



## Syrian Cultural Priorities

Conversations About Contemporary  
Cultural Practices

Syria as a Model (2017-2020)

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Delphine Leccas

Artistic Curator



## Delphine Leccas

Based in Damascus until 2011, Delphine was responsible for the cultural program at the French Cultural Center from 2001 until 2007. She is co-founder of the non-profit organization AIN and curator of multidisciplinary events on contemporary art that focus on artists from the Arab world in general and from Syria in particular. These events include "In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country" (Athens and Beirut), "Paysage interne" (Skol, Montreal), "L'Art en marche" (Bordeaux), "Syrian Anonymous Exhibition" (Nottingham, Viterbo, Milano, Bologna, Florence), "Les Journées de la photographie" (Damascus) and author of the book "Syrie, l'art en armes" (La Martinière Edition, Paris, 2013).

She was the exhibitions manager during "Damascus, Arab Capital of Culture 2008" and proposed a cycle of exhibitions of national art collections entitled "Retrospective of Fine Arts in Syria", in addition to a collection of Syrian art publications.

She has co-curated several events presented during Thessaloniki Biennale; the 15th Biennale de la Méditerranée (Thessaloniki); "Mediterranea 16" (Ancona); "Visual Arts Festival Damascus" (Damascus, IFFR-Rotterdam, DEPO-Istanbul, ZKM- Karlsruhe).

Leccas was also producer and coordinator in several festivals, including "The Jameel Prize Exhibition" organized by the British Museum, Meeting Points organized by YATF, Home Works organized by Ashkal Alwan and documenta 14.

She is the director of the "Rencontres Internationales de Cinéma" film festival in Marseille, since 2016.

*Conversations About Contemporary Cultural Practices: Syria as a Model* is a series of interviews conducted between 2017 and 2020, as part of the *Syrian Cultural Priorities programme*, prepared and rolled out by Ettijahat – Independent Culture. The second interview is a discussion with Delphine Leccas via Skype, from her home in Athens, where she was living.

**Jumana:** So, Delphine, you are an art curator, organizing and leading art and cultural projects. You are French of Greek-Swiss descent. I also consider you part Syrian. You lived for a long period in Damascus, almost 13 years, from the late 1990s until you left in 2011. Since then, you have lived in Brussels, Dublin, Beirut and now Athens.

**Delphine:** I now live in Belfast, less than an hour away from Athens.

**Jumana:** You are very knowledgeable about contemporary Syrian artists. What drove you to acquire this knowledge about the Syrian art scene?

**Delphine:** I arrived in Damascus in 1998, after finishing my studies in fine arts and applied arts. I quickly met Syrian artists from my generation, who were studying fine arts or who had recently graduated. At the time, I started learning Arabic, not through language courses, but by studying Arabic calligraphy with the artist Khaled Al-Said. I began to build a network of connections with artists. We started talking about projects, such as art exhibits. We engaged in a constant discussion about the Syrian cultural and artistic scene. We began visiting the few art exhibits in Damascus: the Atassi Gallery, some Arab cultural centers, the French Cultural Center and the Goethe/German Cultural Center, which occasionally used to organize some exceptional visual art shows, especially photography exhibits.

Meanwhile, the French Cultural Center had announced its intention to establish a photography club. This helped me meet a group of young Syrian photographers, and we took it upon ourselves to establish this club. We proposed a group of periodical exhibitions at the French Cultural Center in Damascus, and in 2001, I established a festival that continued until 2007. Each year, we would prepare what I consider to be a somewhat international exhibition, as it brought together a group of photographers and videographers from several countries.

The festival was a relatively new phenomenon in the Middle East, especially in Syria. It included Syrian artists, as well as artists from Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. We invited artists from Iran, because we believed that their presence and Iran's participation in this artistic platform were important. The festival included - naturally - French artists. With time, this project grew, and other embassies joined as partners, hence the participation of British and German artists.

This was the largest event ever since my arrival to Syria. I had quickly become responsible for this festival, and that helped me organize the photography club, which met every Friday throughout the year. The programme included theoretical and practical workshops, run by members of the club. Many photographers who used to come to Syria visited this club. At the time, we would organize a day with an artist so that they could exhibit their artwork.

