



Visual Narratives from Arabia

ONLINE MASTER MODULE ON ART, DESIGN AND TECHNOLOGY



Collected papers presented by Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès and Tarek Atrissi

with contributions from Teemu Leinonen and Ricardo Mbarkho



Introduction to Art and New Media in the Arab States, with a case-study of Lebanon

by Ricardo Mbarkho

Background

Being interested in communication media in Lebanon during both the wartime and post-war periods, I have been concerned with cultivating a spot of freedom and tackling it. This is mainly the result of the oppression human beings inflict on each other. In such a case, people seek among other things their own safe places where they can discuss current issues. In doing this, many people become activists that stand up to tyranny.

During the war, a local network was invented by the Lebanese – a sort of unofficial ministry of communication. It used the wireless technology such as the Japanese YAESU handy walkie-talkies, bases, linears and boosters. On one hand, these replaced the nearly obsolete analog phones. On the other hand, they became a new place for the conflicting dialogue of different communities. With these wireless machines, it was possible to share a common wave, but only for each speaker on his turn. People who possessed the stronger transmission machine could dominate the

speech priority and could “close the wave” if they wished to. This type of communication made a great impact on people, for they were capable of overhearing discussions that took place on the network. This developed into a certain kind of voyeurism – voyeurism through a machine that links an individual to a complete stranger, to someone from the other side of the green lines (the physical borders that separated Lebanese areas in conflict with each other). Thus, this “Other” became a despised myth of which people are convinced and satisfied. This voyeurism helps the former to view the latter and know him in a clearer way, despite the fact that the main topics shared on these wireless connections were those insulting the other’s religion, culture, identity, and ideology.

What used to be wireless relations during the war migrated onto the Internet, taking place in chat rooms and forums. The Internet provided the Lebanese citizens with a new space to communicate within families or social groups. Hence, it offered them a more regulated forum for better communication and became the realization of everyone’s thoughts.

Therefore, in its first stage, Internet was considered a tool to preserve certain thoughts and beliefs being fought for, such as Arameanism, Arabism, Nationalism, Communism, Christianity, Islam, Socialism, "Zoneism", Secularism, and so on. Internet then operates here as a magnifier of each community's ideas. Nevertheless, as it was introduced into a region characterized with multi-cohabitations, the Internet led people into a paradoxical phase; they had to find a self positioning between two extremes: total polarization or total globalization within the regional conflicts. As a consequence, citizens carried a double burden: the possible consequences of isolation and the fear of dissolution. This inner-conflict resulted in a common tendency for all people to start the path of democracy, the dispute and debate of ideas and dreams, and, even better, an e-war to virtually achieve those dreams, those too-many utopian models of Lebanon.

Consequently, many issues became open to the public. Thus, the definitions people have given to "intimate" and "private" changed, since what used to be private became public. Hence, there was a stronger need to redefine what could be considered private and intimate. This attitude was later reanalyzed by the reality TV wave that worked well in the Arabic speaking countries, projected with the voyeuristic themes in shows such as "Lofts."

All this led to two opposite behaviors: perceiving issues indifferently as banal and amplifying one's own reaction towards them. Thus, the diversity of content strongly satisfied the interest of the former attitude. For instance, a newly-set satellite which enables the viewer to watch around 3000 channels gives him the possibility to experience zapping back and forth throughout the 3000 channels instead of watching one specific channel or program. Thus, he would simply be watching zapping. This becomes the result of diversity; people start enjoying it as much as they enjoy sitting for hours and hours, days and nights, observing people enclosed and monitored in a container, a



phenomenon which embodies the second attitude satisfied by content based on voyeurism. These two tracks became a major concern for artists of the war and post-war generation.

This context paved the need to update the question concerning the role and the dimension of art in this current history and geography. How could we locate or understand Diversity, Research, Collaboration, Interdisciplinary, Access to Media, and Creative Content? When meeting with the Other, there is always a question mark instead of established solutions; this dominates the search and compels people to remain close to democracy. The former preserves the possibility of an ongoing transformation of

the communities' thoughts or dreams - a characteristic that cannot be found in a totalitarian system. This is why, I believe, totalitarianism is not favorable in the Middle East. However, research does not imply direct and quick answers. There has to be a continuous self-investment, volunteering, and individual efforts next those of the government. In consequence, the results appear in a way that maintains the reasonable equilibrium of society that sustains peace. The deeper one goes into this path, the more answers he discovers, and the more they open up and become clear to him. Nevertheless, this outcome is established only when communities seek it; individuals alone will not easily or even possibly suffice.

Concerning the dimensions of Art, these dimensions stretch out from the real to the imaginary. Art has the experimentation and research that are some of the important bases of creative content. So, for uniqueness and diversity to take place in content, one has to refer to some international standards that focus on the individual rights, freedom, equality, and dignity. To respect these human rules, one should, through the interaction of groups, perceive the others through understanding; this understanding is achieved via mobility. Practically speaking, this means that the artist must be opened up to what is happening in the other disciplines and

interact with artists in different regions, cultures, backgrounds and environments. This interaction could be distant or face-to-face and hence updates the creation process with modern scientific and technological achievements. With the digital revolution, many disciplines met around common equations and grounds: the New Technology of Information and Communication. So, transforming the analog representation into an interactive and mathematical digital set shook many disciplines in art, such as music, sound, visual arts, writing, theatre and so on. They all meet today on a crossroad within the information society.

