

ANTHONY DOWNEY

Future Imperfect:
*Focus on Visual Culture
in the Middle East*



ALAN CRUICKSHANK: *Ibraaz* launched its inaugural Platform 001 in June 2011, in response to regional developments across North Africa and the Middle East, the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ and its effects upon the visual culture of the region. In your *Ibraaz* 5th year anniversary editorial, ‘Return to the Former Middle East’,¹ you stated that this was premised by a “relatively straightforward question: what do we need to know about the MENA region today?” The objective was to understand what was happening to art practices under certain political, social, economic, and cultural conditions and how this relates to global developments. And given that these conditions of unrest, as real economic, social, historical and political facts of life, you further considered what the politics of contemporary cultural production in the Middle East can tell us about the politics of global cultural production.

Over five years, Platforms 001 to 010 have solidified into specific research collections with a number resulting in conferences and published books, including the recently published *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* (Sternberg, 2016), which stemmed from platform 007 and the *Future Imperfect: Cultural Propositions and Global Perspectives* conference held at Tate Modern, London, in late 2013; and *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Art and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, published in 2015, from Platform 006; *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practice in North Africa and the Middle East*, published in 2014, which began its development in Platform 004, the latter having been initiated in 2012. Your current Platform 010, ‘Where to Now? Shifting Regional Dynamics and Cultural Production in North Africa and the Middle East’ was imminent in a panel discussion held at the National Museum of Carthage, Tunis, in 2012, and revisits elements from all previous platforms, while also looking forward to future concerns.

In ‘Return to the Former Middle East’ you state that your latest publication, *Future Imperfect*, focuses on the condition and future of current cultural institutions in North Africa and the Middle East, with the ominous caveat that “something fundamental has occurred across the Middle East and North Africa, and it may not be entirely obvious what that is precisely, especially given the attention focused on ongoing conflicts and the legacy of the so-called Arab Spring. That something, and I will call it out for what it is, involves a *de facto* war on culture; an ongoing, prolonged, self-interested, and, in large part, fully intentional and yet incoherent assault on the very fabric of cultural institutions and those who support and work in them.” Similarly, in your introduction to *Future Imperfect*, you assert that “there is a stealthy erosion of certain rights around cultural production and freedom of expression that is having a significant impact on cultural producers and institutions. (This could also be attributed to some Western societies, if not the majority of Southeast Asia and its neighbours.) These appraisals, and a subsequent comment, “Cultural production... under the conditions of historical conflict and autocracy has always attracted... repression and suppression” (a number of texts in this issue attest to this condition) invoke clarification upon this “*de facto* war” on culture across North Africa and the Middle East.

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ANTHONY DOWNEY: It may seem dramatic to suggest that there is a campaign being fought against culture across such a diverse region, perhaps it is; nevertheless, as I explore throughout *Future Imperfect*, the erosion of certain rights—around press freedom, institutional independence, cultural production and freedom of expression—is not only having a significant impact on cultural producers and institutions but it also reveals a number of recurring anxieties about the historical development of cultural institutions and their current condition. It is the recurrence of these issues, in all their socio-political specificities and historically relative contexts, that informs this volume and its enquiry into a singular, but far from straightforward, question: if we consider cultural institutions as barometers of sorts for acknowledging and registering, if not forecasting, prevailing social, political, historical and cultural conventions, then to what extent does their current state, and the pressures placed upon them, give cause for concern when it comes to considering the status of visual culture and cultural production across the region? In order to more fully understand these issues, I commissioned, over an eighteen-month period, a number of writers, emerging and well established, to write alongside representatives from various institutions and other practitioners. Given that events were changing so rapidly on the ground, we also commissioned writers to publish online material so we could map as much of the region as possible and keep it as up-to-date. These will be published simultaneously with the book.

The thing that became apparent through this research and commissioning was the precarious state of institutions with many, such as Townhouse in Cairo and Sada in Baghdad closing over the period in question; while the *5th Çanakkale Biennial* in Turkey was cancelled three weeks before it was due to open. These are some of the more obvious elements at work here, and while it is not unusual for institutions to disband, there would appear to be a concerted attack on them in cities as diverse as Cairo, Baghdad and Istanbul. You could extend this and further ask what is happening in Baghdad, for example, which is still bereft of any meaningful support for cultural endeavour. Or what is happening in Alexandria, Tunis, or Beirut, where culture may not be overtly under attack, but it is underfunded, under-represented and undermined on a regular basis. These forms of attack take many different forms, however, from overt political pressure, to covert threats, to a general lack of funding, or the withdrawal of funding, to outright political interference.