I started to establish a network of art contacts, which solidified my presence in the Syrian cultural art scene. After proving my ability to manage this festival, the officials at the French Cultural Center decided that I would manage all artistic programs at the Center.

**Jumana:** I noticed that, in your beginnings, you did not focus your attention on the artists of Damascus only, but you also supported other artists from Hasakah, for example, artists who usually live in

artistic isolation, and whom we do not usually think of supporting, or of sharing their works in art projects.

**Delphine:** There was something important that I did not notice when I was in Syria, but I only started to feel it after I moved between other countries, especially Arab countries; it is the peculiarity of Syria, and the singularity of the Syrian cultural scene in general, especially with regard to the visual arts. We see a variety of art produced by artists from both central and marginal areas in Syria, not only from the Capital. This is what sets Syria apart from other Arab countries. There, artists come from an aristocratic background and receive the support of their families.

The impact of socialist ideology on culture and society was prominent in Syria; culture is accessible to everyone, even the marginalized. A young, marginalized Syrian woman in a remote village can tell her family she wants to study fine arts in Damascus, and it would be acceptable and favorable. What I particularly like about the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus is that despite its presence in a bourgeois city – i.e. Damascus – it brings together people from all Syrian regions, even remote villages. Artists who become renowned are often people who come from remote places, such as southern Syria, the far north, or the east, including the city of Deir Ezzor.

For me, this is what makes the special and strong character and identity of Syria. We can also see this in the struggle of Syrian artists who wanted to leave Syria during the crisis. They differ from their Lebanese counterparts. In Lebanon, where I lived for nearly two years, you see that the Lebanese, during the civil war, were scattered around the world. It was easier for young people to continue their education in New York, London, or Paris, for example. However, young Syrian artists, who finished their studies at the Faculty of Fine Arts in 2011, did not have family in the diaspora, nor the financial means to travel to pursue their studies in London, New York, or Paris. Social identity played a key role in the current diaspora situation.

**Jumana:** What were the distinctive characteristics of visual arts in the first decade of the twenty-first century, without addressing 2011? What was its status on the international art scene?

**Delphine:** The Syrian art scene is generally strong, narrative, and personified, because it is linked to a highly narrative Syrian Arab culture, which holds all this verbal legacy. This has had a great impact on the visual arts.

I believe the great shift in Syria occurred simultaneously with the advent of the Internet into the country. Before that, from 1998 until 2000, i.e., since my arrival in Syria, Syrian artists did not have the opportunity to travel outside Syria, in comparison with artists from other Arab countries.

Even scholarships for Syrian students were few and limited to certain countries such as Russia, (especially Moscow), Romania, and Armenia, i.e. former Soviet socialist countries. Scholarships were not directed to cities such as Paris, London, New York, and Berlin. Young artists did not have the opportunity to pursue their studies or participate in workshops or artistic residencies supported by these countries. Syrian arts were not known internationally. Invitations to Syrian artists were rare. This was due to the West's lack of interest in Syrian art in general. Even when an invitation was sent, it used to reach the administration of the Faculty of Fine Arts, which would disregard it. Indeed, there was no desire to send artists to the West. Syria is a closed country, and only few young Syrians speak French or English, although the previous generation had a good command of English and French. At this time, education in Syria was not developed; it was difficult to read and access foreign art books and magazines, because they were rare, except for the few magazines available at the French Cultural Center.

There was a lack of international television channels, books, and magazines and no Internet. During this period, the Syrian cultural scene was closed, with the exception of some artists from Lebanon

and Jordan, and a few more from Iraq. International exhibitions were rare in Syria, and in the Arab world in general. Few Arab artists were allowed to showcase their art in Syria, often based on official invitations from the Ministry of Culture which were framed by state standards.

In 2001, with the arrival of Bashar al-Assad, Syria witnessed the advent of the Internet, as well as foreign television channels. It launched a period of openness after severe isolation. This has provided Syrian artists with a gateway to international art. Some young people would spend their nights on computers, learning about and visiting the pages of international museums, reading art-related material, publications, and newspapers translated into Arabic. They were able to communicate with the outside world, by sending their CVs, applying (online) to art competitions, and communicating with galleries abroad and art schools. Suddenly, they became open to the rest of the world.