The access to media with regards to freedom and respect is important to transform communities, ethnic groups, religions, and cultures into familiarity. There is no single and unique e-culture of the global village because the Internet space is the place where people are connected and varies by the interface they are using. Had the Internet been comprised of only one virtual space, it would have been a global village with a single culture. Instead, the Internet is a group of independent local villages. People in the Middle East do not interact with Chinese as much as with people who speak their languages and dialects: Syriac, Armenian, Arabic, French, and English. Hence, interaction is bound to common characteristics between participants. This humanizes the networked software and hardware, makes them less neutral, and gives them their own ideology. Information and Communication Technology expands our access to the real through the virtual in a way that allows us to define the Internet as connected people instead of connected machines. Internet is a human invention; the emphasis on the human being and the mixture of his subjectivities form an e-world, where e-communities and e-cultures exist. The Self and the Other, with all the differences in the way they think, are the atoms and the body cells of this virtual world. In other words, they are the units of the Information and Communication Society.

The unity of human gender complemented by the singularity of each and every person gives way to difference and multiculturalism. It also facilitates agreement between people. But, although we all want to be one, at the same time, we want to be unique to preserve our existence. Therefore, in spite of globalization, and although each person is a member of the whole humanity, he is attached to a specific part in this world. Hence, in order to make e-cultural diversity and pluralism emerge, Information and Communication Technology should harmonize

between the universal and the particular, and not sacrifice the cultures in favor of only one world and only one universal culture, for the cultural richness rises from a contact between the various cultures. Besides, creative content in the e-world is a result of not only the exchange of information about our different cultures, but also the construction of a new e-culture that is different from where the exchange has started. In this sense, each bit of content is far away from being totally associated with other cultures. Additionally, it does not aim to associate other cultures to it. The belonging extremism operates here as the basis of collective contest for the creativity rush. Thus, the remedy to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, between the connected people and the off-liners and to build creative content for a new e-culture is everyone's responsibility. Hence, countries with poor accessibility must accept the e-culture, and rich countries must work politically, legally and economically to establish a universal and global development that touches all the people and all the individuals, materially and ethically, for this creates in everyone the curiosity for knowledge and research. This is how dialogue can establish international standards and criteria to evaluate how and when e-culture could strengthen cultural uniqueness, diversity and pluralism and decide what cultural differences need to remain and which need to be abolished. For this result to happen, a dialogue that protects the rights of everyone is the starting point for any change. Most importantly, people should start by putting aside their prejudice. Furthermore, technology necessitates teamwork to uncover new domains and to build up a new language particular to the field. Industrial models and universities provide appropriate contexts for this issue. Therefore, artists should observe how socio-political contexts affect the use of new media (and vice-versa) in order for them to build new judgment criteria, new meanings, and new questions.

The course development

The e-course was given over a two-week period. Students had to read the online resources I have provided to them, discuss them on the forum and in real-time chat, to conduct further online/offline research related to the topic being discussed and post them on the forum. We discussed art, science and technology in the Arabic speaking countries, as well as art and new media in Lebanon. We also scrutinized Arabic speaking countries according to their use of new media and consequently defined

them as prepared or unprepared to become a part of “the global information society”.

The first resource was about the June 2005 UN WSIS contributory conference on ICT and Creativity that was hosted by the government of Austria in Vienna. This conference, which centered on e-culture, creative content and DigiArt, gathered many experts from around the world to share their visions on ICT and Creativity and to discuss how to build bridges to fight the “Digital Divide” and “Content Gap.” At the workshop “eCulture, Creative Content and DigiArts” (chaired by Tereza Wagner and Gerfried Stocker as rapporteur), we (Mark Amerika, Mark Federman, Carlos Cabral Nunes and I) ended our panel with this conclusion:

“Rich and free artistic practice is the foundation of a creative Information Society and the prerequisite for any cultural industry. In the same way as any other industry needs a continuous flow of new ideas stimulated by “basic research” which is not directly valued by direct return of investment, the cultural industry, too, depends on a prosperous artistic production that can be considered as the ‘basic research’ for the development of e-Culture and e-Content.

Art prepares the ground for new ideas. But artists ‘don’t just fall from the sky.’ Therefore, we have to ensure a supportive environment for artistic production, which accepts and respects art in its experimental nature.

Cultural richness is an effect of contact, understanding and respect between various cultures. In order to overcome skepticism or mere curiosity and to respond to the collaborative nature of digital art, we have to stimulate the mobility and exchange of people and not just the mobility of information. And we have to promote consciousness for a mutual respect for art in political and social environments.

In order to strengthen cultural diversity and pluralism (which are key to the successful development of an Information Society), we have to provide non-discriminatory access to media and information infrastructure to allow and to support the self-representation of individuals as well as communities, cultures and religions.

Most important for artistic production and research is a strong

interdisciplinary and intercultural approach. It should not only link art and science but also promote educational efforts and relevant economic strategies.

