Reflections on Contemporary Arts Education in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia

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Introduction

بذرة الشجرة أول
A tree begins with a seed
(Arabic proverb)

This research critically reflects on current arts education in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, utilizing the personal narratives of the authors who are three arts educators and researchers working in the region. These narratives illuminate that those seeking, facilitating and leading arts education face a range of issues; however, artistic practice and engagement is rich within this region of the world. Artistic practices are intimately intertwined into the lives of the people of the Arab world, and arts education extends beyond the walls of schools, studios and universities and reaches into the cultural and social fabric of streets, communities, homes and families. Artistic education in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia is conveyed in a multitude of ways, echoing the cultural reality of these diverse and dynamic societies. It can be noted that the current arts education practices in each of the countries are at different stages of development.

In some locations such as Lebanon, there is a rich and diverse artistic scene. Visual arts, music, dance, theatre, handcrafts and poetry are readily accessi-

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ble to many, although are yet to all be integrated within the formal public school curriculum. For example, arts subjects such as visual arts and theatre are integrated within the formal curriculum in Lebanon (Frayha, 2003). However, subjects such as music and dance are not included. Some public schools engage music specialists to teach, but it has been noted that the number is not evenly distributed (Baltagi, 2007).

In other locations, such as Saudi Arabia, political and religious agendas influence the types of artistic practices that are taking place. There might not be avant-garde contemporary dance practices occurring here, but there are a multitude of education practices occurring within other artistic disciplines, such as visual arts and craft.

Arts, and more specifically arts education, in the Middle Eastern and the Arabian Peninsula have tended to been neglected by scholars, and often misinterpreted. The representations of specific arts practices in the region have succumbed to distorted, romanticized, exoticized perceptions, understandings and images when being investigated or presented (Shay & Sellers-Young, 2003). For example, some accounts of dance practices in the region tend to reiterate Orientalist stereotypes of both the practices occurring (such as eroticized and exoticized accounts of belly dancing: see Buonaventura, 1983, 2004, 2010) and also generalizations about the people engaging in arts in the region (for examples see: Al-Faruqi, 1978; Helland, 2001).

There are a small number of valuable resources on arts practices, experiences and education in the Arab world (for examples see: Campbell & Beegle, 2003; Karayanni, 2004, 2009; Kaschl, 2003; Khoury, Martin, & Rowe, 2013; Martin, 2012, 2013; Rowe, 2007a, 2007b, 2008, 2009, 2010; Shay, 1994, 1999a, 2002, 2006, 2008; Toukan, 2010; Urbain, 2015; Van Nieuwkerk, 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Winegar, 2006). Simultaneously, in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, there have been substantial developments in specific areas of art over the past decade. For example, Beirut's multidisciplinary arts scene is flourishing, with the emergence of events such as Ashkal Alwan's HomeWorks Forum. Cario's contemporary arts practices are growing through platforms such as Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), and the 21–39 Jeddah Arts Festival is actively seeking to promote contemporary visual art practices in Saudi Arabia.

Through the three authors' distinct experiences the nuances of pedagogy, policy and practice in arts education in the region are revealed. Samia, an arts educator from Cairo, explores her experiences of teaching hand weaving and fibre arts in Sinai, and her work in Cairo with AmeSEA. Rose, a dance educator and researcher from Auckland, New Zealand, reflects on her work in Lebanon, with a particular focus on the experience of teaching dance video workshops in the Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian Refugee Camp in Beirut. Bilal, an arts scholar offers insight into visual art education in the general school curriculum in Mecca, and his reflections on teaching of the arts in Saudi Arabia.

It is also of relevance to highlight the relationship between the geographical location this chapter focuses on and the emerging discourses surrounding the uprisings, political shifts and ongoing conflict in the region.[1] The uprisings and contemporary conflicts across the wider Middle East and Arabian Peninsular region have stimulated issues regarding East/West relations, the exchange of diverse knowledge and the role of the "native intellectual" (Fanon, 1961/1967, p. 35) within a post-colonial society. The arts do not often feature in current, dominant accounts of the uprisings, political tensions and conflicts, yet art and artists in the region are inevitably affected by these events and ideas. The instability of the region can result in displacement, health issues or an unstable school schedule for children and youth (Devakumar et al., 2015). In turn, this means that arts education is not always accessible. Concurrently, arts educators in the Arab world are actively seeking to facilitate positive transformation for individuals and collectives through the teaching, learning, activism and presentation of the arts in a variety of ways (Khoury, 2014; Khoury et al., 2013).

