CHAPTER 4

Come Together: Institutional Frameworks, Communities, and the Rise of Collaborative Art Praxis in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia

4.1 Introduction

How do institutions impact the practices of artists? What does their presence allow that otherwise would not have been possible? And, conversely, are there limitations they set for artistic output? Depending on the size and notoriety of the organization, institutions have been both supportive and nurturing as well as controlling and authoritative forces, and this can happen simultaneously. One can think of the now famous resistance to the art academy that the Impressionists embraced to usher in their style of art. Much lesser known is the effect of community-based groups on the growth of artistic practice in the MENASA. Without the presence of such spaces, some artists might not have the necessary assistance and tools to be able to make and present their art. On the other hand, have these organizations forced a particular “alternative” discourse as some of them have achieved international renown. This chapter will discuss the significance of grassroots institutions in the region in initiating, espousing, promoting, and perhaps compelling the production of participatory or collaborative art projects. I will highlight five arts centers in the region—Marrakech, Cairo, Beirut, Amman, and Karachi. These cities are in different parts of the geographic territory and are significant places for the development of recent artistic practices in the respective nations as well as across the entire area.
Marrakech is the site of a biennial exhibition of regional and global contemporary art. Queens Collective, an arts space and group of artists that are engaged with the local community in the medina (the center of the old city) of Marrakech, has partnered with the biennial organization. It runs “Medina kids’ workshops” and collects donations for the youngest residents of the neighborhood in which the collective is ensconced; however, its ongoing presence is more significant than any specific undertaking. In Cairo, Townhouse Gallery initiated as a grassroots organization and developed a workshop to address the concerns of refugees in the city. Beginning as a small project, it quickly grew to attract thousands of participants. In Amman, Darat al Funun has been instrumental in shaping a culture for contemporary art in the city since 1988. Meanwhile newer organizations have been active in contributing to the same ethos of support for artists working today. During its tenure, the Makan organizers created projects that pushed the limits of artistic practice in the public sphere. No longer in existence, the Spring Sessions has taken over Makan’s physical and philosophical space. Other smaller initiatives feed the spirit of artistic practices in Amman, including Jadid for Knowledge and Culture that provide forums for interchange and debate. In Karachi, practitioners working with the organization Vasl Artists’ Association have produced art in the public sphere in which ordinary citizens have been engaged to address local civic concerns. It is an organization that is at the center of artistic output in Pakistan. According to its mission, “Vasl Artists’ Association functions as a space and a platform for nurturing creativity and encouraging freedom to create experimental work.”\(^1\) A critical space for open dialogue and sometimes radical thought is The Second Floor in Karachi that is known better as T2F. It is a younger organization; however, it has provided artists and others in the city with a crucial outlet that allows them to find like-minded individuals and partake in activities and resources to generate new and innovative ideas. Ashkal Alwan in Beirut is renowned for its programs including Home Works that has offered a platform for artists and arts professionals, both local and international, to gather together and discuss critical issues of the field in the Arab region and globally. This organization and many others in the MENASA have offered a space for the display, study, and dissemination of work by artists in their milieus, thereby raising awareness of art from the region. They provide a service to their audiences, namely artists and arts professionals by creating opportunities for exchange and dialogue and feeding into a culture of innovation and experimentation. A much smaller project in Beirut,
spearheaded by curator Amanda Abi Khalil is Temporary Art Platform. She has been focusing her curatorial projects on socially engaged practices, public spaces and the contextual ways of making art and curating in Lebanon. Concerned with a sociological reading of the art scene in Beirut and interested in cultural policy, she has been particularly devoted to commissioning local artists to explore the possibilities of engaging social, aesthetical or political dialogues in different contexts that are on the margin of the art world.

Institutions in the region offer platforms that facilitate the sharing of narrative accounts and investigate the coexistence and co-dependence of entities and individuals. Such a tactic could help in uncovering and shedding light on concerns affecting these societies, including the ongoing impact of colonialism and the effects of a globalized world. The artworks and activities at the organizations discussed in the essay introduce innovative methods that attempt to address these and other social and political issues. Although the groups and the artists associated with them investigate serious topics, they do so in light-hearted ways that do not foreground the complicated concerns on the table. Instead, the modes of production are sociable and, perhaps, more effective in targeting participants. Rather than alienating outsiders, they are invited to partake in the activity. The weight of history is shed in a convivial situation. Through these actions, each organization builds bridges with its extended community to open up conversations and encourage the telling of stories about shared experiences.