The unique quality of digital artistic work does not lie in the production of content and artifacts alone, but even more in the ability to create new forms of expression that are adequate to local cultural and socio-political needs as well as to new technologies.

Thus, DigiArt should be considered as “applied research” in the culture of our Information Society. With its unique aesthetic characteristics, DigiArt helps to design a human-centered culture of new technology that also gives room to the spiritual dimension of our life.

The ability of artists to create links to the tangible and transcendental aspects of human life, and also to connect the physical with the virtual realities of our Information Age should be considered as another reason to put artists on centre stage of e-Culture. This is why: ICT + Creativity + Collaboration x Interdisciplinary Intercultural Education = Potential Artists Networks Increasing their Political Capital by Positioning Themselves as Cultural Value Generators.”

The second resource was a text I wrote especially for the online course. It introduces Art, Science and Technology in the Arabic speaking countries. I presented a panorama on the history and culture of the Arabs since the 7th century and showed how the students can understand this history as common and/or different from theirs. Although great parts of the invaded people adopted the new religion which entails praying in Arabic – introduced by the Islamic Conquest in the 7th century – several ethnic groups like the Syriacs and the Berbers preserved their own cultures and languages. Moreover, those groups helped spread the Arabic language through the translation of their works into it. Thus, various cultures combined with the Arabic one under the name of the latter. This is very similar to modern globalization. After the 11th century, the Ottoman Empire caused the Arab world a four centuries of cultural decline. However, few new contacts with Europe awakened the Arab region again. Besides, the English created Arab Nationalism in order to find a track against the Ottoman “Holy” Empire. After World War I, the French and English replaced the Ottoman Empire and caused the

Hello Rima, You said: "NEW MEDIA means a new support. Art is not any more a rectangular canvas, it is not any more a decorative object. New media is now a CONCEPT, can be a THOUGHT, a gesture, a way of living and thinking. New Media can now be the human mind as a support, it is more abstract!!! It is neither technological nor esthetic!!!! However, it can make use of digital technologies and internet, however it is NOT THAT!!! I believe it can be deprived of its esthetical aspect, but personally I do not like art without esthetics. How do you work/deal with it? i simply live it and try to make my mind as support." You are mixing the meaning of New Media with the meaning of the new supports, while you are also considering that new supports are now something abstract/conceptual... and that the conceptual and the abstract has no link with technology and esthetic. Don't you think that esthetic gained/changed definition throughout art history? As to New Media, you can basically refer to them as a new medium or support, but it has not to be abstract. In any case, New Media are related to esthetic as long as they are used in art works; unless you can elaborate more about your definition... Ricardo

birth of political states that currently constitute the "Arab world," which is still made up of a mosaic of cultures. This fact proves that neither the language nor the religion can create a single culture, even after hundreds of years.

The text also highlights the early Arabs' engagement in history, sociology, mathematics and science until the current use of media technology in the age of globalization. With the emergence of ICT, these Arabic speaking countries replicated this new system to familiarize themselves with the global world, based on the opportunities provided by each one's political system. On one hand, Arabic speaking countries were brought close to each other in certain fields, but on the other hand were distanced from each other as well as from the Western world, mainly because of different levels of censorship due to the existence of totalitarian regimes and to the absence of democracy. Another factor that distanced some Arabic speaking countries from the rest is the perspective taken by certain Arab groups of a continuous Christian-Western crusade.

The third resource was about the lecture I gave at Transmediale (Berlin) in February 2005. It was about Art and New Media in Lebanon. At this conference, I spoke about the methods artists follow and their positions in the current Lebanese multi-cultural society, where identity and belonging are affected by religion, politics, war and heritage in an attempt to show how the current Lebanese art field deals with new media.

The fourth resource was a case study that I conducted on the current Lebanese art scene dealing with new media. It focuses on emerging artists' approaches and positions in today's Lebanese society, and how they use new technology. The issue of how artistic, cultural and commercial institutions are initiating and funding projects is raised. It also examines how some individual efforts are invested to organize new media events. An overview of roles played by the public, critics and press is covered. In my opinion, art in Lebanon is strongly related to socio-politics. Thus, in order to see how society is reflected by art, it is important to review the Lebanese historical background, especially political events such as the Arab-Israeli war, The Cairo Agreement, the

war on Lebanon from 1975 to 2005 and the numerous assassinations of prominent Lebanese figures. All this is mentioned to give an idea about what historical icons our generation shares today as part of its common geographical and historical context in Lebanon. Of course, not all of them have the same translation or understanding of that the various events they or others have caused. Additionally, these images are a collective and hidden standard and certitudes for the Lebanese. They are also a kind of basic and raw material for artists, on which to build new judgment criterion and questions.

The start of the forum discussion was energetic. Students were familiar with the interface since prior to the course, they were in interaction with the e-learning staff and started reading the adequate and appropriate resources. The discussion in this course revolved around the most

sensitive issues in the Arabic speaking countries. It was in the form of an e-round table that is a necessary step for project-based learning. It all started with a conversation about the first week theme; there were comments, replies, questions, analyses, arguments, and so on. Furthermore, many URLs were exchanged among students. As a consequence, this discussion created a sort of a thematic bibliography.

To be fair, it should be mentioned that the discussion was sometimes conflictive while some other times bashful.

