Present Progressive: Speculations On Cultural Imagination In The Middle East

What do recent accounts of institutional cultural practice in the Middle East offer to further the understanding and the development of contemporary cultural production in the region, and what do they fail to address? Lama Suleiman reviews the latest volume in the ongoing Ibraaz publication series on visual culture in the Middle East and North Africa

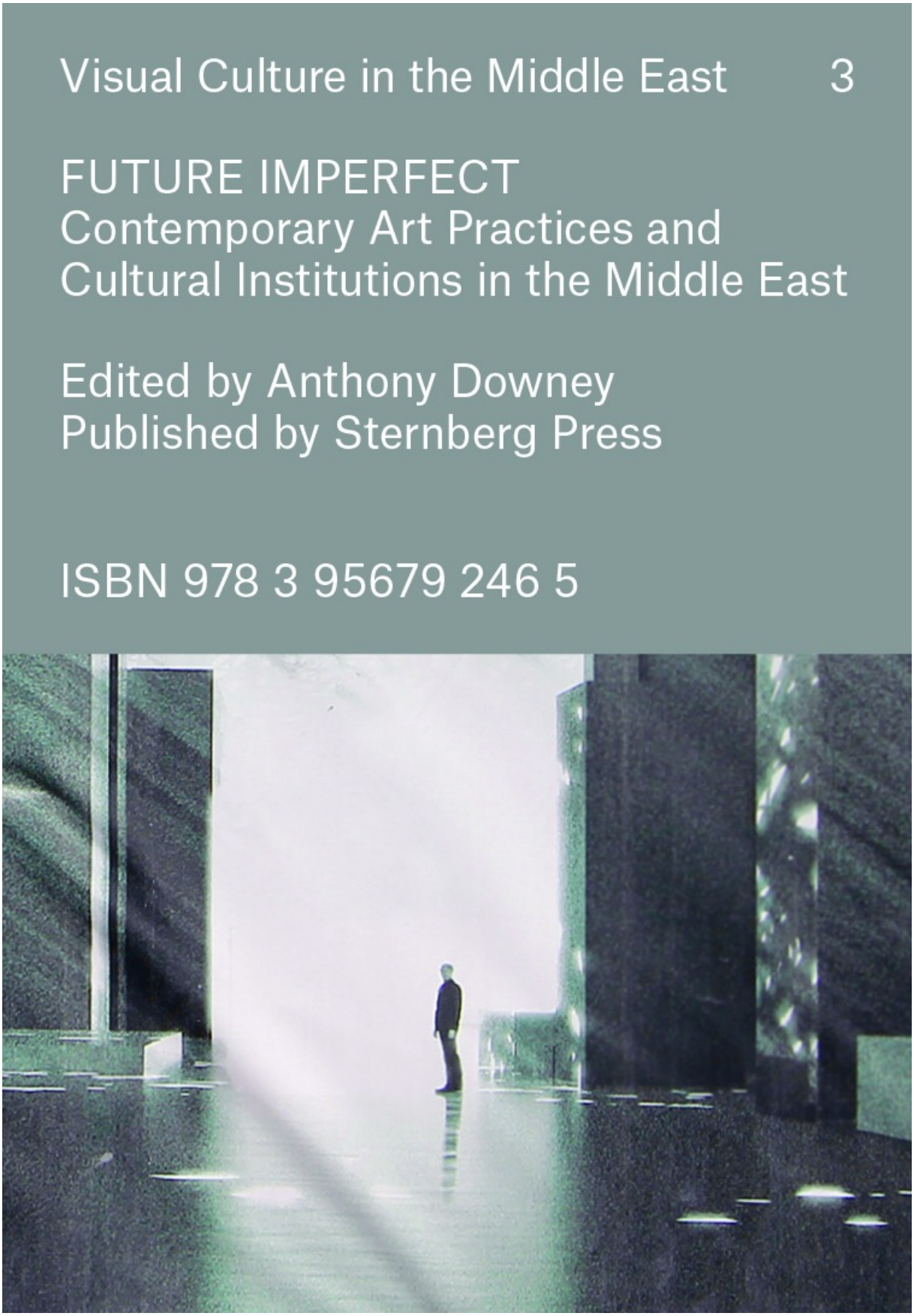
Review / Lama Suleiman August 13, 2017

Anthony Downey (Ed.), *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, Visual Culture in the Middle East Vol. 3, Berlin: Ibraaz and Sternberg Press, 2016, 430 pages.

Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East (2016) is the third publication by Ibraaz in a series discussing cultural practices and socio-political realities across the Middle East. The volume is a large collection of essays that investigate the ways in which culture has been and is being produced within different historical contexts in the Arab world (Morocco, Algeria, Cairo, Beirut, Palestine, Baghdad, Istanbul, Yemen, and the Gulf states), and how cultural institutions in the region are structured by and have become coercively adherent to the neoliberal and capitalist global market.

Edited by Ibraaz's Editor-in-Chief Anthony Downey, the volume is organised in three parts: one introduces various approaches to the "regional contexts, alongside the historical forms of antagonism that exist between cultural institutions and political repression;" another examines the ways institutions can develop by employing the methods and critique of cultural producers; and the third inquires into the meanings that "mega-museums," "soft power," and global modernism project on the future of cultural organisation (p.17).

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[1]

Front cover, Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East

At the core of *Future Imperfect* is a set of themes derived from an exploration of the workings of political pressure on cultural institutions across the region, which alters and structures the progression of social, political, historical, and cultural conventions; of how critical art practices can present resistant, sustainable, and radically constructive critiques to processes of neoliberalism and globalisation, and of "how new infrastructures and institutions can effectively emerge, or not, within such fraught, but undoubtedly dynamic and energetic, contexts" (p.18).

Downey comments in his introduction: "*Future Imperfect* is an admittedly imperfect volume, insofar as no one publication could realistically claim to be wholly representative of an entire region's institutional and cultural output" (p. 17). Thus, as Downey concedes, the collection is intended to outline the different historical contexts of cultural production as an important addition to the recent discussion on the role of culture in the Arab world, and to give an account of the contemporary "state of cultural institutions in an era defined by diversified forms of institutional activity, political activism, and prevalent neoliberal models of cultural rationalization" (pp. 17-18). The collection offers valuable analyses and detailed research-oriented knowledge of the workings of culture and its underlying socio-political circumstances in the Arab world.

Dr. Anthony Downey, Power, Knowledge and Patronage in the context of Civil Society in the MENA region

Future Imperfect is also imperfect because it leaves the reader in need of comparative or interlinking discussion of any existing (or even imaginable) exchange of cultural production across the region and the significance of the communication of art and discourse in the wider pan-Arab culture-scape. It falls short in minding crucial questions about how art and other forms of cultural production are disseminated, exchanged, and received from one place to another; what socio-political implications this may have on proximate Arab societies; what types of cultural networks exist between different cultural localities, and how such networks might be able to make Arab cultural production more accessible on a regional scale.

Correlated exposure to diverse Arab cultural practices and outputs is key to facilitating a farther-reaching understanding of the various historical forms of Arab culture and society – in a manner that is not confined to mainstream media coverage of conflicts, political tensions, and violent realities. Such access to Arab culture can contribute to the on-going discussion on how Arab contemporary art and cultural practices can be understood or defined in form, content, and practice. The importance of such an exchange cannot be understated in the current socio-political state of affairs, and it bears a strong relation to the underlying objectives of *Future Imperfect*, as it conjures recurring, yet fleeting, discussions on what Arab modernism is and how it operates as a colonial discourse in a globalised organisation of culture governed by neoliberal capitalism.