Many of them initiated as small, grassroots organizations functioning on the ground according to what communities of artists and others needed out of them. Some of them have gained increasing notoriety in global contemporary art as artists from the MENASA have been exhibiting in major institutions around the world. And, in fact, it is likely because of these organizations that artists from the region have been getting recognition internationally. As curators want to know more about artistic practices in the area, they often turn to such spaces for guidance with the hope of connecting with more experimental and innovative artists. The apparent belief is that these organizations are aligned with the narrative of contemporary art that is promulgated globally as more subversive and cutting-edge. Whether this is true or not, it does seem apparent that some of the organizations shifted from a marginal existence to one that occupies a more prominent presence in the local contemporary art world as well the global one. With such a move, the authority or influential reach
of such organizations grows. Their impact is analyzed to outline what might happen as the fringe shifts to the mainstream.

4.2 Queens Collective and Le18, Marrakech

In Marrakech, Queens Collective is a multi-function community arts organization founded by women and primarily functions because of women. Although it is not the most prominent organization in the city, it is important to consider it because of its philosophy that sees artistry as activism. At the bohemian “start-up,” they live and work together to create opportunities and projects for artists from the region and around the world, as well as for the public in the neighborhood and beyond to engage in the arts on multiple levels (Fig. 4.1). Like the medina of Marrakech, the organization has grown organically, shaping into a form that has seemed instinctual and spontaneous. In fact, one of its aims is to embrace constant flux, as it develops according to what is relevant and possible. It is deeply committed to the local context, and actively connected to a larger framework of the global community. This has been true since its founding when two individuals from art and sociology backgrounds decided to create a platform to connect the arts, the city and its population, and the interested artists and arts professionals within and beyond Marrakech. Hana Tefrati trained as a dancer and continues to work in the field, as well as in installation and performance art. Siham Taflayout studied to be a social worker and remains one, while she also experiments in various art forms and cares for a guesthouse that supplies some of the funding for the running of the collective.

There are several projects and initiatives that the collective organizes that seem to have developed out of the commitments of its principals. It has a free-spirit sensibility in its communal approach to living and art that blurs boundaries between personal and shared. The collective has programs for children in the neighborhood, as mentioned above. It runs various residency programs for artists from Marrakech and beyond. The guesthouse offers sliding scale rates to provide cultural travelers benefit from its open home lifestyle intertwined with the arts and local community.

Rather than seeing it is as an organization that arranges distinct projects with a beginning or ending, Queens Collective could be considered an overarching bridge connecting local and international artists, children, women, and the general public in a series of moments responding organically to whatever is needed or desired. Yet it could also be viewed as
an entity instigating projects that are often ephemeral and are more about social connections than physical manifestations. The initiative functions in the intervals of art and life; the public and private.

Queens Collective is an integrated whole that aims to be sustainable, and so it shifts when necessary and answers the requirements of its interested audiences, whether those are artists or neighbors. For example,
the Medina kids’ workshops run every week and are multidisciplinary. As such, each session, a performing or visual artist, or any other type of practitioner might offer a workshop. This volunteer might be a visitor staying at the guesthouse.

The collective seems more intuitive in its efforts to serve the mission through one continuing venture that has several branches. These parts are vital for the growing whole and often intersect. For example, the residency programs address the needs and wishes of artists and they also feed the community programs that the collective organizes. Through this platform, Queens Collective hosts holistic and integrated endeavors at select moments that serve each other, the entire venture, and its ongoing presence. In aggregate, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. And because the organization has remained in the area for over five years, the neighbors have grown to trust the collective and reached out to them to provide workshops for what has been required.

So now one of the founding members, half-German and half-Moroccan Hana Tefrati, who had arrived in Marrakech to find herself and began the collective with this in mind, sees the endeavor as a two-way street through which she gains, and the extended community does so as well. The riad, as Moroccans call a house, in which it is located has been a living, breathing organism that has grown as the organization has developed into a multi-faceted addition to the city (Fig. 4.2). Even as it holds exhibitions, it is not the typical white cube gallery found in other parts of Marrakech, and, as such, others in the local art scene have been skeptical of it. Still, it has collaborated with institutions to respond to important developments in the city’s cultural landscape, including the Marrakech Biennial, and internationally, such as 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair. For the latter, Mint Works approached Queens Collective to produce a performance. Tefrati presented *Desire Path* at the Somerset House in London that has a message about the enduring strength of the queer community in Marrakech.