This chapter provides an articulation and reflection on specific arts education situations occurring in the region and how regional politics are impacting on the perceptions and practices of arts education. It is intended that this chapter contributes to the global conversation of arts education, and broadens knowledge and understandings of arts education within the Middle Eastern region. The three narratives shared below provide a snapshot of an arts education experience and/or event in Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. It is anticipated that these will be a starting point for further dialogue and discussion to emerge about arts education in the Arab world.

Samia's Story: Working in Cairo with International Organizations for Arts Education and Facilitating Handcraft Workshops in Sinai

As an arts educator working in Egypt I perceive that art encompasses a diverse range of human activities, often involving imaginative, creative and technical skill. As I understand it, arts education in its simplest form allows individuals to transfer, develop and create ideas, skills and behaviours.

Over the past decade, many arts education projects have taken place in Egypt with the intention of improving engagement and accessibility to artistic experiences. The majority of the projects I have participated in are situated in Sinai and southern Egypt. These projects have often focused on an educational encounter with what could be described as 'traditional' or 'local' arts and crafts with those in Bedouin communities.

For the Bedouins who live in rural locations in the Sinai, arts are often a non-formal practice and an integral part of everyday life. In my experiences of working with various Bedouin groups, I have noticed how there has been

Fig. 1 Bedouin women working with Samia El-Sheikh. Photo courtesy of Samia El-Sheikh

a focus on the preservation of culture, and significant questioning of how to develop crafts practices without radically shifting or diluting the cultural identity they seek to hold on to. I travelled several times to the desert of Sinai to work with small groups facilitating weaving and handcrafts workshops. These workshops were held in a very basic tent (see image below), and were quite informal, both in structure and attendance. I worked with ten women who had a good understanding and existing skills of warp face weaving. The program aimed to work with them daily over ten days, to produce a new item that could be easy for them to sell and gain money while also sustaining their unique craft. While the act of weaving was a focus, so was working with the group to carefully price their items and calculate the cost in a fair way (Fig. 1).

Bedouin people are nomadic, and the boundaries of the tribes in this region are indistinct. However, despite the haziness of tribal borders, each Bedouin group has distinct practices pertaining to arts and crafts, and those inside and outside of the groups respect these traditions. The practice of handcrafts by the Bedouin in the Sinai can be seen as part of everyday life, serving a purpose beyond mere aesthetic engagement or an activity for recreation and social purposes. For example, weaving is one of the most important techniques, and a practice that Bedouin women learn from a young age—from mothers, sisters, aunts, cousins, grandmothers and friends. In their daily life, women and children work with sheep. They cut the sheep wool in a manual way and spin it to make yarns for weaving their tent. It is a practice that allows an opportunity for creative expression whilst simultaneously consolidating collective tribal identities. It gathers them to share their experiences and stories, with circles of children playing around them and sometimes helping to collect items to build looms on the ground (as in the image below). Such informal arts practices, which are taught and learnt in an informal way, also provide a modest income to sustain families (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Warp on ground looms, fixed by Bedouin women, South Sinai, 2009. Photo courtesy of Samia El-Sheikh

My facilitation of the workshops was in part motivated by my own interest to better understand the intricacies of the practices that these women have been engaging with, some for many years. Another motivation I had was to work with the women to explore how elements of teaching and learning Bedouin handcrafts might be taught within a more formal education setting, such as government-funded schools in Egypt. It can be noted that due to the shift of rural to urban living in Egypt over recent decades (and along with this a disbanding of some Bedouin communities), artistic practices have, at times, become separated from their 'traditional' locations. This urban crawl is perhaps in part out of necessity—the need for employment, education, healthcare—and in part reflective of the processes of globalization around the world. Many children who in the past would have learnt arts practices from family and social situations, now only have the opportunity to engage with the arts in formal education settings. Through incorporating practices such as handcrafts from Bedouin contexts in a formal learning situation, students not only have the opportunity to learn the techniques but also encounter their history, lineage and tradition. At the same time, it could be noted that those who engage with the weaving and handcraft practices do not necessarily view these practices as 'art'. Rather, they are perhaps seen as 'craft' practice. This tension of terminology, of what constitutes 'art' or 'craft' is a potential area for future discussion.

