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Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East

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ANTHONY DOWNEY (ed.), *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 430 pages; £21.50 paperback.

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A decade has now passed since the United Arab Emirates announced the construction of outposts of European and US museums — the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi — thereby attracting international attention to the region’s cultural fabric. As these “mega-museums” are still under construction, questions surrounding their relevance for local communities, and the epistemic agendas that underpin their formation, remain open-ended.¹ With architectural sketches being translated only slowly into physical forms, their futures are yet to be determined.

It is with an eye turned towards the future that *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* opens up a discussion about the cultural infrastructure of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. **Composed of nearly thirty essays and interviews, edited by Anthony Downey, and published at a time when political turmoil marginalizes the role of culture in many parts of the region, this volume considers the potentialities for rethinking cultural institutions from within crisis. In order to think of the institution in relation to civil society and grassroots movements, the volume conceptualizes it as both material and immaterial, physical and digital, existing and imaginary, seeking to develop new models that, in the future, could also be implemented on the ground.**

This approach feeds into another aim central to the volume, which is to examine how contemporary art becomes absorbed within a global cultural economy. While the projects launched by the UAE are significant here, these considerations also relate to other museum-building agendas across the Arabian Peninsula, with Mathaf — Doha’s Arab Museum of Modern Art, which opened in 2010 — being an important case study. Questions surrounding these cultural institutions, which are seen as a form of “soft power” aiding specific political and economic agendas, drive the third part of the volume,² and with five essays devoted to the artistic infrastructure of the UAE and Qatar, it is this penultimate section that readers interested in the Arabian Peninsula will find most rewarding.

The penultimate part of *Future Imperfect* begins with Guy Mannes-Abbott’s dystopic analysis of Saadiyat Island (or Happiness Island) — which will house the UAE’s mega-museums — as reflective of the “decontextualizing spaces of globalization” that offer little to local communities (p. 296). Arguing against such readings, Elizabeth Derderian suggests that these projects contribute to the “theoretical infrastructure” of the region since they generate discussions surrounding the sector’s professional norms, including curatorial methods and the role of art criticism (p. 312). Rather than consider these museum projects as mere imports from abroad, a lens through which many critics have approached them, Derderian chooses to see them as feeding into a larger discourse of the UAE’s cultural infrastructure. Following suit, Karen Exell situates these projects within the Arabian Peninsula’s aim to become one of the centers of a global system of

¹ The so-called “mega museums” are defined by spectacular architecture, world-class collections, and an active engagement with globalization. See: Karen Exell, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 2.

² For a discussion of museums in the Gulf and soft power see Alexandre Kazerouni, “Museums and Soft Power in the Persian Gulf”, *Pouvoirs, revue française d’études constitutionnelles et politiques* [Powers, French Review of Constitutional and Political Studies], no. 152 (January 2015), pp. 87–97.

culture, arguing that the incorporation of Western museology models reflects a conscious decision driven by a regional engagement with globalization.

Tensions between the local and the global appear time and again throughout *Future Imperfect*, reflecting the long-running debates that surround the status of contemporary art in general. With a proliferation of biennials across the world, the prominence of transnational curators and technological developments, art and its circulation have undergone significant transformations within the past few decades. Within these increasingly globalized structures, a focus on the local has frequently been regarded as providing a much-needed counterpoint.

In fact, Exell ends her essay by quoting Hicham Ben Abdallah El Alaoui, who suggested that the region's cultural scene should respond to both Euro-US museum models as well as to Middle Eastern mosques and *madrasas* (educational institutions). She further points to heritage museums, such as the Shaikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum in Doha, as examples of locally-produced models of museology. Even so, questions as to who defines what the notion of "local" signifies — whether ruling families, private donors, or citizens themselves — lead to a blind spot in the book, in which several projects with various patronages and funding sources are discussed. Similarly, essentialist approaches towards the local, which render the term vulnerable to nationalist and ideological agendas, are left unaddressed.

Investigations into the mega-museums are balanced by Stephanie Bailey's analysis of the Sharjah Biennial and Art Foundation as examples of experimental practices within the UAE. Bailey approaches these as networks rather than as physical spaces, and examines their mechanisms of "branching out" towards both local and global communities (p. 367). Significantly, she discusses the biennial's recent history of situating itself within a Global South rather than in relation to the Global North, a proposition that redefined the region's cultural scene. At the same time, her proposition of the institution as "network" introduces a conceptual term that readers might wish the volume had addressed in greater detail. As networks between the MENA region and the Euro-US world begin to be addressed through the lens of globalization, cultural alliances within the region itself, or indeed with the Global South, appear secondary. With chapters devised by separate national cultural scenes, the possibilities of investigating these through a transnational lens are limited.

The fourth and final part of the book is absent from the physical publication but can be accessed through *Ibraaz*, the online publishing platform initiated by the Kamel Lazaar Foundation that supported the publication of *Future Imperfect*. Turning towards Saudi Arabia and its potential to become a new cultural center within the Gulf, this section offers an analysis of the relationship between its fraught political context and emerging grassroots initiatives, often formed within the digital realm. Significantly, Saudi Arabia was omitted in Exell's recent publication titled *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (2016), a gap that *Future Imperfect* seeks to address. As with the mega-museums, the futures of these initiatives are still being shaped.

Although it plots Saudi Arabia's place on the cultural map of the MENA region, *Future Imperfect* also has its own blind spots. The cultural infrastructures of Oman and Bahrain are left unaddressed, while Kuwait is visualized solely through Monira al Qadiri's series *Myth Busters*, photomontages in which images of both finished and unrealized mega-museums of the Gulf states are superimposed onto photographs from the 1991 war in Kuwait that tied the region to Western influences.

For readers looking to expand their knowledge of the cultural infrastructure of the Arabian Peninsula, *Future Imperfect* will feel incomplete since its focus on the UAE echoes that of many recent studies devoted to the region, including Gulf Labor's *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor* (2015). Because it is predominantly the cultural infrastructures of the UAE and Qatar that are examined in relation to globalization, the longer histories of cultural practices within the region remain obscured. It is these latter that shape part one of *Future Imperfect*,

which unearths the histories and traditions of cultural institutions in the MENA region in relation to political shifts. However, with the exception of Yemen, the Arabian Peninsula remains absent from that section. Furthermore, the second section, which analyzes knowledge production through dialogue between cultural practitioners and institutions, could perhaps have made a greater contribution towards understanding the constantly-shifting cultural landscape of the Arabian Peninsula.

With the anticipated opening of many of the institutions discussed in the volume during the next few years, new studies of how they resonate locally, regionally, and globally will undoubtedly emerge. These will be able to respond to and evaluate the uncertain futures that have been sketched out by *Future Imperfect*, and which, in relation to the Arabian Peninsula are torn between the alliances of mega-museums with the Global North and the biennial's gaze towards the Global South.

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