Over the course of the last five years or so, which have witnessed unprecedented turmoil in the region, it is all the more notable, moreover, how state agencies have become more emboldened in their outright distrust of cultural producers and the institutions they represent. The political pressure placed upon, and simultaneous neglect of, cultural production has been all the more acerbated by the relative absence of private sector funding and the presence of cultural policies that reveal a disconcerting lack of legislation fit for the purpose of ensuring models of institutional engagement, stability and sustainability. Where funding does exist, in the United Arab Emirates for example, it is arguable that these projects seem less concerned with supporting cultural production—or indeed forms of community-based activities that involve education and participation—and more preoccupied with statist forms of centralised cultural management, which have largely resulted in the building of sepulchral testaments to the expansionist policies of Western institutions.

These elements, operating in tangent with political indifference (not to mention interference, no one is really consistent here) and social disaffection, creates a perfect storm of sorts that sees cultural production and the institutions that support and represent it entering into a period of outright danger and precarity. What also seemed to be at stake, as I was researching this book and its directions, was the very viability and sustainability of institutions associated with post-revolutionary or autocratic states.

In this respect, *Future Imperfect* seeks to highlight a degree of urgency that requires critical attention and a coherent response if we are to rethink the efficacy and function of cultural institutions during a time of local upheaval and global uncertainty. What, I also wanted to ask, would an alliance of cultural producers and institutions—capable of navigating these treacherous waters—look like and do such models already exist? It is within these frames of reference that the volume sought to propose a variety of potential survival mechanisms and suggestions for how institutions could reinvent their operational dialectics and formal function in a time when they are increasingly viewed as part of an endemic, if not systemic, crisis in the way in which art is produced, viewed, disseminated and exchanged.

More specifically, the first section of *Future Imperfect* looked at regional contexts, alongside the historical forms of antagonism that exist between cultural institutions and political repression, and the second section examines how institutions can learn, through both informal methods and formal critique, from cultural producers and critical art practices. This is to recall how art practices, from the mid-1960s onwards, have consistently challenged traditional institutional systems of archiving, curation, display and dissemination. I found this to be a very productive approach: how can practice inform the development and long-term sustainability of institutions? The forms of “institutional critique” evident throughout the volume therefore refer to the specific circumstances of cultural institutions in the region, and, perhaps more importantly, how such practices can present methods for articulating speculative institutional futures. What potential, we asked, is there in critical art practices when it comes to engaging with these processes, and how can they propose a degree of resistance, if not radical, constructive forms of critique, to global cultural economies that would have, in turn, a degree of relevance to the long-term sustainability and short-term functioning of cultural institutions in the Middle East?

Apart from the imminent need to consider the historical contexts out of which this current state of affairs has emerged, and how cultural production has engaged with these frames of reference, the instrumentalisation of cultural production so that it answers to a global cultural economy was likewise a key element here. Globalisation, in conjunction with the neoliberal policies that enable its predominance, not only produces rampant forms of “uneven development” but also co-opts cultural economies into the realm of a privatised, overtly politicised ethic of production, exchange and consumption. It was with these points in mind that the final section of *Future Imperfect* enquires into how the emphasis being placed on so-called “mega-museums” and forms of “soft power”, in the GCC states (Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman) in particular, have affected the future evolution of cultural institutions in the region. While these processes are particularly notable in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, they are also, as we will see, a substantial feature of cultural developments in Istanbul and other Middle Eastern cities.

AC: In ‘Return to the Former Middle East’ and other texts, you queried the institutional and critical legitimacy of the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution and challenged the “profound level of cynicism... made manifest in the forms of curatorial opportunism... Revolution, uprisings, internecine warfare, civil conflict, and human rights, all of these points of reference have been deployed in an intensification of interest in the region and the coextensive demand that culture either condemns or defends such notions. Within these contexts, institutions often co-opt the radicality of practice...”, with the condemnation, “where better to start a career than to show art from a conflict zone—and the avid marketisation of artists from the region?”