**Jumana:** We will move on to 2011. In the introduction to your book *Syrie: L'Art en armes [Syria: Art in Arms]* you say: "Syrian artists are producing art so that the country can survive, we stand now before an unusually committed and influential art, whose boundaries evolve as the situation develops." You wrote this in October 2012. How do you perceive the development of the Syrian art scene since 2011, and more specifically since you wrote this text?

**Delphine:** There has been a great deal of development. The revolution began in 2011. In general, the Syrian art scene was largely committed to this revolution. This commitment manifested itself in different ways. A number of artists took to the streets at the start of the revolution. Many artists organized protest and events in the streets. At this stage, we began to notice cooperation between the performing arts and the visual arts. The popular interaction with these

arts was remarkable, albeit non-existent before that due to control over and censorship of public spaces. This censorship remained present, but the State, in the midst of the developing events, lost some of its control, due to the large number of revolutionary activities. Some events were widely publicized and advertised by the revolutionaries, such as: the ping pong balls event, where political slogans were written on balls which were thrown from the top of Mount Qasioun in the al-Muhajireen neighborhood. Also worth mentioning are the red water fountains that people would see in the evening to pay tribute to a massacre that occurred elsewhere the day before, or the loudspeakers scattered in garbage bins and over the roofs playing revolution slogans in the morning for residents to hear.

All these details indicate that the Syrian art scene started building a rapport with the grassroots, resulting in clear solidarity among individuals. This is also what shaped the identity of the Syrian revolution, as it was not a bourgeois revolution, but a revolution of the people, a revolution that emerged from the villages and spread afterwards across big Syrian cities. As I said earlier: the art scene started in the Syrian villages. This is why a large number of artists participated in this revolutionary movement, because they spoke the same language as the people, they shared the same stories and details, which were filled with a high sense of humor. The revolutionaries, the artists and the residents had started the movement, but they were not yet active on a daily basis. However, they certainly began to evolve at the same time, and this is what made this period very important in the history of the revolution. We felt that everyone was supportive and participating in these daily events.

At that time, the Syrian art scene had a major role to play, not only inside Syria, but also abroad. Everyone was active on social media; (since the advent of the Internet in Syria, it was possible to access

social media even in the most remote villages and the smallest of cities). Social media became available to everyone, and it played the role of political pamphlets that took place in previous revolutions.

We were able to communicate our messages to the people through social media. Artists played a major role in this regard; they began publishing pictures, paintings, slogans, and caricatures. These messages allowed the people to stay courageous and hopeful and to feel strong. On the global stage, social media was a way for Syrians to communicate with other Syrians in the diaspora around the world. It was a platform enabling Syrians to be living witnesses of what was happening.

In the first two years of the revolution, every political event, military intervention, massacre, or direct demonstration was broadcasted and announced in the following hours. This was rare at the time. It was a way for Syrians to record history and keep very rich documentary components. We were able to learn all that was happening inside Syria through the eyes of these artists, especially given the absence of the press, as journalists had no way to know what was happening in the country. This allowed the international community to monitor what was happening. Of course, this type of documentation, or testimony, was not neutral. The perspective and thought of these artists are revolutionary, but for me it remains a way to learn about the events in a more neutral way than if it was a foreign correspondent sent to cover what was happening. They are people present at the scene in their own towns. Therefore, they are more qualified to describe and document the moment and the nature of the events.

With the beginning of the third year of the revolution, artists started to leave one by one, initially for security reasons. Many of them were arrested, as the arrest of artists and intellectuals was one of the first goals of the regime. Therefore, they left to protect themselves and their families, especially since families become in danger once a

relative is arrested or summoned by the regime. Many left for Europe. At that time, the first wave of refugees emerged. Then, between 2013 to 2016, more artists started leaving and seeking asylum. Today, very few of them still live in Syria.

These artists settled in different places. Kurdish artists, who did not have any financial resources, left for Kurdish-Turkish or Iraqi-Kurdish regions. Some artists who have families or ties settled in various regions of France. Many of them received the assistance of the French Embassy in terms of visas or residency. The diaspora grew exponentially. However, today, the situation is different. We are no longer in the stage of documentation, archiving, and memory. This is due to the extreme fatigue experienced by Syrians and the general political situation, which has worsened. At the beginning of the crisis, I had hope. Today, we have reached a difficult stage of sadness, defeat, frustration, and disappointment. Many years have passed. Syrians needed to adapt and settle in complex cities different from their own. They had to face administrative, financial, and social difficulties. During this difficult period, Syrian artists were forced to push back their art projects, in order to settle in these new cities that they did not choose. However, they did not stop producing work. Their art evolved and adapted to the new reality.

