



**Interview with Mai Abu EIDahab
Marti Manen / David Armengol**

1-It seems that when from the art context we are talking of education there are some problems (on reception, temporality, visibility, definition of roles...). Why do you think that it happens? Is because the art context or for the idea of education itself?

I would like to focus my answer on art education and not the concept of pedagogy in general. It is important to first note that the various models of art education institutions in the West are very different at the core of their mandates. In the United States, art schools like those at Columbia University or UCLA are structured as places where you are 'taught' to become an artist by participating in various courses that instruct the student on the different types of art forms, techniques, art history and criticism. On the other hand, in Europe for example at schools like Städelschule in Frankfurt or the Royal Danish Academy in Copenhagen, the programs are structured to provide a stimulating environment conducive to supporting the artistic process and production to the program participants who are already viewed as artists.

Obviously both models have their pros and cons but what they often have in common is that their curriculum is very dated compared to the kind of art being produced today or that they are too intertwined with the commercial art sector and simply function as avenues for networking and promotion.

I think the question is: What is the education that can be provided at an art school? Given the nature of contemporary art practice, its diversity maintained, I believe an art school should be a hub of intellectual scholarship and research directly related to the broader disciplines of politics, society, science, humanities et al. It is about broadening horizons and creating understandings beyond the superficial. Theory and practice have to be emphasized but never separated.

2-The next Manifesta will be based on the idea of the school. The school is one of the main places where to get an education. First of all, we would like to talk with you a little bit about the differences between the ideas of exhibition and school. We can see that the exhibition and the school have different timelines. The school offers to the student a context where to be educated continuously. There is also an idea of personal evolution. On the other hand, the exhibition (or the traditional idea of exhibition) is the result of a process, a space where the audience can get a message, a defined message or some questions that are presented. What do you think about the different timelines of these platforms? Is the combination of the two things a way to go further on of the matter that we have to face at the exhibition and also at the school?

At first it is important to explain that the idea of the school came as a reaction to the idea of Manifesta as a biennale, the specific context in which this edition will take place, as well as to the state of the arts and art education at large. Manifesta 6 (M6) is not intended an exhibition in the form of a school but rather is an attempt to initiate a school as a possible long-term project; it is not only based on the idea of a school but is a pilot project for a school which is to, if circumstances permit, lead to the establishment of an permanent international art school in

Nicosia. It is important, particularly when considering the timeframe, to understand that the school that will exist within the duration of the biennale is intended as a model. The model is a reflection on methodologies of an art school and the content that it should engage with and generate as a knowledge producing entity.

3-If we talk about an exhibition, a biennial, a classical institution it is easy to understand the kind of visibility that you can get for it. The media knows what is looking at. The visitors know what we are asking from them. From your point of view, what kind of attention or lecture can get something that is trying to check other ways and is asking for another kind of relationship?

Thinking about the audiences is not the starting point for this kind of project; the concept of the school is not a gimmick or a new form of art entertainment. I think your question is about evaluation and I think it is integral when you propose a new model or process to realize that you can not measure outcomes with the same criteria you would use for, in this case, a conventional biennale model. The number of visitors or reviews is not the gauge for this project, or many others', success actually. In this instance, the result cannot be evaluated by quantifiable outcomes. The M6 School is essentially aimed at providing a significant experience for the students and teachers involved, as well as creating an exciting and engaging high-quality program of events over a three-month period that locals can attend and participate in. The kind of attention or interest the school can gain has nothing to do with the model but rather with how well we as curators and organizers formulate the program. I am certainly not implying that I don't care about the audience's interest but I am saying that it is our job to create the conditions wherein the students and audience become interested and this can only be developed over a period of time.

4-The fact that the next Manifesta will be in Cyprus is an important factor to bet for a model like the school? Is it a way to avoid the artistic tourism? Is it a way to try to get a better connection with the local context? Can also the idea of implanting and school there leads us to a pre-conception of a place with a contemporary art context on development?

Again I must re-emphasize that the school will have an international character and is not intended as a patronizing reflection on the state of contemporary art in Cyprus. Choosing Cyprus as a site for Manifesta is at first glance very problematic both because of what it implies as preconceptions about the situation there art-wise, as well as the implications of choosing such a highly-charged political context which in many ways is a microcosm of many of the most important political divides in the world today, as the site for a large-scale European cultural event.

The principle attraction to do such a project in Cyprus is its geographic location and history. Nicosia is very well suited to the establishing of an innovative model of art education that can incorporate alternative and new positions outside of the often exclusive mainstream Europe. The situation is open enough to celebrate its location and Middle East connection in a positive and critical way without the burden of competing with international models but present one that is highly-specialized and condensed. I think it is important to positively approach the location and not to problematize along the lines of faults, borders, divisions and such rhetoric but acknowledge the opportunity to use the Middle East and Southern Europe as sources of immense intellectual capital.

5-What is the role of the curator when we are talking about education? Is a new model of curator arising?

What is the old model of curating? The role of curators is in constant flux and is one of the most over debated issues in the art field. I view curatorship as just one type of activity within the field of cultural production that is the most important field first and foremost. Curators are powerful actors within this field and have an obligation to have a position, act responsibly and maintain an awareness of their positions as affective players in the field at large. As much as the art world often pretends to exist in a utopian void that suffers from a few professional problems, this type of

escapism is alarming. I don't think of curating as a profession with defined parameters that is only concerned with exhibition-making, particularly when we speak of freelance curators.

6-You are a curator with an international education. What do you think about the possibility about people thinking about you as a female curator from Egypt curating a project in Cyprus?

Aside from eight months spent in Amsterdam as part of De Appel's Curatorial Training Programme, I received my complete education in Egypt where I have lived most of my adult life. This is an important fact that I don't want to have distorted because that is the background I come from that influenced me, whether positively or negatively, in developing my views and career.

What do people think about Rosa Martinez as a female curator from Spain curating a project in Italy? What do people think about Maria Lind as female curator from Sweden curating a project in England? I would like to believe that your question was a positive one asking about an interest in non-Western curators starting to play a larger role in the international art field and about a new openness to the Middle East and to new positions in general. Unfortunately, I am not so naïve. I think your question is about stereotypes and pre- or mis-conceptions. Personally, I am constantly confronted with attempts to position or view me as a token. I am very conscious of this fact. Let me tell you an anecdote to illustrate: Recently while visiting a Goethe Institute, the director asked me, "Oh really? You are from Egypt and you are also one of the curators of the next Manifesta? Have you ever done this kind of work before?" and she continued with "You know in Germany we have very big art event every five years called D-O-C-U-M-E-N-T-A."

This type of stereotyping is not a question of lack of knowledge of the people in general but often the ignorance of high-level actors in the intellectual arena. Certainly Bush-ism would not be dominating our lives and perhaps futures if influential actors in the culture field were not becoming instrumentalized tokens themselves within the prevalent mainstream market-driven rightwing politics.