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Why Does the Euro-Med need to Support and Develop Contemporary Art and Exchange? The importance of young contemporary artists in the current context

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SUMMARY

1. The West's 'discovery'

High-end art auction houses are netting millions of euros in sales, and government-sponsored exhibitions of 'Arab contemporary art' are touring to Arab and European capitals. Yet, is this the contemporary art which young, experimental artists are making, or safe, 'collectable' work which is acceptable to the 'establishment' in Arab countries?

2. What about contemporary art which asks questions?

The contemporary art practiced by young artists today is provocative in its enquiry into society's practices and is a counterpoint to simplistic popular messaging. It seeks an audience with the capacity to engage with the complexity and unanswerable questions of current life. This type of work is not well supported by either public or private sectors, yet it is precisely the kind of experience which helps to form critical, active citizenship.

3. Why is contemporary art important?

Media and politics collude to diffuse pre-defined messages rather than objective information. Experience with contemporary art can help develop creative, critical, imaginative thought necessary for redefining the values which we need for today's world. Projects which bring young artists to a greater public, both inside and beyond national borders in the EuroMed, support democratic practices and thus should be linked to education in its widest definition, 'art as education'.

4. Whose contemporary is it?

Although 'contemporary' has been closely associated with the West, non-Western artists are experimenting with the same spirit of subjective questioning of reality to make art which is linked to the political in its investigation of interpretations of the past and the present. In this sense, 'contemporary' can belong to any culture, and is a positive contribution to society's continual reconstruction.

5. Good practice models

Despite old fashioned, institutional or non-adventurous cultural policies and the lack of a developed market, the contemporary arts scene in the Med has witnessed a remarkable evolution over last 10 years, and good practice models do exist, including the (slow) development of sources of public and private support. That young Palestinian artist, Emily Jacir, won a Golden Lion at last year's Venice Biennale, is a testament to the value of young contemporary creators from the south Med and should prove the need for supportive policies and programmes from their own public and private sectors, as well as from EuroMed policies and programmes.

6. Why contemporary art by young Mediterranean artists needs to be supported, and how

Supporting such work will help ease the threat of brain drain, and simulate opportunities for inter-sectoral collaboration with formal and informal education, leading to a more informed public. Policy makers, public and private funders can gain by dialoguing with young creators, whose perspectives reflect non-institutional realities. Providing mobility and networking support for contemporary artists and cultural operators will lead to the development and diffusion of new models, innovative solutions and provide the basic ingredient for mutual understanding.

Why Does the Euro-Med need to Support and Develop Contemporary Art and Exchange? The importance of young contemporary artists in the current context

1. The West's 'discovery'?

A quick google search for "contemporary Arab artists" reveals that the high-end art market has certainly discovered contemporary Arab visual arts.

On 24th October 2007, Sotheby's Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art Auction made over 1.5 million British Pounds – *almost 1.9 million euros*. Christie's International Modern & Contemporary Art auction, taking place in Dubai on April 30 2008, with the help of banking sponsor Credit Suisse, is expected to reach *11 million US Dollars*. In March this year, Paris gallery owner Enrico Navarra (Jean-Michel Basquiat, Chinese contemporaries...) launched a new, glossy art book on contemporary Arab art at the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi. In July 2008, the first PAX art fair in Liverpool will take place, focusing on contemporary Arab art. The press release says,

*"Just like Chinese art, contemporary Arab art is expected to be the next big thing in the global art market. The interest in this art is growing at a fast pace, and the success of Arab art sales that were held lately in London and Dubai are reversing the perception of Arab art by art lovers. Experts consider that Arab art is currently undervalued, and as such **it's a good time to buy into this particular market.**"*

Not only Swiss banks, art auction houses, wealthy art collectors and galleries have discovered a new market, but governments too: On 25 February, the contemporary art exhibition "Arab Artists in Italy and the Mediterranean" opened at the Khan Assad Pasha in Damascus in the presence of the Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa. The exhibition, *organised by the Italian Foreign Ministry under the auspices of the League of Arab States*, and conceived by the Italian Foreign Ministry in Rome is done in conjunction with the events celebrating "Damascus, Arab Cultural Capital for 2008". It will travel to Beirut, Cairo and finally back to Italy before moving to the Maghreb countries. In Cairo, a section of the exhibition will be displayed at the *Arab League headquarters* to underscore the political as well as cultural dimension of the initiative.

