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The original text, called 'Introduction to the Gulf Art World', was written with the support of the Dutch Mondriaan Fund and SICA, the Foundation for International Cultural Activities, between May and October 2012, as part of the Gulf Art Guide website.

The author is fully responsible for the text.

This updated, edited and illustrated version of the text, designed by the author, was prepared in February-March 2013.

Self-published (100 copies), March 2013.

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Contemporary Art in the Gulf
Context and Perspectives

Robert Kluijver

About the author:

Robert Kluijver (Nicosia, Cyprus, 1968) grew up between the Middle East and the West. He studied international relations in Amsterdam and Paris and teaches the course “Contemporary Art and Geopolitics in the Arab World” at the Paris School of International Affairs. He combines his work as independent curator of contemporary art with jobs in political and cultural reconstruction in post-conflict environments, having worked extensively in Afghanistan, and in Tajikistan, Iraq and Yemen.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Foreword | 7 |
| Contemporary Art in the Gulf | 11 |
| A Cultural History of the Arabian Peninsula | 29 |
| Saudi Arabia | 47 |
| Kuwait | 69 |
| Bahrain | 87 |
| The United Arab Emirates | 99 |
| Qatar | 119 |
| Oman | 129 |
| Where the Gulf is Heading | 137 |

Foreword

Almost no scholarly works exist to explain the sudden appearance of a thriving contemporary art scene in the Gulf. Most explanations in the West focus on the role of the art market, and the emergence of immensely wealthy local rulers eager to convert oil revenues into cultural capital, thus acquiring some standing on the global scene. These commentators insist on the absence in the region of any form of art history, or even cultural development. From this point of view, the current art world in the Gulf is wholly imported, and therefore as artificial as the cities being stamped out of the desert.

In the Gulf itself, contemporary art is not much discussed and, when acknowledged, it is seen as a by-product of the overall social and cultural development affecting the region; at best, it is exalted as the manifestation of a contemporary Arab culture that is earning recognition in ever-wider international circles. Although the role of foreign artists and art professionals in fostering this local art scene is not denied, the emphasis is put on the vision of the rulers and the participation of the local elites in making this vision a reality.

A person seriously investigating contemporary art in the Gulf is thus confronted with either bland, PR-like statements by local authorities, or with dismissive reports of the 'Disneyworld in the desert' variant, often tinged with old-world jealousy about the resources available for art in this 'uncultured' region. There is little in between.

Although both of these perspectives are true up to a certain point, neither of them are sufficient for understanding the dynamics of contemporary art in this region.

This essay is an effort to remedy this situation and fill in some blank spots in our knowledge about trends in the Gulf art world generally, and its relation to developments in the Arabian Peninsula in particular. It is meant to enable the art professional, or anybody interested in this region's contemporary culture, to develop a broader understanding of how contemporary visual arts both reflect and stimulate broader socio-cultural developments in this region.

Caveats

In your hands you have an improved, updated and illustrated version of the text “Introduction to the Gulf Art World” which originally appeared online, in November 2012, as an essay on the website <http://gulfartguide.com>. This book is self-printed, with a small print-run. The layout and editing were performed by the author in Word. Any deficiencies and mistakes are thus purely my own responsibility.

This edition of the text has been prepared for the 2013 Dubai Art Week, including the opening of the 11th Sharjah Biennial. It begs to be picked up by a publisher that can professionally produce this book and reach out to a wider readership, in the Gulf and abroad.

This essay is not an academic text; therefore, I have followed the spelling of names most commonly used on the internet, not the one that may be most grammatically correct. As a result, it may appear as if the transliteration is inconsistent, for example ‘Bait Muzna’ in Oman, ‘Beit Al Sadu’ in Kuwait, Alserkal Avenue (instead of Al Serkal), ‘Bin’ or ‘Ben’ or ‘Ibn’ for ‘son’ etc.

The artworks have been selected to illustrate the text, not to establish some sort of canon of contemporary art from the Arabian Peninsula. In some cases the artist is not even a native of the Gulf. That I have placed a particular work of art besides a specific section of the text of course implies nothing about the intention of the artist.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Arie Amaya-Akkermans for contributing the base text for the chapter on Bahrain, my Gulf Art Guide co-author Neil van der Linden for his input on many subjects, Rami Farook and Janwillem and for a critical reading of the text and their feedback, Zaki Nusseibeh, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, Ahmed Mater, Aarnout Helb, Mai Al Nakib, and Rana Sadik for their positive feedback and encouragement, and Farida Sultan, Negar Azimi, Mayssa Fattouh, Hamza Serafi, Antonia Carver and many many more for their input.

My thanks also to the Dutch Mondriaan Fund and the Foundation for International Cultural Activities for funding this project; to the website makers Danial Kashani and Kai Bergin; and to Lex ter Braak and Marloes Borsboom for their practical support.

Finally, many thanks to my father Marinus Kluyver for proofreading and editing the first version of this text and to my wife Mariko Peters for her encouragement and useful critical comments.

Robert Kluijver, March 2013.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



1

Introduction

Contemporary Art in the Gulf

Prior to the first decade of the 21st Century, there was little artistic activity in the Gulf. Some painters and sculptors who had been trained in Cairo or Baghdad (in the Arab modernist style) had formed Fine Arts societies to develop the local art world, but their activities carried little appeal beyond a small circle of intimates.

Only Kuwait and Bahrain seemed to enjoy some kind of contemporary cultural life. The theatre and pop music scenes were admittedly more lively than that of the visual arts. Andy Warhol had an exhibition in Kuwait in 1971, but he was highly dismissive of the art scene he encountered there. Insofar it existed, the art scene in these countries was the result of Palestinian and other Arab immigrants enjoying prosperity and relative freedom. In other countries of the Peninsula, conservative religious values generally made any kind of public self-expression through visual arts problematic.

Contemporary art in the Gulf region is thus a new phenomenon; at the time of writing, it is hardly a decade old. This raises legitimate concerns about how connected it truly is to the region's culture. First, most of the art professionals in the region are not native, but from the rest of the Arab world (Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, etc.), Iran or Western countries; many of the artists associated with the Gulf similarly have roots in other Arab countries, notably Palestine. Second, all taste and knowledge of art has generally been acquired abroad; local collectors will say that they acquired their taste for art in New York, London or other European cities. Third, it appears that most of the people that visit artistic events are foreign.

However, it would be wrong to conclude, on the basis of these observations, that the Gulf art world is thus not *authentic*. As a counterargument, one could state that important developments in contemporary art anywhere in the world have always been marked by injections from other cultures – think of the hybrid cultural composition of

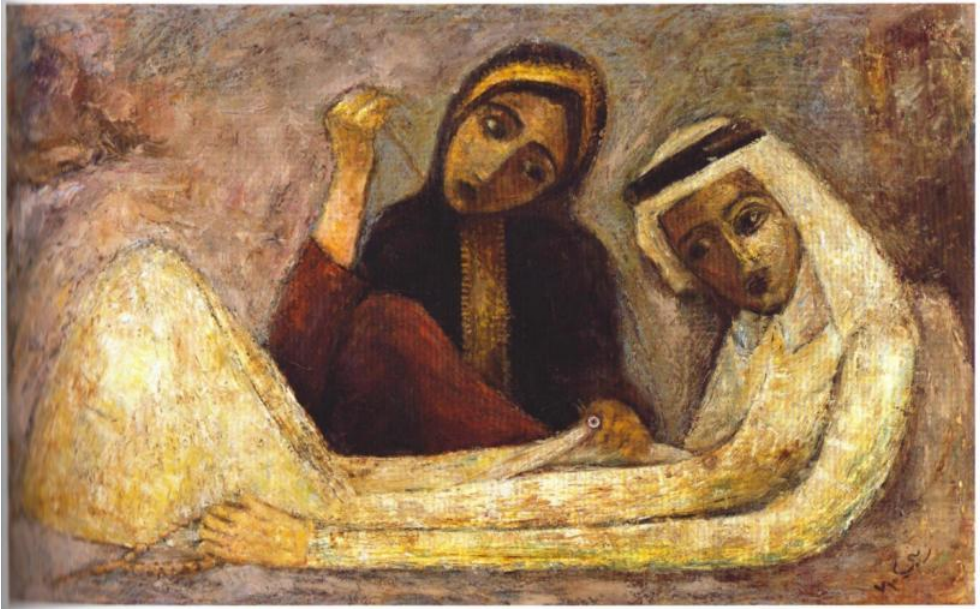
the avant-gardes in Russia in the 1910s, Paris in the 1930s or New York in the 1950s. The percentage of Gulf Arabs participating in this scene may not be high, but it is essential, as will be argued later. Finally, all this is happening in the Gulf region, and the art world there has acquired a distinctive set of characteristics.

It is argued here that the Gulf contemporary visual arts scene is not only authentic, but also that it is intricately linked to the historical cultural development of the region. Indeed, it is seeing art in this wider perspective that makes it a truly exciting object of study. Probably many of the art patrons, curators and artists involved in this scene – or observing it – are intuitively aware of this, whence the general excitement; in the following chapters I hope to give this intuition a solid basis. But let me first sketch the context of the Gulf art world in 2012, as a starting point for our investigations into its backgrounds and dynamics.

left: Jowhara Al Saud: Connected, 2009

right: Boushra Almutawakel: Joy (Fulla Series), 2011

below: Jassim al Zainy: Features from Qatar, 1973. Oil on Board



The Gulf's youth and its aspirations

The Gulf region is in the lift. Not only because of its energy resources, which are more valuable every day; it is also the model of Gulf governance that appears successful.

Compared to the rest of the Arab world, the Gulf is doing well: developing rapidly and with relative stability. 'Evolution, not Revolution' is the mantra. While its rulers may congratulate themselves on having provided sufficient space to their citizens to avoid the fate suffered by the rulers of Egypt and other Arab countries rocked by mass protests, they are also aware of the social pressure inexorably mounting from below: the Gulf's youth and its ambitions.

In Saudi Arabia, the most populated country of the region, 60% of the population is under 25. In Yemen, that proportion is 66%. Bahrain and Oman's under-25 population stands at about 50%. This youth has grown up connected to internet – at the very least to satellite TV – and is not only looking for rewarding employment in local or national economies, but also for its place in the global society. In Gulf States with 50 to 80 % immigrant population (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, UAE), the youth may not constitute such a formidable challenge to the current demographic balance, as their aspirations can be partially met by the social engineering of the migrant workforce.

Indeed, looming youth unemployment has led to government policies to replace the migrant workers with locals, referred to 'Qatarization', 'Omanization', 'Saudization' etc. As could be expected, however, the educated and internet-conscious young Arabs are not interested in taking over the menial jobs of e.g. Bangladeshis and Filipinos. The question remains how they will integrate their countries' societies: whether society will change to accommodate them or attempt to neutralize them, and what may happen in either case.

Despite the financial and economic successes booked by the Gulf states, there is still an acute awareness among many of their citizens (young and old) that they are lagging behind in terms of education, innovation and intellectual achievement. This critical self-awareness has a long history in the Arab world.

A brief intellectual history of the modern Arab world

In the late 19th Century already, Arab intellectuals came to the conclusion that one could not simply import the knowledge and rational thinking that was seen as the determining factor of success in the West, and combine it with Arab culture to achieve modernization. Arab culture – particularly in its religious aspects – came to be seen as the obstacle to progress. The 'awakening' (Nahda) advocated by these thinkers was thus geared towards the elimination of backwards traits in Arab society and its culture.

The scathing self-critique of many Nahda thinkers certainly inspired Arab artists of that period, but failed to gain the reformists mass traction. The falling apart of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the rise to power of secular young Turks and the Bolshevik revolution certainly provided hope to Arab secular reformists. But the carving up of the Ottoman Empire by the colonial powers between England, France and Italy stalled further reform movements. Reformists had the choice to either cooperate with the colonizer and integrate the metropolitan elites (in Paris, London and Rome), or go underground and agitate for an anti-imperialist, socialist revolution. The former constituted the core of the liberal, Western-oriented elites which are still influential today; the latter planted the seeds for the post World War Two reform movements.

Indeed, the failure of the Nahda reform movement in political terms gave rise to three other movements that challenged the colonial (and later post-colonial) status quo: Arab nationalism (Nasserism), Arab socialism (Ba'athism) and political Islam (the Muslim Brotherhood). All three of them were 'pan-Arab', hoping to influence the entire Arab world.

Nasserism, Ba'athism and political Islam

Nasserism was the great hope of the Arab world in the 1950s. Nasser's policies to modernize Egypt and nationalize its main economic assets, his successful defiance of Great Britain and France during the Suez Canal crisis and the creation of the United Arab Republic with Syria, all events duly relayed by 'Sawt al Arab' (Voice of the Arabs) to the Arab masses, stirred the Arab world into a state of excitement. The pan-Arab dream failed to materialize though, and in 1967 Nasser's Egypt and its Arab allies were defeated in the six day war with Israel, delivering a fatal blow to that project. Subsequently, Libya's Gaddafi tried to blow new life into the project during the first two decades of his rule (1969-2011).

Although Nasserism was infused with many socialist ideas, Ba'athism was a more ideological form of Arab socialism, developed during the 1940s by Zaki al Arsuzi and Michel Aflaq. It attracted a large following among the middle classes, officers and people who had formerly been enthused by Nahda ideas – as it built upon that intellectual legacy. Ba'athist parties gained power in both Syria and Iraq in 1963. Although they initially sought to spread Ba'athist ideology to the rest of the Arab world, the coup by Saddam Hussein in 1968 and the accession to power of the Assad clan in 1970 undermined the pan-Arab aspect of Ba'athism, as both regimes became autocratic and primarily concerned with consolidating their own power within their national borders. This diminished the appeal of Ba'athist socialism in the rest of the Arab world.

Dissatisfaction with the materialist and secular aspects of Marxist thought led many reformers to embrace the hybrid form of 'Islamic socialism' pioneered by Hassan Al Banna and the Muslim Brotherhood, created in Egypt in 1928. Proponents reached out to Muslim communities everywhere in the world, but were persecuted by all Arab regimes. As a result the Muslim Brotherhood split into national factions that focused on providing community services, giving it a solid local footing that was to become evident whenever free and fair elections were held in an Arab country – as in Algeria, 1992. After decades of underground existence, the Muslim Brotherhood finally came to power in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in 2011, and could well gain power too in other Arab countries that are rid of autocratic regimes, such as Syria.

The repression of the Muslim Brotherhood helped the creation of more radical Salafi movements from the 1980s onward. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its acceptance of democratic politics and focus on conquering State power, stands opposed to radical Salafism in many aspects. In fact, Salafism is not a political ideology at all but a religious methodology (or attitude); in political terms it is rather an anti-ideology harking back to the pristine state of human society supposedly embodied by the life and times of prophet Muhammad and his companions.

With political Islam firmly repressed, and Nasserism and Ba'athism discredited by the 1970s and 80s, the Arab world went through a long period of intellectual despondency. It was as if it were incapable of original thought or finding creative solutions to its problems, as if resigned to its second-tier status within the global setting, and to autocratic rule buttressed by Western powers at home.



The 21st Century and the Gulf's geo-intellectual positioning

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent 'clash of civilizations' policy that Bush's USA and its allies embarked on, shook the Arab world awake. The 'Us/You' thinking suddenly imposed by the West forced Arabs to re-examine their own identity and position ("You're either with us or against us" as George W Bush said after 9/11).

But as the first decade of the 21st Century came to its close, Western hegemony started to fissure; this was made obvious by the Western failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial, economic and political crises the West is currently experiencing, and the unstoppable rise of non-Western countries such as China, Brazil and India. The West is no longer the only reference point. The success of Muslim countries such as Turkey and Malaysia seems to prove, moreover, that Islam is not necessarily an obstacle to progress. Since the turn of the century, therefore, the Arab search for alternatives has gained new élan.

The developments sketched in broad lines above apply to the Arab world generally, but the Gulf does have its own specificities. This region did not play a significant role in the reform movements that swept through the Arab world, so the countries of the Arabian Peninsula are not crippled by the experience of repeated intellectual failure. In this sense, the youth of most Gulf countries plays in their favor – in the late 20th Century they started with a perhaps empty, but therefore also clean intellectual slate.

More decisive still is what one could call the Gulf's geo-intellectual positioning: while North Africa and the Levant quite literally face Europe as part of the ancient Mediterranean, the Gulf faces the Indian Ocean region. From the Gulf capitals, South Asia is much closer than Europe, while Singapore lies at roughly the same distance from Dubai as London. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula have thus had other intellectual points of reference than Europe; in the 19th and early 20th Century, for example, they had much stronger ties with Iran and the Indian subcontinent than with Europe. Since European powers never colonized the Gulf (only few Europeans moved to the region, mostly on short-term administrative or engineering duty), the Arabs there only experienced European intellectual currents indirectly, by visiting Cairo and Baghdad for their education or for trading.

Viewed from the old centers of Arab culture, such as Cairo, Baghdad or Damascus, the Arabian Peninsula has long seemed a backwater. Until the end of the 20th Century, Arab intellectuals were dismissive of Gulf Arabs. But in their repeated failures to 'catch up' with Europe, the old Arab cultural centers ended up being bypassed by the cities on the Gulf, who quietly developed their own models of governance and modernization, definitely more 'Asian' than European. As in East Asia, this development proved favorable to the emergence of a vibrant art scene.

Regional competition

To a casual observer it may seem as if the tiny Gulf states are engaged in fierce competition among themselves to become the main regional location for contemporary artistic activities. A brief history of this competition would read as follows:

- First Kuwait seemed poised to become the Gulf's most propitious place for art, with a liberal environment and lavish support to the arts by members of the ruling Al Sabah family and private patrons like the Sultans. That was in the 1960s and 70s.

- In the following two decades, as Kuwait grappled with the Gulf wars and their aftermath, cosmopolitan Bahrain was the cool place to be for art lovers. It seemed to be the new Beirut (while 'old' Beirut was in the throngs of civil war).

- The flame then passed to the tiny emirate of Sharjah, whose museum-building policies were crowned with an international biennial. This biennial became famous from 2003 onwards when its director Princess Hoor Al Qasimi appointed Jack Persekian as artistic director. Each subsequent biennial has attracted favorable reviews from the international art world.

- From 2007 onwards, Dubai started to eclipse its smaller neighbor. In a few years, a bustling art market developed that is still going strong. Its main feature is Art Dubai, but the fifty or so galleries that the city currently has ensure a year-round interesting program.

- Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi prepared a grandiose plan for a new cultural district with world-class museums on Saadiyat Island, including the Louvre and the Guggenheim, sparking a vivid international discussion among experts and laymen alike.

- The 2008-10 financial crisis tempered Abu Dhabi's ambitions, just in time for Qatar to impress the world with its cultural institutions, including the Museum of Islamic Art, already ranked among the world's top museums. The Al Thani ruling family of Qatar has built up one of the world's prime collections of Islamic and modern Arab art over the past decade, with forays into the high end of contemporary art.

Meanwhile the government of Oman has apparently decided to specialize in performing arts, with a magnificent new Royal Opera House.

Yemen is blocked in strife. But, having the richest cultural heritage and the largest native population of the peninsula, it could develop well artistically if social reform is implemented.

And Saudi Arabia has established itself, to the surprise of most observers, as the cradle of many talented artists, thus providing a vital local, bottom-up, creative impulse to the Gulf art world. While the Saudi government still oscillates between timid support and outright negligence of the local art scene, the artists are continuously stretching the boundaries of what is considered art in the country.



Patronage and the art market

This schematic overview points out an atmosphere of friendly competition between ruling families that is indeed characteristic of the Gulf's history, as will be pointed out later. But it also demonstrates that patronage by ruling families (or other wealthy private individuals) plays a major role in the Gulf's art world. There is surprisingly little input from other sectors, such as government funding, international donors or local civil society and collectivities.

This crucial role of the patron makes it difficult to compare the structure of the Gulf art world with that of Europe's social democracies, where governments take on the role of main patron of the arts. Notably, the kind of taxpayer support system that exists in the West is unknown in the Gulf, freeing art from the requirement to legitimize itself in the eyes of the majority. Only in Kuwait and - to a certain extent - Bahrain does support by the government, as distinct from the ruling family, play a role. Local patrons and their world views, aesthetical codes and expectations thus heavily influence the local art world.

These patrons and their views are themselves the result of cross-fertilization between East and West. Art patrons are therefore excited by the way in which Arab artists are exploring questions of identity, reflecting the changes occurring the rapidly evolving world which the patrons experience. Some may fall prone to self-congratulation, reflected in the superficial, almost triumphalist kind of art that is also loved by the West's nouveaux riches. But the grander patrons, who do not only support art but also social development in general, hope that contemporary Arab art will inspire local cultural excellence, and thus raise the entire population to the level of sophistication required for dealing successfully with the complexities of globalization. Support of contemporary art is but one of many strategies followed for achieving this objective; the overall emphasis lies on education.

At the regional level, this system of top-down patronage of the arts is mitigated by the art market that developed in Dubai because of its general affluence, permissive policies and an exciting cultural mix. Collectors in Dubai may or may not be interested in the theme of a new Arab identity; in any case, they exist in sufficient numbers to provide for a pluralistic art world. Moreover, many of Dubai's galleries sell to an international clientele, thus opening up much needed international channels for local artists. That international clientele first consisted mostly of Iranians – who can be credited with developing the Dubai art scene – and Arab collectors living abroad; but nowadays Western and Asian collectors (private and institutional) are also major buyers.

Interestingly, this market has spawned a small but growing non-commercial art sector, supported entirely by private funding. This includes artist- and curator residencies, art cafes, all kinds of art education and workshops, private museums and resource centers. This development provides an interesting counter argument to those in the West who argue that the art market kills the impulses of true art, which would lie outside the commercial realm (thus requiring ongoing government subsidies).

This tendency of the art market to generate a superstructure also applies to Kuwait and, tentatively, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In this last country, government involvement in contemporary art seems to be non-existent so far, thus leaving the terrain open for private collectors. The other Gulf emirates and Oman have too small an art market to influence the States' cultural policies.

International involvement

This being said, the Gulf art world of course does not evolve in a vacuum. The importance of local patronage notwithstanding, most artists in the region are first and foremost interested in international recognition. They thus seek maximum exposure to the international art world. Typically, they want to escape the local art market and the narrow views on art that are prevalent in their own societies, and gain critical acclaim abroad. Luckily for them, the critical attention they seek is increasingly forthcoming.

Curators, critics and international collectors now flock to the Sharjah Biennial, Art Dubai and attendant events, and stop on their way in Doha or (soon) Abu Dhabi to admire the museums and cultural initiatives there. Magazines such as *Canvas*, *Bidoun*, *Contemporary Practices* and *Brownbook* find their way into the hands (or screens) of art professionals who don't travel to the Gulf. Online resources such as the *Gulf Art Guide* or *Nafas* are providing a platform for information exchange. Biennials, art fairs, museums and galleries in the rest of the world are increasingly displaying the work of artists from the Gulf. And, of course, almost every artist and art institution from the region can be found on Facebook.

Some Gulf artists live between East and West, are of mixed descent or grew up in a multitude of countries, so they partially the international art crowd themselves, making it a useless exercise to determine who is a Gulf artist and who not.

The international art world can thus be seen as a third variable in the make-up of the Gulf art scene, alongside the ruling families' efforts to provide an appropriate infrastructure for artistic development, and the aspirations of the patrons to recognize the world they inhabit in its art.



Artistic freedom

Given the importance of patronage in the Gulf, one may wonder how much freedom artists enjoy in the region.

If indeed patrons are mainly interested in questions of identity, then, unlike absolute monarchs of yesteryear, they are not imposing the parameters of this new Arab identity upon artists. For that they have the contemporary version of court painters, namely public relations agencies. There seems to be a genuine interest in dialogue. The vision of the region's elites appears restricted to utopian educational, economic and urban master plans designed with great brushstrokes. This leaves a lot of scope for local artists and artistic entrepreneurs to fill in the details, as it were. This open-ended definition of the rulers' vision and the general laissez-faire attitude prevalent among Gulf Arabs, allow art to escape the propaganda trap inherent in the top-down approach to nurturing an art scene.

Artists and art professionals in the Gulf are therefore not bound to a specific discourse by the local patrons of the art world. Does this, in turn, mean they enjoy sufficient freedom? Seen from the outside, the conservative and religious societies of the Gulf do not seem favorable to the development of an independent art world. Let us therefore first deal with the red lines commonly identified as limitations of artistic expression: religion and conservative social morals, and censorship.

The religious factor

Islam is a very important part of the identity of the Gulf Arabs. One could not conceive of either patrons or even local artists openly rejecting religion. In other Arab countries this is not only a possibility, it has happened quite often, if only because not all Arabs are Muslims. In the critical attitude towards Arab culture that was common from the end of the 19th Century to the 1960s, many intellectuals suggested relegating religion entirely to the private sphere (where of course it could be practiced or not). However, this was confined to the rest of the Arab world, particularly to countries with large non-Muslim communities such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine and Egypt; such voices were not and still are not heard in the Gulf.

This does not mean Islam determines public policies. The Gulf rulers shun any form of what has come to be called 'political Islam' or 'Islamism' at home. Arrests of Muslim Brotherhood activists in the UAE in 2012 underscore this. There is no need to propagate Islam within the Gulf, nor to defend it. Islam is seen as a natural and unquestionable given; it is what binds society together. Transgressions of Islamic morals are punished to preserve the social tissue rather than for ideological reasons.

Ahmed Mater: Yellow Cow (poster), 2007

البقرة الصفراء جبنة

55% minimum fat in dry matter (Kosher pcs قطع)

2.50 SR

كاسيوم + بروتين + الحليب

specialized processed cheese spreadable

YELLOW COW cheese

256g - تحفظ في مكان بارد

البقرة الصفراء

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This may sometimes seem quite harsh from an external point of view, but within the Gulf the application of Sharia law is rarely considered contentious among the native population. The statements rulers make about Islamic values are usually so mild they could equally be uttered by European Christian Democrats. Moreover the rulers, who are almost all educated in the West, acutely perceive the need to deal with the non-Muslim world on non-confessional terms.

In their dealings with Muslim communities throughout the world, the Saudi government in particular has attempted to enforce its brand of conservative Islam, by taking over regional media, supporting missionary activities, offering lavish training and support packages to Islamic clerics abroad, and by direct interference, also in its support to armed groups (such as the Afghan Mujahedeen of the past and some Syrian Islamist opposition groups in 2012). This pressure is also exerted upon other Gulf countries, for example in issues such as alcohol consumption. Within Saudi Arabia, however, the government has generally taken a more liberal stance than the clergy; this is certainly true of King Abdullah's rule since 2005.

Among the population of the Gulf, in contrast, political Islam is on the rise, specifically of the Salafi creed. As in the rest of the Arab world, this has much to do with the vexed question of identity in the 21st Century, discontent with governments, the spread of 'clash of civilization' theories and defensive reactions to the increased hostility of the Western public towards Islam. In countries with electoral representation systems – Kuwait and Bahrain – religious parties are becoming ever more influential. Certainly, if other countries of the Arabian Peninsula had proper democratic systems, the governments that would be elected would be much more religious and conservative than the current ruling families. In the Arabian Peninsula the results of a free and fair electoral process would probably not be good for artists.

Nevertheless few artists would be willing to call themselves anti-democrats, in part because the *idea* of democracy might appeal to them. The reality of the society they live in however makes them stay away from public pronouncements, in their art or otherwise, about democratic reform.

In terms of morals, therefore, the local artists of the Gulf thus find themselves much closer to the position of the ruling families than to that of the general population. In some cases these ruling families are their direct patrons, in others they allow spaces of freedom of expression to emerge in which these artists can work. This may explain why few artists from the Gulf emigrate to live and work in Western countries. Within these spaces of freedom, the artists can broach subjects like religion and politics, as long as it does not take the form of offense.

Criticism of the ruling family is considered a criminal offense. This may appear similar to the prohibition on insulting the national symbols in European countries, but it goes much further, because the ruling families play an active role not only in politics but also

in social life, and they have more means at their disposal to fight back than a flag. If an artist disagrees with a prominent royal, or the policies of a ruling family, he is advised to emigrate (like the Saudi writer Abdelrahman Munif) or he may spend long spells in prison.