Most of the students were distinguished from the first couple of days while some were timid in their participation mainly because of their English language skills (the medium of the discussion was English), or because they were not used to the tool.

Starting from the title – Introduction to Art and New Media in the Arab States, with a Case Study of Lebanon – problems occurred. The method of the discussion was based on asking good questions that helped the participants define themselves; it eventually resulted in different ideas and opinions which were made problematic. These questions were the result of worries spinning around people as individuals and communities, mainly on how artists should have a positioning in their socio-political-cultural environment. Good questions also resulted from the urge to get a more profound knowledge of one's goals, motivation, and deeds, in relation to new media, and yet more specifically in relation to how new media breaks into each individual and community history and

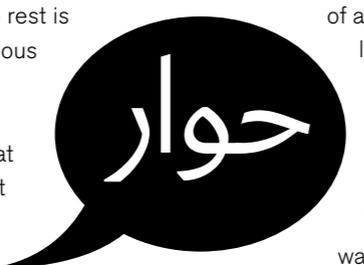
geography. From this point, topics popped up: isolation vs. dissolution, polarization vs. globalization, Americanization, Arabization, Arabophone, e-multiculturalism, commercialism, heritage, e-culture, identity, minorities, human rights' conflicts, religion, fundamentalism, diversity and pluralism, singularity, pedagogy, artist's role, media adaptation, creative content, ICT development, biotechnology, personalized software and interfaces, aesthetic of media, interactivity, virtual, cyberspace, networking, art and new media and politics, art and war, language, e-censorship and how the censorship got new mechanisms with the digital network, "Christian-West vs. Arab-Muslim world," 9/11 and new media, Lebanon, Dubai, United States, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Mardine, Polizario, e-countries, e-world, not only the e- that replicates the real world but as a world in itself, Phoenicians, Berbers, Syriac, Arameans, Assyriac, Chaldeans, Copts, radical-Islamists, Orientalists, standards and common grounds, e-citizen, e-laws in the double sense (laws of the virtual world and the laws taken from the real world and adjusted to fit the virtual world), how new media, such as laptops, mobiles, iPods, PDAs, and so on, penetrate the privacy of each person, and the link between new technology, each of the Arabic speaking countries, and creativity.

The first commentary targeted the identity of the Arabic speaking countries: the common link and differences among them. It also focused on how objectivity and inter-subjectivity can be maintained. The historical background was referred to in order to capture the starting point of the issue. There were also commentaries about how cultures interact, who is an Arab and how the media is participating in answering this question while it is biased when dealing with multi-cultures in the Arabic speaking countries. For instance, from the point of view of the constitution, Lebanon is an Arab country (after the Taëf accord in 1989 considered unofficial by a large part of the Lebanese), but from a cultural point of view Lebanon becomes a multicultural country where Arabs are a part of its population, same as peoples such as Syriacs and Armenians. Within the discussion process, emersion of many clarifications took place such as the link between the religion and culture, and the concerned country. There was also a certain confusion and mixture between religion and language and culture on the part of the students. For some, a Saudi Arabian has the same culture with a Moroccan; however, the discussion made these students aware of what is behind their first intuition: what

is correct is the opposite of what they say. When Arabs were thought of as one culture for all the Arabic speaking countries, we had to look at whether Arabs are minorities in the Arabic speaking countries.

The process of the discussion evolved and caused students to interact in an inter-subjective field. Thus, many students discovered and improved their position as creators, a criterion that would help them build their own projects later on. Furthermore discovering the Other and having impacts on each other clarified each participant's origin to himself and made him much more rooted in it. Consequently, every individual became more aware of the Others' dignity and rights, which are the same as his; this has given positive characteristics to diversity where dialoguing could be a good way to understand facts and reconsider them on the emotional and official level. Therefore, this discussion made clearer the role of new media, here in one's country and there in another's country, now, before, and after.

Consequently, ideas were shaped through the online discussion: how to "culturalize" new technologies? How to protect and sponsor cultural activities? How is technology used in multiple parts of the Arabic speaking countries? How is it customized and personalized? The importance of having national permanent art museums and national show galleries in this unstable region was stretched. The nature of the artist as being initially a thinker and a philosopher and whether he needs to gather all what he carries as language, heritage, ethnicity and technology and embodies those to set his thoughts and aspirations. Culturalizing the technology is exemplified by a missed call in Lebanon and how it has different implications than a missed call in France. The Lebanese missed call reflects the socio-economic impact on human behavior. Besides, the existence of mobile devices, such as iPods, mp3 walkmans and mobile phones, in contrast with fixed devices, adds new needs to the individual, whom is being connected and so, existing in a global network. This goes with today's concerns on how technology is dispatched between the personal and the collective spheres. How the mobile technology is affecting one's relation within the public sphere where he evolves. This mobile technology that can be worn operates as a plug-in for the body; from the customizable artificial eyes to the customizable artificial mind, or yet an artificial self, a mutation between the presence and the machine. Thus new technologies are culturalized once they are personalized. This personalization is the consequence of using and exploring the



new technologies with a critical assimilation of their possibilities. This brings the information and communication to a more humanity-related technology. But here the question of copyright is raised as well: who is the author, the one who built the machine or the one who is creating via this machine?

