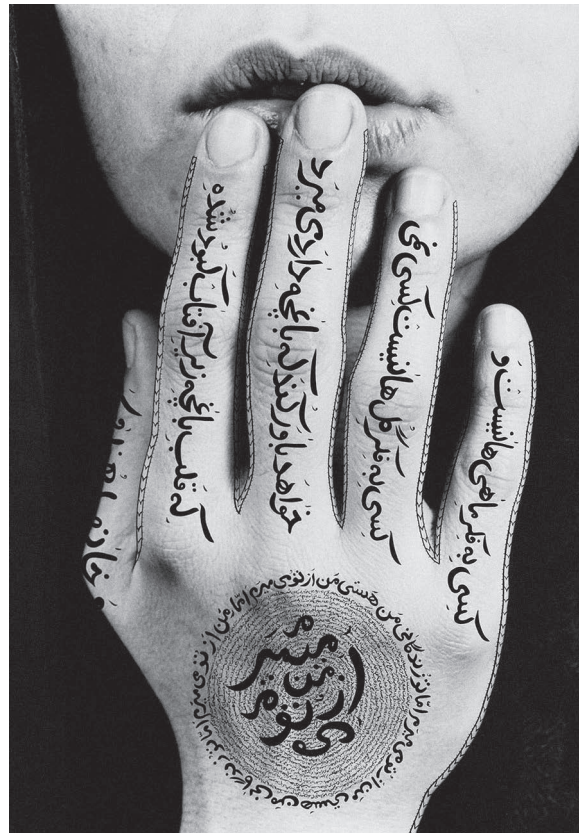


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Making Space: *(Re)Writing (Art) History Now: Who Does It, How, and Where?*



This paper—which has been edited and expanded—was delivered as part of a panel titled, ‘(Re)writing (art) history now: who does it, how, and where?’ at the 2018 Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts Global Academy II, ‘Examples of Transcultural Exchange’. To respond to the title of the symposium, ‘Examples of Transcultural Exchange’ and the theme of this panel, I will draw on two case studies derived from personal experience, starting with one of the core tenets that defined the editorial approach of *Ibraaz*, an online publishing platform focused on visual cultures emanating from in and around the Middle East and North Africa. *Ibraaz* actively published from 2011 to 2017, with mainly essays, conversations and artist projects commissioned around six-month and one-year platforms. These platforms were defined by research questions that included, for example, “What role can the archive play in developing and sustaining a critical and culturally located art history?” and “How do we productively map the historical and contemporary relationships that exist between North Africa, the Middle East and the Global South?”¹

Editorially, *Ibraaz* operated with one key idea: that the artist’s practice comes first. This was one of the first things that founding editor-in-chief Anthony Downey told me when I joined the team as an editor in 2012. The idea that practice comes first was especially important when *Ibraaz* was launched, as uprisings unfolded across the Arab world, starting in December 2010 in Tunis, where the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, which founded and supports *Ibraaz*, is based.

There is of course a decolonial rationale to this methodology. *Ibraaz* functioned on the principle that an artist’s practice comes first in order to counter the colonial gaze—the kind that reduces an artist to a mouthpiece for another agenda, be it diplomatic, commercial, or political. This is something that happened a lot when artists from the Arab world began to be consistently framed as spokespeople for the so-called Arab Spring, itself a term inscribed with colonialist dynamics. The decolonial position, in this sense, would be to have the art work—and by association the artist—speak for itself, and to follow the nuances of that art work, not to mention the considerations of its maker. This position supposes that there is no frame to begin with—or one that is not yet discernably clear—while acknowledging the tendency to frame as an impulse that drives that logic.

This problem of framing is something that *Ibraaz* continuously navigated; a journey that culminated in Platform 010, *Ibraaz*’s final one-year publishing cycle before pausing, for which a simple question was posed: where to now? As this tenth platform progressed, it felt like *Ibraaz* had come to a point where it became necessary to stop in order to reflect on an intensive number of years spent mediating a constant flow of responses to urgent and timely questions that were related to the regions of the Middle East and North Africa, but not limited to those geographies either—from the current conditions of institutional practice, to the role of the globalised cultural economy on the production of contemporary visual culture. By the time Platform 010 ended, it also became clear that the ulterior motive to dismantle the regional frame without losing sight of it through the platform’s work had been achieved; *Ibraaz* was no longer a regional publication, so much as a platform operating from a different centre of gravity—global in its own right.

