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ROUNDTABLE

The Economics of Creative Expression

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About two years ago, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) convened a meeting, featuring individual representatives from the most prominent independent arts and culture spaces operating in Cairo. It was an intimate gathering of around fifteen people at the Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training, and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) offices, downtown on 26th of July Street. Everybody in the room knew each other, their intimacy indicative of the dwindling nature of what was once a vibrant and populated independent cultural scene. Once everybody had gathered around the table, AFAC representatives announced the release of a new grant dedicated to funding running costs for midsize independent cultural institutions in the Middle East and North Africa region for a three-year span. In the schema of funding networks after 2014, such a grant was unparalleled. Although this is a problem facing institutions regionally and worldwide, in Egypt specifically large-scale administrative grants are not as accessible as they once were, and most institutions struggle to squeeze overhead costs (salaries, rent, and utilities) into project-based grants.

I believe the intended tone of the meeting was celebratory, although upon announcing the grant the AFAC representatives were met with a host of unsolicited reactions, as the individuals in the room took the opportunity to air out grievances. They expressed burnout from the toll of the emotional labor required to run such organizations, the difficulties of management, and the frustration of being dependent on grant-giving structures that circumscribed the possibility for growth and limited opportunities for sustainability. Individuals complained that their organizations (some of which were twenty years old) were not capable of handling a grant dedicated to running costs because they did not have solid accounting systems in place. Other individuals complained that they would have difficulty accessing the funds because they had not set up an account outside of Egypt that would allow them to receive funding, as foreign funding was legally banned in Egypt in 2017. One individual who worked in an art space that operated as a "vanity gallery" (meaning it charged artists to rent the space and exhibit work) got up halfway through the meeting and left, no longer interested in what grant-giving organizations had to offer.

The predicament of independent arts spaces in Cairo is a story of civil society in Egypt at large. In September 2016, Representative ʿAbd al-Hadi al-Qasbi submitted the first draft of the Law Governing the Work of Associations and Other Foundations Working in the Field of Civil Work (referred to as the NGO law) to Egypt's House of Representatives. The law, which was passed in May 2017, ensured that all non-state actors, including most of the independent art spaces operating outside of the Ministry of Culture, would be unable to access funding from foreign sources. According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) brief, "Individuals from civil society organizations faced arrests, travel bans, and asset freezes both before and following the NGO Law's ratification."[1] This law catalyzed what had been a gradual withdrawal process of various funding bodies and civil society organizations from Egypt that began after the January 2011 revolution. The withdrawal of organizations such as the Ford Foundation, which had been a bulwark of support for arts institutions (as well as civil society institutions) in Egypt, instigated a shift in an arts ecosystem that had been present since the 1990s.

Arts spaces such as the Townhouse Gallery for Contemporary Art, where I worked as curator for four years, were founded and flourished thanks to aid structures that saw contemporary art as a conduit for

[1]"TIMEP Brief: NGO Law," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 14 November 2018, https://timep.org/reports-briefings/timep-brief-ngo-law/. See also "Joint Statement: New Law Will Cripple Egyptian NGOs," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2 June 2017, https://timep.org/press/press-releases/joint-statement-new-law-will-cripple-egyptian-ngos/.

promoting civil society. The first grant the Townhouse received in 1998 was from the Canadian Embassy in Egypt, and organizations like the Ford Foundation quickly followed suit, supporting institutional initiatives like exhibitions, lectures, and city-wide events, such as the Nitaq Festival for Contemporary Arts that occupied multiple spaces in downtown Cairo from 2000 to 2002. Monetary support continued to flood in, and Townhouse's network grew quickly; over the years, the gallery incubated multiple arts spaces such as the Contemporary Image Collective and Medrar Gallery, which would come to form the cornerstones of the independent contemporary arts scene in Egypt. Artists, bolstered by mobility grants and production grants that allowed them to work exclusively as professional artists, traveled, studied, and exhibited worldwide. As the infrastructure of nongovernmental funding structures was cemented, so too was the dependence of arts institutions and artists on this framework.

