

12 Politics of belonging among young public artists in Amman, Jordan

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Sara, a Jordan-based artist in her mid-20s, reports that when she first began participating in a residency program in Amman's downtown, she was uncomfortable with the conservative milieu that she found there. To that point in her life, she had been more familiar with the socially liberal environments of Amman's wealthier neighbourhoods and art institutions. The social geography of Amman's art scene is very upper-middle-class. Downtown was a very different kind of space, a hub of the popular classes, more socially and religiously conservative than what she was used to, and more aggressively patriarchal, with more street harassment and social policing of gender roles. Feeling out of place at first, she tried dressing conservatively in order to fit in, but as she grew more familiar with the downtown space she defiantly returned to her normal, short-sleeved, loose-fitting clothing. She described this as a demonstration of self and, perhaps more importantly, as a kind of artistic intervention that challenged the conservative social mores she was encountering.

I suddenly became very aware of what I wear, to not stand out, and then after a while then I kind of got used to it, I would intentionally make sure that an extra button was open, not to the point where its aggressive . . . but just in the way that I would at home. To me, that is the sort of intervention [that I want to do]: maybe provocative but not to the point where it is [recognized an intervention and easy to dismiss as "just art"].

By undoing a button of her blouse, Sara here presented her own body as an aesthetic intervention. She inserted herself, as an object of difference, into the social space of Amman's downtown, and through her presence aimed to provoke recognition and acceptance of her alternate way of being.

Over the course of my ethnographic research with artists in Amman, from 2014 to 2017, artists frequently sought to work through issues of social difference that they felt between themselves and Ammani society, engaging that difference through a variety of artistic strategies. Although Amman in

general is notoriously socially fractured and marked by widespread alienation (Shami, 2007), the figure of the artist has become popularly associated with particular markers of difference. Contemporary art is understood as a disposition of the socially liberal, upper-middle classes, although this generalization may not always hold in practice. Art has also frequently been associated with feminist and queer rights activism, and artists generally view themselves as more tolerant and inclusive than wider Jordanian society.

In this chapter, I trace a kind of interchange between this artistic milieu and the wider society of Jordan, often figured as a “public” or “audience” for the art. How do artists put forward ideas about their own social difference, and how does this shape a relationship among artist, public, and identity? My examination includes attention to the ways that some artists, like Sara earlier, attempt to put themselves on display in ways that will provoke a response or opening from the broader public. More generally, however, I look at the ways that artists conceptualize and attempt to enact a political relationship with their audience. Should artists work to integrate into wider society, even if this means negotiating their values and stances, or do the politics of art demand a transgressive, confrontational stance? Is it possible to find a middle ground where artists can draw people in to a transgressive or transformational exchange?

This chapter builds on my long-term ethnographic research, which examines how artists in Amman develop practical relationships to their urban space and how, through this engagement, they enact and transform a wider field of political relationships. I began this research in the wake of the regional upheaval known as the Arab Spring, when I noticed that many artists were attempting to build political community by reaching outside of the normal comfort zone of their upper-middle-class art world, as they were setting up artistic residencies in popular neighbourhoods and staging interventions in public spaces. In my institutional review board-approved research, I conducted extensive participant observation, following artists as they designed and enacted these interventions. Through such observation, I was able to see how artists thought about the city and, particularly, how they imagined a field of social difference and political possibility mapped on to the wider urban geography in which they staged their intervention. I further was able to trace the sorts of relationships that developed through this artistic practice and saw how the experience of particular artistic interventions would then inform artists in the development of future work. Additionally, I interviewed 100 artists and others associated with Amman’s art scene. Artists’ discussions of their own work helped me to analyze the ways that artists conceptualized the interaction between art and Amman’s public. I also conducted extensive archival research to trace the development of Amman’s art scene and its strategies of urban intervention.

The artists included in this study were primarily contemporary artists who had an interest in urban intervention. In general, these artists are

predominantly young (roughly 20–40), middle-class, educated, and politically liberal (although there are certainly exceptions to these characteristics). As indicated by the example of Sara, earlier, the politics of gender and sexuality form an important axis of difference through which this cohort of artists understands itself to stand apart from wider society, and artists' interventions are often shaped around this difference. (Artists in general understand the wider society to have conservative gender politics, evidenced by strict gender roles, behavioural policing in social space, conservative dress, especially in working-class areas, street harassment, and hostility towards gender nonconformity. Note that artists often emphasize the conservative dress and attitudes of working-class areas, and so discussion of gender includes a coded class politics.) While there are other communities of artists in Amman, including abstract fine artists, Islamic artists, crafters, and folk artists, the artists in my study are defined by their emphasis on concept and site specificity and are informed by global trends in contemporary art. Their work is multimodal, including visual art but also performance, movement, sound, and so on, developed to facilitate certain interactions with place.