All of which relates to the title of this panel: ‘(Re)writing (art) history now: who does it, how, and where?’ Through the example of *Ibraaz*, everyone who contributed to the production of what is now a free and online archive of content charting the development of visual cultures in and around the Arab world over a very intense period of time—a history, you might call it—wrote, re-wrote, or challenged a history, or histories, in some way. A very clear example would be Shiva Balaghi’s essay, ‘Against the Market’, which refuted the common dismissal of Shirin Neshat’s work as a result of her

market success, and the tropes that—as it has been said—have become, since Neshat first started using them, passé; thus limiting any discourse around her work to a very narrow set of parameters.² In so many instances, the stories our contributors told, or wanted to tell, resisted ghettoising narratives in favour of readings that sought to open up meanings and particularities so as to link contexts and visual cultures with others. Artist Monira Al Qadiri, for instance, wrote an essay in 2015 about Keio University Professor Dr. Toshihiko Izutsu's 1958 translation of the Qur'an, and what it taught her about Islam, describing how Izutsu's lecture-turned-book, *Islamic Culture* (1991), led her to the conclusion that "Islam is abstract expressionism through poetic illustration."³ That same year, artist Anahita Razmi presented a project that drew on Iranian film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf's poetic, *Sokout (The Silence)* (1998), which narrates the life of a young blind boy enthralled by sounds and haunted by his landlord's knock on the door; John Cage's *4'33"* (1952); and one particular instruction from Yoko Ono's *Instruction Pieces* (1963), with typed letters on a piece of paper instructing the reader to "whisper all your secret thoughts to a pachinko ball", a ball used in Japanese gaming parlours. These references converged into a reflection on the movement of Iranian men to Japan and back in the 1980s and the 1990s—a result of the economic impact of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and a mutual visa exemption agreement between Japan and Iran which lasted from 1974 to 1992—and a rumination on active silence and relevant noise when it comes to the politics of migration and assimilation.⁴

Such narratives opened up pathways to new ones, while simultaneously drawing unexpected—or unsung—connections. In one conversation, Hong Kong artist Leung Chi Wo spoke to Robin Peckham about a work he produced for the 4th *Marrakesh Biennale* in 2012, *So I don't really know sometimes if it's because of culture* (2012), a video installation whose soundtrack consists of a dialogue that was written based on the experience of two Moroccan women who lived in Hong Kong.⁵ In another discussion, artist Samah Hijawi interviewed curators Rasha Salti and Khristine Khouri about their extensive research project around the *International Exhibition for Palestine in 1978*, organised by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation in Beirut—a reflection of an international network of solidarity for Palestine that stretched from Europe to Asia.⁶

With so many trajectories, *Ibraaz* very much felt like a way-finding mission. The platform's structure, from the foundation that funded it to the editorial approach, facilitated as free a flow of testimonies as possible—the idea being that the end result would be an archive that could double as a document of the present, and an ongoing conversation in the future.

