

HYBRID MODELS IN ART INFRASTRUCTURE: A GLIMPSE AT THE ARTIST PENSION TRUST DUBAI

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IT IS TEMPTING to develop quick and sweeping criticisms of recent developments in the art scenes of the Middle East. The dizzying pace of the art fairs and the growing list of commercial galleries in the Gulf region as well as the spectacular debuts of auction houses Christie's, Sotheby's, and recently Bonhams onto the regional art scene could signify more than just testing the local waters. Yet the penchant for the arts in the region is not only limited to the glamorous performance of art fairs and international auction houses. For years a number of key non-profit institutions, such as the Townhouse



Mario Rizzi, still from *Impermanenf*, 2007
DV film on Betacam SP, PAL stereo, 4:3, 14 min 58
Courtesy the artist

Gallery of contemporary art (Cairo) and The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan (Beirut) have held the fort by providing the beginnings of a structure for contemporary artistic practice and development of cultural networks of collaboration and exchange in the region, as well as by relaying their discourse internationally. That said, support for artistic production in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf has grown exponentially over the last decade in the form of new sources of funds, art festivals, and biennials, and it appears necessary that new art production and infrastructure models emerge in the coming years. With this respect, new hybrid models such as the Artist Pension Trust Dubai, which I will discuss below, offer a different form of support for artists by further developing networks and by introducing financial incentives specifically for the artists they work with.

One of the most ambitious development plans, *Saadiyat Island (Island of Happiness)*, located off the coast of Abu Dhabi, will host branches of topnotch art museums such as the Guggenheim and the Louvre, as well as a cutting-edge performing arts center: all with the aim of aggressively establishing an unprecedented concentration of contemporary cultural resources. The Guggenheim Foundation has invited established curators and art administrators from the region to be part of its Curatorial Advisory Group—including the directors of the Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center (Istanbul), the Townhouse Gallery of contemporary art (Cairo), The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, Ashkal Alwan (Beirut), Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art (Jerusalem), and Al Riwaq Gallery (Bahrain). These art professionals take on the role of scouts and are being solicited to direct the Guggenheim's

focus and outreach regionally in an environment devoid of major museums specifically dedicated to contemporary art. A possible collaboration between these leading non-profit art spaces and the Guggenheim might initiate a closer cooperation between different art communities in the region, which is currently limited to a handful of people. It may also encourage the Guggenheim Foundation to adopt new models for its Abu Dhabi museum, perhaps an artist- and production-centered structure to help further establish its new regional collection. The mastermind and developer of this project is the Abu Dhabi Tourism, Development & Investment Company, a public joint stock company owned by the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority that specializes in tourism real estate assets. This \$27 billion plan exemplifies noncommercial initiatives for art infrastructure, as it is eventually funded by the city-state of Abu Dhabi.

The Istanbul and Sharjah Biennials are also important pieces of the jigsaw puzzle of art infrastructure that exists in the region, as they suggest new formats for artistic and cultural production. The 11th International Istanbul Biennial, which opens in September 2009, hosted an open-to-all call for submissions for artists and cultural producers. The Biennial also included two series of discussions and talks beginning as early as the preceding February—one that was designed to travel in Turkey, entitled *Culture in Action*, and the other that took place in Istanbul, entitled *Red Thread*. These activities aimed to expand the working model of the biennial to incorporate a longer period of production and reflection as an alternative to an exhibition spectacle that only lasts two months. The 9th Sharjah Biennial, which opened in March 2009, also pursued a proactive approach and fostered context-specific production and hence experimentation by encouraging participants to create new works upon an open invitation. This approach was accompanied by a film and performance program as well as by a series of presentations, workshops, and group sessions, entitled *The March Meeting*, which examined art education, curatorial practices, and art publishing in the Arab world. The Istanbul Biennial is sponsored by the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts in collaboration with Koç Holding—a global company based in Istanbul, whereas the Sharjah Biennial is funded by the Department of Culture and Information of the city-state of Sharjah. The sponsors are either private or quasi non-governmental organizations, yet they are both operating as non-profit ventures.