Another topic was how the media affects the language, since the language is an important tool for cultural preservation. In Arabic speaking countries, since the Arabic language is often the only official allowed language, it leads many non-Arabic speakers to learn Arabic and to stop using their original language, and even to consider it as non-useful and even obsolete. What is replacing these disappearing languages is becoming not only Arabic but also French and English. However, The Arabic language cannot solely form a culture. Saïd Akl invented letters for the Lebanese dialect that he considered a language in itself. These letters were inspired from Latin. Many agreed while many others opposed his view, accusing him of being an Isolationist. Another opinion considers that the Arabic dialect does not fit all the people who live in Lebanon; so it should be replaced by other languages or dialects that reflect the native Lebanese ethnical identities. Here again we talked about the Latin letters used to write Arabic on the net. This is somehow like the Saïd Akl alphabet, yet more accessible, and most importantly, more acceptable, as it is not linked to the same ideology of what is considered as an extreme right wing behavior on the local and Arab levels attached to Christian Lebanese aiming to detach Lebanon from the Arabic league. But this conflict of culture is sometimes reanimated when one proposes to have three more keys on the keyboard that replace the 2, 3, and 7 used to cover Arabic letters that don't exist in the Latin Alphabet; would this formalize this new "Arabic writing?" What would happen then to the Arabic alphabet? How will they be used and when? Besides that, the Arabic typography remains calligraphic while the Western typography improved analogous to technological innovations. Thus, as the latter changed from calligraphy fonts to pixel fonts, the Arabic typography could evolve and people, then, may possibly cope with the new system.

Many other questions were raised: what kind of role each artist has in his local environment in order to be active in art? What are the needs of artists? Should they have a pre-set role? How does each one's position make up an identity in the field of art, and where is the political ideology

in this process? How is new media understood: is it an aesthetic term or a technical one?

A popular crack in Arabo-Muslim countries is discerned between those who wish for good relations with the West, called Christian, and those who do not see the West but as a symbol of colonialism and imperialism. The first group includes what is known as liberal Arab Muslims whereas the second group ranges from the moderate through the radical Islamists. It is not necessary to choose only one of the two identities, Arabic and Western. Otherwise, this will generate too many conflicts and oppression which would lead to the interpretation of local ideas as propaganda. For instance, in Lebanon some local and national ideas are considered as propaganda for Zionism, or as a pro-fundamentalism and pro-terrorism. Is it right to have restrictions in identifying the cultural belongings? Or should one be for the mosaic of cultures? But here again, this mosaic would stay in harmony, as it would sometimes become the oil that someone needs to turn a region full of conflicts into flames. Corruption and ignorance are two elements that cause potential instability in sensitive Arab areas, which in turn explains why main interests and efforts are oriented to political struggle.

As for bridging the gap between the West and the Arabic speaking countries: it was thought that the Western politics towards Arabs and the way they dealt with them made it possible for those countries never to rise in science and technology. Moreover, these countries were ignored on the media and art levels, since the prospect of international art used to focus solely on Europe, the United States, and Japan. However, after 9/11, this same West opened up to the Arabs and became interested in its most minute details, whether historical, cultural, or political. This interest existed before 9/11 but not on the cultural and media level. The focus was rather on the market and energy level, which was later on revealed by the media. One of the West's strategies that were used to control the market is supporting Arab dictators; they even preferred to work with one instead of many governors in order to have their decisions applied faster. But this affected the people living in the Arabic speaking countries negatively. They abandoned their ambition to seek knowledge in order to seek food instead. Comparing how Arab dictators used media with the way the West used it, it is clear that the methods are different though the purpose is the same: gaining power. Arabs censored media

and did not broadcast but what suited them, whereas the West found that the media is powerful, and since they cannot democratically censor it, every party used it to gain the maximum power they can get. Thus, the West promoted diversity to blur any ideology that might have in a specific period of time a great popularity. This results in a Western people less passive towards the media.

The Western media would usually show a bad image of the Arabs. But why don't Arabs take what the media shows as an image of issues that still have to be solved? Is media then pushing Arabs toward an ideal situation by always showing the "bad" side (like a devil's advocate)? Or on the contrary, behind this or that media, there is a kind of propaganda aiming for nothing but destruction?

New media is a window opened to the world. This explains why Arabic governments are afraid of any riots led by the people against them if the latter liked the democracy discovered via new media. But why is there this fear? The answer is because people in here are patriarchal and many communities are also not Arabs. This is why there is always a fear that if people discover their histories and rights they would want to decide their own fates and become independent. For instance, there are a lot of Internet bloggers that were jailed because of their ideas which opposed their governments' interests. Thus, the issue here is about identity reconstruction and discovering the hidden history of people forced to stay ignorant more than 1000 years ago. With new media, the audience is at the same time content producer. In this case, propaganda may own new capacities that help to fix and cure the Identitarian bug. In order for openness to take place, there should be standards that would help it to occur away from political control and the religious imposition. Of these standards are the objective sciences. However, there are also other successful trials in combining the Western and the Arabic such as in music, through the combination of instruments and composition. Moreover, when the West produces and programs the media for industry, the Arab's use of the media may also be taken into consideration in order to make the software compatible with the Arabic language.

