

# Artistic hubs in and of the Arab Region

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## ABSTRACTS AND SHORT BIOGRAPHIES

### **KEYNOTE 1**

#### **Arab Artistic Hubs from the Twentieth to the Twenty-first Century**

Various cities in the Arab world are or have been artistic hubs or are striving for achieving this goal. From the late 19th and through the whole 20th century, artistic hubs were situated in the Mediterranean region and the Near East, which was where Arab modernity was thought and created. A major shift occurred since the 2000s, when the art world's main centres became located in the cities of the Gulf – Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Doha and now Riyadh – which had played a marginal role until then. This geographical shift was also the sign of new power relations within the Arab world. In this lecture, we will try to outline what characterized the different “artistic hubs” that played a major role in the Arab world, what differentiates them and what this might have as a consequence on art production in the region.

**Silvia Naef** is a full professor and director of the master's program in Middle Eastern Studies (MAMO) at the University of Geneva. She has taught in Tübingen, Basel and Toronto and has been a visiting scholar in Sassari, Göttingen, Paris (ENS) and Beirut (USJ). Her research focusses on modern art and visual representations in the Arab and Islamic world. Her present project explores cultural diplomacy through the study of gifts of MENA region states to the United Nations. She is a founding member of Manazir, Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region. She has extensively published on modern Arab art and representations in the Islamic context in several languages. A new updated French edition and an English translation of her book *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe, L'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (1996) are forthcoming at Zamân Books, Paris.

### **PANEL 1: BEIRUT AS AN INTELLECTUAL AND CULTURAL HUB**

#### **Politics, Economy, and Space: Notes for a Research Program on the History of Beirut as a Cultural Capital (1950s-1980s)**

A laboratory city of Ottoman modernity, a pioneer in printing and publishing, and a university center of regional influence, Beirut, along with Cairo, has been one of the main centers of the Nahda – the Arab ‘Renaissance’ – since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But it was only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that this city, modest in size, was able to rise to the status of a true regional cultural capital. Benefiting from Lebanon's relative political liberalism, the dynamism of its publishing sector, and the economic boom the country experienced from the 1950s onwards, the Lebanese capital proved particularly attractive to many intellectuals and political exiles when the political regimes in the Middle East took an authoritarian turn. Since the Nakba of 1948, the city had also been home to exiled Palestinians, who provided Beirut's

cultural milieus with some of their most prominent figures and a host of more anonymous ones. Backed by a dense network of private cultural institutions and a press and publishing economy with pan-Arab dimensions, liberal Beirut found itself in a position to challenge the supremacy of Cairo and Baghdad. Post-Independence Beirut, therefore, provides a fascinating case study of what makes a cultural capital city in modern times. To delineate what a research program on such cultural capitals could be, my paper will address three sets of questions. First, I will explore what it is about politics that makes a cultural capital. Reflecting on the relationship between the cultural and political functions of capital cities, I will question the centrality of print capitalism in the functioning of Beirut as a regional cultural capital. I will also consider the relationship between the very peculiar kind of political liberalism Lebanon experienced and the freedom of expression and creation it could provide to cultural actors. Second, the paper will examine several mechanisms of capitalistic concentration that were at play, to better understand the processes of accumulation and circulation of symbolic capital and of material and human resources that make up a cultural capital city. Third, I will consider the spatial dimension of these processes. Drawing on Beirut's urban history of culture, I will question the social effects of the spatial density of institutions and actors, in terms of peer socialization, competition, and cultural innovation.

**Candice Raymond** is a researcher at the Centre d'Histoire Sociale des mondes contemporains (CNRS/Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne). She obtained her PhD in history with a dissertation on contemporary Lebanese historians and the writing of history in Lebanon from the late 1960s onwards. Her current research explores the social history of Beirut intellectual worlds in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a focus on the Long Sixties and the Civil War. She is a member of the editorial board of the *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée* and of the *Revue d'histoire des sciences humaines*.

### **La diffusion et le développement de la critique d'art irakienne : le rôle central des revues al-Adīb et al-Ādāb dans les échanges culturels et artistiques transrégionaux**

Dans les années 1950, l'art irakien subit une transformation notable avec l'émergence de manifestes artistiques et la diffusion de critiques d'art au-delà des frontières nationales. La publication de la critique d'art irakienne au Liban, notamment dans les revues *al-Ādāb* et *al-Adīb*, joue un rôle essentiel dans ce processus. Ces revues permettent à des critiques éminents tels que Shakir Hassan al-Said, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra et Mahmoud Sabri de partager leurs réflexions sur divers sujets, allant de la critique d'expositions à la théorie de l'art, en passant par l'historicisation des mouvements artistiques et le rôle politique et social de la critique d'art. Cette circulation de textes enrichit le dialogue artistique régional et international, offrant une plateforme d'échange cruciale pour les artistes et critiques. Elle souligne l'importance de la critique d'art dans l'évolution de l'art irakien, permettant aux critiques irakiens de se positionner, de mieux comprendre leur propre histoire et de contribuer à un récit artistique global. La diffusion de la critique d'art irakienne au Liban s'intègre dans une dynamique plus vaste où les centres culturels jouent un rôle majeur dans l'attraction des artistes et des intellectuels. Elle interroge également la pertinence et l'influence des différentes villes de la région, telles que Beyrouth et Bagdad, et aide à conceptualiser les facteurs qui stimulent et attirent les centres culturels dans le monde arabe. Cette communication vise à analyser les réseaux de circulation des artistes, des œuvres et des