The pulsating riad is a platform for diversity, community, and openness through its entire presence, rather than through any one aspect (Fig. 4.3). The organization as a whole is a work of art, perhaps like an installation, and has transformed over time. Its dynamic shape-shifting existence absorbs a variety of individuals and groups into its framework—this can be the case for installation art that often does not remain a fixed entity. It changes over time and location. Even as the projects at the riad have beginnings and endings, the most significant feature is fleeting. It is about the experiential nature of producing the undertaking, of having the chance
to express life’s little blisses, of seeing themselves and others they know speaking. The concrete remains are few and do not actually hold the same currency as the process of making them. Yet change does happen—not in any physical way, but in the mind and in the heart.

Unlike the artwork examined in Chap. 3, the projects that Queens Collective organizes and facilitates might not fit comfortably into the definition of participatory, collaborative art that art historian Claire Bishop set up in her study. Its practices and projects are too functional, akin to outreach programs that aim to address particular needs in a community. The activities at Queens Collective might well be understood in this manner. The organizers offer the community resources, events, and means of sustenance. The group does provide goods for their neighbors. Yet, the tangible outcomes of its actions are few. Instead, the kinds of things that it does are ephemeral, and not geared for any particular result. In fact, as the organizers have stated, there is no grand project that they have produced. Rather, the simple existence of the entity is enough to sustain them. There may not be a disruption or provocation that Bishop finds
necessary in the labelling of something as art today; however, it is still a label that could be applied to the work of Queens Collective. Why is it important to be able to consider what the group enacts as art? The answer is twofold: expanding the potentials for artistic practices and viewing such initiatives as artistic expressions to shape new formulae for the relationship of art and life.

Also in the medina of Marrakech, Le 18 is one of those grassroots arts organizations so important for artists in local contexts. Le 18 supports the growth of arts in the city and beyond through organizing exhibitions, programs, events, and residencies. Laila Hida is its founding director; she, like Queens Collective’s Hana Tefrati, began the initiative after time spent in Europe. The projects at Le 18 are quite literally fluid: Qanat is an ongoing initiative examining the ancient water systems of Marrakech from various points of view. A shared resource, water connects communities and symbolizes a fluid interdependence among individuals. A transdisciplinary, extended project like Qanat indicates the type of process-oriented work
presented at Le 18. This studied approach to art and society resulted in ephemeral outcomes: in-depth discussions in the organization’s space; walks around the city; and linkages with the neighborhood.

4.3 **Townhouse Gallery and Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo**

In Cairo, Townhouse Gallery has organized events that happen at the intersection of artistic practices and everyday life. As soon as Townhouse was established in 1998, it went quickly from an exhibition space to an entity sewn into the fabric of the neighborhood in which it was located as well as the community of artists and others that it supported. The organization relied on its neighbors as well.

Until recently and probably still effectively true today, the infrastructure for the display of art and support of its production has not been strong in the MENASA region, at least not since the time of European colonialism. In a place like Cairo at the turn of this century, where the government did not favor experimental or political art, the Townhouse Gallery filled a void in the cultural scene. In the late 1990s, William Wells, a Canadian expatriate living in Cairo, was quite conscious of the need for a different kind of art space. He wanted to develop a non-profit gallery accommodating of a variety of practices and one that offered a home for socially engaged art that was cutting edge. This kind of art was beginning to be made in Cairo, but there were no institutions that supported such work. During his search for a space, Wells came across a suitable building in a back alley—one that was near, but away from the main thoroughfare. The structure was ideal for the kind of work that he wanted to exhibit; however, local artists felt that the location was not good for attracting audiences. They told him to find a place in the heart of center streets. And, in fact, at first, Wells had to recruit non-Egyptian artists to exhibit at the gallery because the local ones did not believe that anyone would attend a space tucked into a neighborhood.

Wells felt intrigued by the back alley. Here, there was a community of its own making with a currency used to bypass any irregularities in the national economy. This self-contained society had its rules and regulations. There were all sorts of people working on the street: car mechanics, glass cutters, welders, and others. Wells thought that his gallery could add to the microcosm without “parachuting” in and imposing its ways of doing
things. He believed that it could be a mutually beneficial relationship. With such a diversity of trades taking place in the area, the gallery and the artists working with them could find reliable sources for materials and services. This helped the neighborhood economically while the gallery benefited from the services rendered and the improved relationship and support system from the neighbors.

