

Your browser does not support JavaScript! **Label Middle East**

Tate: Participants discuss controversial developments of contemporary Art in the Middle East



London, February 2009. The conference was presented as a major symposium focusing on recent developments of contemporary art in the Middle East. To a certain extent it was. But not only defining the very fragile region "Middle East" as a label revealed the obvious dilemma which artists, gallerists, curators, authors and critics from the Arabic region are confronted with, as the conference space in Tate Britain and Tate Modern also did.

by [Irmgard Berner](#)

A Living Tableau of Contrasts

Not entirely unselfishly, the organizers from Tate and the also London-based *International Curators Forum*

held the two day sessions within the *World Collections Programme*

(WCP). This programme aims to establish two-way partnerships with institutions in Asia and Africa, and increase their access to the UK collections and expertise, and thus, assumably, a further spread of British art-collections.

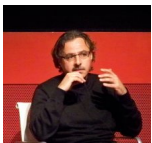
And that is the point which most of the speakers, artists and curators from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq kept admonishing: the change in the region has to come from inside not from outside. But "those who go, don't come back", says **Issa Touma**, photographer and founder of the Syrian festival "International Photography Gathering" and gallerist in Aleppo, Syria, "we don't have enough people to build serious things". So some leading Western cultural organisations act the good shepherd and people in the Middle East defend themselves in form and content against such neocolonial attitude, paternalism, and outside interference. Their principal message thus was to hold against stereotype expectations from the West. Predominant in the partly passionate, partly academic dry speeches, discussions and debates in the museum halls of the Tate rang the urge of emancipation from that kind of art which

matches the established current market and exhibition-business of the West and is, obvious or not, requested by directors of museums and fairs, curators and architects.



Western predominance and inner deficiencies

The young art-scene is targeting against large-scale projects like the planned branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. There are grave inner deficits within the autonomous growth and development of contemporary art in the Middle East as was shown in the lectures, panels and project-presentations. In such diverse scenes of, for example, Ramallah, Aleppo, Beirut, Dubai, and Cairo young contemporary arabic art has to deal with suspicion, distrust, ignorance, censorship, bans and interdictions. Networks, infrastructures, and schools have foremost to be built to offer means for developing ideas.



Sharjah, Riwaq and further Biennials

However, there is good news amidst distrust and financial crisis: Sharjah provides the 9th version of its popular biennial, founded in 1993. The smallest Emirate in the compound with Dubai and Abu Dhabi thus defies the massive financial crisis in the Gulf region. Accordingly lively **Khalil Rabah**, director of Riwaq-Biennial (founded in 2005), presented his challenging programme reading a list with names of 50 villages around Ramallah as if they were artists' names. In fact he revealed them as the playlist of this year's programme: the architecture of villages and towns take over the artist's part and reflect special cultural characteristics, and the history of the West Bank. Rabah's concept does not only allow us to forget the predominant images of ruins in the media, and does not deal with the well-to-do art-tourist, but is foremost searching for the debate in the location itself. He confronts new views with tradition, art and everyday life, artists and the local people.

Restrained self-criticism sounded through Issa Touma's lecture. The Syrian founder of "International Woman's Art Festival" took up the picture of the Arabian house as metaphor for a mentality shaped by mistrust, striving for power, and hermetic webs of relationships: "Our traditional houses are hostile to all communication, their central purpose is control", says Touma. Windows only served to survey the streets, not to look into the house. Touma counts on the arts to break up such patterns and structures and initiate a new way of thinking.



Also from outside, but with an interior point of view a remarkable magazine is being published against all restraints of klischees of the Middle East region that are wide-spread: [Bidoun](#) , Art and Culture from the Middle East.

Negar Azimi

, Iranian born and New York-based chief-editor and founder of the magazine in 2003, points out that there are always problems in communication translating from local Arab and Farsi languages into English and the other way round. Writing about art and its translations is a work in progress as is the whole project Bidoun - which in Farsi means "nothing". Its aim is to connect East and West in putting questions, initiating debates, destabilizing prejudice and rearticulating important issues.



New positions counter the art-hype

Against this background, also 9th Sharjah Biennale, starting on March 16th, will put different emphasis, as **Jack Persekian**, artistic director of the fair, says on the verge of the conference. Because besides the invited, internationally well-known positions like Ayse Erkmen or Lawrence Weiner, more than twenty young Arab artists will be shown, who have developed their works mostly for the Biennial. Persekian appears as decisive critic of the externally stimulated art-hype in the region, which jeopardises the development of a local, critical scene.

A man of contradictions, because he is part of the consultants circle being installed by the [Guggenheim Abu Dhabi](#) for its future direction. Persekian circumvented questions on his function for the prestigious project of the US-museumtrust at the [Gulf](#)

. Not so Christine Thome, curator and current director of Ashkal Alwan (the Lebanese

Association for Plastic Art). She spontaneously admitted that she herself had been invited to be a consultant, and involved two more "confessors" in the audience. On inquiry Thome revealed: "It is not clear yet what they want from us, but I know what I want: Strengthen our position and interests in the museum-concept, in best case through installing an Arab chief-curator." Although the Guggenheim is planning a center for contemporary Arabic and Islamic art, it seems hardly realistic that Guggenheim commissioner

Thomas Krens

would respond to such demand. The local scene, however, deploys.

Dominated by the effort of Arab intellectuals to emancipate from Western guidelines and specifications, and by the struggling for a self-determined identity - the sole geographic definition "Middle East" is a military-strategic label of anglo-american origin- this conference was full of contradictions and sublimial tensions. And even though Western initiatives and approaches come up against Middle Eastern scepticism, it is acknowledged that those often give the first impulse for critical debate within contemporary art. The dilemma remains.

[Tate Modern online - conference video](#)

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