The Production of Cultural Knowledge in the Middle East Today

Anthony Downey

'Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past.'
James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 1922

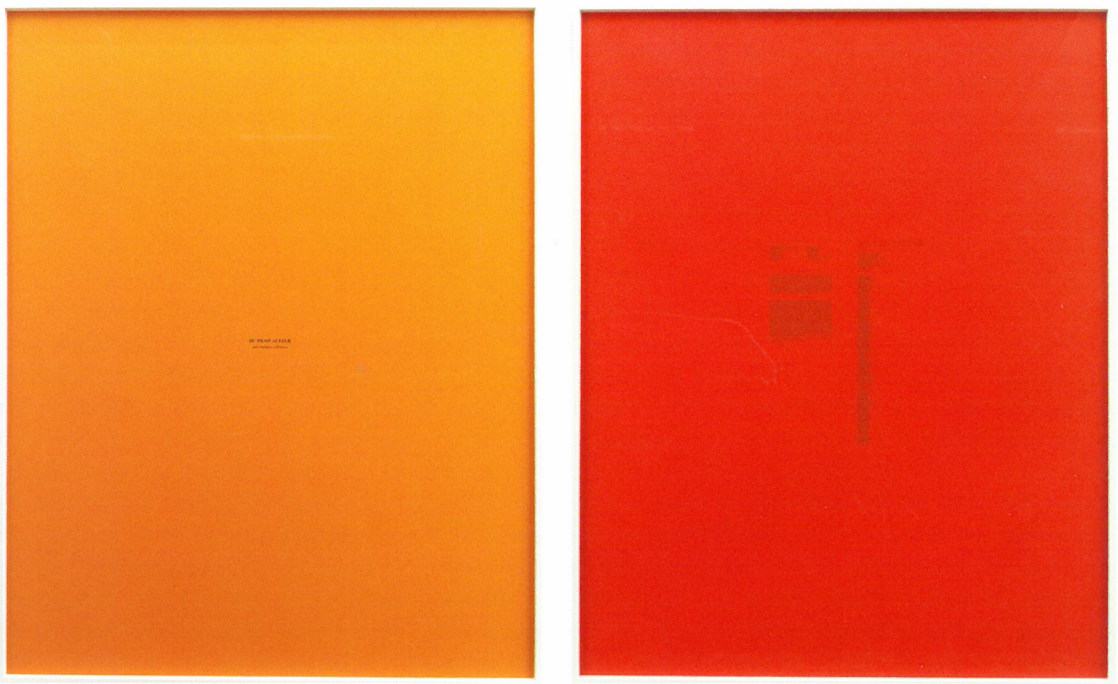
In 1992, the Lebanese artist Walid Raad initiated an extended project with the avowed aim of engaging with the history of art in the Arab world. The work, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World, Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter_1 (Beirut: 1992–2005)*, examined what contemporary artists, writers and thinkers were doing in the region during this period and beyond. It explored the production of cultural knowledge in the region and the institutional contexts within which ideas, visual or otherwise, were being produced and disseminated. Who was producing what, where and when; what were the factors that affect the production of culture in the region; who, if anyone, was supporting these practices; and how, crucially, do we access such information – these were among the many questions raised by Raad's work. Needless to say, an enquiry like this comes with its own inherent difficulties of interpretation and reception. To suggest that any overview of cultural knowledge and practices in the Middle East is transparent, easily accessible, unbiased or somehow objective in its substance, would be foolhardy at best and, at worst, naive. Knowledge, cultural or otherwise, has an institutional context that places it at the heart of competing and often conflicting impulses of power, support and patronage. Which leaves us with a perhaps more immediate set of questions: what forms do present-day institutional contexts take in the Middle East and can they provide sustainable structures for the production, dissemination and reception of culture in the region?

The concept of cultural knowledge, which is effectively the sum of ideas that emanate out of the production and analysis of visual culture, might seem a tad abstract to begin with. And the question of sustainability could be of course levelled at institutions worldwide. However, in a time of unprecedented interest in the cultural output of the Middle East, the issue of what forms of knowledge are being generated, by whom, and to what end, has become a major concern. What, that is to enquire, are the effects of the unparalleled rise in museums, galleries, art fairs, forums, art schools, journals, foundations, magazines, databases, websites, collectors, and festivals – across cities as diverse as Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Cairo, Beirut, Doha, Tunis, Ramallah, Cairo, Tehran, Istanbul, and Amman – on cultural production? Although the answer to such a question is beyond any one essay, in what follows I want to suggest that the unrivalled development of institutional and administrative structures cannot but have an effect on the production, circulation and reception of art. To fully understand the ramifications of such a process we must consider, to recall Raad's original enquiry, what exactly artists, in the first instance, and thereafter institutions, have been thinking and doing during the last decade. We start here from the production, as opposed to the management, of visual art and ask what it has to say about the long-term, sustainable needs and priorities of culture. In this context, I would argue that art needs to be understood not only as a process of producing or exchanging objects – a system that sits neatly with neo-liberal, capitalist philosophies of accumulation and the ensuing circulation of capital – but also as a practice that produces something both immaterial and far less tangible: cultural knowledge.[1] Secondly, and with reference to the general enquiry being developed here, we need to ask what present-day institutions are doing to support art as a practice – in all its contemporary formal methods and ideas – and how they are negotiating the challenges presented by newer forms of emerging art practices and the climate in which art is produced.

