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FUTURE IMPERFECT
Contemporary Art Practices and
Cultural Institutions in the Middle East

Edited by Anthony Downey
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INTRODUCTION: FUTURE IMPERFECT

Critical Propositions and Institutional Realities in the Middle East

ANTHONY DOWNEY

1 "Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention" in *Institutional Attitudes: Instituting Art in a Flat World*, Pascal Gielen ed. (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2013), 67.

"What is at any given moment accepted as the natural order is always the result of sedimentary hegemonic practices. Things could always have been otherwise and every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities."—Chantal Mouffe, 2013[1]

There is a momentous process happening across the Middle East and North Africa today. It is an insidious development, partly surreptitious but mostly blatant in its operations. It is an evolving phenomenon that affects numerous people and communities, albeit to different degrees, and yet remains, with a few exceptions, unobserved. This development, if allowed ascendancy, will present an insurmountable obstacle to social, political, economic and cultural progress across the region. It will also hinder and obstruct relations between individuals and within communities for generations to come. Given the recent attention focused on civil unrest, insurgency, sectarian conflicts and the legacy of the so-called Arab Spring, it may not be entirely evident what this process consists of and how it operates, so it is crucial to state the following as clearly as possible from the outset: there is a de facto campaign, based on mistrust and a fundamental lack of foresight, currently being waged on cultural institutions across the Middle East and the practitioners who work in and support them. This has admittedly been a historical fact for some time, but, following widespread social and political unrest, it has recently become all the more visible, opportunistic and destructive. Despite the upsurge in post-revolutionary cultural production, the effect of this onslaught has produced a veritable and verifiable crisis in cultural production that can be seen in the pressures placed upon contemporary visual culture—in terms of its production and dissemination—and its institutions, be they private galleries, public museums, foundations, magazines (and publishing in general), educational initiatives, workshops, seminars, artistic practices, freedom of speech, debate, the right to protest, or access to public space and cultural events. This is an international concern that will resonate beyond the present and encroach upon the future evolution and establishment of cultural institutions in ways that we are only just beginning, if at all, to understand.

It may seem dramatic to suggest that there is a campaign being fought against culture across such a diverse region, and perhaps it is; nevertheless, there is a stealthy erosion of certain rights around cultural production and freedom of expression that is having a significant impact on cultural producers and institutions. This is not to discount the fact that this situation has unfolded inconsistently, with different means and for different ends, and with discrete outcomes in individual countries; nor is it to disregard the fact that cultural production, nowhere more so than under the conditions of historical conflict and autocracy, has always attracted a degree of mistrust, if not downright repression and suppression. Still, the geopolitics of

2   See *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson eds. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); *Institutional Critique and After*, John C. Welchman ed. (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006); and *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray eds. (London: MayFly Books, 2009).

3   The co-option and deployment of culture by government policies and political ambitions is, of course, a global rather than regional phenomenon. For a full discussion of this process, see George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

4   In using the term "uneven development" I am referencing Neil Smith's *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), which was key to understanding unbalanced geographical development under the conditions of capitalism and neoliberalism.

the Middle East, as complex as they are, reveal a disquieting number of recurring anxieties about the historical development of cultural institutions and their current condition. It is the recurrence of these issues, in all their sociopolitical specificities and historically relative contexts, that informs *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* and its enquiry into a singular, but far from straightforward, question: If we consider cultural institutions as barometers of sorts for acknowledging and registering, if not forecasting, prevailing social, political, historical and cultural conventions, then to what extent does their current state, and the pressures placed upon them, give cause for concern when it comes to considering the status of visual culture and cultural production across the region?

Although this volume takes into account a broad region, the specific questions it raises must be considered through the prism of cultural production, not least the latent possibilities inherent in how it can inform, critically or otherwise, institutional development and cultural infrastructures. While the first section of *Future Imperfect* looks at regional contexts, alongside the historical forms of antagonism that exist between cultural institutions and political repression, the second section examines how institutions can learn, through both informal methods and formal critique, from cultural producers. This is to recall how artists, from the mid-1960s onwards, have consistently challenged traditional institutional systems of archiving, curation, display and dissemination.[2] The strategic critique encapsulated in these practices should be reconsidered alongside the present-day realities affecting cultural institutions across the region — in particular, the extent to which such institutions, in the wake of political unrest and social upheaval, are being challenged or actively dismantled along with other political, economic, social and historic establishments. The forms of "institutional critique" evident throughout the volume therefore refer both to these historical gambits and the specific circumstances of cultural institutions in the region, and, perhaps more importantly, how such practices can present methods for articulating speculative institutional futures.

Apart from the imminent need to consider the historical contexts out of which this current state of affairs has emerged, and how cultural production has engaged with these frames of reference, the unrelenting instrumentalization of cultural production so that it answers to a global cultural economy must be likewise investigated.[3] Globalization, in conjunction with the neoliberal policies that enable its predominance, not only produces rampant forms of "uneven development" but also co-opts cultural economies into the realm of a privatized, overtly politicized ethic of production, exchange, and consumption.[4] Increasingly, and nowhere more so than in an age of deregulation and the dominance of the culture industry, contemporary art institutions have become more and more involved in

5   The notion of "soft power", a non-coercive form of power that appeals to persuasion and co-option rather than force, trades on the economy of cultural production alongside political diktat and foreign policy. The term is associated with Joseph Nye, who popularized it in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

forms of promotion, marketing, merchandising, entrepreneurship, sponsorship, community-based programmes, educational courses, expansionism, and the development of transnational networks. Add to this the diversification of funding models that are available to organizations — ranging from public monies, private funding, charitable finance, commercial sponsorship, and philanthropic resources — and something of the complexity involved in successfully developing an institution, and the global pressures then placed upon them, begins to emerge. It is with these points in mind that the final section of this volume will enquire into how the emphasis being placed on so-called "mega-museums" and forms of "soft power" have affected the future evolution of cultural institutions in the region.[5] While these processes are particularly notable in the United Arab Emirates and Gulf states such as Qatar, they are also, as we will see, a substantial feature of cultural developments in Istanbul and other Middle Eastern cities.

While the politics of contemporary cultural production and institutional practices in the Middle East can tell us a great deal about local and regional concerns, one of the cornerstone ambitions of this volume is to enquire into what they can also impart about the politics of global cultural production, including the multiple ways in which contemporary art practices are being reduced, willingly or otherwise, to the logic of global capital. We need to take into account the extent to which the prevalence of neoliberalism — as a set of policies that advocate various levels of deregulation, competition, privatization, trade liberalization, the withdrawal of state support, the reduction of government, and the usurpation of the legal right to a fair wage and labour laws — has seen cultural production and its institutions co-opted into a global market-led rationale of consumerism, advertising, tourism, gentrification and profit. What potential, we need to ask, is there in critical art practices when it comes to engaging with these processes, and how can they propose a degree of resistance, if not radical, constructive forms of critique, to global cultural economies that would have, in turn, a degree of relevance to the long-term sustainability and short-term functioning of cultural institutions in the Middle East?

Such an ambitious set of questions comes, needless to say, with its own caveats, and *Future Imperfect* is an admittedly imperfect volume insofar as no one publication could realistically claim to be wholly representative of an entire region's institutional and cultural output, nor should it. The collection's underlying intention is in fact more modest and yet, hopefully, more far-reaching, inasmuch as the essays bring both a strong degree of historical context to a discussion that has in recent years become febrile — the role of culture in a time of conflict and regional upheaval — and offer a partisan "condition report" on the state of cultural institutions in an era defined by diversified forms of institutional activity, political activism, and

prevalent neoliberal models of cultural rationalization. While cultural institutions may be undergoing a period of crisis, we need to coextensively acknowledge that there has also been an eruption, so to speak, in cultural production across the post-revolutionary landscape of the Middle East. Based on a collective form of input from numerous practitioners, interlocutors and contributors, *Future Imperfect* is designed to critically engage with this apparent conundrum and to question how new infrastructures and institutions can effectively emerge, or not, within such fraught, but undoubtedly dynamic and energetic, contexts.

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REGIONAL CONTEXTS: FRAGMENTARY NETWORKS
AND HISTORICAL ANTAGONISMS

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Historically, there have always been sociopolitical pressures placed upon cultural production and institutions across the Middle East. The forms of state-approved repression and suppression varied in intensity and duration but were invariably met with acts of social antagonism and the prevalence of individual and community-based models of cultural expression. Over the course of the last five years or so, which have witnessed unprecedented turmoil, state agencies have become more emboldened in their outright distrust of cultural producers and the institutions they represent. The political pressure placed upon, and simultaneous neglect of, cultural production has been all the more exacerbated by the relative absence of private sector funding and the presence of cultural policies that reveal a disconcerting lack of legislation fit for the purpose of ensuring models of institutional engagement, stability and sustainability. Where funding does exist, in the United Arab Emirates, for example, it is arguable that these projects seem less concerned with supporting cultural production—or indeed forms of community-based activities that involve education and participation—and more preoccupied with statist forms of centralized cultural management, which have largely resulted in the building of sepulchral testaments to the expansionist policies of Western institutions.