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In 2012 I presented in Australia the symposium *Shifting Sands*, (coincidentally, many of its ten visitors are contributors to *Ibraaz* as well as *Future Imperfect*), its prevailing context being the comparison it sought to present of the then collective socio-cultural, historical and political issues affecting art and artists from North Africa and the Middle East, with the ‘Australian condition’. Though geographically removed Australia has tangible connectivity with the region, predominantly through its military and immigration histories—Australia’s then military participation in Iraq and Afghanistan, following that of Egypt, Libya, Turkey, Palestine, Jordan and Syria in both World Wars; the exodus of Lebanese citizens due to the 1975-1991 civil war and the “30,000 Australian citizens” stranded in Lebanon during the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel; refugees from post-1991 regional conflicts; and the then Gillard government’s 2012 abstention from voting for Palestinian territories being granted observer status at the United Nations, Australia having been elected a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Whereas artists in general in Australia can be seen to be essentially market/career focused in an established safety-net infrastructure of extensive government and private cultural sponsorship (unencumbered by the anxieties and turmoil experienced in countries mentioned here), artists from the MENA region operate within an environment charged by multiple layers of historical and contemporary concerns that on the surface, and from a removed perspective (Australia for example), would seem to deny or query the pursuit of art making, having one would presume personal, family and community security and futures utmost in mind. Yet within this cataclysm of regional turmoil artists continue to make art and organisations continue to present it, without (mostly) those multiple levels of support enjoyed in Australia. During the life of this project I was very circumspect about what I had identified as international “curatorial opportunism” of “the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution”.

Given that there is, as you note throughout your Introduction to *Future Imperfect*, the danger that visual culture from the region being legitimised through the media-friendly symbolism of conflict and a globally-inclined market-driven interest in artistic production, the role that art criticism might play in producing a more rigorous system of analysing, critiquing and archiving cultural production across the MENA region could here be examined, as could the notion of a neutral position for critique.

AD: This is indeed complex, both in terms of the question and the response. To begin with, the “rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution” that I refer to is part of a larger paradigm in contemporary visual culture where misery and conflict sells and there’s money to be made in poverty (especially images of it). But let us begin with the specificity of the region: if artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events, and who is to say they should not, we need to remain alert to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices. Revolution, uprisings, internecine warfare, civil conflict and human rights, all of these points of reference have been deployed in an intensification of interest in the region and the coextensive demand that culture either condemns or defends such events and notions. Again, this is an international rather than provincial concern, inasmuch as there remains the ever-present interpretive danger that visual culture from the region is legitimised through the media-friendly symbolism of conflict—the latter rubric being redolent of colonial ambitions to prescribe the culture of the Middle East to a set of problems that revolve around conflict and extremist ideology. Such concerns, voiced in the wake of uprisings across the region, remind us that colonial paradigms are not only far from defunct, but easily resuscitated through an evolving neo-colonial preoccupation with topics such as an (apparently) irresolvable form of atavistic conflict brought about by an equally irredeemable strain of dogmatic and sectarian extremism.



What interests me here is what the politics of critical analysis, in relation to regional cultural production, tells us about the global politics of cultural production and criticism. There are a number of key areas to explore here: globalisation and the forces of neoliberalism, capital accrual, financial and curatorial speculation, and how these three areas intersect with critical discourse. A significant number of artists make work about the detrimental effects of globalisation, for example, and these works inevitably find their way into one or other of the key institutional agents of globalisation. By agents of globalisation, I am referring here to the biennial or the triennial. We could also include here the next museum show about “borders”, “revolution”, “civil unrest”, “refugees”, or “migration”; or the next residency in (or from) a so-called Third World country—all are institutionally defined practices that are associated with the global spread of contemporary art. In this context, contemporary art practices (especially when they take on the politics of globalisation) have arguably become indivisible from the very forces of globalisation that they ostensibly set out to critique—this is a potent contradiction, nowhere more so than in the Middle East. If we were to map the development of such processes over the last two decades or so, in geopolitical terms, we could likewise map globalisation and its sinuous channels of transnational territorialisation, with the Middle East having a prominent role to play (and perform) in this conceptual and, in some cases, literal land grab. Curators, critics and artists figure here as quasi-anthropologists—the privileged agents who map and legitimise this brave new globalised world; while the biennial or newly built museum (consider what is happening in Gulf States presently), becomes one of the key nodal points around which the imperatives of global capital coagulates.