While I draw on other examples as well, a large part of my analysis in this chapter focuses on conversations with artists in the Spring Sessions, an innovative, alternative master of fine arts training program, which since 2014 has trained young artists to develop creative engagements with Amman's public. Artists in the program are coached in site-specific research and production techniques and have developed a variety of strategies for negotiating their perceived difference with the wider city. I discuss the diverse approaches of several artists in the program and highlight debates and discussions between them, in which artists theorized about the political stakes of various modes of public engagement. These discussions showcase how artists' ideas about social difference inform (and are shaped by) their strategies of public intervention. My examination of this program builds on a combination of interview and archival research (for its earlier iterations) and personal observation (for its 2017 program and exhibition).

It is a truism, but nevertheless important to note that social difference is a relational construct (cf. Barth, 1998). As several scholars have noted, art itself is a practice that is heavily invested in ideas of social difference and may often produce or reinforce social disparity (Foster, 1995; Clifford, 1981). Artists' ideas about their own difference are shaped against the image of an ethnographic other. Here, that other is the generally conservative wider society of Amman and Jordan. Yet, for artists invested in remediating their own difference, this very effort may perhaps open new spaces for the negotiation of this difference. As artworks and art practices reposition art within a wider social sphere, this relationship of difference is tested and perhaps transformed, opening new possibilities for exchange and community.

In what follows, I begin by outlining the position of the artist, both theoretically and within the specific sociopolitical context of Amman. I explore how the political aspirations and ideas about difference held by artists have

been shaped by the structural development of Amman's artistic sphere. I then trace how this position informs and is mediated by a variety of artistic encounters between artists and the wider public. My findings highlight an agency in the structural position of art, which has an uncertain politics but which potentially facilitates new relationships and modes of social exchange. Alfred Gell, in his groundbreaking "Art and Agency," highlighted the capacity of artworks to mediate between diverse social positions (Gell, 1998). Here, I highlight how artists shape themselves to play this mediating role. They do this both by presenting themselves as artworks, similar to Sara earlier, as embodiments of difference that move out of the artistic sphere and into public space, and through other artistic activities that renegotiate this boundary.

My analysis draws heavily on conversations with Ammani artists and intellectuals and is informed by artists' own theories about social difference and the political role of art. I am indebted to the many artists whose views have shaped this research. This chapter is presented in the spirit of an ongoing conversation with them, regarding issues of art, identity, social space, and the politics of artistic intervention in the city.

The figure of the artist

Artists are frequently mythologized as countercultural figures who stand out from and influence society. Michel Foucault, discussing ways that people can cultivate themselves to embody the possibility of alternate, better social worlds, highlights the figure of the artist as an embodiment of truth, alongside the revolutionary, the martyr, and the monk. He writes of,

the artistic life . . . the idea that the artist alone, as artist, must have a singular life, which is not entirely reducible to the usual dimensions and norms. . . . This is the, I think, modern idea that the artist's life, in the very form it takes, should constitute some kind of testimony of what art is in its truth.

(Foucault, 2011, p. 238)

For Foucault, the artists' position of remove from wider social norms is part of what invests the artist (or at least the modern European artist) with the power to speak truth. In his analysis, this is central to what art is in the modern context, "this idea of the artistic life as the condition of the work of art, as authenticating the work of art, as work of art itself" (p. 238).

This idea of the self as a work of art, which has been taken up powerfully in other contexts, for instance in Saba Mahmood's attention to the "self-fashioning" of pious subjects (cf. Mahmood, 2011), is rooted in ideas about artistic autonomy, the capacity of art to stand apart from wider social norms and expectations. Although autonomy is historically conceptualized as an aesthetic quality of artworks, such that viewers of an artwork might

see the possibility of difference within that artwork and thus be inspired to work towards a better world, Foucault presents the artist as an autonomous figure.

