

Keynote Rima Mismar

Good Morning! Thank you all for being here this morning and thank you to Pro Helvetia and SDC for planning this conference with such care and interest in bringing people together to discuss and reflect.

This is a time of such uncertainty dear colleagues– economically, politically, socially, and culturally. The seamless movement of capital and goods globally and the unprecedented integration of international finance has deepened the cultural fracturing and polarization of societies worldwide. Neo-liberalism has propped assimilation rather than political pluralism, a creed rooted in democracy, human rights and cultural diversity. The crisis caused by the large-scale influx of refugees in Europe as a result of the tragic situation in the Arab world, has aggravated the stakes dramatically and impelled the conscience of communities to a test, forcing a critical examination of commitment to empathy, solidarity, hospitality, generosity and tolerance. While media reports have been peppered with stories of hospitality and hostility, it is crucial that tension, radicalization, intolerance and fear be addressed in a profound, impactful and concerted effort and rally global citizens to responsible and constructive action.

As an independent grant-making foundation, dedicated to empowering creativity, knowledge, independent cultural spaces and audience access to arts and culture, we have been the privileged accomplice to an unexpected surge in Arab creativity. Despite the newspapers headlines about Arab countries being more often alarming or morbid, in the arts and culture, the Arab world is witnessing a captivating surge in creativity that has forged its own paths to international visibility and critical acclaim. In the context of Arab regimes ruled by police states, and societies embattled with the sinister pulls of reactionary extremism, artists and intellectuals have been steadfastly defending pluralism, freedom of expression, the right to dissent, tolerance and justice. This first-hand knowledge and longstanding experience are at the root of our conviction in the that actions in the creative fields are profoundly meaningful.

Writer and researcher François Matarasso describes this powerfully in his book *Mirror Images*:
“Art’s ability to ferry us between different shores of understanding is vital in a public space dominated by communications that are reductively simple, at best, or simply deceptive. When political divisions are daily widened by words of fear and hatred, the complexity of artistic statements is necessary – vital – firebreaks.”

But how can we do that? How can we establish a solid platform with resources that enable, probe and explore imagination, expression, representation, and narratives, which hold keys to shifting perceptions, allaying fearful minds, hearts and consciousness? Recalling George Orwell’s words from his “Frontiers of Art and Propaganda”, where he argued “Art had no option but to be political. What Art is about is so urgently important that the way it is created is almost insignificant” (end of quote), one might agree with the first part of the quote (art had no option but to be political), yet the second part will simply throw us back into the old categorizations of art for purpose, art for art and so forth which in turn lead to instrumentalization of art. Alternatively, I would prefer to speak of a ‘civic role’ for artists and art organizations to assume and play.

Our starting point is that arts production by itself, divorced from any civic intent, is a public good deserving of support and investment. We believe in the inherent value of art and the richness it uniquely brings. Not all artists or arts organizations will want to engage with agendas that extend beyond the arts, nor should they be forced to do so. But we have been witnesses to a shift towards a civic practice of a number of artists and institutions over the past few years as a way of maintaining relevance to the changing realities and/or as a quest to find answers to their own questioning of the role and relevance of arts and culture in times of conflict.

A significant difficulty is the language or terminology. ‘Civic role’ is a contested term. It provokes a wide range of responses from the artists and arts organizations. Rather than defining it, describing it would make more sense: at its root ‘civic role’ relates to how artists and organizations engage with the public, whether that be local people (neighbors), a ‘community of interest’ or a combination of both. Additionally, the term suggests the importance of place and placemaking, to which the arts and culture are vitally important; it is associated with ‘civic virtues’ (discussion of which dates back to ancient Greece and Rome) and their vital link to education; it suggests the importance of active engagement in the public sphere.

In a recent conference we organized in Berlin under the title “Writing (in) Exile” (in being between brackets thus suggesting two faces for the title: the act of writing while in exile and the act of writing the exile as a lived experience)- During the conference, Syrian writer Samar Yazbek who’s been living in exile in paris since 2012, spoke of the weight of feeling entitled towards recording and archiving stories of people who lived through the hardships of detention, torture, smuggling,... as a way of fighting forgetfulness and disappearing memory. She confessed that her literary practice had shifted and that she is obsessed with collecting and archiving stories. Similarly, playwright and dramaturge Mohammad Al Attar shared his doubts about the role of theater in such a crisis like the one that Syria is going through since 2011. His doubts led him to a practice in theater that is heavily based on revelation, as a result of the current situation: taking classical theater pieces like Antigone and Iphigenia and working with non-actors (mainly refugees) who would adapt the plays to their own lived experiences and produce a new theater piece.