Civil Society and the Open Society

The Open Society Foundation, established by philanthropist George Soros, was founded on principles purported by Karl Popper's "The Open Society and its Enemies," which argues that in an open society, truth arises from an ongoing negotiation between the people and the state, mediated by the institutions of civil society. As such, The Open Society Foundation was dedicated to establishing and supporting nongovernmental organizations as a way to implement liberalism, democracy, and freedom. George Soros began supporting contemporary art in 1985, when the first Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) was founded in Budapest, Hungary.[2] Although this center was founded four years prior to the fall of the Berlin wall, its mission was clear: "To support the development and international exposure of contemporary art in Eastern and Central Europe, the countries of the former Soviet Union and central Eurasia as a vital element of an open society."[3] The SCCA network was inextricably linked to the idea of transition; namely, the political transition from socialist and communist ideology to liberal democracy. For the Open Society, with its dedication to the ideals of liberal democracy, culture was the most effective conduit for promoting freedom, democracy, human rights, and pluralism.

The SCCA network grew to encompass twenty centers across cities in Eastern Europe, from Budapest and Bratislava to Riga and Sarajevo.[4] Across Eastern Europe, artists affiliated with the SCCA network were encouraged to produce work that utilized new media techniques (such as digital art and video work), push political narratives (through socially engaged work that could subvert communist ideology), and counter the aesthetic hegemony of socialist realism. In turn, SCCA spaces institutionalized culture, formalizing roles like "cultural manager" and arguing for the importance of archiving and documentation in English as well as vernacular languages. The influence of the SCCA network is well documented by scholars such as Octavian Eşanu, Naomi Henning, and Miško Šuvaković.[5] An exhibition at the Galeria Nicodim in Bucharest in early 2019, curated by Aaron Moulton and titled "The Influencing Machine," was inspired by the earliest years of the SCCA network and sought to create a "meta-SCCA" to understand the power the network had over the history of contemporary artistic production.[6]

In a seminal essay entitled, "The Ideology of Exhibition: On the Ideologies of Manifesta," Miško Šuvaković coined the term "Soros Realism," to refer to the type of politically and socially engaged art produced through the SCCAs.[7] The term, a play on the preceding aesthetic hegemon, "Socialist Realism,"

[2]Octavian Eşanu, "The Transition of the Soros Centers to Contemporary Art: The Managed Avant Garde," contimporary.org, 2008, https://www.contimporary.org/project/view/10.

[3]"Dictionary > SCCA," contimporary.org, accessed 23 February 2020, https://www.contimporary.org/dictionary/view/7.

[4]I gathered location data to map out the SCCA network; https://www.arcgis.com/apps/presentation/index.html?webmap=5ef93b1687194757830fc9589371af7e, accessed 21 May 2020.

[5]Eşanu, "Transition"; Naomi Henning, "Footnotes on Art and Finances: George Soros and What Remains," 2017, http://www.naomihennig.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Footnotes-On-Art-and-Finance.pdf; Miško Šuvaković, "The Ideology of Exhibition: On the Ideologies of Manifesta," platformaSCCA, January 2002, http://www.ljudmila.org/scca/platforma3/suvakoviceng.htm.

[6]Aaron Moulton, "The Influencing Machine," Galeria Nicodim, Bucharest, 14 March–27 April 2019, http://www.nicodimgallery.com/attachment/en/554a393b07a72c743f763dae/TextTwoColumnsWithFile/5c802f6d33d850f476b8997e.

[7]Šuvaković, "Ideology of Exhibition."

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concretized a new discipline within contemporary art. This discipline was concerned with the relationship between civil society and contemporary art, and was defined by an emergence of new, homogeneous, contemporary aesthetics. To help us understand the essential framework of Soros Realism, Šuvaković presents a clear formula: new media + local (regional) themes = presentation of erased traces of culture. Thematically, this new art was unequivocally marginal and urban, and its aesthetics fell under the guise of "new media," which was defined by digital forms such as video art and multimedia installations. This art also had function; it presented a concrete reality of society and culture, and worked towards positive social change. For Šuvaković, Soros Realism was a new conceptual framework, wherein artistic and aesthetic goals are culturally determined effects. Within this framework, he says, "the art of the young, the marginal and those in transition acquires 'its own' mobile reservation of promised prospects of survival and realisation." In other words, this art both existed within and manifested its own vision of a utopian socio-political order, specifically one rooted in liberal democracy. This type of artwork, in the SCCA landscape, was the work that received financial and theoretical support, bolstered to tell stories that promised prospects of democratic transition.