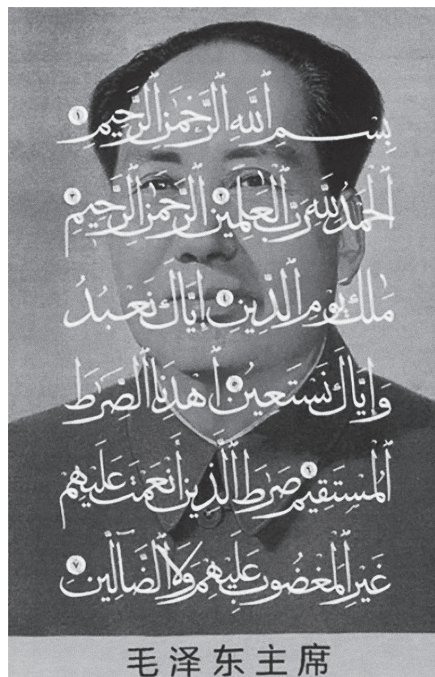
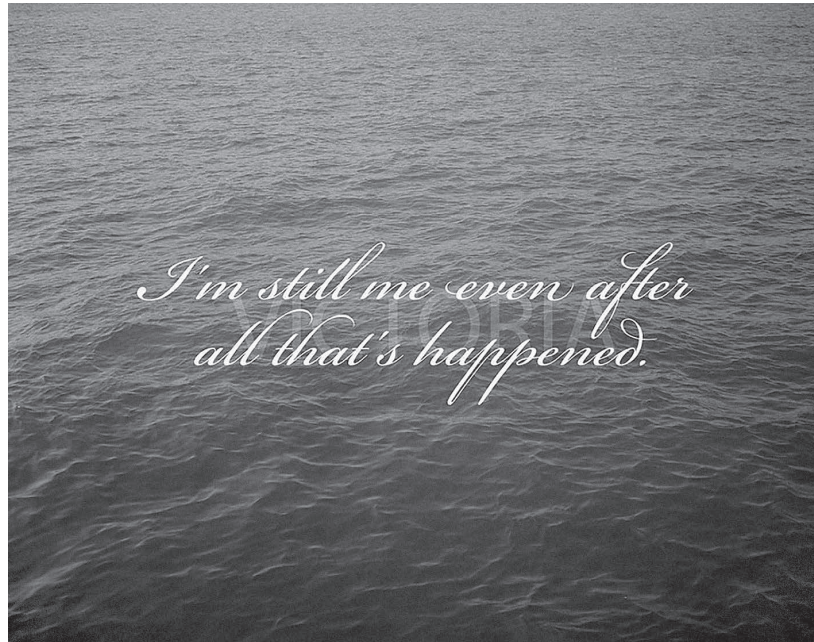
But this fact does not deny that the platform didn't come without its issues. One thing about *Ibraaz's* position that was naturally treated with suspicion was that this was a project funded by a single foundation created by a private individual, which raised questions surrounding the agenda such a project might follow, or perpetuate. In response, I can say that the Kamel Lazaar Foundation did not influence any editorial decisions, nor did the editorial team ever really engage with the Foundation at all. Likewise, *Ibraaz's* editorial approach was hands-off where it needed to be. Our main priority was to facilitate the expression and articulation of ideas and testimonies that texture understandings of present events, art histories, and artistic practices—at times even challenging them.

In many ways, our structure was designed to feel like there was no structure, which actually brings to mind Adam Smith's description of the "invisible hand of capitalism," by which a free market ends up regulating itself. Which is to say that none of the freedoms I outlined above justifies the uncomfortable fact that *Ibraaz* was funded by a single foundation, though the autonomy that the

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platform enjoyed does say something of the various registers of complicity that exist when it comes to the politics of creative labour in the realm of art and culture, and how this relates to the various levels of decolonial work being undertaken by individuals working in the field, not to mention the interests that intersect along the way. This relates to another practical example of a platform that acts, in some ways, as a mediator of some kind of historical rewriting—the *Conversations* program at *Art Basel* in Hong Kong, a fair lodged deep in the belly of the global art market, located in a city with a history as a British colony-slash-freeport, and now an ongoing capitalist—now possibly capito-communist—experiment under the thumb of the Chinese state.

The *Conversations* program in Hong Kong, for which I am curator, is by all accounts complicit, as am I, in the centralising dynamics of *Art Basel* as a global enterprise, in which clear hierarchies exist. In fact, the Guerrilla Girls performed a basic head count at the Hong Kong fair in 2018—part of their participation in Asia Art Archive’s ‘Women Make Art History’ program—and out of the 248 galleries showing in that year’s edition, fifty percent of which came from or have spaces within the Asia region, they found that seventy-six percent of total artists shown were men, thirty-seven percent of the galleries participating showed zero women artists, and twenty-nine percent showed only one woman.⁷ Of course, such numbers are not unique to Hong Kong and are indicative of a much larger global issue with regards to gender representation within the visual arts; and those in the field do what they can in whatever position they find themselves to challenge the status quo, if they are so inclined. In 2018, for example, when *Art Basel Hong Kong’s Conversations* was made free to the public for the first time, we counted a tally—not included in the Guerrilla Girls count—of nearly seventy women speakers to some fifty men on the schedule: a constellation of people from across Asia and beyond, who came together to share their knowledge of working in the culture industry, not only with each other, but with the audience.

