



A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF ARAB MUSEUMS

Challenges and Unconventional Strategies

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"If you go to Washington and accept the racial logic of having a Jewish museum, an African American museum, a First American museum and then several museums called the American museum of this or that then digitization is no threat, and everything would be pragmatic.

In the other hegemonies, museums contain objects which are felt to be talismanic like icons or religious remnants and the librarian senses a loss of control of this identity-related material through digitization."

Peter Gran, Temple University¹

Abstract

The Arab world is in the midst of a radical transformation process. Although this process has been delayed or ignored by political systems that are generally wary of change, it has already impacted societal structures in the MENA region by necessitating a recalibration of the economic basis and its communication streams. At this critical juncture, perhaps more than ever, the region needs integrated, open spaces to discuss and set its future course. This future will not be decided solely by the current elites – even in the medium term, it will necessitate the participation of the younger, more technologically savvy citizens who are largely excluded from decision-making processes at present. Museums in the Arab World have an opportunity to offer spaces for new kinds of participatory discourses by reconfiguring themselves as design labs, workshops for assimilating new technologies, and spaces for trying out increased regional cooperation. To become such a "place for change," museums must rethink their own roles, self-understandings, and capabilities. Interviews with professionals in the region and in Germany reveal that technology and financing are not the primary factors preventing museums from becoming digital platforms for changing societies. The inertia of most traditional museums derives from a conservative view of the role of museums and culture in general. This limited perspective, sometimes officially mandated, sometimes self-imposed, is currently holding back museums at a time when their societies have a dire need for culture as a resource to understand themselves and their histories but also as an inspiration for creatively shaping their future.

Introduction

Arab museums – which hold significant collections of the world's cultural patrimony and heritage – are only beginning to develop strategies to respond to the challenges and opportunities presented by the digital transformation. At the same time, their societies desperately need cultural institutions that can bring about stability, rapprochement, and safety in an otherwise quite tumultuous political context and places that allow and even stimulate discussions on the future shape of Arab societies, the participative assimilation of technology, and global and regional policies.

For this paper, we discussed the goal and process of transforming Arab museums in line with the ambitious or perhaps even utopian "places for change" model with museum professionals from Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Germany. The development of Arab museums, it turns out, is not so much handicapped by the obvious technological challenges (related to skills and resources). These challenges in themselves may be deeply ingrained and difficult to solve but they are basically a question of material resources and apply to many other museums across the world. Perhaps even more importantly, though, digital transformation efforts are often hindered by a lack of motivation and incentives to rewrite the national (past and future) narrative within a restrictive cultural and political context. This is sometimes combined with a general fear of losing control over the definition and interpretation of national histories and cultures at a crucial time when digitization is adversely affecting Arab societies in various ways

¹ Personal communication, 5 November 2020.

(by prompting job losses in traditional industries, changes of global value circuits, and power shifts towards digital centers). One might even argue that such fundamental shifts in national self-understanding and self-representation are not within the scope of the museum and its representatives. Furthermore, in those Arab societies where the political and cultural climate allows museums to play a more assertive role, another problem has appeared: In these often crisis-prone societies, culture has ceased to be a valuable instrument of the political class and is left to itself, often in a dire state, putting limits on the capacity to leverage cultural resources on the national and global stage and support societies.

Thus, before becoming places of change, museums must change themselves. This reimagination can be achieved by piloting new combinations of modern tools and traditional institutions and events to reach new audiences. These experiments – which should also include grassroots cultural actors, private sector, and social entrepreneurs – must build on successively developed digital databases that not only protect and label artefacts but also potentially upload them onto a global digital map. This broadly decentralized, experimental, and step-by-step approach should be augmented by an Arab museum platform that encourages exchanges of skill and experience between museums in the region with their specific needs and contexts. A flagship project that combines the skills and ambitions of agile Arab cultural professionals and institutions with the technological and financial capacities of Arab “prestige” museums could play a tremendous role in guiding and inspiring this process.

1. The Digital Museum as an Incubator for the Digital Society and Economy?

The role that museums should play as institutions of civil society is, of course, a widely and controversially discussed topic in museology in general, in both theoretical and practical contexts. It is not surprising that this discussion originated in the treatment of museums of contemporary art, a segment of the museum sector that has seen a huge expansion since the 1990s as part of the increasing commodification of contemporary art. As Rosalind Krauss polemically but not inaccurately noted in her vastly influential essay *The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum*, museums have moved from being the classical nineteenth-century institutions founded and run for and by a cultural elite of connoisseurs to populist temples of leisure, entertainment, and conspicuous consumption, owing more to the contemporaneous explosion of the fashion industry than to the traditional mechanisms of art historical reflection (Krauss 1990:14). In a second key text for the discourse on the role of museums, *Radical Museology*, Claire Bishop tries to redefine the concept of contemporaneity not simply as a description of something happening in our present, but as “dialectical contemporaneity,” i.e., a specific approach to interpreting and making accessible a museum’s holdings through the lens of topics and issues relevant to a contemporary audience (Bishop et al. 2013:3). While Bishop agrees with Krauss’s analysis of the predicament of museums, she notably differs in seeing this opening of museums to bigger and less traditional audiences as an opportunity to broaden the role of museums as loci of social and political discourse. Although this particular discussion only concerns the role of museums of contemporary art, it is clear that the challenge here applies to all types of museums. Bishop’s “dialectical contemporaneity” implies that in the kind of critical discourse on contemporary issues, the full range of cultural artefacts and heritage at their disposal needs to be examined. Contemporaneity is an approach, not a historical period. As art critic Peter Schjeldahl (2019) points out: “Contemporary art consists of all art works, five thousand years or five minutes old, that physically exist in the present. We look at them with contemporary eyes, the only kind of eyes there ever are.”