The future of the past in contemporary art

There is a curious subsection in Walid Raad's *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow*, a discrete project that brings together the names of artists who have worked in Lebanon in the past century. Printed on white vinyl cut-out letters and placed on a white wall in a single 22-metre line, *Index XXVI_Artists* is not only a collation of artists' names but also an enquiry into how cultural knowledge is produced. The visual effect of white on white, nowhere more marked than when placed in the white space of a gallery or museum, makes the names difficult to read – and this is a key component in the work: how, we are prompted to ask, do we read these names and make sense of their history and legacy in the present? For Raad, somewhat cryptically, a number of the names are misspelled and were sent to him from the future. One name in particular, Johnny Tahan's, not only reached him in a distorted spelling but became the subject of contentious debate when an irate critic who, coming across the solecism in Raad's work, corrected the name in red pen. Raad writes: 'I spent the last seven years researching the misspelled artist's life and works, after which I concluded that future artists intentionally distorted Tahan's name.'[2] This may appear fanciful to some, but Raad's intervention brings into sharp focus not only the nodal points around which cultural knowledge is produced but the institutional contexts in which it is stored, reviewed and disseminated. Artist, institution, critic and viewer are all implicated here in the production of cultural knowledge, and that knowledge is often distorted by precisely such relationships.[3]

Although this is not necessarily the place to digress into the role of censorship in the Middle East today, a far-reaching topic deserving of a more extended engagement, the presence of a red pen here and its associations with censoriousness alludes to the fact that all knowledge is refracted through the prism of political bias, historical necessity, social mores, religious and moral concerns, and theoretical diktat. Knowledge, be it in the form of names, movements, treatises, manifestos, criticism, and so on, is at the nexus of a contested order whereby power produces and distorts the very form knowledge can assume. We may take such ideas for granted – *power produces knowledge* – but we seldom, dare I say, exhaust the ramifications behind such a suggestion: what, for one, is the impact of an institution or form of patronage – or, indeed, programme of censorship – upon the culture being produced in any given region? How, in sum, do these 'powers' inflect and produce cultural knowledge? We could add to this a series of supplemental questions that would enquire into what forms of culture are institutionally supported: is it material forms (the practicalities of producing an object) or more discursive practices that explore the potential implicit in educational workshops, seminars, debates, residencies and so on? What, moreover, is the relationship of cultural institutions to civil society, including community organizations, academia, foundations, and organizations in the voluntary and non-profit sector? And what, finally, is the future of the art institution – both public and private – as a sustainable model for the production of cultural knowledge in the context of the Middle East?



Walid Raad
Scratching on Things I Could Disavow:
A History of Art in the Arab World:
Part I_Volume 1_Chapter I:
Beirut (1992-2005):

(clockwise from top left)
Appendix XVIII: Plate 90 _ Untitled and/or A History of an Exhibition,

Appendix XVIII: Plate 91 _ Untitled and/or A History of a Dissertation,

Appendix XVIII: Plate 92 _ Untitled and/or A History of a Monograph,

Appendix XVIII: Plate 102_ Untitled and/or A History of an Edition,

Appendix XVIII: Plate_135_ Untitled and/or A History of a Sponsor,

2008

Collected under the impressively exact and yet nonetheless vague title *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World, Part 1_Volume 1_Chapter_1 (Beirut: 1992-2005)*, Raad's project offers a quasi-poetic and yet decidedly bureaucratic framework for exploring the very form and meaning art takes after its apparent completion. One of the key events underwriting the evolution of this work was the artist's encounter with a mock-up of a show he had agreed to put on at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Beirut. 'When I went to the gallery', the artist writes, 'I was surprised to find that all my artworks had shrunk.' This enigmatic comment belies a real event whereby the artist, confronted with a model of the gallery with his work neatly shrunk to fit in it, experienced not only a Brobdingnagian uncanniness of scale but also an archival conundrum: what do institutions do to art after the moment of its production? In posing this question, Raad has effectively set up a meta-system of knowledge, an overarching archive of material that engages and explores systems of historicization and how art is discursively produced and by what institutional means we will come to understand it in the future. Again, the questions raised here return us to what institutional forms can be adopted and adapted to contain such knowledge – be it from the past, present or, indeed, future – and its nuances of interpretation. The production of knowledge, even in the form of a partial snapshot or condensed cross-section, would appear to be rife with institutional distortions and interpretive cul-de-sacs. That, furthermore, would seem to be precisely the point: the production of cultural knowledge must have an institutional context and that institutional context will inevitably refract as much as reflect any production of knowledge. And central to this, I would propose, is a demand that we engage with cultural knowledge and the forms it takes in the past and in the present and, perhaps more cryptically, the future. Which returns us, by way of a discussion of art as a practice in the first instance, to the original question: how do institutions today affect the production of cultural knowledge and what can they teach us about its sustainable production?