In post-revolutionary landscapes, the amplification and escalation of individual, non-state-sponsored models of cultural production, across all fields of activity, not only questions traditional institutional contexts but also the authority of the state. The ensuing forms of pre-emptive scrutiny have all too easily segued into conventional modes of surveillance, outright threats, state censorship, self-censorship, the unexplained closure of institutions, and the summary arrest and detention of those associated with them. In recent years, as we will see, these processes have been expanded in scope, encompassing not only cultural organizations but non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in general, and the foundational structures, where they exist, of civil society. To observe this is to further

6   It is important to note that the advocacy of civil society as a solution to political, social and cultural turmoil needs to be quantified inasmuch as, for some commentators, those institutions have come to be viewed as effective facilitators of neoliberal capital. For George Yúdice, neoliberalism "introduces the expectation that 'institutions of assistance' will be situated in civil society rather than in government". This redistribution of the risks associated with maintaining the welfare and well-being of a social order enables, on the one hand, new spaces for activism and engagement to emerge, and on the other, more worryingly, "new forms of social management". See Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture,* 6–7.

7   For Jürgen Habermas, civil society is defined as a series of "associations, organisations, and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private life spheres, distill and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public sphere". See Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 366. For a discussion of Habermas in relation to civil society, political forms of proscription, cultural institutions and contemporary art practices, see Anthony Downey, "For the Common Good?: Artistic Practices and Civil Society in Tunisia" in *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East*, Anthony Downey ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 59–62.

8   In Libya, these included the Gaddafi International Charity and Development Foundation (GICDF), the stated goal of which was to support the efforts of its associated societies

highlight how cultural institutions, insofar as they promote dialogue and debate, are indelibly associated with a perceived threat to social and political orders. This was true pre-revolution in, say, Egypt and Libya, and has become a more evident and daily fact of life in both countries post-revolution, although there are significant differences to be had in the application and demonstration of state power in both countries. If we understand civil society to be an attempt to reconcile public and private mores without resort to state control and government decrees, then the pivotal role of cultural institutions as facilitators of social relationships, and their attendant threat to state control in that role, becomes obvious.[6] Cultural institutions promote and produce mini-publics, engaged constituencies, public debate and, in turn, encourage broader audience participation in discussions about culture and its significance during a time of relative unrest.[7] It is these elements that form part of larger organizational and informal social networks that are indelible factors in the development of civil society and the public sphere, both being overtly contested issues in pre- and post-revolutionary states. And this fact, for governments unused to the broader manifestation of civil society, produces both outright suspicion and predictably reactionary, unimaginative responses to cultural institutions, their agents, and the events associated with them.

The historic suppression of civil society and cultural organizations across the Middle East has given rise to an often fragmented process of development that undermines the sustainability and relevance of cultural institutions—a point that emerges forcibly time and again in *Future Imperfect*. In "Filling the Gaps: Arts Infrastructures and Institutions in Post-Dictatorship Libya", one of the first essays to extensively address the parlous state of culture in a country riven by sectarian violence and political uncertainty, Hadia Gana surveys a relatively familiar story of institutions, alongside the associations of civil society, falling into terminal decline without any formal commitment, or indeed plan, to reconstruct or develop anything to replace them. Surveying the aftermath of forty-two years of despotic rule, where the right to gather or to have a private existence was forfeited to the dictatorial political will of Muammar Gaddafi (who, following his ousting of King Idris I in 1969, became the self-styled "Brotherly Leader and Guide of the Revolution of Libya" from 1977 to 2011), Gana sketches a landscape of cultural isolation and institutions—where they exist—in disarray. As evidenced in other autocratic states, of which Syria immediately comes to mind, succeeding governments in Libya were not reticent when it came to setting up their own cultural organizations while banning all other cultural associations.[8]

Although Morocco differs greatly in respect of Libya, especially in terms of historical development and recent history, in cultural terms there are similar levels of unease when it comes to exploring

how cultural institutions operate within the demands of sociopolitical contexts. In Lea Morin's "Artists and Institution Building In Situ: The Case of Morocco", the author gives an overview of cultural histories from the 1950s onwards and the various difficulties faced by cultural institutions when it comes to political patronage. This historical frame of reference gives background to recent developments and the emergence of newer institutions, be they private or public, such as L'appartement 22 (founded by Abdellah Karroum); Espace 150×295 (formed in 2004 by Faouzi Laatiris and Batoul Shimi); Cinémathèque de Tanger (co-founded by Yto Barrada and a group of fellow artists and film-makers), and L'Atelier de l'Observatoire (co-founded by Mohamed Fariji and Morin herself). What emerges here, and elsewhere in *Future Imperfect*, is a vivid picture of multidisciplinary and independent spaces supporting artistic practices and research within and beyond political patronage and the market.

While support for research-based practices and the institutions that inhabit spaces beyond the traditional, state-sponsored ideal are readily explored throughout this volume, Yasmine Zidane's essay on cultural institutions in Algeria highlights the pressure points involved in supporting individual artistic initiatives and collectives, with the assistance of entrepreneurs and private patronage, as well as the enduring forms of national and official culture that are often given priority in terms of funding and recognition by various ministries of culture. In Algeria, these pressures have been played out against the backdrop of the 2007 opening of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Algiers (MAMA), prompting an enquiry into the role of museums in the cultural contexts of countries such as Algeria in the early part of the twenty-first century. We return here to an extended question, voiced from the outset of the volume: What is the function of cultural institutions in a globalized world economy that seems intent on levelling the distinction of the local in favour of an interconnected, horizontal plateau of cultural consumerism?

Although Tunisia did not witness the brutalities of a regime such as Gaddafi's, under the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (who, until his ignominious departure and exile, was the second President of Tunisia from 1987 to 2011), culture suffered there in similar ways. Under-investment, suspicion, mistrust, neglect, cronyism, corruption, threats and imprisonment greeted anyone who did not accommodate the restrictive rules of political patronage and its simulation of press and cultural freedom. The legacy of this, despite some serious efforts on behalf of public and private individuals, is the current lack of cultural growth that could be said, as Wafa Gabsi argues, to be a contributory factor in the lack of economic growth in the country. The case for cultural institutions as agents of economic growth and social development is not a new one, and is no doubt fraught with concerns (given the prevailing tendency to adapt cultural production to the rationalizing ethos of neoliberalism); however, these arguments

Cinémathèque de Tanger programmes, 2012. Photo: Margot Trutin.
© Cinémathèque de Tanger.

9   Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), also known as Ansar al-Sharia, has been based primarily in Yemen since 2009. It is widely believed that since 2010 AQAP surpassed its parent organization — that is, Osama bin Laden's core Al Qaeda group — to become the organization's most potent and dangerous threat to global security. See Greg Miller, "CIA sees increased threat in Yemen", *Washington Post* (August 25, 2010).

10   Built in the late 1970s, during Ba'athist times, Amna Suraka was the central location for security operations — which included the surveillance, intimidation, detention, torture and killing of the local population — in the attempted suppression of the local Kurdish population and their national identity. It is known locally as the Amna National Museum or Red Prison and has become the locus for cultural events, both regional and international.

11   I have written at length elsewhere about the fundamental problematic of representing refugees, the dispossessed, the interned and migrants in the context of contemporary art practices. See Anthony Downey, "Exemplary Subjects: Camps and the Politics of Representation" in *Giorgio Agamben: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives*, Tom Frost ed. (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 119–42.

12   AMBS was founded in 1996 by Ali Mousawi, who partnered in 2007 with architects Marcos De Andres and son Amir Mousawi.

need to be understood in the context of modern-day Tunisia and the realization that the lack of long-term planning on behalf of governments, along with the urgent need to make informed and transparent decisions about cultural policies, is not only stultifying much-needed growth in the country's cultural economy but also giving rise to further divisions within its social and political orders.

Like Tunisia, the Republic of Yemen has witnessed its own formidable upheavals since mass protests there in 2011 caused the eventual overthrow, in 2012, of President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who had ruled since 1990. The legacy of colonization, partition, unification, civil war and, more recently, sectarianism and the continued presence of Al Qaeda is an all too evident indicator of how much modern-day Yemen is struggling to maintain its sovereignty and the integrity of its borders.[9] Nevertheless, as Anahi Alviso-Marino argues, this has not been coextensive with cultural ruination. Alviso-Marino observes how, following the revolution in Yemen in 2011, a number of non-governmental cultural initiatives emerged as outlets for free speech and gave voice to social actors who were contesting the political order through artistic practices. Detailing the work of Murad Subay and his street art campaigns, this essay is mindful to give historical context to the political institutionalization of art institutions and practices within the country from the 1930s onwards, and the subsequent flourishing of more independent art "groups" (*jama'a*) in the 1980s and 1990s.

The history of autocratic and outright murderous governments is invariably interwoven with the repression of cultural freedom and community-based organizations. In Adalet R. Garmiany's report on cultural institutions in Iraq today, we get a partial sense of a country with little to no cultural infrastructure to speak of and a political system that is both insecure and besieged. The Ministry of Culture and Youth in Iraq, the main governing body for the cultural representation of arts and literature, is highly politicized and, as Garmiany notes, all local art institutions, organizations, agencies and art centres fall under its influence and the protracted agendas of political parties and patronage. Despite this, a number of small independent art groups and exiled Iraqi artists have returned to Iraq to set up cultural organizations, a number of which are considered here, including ArtRole, of which Garmiany is director; the Sulyon Group, based in Sulaymaniyah; the Ninurta Art Group in Baghdad; the Basra Culture Organization; Shanidar Gallery, the only gallery in Erbil (the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq); the Iraqi Safe House; and Amna Suraka, The Museum of War Crimes in Kurdistan, amongst others.[10]

One of the key spaces to operate in Iraq was Sada, an Iraqi nonprofit organization supporting new and emerging arts practices through educational initiatives and public programmes. Founded by Rijin Sahakian, Sada opened in 2010 and closed in April 2015. When we consider its inception — set against the extirpation of the city's

arts and education systems and the concomitant need to connect artists to essential resources — and the decision to close it, a number of concerns come into focus, not least the evident connections between forms of warmongering, endemic corruption and the coextensive funding of the arts in countries such as Iraq. To paraphrase Sahakian, the very people who are in part responsible for and indeed profit from a country's destruction, in this case Iraq's, tend to also sponsor, applaud and exhibit works produced from those conditions.