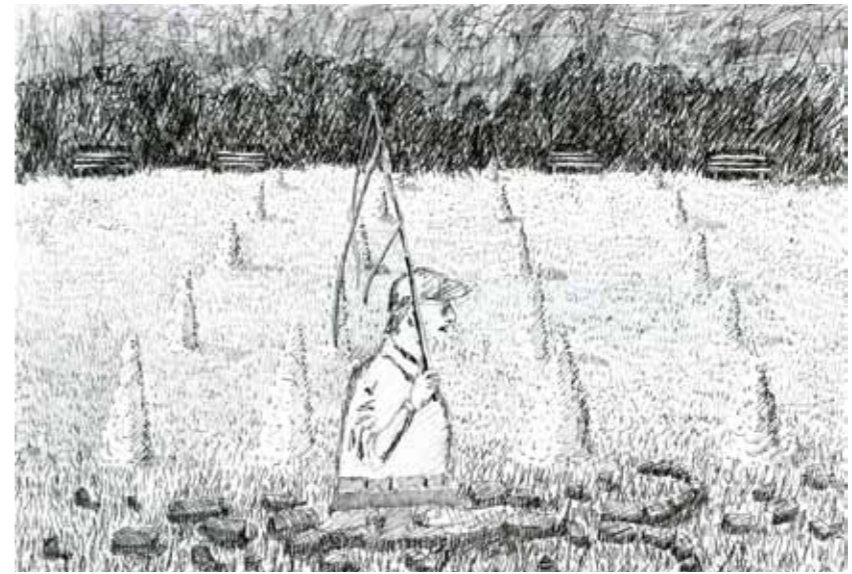
While most of the recent models for production, distribution, and archiving of contemporary art in this region have been initiated by non-profit bodies, the Artist Pension Trust Dubai offers an infrastructure system that functions along business lines. Founded in 2004, the Artist Pension Trust (APT) is a profit-driven company inviting artists to invest in a financial planning model with their own art works. So far, APT has launched eight trusts in New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Mexico City, Beijing, Mumbai, and Dubai. Since its inception in 2007, APT Dubai has selected more than 70 artists to participate in the trust, using the expertise of a group of locally experienced curators. To summarize briefly, the selected artists deposit 20 artworks over a period of 20 years; and once the trust is closed and starts selling the works, they receive a financial return on the sale of their own and also their peers' works. This form of financial distribution enables a model of risk diversification and a stable income for artists, while providing a safety net for those whose work may not yet be economically viable.



Can Altay, *This pigeon went to the forest, this pigeon went to the city*, 2008
One of two inkjet prints on grid paper
8.3 x 11.7 in / 21 x 29.7 cm
Courtesy the artist



Miha Strukelj, Untitled, 2002
Oil on canvas, 66.9 x 55.1 in / 170 x 140 cm
Courtesy the artist



Yochai Avrahami, Lost in Weimar, 2008
Ink on paper, A4 [set of three drawings]
Courtesy the artist



Vangelis Vlahos, U.S. Embassy of Athens, 2006
Wooden construction with plexiglass, mirror, framed text, table
37 x 37 x 13 in / 94 x 94 x 33 cm
Courtesy the artist



Luchezar Boyadjiev, Bill Wall. After all, money is nothing if it is not art on the wall, 2008
Digital archival print on 300g watercolor paper
25 x 42.1 in / 63.5 x 107 cm
Courtesy the artist

Q&A WITH THE ARTISTS

ÖZGE ERSOY What do you expect from APT Dubai? What do you think about the regional focus of the collection?

DDA ALY (b. 1976, Cairo, Egypt. Lives and works in Cairo) I would expect it to fulfill its role as an art pension trust. The idea is great because it could secure a regular income without the obligations of a full-time job or an art gallery. So I would expect it to eventually provide the artists with a certain financial security that would enable them to keep producing art. As for the collection of the trust, I don't know much about it. Maybe there should be a catalogue of it or a similar publication for the artists. It feels relevant to say the least. I think the idea of a regional collection is long overdue. It is important for the history of the region and for individual histories as well. At this time, especially in Egypt, artists are producing quite diverse work, not being propelled by one specific cause, but reacting to various stimuli, so it is important to keep track of this process by means of collecting the work, and putting it in juxtaposition with other works from the region. That's why I think the collection will eventually have to be documented by a catalogue/publication, and should be subject to expansion.

BASIM MAGDY (b. 1977, Assiut, Egypt. Lives and works in Basel and Cairo) Because this is a new model, my expectations in the beginning focused on a stable annual income from the sales of my and other artists' work. Later I was happy to see APT promoting my work on various occasions. I think the fact that APT divided its trusts according to region is mainly for logistical reasons. So far the work is not sold to a regional collection, but if this happens in the future it won't be the issue. In my experience, once the work is sold and becomes part of a collection, the artist has very little if any say in the way the work is showcased in exhibitions or in which exhibitions it should be included. This is the main issue. If an artist is not keen on the inclusion of his work in regionally or geographically themed exhibitions, for example, and has been outspoken about that, it can be something for APT Dubai to consider when attempting to include the work in a collection. As ideal as this would be, it's not practical to assume APT Dubai should go out looking for the perfect collection for each of its projected 250 artists' works and interests.

