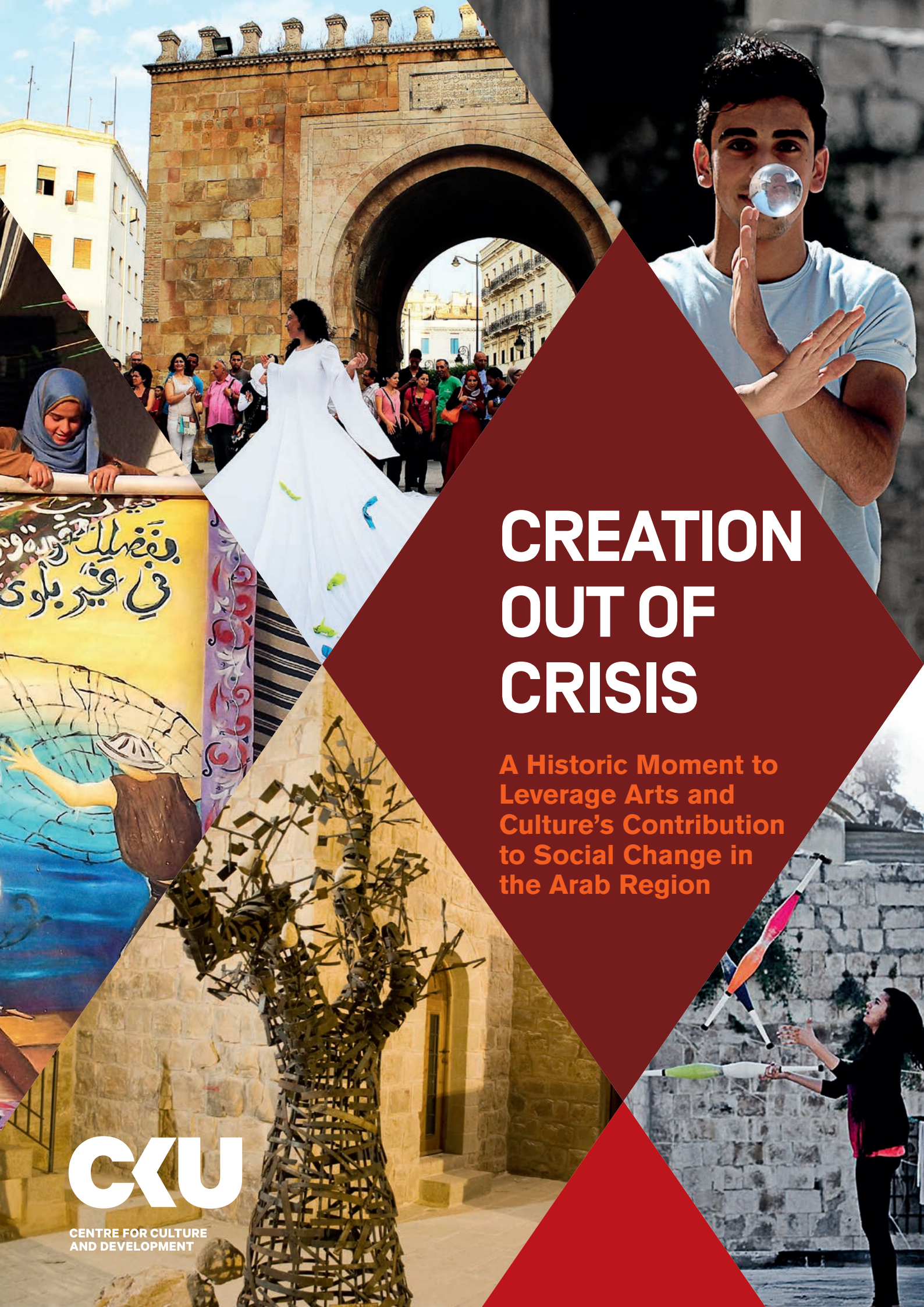

CREATION OUT OF CRISIS

A Historic Moment to Leverage Arts and Culture's Contribution to Social Change in the Arab Region

CKU

CENTRE FOR CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

Hello Out There theatrical production, Syria
Photo by Mohammad Daowd
Courtesy of Citizens Artists

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Creation out of Crisis, A Historic Moment to Leverage Arts and Culture's Contribution to Social Change in the Arab Region
2015
Authored by Moukhtar Kochahe

Centre for Culture and Development
Nytorv 17, 1450 København K
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Editorial Coordination: Muna Bur
Editorial Assistance: Ditte Dalgaard
Graphics: Morten Bak Grafisk Design

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THE AUTHOR

Moukhtar Kocache is an independent advisor and consultant with expertise in curatorial practice, media, philanthropy and cultural and civil society development. His most recent partners and clients include International Media Support, Danish Center for Culture and Development, Salzburg Global Seminars, Open Society Foundations, Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace Network, Art Omi, Hivos and Sundance Institute. He has advised various independent and government agencies and was a contributor to the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs strategy formulation of the 'Right to Art and Culture' in 2012.

From 2004 to 2012 he was Program Officer at the Ford Foundation's regional office in Cairo. During his tenure he worked on the development and sustainability of arts and culture spaces, networks and service infrastructure. He also programmed and managed a cluster of grants that supported alternative and emerging media platforms and media reform initiatives, as well as a cluster of grants that supported the development of local philanthropy in the MENA region. He additionally played a leading role in the Foundation's portfolio for support to Palestinian civil society.

From 1998 to 2004 Moukhtar was Director of Programs and Services at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council in New York, a leading arts council in the US where he developed residency programs, art in the public realm initiatives, exhibitions, publications, conferences and seminars as well as workshops and resources for individual artists and small arts organizations.

Moukhtar has served on the board of the Gerhart Center for Philanthropy and Civic Engagement at the American University in Cairo since 2012.

His current interests include the sustainability of independent creative platforms, cultural and social justice philanthropy, political philosophy and policy, alternative institutional structures, memory, film and material culture.

He divides his time between New York, Paris and Istanbul.

FOREWORD

By Elsebeth Krogh
CEO, the Danish Centre for Culture and Development - CKU

Sizeable waves of transitory change processes are in motion in the Middle East and North Africa. A context in which art, culture and creative expression are produced in an arena of political, social and economic transformation. With this paper, CKU aspires to contribute to a broader perspective on arts and culture in the MENA region.

The aim is to capture emerging trends relating to the impact of arts and culture on social change and development in the region by bringing forth evidence and insight to stakeholders working in the field, as well as to a larger public with interest in the dynamics between arts, culture and change in the MENA region.

CKU's partnerships with the Middle Eastern arts and culture sector were initially bolstered within the framework of CKU's Images Festival of 2006 – 'Images of the Middle East'. More than 500 artists and intellectuals presented their works to the Danish public, under the strenuous background of the war in Lebanon, and the cartoon crisis unfolding at the time.

Under the framework of the Danish-Arab Partnership Programme, CKU built on the established links from Images of the Middle East Festival, and aligned efforts within the scope of intercultural dialogue in support to arts, culture and creative industries in the MENA region from the year 2008 to 2014.

At present, CKU implements two culture and development programmes carried forward by a broad scope of partners in Egypt and Palestine, and activities related to the forthcoming Images Biennale, as well as CKU's Youth Programme in Denmark where artists from the Middle East and other regions where CKU is working teach Danish school children about art as a tool for change. All CKU-supported projects are based on the work of local practitioners, artists, institutions and organisations – a few of whom are mentioned in this report.

CKU's approach is guided by the conviction that support to arts and culture in the context of human rights based development and growth perspectives has the potential to enhance processes of freedom of expression, strengthen diversity, intercultural understanding and social change.

This report is the first in a series of publications that CKU will launch over the coming years focusing on the contribution of arts, culture and creative industries to development and social change. It is our privilege to initiate the series with Creation out of Crisis authored by the distinguished cultural activist Moukhtar Kocache. In 2012, Moukhtar Kocache contributed to the formulation of the Danish strategy for support to culture and development, 'The Right to Art and Culture' that was adopted in May 2013 in the Danish parliament.

Concert by Ibn El Balad Band, Mahatet El Raml, Alexandria, Egypt
Photo: Mohamed el Nagar
Courtesy of Gudran for Art and Development

»Much of the last decade's artistic production has brilliantly captured the pulse of Arab societies and national contexts. «

INTRODUCTION

The MENA region is rich in opportunities for social change through diverse creative cultural expressions. The focus here is not the region's vast array of individual artists and political art or the creative activity that was spurred by the uprisings, although several projects researched for this report were born in that context. It is important to acknowledge as significant to our collective and personal experience, the realm of artistic production that is formal, aesthetic, ephemeral, referential, conceptual and sensual, and that may at times illicit political and social reactions even if this was not its intention. This report however, explores artistic and cultural manifestations that explicitly seek to create social change.