This is a complex and serpentine process that requires formal analysis, and a number of authors here — including Gregory Sholette, Ala Younis and Tom Snow — examine the broader implications of contemporary art's relationship to conflict and capital accumulation. We return here to a vital element in this volume: the vectors of association to be found between recent conflict and upheaval within the region and the demands placed upon cultural institutions by a globalized cultural economy. This is an essential consideration when it comes to understanding why a significant number of institutions now profess to "represent" conflict, and how the artistic, critical and curatorial legitimacy conferred on these works is often part of a broader continuum of global commodification. Moreover, the "value" associated with images of conflict and dispossession is rarely accrued by the subjects depicted therein, which leads us to the all too pertinent question of agency: Who benefits from a work of art that purports to represent conflict? Is it the subject of conflict — the migrant, the refugee, the tortured, the dispossessed, the disappeared — or the artist, gallery, sponsor, non-governmental agency, investor or institution producing and showing the work?[11] This concern may be more institutionally problematic than it initially sounds if we enquire further into the nature of how institutions benefit, not only in terms of capital accrual when they invest in artworks, but also politically and socially from their association with images of conflict. The question, simply put, is straightforward enough: Who benefits, institutionally, financially, socially, politically and historically, from the *work* of art?

The current fractious state of Iraq, across its cultural, social, economic, political and historical axes, is daunting; however, the admission of absolute defeat in the face of recent history does not seem to be an option for some. A case in point would be the architectural firm AMBS and their ongoing attempt to build a library in Baghdad, and how such an institution could establish a groundbreaking platform for Iraq's cultural history, visual or otherwise.[12] The occupation of Iraq in 2003 brought about forms of devastation and calamity that are still unfolding as I write, including, in cultural terms, the burning, sacking and looting of the National Library and Archives (INLA). After the attack, the newly appointed Dr Saad Eskander detailed, as the authors note, the full extent of the INLA's losses as follows: archival materials – 60 per cent lost; rare books – 95 per cent

13   The street, named after a great medieval Arab poet, was famous for its many bookstores, publishing houses and Friday book market, all of which were destroyed.

Baghdad Library, exterior render. AMBS Architects, 2014 © AMBS Architects.

14   Since completing the design and tender package for the Baghdad library in 2014, as AMBS attest in a post-script to their essay, Iraq has unfortunately fallen victim to a number of problems—falling oil prices, political and social instability, and the threat presented by the so-called Islamic State —which has meant the project has been put on hold until a more favourable environment for its construction emerges.

lost; manuscripts – 25 per cent lost. To this unmitigated catastrophe, the destruction in 2007 of Al-Mutanabbi Street by a car bomb made for further soul-searching and despair.[13] It is against this backdrop—and the enduring sectarian conflict borne of an ill-advised, and for some illegal, invasion—that the idea of building a new library for Baghdad becomes all the more urgent. A library, in its goal to produce and make available knowledge about the arts within the country and beyond, could reinvigorate Iraqi intellectual and cultural life, which would be no mean feat within a tragically divided society.[14]

As Iraq continues to crumble as a viable state, with Libya seemingly not far behind, as Syria enters the fifth year of an infernal civil war (with apparently no prospect of resolution), as the so-called

"migrant" or "refugee" crisis has reached endemic proportions, all this talk of cultural institutions, artistic production and critical practices might seem ill-timed or even, for some, distasteful. When confronted with the dire state of cultural institutions in the region and the struggles practitioners now face, the weary response that support for culture and its edifices is not only relative but needs to be relegated in favour of social, economic and political institutions is nevertheless both disingenuous and short-sighted. This bias in support of strategic economic, social and political development, however much needed, continues to disregard the very building blocks upon which political and social cohesion are based; namely, culture and its institutions. A viable and enabling sense of social and political community is precisely that which culture, in all its forms,

15   Although the US-led coalition forces had prepared a list of twenty key sites in need of immediate protection, the National Museum being first on the list, the only one that received such protection was the Ministry of Oil. For a full discussion of these and other issues, see Raymond W. Baker, Shereem T. Ismael and Tareq Y. Ismael eds., *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered* (London: Pluto Press, 2010).

16   The targeted assassination of over 500 intellectuals, lawyers, artists and academics in Iraq following on from the coalition invasion of the country in 2003, and the flight into exile of countless more, remains one of the most sobering events in what has become an unmitigated disaster for the people of Iraq. See Dirk Adriaensens, "Killing the Intellectual Class: Academics as Targets" in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*. Towards the end of the latter volume, the editors compiled an 18-page, small type, list of the academics murdered in Iraq from 2003 until 2008. I defy anyone to read this document in full and not come away with a profound sense that whatever else is wrong with Iraq today, this list is testament to a gross and calculated failure to protect the Iraqi population in the present or to provide for their futures in the form of education and culture.

17   The Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal's project *168:01* (2016) used online crowdfunding to help return books to the shelves of the University of Baghdad's library which, although reconstructed, remains sparse. Bilal remembered visiting the library when he lived in Iraq and his subsequent project featured a 72-foot bookshelf holding

fosters and sustains. In fact, it is arguable that a thorough discussion concerning the importance of culture and its institutions could not be more apposite than during a time of conflict and shifts in local, regional and global cultural economies. To put this argument into perspective, we should consider here how the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, as Raymond W. Baker et al convincingly argued in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered* (2010), presaged the looting of museums, the burning of libraries, and the evisceration of cultural institutions in Baghdad and elsewhere. This was not an inevitable aftereffect of military incompetence and negligence (which would at least offer a partial degree of mitigation by virtue of blithe idiocy), but the consequence of policies that actively disregarded the imperative of protecting cultural landmarks in favour of base economic motives and short-term strategic advantages.[15] This prioritization of the strategic and the economic, among other oversights and policy failures, has left a country profoundly bereft of the very artefacts and cultural objects that are needed to give a nation a coherent, albeit contested, sense of communality and historical purchase. Social and political stability needs cultural continuity. And culture in Iraq, from its looted museums, burned libraries and the wilful, invariably unprosecuted murders of intellectuals and academics, was effectively annihilated—the latter being a term that broaches no nuance of quick or even mid-term recovery.[16] In this context, a new library and reinvigorated cultural institutions could indeed herald a cultural renaissance and a sense of the communal that has been absent in Iraq's recent history.[17]

The precariousness of cultural production and institution building has been an abiding concern for cultural practitioners working under the exceptional conditions that affect, on a daily basis, cultural production in Palestine.[18] In cultural and national terms, this exceptionalism, displaying its own perverse propositions, sees the fragmented sociopolitical landscape of Palestine increasingly aspire towards collective forms of cultural production and institutions. For Jack Persekian, in the interview included here, the exceptional state of Palestine is all too evident in the restrictions placed upon movement and the invidious logistical, not to mention financial, challenges faced by cultural institutions in, for example, Ramallah, Jerusalem and Gaza. A determining element in overcoming these challenges is to balance the often contradictory local and global demands placed upon cultural institutions while remaining pragmatic in the face of what can often appear to be insurmountable odds.[19] This may appear obvious, but Persekian is careful to note the institutional differences between those that function as depositories of knowledge and products, and those that take on the tasks and risks associated with enquiry, research, engagement, production and the dissemination of knowledge. For Persekian, the latter

1,000 blank white books. For a $25 (£17.60) fee on Kickstarter, the artist offered to replace one of the blank books for a real copy, sending the blank book back to the donor. The campaign ended on February 3, 2016, and having aimed to reach $9,000 managed $58,916. See https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/307933775/one-hundred-sixty-eight-hours-and-one-second.

18   A considerable number of books have been written on the anomalous nature of life under occupation in Palestine. See A. Ophir, Michal Govni and Sari Hanafi eds., *The Power of Inclusive Exclusion: Anatomy of Israeli Rule in the Occupied Palestinian Territories* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), for a thorough account of the exceptionalism involved in this anomalous state of being. Elsewhere Ilan Pappe offers a rigorous historical account of the ethnic cleansing involved in deracinating Palestinians from their homeland in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

19   A pertinent example of how to achieve this would be the Qalandiya International, an organization that Persekian helped to form and still oversees. Formed in 2012, the 2nd edition of QI in 2014 saw over 100 local and international artists participating, while visitor numbers exceeded 9,500. Over 65 events were held in 15 cities, towns and villages across historic Palestine. Details of the 2016 edition can be found at: http://www.qalandiyainternational.org/press/press-releases.

20   In her analysis, Fadda draws upon the work of Adam Hanieh in *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013).

institutional paradigm tends to act more as a hub that draws in "all sorts of talent and ideas, which transforms these institutions into drivers of development". It is within these types of embedded art institutions that Persekian sees a collaborative need to progress culture through collective practices that form bulwarks against often competing demands.