Religion is even more pervasive, but criticism can be leveled against religious practices that contradict the spirit of Islam, as long as the artist can argue it convincingly. What is not judged acceptable is offense. Since local artists are born and raised within these religious societies, they are well aware of how far they can go without seeming to deliberately offend. Blasphemy laws, for example, exist in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, but they cause less controversy and lead to less court cases than in countries like Pakistan and Iran.

For foreign artists resident in the Gulf the matter is different of course. Iranian artists, of which there are many in Dubai, often have a deep issue with religion because of their perception of the negative influence of Islam on their homeland. They and other artists from outside the region may feel that the conservative force of religion in the Gulf is a brake on their artistic expression. In absolute terms the freedom of artists to deal critically with religion is of course much more constrained in the Gulf than in the West, and in most of the rest of the world. But in comparative terms the tolerance of authorities seems to increase year by year.

Another oft-heard remark about the freedom of artistic expression in the Gulf concerns the impossibility to portray nudes. Granted, the nude is a very important element of Western art history, but why should this apply to the art of other regions of the world? The question almost never asked is: why should Muslim artists want to portray nudes in their work in the first place? The exhibition "Le Corps Decouvert" at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris in 2012 attempted to dispel the notion that nudity is or was a taboo subject for Arab artists. But it also demonstrated that the Arab nude is firmly derived from Western art; and most of the nearly 100 participating artists either live(d) in the West or in Lebanon.

Censorship does occur in the Gulf. Galleries participating in one of the Emirates' art fairs will occasionally be asked to hide a particular work of art deemed offensive; the Sharjah Biennial's director artistic resigned because of a work of art considered blasphemous in a public space; and a Kuwaiti artist saw her exhibition closed on the opening night by the police, because of what they called an attack on public morals.

The very fact that these cases of censorship can be publicly discussed and that there are usually no legal proceedings as a result, shows that the censors try to draw a fine line between artistic freedom and public morals. The intention is manifestly not to submit the artists or those representing them to certain ethics - with the exception of work considered insulting to the ruling families - but to prevent a clash between visitors

(and public opinion) and the art world. That is also how those affected by censorship usually understand it.

The case of Saudi Arabia is quite apart from the other Gulf countries and will be discussed more in depth in the section on that country. Suffice it to say for now that there are no movie or performing art theatres in the country, few exhibition spaces or museums dedicated to any kind of art, and the rare artistic event may be disrupted (as the Riyadh book fair) or see its permission to take place withdrawn days before the scheduled start. Nonetheless, the Saudi artists I have spoken to accept these limitations and draw hope from the increase in artistic freedom they experience.

To sum up: artists in the Gulf are not often persecuted and, as mentioned, artists seem to feel no pressing need to emigrate to the 'free world' to practice there. Despite the occasional case of censorship, there is a thriving contemporary art scene.



2

A Cultural History of the Arabian Peninsula

In the following pages, I attempt to provide a historical meta-narrative for the development of contemporary arts in the Gulf countries. Local artists have taken up some of the themes mentioned here, but others lie unexploited. I therefore cannot assert that this cultural history is assumed by the Gulf arts community, which sometimes seems to be as unaware of it as are outsiders. Many artists in the Gulf are oriented towards the global village and its future, and feel no need to address a past that might seem quite barren from their point of view. Some artists, however, are beginning to examine the history of their homeland, and they are making surprising discoveries. The following cultural history thus attempts to provide a context for this process of artistic research.

The predominant vision of the Arabian Peninsula, as a desert land inhabited by uncultured tribes, is squarely debunked by the following historical exploration, which touches upon many fascinating developments over the past centuries. It also explains some of the differences between the countries. Most importantly, I hope that it will provide artists in the Gulf and beyond with inspiration in their work, and a novel impetus for researching the roots of a new Arab identity.

Patterns of human settlement on the Arabian Peninsula

One can distinguish three typologies of traditional human habitat on the Arabian Peninsula:

1. the interior, inhabited by nomadic tribes and punctuated by oases;
2. the coastal settlements on the southern shores of the Gulf and the Arabian Sea;
3. the settled rural areas of western Yemen and southwestern Saudi Arabia.

The ancient center of Arab civilization is the southwest of the peninsula: Yemen and the adjacent Saudi provinces of the Hijaz and the Asir. This area, called Arabia Felix (i.e. Happy Arabia) by the Romans, receives sufficient rain to allow for a relatively large settled population. In 2010, about 48 million native Arabs and 20 million foreigners lived in the peninsula. Yemen by itself has about the same number of native Arabs as all the GCC countries combined: 24 million. Southwest Saudi Arabia is also relatively densely populated. The rest of the population of the Arabian Peninsula was traditionally scattered throughout its oases and coastal towns, with a fairly large population in the oases of Eastern Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Today, about 78% of the population in the GCC lives in cities, but the traditional urban centers in the Arabian Peninsula were small compared to other cities in the Arab world.

Throughout history and until the 20th Century, the writ of empires only extended to the settled areas: the northeastern coast around Bahrain, the Hijaz and West coast of the Peninsula and, with considerably more difficulty, parts of Yemen. The interior, as well as the Gulf coast from Qatar to Hormuz and the Indian Ocean coast, usually escaped any kind of central government, being self-ruled by the tribes. Those along the Gulf coast subsisted from fishing and pearls, except the Omanis who have a long seafaring tradition, trading along the shores of the Indian Ocean.

The nomadic tribes derived a sense of pride and legitimacy to rule from their independence, while the inhabitants of the settled areas deemed they were more advanced in all other aspects of life; this rivalry, typical between nomads and settled populations elsewhere in the world, has been a constant throughout the history of Arabia. Today it is neutralized by the swift urbanization in the region. Most Bedouin have settled, and the tribal factor mostly plays out in the domain of interpersonal relations, not different lifestyles.

Clockwise from top: geoglyphs indicate the ancient presence of human settlements in the Saudi desert / Rock carvings from around 4000 BC in the Saudi National Museum / statues from Failaka in the Kuwait National Museum / pre-Arabic semitic script from Al Ukhdoob, Najran, Saudi Arabia. Bottom: Meda'in Saleh. Photographs from press articles or taken by the author.



Pre-Islamic history of the Arabian Peninsula

In the Bronze Age, the climate was much more humid than it is today, allowing for large settlements in the east and north of the peninsula. Rock engravings from the fourth millennium BC of hands and fauna that has since disappeared (like the ostrich) and mysterious 'geoglyphs' prove that what is now a desert used to be populated. Farther south, in northern Oman, the beehive tombs of the third millennium BC are evidence that there were human settlements in areas of Oman that are now sparsely populated.

The first local culture recorded in history's annals is the Dilmun civilization, centered on Bahrain and the Gulf littoral between Kuwait and Qatar. It lasted from the fourth millennium to the first millennium BC. Dilmun was apparently an important trading post between the Indus Valley and the Mesopotamian civilizations. Burial mounds on Bahrain and the archaeological excavations in the Fort of Bahrain are the most visible trace of this civilization.

Around 1000 BC, civilization was thriving in the southern part of the peninsula. The legendary Queen of Sheba (or Bilqis, as she is known to the Arabs, or Queen Makeda as the Ethiopians call her) would have ruled over the Sabaeen kingdom around this period, the Sabaeans being an order of high priests. The great dams of its capital city Ma'rib (in Yemen), probably built in the 8th Century BC, provided agricultural stability and thus wealth to the area. A number of small kingdoms prospered in Southern Arabia during the first millennium BC. It became a coveted region, home to frankincense (from Dhofar) and myrrh, and located on trade routes spanning the Indian Ocean, from the coast of Gujarat to the Horn of Africa. Yemeni kingdoms typically extended to the other side of the Red Sea, and vice-versa; for instance the Ethiopian Kingdom of Axum controlled most of Yemen and the Asir until the rise of Islam. The rivalry between both sides of the Red Sea marked much of Southern Arabia's history until the rise of Islam. Nowadays, the Queen of Sheba is still claimed by both sides as theirs.

The Greeks established a colony on the island of Failaka, which now belongs to Kuwait, but it does not seem they or Alexander the Great's empire and its successors paid much attention to the Arabian Peninsula. The Romans did attempt to conquer what they called Arabia Felix (the term first appears on Ptolemy's maps) in the 1st Century AD, but did not succeed. They did, however, contribute to the prosperity of Southern Arabia by consuming large quantities of frankincense.

In the 4th and 5th Century, Christianity spread throughout the region from Ethiopia. In Najran, in southern Saudi Arabia, the Christian population was massacred by the Jewish convert King Dhu Nawas, the last Himyarite king. This is recorded in the Quran under the name of 'Al Ukhdood' (meaning 'The Trench' referring to the moat around the city in which the Christians who refused to convert to Judaism were burnt).

After this massacre, which took place in 101 BH (525 AD), the region fell into decline, marked by the crumbling of the Ma'rib dams in 49 BH (575 AD) and the incorporation of Southern Arabia into the Persian Sassanid Empire. The Sassanid domination over Southern Arabia was motivated by their permanent conflict with the Eastern Roman Empire, and it lasted until the Sassanid Empire crumbled before the onslaught of Islam. More generally, sea routes came to replace the overland caravan routes on which the wealth of Western and Southern Arabia was based. Important Jewish and Christian communities in Yemen and southern Saudi Arabia survived until the 20th Century.

In the meanwhile, in the northwest of the Peninsula, the Nabataeans also profited from the trade routes with Southern Arabia. They moved their capital, originally situated at Petra, to Meda'in Saleh in Saudi Arabia when Petra was captured by the Romans. The remains of those cities, carved out of sandstone, remain among the most spectacular sights in the region today. The Nabataeans were Arabs, but they had adopted the Aramaic script prevalent during the Persian Achaemenid regime; it is thought that the Arabic script (of which the first documented use was in 512 AD) evolved from the cursive Aramaic script used by the Nabataeans. In any case, both the Arabic language and most probably its script originated in the Arabian Peninsula.

Contemporary artists are increasingly interested in the pre-Islamic cultures of the Arabian Peninsula and their visual remnants—especially in Saudi Arabia, where most of this heritage is to be found. This is partially the result of a collective effort to define a new Arab identity, but also a reaction to the fundamentalist effort to erase this history.

Islamic perceptions of pre-Islamic Arabia

The period preceding Islam is called the era of ignorance (jahiliyya) in religious texts and is usually spoken about in the most negative terms in Islamic literature. As a result, one is led to believe that the Arabs were savages before their mass conversion to Islam: illiterate warring tribes whose only redeeming feature was their love for poetry. To quote a typical contemporary Islamic appraisal of pre-Islamic Arabia: *It appears that Arabia before Islam was without social amenity or historical depth, and the Arabs lived in moral bankruptcy and spiritual servitude. Life for them was devoid of meaning, purpose and direction* (source text on al-islam.org).

As demonstrated above, this was definitely not the case; the Arabian Peninsula was well-integrated into the classic world from at least 1000 BC onwards and the material traces of many archaeological sites prove that the standard of living was relatively high, as attested by displays in the national museums of Riyadh and Kuwait. In fact, the Quran itself provides evidence that the Hijaz, at least, was well-developed in social, economic and cultural terms.

Indeed, the typical descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia seem to focus on life and culture of the Bedouin, and ignore the much more important cultures that took root in Yemen, the Hijaz, the Nabataean north and in the northeast of the peninsula. This negative perception obviously served a practical purpose during the prophet Muhammad's time, to rally the inhabitants to his side and to Islam. But the effect, 1400 years later, is that these ancient Arab cultures and their achievements are still lumped together with the illiterate and unsettled Bedouin lifestyle, and deprecated accordingly. There is hardly ever a mention in public discourse of the achievements of pre-Islamic cultures.

Islamic period until the 16th Century

The life and times of the prophet Muhammad are well-documented, and there is no need to dwell upon them here.

Islam spread like wildfire throughout the ancient world. By the time of Muhammad's death in 632 AD (10 years after the given beginning of the Islamic age) the whole Arabian Peninsula had already converted to Islam. This did not mean, of course, that all the inhabitants rejected all of their prior beliefs, and later some of the most heretic sects emerged in the Arabian Peninsula, some of which still exist today.

As a worldly power, Islam was tolerant of people who held other beliefs, be they Christian, Jewish or practicing some sort of syncretic Islam mixing their local beliefs with Islamic ideology. Today there are still large Zaidi communities in Yemen, while 65% of the population of Oman is Ibadiyya, not seen as heretics, but not recognized as one of the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence either. These sects originated in the early years of Islam, as a protest against the succession system that saw the seat of power move out of the Arabian Peninsula.

The fourth caliph Ali moved the capital of the nascent Islamic state from Medina to Kufa (in modern-day Iraq) in 656, only 24 years after the Prophet's death. A decade later, Caliph Mu'awiyah, the sixth Caliph, established the Umayyad Caliphate with its capital in Damascus. From then on, each Islamic empire—and there were many—had its center outside the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, the peninsula played only a symbolic role (as a pilgrimage site, and a place to direct the prayers to) in the further development of Islam. It is difficult to find the name of natives from the Arabian Peninsula in the long list of Islamic scholars and artists.

The Peninsula thus became a marginal area in historic terms shortly after the death of prophet Muhammad. Caravans henceforth only catered to local needs, and in economic terms the region remained a backwater until the discovery of oil in the 20th Century.

Some historic events of note did take place in the Arabian Peninsula in this period. The Qarmatians, a Shia Isma'ili sect, established their rule on the East coast of the peninsula and Bahrain in the early 10th Century, and proceeded to build a utopian society that lasted until the middle of the 11th Century. Their capital city was Al Hasa (now called Al Hofuf), which is still the center of Saudi Shi'ism today. This utopian society was based on the use of reason and equality, with a unique system of governance, vegetarianism and strong economic development based on an equal distribution of property among the community – except for the large contingents of African slaves. The Qarmatians are famous in Islamic history for having raided Mecca, their massacres of pilgrims – they considered the pilgrimage to Mecca a superstition which they wanted to put an end to – and for having stolen the Black Stone of the Ka'aba in 930 AD, which they sold back to the Abbasids for a huge ransom in 952.

Meanwhile, new kingdoms were formed in Yemen. Queen Arwa al Suhayli, who ruled from 1067 to 1138, established her own branch of Isma'ilism called Taiyabi. Besides greatly improving the local economy, she sent missionaries to Gujarat in present-day India, where there is still a Taiyabi community.

Her palace, mosque and tomb in Jibla, Yemen, can still be visited today. Along the Indian Ocean coast, other sultanates saw their moments of glory, but overall there was little historic continuity in the development of the Arabian Peninsula until the creation of the first Saudi state in the 18th Century.

Along the coast of the Gulf and the Arabian Sea existed the kingdom of Ormus, on both sides of the Hormuz straits. Controlling the access to the Gulf and thus the sea route to Mesopotamia on one side, and the access to India and Eastern Africa on the other, this Omani kingdom was famously prosperous from the 13th to the 16th Century AD. The Chinese fleet of Zheng He visited the kingdom in 1414 AD. Ormus was famous in the West for its licentious, luxurious life, which thoroughly scandalized the first Christian missionaries. It is mentioned in several travel accounts of the late Middle Ages and in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



European powers in the Gulf

In 1507, the city of Hormuz (Ormus) was captured by the Portuguese. From that year until 1622, when they were expelled from the Gulf by the Iranian Safavid dynasty, the Portuguese dominated the coasts of the Gulf. They profited from the Omani ports and seafaring expertise. The Ottoman fleets initially tried to wrestle the dominion over the Indian Ocean from the Portuguese, battling them all the way to the Indian coasts, but by the mid 16th Century the Portuguese hegemony was established. The Portuguese did not manage to capture the important city of Basra, but they conquered Bahrain in 1521. They exercised their sovereignty over the fertile island, home to a prosperous merchant community, for eighty years. There is still a Portuguese fort in Bahrain and some Portuguese words made their way into Gulf dialects, like the word 'miz' for table. The Portuguese retained a presence in Muscat until 1648.

In the early 17th Century, Dutch seafarers, who were competing with the Portuguese over the profitable trade routes to Asia, established trading posts in Al Shihr, Hadramawt (1614-1616), Aden (1620) and then in Mocha (1621-1739), along the Red Sea coast of Yemen. Coffee, first cultivated in southern Yemen, became a hugely profitable merchandise as its use spread over the world. Porcelain, sugar and spices from the Far East were traded for coffee and gold. The Dutch East India Company also approached the Gulf from Iran, but never set up trading posts on the southern shores of the Gulf, operating from Bandar Abbas after the expulsion of the Portuguese, until 1758. They mainly traded spices from East India for local textiles (silk, wool) and fragrances, precious stones and metals. Both the Dutch and the English East India trading companies drew much of their wealth from Safavid Iran.

Top: Map of the Island of Ormus (Hormuz)

Map: The Arabian Peninsula was sidelined in the times the great trade routes between East and West went overland. The revival of the sea routes with the advent of European shipping in the 16th century placed the region in a more central position. Two of the most busy trade routes were the one through the Persian Gulf (connected to the Mediterranean by caravan routes from Basra, along the Tigris and Euphrates and through the Levant), and that through the Red Sea (with a small stretch overland in Egypt and then along the Nile).

Bottom: The Portuguese Fort of Bahrain, now renovated as a museum

Although the Safavid Shahs of Iran ruled most of the Gulf after the expulsion of the Portuguese, their sovereignty was impaired by the British and Dutch dominion of the seas. The island of Bahrain, home to a lucrative pearl industry, did go through an intellectual flourishing in the 17th Century, partially through the clerical links to Iran. The 18th Century, however, saw a lot of conflict on the southern shores of the Gulf, mainly about the dominion of Bahrain, and the island's population was decimated through successive invasions by Oman (1717) and the attempts by Persians and Arab tribes to reclaim the island. Ultimately, the Al Khalifa tribe established its dominance over Bahrain in the late 18th Century; throughout the 19th Century it consolidated its hold over the island with British protection.

The Portuguese and Dutch presences on the Arabian peninsula did not leave many material or cultural traces, with the exception of the words such as 'mocha' (coffee & chocolate mix) or 'burtugal', orange in Arabic. This was different for the English, who ruled the coast from Aden to Basra during the following centuries. Their fleet supported Shah Abbas, the Safavid King who expelled Portugal from the Gulf in 1622. The English never lost their sway in this region, until the independence of the Gulf states, and, arguably, afterwards too. By the mid-19th Century, English hegemony over the Gulf was complete.

For England, the Gulf became increasingly important as their Indian colonies developed, as a midway station and a profitable place for trading goods from either India or England with Iran and Mesopotamia. There was also a strategic aspect to the English presence in the Gulf, which became all-important in the 19th and early 20th centuries: their rivalry with Russia – who wished to establish a presence in the warm waters of the Gulf, and therefore planned a railway link to Bandar Abbas – and with the Ottoman Turks.

Ottoman rule

The Ottomans took over sovereignty of most of the settled areas of Western Arabia in the 16th Century. The Sharif (ruler) of Mecca accepted the Caliph's rule in 1517. The Ottoman's main concerns were the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and the pilgrimage routes leading there. Marauding groups of nomads sometimes raided the caravans and the Hajj was not always an orderly or safe affair. They therefore established forts throughout the Hijaz, to guard the route to Damascus, one of which was built overlooking the holy shrine in Mecca. Remains of Turkish military architecture, caravanserais or other provisions for pilgrims (such as stone wells) can be found throughout northern Saudi Arabia.

The Ottomans also several times attempted to conquer Yemen. They dominated the Red Sea coast of Yemen, with its valuable commodity coffee and its taxable settled population for most of the 16th and 17th Century, but never managed to subdue the highland tribes for long.

The first real challenge to Ottoman rule came from the first Saudi State (Emirate of Diriyah, 1744-1818), which captured Mecca and Medina in 1803. The Saudis ruled both holy cities for ten years. The Ottoman Sultan ordered the Khedive (viceroy) of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, to reconquer the Hijaz, which he did in 1813; his troops followed the Saudis back to their base in Diriyah, which they destroyed so thoroughly that the Saudis had to establish their next base in Riyadh. This happened in 1824.

The second Saudi state, the Emirate of Nejd, lasted from 1824 until 1891. It did not pose a real threat to the Ottomans or to the British presence in the Gulf, as this period was marked by tribal strife between the Saudis and neighboring Arab tribes. At its height, the influence of the second Saudi state encompassed modern-day Qatar and the UAE, as well as central and south Saudi Arabia. In 1891 the Saudis were routed by the Al Rashid dynasty of Ha'il (600 km northwest of Riyadh) and they fled to Kuwait.

In the late 19th Century, the European powers scrambled to assert their influence over the remaining uncontested parts of the globe. The Arabian Peninsula was in itself not a very attractive area, because of its underdevelopment, poverty and few known resources; however, it did occupy a strategic location, especially after the opening of the Suez canal in 1869. The Ottomans therefore moved south into Yemen's coastal plains and eastwards to reoccupy the Gulf coast all the way to Oman (except Bahrain, which was already firmly under British control). The English were in clear control of the seas however, and rolled back Ottoman influence in the Gulf. They were not as successful along the Red Sea coast, but did not suffer Ottoman attacks on their passage to India either.

Precursors to the modern Gulf states

In the 19th Century, Bahrain became the main trading hub of the region, overtaking Basra, Kuwait and Muscat. The prosperous island was home to many regional communities, from Iran, Iraq and the Levant, India, Oman, Bedouin traders, and a sprinkling of English and other Europeans. It was experienced as a remarkably cosmopolitan city by travelers of that era.

Kuwait had long been a relatively prosperous city-state, ruled by the Ottomans from Basra but with some autonomy for the Al Sabah ruling family. The vessels used by pearl fishers in the summer would ply the regional trade routes the rest of the year, and the merchant community in Kuwait (consisting of local Kuwaitis, but also Iraqis, Iranians

and Indians) was strong enough to balance the Al Sabah's rule. In the second half of the 19th Century, Kuwait started playing off Ottomans against the British (the former controlling the land, the latter the seas). Good relations with the Ottoman governor in Basra were essential because the growing city needed the drinking water from Basra. But with the Ottoman Empire weakening, in 1899 the Al Sabah ruler signed a treaty with the British, effectively making Kuwait a British protectorate.

Kuwait's prosperity and relatively lax morals made the city a target for conservative Saudi tribesmen inspired by the teachings of Ibn Abd Al Wahhab. They attempted to capture the city several times in the last decade of the 18th Century. The walls of Kuwait withstood each attempt. When King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud was consolidating his hold over Saudi Arabia he planned to incorporate Kuwait (which had provided him and his family refuge from 1890 to 1902) into his new kingdom. His militias nearly captured the city in 1920, but were deterred by British forces. Kuwait has always been an important outlet and trading partner for the Nejd. Kuwait is closer to Riyadh than, for example, Mecca or Jeddah.

What is now known as the state of Qatar was, during most of its history, an area of continuous migration. Some small pearl fishing communities formed on Qatar's west coast near fresh-water wells, but the main focus of pearl fishing lay farther northwest, in Bahrain and Kuwait. The rest of the Qatar peninsula was a grazing ground for herds from the Nejd and Al Ahsa, Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province.

The first important Qatari settlement was Zubarah, on the northwest coast. This city was founded in 1732 by the Bani Utbah, a tribe that first migrated from the Nejd to Kuwait in the early 18th Century; a large section later moved to the Qatar peninsula. Zubarah profited, as a port and trading hub, from the Persian occupation of Basra in 1777, which sent many merchant families from Basra and Kuwait to Zubarah; it was also the launching pad for the Al Khalifa tribe's invasion of Bahrain in 1783. In the wake of this take-over, many of Zubarah's inhabitants moved to the more prosperous island. The city's fortunes waned as a result, and after the Omani destruction of the town in 1810 its role disappeared.

Qatar was seen as a dependency of Bahrain until strife between its tribes and Bahrain caused the British to intervene and impose a settlement in 1868, which recognized the role of the Al Thani family in representing the interests of Qatar's tribes. For much of the following century, the ruling family's energy mostly went into fighting off the claims of rival tribes, or into settling internal family tensions. Between 1872 and 1913, Qatar was part of the Ottoman Empire.

Besides the pearling industry, another major source of income for the Gulf states was the slave trade. Besides domestic 'consumption' of slaves, the trade of African slaves to India and Central Asia was a profitable business. Oman excelled at it, and from 1698 to 1868 the Sultan of Oman ruled over Zanzibar, even moving his capital there

from Muscat in 1840. Zanzibar was the main slave-trading port of the Indian Ocean. The British disapproved of the slave trade and would use it as an argument to punish wayward allies, and by the end of the 19th Century the slave trade had ceased to be a source of major revenue for the Gulf states – although they only abolished it in the second half of the 20th century, the last country being Oman, in 1970.

'Piracy' was also common; one of the main 'pirate's hubs' was Julfar, the present day Ras Al Khaimah, one of the United Arab Emirates, ruled by the Qawasem (plural of Al Qasimi, who still rule Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah today). The British attempt to put an end to the Qawasem's disruption of their trade channels with their Indian colony led to a series of conflicts in the early 19th Century, along what was then Oman's Gulf coast and is now the eastern UAE. The British eventually entered into treaties with all of the sheikhs along the coast between Hormuz and Doha, basically offering cessation of hostilities in exchange for the control of these sheikhdoms' foreign relations; thus this area came to be known as the Trucial Coast.

Of course, piracy, like terrorism, is a subjective term; what is called piracy by the state suffering from it may appear as the legitimate pursuit of interests from the perspective of the group accused of it. Thus, it may have appeared legitimate to the rulers of the coast to control the adjacent seas and levy a tax on the ships of the East India Company that passed through the straits of Hormuz. From this perspective, the trucial system offered by the British was akin to a protection racket: we will stop shelling you if you agree to our terms and let us get on with any business as we please.

The British strategy in the Gulf was twofold: "First, Great Britain sought to insure that an inimical foreign power could not use the Arabian Gulf as a base for threatening those lines of communication [from India to England]. Second, it was critical that local powers in the region never gain enough military strength to threaten those British lines of communication on their own"¹. With this goal in mind one could argue that the British were following an active strategy to keep the Gulf region underdeveloped, and indeed marginal.

The British Empire guaranteed stable rule by the Gulf coasts' ruling families. Most of the current ruling families have been in power for 150 to 250 years thanks to this British support. The English would not hesitate to intervene in dynastic succession disputes to safeguard their interests, thus alienating some sections of the ruling families. In fact hereditary rule is contrary to a central rule of tribal politics: the legitimacy of a ruler should derive from his wisdom (hekma) and capacity to rule, not from his affiliation. This is reflected in the Arab words for government (hukumat) and ruler (haakim) which come from the root 'hkm', (to pass) judgment. This principle of

¹ From Michael Casey, History of Kuwait, p36

legitimacy is now brandished by those who challenge the current rulers, mostly Salafists but also some traditionalists.

Twentieth Century until the 1960s

The Arabian Peninsula entered the 20th Century as one of the least developed areas of the classical world; the areas inhabited by nomad tribes were again much poorer than the settled areas of the Hijaz and the Gulf coast between Bahrain and Kuwait. Although the precursors to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are conventionally termed 'states', they had no state structures. Only Bahrain and, to a certain degree, Kuwait had developed such structures; the rest of the peninsula was ruled by tribal structures and kinship ties.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw some timid attempts at modernization as a result of the reform movement in the Ottoman Empire (the Tanzimat) and the Arab world (Nahda). The first modern school of the peninsula was established in Mecca in 1911, paid for by a wealthy merchant from Jeddah. The Ottomans even built a railway to Medina (the Hijaz railway), which only operated a few years before the outbreak of WW1. Although this was ostensibly to facilitate the Hajj, the train was also used for moving troops and military supplies, thus becoming a target for anti-Ottoman forces.