Rather than classifying artistic and cultural production in the Arab region through a particular socio-political reading, this report sheds light on the breadth of activities that respond to and engage with the region's social challenges while identifying patterns, contributions and opportunities to support and help scale up this work. Interviews with artists and cultural managers were conducted in Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon and Palestine accompanied by desk research on both global and MENA initiatives and resources. Additionally, feedback for an early draft was received by a group of colleagues from the Arab region's arts and culture funding group.

In December of 2012, two hundred artists, art managers, producers, cultural policy experts and cultural activists from around the Arab world gathered in Cairo at a conference entitled 'Independent Culture for Democracy' to discuss the role of the independent art sector in the region's socio-political transformations and challenges. Buzzing with excitement and hope, this diverse group of leaders articulated a set of guiding principles defining in an unprecedented way their ethical responsibility to their societies and communities.

The group emphasised freedom of expression as the fulcrum of all social activity. Their recommendations and commitments included: a) 'to coordinate and interact with all social and rights advocacy activities and movements espoused by civil society, and participate in and through them so as to better perform the role of the independent cultural sector promoting programs for social change' b) 'to create mechanisms...to express solidarity and support victims of repression, censorship, confiscation, violations of freedom of expression and other such abuses...' c) 'to build models through examples of cooperation with civil society operating in sectors such as education, development, human rights and the media, with the aim of incorporating cultural components into their programs and services.'

Although not fully representative of the region's artistic community nor sustained as an ongoing effort, the gathering and the group's approach towards social issues was a milestone reflecting a particular moment »

»This report sheds light on the breadth of activities that respond to and engage with the region's social challenges while identifying patterns, contributions and opportunities to support and help scale up this work. «

in history. The approach outlined during the gathering offered an inspiring vision of participation with regards to the myriad social and political challenges facing the Arab region and was imbued with the sense of urgency and opportunity that accompanied the Arab uprisings.

The relationship between social change and artistic and cultural production has generated heated debate throughout history. The issue has been revived in the Arab region over the last decade and become especially pertinent since the Arab uprisings. This is heightened by the fact that most funding for the region's arts and culture comes from foreign foundations and governments that have developmental and social justice mandates that may or may not be aligned with the aspirations of local artists and culture organisations. Although local support for arts and culture is steadily rising in the Arab region, the bulk of financial support for arts and culture organisations and initiatives is still provided by European, Nordic and American foundations and organisations. Government funding is negligible or highly politicised and individual support and private philanthropy is still in its infancy. The lack of a well developed and diverse funding ecology in the Arab region greatly limits diversity of practices, independence and sustainability of cultural work.

Given the complex funding landscape, some artists and cultural brokers complain of pressure from funding agencies wishing to employ their work towards certain agendas, claiming that arts and culture have an intrinsic value, while others favour and wish to promote the extrinsic value of art and culture in the service of the community. The binary nature of this debate is reductive and misleading given today's world. Artists today situate their work within a wide range of expressive modes and socio-cultural parameters.

The arts and culture are too often categorised as the 'high' or classical arts versus popular culture and entertainment, or art created 'for art's sake' versus art with a specific function or utility. These dualities ignore the synergetic quality of arts and culture, whose value and impact are felt by society as well as the individual. Only by acknowledging the varied contributions and often overlapping layers of artistic and cultural activities may we begin to devise effective cultural strategies, policies and infrastructure. There is legitimacy, need and space for a diversity of expression that suits varied contexts and produces different outcomes. Contemporary cultural production, in fact, increasingly challenges facile references to 'high' or 'low' culture and 'intrinsic' or 'extrinsic' qualities. Rather than a dichotomy, we see a spectrum encompassing artists and cultural producers who believe in the autonomy and self-sufficiency of their work and those that maintain it should have a socially redeeming purpose. Great and successful art is generally able to do both.

Dream City, 2010 biennale, Tunisia
Photo: Yassine Hakimi
Courtesy of L'Art Rue

The Arab region has a well-established tradition of public intellectuals and engaged artists. Some of the most compelling cultural production of recent years explores socio-political matters such as colonialism, poverty, occupation, military rule, personal and collective freedoms, classism, and gender injustice. A significant segment of an entire cultural generation has in fact, at some point, been either imprisoned or exiled because their work threatened the political and social order. Although a new generation of writers, theatre directors, musicians, poets, visual artists and filmmakers continues to create work that helps stimulate debate, inspires emotional resonance and spurs critical thinking about difficult social issues, the number of audiences they reach remains limited and is often restricted to the social elite. Nevertheless, much of the last decade's artistic production has brilliantly captured the pulse of Arab societies and national contexts.

Over the past twenty five years, in line with global movements, the Arab region has seen the emergence of cultural initiatives and artistic productions aimed at altering social realities. The nature of this work demands the engagement of a broad demographic in terms of audience and salient contributions to the improvement of the social sphere. The medium becomes the means of effecting change within audiences and entire communities. These initiatives tend to be participatory and community-based, functioning and flourishing in the popular, public realm; increasingly they are media-driven, engendering public discourse on social, civic and political matters.

After defining 'social change', this report briefly describes the impacts of socially conscious arts and culture, and the types of interventions that appear best suited to social change. A short description of the socio-political context makes a case for social change-oriented arts and culture in the MENA region. This is followed by a small sampling of the region's many impressive social change projects and initiatives. Culled from Tunisia, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, these model projects were mostly established in the last three to five years, though some have been around for a decade or longer. They are organised here into five groups or types of initiative, though some straddle several categories. Many more inspiring examples could have also been featured had space and framework allowed. Finally, the report offers recommendations to help structure and support the region's emerging community of social change artists and cultural initiatives to help deepen and expand their efforts. ■

Al Kamandjati music school, Palestine
Courtesy of Al Kamandjati

POSSIBLE OUTCOMES AND ATTRIBUTES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

- PARTICIPATION
- COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT
- DIALOGUE
- PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
- CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
- AWARENESS & KNOWLEDGE
- POLICY CHANGE
- EQUITY & JUSTICE
- EMPOWERMENT
- CAPACITY & CAPABILITY
- MOTIVATION
- SOCIETAL VALUES & NORMS
- PUBLIC OPINION

ARTS AND CULTURE
CATALYSTS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Social change refers to adjustments in cultural values, societal norms and behaviour patterns, alterations in social relations and social institutions. It occurs when a society's belief systems, values and customs are consciously acknowledged, reviewed and either rejected or revised. The term implies a range of social and civic outcomes, from increased awareness and knowledge, to attitudinal shifts at the individual, community and institutional levels. Additional outcomes range from increased capacities, motivation and participation, to public discourse, publicly formulated demands and policy changes that correct inequity and injustice.

It is important to acknowledge and clarify arts and culture's contributions on a personal and collective level as well as their various areas of intervention and impact so we can proceed with more mature analysis and understanding.

Some arts and cultural practices are more conducive to social change than others.
The most popular include:

Engaged Art / Citizen Artist

- Works of art and cultural expression that tackle political and social issues and assume an ethical position.
- The work of artists and intellectuals who are socially engaged, even if their work is not overtly political or social in nature.

Creative Activism / Activist Arts

- Works of art and cultural projects dealing with a particular social and political issue and aligned with the culture and methodologies of activism.
- Activities at the intersection of social activism and artistic practice, from the bold to the discreet.

Public Art

- Art works or projects explicitly conceived to engage a diverse audience, usually displayed, performed and/or presented in the public realm.
- Art that interfaces with ordinary citizens, democratises access to arts and ideas, explores and at times help redefine local power structures and boundaries of freedom. Interventions in public space may or may not be free of official mediation.

Social Practice

- A term mostly used by art practitioners, where works and projects seek the alteration of social space and the social order. The practice borrows from and takes the form of disciplines including community development, urban planning, political activism, media, theatre and the visual arts. Social practice art is often interactive, focusing on socio-political issues including the environment, food production, labor, gender, race, colonialism, gentrification, global capital, immigration, incarceration and democracy. In many instances, social practice shares research findings, data and knowledge in a performative manner with the constituencies most impacted by these findings. Social practice often proposes experiments in sociality and civic structures while favouring debate, learning and conversation to impact interpersonal dynamics.

Community Arts

- Often referred to as community-based or community-engaged, these projects typically take place in marginalised or disenfranchised communities and involve a grassroots, interactive approach. Community members (often youth) participate with artists who help structure activities. Some projects explore a particular issue of concern to that community while others make overall development and revitalisation the focus. Activities are often affiliated with a local community centre, school, cultural centre or community theatre. At times, cultural organisations help design and foster arts programs in specific communities such as art education, creative place-making and curated public programs.