My experiences of working in various contexts have revealed to me that arts education within the formal education curriculum in Egypt is still evolving along with gradual awareness of the importance of arts education. Thirty years ago, art education was obsolete in school programs. Arts education (namely, visual art and music) has started to flourish in Egypt over the past decade through the work of some key Egyptian professors who have fought for art education subjects to be incorporated as weekly sessions in the general school system, from elementary through to secondary schools. This group are also members of the International Society for Education through Arts (InSEA). InSEA is a non-profit society that shares arts education experiences and resources online, through art education congresses, forums and workshops and also seeks to be involved in assisting school teachers with arts education practices. Involvement in global conversations pertaining to arts education led arts educators and scholars in the Middle East and North Africa to establish the Africa and Middle East Society for Education through Arts (AmeSEA). AmeSEA is committed to ensuring that every child in a government-funded school has equal access to a well-rounded education of which the arts are a central component. AmeSEA works to achieve this mission through school and community programs, professional development, and advocacy.

Rose's Story: Teaching Dance Video Workshops in Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian Refugee Camp in Beirut

In 1948, the first wave of Palestinian refugees arrived in Lebanon to seek what was believed to be short-lived refuge. A second exodus followed in 1967 as a result of the Arab–Israeli war. In 1970, thousands of Palestinian refugees fled to Lebanon from the Black September Jordanian Civil War. As of April 2014, over 53,070 Palestine refugees from Syria had sought safety in Lebanon from the ongoing conflict in Syria (UNRWA, 2014). At present, the total estimated population of Palestinian refugees in the Arab world is about two million. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) approximately 449,957 registered Palestinian refugees reside in Lebanon. However, this number is contested and estimates vary between 250,000 to 400,000. In Lebanon there are 12 refugee camps that are UNRWA recognized (UNRWA, 2014). The UNRWA administers the education offered in the camps, and the UNRWA schools in Lebanon follow the Lebanese Ministry of Education's curricula and textbooks. However, resources are often stretched, social and political issues in the camp can inhibit access to education for all, and the conditions of the camps do not necessarily make for a conducive learning environment (Shuayb, 2014).

In December 2009, and again in April 2011, my colleague, Dr. Nicholas Rowe, and I went to Bourj el-Barajneh Palestinian Refugee Camp to facilitate a series of dance video workshops for children and youth. While Nicholas was an experienced practitioner in such situations, with extensive experience working in Palestinian refugee camps, initially I was a complete novice. The first time I went to this camp I did not know what to expect. My non-existent Arabic and meagre knowledge of the Palestinian situation meant the best and most practical option was to follow Nicholas' lead.

Bourj el-Barajneh, translated as towers of the towers, is a refugee camp where approximately 20,000 people live in one square kilometre. The camp is situated in the southern suburbs of Beirut, deep in the heart of Hezbollah territory.[2] Established in 1948 to accommodate Palestinian refugees from the Galilee region, Bourj el-Barajneh was one of the areas invaded by Israel in 1982 during the first Lebanese Civil War (Fig. 3).

Arriving with three hand-held cameras, a tripod and two translators we walked into the camp. After navigating the maze of alleyways between crumbling buildings riddled with bullet holes from conflicts past we met with the group of children and young people we would be working with over the coming days. It became apparent that any pre-conceived notions I had of how a dance workshop should be run, or even why it should be run would have to re-considered.

I was immediately struck by the feeling that time seemed to stand still. Generation after generation, children grow up in the same desperate reality,

Fig. 3 Image from a dance video workshop in Bourj el-Barajneh camp. Photo courtesy of Rose Martin

punished for crimes they did not commit, injured by a history not of their making. They stand on balconies, cracked beyond repair, watching the world of Beirut on the horizon go by. Illegal construction and limited space for horizontal expansion has forced the community to build vertically, creating a Kafkian-like reality, true but surreal. The refugees also teeter between the lines of an almost pseudo-reality. They find themselves held hostage in time and space, in a growing city, a rapidly changing world, frozen in time and increasingly lowered expectations. Open sewers run through the narrow alleyways, a spider web of exposed electrical wires runs overhead, some dangerously low; as a result, there are numerous fatalities every year due to electrocution. Initially I was sceptical as to how a few days of dancing might make an impact in such a situation.