A similar shift in the interpretation of the role museums should play in contemporary society is evident in the lively discussion over the definition of the term “museum” that is ongoing within the International Council of Museums (ICOM). While ICOM’s current

definition, published in 2007, emphasizes a traditional view of museums with a focus on acquiring, conserving, and researching artefacts,² the new definition proposed in 2019 by ICOM's Executive Board – which is still under discussion and not yet officially adopted – stresses the role of museums as active participants in the political discourse at all levels of society:

Museums are democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing³.

This definition calls for a radical re-assessment of museums as civil society institutions and makes a case for their relevance as more than just repositories of humankind's material and immaterial cultural legacies and heritage – they have, it implies, a central role in shaping how humanity interprets itself. It sketches out a hugely ambitious project that few institutions would seem in a position to successfully embark on given their current organizational structures and resources. Read as a regulative ideal rather than a description of the status quo, however, it raises interesting questions of what museums would need to do to become institutions capable of fulfilling this role. Clearly, this would require groundbreaking innovation on the part of museums; mere incrementalism would be insufficient. Yet, hand-somely funded individual initiatives are not the most plausible way to achieve such far-reaching change. Rather, as we will argue below, change will be more likely to happen and easier to maintain if, rather than being imposed from the outside, experimental formats are deployed within wider digital networks that ultimately permeate large institutions over time while offering formats and services that are of immediate use to new audiences.

One striking impact digitization has already had

on the evolution of contemporary societies is the reshaping of public discourse. Digital media have profoundly changed how information is transmitted and received, not only in the Global North but across the world. The importance of visual culture has increased, and images are taking precedence over text. The speed and frequency of information dissemination has grown exponentially, while the role of traditional gatekeepers has diminished considerably. The ubiquity and instant availability of information has changed the way in which work is organized and resources are allocated within society. The assimilation of new technologies into the fabric of societies has only just begun, with implications that are slowly emerging. On one hand, digital transformation is putting cultural institutions under enormous pressure. This especially applies to museums, which are inherently conservative, hierarchical, inward-looking institutions due to their traditional focus on preservation. Part of the reason why organizational structures invented in the late 18th and early 19th centuries have persisted in almost unchanged form into the present is that their inherent resistance to change was essential to the fulfillment of their mission of preserving artefacts over centuries and millennia (Weibel 1997). The museum's immobility an inertia is part of its success story as an organizational model. On the other hand, museums have always been places for symbolic transformation and for the use and interpretation of visual imagery. Art history as an academic discipline is imbued with the need to transform individual objects and pictures into an overarching narrative. If museums can overcome their historical limitations, they could also become laboratories or testing grounds for the adaptation and assimilation of new digital technologies into the public discourse and into society as a whole: Museums would then be used as laboratories, educational contexts, and assimilation spaces for new technologies.⁴ While this clearly is an important role for all museums regardless of their location, it offers an even bigger opportunity for museums in the Arab World. The dearth of civil society institutions, including educational and cultural institutions, and the relatively narrow reach of existing institutions within the national discourses of individual countries is one more reason why museums should see it as their mission to step up and provide offerings in this area. This is especially important given the demographics of the Arab region. Its population has almost doubled between 1990 and 2020 to currently 436 million people. Roughly a quarter or 110 million of these are between the ages of 10

2 Cf. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>

3 Cf. <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-announces-the-alternative-museum-definition-that-will-be-subject-to-a-vote/>

4 See here the example of the Vienna Museum of Applied Arts: <https://www.mak.at/designlab> for a summary of these exhibitions, discussions, and laboratories in Vienna Biennale (2019). For a summary of the possible roles of museums in the digital transformation: Al-Ani (2020).

and 24.5 Many members of this demographic group are digital natives, and many are heavy users of social media and could be reached via channels custom-tailored to their interests and concerns. Reaching out to the youth demographic often underserved by the traditional education sector could both educate the younger generation regarding their heritage and art in general and foster social cohesion by providing a platform for informed discussions about the meaning and role of art in relation to pressing social issues in much the way posited in ICOM's definition of a museum.