ARTISTIC CANON

Sustaining and advancing the artistic canon and excellence

Support for artistic traditions, professional art education, the advancement of quality and innovation in cultural production and its dissemination to audiences at art and cultural institutions through art historical discourse and critical theory

VIBRANCY

Living artists and cultural production are forms of innovative, vibrant, contemporary societal expressions

Arts and culture are important for open and vibrant communities and societies given their relationship to creativity, inspiration, identity formation, the presentation of perspectives and values, and the ability to bring forth a diversity of voices and healthy critical discourse.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Supporting arts and culture infrastructure, policy and production as freedom of expression

Arts and culture mirror the state and needs of society in terms of freedom of expression and human rights. They help push the boundaries of and help advance freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and congregation. Artists, media professionals and cultural activists are part and parcel of an expressive and free civil society and it is important to protect them as well as their rights.

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY & RIGHTS

Defending Cultural Equity, Cultural Rights, Cultural Memory and Cultural Access

Support to communities, minorities, groups for the access to, the preservation of and advancement of cultural traditions of communities, heritage, sites, languages, and contemporary production and narratives as well as their celebrations, transmission and sharing with others and future generations. Culture is a human right. Advancing cultural democracy.

EDUCATION

Art education and participation in culture as a means for personal and collective development

Arts and culture help improve personal, emotional, intellectual, cognitive, creative and educational development. They also contribute to the development of new leaders, the building of self-confidence, the advancement of group work and participatory processes. They help advance personal and collective identity formation and values.

COMMUNITIES

Arts and Culture that is central to building social capital and cohesion, community development and civic engagement

Support the health and flourishing of communities. Activating engagement and participation. Develop social and civic networks. Help improve safety, stability, independence and quality of life of communities, neighborhoods and cities. Improve tolerance, healing, diversity and citizenry.

DIALOGUE

Arts and culture that help build bridges, improve dialogue and help resolve conflict between communities

Support the development of empathy, respect for diversity, peace building, memorialization, reconciliation, tolerance, mutual understanding, diplomacy and dialogue.

ACTIVISM

Arts and Culture for theme-specific causes and activism

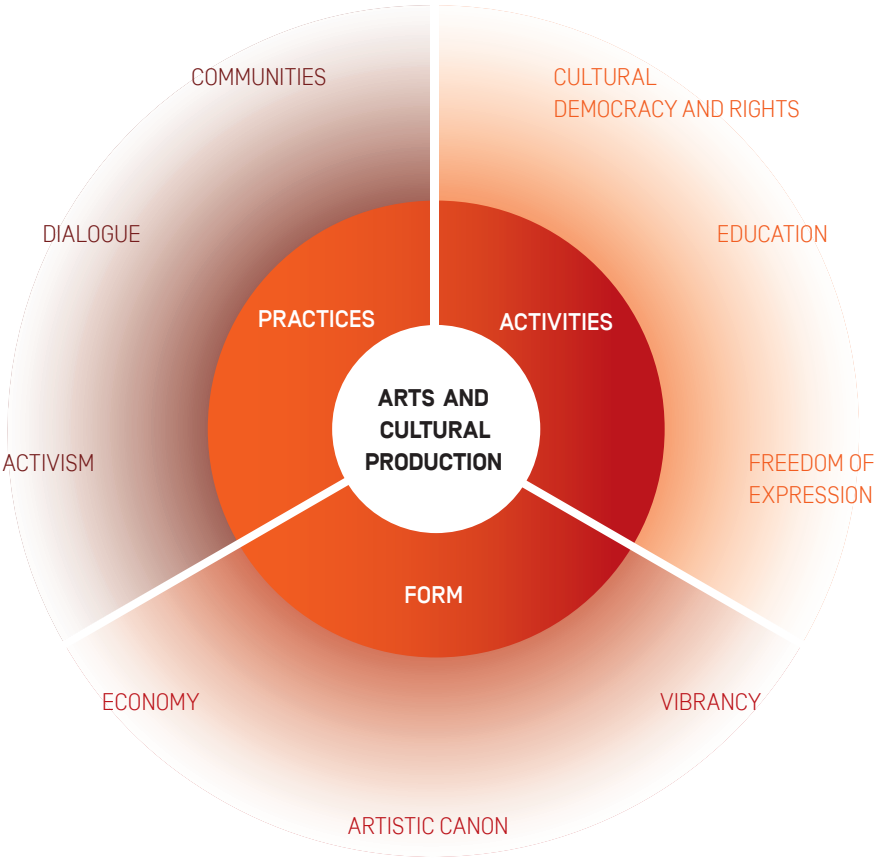
Support communication, awareness raising, discourse and advancement of issue and theme based causes like the environment, sexuality, abuse, refugees, poverty, war, minority and disenfranchised groups.

ECONOMY

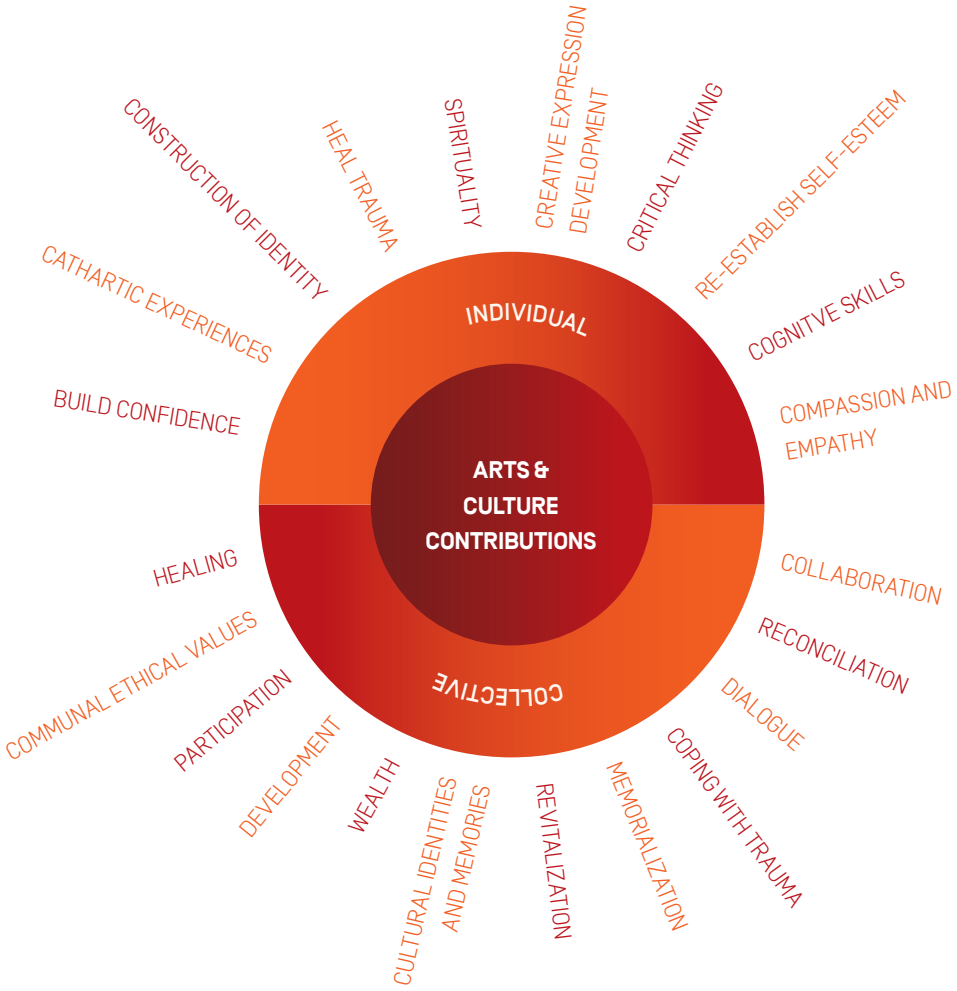
Arts and culture are central to economic development and renewal

The creative industries are essential for the economic well-being of physical and cultural communities, neighborhoods and cities. Arts and culture activity and institutions have an economic impact on constituencies as well as on their surroundings and environment. They help create jobs and generate resources to communities. They help spur urban renewal and development, improve tourism and corporate investments.

Typology adapted from Kevin McCarthy (2002), 'Trend or Tipping Point: Arts & Social Change Grantmaking, 2010, Animating Democracy, Americans for the Arts' and Joshua Guetzkow 'How the Arts Impact Community.' Guetzkow created a chart adapted from Kevin McCarthy's typology with 3 added layers to consider: direct involvement in arts organizations, participation in arts as an audience member, and the presence of arts organizations in the community



Arts & Culture Typology of Intervention and Taxonomy for Impact.



Arts and culture's contributions at the individual/personal levels and at the collective/communal levels are manifold. This diagram, while not exhaustive, serves to illustrate these layered contributions.

Photo courtesy of Theatre Day Productions, Palestine.

»Arts and culture offer platforms for social interaction; they help build civic experience by advancing collective work and problem-solving, experimentation in coexistence and respect for diversity and dialogue, all crucial in moments of transition and reform.«

ARTS AND CULTURE
A FERTILE GROUND FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Despite the diversity that exists within Arab countries and the specificities that apply to the Gulf, the Levant and the Maghreb, Arab societies share fundamental social, cultural and ideological patterns and realities. Generalisations are hence useful while acknowledging the divergences in current states of affairs post uprisings, where Tunisia appears to be on track, while Libya and Syria have slid into full blown conflict and Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine appear to be stagnating in terms of reform, social justice and political participation.