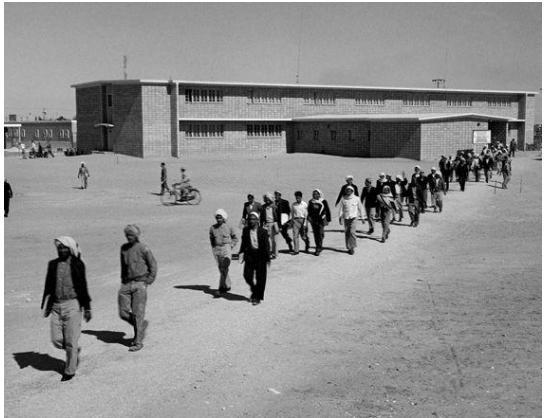
During World War I, both the Hashemite rulers of the Hijaz and King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud were promised future independence by the British, if they would side with England against the Ottomans. The exploits of Lawrence of Arabia in the Hijaz are well known; not so the activities of his colleague in Riyadh, Captain Shakespear, who concluded a treaty of mutual support with Ibn Saud. The Saudi ruler, who unified the Peninsula between 1902 and 1932, at that time needed British support to defeat the Al Rashids from Ha'il, who received Ottoman support. The promise made to King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud was to weigh heavier than that made to the Hashemite rulers.

After the Ottomans were routed from the Arabian Peninsula, Sharif Hussein of Mecca, the Hashemite king, proclaimed the independent Kingdom of the Hijaz (1916-1925). When the Saudis captured Mecca, thus putting an end to seven centuries of Hashemite rule, the two sons of Sharif Hussein were made sovereigns of Iraq (King Faisal) and Jordan (King Abdullah) by English intercession. The Hashemite dynasty survives until today in Jordan.

American Mission in Bahrain, girls' kindergarten; 1928

First Saudi school for engineers, built by ARAMCO in the Eastern Province; 1955

Queen Elisabeth knighting a Hadhramawti businessman in Aden; 1957



After the departure of the Ottomans in 1918, Northern Yemen lapsed into a quasi medieval state, isolated from world politics and micro-managed by Zaidi Kings. The Army and merchant class finally managed to wrestle power from the Zaidi imam in 1962, establishing the Yemen Arab Republic, which was supported by Nasser's Egypt. Nasser sent troops to battle the royalists supported by Saudi Arabia and Britain, and the war lasted until 1968.

Britain remained in control of Aden and the adjoining southern and eastern Yemeni areas until 1967, when Marxist tribal guerillas drove the British out and established the People's Republic of South Yemen, renamed People's Democratic Republic of Yemen two years later. A Marxist state was formed with support from the USSR and other Soviet Bloc countries, but it was eventually undermined by conflict between the tribes that underpinned it. North and South Yemen as they are commonly known (although West and East Yemen would be more appropriate), remained on relatively good terms until 1990, when they decided to merge into the Republic of Yemen.

Bahrain was considerably more developed as a political entity and as a relatively open society than the rest of the region. A first 'American Mission' hospital was established there (by the Dutch) in 1903, and the first boys' school in 1919 (followed by the first girls' school in 1928). With its traders, agriculture and pearl industry Bahrain was never poor, but it suddenly became rich when oil was discovered in 1932. This came just in time as the Gulf's main source of income, the pearl industry, collapsed when the Japanese started cultivating pearls artificially.

Kuwait was severely affected by the collapse of the pearl trade, on which half of the population was dependent. The city-state experienced a decade of poverty and emigration until oil was discovered in 1936.

Qatar entered a protectorate treaty with Britain, thus joining the Trucial Coast system. Oil was discovered on Qatar's west coast in the late 1930s, but extraction only started in 1949. In the intervening years, Qatar, like Kuwait and Bahrain, suffered from economic depression and the collapse of the pearling industry.

Like Qatar, the United Arab Emirates played a marginal role in the region until their independence in 1970, which was preceded by the discovery of massive oil reserves in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi.

Oman, by contrast, was long an influential regional player, and it excited the colonial ambitions of several European nations, such as the French and the Germans. The British however asserted their predominance when they concluded an agreement with the Sultan of Oman in 1908 that effectively made the sultanate a British protectorate. In return, the British helped the Sultan against his rivals, the Imam of Nizwa who ruled the interior and the oft rebelling tribes of Dhofar, the province bordering South Yemen.

For the subsequent history of each country, please consult the following chapters.

General overview of historic developments in the Arabian Peninsula

The Arabian Peninsula was an integral part of the classical world between the 4th millennium BC and 500 AD, benefiting from its location between the Nile Valley, Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley/India. This made it into a hub for commerce and cultural exchange. The southwest of the peninsula and the Gulf around Bahrain were particularly sophisticated. The proto-Arab language and the Arabic script developed into classical Arabic among these cultures.

Despite being the point of departure of Islam, the Peninsula played no significant role in the development of Islamic civilization. From the 8th to the 20th Century AD, its overall role in world history remained marginal. This only changed with the discovery of oil in the 1930s.

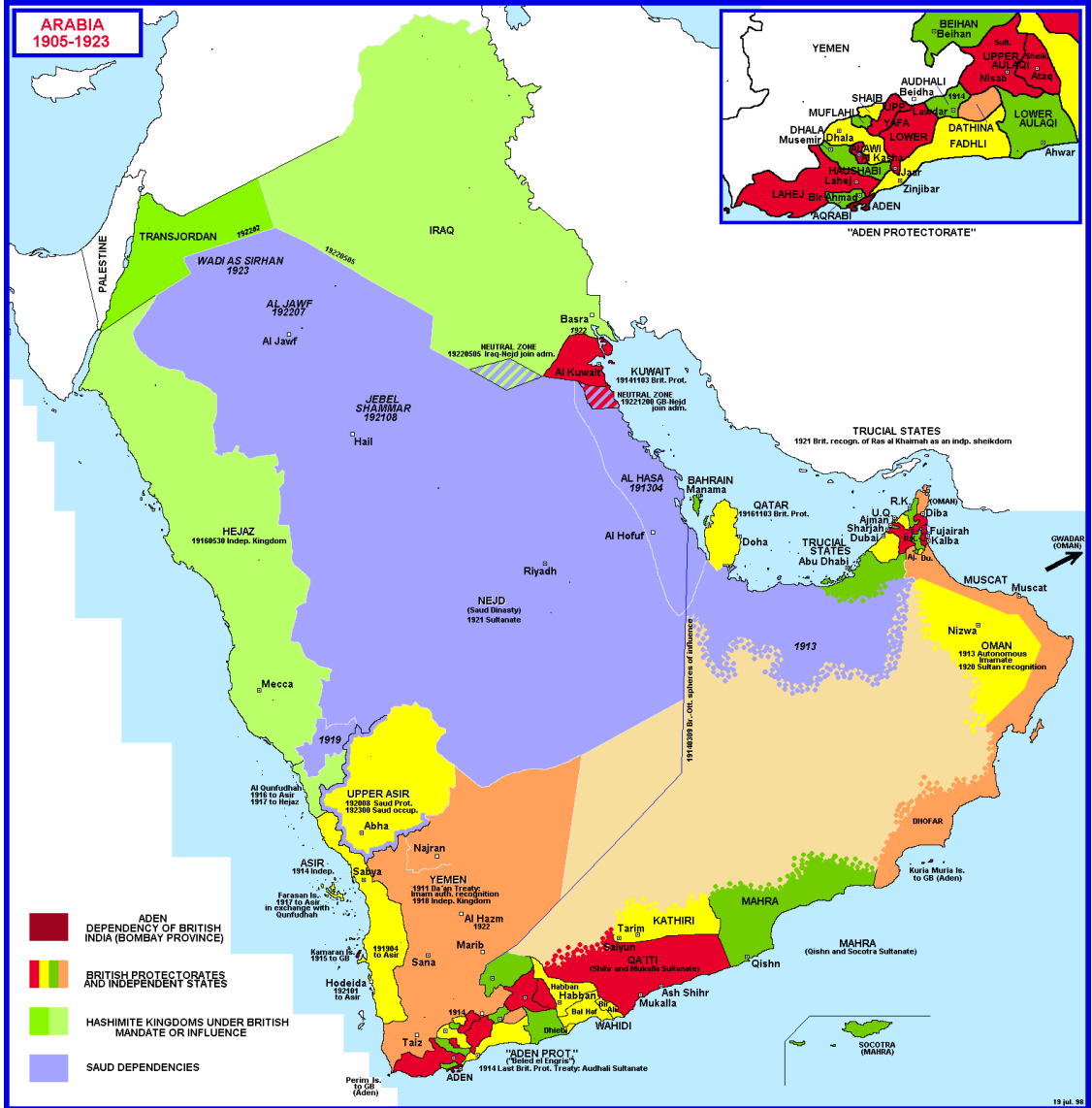
The settlements along the southern shore of the Gulf always retained some prosperity because of their location on sea-trading routes between Mesopotamia and India. Though this trade was taken over by successively the Portuguese (16th Century), the Dutch (17th Century) and the British (18th and 19th Century), the ports of Bahrain, Kuwait and Muscat managed to profit by serving local markets and specializing in the slave trade. Another source of considerable income was pearling, until the 1930s. The discovery of oil came just in time to supplement the loss of pearling income.

After the period of the prosperous Yemeni kingdoms, South and West Arabia lapsed into subsistence agriculture, and the small trading posts (Mocha, Aden) established by European powers on the coast did little to develop the hinterland. Mecca, Medina and the port of Jeddah (i.e. the Hijaz) remained relatively prosperous and connected to the rest of the (Islamic) world thanks to pilgrims, but generally the peninsula stagnated until the end of Ottoman rule in the early 20th Century.

The central areas of the peninsula, from the Syrian desert to the Empty Quarter, had the least means to support a population. These areas were the theatre of tribal strife, often prompted by spells of drought and resulting migratory shifts. From the 18th Century onwards, the House of Al Saud progressively established its dominion over the peninsula, based on religious legitimacy, political skill and historical links to other ruling families of the Gulf. They only conquered the Hijaz in 1924. Their conservative interpretation of religion limited contacts between the population and the outside world. Oman and Yemen kept their own distinctive cultural make-up.

At the turn of the 20th Century, the Arabian Peninsula was one of the least developed regions of the 'old world'. With the fall of the Ottoman Empire, British hegemony over the region was unquestioned. But the British made no attempt to develop the societies of the peninsula, as their main interest was to ensure that these societies did not disrupt their relations with their Indian colonies. This all changed with the discovery of oil.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



3

Saudi Arabia

From the first years of the 20th Century to the end of the 1920s, Saudi Arabia was locked in strife. In 1902 King Abdul Aziz, also known as Ibn Saud, recaptured Riyadh from his base in Kuwait. His religiously motivated troops, the Ikhwan², then wrestled the dominion over the rest of the Nejd from the Rashidi clan from Ha'il, and then progressively established their writ over the rest of what is now Saudi Arabia. After capturing Mecca and the Hijaz, the Kingdom of Nejd and Hijaz was established in 1926. The relatively more sophisticated society, trade relations and administration of the Saudi west coast gave the new state a kick-start. In 1932, King Abdul Aziz established the state of Saudi Arabia, with as its capital Riyadh.

The history of the unification of Saudi Arabia contains the seeds of some current tensions in the Kingdom. On one side of the scale, the Ikhwan rebelled against the new authorities in the late 1920s. They accused them of moral laxity and betrayal, as the Ikhwan wished to continue the expansion of the kingdom into what is now Iraq and Jordan. Their mission, besides the return of the purified form of Islam known as Salafism, included abolishing the nomad lifestyle and breaking tribal affiliations by settling the nomads in sedentary settlements, which they deemed more appropriate to the practice of an Islamic lifestyle. Their search for places to settle led them to breach the new Kingdom's treaties with the British, who helped King Abdul Aziz crush the Ikhwan with their air force and modern weaponry in 1929.

After the Ikhwan's leader, Faisal al Dawish, died in a Riyadh prison in 1931, the Saudi rulers re-established the pact with the clergy which had been the basis for the first Saudi state. This state-sponsored version of Islam is known abroad as Wahhabism³ after

² Ikhwan, meaning 'brothers', is used nowadays for the members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi Ikhwan from the early 20th century are not related; they were Salafi instead.

³ The term 'Wahhabism', commonly used by non-Saudis to describe the official version of Islam in Saudi Arabia, is generally rejected by Saudis. They see themselves simply as Muslims.

Muhammad Ibn Abd Al Wahhab (1703-1792). After being expelled from his native village, this scholar who advocated the return to a strict, pure form of Islam found refuge with Mohammed Ibn Saud (in 1740). He agreed to recognize Ibn Saud and his family as temporal leaders of the movement if they would spread his version of Islam. This agreement holds to today. It allows the scholars and judges inspired by Ibn Abd Al Wahhab's teachings to guide Saudi society in return for submission to the house of Al Saud; this includes not criticizing the royal family members and the Kingdom's international engagements. This arrangement explains the dual nature of Saudi Arabia, whose rulers send their children to Western universities and support Western policies that are questionable from the viewpoint of Islamic theology – such as the invasion of Iraq – while a strict observance of the tenets of Islam is demanded of the population.

On the other side of the scale are the old families from the Hijaz, who lament having been marginalized. They feel that their relatively sophisticated and tolerant culture is being erased by the 'one voice' of what they term 'Nejdi' Islam, in combination with a novel form of Arab-American consumerist culture, which they are unable to resist as they lack access to power. This tension expresses itself in some of the contemporary art currently produced in Saudi Arabia.

After the creation of the Saudi state in 1932, its founder King Abdulaziz devoted his main energy to developing the infrastructure of the country. His sons, which have ruled since his death in 1953 until today, have done likewise. The trilogy 'Cities of Salt' by the exiled Saudi novelist Abdelrahman Munif finely captures the rapid transformation the primitive Saudi society underwent in this period and the role of foreign advisors, who were as quick to profit from the sudden oil wealth as the ruling families. It is truly mind-boggling to realize how quickly Saudi Arabia has developed in less than a century.

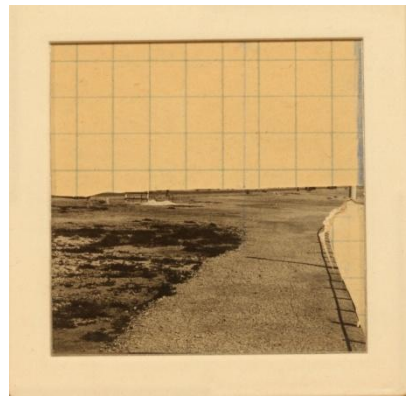
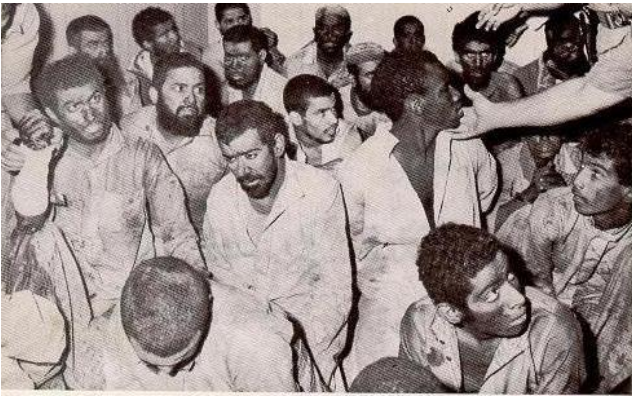
As noted elsewhere, control of the oil supply has guaranteed stable rule by all the monarchs of the Gulf area from the 1930s onwards. Saudi Arabia, being the largest country in the Gulf and the first to develop its hydrocarbon resources, led the way and thus strengthened its influence over the rest of the peninsula. In fact, its *primus inter pares* status within the GCC is hindering further integration of the Gulf countries, who realize that Saudi Arabia would play an overbearing role in any future political or economic union.

Sami Al Turki: "Marhaba" from Washaeq series, 2012

Archive photograph of the captured men of Juhayman Al Otaybi

Hajra Waheed: from Witness series, 2013

When West coast liberals or Saudi Shia object to the strict Islam imposed by the official clergy, they usually refer to it as 'Nejdi', the name of the central region, home to the Al Saud dynasty.



Rapid modernization, 1953-1979

The first successor of King Abdulaziz was the liberal King Saud (1953-1964). He decided to modernize not only the infrastructure of the country but also its mindsets, allowing a relatively free media to flourish and establishing cultural institutions such as the Riyadh Academy of Fine Arts (1964). He did this by borrowing heavily on financial markets, plunging the country into debt despite its ever increasing oil revenues, which went largely to US oil companies.

King Saud was deposed because of what the House of Saud deemed his incompetence, and replaced by his half-brother King Faisal, who continued roughly the same policies in a more organized and sustainable manner.

The American presence in the Kingdom, which had already replaced British influence, became dominant as US companies were tasked with developing the oil industry, physical infrastructure, education and other social services, and the government administration. Major US companies such as Standard Oil, Bechtel, the Ford Foundation and, of course, the US Army, established large compounds in the country for their expatriate staff. Meanwhile the amount of immigrant labor from the rest of the Arab world, South Asia and the Far East also exploded.

This sudden and massive influx of foreigners created all kinds of adaptation problems. The Western foreigners did little to adapt to Saudi culture and offended their hosts' sense of hospitality; in short, they only seemed to come for their own benefit, keeping to themselves. Although many Saudis enjoyed new features of their lives such as going to cinemas to watch American movies or interacting with foreign women and men, the bulk of the population, led by the official clergy, disapproved of the new cultural forms that were being imported as side-products of the economic and social modernization.

This culture clash also took on another form: every year, tens of thousands of Saudi students were going abroad for their education, under a lavish scheme of the Saudi government to provide rapid higher education to its citizens (mostly those from the families with the right connections to power). During the 1970s, scandalous reports about the behavior of Saudi citizens abroad (in Beirut, the Cote d'Azur, London and the USA) started finding their way back to the Kingdom. The biography of Faisal bin Musaid, a grandson of King Abdulaziz, who was arrested for selling LSD and hashish in California in 1970, is exemplary. Living a playboy's life in the West, Beirut and Riyadh with his pro-Israeli American girlfriend, Faisal eventually assassinated his uncle King Faisal in 1975. His motives were not clear, but he may have been frustrated with his virtual house arrest in Riyadh..

In 1973, the Saudi government decided to join the oil boycott against the USA and other Western countries that had supported Israel in the 1973 Yom Kippur war. This

first major action against US interests was followed by the buying of a 64% stake in the Arab American Oil Company (Aramco) which had a monopoly over oil production in the Kingdom (the stake was raised to 100% in 1980, effectively nationalizing the company that was henceforth called Saudi Aramco). As a result of the major OPEC price hike, the revenue of the Kingdom increased dramatically.

King Khalid, who succeeded his half brother Faisal upon his assassination, restored the privileged relationship with the USA and accelerated the modernization of the country. Midway through his reign, in 1979, a series of events would inflect the course of the royal family's modernization policies.

Reaffirming the pact between State and clergy, 1979-2000

In 1979, the house of Al Saud experienced a double challenge to its authority. Across the Gulf a social revolution ousted the Pahlavi dynasty, in power since 1925; it resulted in the formation of a revolutionary theocratic government that vied to take over the leadership of the Islamic world from Saudi Arabia. The events occurring in Iran threatened to stir the Shia in the oil-rich Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, who have practically no access to the Kingdom's power structures.

In the same year, about 500 Saudi Islamists seized the holy mosque in Mecca, on the first day of the Islamic year 1400. Led by the retired officer Juhayman Al Otaybi, the Salafis⁴ – many of them descendants of the Ikhwan that had been crushed by King Abdulaziz in the 1920s – demanded that the 'immoral and illegitimate' rulers of the Kingdom step down, so that a true Islamic state could be established on Salafi principles. The occupation lasted three weeks, and ended in a bloodbath when the Saudi national guard, assisted by the French gendarmerie, recaptured the mosque.

Faced with external and internal contestation of their leadership, the House of Al Saud strengthened its ties with the clergy and rolled back the liberalization in Saudi Arabia, closing cinemas, giving the clergy control over public education, enforcing the segregation between foreigners and Saudi citizens, and strengthening the religious police, known as the mutawwa'in (volunteers).

The Saudi rulers also embarked on a vast campaign of enforcing their version of Islam throughout the Islamic world, bolstered by the peak in oil prices that also

⁴ Salafism refers to the pure form of Islam practiced by the 'Salaf', i.e. early Muslims. The term has been in use since the Middle Ages and can denote any person who tries to remain true to the original tenets of Islam. Although the term has become associated in the West with fundamentalists, it is not considered derogatory by Muslims. 'Wahhabism' (see previous footnote) is a particular form of Salafism which does not question the temporal rule of the house of Al Saud.

occurred in 1979. This campaign included buying Arab news channels and satellite transmission systems, financing the construction of mosques throughout the world, training foreign clergy in Saudi Arabia, strengthening the government's grip over the Hajj and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and funding all sorts of social advancement schemes and charitable activities throughout the global Islamic community.

The year 1979 also saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The civil war that ensued as a result of communist control of Afghanistan, provided an opportunity to channel Salafi fervor outside the Peninsula. The Saudi rulers provided massive funding to the Afghan mujahedeen and helped one of the sons of the construction magnate Bin Laden establish a base (Al Qaeda) on the Pakistani/Afghan border in the early 1980s.

In 1982, King Khaled died and was replaced by his half brother King Fahd. The senior brother of the Sudairi Seven – the single most important block of full brothers among King Abdulaziz's forty sons – strengthened the grip of his clan on power. The Sudairi Seven are seen as the main force behind the conservative pro-Nejdi policies of Saudi government, and they - and their sons – have occupied many of the key posts of government since the 1970s. The current crown prince, Salman, as well as the two previous ones, is one of the 'Sudairi Seven'. (There are only four left, but their numerous sons also form a powerful block).

King Fahd, who ruled until 2005, wielded the double-edged sword of Saudi policy with considerable effectiveness. Within the country, the influence of the Al Saud and their tribal allies was built up, amounting to what can be called a Saudization policy at the expense of other traditional elites in the country. Throughout the Islamic world, meanwhile, the conservative Saudi version of Islam was propagated, seemingly winning the rivalry with Shia Iran. On the other hand, Saudi support for US policy grew even stronger, as both countries discovered many common interests: against Iran, against communism, against Ba'athism and other left-wing Arab movements, pro-oil, etc. The only dissonant note was provided by the US insistence on democracy and human rights, especially under President Clinton. King Fahd embarked on some minimal political reforms as a result, but was spared further pressure to adopt Western political and ethical standards.

The archconservative grand mufti Ibn Baz (1993-1999) is exemplary of Saudi policies during the 1980s and 90s. On the one hand, he insisted the world was flat and that the sun revolved around the earth, and he deemed women in co-education no better than prostitutes; on the other hand, he sanctioned the Oslo peace accords and the presence of US troops in Saudi Arabia during and following the Gulf war (1990 onwards). For Salafists like Osama Bin Laden, he exemplified the very worst, the most hypocritical face of the religious establishment.

This period was bleak in terms of general culture progress; the timid openings that had been made in the 1960s and 1970s were turned back (for example movie theatres and the Riyadh Institute of Fine Arts closed) and the ‘one voice’ of Saudi Islam was imposed on all aspects of life. The older cultural elites of the Hijaz retreated within their own *awa'il* (extended families). The renewed grip of the clergy over education dealt a blow to the general effort of providing Saudi citizens with the intellectual skills necessary to deal with the complex modern world.

In the domain of the arts, this period witnessed the growth of officially sanctioned artist circles in Riyadh and Jeddah, such as the Riyadh Fine Arts Group, the Jeddah House of Artists, and the Saudi Organization for Plastic Arts. At a governmental level, the Saudi Arabian Organization for Culture and Arts of the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information helped artists belonging to these circles find audiences abroad, in places like Cairo, Kuwait and Bangladesh. Abstract Expressionism was the dominant fashion. It did not provoke censorship. Many of the artists of this generation, born between 1940 and 1970, are still active today. Their technical skills may be quite developed, and they enjoy a local following, but this kind of work does not speak to an international audience. This generation of painters, predominant in the official circuit, can form an impediment to the absorption of young artists into the national art scene.

Although the gradual introduction of internet (from 1999 onwards) and foreign satellite communications started eroding the hold of the political-religious establishment over society, the true wake-up call came with 9/11. The fact that 15 of the 19 hijackers as well as the presumed mastermind of the operation were Saudi, showed that the policy of exporting fundamentalism could backfire nastily. The terrorist attacks on US targets within Saudi Arabia during the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as rising popular discontent about the perceived corruption of the Saudi elite, also proved that the strategy was not succeeding in deflating political Islam within the Kingdom. Finally, the negative perceptions of the country within international public opinion – including in the rest of the Arab world – seemed to indicate the virtual failure of the PR campaign the regime had embarked upon.

It was thus time for a new inflection of policy.

Cautious reforms, 2000-2012

In 1995, King Fahd suffered a stroke from which he never fully recovered. Crown Prince Abdullah thus became regent of the country, and in August 2005 he ascended the throne. From the time his rule started, he instituted a program of reforms to render Saudi society more competitive in the global arena.

These reforms were not the making of an enlightened autocrat, but were the result of considerable pressure from Saudi society. In 2003 more than 100 prominent Saudi intellectuals from all provinces and backgrounds presented the petition 'Vision for the Present and Future of our Nation' to Crown Prince Abdullah. They argued for political reforms, to contribute to the development of a pluralistic intellectual development that would counter the religious claim to the truth, which they held responsible for the violence and tensions in Saudi society. This prompted Crown Prince Abdullah to launch a National Dialogue.

The National Dialogue, the creation of official Human Rights organizations and other state-sponsored efforts to start discussing reform, may have been, at least partially, window-dressing operations. Nevertheless, they prompted real discussions on internet between Saudi citizens, who now had received the green light from government to broach subjects previously considered taboo in the public realm, such as relations between Saudi Sunnis and Shias. The media also started reflecting these discussions; the creation of a self-regulating syndicate of journalists allowed the media to escape direct religious control. The Al Arabiyya satellite TV channel (set up in 2003, operating from Dubai, but fully Saudi-owned) offered proof of the increased freedom of expression, broadcasting its critical news about the US 'liberation' of Iraq to Arab audiences worldwide.

The most important reforms undertaken under Abdullah were probably in the field of education. With unusual speed, two world-class universities were established after 2005: King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) near Jeddah and the women-only Princess Nora Bint Abdulrahman University on the outskirts of Riyadh. Both are self-contained campus towns with the best facilities available in the field and a largely foreign teaching staff selected from top universities throughout the world. The new King also established a wide-ranging grants system to fund Saudi students studying abroad, as in the 1960s and 70s, but more meritocratic.

*Ayman Yossri Dayban: "Abeed-al Manazil" (the House Servant); 8 digital prints, 2011. The English translation is not part of the original artwork
Renderings of co-ed KAUST (left) and Princess Nora University (right)*



The house Negro lived in the house next to his master.



He dressed good, he ate good, what the master left him.



If the master got sick, he'd say, "What's the matter? We sick?" "We sick" ! This is the thinking of the house Negro.



He loved his master. He loved his master better than the master loved himself.



If master said, "We got a nice house," you say, "Yeah, we got a nice house.".



Master's house caught on fire, the house Negro would put the blaze out.



If another slave said: "Let's run away, let's separate from this cruel master"



He said, "Why? What's better than what we got here?"