AFAC and the Arts

When the Open Society Foundation spearheaded the foundation of AFAC in 2007 (alongside other public and individual partners), they had a clear-cut objective in mind: to promote artistic projects in the Arab region that cultivated creativity, independent thought, and regional exchange. To artists, filmmakers, and creative practitioners in the Arab world, AFAC meant localized stability, financial support, and open doors. The alternative and independent artistic economies that had been developed a decade prior in places like Cairo, Beirut, and Manama now had a formalized and centralized economic structure to carry and support them. Since its inception in 2007, AFAC has supported more than 1,300 projects across the Arab world and the globe. Starting with 27 grants in 2007, the number of supported projects kept rising slowly, exceeding 100 grants in 2012 and reaching a peak in 2018 with 201 grants. The regional projects have covered twenty Arab countries thus far: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.[8] Since its inception, AFAC has received funds from many public and private donors, including: the Open Society Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Doen Foundation, the Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Pegase Partners, and HSBC Private Bank, as well as individual donations from AFAC board members and other Arab individuals.

In an effort to historicize contemporary art in the Middle East and North Africa, I look to the story of the SCCA network in Eastern Europe, whose vision, purpose, and financial model laid the foundation for the arts ecosystem I experience firsthand in Egypt today. The intertwined political, financial, and infrastructural relationship between Eastern Europe and the Middle East that began in the 20th century is beyond the purview of this undertaking, but its reverberations in the arts are clear. A chilling (and entirely coincidental) parallel is the happenstance timing of the fall of the Berlin wall four years after the opening of the first SCCA in Budapest in 1985 and the rise of the Arab Spring of 2011 four years after the Open Society Foundation spearheaded AFAC in 2007. A more sound similarity is the profound impact of a discourse of transition, freedom, and democracy that has colored an era of contemporary artistic practices in the Middle East from the late 1990s to the present time. Artwork from the Arab world built around revolution, margins, oppression, or change is sure to receive funding and be exhibited worldwide. Similar to the artwork produced through the SCCA network, contemporary art from the Middle East purposefully laid the foundation for a vibrant civil society as envisioned and propagated by the Open Society. To return to Šuvaković's reflections, "the artwork became a 'demonstrating media object,' by which a politically toned, but not wholly explicit practice and production of samples

[8]"The First Four Years," grant report, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (Beirut: 2010), https://www.arabculturefund.org/data/resources/61.pdf; "The First Four Years," grant report, Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (Beirut: 2011), https://www.arabculturefund.org/data/resources/61.pdf; "The (Soft) Power of the Arts in a Changing Middle East," video conference presented at the Middle East Institute, 30 September 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wXLbwgKClg; "About AFAC," Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, accessed 22 May 2020, https://www.arabculturefund.org/About.

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are being realized promising real activity in civil society which is yet to be created."[9] In an increasingly crucial geopolitical landscape, it is not surprising that contemporary artistic production goes hand-in-hand with initiatives such as research centers working on democratic reform, women's political empowerment and legal aid groups, and personal and minority rights activists. Contemporary art then, must be read and situated directly in the context of a larger project to lay the foundation for a sound liberal democracy: an Open Society.

For Egyptian artists working today, the onus of civil society is not a primary concern. In my experience working directly with artists to produce exhibitions, I have noticed that artists in the past four years have turned inward, producing artwork that stems from internal, psychological reflections or domestic anxieties. For artists, censorship from the state and security concerns take a back seat to the more powerful and psychological impacts of self-censorship, production blocks, and economic hurdles. In an arts ecosystem that seems to have room only for sociopolitical reflections, these structural realities present a paradox for those who seek to build careers as independent contemporary artists. Funding sources demand self-categorization, preferably as a "socially engaged artist" or, more commonly after 2011, an "artist of the revolution." Inside of Egypt, with institutional closures, dwindling grant accessibility, and little opportunity for growth, artists turn to foreign outlets—that often cast them in a constraining shade—to fund, produce, and exhibit their work. This Orientalist casting often takes the language of survival (i.e., the survival of the artist), in which the artist's mere existence is automatically an undetermined category, shaped by the projections of the Euro–North American gaze. What results is a crisis of identity, or crisis of representation; unable to produce work in a neutral plane, artists are bound to a reactionary paradigm, forced by a complex network of economic and political interests into a specific thematic cycle of production.

A whole generation of contemporary visual artists, unable to continue with these limitations, have made shifts in their careers, most commonly entering the music and DJ scene that is currently thriving in Cairo. For many, this space offers more than just profitable work opportunities. In a climate where artistic production is riddled with a host of both material and psychological obstacles and difficulties, parties can be a less demanding space for community gathering and creative expression. Free from the constraints of imposed subject matter, DJs are unbridled in their ability to create art (music) that is personal and intuitive, as its aesthetic value deals more with composition (formalistically) and emotion (thematically).