The Arab region is experiencing an historic moment of crisis as it faces a daunting mix of social, political, cultural, civic, economic, environmental and demographic challenges. The humanitarian conditions are in many cases catastrophic, as a consequence of armed conflict and occupation, generating millions of refugees and internally displaced people. Yet even relatively stable Arab societies suffer restrictions owing to rigid patriarchal hierarchies, rising conservatism, Islamism, intolerance and the repression of individuality and social diversity. Political and civic freedoms are undermined or denied; state institutions are hypertrophied, opaque and corrupt. Entire generations lack civic education or experience; opportunities for civic participation in local governance are virtually nil as are arenas for collective, goal-oriented work. The region is weak »

»In times of social transformation such as the Arab region is now experiencing, arts and culture assume fresh meaning and can serve as creative vehicles for change. Especially in an authoritarian environment of excessively dominant power structures, the ability to visualise and articulate alternative narratives is essential. «

in knowledge production, social science research, scientific innovation, unschooled in open, respectful debate; its education systems are in dire need of restructuring and the emigration of educated professionals in search of a decent wage has created a grievous brain drain. Unemployment is high (some 60% of the population is under twenty five years of age with dim career prospects), neo-liberal consumer economies are unregulated, sustainable planning and social welfare virtually nonexistent and inequality is prevalent across the board, most flagrantly across gender lines.

The crisis facing the Arab region is characterised by a massive vacuum in knowledge and collective problem-solving skills, undermining efforts to develop a viable, comprehensive vision for the future and to take the necessary steps to achieve it. These shortcomings may impose themselves in varying degrees in different countries and localities but few citizens are indifferent to the compounded difficulties they represent; indeed, the region is experiencing an unprecedented level of public engagement to address them. In the last five years, a plethora of civic, youth, philanthropic, cultural and humanitarian initiatives has been launched by ordinary people, mostly young and urban, despite the considerable obstacles they must overcome. In some cases, security and humanitarian conditions have forced groups to either suspend their work or implement it from exile.

The civic freedoms that were demanded during the uprisings have, in many cases, failed to materialise and in some instances previously existing freedoms have been severely curtailed. Legal restrictions and/or increased state scrutiny in some countries are impeding the development of this new civic movement while local sources of funding and support remain scarce. Civil society groups, whether working on women's issues, poverty alleviation, cultural democracy, education, environment and political participation, must also contend with their own limited capabilities and fragile infrastructures. Despite all this, the energy, optimism, perseverance and idealism of these initiatives are a vital source of hope and promise for the Arab region, even if the road ahead is turbulent and long.

In times of social transformation such as the Arab region is now experiencing, arts and culture assume fresh meaning and can serve as creative vehicles for change. Especially in an authoritarian environment of excessively dominant power structures, the ability to visualise and articulate alternative narratives is essential. Socially engaged arts and culture helps shift narratives, influencing the collective imagination while challenging existing power structures and paradigms. Participation and exposure to arts and culture encourages creativity, inspiring the collective imagination towards the shaping and reinforcement of alternative visions and realities. Arts and culture meanwhile offer platforms for social interaction; they help build civic experience by advancing collective work and problem-solving, experimentation in coexistence and respect for diversity and dialogue, all crucial in moments of transition and reform.

Arab societies comprise traumatised, marginalised and fledgling communities that benefit greatly from community-based arts and culture initiatives, which have demonstrably helped build social capital, increase social well-being, improve community cohesion, accelerate development and inspire self-confidence and pride. Places and spaces of socially-minded arts and culture tend to be flexible, open, welcoming and safe for diverse people to congregate, experiment, debate, learn and create. Such spaces are rare in Arab societies. Young people naturally gravitate to such spaces as well as to new media forms of expression. Media penetration is strong in the Arab region, a powerful influence in the public sphere and a ready vehicle to popularise issues and ideas. Considering the Arab region's youth bulge, investment in socially engaged arts will have lasting impact, providing the necessary tools and giving hope to young people, motivating them towards action. ■

Dream City 2010 biennale, Tunisia.
Photo: Saif Chaabane
Courtesy of L'Art Rue

»Building on the early experiments and infrastructure that emerged in the 1990s, the last decade has seen a crescendo of creative activity and expression in the region. «

The Wonder Box, Egypt
Photo: Rana el Nemr
Courtesy of Mahatat for Contemporary Art

A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Building on the early experiments and infrastructure that emerged in the 1990s, the last decade has seen a crescendo of creative activity and expression in the region. Aesthetic trends and themes have coalesced from the experiences and realities of different countries, cities and communities. Several Gulf countries have developed infrastructure devoted to an art market catering largely to traditional consumer tastes that supports their bid as global arts players. Elsewhere in the Arab region, arts and culture production has been shaped in response to intense socio-political conditions.

Visual artists, theatre directors, writers, filmmakers, musicians, choreographers and photographers have produced compelling works dealing with war, trauma, violence, occupation, colonial heritage, poverty, sexuality and desire, women's social status, sexual minorities, marginalization, emigration, the plight of refugees, informal settlements, slums, authority, patriarchy and failed governance. Despite the rich output, few of these works have been able to contribute to popular public discourse. Although they have helped seed and vitalise critical reflection within creative and elite circles, the region's poor distribution infrastructure and presentation opportunities prevent these works from reaching a critical mass of audiences. Sadly, many of these works have been seen and appreciated by more international than local audiences. Only when experienced by a large number of people can socially-engaged art activate the discourse that helps shape values and inspire action.

In the years leading up to and following the Arab uprisings a new generation of artistic infrastructure emerged primarily from within civil society. Whereas cultural infrastructure formerly belonged almost exclusively to the state, new independent spaces, collectives, platforms and initiatives were founded by ordinary citizens, artists and intellectuals. Community-based spaces and interventions multiplied, while experiments in cultural advocacy and artistic outreach began to take shape. This development is largely owed to the region's relatively new service infrastructure of organisations that provide financial, capacity, training and circulation support, which began to democratise access to resources and create opportunities for convening and exchange. The Young Arab Theatre Fund, Culture Resource/Al-Mawred Al Thaqafy and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC) deserve mention along with the many international foundations and development agencies that supported and shepherded this infrastructure. ■

CREATIVE PLACES & PUBLIC SPACES

In the course of fifteen years, the handful of independent art spaces operating in most Arab countries dramatically multiplied into hundreds of venues, mostly small and run by artists. Although struggling to sustain themselves, these venues grew in response to the demand for places of congregation, experimentation, exchange, debate, learning and freedom especially on behalf of the region's youth. Although typically frequented by young people, they attract individuals of diverse backgrounds that would otherwise have little or no opportunity to interact.

Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research

Cairo Lab for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) is an initiative focused on the intersection of urban design, cultural revitalisation and experiments in decision-making processes for urban and architectural development. Cluster launched 'Cairo Passages' in 2013, a project exploring downtown public spaces as a framework for art and urban development in a time of transition. The project consists of design workshops for artists, planners and architects who propose interventions on specific sites in downtown Cairo, followed by a second phase of execution. The project brings a novel approach to the fabric of a city with a history of highly centralised public works, policies and bureaucracy and has managed to acquire the complicated approvals and permits necessary to intervene in public space. Their success in negotiating the bureaucracy represents an important precedent and argument for decentralised civil society-based knowledge and resources in the service of the common good.

Artellewa

Artellewa was founded in 2007 in Ard Ellewa (the General's Land), one of Cairo's largest informal settlements. It is the sole cultural centre for over a million people living in this under-serviced neighbourhood. Founded by local artists, the centre conducts workshops, training courses, interactive arts projects, public interventions, performances and exhibitions that have deeply affected the community, producing a proud, self-confident culture among its members. Artellewa has received international recognition and attracted foreign and Egyptian visitors from all walks of life to interact with and learn about the informal settlement and its residents.

Massart

Established in 2010, ***Massart*** is now one of Tunis' most vibrant alternative cultural venues. Small and polyvalent, it was created in a storefront garage shop in a centrally-located but marginalised neighbourhood. The space spills onto the sidewalks and the street during performances and events. Created by a group of young artists, Massart runs workshops for young people, children and women and its partnership with the Arab Human Rights Institute has made it a champion in children's rights issues and awareness-raising. A meeting place for members of all social classes, the centre has hosted programs on citizenry, voting rights, clandestine immigration and women's rights. In 2013, along with a cluster of NGO's, Massart established a travelling film festival devoted to rights and freedoms.

Revolution Records

Revolution Records, founded by the eponymous rap group in 2014 in Alexandria, Egypt calls itself a 'street arts licensed space', a venue devoted to teaching and developing hip hop and street arts. The space, which runs workshops for young men and women, has a fully equipped rehearsal and recording studio that has produced dozens of titles for local rap musicians. Posted on the internet, some of these recordings tackling corruption, military rule, sycophantic media, social equity, personal responsibility, women rights and regional politics have been downloaded hundreds of thousands of times.