concepts entre l'Irak et le Liban. En explorant ces rencontres, nous pourrions comprendre l'impact qu'elles ont eu sur un groupe d'artistes irakiens, lesquels ont réorganisé leurs idées en incorporant de nouveaux éléments esthétiques dans leur peinture. De manière plus générale, cette étude nous permettra d'appréhender comment s'est formé le premier discours historique et théorique sur l'art en Irak dans un contexte interrégional.

Titulaire d'un Master 1 sur l'artiste Dia al-Azzawi et d'un Master 2 sur les pratiques artistiques modernes dans les pays du Maghreb à l'Université de Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, **Zouina Ait Slimani** soutiendra prochainement sa thèse « Écrire sur l'art en Irak au XXe siècle : élaboration d'une critique, d'une historiographie et d'un monde artistique (1922-1972) » en histoire et critique des arts à l'Université de Genève, en co-direction avec l'Université de Nantes. Pour cette recherche, elle a bénéficié du soutien de plusieurs bourses doctorales, dont celles de Translitterae, de la fondation Ernst & Lucie Schmidheiny, et de Swissuniversities. Membre du comité éditorial de la revue Manazir, elle a publié dans des revues telles que Diptyk, Aware et Manazir.

### **The Maghrib in Beirut: Beyond Stories of Centres and Peripheries**

One defining feature of post-1967 Arab thought was the centrality of intellectual voices coming from North Africa, traditionally considered an Arab periphery since the start of the Nahda. For Hisham Sharabi, “North African cultural critics of Arab Society” were “deconstructing and dismantling Arab neopatriarchy” with their writings on Arab *turath*, and charting a path toward social and political emancipation during these decades of political disillusionment.<sup>1</sup> While Sharabi attributed their methodological originality to their proximity with French theory, little by comparison is devoted to why and how these thinkers made their way to Beirut. Such accounts merely assume rather than reconstitute the drawing element of this Arab hub for intellectuals from Arab peripheries, hoping to participate in its debates and its questions. They underplay the agency of circulating intellectuals from the peripheries and the multiple encounters that shape the genesis and reception of these intellectual projects, during their circulation and once they arrive in the centre, or hub. To remedy these shortcomings, this paper argues that the turn to Beirut was a conscious strategy from a group of intellectuals in North Africa from the 1960s to the 1980s in their efforts to decolonize the social sciences, to think beyond the project of nation-building in their respective countries, and alleviate their intellectual dependency on Western experts on national development. The visibility and influence of these thinkers in Beirut illustrates the mastery of the periodical as a tool of communication, and a crucial component of their intellectual praxis. This paper will reconstitute the involvement of a selection of North African intellectuals in two pan-Arab periodicals based in Beirut, *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi* and *al-Fikr al-Arabi al-Mu'asir*, to better illustrate how thinkers from the periphery engaged with this Arab hub, including the importance of local counterparts that serve as drivers of their reception. Finally, this paper retraces how ideas *return* from the Arab hub, especially how their visibility shapes their reception in North Africa through a series of round tables and critical reviews in its periodicals. This case can help enrich our portrait of the contemporary Arab field of ideas by reconstituting the agency of its participants, assessing the shaping effect of movement, and identifying structuring logics between the Beirut hub and the Maghrib.

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<sup>1</sup> Hisham Sharabi, “Cultural Critics of Contemporary Arab Society,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 9, 1 (1987), 1-19.

**Idriss Jebari** is a Lecturer in Middle East Studies at Trinity College Dublin. He is a historian of Arab thought and his upcoming book will address North African cultural and social history after its independences from France, on the radical sixties and seventies, on collective memory in the Arab world. After completing his doctorate on the history of the production of critical thought in Morocco and Tunisia at the University of Oxford, he held a postdoctoral research fellowship at the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), and at Bowdoin College in Maine (USA).