Attempts to realize this role are still in their infancy. Even the big, relatively comfortably funded museums in Europe and the United States with their considerable technological, educational and financial resources have only recently started to systematically think about digital strategies and formats that integrate their physical and online activities. But there are promising signs: The German Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media (BKM) dramatically increased public funding for the digital transformation of cultural institutions recently.⁶ In Switzerland, private foundations such as Engagement Migros have played a similar role in designing and financing large-scale efforts to bring about structural change in the digital museum landscape.⁷ Many individual institutions such as the Städel Museum Frankfurt or Tate Modern in London have found ways to effectively address audiences through digital media. As is the case with many disruptive technologies, digitization is still at such an early stage as to allow leapfrogging, i.e., adapting international best practices to one's own institution with relatively little prior experience. However, in contrast to major digitization efforts that typically involve scanning and processing artefacts and cataloguing them in expensive database software solutions, museums can often offer education, discussions on technology, and digital marketing efforts as part of an audience building program using social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube and create opportunities for experimentation at relatively modest cost. Surprisingly professional digital content is already created by many often very young users without any financial resources. Harnessing their creativity and gifts in using new online media within the messaging of museums is eminently possible. Museums all too often try to develop online content for a specific target group. A strategy more likely to succeed is to develop such content with them. This would require new efforts to define content co-creation strategies that are inherently participatory. Ideally, this would be both materially interesting – i.e., it would pro-

mote the museum's message in terms of educational outreach – and formally support desirable social outcomes, such as engagement in participatory processes by a significant part of the population.

There are many ways in which museums could spearhead transformational processes by digital means, and individual answers will necessarily be conditioned by local circumstances – political, economic, cultural, etc. It would be inappropriate to expect these to be identical in all cases. We are arguing merely that all institutions should define and implement their own specific digital strategy as a central part of their general mission. Part of the reason why Arab museums often find it difficult to do so is the highly politicized role they played in the formation of national states in the process of decolonization. This role deserves a closer look.

5 Cf. <https://www.arabdevelopmentportal.com/indicator/demography>

6 Cf. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/bundesregierung/staatsministerin-fuer-kultur-und-medien/kultur/digital-programme-1777048>

7 Cf. <https://digitals.ch/>

2. The Role of Museums in Arab Nations and Implications for Digitization

While museums and cultural management are obviously part of the political system, no explicatory political or social theory has to date looked at the concrete modes for utilizing culture and museums as spaces of cultural crystallization in an integrated fashion.⁸ Yet, even if we bear this theoretical gap in mind, we can see a few paths taken by the respective nations in this region. One common denominator is the obvious role played by culture and museums in the building of the Arab nations after WWI. It is safe to assume that state agencies played a central role as modernizing agents in this regard (Huntington 1968): Various countries in the region chose a hegemonic model that ensures the dominance of a state class responsible for modernization. This hegemony presupposes certain characteristics that also enshrine the role of culture in a process of modernization, mostly understood as an attempt to adapt the concept of a unified national state that evolved in Europe during the 19th century to the complex geographical, political, and ethnic maps of the Arab region. One relevant characteristic concerns the duality of a modern urban space and traditional regions within a country, calling for museums that enshrine the folk heritage of the traditional regions while adding some more prestige culture for the metropolitan spaces.⁹ Historically, this development led to serious tensions as modernization prompted different social groups to seek more influence and resources. It is thus unsurprising that in this conflict-prone situation, the establishment of cultural organizations, cultural professions, and cultural roles has generally been heavily regulated (Gran 1996:74ff.). In addition to the role of culture in modernization, museums also anchor nations in their history. This, of course, seems to be the most natural function of culture and museums: They describe the heritage of the nation and by doing so, also determine current and future policies: "Tradition is an instrument for achieving modernity" (Hudson 2006:150). Consequently, in the Arab world, the role of Islamic traditions seems particularly strong through its association with the political idea of pan-Arabism of some sort. Besides these pan-ideas, local, nationalistic culture has at times seemingly gained the upper hand, especially since the idea of pan-Arabism has steadily lost ground.¹⁰

Moreover, in recent times, the musealization of local cultures has often taken its cues from the increasingly globalized cultural industry, manifesting itself in many of the high prestige museums created in the Gulf States, albeit in a very controlled manner (Erskine-Loftus et al. 2016). These trends notwithstanding, museums in the Arab world are powerful vehicles to nudge societies towards modernization, especially while national identities remain somewhat unclear: "With the absence of the discourse of national being, the trend for museums today is globalism, which at times is translated into new collectives, such as Jordan's National Gallery of Fine Art with its emphasis on pan-Islamic and 'developing' worlds production, and several initiatives in the Gulf to feature Arab and Middle Eastern collections" (Shabout 2016:203).

This brief and necessarily incomplete overview of the central role of museums in modern Arab nations leads to the following conclusions and considerations regarding the idea of digitizing museums and of those institutions playing a more assertive role in the transformation of their societies:

If the narrative of heritage is of national importance, then opening this labelling discourse in a participative manner, as digitization would allow, will be a highly politically charged and rather challenging course;

As a concept of Western origin, digitization will face the challenge of being conceived as another Western strategy that seeks to define from the outside and dominate the narrative of Arab history and culture and exploit Arab cultural goods and resources akin to earlier Orientalist attempts at cultural appropriation;

The Arab world is currently engaged in massive economic but also political transformation processes. This is creating uncertainties and calls for conservative behavior that limit necessary collaboration between local and international actors and reduce approval for museums and other cultural players in acting to define national narratives;

As an institution for achieving modernity, museums in the Arab world have a "natural propensity" to be part of the transformation process, although this role is currently limited by a highly controlled general political situation.

⁸ "Whoever speaks of culture speaks of administration as well, whether this his intention or not" (Adorno 1991:107).

⁹ For the role of culture in the development of the Iraqi nation see: Gran (1996:74ff.).