Elsewhere, Pierre Bourdieu has described art's "social field" as an autonomous entity, where different rules of behaviour and social expectations apply (Bourdieu, 1993). In the context of Bourdieu's larger work, this artistic social field can be understood as a unique habitus, within which artists adopt dispositions at odds with wider society. Connecting these two ideas, we can see how the particular dispositions which predominate within art's social sphere might help position individual artists as icons of difference. When artists move through wider society, especially via the institutional expansion of an artistic geography,¹ this habitus is extended, reshaping a wider field of relationships around structures of artistic difference.

This countercultural figure of the artist is invested with significant cultural capital. As a figure of truth and insight, artists are given unique authority to narrate. Scholarship on public, site-specific, and community art has highlighted how artists are empowered to define points of collective attention and invest place with meaning (Kwon, 2004; Kester, 2011). The cultural capital invested in the figure of the artist has at times been a motivating factor in wider processes of social change, such as gentrification, when wide swaths of a society have sought to adopt artistic lifestyles (Zukin, 2014; Lloyd, 2010). In some cases, this has been connected with the development of entrepreneurial and neoliberal subjectivities (Lee, 2013). Yet, as some critics have pointed out, artists' authority is often constructed against the image of an ethnographic other, often in a deeply unequal relationship (Foster, 1995; Clifford, 1981). In the case of Sara, earlier, the authority of her performance depends on the presence of the conservative downtown public as a foil/audience. In some respects, this performance reinscribes divides between the liberal artist and the conservative society in which she moves. As Jessica Winegar has shown, the figure of the liberal artist in the Middle East often stands against the foil of a conservative society in ways that reinforce orientalist stereotypes (Winegar, 2008), although this is rarely an artists' intent.

And yet, as Winegar points out elsewhere, artists' dispositions are historically and locally specific phenomena (Winegar, 2006). The artist as a countercultural embodiment of truth-speaking, described by Foucault in the context of European modernity, is not a universal figure. Indeed, artists can take on a variety of different social roles and positions in different places and points in time. In Winegar's own work in Egypt, she observes that artists often aligned with state power as a product of the way that artistic funding, prestige, and education were organized through state channels. As such, even when artists do adopt starkly countercultural dispositions, it is important to contextualize this within the local fabric of which the artist is a part. Here I explore how Amman's art scene developed as a site for a particular kind of difference.

Development of Amman's art scene

Over the approximately 100 years that Jordan has been a country (founded in 1921), the figure of the artist has developed in dramatic ways. Early on, artists played an important role in Jordan's nation-building project. Artists designed museums and used artwork to re-contextualize diverse regional folk practices into a shared aesthetic of national heritage (Rough, 2016). Yet, as the country grew, fine art developed into a more exclusive domain, closely tied to elite practices of distinction and, later, to the consumer culture of liberal middle-class youth.

Over the 1970s and 1980s, the arts were dramatically underfunded, with limited opportunities for Jordanian artists primarily available through European embassies and occasionally the banking sector. In the 1980s and 1990s, a small group of elite women embarked on institution-building projects aimed at rebuilding the public profile of art. These included Princess Wijdan Ali, who founded Jordan's National Gallery in 1980, as well as Suha Shoman, matriarch of a powerful banking family, who established *Darat al Funun*, a leading museum-like institution in 1993. These museums were frequently described as educational projects, through which the founders sought to build artistic literacy amongst the public, yet they should also be understood as projects of distinction, through which the founders were able to display their wealth, beneficence, and taste. The role of women's leadership in the development of these institutions in Amman is highly visible and frequently remarked upon, the arts sometimes discussed as a path towards women's empowerment (Sawalha, 2016). In consequence, one product of the institution-building period is to further tie art to public ideas about status, difference, and particular values, including women's empowerment. The arts today are often thought of as a particularly liberal domain, especially with regards to women's rights.

Over the 1990s and 2000s, Jordan and its art sector were heavily impacted by the mass arrival of refugees from the Gulf Wars. Unlike other residents of Jordan at that time (including large numbers of already present Palestinian refugees), many of these new refugees were quite wealthy, having profited from the Gulf's oil economy. These new refugees were already sophisticated consumers of art and supported the growth of arts institutions, while also contributing to the development of Amman's gallery sector (Hijawi, 2015). During the 1990s, *Darat al Funun* was a hub of activity for displaced Iraqi intelligentsia. Galleries became sites of ostentatious displays of wealth and taste, in both the buying and selling of expensive art but also in the clothes worn to openings and the forms of elite sociality that predominated in galleries. They helped to popularize an abstract and de-politicized style of art, closely connected to the display of wealth and luxury (Hijawi, 2015). As E.A. Beal writes, ostentatious displays of wealth at that time were viewed as socially divisive and unpatriotic, since they demonstrated class inequality, undermining monarchical claims of unity (Beal, 2000). In this way, the

development of Amman's art sector contributed to marking out a wider sphere of social difference, especially along lines of class and national origin.

