

'But There Is no Word for Installation in Arabic...' Teaching Exhibition Development in Qatar

by Dr. Karen Exell

Dr. Karen Exell is Lecturer, Museum Studies & Degree Coordinator, MA Museum and Gallery Practice at University College London, Qatar, Doha. She may be contacted at k.exell@ucl.ac.uk.

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Earlier this year two exhibitions opened in Qatar's capital city of Doha: *Ana Arabi? (Am I Arab?)* at the Katara Art Center, and *Is the Sea a Woman?* at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.¹ The exhibitions were the product of an intensive three month process of exhibition-making, taught as part of the MA in Museum and Gallery Practice at UCL Qatar, which I direct. Over the previous two years of teaching the programme, two issues have emerged that have influenced my teaching: the role of international best practice in an emerging field and how this is adopted, negotiated, and adapted—or not—to the local context; and how museums and their work are culturally and conceptually understood in the region. Overall what is clear is that a programme as culturally-rooted as museum studies cannot be introduced to another culture without addressing issues of cultural translation. This essay will focus on the teaching of exhibition making within the MA in Museum and Gallery Practice and the challenges and opportunities that exist in this area in Qatar.

The Context for Teaching Exhibition-Making in Qatar

Qatar, the tiny, super-wealthy Gulf state located on a peninsula in the Arabian Gulf, has received extensive international media attention in response to the opening of the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA; 2008)² and Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (2010).³ These museums are overseen by the cultural body, Qatar Museums (QM), established as Qatar Museums Authority in 2005. This initiative was part of a policy of international visibility and diplomacy of the father Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin

Khalifa Al Thani. Both museums utilise a Eurocentric exhibitionary method and visual language—for example, at Mathaf the interior space follows the tradition of the 'white cube' gallery, a homogenising aesthetic serving the universal modernist artistic discourse (Weibel, 2007). These new international museums are dramatic, formal spaces presenting disciplinary narratives of Islamic, modern, and contemporary (Arab) art and are yet to take root in Qatari culture conceptually or socially; they are western-style museums rather than locally produced institutions (Exell, 2014a).⁴

In 2011, University College London (UCL)⁵ established a branch campus on Doha's Education City campus with a remit to deliver postgraduate teaching and research in cultural heritage, an area in which UCL excels through the work of its Institute of Archaeology. The MA in Museum and Gallery Practice is a 12 month intensive programme balancing theory and practice whilst attempting to embed this in, and respond to, the local context (Exell, 2013). One of the central elements of the degree is the curation of an exhibition, a student-led project that runs through the second semester and results in an exhibition in one of Qatar's cultural institutions. The taught element covers aspects of exhibition making, such as the concept-development-implementation project structure, audiences and communication, evaluation, developing an online presence and writing text for exhibitions. Alongside this the students develop their project, managed through a series of structured meetings with me, and a weekly student-led project meeting. They are given either a collection or topic, and a space, and are tasked with

creating a project team which will then develop and implement an exhibition, drawing on the wider philosophies and theories of museums taught in the first semester and the practical aspects of exhibition making taught as part of this module. The final project exhibition has an opening event and associated programming which runs as part of the host institutions' events programme. The emphasis is on professional best practice, from developing institutional relationships to project management and teamwork.

Challenges of Cultural Translation

Generic and specific challenges have emerged in the teaching of exhibition making in Qatar. Generic challenges include team work dynamics and different levels of engagement with the project, which can result in tensions that affect the participants and project. I will focus on the challenges arising from the specific local context. These derive from the innovative nature of a student exhibition project in a region where large-scale museum investment and the teaching of museum studies is new, and from the differing cultural understanding of the exhibition project's nature, aims, and content.

The cohort in both years has been international, with Qatari Nationals alongside students from as far afield as China, Poland, and the US. This discussion focuses on the response to the teaching of the Qatari students in each year's cohort, as this is the country for and in which the teaching is being developed. In Qatar most exhibitions are lavishly funded and have a strong international element, such as the recent retrospective of Damien Hirst (*Relics*;



Students and participants in the workshop conducted as part of the Is the Sea a Woman? exhibition opening at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, April 2014. Courtesy of Lesley Gray.

10 October 2013-22 January 2014), or exhibitions such as *Hajj: Journey through Art* at MIA (9 October 2013-5 January 2014), curated with the British Museum. Exhibition-making relies on extensive outsourcing to consultants, and this practice means that many Qatari museum staff gain limited hands-on experience. The Qatari students in the groups, many of whom are QM staff, initially assumed that expertise would be bought to undertake certain tasks, despite the limited project budget (QAR14,500; around \$4,000). Working within a budget encourages a creative response to the requirements of an exhibition and is a central shaping element of many projects in the rest of the world, but has not until recently been something that needed to be considered in the world's wealthiest country. Another element to consider is that in Qatar the focus of exhibitions is often the VIP opening; the dramatic drop-off in visitor numbers thereafter is well-known. The students expressed anxiety about the catering and other elements of their exhibition openings which may seem a superficial concern, but in the region the quality of a public event in terms of presentation and hospitality has an enormous social impact. In my approach, I have attempted to shift the locus of value from the event to the process and

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Traditional dhow-boats with the new high rise development of West Bay, Doha, in the distance. Photograph by Karen Exell.



The Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. Photograph by Karen Exell.