A similar trajectory is found in other cities in North Africa and beyond. Broadly speaking, in many places around the world, it could be argued that experimental, grassroots arts organizations (or non-establishment institutions) have not had the luxury or aspiration to be an elitist platform for cutting-edge art. These spaces are deeply ingrained in the local communities from which they emerge and all of the sociocultural, political, and economic issues that accompany them. They rely on the good will of the area and interest of their neighbors to sustain operations at the organizations. Creating a harmonious environment in their locale appears to be crucial to their upkeep and existence. And, discursively, the communities often come to rely on the initiatives that the organizations offer.

Now, with the existence of the category of collaborative art, participatory art, and socially engaged art, there is a name that could be given to the experiences created in these spaces that are encouraging and producing such a practice. Even while they are “organizations” or “entities,” they espouse an artist or a neighbor point of view, so one that is more relatable, familiar, and casual rather than official and hierarchical. At Townhouse, one initiative that weaved “neighbor” and “neighborhood” into a union is SAWA, an Arabic word literally meaning together. On Saturdays, the art organization opened its doors to anyone that wanted to make art. They supplied materials and space for such an undertaking. Artist-led workshops offered guidance in this endeavor. At first the project of social engagement through the arts was directed to the neediest communities in Cairo: refugees from Sudan. Soon other refugees joined them; first from Iraq and more recently from Syria. In a conference in the United Arab Emirates, the director informed that the Egyptian government disapproved of that kind of initiative and so the organization simply took “refugee” out of the title to keep the program afloat and thriving. It is now called SAWA Workshops for the Visual Arts.

In the years following, the outreach expanded to newer audiences. People from various parts of Cairo, economic backgrounds, age groups, and ethnicities have participated in the program since it was established in 2006. Offered as a free event during which participants are guided in the
making of art, topics like “surrealism” are explored in sessions that anyone can attend. As a result, the workshop has introduced the unlikeliest of people to the field. A former security guard discovered his talent and creativity. He is now an internationally exhibiting artist.\(^9\) While this success story might be unusual (although there have been others), it demonstrates the impact that the institution has made on the local community: its outreach wholly transformed the life of an individual. In turn, the gallery has reached an international level of notoriety due to the success of the program and individuals associated with it.

The kind of influence that the organization could have did not go unnoticed by the authorities in Egypt. In December 2015, the government shut Townhouse down without citing provocation for the action and raid into the establishment.\(^10\) Apparently Townhouse Gallery set off bells and whistles, perhaps due to its popularity and ability to connect with its communities. The organization managed to reopen after almost a year in a new location. (It had temporarily opened in February 2016, but its building partially collapsed and then the government further demolished some of the structure.) The government imposed tight regulations and levied costly infrastructure requirements. Free speech, exchange of ideas, and an open society was what the SAWA Workshops for the Visual Arts embraced to attract thousands of people over the years; however, the exact things that drew attention to the project threatened its very existence. Unrestricted and open access to information was, as we all now know, a clear and present danger to the permanency of the oppressive regime in Egypt during the first decade of the twenty-first century. The authoritarians attempted to keep a check on dissenting voices, but eventually could not win in the technologically advanced world where communication is instantaneous and prevalent. The SAWA program contributed to an environment of free dialogue among the people of Cairo. According to Townhouse, “By providing a communal, un-politicized space where people—regardless of race, gender or class—can make art, the SAWA workshops break down obstacles of communication and understanding.”\(^11\)

The foundation of the SAWA Workshops for Visual Arts was based within the ideology of the Townhouse Gallery: to serve as a platform for artists to have an open and accessible dialogue with audiences.\(^12\) For example, the gallery includes a library that is available for anyone to visit and take advantage of the diversity of books on the shelves—from ones that provide general information on art and history to those that are specifically about local and regional practices. The library is also an inviting
space where visitors can sit for hours and freely utilize the Wi-Fi signals and have a cup of tea and meet with friends and colleagues (Fig. 4.4). Talking to each other, sharing stories, and engaging in the community rather than prioritizing individual lifestyles—these are the aspects of the program and institution that connect with the social dynamics of the local society. Evidence of the communal is found in the alley where Townhouse is located: chairs lined up together serve as a space for neighbors to sit and chat (Fig. 4.5). Existing together and exchanging ideas are critical features of both the organization and the society at large, as such the gallery offers an organic manner for art to function in the community, and the community can become engaged with the art.