The e-world is a representation and a digital reproduction of the real world, but it can also be a presentation rather than a representation where it carries within itself particular rules and new esthetic codes that

make a new base out of it - a base that would stand on its own. Thus, new media becomes a mix of technical, esthetic, and cultural terms. It is a medium like any other medium that allows artists to embody ideas and emotions in it. Moreover, technical possibilities of new media are being used as a place where a new esthetic is discovered. This must go at the same time with a theoretical development accessible to people so that it can be better understood. So technology developed the conscience and improved it; it didn't replace the body as is the case in countries where the virtual connection replaced the physical body. Like any weapon, new media must be placed in safe hands in order for it to be used appropriately.

In the discussion about globalization and polarization, it was assumed that the world is going into globalization because it is its time. That is, the conditions that necessitate its existence are met. To know the effect of this globalization on people and vice-versa, artists must investigate the behavior of people in societies, and the constituents of this society such as economics, politics, security, religion, and so on, because culture is descendent and ascendant at the same time. One advantage of globalization is that it has improved education because wherever the individual is, he has access to the learning environment and by that, he can better position his own culture. Another advantage is that globalization has improved technology, just as technology has contributed in the spread and nourishment of globalization. This process can be explained as follows: technology is the application of knowledge and since knowledge is strengthened by education and education by globalization, then globalization strengthens technology; it is also true the other way round.

But, globalization does not imply that individuality is annihilated. Globalization and individuality should go together. On one hand, globalization dealt with individuality: as the individual cannot by his own nature surrender to globalization, the commercial globalization gave him what he wants by making him more unique if he gets more global. Thus, it played on this paradox and offered him this true illusion. For instance, the more one is connected to the global information society, the more he has to pass through a customized interface, such as profiles, wallpapers, ringtones, and so on. All these are personalized. As for diversity, the same producer offers the audience a greater range

of products distributed by interest: food, cartoons, movies, reality TV, nature, music channels, and so on. But here again intimacy borders and limits are questioned in relation to diversity. Again the amplification and magnification of the ego goes against the indifference and diversity since both are bases for the content quality.

But this kind of commercial globalization that places on the first level the general and personal profit is less dangerous than the cultural globalization, because the first is a material one, while the second is an ethical one that touches upon the person himself and his belongings. So globalization succeeded on the short run in terms of technological, commercial, and scientific aspects but surely failed on the humanitarian, political, and cultural levels. Thus, Individuality alone leads to fatal isolation and it easily affects the mind and the self, while Universality alone completely erases one's identity and opinions.

Another topic mentioned was globalization and mobility. Globalization did not take the place of mobility. It did not make it static because which is static – the body or the self? On the Internet, one may have virtual tours while at home. Hence, this mobility is virtual and could sometimes be self-satisfaction against loneliness. This would be viewed as if one is disconnecting from the real world and living in another world that may be harmful, even physically. But one of the advantages of virtual mobility is that it would have more tele-shapeless-presence. This lack of physical mobility does not imply that it affects an individual to an extent that he starts living in a cocoon, and even if he goes out of his home it does not mean that he is not in a cocoon. Sometimes when people leave their home countries they coagulate with others from their own countries or cultures or religions. So, if new technology offers people the possibility to be in one global village, they would always have links between real and virtual spaces, real and e-real. Otherwise, if we neglect the effect and the role of the real world on the e-world, the real will have no sense and people will find themselves in an imaginary country or planet. In such global environment, one could say that it is better for someone to have strong cultural affiliation and engagement (with all what these affiliation and engagement include) from where he can interact with the Other on the basis of freedom, dignity and rights. Here again the question is: do freedom, dignity, and rights have the same meaning in this or that culture? The answer is (proven to be) no.

Talking about the nature of art resulted in the discussion about the role and dimensions of art. There was a dominant meaning that makes art the reason and emotion embodied into artwork through some means. So art becomes a fertile field in order for the imaginary to take shape. Consequently, everything becomes possible in this field. As the artist plays an essential role in developing the ideas and the questions asked in his society, he also has a role to transmit his work to his audience in a comprehensible way. Furthermore, he has to take a position even if the latter is only his interaction with the e-world. But in many Arabic speaking countries, this question may be asked: what can still be offered to societies that have lived everything to the fullest? The imagination of the artist in such a situation would face the fact that it has become already a reality in some societies. Thus, this question is transformed to the following: has art in this region become an entity in between reality and imagination, documentary and fiction, reason and insanity, objectivity and subjectivity, all at once?

