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Sam (right) and Till (left) at Mona Hatoum's solo exhibition in Kiasma, a contemporary art museum in Helsinki, Finland



In conversation with
SAM BARDAOUIL AND
TILL FELLRATH

*The duo behind curatorial platform Art Reoriented discuss their most ambitious and far-reaching programming to date, writes **Anna Wallace-Thompson***



Above: Installation view, *ItaliaArabia*, Chelsea Art Museum, New York, 2008. Courtesy of Art Reoriented.
 Foreground: Fateh Moudarress. *Wada' Al-Alliha Fi Beirut*. 1976. Oil on canvas. 120 x 320 cm. Courtesy of private collection
 Background: Louay Kayyali. *Then what?* 1965. Oil on wood. 190 x 172 cm. Courtesy of collection of Khaled Samawi
 Right: Roland Penrose. *Egypt*. 1939. Oil on Canvas. Exhibited at *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)* at the Centre Pompidou. Courtesy of Lee Miller Archives



“CURATING IS ABOUT CHANGING
 POINTS OF REFERENCE”

Sam Bardaouil

“**T**he relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. Each evening we see the sun set. We know that the earth is turning away from it. Yet the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.” So wrote John Berger in his seminal 1972

work, *Ways of Seeing*, the inspiration (and title) for the summer exhibition at Arter – Space for Art in Istanbul. Curated by Art Reoriented’s Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, it marks the latest in a busy calendar, most notably the ambitious travelling show *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)*, which debuted at the Centre Pompidou in Paris last October, as well as the revitalised programming of the fourth edition of the annual 21,39 Jeddah Arts.

Berger’s quote is particularly apt, given Bardaouil and Fellrath’s projects have always been characterised by a holistic and long-reaching approach which, while rooted in stringent research, unabashedly requests viewers to examine and re-examine what they thought they knew. “Curating is about changing people’s points of reference,” explains Bardaouil. “When you change the context, you allow people to have other references in their mind. Curation shouldn’t be about loading an already-exhausted cannon

with new names that seem idiosyncratic and out of context, rather, it should be about expanding and correcting contexts and references that allow a more fluid interpretation of the subject matter at hand.” This ethos has marked their career, from 2009’s *Iran Inside Out* at New York’s Chelsea Art Museum, which first placed them on the map, to *Told, Untold, Retold*, the inaugural exhibition at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Art in Doha (2010) to *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence* (2014, also Mathaf), and the travelling show *Tea with Nefertiti* (2013–14).

As such, Art Reoriented’s curatorial approach has always encompassed research, publications, audience engagement and extensive programming beyond the dates of the physical exhibition itself. This was particularly evident in *Art et Liberté*, which, after Paris, travelled to Madrid, before it goes to

Dusseldorf, Liverpool and Stockholm. A labour of love, it presents a period of Egyptian art history that, not only little known outside the country, has had its history rewritten by the generations that followed in Egypt itself. The *onus*, then, to correct the historical record has been immense and involved a Herculean effort involving no less than 200 interviews over five years (in locations as far and wide as Cyprus, Canada, Spain, Japan, Lebanon and more) as well as relentless detective-work, from discoveries of forgotten artworks in attics to braving the (extensive) red tape of the Cairo public archives.

The result, however, not only breathes life into a politically volatile Cairo of the 1930s and 40s, but provides unprecedented insight into the cultural milieu of the time, through the efforts of the artists, playwrights, poets and writers who were part of the Art and Liberty Group, the name the Surrealists in Egypt gave themselves. “When you want to do a show that is grounded in art history, you can only do it through proper historical research and allow the facts to speak for themselves,” says Bardaouil. “You cannot historicise, you cannot take the current politics of today and try to tell a story that is

Below: An installation view, *Mona Hatoum: Turbulence* at the Mathaf (Arab Museum of Modern Art), Doha, 2014. Image courtesy Gérald Karlikow. Artwork: Mona Hatoum, *Suspended*. (detail). 2011. High-pressure laminate and metal chains. Dimensions variable. 35 swings each 45 x 65 x 0.32 cm.





An installation view of Paul Guiragossian: *The Human Condition*, Beirut Exhibition Centre, 2013.
 Courtesy of Art Reoriented
 Main artwork: Paul Guiragossian. *Antiques*. 1970.
 Oil on canvas. 452 x 182.5 cm. Courtesy of The Paul Guiragossian Foundation
 Below: Abdel Hadi El Gazzar. *Mahasseb il Sayyidah*. 1953
 Collection of Yasser Zaki Hashem, Cairo

within what is now being said only; you have to allow the history to be brought back and let it speak for itself.” In line with this, each venue on its tour includes a publication, as well as efforts to produce a publication in Arabic.

