The Adaptation of Western Museum Education Practices
International Case Study session, Education & Interpretation Track
Wednesday 22 May 2013
10:15 – 11:30 am

<u>Michelle Dezember</u>: "Building Islands: Audience and Institutional Development Approaches at Mathaf"

<u>Session Description on AAM website:</u>
Emerging museum educators in the Arabian Peninsula have adapted western museum education practices for their institutions and the communities they serve. Three museum professionals working in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar will share their work in adapting these practices to the culture and heritage of their countries.

My objectives:
- To contextualize the work that we are doing in Qatar and the wider Arabian Peninsula to build audiences and museums
- To outline the genesis of Mathaf and its knowledge development objectives and strategies that are tied to our specific cultural context
- To draw connections with challenges faced in western contexts to illuminate potential solutions for international best practices

<u>Presentation Notes</u>

1. Qatar – Al Jazeera – Arab Spring….Mathaf as an 'island'
   a. Qatar positioning itself as a "Switzerland of the Middle East"
      Al Jazeera counters the propagandistic, state-funded and directed news channels by providing a safe space for unsafe ideas
         - Al Jazeera = "Island" in Arabic
   b. But not really an island—Al Jazeera English gained much of its credibility recently for its coverage (some say encouragement) of the revolutions that have come to be defined as the "Arab Spring". This was particularly powerful during 24-hour broadcasting of Tahrir Square. So although it takes the form of a typical media outlet, it has set new standards for how news is exchanged, from a positivist, content provider to a platform.
   c. Two of my favorite quotes released by AJE:
      i. "We have been working round the clock to make sure we are broadcasting on alternative frequencies,"
      ii. "give a voice to the voiceless"
   d. Al Jazeera provided an important benchmark for best practices for Arab organizations, and in creating museum education strategies perhaps some of our adaptation of western practices are equally met by non-arts, Arab organizations such as Al Jazeera

2. History of Mathaf
      i. Sheikh Hassan collecting in the 1980s as a form of self education because there was no where he could hear the voice of the Arab artist in his schooling
      ii. Artist Residencies in the 1990s-2000s provided an important 'island' for political refugee artists
      iii. Opening in 2010 in Education City marked our first public face, with an emphasis on being 'under construction'

3. Who is our audience? Who are we?
    a. How do we define **"non-traditional" audiences**? We in fact must be very diverse to represent the diversity of Qatar. Remember only 15% are Qatari nationals…
        i. Our team: Very diverse in and of itself. Reflects the demographics of the city, and only 4 of 50 have prior museum experience
        ii. Student community
        iii. Public
    b. So since Doha is already a "non-traditional audience"…Perhaps what we mean is to recognize the **museum's potential to be a social activist**?
        i. Advocating for and activating agency within contexts that are unaware of, underserved by, or excluded from general museum practices and by extension social/cultural capital?

4. Challenges of accessing contemporary art in a context with inconsistent, if any, formal art education offerings.
    a. Neoliberalism in the education system has turned learning into a commodity.
    b. The museum cannot replace this form of long-term, institutional value of learning about art - but what opportunities do museums present in creating public dialogues through art?
        i. Mathaf Voices: let the community talk to/with itself
        ii. Student art competition and exhibition: cut in art education curriculum; we cannot take the place of formal art education but can provide advocacy

5. What role, in particular, can artists play in bridging knowledge gaps across the museum and communities?
    a. Artist Encounters
        i. Sadik
            1. Deena: Link with other refugees or expats
            2. Emotional: Family workshop
            3. Humanize artist
            4. Valuable to artist
        ii. Abbas
            1. Partner with other local organizations: Al Shaqab and MAC
    b. Cai Guo Qiang – Gunpowder Drawings community project
    c. Artist Residency on the relationship with the city

6. What are successful learning objectives for projects with artists and undeserved/non-traditional audiences?
    1. Defining target audiences
    2. Building trust over time (VCU)
    3. Relevancy in adoption/appropriation of other models or institutional partnerships
    4. Choosing artists with socially engaged practices, experience/interest in teaching, understanding of the context
    5. Defining expectations of the institution, artist, and participants and ensuring this is clearly communicated at every level
    6. There is always room for feedback