

Interview

Common Grounds and Common Cultures

Kamel Lazaar in conversation with Anthony Downey

*Proposal for the Kamel
Lazaar Foundation
Building.
Courtesy of Khaled Ayed
Architects.*



The Kamel Lazaar Foundation was founded with the ambition to promote thought leadership in the visual arts. Its long-term mission is to respond to the imminent need for the creation and dissemination of visual arts in the Maghreb and the Arab World. Through research and publishing initiatives, support for exhibitions, conferences, educational seminars, the development of a collection, an Artists' Projects initiative, and an emerging artist's prize, the Foundation develops sustainable forms of cultural dialogue and debate within the region and beyond. The following interview took place in London in September 2012, in which Kamel Lazaar, the Foundation's chairman, discusses the origins, aims and ambitions for the Foundation with Anthony Downey. The interview was revised in July, 2013, to take into account a number of new developments.

Proposal for the Kamel Lazaar Foundation Building.
Courtesy of Khaled Ayed Architects.



Anthony Downey: I want to start with the development of your Foundation and your plans for bringing together artists and intellectuals from the Arab region. How did this come about and what are your short- and long-term plans for your Foundation?

Kamel Lazaar: I started a foundation six years ago by creating the legal entity, the Foundation Kamel Lazaar. Although this came out of a passion for culture and the visual arts in the Maghreb region, I initially had no long term plans as such and wanted to see how things would develop in a more natural way - how we could engage a community of sorts in the development of the Foundation. This ideal of community-based institutions and organisations has always been key to my thinking about the Foundation as I grew up watching local craftsmen from the Mahdia region producing wonderful fabrics and embroidery. Growing up in Mahdia (a city in the north east of Tunisia), I also noticed that we had an uncommon amount of painters in the area. You would see them painting in the streets as if it was the most normal thing to do. And we had artisans. In every house you would find men and women working with some form of artistic and craft-based practices. There were also small workshops where you could go and see men weaving silk. They would explain to you how to do it and what they were doing. There were also costume and jewellery makers. I have a small collection of local paintings from Mahdia which I have always enjoyed, paintings of wedding parties and fishing boats, very simple but very affecting too. These were very much part of my environment. So, from the beginning I was exposed to all of this and saw how art, rather than being a separate part of a community, was very much part of it. It is with this sense of art as a community-based practice that I started to consider the Foundation and what its responsibilities would be.

AD: Were there other influences upon your thinking at this stage?

Kamel Lazaar: Yes, but that came later. That was when I became a student and started to travel at the age of 17. I was lucky at that stage to have met someone who changed my life and had an impact

on me. I had a girlfriend in Belgium so I used to go to this small village called Bilzen, next to Maastricht, for the Bilzen Jazz festival held there until 1981. My girlfriend at the time was a descendent of Rubens and her father, who was a lawyer, took me to Amsterdam and brought me to the various museums there to see the Flemish School artists - Rembrandt, Rubens, Breughel - and he urged me thereafter to visit other museums. And we shared notes. Everywhere I went, whether I was in Madrid or Paris, I would go and visit the museums there and we would later discuss what I had seen. That is how I had my further exposure to art, firstly in Mahdia and then later on in Europe under the influence of my then girlfriend's father.

AD: Why did you choose to focus on art from the Maghreb and Middle East in particular?

Kamel Lazaar: As an Arab and a Tunisian, I found myself quite frustrated by the ambient mediocrity in the system and the lack of support that Arab art was getting within and beyond the region. This was doubly frustrating because I strongly believe that art is the soul of a nation, of its people, and to see how this was being dealt - and continues to be dealt with today - continues to be a source of disappointment for me. I wanted the collection to be one way of supporting artists, by collecting their work in a sensitive manner and giving it a good home and on occasion loaning it to interested institutions. This was part of the broader issue that I want the Foundation to address, but that also came a little later. After my time in Bilzen and travelling to various cities in Europe and elsewhere, always being careful to see as much art as possible when there, period I started my career as a banker. But I always remained curious about art and continued with my practice of visiting museums and thinking about art. And then when I started to make some money, I asked myself what can I do? And how can I bring together my interest in art with my career as a banker. And that is when I came to think about the Foundation but I had started

Proposal for the Kamel Lazaar Foundation building by Zaha Hadid, film still.
Courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects.



collecting before that, about twenty years ago. I was then collecting mostly artists from the Arab region, mostly painters, for reasons already noted. But my daughter Lina, who helps with the collection, has been adding other works to this over the years in the form of photography and video.