The promise of the future: institutional contexts and the production of knowledge

On the face of it, the latter question might appear relatively straightforward. However, in order to fully address it we must observe, albeit in passing, the burgeoning and unprecedented growth of institutions in the Gulf region over the last few years. The quality of engagement in these enquiries to date, and despite the critical need for a broad discussion, has become increasingly reductive, with criticism mostly focused on the way in which culture has been incrementally co-opted into city-wide or regional forms of development. It is of course arguable that this is precisely what is happening and we need only to note here how the website for the Saadiyat Island project, the so-called 'Island of Happiness', carries the tag-line 'One Island, Many Masterpieces'.[4] This phrase would seem to confirm that culture and the knowledge it produces – the reciprocal relationship between financial and cultural 'capital' – is being presented as both a pretext for and legitimizing agent in the development, if not monetary enrichment and economic diversification, of Abu Dhabi.[5] To suggest as much, however, is to not only unquestioningly repeat something of a current cliché but also deflect discussions of the long-term ramifications of

The Production of Cultural Knowledge in the Middle East Today

Anthony Downey

projects in the Gulf. Although the development of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi have attracted most attention to date, it should be noted that, when completed, the 27 square kilometres of Saadiyat Island will also house a performing arts centre (designed by Zaha Hadid), the Abu Dhabi campus of the New York University and the Sheikh Zayed National Museum, not to mention a Tadao Ando-designed maritime museum. When the entire project is finished there will be schools, colleges, universities, magazines, foundations, collections, libraries and the entire economic and social structure that comes with such an infrastructure. In this context, support for the arts in Gulf States will not only influence the level of access to and circulation of culture within the region, it will also determine the very models of development and perhaps the ideas that will preoccupy cultural production and knowledge for the foreseeable future.

At the time of writing, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi are set to open in 2012 and 2014 respectively, and no detailed information has been forthcoming on either their programmes or, indeed, their templates for the sustainable support of visual culture beyond the fact that, in the case of the latter project, Abu Dhabi's Tourism, Development and Investment Company (TDIC) will own the building and the Guggenheim will establish and manage its own programme.[6] In the absence of substantive information, we may wish to enquire into how we could possibly garner a degree of critical purchase on the effects of emerging regional institutions without recourse to abstract models of what might happen in the next decade? In formulating a response to this I will examine a number of already existing institutional contexts and outline how they offer potential models of sustainable engagement and development in the field of cultural production and knowledge. This is to ask not only what artists and institutions know but what they can impart to the more recent developments we have seen in the region.

Opening exhibition and launch of Ashkal Alwan's new space for contemporary art, 'Home Works 5' forum
Courtesy of Ashkal Alwan

Inaugurated in 1998, the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo is an independent art space with a broad remit that includes film, music and theatre. Its activities are underpinned by a far-reaching programme that is further complemented by workshops, seminars and classroom-based talks and lectures. In June 2010, a lecture colloquium was held in their library and an extensive series of films was screened alongside artists' talks and workshops. Bearing in mind the variety of events, there is obviously a need here for close or hands-on programming and, secondly, much of this programming (in keeping with institutions worldwide) is primarily exhibition-led. Although I chose a relatively arbitrary example of Townhouse's programming, their show at the time of writing was 'Invisible Publics', a group show that, pertinent to my discussion above, sought to explore the modes of exchange and relations that converge on the exhibition space as a locus for the production of cultural knowledge. To quote the press release, 'Invisible Publics' was an attempt to explore mediality or, 'the process of making an audience, or invisible public, visible'.[7]

What precisely does this mean in the context of my discussion? First, there is a concern here with the discursiveness of art as a practice and its ability to ask questions about the nature of viewing, interpretation, spectatorship, knowledge, collectivity and institutional paradigms – the ability, that is, to reflect upon processes of thought as opposed to material product. However, and putting to one side the merits of the show or otherwise, it is in the implicit questioning of an audience that we perhaps find a more profound enquiry: what is the audience for contemporary art in, for example, present-day Cairo or, for that matter, Abu Dhabi? Likewise, and apart from an exhibition platform, how do you develop audiences in other contexts, be they screenings, workshops, lectures, talks, performances and, broadly speaking, educational programmes? This may appear obvious but we repeatedly return to singular issues here that need explication: who and where are the audiences for contemporary art in the Middle East today and how are they to be developed in a climate that sees artistic production, on a global level, increasingly driven by forms of spectacle? To highlight such issues is to further observe the extent to which art as a practice has developed and is not simply a question of passively viewing objects in the rarefied setting of a gallery or museum.