Nevertheless, a number of essays in the volume provide fascinating vistas onto different Arab cultural-scapes. In "How Much Future is Left? On Speed and Withdrawal in a Cairo Arts Institution", Ania Szremski, curator of Cairo's Townhouse Gallery [2] between 2011 and 2015, discusses the post-revolution political context and its relation to a shift in cultural production. In 2014, "a series of shows, against the backdrop of serious political and social unrest, were staged on 'the object, the permanent, the photographable, the beautiful'" (p. 31). Szremski asks, "was this shift a turn to beauty, or a retreat from the real? An embrace or a withdrawal?" (p. 233), and argues that this shift had "altered the ability to conceive of possible histories and futures" due to a utopian preoccupation with capturing and memorizing the present through choosing what to remember and what to forget. Within apocalyptic mechanisms of memory, anxiety disorientates our measure and perception of the

future, which is perceived either as too long or as a fleeting and shrinking present that is already happening. In this state of being, “pathologies of conceiving future-ness arise when the mechanisms of apprehending the present and writing it backwards into memory are disrupted. The future is the imagination of the past rewritten through the experience of a “present” that is always slightly removed” (p. 237).

What is particularly interesting in Szremski’s argument is her critical engagement with the temporality of experiencing art, and the way it refers to the experience of time in socio-political reality. She posits these against the underlying political economy of globalised cultural production:

...the so-called West... [has] a fetish for art from the “developing” world that speaks truth to power and other such hackneyed notions - a fantasy of art as working for a counter-hegemonic agenda by carving out some sort of space for “freedom”. According to this paradigm, then, the turn to beauty would indeed be a complicit, reactionary position. By relinquishing these fantasies of resistance, we can look at the turn to beauty not as a withdrawal into a safe space, but rather as the opportunity for delay. The aesthetic encounter allows us to briefly step out of time... allowing for the time to remember, and thus possibly even restore some depth to the imagination of the future. (pp. 244-5)

Szremski proposes that while aesthetic experience is inherently one of “delay, stillness, and self-indulgence” (p. 246), it is perhaps perceived as meagre in comparison to the role of direct action and subversion of political power. Yet, she argues that “one potential course of action in these uncertain times, where 'resistance' is impossible, is to privilege experiences that expand our imagination of time itself... to indulge in the luxury of wasting time. In so doing, even as we are compelled to submit to the police of the imagination, we can secretly serve as its pirates” (p. 246).

In another essay, “The Global Spectacular: Modernity and Supermodernity in the Arabian Peninsula Museums,” curator, scholar, and Egyptologist Karen Exell [3] examines art institutions in the Gulf states, specifically modernist mega-museums, as representatives of an “‘aesthetic of globalization’ driven by late capitalism… harnessed in the Arabian Peninsula as a signifier of the region’s modernity” (p. 39). These cultural spaces provide entry to the global system through cultural branding and tend to indulge an audience of global cultural elites and the leisure class of the northern hemisphere – a minority within the larger population of nationals and status-less migrant workers.

Exell bases her critique of supermodernity, a theoretical concept coined by anthropologist Marc Augé,1 on Qatar’s Museum of Islamic Art (MIA [4]), and Mathaf [5], the Arab Museum of Modern Art, as examples of institutionalised discourses of global capitalist modernity that employ “an epistemological structure 'grounded in Western modes of perception'” (W.M. K. Shaw cited on p. 326). The white cube aesthetic these institutions employ, she argues, are productions of global “non-places,” which are, in Augé’s words, “places without history, disconnected from the concerns of identity, and un-integrated with previous places”2. As Qatari museums merely “record and conserve recent lifestyles transformed by the wealth brought by oil” - they constitute supermodern structures.

Museum_of_Islamic_arts_SOP.jpg **[6]**



[7]The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha

Photo by: Shahin Olakara

Steve_Sabella_Mathaf.jpg **[8]**



[9]Steve Sabella, Settlement - Six Israelis & One Palestinian, 2008 / 2010, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar
Installation of life size images, 230x164 cm, each mounted on aluminum

In curator and theoretician Peter Weibel's words, cited by Exell in this essay, the white cube is "a synonym for North American and European art that conceals all social, gender, religious, and ethnic differences in the name of aesthetic autonomy and a universal language of forms, suppressing differences in the origins of the art" (p. 328). According to Exell, this white cube aesthetic as a symptom of supermodernity is used in the Gulf "to validate the integration of Arab artistic modernism with Western modernism by presenting it in the appropriate ideological context." What these arguments bring forth is a valuable consideration of how art, cultural production, and cultural critique in the Middle East are important prisms for studying Arab cultures, and how they take shape through processes of political power, globalisation, and commodification3.

