

# KALIMAT



Challenge the Status Quo

## A necessary dialogue: JAOU Tunis 2015

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**14 June 2015**

Do conferences matter? Especially when they are called “Visual Culture in the Age of Global Conflict”? Can we discuss art and politics in a way that is productive, non-reductive, and leads to some tangible outcomes? Who learns, benefits and evolves at a conference that calls for cultural exchange and dialogue, apart from the 200 participants involved? These questions were going through my head on the way to Tunis, where the third edition of the **JAOU conference** organised by the Kamel Lazaar foundation and Ibraaz was taking place. Yet a lot of these preoccupations seemed somehow obsolete once I arrived.

When art and politics come together, the outcomes are unpredictable and sometimes even explosive, as we have been constantly and painfully reminded in the course of the past few months. In March, Tunis suffered from a gruesome terrorist attack when two gunmen stormed the Musée du Bardo, killing 22 people and leaving many injured. It is significant, if coincidental, that the conference took place in that same museum, home to an important collection of Roman mosaics and antiquities, though now sadly famous for reasons beyond the wealth of its collections. When getting into a cab on my way to the conference, I, conscious of taxi drivers’ tendency to drive around for hours not knowing where to go, decided to cautiously double-check: “You know the museum, right?” “Ben oui, the whole world knows it now!” replied the driver cheerfully. I rushed to express my sorrows. “Tout se passe,” he unhesitatingly announced in reply to my condolences.



Visual Culture in an Age of Global Conflict symposium, opening remark: Kamel Lazaar, President, Kamel Lazaar Foundation. Photo: Hydar Dewachi.

Choosing the Bardo Museum as the location of the conference was not an opportunistic move by the organisers, as the event was scheduled long before the tragic events in March took place. The host of the conference and editor-in-chief of Ibraaz Anthony Downey remarked that after the devastating news arrived during Dubai Art Week and the initial disarray that followed, the decision was made to double and triple the efforts of making JAOU 2015 happen despite the attack.

Today, as ever, an inter-cultural dialogue between countries across the region and beyond remains both a challenge and a priority. Echoing Kamel Lazaar's opening speech from the 2014 JAOU conference, Downey noted that whilst the question raised by the conference as to what is the role of culture in the time of conflict has a particular regional pertinence, this is not, strictly speaking, a regional issue, but a global one affecting all parts of the world. "Culture today is not just under challenge – it's under attack", he observed.

It is this vague idea of cultural dialogue, that is usually perceived as no more than a clichéd expression of a utopian concept spelled out in politically correct articles and diplomatic speeches, that suddenly became a living and breathing matter and substance of the three days of the conference. The JAOU 2015 delegates came from as close as Dubai to as far as New York, and languages were being switched from English into French into Arabic every few minutes. With guests from London learning about day-to-day challenges of cultural production in Casablanca and participants from Beirut comparing their experience of running institutions to that in Paris, the idea of a dialogue suddenly emerged as what is happening here and now; within the conference's programme of talks and panel discussions, as much as in the multilingual debates at coffee breaks and conversations at the dinner table. At JAOU 2015 it was dialogue – in its most plain literal meaning – that emerged as promise and hope for continued conversation and exchange in the future.



Visual Culture in an Age of Global Conflict symposium, roundtable III, Performing Archives/Archiving Performance: Contemporary Art Practices across the Middle East, (left to right) Anthony Downey, Slavs and Tatars, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Hiwa K., H la Ammar, Tania El Khoury. Photo: Hydar Dewachi

While I was prepared for two days of talks on art, politics, political art, activism, and anything else that lies in between, I discovered that the conference attempted at something much broader and perhaps more significant. Staying away from the conventional rhetoric and the minefield of the subjects mentioned above, JAOU moved beyond the perceived notion of 'the international conference' and perhaps even tried to reinvent the idea of such an event in itself. Stepping outside the comfort zone of familiar subjects and formats, the symposium aimed at bringing in not just contemporary artists but cultural practitioners working in all fields of visual culture in Tunisia and elsewhere. 'Thinking big' could certainly be chosen as the motto of JAOU, and we can only salute the ambition.