As a grant-making institution that is constantly working to sustain itself, remain relevant to the arts and culture landscape and artists’ needs, and therefore remain a viable resource for artists in the Arab region and diaspora, we are often forced to quantify the importance and impact of arts and culture. Terms such as social justice, freedom of expression, inequality, marginalized communities, under-represented or vulnerable groups, positive change and more come into play to justify why the arts are important to continue to be supported especially when times of conflict such as the ones we are experiencing nowadays, give rise to what could be labeled as more ‘urgent’ matters: poverty, hunger, shelter, health,... Our solid conviction in the importance of arts and culture is suddenly not anymore self-evident. The fleeting nature of art and its intangible impact- in addition to a sense of guilt felt by donors, institutional and individuals, towards humanitarian crises- called for a more focused argument on how arts are beneficial, impactful, agents of change... Disenchanted at the beginning, we started an exercise four years ago analyzing 50 projects out of the 150 projects we support annually, in terms of how and where they intersect with the social, political and humanitarian spheres. We opted to do this in retrospect i.e. after the arts projects have been supported and completed, thus staying faithful to our mission of safe-guarding artists freedom and independence. But what started as a forceful task turned into a most gratifying analysis for both, us and the artists. Working closely with 50 artists and art institutions we support each year, we would identify together parameters and indicators along which impact could be analyzed and sometimes even quantified. But let’s put these terms aside for a moment and reflect with more depth on this exercise. What is really striking to me is the wide range of subjects, topics, motivations that artists are working with in the Arab region. What is striking to me is their high sense of responsibility towards making a difference. This, dear colleagues, is such a unique case in a region like ours where terms such as accountability, responsibility and transparency are so vaguely practiced. Artists and cultural practitioners are applying their very own strict codes with regards to civic responsibility, informing the public, uncovering truths, recovering histories... only in visual arts, performing arts, film, photography, literary writings, music can we find today a concerted effort to

- Spur Critical Thinking
- Create Spaces for Healing
- Build Capacities
- Push boundaries and Question stereotypes and clichés
- inspire Engagement
- defend Diversity, Empathy, and Freedom of Expression
- Shed Light on the Marginalized
- work on Social Cohesion and Community Development
- Probe Identities
- deal with Displacement and Migration

It is interesting that the art practices today in the Arab region are becoming the substitute embodiment of notions such home, education, public space... they are places of safety and belonging, where people can feel relaxed and be themselves; they are playing an important role in education. For people of all ages, they provide education and skills development. For younger people, they build confidence and skills. They foster conversations around migration, discrimination and feelings of insecurity and anxiety in ways which reveal and explore their complexity and which generate empathy. They have the ability to do this in the way that the media do not.

The most pressing questions of our times my friends are finding their place in works of art and not in political debates. Whereas politics and politicians are chained, artists are free to imagine! Are able to imagine a future beyond the current crisis!

Palestinian architect and artist Sandy Hilal worked on a project titled “Decolonizing Architecture: scenarios for the transformation of Israeli settlements” whereby she was able to imagine a future without settlements and

with architecture being an applied practice, her project is not just a mere imagination per se.

Syrian Architect and visual artist Khalid Malas whose project **Current power in Syria** is an act of creative resistance, one that takes power literally. In collaboration with a photographer and a blacksmith, Khaled Malas is building a windmill in the besieged Damascus Ghouta to generate electricity for an underground hospital. In his words: "At a time of revolution, citizen resilience and resourcefulness in the face of electricity cuts and deprivation becomes a history of opposition to the productions of power from above."

Temporary Art Platform's guide is a research project that looks at the administrative challenges of producing art in public spaces in Lebanon, as well as the potential authorizations, which complicates the process of producing and disseminating public art projects. The guide answers a series of questions and provides solutions for: the legal framework through which contemporary art practices operate, the transformation of public spaces to more socially and aesthetically engaging urban spheres, and the creation of a straightforward legal process regarding public art commissions. The aim of the project is both practical and policy-oriented, facilitating the work of artists and organizers, as well as informing cultural policy regarding art in public spaces.