In this workshop, Nicholas took a similar approach to his previous work in this and other refugee camps. He has explained that within this workshop there would be a clearer focus on the function of dance to collectively re-define and re-imagine space. Nicholas began the workshop by playing movement games with a group of ten children, who were between 9 and 15 years of age and of mixed abilities. Over the days we were in the camp brothers, sisters and cousins also joined in swelling the number of participants. Nicholas encouraged the group to devise some short stories that they wanted to make a dance about. They came up with four stories with the common thread of a football game running through them all. As a group, we started to make some movement related to each story and characters were developed. When they were told that they could film their stories anywhere in the camp there were giggles and looks of confusion, but there were also suggestions of 'film it in my house' or 'I know a great place' and we set out to begin filming.

The children led us through their streets, and we stopped in an empty alleyway with high walls either side and water streaming down one like a waterfall. The space implicitly called for movement that navigated around the spray of water, over the muddy puddles, and under the electrical wires above. This story was quite straightforward; it was about a group of boys who annoyed a group of girls who liked to dance, the boys would always run through the circle the girls were dancing in, they would chase them and generally cause chaos.

The boys were energetic in their performance, wanting to show off their 'best' moves, which were often fast and frenetic. The girls wanted to show through the story how they just wanted to continue with their dancing, performing calm *dakbe*[3] movements in circles or lines, however running and jumping when the group of boys disrupted them. The movement the group decided to use was a hybrid of dabke, gestural and what might be considered to be popular movements. In this alleyway it appeared that their physicality was linked with the sensory aspects of the space. Some traced the wall with their hands or ran their fingers under the water coming down the concrete wall. The puddles

incited jumps over them and unsuspecting members of the community who were walking through the alleyway became caught up in the movement, some joined in, others scurried past. A group of little girls, no more than five or six years old looked on, wide-eyed whispering to each other with smiles beginning to stretch across their faces.

These dance video workshops specifically focus on how dance can contribute to the sustainability of communities during times of adversity, and within this provide a creative, informal learning experience. The activities are not designed to be psychotherapy, and nor is it intended to be drama-through-movement. This is not to devalue the use of dance within these modes, but rather re-frame it from an alternative perspective. Within this alternate frame, it could be understood that perhaps the most useful thing that any art form can do when instability surrounds us is draw our attention away from current tragedies and hardships and into a safe (in terms of being able to take risks in a supportive environment), creative world where anything is possible. It may not seem hugely significant, but when everything in some situations is so impacted by an ongoing trauma, being able to step (or hop, shuffle or slide) out of it for an hour or two can allow for physical, social and personal regeneration to begin.

Bilal's Story: Reflections on Philosophical Influences and Art Education in the Curriculum of Mecca, Saudi Arabia

As an arts educator, researcher and practitioner concerned with the visual arts and working in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, there are certain issues and considerations I have noted in arts education in this particular cultural locale. In the Saudi Arabian 1st–12th grade (K-12, children approximately 6–17 years of age) education system art classes generally run for 90 minutes each week. Most K-12 art teachers hold a bachelor's degree in education, and they receive their arts training at teachers' college rather than at fine arts programs in universities. Arts education in a teachers' college is different to art education in a fine arts program in a university, in the sense that the primary focus of art education in a teachers college is not the art that is produced; rather it is the curriculum and pedagogical understandings and theories which are the focus. The ramifications of this mean that the majority of those teaching in the K-12 system have no experience as visual arts practitioners (Fig. 4).

In Saudi Arabia, the culture is conservative, and dominated by Islamic religious perspectives. Genders are separated within public spaces such as schools, and to some extent, private home spaces too. This means that students learn in all male or all female environments; in turn, this can impact on the art the

Fig. 4 Mixed media artwork by schoolgirls in Mecca. Photo courtesy of Bilal Makled

teacher chooses to facilitate and the outputs the students create. When one is immersed within a context where religion is so prevalent I have found that it is nearly impossible for the religious environment not to have an influence on how the world is understood. In turn this can shape (to some extent) the visual arts practices occurring in Saudi Arabia. The values conveyed by Islam practised in Saudi Arabia, rather than the rise of Islam more generally have resulted in particular nuances in the artistic work emerging from Saudi Arabia and how artistic practices are taught. For example, many artists, arts educators and students are reluctant or refuse to draw or depict people in their artwork.[4] This has resulted in an abstract style of work, even with younger students in formal arts education settings.

The religious influence encouraging gender segregation, and issues such as the choice to represent certain ideas (or not) in the artwork, can often result in some students missing out on partaking in arts education, especially if parents deem it 'inappropriate'. Often girls are the ones who are unable to participate, resulting in them not attaining a well-rounded education and artistic experience. As an arts educator working within the confines of a particular cultural and religious context I am seeking to explore how these challenges can be negotiated.