Amman itself is frequently described as a profoundly socially fractured and alienating city (Shami, 2007; Daher, 1999; Parker, 2009). There are long-standing tensions between Jordanian nationals and Palestinian refugees, which have sometimes resulted in conflict. There are further stresses between other national groups and along lines of class. Residents struggle to view the city as a space of common belonging and frequently describe difficulty connecting to one another or to the city as a whole (Shami, 2007). Within this alienating space, art institutions have often appeared as sites of sanctuary to their intimates, who are able to find community through art, which they are not able to find in the wider city. Suha Shoman, the founder of *Darat al Funun*, describes her own experience as a Palestinian refugee feeling profoundly alienated from Amman until the art institution gave her a base of community through which she began to feel at home. Ola el Khalidi, founder of the influential contemporary art space, *Makan*, similarly reports that she initially felt isolated as a Palestinian refugee who had been displaced to Jordan via Kuwait during the Gulf War. She says that founding *Makan* helped her build an inclusive community that she could not find elsewhere in the city.

These were important physical sites where people who came together around art were able to recognize themselves as a collective and to experience an artistic sociality which stood apart from the wider city. By participating in these sites, artists developed alternative forms of community and artistic dispositions, which they understood as opposed to the wider alienating disorder of Amman (see also McLaughlin-Alcock, 2019).

Over the 2000s and 2010s, *Makan* and a handful of other "independent" art institutions provided a base for a cohort of middle-class youth who felt estranged from the wider city, especially liberal youth who struggled with the city's wider conservatism. This included feminist and queer youth who were able to use these sites as organizational bases, both for holding meetings and for finding sites of inclusion outside the wider conservative city. Elsewhere I have written about these institutions as "autonomous" sites that supported developing activist dispositions (McLaughlin-Alcock, 2019). In its published materials, *Makan*'s artists described the city of Amman as a "non place" (Makan, 2010) or a "void" (Khalidi, 2010), while simultaneously celebrating the sense of peace and community found within the institution.

This sense of difference was powerfully described by Ammani journalist Lina Ejeilat, reflecting on some "man in the street" interviews she had conducted as part of a larger public art experiment based out of *Makan*,

When we did a "street beat" video asking people what public art means to them, one of the common answers was, "we don't see it, it's not part of our lives." . . . One man said he could barely handle seeing the way women were dressed on the street, so public art was the last thing he

needed. . . . When we returned to Makan after that video tour downtown, it felt like returning to a beautiful bubble at first. But then the more I thought about it, the more questions I found myself pondering: Why does the word “bubble” come with negative connotations?

(Ejailat, 2010, p. 68)

The metaphor of a “bubble,” used here by Ejailat to describe Makan, was frequently used by artists to describe the art world in general and the sense that it stood somehow apart from the wider city. Within this space, what developed was not only artwork but liberal activist dispositions distinct from those found in Amman’s wider social space.

Yet, as Ejailat’s quote also indicates, if Amman’s art institutions were able to provide insulated sites of community, politics, belonging, and art, they were also sites of isolation from wider society. Were artists only talking to themselves? And if artists hoped to effect wider social change, how could they connect with the wider population of Amman? Artists frequently struggled to mediate between the sanctuary they experienced in these institutions and a desire to connect with the wider city. Some sought to respond by bringing in people from outside the artistic sphere, such as through hiring staff from more marginal communities. Others sought to reach out and connect to the wider public of Amman through art. Artists moved into unfamiliar areas of the city, hosted long-term residencies in working-class neighbourhoods, led participatory workshops in refugee camps, and staged a variety of interventions in public spaces across the city.

In the next section, I turn to a discussion of artists’ movement into public spaces. How did these experiences of liberal separation and difference shape artistic encounters with wider Amman?