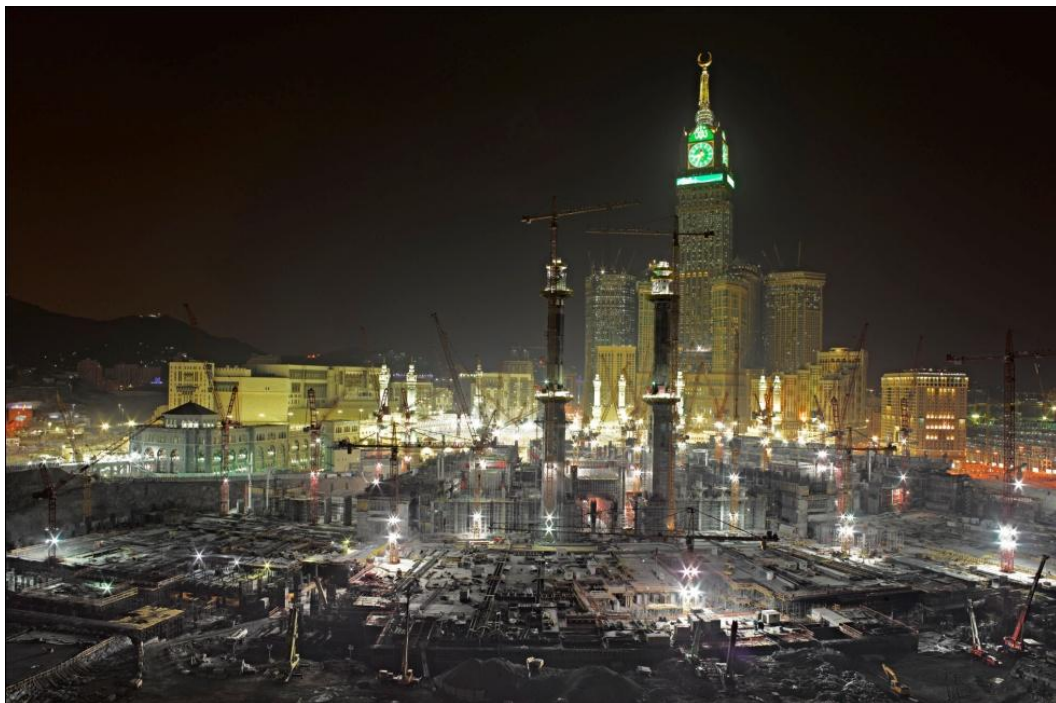


King Abdullah also instituted reforms to include women in the labor force; in 2011 he decreed that women are allowed to vote and run for office in municipal elections. He also appointed some women to top-level posts in government. In July 2012, King Abdullah lifted a ban on Saudi women participating in international sports events such as the Olympics. In the same year Haifaa Al Mansour, a female Saudi movie director from Riyadh, won awards at the Cannes Film Festival with *Wajda*.

In politics, King Abdullah has reduced the power of the Sudairi clan and appointed ministers, deputy ministers and governors who could be qualified as technocrats, whereas the rule previously was to appoint people with strong connections to the House of Al Saud (there are about 4000 princes in the Al Saud clan while the extended royal family counts about 22,000 members: enough to fill quite a few government posts). He has also made - rather timid - overtures to the Shia majority in the Eastern Province, appointed relatively moderate heads of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and he has generally weakened the strong grip of the religious establishment on society.

To avoid upsetting the pact between the royal clan and the clergy, which is the foundation of the Saudi state, two steps forward are generally followed by one step back. As one could expect, Saudi Arabia does not score high on global rankings of political and social freedoms, despite the reforms undertaken under King Abdullah. It is also unclear how the next King will position himself, as King Abdullah, born in 1924, is 88 in 2012. The current crown prince Salman (born 1935) seems inclined to continue King Abdullah's cautious reforms - if of course he survives him.

Ahmed Mater: Artificial Light (from the Desert of Pharan series) 2012. In the foreground the construction activities for the five-fold expansion of the Masjid al Haram, the holy mosque; in the background the clock tower of the Abraaj al Bait commercial development towering over the Ka'aba.



Planning the future

The Saudi government has developed ambitious plans for integrating the Kingdom into the global economy, taking into account that the current bonanza due to oil wealth will one day come to an end and that it will be difficult for Saudi Arabia to sustain its growing population. Although 'planning for the post-oil era' has been a catchphrase for a few decades at least, some of the proposed projects are now far into the implementation phase.

A National Spatial Strategy was approved in 2000 to correct the imbalances in a country where three major urban areas (Jeddah, Riyadh and Dammam) attract almost all economic activities. The idea was to establish provincial development poles and establish urban development corridors between them.

In 2000, too, the Saudi Arabian General Investment Agency, SAGIA, was created. Its purpose is to attract private investment (domestic and foreign) to wean the Saudi economy away from government funding, and in the process diversify the economy and provide employment. The objective is to make the Saudi economy globally competitive. In accordance with the National Spatial Strategy, SAGIA received 60 billion dollars in 2004 to lay the groundwork for six economic cities in diverse locations of the peninsula, keeping in mind local resources, employment needs and regional opportunities. Each economic city operates as a public-private partnership.

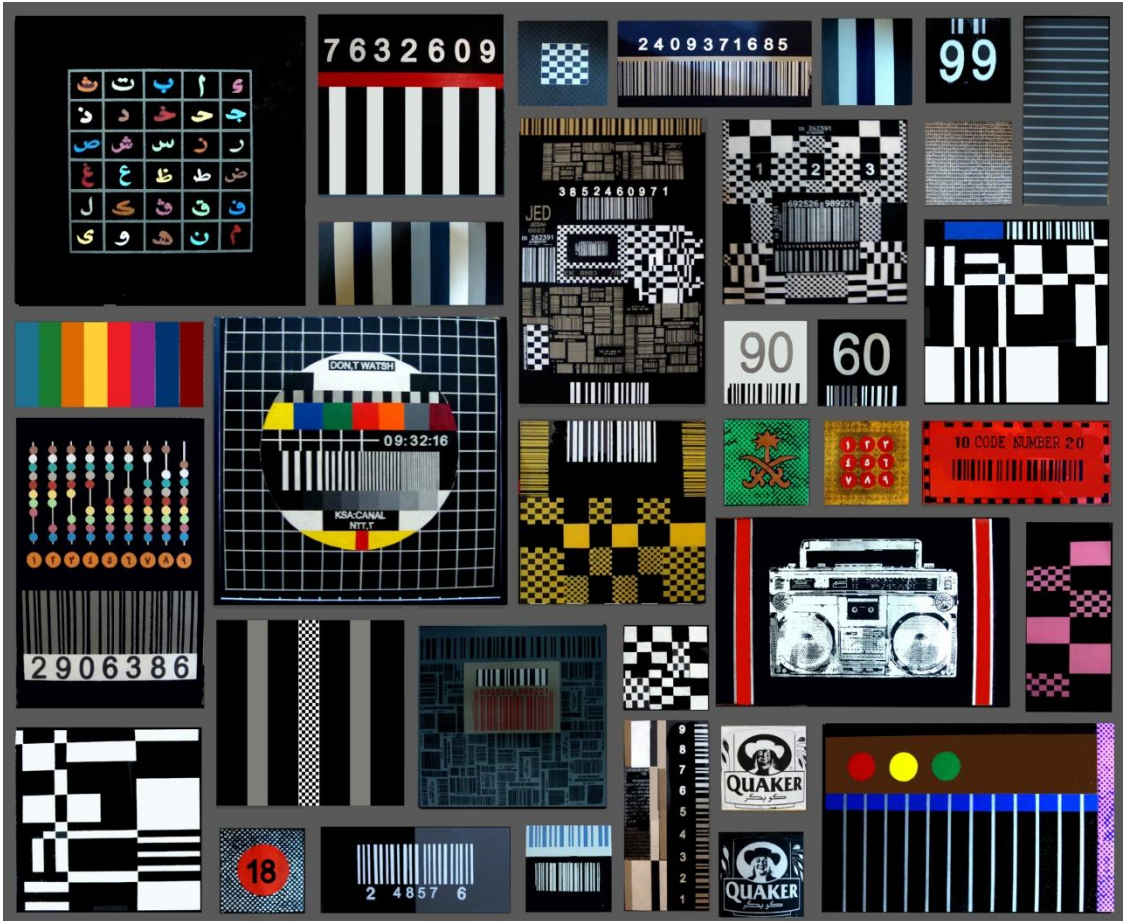
Thus Jazan Economic City, on the Red Sea coast near Yemen, is meant to become an industrial hub that will eventually create 500.000 jobs for the impoverished local population. Construction is reportedly well underway, with major investment by a Malaysian company. King Abdullah Economic City is destined to become the largest port on the Red Sea coast, while the outskirts of Medina will host Knowledge Economic City, just beyond the radius within which only Muslims are allowed. Other economic cities have been planned around Ha'il, which is supposed to become the largest transportation hub in the Middle East, Tabuk (in northwest Saudi Arabia), and on the Gulf coast near the Kuwaiti border.

Interestingly, the planning and implementation of these cities is largely in the hands of Saudi specialists and regional investors (like Emaar from Dubai and the Saudi Binladen Group), whereas the planned Saudi cities of the 1970s and 80s were almost entirely developed and built by Western companies. This is evidence that the education policies of previous Saudi governments have borne their fruit. The imposing King Abdullah University for Science and Technology, opened in 2009, will undoubtedly bring forth new generations of highly competent planners. Energy saving and environmentally friendly 'pedestrian' cities with mixed housing to ensure maximum social cohesion are becoming standard practice in Saudi urban planning.

There is obviously a political aspect to this utopian planning exercise, with potentially far-ranging consequences for further cultural development. Every year, hundreds of thousands of young Saudis enter the labor market; the gamble of the government is that, through the economic reforms and infrastructural planning, enough of them will be able to find jobs to 'keep them out of trouble'. For discontent is rising among the un(der)employed young Saudis. Especially the children of rural immigrants who moved to the cities in search of work over the past decades have difficulties in finding jobs. Most of the jobless blame the closed nature of Saudi society, where one needs appropriate connections ('wasita') to move forward. Some of them may yearn for more democracy and an open society, but the majority seems to be rather attracted by revolutionary Salafi discourse and its millenarian project with egalitarian undertones.

This is probably the reason why Saudi Arabia resisted the first wave of the Arab awakening in 2011 quite easily, because of the secular, pro-democracy nature of the protest movements elsewhere. Few Saudis believe that democracy is a realistic option; they realize that their country is founded on the alliance between the Al Saud and the clergy, and that a revolution would need to go extremely deep to remove these roots. Only the Salafis can envisage such radical change that would wipe out the entity of Saudi Arabia. For these reasons, the liberal, cultured class to which Saudi artists pertain rather supports the current government as long as it continues its reforms: evolution, not revolution.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



3.5 Artistic developments in Saudi Arabia today

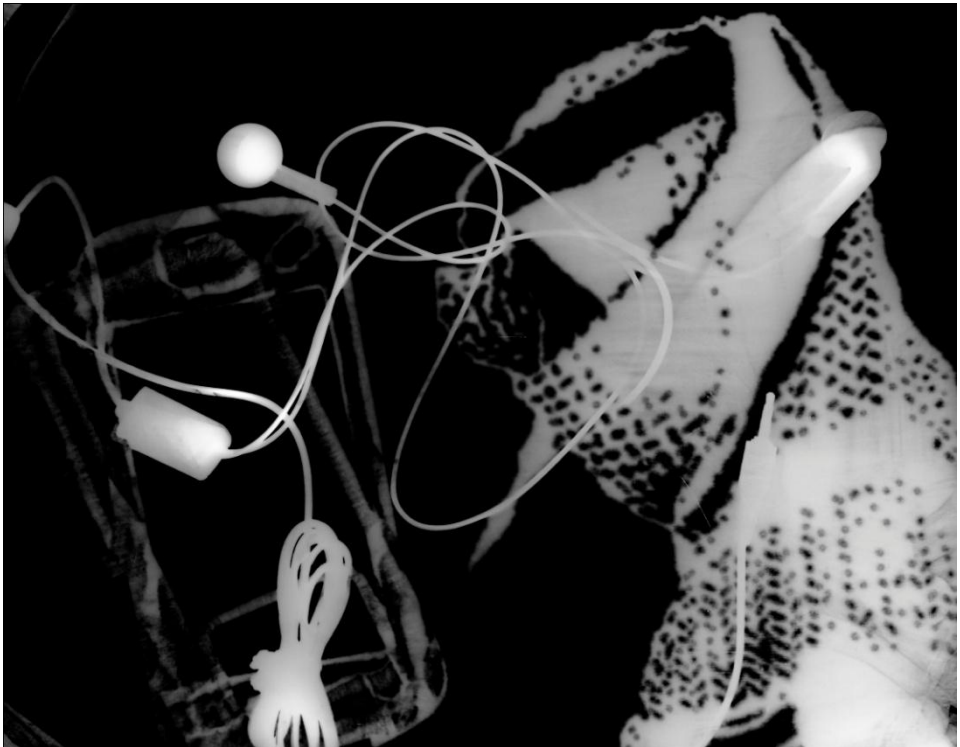
Current policies provide breathing space for the cultural and artistic sectors. It seems young Saudi artists are releasing a lot of pent-up energy. There are, however, no specific PR policies for creating an arts sector. The Kingdom lacks art schools, museums, exhibition halls and all the other basic elements of an artistic infrastructure. From the government's point of view, contemporary visual arts remain problematic, as they might stir Islamist resentment, without serving a particular policy purpose or a large community in return.

The Saudi government and many important institutions do, however, appreciate the positive PR effect the support of contemporary art has on international audiences. While the success of *Edge of Arabia* (2008 onwards) was achieved with little or no government support, the Saudi government did organize a pavilion in the Venice Biennial in 2011.

Within Saudi Arabia, the government can keep the religious police at bay, but any event deemed contrary to a strict interpretation of Islam may provoke the ire of self-appointed guardians of the faith. Each step towards a more liberal, plural, society might be met by violent protests. This already occurred with the introduction of television in 1966.

The case of the Riyadh book fair is illustrative. In 2010, the fair only hosted publishers with very safe, innocuous books. In 2011, the scope was enlarged to books about political, social and cultural subjects. A mob attacked the book fair, beating publishers and visitors, because such devilish books might detract Saudis from the true faith. This did not deter the government from further expanding the scope of the book fair in 2012. Not only were books (mildly) critical of religion and Saudi politics allowed, but the fair organizers decided to allow men and women to visit the fair simultaneously. The stir created on social media by Islamists before the fair prompted the government to issue stern warnings that disruptions of the fair would not be allowed, and strict security measures were taken to avoid them. The fair reportedly attracted a million visitors, giving an indication that many Saudis would like more relaxed cultural policies, and that they may outnumber the fundamentalists.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



In recent years, Saudi writers such as Raja Alem, Abdo Khal and Turki al Hamad have won international prizes and were translated into many languages. Despite the Saudi government expressing pride in its award-winning authors, their books are not available in the Kingdom. A book that has been a success both inside and outside the Kingdom is Rajaa Alsanea's 'Girls of Riyadh'(2005), which describes the love-life of a group of rich young Saudi girls. Written as a series of e-mails sent out to a group of friends, the book provides valuable insights into modern Saudi high society. It was banned in Saudi Arabia and is deemed controversial by the country's authorities, but it circulates widely nevertheless.

There is much less censorship in the lively Saudi pop scene, with singers famous throughout the Arab world such as Mohamed Abdu and Abdul-Majeed Abdullah, or the rapper Qusai; there seem to be many bands playing a variety of folk and Western music styles throughout the country. Saudi Arabia has interesting folkloric music, especially along the Red Sea coast, but it risks being drowned by Arab-American commercial pop culture and the lack of interest of the authorities in preserving this cultural heritage – with the notable exception of the Janadriya cultural festival. This folklore festival takes place every February just outside Riyadh in a purpose-built village, which simulates the different cultures of the country (building styles, food, sports, music and dances).

The Saudi design scene is also picking up; Saudi Design Magazine offers a regular overview of creations by Saudi designers, while other 'arty' magazines like Oasis also provide extensive coverage. Many people who see themselves as artists study design and work in that branch, because 'artist' is still not a socially acceptable occupation.

There has been some media buzz about Saudi Street Art. However, as one Saudi graffiti artist who had been part of the US and European graffiti scenes pointed out, the related subculture does not exist in Saudi Arabia; as he put it, the 'street art scene' consists of teenagers indulging in a bit of copycat behavior, inspired by internet or music videos, on a weekend afternoon. This boredom also translates in other cultural expressions such as the 'sport' of slipper skating or the acrobatic stunts performed with cars (drifting). The 2012 video clip 'Bad Girls' by the British artist Mia is inspired by these Saudi daredevil drivers.

Talal Al Zeid: Untitled (Khaleeji Girl), 2012

Maha Mullah, I-Shemagh, from the Shemagh Mirage series. Photogram, 2010

Specificities of the Western Region

The Hijazis of the West coast pride themselves on being the more intellectual, cultured population of Saudi Arabia. Undeniably, the Hijaz has been more open to the rest of the world than the central Nejd region, thanks especially to the large influx of pilgrims from the rest of the Arab world, many of whom settled in Mecca, Jeddah or other towns of the region. But by 1925, when the then independent Kingdom of Hijaz was incorporated by King Abdulaziz, the region was still pitifully underdeveloped in comparison to other ex-Ottoman provinces. The great development of the Western Region has taken place under Saudi rule.

Jeddah has the most lively art scene of the Kingdom, but, curiously, the breeding ground of the wave of Saudi contemporary art that has grabbed international attention took place in a small mountain town, Abha, in the early 1990s. The then governor of the Asir province of which Abha is the capital, Prince Khaled al Faisal, is himself a painter, and he took several cultural initiatives. The most important one was Al Miftaha arts village, which he established on the outskirts of Abha to provide studio space for artists and a place to meet.

This is where Abdunasser Gharem, Ahmed Mater and a few other artists decided they had to become more socially engaged as artists. This led to the seminal exhibition *Shatta* (disembodied) in Jeddah in 2004 and public performances by Abdunasser Gharem in the Asir and Jizan, followed by more daring art using novel techniques by both artists, soon joined by other young Saudi artists.

Al Miftaha closed in 2011, but the Asir remains one of the cradles of contemporary artists. Which is surprising, given its rural nature; for a long time it was the most neglected province of the Kingdom, though the Saudi government is investing in it now. Most Asiri artists move directly to Jeddah to participate in its art scene.

Jeddah received a major cultural impetus when Mohammed Said Farsi was elected its mayor in 1972. Farsi was an avid collector of Egyptian modernists (his collection sold for 6.7 million dollars at Christie's in 2010) and he used the city's share of sudden oil wealth to transform it into an open-air museum. During the 1980s and 90s, the city's art scene remained relatively alive despite the contrary winds blowing from Riyadh, leading to the establishment of several art societies and foundations.

Abdunasser Gharem: Manzoa (2008). Photographs of a day-long performance of the artist in an impoverished village of Jizan where the houses were 'to be removed' ("manzoa")

Three images of the Edge of Arabia 'We Need To Talk' exhibition in Jeddah, Jan 2012: Saddek Wasil: Faces of Tin, Wall Sculpture 2012 / Sarah Al Abdali: Makka stencil / Hamza Serafi (founder of Athr, besides artist): detail of World Carpet, 2012



The Al Mansouria Foundation became the most important of Jeddah's art institutions, thanks to the patronage of Princess Jawaher. The Foundation supports a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris, and its erstwhile director Mona Khazindar became the director of the Institut du Monde Arabe in March 2011.

The gallery scene in Jeddah was flourishing from the mid 1990s onward, although most galleries are little more than shops where one can buy art, and many close after a few years of operation. Nevertheless, the proliferation of venues allowed Saudi artists such as Ayman Yossri Daydban and Shadia Alem to live an artists' life when that was impossible elsewhere in the Kingdom. The opening of Athr Gallery in 2009 brought international gallery standards to Jeddah. In recognition of the city's art (market) potential Syria's Dubai-based Ayyam gallery opened a branch in Jeddah in February 2013, and it is quite likely other galleries will follow, despite the complicated and at times hostile regulatory framework in Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile the city of Mecca, the historic center of the Hijaz, has been declining in cultural terms. The pluralistic religious and intellectual life the city was once known for has been erased along with its cultural heritage. The ostensible reason is to accommodate the ever growing number of pilgrims, but the conservative clergy also fears that cultural heritage can detract visitors from the only point of worship, the Ka'aba.

In recent years, Mecca-born artists like the sisters Raja and Shadia Alem—who created a rather hermetic installation for the Saudi Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2011—and Sarah Al Abdali have started dealing with the transformation of their city in their art. Raja is a writer and several of her books deal with the lost heritage of Mecca through magic realism, legend and lore. The current developments, whereby the last old quarter of the center has been erased to make way for a five-fold expansion of the holy mosque, surrounded by high-rise luxury hotels and real-estate ventures, are like a shock-therapy of modernization for many Meccans. The mystique of the Ka'aba is challenged by the grandiose kitsch of the new buildings. The Abraaj Al Beit complex now opposite the holy mosque has broken many world records, including that of the building with the largest floor space, the biggest clock, the second highest tower (after Dubai's Burj al Khalifa) and a mall spanning twenty floors.

Specificities of the Eastern Province

The East coast of Saudi Arabia modernized before the rest of the Kingdom, as this is where the first compounds, and new towns and their facilities were built with Western expertise, to provide for the growing oil industry. Some Saudi artists, whose parents worked in the oil industry, grew up in these American-style compounds; female artists such as Manal Al Dawayan and Hajra Waheed benefited from the freedom and educational facilities on the compounds, allowing them to emancipate vis-à-vis other Saudi women.

Many artists of the Riyadh scene actually hail from the Eastern Province, including the founder of Lam Art Gallery, Lamia Al Rasheed. The majority Shia population is still discriminated against. For example, a Shia still cannot give testimony in court, become a butcher (since the meat he cuts is not considered halal), or marry a Sunni. Moreover, the Shia feel they do not profit sufficiently from the oil wealth of their province. In recent years, especially with the start of the National Dialogue, matters have improved somewhat and it has become possible to speak openly about Shia-Sunni issues. However, the 2011 riots in Al Khobar prove that the tensions still persist; they flare up sporadically, and are negatively affected by the developments in neighboring Bahrain.

There are a few galleries in Dammam and its 'American' suburb Dhahran, but most artistic activities are organized by the national oil company Saudi Aramco, whose headquarters are in Dhahran. Curiously, the oil company has gained cult status among some international artists with roots in the Middle East because of its magazine, Saudi Aramco World, published since the early 1960s from Houston. The magazine has always included cultural information about Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. It has become a valuable resource, and its archives (including an extensive photographic database) can be consulted online.

Saudi Aramco organizes a yearly cultural season for the local inhabitants to provide intelligent entertainment. But its most impressive project is the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, which is being created as the main attraction of Saudi Aramco Cultural Park in Dhahran. Rescheduled to be finished by 2014, it will house a museum, art educational activities, and more facilities.

*Following page: Manal Al Dawayan: Do You Share My Dreams? Spray paint on digital print, 2011.
Image courtesy the artist and Cuadro gallery*



4

Kuwait

Since ancient times, Kuwait – meaning ‘little fort’ – has been a hub on the sea route between Mesopotamia / the Mediterranean, and the countries bordering the Arab sea. The ancient Greeks established a colony on the island of Failaka in the 4th Century BC and the Parthians built a harbor in the 1st Century BC. After the Parthians, Kuwait became part of the Persian Sassanid empire, and with the rise of Islam the Emirate was incorporated into the successive caliphates (from the late 7th Century AD onwards).

Besides trade, the country thrived on the pearl fishing industry until the 1930s. Its merchant class, like in nearby Bahrain, was sufficiently strong to impose some of its demands on the rulers of the country. Kuwait for a long time belonged to the Ottoman province of Basra, although the ruling Al Sabah family enjoyed considerable autonomy from the time they established themselves there in the mid 18th century. In the second half of the 19th Century, the Ottoman Empire belatedly undertook the conquest of the east shore of the Arabian Peninsula (south of Kuwait), to protect itself against the encroaching British Empire. The Sheikh of Kuwait initially supported the Ottomans in subduing his rivals from British-supported Bahrain, but as the Ottoman Empire became dysfunctional around the turn of the 20th century, the Al Sabahs established an agreement with Great Britain (as had other Gulf states before it). Until independence in 1961 the British effectively protected the independence of this city state against the designs of its neighbors, excited by the emirate’s oil wealth, discovered before World War II.



Political history of Kuwait

What sets Kuwait apart from the rest of the Gulf states is the traditional strength of its merchant community and city notables. This explains why Kuwait is the only constitutional monarchy in the region, with a reasonably powerful parliament.

When the Bani Utub tribe moved from the Nejd to Kuwait in the mid 18th Century, they encountered a relatively well organized trading community in ‘the little fort’ (the literal translation of ‘Kuwait’). The merchants supported the succession of the first Al Sabah in 1756, against the other influent members of the Bani Utub (the Al Khalifa for example, who left for Bahrain in 1766, where they still rule as distant cousins of the Al Sabah). Until the end of the 19th Century, the Al Sabah clan’s legitimacy rested on its capacity of managing the city’s affairs with the support of local notables. Religion or military prowess were thus not essential legitimating factors of power, as they were in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

This social pact was first broken in 1896, when Sheikh Mubarak imposed his rule and that of his descendants by killing his brothers. He overcame the resistance of the urban community by forging alliances with the Bedouin and the British (in 1899), but had to relent when the trading families started moving to Bahrain in 1909. This set into motion a political tug of war between the Al Sabah family and the rest of the Kuwaiti population, which continues until today.

Originally, the power struggles remained confined to the ruling family and the traditional elites, of whom many are also Bani Utub. The rest of the population fell victim to this power struggle, as dramatized in the Kuwaiti film about pre-oil pearl divers ‘The Cruel Sea’ (1972). When the ruling family (buttressed by foreign powers and, from the 1940s onward, by oil wealth) would pursue its interests vis-à-vis the city’s merchant community, the elites would respond by strengthening the institutions that represented them, for example through the 1962 constitution. When the elites increased their share of power over national affairs, the ruling family would look for new allies in society and give them access to power on the basis of their loyalty. Thus, the writ of democracy was extended to non-notable families, the rural Bedouin and, in 2006, even to women, on the initiative of the ruling family.

Sami Mohammed: The Penetration, 1989 (in the courtyard of the Mathaf Museum of Modern Arab art, Doha. Photo by the author)

The 1962 constitution establishes a political system that is a compromise between the traditional balance of power within Kuwaiti society (between Al Sabah and the notables) and the principles of Western democracy. The ruling family, which dominates the executive and can influence the legislative and the judiciary through appointments, clearly remains in power. The elected representatives, however, exercise quite some control over the executive and the legislative process, thus keeping the key to the legitimacy of Al Sabah's rule.

Since the mid 2000s, however, the system is faltering. More political awareness among society, which uses social media to mobilize itself, has translated into stronger opposition within parliament; since 2006, eight governments have fallen and parliament has been dissolved five times. Accusations of corruption—the government bribing MPs—have caused the prime minister to resign in 2011, under heavy popular and political pressure. Elections in February 2012 gave a landslide victory to the opposition, mostly Islamists, but in August 2012 the government dissolved parliament and called back the previous parliament (the one riddled by corruption) with the backing of the Constitutional Court. This political turmoil is crippling the country; for example, major investment deals have been put on hold as MPs demanded to investigate them for possible corruption.

The Gulf War and its consequences

Baghdad had always considered Kuwait, which had been part of the Ottoman province of Basra, as naturally belonging to Iraq, but its intention to annex the newly independent state in 1961 was foiled by the diplomatic efforts of the Kuwaitis. Neither the other Gulf states nor Western countries, who had a stake in Kuwait's oil wealth, would allow this to happen. Strengthened by its international ties, Kuwait could rest assured of its independent status.

In cultural terms, however, Kuwaitis regarded Iraq as their 'older brother' until the invasion of 1990. For example, many Kuwaiti artists submitted works to the Saddam Biennial that had been held first in 1986 with the participation of 20 Kuwaiti artists. In 1990, a number of Kuwaiti artists had sent their work to the Saddam Biennial that was cancelled because of the invasion of Kuwait (apparently none of them retrieved their work).

Conflicts about shared oil fields and the debt that Iraq had incurred during the Iran-Iraq war (Kuwait had loaned 65 million dollars to Iraq) revived Baghdad's intentions to annex Kuwait. Baghdad had suffered from what it considered overproduction by Kuwait, aggravated by the allegation that Kuwait was emptying oil fields that belonged

to Iraq by cross-border slanted drilling. This had driven down global oil prices, making Iraq's recovery from its war with Iran difficult. In August 1990, Iraq 'annexed' Kuwait.

The National Memorial Museum dramatizes the Iraqi invasion, as have many other accounts written since the war. But, in fact, international public opinion, in the West and particularly in the Arab world, was not that moved by the invasion. As an interview with two artists who were then children reveals, the invasion may not have been as traumatic as it is usually portrayed to have been. Some Kuwaiti residents (mainly migrant Arab laborers) even welcomed the 'annexation', supported diplomatically by Jordan, Yemen and the PLO.