¹⁰ See here the evolving narrative in Iraq, which has shifted from a nationalistic (Mesopotamic) narrative serving different ethnic groups under British mandate to pan Arab and Islamic narratives (i.e., Abbasid history) under the Baath regime, which in its last phases included modern art: Shabout (2016:201).

3. Scenarios for Arab Museums

The expert discussions used as a source in this article focused in large part on the technical resources and capabilities needed to digitize Arab museums and their artefacts.¹¹ Investment in cultural institutions is often not seen as a priority in countries faced with existential economic, social and political challenges. Rigid and antiquated governance structures further hinder the reallocation of public funds that would be needed to make ambitious digitization efforts feasible. However, in most cases, resource constraints were not held to be the biggest issue holding back digital transformation. Not surprisingly, considering the central role of culture in Arab nations, complications due to the role of culture and attempts to control and influence it by political structures and entities often overshadowed resource-related issues. Thus, although it is a technologically driven strategy, the digitization of museums quickly acquired a highly political connotation, described here as “cultural openness”: the possibility to reflect on and participate in culture freely, with limited explicit interference by the authorities. Along these trajectories, the issues, ambitions and strategies of the different countries take different shapes. A mapping of the experiences in different countries along these two dimensions of “digital capability” and “cultural openness” yields the very rough matrix depicted in Figure 1.

3.1 Keeping Traditional Heritage

In this quadrant, museums are very much kept in their current model and roles by limited financial and technological resources but also by political limitations. Although digital knowledge is quite ubiquitous and widespread, especially among the younger generation, these resources seem to be difficult for museums to operationalize. This might be linked to the absence of digital strategies and motivating success stories as well as a conservative management layer.¹² Accordingly, technical opportunities, although always somewhat limited, are not fully exploited. Limited use of existing technology is therefore explained away by the rigidity of the cultural narrative.¹³ Technological projects seem to focus on building sufficient databases for artefacts. But even this process faces difficulties, as cataloging requires renewed labeling that has a disruptive potential or at least hints at the option of using digitization to adapt the narrative and create a compelling integrative storyline; it is therefore met with high caution and reluctance.¹⁴ Added to this conservatism is skepticism towards the openness and participatory potential of digitization.¹⁵ In Egypt, Al-Azhar University, for example, decided to take their manuscripts offline again because it feared their misuse (Nasr 2016). Another set of obstacles has emerged due to the dominant western influence and the possibilities to “copy” digital images of artefacts and thus lose control of the narrative.¹⁶ Given centuries of colonial exploitation and orientalist misappropriations of local cultural resources and legacies by Western powers, there is

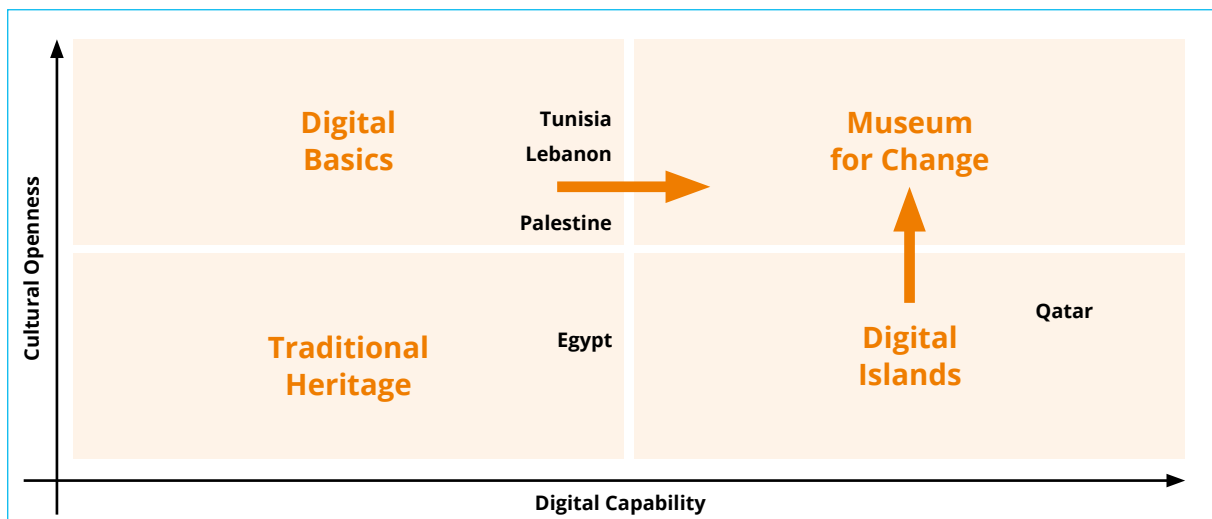


Figure 1: Digital Strategy Models for Arab Museums

11 For a description of the experts see the Annex. All interviews were conducted between November and December 2020. Although most of the interviewees represented their institutions, an attempt was made during the interviews to also include the situation of their home country.

12 (2): “We are hindered by lack of operational ready to use open source systems. No museum has the power to create its own system.”

13 (6): “I don’t think technology is an obstacle. Most museums have sufficient digital technology at hand, but don’t seem to use it.”

14 (2): “Curators are busy in their original field and therefore contextual information is not always available.”

15 (2): “There is a huge concern on how to protect images online.”