Meanwhile, in Jeddah, 21,39 has been refocused from an event targeted at itinerant visiting foreign curators and patrons to engaging with – and catering to – local artists. A six-month programme extends well beyond the reach of the event itself, and includes film screenings, foundation art courses, panel discussions and seminars held by local partners. It has also featured a travel programme for six emerging artists that saw them visit cities such as Berlin and Seoul, and which the curators hope to continue this summer.

The choice of Seoul is interesting, as it is a market that Bardaouil and Fellrath do not normally focus on. However, their work is not limited to one geographic area. Though perhaps better known for their Middle Eastern expertise, significant exhibitions involving Asia have included *Songs of Loss and Songs of Love: Oum Kulthoum and Lee Nan-Young* at the Gwangju Museum of Art in South Korea (2014) as well as an exhibition on Korean Abstraction at Villa Empain in Brussels (2016). “One of our core issues is to go against this East-West attitude,” asserts Fellrath. “What is ‘East’? What is ‘West’? What do those terms actually mean? What is a ‘Western audience’ if you are in Brazil, Russia or Asia? Going against this East-West concept has been so important, because you can’t relate everything to the usual centres of, say, the US or London.” This has led to an extensive travel programme, as both curators believe that exposure and exchange are at the heart

“ONE OF OUR CORE ISSUES IS TO GO
 AGAINST THIS EAST-WEST ATTITUDE”

Till Fellrath





Above: Ramses Younane. *Untitled*. 1939. Oil on canvas. 46.5 x 35.5cm.

Right: Mayo. *Coups de Batons*. 1937. Sergio and Renata Grosseletti Collection, Milan. Courtesy of ADAGP 2016.



Which brings us back to *Ways of Seeing*. “We sought to do an exhibition that makes you take a second look at an artwork and at how artists employ formalistic strategy to make you see something that’s not there,” explains Fellrath. “As we all know, Turkey is going through some challenging times at the moment, and we felt it was very easy to fall into the trap of doing a political show, so we wanted to do something formalistically-driven. It’s almost like a search-and-find type of show that shows the importance of not taking things at face value.” From prehistoric statues to Orientalist painting, it also features works by artists such as Ghada Amer, Salvador Dali, Andreas Gursky, Paul and Michele Kos, Grayson Perry, James Turrell and more.

“Curating is really about finding ways to tell stories,” concludes Bardaouil, “It’s about engaging your audience with stories that are

open-ended. You provide the context, the framework and the tools. You can even provide a vernacular, artworks and documents. You may propose a clear narrative, but you can never ever tell your audience ‘this is what it is or how you should understand it’. At the end of the day, you must allow viewers to take all this information with them and continue that story in their own discussions and interpretations, and that takes time and sensitivity and effort.” ■ ‘*Ways of Seeing*’ runs at Arter from 1 June – 13 August. arter.org.tr or artreoriented.com

of an informed discussion. “Certainly, I firmly believe no curator can be all-knowing and helicopter around the world and have expertise in everything,” says Fellrath. “I think it is important that we own up to that. However, it is also imperative we find and study other creative centres around the world, follow a little bit what’s going on and try to soak up those new exciting experiences as much as possible.”

The last year has also marked the duo’s appointment as chairmen of the Montblanc Cultural Foundation, where they have been working to refocus its attention onto visual arts and have recently launched a Curatorium, an initiative supporting two arms of the Foundation: an artist commissioning programme to acquire new artworks for the Montblanc art collection, as well as an arts patronage award. The former sees artists selected and given the chance to produce work for a biennale, museum or art centre. This year it has gone to Manila-based artists Katherine Nunez and Issay Rodriguez, whose commission has been included in Christine Macel’s Venice Biennale show, *Viva Arte Viva*. “We hope we’re able to provide a corrective element through our initiative, in that there is an imbalance in the sense that artists with major galleries behind them are much more easily found in biennials and other projects than those who don’t,” says Fellrath. “We want to offer an alternative forum and help these artists who might otherwise not be given the opportunity, to work with curators to create very strong pieces.” Meanwhile, the Montblanc Arts Patronage Award sees patrons and their projects selected from local nominations. “We want to build these relationships with institutions, projects and educational programmes that really need this type of support,” says Fellrath.



An installation view of *Staging Film: the relation of image and space in video art* at the Busan Museum of Art, South Korea, 2015. Image courtesy Art Reoriented. Artwork: Mikhail Karikis. *SeaWomen*. 2012-2013. 12-channel sound and two-channel video installation.