What's going on here? Political chic? What kind of contemporary art is being sold and exhibited? 1950's French retro?, calligraphic abstracts? , swarovsky crystals?...

How is it that Egypt, a country which physically punishes homosexuality as illegal, is proud to host a contemporary art exhibition? Perhaps we are speaking about a certain kind of contemporary art: that which is collectable, marketable, whose price will appreciate with each international exposure, which will grace the glossy pages of coffee-table books too heavy to lift and the walls of penthouse apartments, and which perhaps does not pose overly-embarrassing questions about the current societies and political structures out of which it arose.

Isn't there another 'scene' going on which is not quite so marketable?

2. What about contemporary art which asks questions?

There is another kind of contemporary art which does not so easily reach the google heights – that which is proposed by young experimental, interdisciplinary artists, *artists who are interrogating rather than celebrating*, for whom the prefix 're' is central: re-locating, re-positioning, re-configuring, re-flecting, re-presenting.....

Contemporary art looks at society; observes; reflects current issues; comments; provokes thought; looks from alternative perspectives. Young artists act as sensitive antennae picking up what is all around them and representing it in order to *engage its public in a joint reflection* on its chosen topic

This art requires some *work on the part of the public*: it is often complex, mysterious, layered, deliberately ambiguous, unsettling. It does not conclude, summarise, answer or decide. Experience with this sort of work is a kind of mental training in unpicking what seem obvious, in questioning received information, in looking at issues through other perspectives

It is this type of contemporary art which is critically needed in the Euro Med today. it is this type which outside of the institutional circuits and does not benefit from the high end art market, public support or supportive cultural policies.

With the possible exception of some parts of Spain, *public support for emerging artists is meagre* in Portugal and Italy, not to mention in the countries south of the Med,. Following the recent elections in Italy which decisively brought the Right wing to power, the arts sector is holding its breath, waiting for the public subsidy cuts to start. Italian projects which link to countries like Turkey, Albania, Morocco etc are feeling that their days are numbered.

And a recent, soon-to-be published study on the status of the artist in non-European Med countries, undertaken by the Roberto Cimetta Fund (with UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the Anna Lindh Foundation and the European Cultural Foundation) clearly shows that independent artists and groups especially suffer from a lack of the kinds of basic legal and social status which are given to ordinary workers. They also lack the kind of well-structured professional environment which would allow for a reasonable career path : arts and arts management training, a multi-facteted ladder of progressively challenging jobs, a reasonable employment market with job possibilities at all levels in society, an informed public interested to engage with their work.

If the EuroMed political rhetoric today calls repeatedly for an *active, informed citizenship*, public consultations, appreciation for the benefits that the EuroMed Process can bring and greater understanding between cultures, shouldn't a discipline such as this type of enquiring art be supported more?

3. Why is contemporary art important?

It goes without saying that we live in a globalised context characterised by sound bites, easy-to-digest popular politics, black and white 'analyses', simplified prejudices, paternalist, if not corporate-style political leaders, who do indeed conclude, summarise, answer and decide on behalf of their constituents, clients or subjects.