The ambition to build new institutions across the region, despite localized forms of social and political unrest and the political economies of global culture at play, should not be underestimated. For Reema Salha Fadda, in her extensive account of institution building in Palestine, the various challenges that such endeavours face are not only daunting but need historical contextualization. In "Playing against Invisibility: Negotiating the Institutional Politics of Cultural Production in Palestine", Fadda observes that the forms of advanced militarism utilized by Israel have produced a spatial reordering of Palestinian society into Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. This process has not only come to be accepted as a given order but also favours—through political, financial and developmental strategies—Israeli expansion and control over the Occupied Territories.[20] This has resulted, for the author, in a "political economy of uneven development across Palestinian cities, which is exemplified by the stark contrast between Ramallah's seemingly autonomous economic and cultural development and Gaza's rapid de-development." Ramallah's apparently autonomous economic and cultural development, and the fragmented de-development of Gaza (a city that remains, under the conditions of a continued Israeli siege, exempted from global economic and cultural flows), raises a key question in this essay: What role can cultural institutions play, under such conditions, in countering Palestinian invisibility in the face of insurmountable violence and the political rationalization of space? Observing the work of institutions and organizations, some already mentioned here, such as the Riwaq Biennale, the Jerusalem Show, Al Ma'mal, Qalandiya International and the International Academy of Art Palestine, Fadda also offers one of the first extended forms of engagement with the Palestinian Museum, which opened in Birzeit in May 2016, and the broader issues it faces as a cultural institution working within often conflicting and conflicted contexts.

The challenges faced by cultural institutions and cultural producers brings us, inevitably and with a significant degree of apprehension, to the hazardous, treacherous and seemingly forsaken contours of modern-day Syria.[21] To the extent that this volume is intended to present a partial "condition report" on the Middle East, and is therefore a partisan rather than exhaustively inclusive account, it became apparent from the outset that events were always going to render elements of this volume obsolete upon publication. This is a difficulty inherent in all such accounts and needs to be observed;

21   At the time of writing, Syria was mired in a protracted civil war that had, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), seen over a quarter of a million Syrians killed and, since March 2011, over one million injured. 4.8 million Syrians have been forced to leave the country, and 6.5 million are internally displaced, leaving an estimated 13.5 million people, including 6 million children, in need of humanitarian assistance. In April 2016, the United Nations special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, suggested that the number of people killed since 2011 was higher than that estimated by UNOCHA, and was more likely to be in excess of 400,000 people. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) suggests that the figure is closer to 470,000.

22   All online projects can be found at www.ibraaz.org/publications/73.

23   See Robin Yassin-Kassab and Leila Al-Shami, *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (London: Pluto Press, 2016).

24   The two previous volumes in this series examined, respectively, the sociopolitical impact of how new media was being employed, post-revolution, by cultural practitioners across the region and how artists have utilized archival practices to examine the historical contexts and present-day demands placed upon archives in the Middle East. See *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practice in North Africa and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014) and *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

nonetheless, to counter this somewhat, we simultaneously worked with a number of authors in the development of online contributions that will be regularly updated to take into account institutional developments and ongoing practices.[22] For Leila Al-Shami, the co-author of *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (2016), the recent events across the country have not only been devastating but have revealed the enduring potency of culture.[23] In this thesis, the revolutionary processes that have been unleashed in Syria have also contributed to an eruption of popular culture, specifically through the liberation of spaces, public and private, in which art can be produced and experienced. In a companion piece to Al-Shami's essay, Lois Stonock continues this conceptual thread and presents an online report that maps artists, organizations, collectives and the various movements involved in cultural production—across literature, music, film and the visual arts—both within and outside Syria.

We began this discussion with an overview of the far from reassuring current state of cultural institutions and how the relationship between fragmented cultural networks and historical antagonisms—further compounded by a global cultural economy—have left a legacy of neglect and underfunding when it comes to significant elements of cultural production. It would be defeatist, however, to outline these processes without at the same time considering the unprecedented upsurge in recent cultural activity across the Middle East, nowhere more so than in post-revolutionary countries.[24] While the essays in the first section of this volume explore the degree to which institutions reflect on (and are reflective of) historical, political, institutional and practical realities, in what follows we need to ask how the practices associated with contemporary art can critically engage, if at all, with the question of how new infrastructures and institutions can emerge in the context of these present-day historical, political, institutional and practical realities. This question is integral to an extended concern expressed within this volume: How can institutions "learn" from artistic and cultural practices and how can they in turn adapt and adopt those practices to foster and sustain future institutions that are fit for the purpose of cultural production in all its ameliorative, antagonistic and, indeed, agonistic forms?

INFORMAL METHODS AND FORMAL CRITIQUE: LEARNING FROM CULTURAL PRODUCERS

What is the relationship of contemporary art practices to institution building in the twenty-first century? To ask such a question is to address a global issue that encompasses artists, critics, historians, curators, audiences and all those employed, directly or indirectly, in the building of an institution. There are, needless to say, no definitive answers to be had here but we could begin by acknowledging the

manner in which art practices—in terms of their collaborative processes, forms of knowledge production, research-based activities, educational methods, curatorial remits, interdisciplinary inclinations and, occasionally, counter- or anti-institutional ethos—often attempt, with varying degrees of success, to both critique and support institution building. This is to remark upon the extent to which the "bricks-and-mortar" model of institutions—the physical edifice and structure in situ—needs to be reconsidered as an evolving, self-reflexive and discursive series of interjections that unfold over time and space. In Rachel Dedman's first-hand response to the Home Workspace Program (HWP), an initiative launched by Ashkal Alwan in Beirut in 2011, a discussion emerges of how critical art practices and educational initiatives can relate to the contexts of institution and capacity building in specific contexts that exist *beyond* the institution as a building. Focusing on a recent HWP programme, of which Dedman was a participant, the author reflects on changes to the cultural landscape and economy of art institutions and educational spaces in Beirut. The extent to which such programmes and their pedagogical form contribute to the development of the next generation of artists, thinkers and institutions in general is a central component here. More specifically, Dedman explores how programmes such as HWP, operating in regions with varying levels of resources and infrastructure, develop their own pedagogical trajectories in relation to the global demands of the art world and, ideally, the local concerns of potential constituencies. This is not an easy task, as we will see, insofar as global exigencies are rarely mindful or indeed prepared to relate to local needs and contexts.

HWP was initiated by Ashkal Alwan in 2011 under the directorship of Christine Tohme, who was central to the inception of the latter organization when it was set up in 1994.[25] In the interview included here, Tohme speaks of the specific environment surrounding Ashkal Alwan's emergence, noting the political urgency to build it that has morphed over time into a self-reflexive critique of what an institution can achieve and what it can feasibly do in the early part of the twenty-first century. A fundamental element in effecting this, for Tohme, is to continue working with developing art practice as a persistent investigation into, as opposed to an affirmation of, institutional relevance. Rather than assume that an institution survives by virtue of its institutionalization or self-valorization, "our identities", Tohme notes, "were composed through our work, through our practice, through what we do." It is within these contexts that HWP, as it emerged out of Askhal Alwan, offers something of a testing ground, or an example of an institution in practice, that engages with the political potentiality of counter- or anti-institutional contexts.

It is this premise of political potentiality, and the ideal of a counter-institution, that proves central to Gregory Sholette's timely essay "Encountering the Counter-Institution: From the Proto-Academy

to Home Workspace Beirut". Sholette, a member of the curriculum committee for the 2014/15 iteration of HWP, focuses on the so-called "educational turn" in curatorial, critical and institutional contexts. An abiding consideration here is directed towards how the "educational turn" realigns the relationship between art and learning and how the development of HWP, as an institution formed around education within the context of post-civil war Beirut, is related to various historical experiments in pedagogy.[26] As Sholette observes, these pedagogical experiments often revived radical educational theories from the past; however, within institutional environments and art practices over the last decade or so the "educational turn" has "nudged these projects into becoming more like actual methods of survival than pure experiments within the shattered social landscape left by neoliberal privatization and deregulation." Again, we return to a prevailing concern: If we accept that neoliberalism invariably reduces institutions to the divisive imperatives of economic reasoning, then we need to ask whether art as a practice can "teach" institutions and, in so doing, effect transformative acts of defiance that interrogate the broader, globally defined institutional economy of contemporary art?

The question of education and audience engagement returns in Toleen Touq's contribution to the collection, "A Sense of Scale: Art and Cultural Practices Beyond Institutions in Amman". An independent cultural practitioner, Touq surveys Amman's cultural, political and social make-up, noting the sense that—after decades of offering refuge to countless displaced people from across the region—it often resembles, in its shifting models of identity formation and civic constitution, a city in transit. Given the political and social issues faced by Amman and Jordan as a whole, support and funding for the arts is not considered high on the list of government priorities. Nonetheless, several institutions have emerged including, as Touq notes, Darat al Funun, an important platform for the contemporary art scene of Amman since 1988, and Makan Art Space, which has been at the forefront of cultural practices and experimentation in the capital since it was established in 2003. For Touq, Makan was instrumental in the development of other alternative spaces—such as The Studio, Darat Al Tasweer, Fada 317, Studio 8, and Ta3leeleh—and in the ambition, inherent in these independent and often transient projects, to reconsider the traditional characteristics of institutional arts structures, commercial art galleries and arts programming in Jordan. It is against this backdrop that the author outlines the educational and informal residency programme that is "Spring Sessions", a project guided by a methodology based on creating a space for new experiences within the familiar setting of the city. Moreover, in its informal, pedagogically driven approach, "Spring Sessions" reflects upon an institutional lack in a city that has very little by way of regular contemporary arts education or residency programmes. This institutional absence in the cultural and educational infrastructure

of Amman provides a point of leverage for informal collaborations: How, Touq asks, can we define the impact and import of these "informal" institutions and associations, and what are the ultimate, if often deferred and intangible, institutional benefits of this informality?