Marc Augé: Architecture and non-places [10] from Tallinna Ülikool [11] on Vimeo [12].

In a specifically Palestinian context, another, final point for discussion is eminent, which sheds light on the implications of the book within a wider framework for thinking about cultural production in the Arab world. Two essays are devoted to discussing cultural production and institutions in Palestine. The first, “Collective Institutions: The Case of Palestine,” is an interview with curator Jack Persekian [13] talking about the importance of synergy between cultural institutions in Palestine, as in the case of the Qalandiya International [14] Biennial, for cross-border Palestinian cultural production; the second, “Playing Against Invisibility: Negotiating the Institutional Politics of Cultural Production in Palestine,” by Reema Salha Fadda [15], discusses Palestinian reality as dominated by a “visual rhetoric of... military violence and colonial management”, producing a “spectacle of violence” in “a political economy of a global media industry”. Fadda asks how to “institute a new visual discourse, one that allows for more meaningful forms of political engagement and radical critique to emerge within the international public sphere? Or does the visualization of violence succeed in subordinating, or indeed eclipsing, other forms of aesthetic representation?” (p. 150)

The demanding problem that emerges from reading both pieces is their negligence of Palestinian art and cultural production within the so-called Green Line, and thus their complicity in the reduction of Palestine to islands of occupied territories. In this often-forgotten part of Palestine, there is an accelerating growth in contemporary cultural production that is hindered either by being bound to the colonial discourse and practices of Israeli institutions, or by struggling for independence in the face of limited access to Palestinian, Arab, or international cultural exchange and funding.

The failure of Palestinian cultural practitioners, commentators, and critics, such as Fadda and Persekian, to engage with these conditions as part and parcel of Palestinian culture is critical on a number of levels: first, such forgetful discourse misses out on artistic and cultural projects that are fascinating and innovative in form, content, and methodology. Second, it overlooks the substantial disparity/duality between West Bank cultural institutions’ instrumentalization of art and culture towards depicting, scrutinising, and challenging the present occupation, and the tendency of cultural practices in occupied Palestine towards attempts to recapture history and cultural space through the aesthetics of loss. This epistemological break points to a crucial temporal rupture within Palestinian society and culture that demands inquiry. Third, failure to acknowledge cultural production inside historical Palestine succumbs to a post-Oslo agendum and conforms to an occupation-compliant nationalist hegemony, thus remains unaware of its complicity in furthering the disintegration of Palestinian culture and society.

Moreover, this is even more important, especially in regard to the growing call for boycott – with which Palestinians of 1948 are expected to comply despite the numerous impracticalities it entails for cultural production, yet they are constantly marginalised as active producers of Palestinian culture, are offered no economic alternatives for taking a precarious independent stand, and are seldom included in cultural, academic or professional partnerships. Lastly, this invisible “territory” is also home to independent platforms (film festivals, music networking, and visual art exchanges), we might even call them “non-institutions”, that produce and access Arab culture through persistent efforts to permeate the political borders and the social and cultural segregation they impose – by persisting on accessing and engaging with wider Palestinian and Arab cultures.

