

The ripple effect of the Arab Spring

Political upheaval across the region presents challenges—and opportunities—for artists and collectors

By Gareth Harris | From [Art Basel daily edition](#), 17 Jun 11

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Left to right, patrons Farhad Farjam, Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi and Sheikah Lubna in Sharjah; below, *Suspended Together* by Manal Al-Dowayan

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Art Basel is engaging with the politics and art of the Middle East through Friday’s “Collector Focus: Patronage and Politics”, a discussion that focuses on “the heightened challenges, pitfalls and opportunities of art patronage in the 21st century”, according to the organisers. Speakers include the patrons Farhad Farjam and Dana Farouki, both Dubai-based collectors. The talk could not be more timely as the Arab Spring continues to engulf the Middle East with uprisings in Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and Syria. According to a press statement, the panel will discuss “to what degree or on what occasions does patronage carry over into diplomacy and politics?” But how relevant are these topics to Middle Eastern developments, and where does the Arab Spring leave patrons, museums and artists in the region, especially in light of the worsening situation in northern Syria?

“Across the region, and over the past three to four decades, there has always been a tiny niche of local hardcore collectors and hardly any Arab equivalent to [UK collector] Charles Saatchi or

[French billionaire] François Pinault in terms of patronage... maybe Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani, the founder of the Mathaf Arab museum of modern art in Qatar, followed by [Dubai-based] Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, could come close to that Western definition of patronage,” says Cairo-based art adviser Fatenn Mostafa, whose plan to open a gallery in Cairo in March, called the Cairo Art Initiative, has been put on hold post-revolution. The gallery was meant to be a space for contemporary artists from the “entire Middle East and Iran, a first in our closed artistic, commercial circle [in Egypt]”, she says, adding that the opening exhibition was due to be a controversial pairing of Egyptian artist Youssef Nabil and Iranian artist Shirin Neshat.

“Art patrons emerge from the wealthy. Many of Egypt’s business tycoons and mega art collectors are either on trial, in jail or have escaped following accusations of illicit financial gains. In Syria, Asma Al Assad [the wife of president Bashar Al-Assad] was starting to support the arts in a significant way. As dictatorships fall, so do many of the business people surrounding old regimes. We will see this in Syria very soon,” says Mostafa. “Hence, talking about art patronage following the uprising is premature. It will take time for the Arab Spring to translate into art collecting...the wealthy are more focused on reviving the economic wheel and the intellectuals/artists do not want to miss the chance to fight for ‘serious’ democracy.”

On the artistic front she says there are two significant developments, however: the importance of diaspora artists, such as Kader Attia and Emily Jacir, who act as “spokespeople of their impoverished, struggling jailed population”, and the explosion of graffiti art on the streets of Egypt and Syria, among other Arab countries. “Some of these graffiti walls are so strong visually that they are now used as logos among the masses,” she says.

Art fairs and biennials have, meanwhile, become flashpoints for dissent and censorship. At the Art Dubai fair in March, The Lost Springs, 2011, an installation by Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi reportedly fell foul of Emirati officials. As part of the piece, Tunisian and Egyptian flags were held up by brooms, but each time a government official strolled by, staff at Galerie Hussenot of Paris were instructed to remove the brooms.

At the Sharjah Biennial in April, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammed Al Qasimi, the ruler of Sharjah, summarily sacked Jack Persekian, the director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, over the work, It Has No Importance/Wild Writings, 2011, by the Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil, which included sexual phrases in Arabic and references to Allah. Hossein Amirsadeghi, the editor of “Art & Patronage: the Middle East”, says that the incident reflects an inherent tension in the region between the ruling authorities and local artists. Although religious sensitivities can be distinct from political issues, Amirsadeghi says: “Persekian’s fall from grace and favour is emblematic of the Gulfies’ desire to have their cake and eat it: to receive all the publicity, PR and aplomb that goes with ‘high art’ contemporary movements, and the (desperate) need to lock down socio-political blow-out.”

In addition, the Venice Biennale (until 27 November) also reflects the Middle Eastern tumult. In March, Bahrain cancelled a collaborative project by Waheeda Malullah, a video artist, and Hasan Hujairi, a sound artist; the Lebanese Pavilion was cancelled because of organisational problems, but its curator Georges Rabbath launched a new Lebanese project in Venice entitled “Lebanon as a State of Mind”. The new project involves audience participation whereby the public votes on creating an imaginary constitution—a sensitive issue given the country’s history of religious sectarianism.