Recently, artists have begun to adapt and adjust their creativity and projects based on their circumstances and new places of residence, especially after losing their workshops, ateliers, and tools. Sculptors lost their tools, so they turned to painting. Visual artists accustomed to painting on large canvases are today confined to small rooms, often sharing them with other people. Hence, they now produce smaller paintings, or even digital paintings on computers. They were able to adapt their medium to the new circumstances.

A second point I would like to talk about is the more mature artwork being produced now, compared to the first period of the revolution.

Artists are no longer in a hurry to produce work fast to testify to what they see. Today, we are going through a more analytical and mature stage. Artists are taking their time; they are preparing for a year or two, before exhibiting their work.

Today, there is frustration and disappointment. This deep feeling of disgust and defeat is also reflected in the art, which is the only way to express oneself. We follow the development of this feeling through their artworks. Nowadays, they have completely abandoned social media.

**Jumana:** A few months after the start of the revolution, you started preparing for art exhibitions and projects about artworks that accompanied the revolution. As an art curator, what was your selection process like, especially with the wide range of artworks online and on social media? What did you want to showcase? Who was your target audience? How does Syrian creativity today fit in with your work as an art curator? Indeed, at the start of your career, your focus was centered around Syria, but perhaps today this focus has waned.

**Delphine:** I too had to leave Syria in August 2011, but I stayed in contact with Syrian artists, not just through social media. I always followed their work. I had direct relations with artists, whom I used to visit in their ateliers, and whom I contacted via Skype. These were beautiful moments. We kept doing what we did before; they would tell me about their new pieces, as if we were in Damascus. I stayed in contact with the artists inside Syria, and those who had become refugees, including those living in small rooms and others living in shared housing. Some stayed in temporary places before moving to new housing. I would monitor their artworks. I could see that these pieces generally reflected strength, creative energy, exceptional poetry, and positive messages to a large extent, thus prompting me to showcase the artwork.

I was so tired of media photos that did not portray the Syria I know. There was a visual pollution that was distorting the truth, and I did not want to be part of it or support it. I believed that supporting the Syrian revolution and supporting its artists was underpinned by exhibiting their artwork, and showcasing Syria through these pieces. This was my way to share that with the world through international exhibitions, in order to display their pieces and talk about Syria in a different way. There was often no need to talk about Syria because the artwork was sufficient to show the desired image, especially that the pieces were very narrative and symbolic; they were clear testimonials of what was really happening, in a language that everyone could understand.

There were no cultural differences compared to the countries and places where exhibitions took place. These exhibitions traveled to many countries that did not know much about Syria except through what was said on television, and the artists' message got across to the recipient easily and smoothly.

**Jumana:** Can you give us examples?

**Delphine:** A prime example is Randa Maddah's video, *Light Horizon*, a piece I love very much. It depicts a young woman inside a destroyed structure, tidying up and organizing. It ends with her sitting down at a table at the center of this destruction, surrounded by marvelous scenery. The film is worthy of international screening. When we show this video in Eastern European countries, the audience can recognize themselves in it because it contains elements that resemble scenes filmed in Yugoslavia. When it is shown in a country like Turkey, the audience finds something that echoes or resembles some Turkish regions, and the same goes for Greece. The European public found something that reminds it of itself. Life needs to go on, and women play an essential role in the midst of it all.

Pictures like these speak on their own. Our goal is not to shape a

political affiliation, but we are confronted with images that show what is actually happening in Syria. Syria is not far away; it is only on the opposite side of the sea. Syria is made up of cities, villages, and people like you. They used to live like you a few months ago, but today they are living the life you see. Through that, spectators can find themselves and their history in these pictures, which is not the case with the pictures broadcasted on television.

A European woman cannot relate to the images of veiled women running barefoot in completely destroyed places. No European man can relate to a bearded man shouting: (*Allah Akbar*) with a Kalashnikov rifle in his hand. On the other hand, an image of a man carrying a weapon, sitting in his completely destroyed living room, looking at the picture of his daughter with eyes filled with sadness and a sense of betrayal, is a picture to which we can all relate and empathize with the people in it, because it is an image has a universal human dimension.