Conversations is devised in close collaboration with Asia director, Adeline Ooi, the *Art Basel* team, and the network of practitioners who are engaged in the *Art Basel* network. At every point, we have tried to remain conscious of the program’s position as an economically instrumentalised site of cultural discourse produced from a Western—and capitalist (market platform)—structure that does not come untainted with colonial dynamics, when taking into account the fair format’s relationship to the imperialist spectacle of the World’s Fairs of yesteryear.⁸ At the same time, we are cognisant of the unique position *Art Basel Hong Kong* has as a global art fair positioned in Asia: a region that has been fast forwarding from a tumultuous twentieth century and remapping itself in the process, with the histories of the Cold War converging in the city, once hailed as the perfect embodiment of free-market capitalism and now becoming absorbed by a contemporary communist state.

As a post-colonial city with an identity that has traditionally been predicated on being a portal between East and West, Hong Kong is now grappling with another form of colonisation by a new twenty-first century superpower with global ambitions. This context feeds into the idea of *Conversations* as a space where discussions can explore what lies ahead in a world where the West has become decentred, by bringing together cultural workers—who all engaged in seeking out what has been, what is, and what might be possible through their work—into dialogue with one another.

In general, the *Conversations* program occupies a peculiar space in *Art Basel’s* portfolio of sectors—in many ways it is the public arm of its three fairs (Basel, Hong Kong and Miami), with simultaneous translation available for all talks, which are recorded, often live-streamed, and available on YouTube within days of the event, sometimes even hours. But this does not defend what *Art Basel* as a global enterprise represents on a larger scale, given the impact the fair model

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has had on local art scenes, and the hierarchies it produces through the creation of a global network and an associated global class. Simply, the framing of *Conversations* as a public space—given that it is an un-ticketed open platform within the event itself—acknowledges the fact that this view is but one perspective of an infinite number of others that apply to a space like *Art Basel*, not limited to the issues that come with the market and the multitude of stakeholders that are connected to its global enterprise.

The *Conversations* program is where the space of the art fair can expand beyond the market, while also honouring the ancient concept of a market as a site where not only money is exchanged, but also knowledge and politics. The art fair, in this light, is a potent space where cultural traditions, politics, and histories cross-hatch openly and explicitly for the short period that the event runs: an overwhelming cross-section, or microcosm, of a wider world that, when the art fair closes, remains networked by an intricate system we know as the “art world” which is ultimately a transglobal—though by no means cohesive and singular—community bound by the idea of art.

To that end, if I were to apply the question of this panel to *Art Basel*—who (re)writes history, where and how—I would not say *Art Basel* writes history, but its structure certainly facilitates the production of it, taking into account that history is in fact a fractal word whose singular form encapsulates a plurality. This is very much the logic that has driven the development of the *Conversations* space in Hong Kong, which acknowledges the great opportunity this platform offers to not only reflect on the narratives that have defined the world through the many relations that have brought peoples together and apart, but to try to transcend them.

One talk that encapsulates this approach was ‘Decolonising “Ethnography”: Contemporary Representations’, a panel staged in 2018 with artists who have consistently engaged with decolonisation in their practice. Moderated by curator Qinyi Lim, speakers included Charwei Tsai, Yee I-Lann, Gala Porras-Kim, and Lisa Reihana, who represented New Zealand at the 57th *Venice Biennale* in 2017 with a vivid audio-visual re-telling of Captain James Cook’s voyages based on the early-nineteenth century French scenic wallpaper *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804-05).⁹ There was a great moment in the question and answer session when someone from the audience asked why no men were included in the lineup, which was fair to ask, and I remember thinking, why should there have been? Sometimes it’s that simple, especially when thinking about the demographics that have dominated the study of ethnography for so long.