## **PANEL 2: BEIRUT AS AN ARTISTIC HUB**

### **Thea Porter, “gifted amateur and embassy wife”**

Thea Porter (born Jerusalem 1927 - died London 2000), a dress designer, is best known as a key founder of what is described as Bohemian Chic, popular in the 1960s, a style, which drew heavily on ‘exotic’ costumes and textiles brought back by hippies from their travels to the Middle East, Afghanistan and beyond. Opening in 1966, Porter’s iconic shop in London’s Soho, attracted rockstars and actors from Pink Floyd to Elizabeth Taylor and Barbra Streisand, who adored her clothes made from lavish silks and antique fabrics, inspired by a childhood trailing around the Damascus suq with her mother as she was growing up. Less well known is her life as an artist in Beirut. Sent to university in London soon after the end of the Second World War, to study Anglo Saxon and Old French, having been prevented from studying art, it was in Beirut in the early 1950s, that she finally learnt to paint. Her two teachers were the celebrated Georges Cyr, and Madame Aubry Beaulieu, wife of the Canadian Ambassador. Married to a British diplomat, amongst her closest friends were artists and writers who included Aref Rayyes, Paul Guiragossian, and Jalal Khoury, who teased her for being ‘a gifted amateur and embassy wife’. Mornings drinking coffee were spent at the Horseshoe café and evenings at the Cave du Roy, where as she describes in her memoir, Johnny Halliday and Sacha Distel, sat one night at their table. She held three solo exhibitions at the Alecco Saab Gallery between 1959 and 1963 before leaving Beirut for good. Working on paper and canvas, her works are abstract and full of colour often using mirror and gold leaf. Writer Michel Fani described her as having echoes of Pop Art mixed with local popular culture. Intensely superstitious, blue beads and ‘the eye’ often populated her paintings. Although she was largely to abandon painting, this period was integral to her later work as a designer. Through examples from her archive of paintings, writings and photographs, this paper sheds light on Thea Porter as an active participant in the vibrant artistic hub that was the Beirut she knew.

**Venetia Porter** is former Senior Curator for Islamic and Middle East art at the British Museum. Born and brought up in Beirut, she studied Arabic and Islamic Art at the University of Oxford. Her PhD from the University of Durham is on the history and architecture of Medieval Yemen. Publications include *Reflections: contemporary art of the Middle East and North Africa* with Nastaha Morris and Charles Tripp, (British Museum Press 2021) and *Artists making books: poetry to politics* (British Museum Press 2023). She co-authored *Thea Porter Bohemian Chic* with Laura McLaws Helms (V&A publications 2015) and edited her mother’s autobiography *Thea Porter’s scrapbook* (Unicorn Press 2019).

**Soviet Influence on Beirut's Cultural Scene through the lens of Dar El Fan**

This paper considers a series of events such as art exhibitions, movie screenings and music concerts held at Dar el Fan, a cultural centre in Beirut (1967-1975). Through the lens of cultural diplomacy exercised by Soviet foreign policy within the broader context of the Cold War, contrasting forces acting in Beirut as a cultural hub will be discussed. Dar el Fan, a platform for artistic expression and intellectual discourse, served as both a platform for local artists and a conduit for international cultural exchange. Central to this exploration are the experiences of two Lebanese artists, Wahib Bteddini (1929-2011) and Nazem Irani (1930-2016), who studied in the USSR and later exhibited their works and, in the case of Irani, held lectures on Russian art at Dar el Fan. By analysing their artistic output and their trajectories alongside other USSR-sponsored events within the context of the centre, threads of cultural transmission between the Soviet Union and Lebanon will be unravelled. Considering the intersections of art, politics, and diplomacy, the interplay between a superpower and a cultural institution is discussed, questioning implications and limits of some tropes of the Cold War discourse. The paper adopts a “pericentric” approach<sup>2</sup> that illuminates the multifaceted influence of Soviet cultural diplomacy and ideological projection on the Lebanese cultural landscape while acknowledging the agency of the cultural actors involved. In this sense, Dar el Fan constituted both a meeting point and a battleground for different conceptions of culture that were produced and promoted by “competing” sides. Within this panorama, it is argued that Dar el Fan and its members were never passively engaged with Soviet-sponsored events and initiatives, but rather played an active role in shaping its hybrid identity, leveraging the Soviet impetus of cultural dominance to gain access to high-quality cultural outputs and education. Regarded as a microcosm of Lebanon, Dar el Fan and its actors found themselves in a larger political, diplomatic and cultural twine where antagonistic tensions were at play and generated the rich, diverse and hence attractive artistic and cultural panorama of Beirut, with its freedom of expression and encounters. This study aims to situate Dar el Fan within a global perspective and contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of cultural actors and institutions. Navigating the complexities of international relations, they contributed in shaping Beirut into a unique artistic hub.