Art in public

Moving into public, these artists employed a variety of strategies, establishing divergent and debated political relationships to this public. One common strategy was to use public performance and spectacle to demonstrate the value of art to a public that artists viewed as conservative and potentially hostile.

Performances in public space could be believed to fill the space with art, to demonstrate the value of art and artistic politics, and to transform the conservative space of popular neighbourhoods into spaces briefly governed by an artistic sociality. Several artists experimented with impromptu concerts in popular neighbourhoods, especially with concerts where artists perform on balconies to audiences in the streets below. As one artist described this process, it could be fraught, as artists sought to force their entry into more conservative, less artistic spaces,

When you do something artistic, they say, “are you crazy? To sing from a balcony? Who are you? What is this?”

They might hit you, the people might take actions. This is what they are expecting.

The experience of artists in this region, they don't reach out to the people because they are afraid that the people won't accept them. It requires being very brave. We really prepared ourselves and talked to each other before the performance on what we might expect, anything, any reaction, we have to be strong, we have to be okay, expect anything.

In practice, such performances were rarely, if ever, met with violence. In concerts that I witnessed, passersby gathered to watch the performances with a mixture of curiosity and enthusiasm, sometimes even singing along to popular songs. Yet this comment highlights how artists approached these interactions as an entrance into potentially hostile territory—the hope being that the presence of art would be enough to startle onlookers beyond their initial opposition towards an acceptance of art's presence in public space.

In 2014, an artistic training program, the Spring Sessions, set up residence in a downtown hotel, as a way of shaping interaction between artists and the downtown public. The program emphasized site-specific methods and practical engagement with the urban space of Amman. In their workshops, led by prominent local and international artists, participants were encouraged to wander through the city, including a 48-hour continuous walk that passed through various neighbourhoods. They staged sensory explorations of the downtown markets, blindfolded listening exercises, dance workshops that moved through the crowded streets, and ethnographic mapping exercises. Through these activities, artists established their presence and gained confidence and comfort in navigating the downtown sociality. This helped artists feel a stronger sense of connection to the city, from which they had so often felt isolated. As one artist described to me, “this was the first time I felt like I belonged in my city.”

From this staging ground, participant artists engaged the public in a variety of ways. Often, they relied on spectacle, as a means of showcasing artistic difference, which they hoped would provoke a response from the public, perhaps even challenging the conservative norms that predominate in popular public spaces (as Sara, in the opening vignette, hoped to do with her slightly unbuttoned blouse). One interesting example of this kind of public engagement is “Flock,” a movement workshop, led by dancer Shireen Talhouni. Talhouni had artists cluster together and move through the downtown streets like a flock of birds. She reports that this unsettled the normal patriarchal relationships of the crowded downtown streets:

When we were rehearsing, I noticed that men in the street weren't making rude comments about the women performing like they usually do, and it was more about asking what they were doing. One man was watching the flock walking in front of the mosque and asked me what you were doing. I didn't respond, instead I asked him, “Don't they look

like birds?” I was surprised at his answer, he said, “Yes, you’re right. Animals are much more aware than humans.”

(El-Rayyes)²

In Talhouni’s framing, the spectacle of the performance unsettled the normal patriarchal relationships of the downtown space, undermined typical gendered policing, and opened new possibilities of engagement. In activities like these, the artists’ presence is itself figured as a powerful instantiation of social difference. The downtown public is provoked into recognition of this difference and, at least in the artists’ view, challenged to rethink their preconceptions about how the world works.

Yet at the same time, such practices maintained a strong sense of artistic difference, often using the downtown as a foil in the site-specific construction of artistic expertise. While this was going on, the inside of the hotel where artists were in residence largely remained a space apart, where artists enjoyed libertine parties and relaxed attitudes that contrasted sharply with the downtown sociality. Some artists celebrated the hotel as a free space where they could be creative and experiment with identity without the constraints experienced outside. While some artists experienced this as building a powerful connection to Amman, others dismissed the artists as “a bunch of rich kids playing tourist in the downtown space.”

In these encounters, the artist occupies an awkward structural position. On the one hand, they work from a position of alterity and exclusion, a position partly attributable to the structural formation of Amman’s institutional landscape of art, as outlined earlier. Within the wider fragmentation of Amman, this alterity has been marked along lines of gender, sexuality, national origin (as well as class and politics), with experiences that artists seek to address and remediate through their artwork. On the other hand, as representatives of upper-middle-class liberal subjectivity, the artists engaged in a classed space from a position of power, and they further claim authority through a performance in that space that reifies class and political difference (even while it may challenge the boundaries that that difference manifests).

