

Towards A Culture of Critique in the Visual Arts of the Gulf Region

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There is no doubt that Middle Eastern art is on the rise abroad, with terms like ‘Saudi Art’, ‘Arab Art’, and even ‘Art of the Arab Spring’ quickly becoming buzzwords. A number of exhibitions dedicated to contemporary art from the region have opened at international institutions including The New Museum and LACMA, and the 2015 Armory Show has a MENAM focus. It’s clear that due to a combination of Orientalism and the Western media’s love of stereotypes, the region and its art are still very much in the “Subaltern other” camp (just look back to the war zone of a region depicted in Houston at the FotoFest 2014 Biennial Arab Exhibitions for a good example). While it’s exciting to observe interest in the region’s art picking up momentum, it’s regrettable that with a few rare exceptions, the artists are always referred to in the media chiefly as Middle Eastern or Arab artists rather than simply as artists. This practice keeps them trapped in a box and prevents the region, and specifically the Gulf from being viewed as a global art hub.

Closer to home, auction houses with a presence in the region including Christie’s and Sotheby’s have announced strong results for 2014, a sign that the market has bounced back from the crash and is on the up and up. The continued strength of Mathaf in Doha and Sharjah Art Foundation bolstered by the construction of the Louvre, Guggenheim, and Zayed National Museum as part of the Saadiyat Cultural District, firmly establishes the Gulf as a centre of top-notch institutions. Art Dubai and Abu Dhabi Art continue to expand with each edition, while Alserkal Avenue is set to double in size by the end of the year and stands as a sign that the gallery scene in Dubai is stable and growing in the right direction. While these are all positive developments, an increased culture of critique within the visual arts is needed now if the artists, galleries, and institutions want to grow to stand shoulder to shoulder with international greats.

The Argument for Criticism

All too often, the blandly enthusiastic words, “good job” are thrown out to artists and curators at openings without any qualifying praise or constructive suggestions. The excuse is often made that the region’s art scene is still emerging, and as a result, criticizing young galleries, fairs, or artists will have a debilitating effect, similar to punishing a child for not knowing how to ride a two-wheeler before he’s even mastered skipping. However, if one goes with the commonly accepted timeline that the region’s market first gained momentum with the inaugural Christie’s sale in Dubai in 2006, then the scene is inching towards a decade next year—hardly a new kid on the block anymore by anyone’s standards, least of all in countries that have accomplished so much in less than five decades of independence.

There’s also the cultural explanation—typically offered by expats rather than those who are actually from the Gulf—which suggests that publicly criticizing someone’s work goes against local cultural norms and is even against the law. It is necessary to quash that

argument here by clarifying that criticism is not a personal attack, slander or rant, nor is it necessarily negative in nature. Criticism can also appear in the form of detailed, objective praise or discussion, through mentoring relationships, patronage, or in interactions between artists. The very word, as the prolific critic Dore Ashton once clarified for her readers, originates from *'kritikos'* in Ancient Greek, which translates as, “to talk about” not “to judge”.

In fact, speaking one's true mind through criticism has manifold roots in the region. Perhaps the best example can be found by taking a look at the formal training of the calligrapher. Arabic calligraphy, which is the most traditional artistic medium to the Gulf, is based around a healthy and detailed culture of critique between master and novice, with the master judging and correcting everything from the curve of the letters to the flow of the brush, and only signing a certificate authorizing his student to practice independently once he is satisfied that the novice's technique is deserving.

Is Criticism Dying Out Worldwide?

In order to persuasively argue for the need for critique in the visual arts in the region, it is important to examine the history of critique in general and the state of criticism today on a global scale.

Kerr Houston provides a fantastic overview of the birth of the genre of criticism in “*An Introduction to Art Criticism*”, pointing out through examples that criticism first originated with the writing of Jonathan Richardson in the 1700's who developed a scorecard for evaluating a work of art, a task that was far more straightforward in the era of landscape paintings, then it could ever be today. The emergence of regular art exhibitions as a form of culture for the middle class public, led to the popularity of pamphlets bought for a few coins and distributed widely on the streets of European cities then debated heatedly in art salons beginning in the mid-1700's. This format evolved into newspaper critiques with readers waiting for a writer's weekly column. Until the widespread emergence of the Internet, such critics had the power to make or break artists' careers (in a similar vain as Michelin reviewers steer the trajectory of a chef), but now their power is generally waning.

In his short book, “*What Happened To Art Criticism?*” the historian and critic James Elkins suggests, “Art criticism is massively produced and massively ignored.” The chapter containing the above quote is pessimistically titled “Art Criticism: Writing Without Readers”. Citing the ever-expanding number of online art platforms and the lack of established academic training for art critics, Elkins says that we are living at a time in which there are more critics and written resources on art than ever before, yet fewer dedicated readers than any other era.