**Flavia Malusardi** is a PhD candidate in History of Art as part of the LAWHA project, with an international position between Università Cà Foscari (Venice) and OIB Orient-Institut Beirut (Beirut). Her project investigates the role of gallerist Janine Rubeiz and her informal space Dar el Fan (1967-1976) within the Lebanese cultural panorama. She holds a Master's degree in History of Art and Architecture of the Islamic Middle East from SOAS School of Oriental and African Studies (London) and an MFA in Visual Cultures and Curatorial Practice from Brera Fine Arts Academy (Milan). Her work focuses on the contemporary arts and visual culture of the Middle East and North Africa, with an interest in archival and collecting practices within post-colonial contexts.

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<sup>2</sup> T. Smith, *New Bottles for New Wine: A Pericentric Framework for the Study of the Cold War*, in “Diplomatic History”, Fall 2000, vol. 24 no. 4.

### **“Those days, the heart of Beirut was beating very hard”: The Sursock Museum as an Artistic Hub of Elsewhere**

“Those days, the heart of Beirut was beating very hard.” So wrote the first curator of the Nicolas Sursock Museum, Camille Aboussouan, of the museum’s beginning in the 1960s, in a chapter titled “Birth and Glory of a Museum” in the reference tome of the museum.<sup>3</sup> That decade of “glory” saw nearly 40 exhibitions at the museum (as well as a couple abroad), making it the most productive in the history of the museum that century, hosting around 44% of its exhibitions (compared to 28% in the 1990s, 14% in the 1980s, and 3% in the 1970s), even if in the smallest architectural footprint the museum ever held. The 1960s also saw the most international exhibitions at the museum. Although Nicolas Sursock’s will stipulated for a museum for arts from “Lebanon, the other Arab countries or elsewhere”, more than half of those exhibitions covered the “elsewhere”.<sup>4</sup> More than a quarter (28%) then was of European art; another third was of other global exhibitions, the largest portion of which featured UNESCO reproductions of “masterpieces” (15%, the majority of which was of Western art), along with non-European art (10%, such as Japanese, Soviet Azerbaijan, Mexican and Eskimo art) as well as film- and photography-programming (8%, also mainly Western in scope). The UNESCO reproduction exhibitions were unique to that decade; and for that, the Aboussouan connection is undeniable. As he wrote in the aforementioned chapter, “As secretary general of the Lebanese National Commission for UNESCO, I had established numerous relationships within the international organization which would prove very useful in the future.” And the figure of Aboussouan is not only reflective of the leadership at the museum at the time, but also the post-colonial dynamics of power in recently independent Lebanon. In this presentation, I hope to examine what looking at these exhibitions, and their audiences, may reveal to us about the Sursock Museum, and Beirut, as an artistic hub in those days.

**Ashraf Osman** is a PhD candidate in Art History as part of the LAWHA project, with an international position between Università Cà Foscari (Venice) and the Orient-Institut (Beirut). His project investigates the history of the Sursock Museum in the second half of the twentieth century. He holds a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating from the Zurich University of the Arts (Switzerland) and a Master of Architecture from Syracuse University (New York). Ashraf has curated several scent art projects at international biennales and museums, and lectured on the cultural history of smell at universities in Europe. His diverse academic background also includes socially-engaged art, as well as the architectural and urbanistic memory of the Lebanese War.

### **“Vive l’expérimentation!” Looking at Beirut through its Art Exhibitions: Contact Art Gallery**

This presentation focuses on the exhibition activities of Beirut’s art galleries during the 1970s, with special attention to one particular exhibition at Contact Art Gallery in March 1972. Together with Gallery One, it was one of the leading galleries in Beirut in terms of vision and outreach and instrumental in making Beirut a centre for modernist trends in the Arab region. Although a commercial gallery, Contact Art Gallery had an aesthetic identity and a profile that were not primarily profit-oriented. Its aim was to expose the public to the latest developments in art, both from the region and abroad, and to connect artists with each other.

<sup>3</sup> Aboussouan, Camille. “Naissance et gloire d’un musée.” In *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre*. Sursock Museum, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Agémian, Sylvia. *Nicolas Sursock Museum*. Beirut, Lebanon: Chemaly & Chemaly, 1999.

Waddah Faris, co-director of the gallery, was particularly interested in expanding the definition of art in Lebanon by showing works that challenged conventional expectations. In March 1972, immediately after the inauguration of the gallery one month earlier, he organized an exhibition of works by the artist Farid Haddad entitled “Hearts & Monuments”. The exhibition of paintings and drawings challenged common ideas about art, artistic creation, and the image of the artist, posing questions rather than providing answers. At the same time, the exhibition represented a challenge for many in Beirut’s artistic community including art critics, as it left “safe territory”. It was an important exhibition in that it provided insight into the artist’s research process and could perhaps be considered an early example of a “work in progress” exhibition in Lebanon. The show also raised some controversy regarding the status of a work of art: When can it be considered a “finished work” and should the process be exhibited? Seeing the artistic and intellectual potential in Farid Haddad’s work, Waddah Faris with this exhibition wanted to set the tone for the gallery as an experimental space that invites debate about art. By pushing the boundaries of artistic reflection and expression it contributed to Beirut’s status as an artistic hub that was open to experimentation. It also shows that the development of artistic centres depends strongly on individuals and their visions and efforts, and their sense of the right moment to move things forward.