While art as a practice is undoubtedly changing, the issue here is whether institutions are changing with it or, indeed, whether they are ready to engage in the more contentious elements expressed therein. Aesthetic practices have shifted from being primarily object-based (sculpture and painting) to increasingly context-based practices (installation, video art, time-based media, and performance). Today, these practices are also more readily engaged in forms of research-led processes, social intervention, collaboration and participation. Of course, object-based practices – such as sculpture and painting, for example – continue to have a significant place in this dialogue, but there are broader issues being addressed here and they implicate the discursive field of art: the education, reception, constitution, and sustainable development of audiences in the context of civil society has become, in sum, a key focus of contemporary art practice. Institutions need to take this into account and adapt to (rather than simply adopt) such practices.

Front of the Townhouse shop. The shop features publications, periodicals, artworks produced in the gallery's outreach programmes, and arts and craft produced through local NGOs

It is interesting to note in this context that the Townhouse Gallery presents a network model of engagement with a substantial degree of decentralization. Although the exhibition-led platform is crucial to its day-to-day running, in the past the Gallery has been involved with Photo Cairo, whose most recent incarnation in 2005 showcased international artists such as Ursula Biemann, Christoph Büchel, Emily Jacir, Jean-Luc Moulène and Akram Zaatari. Outreach programmes organized by the Gallery offer workshops in animation and other forms of art practice to thirty or so child labourers; that is, children who would not ordinarily have access to such facilities or outlets. Townhouse also holds the SAWA workshop, which aims to bring together marginalized groups (refugees, for example) with working children and pupils from private schools in Zamalek. Again, we encounter here a socio-political element to art as a practice and its institutions – aesthetics in a social and civil context – that is often overlooked by larger institutions in favour of blockbuster shows and the de-contextualized spectacle of art as object.

The successful and sustainable development of contemporary visual culture in the Middle East and Gulf States needs active audiences who can engage with these developments rather than being merely visitors to a museum – the latter term suggesting a one-off engagement that remains relatively superficial. This brings me to 'Home Works', a bi-annual event launched by Ashkal Alwan in 2002 with the expressed ambition of providing a forum to explore precisely these concerns. Writing of the aims of 'Home Works', Christine Tohme, the director of Ashkal Alwan since its inception in 1994, observed that what was needed then and now was the 'creation of an active and serious debate, based on the close relations between the fields of research or the identification required in determining the questions which need to be asked'.[8] Again, the forum, like much of the art discussed in it, was interrogative in its engagement with issues and audiences alike, asking questions about institutional contexts and the production of cultural knowledge in the Middle East during times of conflict and, more recently, the unprecedented level of interest in the output of the region. On a formal level, 'Home Works', which had its most recent incarnation in 2010, deploys a series of formats for its events, ranging from lectures (from artists and theorists such as Jananne Al-Ani, Catherine David, Akram Zaatari, Jacques Rancière, and Jalal Toufic), to performances (by Rabih Mroué, the Otolith Group and Tony Chakar), to film programmes and exhibitions. In short, there is a degree of discursiveness to 'Home Works' as a project that reflects not only the heterogeneity of practices in the Middle East but the sense of visual culture as formally diverse. The questions – and no doubt the potential answers – have changed over the period of time that Ashkal Alwan and 'Home Works' have been evolving. The financial omnipotence of the Gulf States has also had an effect upon how cities such as Cairo and Beirut see themselves. But the question of how the development of culture, to paraphrase Tohme, is integrated into the development of a collective will and civil society remains the same.[9] The topic of civil society, that component of the social order that includes voluntary civic and social organizations that are independent of state-led and commercial institutions, including cultural groups, has been one of the less addressed issues facing developments in the Middle East and Gulf regions. What role will culture play in the formulation of civil society, not to mention the sphere of the political, in countries where dissent can result in imprisonment or worse? What place do cultural organizations have in the Middle East, we need to equally ask, if it is not to express and give form to the concerns and visions of its immediate environment, in the first instance, and the place of that environment in a broader social, political and historical structure? This is to explore the implicit potential of institutions to become part of the civic, if not socio-political, imaginary for future generations – a horizon upon which the cultural order is firmly intertwined within and coextensively informing social and political debate. If this is indeed the issue in hand, and I am suggesting here that it is, we may want to ask whether the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, to take but two examples, consider these issues as part of their localized remit to provide a sustainable environment for culture.