MIHA ŠTRUKELJ (b. 1973, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Lives and works in Ljubljana) I think it is good to participate in such a program because APT has a good curatorial and therefore collectors' network. Since it's very important for an artist to be recognized by different art world professionals, this is definitely one way of doing it. I don't see it as a completely commercial project, even though I expect APT to do its best to sell the works contributed by artists (and properly store them in the meantime). I also find it good that if the works are not sold, you can have them back after 20 years. I'm new to APT, and have only contributed two works so far, so I think it is too early to say directly what my expectations are. Yet I expect that some accompanying projects will be drawn up. Also, I'm glad to be in such an extensive art collection. There are some really good artists in the same regional collection as I am. I find the principle of selecting artists, with different curators and curatorial boards, quite interesting and good, because it results in diversity and openness. I like the personal contact with my advisor, it makes me feel comfortable.

YOCHAI AVRAHAMI (b. 1970, Afula, Israel. Lives and works in Tel Aviv) I expect that an improved connection between the global economy and local/regional socialism will realize itself. Such a network of extensive connections and promotions will combine material benefits and discourse beyond the regular channels. Regional collections have the ability to use the uniqueness of the artists who live in this region, or whose routes originate from this geography, in order to defeat the clichéd obstacles that may come of this fact. I hope that this platform will suggest a new practice of artistic activity and exhibitions due to regional revival. Events that co-operate with the existing events and unattached events are unapologetic acts on the political and economical process in the regional and in the global sense of the word.

MARIO RIZZI (b. 1962, Barletta, Italy. Lives and works in Berlin) Since I first read about APT, I have thought that the idea of creating a kind of solidarity fund for artists, which is at the same time a growing prestigious collection of art, could be simply genius or a flop according to the engagement and motivation of the people involved both on the curatorial and on the artistic side. Seeing the experience of the curatorial staff of the different trusts and also considering the moment of financial crisis and of re-discussion of the role and structure of art institutions in general, and particularly the wonderful list of artists that has been put together by the curators, I believe that all the premises are there to build a wonderful collection and an effective means of artists' support. Time will tell, of course! I am Italian, but my work and my interests mostly focus on the Middle East and on the Eastern Mediterranean area. Even my best

friendships are definitely connected with that area. It would be less appropriate for my work to be included in the regional collection of London or New York, for example, and, apart from this, I need to say that I feel really proud to be invited to join the artists of this region, whose artistic production I find the most fertile and interesting today. With most of the artists of the region I also share priorities and a particular sense of engagement. The team of the Dubai trust is composed of curators with whom I have enjoyed working in the past for the conceptual framework of their projects, for their capacity of establishing a fruitful dialog and for their human qualities, beginning from the very gifted November Paynter.

LUCHEZAR BOYADJIEV (b. 1957, Sofia, Bulgaria. Lives and works in Sofia) I do not really know what to expect from APT Dubai. If I say "money" you will think that I am mercenary. If I say "exposure" you will think that I'm frustrated. If I say "curatorial promotion" you will think that I'm naive. If I say "artistic solidarity in sustainability" you will think that I'm stupid. Maybe a bit of all these things? But I am not a fanatic. I said "yes" to some nice people (curators are people too, right?) who want to: a. built up a collection I would be happy to be part of; b. help me diversify my market potential. The regional aspect is the cherry on top of it all.

VANGELIS VLAHOS (b. 1971, Athens, Greece. Lives and works in Athens) The particular region that APT Dubai seems to cover has experienced significant socio-political changes over the last 50 years. The Balkans, the Middle East and the Northern part of Africa were objects of a political agenda before entering into that of art; a political agenda that until today has in most cases seemed to be shaped in such a way in order to promote interests from outside the region. I expect the APT Dubai not to adopt and apply a unified Western model of promotion and circulation of artworks but rather to develop and contribute to a regional infrastructure where APT Dubai itself will be part and not an observer.