Without forcing a union, Townhouse Gallery has constructed a web to connect with a diversity of publics that seems to be lateral rather than top-down. The community is critical in the system that expands the interconnections between art and everyday life in order to benefit all participants. These dialogical avenues have the potential to open up channels for forging new tales that will be shared in the future.
In launching such actions, Townhouse features projects emerging out of an aesthetics based on social interaction rather than visual or conceptual forms. The organization does present exhibitions of art by local and international artists that include a wide variety of media. However, it could be argued that a more significant contribution to global contemporary art is the provocation and embrace of initiatives that prioritize social engagement. Townhouse addresses the community’s interests and requirements through a multifaceted platform that connects the arts with the society. The resulting “art” is expressed in shared exchange.

Townhouse has held regional symposia to address topical issues in the art of the area. Building connections among likeminded colleagues in Cairo and beyond, the seminars have facilitated cross-dialogues to take place. According to its mission: “The institution collaborates with a range of artists and institutions in every aspect of its work, aiming to contribute to a comprehensive network in the local, regional and international arts community.” Building connections is a priority for the institution. With
such linkages in the region, Townhouse promotes storytelling and collaboration as invaluable tools in the development of art.

A smaller initiative in Cairo is Contemporary Image Collective (CiC) that is nonetheless a significant entity in the city for the arts. It is a cultural institution with a special interest in the overlap of visual culture, artistic practice and critical discourse. An artist run organization that often works collaboratively with the community, CiC has overlaps in its spirit as well as structure with Queens Collective in Marrakech. It is a grassroots organization located in what would have been a grand early twentieth century apartment building in the downtown area with an original elevator that seems precarious these days. The space is a haven for Cairo’s artists that seek out facilities for photography, including a dark room and digital lab. As the name suggests, Contemporary Image Collective is a repository of images, from offering support to photographers to create imagery through the provision of labs to the library (Fig. 4.6) that provides “an open, discursive space where artists and non-artists alike may engage with literature, multimedia and one another.”

The entity shifts its shape
according to what is needed by the community. Although difficult to maintain the organization, its principles have found ways to continue its existence in order to support artists in Cairo and beyond. Clearly the interest of CiC and other organizations discussed thus far is to bring people together in order to encourage an exchange, whether it is ideas, energy, or actual things.

4.4  **Ashkal Alwan and Temporary Art Platform, Beirut**

Ashkal Alwan in Beirut has offered a space for artists to be able to investigate a variety of approaches to making art. Christine Tohme is the founding director of the Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts, which is the full English name of Ashkal Alwan. It provides a physical facility for the presentation of art exhibitions, setting for panel discussions and other educational events, and residencies for artists from around the world (Fig. 4.7). In existence since 1993, Ashkal Alwan has been critical in the development of art practices in the city and regionally, including ones that are more socially engaged. It initiated as a collective of artists interested in supporting each other and an extended community of artists in the city, country, and beyond.

Since this beginning point, more than two decades has passed, and several other arts organizations have been established in Beirut and around the extended Middle East, yet Ashkal Alwan maintains a prominent position. It guides the development of contemporary art practices in Lebanon and around the region. It is having a global impact primarily because of the presence of Tohme. She is instrumental in promoting the arts of the country and the extended region to audiences around the world. Tohme has been recognized as functioning in such a capacity. She was appointed curator of the 2017 edition of the Sharjah Biennial, an event that has reached an international stage. A more recent measure of her positioning in the art world is ArtReview’s Power 100 that assesses and determines a list of the most impactful figures in global art. It is not determined by a geographic area, but the art world as a whole. In 2018, she placed at 55, down from 50 in 2017. Her significance is evident through such a ranking.
Even as the founding director has achieved international recognition and accolades, and the institution that she founded has extended its reaches far beyond a niche audience, upon entering the space at Ashkal Alwan, there is a feeling of a grassroots, communal organization. There is no sense of a corporate institution, with a refined and pristine identity. It remains rough around the edges. Ashkal Alwan is located in an industrial area of Beirut and the space that it has is a former factory. This kind of a

Fig. 4.7  Ashkal Alwan space, Beirut, 2018. (Photograph by the author)
facility has been favored by commercial galleries as well as non-profit art ventures extensively in recent years. However, there is a tendency to convert the raw infrastructure into a clean environment. That is not the case for the Lebanese Association of Plastic Arts. Instead, it offers a relaxed set-up where conversations can be had, research can be completed, and art can be viewed (Fig. 4.8). The space appears to be open for all, approachable, and supportive in the display and study of art from the city, region, and globally. As such, Ashkal Alwan has perhaps toed the line between the global and local.