A central component in these debates about civil society and the impact of culture upon social and political realms is concerned with the role of education in the Middle East and Gulf region. A series of panels for the most recent 'Home Works' set out to actively probe questions around pedagogy and institutional forms of knowledge. 'In and Out of Education ... What Can We Teach Nowadays?' brought together speakers such as Okwui Enwezor, CAMP (Alessandro Petti and Sandi Hilal), and Walid Sadek to discuss how education has been incorporated not only into institutions but into art and curatorial practices too. In the programme notes the organizers posed the question of 'how to develop an experiential approach to arts education, which not only offers a challenging and creative space within society but also responds to the city's [Beirut's] urgent questions and uses its wider context as its main curriculum'.[10] We return here to the development of civic social structures, academia in particular, and it is therefore all the more timely that the establishment of a school for curatorial studies in Beirut has been recently announced. The school, which has yet to be named, has been a long time in planning and its intended aim is to give scholarships to approximately twenty students from the region and provide an 'incubator' for thought there. The curatorial programme will also provide a public space for contemporary art in the city that will bring together postgraduate students and, in the form of studio spaces that can be leased from the school, the local artistic population. Like the 'Home Works' project and Ashkal Alwan's overall remit, the city of Beirut will be the locus – in the form of a broad campus – and the initial research topic. In a move that brings us full circle, it is envisaged that the 'Home Works' programme will be eventually incorporated within the school curriculum. If, to return to the discussion above, we consider how art as a practice is increasingly research-led, collaborative, multi-disciplinary and formally discursive, then how (if at all) can an institution adapt to that practice without merely adopting a pose of 'outreach' programmes and the occasional lecture? These are the questions that Ashkal Alwan raises, and without these forms of self-reflexive enquiry into institutional, social, cultural and civic contexts we remain tied to an insular discussion that takes the management of culture as a starting point without involving itself with the localized, or indeed broader, condition of culture as an element in the emergence of civic

The Production of Cultural Knowledge in the Middle East Today

Anthony Downey

social orders and debates concerning, for example, human rights, censorship, sexuality, gender, religion, and politics – all being controversial topics in parts of the Middle East today.

As one of the most contested sites of cultural production, not to mention political discourse, Palestine continues to attract discussion. These debates demand more space than time allows; however, it is worth noting how institutions such as the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP) in Ramallah is firmly enmeshed in Palestine and its day-to-day reality, with an avowed aim to 'maintain collective memory, history and identity through its education programmes and activities'.[11] The IAAP focuses attention on the manner in which the history of occupation in Palestine has resulted in the relative absence of art schools, academies and funding in the country. 'Due to these factors', their remit continues, 'there is a general lack of understanding of the important role that art can play in Palestinian society. Art is a powerful intervention tool that raises awareness, and develops new knowledge on social and cultural issues.'[12] We engage, here, in an all too immediate manner, with the perennial issue of the discursive role of culture in a civil society and, in a broader context, the production of cultural knowledge.

A similar emphasis on production and development, in the specific form of archiving, can be found in the Arab Image Foundation (AIF). Based in Beirut, the AIF is a non-profit organization, established in 1997. Its mission, according to its director Zeina Arida, is to preserve photography from the region. This, of course, involves a form of archaeology and excavation that seeks to map the production of cultural forms in the region as a whole.[13] Current and ongoing projects include a show based on the archive of the chameleon-like photographer Van Leo, an artist whose work not only predates but prefigures many of the discourses on identity and masquerade that were common in the 1980s and '90s. Another ongoing project, initiated by Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh and Simon Lourié in 2001, explores the relationship of photographic representation and visual memory – through forms of 'participatory photography' – in Burj Al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp in south-east Lebanon. Yet another extended project looks at Hashem El-Madani, a commercial studio photographer from Saida who photographed many of the city's inhabitants and places of work. In 2007, under the curatorship of Akram Zaatari, forty-one of these photographs were placed in thirty-three locations in the old city. Visitors to the city could thereafter follow an itinerary prescribed by these photographs and their locations. Again, there is an explicit engagement with knowledge here in a civic and socio-historical setting.

The question of knowledge and archiving has been central to the development of Platform Garanti, an Istanbul-based art centre that promotes itself as a catalyst for knowledge production, research and practice throughout the region. Since a new initiative began in 2006, Garanti Bank's art and culture projects have been united under the umbrella of Garanti Kultur A.S. This new, landmark institution, which consolidates the former cultural initiatives by the Bank, Platform Garanti, Garanti Gallery and the Ottoman Bank Museum and Archives into a new entity, oversees a residency programme that runs in conjunction with both an exhibition space and a comprehensive archive that covers over 140 artists from Turkey. The archive also includes video installation pieces and exhibition archives. Inaugurated in 2001, Platform Garanti also offers an interesting model of institutional support, drawing on sponsorship from, inter alia, Garanti Bank, national and regional funding bodies including those of Holland, Norway, Sweden and France, and grants from the American Center Foundation and the Open Society Institute.[14] This extensive level of patronage for the arts has been no doubt helped by the success of the Istanbul Biennial, which has been running under the auspices of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts since 1987 and has had no less that ten incarnations during that time. Originally organized by Beral Madra (in 1987 and 1989), the Biennial has since attracted curators such as René Block (1995), Yuko Hasegawa (2001), Charles Esche and Vasif Kortun (joint curators in 2005 with the latter being the current director of Platform Garanti), Hou Hanru (2007) and, under the exhibition title 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?' the Zagreb-based foundation What, How and for Whom, who curated the last Biennial in 2009.