Secondly, contemporary art as an asset class has also become a key commodity in the circulation of capital. Apart from base capital accrual, art as an alternative asset class is evident in the nomenclature surrounding emerging markets (emerging in relation to what exactly?) and the spectre of cultural gentrification as a form of property-based speculation. Consider this: a third of hedge funds, the shock troops of neoliberal speculation, are now investing in art as a so-called diversified asset. The very ideal of the speculative aspect of contemporary art, and its tendency to reimagine potential forms of engagement, has been co-opted (willingly it seems) into the scope of territorialising capital—this is a continued and imminent danger when we consider art from the Middle East and how it is co-opted, curatorially and materially, into a global cultural economy. Art as a form of speculative visual narrative here becomes a form of speculative transaction, whereby the financial element of its exchange is not extraneous to the value of art but embedded in the very apparatus that validates its institutional, critical and conceptual meanings. It may be a tad simplistic to say that the speculative nature of art—its tendency to rethink horizons of potential engagement—has segued into a form of financial speculation, but we arrive here at a fundamental question: who actually benefits from the *work* of art? A further perhaps more important question is thereafter all the more clear-cut: can art *work* to benefit the object of its speculation? Can the refugee, dispossessed, disenfranchised, or the revolutionary, or the social activist, benefit from the *work* of art?

Which brings us, finally, to art criticism. Forget about the failure of art criticism, a hoary chestnut if there ever was one, and let us consider the wholesale co-option of art criticism into an ethos that can be only understood as secular, neoliberal fantasy that often works in tangent with the processes just outlined. The language of criticism—marginalisation, globality, transnationalism, biopolitics, refugees, statelessness, precarity—contains terms that are valid in their own right, as critical paradigms, but such terms, when used uncritically as props for so-called “engaged” criticism, often merely re-enforce a linguistic economy of neoliberal thought that adheres to sketchy notions of democracy, freedom, morality, liberty, equality, human rights, ethics, Western humanism and secularism.

We see this again and again in critiques of cultural production in the Middle East and we need to ask simple questions here: What is this liberal secularism we all seem to abide by, whose interests are being served in the advocacy of human rights, democracy, freedom, and liberty; and whose ethics are we talking about? What passes for Western humanism and democratic secularism, in these debates, largely betrays an often ill-concealed contempt for those who refuse the ascendant logic of neoliberalism. The broader concern here is all the more evident: what has happened to visual culture—its reception, dissemination and management—in the aftermath of global financial upheaval, regional conflict, civil war, and revolution and how has it been co-opted (and neutralised) by institutional, financial, critical, political, and apparently well-meaning organisations looking to ‘support’ culture in the region. Has culture become increasingly sidelined or, conversely, all the more instrumentalised by political and economic forces across the Middle East? Moreover, if cultural production has become complicit in the accumulation of capital—be it cultural, private, economic or social—as a result of neoliberalism, global forms of gentrification and the relative absence of state and private funding, how might we explore the potential for productive cultural alliances that can effectively address these concerns? A central tenet to this enquiry is a reflexive consideration of what art criticism’s role is in these processes: is there, I would ask, a neutral position for critique and how do we rethink the institutionalisation, instrumentalisation, and commercialisation of cultural production while also critiquing our own complicity, as cultural producers, in this process?

Finally, when we apply critical thinking, in these contexts, we must ask what assumptions are being considered when critical paradigms that foreground conflict and revolution become the prism through which we view cultural production. Whose interests are being served by a global cultural economy that thrives on such images and hermeneutic methodologies? When it comes to discussing cultural production in the early part of the twenty-first century, are alternative forms of knowledge production available to cultural practitioners and artists alike? That is key for me in my research: are there different ways of thinking about these issues; different heuristic forms and different pedagogical approaches? Apart from epistemological questions on the subject of knowledge production I am interested here in who is producing this knowledge, how is it utilised, and to what end. Whose interests, in sum, are being served in the moment of producing knowledge about the Middle East? And if we, as cultural producers, neglect—for whatever reason (be it short-sightedness or self-interest)—to at least pose these issues and questions in advance of our critical engagement with forms of cultural production from across the Middle East then we are, at best, ill-advised and careless, and, at worse, complicit with the very forces we assume we are critiquing—be it neocolonial attitudes towards the region, or the inequities wrought by neoliberal doctrine and globalisation—and thereafter, invariably, we are part of the problem and need to admit as much.