Basim Magdy, Man and Domesticated Aliens Convention, 2007
Gouache and spray paint on paper, 10.6 x 14.6 in / 27 x 37 cm
Courtesy the artist



Doa Aly, still from Chinese Sweet, Chinese Pretty, 2006
DVD, 12 min 26
Courtesy the artist





Tarek Zaki, *History of O.*, 2009
Resin, plaster, sand, soil, cement and latex, dimensions vary
Courtesy the artist and Haunch of Venison, London

Not to mention the limited collectors base, finding support in a sustainable and long-term relationship with commercial galleries is a very rare phenomenon in this region at this time; and artists who work in a flexible, self-motivated and self-reliant fashion find themselves operating in deregulated job markets with no security provided by the state. Such precarious work conditions for artists in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf are relatively more poignant than for artists in Western Europe and North America, as the art infrastructure in the former region is much less geared towards supporting living artists to earn their livelihoods exclusively by selling their artworks, teaching at art schools, or surviving off the plethora of public and private grants that are available. APT Dubai attempts to address the peculiarity and the downside of this precariousness in the region where in addition there is a complete lack of social and public services, such as unemployment benefits and health insurance for practicing artists. To this end, APT Dubai invites artists to invest in their future with the type of capital they can offer—their own artworks. Yet this is not the trust's only premise.

In the coming years, APT Dubai will have one of the largest contemporary art collections in the region, as it aims to receive 20 works each from up to 250 "emerging

and mid-career artists." [1] The company stores and offers insurance for all the works in its collection and loans them to museums and curatorial projects. However, the collection remains virtual for several reasons. APT does not buy the artworks but receives them on consignment from the artists who retain ownership rights until the point of sale. It is also crucial to underline the fact that the collection will be dismantled once the trust starts selling the works. For the time being, all received artworks are stored in different warehouses around the world to optimize shipping costs; hence they don't share a physical storage space that would ideally be open to curators and art administrators. Instead, the collection manifests itself through a website. This online database is indeed the key asset of and for the collection.

APT's web database features artists' biographies and digitized images of the works entered into the collection as well as published articles. At this point, I would like to emphasize the immediate research value of this registry and its future research value as a pool of information. Accessible to the public, the database acquires and disseminates data on the artists, and functions as a resource for curators and researchers, so that it constantly increases artists' visibility on the international scene. After the trust's closure, these records will serve as the archive of a non-existent, or rather a liquefied collection, and remain as the testimony to the creation of a temporary regional contemporary art collection started in 2007. In other words, such documentation will archive a region- and period-specific overview of artistic production meticulously selected by established art professionals.

The curatorial committee is worth mentioning here. It includes November Paynter (Director, APT Dubai), Mai Abu ElDahab (Artistic Director, Objectif_ Exhibitions, Antwerp), Vasif Kortun (Director, Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul), Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (curator and critic based in Paris and Ljubljana), and Tirdad Zolghadr (critic and curator based in Berlin), all of whom work for APT on a freelance basis. The diversity of expertise and know-how of these curators is definitely not limited to the United Arab Emirates and the neighboring countries, as the association with Dubai might possibly imply at first glance. The committee has already selected and nominated many artists from the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, North Africa, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, and is thereby attempting to reread, perhaps even redefine, the borders of the region as well as the regional art market. They also aim to initiate a series of exhibitions in 2010 that will bring together works from the collection in different venues across this expanded region. Ambitiously, this broader geographical scope may even influence the ways in which developing museum collections as well as private collections might reconsider their regional span.

Criticism of the speculative aspect of APT is abound. This skepticism mostly revolves around the relationship between APT and its parent company, Mutual Art Fund, which attempts to detect new methods of tracking the performance of artworks in the market. Started in 2006, Mutual Art creates a data pool containing art-related articles from magazines, newspapers, and journals, as well as news from art fairs, galleries, museums, and auctions, all of which are seen as indicators of how well a work is performing in the art market. APT Dubai's database is then said to be a pragmatic tool for finance-oriented evaluation by reducing artworks to assets whose performance can be tracked and archived. In my view, this is precisely where the discussion about APT Dubai becomes most interesting. APT Dubai is one of the few hybrid structures that combine a business and a philanthropic model. Even if such a speculative argument is true, that doesn't change the fact that the trust is innovatively building a contemporary art collection, providing secure financial support for artists, and creating an online resource accessible to the public. At a time when the development, sustainability and transparency of non-profits are being challenged for a variety of factors, hybrid models are a breath of fresh air on the art scene and innovative alternatives worth considering.

The initiative to start a trust named Dubai with the aim of covering the artistic production of this particular region is ultimately linked to the rising appetite for art from the Eastern Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf as well as an accelerated awareness of the potential of the art market in the region. However, it would be too easy to dismiss APT Dubai's activities to only these terms. This regional trust will eventually establish a cultural niche, offer an ad-hoc model that will support artists' careers and practice, and create a resource with great future research value. While the company will also profit once the sale of the collection is initiated, APT Dubai seems to offer a legitimate win-win situation to all parties.

NOTES

[1] Quote taken from the official APT website. For more information on the Artist Pension Trust and complete list of artists participating in APT Dubai please see www.aptglobal.org.

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