Meanwhile, the first pan-Arab exhibition of contemporary art in Venice (Magazzini del Sale, until 20 November), with the heavily loaded title “The Future of a Promise”, touches upon sensitive subjects such as the subordination of women in Saudi Arabia through *Suspended Together*, 2011, an installation by Manal Al-Dowayan (right). The work consists of 200 doves that carry the authorisation documents needed by Saudi women to travel. Regardless of a woman’s age and status, travel visas must be signed by an appointed male guardian.

Until this year’s insurrection, the artist for the Egyptian pavilion had always been selected by the ministry of culture. This year, the independent curator Shady El Noshokaty has put together a paean to his dead friend, the artist Ahmed Basiony, who was killed in Tahrir Square in January while demonstrating against Hosni Mubarak. The works include footage of the riots shot by Basiony as well as a 2010 film of the artist running on the spot. “The culture ministry, which has changed several times, was going to cancel, but we stepped in,” says El Noshokaty.

Many artists were in the vanguard of the Tahrir Square revolution; William Wells, the director of the Cairo-based independent space, the Townhouse Gallery, stresses how established Egyptian artists have focused on political issues following the revolution, pointing out that Hala Elkoussy, a 2010 Abraaj Capital Art Prize winner, and Lara Baladi were among the many artists who protested. With the military acting as a de facto government until elections in September, Wells says: “Everyone is taking advantage of this vacuum. Without state security on our backs, there is an enormous amount of freedom. Every space at the Townhouse is taken up with bookings from political organisations, human rights groups and performance groups. There is also a flood of emerging artists.” Museums, such as the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, are “ticking over”, he adds.

“Egypt has seen mixed reactions towards art, culture and politics post-Mubarak [the president resigned on 11 February]; the jury is still out. After all, people want bread more than art when half the population is living on \$2 per day and the patrons and collectors of art are not of the street. Many have fled Cairo in the wake of the Arab awakening, and several galleries and art institutions closed down given the uncertainty,” says Hossein Amirsadeghi.

Ayyam Gallery, which has spaces in Beirut, Damascus and Dubai, closed its base in Cairo earlier this year due to the country’s political and economic conditions. “The revolution happened and everything changed...It’s almost impossible to import and export anything. In

addition to that, our insurers did not want to cover us,” said Hisham Samawi, Ayyam’s managing partner (*The Art Newspaper*, May 2011). Egypt’s burgeoning art market has since floundered; the main springboards for artists to a global platform are international auctions and exposure at Qatar’s Mathaf museum.

A wave of private patrons, mainly backing contemporary art from the region, has also pulled out. “Before January, many of these patrons, who recognised a tier of artists selling well at auction, were constantly in my office. But they have since gone,” says Wells, who adds that 72 independent arts organisations are currently lobbying the interim ministry of culture for reforms and resignations of key government officials.

But Fatenn Mostafa is not despondent, believing that private patrons will “sooner or later step in”, stressing that some corporations had shown interest pre-revolution in building art collections. Most were halted with the exception of SODIC, a property company in Egypt that is pursuing plans to launch a private sculpture symposium. Meanwhile, Maya Rasamny, the co-chair of Tate’s Middle Eastern and North African collecting committee, sees the rise in the past ten years of non-governmental organisations across the region as crucial. She cites Beirut as an example of a city that, in the aftermath of war in the mid 1990s, built an alternative infrastructure for exhibiting, documenting and archiving contemporary art.

In Tunisia, meanwhile, key projects are moving ahead. Kamel Lazaar, a North African contemporary art collector who is chairman of Swicorp, a private equity firm that advises on investment in the Middle East and North Africa, is due to open a centre later this year in Tunis to display his Middle Eastern art collection. Artists in his collection include Mona Hatoum (Lebanon), Farhad Moshiri (Iran) and Timo Nasserli (Iran/Germany). The Bardo Museum in Tunis is also pressing ahead with a major restoration project. Following the downfall of the Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January after 23 years in power, the museum’s chief curator Taher Ghalia says: “It is absolutely vital that culture finds its place. We also need to create a museum of the revolution, with testimonies, films and objects.”

And what of the future? Mostafa believes that the “Turkish model shows that art patronage [has] boomed in parallel with freedom and a healthy economy.” Amirsadeghi strikes a note of caution though: “It will be interesting to see what language patrons take up, either in support of independent art, or in defence of their entrenched interests by siding with official repression or subtly organised redirection in the recent drive for more open societies fostered by art.”

“Collector Focus: Patronage and Politics”, *Art Basel Conversations*, 17 June, 10am, Hall 1 Auditorium