Dina Haddadin's **Symphony of Emptiness – Island 861** is a public urban intervention that sheds light on a forgotten part of Amman's urban landscape, specifically Hay Al-Qaysieh neighborhood. It peacefully protests the systems controlling and shaping Amman's landscape and works on changing perceptions of its marginalized communities.

Zied Romdhane's **Phosphate Road** is a photography project that documents the journey of phosphate in Tunisia, from the mines in the south west of the country to the chemical factories in the gulf of Gabes, highlighting the different issues in the process. The project also underscores how natural resources can be both a blessing and a curse.

Ymane Fakhir's **The Lion's Share** questions through photography and sculpture inheritance proceedings in Morocco based on the Islamic Sharia law which grants men double the inheritance of women although the logic of the 'male provider' has drastically changed. Research shows that one out of five Moroccan families depends solely on the woman for their livelihood. In her words, Ymane considers that 'the artist can offer a different perspective and a different point of view, one that is neither political nor academic, and one that can address the complexity of the issue at hand. This kind of detached yet immersive approach can present society with a mirror of itself, and create a space for dialogue that was not there before.'

Arwa AlNeimi's **Never Never Land** is a photography project that looks at how Saudi women experience theme parks where signs state that the management 'strictly forbids lifting your abaya...or screaming while on the ride. Offenders will be removed.'

I will stop here although there is a wealth of artistic projects in the region that can be studied and researched as main sources to understand the political, social, and historical contexts.

But if that's the case and if we are able to sense the seminal work that is being accumulated by artists and arts institutions, is it accurate to say that arts and culture are finding their way to impact societies, shift perceptions, contribute to the development of a critical discourse, and create spaces for discussions and dialogue?

It is hard to give a straightforward answer especially if we believe that arts and culture are an ongoing process and that change is a process of accumulation rather than a mathematical equation. Yet we are led by a set of realities to believe that we as supporting institutions, communities, civil society and audiences are not yet able to rise to the level of creativity of art production neither to explore its impact in full throttle. It might be useful to arrive now to a bit of a description of the landscape where artists and arts institutions function across the Arab region and to some significant social, economic and environmental trends:

1. Funding and Funding Cuts

Public funding for arts and culture is almost non-existent in the Arab region. The few countries that do have public funding, namely the Maghreb and Syria prior to the war, have undisclosed restrictions on who and what to fund with political convictions of the artists and their works being a main concern to the state, thus depriving artists of their role as 'provocateur' in articulating the value of difference and enabling voices to be heard which might not be ordinarily. On the other hand, with Western funding that is most often sought after

as a compensation for the lack of local funding, there is an ongoing debate about both the rationale for and the extent and focus of funding for the arts. Comments have regularly surfaced that more should be spent on humanitarian, development, education, with the danger of transforming art to a tool at the service of 'more important disciplines'. This reduced money in the system creates an atmosphere of conservatism, which makes funders less likely to fund innovative work.

2. Growing disillusionment with conventional politics

Politicians are today less trusted than estate agents. The level of skepticism about the ability of conventional politics to make a positive difference is probably at its height. While this opens the space for different initiatives including of course the artistic and cultural, we should understand the limitations: while the arts can play a civic role, they can't prop up or be a viable substitute for the absence of governmental strategies and plans and services.

3. Shrinking public space

There has been a notable trend towards the privatization of public spaces. At the same time, this is coupled with an increased emphasis on crime and safety in public spaces, in light of increasing concerns over terrorism. But public spaces have always been controlled in the Arab countries by governments who fear the outcomes of people actively and collectively engaging with art works. A blunt example of recent attack on public spaces can be seen in Egypt where art and culture Spaces like Townhouse, Contemporary Image Collective, Cimatheque and much more were raided many times by police security and its managers jailed in many cases.