16 (1): “Tunisia is afraid that its national heritage is stolen.”

a deep reluctance to make material and immaterial aspects of national heritage publicly accessible. Faced with the risk of losing control over the national cultural narrative, institutions are reluctant to widely share even existing data and images. Projects with foreign partners that could help to address shortfalls in technological and financial resources are not viewed positively. Paradoxically, this dependency on the West is not counterbalanced by a stronger cooperation and shared investment strategy among Arab (or African) museums.¹⁷ As a result, the role of museums remains constrained by traditional boundaries. Modest achievements in digitization, at a minimum, secure artefacts, prevent the further loss of information, and prepare the ground for future strategies.

3.2 Digital Basics (Preparing for Dissemination)

This limited digital progress is also a feature in Arab countries that operate in a more open political and cultural climate. Of course, clear red lines also exist here.¹⁸ But national structures are generally not able to dominate the cultural narrative the way the “Traditional heritage” model does.¹⁹ However, in many cases, this openness does not seem to stem from a deliberate political choice but rather from a deterioration of national cohesion; a consequently weak state class is thus (or therefore?) unwilling or unable to invest in culture.²⁰ This inability to use technology to enhance the potential of museums and to provide a much needed “public space” for societies in crisis must therefore be organizational in origin. This paradox was already hinted at by Adorno (1991:108): “While culture suffers damage when it is controlled by politics, when it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well.” The organizational issues seem to be rooted in a weak civil society exhausted by war, occupation, civil strife, unemployment and a self-privileging ruling class, inhibiting abilities to self-organize cultural expression.²¹

This model also focuses on building databases to secure often endangered artefacts, but – in contrast to the strategy used by “traditional heritage” institutions – it is nonetheless able to use the digitized content more often to advance into open spaces by reaching out to new audiences and pushing the borders for civil society.²² The fear of losing control of artifacts seems to decline as the advantages of attracting new target groups become clear.²³ Also, digitization seems to enable collaboration within countries and even the region.²⁴ While from a technological perspective, the museums in this quadrant only seem to be “preparing for dissemination” it can be expected that some of these initiatives, especially if they experiment with new organizational and digital concepts and take a regional attitude, can move into the “museums for change” mode, which promises more participation and increased political and cultural impact.

3.3 Digital (and Cultural) Islands

To some extent, the Arab Gulf societies are already futuristic societies. When describing the outline of a society that is based on automated and robotized reproduction, the cybernetic expert Hans Moravec chose the Gulf area as an exemplary place where this vision is already becoming a reality. The sole (and, of course, highly problematic) difference is that cheap Asian labor financed by oil revenues is taking the role of a robot substitute. Still, even this substitute would enable their “citizens to happily simply live their lives” (Moravec 1999:135).²⁵ Advanced modernity in this scenario is central, yet it is not supposed to interfere with the traditional culture. On the contrary, the comfort and wealth it produces paper over the civilizational cracks, including the tension between traditional values and the liberties of a wealthy global culture (Al Qadiri et al. 2012). Arguably, the significant museum projects – or perhaps even the modern architecture of the Gulf metropolises themselves – in the region fall into this model.²⁶ They are

17 (2): “We see almost no cooperation among Arab museums although challenges are similar. Attempts in the past have ended abruptly and currently cooperation in Egypt is mainly with western museums.”

18 (4): “There still is no history about the Lebanese civil war.”

19 Rather, achieving consensus on difficult issues poses further limitations. See here the initial difficulties in agreeing on an exhibition for the Palestinian Museum: https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/palestinian-museum-hoch-politische-ausstellung-ueber.691.de.html?dram:article_id=394437

20 (4): “Art and culture is no priority for the government.”

21 (4): “In the Lebanese context the public sector is totally inexistent, we still need to fight to have any kind of input from the public sector, i.e. national organizations”.

22 (3): “There is nothing shameful about being political.”

23 (5): “We don’t adhere to the belief that secrets are still secrets. Our heritage has to be exposed.”

24 See, for example, the initiative to preserve photographs in the Middle East: <http://MEPPL.me>

25 This is of course an oversimplification of the situation and some views of this evolving culture are more than skeptical: “The Arabian Gulf is a region that has been hyper-driven into a present made up of interior wastelands, municipal master plans and environmental collapse, thus making it a projection of our global future. From this statement, the themes and ideas of Gulf Futurism emerge: the isolation of individuals via technology, wealth and reactionary Islam, the corrosive elements of consumerism on the soul and industry on the earth, the erasure of history from our memories and our surroundings and finally, our dizzying collective arrival in a future no one was ready for” (Al Qadiri et al. 2012).

26 “Qatar’s capital Doha itself becomes an ‘open museum’ to showcase new architectural narratives of scientific experimentations (...)” (Maziad 2016:127).