Today, Syrian artists are generally active within the framework of international programs, or programs for artists from the Arab region, and I say this as a specialist on the Arab region. It is a big debate, and many people do not agree with me, but I find it important to preserve the Arab identity in a country like France. There is a problem with the word "Arab", and there is a problem with talking about "an Arab identity, or an Arab culture." The West today is trying to camouflage this as much as possible. If the artist is introduced as "Mediterranean," then everyone is happy. Therefore, I insist on presenting an Arab identity, Arab films, and Arab visual artists, to preserve their identity. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Attempts to erase this word, as if it were shameful, must be stopped. It is as if we can no longer utter the word "Arab" or "Islam."

**Jumana:** I will get back to this topic later, but I would like to ask you: Do you notice a worldwide desirability for Syrian art? I pose

this question while wondering: If this desirability is mainly related to today's abandoned Syria, or to Syria as a subject of art, then I personally believe that there is a general desire to tell the story of this current disaster. I even would like to compare this infatuation with a kind of neo-orientalism. What is your take on that?

**Delphine:** I don't know if I would call it neo-orientalism. I certainly call it the great thirst for disaster. We cannot deny that there is some kind of appeal in the idea of war. The media publish images with violent and indecent content because people want to watch this and because of the thirst for war. Therefore, we must go beyond the idea of completely pinning the blame on the media and television. The main party responsible is the audience. I cannot understand people who, to this day, enjoy attending photo exhibitions depicting piles of corpses! This is strange behavior to me, especially when there is no discussion about the meaning of these pictures, which is what often happens.

Since Syrian art was previously completely unknown by the West, it is possible today to display all artworks, both the bad and the good, and there is no artistic judgment on these works. Every piece is showable without concern for its artistic level. People make an effort to visit an exhibition by a Syrian artist, not for the quality of the art, but merely because it is Syrian. We visit the exhibition, discuss, or even acquire the artwork, not for its value, but to express our solidarity and sympathy.

Syrian artists need many things. If we really want them to integrate and interact with European art, we should not treat them like we pity them but rather like we value their artwork. Nowadays, when someone buys a piece, they do not say: "I bought this beautiful painting." Rather, they say: "I bought a painting by a Syrian artist," as if we are branding or signing these pieces as Syrian artworks.

Furthermore, I go back to what I said about NGOs such as Médecins Sans Frontières or Amnesty International organizing their events

as art exhibitions, which is unacceptable. Therefore, I think that we should not assess the artwork from this perspective, otherwise, we will fall into this trap every time. The widespread lack of knowledge about Arab, and specifically Syrian art, makes pieces of no real artistic value famous.

**Jumana:** Personally, what has been bothering me about displaying Syrian art since 2011 is that this art is often exhibited without reference to its artistic heritage and history, and its political history as well, as if this art came out of nowhere. Syrians have been living for more than forty years under oppression and dictatorial rule. Violence is not the product of this period. Despite that, art has been produced in the past, but it seems that a revolution or war was necessary for the world to see Syrian artistic creativity. In your opinion, what does the artistic demonstrations organized today about Syria all over the world mean? What do you think about Syrian artistic creativity before and after 2011?

**Delphine:** The big problem in Syria, before and after the revolution, is the lack of written records and archival documents, even at the educational level. For instance, I remember that I gave some lessons at the University of Qalamoun in Syria, and many students did not have any knowledge of Syrian visual arts. Imagine that I (a French woman), instead of introducing them to international visual arts as I had intended, found myself in front of Syrian students completely unaware of their Syrian culture. This is due to the lack of exhibitions, the lack of museums, and the lack of communication between the different generations of Syrian artists, as if Syrian artistic culture was prosperous in the era of Islamic culture or arts, and has made no progress since.

According to my personal knowledge, there are not enough Syrian researchers who have released publications, articles, or in-depth analytical research on the history of contemporary Syrian art and the

history of art. I have a friend whose PhD thesis focuses on Syrian art, and she is really struggling to find these types of documents. I did not know what to answer her. Even my personal collection of books that I had acquired from the 2008 Arab Capital of Culture event in Damascus, remained in Syria, and I could not bring them with me.