4. Censorship

This is not a new phenomenon but its influence had aggravated in the past few years blocking the channels of dissemination of art works. Most of the examples I gave a while ago about art projects probing questions of identity, oppression, marginalized communities were denied exhibition in their natural contexts. Arwa's Never Never Land will never be shown in Saudi Arabia; few months ago four documentary films that we have supported dealing with homosexuality were banned from screening in Beirut... and of course the obvious question of how can governments imagine maintaining control in the digital era leads nowhere.

5. Consumerism

Despite the positive impact brought forward by the digital revolution the reality is that it's a double-edged weapon that has standardized people's habits of what, where and how to see/consume. Not all artistic content is appropriate for online consumption and yet we are constantly faced with this neo-liberal argument that all channels of communication but the virtual are dead or on the way to die and then on the other hand are forced by that same rhetoric to prove that arts and culture can induce change.

6. Dissemination and access

Last but not least, we have to be aware of the fact that channels of distribution, dissemination and circulation of works of arts within the Arab region are largely non-existent and this is more of a result of all the above: absence of public funding, censorship, shrinking of public space... dissemination of art works and public access to them are the pressing question today of the arts and culture landscape especially in the Arab region. Without building those bridges with the communities on a local as well as regional levels, the traces that art works are capable of leaving remain blurred.

I am reluctant to draw final conclusions and would rather leave you with this split-screen picture of the arts and culture landscape in the region, where vitality and creativity are at their heights on the one hand and where channels of public engagement with arts productions are suffering more than ever on the other hand and this is paradoxically happening in the era of globalization.

Dear Colleagues, allow me to take advantage of this gathering to build on your generous invitation to open up and discuss, and send out a candid invitation to all supporting institutions of the arts to work and think together of our role as supporting institutions and to acknowledge and remember the following:

- let's not instrumentalize the arts nor franchise them. Community-based arts, participatory arts, finding the artist in each of us... are all the good but those should not become proto-types or pre-requisites for arts to matter.

- art is always 'political' by its very nature, i.e. artists and arts organizations do not need a social justice frame to make it so but at the same time Art is an antidote to political slogans and dangerous simplicities. It makes things more complex, not less. It helps us see things from other points of view. Thus it should never be asked to compromise otherwise it will become propaganda.
- it is exhausting to constantly having to justify or explain why the arts and creativity are crucial and how they intersect with social concerns.
- It is really, really difficult sometimes to express what the outcomes are when they're quite intangible.
- let's not get stuck in metrics. Stories about people are sometimes more indicative than numbers and feelings can be neither quantified nor evaluated.
- outputs can sometimes be hard to outline beforehand and to develop something we should allow the space and time for testing and then through going back and redeveloping it'.
- it's already so difficult for institutions to keep sight of their priorities with the different funding sources and demands. Let's be progressive and work towards ensuring that the institutions and artists we support are always faithful first and for all to their local contexts and needs and mandates.
- we must believe and practice that Money should follow good ideas and not pre-set agendas.
- opportunities for expanding the civic role of arts include aspirations to work in deeper partnership. the reach, the communications, the amplification of what we do, so I think there must be a way of forging links. Let's work together to find those links amongst each other and forge them
- let us think less of individual projects and direct impact and more of an accumulation and abundance of creativity that can incur change over time
- last but not least: the arts and culture sectors are conceived of as the least of priorities in the Arab region. At the same time, they are requested to exemplify their impact without any support from other structures.

Thank you so much for your time.

Rima Mismar was appointed Executive Director of AFAC (Arab Fund for Arts and Culture) in 2016 building on her extensive experience within AFAC as Deputy Director. She completed her studies in Communication Arts (Radio/TV/Film emphasis) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) in Beirut in 1998. Prior to graduation, she began writing for local newspapers and cultural supplements, focusing on cinema and pursuing her professional career as a film critic as of 1999. She participated in several festivals as jury member or as a member of the selection committee, contributed to serious critical writings on Arab cinema, moderated panels and wrote for several regional media. She worked briefly in television, writing and producing several episodes of 'The Arabic Lens' (Al Adasa Al Arabiya), a series on Arab cinema produced and broadcast by Al-Jazeera channel between 2005 and 2008. She also wrote and researched a number of feature documentaries produced by and broadcast on Al-Arabiya channel. Rima Mismar joined the AFAC in June 2011 as the Film Programmes Manager and in 2015 was appointed Deputy Director.