Darat al Funun headquarters and The Lab, Amman, Jordan. Courtesy of Darat al Funun.

27   This interview was carried out with William Wells at Townhouse Gallery in Cairo on March 29, 2016. Since December 2015, when the gallery, established in 1998, was temporarily shut down, Townhouse has been at the centre of discussions about Egyptian culture. On April 6, 2016, a partial collapse of Townhouse's 19th-century Khedival building resulted in a threat of demolition that galvanized the arts community in Cairo to support and protect it.

28   Both Freire and Boal remain central to the discussion of radical pedagogy and institution building in the arts. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London: Continuum, 2000, first published 1968) and Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979).

In the interview with William Wells, published here for the first time, we capture something of this informal approach to institution building as both practical strategy and pragmatic necessity.[27] Wells, who in 1988 co-founded the nonprofit Townhouse in Cairo — an institution that combines contemporary art with an extensive outreach programme — speaks incisively of the political landscape that predicated the institution's origins and how, since its inception, the fast-changing political and social landscape, which included a full-blown revolution in 2011, has changed its modes of address and practical response to sociopolitical change and upheaval. Observing how the origins of Townhouse were founded in an "alternative" guise, Wells suggests that these models have become solidified into a "norm" of sorts that needs rethinking. Distancing its activities from the language of the traditional institution, Townhouse's educational programmes and workshops have an informality to them that answers not just to institutional flux but to the need to operate under the sociopolitical radar of present-day Egypt. To recall Sholette's phrase, this is a matter of survival through expedient institutional questioning and potential reinvention. A central component to Well's thinking, and the institutional context of Townhouse, involved rethinking educational models, and he alludes here to the specific importance of Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire and the central role they have played in the forms of radical pedagogy that have influenced global institutional thinking.[28]

Ania Szremski, the curator of Townhouse from 2011 until 2015, looks at these institutional issues from a curatorial perspective and, as with Wells, examines how an organization can respond to political and social change through practice. In a revealing discussion on the manner in which curatorial processes inform the development and overall direction of an institution, Szremski recalls how, in the years immediately following the 2011 revolution in Egypt, Townhouse

29   Co-founded by Sarah Rifky and Maier-Rothe on Labour Day, 2012, the organization was later joined by curator Antonia Alampi following the launch of its first programme in October 2012. Active from May 2012 to May 2015, *Beirut* closed its Cairo premises on Labour Day, 2015.

became home to exhibition-styled projects that depended on audience interaction and collaboration. In 2014, however, a series of shows, against the backdrop of serious political and social unrest, were staged on "the object, the permanent, the photographable, the beautiful". Was this shift a turn to beauty, the author asks, or a retreat from the real? The story of these participatory gestures and the (re)turn to beauty, Szremski suggests, reflects "the emotional life of an institution perturbed by a post-revolution temporal shift in which time became arrhythmic". This unsteady, oscillating temporality, she argues, disturbed a unified sense of an institutional "self" and, in turn, altered the ability to conceive of possible histories and futures.

The apparent disavowal of art's ambition to imagine and engage with speculative institutional futures, under the dangerous and frankly treacherous conditions of conflict and revolution, and the unwavering ambition to continue such an enquiry under the same conditions, is fundamental to this volume and raises additional questions. What role, for one, do the arts play in producing an idea of a future, or, indeed, producing future realities? Perhaps, crucially, we need to explore what speculations on the future tell us about the concerns of the present and the legacies of the past. An overarching concern here, if not the basis of *Future Imperfect*, is an abiding ambition to present institutions, be they material, immaterial, digital, informal, formal or imaginary, as potential harbingers of a speculative future within which cultural practices and practitioners can pursue their interests. What will these future institutions, post-upheaval, post-revolution and in a globalized cultural economy, look like? Who will be the audiences for these future institutions and will these edifices continue to be relevant in an age when co-option into, and complicity within, the contemporary art industrial complex has become the rule rather than the exception?

The question of how an institution functions under political and social upheaval, and how critical practice can inform its structures under such conditions, is advanced by Jens Maier-Rothe who, in 2012, co-founded the art initiative *Beirut* in Cairo.[29] The founding mission of this institution, as Maier-Rothe notes, was inspired by the question "What is an Institution?" and the American philosopher John Searle's theorization, in his essay of the same title, of how institutions consist of performative proclamations by way of language. How could we, Maier-Rothe asks in retrospect, state exactly what *Beirut* "was" without presupposing the affects of language? In addressing the function of linguistic and semiotic practices within the context of institutional structures, this essay underlines the evolutionary nature of an institution and the provocation involved in radical modes of role-play. What repeatedly emerges is the sense of how institution building is performed as a curatorial act and how institutional "becoming" is largely the result of specific artistic perspectives.

The sense of how institutions "learn" from practice, as developed in Maier-Rothe's essay, is undercut by the imminent state of emergency that resulted from legislation brought in by the Egyptian state to counter what they considered to be incipient acts of terrorism and civil disobedience. The resulting state of emergency not only allowed for questionable forms of criminalization to be elevated to a nation-wide level but enabled the de facto suspension of law, the usurpation of legal representation, and a clampdown on the institutions of civil society, with cultural organizations specifically targeted. As Maier-Rothe observes, the restrictive amendments to existing civil society laws throughout 2014 generated considerable fear among non-government organizations. The intimidation and imprison-ments that followed, alongside the monthly announcements of life, and death, sentences culminated in a law allowing the apparatus of the state to not only investigate but also penalize any "NGO-type organization", including cultural institutions.[30] The amendment was enacted on November 10, 2014, and saw several international human rights organizations immediately shut down operations, both within the country and regionally. The effect of these and other laws upon cultural organizations across Egypt has been immeasurable and continues to this day, with Al Mawred Al Thaqafy (The Culture Resource), Townhouse, the Rawabet Theater in Downtown Cairo, and Cimatheque, an alternative film centre, all either closing their doors or suspending their activities. Since November 2014, Maier-Rothe estimates that the government crackdown on NGOs in Egypt has increased, with over four hundred entities being shut down in 2015 alone, and press freedoms effectively suspended.[31] To exhaustively trace these developments would be impossible; however, in keeping with the volume's online component and its ambition to update cer-tain elements of the mapping processes at work, an artists' project by Nile Sunset Annex plots the various contemporary visual arts orga-nizers working in Egypt today and, more specifically, where and when they have studied and worked over the past twenty years. In "Plotting in Cairo: Art People", the resulting data is presented in a bilingual, hand-drawn "scientific" map in an effort to trace institutional meeting points and develop a "screen grab" of sorts for researchers and read-ers to pursue other matrices of cultural production in the city.[32]

Egypt's current state of emergency prompts an urgent dis-cussion of how a cultural institution can adequately operate and function under the conditions of conflict, unrest, insurgency and emergency. These questions are not only germane to Egypt but could likewise form the basis of a study on cultural institutions in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and, as we have noted above, Palestine. Whereas the majority of contributions to this volume are focused on the predicament and conditions of institutions associ-ated with contemporary art practice, Doreen Mende's contribution, produced in partnership with Baha Jubeh and Suhair Jubeh, details

an extraordinary critical intervention into the development of the exhibition design for the Abu Jihad Museum for Prisoner Movement on the Abu Deis campus of Al-Quds University.[33] The museum, opened in April 2007, is the first in Palestine to present the conditions, stories and activities of the *fedayeens*—that is, workers, intellectu-als and prisoners who have fought against the Israeli Occupation since 1967. The extended update on the museum's development contained in this volume details a process of engagement that started in November 2010 with a one-week seminar in Abu Deis and Ramallah, and an ensuing report that focused on art-led cura-torial methods and the input of practitioners—including artists, prisoners, poets, architects, exhibition-makers, curators, organizers, administrators and an anthropologist—from institutions across the West Bank, Berlin and Belgrade. Given that much of the Abu Jihad Museum is about how to display artefacts and curatorial practice, this essay is a pertinent example of how, if at all, institutions can learn from cultural producers and critical practices, especially when such institutions are subject to, and formed by, the conditions of historical trauma.