**Monique Bellan** is a researcher in the project *Lebanon’s Art World at Home and Abroad* (LAWHA) since 2021. Her research interests include the development of art galleries and art criticism in Lebanon. She holds a PhD in Arabic Studies from Freie Universität Berlin, an MA in Islamic Studies, Sociology and Political Science from the University of Bonn, and an MA in Library and Information Science from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. She previously worked as a research associate at the Orient-Institut Beirut (2013-2019).

## **EXHIBITION INSIGHTS**

***Présences Arabes: Art modernes et décolonisation. Paris 1908-1988.***

**Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris, 5 April-25 August 2024**

The exhibition explores a different history of modern art, illuminated by a wealth of historical audio and visual archive material. Organised chronologically, it begins in 1908, the year in which the Lebanese poet and artist Gibran Khalil Gibran arrived in Paris and the opening of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Cairo. It ends in 1988, with the first exhibition devoted to contemporary Arab artists at the Institut du Monde Arabe (officially opened a few months earlier) in Paris and with the exhibition *Singuliers: bruts ou naïfs*, featuring among others Moroccan artist Chaïbia Tallal and Tunisian artist Jaber Al-Mahjoub, at the Musée d’Art Moderne in Paris. The exhibition foregrounds over 130 rarely shown artists whose works make an essential contribution to the Arab avant-garde and the history of modern art in the 20th century. It also highlights the essential role played by Paris. Described as the “capital of the Third World” by the historian Michael Goebel, the city was seen from the 1920s onwards as a breeding ground for anti-colonial networks and the home of new cosmopolitan modernities. The exhibition is structured around the differing careers of artists who studied at local art schools before moving to Paris to continue their training. Throughout the twentieth century, Paris was a place where modernity was embraced, colonialism was

criticised and numerous encounters took place. The Musée d'Art Moderne itself played an important role in the post-war period through its exhibitions (Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Salon de la Jeune Peinture, Biennale des Jeunes Artistes de Paris, etc.) and the acquisitions it made from the 1960s onwards.

**Morad Montazami** is an art historian, publisher and curator. After working at the Tate Modern (London) between 2014 and 2019 as a curator for the Middle East and North Africa, he developed the editorial and curatorial platform Zamân Books & Curating, which explores and enhances Arab, African and Asian modernities. He has written numerous essays on artists such as Zineb Sedira, Walid Raad, Latif Al Ani, Faouzi Laataris, Michael Rakowitz, Mehdi Moutashar, and Behjat Sadr, and curated exhibitions including *Baghdad Mon Amour* (Institut des cultures d'Islam, Paris, 2018); *New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School* (The Mosaic Rooms, London & MACCAL, Marrakech & Alserkal Arts Foundation, Dubai, 2019-2020); *Douglas Abdell: Reconstructed Traphouse* (Cromwell Space, London, 2021); *Monaco-Alexandrie: Le Grand détour. Villes-mondes et surréalisme cosmopolite* (New National Museum of Monaco, 2021-2022), and *Présences Arabes: Art modernes et décolonisation. Paris 1908-1988* (Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, 2024). He is currently a fellow at the French Academy in Rome (Villa Medici).

### **PANEL 3: INSTITUTIONS AND NETWORKS OF CULTURAL HUBS**

#### **Pan-Arabism in Baghdad: Revisiting the Genesis of Regional Artistic Solidarity**

In 1974, Baghdad convened the first Biennale of Arab Art, a radical nomadic exhibitionary model envisioned to roam different cities in the Arab world. The idea was to celebrate the excellence of contemporary art from the region, and to create alternative venues for meeting and exchanging knowledge, displaying and disseminating artistic production, and empowering Arabs to defy and decentre Western dominance. This regional biennial was followed by even more ambitious initiatives, also led by Iraqis but targeting artists in the larger "Third World" to catalyse anti-imperial solidarity amongst the colonized. Coming out of research on the grassroots art-architectural movement that flourished in Baghdad during the mid-twentieth century, I argue here that pan-Arabism took hold within the visual arts only later, when the ideology was gradually adopted by specific Arab states and propagated by several non-governmental cultural organizations. I revisit existing literature about the ideology, and provide a pre-history of collective mobilization within the arts, which later culminated in the Biennale of Arab Art. Despite Iraq's indisputable regional leadership during the 1970s, owing to Ba'athist secular socialism, I demonstrate how pan-Arabism emerged incrementally from the mid 1960s onwards, in a diffused manner, promulgated by different regional actors, to then be appropriated and spearheaded by Iraqis. The paper challenges traditional assumptions about pan-Arabism being embraced in the cultural domain during the early decades of the twentieth century, and more importantly, about Iraq's 1970s projects being the last gasp of that ideology in the visual arts. Instead, at least in the context of Iraq, the ideology could have thrived, both officially and at a wider popular level, if the country's regional leadership did not come to a sudden end due to the Saddam Hussein government's belligerent foreign policy, and the devastating Iran-Iraq war.