The tangible culture was severely damaged due to the destruction and looting of Syrian museums, which is – needless to say – a monumental loss. Due to the lack of adequate archiving, we have lost any intangible trace. Furthermore, people such as Mr. Elias Zayat, are a living and breathing library, and we should interview, record and document in writing what they say. For instance, I think that what Ms. Mona Atassi did by establishing the Atassi Foundation in Dubai to preserve her art collection is very important. She has moved the entire collection from Syria to Dubai, and she regularly organizes exhibitions of her collection. Where are those art collections? This is very important, because there is an entire culture that is not documented and is not available digitally, because there are no sites to preserve it, and this is a great loss. We talked about the past and the present; realizing that nothing is eternal can be positive for the future. Hence, it is necessary to preserve this memory, because it contains great artistic and cultural wealth.

Going back a bit to what you pointed out in your question about the West's lack of knowledge of Syrian culture before 2011, I think that this culture was not available even at the Syrian level.

When I lived in Beirut in 2017, I was in constant contact with young Syrian artists, who had recently graduated from the Faculty of Fine Arts in Damascus, i.e. they had finished their university studies, and began their lives as adults in a country at war. They were taught by the few professors who remained in Syria because the vast majority had left the country. Their knowledge of global art barely skims the surface. These young people came to Beirut without any knowledge,

but with a great need to see what is happening in the world. Even their knowledge of their previous Syrian art culture is less than that of their peers who lived in Syria ten years ago.

**Jumana:** In your opinion, how does the Syrian art market fit in with the international art scene, especially since we talked about the several exhibits that were opened in Damascus before 2011, such as Ayyam Gallery, among others.

**Delphine:** When the Criticize Auction, which is an art auction in the Arab Gulf states, was established in 2005 and 2006, there was a massive and rapid wave of large galleries springing up in Damascus. In the beginning, there was the Atassi Gallery, which was a beacon of Syrian art. This gallery was born in Homs, at the end of the 1980s, I believe, then moved to Damascus at the end of the 1990s. It was the only (known) exhibition house to display Syrian art.

The Atassi Gallery was family-oriented, not just commercial. It worked with specific art collectors from the region. Despite organizing exhibitions periodically, and printing some art books and publications, it remained at a local (family) level. As for the galleries that later emerged in Damascus, they had a more commercial character. They had a global network, and their owners knew exactly how to market artistic pieces and how to lure the global art market. However, the sudden emergence of these galleries disrupted the stability of Syrian art. In fact, the Syrian art market did not exist in the past, so the value of works by artists who used to sell at reasonable prices suddenly skyrocketed to ten times their original value. Therefore, we can no longer estimate the value of the Syrian art market.

Exhibits and galleries gradually began to leave Syria. Currently, none of them remain in Syria, and most have relocated to Dubai. As for the Atassi Gallery, it closed its doors completely as a gallery, and has been reopened today as a foundation. The commercial value no longer

exists and is no longer part of the art market. The Rafia Gallery was closed completely, but it continues to organize a few exhibitions in non-commercial spaces. Ayyam Gallery, which used to showcase the work of a large number of Syrian artists from different generations, and which previously opened a large gallery in Damascus, and others in Cairo, London, and Dubai, is now closed in Syria, Cairo and London. I have also learnt that even the Dubai gallery is not doing well today, because the global art market is in bad shape.

As for the Syrian art market, which was mostly displayed in Ayyam Gallery, it is difficult for us today to assess its condition. I also know that Ayyam Gallery proposed to its artists a contract with a monthly salary since its opening in Damascus, but this type of contract was suspended in 2016. Hence, many Syrian artists who benefited from the monthly salaries to live in Beirut have been forced to leave the city. I don't know what the future will hold, because this is still recent and it is hard to gain enough distance to analyze it.

**Jumana:** Do you think that Syrian artists after 2011 no longer need these galleries?

**Delphine:** In Europe, if the artist was not sponsored by a particular gallery, they would not be known.

**Jumana:** And what about recognition through the Internet?

**Delphine:** If we want to talk about recognition in its professional sense, we cannot consider the Internet sufficient for that. No museum or important gallery is interested in displaying the works of an artist by viewing it online or on social media. It is good from a publicity standpoint, as articles may be written about this work, or you may find some interested researchers. However, this is not enough to enter the international art scene.