built to impress or even “cultivate” the local population so that they can re-align with the requirements of the future (Maziad 2016:127). Perhaps even more so, these projects are geared towards the (Western) foreign visitor as part of some sort of cultural diplomacy initiative, but in any case, they appear to have little connection to the local population and culture: “The museum may be physically located in Qatar, but in form and content the museum is an outpost of western discursive terrain in relation to the Islamic world, with collections and styles of display that could be found in New York or Paris” (Exell 2016:36). However, because of the financial and technological potency of these museums and their ambiguous setting, they produce further effects: By buying and conserving Islamic art and mixing it with global artefacts, they produce a kind of pan-Arab or pan-Islamic sphere that differs from previous iterations in catering to global tastes. They can therefore also be considered islands – “foundations” in Asimov’s sense – for art in a tumultuous region. Furthermore, they could produce high class digital strategies and platforms for this content and thus transcend their own national boundaries. The resource restrictions limiting most institutions in other Arab countries are not a factor here. In theory, mixed projects that bring in proven formats and technologies from big international arts institutions could be financed and combined with local cultural and linguistic expertise. That this has not happened in a major way is a failure of policy and politics. Another interesting observation is that these islands cause some kind of debate and even criticism in their societies, which are usually not open to such discussions. Thus, a further – unintended and paradoxical – effect of these museums is that they can enable a more open debate about identity and cultural narratives.²⁷

that all museums must go in this direction to overtly support their society’s move into a more technologically augmented terrain.³⁰ But it could be argued that even the use of technology to enhance the traditional role of the museum (to protect artefacts) could contribute to the political discourse.³¹ This move towards a more inclusive and participative museum platform could also be furthered by collaborating with island museums and utilizing their databases, technical experience, and resources to develop joint exhibitions. Thus, this quadrant could be a meeting point for technological capability and new concepts of a fluid and accessible culture that helps society to reflect on the options and effects of the societal transformation triggered by digitization.³²

3.4 Museums for Change

The museum and society conceived in this quadrant do not yet exist in the region (and may not exist anywhere except as a general idealization).²⁸ However, it is plausible that institutions that are now “preparing for dissemination” of their databases and platforms would move into this direction. Certainly, the necessary self-confidence and technical capability is already present in some cases.²⁹ This does not mean

27 “There is a discourse of dissent surrounding the employment of western expatriates in the new museums in Qatar and the investment in these western-style projects, an anxiety that is illustrative of wider state-society tensions” (Exell 2016:33).

28 The German Futurium museum in Berlin is perhaps a first prototype: <https://futurium.de/>

29 (3): “Culture can be seen as platform and should be accessible for everybody.” (6): “Although the situation is somewhat dire, we must prepare to be ready when things improve.”

30 (5): “It is not our role to change society by new digital art forms.”

31 See, for example, the digital project of the Bir-Zeit museum that catalogued more than 50,000 historical buildings in Palestine: <https://www.rwaaq.org/rwaaq-register/registry-historic-buildings>

32 (3): “We should create a space for debate.”

4. Strategies and Options

Based on the possible trajectories of the different models, we derive some strategies and operational measures that could support these development paths.

4.1 Foundation Building: Arab Digital Museum Platform

One common thread in all discussions was that building a robust database for artefacts is the right and necessary thing to do, and that in fact many such efforts are under way, although most are partial and have not been widely publicized.³³ Even if new narratives and descriptions of artefacts cannot be made publicly accessible right now because of political sensitivities or excessive caution, museums need to digitize and archive their artefacts for immediate protection and recording and also prepare for further steps that may lie in the future and would allow or even require further dissemination of their content (sharing artefacts, uniting collections, etc.).³⁴ Current efforts focus on creating databases for academic and specialist use. The question of how this valuable information can be made accessible for general, nonspecialist audiences is very much an open one. Besides political concerns, one big roadblock is that the necessary software requires not only sizable initial investment beyond the operational cost of scanning objects and entering data but also considerable ongoing license fee payments that are simply not affordable for many museums in the Arab world. Online collection software widely used by Western museums, such as MuseumPlus, also raise (fair or unfair) concerns about the security of proprietary data, being hosted externally, outside of the direct national control of the countries involved. In addition, these standard software packages only provide limited customizability.³⁵

Partnering with other global players such as Google Arts & Culture is mostly, and with some justification, not seen as a viable alternative.³⁶ While this and similar initiatives address the cost issue by being mostly free for participating museums, they require the institutions to relinquish all control over content they make available. For most institutions, becoming part of the business model of a major US internet company without any clearly defined advantage for the museum itself is unthinkable, both economically and politically. Rather than being viewed as a tool to broaden an institution's reach worldwide, such initiatives are mostly regarded as yet another way in which Western institutions appropriate non-Western culture in order to cement their hegemony.

Thus, there seems to be a demand and a rationale for an Arab digital museums platform. Such a platform should utilize shared open-source applications, experiences, use cases, best practices, and contact information. It may not only offer great potential synergies across participating institutions by leveraging and consolidating "Arab" capacities but could at the same time counterbalance Western dominance in this process and address fears regarding the loss of control over content that is regarded as a core part of a country's national heritage.³⁷

As noted above, there are already numerous data collection efforts underway, sometimes coupled with online tools to make the wealth of information available online. These include the cataloguing of archeological sites and artefacts, often in partnership with local institutions and Western universities or research institutions. There are also completely locally organized efforts such as Riwaq in Palestine, the limited but significant online collections of many individual museums in the region,³⁸ or trans-national projects to collect images and information on cultural sites and artefacts such as the "Museum with No Frontiers."³⁹

Regional efforts – such as the collection of photographic objects and documents from the Arab world with a critical approach to rethink, preserve, activate and understand these photographs by the Arab Image Foundation – also offer models of how digital platforms run from within the region offer the opportunity to reach countries in the Middle East such

33 (2): "We need digital platforms that consider security issues, allow for new online projects and even new business models."

