



The Future is Now

A podcast series | ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows

Podcast by Fatin Farhat

Transcript abridged and edited by Anya Szykitka

Simon Dove:

Hello, and welcome to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink. My name is Simon Dove. I'm the Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. And for this podcast series, we asked 10 independent artists and curators from different parts of the world, whom we call the Future Fellows, to talk about the current context of their work and to share their vision for how they see the future of arts practice. In this episode, we hear from Fatin Farhat, based in Ramallah, in Palestine.

Fatin Farhat:

My name is Fatin Farhat. I am a Palestinian. I am a freelance cultural manager, researcher, and evaluator. I'm based in Ramallah, but I work across the Arab region. In particular, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, also a lot in Egypt and with Syrians, not inside Syria, but outside of Syria because of the political situation.

Luckily, I'm not affiliated with one organization. I have been freelancing for the past six years. I work with multiple organizations, on different projects simultaneously. I try to balance practice and research because as a practitioner I used to manage projects on the ground. And research sometimes makes me distant; I miss the thrill of being on the ground. So in my assignments, I try to make this balance. I co-create and curate artistic projects that have connection to the community. I'm more interested in community-based projects. I also help Arab artists, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Syrians to manage their projects.

I advise funders who support the independent cultural scene in the Arab region and work with organizations like AFAC and Al-Mawred—I sit on the board of Al-Mawred—that act as intermediates between local communities and big funders. Artists and art-led initiatives are pressured by funders and organizations to work with communities because this is the trend. This is a bit risky because it tends to instrumentalize artists and communities they work with. For example, when you have a short scale project where artists are encouraged to work with the community, the artists work, they get out, and what happens to the community? No one asks these questions.

Many artists post Arab spring, in the region, felt for the first time that they have a duty towards their communities. Different projects like Fanny Raghman Anni, a Tunisian organization I work with, that do projects in streets, public spaces. There is the Ramallah municipality festival, *Wein a Ramallah*, which works with the community and encourages artists to create projects for the communities.

There is also a very interesting model I started working with called Sakiya, in Ramallah, an organization based in a village that helps the community and artists to reconnect to the land, creates artistic projects that are very localized and makes links with the environment. Artists should have a choice. The ambience is sometimes forcing artists to work in certain directions. The pandemic came as a surprise more to the Western world. In countries like Palestine, where we live in constant crisis, the pandemic is just another crisis.

I was overwhelmed because of the panic by my European colleagues who are not used to uncertainty, having to cancel events last minute, having little money to work with. Where I come from, this is the norm, not the exception. In Palestine in particular, the fragility of our cultural sector has been, ironically, a reason it survived and recovered in spite of the pandemic. Mobility in the Arab region is not easy. It's easier for me as a Palestinian to get a visa, go to Europe, than to go to Lebanon. Relying on online platforms has encouraged many partners in the Arab region to work together without worrying about visas and so on.

We tried to mobilize to help artists during the lockdown. But there is little money anyway dedicated for culture in the region. There are issues of mobility, censorship. They were intensified by the pandemic, but just another in a series of crises our artists and practitioners have had to deal with in the past few years. For a big chunk of the Palestinian population that used to go to public events in person, especially in the summer, this has been a catastrophe, because they could not jump on these new tools as efficiently as the audiences that are used to going online to attend activities.

There was an advantage, but there was fatigue after a few months, not only in Palestine but across the world. Initially, everybody wanted and was excited to go online, but now a year and a half through lockdowns, people are willing to take a bit of a health risk and join an event instead of being online.

Even during the pandemic, there was a lot of focus on the sector as a whole, but not on individual artists in Palestine. Initiatives that were led by Al-Mawred, AFAC, and also Ettijahat and Action for Hope, creating emergency funds for artists, sick artists for the first time, artists facing legal difficulties—launching these projects created a debate in the region and made artists think of their own status. Because we don't have active unions. The issue of pension, health insurance, artists struggle on the individual level.

There are no schemes to protect artists. Facebook posts by artists are calling for creation of unions. I see also organizations like Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Palestine creating a whole program that has to do with the condition of artists. This whole debate is motivating organizations and individuals to open up these questions. They are realizing that if they don't work together, it's difficult to survive.

One way of survival is to stand in solidarity with each other, look after each other. This is really vivid, really obvious, not only in Palestine but in Arab countries nearby Palestine.

Foundations in the region are interlocutors between big funders and smaller organizations. We have visions and future plans, but it depends on foreign funding of the organizations that support our organizations, our foundations. With very little exception—not speaking about the Gulf region—there's very little local funding to the art sector in Palestine and many Arab countries. If you look at Jordan, Lebanon, maybe Tunisia, Syrians outside Syria: a lot depends not on our local foundations' views, but on funders' agendas.

Funder agendas change so rapidly for political reasons, thematic reasons. Sometimes funders are interested in women in the region, other times in environment issues. The fact that there's no local public funding for culture makes it very difficult to think strategically. There is an organization in Lebanon now called Beirut DC that I'm working with on two projects. They decided to experiment with a new basic income project, give a chance for 20 filmmakers from the Arab region to have two years of basic income, so that don't lose sleep over bringing food to their families, can focus on their projects. But how many funders are interested in this is another question; many funders feel it's not sustainable. This issue of sustainability is becoming overused and abused in our region.

