

AAM Annual Meeting and Museum Expo, Baltimore, MD.  
Sunday 19 - Wednesday 22 May 2013

### **The Adaptation of Western Museum Education Practices**

International Case Study session, Wednesday 22 May 2013, 10:45am

Remarks: Marjorie Schwarzer

Thank you for staying for the last speaker on the last session on the last day. Fortunately, the message of my talk is short: buy Pamela's book. Read her book. I'm going to elaborate on my co-written chapter in her book titled "Social Change and Rules of the Game: A conversation about Museum Values in the United Arab Emirates."

SLIDE ONE: Here are my co-authors -- Aisha Deemas from Sharjah's Museum of Islamic Civilization and Leigh Markopoulous from California College of the Arts. I'll speak from my perspective as an American of what it has been like for me to work in the Gulf Region.

SLIDE TWO: There are different kinds of simultaneous museum growth in the UAE right now: Some are Bottom up like the projects, Alya and Michelle described. Others like the Louvre, Guggenheim and British Museum mega-projects in Abu Dhabi, are top down, occurring with strong input from mother institutions in France, the US and the UK. I took the photo on the right a year ago from a car window as Leigh and I toured the museum construction site on Saadayit Island. At that point, the museums' architectural footprint consisted merely of a few signs plopped into the desert.

SLIDE THREE: Regardless of how UAE's museums are being developed, the question is: how will the local populace ultimately care for and nurture these museums? Since 2009, I've been dealing with this question by travelling to the UAE to train emerging Emirati and other Arab museum professionals. I'm going to describe a series of intensive training courses I co-developed and taught in English through the Emirates Foundation of Philanthropy under the direction of Salwa Mikdadi who is now Head of Professional Development for the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority.

SLIDE 4: The pilot course took place in Abu Dhabi in 2010. Here are a few members of our class visiting the Emirates Palace.

SLIDE 5: The second was at the Farjam Gallery in Dubai. Here you see students presenting various projects. Alya was a member of this class.

SLIDE 6: I co-taught the third course with Leigh a year ago at Traffic Gallery, also in Dubai. Each course ran for 3 months and students completed about twelve written assignments and participated in two weeklong workshops.

SLIDE 7: We used a variety of instructional techniques including; a password protected google site onto which we loaded readings and assignments.

SLIDE 8: A lively and VERY active chat room.

SLIDES 9 and 10: Small group activities & student presentations.

SLIDE 11: Site visits to analyze exhibit techniques and the visitor experience -- This is the historic Fort at Al Ain.

SLIDE 12: And formal lectures and discussions.

One of the most challenging topics Leigh and I were asked to cover was museum ethics, and this experience inspired the chapter in Pamela's book. Students were especially concerned about censorship -- in 2011 for example, the curator of the Sharjah Bienale -- had been fired -- and could have faced prison -- because of the display of an artwork deemed to be religiously offensive. The facts of the case were, of course, complicated and they raised a deeply affecting question for Emiratis entering the field: what happens, one asked -- close to tears, if I am in a position where I am responsible for a museum or gallery program that potentially conflicts with my nation's religion and customs. Can I really operate in both the professional global museum field -- with its inherent values -- and also be true to my own culture and values?

Discussions about ethics and values are always challenging and contentious. But here I was -- a secular Jewish progressive feminist from San Francisco -- trying to have a balanced and respectful discussion on contemporary American museum values like social change & democracy -- when my generous sponsor is a religious Islamic conservative monarchy operating with a different set of rules.

SLIDE 13: Let me talk about this in more detail. American professionals are accustomed to the separation between religion and a civic state, and a secular legal and professional framework. We are free to express our own personal values, religious faith (or lack thereof), & political beliefs even though we also implicitly understand the business-like ways to talk, behave and get things done when we are on the job. In the UAE, this isn't the case. Laws, professional standards and especially religious, family and personal values and ways of being are intertwined and inseparable from one another.

SLIDE 14: I want to touch on four challenges from my perspective as an American: language, gender, religion and freedom of speech, all of which -- of course -- are intertwined.

SLIDE 15: Language. Words and concepts carry different meaning and weight when spoken in English -- the language of business -- or Arabic -- language of home, tradition and family, or even different dialects of Arabic. Arabic is wonderfully expressive and poetic, and I learned to embrace it. A single word can condense a lot of meaning -- a

favorite of mine is "KHALLAS" which really has no translation. In fact, you can't translate Arabic word for word -- or even using Google translator -- which can sometimes stump Westerners. One has to be open to understanding other non-text based ways of communicating, as Pamela discusses in the book.

SLIDE 16: Gender. This too is more complicated than meets the eye. Westerners are not accustomed to practices like separate "ladies only" hours in public places (including museums), arranged marriage, the wearing of the abaya and so on. Yet, despite our stereotypes about practices like these, let me emphasize that women in the UAE are not oppressed or naive. They are amazing. Their poise, intellect and educational accomplishments are quite extraordinary and museums may represent a pathway for creating change on their own terms and in their own way.

SLIDE 17: Religion. Here I am with Salwa Mikdadi visiting the Great Mosque in Abu Dhabi, 2nd largest mosque in the world. UAE is an Islamic nation and being a person who is fascinated with prophets, spirituality and religious doctrine, I've done a lot of reading about Islam. I even read the Koran - twice -- which was tough going I admit. I was easily able to adapt my teaching to some practices, like giving students prayer breaks. On a even deeper level, working in the UAE has made me ponder how museums -- which in the Western world are no longer temples but forums, and are no longer dogmatic but open-ended can nonetheless be spiritual places, albeit secular ones.

But what happens when there is conflict between religious dogma and museum as open-ended forum?

This leads me to our class's discussion when a student brought in an image of

SLIDE 18: this painting -- titled It's a Man's World -- by Shurooq Amin. Amin describes her painting as "portraying the dichotomy of the Arab man: Religious preacher versus weekend alcoholic; political activist versus weekend party-goer; conservative father versus playboy. Our society, by the very nature of its sharia-run politics, cannot exist without double standards, hypocrisy, and secret private lives." This work was exhibited at Al M Gallery in Kuwait City in March 2012 in an exhibition which was suspended 3 hours after opening when police and officers from the Ministries of Commerce and Interior ordered its closure on the basis that the work is "pornographic" and "anti-Islamic." We discussed the difference between a good work of art (which this is probably not), a direct provocation and publicity stunt (which this may have been) and what it means to create a safe environment for social change and artistic exploration in a society that may not be ready for such direct provocations.

SLIDE 19: My role as Westerner training Emiratis is I think, to invite dialogue: not to provide answers. To listen and pay close attention, with honesty, respect, patience and an open heart, a role I am honored to play.

SLIDE 20: It occurs to me that perhaps the place where the deepest museum dialog might occur is not in the galleries, but in the cafe through the universal language of breaking bread. Emiratis and I had the most wonderful conversations about all matters of life, and love and even the Israeli-Palestinian situation over our lunch breaks. And this brings me to zataar -- an Arabic spice blend that Alya generously brought me from the UAE. I thought that the topics of gender and religion would intense, I did not imagine that I would nearly ignite a war with this innocent question: "where can I buy the best zataar to bring back to the US with me?" The room was abuzz with loud overlapping opinions as to whether the Jordanians, the Palestinians or the Lebanese do it best and finally me yelling "khallas!" and then we all just burst out laughing.

In conclusion, Western and Gulf region museums may be operating under different linguistic, gender-role, religious and political systems, but as museum professionals we can all agree: what's life without the right combination of spice?

Thank you.