Based on Elkins' theory, is it possible to argue that the only thing necessary to become an art critic is a consistently solid readership? What critical mass of readers makes up that magic number? With most regional publications and platforms purchasing fake likes of

social media and not offering transparent subscriber stats, it is nearly impossible to discern an actual number of genuine and active readers. Consequently, the media, academy, market, and perhaps most importantly—the artists themselves— need to develop a new framework for evaluating to whom the title of “critic” even applies to and if that title should demand an elite education or could be awarded to the art blogger with the most Instagram followers.

Critique and Pricing

Dianne Brown, a Dubai-based art consultant who tracks artists’ practices, studies pricing and keeps tabs on art market trends for a number of high-profile collectors, believes that an objective critique that grounds work in the broader global context is essential, noting, “This plays into the economics of the art market. Art pricing is supposed be based on context—not just the artist’s product... So the art critique is important to the artist, to the artist’s representative or gallery, and to the artist’s immediate community because a true art critique shows where they all sit in the broader global art world.”

If artists are only patted on the back and never productively questioned, and if the prices for their work continue to start unrealistically high, a rude awakening is sure to follow the first time she or he participates in a residency and is critiqued by an instructor or peers. Galleries that do not welcome constructive evaluation on pricing and programming will likely have a challenging time gaining invitation to or success at competitive fairs like Art Basel or Frieze. While magazines and newspapers that only present exhibitions as though viewed through a worn pair of rose tinted spectacles will never be viewed as objective and authentic by the greater art world.

Critique in the Media

In a 2012 opinion piece for *What’s On*, Meem Gallery Founder and art historian Charles Pocock called for more transparent, educated criticism from the region’s journalists, writing: “What is needed more than anything else is a responsible media that is more critical. When it comes to the work, a tougher media is required – open criticism is urgently required, and the role of the art critic must develop. If an exhibition contains work that is weak, this should be highlighted and discussed, and on the other hand, when great work is exhibited, it should be celebrated.” Though this piece rattled some cages, sadly, little to no change has taken place since the date of Pocock’s publication.

While there are many writers covering the art scene in regional newspapers in both Arabic and English, few of them ever offer any public critique. The writing tends towards description, interpretation, and interviews, with many editors flat out refusing to publish a balanced (much less a negative) review. Because the art community is an insulated ecosystem, it is risky for a writer to honestly critique a show, as a shunning by the community can have serious impact on his or her reputation as well as financial situation. With the going rate for art-related writing for print publications in the region at a small

average rate per word, writers rely on art galleries and institutions for commissioned jobs, sometimes sacrificing neutrality for the sake of paying the electric bill and keeping the AC running through the summer. Writers need to stop exercising self-censorship out of fear of stepping on toes and losing business, and some editors need to stop pandering to the galleries advertising on their glossy pages and realize that readers are clever enough to discern the difference between a public relations promotion piece and an unbiased review.

Globally, there are more than 70 chapters of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) an exclusive membership based non-for profit organization representing around 4,000 art critics. Yet sadly none of the member-nations are located in the Gulf, with the closest geographical chapter based in Lebanon. In addition to nurturing a culture of critical discourse with sound methodological praxis, AICA also vocally opposes “arbitrary censorship” of writers and visual artists, and defends freedom of expression. It is impossible for the Gulf to grow to be viewed abroad as a global art hub, without a formal professional organization of talented individuals who can work together to further define the vocation of art criticism.

Writers should commit to balanced transparency and take steps to charter a Gulf chapter of the AICA to further substantiate regional publications and opinions, and give regional voices equal clout as international voices. For this to happen, readers, artists, and galleries will need to take an increased sense of pride in local and regional Arabic and English press and give well-worded reviews as much prestige as a coveted 300 word mention in *Artforum*.

Critique in the Classroom

At highly ranked visual arts schools in North America, students are almost uniformly subjected to what is called, The Crit, an established rigorous (and at times even soul-numbing) public group critique of their work by both professors and peers, a process which causes artists to emerge from the academy with a clear artistic statement, a thick skin for rejection, and the natural need to either formally or informally collaborate with one another. For an excellent window into this process, re-read Sarah Thornton’s chapter in the classic “*Seven Days in The Art World*” in which Thornton sits in on Michael Asher’s Crit Class at the California Institute of the Arts.

Visual Arts programs at the undergraduate and graduate level are on the rise in the Gulf, but the teaching style tends to shy away from The Crit and lean more heavily on rote memorization and sheltered experimentation. It’s not necessary to impose western pedagogy, yet some other framework is needed to empower students to grow with both confidence and humility to become the next generation of artists who do not react with indignation to well-intentioned criticism, but actually welcome it as a chance to grow.

Roberto Lopardo, who currently serves as Director of Cuadro Gallery, is an artist and former Director of Visual Communication at American University in Dubai who keeps

one foot in academia. Lopardo beautifully boils down the need for critique in the Gulf to two simple questions: “The bottom line of what we are really talking about is the question of ‘*How do we make artwork better? How do we raise the bar?*’” With this kind of inclusive definition at hand, it seems that everyone in our community has a logical and ethical responsibility to encourage critique on the ground.

-Danna Lorch