The wellbeing of artists is becoming a priority in my work, whether I work with a small organization to strategically plan, the issue of the artist fees, workers' rights, health insurance, wellbeing as well. Two years ago, they were not so important to me as now. In my Ph.D. research, I changed my whole dissertation. I was working on decentralization of cultural policy in Palestine, focus on municipalities. I changed completely to governance of the independent cultural sector in the region, to see how artists are working and surviving. It's unbelievable how drained artists are. Some just drop out of projects, and it takes us weeks to trace them, see where they are; they're simply burnt out. Because they're not properly compensated, work long hours, because there's this argument that what you're doing is good to the community so it doesn't really matter if you as a mother are ignoring your kids, not taking time off. These issues have made me, in fact, reshape my research.

Lately cultural organizations realize they have to open up to other sectors. So now projects involve human rights organizations, women's organizations, environmental organizations. A project I'm working on with Beirut DC is called Dealing With the Past. In Lebanon, the past is a very heavy issue: civil war and disappearance of 17,000 Lebanese. No one knows where they are. This project invited civil society organizations, not only cultural and cinema organizations, to think of how to come together, work artistically with communities, and deal with this difficult past of Lebanon. This ultimately leads to a bigger audience, because each sector has its audience as well. This is one of the best ways for the cultural sector in our region to be acknowledged by bigger communities: through bigger partnerships with other civil society organizations.

We have a project called Stand with Art, dedicated to artists under threat, to get Arab artists out of the region. We try first to relocate them in the Arab region then it's impossible. These exchanges are very important at creating safe haven for artists to go up north. But that's also problematic because most of the transnational cooperation is Eurocentric. Because again,

that's where the money is. We see less cooperation between the Arab region and African countries, or with India. Normally when we speak of transnational, it's Arab European. I see it all the time. And again, that's because the cooperation follows the money. We are trying to create schemes in the region that encourage Arabs to work together but also encourage artists to work with Central and South America. This needs fundraising, again.

In the last 10 years, we witnessed the emigration of many Arab artists to Europe. Berlin, for example, is becoming the new hub for Arab culture. There has always been Arab artists living in Europe, but the numbers have significantly increased post Arab spring. So we have to be very sensitive when we speak of north-south in that definition; I'm not sure that the definitions are valid anymore, since many artists are already making a living in Europe.

In general, I'm a pessimist, but I get waves of optimism. Artists and practitioners are more aware of their rights, more willing to negotiate for them. The problem is that we need frameworks to help them work collectively. Personally, this is the responsibility of someone like me who is more of a manager, has a general view about the sector, comes from a union background, has connections to organizations. We have to capitalize on this knowledge and desire that artists and practitioners have, help them with frameworks, because, you know, artists hardly have enough time to survive, to create, to also worry logistically about this layer.

Almost every employee in Palestine has health insurance, whether it's good, public, private, premium [inaudible] and workers. We had a case last year of an artist diagnosed with cancer. He had to mobilize friends to pick him up and pay for his medical care. This should not be the case. In any other organization, the NGO would've paid his medical bill. Independent and freelance artists don't have this. We need to, as practitioners and managers, researchers, organizations, lobby for public funding for art and culture in the region. It might be difficult in some countries, but it's definitely possible in countries like Jordan, Palestine, Tunisia. We have different governmental structures, but it's possible if we are better organized.

Arab cities are changing and demanding cultural management. In Ramallah I started this issue of what became the decentralization of public cultural policy. Amman is another example, capital of Jordan, different cities across the Arab region that have said, enough, we have a mandate towards our community in cultural development. We need to advocate for that because, to be honest, cities are much more democratic. I'll give you an example. In Palestine, we haven't had legislative or presidential elections for 10 years, but we have regular local elections. It's a democratic tool that we as artists have to capitalize on.

We need also to negotiate with big funders, to open discussions. Because to have more equilibrium in the relationship, of power, between us and funders, it's very difficult to do that. But as coalitions in the region, we might have some power on deciding our priorities, rather than funder priorities. At least engage in a process of dialogue. We need to encourage artist-led initiatives, to be more flexible with governance structures. Many of the available or adopted governance structures are so strict and limiting. We need to invest in art education, which in many of our countries is almost nonexistent. This is really horrible in terms of artist empowerment and community empowerment.

As people working in the independent art scene in the Arab region, we have to challenge what it means, the terminology itself: What is the independent Arab scene? What is it

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independent from and why is it independent, and when should it not be so independent? This is the first thing we have to do. This is making it very difficult to advance the sector because it's so diverse, so many different artistic disciplines and political realities.

The other issue is, we need to explore flexible governance structures; many organizations are doing that on the ground. Even classical civil society in Arab region is becoming very hegemonic, acting like the government. We want to mobilize a different way, engage more with communities, in longer conversations that are not as efficient—if you wish—but more relevant to the communities. We need to identify these initiatives, work with them, try to understand them, and encourage other artists to learn from them.

Simon Dove:

You have been listening to *The Future is Now*, a podcast series from CEC ArtsLink with support from HowlRound. All interviews and post-production is by me, Simon Dove, Executive Director of CEC ArtsLink. The specially composed music is by the extraordinary bass player and composer Shri. This podcast is part of the ArtsLink Assembly 2021: Future Fellows supported by the Trust for Mutual Understanding, Kirby Family Foundation, John and Jody Arnhold Foundation, and of course, generous individual donors. These podcasts are available to listen to, or download the transcripts at our website, www.cecartslink.org, or at howlround.com.