AD: Did you have an actual building in mind for the Foundation when you started it in 2005?

Kamel Lazaar: We initially asked Zaha Hadid to design a building for us and she very kindly agreed. We came up with the plans and design for what would have been a landmark building in the historic city of Carthage. The plans and design for the building were completed but, due to a number of reasons, this plan for the Foundation had to be reconsidered at the time. But I did not give up on the ideal of a building and, prior to the recent upheavals and revolution in Tunisia, we decided to locate the Kamel Lazaar Foundation in the medina of Tunis, the oldest and most vibrant part of the city. This is the short-term aspect of what is going on with the Foundation as a building, which is due to be inaugurated in 2013 and we are currently looking plans for that. The work on the building stopped after the revolution as we gave the building over to be a meeting place of sorts - it seemed more relevant in 2011 to get people in and talking than to continue refurbishing the building. For the long-term, however, I see the Foundation, and our building in the Medina, as a place for artist's residencies and also as a forum for exhibitions, educational seminars, workshops, and an extensive library. We would also like to invite curators to work with us and other professionals. The area we are in is very vibrant artistically so we fit in quite well already. We have a museum of modern and contemporary art which is due to open nearby and an area that is already associated with artists. We will appoint a Director in 2013

and a board of Trustees at the same time. We are also looking to appoint a curator and events administrator. The key to the Foundation, however, is its sustainability as a long-term project and that will mean engaging the local community from the outset.

AD: This notion of a community, do you think that also has an international aspect to it?

Kamel Lazaar: I personally like the term "global village", a sense that a Foundation can serve both an international and local audience at the same time. This is about the cross-fertilization of ideas within the Maghreb and Middle Eastern region but also in the international context. I welcome and applaud all sorts of initiatives in this area. I think, for example of Daniel Barenboim and Edward Said's use of music and collaboration not to address politics direct but to create a cross-cultural forum for the enjoyment of culture. It is precisely this exposure to culture, in all its forms, that can often counter stereotypes and extreme views. These may appear to be small actions in the wider scale of things but it is precisely small actions that add up. It is in this context that I see the Foundation developing: small actions but with an accumulative effect.

AD: Is this about opening up a dialogue of sorts?

Kamel Lazaar: I genuinely think that different people can learn different things from each other, and I want to insist on the word 'dialogue' in the context of the Foundation and thereafter provide the means for a dialogue between communities and cultures and people to be pursued. I know it is a business allusion but synergies and cultural productivity need to go beyond borders if we are to attain a broader sense of the effects global developments have on local concerns.

AD: What do you consider those concerns to be today?

Kamel Lazaar: The revolution has changed everything in my country and throughout the region. Things are changing daily and current events in Syria are very worrying; however, there is no doubt in my mind that the Arab world, its youth in particular, is yearning to regain its dignity and freedom after many decades if not centuries of oppression, invasion and dictatorship. Inspired by universal values and ideals, rather than the limited, local horizons of politics and economics, culture will undoubtedly effect further dialogue between the Arab world and the so-called West and it is this opportunity which we must now seize. It may seem beside the point to some to talk about culture at a time like this but it is arguable that the time to discuss culture has never been more relevant: it is culture that gives a people a sense of community and historical narrative - precisely what is needed for the healthy development of a nation.

*Proposal for the Kamel Lazaar Foundation Building.
Courtesy of Khaled Ayed Architects.*



AD: Why do you think a Foundation is the best framework within which to do this?

Kamel Lazaar: The thinking behind the Foundation is very much concerned with my own personal background. As noted, I am frustrated by the mediocrity that pervades the system and discussions about contemporary Arab visual culture in the MENA region and beyond. I want to Foundation to address, in however small a way, some of these issues. It needs to become a meeting point for artists, curators, writers, and thinkers in general to discuss ideas and have those ideas heard and discussed further. The Foundation can provide a community-based setting for this but one with an international reach and influence.

AD: It seems that art, as a practice when you were growing up, was very much part of the everyday, very much part of what was going on around you rather than a separate activity. It had a social dimension. Do you think it was the notion of the sociability of art that interested you and continues to do so now?