Public space in the Arab region has been strictly controlled and politicised under authoritarian regimes. Yet it has also been subjected to a massive wave of privatisation and neoliberal commercialisation, resulting in highly regimented codes of behaviour and social interaction. One of the foremost attributes of the Arab uprisings, has been the exploration of a new negotiated »

relationship between citizens and public space as a symbol of acquired freedoms. Streets were the venue for unprecedented informal artistic interventions in the form of graffiti, murals, publiperformances, screenings and debate.

L'Art Rue

#2

In 2008 ***L'Art Rue*** (Art Street) was created in Tunis with the goal of exploring and animating urban public space. One of the organisation's signature projects is Dream City, a biennale for artistic inspiration and committed citizenship. The event allows thousands of average citizens to experience art that questions the place of the body in society, authoritarian power structures, censorship, interpersonal dynamics, moral boundaries and commercial consumption. The organisation has led numerous workshops and seminars on the politics and aesthetics of shared public space and citizens' responsibility towards them. A program entitled 'Change Your Class' gives young students the chance to redesign their classrooms with the help of architects and designers. Another program, 'Conflict and Resistance: the Artist Citizen and the Tunisian Public Space', trains young artists and activists in methodologies of intervention in the public realm.

Al-Fan Midan

#3

Al-Fan Midan (Art is a Square) was launched in 2011 in Cairo by an independent cultural coalition as a monthly festival democratising access to the arts while enabling artists and citizens to celebrate freedom of expression in a public space. Monthly performances of music, dance, circus art, theatre, poetry, rap and storytelling were successfully held in Alexandria, Port Said, Minya, Asyut and Luxor. Although the festival organisers faced occasional difficulties obtaining permits from the relevant governorates, the initiative was a great success. Thousands experienced an atmosphere of shared civic space and human warmth. The diversity of the attendees was striking, in terms of class, gender, religious and political affiliations. Such gatherings offered a model of tolerance rarely experienced during the Mubarak era while setting a precedent for how public space could be used in a new Egypt, a place of freedom and dialogue. Tellingly, Al-Fan Midan was discontinued in 2014 following the change in the Egyptian political climate and the state's desire for greater 'security'.

Mahatat

#4

Created in 2012, ***Mahatat*** (Stations) is an independent initiative by a group of Cairo artists and cultural workers designed to celebrate the uprising by engaging audiences in the public realm. Mahatat developed a series of projects called Shaware3na (Our Streets) involving artists and average citizens in collective experiences including visual arts interventions and contemporary dance performed in the Metro (underground mass transport), flash-mob style. These initiatives challenge people's expectations of their fellow citizens and their behaviour in public space. Mahatat's most recent project is a revival of the 'magic box' (sandouk el-donia) treated in a contemporary way and accompanied by musicians, actors and story-tellers who entertain passersby with narratives conveying social and ethical values, much as they did in the city's historic past.

Jesuits Cultural Centers

One of the region's first dynamic initiatives was led by the ***Jesuits Cultural Centers*** in Egypt, who created vibrant, open venues in Cairo, Alexandria and Minya at the turn of the millennium. Equipped with performance and workshop spaces, editing facilities and studios, these centres cater mostly to marginalised young adults and children, offering courses in theatre, cinema, singing, music and interdisciplinary arts. Over the years, these centres have helped form community leaders and inspire thousands of individuals. ■

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA ADVOCACY

Access to independent media (non-governmental, privately funded and operated satellite TV stations) and mobile phone penetration have augmented communications and altered society, empowering millions of citizens. Rather than a technical revolution, media is experienced as a powerfully socialising force in the region, one that has helped liberate societies and individuals who had traditionally been spoken for and about but now possess the tools to make their voices and stories widely heard. In some cities, mobile phone film festivals were spontaneously invented and circulated, celebrating the power of ordinary citizens to film their own narrative. New media tools have also greatly contributed to the development of personal freedoms and individuality, attributes often discouraged in traditional Arab societies.

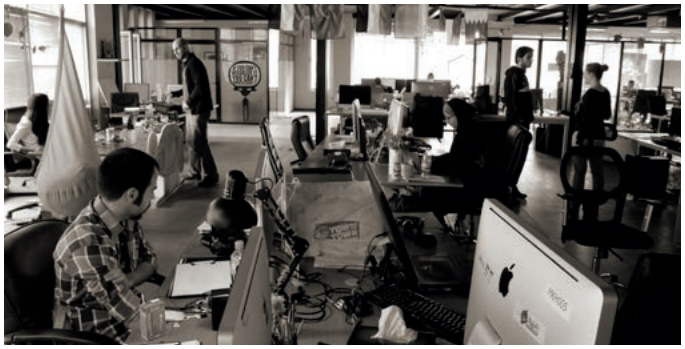
Shashat

Created almost a decade ago, ***Shashat*** (Screens) is an organisation based in Ramallah, Palestine that addresses women's issues through film, raising the awareness and capacity of women filmmakers. Shashat has curated a yearly women's film festival, trained several dozens of young Palestinian women in the art of filmmaking and produced films by first time women directors. Screened to large audiences at universities, community centres and art venues the films are accompanied by teaching manuals and discussion groups comprising policy makers and counselling experts. These screenings have given rise to dialogues on sensitive themes such as early marriage, inter-faith relationships, sexual abuse, religious intolerance, domestic violence, workplace challenges and motherhood, bringing them to the forefront of Palestinian society.

Arab Digital Expression Foundation

Arab Digital Expression Foundation (ADEF) is a Cairo-based organisation whose mission since 2008 is to create a new generation of citizens versed in the use of technology, while promoting digital media, storytelling, film, animation, programming and music to advance alternative visions, empower communities and open societies. Having trained hundreds of children and young adults in various interconnected technologies and forms of expression, the organisation has established platforms of communication and expression in Egypt and the region. ADEF runs an independent space for training, recording and editing where an interdisciplinary community of activists, artists and technologists can experiment and collaborate. One of the most participatory and non-hierarchical organisational structures in the region, ADEF is currently creating a series of similar spaces throughout Egypt.

Kharabeesh



Kharabeesh (Scribbles) is a web-based media and entertainment network with youth-oriented content characterised by exceptional animation and edgy story-telling. Since 2008, the group has produce hundreds of videos dealing with socio-political issues and events, capturing the despair, challenges and hopes of the region's people. Some have been seen by over two million viewers on youtube. The scale of this initiative outreach and penetration is groundbreaking, making it a major source of debate and dialogue among regional youth.

Contemporary Image Collective

Contemporary Image Collective (CIC) was established in 2004 in Cairo to study, present and advance photographic arts, documents and expression. At a time when regional image production was undergoing radical change, CIC held workshops, classes, exhibitions, seminars and debates, uniting artists, photographers, media professionals, editors, journalists, and archivists to formulate new paradigms for the role of the image in society. In 2014, CIC launched 'Social Issues and the Image', an initiative involving workshops and conversations in several Egyptian cities that culminated in the production of a practical guide to photography and filmmaking for citizen journalists, NGO workers and others wishing to use images in their work on social issues.

Mosireen

Mosireen (Determined) is a Cairo-based media advocacy founded in the wake of the January 25, 2011 uprising. Uniting activists, filmmakers, writers and citizens, Mosireen's mission is to document and catalogue human rights abuses and the machinations of authoritarian rule in Egypt. The group acts as a clearinghouse for video footage and media of the ongoing revolution produced by artists and citizens, while training citizen journalists in media-making and dissemination. To date, their YouTube channel is the most ever watched Egyptian internet TV outlet.

Abounaddara

Formed after the 2011 uprising that escalated to the Syrian civil war, ***Abounaddara*** (The Eyeglass Wearer) is an anonymous Syrian film collective that produces so-called emergency cinema. The group releases one short (1-10 minutes long) film per week online (over 200 to date) conveying the plight of Syrians from all walks of life in a visceral, poetic and cinematic way. The collective provides an alternative narrative that counteracts both the regime's and international media's portrayal of the nation's ongoing struggle. These films have been seen by millions online and at regional and international festivals, winning numerous awards worldwide. In communicating Syria's reality, Abounaddara has helped to humanise the conflict both for Syrians and the outside world. ■

»...media is experienced as a powerfully socialising force in the region, one that has helped liberate societies and individuals who had traditionally been spoken for and about but now possess the tools to make their voices and stories widely heard.«

Lost and Found, Al Darb Al Ahmar School, Egypt
Photo: Hasan Amin
Courtesy of Al Mawred Al Thaqafi

El Teatro

In 2012, ***El Teatro,*** one of Tunis' first multidisciplinary spaces, hosted programs focusing on ideological, sexual and racial diversity, charged if not taboo topics in most milieus. Etre Noir Dans La Verte ('Being Black in The Green'), an extensive program of debates, panels, films, theatre, rap and visual arts explored the racism directed towards the ten percent of the population with sub-Saharan ancestry. The program helped bring these 'hidden' issues into the open, initiating unprecedented public campaigns and debate.