Of course, some artists were able to showcase pieces in some small galleries in cities in Germany or France. I am mainly talking about these two countries because most Syrian artists are living there. They may also be able to show their work in a commercial gallery or a mall in Dubai. However, this is not equivalent to entering the international art scene.

**Jumana:** Who are the Syrian artists who have become international? Khaled Takriti, for example?

**Delphine:** Khaled Takriti has been living in France for a long time. He was one of the artists working at Ayyam Gallery. Jaber Azmeh, for example, was largely supported by Mona Atassi, and now he works with the Yasmin Atassi Green Art Gallery. He has achieved worldwide recognition through this gallery. There has been an announcement that the British Museum had acquired a piece of his. However, the museum contacted the Gallery, not him personally.

**Jumana:** But the British Museum acquired several Syrian artworks when you organized an exhibition in Bordeaux.

**Delphine:** Yes, this exhibition was the second phase of the project. The first stage of this project was the publication of a book to support Syrian artists who were still living in Syria. As for the exhibition, it was intended to support Syrian artists who left Syria for Europe, and who did not have a network of art contacts. At that time, the British Museum, the Atassi Foundation and a group of local and international collectors acquired many pieces.

As I mentioned earlier: I played the role of the galleries. A group of large museums happened to be interested in Syrian art at the time, and this means that organizing this exhibition in London or Berlin will have the same network of contacts.

**Jumana:** How did you go about writing *Syrie, l'Art en Armes*, especially since it was one of the first books issued addressing Syrian art during this period?

**Delphine:** The book's story is very beautiful. In 2012, I traveled to Rotterdam to screen a number of Syrian films at a film festival, and I met a journalist working for the French newspaper *Le Monde*, called Jacques Mandelbaum. He wanted to write an article about Syrian filmmakers, and he knew that I was working with these artists. It was a great opportunity for him, not only to watch the films, but to meet other artists as well. Mandelbaum had met filmmaker Osama Mohammed in Paris, and he wanted to interview other filmmakers who had come directly from Syria. At that time, we organized many interviews with the artists, and we discussed media campaigns and social media platforms tackling the Syrian issue. I informed the French journalist of my documentation work of all pieces circulating online.

Several months later, La Martinière Publishing House contacted Jacques Mandelbaum to suggest that he write a journalistic text on Syrian art, and he wanted the text to be accompanied by a selection of photos. Since Jacques did not have these pictures, he contacted me to collaborate. He offered to write the text, and in turn I would provide him with the necessary visual information. Mandelbaum wrote the introduction to the book, which is the same text he wrote for *Le Monde* after our meeting in Rotterdam. The text talks about Syrian cinematic art a year after the beginning of the revolution. It also discusses Syrian visual art, and concludes by referring to the art collection showcased in the book.

**Jumana:** One day, you and I were talking about a documentary that had been shown for a while in several international festivals, and you told me at the time that you did not think that this film was strong

enough from a technical point of view, but you felt it was necessary on the Syrian art scene. I ask myself: If Syrian artists currently live in a dilemma, caught between the need for testimony and the pleasure of producing a work of art, who decides what work meets artistic standards, and what work fulfills the function of responding to this need for testimony?

**Delphine:** I think that this selection and decision is made with time, and on its own. In the early years, there was an urgent need for testimony, and I think that the artists did not produce art intentionally at the time, but rather wanted to present a testimony. There were no art gatherings and no collective action; the attempts were individualistic. They were trying hard to find their place in Syria. With the beginning of the revolution, they started creating art groups for collective action. They started working under pseudonyms, or without mentioning the artist's name on social media, and this made a big difference. This meant that the artist had put his profession aside to serve his desire to testify and document what was happening. I find in these testimonies and attempts to comment on events interesting forms of artistic value. Artworks became the result of a collective action, or the work of a person under a pseudonym, and this is not only considered a testimony or journalistic work. When these artists began to leave Syria, there was no longer a need to hide their names, and they no longer needed to produce art quickly. Their artworks matured, and they had the time to create more sophisticated pieces. I reiterate that in the beginning, there was a pressing need to document, but today I find art pieces that have maintained this need, but with a significantly developed artistic aspect.

