



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge
Knowledge for All

Workshop 1
GRM 2020

Art, Museums and Cultural Initiatives in the Arabian Gulf: an examination of future directions in a shifting political world

Workshop Directors:

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Abstract

Over the past several decades a number of the Arabian Gulf states have invested heavily in often highly ambitious and high-profile policies of art investment, museum infrastructure development and a host of related cultural heritage and cultural events management/cultural diplomacy initiatives. These have been formulated as part of wider policies to reposition these historically traditional Islamic nation states as globally-oriented and culturally sophisticated societies with a strong engagement with Western artistic/cultural traditions and an investment in the development of robust knowledge-centered and forward-looking economies that are intended to replace the historical reliance on oil and gas revenue. In 2007, for example, the UAE brokered a US \$1 billion agreement with the French government that resulted in the November 2017 inauguration of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, a prominent, global franchise museum designed by the ‘starchitect’ Jean Nouvel that aims to act as a cultural beacon and international tourism hub for the entire Arab world. It forms part, in turn, of a group of planned museums in the future-oriented Saadiyat Island development – the Zayed

National Museum, designed by Foster+Partners, has recently broken ground. The March 2019 opening of the National Museum of Qatar (also designed by Jean Nouvel) was, likewise, widely reported on by the international media and presented as a major global art world event. So too, Saudi Arabia has announced ambitious plans to commit ca. US \$20 billion to a development agreement with France that includes a “world class museum of Arab culture and civilization” that is projected as being two to three times larger than the Louvre Abu Dhabi (Noce, 2018). This is being developed in tandem with a number of other large-scale cultural initiatives such as the Diriyah Gate mixed-use development in Riyadh, Amaala on the Red Sea coast (Dobson 2018), the Misk project cultural initiatives and Neom, the future-city in development in the north-west of the Kingdom. This workshop aims to consider the implications and challenges created by this explosive boom in regional cultural infrastructure developments together with the dynamic shifts that it has created in the wider art, museums and cultural heritage industries across the region, and beyond.

The workshop will explore a diverse range of perspectives relating to the expanded field of art, museums, and cultural development across the Arabian Gulf region, including those of academic researchers, museum and industry professionals, cultural policy makers, artists, architects and others with an interest in the area. It will investigate a broad range of issues, including: To what extent have factors such as cultural infrastructure development, global tourism, and ‘soft diplomacy’ worked in tandem across the region to encourage the development of so many high-profile projects and initiatives along these lines? To what extent has the recent inauguration across the region of so many globally ambitious museum complexes, art events and cultural festivals had a significant impact on the ongoing development of a regional cultural and political identity – and to what extent has such an identity been impacted by the June 2017 ‘blockade’ (when the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, together with Egypt cut diplomatic ties with Qatar), resulting in a reconfigured region. These large-scale global projects embody and project utopian ideals for the future of their host countries, whilst in production in a shifting, conflicted present; the workshop will accordingly ask, how do these cultural projects re-imagine the lived experience in the Gulf, and what are the ethical considerations inherent in the production of utopian visions of these kinds? How is the process of globalised cultural production reflected in the ways in which the Arabian Gulf region is perceived across the world? Does the regional vitality reflect the passing of the ‘old world’ model of the dominant Western culture/art world transmitting its influence from the centre to the periphery? Or is the centre-periphery model no longer relevant in this globalised contemporary Gulf world, considering the wealth and agency of the Arabian Gulf countries?

Description and Rationale

Objectives and Scope

While focusing on targeted and emerging case studies from within the region, the workshop also aims to engage directly with such broad and overarching topic questions as:

- What does the recent history of museums and related initiatives in the Gulf region suggest for future possibilities and innovations in the fields of collecting

- practices, exhibitions, museum development and outreach/cultural diplomacy initiatives both within the region and beyond?
- How does globalisation function in the international arts/museum landscape and how does it impact on the confluence of Middle Eastern/Western understandings of these issues as they apply to varying degrees and in varying contexts across the Gulf region?
 - How can we re-think paradigms and theoretical frameworks that are frequently used to interpret the Arabian Gulf's regional investment in and production of globally-recognised cultural projects – frameworks such as post-colonialism, cultural globalisation, cultural imperialism, centre-periphery theory – to capture more precisely the dynamics at work in the region?
 - Given that future imaginings always reflect contemporary realities or concerns, what can the recently realised and planned cultural projects tell us about the Gulf countries' ideas of the nation, national belonging, cultural identity and demography? We invite nuanced explorations of identity and belonging in the region.
 - What are the historical and contemporary comparisons to the current cultural investment in the Arabian Gulf? Can the processes at work be understood less as a form of exceptionalism and more as an example of a broader global reconfiguration of global cultural investment – and wealth?