Though the social and political conditions across the Middle East are complex and varied, there remains an ascendant sense of evolving conflict, reactionary political gestures, institutional failures, cultural crises and neoliberal encroachment. For Ala Younis, an artist who combines collaborative practices in her work with curatorial models, the notion of the individual as an institution capable of cap-turing a particular moment of cultural production, or retrieving it, is central not only to her practice but to the sense of how artists can produce institutional models to counter past failings and present-day forms of exceptionalism. Younis's highly personal take on insti-tution building, comprised of what she refers to as a set of notes to herself, involves an in-depth discussion of her own work and how, having been alerted in 2008 to a deserted Soviet collection of 16 and 35 mm films (which included some of the earliest works of Palestinian Revolution film-makers), she attempted to find an insti-tutional context for this important collection. Presented as a partial cartography of the insecurity that attends such endeavours, and art institutions in the Arab World more generally, Younis's essay not only highlights the self-made or indeed temporary fixes that attempt to address such uncertainties but also the institutional absences that are undermining cultural production. For Younis, the historical exclamations and efforts made by artists and others in relation to the future of cultural production and the fragility that underwrites the region's attended and unattended projects, not to mention collections left at the mercy of informants, violence and chaos, needs to be carefully considered as "part of the broader debate on the fate of cultural production in the Arab world." How, such comments seem to ask, will we ever be able to understand the institutional

of Happiness", to take but
one example, is historically
a distinctly less than happy
place for a significant
number of workers involved
in the building of it. In an
80-page report published in
2009, Human Rights Watch
found that "while the UAE
government has moved to
improve housing conditions
and ensure the timely
payment of wages in recent
years, many labour abuses
remain commonplace.
International institutions
planning to open branches
on the island—including
the Guggenheim, New
York University (NYU)
and the French Museum
Agency (responsible for the
Louvre Abu Dhabi)—should
urgently obtain enforceable
contractual guarantees that
construction companies
will protect workers'
fundamental rights on
their projects." The report
went on to observe that the
"Guggenheim Museum,
the French Museum Agency
(which is overseeing the
development of the Abu
Dhabi Louvre), New York
University, and other
institutions have failed
to take adequate steps to
avoid the same abuses on
their own workplaces."
See "'The Island of
Happiness': Exploitation
of Migrant Workers on
Saadiyat Island, Abu
Dhabi", https://www.hrw.
org/report/2009/05/19/
island-happiness/
exploitation-migrant-
workers-saadiyat-island-
abu-dhabi.

failings and crises we are now witnessing in any sense other than that of reified loss, abandonment and non-existence? Throughout this volume, there is the inherent suggestion that it is through practice that we will eventually reimagine how new infrastructures and institutions might produce the forms of productive cultural alliance and support that are needed to counter the inequitable processes undermining culture across the region.

CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GLOBAL CULTURE

In the last decade, the United Arab Emirates has witnessed a level of investment into cultural institutions that is unprecedented in its scale, scope and long-term ambitions. The development of Saadiyat Island (Arabic for "Happiness Island") just off the coast of Abu Dhabi, when complete, will be the location of the world's largest cultural district and will feature the latest instalment of the Guggenheim Museum, alongside an outpost of the Louvre, a Zaha Hadid RA-designed performing arts centre, and a New York University campus. In terms of delivery, the Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, although beset by a number of problems, are earmarked to open in 2016 and 2017 respectively. In other Gulf states, and under the auspices of Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, the Qatar Museums Authority (QMA) has already overseen the opening in Doha of the Museum of Islamic Art in 2008 and Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art, in 2010. In nearby Dubai, the eponymous art fair continues to grow and attract a variety of international galleries and collectors every March, while in Sharjah, a twenty-five-minute car ride from Dubai, a series of buildings in the historic centre have been redeveloped for use every two years as part of the region's increasingly important biennial.

The motivations and costs involved in these projects are subject to continued speculation. In some quarters, these initiatives are viewed as a strategic and important shift away from a long-term dependency on oil revenues towards an economic model based on the global tourist industry. In other quarters, accusations of hubris and direct condemnation of the treatment meted out to the countless workers hired to construct some of these buildings continues unabated.[34] One element that remains relatively uncontested, however, is that despite significant realignments in world markets and oil prices, the United Arab Emirates—a federation of seven emirates that includes Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ras al-Khaimah, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain—is fast emerging as a significant tourist destination. Regardless of the resources involved, these institutions remain caught between the competing demands placed upon them in an age of globalization—the need to attract international audiences, for example—while responding to more localized needs.

Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, Qatar. Courtesy of Mathaf.

Gorica labour camp: clothes hung out to dry, 2014. © Guy Mannes-Abbott.

35   Despite a degree of progress in these discussions, in April 2016 the Guggenheim Board of Trustees informed Gulf Labor that it would no longer negotiate with the group nor discuss the living and working conditions of the workers who are and will be building its museum in Abu Dhabi. See Hrag Vartanian, "Guggenheim Breaks Off Negotiations with Gulf Labor Over Migrant Rights", http://hyperallergic.com/291594/guggenheim-breaks-off-negotiations-with-gulf-labor-over-migrant-rights and Gulf Labor's response: http://gulflabor.org/2016/gulf-labor-responds-to-guggenheim-breaking-off-negotiations.

36   In Guy Standing's *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), he regards a certain category of worker that has become indicative of an emerging class, namely, the "precariat"—a sub-group who, through chronic and pervasive economic insecurity, is denied community and a sense of collective memory that would provide individual safety, long-term security, and peace of mind. The precariat, more broadly, are as likely to be found in the cities of developed countries—with their increased reliance on casual labour and "zero hour" contracts—as they are in under- or non-developed countries. For a discussion of what purchase, if any, the term has in the context of the UAE and other Gulf states, see *The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor*, Andrew Ross ed. (London: OR Books, 2015).

The distinction between localized forms of employment and the labour laws in the countries from which these imported institutions originated has likewise become an inescapable fact for many, so much so that in 2011 a coalition of international artists working under the name Gulf Labor was set up to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are protected during the construction and maintenance of museums in Abu Dhabi. In March 2012, despite noting improvements since the beginning of their involvement, the group observed continued failings across a number of areas in relation to Saadiyat Island.[35] More recently, individual members of Gulf Labor, including the artist Walid Raad, have been refused entry into the UAE and effectively deported. All of which gives rise to a decidedly caustic conundrum: the Guggenheim, an institution that owns work by Raad and others, will most likely show this work in their new museum in Abu Dhabi despite the fact that the artist has been denied entry to the UAE. This contradiction can only erode faith in the long-term sustainability of an institutional project that proposes, according to its own publicity, to be concerned with forms of "dynamic cultural exchange".

As a member of Gulf Labor, and writing in the aftermath of a visit to the labour camps that service the institutional projects of the United Arab Emirates, Guy Mannes-Abbot highlights some of the institutional complexities involved in these debates. He notes that 2014—a key date in the planned development of Saadiyat Island—was supposed to form the "future horizon of a remarkably ambitious plan" to develop the site "into a culturally driven city quarter of global stature." The ambition, he remarks, was to plan for a post-oil economy and develop a service-based economy, but, as we now know, 2014 has come and gone, and the UAE seems increasingly mired in a scenario of its own making. Taking issue with the ambition of cultural institutions such as Saadiyat Island—and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim and Jean Nouvel's Louvre set to find residence there—Mannes-Abbot argues that they pertain to the status of "spectacular shops" and deploy a "copy and paste model utilized wherever globalization has flourished in the world". Shifting the focus away from these mega-museums, and taking in the Jebel Ali Industrial Area, where there is a sustained boom in labour camp construction, this essay asks who builds the labour camps for the construction workers who build, in turn, the future institutions that we are witnessing on the skyline of Abu Dhabi and elsewhere. Why, in addition, does no one talk of cultural institutions for these isolated labour camps? In this polemic, institution building, in a region that seems intent on spending as much as it takes to become a cultural and investment destination, implicates a global economy of cultural production, and, thereafter, the author complicates such ambitions by outlining their complicity in the inequities involved in precarious forms of global labour.[36]

37   Writing in 1986, Bourdieu outlined three distinct types of capital: "economic capital" (which is primarily financial); "social capital" (predicated on networks of membership that confer influence and causal agency upon an individual); and "cultural capital". In the latter category, the forms and applications of knowledge that give individuals a perceivable benefit, and therefore status in contemporary society, also act interchangeably with social and economic capital. They have, in sum, a negotiable quality whereby "cultural capital" can leverage economic and social capital. See Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital" in *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, J.G. Richardson ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241–58.

38   Richard Florida's work has been formative for the idea of the existence of a creative class — a demographic segment made up of knowledge workers, intellectuals and artists — who represent an economic force that has evolved from traditional agriculture- or industry-based economies towards more complex hierarchies based, in large part, on creativity and cultural production. Seen as central to processes of culture-led gentrification, and witnessed in cities as divergent as London, Berlin, Bilbao and New York, Florida's work has been critiqued for its broader application to urban areas and the deracination of indigenous businesses and communities. See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (New York: Basic Books, 2002). For critiques, see Joshua Long, "Sustaining creativity in the creative archetype: The case of Austin, Texas", *Cities* 26, issue 4 (August 2009), 2010–19; and Stefan Krätke, "'Creative Cities' and the Rise of the Dealer

If we consider the rapid, unprecedented investment in cultural institutions across the Gulf states as a none-too-subtle instrument of the political will to diversify the economic base of a country, then we must ask in what way this is different from, say, processes of gentrification in Bilbao, Berlin, Birmingham and Barcelona, to name but a few cities that have taken advantage of the cultural capital associated with creativity.[37] Culture, along with its institutions, has always been an agent, willingly or otherwise, of politically motivated goals and capital accrual, be they to whitewash otherwise question-able records on human rights or to develop former industrialized sites and gentrify cityscapes. Again, there is nothing new here, nor, alas, is it a problem uniquely located in the UAE: from the historical exam-ple of New York's SoHo, to the East End of London and countless districts in Berlin, culture is on the vanguard when it comes to devel-oping the outposts of urban environments and attracting property investment. The precarious nature of global labour would seem to be a structural necessity for elements of the global art world to continue to develop and capitalize upon investments in culture. It would be therefore disingenuous to note that culture is being used to develop an area in the UAE or Qatar that had been previously overlooked or indeed underused. However, it is arguable that we are encountering something quite different here: artists and artisans were not the pio-neers of Saadiyaat Island, developers were. In this context, "culture" per se is being deployed by commerce from the outset. The "Island of Happiness" carries the tagline "One Island, Many Masterpieces", a phrase that in its choice of marketing language confirms that culture — already implicated within the reciprocal relationship between financial and cultural capital — is being presented as both a pretext for and legitimizing agent in the economic diversification, geopolitical development and monetary enrichment of Abu Dhabi. What remains less debatable is that the two main developments, the Frank Gehry-designed Guggenheim and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, are Western-inspired edifices whose history is firmly enmeshed within Western collections.