The Egyptian Complaints Choir

The ***Egyptian Complaints Choir*** is an offshoot of the international complaint choirs movement that began in Helsinki in the early 2000s and has spread to 140 countries throughout the world. Formed in Cairo, the initiative collects the grievances and rants of Egyptian citizens from all walks of life and renders them into song. What started in 2011 as a humorous, creative way to make social and political commentary, attracted the media and wide audiences to the extent that the group's work was considered a potential political movement and monitored by the secret police. Musicians and singers of different ages, classes and traditions collaborate on collecting stories, arranging and performing the music. Songs deal with issues such as corruption, the sorry state of public transportation, pollution, poor medical services, lack of economic mobility and civic freedoms. The choir elicits cathartic and euphoric reactions from both performers and audiences. The power of not only voicing but singing out loud about deep social and political malaise helps release fears and inhibitions while building a sense of shared humanity and common purpose among participants.

ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE

After decades of censorship, Arab societies are thirsty for open and constructive discourse as manifested through satellite channels debates, vibrant social media and packed crowds at public events. State restrictions on freedom of expression have stifled debate, preventing citizens from learning about alternative perspectives or expanding their worldview and ideological parameters. The traditional spaces for discourse, like schools, universities, religious institutions, media and public sphere are often strictly controlled, unsafe, or unequipped to handle dynamic, instructive discussions in an orderly and constructive way. Cultural settings remain the most propitious places for vital and difficult discourse to take place, offering innovative methods to encourage engagement and dialogue.

Campus in Camps

Campus in Camps in the Dheishi refugee camp in Palestine was initiated in 2012 by artists and architects and is now supported by two university programs. This groundbreaking two-year degree program helps build a new cadre of young leaders from various refugee camps and accompanies them through an alternative educational format. Students acquire knowledge about urban planning, artistic strategies, human rights, governance, and community development in a participatory environment. Guest artists, theoreticians, academics and activists work regularly with the students while academic staff and mentors support them in their action-oriented projects in the refugee community. The development of a polyvalent and knowledgeable leadership enables refugees to visualise and chart a self-determined future. Campus in Camps is, in effect, working to shift the power relations that have governed the state of Palestinian refugees for the last seventy years.

ALTERNATIVE LEARNING & DISCOURSE

- Offer Laboratories for Critical & Open Debate
- Promote the Development of Arguments & Respect for Diversity of Perspectives
- Advance Civic Education
- Encourage Interdisciplinary Collaboration & Partnership
- Foster Creative Collective Problem-Solving

Townhouse Gallery

'The Workshop Series' was held in 2012 at the ***Townhouse Gallery,*** Cairo's first art space devoted to the independent cultural sector, now celebrating its fifteenth anniversary. These long-term workshop united artists, activists, students, lawyers, theoreticians and civil society professionals to explore issues including the negotiation of multiple truths, alternative advocacy, sexual harassment and social and political identities. Around 100 individuals experienced a safe and free space for radical open discussion, interdisciplinary exchange and research. Participants were able to experiment with their newfound freedom of expression, learning to present opinions and arguments and to entertain opposing perspectives, essential skills for productive participation in a growing civil society.

Beirut

At ***Beirut***, a Cairo art space opened in 2011, a lab-like investigation is underway involving artists, social scientists, human rights lawyers and activists in an innovative eight-month initiative called The Imaginary School Program. In an environment of authoritarianism, counter-revolution, restricted civil freedoms and intimidation of civil society, participants are exploring different organisational forms and institutional structures through philosophical, legal, economic and political frameworks. The premise of this investigation is that independent institutions in Egypt, despite their fragility, "constitute a resilient front and alternative infrastructure to defend social justice, the right to expression and the autonomy of thought and practice in all disciplines". ■

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & OUTREACH

With the failure of many government institutions, the absence of social safety nets and marginalization as a result of conflict, the Arab region is rife with under-serviced communities lacking social welfare and economic viability. Whether in poor historic neighbourhoods, refugee camps or informal settlements, millions are living at a bare sustenance level, without hope for community development. Civil society interventions are critical, often the only available source of basic services such as education and health. Arts and culture have proven to be significant forces in revitalising marginalised communities and creating alternative livelihoods.

»Arts and culture have proven to be significant forces in revitalising marginalised communities and creating alternative livelihoods.«

Riwaq

Founded in 1991 in Ramallah, ***Riwaq*** (Arcade) seeks to restore and activate the collective memory of Palestinians through projects that document and preserve eighteenth and nineteenth-century architectural heritage in the West Bank and Gaza. Rather than individual buildings, the project targets entire communities with important and endangered historic sites. Riwaq has intervened in dozens of villages and rural centres, elaborating a successful model for involving community members and local resources. Its program has created hundreds of jobs through the training of local members in restoration and construction techniques. It has also ensured that restored centres are immediately inhabited by local and regional NGOs who create libraries, training centres, cooperatives, music schools and other community-invigorating and sustaining cultural and economic activities. This holistic approach has earned Riwaq international recognition and awards.

Theatre Day Productions

Since 1995, against extraordinary odds, ***Theatre Day Productions*** has trained children and young adults in the theatre arts and performed original works in the south West Bank, Hebron and the Gaza Strip. The organisation has worked with thousands of disadvantaged youths in communities suffering from occupation, violence, discrimination and despair, fostering personal development alongside a sense of social responsibility. Training and productions are tailored by community members according to their needs, determined collective discussions involving parents and community leaders. The organisation has created curriculums for schools and through its long-term interactive process encouraged pride and motivation at the community level.

Gudran for Art and Development

Gudran (Walls) for Art and Development is a leading regional example of social change art. Founded in 2000 by a group of artists, writers, activists, filmmakers and theatre professionals, the organisation has, through various long-term initiatives, expanded the boundaries of artists' social responsibility. In a variety of informal spaces – cafes, street shops, a bookstore, a rehearsal and recording studio – Gudran conducts community-based training and outreach programs. Their first intervention in El-Max, a small fishing village near Alexandria, helped revive its culture, aesthetic and economic viability over the course of a decade at a time when the community was threatened with demolition to make way for upscale real estate development. Several community centres were founded, offering literacy classes, workshops for women, arts education for children and an engine and boat repair workshop for the fishermen. Thanks to community involvement and media attention, the municipality was obliged to rescind the demolition order and El-Max is now an integral part of Alexandria's municipal master plan.

Al Kamandjati

Founded in 2002, ***Al Kamandjati*** music school has inspired thousands of disadvantaged youths and communities in Palestine. Hundreds of students are currently enrolled at centres, some in refugee camps, most of them on scholarships. Teaching classical Western and Arab music, the school has enlivened communities and changed lives, helping a generation of young musicians to overcome fear, trauma and isolation. The founders of the school received an unprecedented official approval from Islamic authorities in support of the performance of non-religious music.

Freedom Theatre

#11

Since 2004, when the ***Freedom Theatre***, was founded in 2004 in Jenin, one of Palestine's largest refugee camps, it has been a beacon of light, discourse and creativity to a traumatised population. While tackling pertinent and emotional issues, the theatre has developed dozens of new community leaders and artists. Its bold approach has ignited heated controversy but the theatre continues to thrive and impact the lives of thousands of individuals.

The Darb Al-Ahmar Arts School

#12

The Darb Al-Ahmar Arts School was started by Culture Resource in Cairo in 2010 in partnership with The Agha Khan Trust for Culture. Located in one of Cairo's oldest and most destitute neighbourhoods, the school provides hundreds of children and young adults with training in music and the circus arts. The school is the only community outlet for entertainment and learning for both participating youths and their families. Its work is designed to foster interpersonal skills, improved physical and mental constitution and exposure to different social spheres, while creating job opportunities for graduates.

Palestine Circus School and Assirk Alsaghir

Two circus schools in Palestine, the ***Palestine Circus School*** in Bir Zeit and ***Assirk Alsaghir (The Small Circus)*** in Nablus must also be mentioned. Collectively, the schools work with over five hundred students from marginalised communities and refugee camps and perform annually to local audiences numbering in the thousands. Aside from training in the various circus arts, the school's performances use drama, dance and acrobatics to entertain while portraying harsh social and political realities. These performances challenge conservative social values and tackle taboos by addressing various forms of oppression and the pressures of occupation on the individual and collective body.