In addition to these questions, there is also the identity of the artist. The artist, whoever he is, is still perceived by others to be linked to a received idea. In this context, he is invited artistically not to create art that serves a specific politic, but to have his own ideology that asks questions about the other's ideologies, for the sake of new meaning of entities. However, these meanings can have political concerns and the answers to them can be related to an existing politic. Moreover, the artist should not place the project he is working on at the head of the pyramid. That is, it should not be prioritized and he should not be at its service, because he is not creating an advertising campaign, a fiction or a video clip. Rather, he is creating art that reflects his own position; the product is the artist himself. And from here, it is asserted that political concerns are taking their places in art. In parallel, a further question is asked about whether the artist and his political concerns change anything in society the same way politics does? Parting from here, there are ideas that consider if an artist is anyone who has anything to say. This is why the job of curators, critics, the press, and estheticians is filtering the values. Hence, these political concerns of the artist can use art to fit themselves into the media without being trapped by censorship. If one looks at what and where artists speak in the newspaper, they can be located in the cultural section and not in the political section. This allowed many artists' political statements to pass to the public with no problem for the government, when one was

never able to read the same stands in the political sections, because of censorship in this section. This is a way that shows how the umbrella of the art can protect people from injustice sometimes. Thus, art raises the awareness of society to capture issues that it might have otherwise missed; people live in a society that needs its counterbalancing utopian spirit to reconstruct its present.

The chat session was set to take place on Saturday, November 12th, 2005, from 11 AM to 12 Noon, Beirut Time - Standard Time Zone: GMT/UTC + 02:00. The chat was scheduled to discuss the course topics.

When I was a kid, I used to watch Treasure Island. On the last episode, almost at the end, during an intense scene, the electricity at Ain el Remmeneh was cut. After a couple of years the series was broadcasted again, but the same happened again at the exact shot.

At the beginning of the eighties, I received a gift: a toy walkie-talkie. But each time I went to the bedroom with my walkie-talkie switched on, I would start hearing people talking but they could not hear me if I talked, for they were using professional handies; It was a great mystery for me at that time. Another incident happened in my bedroom; my PC computer would catch radio signals and emit songs while I worked on it.

A further incident happened in year 1989; during the Liberation War against the Syrian army, Achrafieh was under the Syrian siege. I was there and used to spend my time trying to call any random number. Whenever it rung I would simply close the line. I was curious to know if any of these lines were still working, in order to find out if the siege was getting heavier and if any connection with areas outside East Beirut was still possible. Many days later, one of the randomly dialed numbers connected to a kind of a telephony centre. Each time I dialed it, I could hear people talking. Only sometimes they were able to hear me speak. This was something that amazed me and so I kept on calling this number to listen to people talking to each other. Once, there was someone talking from Tripoli to Beirut, and another time there was someone asking to talk with people from Terbol. Not knowing where this place is, I hung up the phone. I once shared a similar experience with my uncle. I must be convinced now that having given to the machine the role of a telephony centre it reacted to my will and became itself a telephony centre.

Once I was awakened by my answering machine: someone was talking in a foreign language but I was able to recognize my name that was repeated many times. The call was ended before I could reach the answering machine, and the blinking screen notified me that a message was recorded. However, when I pressed the key to hear the message, it had disappeared.

I was at LibanCell Centre to buy a new mobile number. When I asked the operator to give me a special number, she replied that she couldn't do this, because it is the machine itself that chooses the number randomly. So I said "then let's hope that the machine will give me a special number". Later, I realized that the number I had was considered to be a very special one: 03 7177 03.

Another time, late at night, a friend of mine called me but I could not answer because I had my mobile phone set on silence. So, she kept on calling me many times. When I answered her about an hour later, she heard a woman speaking at the same time with me. Here in Lebanon we call this phenomenon "scrambled lines."

Recently, my car radio started changing frequencies randomly. Sometimes, it stops transmitting the channels, gives me the "Phone call" signal on the screen and sends out a phone-call ringtone. I showed this to the radio repairman, but he proposed changing the device.

In April 2007, I asked for a legal paper to be sent by fax from abroad, and I gave the sender the fax number. But later in the evening, I was thinking that it should have been sent more privately. So, after the weekend, when I went to get the paper, I have been told that a paper was received and the document that was printed on it was covered with black ink. After the employee who has received the paper showed it to others, not knowing to whom it belongs, she has thrown it away.

My current mobile phone sometimes switches on and off on its own to show me the screen up side down and reversed, rings with a blank screen and when I answer no one answers at all.

For the class chat session, the students and I designated a one hour meeting. When I tried to connect to the Internet at home, I was frustrated that it was not connecting. I tried many times but still no connection

worked. When I was late for the meeting, I decided to move to the closest Web Café. I drove to Fanar and entered a Web Café where I was asked to use a specific computer. Surprisingly, the connection was not working either! The man working in the store told me that he is not the one in charge of the machines, and that he has no idea why the Internet is failing to connect. He proposed that I wait until his brother arrives to fix the problem. I then decided to move to the next Web Café. This time I went to Sed El Bouchrieh, to a Web Café I used to frequent. I found someone sweeping the floor who asked me if I could wait a little bit until the floor dries. I told her I was in hurry, so she let me in, yet the connection was blocked. She was very surprised that it was failing to connect and tried other Internet lines in vain. At that time I was around half an hour late. So, I went to Johnny's Web Café and tried to connect. I finally connected!

The chat was evolving in a chaotic-like environment; a common context to chatters. The style was friendlier than the style of the forum, and students had already gained familiarity. The online discussion covered the connection problems that can plague Internet connectivity – rainy seasons, limited bandwidth capacities when it comes to huge simultaneous connections, storms destroying motherboards and network cards, firewalls and the kind of impact humans have on machines and vice-versa. Hazardous things happened and we creatively cultivated and analyzed them.