Collective Reflections on the Three Experiences

The three experiences from the authors illuminate that arts education in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula is diverse. In all three experiences, the impact of arts education in non-formal locations is emphasized. Further investigations of formal locations, such as school curricula in the region would be beneficial to explore how arts education is accessed and appreciated within such contexts. It can also be noted that the sociopolitical context of the region profoundly shapes the artistic learning experience. It could be said that the arts education practices in some parts of Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia are still grappling with access to artistic experiences and the right to education and cultural participation. As the UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education (2006) articulates:

> International declarations and conventions aim at securing for every child and adult the right to education and to opportunities that will ensure full and harmonious development and participation in cultural and artistic life. The basic rationale for making Arts Education an important and, indeed, compulsory part of the educational programme in any country emerges from these rights. (p. 3)

It may also be of benefit for the essential strategies for effective arts education, as outlined in the UNESCO Roadmap for Arts Education (2006), to be further contemplated by those within the Ministries of Education in locations such as Egypt, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. This could allow for a more comprehensive arts curricula and greater support and resources for arts educators. However, in saying this each location in the region is encountering unique challenges and experiences. In Samia's narrative, we can observe how there is a rural to urban shift in Egypt's population, leading to questions surrounding what in turn might happen to arts and crafts practices that once solely existed in informal rural settings. In Rose's narrative the climate of trauma can be woven into the arts learning experience, re-imagining and re-defining how we might understand and experience our surroundings through arts education encounters. As noted in Bilal's narrative, in Saudi Arabia it is the negotiation of strict Islamic expectations and protocols, which can challenge, shape and inspire visual arts education and practices. The three authors' experiences barely begin to scrape the surface of the arts education practices occurring in the region, if anything their perspectives are merely small snapshots of certain places at certain times.

Conclusion

Like the Arabic proverb at the opening of this chapter articulates, 'a tree begins with a seed'. The seed for arts education in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula has been planted, and the roots are forming for a strong

future for arts education across the region. What is required for the next phase of development is patience and perseverance, and those working with arts education in the region to have support both nationally and internationally to nurture and encourage existing projects and new initiatives. Including the voices of those working within the arts in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula in global dialogues demonstrates respect, value and inclusion. Through this respectful dialogue tolerance and understanding of the diversity and nuances of the arts, and more specifically arts education practices, taking place in the region can be presented. In a time when this region is experiencing conflict, trauma, political instability, refugee crisis and economic hardship it is now more than ever we need to look at situations creatively. We need to encourage people to personally express themselves through dancing, weaving or painting in order to foster a sense of collective community. From this perspective, arts education in the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula is not a luxury, it is a necessity.

Notes

1. The Middle East and North Africa region has been in turmoil over the past five years (Danahar, 2015). There have been numerous political tensions in the region, armed conflict, violent protests and upheavals. Uprisings occurred in Tunisia and Egypt; civil war in Libya resulting in the fall of its government; civil uprisings in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen; major protests, violence and turmoil in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman; Lebanon, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Western Sahara (Bishara, 2013; Danahar, 2015; Fakhoury, 2011). It can be noted that the uprisings in Syria have led to a horrific civil war conflict. This has resulted in many casualties, displaced people and refugees. The events in Syria have in turn had a profound effect on the surrounding region (Danahar, 2015).
2. Hezbollah (also transliterated as Hizbullah or Hizballah) is a Shi'a Islamist militant group and political party based in Lebanon, with a strong presence in southern Lebanon (Levitt, 2013; Norton, 2014).
3. Dabke is a folk dance 'made up of intricate steps and stomps' (Rowe, 2011, p. 364) performed by both men and women that is popular in locations such as Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, the north of Saudi Arabia, Occupied Palestinian Territories/Israel and Yemen.
4. In Islam the notion of aniconism recommends avoiding creating of images of sentient beings (Burckhardt, 2009). The most absolute proscription is of images of God, and also depictions of Muhammed and Islamic prophets (Burckhardt, 2009). It can be noted that the depiction of all humans and non-human animals is discouraged in the hadith (Hossein Nasr, 1987). As a result, Islamic art has been dominated by geometric patterns, calligraphy and patterns such as the arabesque. However, figurative art is still developed, especially for the private works.

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