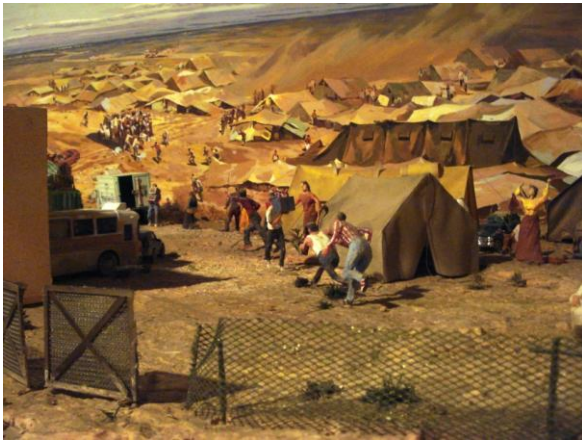
Saddam had manipulated Arab public opinion by portraying the rulers of Kuwait as corrupt, autocratic and wasteful. He promised to use Kuwait's oil wealth to support the pan-Arab cause. By then, he had become the champion of the Palestinian cause, and Palestinians represented 25% of Kuwait's population. Inside Kuwait, the Al Sabah family had lost some of its legitimacy by suspending parliament four years earlier. Nevertheless, most Kuwaitis, including many well integrated Palestinians, rallied behind the Al Sabah family.

The rulers of the neighboring Gulf countries of course supported the Kuwaiti Emir, their family member and OPEC ally. Saudi Arabia, to which the royal family had fled on the day of the invasion, hosted a big conference in Jeddah to rally all Kuwaiti national forces behind the Al Sabahs. These groups agreed on condition that the Emir restore the democratic order (i.e. share power) after the liberation of their country. The restoration of democracy was also a condition for international support.

Internationally, a well-funded public awareness campaign was set up to sway Western countries in Kuwait's favor. The fact that Kuwaiti oil was exported mostly to the USA and its allies (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, etc.) certainly helped the PR effort. The daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in Washington played an essential part in this campaign by giving a false testimony in front of congress, pretending she was a simple victim of the war (the fraud was uncovered only in 1992). This rallied US political circles and public opinion to back the liberation of Kuwait.

During the occupation, only a third of the pre-war population remained, as most Kuwaitis and foreign workers (now jobless) had left. The 'annexation' was producing few positive results and had many drawbacks (lack of food supplies, lack of work, frozen bank accounts). Worse, much of the national wealth, including some cultural assets, was being looted by Iraqi soldiers. Fortunately, the impressive Islamic art collection of Sheikh Nasser Al Sabah had been traveling when Iraq invaded.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



As a result of the Gulf War, the social and political make-up of the country changed. Four hundred thousand A sense of national solidarity was forged between the remaining Kuwaitis, who had to deal with the occupation on a daily basis. It took six months for the USA to start the Gulf War and bomb the Iraqi soldiers out of Kuwait. The damage inflicted by both the Iraqi invasion and the liberation – Iraq set the Kuwaiti oil fields ablaze before leaving, causing enormous environmental and economic damage – left a deep scar on the Emirate.

Palestinians left, as did many other Arab immigrants (Iraqis, Jordanians, Egyptians, etc.). They were mostly replaced with South Asians over the following decade. The constitutionalist forces and the democratic opposition were strengthened vis-à-vis the autocratic tendencies of the ruling family with the restoration of democracy. However, leftists and supporters of a pan-Arab identity were now seen as suspect, freeing the domain of ideological opposition for the Islamists.

Kuwaiti society

Kuwaiti society roughly consists of the following groups:

a. The royal family; there are frequent tensions between its branches over power sharing, and occasionally between the younger and the older generations, but most of these are solved amiably in the Family Council (est. 1921). Moreover, most Al Sabahs receive a pension for life, they are constitutionally protected from public criticism, and with a net worth of between 100 and 200 billion dollars, they remain much more powerful than most other royal families in the world. This means that they share a common interest in preserving the current system. Among the Al Sabah, the main art collectors are Sheikh Nasser and his wife Sheikha Hussah, the founders of the Dar al Athar al Islamiyya, and Sheikha Paula and her daughters, notably Sheikha Lulu who runs JAMM consultancy.

Bendaly Family, a 1970s Kuwaiti pop band

Detail of one of the installations in the National Memorial Museum of Kuwait.

'Nurse' Nayirah (actually the 15 year old daughter of the Kuwait ambassador) 'testifying' to the murder of babies in hospitals by Iraqi soldiers before Congress, in a campaign organized by lobbying firm Hill & Knowlton

Still from Lessons of Darkness, Werner Herzog's recording of Kuwait's burning oil wells, 1992

b. The upper class is structured around the merchant families, who used to share power with the Al Sabah; now they have to share it with many more groups. Nevertheless, they remain at the top of Kuwait's prosperous business community. The crème de la crème are the eight 'asli' (genuine) families hailing from the Bani Utub (Al Saqr, Al Nisf, Al Ghanim, Al Hamad, Al Mudhaf, Al Khalid, Al Khurafi and Al Marzuq), followed by lesser Sunni tribes and the Shia, who are mostly of Iranian provenance.

c. The middle class is composed of non-notable families, in many cases the descendants of pearl fishers, who through their 'hadhar' citizen status were the first to benefit from the social welfare state – and thus education – allowing them social mobility. Until the 1970s, their political orientation was pro-Arab Nationalism; since then, most have become politically neutral, generally supporting the status quo but protesting corruption and the waste of State resources. Like the upper class, they have access to power mainly through the parliamentary system. Both the upper and middle classes count a fair number of people interested in the arts, but the sector is less fashionable than it was before 1990, as Kuwaiti society has become more business-minded.

d. The working class is composed of expatriates from South Asia and from other Arab countries, and some Bedouin and Bedoon. In 2009, more than 580,000 Indian nationals were residing in Kuwait, making them the single largest expatriate community there. In 2003, there were also an estimated 250,000 Pakistanis, 260,000 Egyptians, 100,000 Syrians and 80,000 Iranians in Kuwait. There is also a small Western expatriate community, usually employed in management positions.

The Kuwaiti State employs about 19% of the total workforce (compared to 8% in Bahrain), almost exclusively Kuwaiti nationals, especially women, who constitute almost 50% of State employees. The unemployment rate among Kuwaiti nationals stood at a low 3.6% in 2008, but this figure masks a high rate of underemployment.

The percentage of Kuwaiti citizens that is Shia varies, according to the sources, from 13 to 35%. The Shia are divided into three groups: those whose origins lie in Iran (the Ajam) and Iraq are mostly Usuliyya (they interpret the Quran); those whose origins lie to the south, in Saudi Arabia's Al Hasa province or Bahrain are Akhbariyya (they do not interpret the Quran), while there is also a small native Sufi-inspired sect called the Shaikhiyya. Although Kuwait's rulers have sporadically feared since 1979 that the revolutionary winds from Iran might destabilize the country, Kuwait's Shia seem content with pursuing their objectives through electoral mechanisms.



"WORDS APPEARED IN THE DUST. THEOREMS, PHILOSOPHIES, ANCIENT WRITINGS, ALL SCROLLING DOWN THE BEAMS OF LIGHT.

"AND IN THAT MOMENT, THE LIBRARIANS KNEW THAT ALL OF IT -- THEIR FOREBEARS' SACRIFICES, THEIR OWN HARD LABOR -- HAD BEEN WORTHWHILE.

"FOR IN THIS NEWLY FORGED GATHERING PLACE...

"...THE WISDOM OF THE DAR AL-HIKMA LIVED AGAIN.

"BUT WITH THAT GREAT SUCCESS CAME A GRAVE RESPONSIBILITY.

"THE LIBRARIANS REALIZED THEY HAD TO GUARD THIS KNOWLEDGE. SO THEY CREATED A COUNCIL OF GUARDIANS, TO PROTECT BOTH THE FORTRESS AND THE NOOR STONES THEMSELVES.

"THESE WERE THE HURAS AL-HIKMA... THE GUARDIANS OF KNOWLEDGE."

Among the Sunnis, there are also three main currents, with quietist, a-political Sunnis forming the majority. The Muslim Brotherhood-inspired reformists have been slowly gaining terrain since the 1940s; they received a boost during the Iraqi occupation because they were instrumental in organizing the internal resistance. Over the past two decades, they have made significant electoral gains, and they are at the forefront of parliamentary opposition to the ruling family. Finally, the Salafists were inspired by the Saudi Sahwa (awakening) of the 1990s, and they were boosted by the US occupation of Iraq and the international jihad it attracted. They do not participate in parliamentary politics and they pose a threat to the system, but there has been no important terrorist attack in the country, despite it being a likely target.

Islamism of various colors is thus on the rise in Kuwait, and has come to dominate parts of public life, which particularly affects the cultural field. It has benefited from Kuwait's democratic systems, so it does not form a systemic challenge—thus far.

Spatial politics of Kuwait: The desert and the city

The desert surrounding the city of Kuwait is extremely dry. It is the fourth-hottest country in the world. Kuwait lacks water: no river flows through the country, there are no lakes, and there is only one subterranean aquifer in the west of the country and a smaller one in the south, created 30,000 to 6,000 years ago and containing non-renewable resources. There is little rainfall, but occasional flash floods occur during winter. Since times immemorial, Kuwait has had to import water from the great Mesopotamian rivers flowing through Basra.

The desert was long a source of danger for the urban community, as the city was prone to raiding Bedouin tribes. Despite having hosted the Al Saud family when they were routed from central Saudi Arabia by the Al Rashid from Ha'il (1892-1902), Kuwait had to endure several assaults by the Ikhwan of King Abdul Aziz in 1920 and 1921. This led to the construction of a new Sur (wall) around the city in 1920. The Sheikh and the city's notables determined that only those people living within the Sur were 'hadhar', citizens, thus excluding the Bedouin.

The city walls have been taken down, but this definition of citizenship, replicated in the 1962 constitution, was to have far-reaching consequences in its exclusion of the Bedouin. As the city expanded, only hadhar Kuwaitis were allowed to buy property in it. The ring roads were to become the new 'walls' of the city.



The first ring road follows the path of the old city wall (Sur), and the fourth marks the limit of areas where property can only be bought and sold, not rented. As only Kuwaitis (i.e. with citizenship) can buy property, this maintains a fairly homogeneous center. The land between the fourth and the sixth ring road is for mixed use (rented residences) so this is where most of the foreign labor force and other immigrants live. Beyond the sixth ring road is the desert, for Bedouin (badu), stateless people (bedoon) and new developments.

About 200,000 Bedouin gained Kuwaiti citizenship between 1965 and 1981, but then the government ceased granting citizenship to those who could not prove their Kuwaiti ancestry, which is almost impossible for most Bedouin. The reason was that Bedouin from all over the Syrian desert (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan and Syria) were coming to benefit from Kuwait's wealth, employment opportunities and social welfare. Other, non-Bedouin Arabs were also trying to stake a claim to Kuwaiti citizenship through this channel, for example refugees from Saddam Hussein's Iraq and from the occupied Palestinian territories.

This created the problem of the 'bedoon' (from 'bedoon jinsiyyah', without nationality), which are thought to number about 100,000. They are concentrated in industrial slums outside Kuwait's sixth ring road, in places such as Jahra; they include Bedouin and other Arabs, who still hope to receive Kuwaiti nationality; many of them have lived there for decades and cannot go anywhere else. Without citizenship, they cannot buy property, have no access to the public education and health system, and

have difficulty finding jobs. They occasionally cause disturbances that the Kuwaiti security forces tend to repress heavy-handedly (the latest clashes took place in February 2011, during the Arab Spring).

The Bedouin with Kuwaiti nationality nowadays represent 50 to 60% of the native population, thanks to their rapid demographic increase. Many of them live in areas urbanized specifically for them outside the 6th ring road, such as Jahra and Ahmadi. They received citizenship selectively according to their tribe and its loyalty to the Al Sabah, to offset the power of urban-based opposition. The Kuwaiti government let them be overrepresented by drawing the electoral boundaries in their favor, which became a major bone of contention between the government and the opposition in 2006. This has had a profound effect on the traditional cosmopolitan urban culture. The Kuwaiti political scientist Shafeeq Ghabra, has termed this process 'desertization': the transfer of the conservative values of desert tribes to modern urban settings. This process has accelerated the spread of Islamism in Kuwait.

MinRASY projects, set up by Rana Sadik, has set out to explore the Palestinian legacy in present-day Kuwait through a series of art projects, a few of which are illustrated here:

- 1. Tarek Atoui's sound installation "Unplified" (2012) is based on the Palestinian novelist Kanafani's short story "Men in the Sun", about three Palestinians that suffocate from the heat in an empty water tanker as they are smuggled into Kuwait, in the 1960s.*
- 2. Tarek ala duwwar (2011), installation of Kuwaiti-born Palestinian artist Tarek Al Ghousein's photographs in what used to be the Palestinian-majority neighborhood Hawala.*
- 3. The 'Museum of Manufactured Response to Absence' (2012), an exhibition curated by the Kuwaiti Palestinian Ala Younes in Kuwait's Museum of Modern Art, whereby artists were asked to create an object symbolizing the Palestinian presence in Kuwait. Shown here: Hakim Jamain: Return, acrylic keys.*

Images courtesy of MinRASY projects



Cultural developments in Kuwait

During the 1960s and 70s, the Emirate, flush with its oil wealth, attracted socially mobile people from all over the Arab world to build the new country. As a result of the parliamentary system, much of the oil wealth was diverted to create a social welfare state with free education and health care for citizens; from the 1970s until today, Kuwait has scored highest of all Arab countries on its Human Development Index. In these years Kuwait was the capital of higher education, arts and culture in the Gulf. The University of Kuwait, established in 1966, attracted students from neighboring countries. Artistic life flourished in all domains: theatre, music and contemporary art. This was reflected on Kuwaiti TV, which was watched throughout the Arab world.

Kuwait freely mixed cultural influences from Baghdad, Beirut and Bombay (where many Kuwaitis had moved during the depression of the 1930s) with the nascent global media culture (Hollywood films and Japanese animations). The government was eager to develop the arts and sent artists to train abroad, while in Kuwait a complex was created with studio space for artists (Marsam Al Hur, the Free Atelier). A government committee selected thirty artists each year who received an annual stipend. The creation of the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters in 1974 spurred further institutional development of the arts, with the establishment of museums, art magazines, etc.

The private arts sector received an impulse with the opening of the Sultan Gallery in 1969, fostering a habit of art collecting that continues until today. There are many internationally renowned art collectors in Kuwait, such as Sheikh Nasser Al Sabah, Abdullatif Hamad, Sheikha Paula Al Sabah, Farida Sultan, Amer Huneidi and Rana Sadik, to name but a few.

Kuwait became a fashionable city. Andy Warhol was invited by the Kuwaiti government in 1977 to exhibit in one of the government-sponsored venues. Yves St Laurent opened a boutique in Kuwait in the 1970s, alcohol flowed freely, and there was little censorship; as long as the Al Sabah family or Islam were not criticized, artists could get away with a lot.

These heady years came to an end in the 1980s. Perhaps the most significant event was the Souk Al Manakh stock market crash. This informal stock market, located in an air-conditioned parking that had been used to trade camels, came to be the third most capitalized stock exchange in the world before the bubble burst. In hindsight this event may have symbolized the end of the Kuwaiti dream. During the 1980s, falling oil prices and the bloody Iran-Iraq war that raged near Kuwait's northern border, together with a faltering political system and a crashing economy, created disillusionment within

Kuwaiti society. The government lost its focus on cultural and social development. Bahrain became the new destination for culturally open and socially mobile Arabs.

The occupation by Iraq and the first Gulf War had a major, traumatic, influence on Kuwaiti society. The anti-Iraqi, anti-pan-Arab/Palestinian and pro-ruling family narrative severed many of the ties with Kuwait's organic past. The new Kuwait that was built on the ashes (or soot) of the old country seems to lack identity as a result: it is a ghost of what it once was.

In economic terms, Kuwait was rebuilt fast, with the assistance of the USA, Saudi Arabia and other international friends. The Palestinian and Iraqi engineers, administrators and laborers who were no longer welcome were replaced by South Asians, who generally failed to take root in the country. Until the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Kuwait lived in fear of retaliation by Iraq. In terms of artistic production, the period between 1991 and 2005 was dismally bleak.

Since 2005-2006, a fresh wind seems to be blowing through Kuwait; it may have started with the mass demonstrations by youth groups and opposition parliamentarians to counter the government's attempts to sideline opposition in 2005. This was the year that Kuwait's women first participated in elections, but 2005 was also the year in which the University was segregated, marking the strength of Islamism in society and politics that has been increasing ever since. The year 2006 saw the reopening of the Sultan Gallery, and several new commercial galleries, each vying for the attention of wealthy collectors and critics, have appeared on the Kuwaiti scene in its wake, or, in the case of the older galleries, they have improved their programming. Interesting artistic ventures such as JAMM consultancy, the Contemporary Art Platform Kuwait and MinRASY projects have emerged, while on the less experimental side, the Dar Al Athar Al Islamiyya is improving its program every year, and has opened a new cultural center. Kuwait is still doing well on the Arab pop music scene, while the literary scene has received a boost with the opening of the beautiful Babtayn central library for Arabic poetry.

The worsening political crisis in Kuwait and the seemingly unstoppable progress of Islamist attitudes – witness the closing of Shurooq Amin's exhibition for 'pornography' and public indecency in March 2012, or the increasingly frequent 'gay-bashing' by the police – make the future development of Kuwaiti culture very uncertain. Up to now, however, the arts community seems sufficiently strong to deal with these challenges in its own manner.



Trends in the Kuwaiti art world

One finds a surprising number of women artists in Kuwait; many of the most prominent Kuwaiti artists are women, such as Munira Al Qadhi and Thuraya al Baqsami from the pre-1990 generation, Ghadah Alkandari (the writer of the blog *Pretty Green Bullet*), Shurooq Amin, Nadia Al Foudery, Monira Al Qadiri and Fatima Al Qadiri. Since most gallery owners and many of the collectors are also women, the Kuwaiti art scene is in fact strongly dominated by women.

Kuwait has a relatively large gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. Clashes with public authorities have increased over the past years. This is due to the rise in political Islam and its hold over politics, but also to the more vocal struggle of gay activists worldwide, drawing attention to something that could previously be conveniently ignored. There is also some discussion of these issues within Kuwait. Recently, the phenomenon of 'boyat' (from the English boy, referring to women who dress and behave like boys) has become a subject of heated debate. The Western tendency to equate 'boyat' with 'lesbian' does not do justice to the complexity of the issue, which seems to reflect changing gender politics within Gulf societies, rather than personal sexual inclinations.

As mentioned previously, the youth made a forceful entry in Kuwait's public eye during the 'Orange revolution' of 2006 (named after the 2004 Ukrainian revolution that forced a transfer of power). Unfortunately, this has not translated much into the practice of Kuwaiti artists. Maybe it goes to show that this youth movement is a political rather than a cultural phenomenon. Or it is a reflection of the underrepresentation of the youth in Kuwait's art world. Lack of art-education facilities and the predominance of the country's older generations of artists in the institutional sphere may impede the rejuvenation of Kuwait's art scene.

The NCCAL and the Kuwait Arts Association, which played such an important role in the past, no longer drive artistic innovation. The government seems to have lost its interest in art: in the new mega-development project 'Silk City' there is no role reserved for art, unlike similar projects in Qatar, the UAE and Bahrain.

Wawa Complex by Fatima Al Qadiri and Khalid Al Gharaballi. A popular singer, Haifa Wehbe's album cover is 're-enacted' with the presence of a 'boyat' female admirer; the album's title is "I wanna live". Digital print, 2011.

Shurooq Amin: I Like Him, I Like Her; from the series "It's a Man's World", 2012, which was closed by the police.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



5

Bahrain

Chapter contributed by Arie Amaya-Akkermans, edited by Robert Kluijver

The tiny island-kingdom of Bahrain is in fact an archipelago of thirty-three islands to the east of Saudi Arabia, south of Iran and north-west of Qatar. Albeit a young state and small in size – an area of slightly over 765 square km – the Bahrain region has been historically important since roughly the third millennium BCE as the home of the Dilmun civilization mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh, a trade partner and source of metal copper in the crossroads between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley. Ever since Bahrain has been ruled by every regional power in succession, due to its strategic location in the Gulf.

The name “Bahrain”, literally “The Two Seas” in Arabic, appears five times in the Quran but it does not refer to the modern island, then known to the Arabs as *Awal*. “The Two Seas” more likely refers to the two large oases of Al Hasa in Eastern Saudi Arabia. The earliest known site of the still disputed Dilmun civilization is located at Qal’at al-Bahrain (Bahrain Fort), where archaeological excavations carried out since the 1950s have revealed burial mounds in the north of the island that date back to approximately 2200 BCE. An entire section is dedicated to these ancient burial mounds at Bahrain National Museum and research carried out by the Bahrain Historical and Archaeological Society is on-going in order to establish a clearer timeline.

Ruled by Assyrians, Babylonians, annexed by the Persian Empire, then by Alexander the Great, Nestorian Christian for a period, Bahrain was an early convert to Islam. It was annexed again by Persia and for a period was under control of Portugal. In more recent times the island was conquered by the Bani Utbah tribe from the Najd in the Battle of Zubara in 1782 and has been ruled by the Al-Khalifa family since then. Early in the 19th century Bahrain was briefly conquered by Oman and the Al-Saud, but in 1820 the Al-Khalifa clan was recognized by Great Britain as rulers after the signature of a treaty. By the end of the 19th century agreements between the rulers and the British sealed the protectorate status of Bahrain under colonial rule.

Faika al Hassan: Untitled History of the Fez. Acrylic and sand on canvas, 2012

The geopolitical importance of Bahrain and the rise of Manama as a port city in the 19th century translated into early modernization and the island was known in that period as a cosmopolitan hub whose economy depended on pearl diving and fishing, being the home of transnational trade communities from the Arabian peninsula, Persia, Oman, India, Europe and elsewhere. The discovery of oil in 1932 brought an even more rapid modernization and state bureaucracy to the islands together with a long history of political upheaval, as the modernization of the state was unmatched by developments in the tribal structure. In general terms Bahrain was the first modern state and the most politically and socially advanced country in the Gulf region. Its trade unions and opposition fronts were famous for their well-organized mass actions.

The development of Bahrain's art scene was supported by its enlightened rulers, with secular inclinations and an interest in culture and heritage. The inhabitants of the islands are reputedly the most open-minded and tolerant in the Gulf region. Before independence the small but lively art scene consisted mostly of modernist painters and writers. Bahrain has practically all the elements to be the natural artistic hub of the region; nevertheless, shifting regional conflicts, internal politics, the small size of the country and the unrivaled resources of neighboring states have somewhat stalled further development.

Bahrain: A Frontier Society

Unlike other cities in the Arab world, Bahrain's capital Manama received few mentions in historical documents before the 19th century. It bears little resemblance to the traditional Islamic city. Typically, the history of the state in the Gulf is simplified as a transition between pastoral nomadism and petroleum tribalism, but Manama and Bahrain did not enter the modern age through the oil boom from the 1930s to the 1950s; their point of departure lay in the 1880s, during the first era of global capitalism and the boom of the pearl trade in world markets.

The National Union Committee direction in 1954, consisting of leaders of Sunni and Shia groups and the working class.

Abdulla Al Muharraqi: Adam's Fall. Oil on canvas, 1979.



The flourishing of the pearl trade was not only due to small-scale exploitation; it was also assisted by an organized bureaucracy that towards the end of the 19th century merged colonial intervention with centralized government. The abolishing of the tribal feudal states gave rise to a series of reforms that opened Bahrain to the rest of the world. The heterogeneous society of the small island – consisting of traders and professionals from Iran, South Asia and more distant countries, as well as Arabs from Bahrain and neighboring states - created complex social and urban dynamics. It wasn't oil as much as the island's cosmopolitan outlook which radically transformed Bahrain.

Aware early on of their limited oil resources, the rulers of Bahrain planned for a post-oil economy since independence; a number of policies and projects reflect this. The further modernization of Bahrain and its full integration into the Arab context of the Gulf, nevertheless, altered the texture of this cosmopolitan society. The late 20th century Arabization of the country was a half-hearted attempt to create a more homogeneous society on par with neighboring oil-rich countries, quite different from the pluralistic nature of old Bahrain. Political commentators such as J.E. Peterson and Nelida Fuccaro have observed that it was precisely globalization and oil wealth that homogenized Bahrain, at the expense of social and cultural diversity.

As was the case with Lebanon – the one other Arab country that modernized very early – the price that Bahrain paid for entering the global stage was high: continued political unrest nearly every decade since the end of the 19th century – culminating in the 2011 uprising. It became increasingly difficult to reconcile advanced state bureaucracy and the existence of an open civil society with a persisting and intact syndrome of tribalism and unequal distribution of wealth (in the words of Fuad Khuri). Nonetheless, none of this prevented Bahrain from developing a modern artistic movement decades prior to other Gulf states. It might even be argued that art and political movements developed in Bahrain not simply in spite of the on-going conflict but because of it.

An art movement emerged already in the 1950s with the establishment of an art and literature club which served the interests of both professional and amateur artists, musicians and actors. The first art exhibition in the Gulf region was held in Bahrain as early as 1956 and other than modernist Arab painting also expressionism, surrealism and abstract expressionism have been popular genres among local artists (the first generation of Bahraini painters, including Abdul Aziz bin Mohammed al Khalifa, Ahmed Qasim Oravid, Rashid Oraifi, Nasser Yousif, Rashid Swar and Abdulla al Muharraqi have nearly all been expressionist). Theater has been popular in the country since the 1940s and a decade later the first Bahraini plays (and Arabic translations of classics) began to appear; the Awal Theater and the Al-Jazira Theater were both founded before independence. Arab music has also been particularly popular in the country.

The Art Scene in Bahrain since Independence

Bahrain formally became an independent emirate on August 15, 1971 (although it became a kingdom in 2002) marked by a friendship treaty between Bahrain and the United Kingdom that replaced a number of former agreements signed since 1820 between the rulers of Bahrain and the British. The coming of independence was also marked by a number of undertakings in the arts. The Annual Bahrain Art Exhibition has run for nearly forty years, showcasing mainly artists that are members of the Bahrain Arts Society. The society was founded in 1983 with the support of a local painter, Sheikh Rashid Al Khalifa.

The Bahrain National Museum opened in 1988 and is considered one of the first museums in the Gulf region. It possesses a rich collection of Bahrain's archaeological artifacts covering the entirety of Bahrain's history. Three halls are devoted to ancient history and the Dilmun civilization, while two other halls are devoted to Bahrain's pre-industrial past and the culture of the pearl divers. The museum also includes a hall devoted to natural history and a documents and manuscripts hall, as well as a collection of contemporary art and Bahraini masters.

Traditional and modern music is also popular in the country. The Khaleeji music style was best represented by the recently deceased Ali Bahar and his band Al Ekhwa, active since 1986; more traditional Arab singers are Sultan Hamid and the oud player Khalid Al Shaikh. The Bahraini male-only vocal music of the pearl-divers known as Fidjeri and the Sawt music, originally from the Gulf but influenced by African, Indian and Persian music, still survive in Bahrain.

The progressive rock band Osiris has achieved some renown since the 1980s. There is also a large public for heavy metal and hard rock with a variety of bands performing original songs (mostly in English). The best known bands are Motör Militia, Smouldering & Forgotten and Lunacyst. Other musical projects in this genre include Rain in Hell, Thee Project, M.U.S.T., Bloodshel, Qafas and the progressive rock band InsideOut.

A number of films have been produced in the country since Bassam Al-Thawadi's "The Barrier" (1990), one of pioneers in Gulf cinema, and many short films have been produced independently by local filmmakers.

An account written by Mayssa Fattouh for Nafas Magazine in 2010 reveals a number of private and public initiatives to promote the arts sector in the country. For example a museum of contemporary art designed by Zaha Hadid was announced in 2009 - but it is now uncertain whether the project will be completed. Nonetheless the Ministry of Culture and Information has been keen to invest in art, with a number of other ambitious projects. The Bahrain Fort Museum opened a few years ago and the Art Center was inaugurated in 1992. Bin Matar House plays an active role in promoting Bahraini art and heritage, a project initiated by the Sheikh Ebrahim Bin Mohammed Al

Khalifa Center for Culture and Research, in turn founded by Sheikha Mai bint Mohammed Al Khalifa, the energetic Minister of Culture.

A number of annual cultural festivals and events are run in the country and in 2009 the Elham Group was founded as collective of creative people to provide a platform for local talents in the arts hosting a number of events in different venues.