Conclusion

Compared to a class in a single room in a physical space, the online discussion was more individual for each student, because emails arrived to personal inboxes and the time lapse between posts gave the necessary occasion for all students to get involved. This online part was already a live example of how new media could develop knowledge and thus artistic practice.

Students learned to be critical, to think before reacting and to imagine adequate entries that best suited their position in society. They developed a personalized way to consider art, science, and technology based on their own experimentations, while linking these to their place among the collective approaches. It was a continuous questioning to define the

limits and the meaning of freedom in art as well as in any other discipline. There is definitely nothing that has remained the same for all participants after this e-course, as the latter dealt with the person himself in relation to art and new media, and contributed to self-criticism that in turn assisted the achievement of the pedagogical objectives. This was mainly reflected in answering the nature of Arabic speaking countries that all shared a single political concept – that of being named Arabs. It was also reflected in answering whether this concept is still available in the age of the nations' reconstruction and liberation, starting through discoveries and creativity via global networking.



Mr. Teemu Leinonen

Mr. Teemu Leinonen (b. 1969) holds over a decade of experience in the field of research and development of web-based learning. His areas of interest and expertise covers design for learning, computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL), online cooperation, learning software design, educational planning and educational politics.

Teemu is currently the leader of the Learning Environments research group (<http://legroup.uiah.fi>) of the Media Lab (<http://mlab.uih.fi>), University of Art and Design Helsinki (<http://www.uiah.fi>). The group is internationally recognized from its open source virtual learning environment for knowledge building, called Fle3 (<http://fle3.uiah.fi>), a web community and platform for finding, authoring and sharing open and free learning resources, called LeMill (<http://lemill.net>), and audio wiki platform for mobile communities, called MobilED (<http://mobiled.uiah.fi>).

Teemu conducts research, design, and publishes in different forums. He has delivered a number of talks and presentation in national and international conferences, has given in-service courses for teachers and carried out consulting and concept design for several ICT and media companies.

Teemu is an elected member of the University Senate (<http://www.uiah.fi>), founding member and the first president of Voipe Ry - the Finnish association of Libre and Open Source in Education, member of the Wikimedia Foundation's (<http://wikimediafoundation.org>) Advisory Board, and program committee member of several international conferences.

Ricardo Mbarkho

Born in Beirut in 1974, Mbarkho's net and video work questions the identity and belonging issues, especially in Lebanon and the Middle East region today. His interests also deal with the relational and the communicational environments between people, most often in the sociopolitical sphere. His work and lectures are presented in many festivals, exhibitions, universities, publications and in the press throughout the world, such as Goethe-Institut and Espace SD (Lebanon), ARS Electronica (Austria), La cinémathèque (Canada), Guislain Mollet-Viéville and le Cube (France), Transmediale (Germany), and Le Centre Culturel de Sousse (Tunisia). Mbarkho curated and co-curated many video screenings showing the positioning of the still emerging Lebanese video artists, such as at the Festival International de Film et Vidéo de Création (Lebanon), and at B-312 gallery (Canada).

Ricardo Mbarkho graduated from the National Superior Institute of Fine Arts of Beirut. He pursues his studies in the United States (Carnegie Mellon

University) and in France where he received the diploma of the Superior National School of Fine Arts of Paris and the diploma of the Superior School of Cinematographic Studies. Since 2002, he has taught video and new media arts at the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts (ALBA). Currently he lives and works in Lebanon and France.

www.ricardombarkho.com

Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès

Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès was born in Beirut in 1965. Author of Arabic Typography: a comprehensive sourcebook (Saqi Books, London, 2001), Experimental Arabic Type (Saatchi & Saatchi, Dubai, 2002), Typographic Matchmaking (BIS Publishers, Amsterdam, 2007), and a number of articles on multilingual communication in the Middle East. She holds degrees in graphic design from Yale University School of Art and Rhode Island School of Design, and specialises in bilingual typographic research and design. She has worked as a designer for a number of years in the United States, Amsterdam, France and Beirut. She has taught typography and graphic design at the American University of Beirut and the American University in Dubai since 1994. She was the Chair of the Visual Communication Department for three years at the American University in Dubai and is the founder and active board member of the Khatt Foundation, Center for Arabic Typography (www.khatt.net).

Tarek Atrissi

Tarek Atrissi, was born in Beirut. He has worked and studied in Lebanon, the Netherlands, Qatar, Dubai and the United States. He holds a BGD in graphic design from the American University of Beirut, an MA in interactive multimedia from the Utrecht School of the Arts in Holland and an MFA in design from the School of Visual Arts in New York. His work was exhibited at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and is in the permanent design collection of the Affiche Museum in Holland. His work is featured in major international design magazines and books worldwide. He has received several international design awards and is a frequent guest speaker at universities and design seminars around the world. He is the founder of the online platform for Arabic typography (www.arabictypography.com). He is the principal of Tarek Atrissi Design (www.atrissi.com), based in the Netherlands and serving a variety of clients from Europe, the Middle East and the United States. The studio's multi-disciplinary scope of work focuses on modern Arabic visual communication and the development of both original and custom Arabic fonts. He is a consultant for several International Branding firms.