34 (6): "Right now, we can only prepare as much as we can, and be ready for a new stage of developments, where civil society is stronger and need out support."

35 (1): "Local control of any technological solution is essential."

36 <https://artsandculture.google.com/>

37 (4): "Western partners come to us after having conceived the database, asking us to share our data, rather than including us in the elaboration of the database itself. Which often results in databases that don't fit our needs so cannot be really used by us." (6): "Collaboration's between West and Arab region in the cultural sphere (i.e., Scala Archives) so far are clearly dominated by the West."

38 For example: <http://museum.bireit.edu/> or <https://surock.museum/>

39 <http://explore.museumwaf.org/>

as Yemen that are extremely difficult to access from the West.⁴⁰ As part of a project to safeguard photographs and historical accounts from Yemen in the context of AIF's lead in the Middle East Photograph Preservation Initiative (MEPPI), preservation and digitization experts in Beirut designed an online course for colleagues at the Basement Cultural Foundation. This involved basic preservation and cataloguing techniques but also reflections on issues related to access, rights, and ethics in dealing with the use images, showing how the ubiquity of the internet can be made productive in the most challenging of circumstances and encouraging a peer institution to find productive models for working with Western institutions without giving up local control.

While all these efforts deserve individual support, a collective effort to set standards and design technologies that reflect local knowledge, experiences, and needs would enable an aggregation of these various repositories of valuable data that currently mostly exist in isolated database silos. Increasing overall searchability, ease of use, and attractiveness across many platforms could create a network that would make the data collected exponentially more valuable to researchers and the general public alike. Metasearches of, for example, objects depicted in private photographs and their comparison with similar objects in museum collections through AI algorithms for visual identification could uncover whole new layers of meaning in existing datasets.

4.2 Experimenting with New Formats

“Audience building” and “audience development” are ubiquitous catchphrases for a very good reason, especially in the context of the digital transformation of cultural institutions. Almost none of these institutions have the resources to quickly reach the wide cross-section of society they would need to address to serve as a driver for digital transformation in their societies. After all, as Doug Berwick put it, “the survival of established arts organizations hinges on their ability to engage effectively with a far broader segment of the population than has been true to date. [...] Communities do not exist to serve the arts; the arts exist to serve communities” (Berwick 2012). If they do not broadly engage the communities they are meant to serve, the arts cannot play a significant role in transforming society.

Museums around the world face the challenge of competing with many different offerings, digital

and physical, in a fierce competition for attention. In many countries, museums are not well-placed to attract enough interest. Their offerings, often fairly stable over longer periods of time, with most of their effort invested in their permanent exhibitions, may also not offer the dynamism required by digital media. State-of-the-art digital offerings requiring fast download times and large screens may not be practicable for most users, even though they may be very much active online in general. Furthermore, the most successful offerings tend to blend physical, person-to-person elements with purely digital experiences. Especially in countries with relatively few public meeting places, museums should prioritize the power of art and culture to literally bring people together. By building alliances with other cultural institutions and existing events, museums can reach existing audiences and achieve relevant scale far more easily than through proprietary digital content alone.

This is especially true for young people in the MENA region, whose opportunities for in-person social interaction are often restricted by cultural traditions and societal constraints. This is a major factor in the astonishing growth of social media use throughout the region. As of 2017, total internet penetration in the region was 60%; active social media users were at 38%, and active mobile social users at 34%. These penetration rates skew significantly to younger users, and of the more than 400 million people in the region, 65% are ages 30 or younger.⁴¹ Clearly, if even a small percentage of these users could be reached by cultural institutions, the impact would be huge. Much of the most requested content on social media is audiovisual, something that museums are well-placed to provide.

The use of short, attractive social media content across a network of cultural institutions covering a wide range of activities would reach a greater audience than would be possible for each individual partner. Building networks and co-operations between private galleries and collections, music and film festivals, arts and-crafts showcases, and museums might help to generate a critical mass of diverse cultural offerings and bring them to larger audiences. The tools used to do so could be fairly low-tech and include shared email distribution lists or social media channels like Facebook, which remains an important tool in the Arab world. A joint and coordinated site or platform that functioned as a cultural aggregator for (mostly) local/national audiences could include events and schedule news as well as online formats explaining/discussing featured artworks, from artifacts to songs or even recipes. Links to further information or specific online formats – e.g., for exhi-

⁴⁰ <http://arabimagefoundation.org>

⁴¹ Radcliffe and Lam (2018), p. 4.

bitions and other content perceived as helpful and interesting – could also be provided.⁴² Success factors would be minimal coordination to ensure new content is available several times a week and potentially centralized assistance for the production of attractive audio-visual content (e.g., short teaser clips and viral videos for social media channels, a weekly/bi-monthly podcast or similar formats). Museums would have to be convinced to provide content, but they could still participate without committing major resources if they felt they did not have the resources or priorities to work as the central node.

4.3 A Daring Pilot Project

While the aforementioned work streams would prepare the digital ground and enable experiments with new technologies and narratives, there seems abundant space and options for at least one big pilot project that would demonstrate the huge capabilities and possibilities of the digital approach to facilitate broad cultural engagement. For this pilot to be effective, Arab museums from the “cultural island” and “digital basics” quadrants could and should cooperate and produce a joint venture that would also inspire other actors in the region.⁴³ For such a project to be successful and impactful, it would need to find an inspiring and motivating issue, not only on a national but on a regional if not global level.