This can be connected to dispossessive processes. In Amman, as in many other cities, art has been tied to gentrification. The presence of artistic display may help to sanitize public perceptions of declined neighbourhoods, invest that space with cultural capital, and pave the way for consumer-oriented development (Ley, 2016; Wright & Herman, 2018). Indeed, artists’ growing interest in Amman’s downtown and some other working-class areas has helped to make these areas ripe for capitalist intervention. The municipality, in its push to realize a global downtown, has at times allied with artists and creatives, for instance, in the 2017 multi-million-dollar spectacle of Amman Design Week, which spread across downtown and highlighted the potential of technocratic design interventions to make the downtown space more livable (such as traffic crosswalks, public transit, beautification, walking districts, and reorganized traffic flows). The presence of artistic performances,

newly painted thoroughfares, and murals help to mark this site out as a safe and culturally dynamic location. Yet, many artists also resist the political implications of gentrification and do not wish to be associated with the dispossession that it causes.

In a debated moment of the 2014 Spring Sessions program, several artists joined in a protest led by informal street vendors. (This incident was related to me by several different participants, with diverging opinions on the event.) The protest was challenging the forced removal of informal vendors from the downtown corridor. Those vendors were being removed as part of a municipal, broken-windows-style beautification campaign, which aimed to make the downtown more appealing to international business and tourism. Seeing the protest pass by the hotel where the Spring Sessions were based, several artists rushed out to join the protest in support of the vendors, expressing an obligation to speak out against dispossession. Other artists stayed behind, however, arguing that the rush to join the protest was ill informed. These artists who stayed behind claimed that those who joined did not know enough about the protest to judge its politics and were demonstrating a lack of artistic criticality in joining in a random protest. These artists who stayed behind felt vindicated later, when it was revealed that many of the protesting vendors had also participated in nationalist mobs that had attacked Jordan's Arab Spring protests (which many artists had participated in). These artists claimed that it was "a mistake" to join with counterrevolutionary and repressive forces. Other artists, however, argued that joining in the protest opened up potential solidarities across largely closed boundaries. Some continue to describe the protest as a highlight of the program, "one of the most important things we did," in the ways it worked across lines of Amman's political fragmentation. This debate highlights the stakes of artists' different strategies of engagement across difference.

Debating artistic politics

Artists here demonstrated a variety of approaches that built off of a common recognition of artistic difference and developed contact across spatial boundaries between the artistic community and a conservative wider public. Entering into the social space of Amman's downtown, some artists took a confrontational approach, seeking to challenge the downtown public through the image of alternative artistic lifestyles. Others sought out opportunities to interact with the downtown public, through strategies of exchange or even integration into various activities, joining in social activity ranging from commerce to conversation to political demonstrations. These artists sometimes expressed a desire to belong and in their forms of participation partially upset the power dynamics of the art world (and the way that difference is used to construct authority). Still others sought to withdraw from public engagement and use the Spring Sessions' institutional space as an autonomous site of free expression and creativity.

Artists frequently debated the politics of public engagement and sought out the most politically appropriate and effective strategies for such engagement. For instance, in January 2017, I led a workshop with a small group of artists, where we discussed a variety of public art projects that had taken place in Amman and worked to evaluate their connections to community and place as well as the various stakes of the projects we identified. As our conversation progressed, one young artist, Brahim, spoke out with frustration about the arrogance he saw in many public-facing artists' political missions, "You can't just force [the public]," he said, arguing that if artists want their political messages to be received, they can't rely on shock value and spectacle, but need to engage productively with the communities they hope to reach. In the following quote, he illustrates this perspective through discussion of a confrontation over some artists writing "Palestine" on a wall:

The other day I went with [some graffiti artists], and they insisted that they want to write Palestine on the wall. The guys on that street, they said, "we don't want Palestine." [Well, the artists] want to draw Palestine. And in the end, they draw Palestine. The next day, the guys came and painted over their graffiti because here, when it comes to public art, they didn't ask the people who were living there, what would you like to see? What would you like to see when you come out of your house on this wall? I like Palestine. That's fine. It doesn't mean I'm going to force them to see my side. I'm going to be there for half an hour and draw it for just me and force him to see it everyday. . . . [Me personally,] I wouldn't go just draw Palestine. I would go, live for a while, see what they really want to see every day. And so I want to put my message and what do they want to see and to come somewhere in between so that no one is forcing anyone.