Observing the influence of Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), and the theory that that the creative class drives economic growth, Elizabeth Derderian explores the connection between public art museums and the perceived national identities of modern liberal nations.[38] Observing these issues from the view-point of a cultural anthropologist, and containing interviews with a number of interlocutors, Derderian draws attention to the theoretical structures that undergird arts and cultural production in the UAE. This, by necessity, involves questioning the popular notion that sup-porting the arts and cultural sector is a prudent short-term economic decision for city and state governments. While this is often taken to be an incontrovertible truth, she notes that there has been less eval-uation of the realities of producing and nurturing an art world. What,

Class: A Critique of Richard Florida's Approach to Urban Theory", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34.4 (December 2010), 835–53.

39   Al Qadiri is here referencing research by Alexandre Kazerouni on "mirror museums". See Alexandre Kazerouni, "Museums and Soft Power in the Pursian Gulf", *Pouvoirs: Revue Française d'Etudes Constitutionnelles et Politiques*, no. 152, 87–97, http://www.revue-pouvoirs. fr/Museums-and-soft-power-in-the.html.

in sum, does supporting growing arts and cultural infrastructure look like on the ground, and what are the potential challenges of this type of venture? In "The Global Spectacular: Modernity and Supermodernity in the Arabian Peninsula Museums", Karen Exell also offers a critique of some widely held assumptions about the motivation and long-term sustainability of cultural institutions in the Gulf states. Observing the extent to which modernist art museums "have been categorized as belonging to an 'aesthetic of globalization' driven by late capital-ism" the author foregrounds how this globalized aesthetic is being harnessed in the Arabian Peninsula as a signifier of the region's modernity. One of the issues that emerges here is how a formal cri-tique of museums, as processes involved in various forms of "soft power", capital accumulation, regeneration and gentrification — in sum, the critique of capital-driven spectacle architecture — are often grafted from Western contexts onto the Arabian Peninsula without fully taking into account the localized contexts of these cultural and museological debates on economic regeneration and social inclusion. What these new cultural spaces do represent, Exell argues, is entry "into the global system through world culture branding that includes various elements such as the petitioning for UNESCO World Heritage sites, their election as cultural capitals, the hosting of major sporting championships, and the construction of emblematic buildings". These edifices and activities, for Exell, are akin to what anthropologist Marc Augé has termed "supermodernity", or, the embrace of global capitalist modernity.

There are of course other geopolitical elements to be consid-ered here and Exell's contribution draws attention to the work of the Kuwait-born Monira Al Qadiri and the way in which her series *Myth Busters* (2014) alludes to the new and imagined "starchitect" muse-ums of the region's near future. Combining renderings of spectacular museums and Kuwait's landscape following the invasion and occu-pation by Iraq in 1990–91, Al Qadiri's work is represented in this volume by a series of images that offer a stark reminder of recent conflict in the region and the role of oil in developing its national and cultural infrastructures. Observing the presence of "visibility museums", the artist remarks how, in the early 1990s in Qatar, the notion of the "Heritage Museum" model that had existed in the Gulf states until that point was replaced by a commitment to build the brand-named, mega-museums that we are becoming familiar with today.[39] Designed by I. M. Pei, the Museum of Islamic Art Qatar was more ambitious than anything that had come before it and, crucially, was not directly focused on attracting or indeed sustaining a local audience. Evidence of this could be seen in the use of English across all publications and events so as to create a more global appeal for the museum. As Al Qadiri notes, the "target audience was not in fact merely 'global' in the traditional sense of the word, but specifically 'Western' — American and western European to be specific".

There is a complex process at work here as we see cultural institutions become prisms for reading larger geopolitical shifts and politically reimagining what forms "soft power" may take. For Alexandre Kazerouni, whose work is central to Al Qadiri's conceptualization of "mega-museums" in the Gulf, the expediencies involved in the move from heritage-based museums, which were developed largely for local audiences, to "visibility" or "mirror" museums, with their Western contexts and focus on Western museological practices, needs to be considered in direct relation to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990–91. The invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein was not only an act of aggression against other Arabs, it effectively sounded the death knell of any ideal associated with the Pan-Arab movement. The Gulf Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council or GCC, proved ineffective in the face of such aggression and, as Rijin Sahakian also notes in her contribution to this volume, a foreign, predominantly American, army had to be hired to liberate Kuwait from its neighbour. The Gulf War not only laid bare the inadequacy of political pacts and preparation for invasions, it also, in this rubric, gave rise to "visibility museums" that became, for Al Qadiri, "intertwined with the foreign policies of Western governments and, more importantly, their populaces' image of these states." The new museums strove to advertise the culture of Islam and contemporary art practices in order to create the facade of a "benevolent government", a sop to a Western political class, that was essential to maintaining successful defence policies. The geopolitical motivations of cultural institutional building are exposed here within a matrix of global art markets, national forms of investment, private interests and, ultimately, sovereign survival.

Al Qadiri's project also offers a touchstone for Stephanie Bailey's essay "Branching Out: The Sharjah Biennial and the Sharjah Art Foundation", where she writes about the extent to which "visibility museums" became a defensive strategy on behalf of GCC nations when they engaged in culture building as a post-war political strategy. For Bailey, the narrative and development of the Sharjah Biennial, the Sharjah Art Foundation and the March Meetings held there every year reveal a "visibility" project of sorts that highlights relatively alternative ways of working as an institution within the context of the UAE. Focusing on some of the more recent iterations of the Sharjah Biennial, in particular, Bailey's essay considers how the institutional forms of the biennial have evolved into an international event that includes an emphasis on producing forms of localized "visibility" that, ideally, coexist within the network of the global art world. Exhibitionary formats such as the Sharjah Biennial, as they do for other biennials, according to Hoor Al-Qasimi, the Director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, made the foundation more aware of its local publics and generated a reassessment of the way in which "visibility" is ultimately aimed at a Western audience. In the interview published

Olaf Nicolai, *Untitled*, 2005. Laundry and laundry ropes. Installation view. Commissioned and produced by Sharjah Biennial 7. Photo: Prem Ratnam. Courtesy of Sharjah Art Foundation.

In May 2013, plans to replace Gezi park, one of the last green spaces in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul, with a reconstruction of a former barracks provoked widespread protests which led, later that year in September, to several deaths amongst protestors and police. In June 2016, president Erdogan of Turkey controversially announced that he intended to revisit the plans, in spite of these protests. This decision was taken before the attempted coup in Turkey on July 16, 2016. At the time of writing the coup had not only been quashed but has resulted in the dismissal, detention and suspension of over 60,000 officials including civil servants, members of the judiciary, the military and teachers. Can Dündar, the editor-in-chief of the Turkish daily *Cumhuriyet,* itself the target of historical government intimidation and pressure, described the reprisal as "the biggest witch-hunt in Turkey's history". See "This is the Biggest Witch-Hunt in Turkey's History", *Guardian* (July 22, 2016), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/22/biggest-witch-hunt-turkish-history-coup-erdogan-europe-help.
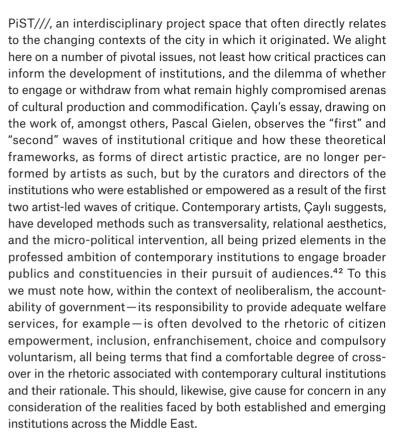
41 For the 7th Berlin Biennale in 2012, the two curators, Artur Zmijewski and Joanna Warsza, invited members of the various Occupy movements to take up residency on the ground floor of the Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. The project was criticized in some quarters for institutionally integrating activism and thus containing it, but praised in others for offering a staging post for considering the relationship between art institutions and various forms of protest and conflict.

here, Al Qasimi reflects further upon the history and development of the Sharjah Art Foundation and the Sharjah Biennial, proposing a more autochthonous, involved sense of an emerging arts institution that is firmly set within the socio-politics of its context and yet open to a broader global audience.