As I am writing this article, the International Herald Tribune is running a nine page article on the discovery that the Pentagon has been systematically 'briefing' hundreds of former high ranking military officers who regularly serve the major – and international- broadcast media in the USA as supposedly 'objective military analysts'. Called 'surrogates' by the Pentagon, these former generals are also almost all working as advisors, Board members or lobbyists for weapons manufacturers. They were briefed, sometimes on an almost daily basis, by Donald Rumsfeld, and all but a few happily carried their hand-fed misinformation to a population which is supposed to live in a well-informed democracy. "A few expressed regret for participating in what they regarded as an effort to dupe the American public with propaganda dressed as independent military analysis."¹

That this happens is not really surprising; that it also exists in other countries is certain. The level of propagandist misinformation in the EuroMed countries is at least as high. Don't we need to foster a *healthy degree of questioning* in our populations, and especially amongst young people?

A.L. Kennedy, the Scottish writer who recently won the Costa Literature Prize for her novel, "Day" about the Second World War, highlights today's urgency for participation in *creative thought*. She says, "Raphael Lemkin² defined the precursors to genocide as preventing a population from expressing itself and from having an imagination...from redefining themselves..... And if you can no longer exercise your imagination because it has atrophied, you [only] have reality television... your life is so miserable that you really need programmes about people who are excessively miserable to make you feel better.... But use of the imagination means that you can make your life or someone else's life better ... It means you have the imagination to change the government, to know when you're being lied to".³

Imaginative, interrogative, critical thought is not necessarily a skill essential for actively inhabiting our complex and rapidly mutating world, but it is necessary if we want to *ensure to avoid a future based solely on materialism* as the only 'value' in society, or the *withdrawal into one's own, closed community* as the only survival strategy.

Indeed, Nehad Selaiha writes of the importance of contemporary art to demonstrate complexity as a positive process, "in opting for diversity and complexity, and in citing originality, 'an independent way of looking at the world', and the urge and artistic capacity to communicate it as her criteria of choice, Frie Leysen [Artistic Director MMP5] ended up putting together more than just a successful artistic encounter.

¹ International Herald Tribune, 20 April 2008

² Legal expert, writer, creator of the word 'genocide' in "Axis Rule in Occupied Europe", Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944

³ Interview with A.L. Kennedy, The Guardian

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/costa2007/story/0,,2245842,00.html>

The fact that every Arab artist who fits these criteria invariably happens to be a rebel, a dissenter, an exile, or a deserted outcast on some godforsaken fringe in his/her country gave the whole event a pronounced political profile. By embracing such artists, and allowing them to move freely across the Arab world and Europe, and communicate their uncensored thoughts and images to people in truly democratic spaces, Meeting Points 5 has gone, wittingly or otherwise, and albeit for only a short time, beyond the merely artistic, acting as a force of liberation, a concerted campaign in defence of political and artistic freedom.”⁴

Nehad Selaiha was reviewing the Young Arab Theatre Fund’s Mediterranean Meeting Points 5, an international and multidisciplinary contemporary arts festival which took place in November 2007 in 9 cities in the Arab world: Amman, Damascus, Beirut, Ramallah, Alexandria, Cairo, Minia, Tunis and Rabat as well as Berlin and Brussels. The festival presented theatre, dance, visual arts, film and video, and music by young Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean artists, with a majority of artists from the Arab world

It is this kind of contemporary art that does not earn 11 million dollars at auctions in Dubai, but whose ‘collectors’ are a bit closer to the people whose lives are addressed by the work. And it is this type of work which actually *needs to be closer to more people*, starting with kids in schools, families and students at university. This is not art in education, but rather art as education: mental training to engage more fully in our local and global society.

4. Whose contemporary is it?

Some critics challenge the very notion of ‘contemporary art’ as being yet another imposition of the West, possibly deriving from the individualism born from the Protestant Reformation’s demand for individual interpretation of religious texts. Yet non-Western artists all over the world are defining their own ‘contemporary’, appropriate to their own cultures and contexts, yet still keeping the essential elements of enquiry and re-definition of the status quo.⁵

Nehad Selaiha again, “...Even when the theme has nothing to do with war, sectarian violence, military occupation, the destruction of cities and the souls of their inhabitants, or the struggle to survive in a ruthless, capitalist society -- even when the theme of the work is purely artistic and highly specialized.... or intimately subjective and woven out of personal memories..... one can detect, in the very style of the performance, in the dialogue of forms, the deconstructivist tactics, the breaking down of the familiar and synthesizing the fragments in new and strange ways, a subtle political dimension. And when I say 'political', I mean political in the broadest and most profound sense of the word -- a sense which involves a perception of reality as a socio-historical/ideological construct, supported by an invisible web of power relations, a radical questioning of this reality, and an honest, unflinching investigation of one's relation to the world -- to people, cities, nature and history.”