The country's two main galleries were opened in the late 1990s: Al Riwaq Gallery opened in 1998 under the vision of Iraqi art patron Bayan Kanoo as a commercial art space but was transformed in 2007 into a non-profit organization and art space hosting a variety of projects, resident artists, workshops and exhibits. In recent years Al Riwaq hosted Bahraini musicologist Hasan Hujairi, who completed a number of unique projects and creative installations, which explore soundscapes of Bahrain. Al Riwaq also hosts Market338, an outdoor market dedicated to showcasing Bahraini artists and other local talents in all formats, sizes and styles.

Albareh Gallery was also founded in 1998, by Bahraini art patron Hayfa Aljishi, presenting local and international artists with an emphasis on contemporary Middle Eastern art. Albareh also provides alternative spaces for art and workshops; the gallery represents a good number of mid-career artists from Bahrain and elsewhere and has a rich calendar of exhibitions and events. There are other spaces such as La Fontaine Center of Contemporary Art and the Nadine Gallery, opened in 2007 by local artist Nadine Al Shaikh.

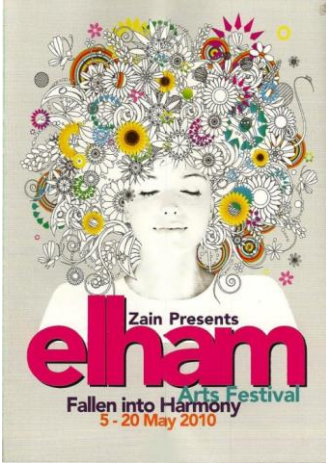
Despite its small size and limitations, the art scene in Bahrain provides an interesting space for artistic creation that precedes the ambitious projects of neighboring Gulf states. Cases of artistic censorship are rare. Beside the prominent Sheikh Rashid Al Khalifa there are a number of painters in the country with international projection such as Omar Al Rashid, Balqees Fakhro, Faika Al Hassan, Abdulla Al-Muharraqi and Mayram Janahi. International artists frequently come to Bahrain to attend residences, workshops and festivals.

In 2010 Bahrain participated for the first time in the Venice Architecture Biennale with the project "Reclaim Bahrain" that earned the country a Golden Lion for best national pavilion. The project was run jointly between the Ministry of Culture, Studio Lapa in Switzerland, the Bahrain-based Lebanese photographer Camille Zakharia and a number of local art practitioners. It explored the decline of the sea culture in Bahrain through installations, photography, documentation and a documentary film.

Poster announcing the first Elham festival, 2010

Image of the Bahraini Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010.

Camille Zakharia: Assembling Places - Muharraqi II; 1998



Political Troubles

For all its achievements Bahrain remains affected by the 2011 uprising that engulfed the country in waves of instability, violence and unrest. Spurred on by developments in other countries (the 'Arab Spring'), protests erupted in Bahrain on February 14 2011, which soon turned violent. The protests centered around the Pearl Roundabout in central Manama and when they were attacked by security forces, a number of protesters were killed and scores were wounded. Life in the country came to a standstill, state of emergency laws were passed and violence continued for months as the political opposition became split within its ranks, and although many were still demanding political participation, there were also vocal calls to remove the monarchy.

While the protests attracted very large numbers of Bahrainis demanding more political freedom and participation together with the political opposition, voices in the government blamed the uprising on foreign interference, particularly by Iran. The protesters denied any ties to Iran and blamed the government for ruthless violence, especially after the incursion of Shield Forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Both claims have been exaggerated and do not necessarily reflect the situation accurately. Nevertheless the country was deeply divided and local media played an active role in deepening the divide.

After months of political deadlock, a national dialogue was initiated in 2011 and an independent committee (BICI) was formed and headed by an international expert to look into human rights abuses committed by security forces. The findings of the commission were received with skepticism on the part of the opposition and many international observers; the commission also reported abuses committed by protesters. Although reforms have been underway in the kingdom since then and the nation-wide instability has somewhat subsided, the situation remains politically tense at the moment and there are sporadic outbursts of violence.

Nevertheless the majority of Bahrainis have returned to normal life, the economy is slowly recovering and a number of projects in the arts have continued unhindered.

How artists in Bahrain will reflect on the consequences of the uprising and the need for reforms remains to be seen, but overall Bahrainis are optimistic about the country. Unlike international media, many people in the country see the uprising not in the context of the 'Arab Spring', but in that of Bahrain's internal politics and history of unrest. That goes back to civil strife in the 1930s, 1950s and the long Bahraini Intifada of the 1990s. The simplification of the uprising as sectarian conflict among Sunnis and Shias is flawed: the conflict also runs along lines of conflict between modern and traditional, religious and secular, urban and rural, poor and rich segments of the population.

The need for political reforms in Bahrain is pressing but it also needs to be understood in the larger context of the current geopolitical situation in the Gulf overall and tensions that are crippling not only Bahrain but nearly all the neighboring countries. It is unlikely that democracy will arrive on the shores of Bahrain and the Gulf anytime soon, while it also remains true that in spite of the political and social transformations undergone by the country as a consequence of the unrest, it is still a dynamic country with a relatively empowered society, attractive for artists and creative people.

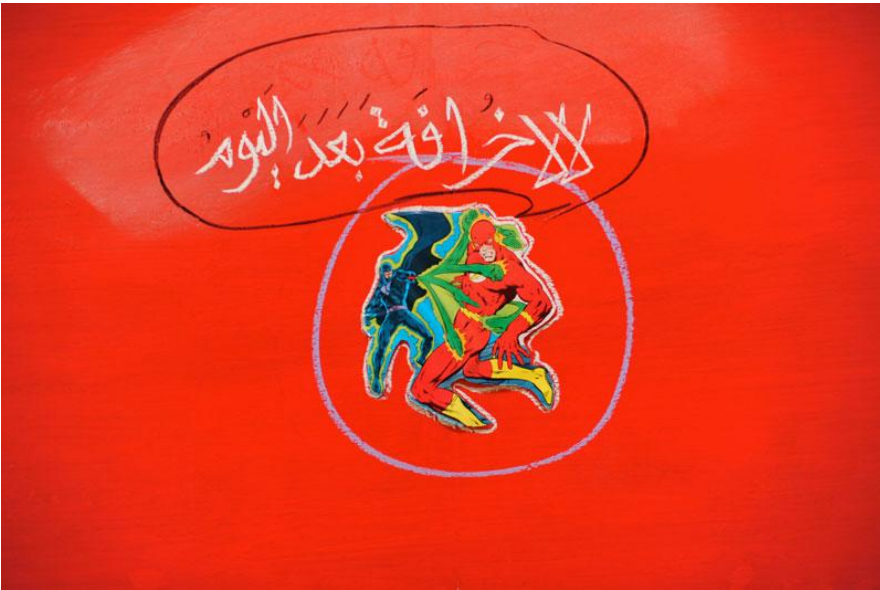
Art in Bahrain after the 2011 Uprising

A number of projects have been either set in motion, continued or completed in the aftermath of the uprising, and while normalcy hasn't completely returned, the country seems indeed to be recovering. At present the country is working on a number of cultural policies to empower artists and the arts, showing a certain degree of tolerance and openness that is reflected in the artistic production.

While 2011 was very slow and indeed a number of events were cancelled or postponed, in 2012 more positive waves came from the art world in the island kingdom. Sheikh Rashid Al Khalifa was exhibited at the Bahrain Financial Harbor Gallery, Beirut Art Fair and more recently at Abu Dhabi Art, now represented by Leila Heller Gallery in New York. Bahrain made waves at the Gulf Film Festival with filmmaker Mohammed Rashid Bu Ali; this led the Ministry of Culture to set up the Bahrain Film Fund to support struggling filmmakers in the country. Manama was chosen by the Arab League and UNESCO to be the capital of Arab culture in 2012, hosting a number of cultural events, symposia and forums.

One of the country's most ambitious cultural projects, Bahrain's National Amphitheater, located north of Bahrain National Museum, was completed in November 2012. The 1,001-seat venue, covering nearly 12,000 square meters, is now the third biggest amphitheater in the Arab world after Cairo Opera House and Al Sultania Opera in Oman.

Since the time of the uprising a number of new rock bands have appeared in the local scene and in September 2012, the Bahraini Rabble Rouser Studios released "The Resurrection DVD: The Bahrain Underground Vol. 1", one of the first metal music DVDs released in the Middle East.



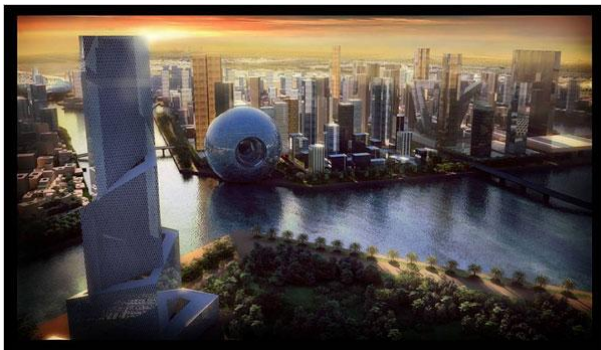
Bahrain's second participation in the Venice Architecture Biennale, 2012's "Background", was designed and curated by the same team as "Reclaim Bahrain" in 2010. More than an architectural or artistic project proper, "Background" was a sharp reflection on how the country has been portrayed by international media from the first TV transmissions of the BBC in the 1950s to the televised coverage of the recent uprising. This was contrasted with images of the real Bahrain as it is seen in everyday life through a creative installation that consisted mostly of real-time footage projected on screens. The project showed that the country is not forgetful or indifferent to recent events and that artistic practice can reflect a certain degree of self-criticism.

While much about Bahrain's short-term future remains uncertain, the country is doubtless an ambitious cultural center with an offer radically different from that of neighboring countries; it will therefore always be interesting to observe and engage.

Faisal Samra: No Myth After Today. Mixed media on canvas, 2011

Waheeda Malullah: still from Rainbow Action Painting, performance, 2011

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



6

The United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates are wedged between the mountains and plateau of Oman to the east, the Empty Quarter to the west and south, and the Gulf to the north. From the dawn of history to the late 20th Century, this area has never been very important in historical or cultural terms. There were only small settlements during the Bronze Age, in the oases at the foot of the Omani mountains (around Al Ain) and along the creeks of the Gulf. From 3000 BC onward, the area lay on the trade route from Oman's Hajjar mountains, famous for their copper mines, to Mesopotamia.

The political roots of the UAE are to be found at the end of the 18th and the first half of the 19th centuries. During this period, the Al Qawasem rulers of the coast between Sharjah and Ras al Khaimah were joined by tribes of the Bani Yas confederation, which occupied the coast between Sharjah and Qatar. Together, they posed a threat to British trade routes with India, and the British dealt with them accordingly, through a mix of sticks (naval bombing of the coastal settlements) and carrots (promises to support the ruling families against their rivals).

Although the British have inscribed these conflicts into the annals of history as a fight against piracy, one may also see them as a protection racket imposed by force upon the seafaring activities of the rulers of the Gulf settlements. This is the view taken by the ruler of Sharjah, the historian and prolific writer Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qasimi. Nevertheless the relations between the UK and the UAE have remained cordial. British expats perform key functions at many levels of the UAE's government and within its other institutions; they are also prominent within the UAE's art world.

Abu Dhabi corniche in 1948. Photograph by Wilfred Thesiger

Flag of the Trucial Coast

Sheikh Zayed road in the early 1990s

Office for Metropolitan Architecture (Rem Koolhaas): plan for Waterfront City, Dubai 2008

The Trucial Coast, as the region came to be known after the series of protection agreements signed with the British Empire, was integrated into the Indian economy. The Indian rupee remained the national currency until 1969. Just as Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, the port cities along the UAE coast – Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah and Dubai in particular - prospered because of pearl fishing and trade until the 1930s. Iranian traders in particular set up their base in the small free ports. But after the collapse of the pearling industry in the 1930s, these sheikhdoms languished, their population being partially depleted, until the discovery of oil in the 1960s.

The first modern developments took place in the 1950s and 60s, before independence. The first hospitals, schools, roads and other infrastructural amenities (electricity, postal services) date from this period. The discovery of oil in Abu Dhabi in 1960 was followed by the discovery of small amounts of oil in Dubai and the other emirates in the late 1960s. The revenue generated by the oil wealth kick-started development, allowing each emirate to attract trade and foreign investment, thus multiplying the revenue provided by hydrocarbon resources.

In 1968, Great Britain announced its intention to terminate the protection agreements offered the sheikhdoms; Qatar and Bahrain opted for independence, but the six Emirates of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Umm Al Quwain, Ajman and Fujairah decided to federate and created the United Arab Emirates in 1971. Ras Al Khaimah joined in 1972. The same year a federal constitution was adopted. With the largest territory and the most oil wealth, Abu Dhabi naturally took the lead, and the federal government offices are mostly located in this Emirate, whose ruler is the UAE's head of state; while the ruler of Dubai is the deputy head of state.

The arrangement has worked well since. The UAE seems to have one of the smoothest governments in the world, with few known political tensions. Political tensions that exist within and among the ruling families include the odd assassination attempt, but none of them has seriously threatened to disrupt the UAE. The vision of the UAE's founder and ruler (1971-2004) Sheikh Zayed, the beloved father figure of the country, provided the guidelines for the UAE's peaceful and rapid rise to prosperity, but also helped bring about a remarkably tolerant society.

Since his death and after the financial crisis that rocked Dubai in 2008-2010 the country seems to have lost some of its forward-looking dynamism. The harshening of the political climate since the Arab spring, with mass arrests of alleged Islamists and new restrictions on the freedom of online expression may indicate growing insecurity about the future among the ruling families of the UAE. For the time being, however, the UAE remain a vibrant and open space in the region, drawing in not only fortune-seekers from the Philippines to the USA, but also artists and other creative minds looking for a place to develop their talents.

Rokni Haerizadeh: Tehran Cabaret Dubai, 2009. Oil on canvas



Sharjah: Cultural development strategies

Sharjah was the first port to develop global ambitions in the 1970s, and the first of the Emirates that went through a boom-and-bust cycle. In 1987, the Emirate almost went bankrupt, burdened as it was with almost 1 billion dollars debt. The crisis was caused when the speculative real estate bubble burst (as two decades later in Dubai). This led to a coup attempt (the contender was allegedly backed by Abu Dhabi), which the profligate ruler survived thanks to the support of Dubai's rulers. Sheikh Sultan, who became ruler in 1972, still rules today. Dubai, Abu Dhabi and, apparently, Saudi Arabia bailed out the Emirate, which toned down its ambitions. Although developing with a respectable growth rate, the Emirate of Sharjah has since been overshadowed in most regards by its neighbors Dubai and Abu Dhabi.

The bustling port city of Sharjah, teeming with drunken sailors from all over the world, became much quieter when alcohol was banned. Visiting revelers relocated to Dubai or (as a budget option) adjacent Ajman, which nowadays attracts many budget tourists from Russia and other Western countries. In 2001, Sharjah adopted decency laws promulgating strict dress codes, which some say was because of Saudi loan conditions. They rarely seem to be enforced.

From Sharjah's port, dhows still ply the trade routes between the Indian subcontinent and East Africa; there is also a huge car re-export business. As Sharjah also manages a big and profitable port on the Indian Ocean coast (Khor Fakkan) it is well situated in case the Hormuz straits are blocked by warfare. The emirate has an industrial atmosphere. Sharjah also serves as a dormitory city for Dubai, as rents are considerably lower there.

What is most surprising about Sharjah is its cultural life. Sharjah is home to seventeen museums, which earned the Emirate the UNESCO designation 'Cultural Capital of the Arab World' in 1998. Sharjah's cultural policies are often counterpoised against Dubai's glitzy commercial art glamour or Abu Dhabi's expensive top-down efforts to create an arts infrastructure. Sheikh Sultan Al Qasimi tries hard to share his love for literature (he is a prolific writer himself) with his population: the annual book fair is one of the most established in the Arab world, and he is behind a program to send books to every household in the Emirate.

Sharjah Heritage Area, new art spaces (white hued). Image courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation
CAMP: Radio Wharfage, Sharjah 2009, view of outdoor studio. The Mumbai-based collective, upon invitation by Sharjah, established careful logs of the freight carried by the dhows that still ply the trade between the Gulf, the Horn of Africa and India, and a FM radio station for the crews of the boats

Hoor Al Qasimi: Untitled 4, 2010. Photograph



His daughter Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, who studied art in London, has similarly become the driving force behind the city's contemporary art life. She is director of the Sharjah Biennial since 2002 and of the Sharjah Art Foundation since 2009; the Foundation is behind a year-long program that includes performances, screenings and exhibitions in the city's many cultural venues, and also organizes the yearly March Meeting, drawing curators, artists and art professionals from the region and the international scene. The downtown heritage area forms a tastefully rebuilt and pleasant backdrop to these cultural activities; it is here that most of the museums are.

Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, also from the ruling family, is the other driving force in Sharjah's art world. He is the owner of the impressive Barjeel collection and initiator of a number of contemporary art ventures such as the Barjeel Art Foundation and Meem in Dubai; besides he sits on the boards of several cultural institutions, such as Art Dubai. Sultan has now become famous as a liberal news commentator, including articles in the international press and a huge following on Twitter.

Finally Sharjah University, and to a lesser degree the American University in Sharjah, offer art education courses to students. Altogether Sharjah's art infrastructure is more solid and mature, and seems better implanted in the city's society, than in neighboring emirates. This allows practitioners to focus more on content.

The development of Dubai

Dubai is truly a free port; in 1902, already, the dusty settlement along the creek welcomed the traders of Bandar-e Lingah from the other side of the Gulf, when the Iranian government announced its plans to tax them. They were lured to Dubai with the promise of support rather than taxation, and the place they settled was called Bastakiyya in reference to Bastak, the Iranian province where Bandar Lingah lies. Bastakiyya, now the 'cultural heritage' village of Dubai, thus appropriately symbolizes the city's love of free trade. Just as symbolically, the fact that the government decided to rename the area 'Al Fahidi' in 2012, in reference to the nearby old fort, indicates the city's propensity to keep re-imagining its identity.

After the independence of the UAE, Dubai immediately embarked upon plans to create the biggest free-trade zone of the region, Jebel Ali. When foreign consultants suggested that four berths would be the right amount, the sheikh ordered them to make fifteen instead. Today, Jebel Ali is still one of the largest free zones in the world. It contributes 50% to Dubai's GDP and has created 160,000 jobs.

Similarly, when the World Trade Center in New York had just been inaugurated, Sheikh Maktoum decided that Dubai should have one as well. Upon completion in 1979, the skyscraper stood conspicuously alone in the desert landscape, leaving visitors

wondering what could possibly be the function of such a huge building. But, before long the building had become too small and was dwarfed by adjacent skyscrapers.

Dubai has been continuously criticized for its ambition, and predictions about the imminent fall of the city have been a favorite pastime of critics from the West, since the 1980s at least. When the financial crisis hit the city in 2008-2009, the main reaction in the Western press seemed to be satisfaction: finally the city and its rulers were being punished for their hubris, the bubble had burst, the sands would swallow the mirage... However, in 2012 Dubai seems well on its way out of the dip. Some of the most ambitious development projects are still stalled, but all the indicators and many construction cranes are pointing upwards. In a few years, the present financial crisis may seem no more than a ripple on Dubai's timeline, which prompted the right corrective measures at the right time. On the other hand Dubai may be heading towards its next real estate crisis.

What is surprising about the city and its rulers, is the self-confidence in going about business 'Dubai style' (think big, act fast, enjoy the rush). This applies to financial and economic policies, but also to the field of culture. Instead of trying to establish venerable institutions that provide depth to the city, or supporting efforts to establish a 'true identity' for Dubai, the focus seems to be on planning and building new and ever more compelling mirages. The artificial islands built before the coast (Palm Jumeirah and The World), the Burj Khalifa, the tallest tower in the world and many more such projects have shaped the face and the reputation of the city.

Although one of the biggest projects - Dubailand, a new city resembling an oversized Disneyland – was killed by the financial crisis, new and even bigger projects are in the offing: Mohammed Bin Rashid (or MBR) city, named after the current ruler, was announced in November 2012. To be built in the desert close to the Burj Khalifa 'Downtown' area, the city is to comprise a park to be established in collaboration with Universal Studios which will include more than 100 new hotels, the largest shopping mall in the world and... "Cultural Crossing", the largest area for art galleries in the Middle East and North Africa.

In this regard Dubai's bid to host the World Expo 2020, with as its theme connecting minds around issues of sustainable water and energy resources, novel transportation systems and a search for new models for economic and financial stability, is particularly interesting. Just as Sheikh Maktoum's book / manifesto "My Vision" (2012) it seems to provide a direction for further development, just when the vision and policies of Sheikh Zayed seem to have run their course.



Dubai: emergence of a regional art hub

Dubai itself, as a city and a society, is an artwork. One may love it for its unique energy and cosmopolitan ambiance, or hate it for its cut-and-paste identity and lack of history, but the city never fails to impress. Given the city's strongly contemporary and visual identity, it makes sense Dubai has become the setting for a strong visual arts scene. Large artworks making strong statements perfectly reflect the spirit of the city and its buildings. Subtle conceptual art in contrast seems quite out of place. Self-criticism is apparently also not in tune with the city.

The development of the art scene in Dubai is purely market driven; it is not part of a top-down strategy to develop or acquire culture, as in some other Gulf states, nor is it the result of a long-term local development: in 2005 there was very few galleries in Dubai, with practically no international appeal. What then made Dubai such an important node of the global art world, in such a short time?

To begin with, one can identify pull and push factors (supply and demand). The pull factor relates to Dubai's general welcoming environment for business, its affluence and its cosmopolitan population. This would attract businesses such as the multinational Opera gallery, and explains why the Dubai International Finance Center became a gallery hub.

The push factor relates to regional politics: conflict and turmoil at home, the lack of artistic freedom or isolation from the international art world have pushed artists from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, etc., to relocate elsewhere in the world. Some of these found a new home in Dubai, which has relaxed visa policies for citizens with nationalities warded off by the West.

This is notably true of the Iranian art community. Iranian artists generally believe that Dubai especially attracts market-oriented artists and outfits, such as the Tehran-based gallery Etamad, which set up a branch in Dubai. Indeed, Tehran-based artists such as Farhad Moshiri and Shirin Aliabadi travel back and forth to exhibit and sell their work in the UAE. But others, like the brothers Haerizadeh, moved to Dubai when their political involvement or censorship made it difficult to stay in Iran. In fact the Iranian presence in Dubai has deep roots: the UAE minister of foreign affairs, Anwar Muhammad Gargash, is of Iranian descent while Sunny Rahbar, one of the founders of pioneering gallery The Third Line, was born in Dubai to Iranian parents. Collectors such as Farhad Farjam and Ramin Salsali are successful Dubai-based Iranian businessmen. Their commitment to the city is proven by their efforts to provide public access to their collections.

Nadia Kaabi-Linke: Black is the New White, lightbox. The Tunisian artist developed the fake fashion brand Joseph van Helt for Dubai, encouraging men to wear abaya-like black cloth.

The turmoil and stagnation in the rest of the Arab world have also helped Dubai attain its current position. The old centers of Arab civilization (Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo) have either suffered thought-numbing and hand-binding dictatorships, or they have found themselves engulfed in conflict. There was a need for a new focal point for Arab culture. It could have been Beirut, but Lebanon remains in the throes of political conflict, and the 2006 Israeli bombing campaign proved that Beirut would not easily regain its pre-war status as peaceful hub of the Arab arts world. What gave Dubai its lead over other Gulf cities, such as Kuwait and Manama, might have been its connections with the Iranian and Indian art scenes, which by the mid-2000s were booming. Finally the ease with which Western collectors and curators can travel to Dubai (compared to other destinations in the region) have helped its art world expand rapidly.

Dubai found itself promoted by architects such as Rem Koolhaas, whose fascination with the city led to the impressive publications of 'Al Manakh'⁵. These compendia register the transformation of Dubai and the Gulf countries in terms of culture, urban planning, architecture and 'social design'. In the wake of Koolhaas and consorts, art critics, curators and cultural philosophers explored the hybrid nature of this cosmopolitan center of the 21st Century, giving rise for example to the book 'With/Without'⁶.

Another weighty influence upon the genesis of Dubai's art world was Bidoun Magazine. Set up in 2004 by Iranians based in New York and Dubai, with a handful of international art-world friends, the magazine offered a completely new take on the Middle East. It showed the region as a place where strands of global pop culture mixed with high art in the Middle Eastern context, creating a uniquely hybrid form of contemporary culture; which in turn led to novel forms of artistic expression – one of them being the magazine itself. Of late the magazine seems to have severed its ties with the Middle East, becoming a New York global art-crowd mouthpiece.

Installation view in Traffic of Lantian Xie's exhibition "I Think I Love You", with portraits of Sheikh Mohammed Al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai, painted by Chinese art reproducers (Oct 2012). The Dubai Media Office (responsible for the image of Dubai) allowed the exhibition but prohibited sales of the ruler's unauthorized portraits.

Entrance to Salsali Private Museum, in Alserkal Avenue

⁵ Al Manakh Vol 1, 2007, by Moutaramat, AMO and Archis; Vol 2, 2010, by Archis, AMO, C-Lab, Pink Tank & NAI. Moutaramat and Pink Tank are Dubai-based initiatives; Archis, Koolhaas' AMO and NAI are Dutch architectural organizations, and C-Lab a Harvard-based think tank.

⁶ WITH/WITHOUT: Spatial Products, Practices and Politics in the Middle East; edited by art critic Shumon Basar, then Bidoun editor Antonia Carver, and architect Markus Miessen; 2007.



Finally the success of Dubai is also due to the capable individuals who structured this art world. Art Dubai, the art fair first run by John Martin and now by Antonia Carver, is the most important single structuring element. It provides art professionals and art lovers from all over the world with a convenient reason to visit Dubai, and to return, because its scale of programs and activities expands each year. Christie's move to Dubai was timely, and it has provided an enormous boost to the local art market, not least because it sets pricing standards. Galleries such as The Third Line, Green Art, Isabelle van den Eynde and Cuadro, to name but a few, have ably positioned their artists on the local and now increasingly global art scene.

The list above indicates the prominence of the art market, and some of the more serious curators and art lovers of the region balk at the superficiality and the lack of commitment of the Dubai art world. Interestingly, however, a non-commercial sector is emerging: sometimes in the shadow of the market, but at other times in a symbiotic relation with it. Art lovers who start by collecting art may at one point want to share their passion with the community, and individuals such as Rami Farook, Farhad Farjam and Ramin Salsali have turned toward patronage.

One cannot omit the rulers of Dubai from this list, as they have not only tolerated, but also actively encouraged artistic development. Thus Sheikha Latifa Al Maktoum is behind Tashkeel, while Sheikha Wafa Hasher Al Maktoum set up FN Design. It is also rumored that a high-ranking member of the Al Maktoum family is a large collector (buying through proxies) and that his collection will form the backbone of the planned Dubai Museum of Modern Art, which was announced in March 2012 but about which precious little is known.

Dubai's art scene thus truly reflects the city as a whole: it is visual, prosperous, dynamic and future-oriented; according to one's taste, it can appear to be tacky, filthily rich, self-indulgent and superficial. But it is there, it is unique, intense, and it is developing rapidly.

Abu Dhabi: Long term policies

Abu Dhabi's cultural policies are in many ways a mirror image of those of Dubai. Whereas Dubai's rulers let things happen, Abu Dhabi's rulers like to plan well ahead. While Dubai has become the icon of glitzy global capitalism, Abu Dhabi seems modest, almost sleepy at times. Dubai is fun, Abu Dhabi serious.

The ruling families of both emirates trace their ancestry to the same Bani Yas tribe and the same settlement, Liwa oasis in the far south of the UAE, on the northern border of the Empty Quarter (Rub' al Khali). The difference between both is best explained by accidents of (natural) history, namely the existence of large reserves of oil

in Abu Dhabi, and of an incipient merchant community in Dubai. The disparate size of both emirates (Abu Dhabi covers 87% of the UAE, and Dubai only 5%, the other emirates being even smaller) explains why Abu Dhabi's Al Nayhan have for long been considered the *primus inter pares* among the tribes that ultimately created the UAE together.