The biennial as a cultural model for effecting gentrification and diversifying models of labour has become a mainstay in state policies directed towards utilizing culture as a resource. As a model, it has fast become emblematic of the globalizing tendencies inherent within the practices and institutions of contemporary art. Throughout *Future Imperfect*, the sense of a biennial's cultural economy, and how it comes into play in relation to localized cultural production and institutions, is a recurring factor. Tom Snow's analysis of the enterprise that is the Istanbul Biennial and the far from resolved debates about public space in the city is presented against the all too real events that surrounded the protests in Gezi Park in 2013, which occurred in conjunction with the 13th Istanbul Biennial.[40] In an environment riven by private claims and political interests, Snow observes that the biennial's conceptual framework, concerning as it did recent autonomous, broadly anti-global social movements, was somewhat at odds with the embedded contexts of many art institutions in the neoliberal economy, the Istanbul Biennial included. Suggesting that, as an institution that regularly attracts criticism in relation to its main sponsor, Koç Holdings (Turkey's largest industrial conglomerate), "the Istanbul Biennial would seem a good place to examine art's current conflicted institutional politics", Snow's essay implicates the ambitions of biennials to question neoliberal tendencies, such as gentrification, to take but one example, while they remain beholden to, if not active agents within, the rationalizations of capital and the staged spectacle of protest. One of the more crucial elements here, as it was in previous discussions of the Sharjah Biennial, concerns not only the question of public space, but publics. The author raises the concern of "what public sphere would be addressed by the biennial and, by extension, what kind of discourse it would bring proximately to Istanbul." Further, cultural institutions tend to co-opt the radical circumstances of practice and, through embedding it within institutional concerns, effectively mollify its potential as a transformative act or event.[41] If artists are going to respond to the immediacy of events, and who is to say they should not, we nevertheless need to remain alert, as previously argued, to how the rhetoric of conflict and the spectacle of revolution is deployed as a benchmark for discussing, if not determining, the broader institutional and critical legitimacy of these practices.

In Eray Çaylı's analysis of what it is to run an institution in modern-day Istanbul—the site of both overt government pressures, globalized demands, the politicization of cultural output, and the accumulative privatization of the public sphere—he details the work of

42 There is another, no less important, discussion to be had here that would actively question the degree to which relational art practices, as outlined by Nicolas Bourriaud, are consistently proposed as remedies for the socially de-personalizing effects of a neoliberal, post-industrial, and increasingly globalized world. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002, first published 1998). For critiques of Bourriaud's thesis, see Stewart Martin, "Critique of Relational Aesthetics", *Third Text* 21, issue 4 (2007), 369–86; and Anthony Downey, "Towards a Politics of (Relational) Aesthetics", *Third Text* 21, issue 3 (2007), 267–75.

PiST's premises today. Courtesy of PiST.

PiST///, an interdisciplinary project space that often directly relates to the changing contexts of the city in which it originated. We alight here on a number of pivotal issues, not least how critical practices can inform the development of institutions, and the dilemma of whether to engage or withdraw from what remain highly compromised arenas of cultural production and commodification. Çaylı's essay, drawing on the work of, amongst others, Pascal Gielen, observes the "first" and "second" waves of institutional critique and how these theoretical frameworks, as forms of direct artistic practice, are no longer performed by artists as such, but by the curators and directors of the institutions who were established or empowered as a result of the first two artist-led waves of critique. Contemporary artists, Çaylı suggests, have developed methods such as transversality, relational aesthetics, and the micro-political intervention, all being prized elements in the professed ambition of contemporary institutions to engage broader publics and constituencies in their pursuit of audiences.[42] To this we must note how, within the context of neoliberalism, the accountability of government—its responsibility to provide adequate welfare services, for example—is often devolved to the rhetoric of citizen empowerment, inclusion, enfranchisement, choice and compulsory voluntarism, all being terms that find a comfortable degree of crossover in the rhetoric associated with contemporary cultural institutions and their rationale. This should, likewise, give cause for concern in any consideration of the realities faced by both established and emerging institutions across the Middle East.

In keeping with the aim to present material that can be regularly added to and updated, alongside the print edition a number of essays on cultural production in Saudi Arabia will be published online. In "The Saudi New Wave: Digital Landscapes and Future Institutions", the artist Monira Al Qadiri, also represented in the publication with her groundbreaking work *Myth Busters* (2014), reports on how informal cultural initiatives come together through digital media in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite the nation's extremely conservative exterior, Al Qadiri comments on how Saudi Arabia stands to be, potentially, the future cultural centre of the Gulf region.

43 See www.ibraaz.org/publications/73.

44 See www.ibraaz.org/publications/73.

45 *Future Imperfect: Cultural Propositions and Global Perspectives* was held at Tate Modern on November 9, 2013, and invited speakers included Raqs Media Collective, Douglas Coupland, Todd Reisz, Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige, Tony Chakar, Tarek El Ariss, Zineb Sedira, Abdelkader Damani, Omar Berrada, Lina Lazaar and Bassam El Baroni. For the full programme and video footage, see http://www.ibraaz.org/channel/24.

With half of the population aged under twenty-five, the digital landscapes that compose Saudi Arabia have formed collective groups of cultural producers engaged with informally producing art. Though much of this activity exists within the relatively safe zone of digital space, these groups, Al Qadiri observes, oscillate between underground and mainstream realms, carefully navigating the maze of bureaucratic red tape that obstructs their every move.[43] To accompany Al Qadiri's online contribution, Wided Rihana Khadraoui's essay "Digitizing Social Change through Cultural Institutions: The Case of Saudi Arabia" gives an overview of how various cultural institutions are utilizing formal online innovations to effect alternative platforms for engagement and development. Khadraoui argues that the ambition inherent in engaging on a grassroots level in the development of the country's creative scene reveals how social media platforms have aided in promoting and marketing artists and collectives, as well as introducing new ways of communication that do not conform to societal restrictions.[44] This allows cultural producers across Saudi Arabia to access global support systems in ways that were out of reach even a decade ago.

In both of these online contributions, digital technologies, as they do elsewhere in *Future Imperfect*, offer an opportunity to interrogate what future institutions will look like across the region and on a global scale. How will technological advances change the way institutions interact with audiences and broader constituencies? How, additionally, can we imagine new infrastructures and institutions in the wake of digital technologies and the move towards institutions that primarily exist online? We should also consider what form future audiences might take, both on site and online, and, further, how culture will continue to negotiate with social activities, forms of political engagement and critical practices. What is the future sustainability of culture, in sum, as a material fact of life? To fully address these propositions, we must investigate other elements of institution building, not least the role that online education and forms of virtual interaction have had in developing audiences. How do these digital models, formal and informal, of institutional self-organization rearticulate the function, or, indeed, rationale of institutions in a global cultural economy based on virtual media?

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The kernel of the idea for *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East* originated in a conference held in London in late 2013.[45] The conference invited cultural practitioners to address issues around the future of cultural production in the region and one of the panels, "Structural Futures: Where to Now?", encouraged panellists to speculate on possible futures for institutions across the Middle East. It quickly became

apparent that not only was there no consensus on this question, but that the very ideal of the future as a concept was problematic. There was a sense that historically displacing the problems of today on to some future paradigm merely distanced the issues at hand: Why do we rely so much, for example, on future-orientated goals rather than dealing with the realities of the here and now? The future, as Louis Althusser once observed, lasts a long time and the possibilities associated with it often remain unrealized. This may be, under the compromised conditions of conflict and globalization, a conceptual necessity: the future must always remain in the future if we are to aspire to an axiom of teleological progress and the notion that things will get better, come what may and regardless of the evidence before us. Yet for possibility to become potential, for projects and initiatives to be realized over time, within both cultural practices and institutional contexts, infrastructures need to be in place and a will to address the current state of cultural production needs to be asserted. Throughout this volume, the contributors outline precisely what is involved in these demands and what it takes to build, develop, maintain, support, critique, project and, indeed, refuse institutions under certain political, social, economic and cultural conditions. What, they ask, is it to experience and maintain institutional networks when they are understood as real economic, social, historical and political facts of life, rather than abstract ideals partially understood through theoretical frameworks?

In an era of globalization, these local realities must address the political qualifications and risks associated with neoliberalism, alongside its legacy of deregulation; unequal distributions of wealth and impoverishment; the suspension of labour laws intended to protect workers; the impact of so-called free-market ideology on local communities; the presence of a globalized underclass of migrant workers; and the increasingly visible fact of economic and political migrants. The insistence of neoliberalism has instrumentalized culture so that it answers to (rather than opposes) political agendas, and we need to cumulatively enquire into whether there is indeed a neutral position for institutional critique and, if so, how we should rethink the institutionalization and commercialization of cultural production. Can institutional knowledge production, encapsulated in art practices, art criticism, theoretical analysis and historical reflection, be directed, moreover, into a productive form of institutional critique that will, on some level, provide a framework of cultural engagement for future generations?

The viability and sustainability of institutions associated with post-revolutionary or autocratic states is the central issue driving the following discussions into the speculative futures that cultural institutions could take, bearing in mind their historical contexts and politicized conditions of existence. This approach highlights a degree of urgency that requires critical attention and a coherent

response if we are to rethink the efficacy and function of cultural institutions during a time of regional upheaval and global uncertainty. It is within these frames of reference that *Future Imperfect* seeks to propose a variety of potential mechanisms and suggestions for how institutions could reinvent their operational dialectics and formal function in a time when they are increasingly viewed as part of an endemic, if not systemic, crisis in the way in which art is produced, viewed, disseminated and exchanged. What, finally, would an alliance of cultural producers and institutions — capable of navigating these treacherous waters — look like and do such models already exist?