT ARE THE DYNAMICS SHAPING ART CRITICISM IN THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST?

Stephanie Sykes

This question set the course for the first of a series of four talks accompanying *To The Holy Lands*, an exhibition at the DIFC of original 19th century black and white photographs of holy pilgrimages to the Middle East. The Photographs are on loan to the Dubai Cultural and Arts Authority from the Reiss-Engelhorn Museum, Germany.

The panel, organised by START's Sonia Brewin, featured Janet Bellotto, artist, curator and Assistant Professor of Art & Design at Zayed University, Chris Lord, Arts & Culture Editor for *Time Out Dubai*, and Talal Moualla,

artist, curator and critic. Representing Art Dubai was moderator Laura Trelford, Education Manager, and myself, Stephanie Sykes, Communications Manager. The panellists, each hailing from different professional backgrounds, provided a kaleidoscopic perspective about their personal engagement with art critique.

Janet Bellotto spoke from the viewpoint of an arts educator and writer moving from Canada to the UAE. As a professor, she is dedicated to informing the next generation of art critics and believes it is crucial to propose critique as a way to raise questions and discussion. While it is important to draw upon references, she maintains that regular dialogue is a key factor to art criticism and emphasises the importance of learning to talk about art.

Chris Lord addressed the cultural shift he encountered having transitioned from a Western background to writing for *Time Out Dubai*. As an arts editor for a Middle Eastern publication, there is a constant pressure to instantly absorb a new canon of references that extend beyond the investigations of place and society many journalists impose on local artists. Yet, he does not lament this challenge as a limitation; rather, he utilises it as a tool to push his understanding of regional artistic production further, which ultimately impacts his capacities as a writer and critic.

Talal Moualla, the only Arabic speaker and regional representative on the panel, discussed the lack of resources available to nurture critique in the UAE. The Emirates do not have a long tradition of scholarly art criticism, and the deficiency of published material, combined with a near absence of academic environments that discuss critique as an autonomous artistic function, leave the field neglected and unrefined.

I suggested that critique in Dubai exists primarily in traditional forms, and in order for Dubai's young art community to be sustainable, these forms must be expanded upon. Artistic production alone is not enough to make an art centre thrive; there must be discourse that questions boundaries, keeps ideas fresh and innovative and ultimately influences the market. I argued that artistic production and criticism is a vital form of conversation. It is a response to a proposition offered by artists, and in order for it to move forward, critique must be self-critical and perhaps offer new opportunities to produce something creative.

In response to the panel, an intense debate sparked amongst the audience highlighting the need for critics to familiarise themselves with local references and culture in order to have a deeper understanding of the work being produced. However, if Dubai is indicative of the UAE's future, the emirate has become one of the most multi-national places on the planet with Emirati nationals composing just 12% of the population. How is one able to identify a "local" culture in Dubai? With a population of 88% expatriates representing most cultural pockets of the world, it can be argued that "local" has become a fusion (or collision) of all these various cultures. While it is important to learn the traditions of Emirati culture, it is undeniable that in its current state, it has been deeply influenced by its coexistence with expatriate cultural practice.

Another issue that arose was a critique upon the UAE's short history of art writing and discussion. Talal Moualla encouraged the local art community to draw upon the scholastic traditions of its regional neighbours, including Lebanon, Egypt and Syria, each of which boasts a rich history of artistic production and discourse.

The UAE is an extremely young state, and it is easy to forget that its contemporary art activity was exposed to an international platform just three years ago. While it is true that artistic discourse is not deeply rooted in the UAE's tradition of humanities, there is now the exciting opportunity to strengthen existing forms of critique and develop new ones, and active players in the UAE's art community find themselves uniquely positioned to establish a canon for future generations of art thinkers.

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