What happens after Transition?

In 2004, many of the institutions in the Soros Center for Contemporary Art (SCCAs) network transitioned into simply Centers for Contemporary Arts (CCAs), dropping the S (Soros) in light of shifts in funding structures as Eastern European countries joined the European Union. Now that these countries had officially become liberal democracies, gaining legitimacy through their status as EU member states, arts spaces had access to a breadth of funding opportunities and were no longer reliant on the Open Society Foundation. For the most part, administrative practices in institutions did not change: archiving and documentation was important, there was still an annual exhibition, and local artists still received support and grants from the CCAs. Many cultural managers, curators, and administrators from the former SCCAs went on to become prominent figures in the art world, taking positions at institutions like the Yale Art School and the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Although there remains a need for research on the shifts that took place in the pre-2004 and post-2004 Eastern European contemporary arts scene, the economic model of dependency remains. It would be simplistic to claim that EU funding structures replaced Open Society Foundation funding structures to the same ends. What is becoming clear, however, is that in light of the rise of right-wing sentiments and increased insularity across Eastern Europe, government funding for contemporary art is also dwindling, strangling artists and institutions that are now scrambling for independent, sustainable financial models.

Meanwhile, after 2011, independent artists and institutions alike all across the Middle East and North Africa still depend on AFAC and other grant funding for support during political tumult, economic

[9]Šuvaković, "Ideology of Exhibition."

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instability, and social shifts. The interconnectedness of these institutions, artists, artistic practices, and the striving for a liberal, democratic civil society is no secret. Upon presenting my research into these connections in a work titled "Whose Open Society? Understanding Neoliberalism and the Economics of Artistic Production in the Middle East" at the Warsaw Biennale in the summer of 2019, I was asked, "Is there such a thing as a neutral patron?" Although this may appear to be an existential question, there are tangible answers to a conundrum that seems to be facing an entire ecosystem of independent arts institutions and individual artistic production.

Of course, a critical approach to this question must first dismiss neutrality, as nothing can be removed from a series of codependent economic underpinnings. More palpably, there are indeed attempts to look at grassroots methodologies for financial sustainability in contemporary art in Europe and the Middle East. Artists are experimenting with different models of cooperatives, and arts institutions are looking to for-profit models (space rentals, cafés, shops) that can generate income while allowing thematic autonomy. In Cairo, where many artists feel starved for collective initiatives, the breakdown of competition created by nonprofit financial models offers potential for new methods of production. Many artists complain about the lack of collectivity present in the culture of artistic production and lament the lack of historical models for collective practices in Egypt. As such, alternative financial solutions, such as a cooperative structure, offer exciting potential: first, to liberate artists and arts institutions from a binding, circuitous discourse that invokes words like survival and resistance and enforces reactionary production; and second to encourage collective practices. For example, shared studios lead to increased collaborations and resource sharing, where artists feel at liberty to disclose contacts, sources, and materials. In another instance of effected collectivity, a lack of institutional resources or concern for security means artists host screenings and discussions in the confines of their own homes.

Still, the actualization of these alternative models often feels out of reach. In the vacuum left by nonprofit, nongovernmental artistic spaces, a resurgence of commercial art outlets dominates the arts landscape in Cairo and Alexandria. New initiatives and new galleries have emerged since 2017 under the guise of contemporary artistic practice, created in the service of domestic capital. These new efforts are evidence of the ineffective nature of the nonprofit spaces that formerly dominated the arts scene. Yet the primary sacrifice in these for-profit commercial initiatives is criticality; artists revert to modernist-style painting, folk-style production, or photography depicting common Egyptian tropes, all with the knowledge that the results are easily purchasable, readily consumed, and digestible to a large audience. Of course, in such a multilayered ecosystem, it is difficult to ascertain the relationship between changing economic structures and the local critical, conceptual artistic practice. To avoid the elisions that can accompany broad-stroke assessments, it is important to note that despite all these shifts, artists continue to push aesthetic boundaries, ask critical questions, and experiment with ideas and form. What is certain is that we are at a turning point; artists, practitioners, and cultural workers alike are caught up in a deep, radical shift in the economics of Egypt's contemporary arts scene, the effects of which are important to observe, document, and reflect upon.

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