Laaroussa

Laaroussa (The Doll) was founded in 2010 in Sejane, a rural community in Tunisia, as a multidisciplinary collective seeking to advance social cohesion and development and democratic culture through the arts. Laaroussa is a project for a popular production space housing a women's cooperative dedicated to artistic and artisanal pottery and an ancient tradition of doll sculptures. Around sixty women work in a creative atmosphere with the support of the artists and trainers, building an economically viable community and social solidarity, renewing a disappearing cultural tradition and negotiating their emancipation towards their families and communities. Although currently struggling to secure funding, Laaroussa has provided opportunities for debate, learning and awareness on a roster of civic and gender issues. ■

Nablus Circus School, Palestine
Courtesy of Assirk Assaghir

SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Under conditions of armed conflict, civil strife and engrained ethical positions, Arab societies urgently need to rely on indigenous initiatives for both survival and advancement, daunting tasks that can only be accomplished through cooperation. Ordinary citizens, youth and grassroots communities must be mobilised as active participants in their societies. Cultural strategies and infrastructure are well-positioned to demonstrate the value of such engagement and to attract deeper participation. Whether raising awareness and calling for action on specific societal issues or rallying forces in response to humanitarian crises, arts and culture initiatives are often on the front-lines, providing vital, exuberant models for communication, interaction and social change.

Catharsis

Catharsis was the first organisation in the region dedicated to drama therapy. Founded in Lebanon in 2006, Catharsis has worked with marginalised groups to heal trauma, build confidence and alter the power dynamics and perceptions between excluded members of society and the mainstream. Two of its signature projects involved prison inmates in the development of theatre productions. '12 Angry Lebanese' explored narratives of truth and guilt at the Roumieh prison, one of Lebanon's most neglected and notorious institutions. 'Scheherazade' enabled women at the Baabda prison to tell their stories of grief and hope. These projects have helped build morale and solidarity inside the prisons, both among inmates and with prison guards. By holding performances in prisons for outside audiences which were attended by judges, ambassadors and ministers, Catharsis has helped to shape community leaders' and politicians' opinions regarding jail conditions and to humanise those incarcerated under brutal, discriminatory legal parameters. Recent legislation to reform prison conditions may well be a result of Catharsis' interventions. Catharsis' latest project/ performance 'Shebaik Lebaik' (Abracadabra) involved the participation of Lebanon's migrant workers, calling attention to their harsh living and working conditions.

Masrah Ensemble

Two other organisations based in Beirut must be mentioned. Dar Al Mussawir (The Photographer's House) focuses on the advancement of the photographic arts. It has produced several popular and pertinent workshops that cater to at risk and disadvantaged groups. Amongst them 'Nouzha' (Righteousness/ Integrity) a series of photo workshops and exhibitions produced by women prisoners in Barbar Alkhazen prison and 'Lahza' (Instant) which trained and provided cameras to 500 displaced Syrian children in Lebanon which culminated in a wildly successful exhibition. ***Masrah Ensemble*** (Theatre Ensemble) is a community based alternative theatre company which has recently produced a series of plays, readings, communal dinners and workshops that bridge between the avant-garde and community outreach and mixing actors, audiences and languages from various cultures that include domestic workers, migrants, refugees and labourers in Lebanon

Zoukak

Zoukak (Neighbourhood) is a Beirut theatre company founded in 2006 that approaches theatre as a medium for political and social involvement. The ensemble has produced interactive, psycho-social theatre and street performances in emergency situations, worked with incarcerated youth, refugees and rural communities, leading them through difficult dialogues on the civil war, interfaith relationships, sexuality, abuse and freedom.

The Association Tunisienne d'Action pour le Cinema (ATAC)

The Association Tunisienne d'Action pour le Cinema (ATAC) (The Tunisian Action Association for Cinema) was created in 2009 with the goal of presenting cinematic art to a wide spectrum of the Tunisian population, creating interdisciplinary social and civic relationships with cinema as a narrative art form. The group has promoted civic education and citizenry through curated film series, managing discussions and debate around them. These programs have circulated Tunisia offering thousands the opportunity to both enjoy a classic work of art and participate in open debate relating the films' issues of civic responsibility to their everyday lives.

Kefahteya

Kefahteya (The Strugglers), initiated in Cairo in 2014, is a project merging social commentary with social welfare. Artists worked with a group of street vendors in a downtown Cairo neighbourhood to renovate their kiosks (makeshift curb-side shops selling snacks, cigarettes or other items), painting murals »

and creating colourful brands for each enterprise. Portraits of the vendors were exhibited in a local gallery, elevating these modest entrepreneurs to the status of 'ordinary' heroes. Kefahteya's street art impacts the urban aesthetic while shifting the power dynamics governing the lives and livelihoods of its inhabitants. The project aims to be replicated in other Egyptian cities.

Massasit Mati

Massasit Mati (Mate Straw), is a Syrian artists' collective that gained notoriety with the online 2012 release of its animated film satirising the Syrian regime and the factional conflict. In 2013/14, the group hosted a workshop series on the traditional art of puppetry with young Syrian refugees in Northern Syria and Lebanon. The resulting puppet shows portrayed themes highlighting civility, human rights and respect for diversity with the goal of communicating liberal values to those who will be responsible for rebuilding Syria in the future. Held in dozens of refugee camps for over 5,000 children and young adults, the performances provided badly needed entertainment and an opportunity for debate, free expression, civic education and community healing. Additional puppetry ensembles were subsequently created in several refugee camps.

Citizens Artists, Antigone of Syria The Syrian Trojan Women

#15

Throughout the region, interactive theatre has helped communities to rewrite their narratives of oppression and to renegotiate power dynamics. Theatre has proved a powerful means to engage with the Syrian crisis and the millions of refugees in neighbouring countries. Interactive theatre following the methodologies of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed as advanced by the Syrian organisation ***Citizens Artists***, reaches Syrian communities in refugee camps and rural settings.

Antigone of Syria is another theatre-based initiative that has worked with Syrian women refugees to help them develop and dramatise their stories. Audiences numbering in the thousands in Lebanon have been inspired by these performances portraying resilience and grace under pressure, and the yearning for self-realisation against formidable odds. Similarly, ***The Syrian Trojan Women*** project recently produced in Amman brought the personal stories of twenty five Syrian women refugees into a successful and unique production based on the classic tale.

Ettijahat

#16

The Cultural Relief Initiative operated by ***Ettijahat (Directions)***, a Syrian NGO located in Lebanon, has offered video, visual arts and theatre training to hundreds of young adults in refugee camps and fractured communities. Some of these youths continued the work themselves, providing cultural relief activities for their communities. One affiliated theatre company in the Marj refugee camp produced two plays ('Our Tent' and 'A Thousand and One Tents') that have circulated to other camps and to professional theatres in Lebanon.

Action for Hope

Action for Hope is an initiative launched by Culture Resource in 2013 that offers cultural programs for communities in crisis in Syria and Egypt, providing services and activities addressing their material and emotional needs. Volunteer artists, community organisers, educators, cultural managers, therapists, and doctors work in a convoy manner, congregating and intervening in communities for a limited period of time. Action for Hope provides training, education, arts programs, medical and psychiatric assistance while coordinating available resources and volunteers to sustain the work long-term. Action for Hope will become an independent organisation in 2015. ■

Scheherazade's Diary, Lebanon
Photo: Dalia Khamissy
Courtesy of Catharsis, Lebanese Center for Drama Therapy

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This short survey of regional initiatives suggests that a powerful current of creativity and participation is flowing through the region. More than ever, youth are responding to the challenges and promise of their times with bravery, dedication and ingenuity. The vitality and potential of socially engaged arts and culture in the Arab region are clear. Yet most of these initiatives are struggling to survive, often operating with short-term funding, obliged to periodically suspend activities until the next source of support, usually from foreign agencies and foundations, is identified.

Although, the funding landscape for arts and culture in the Arab region is steadily changing and becoming more diversified through a growing community of philanthropists, crowd-funding efforts and private consumers and collectors, the majority of support to key institutions and initiatives still comes from foreign donors. This is especially true for work that is socially engaged and politically sensitive. These recommendations are meant primarily to inspire both local and international funders and supporters of arts and culture in the region. But given its social, political and civic dimensions and scope of engagement with marginalised communities, the value of social change arts and culture may well appeal to other donors, outside the specific realm of arts and culture.

The recommendations listed address the means to sustain, expand and strengthen this work for the future.

The Wishes Tree, by Raeda Saada during Dream City biennale 2012, Tunisia
Photo: Saif Chaabane
Courtesy of L'Art Rue

Dissemination and Activation

Dissemination
Works and projects must reach a critical mass of audiences and citizens. This could be accomplished through a cultural/ civic platform whose mission is to assist initiatives in developing and implementing distribution and activation strategies. This regional structure would provide training and match-making opportunities for projects, venues and communities while offering communication and branding support. Whether centralised or not, these critical services would help deepen and expand community work.

»Only when experienced by a large number of people can socially-engaged art activate the discourse that helps shape values and inspire action.«

Improved Guidelines for Dissemination Plans
Donors and supporters of initiatives should develop guidelines that encourage grant-ees to formulate plans for dissemination, outreach and activation. Donors should be willing to fund the dissemination aspect of the project, which could also be funded on »

its own as a separate component. They can also help encourage initiatives outside of capitals and major urban centres in order to reach large and often neglected populations with limited access to opportunities.