**Amin Alsadén** is a curator, scholar, and educator whose work focuses on transnational solidarities and exchanges across cultural boundaries. His research explores the history and theory of modern and contemporary art and architecture globally, with specific expertise in the Arab-Muslim world and its diasporas. He is preparing a book, based on his doctoral dissertation completed at Harvard University, about the art-architectural liaisons that shaped the modernism of post-World War II Baghdad, Iraq.

### **Building a Cultural Hub in the Arab Region: The Role of Public Relations in Shaping Sharjah's Image**

The Emirates of Sharjah, one of the seven emirates in the United Arab Emirates, has emerged as a prominent cultural hub in the Arab region. Sharjah has strategically invested in the arts and culture sector, developing a comprehensive infrastructure that supports the creative industries. This has resulted in Sharjah being named by UNESCO as “Cultural Capital of the Arab World” in 1998, recognized by the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as the “Capital of Islamic Culture” for 2014, and named the “World Book Capital” for 2019. Using a nation branding framework, this paper explores the public relations strategies and tactics that Sharjah Media Bureau has employed to position the Emirate as a cultural hub. It examines how Sharjah has leveraged traditional and digital media to communicate its cultural offerings to local and international audiences. The paper also analyses the role of stakeholder engagement and cultural diplomacy in enhancing Sharjah's nation branding efforts. In particular, it looks at how Sharjah has collaborated with local and international stakeholders to promote the emirate's cultural heritage and artistic achievements. For example, the Sharjah Biennial, one of the largest contemporary art events in the region, has been a platform for showcasing the work of artists from around the world. The Sharjah Book Authority, established in 2014, has been instrumental in promoting literature and publishing in the region. Similarly, the Sharjah Art Foundation has been instrumental in nurturing local talent and promoting contemporary art through various programs and initiatives. Based on in-depth interviews, the paper will also examine the challenges that public relations practitioners faced in the process of promoting a cultural hub. These challenges include the need to engage with a diverse audience with different values and perspectives. In conclusion, this paper argues that Sharjah's success as a cultural hub in the Arab region is part of larger strategies of nation branding and a sound approach of cultural exchange and collaboration. By highlighting the case of Sharjah, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discussion on the roles of public relations in shaping a cultural hub's image and enhancing its global reputation.

**Samar Ben Romdhane** obtained her Master and doctoral degree in Public Communication from Université Laval (Québec, Canada). Currently, she holds a faculty position within the graduate program in public relations and corporate communication at Ajman University in the United Arab Emirates. Prior to this role, she delivered undergraduate lectures at Moncton University in New Brunswick. Her professional background includes experience in strategic communication as a Communication Advisor at the Department of National Defense. Her academic research interests revolve around the discursive and rhetorical dimensions of public relations, as well as global and intercultural communication, public diplomacy, and

nation branding. The outcomes of her research efforts have been shared through various academic outlets, comprising scholarly journals and book chapters.

### **Why Riyadh is a Centre for Culture in the Arab World**

Over the last decade, Riyadh has become a regional cultural hub, outshining other cities long viewed as centres of Arab civilization. That success reflects the city's creative class, which has produced world-class works in film, literature, music, television, and the visual arts. Among those who have contributed to the creative ecosystem are individuals fleeing turmoil elsewhere in the Arab World and Saudis from Abha, Jeddah and other communities in the Kingdom seeking to take advantage of the opportunities created by Vision 2030. Launched by MBS in 2016, the reform program has paved the way for the launch of the Ministry of Culture (MOC), the media company Mdlbeast, and other creative institutions that channel resources into cultural projects in Riyadh. Although raves and concerts headlined by foreign musicians are the most visible new investments in culture, other projects, including JAX, a creative district in Diriyah, have played a critical role in cementing Riyadh as a regional cultural hub. There, artists have opened studios and exhibition spaces in a former industrial district adjacent to the MOC and Mdlbeast. Yet the past remains visible in the new district: murals depicting historic Saudi singers adorn the offices of Mdlbeast, which are adjacent to a mosque—a reminder of Diriyah's conservative past as the first Saudi capital. This juxtaposition of past and present in JAX reflects an important element in Riyadh's success and Saudi culture generally. As I argue in *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture and Society in the Kingdom*, Saudi creatives explore, in imaginative ways, oppositional forces in the visual arts, music, and other artistic genres. These works have provided Saudis with ways to explore critical issues facing their lives and country while avoiding the types of questions that have destabilized other Arab societies and reinforced Riyadh's role as an Arab creative hub.