The 12th International Istanbul Biennial in 2011 will be curated by Adriano Pedrosa and Jens Hoffmann and goes some way to highlighting the importance of biennials in the broader institutional context of the Middle East. We could likewise mention here the newer but equally established Sharjah Biennial which, since its inception in 1993, has done much to foster links between the Gulf region and broader cultural mandates, with the avowed aim of the organizers of the 6th Biennial in 2003 to introduce what they termed a 'new era for contemporary art in the Gulf'. In 2007, the Sharjah Biennial, under the directorship of Jack Persekian, hosted 'Still Life: Art, Ecology, and the Politics of Change', which looked at climate change; and in 2009 an equally ambitious biennial, curated by Isabel Carlos under the collective title 'Provisions for the Future', was the centrepiece show. Alongside the main exhibition, and recalling our earlier discussion of the future of the past, Tarek Abou El-Fetouh staged a film and performance series under the title 'Past of the Coming Days', which included work by, among others, Walid Raad.
In both of these shows, there was a discernible concern that chimes with our overall discussion here: the status of knowledge, the means of its production and dissemination and, in respect of history, a concern with institutional sustainability.

I am conscious here that grouping cities as diverse as Beirut and Istanbul within the context of one category – the Middle East – offers a more than capacious reading of the region. Nevertheless, if we were to examine knowledge production in the context of, say, Arab contemporary art, we would include art from twenty-two countries in the region but exclude the two other major non-Arab Muslim states, namely Iran and Turkey. While my list may seem far too commodious, my intention here is to engage institutions that produce knowledge and address the inherent problems of such processes.[15] More specifically, what do they have to say to the institutions that are currently emerging? Any discussion of the region must therefore mention the profound impact that Iran has had locally and internationally when it comes to cultural production within and beyond the region. Although support for the arts within Iran is limited, this has not stopped Iranian artists from contributing to the debates, both local and global, that have informed international discussions of contemporary art. One of the more interesting elements at work here has been the force

and influence of the Iranian Diaspora. Largely a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Iranian Diaspora is a significant factor when we consider notions of tradition, modernity and cultural authenticity in artists as diverse as Siah Armajani, Monir Farmanfarmaian, Shirin Neshat, Shirazeh Houshiary, Mitra Tabrizian, Farkhondeh Shahroudi, Y. Z. Kami, Mehdi Farhadian, Shahriar Ahmadi and Nicky Nodjoumi. In doing so, we reach a crucial stage within which to understand what is happening in contemporary Iranian art and how it produces cultural knowledge: it is a globalized practice with sites of production and reception that stretch from Tehran to Toronto, Shiraz to Sydney, Qazvin to Queens, and Esfahan to the East End of London. Globalization and the spread of an Iranian Diaspora tends to hyphenate forms of self-identification and cultural authenticity – precisely the contested ideals that still inform a significant part of political rhetoric in Iran today. Similarly, any understanding of institutional contexts in the region and the production of cultural knowledge must engage with the diasporic, de-territorialized contexts that inform visual culture and aesthetic practice. The Middle East may be geographically identifiable, an assumption that is nevertheless regularly put to the test, but on an imaginative level it is far less localized.

In supporting art practices that fall outside of traditional object-making processes, practices that involve forms of video installation, film, performance, intervention, participation and collaboration, alongside the discursive elements that support the dissemination of information (such as educational programmes, symposia, round-table, international collaborations and lectures), patronage in the Middle East could promote and provide a base for aesthetic practices that broaden the horizons of the socio-political imaginary and firmly imbricate the aesthetic within a civic dimension. It is in venues and projects such as those developed by Townhouse, Ashkal Alwan, Platform Garanti, IAAP, 'Home Works', the AIF, to name but a few, that we see precisely such a level of engagement and potential sustainability. The questions that will continue to be of concern relate to the extent to which future institutional contexts will develop new cultural models and alternative cultural spaces for the expressions of culture – or, will they merely content themselves with managing (and in some cases censoring) culture to avoid precisely such a scenario? We may likewise want to ask what effect such practices, if supported, might have on the immediate political, cultural and indeed civic context of, say, Abu Dhabi. The encouragement of cultural debate – art has always been a contentious issue – will no doubt give rise to political debate, which will in turn present governments and rulers with a conundrum of sorts: do they encourage or indeed stymie such developments? And, finally, will institutions support the aesthetic practices that we see *in situ* throughout the region and beyond and in turn support an autonomous, creative and independent-minded arts sector?

