

In conversation with Rose Issa

Rose Issa is a highly respected independent curator, producer and writer who specialises in visual art and film from the Middle East and North Africa. She visited Brisbane in early 2009 as a guest of the Australian Centre of Asia Pacific Art — the research arm of the Queensland Art Gallery's Asian and Pacific activities — to advise on West Asian artists for APT6. She is in conversation with Ruth McDougall.

Rose, your earliest curatorial project was a two-week film festival engaging with the idea of occupied lands in the Arab world. How did this come about? What were your aims?

In 1982 I was a student in Paris studying the history of the Middle East. Then the Israeli invasion of Lebanon took place and my parents, sister and family were trapped in Beirut with the airports closed, and I felt very frustrated not to do anything about this situation. This invasion, unlike the '67 and '73 conflicts with Israel, was a territorial one. So I mobilised some students in my university and we went and occupied the Arab League office. I then approached some embassies for sponsorship to create a film festival because I knew a lot of directors and filmmakers from the Arab world. In fact, I also included Israeli film directors who were supposedly pro-Palestinian, and quite revolted that their country had invaded Lebanon.

The theme was occupied territories and resistances. The ideas behind the festival were broader than Lebanon . . . and included the different existing facets of occupation and colonialism.

The response was fantastic, we had long queues, we had television coverage. There was really a demand for people to know about the Arab world as there was, and still is, a lack of self-representation in the West on this part of the world.

I was not a curator then, I was a mathematician and historian . . . but I felt that since I loved filmmaking and knew the filmmakers, why not share the little knowledge I had with others? Give visibility to unheard voices. Within less than 10 days we organised the film festival . . . everybody was mobilised very quickly to make it a successful event.

You begin one of the chapters of your catalogue essay 'Borrowed ware' for the 2001 exhibition 'Iranian Contemporary Art' with a quote from the Persian poet Rumi: 'Let yourself be silently

drawn by the stronger pull of what you really love'. Is there a period, writer or single artist whose work has silently inspired or helped shape your curatorial and writing practice?

Jalaleddin Rumi is a very important poet for me and many artists.

In terms of contemporary people who inspired me, I had a friend, a Spanish artist — Manuel Duque — who taught me when I lived in Paris, what the difference was between being an artist and being a painter, between being an artist and a filmmaker or sculptor. I still cannot explain it, but it was an important lesson.

In the late 80s Abbas Kiarostami was a major influence for me in reopening the door to Iran, which I had left at the age of 13. I saw a film in Paris called *Where is the House of My Friend?* [*Khane-ye dost kodjast?* 1987] This film suddenly made me feel that despite eight years of war between Iran and Iraq — the destruction, the millions of young people who died, and the closure of so many universities and galleries — the art scene was still alive in Iran. Kiarostami's film encouraged me to think that despite whatever I hear through the news, the artists are there . . . and it is time for me to go back and see what is happening.

Egypt. I am absolutely in love with Egypt as a country, its people its art. I think that visually, the early twentieth-century art has learned a lot from this country. When you talk of Art Deco, I find it 4000 years ago in Egypt — those shapes, pure colour and lines. Also, Chant Avedisian, an Egyptian artist I became familiar with, introduced me to the work of the architect Hassan Fathy. Fathy was a bit like the Ghandi of the Arab world . . . He believed in architecture without architects. He said, 'do with what you have, don't look for imports, because you can create with what you have.

Who else? Edward Said. Not only because of his books and writing, but also his love of music, theatre and life. Even though his music



Rose Issa during her visit to the Queensland Art Gallery, February 2009 / Photograph: Ray Fulton

interest was music and literature . . . people always interviewed him on the politics of Palestine, about colonialism and cultural imperialism. He was the one who encouraged me by saying not to wait for someone to sponsor, to curate an exhibition or festival. He taught me to 'just do it'; give visibility to our voices, images and thoughts, without much expectation from others or support. That I found very inspiring.

Contemporary and modern art from Iran and the Arab world is not only receiving widespread attention in the West but is increasingly becoming part of an international art discourse. What do you see as the challenges ahead for artists and for curators?

I think that the fact that it is receiving widespread attention was due, in the last few years, mainly to the market, and the speculative aspect of it. In the West, the attention started really after 9/11. The West found that in fact they didn't know much about what the Muslim world was producing. Suddenly you saw European public institutions sending curators throughout the Arab world and Iran to discover what was going on. I think this was fine, every cultural interest is good, especially when they produce publications. It is a start. Then with the economic crisis, many wanted to become collectors, because of the prestige associated with it. I think the artists are having a good time now.

For many years I could not understand why there were no art courses on the Middle East. There are courses about politics, about religion, but never about what is going on in the art scene, visual arts, films, music. That's why I became involved.

For decades, I never had any financial support to do publications, but now that I publish myself I decided that I would no longer do events without some record, so that resources for students in the area were available. Still we have little reference material . . . regarding our cultural scene, but things are changing fast.

The Queensland Art Gallery will provide a lens for looking at contemporary art and film from Iran and Turkey with its inclusion of these geographical areas in 'The 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art'. There are key historical relationships of cultural influence and exchange between Iran, Turkey and parts of Asia. What do you think contemporary dialogues will reveal?

For someone like me, Iran and Turkey is Asia. The influence of China, the exchanges of Mongol–Islamic art are absolutely evident. When I am in China even, I can see the Islamic references, because the Silk Road was an important trade route and it is through trade routes that cultural exchanges took place.

I also think that Turkey and Iran are part of Asia in terms of culture or moral ethics. In some ways there are lots of similar ways of dealing with life: the notions of face, of shame, honour, respect of the elderly. These things still exist in these countries.

I know that for an artist like Chant Avedisian in Egypt, the patterns from China, Japan, Egypt, and the Islamic world have several things in common. So I think that there are aesthetic links, cultural links and certainly trade routes that are very evident. Chant always said, look East not West. I live in the West, but my interests are linked to the East — my inspirations come from the East.

Ruth McDougall is Curatorial Assistant, Asian and Pacific Art, Queensland Art Gallery / Gallery of Modern Art.

Rose Issa is the director of Beyond Art Productions which publishes monographs and thematic books on artists from the Arab world and Iran. She has also been advisor to the London, Rotterdam and Berlin film festivals on Arab and Iranian films.