Amongst the most unforgettable moments and speakers were Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi, president of the Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah, who gave a short and extremely useful overview of how modern and contemporary artists in the Middle East and North Africa [MENA] region have tackled and responded to conflict. "Art in the Arab world provides one of the most vibrant cultural reflections of politics in the world," he announced at the start of his speech. Berlin-based Iraqi-Kurdish artist Hiwa K whose heart-gripping presentation of his latest projects – seen through the spectacles of his personal life and career changes – was perhaps the most poignant reminder of the very real brutality, conflict and violence that dominates the daily experience of hundreds of thousands of people living in the region; Payam Sharifi, the outspoken half of the Slavs and Tatars duo, whose phantasmagoric lecture/performance took the audience on a journey swirling effortlessly through time and space and evoking obscure histories,

whether real or imaginative. The distances travelled within the thirty-minute performance were vast: from Russian futurists' linguistic experiments called Zaum to the collective's own project Beyonsense that celebrates linguistic ambiguity and misreading across cultures, histories, and geographies, from the enigmatic Rothko chapel in Houston to a mystical and largely unknown project of Majid-al-Farah, a Sufi mosque in downtown New York adorned with Dan Flavin light installations (1980), from the architecture of past histories and memories and finally to the architecture of contemporary museums and public art collections.



Visual Culture in an Age of Global Conflict symposium, opening remark: Kamel Lazaar, President, Kamel Lazaar Foundation. Photo: Hydar Dewachi.

One of the highlights of the conference was an engaging panel involving five artists: Tania El Khoury, H la Ammar, Nadia Kaabi-Linke, Payam Sharifi and Hiwa K who responded to the notion of performativity of an archive and explained how they utilise, re-read and re-enact oral and written archives in their work. Anthony Downey opened the discussion by stating that “an archive is not a dead space, it is a performative space,” inviting each of the artists to respond to this statement in their short presentations. Our memories are spaces of contemplation, but also of speculation, and as a result, an archive is not something related just to the past, but very much to the future, he elaborated. Nadia Kaabi-Linke for example spoke about her public art project where she interacted with immigrants living in Neuk lln, a borough in Berlin, to create a public monument – or rather a public pavement – out of colourful stones all imported from the various countries and regions that the participants of the project have come from.

How does one compromise his/her artistic pursuits with family and social conventions? Dancer Wael Maghni shared his personal journey of swapping a promising and highly-esteemed career as a football player to a rather controversial one as a dancer. Lastly, Antonia Carver, director of Art Dubai, explained how the idea of a fair serving as a bridge between East and West has evolved into something much more complex and subtle. Nine years after its inauguration, Art Dubai has outgrown the confines of being merely a commercial art event, and serves as an incubator of ideas of what a cultural institution in the Gulf could represent. Arguably, JAOU could equally mature into an important ideas generator in the Maghreb with all the major thinkers and doers involved, yet without the sparkly glitz that Art Dubai is obliged to sprinkle on top.

The conference culminated on the third day with the opening of All the World's a Mosque, a moving exhibition curated by Lina Lazaar. The exhibition, hosted in purpose-built metal containers, featured twenty-two artists from the region, although not all twenty-two artists had their work on display for the opening. As a reminder of the difficulties and struggles discussed throughout the conference, several works had not managed to cross the borders from Egypt or overcome the challenges posed by nature and technology (for instance in the case of Adel Abidin's video work that suffered bitterly from rain).



All the World's a Mosque. Image courtesy of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation.

A rather brave title for the exhibition reveals an attempt to create a platform for open dialogue serving against fixed doctrines and formalised notions, and aimed to discuss religion in a respectful way. “We want to send a message of peace, love and tolerance”, the curator explained. The show, put together in a mere three weeks, attracted huge and surprisingly diverse crowds on the opening night. However, though the exhibition succeeded in creating a visually engaging display and an all-immersive ‘adventure castle’ experience, its critical powers appeared undermined – either by an accidental absence of several works, or by deliberate cautiousness in the light of the show’s future travels to Saudi Arabia. Yet one should acknowledge a great responsibility that Lina Lazaar has taken up in embarking on this project, as well as applaud another effort from the Lazaars’ to open up and expand a new space for reflection, dialogue and discussion.



All the World's a Mosque. Image courtesy of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to make a full circle here and come back to an image presented by Sultan Al-Qassemi at the very start of the conference: a piece by a French-Tunisian street artist El Seed painted on a minaret of the Jara Mosque in the southern Tunisian city of Gabes in 2012. Sultan called it a beautiful message of tolerance from Tunisia to the rest of the world. “Art should bring people together”, he noted, and it is in articulation of this simple yet profound aspiration where JAOU 2015 has arguably most succeeded.

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