Until the 1960s, the rivalry between Abu Dhabi and Dubai sometimes resulted in armed clashes, but now cooperation within the federal structures of the UAE seems harmonious. Abu Dhabi retains the presidency of the UAE, and is the seat of federal government, and thus of the embassies, most international organizations, etc.

With about 10% of the world's proven oil reserves for a population of at most 500,000 Emiratis (and more than 1.5 million migrant workers) the emirate basks in wealth. Abu Dhabi's Sovereign Wealth Investment fund is capitalized to the tune of 850 billion dollars, making it the richest in the world. But instead of laying back and enjoying their wealth, the Al Nayhan family, under the inspiration and the policies of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nayhan, the founder of the nation, has decided to use the funds to build the infrastructure for a sustainable future of Emirati society.

Ruling from 1966 (i.e. before independence) to 2004, Sheikh Zayed set the tone for not only Abu Dhabi, but also for the UAE as a whole. The core of his development policies is education and economical diversification. This policy is still the guiding one for the UAE, although speculative tendencies sometimes seem to undercut it in other emirates, leading to boom-bust cycles which are ultimately resolved by Abu Dhabi.

Abu Dhabi's ambitions to promote cultural development in the emirate not only focus on the capital city. Al Ain, a historic city on the border with Oman – and the fourth largest city in the UAE after Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah – is not only the epicenter of the UAE's archaeology and built cultural heritage; it is also home since 2011 to the Al Qattara arts center, which provides modern workshop facilities to artists, and educational programs for the public at large.

With local development policies well on track, Abu Dhabi plans on playing a larger regional and international role. A keyword in all the public relations documents spawned by the city's project development agencies is 'excellence'. The initiatives taken by planners to achieve excellence, affect the full range of development, from port facilities through industry to environmental programs. Hereafter, we mention a few that concern the cultural sector directly or indirectly.

Examples of Abu Dhabi's planned cultural developments

Abu Dhabi master plan 2030

The current city is constrained in its natural growth by its original location on the tip of an island. Over the years, it has crept down the island and spilt over on to the mainland. The new master plan provides for a new urban center on the mainland and many new development zones, to relieve the congestion of the current downtown area, but also to make Abu Dhabi into a true capital city. According to the master plan, *“Abu Dhabi will be a contemporary expression of an Arab city, which has people living, doing, and thriving in healthy supportive proximity to each other (...); Abu Dhabi will respect, be scaled to, and shaped by the natural environment of sensitive coastal and desert ecologies (...) [and its] urban fabric and community infrastructure will enable the values, social arrangements, culture and mores of this Arab community”*⁷.

Although the plan refers continuously to Abu Dhabi's natural and social determinants – for example the ‘building block’ of Emirati communities is the Freej, the neighborhood centered on a courtyard in which the extended family lives – the question is how these pre-modern social structures, that originated within small communities and traditional lifestyles, will adapt to the future global mega-city of Abu Dhabi. What will the cultural consequences be of this adaptation process?

Masdar City

The revelation, in 2006, of plans for the first completely carbon-neutral and wholly self-sustainable city in the world, created quite a stir. Masdar City would accommodate 40,000 residents and 50,000 commuters in a six-square-kilometer desert area near Abu Dhabi. Six years later, progress on the ground is slow, to the point that observers regularly conclude the city will never be completed. Only a few buildings have been built, structured around the MIT-supported Masdar Institute for Science and Technology. Some of the most ambitious elements of the original plan have been scrapped, such as the fully automated pod-car system serving the whole city (only one line has been built).

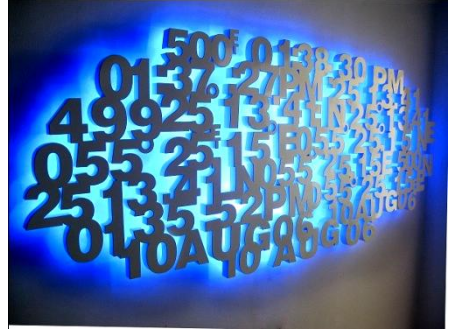
Mohammed Kazem: Autobiography, photographs with flags, performance documentation; 1997

Mohammed Kazem: Directions 06; aluminium & LED, 2006

Ebtisam Abdulaziz: Untitled Autobiography. Photograph of filmed performance, 2007

⁷ From the document “Abu Dhabi Master Plan 2030: Urban Structure Framework Plan” accessed on the government's website:

<http://gsec.abudhabi.ae/Sites/GSEC/Navigation/EN/publications,did=90378.html>



In this case, however, the process is more important than the result. The main objective of Abu Dhabi may never have been to complete the city, but to attract leading innovations related to it by providing a 'sand box' to test novel sustainable technologies. It was the clearest expression to date of Abu Dhabi's determination to prepare for the post-hydrocarbon era. In that sense, the project is not a failure. Some leading companies in this sector are already participating in the experiment; Siemens has started building its Middle East headquarters there. Masdar City thus reveals both the difficulties involved in 'making dreams come true' and the results of perseverance with a long-term goal.

Higher education

The Sorbonne University of Paris, New York University and INSEAD (a top-notch Paris-based business school) have all set up campuses in Abu Dhabi, as have a number of other Western academic institutions. Reportedly, the invitation by the emirate was so generous that, basically, all expenses of the universities are paid (infrastructure, facilities, staff...), allowing the mother University to keep the tuition fees as pure profit.

Although this does not necessarily entail a relation of dependency, it strengthens the incentives of the Western universities to stay on good terms with the Emirate's rulers. Some say this has led to cases of academic self-censorship, while others argue that these universities have admirably adapted to local circumstances. In fact the degree of freedom of expression at these universities is certainly less than in the West, but more than that in the rest of Emirati society.

Both NYU and the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi have graduate and post-graduate programs in fields relating to culture, such as art history, museum studies, and arts & humanities. This will allow locally-trained professionals to find employment in the city's new cultural venues. The Abu Dhabi government has also signed agreements with the Louvre and the British Museum to train curators, conservators and other museum staff.

Saadiyat Island

This brings us to the cultural district being built on Saadiyat Island. Focused on four major museums, the island will host many other cultural venues, such as the Manarat exhibition hall and the adjacent UAE Pavilion (originally built for the Shanghai world exhibition) which are already fully functioning, providing the venue for many exhibitions and the Abu Dhabi Art fair. The cultural district will be but one of a number of themed developments on the island, including a business district, residential areas, touristic developments and a wildlife preserve.

The original targets have been delayed, but it does seem that all the different phases of Saadiyat Island development will be completed in due course. The openings of the major museums have been scaled back to one a year (2015: Louvre Abu Dhabi; 2016:

Sheikh Zayed National Museum; 2017: Guggenheim Abu Dhabi), while it is as yet uncertain when construction will start on the Maritime Museum and the Center for Performing Arts.

Abu Dhabi hopes to become the region's principle cultural hub by 2020, attracting visitors from all over the world to its museums and other artistic activities.

Artistic developments in Emirati society

So far, this section has focused on the different policies of the UAE's ruling families and the general dynamics of UAE's society, not on the actual Emirati art scene, which is dealt with here.

Emiratis were actively involved in the art world long before the international art world took note. Artists such as Hassan and Hussein Sharif, among the founders of the Emirates Fine Arts Society in 1980, and Abdul Qader Al Raes who graduated from Al Ain University with a diploma in Sharia Law in 1982, have had a huge impact on the local art scene, as have some of the organizations they established. They have made art acceptable to the Emirati masses through their example. As the art world hurricane descended upon the UAE in the late 2000s, they managed to find their place and further develop their work.

These Emirati artists of the previous generation were living proof throughout the last heady decade that contemporary art was not an 'imported' phenomenon, but actually did have local roots. It justified, in social terms, the choice of young men and women to make art and even pursue an artistic career.

Many initiatives to improve art education and awareness of art in Emirati society are deployed by the private sector. Emiratis such as Rami Farook of Traffic, Hetal Pawani of thejamjar, Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi of the Barjeel Foundation or the Bin Shabib brothers of Brownbook magazine and the Shelter cafés target specific segments of the population with artistic events and workshops; some galleries host artist presentations and art talks to inform and widen their audience, while patrons from the ruling families have invested in art education (such as Sheikha Latifa Al Maktoum, behind Tashkeel) or other forms of support: the rulers of Sharjah and Sheikha Salama bint Hamdan Al Nahyan of Abu Dhabi have invested in creating platforms for Emirati artists both in the UAE and abroad.

These efforts are bearing their first fruit, in the form of a generation of young Emirati artists that is starting to make headway in the art world. Think of Lamyā Gargash, Ebtisam Abdul Aziz, Reem Al Ghaith or Hind Bin Demaitan, to name just a few, all women. Interestingly, many Emiratis turn to visual art to express themselves, instead of, for example, politics. Music and poetry are also well alive.

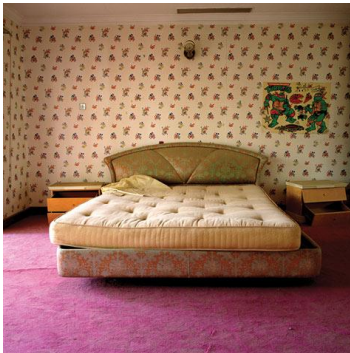
Emirati TV is gaining an audience throughout the Arab world; its most successful program, 'Poet of the Millions', draws a crowd similar to that of 'American Idol' (with prizes going over 1 million dollars), partially because it champions Nabati/vernacular Arabic, instead of classical Arabic, in which most poetry is still written. This allows young talents to broach contemporary subjects. Thus, in 2010, Hissa Hillal, a young Saudi woman who recited a poem passionately condemning religious bigotry, made it to the finals (although the original performance was good, the rapturous attention it received from the West was a bit embarrassing). The UAE also hosts many other Arab media; these are attracted by Dubai Media City, a free zone for media with minimal red tape and taxes, and shared infrastructural facilities.

The art infrastructure of the UAE is developing quickly, with interesting differences in policies between Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah providing for a wide range of opportunities. Thus, the young artists that are now being nurtured through art education, workshops, competitions, etc., are also provided with a podium to show their work and interact with their peers and the public at large. What may be most lacking at this stage, is critical self-reflection. Maybe the current times, with their emphasis on action and growth, will be followed by a more contemplative period, in which the artistic achievements can be evaluated and further built upon.

Hassan Sharif: City (etching, 1981) and Weavings (mixed media installation, 2012)

Some young Emirati artists demonstrate a nostalgic tendency, trying to seize the past before it is erased by the future. Lamya Gargash (Pink Ninja, from the Presence series, 2005-6) & Reem Al Ghaith (from the Held Back series, 2009)

The Archive, a new arts café in Safa Park set up by the Bin Shabib brothers, and the 'Biladi' skating park on Arabic calligraphy installed in the gardens of Tashkeel





7

Qatar

There has been much ado about Qatar's cultural ambitions, which even laymen in Europe are aware of thanks to well-publicized acquisitions such as Cezanne's 'Card Players', which commanded the highest price ever paid at an auction for a painting. The recruitment of Christie's former CEO by the Qatar Museums Authority, the amazing museums and cultural institutions built or being built by famous architects, such as I.M. Pei, Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel, or Qatar's sponsorship of the famous artist Takahashi Murakami all fascinate the international art community.

The true art of Qatar, however, may lie in its skill in using its wealth to position itself as a global player. Its efforts in the field of culture are but one aspect of a multi-faceted, apparently well thought-out strategy of influencing the world to its advantage. If Machiavelli were alive today, he would probably seek employment as an advisor to the Qatari 'prince', or, to put it more generously, the Al Thanis of Qatar seem to be the equivalent of the Medicis of the Italian renaissance.

Before examining the art sector, we should first elucidate the role it is playing within the general development strategy of the State of Qatar.

A clean slate

The State of Qatar has even less historical background than the other Gulf states. As in the rest of the region, there are traces of Bronze Age settlements; history also records the traces of fishing/trading villages along the coast, but no place of major importance until the rise of the town of Zubarah, which was the base from which the Al Khalifa family conquered Bahrain in the late 18th Century. The prominence of Zubarah

Two of the masterpieces of the Museum of Islamic Arts collection:

left: Steel War Mask, Western Iran or Turkey, 15th century.

right: Head from Rayy, Iran, c.1200, stucco and paint

was short-lived (it was soon eclipsed by Bahrain), and Qatar only became a place of geopolitical relevance in the second half of the 20th Century, due the discovery of its hydrocarbon reserves. Qatar lies upon a gas field roughly as big as the state itself, containing 14% of the world's known gas reserves.

This relative historical insignificance reflects in the uncertainty of the etymology of Qatar. The version on some government websites, that the name derives from Ptolemy's naming of the southern Gulf shore as 'Katara', does not mention that the Greek 'katara' means 'curse' – by extension 'the accursed place' – which could refer to the insalubrious climate and arid soil of the Qatari peninsula. (Another etymology could be the Persian 'Gwadar' meaning 'bay'). The outline of the peninsula rarely appeared on maps, despite its geographical prominence, until the 19th Century, when the British and Ottomans were mapping the region in order better to control it.



Jean Nicolas Bellin's 1745 map of the Gulf names 'Katara' but the peninsula doesn't appear on the 'Pearl Bank'.

The interior of the peninsula is still used as 'dira' (tribal grazing grounds) in the winter by Bedouin from Saudi Arabia. These were, and still are, heavily influenced by Salafi strains of Islam. The abundance of fish and pearls in the waters around the peninsula allowed some degree of prosperity over the ages in the coastal settlements. The description Brill gives in his *Encyclopedia Islamica* (1913-36) of the then capital of

the Emirate, Al Bida, however, conveys the image of a rather poor, insignificant town. Al Bida, south of Doha, counted only 6000 inhabitants at the time of Brill's description.

The modern state of Qatar could thus begin with a clean slate when it became independent in 1971. The ruling family, strengthened by the extraction of hydrocarbon resources, faced almost no competing centers of power internally. The greatest threat to its absolute power within the small State came from other Al Thani family members. In 1995, the current ruler Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa deposed his father, who had ruled the Emirate since 1972, in a coup that was apparently backed by most of the 1500-strong royal family, but which created considerable tensions with Saudi Arabia.

The other focus of power lies within the military. They were largely created by the current ruler, who graduated from Sandhurst Military Academy in the UK in 1971, and was crown prince and Minister of Defense until becoming the ruler. Nonetheless, there was a coup attempt by officers disgruntled with the pro-US policy of Qatar in 2002, and there were rumors of another coup attempt in April 2012.

Qatar between East and West

This background sketches the main overall policy issues faced by the rulers of Qatar: whether to support overall US and Western policies in the Middle East, or use their incredible wealth to support an Islamist, pan-Arab cause. Like Saudi Arabia, but differently, it has resorted to doing both.

As a US ally, Qatar provides the base for the US military's largest 'pre-positioning' base in the world. The invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 was coordinated from there. Qatar also invests most of its oil wealth in the West, thus helping Western economies keep afloat in these times of economic crisis. Recent Qatar acquisitions include shares in transport and energy infrastructure, luxury brands, banks, automobile industries, key buildings in London, Paris and US cities, and the Paris St Germain football club. Qatar is also an active, supportive, member of many international organizations that primarily reflect Western interests, such as the World Trade Organization.

As a driving force in the Arab world today, Qatar follows other policies. It has played an important role in the 'Arab Spring' by drawing attention to crowds in Tunisia and Egypt who challenged their rulers; it was quick to participate in the ousting of Gaddafi's regime from Libya, and one of the first countries to declare its support to the rebels in Syria. It has shown a marked penchant for the new, moderate, strain of the Muslim Brotherhood, investing heavily in Morsi's Egypt, Ennahda's Tunisia, and Libya. Syria's National Council, supported by Qatar, is similarly dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. It is here that the main tensions with Saudi foreign policy emerge: the

Saudi state supports quietist forms of Islam, not the political Islam championed by the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar also maintains friendlier relationships with Ahmadinejad's Iran than the other GCC countries.

These foreign policy choices may be the result of Qatar's historically clean slate: while the foreign policy of most countries reflects their internal balance of power, Qatar's rulers enjoy complete freedom in determining their foreign policy, according to their vision of how the world should be. Incidentally, this allows Qatar to be a useful mediator for Western regimes seeking some kind of rapprochement in the region. Doha was chosen by the Taliban as the place to initiate discussions with the Afghan government and its Western allies.

The dual-track policies of Qatar, for the Arab world and for the global West, are reflected in what may be their prime public face, Al Jazeera. The channel was set up and made to be a global media concern with public funding, even though it is nominally independent. Of late, Al Jazeera Arabic has shown a marked inclination towards Muslim Brotherhood-oriented reform movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera's English language channel is becoming more and more mainstream, making it difficult to distinguish from BBC World.

It is in this light, as a driving force behind the revival of the Arab world today and a place where the Middle East meets the West, that Qatar's cultural endeavors must be seen.

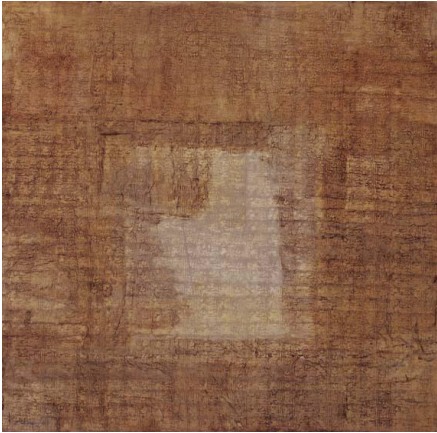
The Al Thani's involvement in the arts

Qatar's first ventures into the field of arts were due to the keen interest of several members of the ruling family. Sheikh Hassan Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al Thani, now deputy director of the Qatar Museums Authority, started studying art in Qatar University in the mid 1980s, with the Qatari modernist painter Yousef Ahmad. The lack of support for Arab art (and artists) prompted him to establish a studio space, which was used by some famous Arab modernists – especially Iraqi artists fleeing Saddam's rule – as a kind of refuge. The art made in this workshop and his collection of modern Arab art – with 6300 pieces the most extensive one in the world – form the core of the collection of the Mathaf museum. The highlights of the collection were displayed in the Sajjil exhibition with which Mathaf opened in 2010.

Yousef Ahmad, Untitled, 2009, thread, varnish, paint and paper laid on canvas, 175 x 175 cm

Sheikha Mayassa at the opening of Murakami's exhibition in Versailles, 2010

Doha West Bay skyline seen from the Museum of Islamic Arts. Photo by Neil van der Linden



Qatari collecting shifted gears when Sheikh Saud Bin Muhammad Bin Ali Al-Thani, a cousin of the current ruler, became President of Qatar's National Council for Culture, Arts, and Heritage, and was charged with establishing collections for five planned museums: the Museum of Islamic Arts, the National Library, the Natural History Museum, a Photography Museum and a Traditional Textiles and Clothes museum. He was also an avid collector himself. His spending sprees in Western auction houses have become legendary. Together with Sheikh Al Sabah from Kuwait, Sheikh Saud drove up the prices of Islamic art on the international market. However, as he could not separate his personal purchases from those he made for the State, and as his high profile as a profligate spender became uncomfortable for the ruling family, he was removed from his post in 2005.

His taste, however, was excellent, as a visit to the Museum of Islamic Art proves. He is still an avid collector of Islamic art, but does so now for his personal collection.

The Emir's wife, Sheikha Mozah – head of the Qatar Foundation – and their daughter Sheikha Mayassa picked up where Sheikh Saud had left off. Sheikha Mayassa (born 1983), the director of Qatar Museums Authority, has become the face of Qatar's global art collecting effort. Qatar was the biggest buyer on the global art market in 2011; although Islamic art and artifacts remain its focus, the state's acquisitions on the modern and contemporary art market have attracted more attention. Qatar now owns a growing collection of European masters and contemporary art. Qatar not only buys, it also sponsors high-level exhibitions, such as Takahashi Murakami's exhibition at Versailles (2011) or Damien Hirst at the Tate Modern (2012) with the intention to subsequently bring these blockbusters to Qatar.

Having established solid art collections, Qatar proceeded to build the museums to host them. By insisting on the integration of cultural heritage (of the Arab world and, where possible to reference, of Qatar itself) in the building plans, the museums seem more serious and less prone to conceptual architectural fantasies than those planned for Abu Dhabi. To date, only the Museum of Islamic Art has opened; the National Museum will follow next. The National Library will be the home of Qatar's manuscript collection, and there are also plans to open an Orientalist Museum. As to Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, it still awaits a permanent home.

The Al Thani family has achieved an international aura as progressive-minded supporters of the arts. The educational, scientific and charity activities of the Qatar Foundation, a massive government body headed by the first lady Sheikha Mozah, overshadow those presided over by her daughter. Qatar Foundation's Education City, which also hosts the Mathaf, is home to several international academic institutions, such as the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Arts, which offers BA's in Graphic Design, Fashion, Interior Design, and Painting and Printmaking, and an MA in Fine Arts. The school also has a gallery in which it occasionally mounts interesting

exhibitions. Qatar University also offers a degree in Fine Arts, and University College London will open a campus in Education City offering master programs in museum studies.

Qatar is investing heavily in scientific and technological innovation. A fine example of Qatar's blending of arts, culture, education and science will be provided by the Qatar National Library building designed by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, which is scheduled to open in 2014. Koolhaas' only office in the Middle East is located in Qatar, where he has several other large commissions. Doha has attracted other star architects to build its museums, but overall the city still seems to lack an identity, or a face.

Cultural developments in Qatar

In the non-museum sector, the most important development is Katara Cultural Village. Built in heritage style, it is the center of a (yet to be constructed) extensive low-density residential area, which will include a giant mosque built in the sea. Katara Cultural Village opened to the public in 2011; it includes an opera house, an indoor theatre, a giant Roman-style amphitheatre built on the beach, the Katara Art Center (several galleries), the Qatar Museums Authority gallery, half a dozen restaurants, the headquarters of several cultural institutions, such as the Qatar Fine Arts Society and the Photographic society, educational programs, water sport activities, and more. It was conceived as the place in which most of Qatar's cultural activities should take place. For the time being, the programming suffers from insufficient artistic supply and demand, but it is likely that, as Qatar's art scene grows, Katara Cultural Village will become livelier. Interestingly, the choice was made to exclude retail activities from the village (other than that of the art spaces).

The private gallery scene is still very small, reflecting the small local market. Qatari collectors tend to make their purchases abroad, the flight to Dubai taking one hour. In 2008, Dubai's The Third Line opened a gallery in the Waqif Art Center, in the downtown Souq Waqif that was restored as a heritage village, but it left after a year of low sales. Waqif Art Center, with a bookstore, arts-supply store and a photographic gallery, turned out to be unviable and it closed in 2010. Most of the initiatives housed there relocated to Katara Cultural Village. Only the Al Markhiya Gallery remains in Souq Waqif. Recently, the lavish Anima Gallery & Lounge opened its doors in March 2012 on the Pearl, one of the artificial islands being built as a luxury archipelago to the north of Doha.

The progressive, serious, character of Qatar's art scene has attracted many art professionals hoping to find a job, or to realize their projects. The experiences have not all been positive. Since the private arts sector is very small, almost all jobs are in the

public sector. The terms of reference, recruitment process, oversight and evaluation, and firing are all remarkably opaque, indicating that the administrative structures of the government are still weak. From personal accounts, it transpires that each employee must vie for the favor of the most important Qatari national (preferably royal) within his reach and tread carefully, or he may be fired without notice. The turnover among expatriate staff is accordingly high. Candidates for the highest-level jobs are recruited abroad, such as Ed Dolman, the veteran CEO and chairman of Christie's, who now works for Sheikha Mayssa as the director of her office at the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA). Some art consultants have also set up shop in Qatar, such as Art Reoriented's prolific duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath.

This indicates a weakness of the Qatari art scene: it all hinges on a few important people and particularly on the ruling family, and is extremely 'top-down'. Given the size of the country with only 300,000 native Qataris, there may not be much space for 'bottom-up' developments; and if they do occur, they could be accidentally crushed by the state cultural juggernaut. This leads artists and art professionals to adopt court attitudes, flattering the rulers rather than providing objective views. It was amazing, for example, how the Chinese star artist Cai Guo Qiang adopted Qatari cultural discourse for his extensive 'Saraab' exhibition at Mathaf; whether it was true courtesy or subtle irony is debatable, but the result was questionable.

To put it differently, the people flocking to Qatar may not come for the country or its people, but only for a share of the fascinating wealth of the country, which is securely managed by the ruling family. This is probably true for all sectors of the economy. The ruling family should thus find ways to delegate 'art power' wider throughout Qatari society, let it institutionalize, and then step back. Surely, well educated young Qataris such as Sophia Al Maria will soon be able to start up their own creative industries or artistic practices, and start shaping the cultural scene themselves without government support

Sophia Al Maria: Gulf Colloquy Compendium presentation, video still, 2012

Cai Guo Qiang: untitled artwork in Saraab, Mathaf 2012.



8

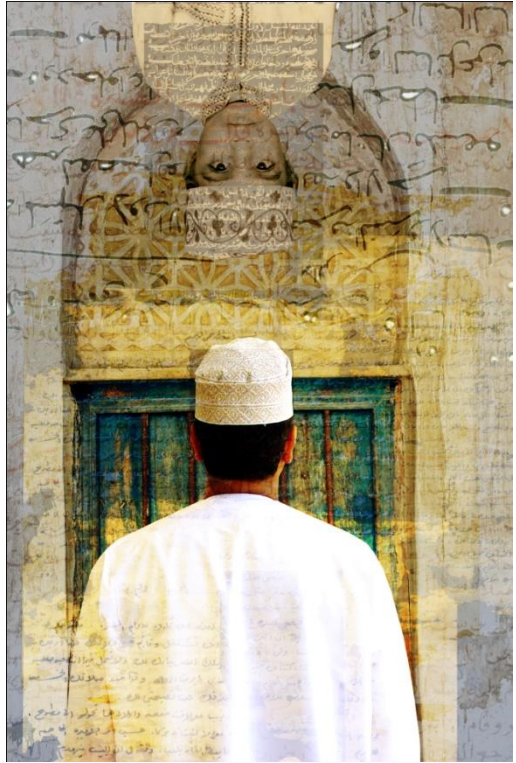
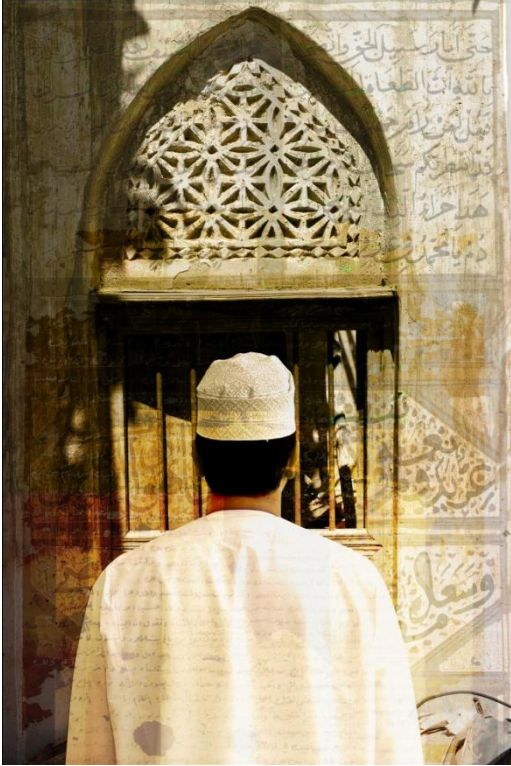
Oman

Oman is a newcomer to the Gulf contemporary arts scene. For the time being, the focus of artistic development policies appear to lay on music: traditional (oud), classical Western, and 'world' music, with many interesting fusion experiments in the offing. The construction of a Royal Opera House in Muscat that opened its doors to the public in October 2011, seems to confirm this choice. It has much to do with the personal predilections of Sultan Qaboos, the ruler of Oman, who has taken a direct interest in the programming of music festivals in the past, and who created the Royal Oman Symphonic Orchestra in the 1980s.

On the visual arts side, Oman is slowly emerging. There are only a few art galleries in Muscat, and only one of note dealing with contemporary art, Bait Muzna. The Omani Society of Fine Arts has its own gallery, showing the work of local and a few expatriate artists. The society provides workshop space for artists and plans to offer residencies to foreign artists in the future. There are also some temporary exhibition spaces, for example at the Bait Al Zubair museum and in luxury hotels, but that is about it.