Dissemination Network
Community-based organisations and venues region-wide can join in a formal partnership to share resources, circulate productions and projects and curate public programs and educational material around them. Donors can help bring strategic grantees together to build such networks as well as design support programs that encourage the creation of networks and partnerships amongst local organisations for improved and effective dissemination and activation.

Visibility & Community Building

Annual Awards
Social change arts and culture need visibility to both build a community of practice and engender public and policy support. Annual regional awards for the best engaged art and socially conscious initiatives would capture attention and generate discourse regarding cultural production and its impact on society.

»Social change arts and culture need visibility to both build a community of practice and engender public and policy support.«

Annual convening
A yearly event for artists, cultural producers and supporters engaged in arts and culture for social change would help build community, offer opportunities to exchange experience and ideas and to develop joint strategies and support structures. Workshops and learning modules on specific tools and techniques can also be provided to participants to improve quality, effectiveness, capability and deeper intellectual and strategic engagement on arts and culture for social change.

Promotional Campaign
A compelling audio-visual media campaign would support the social values and contributions of arts and culture in the region, targeting the general public, civil society professionals and policy makers.

Capacity Building

Deeper Learning
Artists and cultural practitioners could benefit from theoretical, art historical and practical training in the different forms of social change arts and culture. Lesson plans, readings, expert teachers, pedagogical tools and group projects should be created in Arabic to make this corpus of knowledge available to a wider spectrum of individuals.

Courses and workshops focusing on community arts, cultural strategies, participatory theatre, oral history, art therapy and art activism should be presented as independent modules and/or as courses at schools, universities and academies.

A centre or institute at a university in the Arab region can be dedicated to social change art and culture to help train a new generation of cultural leaders and to generate and centralise knowledge. Learning modules, certificates, degree programs and e-learning programs can help promote education about social change and arts and culture.

Management
Art managers and cultural operators need training in the activation of arts and culture for social change, in addition to the means of generating suitable sources of support and income.

Cross-Sector Outreach
Professionals and leaders from other civil society sectors could participate in learning and training sessions to leverage their work by partnering with or harnessing the powers, tools and techniques of arts and culture for social change. Models of creative civic and social engagement can be devised in partnership with other sectors to impact diverse constituencies.

»Models of creative civic and social engagement can be devised in partnership with other sectors to impact diverse constituencies .«

Research & Documentation
Clearly, there is a need for deeper research and analysis of successful and failed models in the region. Case studies need to be developed by carrying out a thorough assessment of initiatives and how they impact participants, constituencies and communities.

The creation of a web-based platform focusing on arts and culture for social change can help build community and knowledge in the Arab region.

Groups and artists need to receive better training and support in documenting their work and communicating its benefits to larger audiences in a dynamic and effective manner.

Activities and Programming

Popular Culture
Popular culture is a powerful vehicle for change. The Arab region is ripe for creative civil society-based content produced in popular idioms such as soap operas, radio programs and comics. There are successful examples in Africa, Latin America and Turkey of popular culture products with massive social impact. Donors and local creative players should improve exchange about the value and power of popular culture to play a meaningful role for social change.

Interdisciplinary Forums
Support and infrastructure for interdisciplinary forums should be provided to unite leaders and experts with diverse perspectives and different communities of practice to exchange and collaborate. These forums would harness creativity, circulate ideas, inspire cross-disciplinary problem-solving and help to pool limited resources for greater social impact.

Public/Private
When possible and meaningful, explore initiatives that help bridge the divide between the creative private and public sectors

to maximise dissemination, resources, outreach and social change impact.

Funding and Support

Responsible Funding

International funders should consider longer-term engagement with initiatives in the region and provide the needed expertise and training when appropriate. When funding one-time projects, funders should insist upon and fund advanced distribution, dissemination and educational activation plans and strategies with the objective of leveraging social change potential.

»Support for social change arts and culture must also come from the Arab region and diasporas.«

Local Support

Support for social change arts and culture must also come from the Arab region and diasporas. Documentation and campaigns can convey the importance and efficiency of this work.

In addition to crowd-funding and leveraging in-kind community support, closer links can be created between the arts and culture sector and the growing Arab community of venture philanthropy and social enterprise. Corporate social responsibility programs and sponsorships are a relatively untapped source of support for social change arts and culture although they may hold greater appeal to local philanthropists than overt human rights, humanitarian and traditional civil society work.

Donors can help support research, learning and initiatives that generate local resources from individuals, corporations, communities and social enterprises.

Funding Data

Improved data collection and analysis about existing funding for arts and culture in the region is critical. Key donors should prioritise the production of up-to-date data on the levels of existing support and the types of organisations and activities being supported. A more sophisticated understanding of available support and potential opportunities for diversified resources will help ensure the sector's capacity to be more strategic, evaluative and methodological.

A directory of non-art and culture related funding partners who might be interested in the social change dimension of the region's cultural practice should also be compiled as a first step towards expanded partnerships and leveraging new, untapped support. ■

Dream City 2012 biennale, Tunisia
Photo: Karim Salam
Courtesy of L'Art Rue

»Exposure to and participation in artistic and cultural experiences and processes are well suited to produce awareness and a new kind of civic and social engagement.«

CONCLUSION

The historic moment of crisis and transition facing the Arab region will require unprecedented mobilisation, planning and resourcefulness to help seed the necessary momentum for broader engagement, creative problem-solving, resource mobilisation and leadership development. As argued here, a broad segment of artistic and cultural action in the Arab region is focused on producing tangible social change. There are ample indicators that these types of interventions are on the rise and contributing to the development of citizenship and communities while raising awareness and debate about critical societal issues.

Healthy developmental change is difficult and time-consuming to engineer, yet for systemic, sustained change to happen societies and individuals need to experience a paradigm shift that is often cultural in nature so that norms, values and perceptions are altered as a result. Exposure to and participation in artistic and cultural experiences and processes are well suited to produce awareness and a new kind of civic and social engagement, especially with marginalised communities, precisely because they help alter personal and collective assumptions and value judgments as well as power relations and dynamics.

Funders and development agencies, both international and local, who are currently working in the Arab region, must recognise and further investigate the benefits of socially focused arts and culture during this critical stage in the region's history. Likewise, the growing community of arts and culture service infrastructure and institutions who are working on the ground must assess and enhance their progress. Such action should not be to the detriment of continued support for artistic and cultural forms that are not focused on direct and tangible social change, nor should this be carried out in a top-down prescriptive and directive manner. Rather, broader and more tailored attention to social change arts and culture should be advanced as a means of supporting a growing community of practitioners and developing the specialised knowledge and practice necessary to actualise the inestimable potential of arts and culture in the Arab region. ■

Courtesy of Laroussa, Tunisia

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Arab Digital Expression Foundation
Artellewa
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CLUSTER
Contemporary Image Collective
The Darb Al Ahmar Arts School
Egyptian Complaints Choir
Gudran for Art and Development
Jesuits Cultural Centres in Egypt
Mahatat for Contemporary Art
Mosireen Media Collective
Revolution Records
The Strugglers (Kefahateya)
The Townhouse Gallery

JORDAN
Kharabeesh
Trojan Women of Syria

LEBANON
Catharsis
Zoukak
Masrah Ensemble
Dar Al Musawir

PALESTINE
Assirk Alsaghir
Campus in Camps
The Freedom Theatre
Al Kamandjati
Palestine Circus School
Riwaq
Shashat
Theatre Day Productions

SYRIA
Abounaddara
Antigone of Syria
Citizens Artists
Ettijahat
Massasit Mati

TUNISIA
L'Art Rue
ATAC, L'Association Tunisienne pour le Cinema El Teatro - Etre Noire Dans la Verte
Laaroussa
Massart

Face to Face project, Egypt
Photo: Malek Eissa.
Courtesy of Mahatat for Contemporary Art

ABOUT CKU

The Centre for Culture and Development (CKU) is an independent institution under the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. CKU implements the Danish strategy for culture and development, 'The Right to Art and Culture' (2013), in close cooperation with Danish embassies and representations in 13 countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

In Denmark, CKU offers digital educational material on global challenges and a workshop programme with artists from the Global South. The Images Biennale and the CKU Arts Fund presents contemporary art from Africa, Asia and the Middle East in Denmark.

Key priorities for CKU's work are

- Empowering people through active participation in art and cultural activities,
- Strengthening freedom of expression for artists and cultural actors,
- Enhancing economic growth through creative industries,
- Facilitating peaceful coexistence in post-conflict areas through arts and culture, and
- Promoting intercultural dialogue and collaboration.

CKU
CENTRE FOR CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

Nytorv 17,
1450 Copenhagen
Denmark

Read more: www.cku.dk/en
Facebook: ckuinternationall
Twitter: @CKUdanmark

International Department
International Director
Jakob I. Myschetzky
Phone: 33 38 97 38
Email: jim@cku.dk