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content, and to encourage the students to develop an holistic understanding of all aspects of exhibition-making. These have been sites of negotiation in both years that the student exhibition project has run, and this experience has helped me to gain a better understanding of aspects of Qatari culture and professional practice, whilst allowing the Qatari students to develop an increased understanding of the creative potential of their own practice.

In the wake of post-modernity and new museological approaches with their focus on community participation and shared authority, the traditional, didactic museum model in operation in Qatar at MIA, Qatar's flagship museum, is regarded by many in other parts of the world as outdated. In addition, this mode of display and interpretation does not engage Qatari Nationals (see Erskine-Loftus 2013), but when Qatari students have been asked to develop alternative approaches that spoke to their interests, they have initially lacked the confidence to contradict the authority of the museum. Qatari culture requires that authority go unquestioned; museums are regarded as offering truths, not interpretations. In addition, in Qatar, a conservative Muslim country, "interpretation" can be associated with the Qur'an, which can only be interpreted by highly-trained religious experts with the required authority. In the context of museums, the term means the practice of using various methods to communicate a subject to a defined audience, who might also input into the interpretation in a dialogic process. Students assigned the role of Interpretation in the exhibition project have expressed confusion each year in relation to the meaning of "interpretation" as they saw no creative space between the object presented, and the text (or other medium) referring to it; this was regarded as description, not interpretation. Such cultural and conceptual differences constantly reshape the emphases of teaching, as close attention is required to understand where the student response is coming from culturally, and if and when to guide this position towards a more western approach, i.e. how much criticality to introduce into a culture that operates on an alternative model of

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authority with knowledge transmission based on respect for authority.

Creative Engagements Beyond the White Cube

The two exhibitions curated by the students in 2014 were the result of collaboration among all participants, so cannot be assessed as purely Qatari productions, but they were certainly shaped by the Qatari students and the Qatari context, and this context also shaped their reception. *Ana Arabi?* at the Katara Art Center, displaying modern Middle Eastern art, surprised the audience with the creative choice of works and use of space and colour—the works were densely hung, and one wall was painted black, forming a dramatic backdrop. *Is the Sea a Woman?* at Mathaf was an experiential response to the exhibition on show in the main galleries, *Etel Adnan in all her Dimensions* (18 March–6 July 2014), locally recontextualising Adnan's themes of language and the sea as a feminine entity. The exhibition drew the visitor through an entranceway lined with quotations from Adnan's poetry in Arabic and English, illuminated with video and sound installations of the sea around Qatar and Qatari poetry, and invited visitors to share their own stories and poetry in the exhibition space and online. Through the experience of the Masters programme, the students gained the confidence to go beyond Qatar's traditional exhibitionary discourse, exploring the multiple forms an exhibition can take, and implementing their own ideas and interpretations. In this process the Qatari students progressed from asking, for example, "Is this the correct information for the label?" to discussing

what kind of information would be useful in the context of the particular audience and theme. There was a shift in understanding exhibitions as information disseminators to regarding them as contextual experiences which did not necessarily challenge more orthodox authorities in other contexts.

One thing to note is that the learning experience of the exhibition module



Listening to oral histories at the Is the Sea a Woman? exhibition at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, April 2014. Courtesy of Lesley Gray.

extended beyond the classroom to the institutions that we have worked with, with one significant process deserving a mention: evaluation. Evaluation is central to many western museums where audience responses and visitor numbers are connected to funding and

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We must consider the nature of the soil in which a practice is being sown, and how that soil might creatively reshape a practice.

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Students Michailangelos Vlassis-Ziakas and Alkindi Aljawabrah de-installing the Arabic wall text from the Ana Arabi? exhibition at the Katara Art Center, May 2014. Courtesy of Alkindi Aljawabrah.

institutional sustainability. Qatar's wealth and the nature of its museums as tools of international diplomacy has meant that visitor engagement has not been central. The Masters students carry out front-end, formative and summative evaluation as training in best-practice. The host institutions have expressed enormous interest in this process and results, and evaluation is beginning to be implemented.

A nuanced, Socratic approach is needed when teaching practices whose concepts and philosophical underpinnings may be culturally alien to some of the students.

End Notes:

¹Katara Art Center: <http://www.kataraartcenter.com/>; Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art: <http://www.mathaf.org.qa/en/>; The student exhibition website containing information on the exhibition projects is <http://uclqurates.squarespace.com/>

²Museum of Islamic Art: <http://www.mia.org.qa/en/>

³The first Qatar National Museum opened in 1975, and has been closed since 1996; the new National Museum of Qatar will open in 2016 in a building designed by the architect Jean Nouvel.

⁴A locally created museum does exist, the private Sheikh Faisal Bin Qassim Al Thani Museum, which presents collections, displays, and a world view of a very local and particular sort (see Exell, 2014b, 2014c-in press).

⁵UCL, established in 1826, is a large interdisciplinary university located in central London.

This minimizes the danger of the teaching becoming another form of rote learning devoid of meaning (Bourdieu, 2002), and takes into account the impact of encouraging critical reflective practice within a culture that may not comfortably accommodate this. Ultimately, it is essential to consider critically the culture in which a museum is operating and how the normative professionalism of museum practice will be received and interpreted (see Kreps, 2003). In other words we must consider the nature of the soil in which a practice is being sown, and how that soil might creatively reshape a practice. *