

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Mathqaf

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Case Study: Mathqaf

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Mathqaf¹ is an organization that covers modern and contemporary art from the West Asian and North African (WANA) region. It was founded in 2020 and currently runs virtually; the cofounders operate from Jordan and France. Its mission is to “offer a constellation of biographies, archives, documents, and histories of institutions”² related to the art world and become an important resource to students, researchers, and art practitioners. The organization’s website also offers news and commentary on art and artists and data on developments in art history and museology. This work strengthens the bonds between artists, their artworks, and their audiences. In response to the lack of documentation of art organizations and institutions in the region, Mathqaf offers resources for navigating and understanding the field.

Responding to the World Humanities Report survey, Mathqaf cofounder Wadha Al-Aqeedi stated that the organization produces both critical and descriptive work that counters the lack of resources covering WANA art history. In the commentaries published on its website, Mathqaf contextualizes artworks by analyzing the circumstances in which they were produced. One article by Al-Aqeedi, titled “In Focus: Mona Hatoum’s Performances,”³ demonstrates this point. Mona Hatoum was a Palestinian contemporary artist who lived in Lebanon until the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. Al-Aqeedi describes some of Hatoum’s performances, including one in which she contrasted socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviors by drinking water until she publicly urinated. Al-Aqeedi explains that like George Carlin’s famous 1972 monologue about the seven words that cannot be said on American television, this performance tested social acceptability and tolerance and raised issues of gender and power. Al-Aqeedi goes on to point out that many art forms are relative and very dependent on context. “The nature of a live performance,” she writes, “is constrained by its ephemerality and temporality, it exists by the presence of the artist’s body, the spectator as a witness, and its resonance to create a meaning or an experience embedded in one’s memory.”⁴ In Hatoum’s case, the live performance in ques-

¹ See <https://mathqaf.com>.

² “About,” Mathqaf, <https://mathqaf.com/about/>.

³ Wadha Al-Aqeedi, “In Focus: Mona Hatoum’s Performances,” Mathqaf, December 4, 2020, <https://mathqaf.com/2020/12/04/in-focus-mona-hatoums-performances/>.

⁴ Al-Aqeedi, “In Focus.”

tion happened in 1982; however, the questions of morality and propriety that it raised live on today.

Mathqaf was established by two PhD students who believe in the power of feedback. The organization intends its publications to initiate debate and discussions among their audience, which allows Mathqaf's writers and researchers to identify the information that is missing from the public conversation. Mathqaf follows a *savoir-faire* (know-how) research method instead of a know-what or know-why method.⁵ The coeditors believe that this method helps them produce work that is critical and incisive, not simply a static archive.

Mathqaf suggests that it is important to carry out collaborations with regional and international organizations. The cofounders state that it is important to nurture regional collaborations to develop a better understanding of the history and contemporary landscape of art in the WANA region. Their website features interviews with artists and art theorists from around the region, such as Alymamah Rashed,⁶ a Kuwaiti visual artist whose work examines the discourse of her body. The cofounders also mentioned that the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted more virtual collaborations with artists around the world. For Mathqaf, international collaborations are a method of collecting data and expanding on existing data from different research perspectives.

To better engage with their audiences, Mathqaf balances coverage of art history with promotion of art exhibitions in the region. In January 2021, for example, Mathqaf invited its readers to exhibitions held by Sharjah Art Foundation, NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, Fire Station Doha, and the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art. In the same month, Mathqaf published an article that explored a 1989 contemporary art exhibition in Jordan. The article guides readers through the history of the exhibition and critiques some notions such as “modern Islamic art.”⁷ The author, Elina Sairanen, argues that while “contemporary Islamic art” began to be recognized as an artistic movement in the late 1980s, the distinction remains unclear between contemporary art that happens to be found in the geographical boundaries of an Islamic country and contemporary art that genuinely symbolizes Islamic thought. Mathqaf tries to urge individuals to define art-related terminologies and use them accurately.

⁵ *Savoir-faire* research method is a combination of abilities in expressing oneself verbally, engaging others in interactions, and sophisticated social role-playing.

⁶ Wadha Al-Aqeedi, “In Conversation: Alymamah Rashed,” Mathqaf, December 3, 2020, <https://mathqaf.com/2020/12/03/in-conversation-alymamah-rashed/>.

⁷ Elina Sairanen, “Implications of the ‘Contemporary Art from the Islamic World’ (1989) Exhibition,” Mathqaf, January 27, 2021, <https://mathqaf.com/2021/01/27/implications-of-the-contemporary-art-from-the-islamic-world-1989-exhibition/>.

Mathqaf shows flexibility in its work process and production, which allows for its collaboration with different institutions and individuals. It is currently collaborating with Hunna Art Gallery (Gulf),⁸ AlMashtal (Saudi Arabia),⁹ Selma Feriani Gallery (Tunisia),¹⁰ and BAWA (Kuwait).¹¹ In the survey, Mathqaf states that its work targets all social groups, including students, researchers, women, and the LGBTQI community in the Arab region. It is a hub of information on artworks and artists. Just two months after the website was launched, it had published biographies of fourteen artists. Mathqaf reports that it has been successful in reaching its intended audiences, no doubt as a result of its flexible and malleable work process.

⁸ See <https://www.hunna.art/>.

⁹ See <https://www.almashtal.io/en/>.

¹⁰ See <https://www.selmaferiani.com/>.

¹¹ See <https://gallerybawa.com/>.

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