

The World Humanities Report

Case Study: Arab Media Lab

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The World Humanities Report is a project of the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI), in collaboration with the International Council for Philosophy and the Human Science (CIPSH). The views expressed in the contributions to the World Humanities Report are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editors, scientific committee, or staff of CHCI.

The World Humanities Report gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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This publication is available online at <https://worldhumanitiesreport.org>.

Suggested citation:

Joudi, Reem. *Case Study: Arab Media Lab*. World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023.

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The Arab Media Lab (AML), founded in Marrakech, Morocco, in 2010, showcases the work of emerging artists from Morocco and the Middle East and North Africa region. Their work aims to “contribute to personal transformation and social change through the media arts,”¹ placing significant importance on the power of the image—whether digital, film, or photographic. With this goal in mind, they organize individual workshops, training programs, festivals, and screening programs.

The AML undertakes four principal activities: the Digital Marrakech International Festival, Media Art Morocco workshops series and master classes, the Morocco Moving Images Archive, and unpacking Arab stereotypes in Western media. The Digital Marrakech International Festival is an “an international media arts and digital festival.” Festival participants share digital audiovisual trends, as well as the latest practices in video installations, multimedia performances, digital mapping, and “Internet art.”² In addition to showcasing novel and experimental work, the festival connects Moroccan artists with international collaborators, forging a space for conversation and interdisciplinary work.

The Media Art Morocco workshops train people in 3D animation and experimental cinema so that these hands-on experiences will encourage young artists to broaden their creative horizons and understandings of what media, film, and art can do for their communities. The Morocco Moving Images Archive is a database for “experimental films, video art, TV shows, short documentaries, reportages, interviews, music videos, extracts from old feature films, etc.”³ AML notes that these images represent parts of Moroccan heritage and are therefore left open for use and interpretation.

The lack of context offered to the various media texts, and the absence of a clear indexing system, signals the transformation of the traditional archive into an amorphous digital space for exploration. Ulrike Lune Riboni notes, “Vernacular videos on the internet appear to be free of any indexation and ties, and to spread and spill without control, constituting what looks like a bottom-

¹ Abdelaziz Taleb, Arab Media Lab, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

² "About," Arab Media Lab, About page, <http://www.arabmedialab.org/about/>.

³ Taleb, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

less archive.”⁴ Riboni looks at online archives from the Tunisian uprisings and argues that such contextless archives necessitate a different approach for researchers: one that focuses on the image, includes a strong knowledge of the field, and the “sociopolitical context of the production of the contexts”⁵ to not place a heavy emphasis on the social media platforms. She argues that one must immerse oneself in the material.

Finally, AML’s project on Arab stereotypes in Western media is a series of discussions around the often negative representation of the Arab world in mainstream Western media. Using the film *Reel Bad Arabs* (written by Jack Shaheen, directed by Sut Jhally, 2006) as a central model, the AML ensures that critiques like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* remain invigorated in contemporary discourse. This highlights the AML’s critical understanding on the importance of controlling the narrative and unpacking the struggle over representation in film.⁶

Recently, AML hosted an online streaming film program titled “Tangier Interzone.” The selection of films offered a critical exploration of the city’s history as an “international zone” from the mid-1950s, when artists, intellectuals, and poets came to Tangier seeking inspiration for their work. The film program aimed to nuance this encounter between East and West, exploring the Orientalist fantasies that framed the artistic exchanges at the time and the cultural chasms that shaped reality. Viewing this meeting of cultures as a frontier rather than a space for peaceful coexistence, the AML’s film program offered viewers an opportunity to critically reimagine and analyze a transformative moment in history.

Furthermore, AML’s four main projects demonstrate the civic role of the artist in the Arab world, particularly following the Arab uprisings of 2011. Rima Mismar notes that contemporary art practices in the region are “becoming the substitute embodiment of notions such as home, education, public space . . . they are places of safety and belonging, where people can feel relaxed and be themselves; they are playing an important role in education.” More important, Mismar clearly spotlights the role of creatives in forging alternative futures: “artists are free to imagine! Are able to imagine a future beyond the current

⁴ Ulrike Lune Riboni, “The ‘Flâneur,’ the Archaeologist, and the Missing Images: Doing Research with/on Online Videos,” in *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, ed. Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson, and Sune Haugballe (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020), 117.

⁵ Riboni, “The ‘Flâneur,’” 127.

⁶ For more on Orientalism in film and media practices, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994).

crisis!”⁷ This ethos is mirrored by the AML in the survey. Following the rubrics of development reports that define youth as those aged fifteen to twenty-four and young as those under thirty years of age, they say that nearly 60 percent of the region is young and therefore must “[reclaim] their right to create.”⁸ They explain that

the majority of our population is young (roughly 60%), and young people are reclaiming their right to express themselves in different ways. Media arts are playing an increasingly important role for this young generation to openly, freely, and creatively express themselves.⁹

The AML is an example of a multimedia and multidisciplinary space that works at the intersection of pedagogy, art, creation, and discourse. Its local, regional, and international collaborations, along with its critical and creative output, demonstrate a framework through which teaching and practicing the arts can be carried out. As for impact, discussion is ongoing and requires continued research that focuses on quantitative measurement—which is limited in what it can tell us about the affective, emotional, and experiential dimensions of the media arts—and explores the “immersive” (to borrow Riboni’s term) potential of these practices. This necessitates investigations that are attuned to the complex and varied sociopolitical and cultural contexts (online and offline) within which art is produced and consumed.

⁷ Rima Mismar, “Crossroads: Creativity in Uncertain Times” (keynote address, “CROSSROADS: International Perspectives on Culture, Art and Society” Conference, Basel, Switzerland, February 8–9, 2018), 2, https://prohelvetia.ch/app/uploads/2018/05/crossroads_rimamismar.pdf.

⁸ Taleb, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

⁹ Taleb, responses to the ACSS/WHR survey.

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