One issue that has been a major force in shaping relations between Arab countries and the rest of the world has been the fate of the Palestinian people. Palestine is still dramatically underserved in terms of cultural representation, while at the same time it is clear that repressing (or simply failing to address) the plight of Palestinians is a major roadblock to forging new, peaceful relations between the West, Israel, and the Arab countries. It would be worthwhile countering this history of neglect and offering a real chance for these relations to develop and political rights to be asserted. Although it might be extremely ambitious given the long history of enmity engendered by the Palestinian question, a museum of Palestinian identity would be a prime topic for a pioneering institution that uses cultural resources to foster an open discussion of a seemingly intractable geopolitical issue rather than silencing it.⁴⁴ Some aspects of the difficult and highly contentious narrative that would need to be woven call for a digital version of a new museum: Digitization would allow for differ-

ent and more dispersed narratives that go beyond the 19th century concept of a national state to be forged. Globally scattered Palestinian communities could come together in shaping an identity narrative that has developed under the circumstances of diaspora, occupation, and isolation, allowing for often differing and conflicted stories to be heard. Arab museums in different countries could contribute to this “platform museum” as the Palestinian diaspora, culture, and politics have played a part in all these countries. Thus, the topic is relevant to many museums in almost all Arab countries and would invite cooperation: Digitization could unite these fragmented pieces of Palestinian identity and thus urge and legitimize the search for a just political solution that breaks free from the tired and highly unsuccessful paradigms of the past decades. This might support the development of a full-fledged Palestinian civil society that is not exclusively defined through territorial claims and counterclaims. While no cultural initiative by itself can overcome a deeply ingrained political conflict, it could serve as an important building block of a free, critical, and honest discourse on Palestinian identity all over the world and support the international and regional forces that have shaped it in recent decades. If successful, it could serve as a blueprint for similar discussions of fragile national identities in the wake of colonial exploitation, which are still prevalent throughout much of the Arab world.

42 (1): “Culture must be available to the public. However, a shift in the mind set and some kind of audience development is necessary. In Tunisia, we have no museum of modern arts. Galleries are taking up this role. Couldn't we use the popular format of a festival, powered by social media as a testing ground for new formats using all sorts of established and informal cultural producers: galleries, museums, local artists etc.?”

43 (6): “Many countries don't seem to have an idea on what to do. We must get out of this painful situation and show a possible direction.”

44 (6): “Palestinian Identity could be a topic for a new kind of Arab museum and could help preserving and strengthening an identity under siege by using digitization to include Arab and other countries which gave shelter for Palestinian refugees.”

5. Summary and discussion

Although the Arab region is home to a huge number of important cultural and artistic artefacts, the digitization of museums has been slow. One reason is the lack of the necessary skills and resources in a region in which culture is not always a priority. In countries where funds are available and skill can be imported, museums often constitute islands with limited impact on their surrounding communities. On the other hand, museums that operate in contexts that are open and would allow them to play a more assertive role are often hampered by financial and organizational restrictions and shortcomings. Hence, although they are important civil society institutions, culture in general and museums in particular are currently limited in playing an active role in a time when Arab societies are facing fragmentation, economic challenges, and political stress. This is especially unfortunate, as culture could provide an important avenue for discussing the future shape of Arab societies using narratives, artefacts, and symbols that are deeply ingrained in these embattled societies. It could thus ease and guide the necessary transformation towards more digitized and global societies. This role for museums as “places for change” that use technology to assimilate and adapt technology could, however, be furthered by constructing a platform for Arab museums that shares open source software, use cases, and contact details and could help to lay the digital foundation for their evolution. Likewise, familiar formats such as festivals could be used as a context in which to experiment with new tools, collaborations, and cooperations among traditional and grassroots cultural producers. Additionally, a pilot project with a vision that encourages and guides traditional institutions should be considered, and what better topic could there be than the shattered Palestinian identity? This topic – which is not only important for Palestinians but also for the entire Arab region, as it defines their relationship with the West – could benefit from a museum that functions as a platform for reintegrating different Palestinian experiences on a regional or even global scale, using innovative digital tools to develop a Palestinian narrative not only of the past but also for the future.

Annex

Interview partners

Interview partner (1): Shiran ben Abderrazak, CEO Rambourg Foundation, Tunisia. Personal interview: 19 November 2020.

Interview partner (2): Yasmin El Shazly, adjunct assistant professor of Egyptology, American University in Cairo, Egypt. Personal interview: 22 November 2020.

Interview partner (3): Heba Hage-Felder, director; Rawad Isaiyah Bou Malhab, communications; Mahmoud Merjan, digitization, *Arab Image* Foundation, Beirut, Lebanon. Personal interview: 4 December 2020.

Interview partner (4): Zeina Arida, director, Sursok Museum, Beirut, Lebanon. Personal interview: 3 December 2020.

Interview partner (5): Nazmi Al-Jubeh, associate professor and director, Birzeit University Museum, Birzeit, Palestine. Personal interview: 1 December 2020.

Interview partner (6): Eva Schubert, president and CEO, Museum With No Frontiers. Personal interview: 11 December 2020.

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