As Nanjo Fumio, Director of Tokyo’s Mori Museum has said, “Contemporary Japanese artists create work which is not mere imitation of the West but has an inner essence which can only have come from their own culture”.

⁴ “Bonding across borders” Al Ahram Weekly Online, 15 - 21 November 2007, Issue No. 871

⁵ “The Culture of Light Project / Asian Culture Hub Gwangju : Concept, Vision and Strategy” Korean Minister of Culture and Tourism, Seoul 2005

This is the challenge of the young artist: to remain true to her/himself while reflecting the dilemmas of the globalised, evolving society. And in doing this, s/he contributes to the constant rebuilding of that society.

5. Good practice models

Although artists and cultural operators, especially but not only in the South Med, still have to have two or three jobs in order to subsidise their art work, the changes which have taken place in the Med contemporary arts landscape over the last 10 years are enormous. Another google search (using advanced search techniques, it has to be admitted) can reveal several good examples:

- "**AIW:A** is inviting applications for its 2-week workshop residency program in Aley, Lebanon from the 17th of August until the 1st of September 2008.

The workshop is process oriented, supports experimentation in all media and is targeted at emerging to mid career artists in all fields; encouraging contemporary work in painting, drawing, sculpture, installation, video, performance and sound." ⁶

- "The fourth edition of the **Home Works** forum will take place from 12 to 20 April 2008 in different venues around Beirut. As usual, it will be an interdisciplinary event featuring lectures, panels, exhibitions, film and video screenings, and publications.

As a title, the term "Home Works" suggests an intertwining of public and private spheres, the outside world of work and the inside space of home. In referring to the exercises, lessons and research problems worked out by students repetitively and in solitude, "Home Works" implies a process of internal excavation, digging and burrowing deeper all the while constructing and accumulating new practices.

This year, the Forum proposes for thematic axes: disaster, catastrophe, recomposing desire and sex practices."

- Culture Resource (**Al Mawred Al Thaqa**) is a "regional, non-profit organisation that supports artistic creativity in the Arab region and encourages cultural exchanges within and beyond the Arab world. Their work is based on an appreciation of the value of the Arab cultural heritage and an awareness of the need for a new Arab creativity that liberates the imagination and stimulates progress. Culture Resource also believes that artistic and literary activities are a social necessity that demands moral and material support by all active powers in the society." Funded by European, American and international foundations, it organises events, offers training and gives grants.

These are but a few of the most well-known examples (the **Young Arab Theatre Fund** is another) of pioneering work of committed individuals, funded by international foundations and sponsors. But there are signs that the private sector is also capable of responding to the non-safe, more experimental type of work:

⁶ This workshop is part of the Triangle Arts Network of workshops currently active in 20 countries. The Triangle Arts Trust, established in 1982 by Robert Loder and Anthony Caro, is organised as a network of artist-led workshops that encourages experimentation, and cross-media exchange.

- "A unique opportunity for international curators to work with artists from the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. The **Abraaj Capital⁷ Art Prize** is designed to raise awareness of innovative and experimental work being created by artists working in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia. As well as providing international recognition, the prize will provide the opportunity for artists to work alongside established international curators and to show individual exhibitions of their work in Art Dubai 2009. By working with a curator, it is hoped that each successful artist will be able to develop their work through creative collaboration whilst widening their international reputation. Additionally, a work from each artist will form the basis of a corporate collection that will over time reflect the changing concerns of art practice in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia."

