

Curating (in) the Gulf
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Workshop Summary

Participants:

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Workshop objectives

The workshop seeks to explore the question of curating in light of the current cultural developments in the Gulf and in the UAE in particular. As evidenced by the selection of articles provided and the relevant media reports, cultural initiatives in the region are often portrayed either as a bland PR exercise or in a dismissive manner critical of an attempt to 'buy culture'. Both extremes of these projections bypass the cultural reality of the Gulf. The workshop seeks to look beyond this dichotomisation to investigate what can be learned from the unique cultural situation and the emerging art scene observed in the region.

The workshop aims to create a platform for exchange between academics and cultural practitioners to explore together curatorial issues through the lens of three main themes: transnational and cross-cultural dynamics, orality, and audience engagement.

Beyond this workshop, the objective is to plan for a future event in March 2014 to coincide with the Dubai Art Week and Sharjah March Meeting, as well as to propose a tangible creative output that can be carried out to explore these themes, questions and opportunities further.

Context

- Transient immigrant population makes up the majority of residents
- Racialised class system and hereditary ruling elite
- History of patronage
- Element of censorship
- Futuristic development aspirations

Case Study

The case study, presented by Rebecca Jarvest (Arts-Link), discussed a partnership between the Farjam Collection in Dubai and Zayed University. It is clear from this project that there is a huge opportunity for organic, interesting development in which art and curation could be taken in radical new directions, particularly if unencumbered by conventional (Western) curatorial traditions. Upon further reflection, this organicness observed from the students in this case study could be seen as a metaphor for the UAE as a whole.

Opportunity in the UAE

The Emirates have a fantastic, enviable even, opportunity to be pioneers of the cultural industries globally and to create a new cultural geography with the Gulf at the centre. The unique circumstance of the UAE is that these institutions are unencumbered by hundreds of years of history/baggage or with financial strains.

Breaking out of the big space + curator equation represents a significant challenge. Is it possible to break down the institution of the curator? It was suggested that too much control or heavy-handed curation could mean this moment of possibility and freedom passes by.

Whilst this opportunity is evident, the objectives driving the creation of many museums in the region were questioned. The group interrogated the reasons for these developments, which could include international power and authority, staking a claim in the global culture market, nation building or the preservation of objects.

The Role of Museums

Museums play a significant role in constructing a sense of collective identity and cementing the notion of nationhood. In a country where censorship exists and the class structure is heavily demarcated and racialised, the notion of identity is both complex and political.

As a result of the selective nature of museums and curatorial practice, a common narrative or understanding of objects and history is often reinforced through the presentation of what is supposedly the authority on the subject. It is essential to consider this legitimising power and the impact it can have on accepted notions of truth, identity, order and nation.

The need to rethink appropriate museum models, from museum format and curatorial practices, such as the over-privileging of (Western) convention, to narrative devices and architectural design, was discussed in detail.

The complexity of questions surrounding curation comes perhaps from the location of curation within broader questions such as: What is art? What is art's purpose? What does art mean in society? Who is art for?

Balancing Civic and Local Agendas

The way museums collect, categorise, and transmit information to audiences across time and space raises questions about access, selection, inclusion and exclusion.

Determining an agenda for the creation of museums and their curation depends significantly on their underlying objectives. Nation building and international acclaim are two key roles that museums can play and heated debate characterised the discussions about the role of the museum in the UAE.

The notion of a civic agenda immediately calls to the fore the question of what is local in the Gulf. What does 'local' mean in the UAE? Does 'local' include the migrant workers that make up more than 80% of the resident population? On the other hand, museums function as a means to gain international prestige and recognition in the cultural arena.

Upon further reflection, we can consider whether the concept of nation is losing or gaining importance in an increasingly globalised world where citizenship is more fluid and migration is in a constant state of flux? What can we learn from the UAE's example?

Considering these questions, discussion returned to the question of audience and intentions.

Audience:

It is essential to recognise the plurality of UAE society that results in the need for multiple narratives in curation and for different ways of understanding and engaging with art objects.

The importance of native local audiences, however small, was emphasised because without a local audience these museums would have no connection to their people. How can local people be engaged and how can culture be effectively disseminated?

What can we learn from the example of transnationalism and globalised society that we observe in the UAE?

How to work with a broad spectrum of voices is an interesting question to consider more widely as the same question will surely face numerous cultural institutions as migration continues to increase, e.g. consider the USA's changing demographic, indicating the wider relevance of this project.

The power of the curator

The power of the curator lies in their ability to legitimise an art object. This is where power relations may have the potential to shift, for the curator has the power to select and interpret objects and narratives which in turn contribute to the establishment of a normative vision of the past and present.

This legitimising power should be considered in light of questions such as: who tells the story? Whose story? Whose heritage? Who has access?

Curating oral culture

Part of what makes oral traditions so interesting and important is the way that they change and perpetually evolve. To choose one moment to preserve is to arrest the flow

of that story in the midst of its evolution. This can be interpreted as overly authoritative, presenting a challenge for archiving and curating the oral.

Oral culture was also highlighted by the group as perhaps holding the key to how the region could do something completely new and pioneering in the field of culture. Overcoming the challenge of archiving, curating and incorporating oral histories into the museum space could drive the innovation of museum spaces in the UAE.

The potential of digital space

An alternative digital cultural platform could be used to legitimise other voices, disrupt the hegemony of official or institutional narratives or to add a polysemic dimension to collections through alternative narrative possibilities.

We often need alternatives to institutions: counter cultures and subcultures often develop greater nuances and metaphorical complexity when working against or outside the system. Digital platforms can exist ambiguously between public and private spaces.

Potential creative output

An open call exhibition to act as an experiment to see how different people from the Gulf societies think and feel about the culture and identity of the region. If they are given the chance to curate these themselves based on their experiences, narratives and memories, what would the picture look like? How different would it be from an 'officially' curated version?

The digital platform could provide a suitable space to test this idea as it will allow people to engage with the question of curating and content beyond the 'walls' and constraints of institutions.

In practical terms this will involve:

- Inviting members of the public from the UAE (or wider), through an open call using existing networks in the region and beyond, to submit material that is reflective of their identities and cultures (pictures, poems, stories passed down from one generation to another and anything they feel is representative of their individual as well as communal culture and identity). We would try to target many segments of society and nationalities to reflect the multicultural and transnational character of the region.
- Developing a website for the project to act as a platform for people's submissions and which later on can host a curated online exhibition together with related articles, commentary and content.
- Undertaking a reflective curatorial project on the submitted material in a way that critically embodies the debates and discussions of the workshop and the project's findings in general.
- Create an online exhibition which can also be translated into a physical exhibition at both King's and in one of the chosen institutions in the Gulf region.