Contribution to the Gulf Studies

This workshop has the potential to expand the field of Gulf Studies in significant new directions. It taps into a topical and prominent regional developmental issue and provides a timely platform for discussion of its ongoing challenges and implications while bringing together different areas of research specialisation from across a diverse range of disciplinary foci, including art history, contemporary architecture and design, heritage and museums studies, economics, government and political studies, international relations, citizenship studies, and gender and cultural studies. The dynamism and interdisciplinary nature of the workshop will be further enhanced by a focus on highlighting current professional case study presentations so as to encourage a dialogue across a diverse range of positions and paradigms, ranging from that of academic researcher through to speakers from the museum/cultural infrastructure industries, together with artists, media commentators, policy analysts etc. This will, moreover, be the first time that a workshop entirely focussed on this topic has been held at the GRM (although there have been a small number of related workshops, including a 2014 workshop on the public dimension of museums and nation building and a 2019 workshop focused on cities, urbanism and cultural heritage more generally). The workshop is, moreover, timely given the recent shifts in cultural production in the wake of the changing regional affiliations, for example the recent enormous investment in cultural projects in Saudi Arabia. So, it is anticipated that the workshop will also act to bring a new range of speakers and research interests into the remit of the GRM.

Anticipated Participants

The kinds of papers that the workshop directors would like to attract include critical interventions in the following fields:

- Global museums in the Arabian Gulf

- Cultural globalisation in the Arabian Gulf
- Theories of utopia and Gulf futures
- The realities and challenges of developing regional global cultural projects
- New and emerging models of public/private partnership underpinning cultural infrastructure development in the Arabian Gulf
- Gulf architecture and urbanism
- Theories of inclusion and exclusion in globalised urban space
- Artistic responses to global cultural developments – contemporary art and film
- The lived experience – anthropological/ethnographic explorations of contemporary Gulf reality alongside and within these cultural projects
- Critiques of traditional paradigms of analysis: post-colonialism, cultural globalisation, cultural imperialism, centre-periphery theory
- Regional comparisons
- Global/National/Cultural and other forms of identity formation in the Arabian Gulf

Workshop Director Profiles

Dr. Christopher R. Marshall is Associate Professor in Art History and Museum Studies at the University of Melbourne. His publications on museums and curatorship include *Sculpture and the Museum* (Ashgate, 2011) and contributions to *Museum Making; Making Art History* and *Reshaping Museum Space* (Routledge, 2005, 2007 and 2012), together with articles in *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, *Journal of the Inclusive Museum* etc. His publications on Neapolitan Baroque art, collecting and the art market include *Baroque Naples and the Industry of Painting* (Yale University Press, 2016) and contributions to *The Economic Lives of Seventeenth-Century Italian Painters* (Yale University Press, 2010); *Davanti al naturale* (Officina Libreria, 2017); *Mapping Markets in Europe and the New World* (Brepols: 2006); *The Art Market in Italy* (Pannini: 2002); as well as articles in *The Journal of the History of Collecting*, *The Burlington Magazine*, the *Art Bulletin* etc. Other publications include the co-edited volume, *The Legacies of Bernard Smith* (2016), winner of the 2017 Art Association of Australia and New Zealand award for best anthology, and *Macmillan Interpreting Art: A Guide for Students*, (2001) which was highly commended in the 2002 Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing.

Marshall's research distinctions include two years support from the Australian Research Council, the Paul Mellon Visiting Senior Fellowship (Centre for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC), a Senior Research Fellowship at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, a Research Fellowship at the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, and Visiting Senior Lecturing Fellowships at the Hubei Institute of Fine Arts, Wuhan, and the Department of Art and Art History, Duke University, Durham NC.

Dr. Karen Exell is Honorary Senior Research Associate at UCL Qatar and, from 2015-2019, Senior Museum Development Specialist at the National Museum of Qatar, Qatar Museums, where she led the delivery of this new museum project to its opening in March 2019 (<https://nmoq.org.qa/>). Prior to joining Qatar Museums, she directed the MA in Museum and Gallery Practice at UCL Qatar from 2011-2015, after teaching museums studies and holding curatorial

positions in university museums in the UK for several years. She is also currently concluding a three-year research project funded by the Qatar National Research Fund exploring the concept of national identity in relation to the new National Museum of Qatar.

Exell's recent publications include the monographs, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (Routledge, 2016) and *The Global Spectacular: New Museum Architecture in China and the Arabian Peninsula* (Lund Humphries, April 2018), and the co-edited volumes, *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula Debates, Discourses and Practices* (Ashgate, 2014) and *Museums in Arabia: Transnational Practices and Regional Processes* (Routledge, 2016). She has also written on the impact of the current Gulf blockade on Qatar's cultural developments for the edited volume *The Qatar Crisis 2017: The View Within* (2018).

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