Perhaps most encouragingly:

On 17 October 2007, the International Jury of the Venice Biennale's 52nd International Art Exhibition assigned a Golden Lion to **Emily Jacir** for her ongoing work "Material for a film". The press release mentions, "The award for an artist under 40 is given for a practice that takes as its subject exile in general and the Palestinian issue in particular. Without recourse to exoticism, the work ...establishes and expands a crossover between cinema, archival documentation, narrative and sound."

Jacir's work is an installation documenting the 1972 assassination of Palestinian writer, Wael Zuaiter, "the first victim in Europe of a series of assassinations committed by Israeli agents on Palestinian artists, intellectuals and diplomats that was already underway in the Middle East."⁸

.. proving that engaged, interdisciplinary, complex contemporary art from young south Mediterranean creators is worthy of world respect – isn't it also worthy of support from their own national and local sources of public and private funding as well as from the EuroMed funds?

6. Why contemporary art by young Mediterranean artists needs to be supported...and a final plea for mobility.

Even if it may be unrealistic to expect national ministries to rush to the support of work which questions government stances and policies, or even if in some cases the artists and arts organisations in question may not wish for official, institutional State support, means have to be found to ensure the continuation of best practice models and the encouragement of new actors:

- to foster brain *gain* in the EuroMed region and not brain *drain*

⁷ Abraaj Capital is the premier investment firm specialising in private equity investment in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia (MENASA) region. With over US\$4 billion of assets currently under management, Abraaj has pioneered institutionalizing private equity practice in the region and is setting trends and benchmarks for others to follow.

⁸ Jacir, Emily, artists statement to her installation at the 52nd Venice Biennale

- to encourage the development of informed, interested, critical and alert publics (and not just the educated elite)
- to support audience development, education and mediation with the different types of public, especially in the South Med
- to foster dialogue between policy makers and artists thereby opening up rigid and old fashioned local and national cultural policies
- to support and build training and professional infrastructure in models appropriate to the local conditions
- to give artists and cultural operators in the region a stronger voice and influence ensuring the pertinence of international funders' policies
- to support UNESCO aims for South-South networking , exchange and partnership without necessarily passing via the West , thereby ensuring more financial control and thus influence in the hands of the artists in the South

In addressing these objectives, a crucial aspect is the support of the *mobility of young creative artists and arts organisers*. Quoting Nehad Salaiha again, "It is a painful fact of life in the Arab world that artists, especially independent artists, have little opportunity of sharing their experiences with audiences across borders independent of governments." Professional mobility which allows individuals and groups the opportunity for comparing and contrasting artistic practices, innovative solutions to working conditions, inspirational models and alternative perspectives is an important source of creative nourishment.

The arguments for sharing information via *networking and mobility* are no longer new or radical. It has been proven again and again that networking leads to the collective creation of "intelligent higher-level behaviour". Science writer Steven Johnson is frank, "The simplest rule of all the systems I talk about is: learn from your neighbours."⁹

Travelling to colleagues' contexts, meeting and reflecting together is the stepping stone required to make some kind of reality out of the confused mantra of 'intercultural dialogue". It is only through initial and continued meeting and the inevitable misunderstanding that some kind of shift towards understanding can occur. As Swiss artists Adi Blum and Beat Mazenauer have written, "Communication is bound to fail if both of the partners know exactly what the conclusion will be. Communication can be seen as an open form of exchange in which only the conversation as a whole creates the meaning."¹⁰

Conclusion? Support young, contemporary artists in the countries of the EuroMed : support them, through a diversity of sources, in their own places, and support their networking amongst one another and in the world. Build the kind of professional infrastructures which any legitimate profession requires to achieve its potential. Ensure that their work is part of informal and formal education systems. Oh, and by the way, listen to what they have to say.....

⁹ Steven Johnson, "Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software", Simon and Schuster, 2001

¹⁰ Concept for IETM Plenary Meeting, Zürich, November 2008