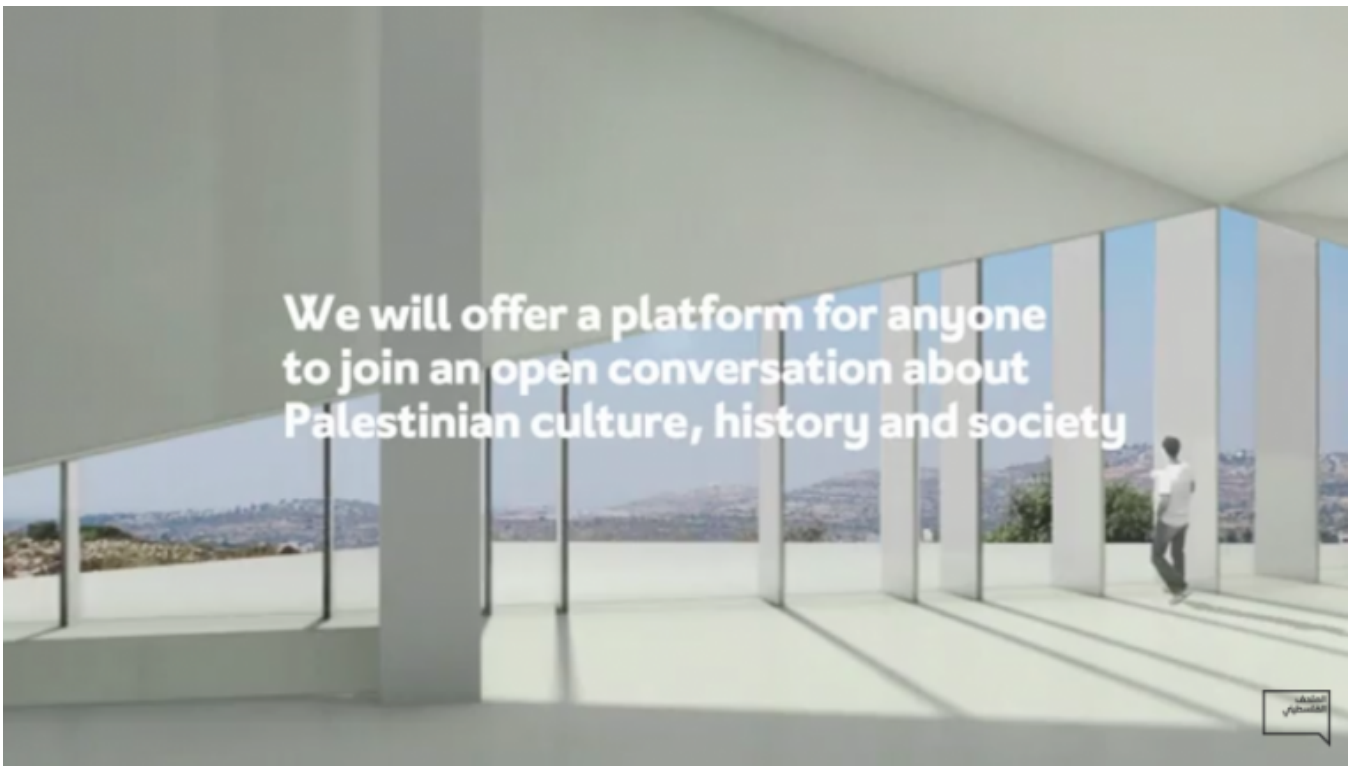
1.png **[16]**



[17]The Palestinian Museum

Screenshots from ‘About the Palestinian Museum’ [18] promotional video

2.png **[19]**



[20]The Palestinian Museum

Screenshots from ‘About the Palestinian Museum’ [18] promotional video

In this light, it becomes crucial to consider another of *Future Imperfect*’s points:

…a significant number of institutions now profess to “represent” conflict… artistic, critical and curatorial legitimacy conferred on these works is often part of a broader continuum of global commodification… the “value” associated with images of conflict and dispossession is rarely accrued by the subjects depicted therein, which leads us to the all too pertinent question of agency: Who benefits from a work of art that purports to represent conflict? (Downey, p. 23)

It might be, then, that *Future Imperfect* is an excellent juncture for beginning to think through a cultural and historical consciousness that is unyielding and captivating in its ability to envision temporality and cultural production by way of a *post-catastrophic* perception.

However, for such an alternative discourse to really emerge, *Future Imperfect* and other such cultural analyses need to be self-critical of a predominantly formal perspective of cultural production across the Arab art world as an institutional process, and to acknowledge the vitality of grassroots, cross-border, and geopolitically fluid cultural action.

- 1. Most notably in his 1995 book Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity [21] (London: Verso)
- 2. Augé cited in pp. 328-9
- 3. In this context, it is important to note the trend of examining institutions through this same lense, prevalent in the work of major artists of Middle Eastern origins, mainly Walid Raad [22]’s speculative museum of contemporary arab art, which takes on different shapes in several of his works.

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