It is possible that artists and certain institutions know the following: for a social, cultural and civic imaginary to emerge, a space wherein which people can voice alternative views to those of the mainstream, there is a consistent need for sustainable support systems and informed levels of patronage. The past is not so much a foreign place in this context, nor is the present merely positioned in chronological anticipation of the future;

Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh
Negotiation
Public display in
Al-Husn camp
Irbid, Jordan, 2009
© Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh
Courtesy of the Arab Image Foundation

rather, they all exist in a continuum, a moment within which all possibilities lay awaiting further direction. I will finish by noting that the epigraph from James Joyce that prefaced my discussion has, of course, its own antecedent, one found in St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) – Hippo being, somewhat appropriately, a region in modern-day Algeria. Apart from his influence on theology and philosophy, Augustine's writings have proved durable in studies of education and teaching. However, for now, and in conclusion, Joyce's channelling of Augustine through the character of Stephen Dedalus is a reference to *De Immortalitate Animae* (*On the Immortality of the Soul*) and a passage that reads thus: 'For what is done needs expectation, that it may be done, and memory, that it may be understood as much as possible. And expectation is of future things, and memory is of things past. But the *intention to act* is of the present, through which all future flows into the past.' If there ever was a time to act, a time for public and private institutions – not to mention public and private funding – to come together in the name of cultural production, civic society, and the discursive dissemination of knowledge and accessible education, that time is undoubtedly now, when development is ongoing as opposed to complete. And if that seems too monitory a statement, it is worth noting Augustine's warning about the future and its potential abandonment to the oversights and mistakes, intentional or otherwise, of the present.

Notes / Bibliography

The Production of Cultural Knowledge in the Middle East Today
Anthony Downey

1 It is crucial here that we do not fall into the heuristic trap of suggesting that the immaterial circulation of cultural knowledge somehow evades systems of commodification. On the contrary, in any given social order, be it neo-liberalism or conservative forms of theocratic, sovereign or one-party governance, the notion of a 'knowledge economy', where information is given a capital value, is fundamental to forms of exchange and utility. In fact, we may be able to theorize a direct relationship between contemporary commodity systems and the so-called dematerialization of the art object. 'There is a direct corollary', Simon Sheikh has argued, 'between the dematerialization of the art object, and thus its potential (if only partial) exodus from commodity form and thus disappearance from the market system, and the institutional re-inscription and validation of such practices as artistic research and thus knowledge as an economic commodity'. See Sheikh (2008).
2 All artist's quotes are from Raad's notes and are used courtesy of Walid Raad and Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London.
3 Raad's project is also concerned with how culture becomes 'withdrawn' in times of conflict. Influenced by the work of Jalal Toufic (specifically the latter's writings on the idea of the 'withdrawal of tradition' during a time of conflict), Raad examines the suggestion that certain wars and conflicts not only affect a culture on a material level (the destruction of museums, artworks, books and so on), but also on an immaterial level whereby an artwork and the ideas behind it become unavailable to vision and thereafter 'withdrawn' – that is, remote and not readily understood in the present or indeed future. To this end, Raad examines that which has been withdrawn in cultural knowledge, that which remains liminal even to those who know where to look. See Toufic (2009).
4 The 'Island of Happiness' is, nevertheless, a less than happy place for a significant number of workers involved in the building of it. In an eighty-page report published in 2009, the group Human Rights Watch found that 'while the UAE government has moved to improve housing conditions and ensure the timely payment of wages in recent years, many labour abuses remain commonplace. International institutions planning to open branches on the island – including the Guggenheim, New York University (NYU), and the French Museum Agency (responsible for the Louvre Abu Dhabi) – should urgently obtain enforceable contractual guarantees that construction companies will protect workers' fundamental rights on their projects'. The report went on to observe that the 'Guggenheim Museum, the French Museum Agency (which is overseeing the development of the Abu Dhabi Louvre), New York University, and other institutions have failed to take adequate steps to avoid the same abuses on their own workplaces'. See '"The Island of Happiness": Exploitation of Migrant Workers on Saadiyat Island, Abu Dhabi', available at http://www.hrw.org/node/83111 (accessed 21 July 2010).
5 It may seem disingenuous of me to note that culture is being used to develop an area that had been previously overlooked or indeed underused. From the East End of London to Williamsburg in New York and Brunnenstrasse to the north of the Mitte district in Berlin, culture is on the vanguard when it comes to developing the outposts of urban environments. However, it is arguable that we are encountering something that is different here: artists and artisans were not the pioneers of Saadiyat Island, developers were. In this context, culture and commerce are being developed contemporaneously. Perhaps this is a newer, more egalitarian, model than those used in cities such as London or New York, perhaps not.
6 What is at least obvious is that the two main developments, the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, are essentially Western-inspired edifices whose history is firmly enmeshed within Western collections. It would be thereafter relatively safe to assume these collections will form a significant part of the programme.
7 See http://www.thetownhousegallery.com/main7.html (accessed 22 June 2010).
8 See http://www.ashkalalwan.org/homeworks.aspx?id=1 (accessed 10 July 2010).
9 Paraphrased from a conversation between the author and Christine Tohme, Beirut, 20 July 2010.
10 For full details of *Home Works V* programme and notes, see http://www.ashkalalwan.org/homeworks.aspx?id=5 (accessed 20 May 2010).
11 See http://www.artacademy.ps/english/index.html (accessed 20 May 2009).
12 See http://www.artacademy.ps/english/index_foundation.html (accessed 20 May 2010).
13 The discussion here is paraphrased from a conversation between Zeina Arida and the author, Beirut, 19 July 2010.
14 The conjunction of public/private finance is a significant feature of the arts funding in Turkey and includes private funding from banks such as Akbank, which supports the Akbank Art Center in Istanbul; Borusan Holdings' support for music and the arts; and support from the Koc family for the newly initiated ARTER space in Istanbul.
15 For a more detailed analysis of the problems attending the designation 'Middle East' and, respectively, Iran's relationship to the term, see Downey (2009, 2011).