AC: In your essay ‘Beyond the Former Middle East: Aesthetics, Civil Society and the Politics of Representation’ for the first *Ibraaz* Platform in 2001, in the hopeful context that a new order, an ‘Arab Spring’, might emerge in the coming years from events at the time, you paraphrased Stephen Dedalus’ musings in *Ulysses* that history may yet turn out to be the nightmare from which we are trying to awake, a caution extended in your *Future Imperfect* Introduction that the future, as Louis Althusser once observed, lasts a long time. You’ve revealed that the essence of the idea for *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* originated in a conference held in London in late 2013, where it became apparent that the very ideal of “the future” in the Middle East as a concept was problematic. This query was already present in ‘Beyond the Former Middle East...’,

whether the world was then looking at the emergence of, through the prism of visual culture, a ‘former’ Middle East, and if new geographical, social, political, economic, religious and historical frames of reference necessitated the rejection of the very term. Given these considerations, it’s worth noting that 2016 is the centenary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement and 2017 the Balfour Declaration, both cataclysmic assertions that crudely carved up the region into colonial subplots. Colonialism, for want of a better distinction, more or less kept post-WW1 demarcations in check until the Cold War incised additional fault lines, a disunion that remained apparent until the rise of Islamic fundamentalism through the Iranian Revolution and its consequences. Now both Dedalus’ musings and Althusser’s observations would seem to be in play.

The premise that art and artists emerged in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring is a conceit not wholly acknowledged by the West. Its visual culture, similar to that of Chinese contemporary art since the 1980s, has been mediated principally by Western paradigms of presentation, collection, marketing and critical discourse, if not more (conditions to which you’ve just referred to at length). The Middle East’s futures it would seem are proliferate with both real and projected dangers.

AD: The events of 2010 and their complex unfolding are still being played out across the region and, with the advent of the so-called migrant crisis, within Europe and beyond. Revolution, uprisings and unrest, in our globalised age, can only ever have an extended geopolitical reach and the shock waves are still resounding and will do for some time. One of the more positive elements to emerge from this period, albeit one that needs qualification, was an unprecedented upsurge in cultural activity. There has been, and continues to be, an exuberant degree of activity around cultural production that has seen cultural practitioners expanding on the notion of art as a practice and its relationship to the realm of the public and the political. These activities continue to make a significant impact on political and social debates within and beyond the region and need, if not institutional support (given the often compromised state of institutional support and the contingent forms of co-option associated with them), then critical acknowledgment and provisions made for sustaining such activities, be they individual or collective in their practice. We are, of course, still in the very early stages of what has been a seismic historical shift in terms of cultural production within the region but the one element that is recurrent and central to these discussions has been the role of cultural practices and their engagement with issues around historical consciousness, artistic movements, political and social debates, cultural narratives, new media, digital archiving, activism, civil society, public space, globalisation and institution building.

Underwriting these considerations, there lies an attendant concern with how North Africa and the Middle East, as a diverse political, social and cultural entity, can be potentially more fully understood in terms of its relationships to the Global South rather than the often opaque prism of an East/West dichotomy. This has led me to consider other research questions for future volumes of our *Visual Culture in the Middle East* series—not least an enquiry into how a globalised cultural economy has affected the production of contemporary visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East—and how they could be developed more fully. Again, this is a decisive consideration if we are to blast open historically ossified and interpretively reductive paradigms of interpretive analysis and further re-consider how we might productively map the historical and contemporary relationships that exist between North Africa, the Middle East and the Global South.

Note

¹ I would like to acknowledge the collective writings of Anthony Downey informing my observations and queries; see the full text at <http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/159/>; for *Future Imperfect* see <http://www.ibraaz.org/publications/73>