Kamel Lazaar: Yes, that is very much part of my thinking, not only in terms of my past and the quality of art and craft in my environment as a child - which has been rapidly disappearing I am afraid to say - but also in terms of how environment shaped the art being practiced. When you see these things being made before you, it is easier to enjoy the aesthetics and the modes of expressions. In Mahdia I have attempted to revive aspects of those traditions. I have bought a small house there and brought it back to its previous glory. People come to see it so as to remember what these houses looked like. I have also created an association of artists there, some of there from the city, some from the countryside and some from Europe. They come and live there and work. Every summer, they create an exhibition and

Fayçal Baghriche, image of *Souvenir*.
Photo copyright: Didier Plowy.
View of the exhibition *La force de l'art Paris*.



Mounir Fatmi, *Save Manhattan 01*, 2004.
Table, books published after September 11, 2001, strings, spotlight.
Around 150 x 90cm.
Courtesy of the artist.
Photo: Jean-Paul Senn.



create a book. They use many of the buildings in the city, any space they can, and showcase work by regional artists which gives the city a sense of vibrancy.

AD: Whilst the Foundation itself is awaiting full instantiation in a building, it has been supporting quite a number of projects since it was set up - can you talk a little bit more about these?

Kamel Lazaar: (Laughing) I have to be reasonably careful here because some of these projects were initiated by my daughter Lina and some are still very much in process. I also like to think of these as initiatives as they have a long development and gestation period before coming to fruition. Apart from the project in Mahdia, which involves the restoration of our house and the employment of artisans to maintain traditional ways of working with it, we also have - as mentioned - a small community of artists working there. I am hoping that develops into a self-sustaining community over time. We are also developing another building in the Media region, a 15th century palace which I hope will become an additional meeting place for people from all over the region to come and develop ideas. The building itself is enormous and will take some work to restore its former glory but I also see this as an opportunity to showcase traditional artisan's work and perhaps some of our traditional craft. The Kamel Lazaar Foundation, with my daughter Lina's guidance, is also the proud custodians of an extensive collection of contemporary art from the region. We have been, I hope, very careful in our choice of work for the collection and have also encouraged artists to produce work for it where we thought there were gaps. I intend to have it completely catalogued and made available on-line for scholars and artists to use a research tool. The Foundation recently supported two long-term publishing projects, Ibraaz Publishing and Ibraaz Perspectives. Ibraaz Publishing, which is also an online research

forum that can be viewed at www.ibraaz.org, released its first publication last year, *The Future of a Promise*, which was the title of a show curated by daughter Lina Lazaar Jameel for the 54th Venice Biennial. Ibraaz Perspectives is a separate side to that venture and focuses on publishing in French theses on visual culture from the region. We have also worked with artists in the region such as Nadia Kaabi-Linke in the development of her projects and we are intending to work with more artists at the development stage in the near future as part of the Kamel Lazaar Projects, which we will pilot in association with Ibraaz. I like to think of these initiatives as a series of “small actions” that have collateral benefits that cross-pollinate one another over time. In July we will launch, in association with Ibraaz, a research initiative under the aegis of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation Projects. We are increasingly conscious that art as a practice today is research-based and very closely involved in producing different types of knowledge, and that needs support. We invited a number of artists, all outstanding in their field, to participate, including Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Michael Rakowitz, Marwa Arsanios, Ala Younis, Haig Aivazian, Slavs and Tatars, Wafaa Bilal, Amina Menia and Nadia Kaabi-Linke. This is a pilot year, but we will be adding to this list before the end of 2013.

AD: Are there other initiatives in the pipeline?

Kamel Lazaar: Again, I need to be careful here but I can say that the Foundation has recently been involved in supporting an award-winning film on Marlon Brando (which was shot in part in Tunisia) and a project with the city of Bizerte, the oldest city in Tunisia. We are also looking into a gallery for design from all over the Arab world. In this space I have envisioned, which is separate from the Foundation building, we will showcase the best design from the local and extended Arab region. With the support of Ibraaz Publishing, we will hold a series of conferences in London, Tunis, Paris, New York, Beirut, and Ramallah. There are further events planned for London (with the London Middle East Institution and the School of Oriental and African Studies, and we are working to produce a Critical Forum at Tate Modern in November, 2013). The key to that though is the appointment of a Director for the Foundation and a board of Directors or steering committee to support these initiatives and their future development.

AD: I am very taken by this notion of “small actions” and how they accumulate. Is this something of the Foundation’s philosophy behind its initiatives?

Kamel Lazaar: Again, in today’s world there seems to be a continued need for dialogue between the Middle East and the so-called Western world. Any culture, which is often more accessible than the political, can provide steps on this way without becoming

Haig Aivazian, *Reveries*, Composite #2 and #5, Preliminary study for *Reveries*.
Courtesy the artist, commissioned by the Kamel Lazaar Foundation (in association with Ibraaz).