But it goes deeper than that when taking into account what Cultural Studies Professor Fred Inglis has said about culture being the study of power. In the Foucaultian sense, power is a material force that is produced, maintained, and imposed by a consenting body of individuals, values, and systems. By that definition, art is a domain where you are not only able to study power, but also participate in its mediation, fragmentation, valuation, circulation and renegotiation while observing its effects, and perhaps even affecting them in turn—sometimes in the most subtle of ways. In fact, each artist on the decolonising ethnography panel described certain strategies and tactics that focused on co-opting languages, systems, and forms of defining in order to tell more nuanced stories—a common thread among those who contributed to *Ibraaz*, too. As Malaysian artist Yee I-Lann explained when talking about “the violence of admin,” her concern is not so much history as it is about the tools and methods of power and how it is learned,¹⁰ because that is what it really amounts to—representation and the struggle to participate in the production of its meaning. In this field, keeping things open enough for discussion is what counts, especially when the space for open discussion—as is the case in Hong Kong—is not always guaranteed.

Colombian-American artist Gala Porras-Kim touched on this idea, too, when thinking about decolonising ethnography and how this idea applies to her research, and I am both quoting and paraphrasing her here. It is not about “writing history not from a top down view... such as male, or global North... but from an individual, domestic perspective” — “a democratic way of looking at our shared history” that acknowledges the fact that “the representation of history is almost impossible to achieve,” given the multitude of views constituting historical experience.¹¹ The suggestion here is that while a representation of history is almost impossible, a democratic attempt at knowing — and indeed, producing — history is.

This brings me to my final response to the question that this panel asks. To this I would say, all the components of the art world participate in the unwieldy and ongoing discourse we call art history, and by that virtue they all contribute to its writing. It’s a predictable answer, but that doesn’t make it less true.

This is the third text of a trilogy on decolonial practice, following ‘A World Affair: Biennials, Art Fairs and The 1851 Great Exhibition’, *di’van* | *A Journal of Accounts* Issue 5, 2018, pp. 20-33, and ‘Now Where? On Navigating Without a Compass’, *di’van* | *A Journal of Accounts* Issue 4, 2018, pp. 32-45.

Notes

¹ See www.ibraaz.org

² Shiva Balaghi, ‘Against the Market: The Art of Shirin Neshat’, *Ibraaz* Platform 010, 25 September 2016; <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/164>

³ Monira Al Qadiri, ‘How Toshihiko Made Me Understand Islam’, *Ibraaz* Platform 008, 26 February 2015; <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/119>

⁴ Anahita Razmi, ‘Some Pachinko Pieces: On Silence and Noise in Times of Crisis’, *Ibraaz* Platform 010, 11 September 201; <https://www.ibraaz.org/projects/142>

⁵ ‘Is This about Culture? Leung Chi Wo in conversation with Robin Peckham’, *Ibraaz* Platform 008, 6 November 2014; <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/149>

⁶ ‘Past Disquiet: Rasha Salti and Kristine Khouri in conversation with Samah Hijawi’, *Ibraaz* Platform 009, 30 July 2015; <https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/169>

⁷ Lisa Movius with additional reporting from Alec Evans, ‘No end to gender woes? Time’s not up in Asia’, *The Art Newspaper*, 29 March 2018; <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/no-end-to-gender-woes-time-s-not-up-in-asia>

⁸ See Stephanie Bailey, ‘A World Affair: Biennials, Art Fairs and The 1851 Great Exhibition’, *di’van* | *A Journal of Accounts* Issue 5, 2018, pp. 21-33

⁹ For further reading on this work by Lisa Reihana, see Andrew Wood, ‘What Comes Over the Seas In Pursuit of Venus’ and Lana Lopesi, ‘Indigenous Futurisms, New Media and Contemporary Assertions of Indigeneity’, *di’van* | *A Journal of Accounts* Issue 4, 2018, pp. 120-129 and pp. 130-137 respectively

¹⁰ ‘Decolonising “Ethnography”: Contemporary Representations’, *Art Basel YouTube*, 30 March 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJucLbvCW1U>

¹¹ *ibid.*