The Palestinian cause is a frequent point of tension in Jordan, as Jordanian nationals often view the numerous Palestinian refugees in the country as a hostile, disruptive population, and often see Palestinian advocacy as a threat to national unity. Yet here, the specifics of the confrontation are less important than the critique that Brahim levels against the graffiti artists' confrontational strategy.

Highlighting a need for dialogue if artistic intervention is to be effective, this comment sparked an extended discussion amongst several artists in the room. They debated what constitutes "force" and what forms of engagement are appropriate.

One artist asked whether wearing liberal dress in conservative neighbourhoods would constitute forcing your ideas on the public. Many feminist artists in Amman often describe wearing liberal dress in conservative communities as one way that artists can unsettle conservative gender norms. What about more provocative performances like gender-queering dances and parades? Would these count as forcing oneself on the public? "No, that

doesn't count," a third artist claimed. "When I go out in the street and I show my behaviour or my message with my body, that's different from when I draw my message on their walls."

Here, this artist highlights a proprietary distinction between their body as a site of intervention and public space, like walls, over which a greater community might have a claim. In this perspective, tactics like disruptive and spectacular performance reflect a better politics because they respect a boundary between the artist's person and the wider social space, over which the artist should have less authority.

Yet another artist interjected, highlighting different levels of intrusiveness and permanence between the two modes of artistic engagement,

I have a bit of a problem with permanent [interventions], like [murals] and painted staircases and things. In addition to I don't know how effective they are, I also find them to be extremely intrusive. . . . With time I've become more interested in performative type things because of the intangibility of doing something and then walking away from it. I think with time it's become less to do with presenting it as an art intervention and more to do with a behavioural thing that can't necessarily be placed. Describing it as an art intervention or a performance it makes it a lot less difficult for someone to place themselves in relation to it rather than if it was someone behaving rather oddly.

In this comment, artists' self-cultivation of their own difference is presented as a more effective tool of intervention than more tangible artworks (which are perceived as too confrontational). A subversive energy moves through the body of the artist while distancing from the spectacle of art. If artists indeed seek to create neutral and equitable encounters, where "no one is forcing anyone," this quote suggests that the presence of the artist can be disturbing without being demanding, and it can open up space for engagement and creative exchange.

Others in the room, however, were not so sure, and wondered whether in disruptive performance artists weren't still forcing themselves on an unwilling public. "The street, you don't own it," one artist argued. "When you come and do something that doesn't fit with what they think, it's kind of the same thing. You're trying to break the conversation there. And maybe those graffiti artists are trying to create a conversation on the wall."

While most artists in the room agreed that it would be wrong or ineffective to paint a controversial political message in a place where it was not wanted, there was greater disagreement about the politics of artists' own bodies presented as sites of difference. Is the presence of artists' liberal subjectivity itself a confrontational imposition, or can artistic performance spark curiosity? Are there ways that the presence of artists can open up new possibilities of engagement and change?

Artistic openings

In this final example, I explore how artists sought to mediate with the public through disruptions to the form of an artistic opening. In this intervention, artists' presence disrupted the traditional "bubble" of the artistic sphere, to create opportunities to invite regular Ammanis into an artistic experience. In June 2017, I attended the Superfine Art exhibition, a display of artwork from that year's Spring Sessions participants, held at Jordan's National Gallery (an indication of the growing prestige of the program). This exhibition was more like a standard art world exhibition than anything that the Spring Sessions had done before. At a high-profile opening, much like what one would see at any prestigious gallery in the city, artists hobnobbed with art world insiders, while showing off their carefully curated artworks along the National Gallery walls. Reflecting the wider social position and concern of the artists, much of the work addressed themes of belonging, difference, exclusion, and the desire for community. Ameer Masoud staged a performance where he sorted the items from his mother's silverware drawer, trying to find a spot where his complex personality fit within the order she had cultivated. Fadi Zumot and Ahmad Salameh explored the (im)possibilities of coexisting with others, Zumot with a five-person outfit which required all wearers to coordinate their actions, see Figure 12.1, and Salameh invited people to spend the night together in a seven-person bed, complete with group-pajama, which he set up on the gallery floor.

