

Ahmed El Attar – Curating within and beyond conventions, identities and politics in the Arab world

In the following I summarize the contribution of the Egyptian curator Ahmed El Attar to the Symposium "Show Me The World" in Munich and I try to give an idea about his person and about his approach to the practice of curation. Ahmed El Attar is an Egyptian playwright, theatre director, translator, culture manager and curator. He is responsible for a number of projects. To name only a few: He is the founder and artistic director of *Temple Independent Theatre Company* and of *Orient Productions* for film and theatre, he is the founder and director of *Studio Emad Eddin Foundation*, as well as the artistic director of *Falaki Theatre*. His projects share the idea of stimulating and encouraging contemporary art in Egypt, or offering an infrastructure for cultural production (e.g. rehearsal spaces). Moreover Ahmed El Attar, who also conceives himself as an artist in the first place, is organizing and curating the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (shortly called D-CAF) established in 2012. It is the only international performing arts festival in Egypt, taking place every year for three weeks. Ahmed El Attar's vision for the festival D-CAF is to activate the districts of downtown Cairo, to provoke new discourse and to add to the current discourse. It is a kind of an independent manifestation with the art sections theatre, visual arts, film, music, dance and a category called 'urban visions'.

D-CAF is a unique project in the Egyptian cultural life. As there is nothing that is completely independent in Ahmed El Attar's opinion, he prefers the denotation 'alternative'. In his curatorial work he is battling limited funding and poor infrastructure. There is very little state funding and very little private support for his festival. D-CAF's main partners are a Real Estate Company, as well as a number of international organizations like the British council and the Danish Embassy. Furthermore there is a lack of professionals in cultural work and limited experiences with contemporary art in general in Egypt. In his work for D-CAF, he puts high value on good organization: Punctuality, for example, is not a matter of course in Egypt and Ahmed El Attar tries to implement it by starting the performances during the festival in time.

Ahmed emphasizes that curating a festival is a process. He regards himself as a spin doctor: he is empowering people and he is making people speak, although not politically. This has so much power in Cairo in his opinion: Conveying to the audience a feeling of freedom can already be understood politically in Egypt. Working as a curator means for Ahmed El Attar to regard the Egyptian context all the time. He is trying to contribute new ideas, different ways of thinking and reflection to it.

For Ahmed curatorial practice is a kind of navigating: He is travelling a lot to different festivals around the world. During his journeys he is building – what he calls – imaginary 'docks' out of his impressions which then develop the structure of the festival in his mind. It is obvious that curating for him is a very personal process. His experience, his way of thinking, and his emotions are involved all the time. But still it is important for him not to curate according to his personal taste, but to artistic value.

The big challenge for him is to deal with conventions. In this sense 'conventions' do not mean traditional ways of performing that are known from the past. They refer to the present and mean comparable ways of performing becoming apparently at various international festivals. There are similar things to see at festivals all over the world, so the risk to produce

copy-like performances is high. According to Ahmed El Attar, by copying, the artistic value is getting lost. For him the only parameter that counts in any work is the artistic value: it has to be somehow inventive and original. Nationality doesn't matter for him, even though he admits that he has to act with caution in order to not present a western showcase to the Arab world with his festival.

In his artistic work, one can highlight topics like questioning reality, mistrust of language, meditations on power relations in families, as well as on questions of space. All of them relate to the identity or the process of identification. Aesthetical and contextual identification also play a great role in his work as a curator.

Identity, politics and economics are factors within the curation and organization of a festival that are all dynamic and that shape the festival. So, what are factors that constantly exist? Ahmed El Attar's answer is intuition, analysis and vision.

In the workshop during the Symposium "Show Me The World" in Munich, Ahmed El Attar is giving an idea of his work philosophy. He doesn't seem to pay much attention to pedagogical principles. He is simply taking everybody very seriously, so the Saturday afternoon that was declared as a 'workshop' turns out to be a very interesting talk between theatre makers or festival organizers of different countries. Everybody has to tell a lot about the cultural work in his or her country; an exchange of experiences is what Ahmed puts centre-stage. This gives only an impression of his unconventional way of thinking and working.

Handling within and beyond conventions, identities, politics and economics is the challenge for Ahmed El Attar while curating an international festival of contemporary art in the Arab world. He is working in a transcultural context, constantly reflecting about it and being aware about difficulties and chances through this. However he does explicitly not consider himself as part of any theoretical discourse. Ahmed El Attar takes a pragmatic approach and is successfully programming the unique Downtown Contemporary Art Festival in Egypt.

*Angelika Endres*