This means that what counts are the meaning and the message of the film, not its form and artistic elements. However, I believe that, today, we are at a stage where form and meaning have become equally important. Artists have realized that they need to create international artworks. I think the films of cinematographer Ziad Kalthoum are

a good example. His first work, "The Immortal Sergeant," is a very beautiful film on both levels: the film is an important testimony, but its artistic level is also very good. Everyone was wondering: After producing a film at such a high artistic level, how will his next one be? This question put a lot of pressure on Ziad. However, he proved through his second film, "Taste of Cement," that he is able to create a wonderful film in terms of meaning and form. This film was nominated for the Best Documentary Award at the Visions du Réel Festival. This proves of the point I wanted to make earlier: Not only in the urgent need for testimony was Ziad able to create a good film, but even when he left Syria and sought asylum in another place, and perhaps with a larger budget, he was able to maintain the balance required to create a world-class film. He was also able to strike a balance between the artistic form and the deep meaning of the film.

Therefore, Ziad began to establish his position as an artist. This is no exception, as there is a good number of artists who were up to the challenge. Another example is Monif Ajaj, a visual artist who was very prolific when he was in Syria. When he moved to France, it was difficult at first. Today, however, he began to consolidate his stature as an artist despite his few exhibitions. His artistic identity remained strong and clear. Therefore, I think time will tell.

**Jumana:** I was very surprised that there were no pieces on Syria at the Georges Didi-Huberman exhibition in the Jeu de Paume. There were one or two small videos about "Liberation" in Egypt. These were the only two artworks addressing the revolutions in the Arab Region. Why is that? My question is not innocent. I think the issue is related to France's relationship with these colonial countries (colonized by France), and it is linked to the history of the Arab Region, but from the perspective of the West. What do you think is the reason for this desire to erase the period of the revolution from our history, and only

preserve the part related to war? To go one step further: What is the role of artists and curators in rewriting this history?

**Delphine:** Regarding Syria, I am sure that the issue is related to the international art scene's lack of knowledge about the arts and art history in Syria. Therefore, the Syrian revolution has had a great effect on this lack of knowledge, but the situation remained confusing, due to the lack of symbols necessary to adopt art forms.

The Egyptian case is completely different. Contemporary Egyptian art is better known internationally. There are several internationally known cultural and artistic places in Egypt, such as the Townhouse Gallery. There are also many curators and cultural centers interested in Egyptian artists. Furthermore, the mobility of artists was easier.

After the war, Lebanese art gained international recognition. I think Syria will have a similar story. In fact, interest in Lebanon and Lebanese art grew after the rise of a strong art movement during and after the civil war. At that time, there was a new generation of artists who had studied in the West, created a network of professional contacts, and then returned to Lebanon to build these connections between Lebanese and international art. Perhaps this will be the case in Syria, but after a while.

Were curators, museums, and art centers the ones who invited Lebanese artists before the 1980s? I don't think so. Perhaps this is what awaits Syria in the future. Today, I think that when current curators organize huge retrospective exhibitions, they feel uncomfortable talking about Syrian art, because of this lack of knowledge.

**Jumana:** My final question is this: How do you personally define the profession of curator?

**Delphine:** There are many definitions, and many ways to be a curator.

My take on this is linked to my majoring in art at university. Therefore, my work - in my capacity as an art curator - is an expression of my ideas, not through my artwork, but through the works of other artists. Every time I organize an art event, be it an exhibition or a film festival, I try to express my thoughts, feelings, and desires through the work of other artists, but this is my personal way of being a curator.

The tendencies of the art curator could rely on theoretical research. I, however, do not rely much on the theoretical side, but I express myself by creating an event that includes pieces by a group artists, and elaborating a language that speaks to them. Not only am I trying to convey a message through it, but I am trying to convey emotions and feelings as well.

**Jumana:** That was all. Would you like to add anything else?

**Delphine:** Our future is taking shape and evolving, whether we like it or not. I am sure that Syrian artists will find their way, because there are hundreds of them today in all parts of the world. Their story is still being written. From that stepping stone, they will write the story of Syrian art. However, it is important to preserve and archive the past, so that we can build on a strong foundation. This intangible heritage must be protected at any cost.

**Jumana:** Thank you, Delphine Leccas, for this important input on the most significant developments in Syrian visual art in recent years.

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