Yet artists expressed discomfort with the way that this exhibition seemed again cut off from the wider city. As part of the opening, philosopher Abdullah Awad presented a lecture and critical discussion on the role of the museum, in which it was argued that museum presentation cut art off from social life, rendering art powerless. For much of the exhibition, artists sought to work against this state of removal by extending activity from the gallery out into public space. They kept the gallery open and occupied for a continuous 72-hour period, and spent much of that time on the gallery steps, shouting at passerby to "come to the exhibition." They staged small performances and workshops in a community park across the street from the gallery, led neighbourhood children on singing tours of the artwork, and otherwise sought to bridge the gap between the museum and public space, for example, in the community cooking demonstration as performance art in Figure 12.2.

One particular success story was related to me by a participant artist (again, I also discuss this anecdote in an earlier review, see McLaughlin-Alcock, 2017). Late at night, artists were still out on the steps of the gallery, trying to wave people in. A group of young working-class men, who seemed to have been out partying, pulled up and got out of their car intrigued by the commotion at the gallery. Artists led these men on a tour with extensive conversation. Along the tour, they paused at a video installation produced by Mohammad Tayyeb, in which the narrator described how their pregnant



Figure 12.1 Leg to Neck, Neck to Thigh, Thigh to Arm, by Fadi Zumot, an experimental fashion piece exploring the challenges of belonging together, presented as part of the Spring Sessions' 2017 exhibition.

Source: Photo by Colin McLaughlin-Alcock.

mother had not known whether they would be born male or female and had bought both pink and blue baby outfits, sometimes dressing him in the pink when the blue was being washed. The installation describes how even after that, the speaker remained plural, male-female. The installation expands on this to describe a universe of ambiguities which disappear as the narrator grows.

Ammanis are often very conservative with regards to gender and sexuality, and expressing sexual difference can be dangerous. Artists leading the tour were unsure how the visitors from outside the art world would react to this controversial piece. Yet to the surprise of at least some of those artists, the visitors found the piece highly moving and described it as their favorite of the exhibition, finding it deep and thought-provoking. For the artist who described this story to me, this was a major success, as art reached across its boundaries and opened a space for exchange across difference between artists and other Ammanis. In later conversations, this incident was highlighted as an example of what it might mean for art to engage without forcing anyone. How can artists create situations of openness, where others



Figure 12.2 Andre Mcheileh stages a cooking demonstration as a performance art piece outside the Spring Sessions 2017 exhibition.

Source: This performance was one of many activities through which artists sought to build connection between the inside space of the exhibition and the public outside, inviting public engagement with artistic display. In this performance, Mcheileh combined several diverse popular Jordanian foods into a single, unified hand roll. Photo by Colin McLaughlin-Alcock.

feel invited to engage with artistic difference without feeling imposed upon? What exchanges or solidarities might this make possible?

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, I have discussed several examples of artists who sought to work through a profound boundary separating Amman's art world from general society. In seeking engagement across this boundary, artists recognized themselves as embodiments of social difference, their very presence in social space potentially challenging social mores. This sense of artistic difference was a product of the specific history of Amman's art world, and it presented an important problem for artists to work through. The artists discussed in this chapter developed a variety of strategies for addressing difference in public encounter. While some, like Sara in the introduction, cultivated their bodies as images of difference through which they hoped to confront a conservative society, others questioned the politics of

confrontation and sought more open engagements where the artist could mediate between diverse social positions. In the exhibition, artists sought ways to open out and invite others in for engagement with artistic difference. Across these examples, the issue of artistic difference itself emerges as more than a simple aesthetic issue (wherein artists are recognized as embodying the image of a potential alternative lifestyle). Rather, difference is a prime site of artistic intervention and work. As artists seek to sort through their political relationship to Amman's public, their experiments open up this boundary for renegotiation and change. In a city like Amman, long noted for its social fragmentation, this points to new possibilities for belonging together and for experimentation that crosses over lines of difference. More broadly, it highlights the figure of the artist as a socially dynamic site, a performative effective entity, through which wider constructions of difference can be reimagined.

Notes

- 1 By "artistic geography" here, I refer to the spatial organization of artistic activity in Amman. I understand this geography as a developing field of movement and interaction through which people and spaces are connected around the domain of art.
- 2 This is an interview, available online at www.springsessions.org/happenings/essay81?edition=edition2014-en

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