Patronage, Art and Society in the Middle East: A Reconsideration
Layla S. Diba

1 I wish to thank my research assistant Sarah Malaika for researching and editing this article.
2 Martin (1968), p. 35. It should be noted that no evidence of direct contact between the two courts has ever emerged.
3 Building on this scholarship, an edited volume devoted to the topic as it pertained to the formation of the collections of the Kuwait Museum of Islamic Art appeared in 1990. See Atil (1990). The role of women patrons and the socio-historical context of architecture have received considerable attention in the last two decades.
4 See Grabar (1990a), p. 27.
5 Creswell (1969), p. 188.
6 For Ibn Khaldun see Grabar (1990b), pp. 31–2; Babur (1969), p. 283.
7 Peters (1994).
8 Patronage is defined here as a process between a client and craftsman expressed in a commercial transaction for the pleasure or otherwise non-utilitarian purposes of the client. Following this definition, this essay will not consider nomadic and village production but will include bibliophilia and the formation of libraries.
9 See Whelan (1990), p. 45 for the similarities between wall paintings of dancers in the palaces of Samarra and painted labels on early Christian ceramic wine jars.
10 See Negipoğlu (1995), p. 108 for a discussion.
11 Wolper (2000), p. 48; and Rizvi (2000), p. 134.
12 Bates (1993), p. 57.
13 Wolper (2000), pp. 36–7.
14 Bates (1993), p. 52.
15 Atil (1993), pp. 5–6; Peters (1994).
16 Sadek (1993), pp. 14–27.
17 Bates (1993), p. 57.
18 D. S. Rice was an early pioneer on this topic. See Rice (1952), pp. 573–8.
19 First cited in Wolper (2000), p. 39. The quote appears to reference the ubiquity of Seljuk architectural patronage.
20 *Hadith* narrated by Sahih al-Bukhari, 8.65. See http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/library/hadith-5.htm.
21 Brend (1991), p. 126.
22 Abu Al-Hasan 'Ali (n.d.), first cited in Negipoglu, *The Topkapi Scroll*, p. 96.
23 Mir Munshi Qazi Ahmad (1959), p. 184.
24 Raby (1999), p. 14.
25 Diba (1998a), pp. 30 and 41.
26 The most dangerous patron was probably Timur who ordered the execution of the architect employed by his consort, either for embezzlement or for flirting with the Queen, depending on the source. See Grabar (1990a), p. 34 and Merefat (1993), p. 32.
27 'Wakf' in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden 2000), vol. 11, pp. 59–99, and Menasce (1964).
28 Brend (1991), p. 100.
29 Afshar (1974), no. 2, p. 157.
30 Wolper (2000), pp. 39–47 and Subtelny (1988), pp. 479–505.
31 Blair and Bloom (1996), p. 16.
32 Ibid., p. 19.
33 Marefat (1993), p. 42.
34 Ibid., pp. 42–3.
35 Ibid., p. 41.
36 Diba (2001), pp. 7–12. Note that one structure, the Qazvin palace of the Hasht Bihisht has been preserved with its wall paintings.
37 Diba (2006), p. 110.
38 Poster (2003), pp. 214–15.
39 Diba (1994), pp. 372–6.
40 Shreve Simpson (1981), p. 22.
41 Al Jahiz, the ninth-century philologist, claimed in his work *In Praise of Books* that books were more effective than architecture in preserving the accomplishments of the past. See Bosch, Carswell and Petherbridge (1981), pp. 6–7.
42 Komaroff and Carboni (2002), pp. 145–7.
43 Köseoğlu (1987).War trophies and Chinese porcelain were housed separately.
44 Whelan (1990), p. 53, who cites the eleventh-century historian al-Biruni's description of a Chinese porcelain collection displayed in a merchant's house in Rayy, Persia.
45 Babur, *The Babur-Nama in English*, pp. 78–9.
46 Canby (2009), p. 104.