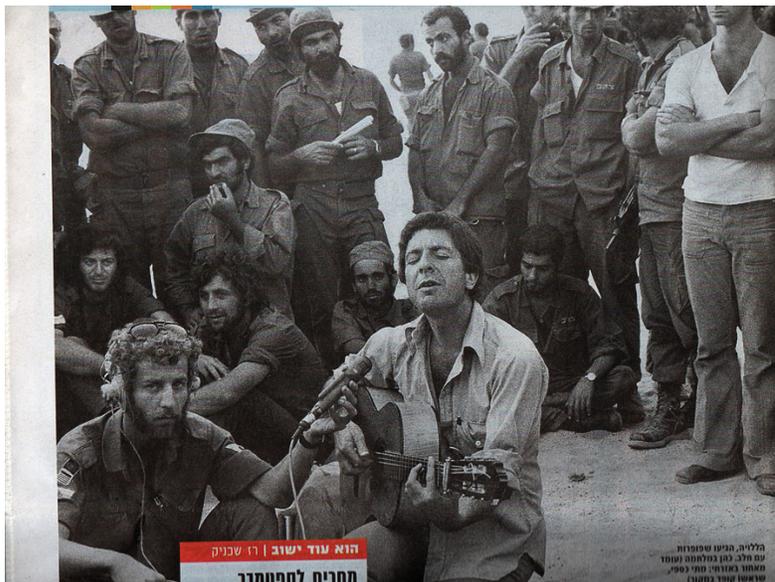
necessarily subject to the political. I am often amazed at the level of non-engagement that marks the relationship between East and West. Again, I think one of the Foundation’s functions is to generate not only cultural dialogue but to give a sense of art as a form of education that is more subtle than politics and as a form of knowledge production that addresses communities as a whole and integrates forms of thinking. There is more “common ground” between East and West, not to mention individual countries in the region than we think - I want the Foundation to exploit precisely those “common grounds” and the communities, local and international, that emerge from them.

AD: All of which returns us to where we started: we are back to an idea of art as a form of community-based activity, an environment where art is part of the community, not a form of financial investment, but a form of cultural renewal.

Kamel Lazaar: Absolutely, but this is also effectively the challenge: art as a form of community, understanding and dialogue between many people needs to be supported and made sustainable in the lives of a community and a people who share an interest in culture, both Western and Arabic. And I am very lucky in this project. My daughter Lina has been guiding me with initiatives, ideas and artists - she is the younger generation and can perpetuate this project - and my brother Adel, my alter-ego, has been magnificent in overseeing these ideas on a practical level. We have had a number of difficulties with securing a building for the Foundation which I have addressed elsewhere but for now, we are having very productive discussions about the potential to redevelop a building in Tunis and build, finally,

a world-class contemporary arts centre for Tunisia. The centre will not only house the Foundation's collection, which includes works by, amongst others, Ziad Antar, Kader Attia, Ayman Baalbaki, Yto Barrada, Ahmed Alsoudani, Mona Hatoum, Mounir Fatmi, Amel Kenawy, Walid Raad, Zineb Sedira, and Latifa Echakhch, but it will also provide a venue for residencies, workshops, conferences, and an international meeting point for artists from across the region and beyond.

Uri Dan photographer.
Copyright Michael Rakowitz. From the project *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze* by Michael Rakowitz, commissioned by the Kamel Lazaar Foundation (in association with Ibraaz).



About the author Anthony Downey

Anthony Downey is the Director of the Masters Programme in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art and the Editor of *Ibraaz*. He holds a Ph.D from Goldsmiths College, London, and sits on the editorial board of *Third Text*. He is also a Consulting Editor for *Open Space* (Vienna) and the *Open Arts Journal* (Open University, England). He is an Advisor to the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, sits on the Advisory Board of Counterpoints Arts, a forum on migration and the arts, and is a member of the Advisory Board of Pivotal Arts Studio, an organisation involved in curating creative arts projects and social change agendas. He is also a Trustee of the Maryam and Edward Eisler Foundation and the Chair of Judges for the 2013 Magic of Persia Prize.

Anthony is currently editing a volume on social media and participative practices in the Middle East and North Africa (I.B. Tauris, 2013), guest editing *Becoming Communities: Participation, Collaboration and Curatorial Practices* for a *Third Text* special issue (forthcoming 2014), and writing a book on *Art and Politics* (Thames and Hudson, forthcoming, 2014).