Oman does, however, have the potential of developing a lively contemporary arts scene. This is due to its fascinating history and the important regional role it played from the 15th to the 19th Century, being a conduit for cultural cross-fertilization between the Gulf, East Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Oman's artistic community is strongly rooted within the country's cultural history, setting it apart from its counterparts in the Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait, which seem oriented abroad. This actually provides an opportunity for Oman, as the thriving art hubs of the Gulf are not far away, providing Omani artists with a market and an audience.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



Indian Ocean trade

Of all the countries on the Arabian Peninsula, Oman has the longest history of regional outreach. This has opened the Sultanate to foreign cultures, in contrast to the closed societies of Saudi Arabia and the highlands of Yemen, or the small tribal societies of the emirates along the Gulf coast.

This external orientation goes in pair with the ancient tradition of shipbuilding and sailing in Oman. Dhows of various kinds are still being built in cities like Sur, and it is said Sindbad the Sailor was born in Sohar, a city on the coast of Al Batinah plain, not far from Fujairah in the UAE. The inhabitants of the Omani coast early on gained a solid reputation as seafarers. They were also enthusiast Muslims from the first days that the prophet Muhammad's message spread to Oman; they transported Arab troops to conquer the Sindh (around Karachi) and Eastern India, and helped spread Islam along the African east coast while trading with the local kings and chieftains.

With its ports and trading community, the coastal region around Muscat was an obvious magnet for early European seafarers. Only ten years after Vasco da Gama discovered the route to India around the southern tip of Africa in 1498, the Portuguese occupied Muscat, and stayed from 1508 to 1648. Several of the fortresses and other fortifications they built still stand today. Omani traders profited from the Portuguese presence, guaranteeing peace and stability, and allowing them to develop their regional trade routes with merchandise from Europe. Oman has always controlled the straits of Hormuz leading into the Gulf, never letting go of the strategic peninsula of Musandam.

More important than the trade in the Gulf was the triangular trade with India and the East African coast. At the end of the 17th Century, Oman conquered the rich port of Zanzibar, which prospered for centuries thanks to the slave trade, and because of its role as depot for all the kingdoms along the East African coast, from present-day Kenya to Mozambique, and its hinterland. Zanzibar became so important to the Sultan of Muscat that he transferred his capital there in 1837. To solve a problem of succession Zanzibar and Oman split two decades later. By that time, Oman had lost most of its importance, as the British controlled the seas and didn't need Omani ports any longer, with their new ships sailing straight through the Indian ocean.

In Zanzibar, the Omanis built beautiful structures, many of which still stand today. These reflect an amazingly cosmopolitan society, mixing elements from all coasts of the Indian ocean. A colorful character from this period was Tippu Tip (1837 – 1905), or Hamad bin Moḥammed bin Jumah bin Rajab bin Muḥammad bin Saʿīd Al Murghabī. He was a Swahili-Zanzibari slave and ivory trader, whose mother, Bint Habib bin Bushir, was a Muscat Arab of the ruling class, her name indicating that she had roots in Persia, and whose father and grandfather had been a Swahili slave traders. Tippu Tip worked as slave trader, plantation owner and governor for the sultans of Zanzibar, but also for the British explorer Stanley and for the Belgians.

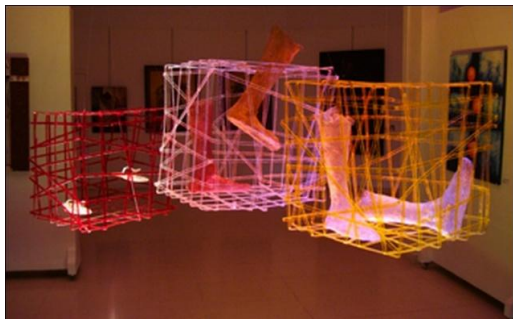
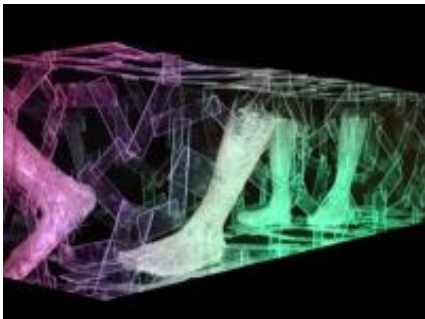
Eventually the British took over Zanzibar, putting an end to its lucrative slave trade in 1897. But the long Omani presence had lasting effects, for example in the formation of the Swahili language that is spoken in East and Central Africa today. It incorporates many Arabic words and became the vector for the regional spread of Islam. It is said that the purest form of Swahili is spoken in Zanzibar.

One (unexpected) result of the Omani preeminence in the Indian Ocean trade, was the spread of Ismailis, often persecuted as heretics in other Muslim areas, into East Africa. The inhabitants of Oman's coast are known for their religious tolerance, probably because they themselves are mostly Ibadi, a form of Islam proper to Oman. Oman ruled Gwadar, a small port in Baluchistan, until 1958 when it sold it to the new state of Pakistan. This possession allowed persecuted Ismailis from the Indian subcontinent to find their way to other Omani ports around the Indian Ocean. Of a scholarly and studious bent, Ismailis prospered and still form a small elite in East African countries today, although since decolonization many opted to emigrate to Europe and North America, where they are mistaken as 'Indians'.

Image from the Old Fort of Zanzibar (by Muhammad Mahdi Karim, Wikimedia Commons)

Oman Royal Opera House

Essa Al Mafraji, art installation at Oman Fine Arts Society. Plastic, acrylic and fiberglass.



The development of modern Oman

Cut off from its Indian Ocean possessions, Oman traversed a relatively obscure period that lasted until 1970. Unlike other Gulf states, it never became a full British protectorate, although the British did influence local politics and maintained good relations with the rulers of Muscat. A treaty of friendship signed between the two countries in 1800 (when the UK was hastily building a system of alliances to avoid French encroachments upon its profitable Indian trade routes) states that friendship between the two countries should “*endure till the end of time or the sun and moon cease in their revolving careers.*”⁸. Indeed, when the Sultan of Muscat faced the rebellion of the ‘Imamate of Oman’ in the 1950s, and in Dhofar in the 1960s and 70s, the British sent troops and the Royal Air Force to assist him.

Oman is historically split between its coast and its interior. The coast receives more rainfall and is shielded from the interior by mountains and a plateau. The interior of Oman is dry, rocky and sparsely populated. The Arabs there are mostly Bedouin, partially settled and partially nomads that venture across the Empty Quarter towards central Arabia. It is considered that the Arab spoken in the highlands is the purest in the Peninsula, unaffected by the Persian pronunciation and foreign words that mark the ‘Khaleeji’ (Gulf) Arabic, and without the grammatical simplifications of colloquial Arabic as spoken elsewhere in the Peninsula (and indeed the rest of the Arab world).

The capital of Oman’s interior is Nizwa, which is also the seat of the Ibadi Imam. Ibadism is a school of Islam that took root in Oman in the early days of Islam, but which only spread to Zanzibar and some small communities in North Africa. Although it may technically be heretic (or a sect) because it doesn’t conform to one of Sunni Islam’s four schools, it has never drawn much animosity from other Muslims, not even from Saudi Arabia’s conservative clergy. This is probably due to its lack of missionary zeal, its tolerance of other forms of Islam, and its rather conservative interpretation of the Holy Quran. The Ibadi Imamate that ruled over Oman’s interior was strictly based on sharia.

The main differences between Ibadism and Sunni and Shia Islam, is that they disagree on who the fifth caliph was after the prophet Muhammad’s death. While Sunnis hold that the Muawiya line that went on to form the Umayyad caliphate is the legitimate one, and Shias say that Ali was the rightful heir to the title, the Ibadis follow a third candidate, Abdullah ibn Wahb al-Rasibi. They also accept less hadith and disagree on some other doctrinal points, such as how long sinners must burn in hell and whether those that will rise on Judgment Day will see the face of God or not.

Nizwa became a seat of learning and jurisprudence, and the Ibadi Imam that ruled from there commanded the respect from the surrounding population. Faced with the

⁸ <http://ukinoman.fc.gov.uk/en/about-us/working-with-oman/uk-in-oman/uk-oman/>

decline of the Omani coast, the interior began to affirm its autonomy, leading to the Treaty of Seeb in 1920 that split the country between the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman, and the Imamate of Oman. When oil was found in the interior in the early 1950s, the Sultan of Muscat, however, broke the treaty, leading to five years of uprising that was quelled by the Sultan with British help. The last Ibadi Imam fled to Dammam in Saudi Arabia where he died in 2009, apparently still an oft-consulted and much respected figure.

The region of Dhofar along the Yemeni border has also been a source of unrest. Separated from the rest of Oman by large expanses of rocky plains that stretch from the Empty Quarter until the sea, Dhofar catches part of the monsoon rains, making it the greenest area of the whole Peninsula. It is the world's main producer of frankincense, traditionally traded through Yemen. Home to many tribes speaking a variety of south Semitic languages, it was independent throughout most of its history, until being incorporated into Oman in the early 19th Century. Although its capital Salalah is now a major tourist destination, the population has long felt sidelined by Muscat. The most serious uprising in Dhofar took place from 1962 to 1975, and it prompted the current Sultan Qaboos to stage a coup against his father in 1970.

Sultan Qaboos instated a modern system of governance, leading to a long period of peaceful development that continues until today. During the 2011 'Arab Spring', Oman was also affected, with small-scale uprisings in Sohar, Haima (the oil-producing region) and Salalah. The reaction of Sultan Qaboos was to mostly meet the demands of the protestors, including higher wages and a better distribution of public wealth, thus maintaining peace. Sultan Qaboos' leadership has been rewarded, among others, by the UNDP designation of Oman as the country that has most developed in the past 40 years.

In the field of visual arts the Omani Society for Fine Arts has played a leading role, bringing together talented artists such as Hassan Meer, Abdul Majid Karooh, Alia Al Farsi and Essa Al Mafraji and helping them develop their talent. The main commercial outlet for these artists is the Bait Muzna. Although most of the work is painting, some experimentation with novel art forms is also taking place. Those that participate in it say the Omani art scene, though small, is exciting and has potential. For the time being it has not achieved much projection abroad.

9

Where the Gulf is Heading

The Gulf countries have a promising future ahead of them. Since their independence, most of them have embarked upon a path of sustainable development, investing heavily in infrastructure, economic diversification, education and social services, and therefore in their future. In most countries, there seems to be a healthy balance between forward-looking policies of the ruling families and the pressure exerted by citizens' aspirations.

The situation seems most propitious in Qatar and the UAE, with Oman not far behind. In Qatar, the pressure from society seems insignificant in comparison to the drive shown by the House of Al Thani. The UAE benefits from its federal system, which allows pluralism within a system that is fundamentally autocratic, but quite close to its citizens in practice. Oman has to deal with historical tensions between the coast, the interior and minority groups, but as long as all groups profit from development there is peace.

In Saudi Arabia, the situation is more unpredictable: the pressure from the population – especially the youth – is tremendous, and the policies of the House of Al Saud are wavering. For the time being, the Kingdom is opening up, responding to key aspirations of its population and thereby defusing tensions.

Kuwait is caught in a deadlock between the House of Al Sabah and the parliamentary opposition, which is itself divided into Islamists and liberal democrats; the former represent a sizeable chunk of the electorate and the latter the aspirations of the old and new elites. But one may draw hope from the fact that the fundamental political discussion about how the city-state should be governed can be held within its democratic institutions.

The situation is most worrying in Bahrain. The violent clashes between the government and the opposition in 2011 still resonate today. It is not that the rulers of Bahrain are more despotic than in neighboring countries – rather to the contrary. The fact is that Bahraini citizens are more vocal and have higher expectations as to their political participation than other inhabitants of the Gulf. Hopefully the House of Al Khalifa will respond to popular aspirations with more democratic reform.

These inner tensions pale in comparison to the situation of the other country on the Arabian peninsula, Yemen. Although there is some hope that the new government will manage the transition to the post-Saleh era, it is unlikely that this will put an end to the republic's significant economic and social woes. Yemen lies like a festering wound on the edge of the GCC countries, and, if it erupts, this may send shock-waves (and streams of refugees) throughout the GCC, particularly into Saudi Arabia.

The contemporary art scenes in the GCC countries reflect not only their current situation, but also give indications about the path ahead. Contemporary art is a novel and still emerging phenomenon in these societies. Its mere existence proves that Gulf societies have matured to a point where individual creative expression is becoming part of the overall make-up of society – even when it challenges existing social codes and the voice of authority. Starting with the educated elites, ever-larger groups are looking toward artists to express shifting identities in a new cultural era. The same process is taking place on a more massive scale in popular culture, with contemporary music, TV programs and, to some extent, poetry addressing new forms of collective self-perception.

Arts and culture as elements of the transition to a post-oil era

Most countries in the Gulf are acutely aware that the hydrocarbon bonanza is going to end at some point in the future. In fact, Bahrain (and Yemen's) reserves are nearing depletion already. Other countries, except Oman, still have comfortable reserves, even at the current high rates of extraction, but they are determined to complete the transition to a post-oil economy before it is too late.

The core of their strategy lies in economic diversification (trade, industry, services) and education. Education policies have been inspired by Western models, so creative thinking is encouraged. Witness the large arts & humanities departments of NYU and the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, or the innovative curricula of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology near Jeddah.

Arts are part of the formula to foster a creative, intelligent, population that can lead the GCC countries into the post-oil era. In this regard planners in the Gulf seem to be following contemporary Western theories about economic growth, where the creative industries play an essential role. It remains surprising, however, that models developed for responding to the economic stagnation of Western countries are adopted by the buoyant GCC economies. How can one compare Berlin's Kreuzberg or the New York's Lower East Side to Doha's Katara Cultural Village? In fact Gulf *economies* do not need arts or the creative sector; but there seems to be a *cultural* craving for it.

In this guide we have not ventured much into the domains of design, fashion and other applied arts, but there is clearly a boom taking place in this sector too. It has been said that would-be artists in the Gulf often choose careers in design or the advertising industry because it provides them with a safer social status (and income). But there is also a strong demand for these talents, from the local fashion industry through home design to the lay-out of magazines, the crafting of internet campaigns etc. There are many new communities throughout the Gulf developing hybrid identities; it's a great time for cultural branding specialists.

To return to the scale of regional cultural policies, it is often observed outside the region that the large-scale planning of museums and other cultural infrastructure, in Qatar and Abu Dhabi most notably, serves status-seeking goals. The objective would be to establish their sponsors as global cultural players. This may be one explanation. The promotional documents accompanying these projects, however, emphasize their role in building the kind of society that the Gulf countries will need for transitioning into the post-oil era. The museum model followed is therefore not the 19th century European museum – a temple for national culture – but the late-20th century 'museum as a hub for the creative community'.

Insofar arts are a conscious element of state policy, therefore, they are supposed to stimulate the blossoming of creativity, an awareness of global culture, and an appreciation of the role of Gulf Arab communities in contributing to a better and more beautiful world. Whether these high-minded objectives will be partially or fully realized is a question history will answer.

Opportunities for cooperation

Gulf artists tend to band together in like-minded groups; they have a lot of time to spare for each other and together overcome the tediousness of daily life. They enjoy hosting foreigners, especially those who work in the field of arts. Galleries tend to be less high-brow and more welcoming than their counterparts in Europe. As many of them feel they are building an arts community, they are not only interested in sales. Whether one deals with galleries or artists, one deals with people, while in the West the art world has become institutionalized to such a degree that one often is dealing with institutions rather than the people in it. This obviously has advantages (predictability, rationality, equal treatment for all, institutional memory, etc.) and the visitor looking for that in the Gulf may be disappointed. Nevertheless, the person willing to invest in personal relations might find it easier to connect to the art scenes of the Gulf than to those in many Western countries; and he may even find that the energy of the Gulf art world is contagious.

Personal contacts are a prerequisite for successful exchange. This is probably true everywhere, but in many countries the institution you represent is sufficient for gaining access, which is not necessarily true in the Gulf. The experiences of Michael Schindhelm, who went from being director of Berlin's operas to heading up the nascent Dubai Culture and Arts Authority in 2008, provides a good example. He found to his astonishment that, despite his position, he was kept out of major decisions, was not consulted on important matters, and that his staffers often had better information than he did. He spent weeks working on detailed plans for cultural development his bosses had asked for, but they had no interest in the results of his work. From his highly entertaining account 'Dubai High', it appears that he made few efforts to establish personal relations with his professional contacts; this explains the disconnect.

This section briefly examines opportunities for cooperation, but for any venture to have a chance of success there must first be some affinity with Gulf culture and the people one will be working with.

Art market

The Gulf art market is in reality still quite small. Most galleries in the region do not make a profit, and are subsidized by the personal wealth of the gallery owners (or their husbands). Rents in places like the Dubai International Finance Center are extremely high, which explains the emergence of Dubai's industrial area Al Quoz as an art hub. Eventual profits are often reinvested in publications, 'status' participation in international art fairs or outreach/art education activities – i.e. building the arts community.

Perspectives, however, are good, and this art market seems assured of a good growth rate in the years to come. Originally buyers consisted of a handful of Westernized wealthy Arabs and members of the ruling families. But now the pool of buyers is rapidly expanding: witness the success of auctions such as those organized by Ayyam gallery in Dubai (young collectors) or Jamm consultancy in Kuwait. It has become fashionable to collect art and to be part of that crowd. This has prompted individual experts and galleries to offer consulting services. They help starting collectors to identify good buys and mid-level collectors to structure their collections.

The appeal of Gulf artists abroad is still limited by the lack of knowledge about the Middle Eastern art world and relatively high prices. Edge of Arabia has finally opened a gallery in London, the participation of Dubai-based galleries in international art fairs is increasing, and some galleries in the West (and East) have shown work by artists from the Middle East. Although international collectors are starting to take note of this new 'art region', negative stereotypes of the region still dominate Western thinking, so the art produced there is expected to echo, in some manner, those stereotypes. Generally, the lack of knowledge about the Gulf undermines the appreciation of its artistic production.

Nonetheless, a few artists like the Saudis Abdunnasser Gharem and Ahmed Mater have gained international acclaim. Their work has been acquired by important institutions such as the British Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This has sparked the interest of a larger community of collectors and museums; in 2012, no less than 70 museum groups visited Art Dubai. It appears that the Gulf art market is at the beginning of a long stretch of growth.

If anything, there is a danger of this market overheating, which occurs when demand outstrips supply and inflates prices, and buyers start speculating in art. This can wreak havoc on an art scene: it created a bubble on the Indian art market which ultimately burst – as bubbles are prone to do. Prices in the Gulf are already high and young artists seem to harbor unrealistic expectations about what their work can sell for. As one cannot realistically expect the market to regulate itself, the best antidote to overheating is the existence of a sufficiently large contemporary art base that is not involved in the market. Thus, when the bubble bursts it only affects the market-oriented segment of the art world. It is questionable whether this substratum exists in the Gulf.

Contemporary Art in the Gulf



Development of an art infrastructure

The museums being built in the Gulf draw a lot of attention, but this focus hides the near absence of an art infrastructure in the region as a whole. There has been much discussion in this essay of artists, galleries and museums, but not of non-profit organizations and community-based initiatives. That is because these hardly exist. Discussions between the author and protagonists of the Gulf art scenes revealed a general awareness that such non-commercial, non-governmental, structures are vital to the development of a strong art scene.

Taking the Netherlands as an example, art infrastructure includes creative art education in schools, art colleges of varying levels of prestige, grants and other funding schemes for artists and for art organizations, non-commercial art spaces, community art centers, support for international projection of artists, prizes with peer review systems, art journals, tax-exemptions for patrons, special treatment of art by customs, museum passes etc ; most of this is funded with public money.

In the Gulf, no government funding exists for such initiatives and the private sector only sporadically invests in them, keeping its own interests in mind. International funding is generally also inaccessible, because it is usually reserved for developing (=poor) or post-conflict countries. Arab countries along the Mediterranean Sea have more options thanks to Euro-Mediterranean programs. One of the only funding bodies that artists in the Gulf can apply to, is the Beirut-based Arab Fund for Arts and Culture.

Luckily, some wealthy patrons fund organizations like the Contemporary Art Platform in Kuwait, Al Riwaq in Bahrain, or Tashkeel in Dubai. These do perform very useful functions, but many more of such initiatives are needed to make a difference. Patronage will probably gradually develop in the Gulf countries, but there is more lacking than money.

For example, a certain breed of art managers is also needed: people who know how to deal with artists and have affinity with their work, but also know how to organize events, communicate efficiently, manage budgets, maintain relations with sponsors and patrons and stay abreast of developments in their field. What would also be useful are platforms for exchange of services, expertise and recruitment in the Gulf focusing on contemporary arts.

Message / Messenger by Abdunasser Gharem established a record for contemporary Middle Eastern art when it sold at a 2011 auction at Christie's Dubai for 842,000 USD. The pre-sale estimate for six works by Saudi artists was 135.000, but they sold for 1,050,000 USD instead.

Installation view of Ayman Yossri Daydban's 'Flags' at Jeddah's Athr Gallery, 2012. On the opening night more than 100.000 USD worth of these steel sheet sculptures were sold.

Art education, criticism and artistic exchange

Art education is a specific concern throughout the Gulf's arts communities. Privately organized art appreciation courses take place in all cities described in this guide, and some of the Gulf's universities offer art history, art teaching and applied arts courses, at both BA and MA levels. Courses in museum studies and conservation are being established, too, but there are hardly any educational or research facilities for (aspiring) artists. Some of them have followed applied arts courses that are geared toward the advertising industry or the media, but most Gulf artists are either self-taught or have studied abroad.

Although the Gulf's rulers generally prioritize education, art schools do not exist, nor, as far as I know, are they in the planning. Some private patrons have therefore established workshop facilities (such as Taskheel in Dubai, and the Al Qattara center in Al Ain) and Fine Arts societies in most cities offer such facilities to their members, where older artists tutor young ones. A more recent development is the setting up of residency programs, to allow exchange between local and international artists, and to attract new talent. London's Delfina Foundation for example has established partnerships in Dubai and Muscat. But none of these initiatives can fill the gap of a proper art school.

Surely, it will only be a matter of time before a Western art school establishes a partnership with one of the Gulf's education hubs to provide such training to local artists.

Besides education, artists in the Gulf also seek professional exchange with international experts. In this regard, matters are looking up: the increasing presence of international artists and art professionals - attracted by events with a global reach such as Sharjah's March meetings - provide some exposure to local artists, but it is mostly of a fleeting nature. Initiatives such as Edge of Arabia and those taken by the better galleries in Dubai to promote their artists abroad, allow artists to meet their peers and art professionals abroad. But this opportunity is provided to precious few artists – the most famous ones – and the exchange often focuses on commercial aspects.

In my travels through the region, I have noticed that local artists are eager to receive curatorial advice, glad to go through a critical review of their work, and hopeful that the contact thus established will be a lasting one. For foreign curators and researchers this contact can be equally rewarding, as it provides insight into the society the artist operates in, and there is a large reserve of untapped artistic potential that awaits professional guidance. As the title of a recent exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern art by the Nadour Collection promises: *Invest in us, you'll strike gold.*

Constructive criticism is particularly needed, for both local artists and art professionals. In the West, this is a function performed by gallery owners, curators and

reviewers. Gallery owners, however, have a tendency to exchange long-term development for short-term gain, i.e. to cater to the market. Only the best galleries are smart enough – or dedicated enough to art – to encourage an artist to stop producing work that sells well and move on, or to seek the right development opportunities for their artists. There are some galleries like this in Dubai, but not many. As to curators, there are some very capable curators with a broad international view that are partially based in Dubai and Doha, but not enough venues for their exhibitions – here again the lack of a non-commercial art infrastructure is to be regretted.

Concerning magazines, most of them are descriptive rather than critical. Bidoun (published in New York) is informed by a radically critical view of the art world generally and approaches to the Middle East in particular, but it is more concerned with constructing a meta-narrative than with the cases of individual artists. Canvas, published in Dubai, is a successful regional art magazine; but, as a commercial glossy that aims to inform and widen the regional art audience, it is hardly the appropriate place for serious critical reviews. Harpers Bazaar Art Arabia, a new addition to the local magazine scene, follows a more serious editorial strategy than Canvas but is not primarily directed at an art audience. The main periodical resource for those looking for a critical view on Middle Eastern art is Contemporary Art Practices, but this magazine is published only twice a year and not circulated widely, and the quality of its reviews varies rather wildly. I found that in most countries of the Gulf, only Canvas Magazine is readily available.

In the West, there is no shortage of specialists who can critically analyze an artist's practice and place it within the context of art history and the prevalent trends in the international art world. What they lack to operate in the Gulf, is understanding of the local context. I hope this essay and the Gulf Art Guide website will partially remedy this, and foster fruitful cooperation ventures.

The quest for a new Arab Identity

The Arabian peninsula was solidly rooted in the ancient world and participated in its cultural blossoming. It contributed the Arabic language and Islam to the rest of the Arab world. Since the late 7th Century AD, the Arabian peninsula turned into a backwater of the Arab world, contributing almost nothing to world culture. This condition lasted until the late 20th Century. The Arabian Peninsula, as we have seen, played almost no part in the various pan-Arab reform movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, and therefore did not taste the bitterness of intellectual defeat.

The Gulf countries, with the partial exceptions of Kuwait and Bahrain, are particularly self-confident today. They need no lessons from East or West because they

are doing well, in terms of economy, finance, governance, and social development. They are also starting to exert a greater influence on regional and international affairs.

Over the past decades, the main cultural export item from the Gulf was Saudi Arabia's conservative strain of Islam known abroad as 'Wahhabism'. Today, the influence of the conservative clergy in Saudi Arabia seems on the wane, though it is not inconceivable that the conservative religious creed will again strengthen its grip over Saudi society in case the Kingdom experiences major upheaval. In the post 9/11 era, however, there seems little appetite, within or outside the country, for an expansive religiously-based policy as in the 1980s and 90s.

In recent years, Gulf countries have started exerting a different kind of regional influence. Through Arab media broadcasting, political and even military pressure, investments, business opportunities, charity funds and other means, they have influenced the course of political events known as the 'Arab Spring'. Their agenda is not that of the pro-democracy activists, but it is not specifically contrary to it, as long as it doesn't threaten the continued rule of families which have been in power for the last 100-250 years. The 24/7 live coverage by Al Jazeera of the Egyptian revolution, the bombing of Gaddafi's army by Qatari fighter jets, the GCC-brokered transition of power in Yemen, the Saudi and Qatari support to the Syrian rebels and diplomatic efforts to avert a military strike on Iran are examples of this forward-oriented regional policy.

The regional projection of the Gulf countries is not based on religion or ideology, but on their interest in having stable, friendly regimes in their vicinity; a pragmatic goal supported by realpolitik and impressive financial clout. There is no obvious cultural component to it, but there is a cultural effect. The kind of regimes the Gulf has, and those it assists in the rest of the Arab world, are Islamic, but more liberal than the majority of their citizens. They are business-minded and concerned about the development of the economy, but also of their societies, and they seek long-term stability to allow progress. These policies are apparently favorable to the burgeoning of a contemporary art scene.

The museums being built in the Gulf may not directly affect the contemporary art scene. But they do send a signal that the rulers have an interest in culture. That interest is expressed even clearer in the patronage offered to artists by some members of the ruling families and the business elites. And why would they be interested in fostering the Arab contemporary arts scene? For clearly, their interest in art is not limited to that produced in the Gulf, but to the production of contemporary Arab artists in general.

Abdulnasser Gharem, The Stamp (Inshallah), 2008. The original stamp used to make the print has a diameter of 95 cm and was used to protest against the removal of one of his political work in a Saudi-funded exhibition... in London.

In the West artists and other free thinkers spearheaded the transition from religious to secular societies, and from class-based social hierarchies to pluralist open societies. Given current policies in some countries, and laissez-faire and personal passion. And that passion, it seems, is triggered by the intuition that artists are defining the contours of a new Arab identity. A search, at times irreverent, at times maybe misguided, but always creative into what it means to be an Arab in the global context of the 21st Century.

END