**Sean Foley** is a Professor of History at Middle Tennessee State University specializing in the history and politics of the Middle East. He has published widely, including *The Arab Gulf States: Beyond Oil and Islam* (2010) and *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom* (2019). The latter draws extensively on in-country research and interviews. The book was translated into Arabic and published by Saudi Arabia's Adab Press in 2022. Foley has lived in Saudi Arabia, frequently visits the country, has presented his work around the world, and has held Fulbright fellowships in Syria, Turkey, and Malaysia.

### **PANEL 5: QUESTIONING ARTISTIC HUBS**

#### **Crisis as Opportunity: Artistic Negotiations of Queer Rights in Beirut's Protest Movement of 2019**

Despite a volatile social and political situation, Beirut is frequently framed as the most important artistic centre or "hub" of the Arab region. Artists, curators and cultural organizers have been apt at working around obstacles and attract international visitors, who have been drawn to the city's art scene due to its ability to combine negotiations of local issues with global contemporary visual practices. Currently the city is experiencing a crisis of hitherto unknown dimensions. An economic crisis has resulted in soaring inflation and, together with

unresolved social and political grievances, led protestors to take to the streets in autumn 2019 to demand political change and an affirmation of civic rights. Numerous young artists and cultural producers were active in the protests, adding their creative output to the slogans of activists. As something new, Beirut's queer community developed into a strong voice in its efforts to call for LGBTQ+ rights alongside the other demands of the revolutionary movement. This was fuelled and accompanied by artistic projects that sought to strengthen the visibility of this marginalized social group, while underlining its historical existence in the country. This paper discusses a number of artistic projects, such as Omar Sfeir's *Marchand de rêves* (2018/19) and Mohamad Abdouni's *Treat Me Like Your Mother* (2019), and how a changing artistic infrastructure caused by the multiple crises of the past years have helped creating venues for their presentation, while still necessitating diverse strategies to ensure the safety of the protagonists. It opens up the question whether a new understanding of Beirut's centrality for contemporary artistic production may arise out of a crisis. Can we see Beirut as a hub for queer art production, despite the fact that non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality is still frowned upon by large parts of Lebanese society?

**Charlotte Bank** is an art historian and curator. Currently, she is postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Art and Society, University of Kassel. She holds a PhD in Arabic Culture and Language from the University of Geneva and has held academic positions and fellowships at the Universities of Bamberg and Geneva, the Orient Institute Beirut and the Museum of Islamic Art Berlin. Her monograph, titled *The Contemporary Art Scene in Syria: Social Critique and an Artistic Movement* was published in 2020 by Routledge.

### **Berlin: Capital of Arab artists in exile? Thinking about mobility and otherness through the experiences of Egyptian artists**

Since 2019, several journalistic articles have put forward the idea that Berlin has become the new Arab intellectual capital, or the capital of Arab culture in exile. The use of the singular in these labels tend to frame a form of exceptionalism to the city of Berlin, masking more complex and nuanced realities for those who have (re)settled here. In this presentation, I propose to analyse what is at stake for artists and intellectuals who have settled in Berlin in recent years? How have the city, the urban and socio-political context impacted the reconfiguration of artistic practices of artists from the SWANA region who have recently (re)settled in Berlin? Taking as starting point my doctoral research that focuses on the reconfigurations of artistic practice and political engagement of Egyptian artists living in Berlin, this presentation examines how *exiled* artists negotiate their *installation* in this new place; and how artistic practices have become a medium for discussing and exploring their relationship to this space. This presentation will be based on the analysis of two films, together with discussion on the life trajectories of their directors: *Bandido* by Mohamed El Hadidi and *Bashtalak Saat – Shall I compare you to a Summer?* by Mohamed Shawky Hassan. Based on this empirical material, the presentation will demonstrate how experiences of mobility and otherness affect subjectivation, and the strategies used by artists to (re)position themselves in the Berlin art scene. I will first question the idea that Berlin is a city of refuge, and secondly, analyse how the work of Arab artists is not only influenced by the Berlin context, but also contributing to question the art worlds it is embedded in.

**Ophélie Mercier** is a PhD Student in Anthropology at Ghent University and affiliated with the Centre Marc Bloch in Berlin (where she is based). She graduated from Sciences Po Rennes and SOAS. Her first research explored theatre as a form of resistance in Palestine, focusing on the Freedom Theatre. She worked in Cairo from 2013-16 as a street clown performer with the collective Outa Hamra. In her thesis, she is exploring the life trajectories of Egyptian artists who (re)settled in Europe in recent years, focusing on the reconfigurations of their artistic practices and looking at the transnational dynamics of the production and distribution of their art works.

## **KEYNOTE 2**

### **Rootlessness, Exile, and Anxiety: Reflections on Berlin**

Berlin was heralded to be the exile capital of the post-Arab Spring milieu. The Arab intellectual and artistic community in Berlin was on the path to acquiring a name, shape, and a potential mandate. There were even discussions to build a school of thought, political philosophy, or even an ideational movement – all cross-fertilized through a deeper engagement with the Arab world. Then Gaza changed the equation and threw Arab thinkers and artists into disarray as they now navigate difficult terrain in a changed Berlin in which their viewpoints and works are treated with suspicion. In this lecture, Amro Ali will discuss the changes underway in Arab Berlin and the lessons that can be drawn from it.

**Amro Ali** is an Egyptian-Australian sociologist and writer who resides between Cairo, Alexandria, Casablanca, and Berlin. Ali focuses on the Arab World, Mediterranean studies, intellectual history, cities, citizenship, exile, technological modernity, and political philosophy. His current book project examines the emergence of Arab intellectual spaces in Berlin, as well as an anthology of his fictional short stories. Ali received his PhD in political sociology and political philosophy from the University of Sydney. His doctoral dissertation employed the works of Hannah Arendt and Vaclav Havel to understand the changes in Alexandria after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011. He also does stand-up comedy and poetry. His writings can be found at [amroali.com](http://amroali.com).

## **ROUNDTABLE**

**Lamia Joreige** is a visual artist and filmmaker who lives and works in Beirut. She earned her BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied painting and film-making. She uses archival documents and elements of fiction to reflect on history and its possible narration, and on the relationship between individual stories and collective memory. Her practice, rooted in her country's experience, explores the possibilities of representing the Lebanese wars and their aftermath, particularly in Beirut, a city at the center of her imagery. Her work is essentially on time, the recordings of its trace, and its effects on us. Lamia Joreige's artworks, which include drawings, paintings, sculptures as well as large scale multimedia installations, were presented at various international exhibitions and venues, including: MAXXI, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Venice Biennale (Lebanese pavilion 2007) in Italy; Centre Pompidou, le 104, and Musée Nicéphore Niépce in France; Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute and Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, the International Center of Photography, the New Museum, the San Francisco Museum of

Modern Art and Taymour Grahne Gallery in the USA; Istanbul Biennial, and Arter in Turkey; Liverpool Biennial, Tate Modern, Serpentine Gallery and Cardiff National Museum in the U.K.; Sharjah Biennial in the UAE, Mathaf museum in Qatar and Marfa gallery in Lebanon. She has written, directed and produced various short essay films, among which: *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* (2003), *A Journey* (2006) and *Nights and Days* (2007), *the River* (2013) and one feature narrative: *And the Living is easy* (2014), which were presented in many festivals and venues. Her first monograph, *Lamia Joreige: Works 1994-2017*, was published by Kaph Books in 2018. "Records for Uncertain Times" published by Taymour Grahne Gallery in 2015. She is the author of "Under-Writing Beirut —Mathaf" (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2013); "Time and the Other" (Alarm Editions, 2004) and "Ici et peut-être ailleurs" (HKW, 2003). She has contributed writings and visual essays to various art periodicals such as *TDR* (MIT press Journal), *Kamel Lazaar Foundation Projects*, *Apexart*, *Afterall* online magazine, *Sarai Reader 7*, *Art Journal*, *Art Forum*, and *Camera Austria*. She is the recipient of a fellowship from Columbia University *Institute for Ideas and imagination* in Paris (2021) and a fellowship from the *Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study* at Harvard University (2016–2017). She is a co-founder and board member of Beirut Art Center, which she co-directed from 2009 to 2014.

**Gregory Buchakjian** is an interdisciplinary artist and art historian, Associate Professor and Director of the School of Visual Arts at Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts – Alba – University of Balamand. His practice is based on archive, archaeology and narration. His PhD dissertation generated the book *Abandoned Dwellings, A History of Beirut* and the exhibitions *Abandoned Dwellings, Display of Systems* (Beirut, Sursock Museum, 2018) and *Abandoned Dwellings of Beirut* (Brussels, Villa Empain, 2019). In 2018, he contributed to the first pavilion of Lebanon at the Venice Architecture Biennale. In 2021, he created with Valérie Cachard the video *Agenda 1979*. In 2022, he conceived the historical section of *Beirut. The Eras of Design*, curated by Marco Costantini at the mudac, museum of Contemporary Design and Applied Arts, Lausanne. He also premiered *Record of an Ordinary Life* at Fotofocus Cincinnati Biennial and executed *HN51 [48 Circles]*, a site-specific earthwork in the temple of Hosn Niha. Buchakjian attributed two paintings to Artemisia Gentileschi, *Penitent Magdalene* and *Hercules and Omphale*. He created an installation based on the latter and participated to the monograph *Artemisia Gentileschi | Collezione Rinascimento Sublime* published in 2024 by Scripta Maneant.