It developed Home Works in 2002 as a forum for dialogue and exchange of art and ideas in the region. This has been a key feature at the organization that has fueled the discussion about art and related ideas, as well as led to its increased production in the region. It has been such an important forum for artists in Beirut and beyond to be able to address critical issues in contemporary art. The event has had a major impact on artistic practices across the region. In the first Home Works, professionals in the field were

Fig. 4.8 Ashkal Alwan space, Beirut, 2018. (Photograph by the author)
invited to explore the notion of dislocation amidst the current geo-political and economic context at that time in the Arab region. Over the last two decades, many participants have shared art and ideas to increasing numbers of audiences. As the profile of art in the extended Middle East has become more prominent, many of the artists and curators have achieved global renown. And, as the event has gained more significance in the global contemporary arts calendar, well-known participants have arrived from various parts of the world. Artists and arts professionals that have presented ideas and art in Home Works in the different editions include Emily Jacir, Catherine David, Walid Raad, Naeem Mohaiemen, Okwui Enwezor, Janane Al-Ani, and many others.

This forum has meant an increased communication among artists and arts professionals across varied lines, including national borders. As art historian Grant Kester has written, artists and groups globally have found benefit in the “facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities’ and that they are ‘context providers.’” Ashkal Alwan’s role has been vital in creating an arena for the interchange of ideas and practices. It is not simply for the display of art. Although Kester is referring more specifically to artist collectives, or a group of artists working together, an organization like Ashkal Alwan (as well as Queens Collective, Townhouse Gallery, and Contemporary Image Collective) might be understood as more process-based because it creates situations in which art can be developed and ideas can be pursued. With collaborative art praxis, artists are offering a similar set-up. As a think tank of sorts, it is not through just one approach, but rather a multi-pronged process to engage a community of artists and arts professionals, along with an extended public.

Ashkal Alwan has published the notes for the gatherings, making available the concepts explored in the past. For Home Works II, the introduction makes clear quickly expanding participation:

Originally conceived as a regional platform for cultural practices in the Arab world, the Home Works Forum has since shed its geographic/geopolitical focus to concentrate on kindred artistic and intellectual concerns that are operative all over the world. And what are these “kindred artistic and intellectual concerns?” A review of the proceedings suggests that these are linked to politics and society beyond the arts or to which the arts are connected. This interlacing is acknowledged in the introduction that limits the possibilities of truth.
According to Tohme, “What the Home Works Forum allows for, rather, is a productive space in which political, social, economic, and cultural realities can be explored, reflected, and made manifest as visual and verbal articulations that occur with some consistency.” The event, as such, is a process much like how works of art are created in the contemporary moment. Throughout the world, many artists place more significance in the act of making, rather than any finished product. In recent artworks generally, various boundaries are dissolved. Lines are blurred between artistic practice and curating, between an artwork and an educational project. It seems that several practitioners and professionals are not interested in maintaining these potentially false splits. With such a shift in artistic practices, is it possible to reconsider the role of arts organizations?

Also in Beirut, Temporary Art Platform (tap.) is an organization that attempts to find modes of erasing such borderlines. The Beirut-based initiative is the work of curator and writer Amanda Abi-Khalil. She has organized projects to bring arts to the community in a process-oriented manner. Abi-Khalil has collaborated with individuals and groups from the region and world. She has worked with artists, curators, intellectuals, government officers, and others. One of the main purposes of the organization’s activities is bringing together art and life, including the presentation of work out in public space and examining all of the implications of such undertakings.

A project that took place in 2018 is Mathaf Mathaf/Chou Hayda. It involved negotiations with the prominent institution, National Museum of Beirut. A permanent display of ancient art is on view in its galleries, and Temporary Art Platform enlisted a contemporary artist to interact with the work and institution. Artist Annabel Daou examined the meaning of the national museum and its collections for the general public. Chou Hayda is a project produced in collaboration with groups of people, professional actors, and the artist. It is presented in an experiential manner—an audio tour through the galleries in which individuals (sometimes actors) express their views of the art, rather than it being an official voice from the institution or any other authority (Fig. 4.9). Through such an approach, the people have their voices heard and participate meaningfully in a major cultural institution in the country. Acting as agents, they claim the museum for themselves in this action and find methods to personalize the weight of the dynamic culture from history to make it significant for them today.
Tap. also organized a research project: “A few things you need to know when creating an art project in a public space in Lebanon.”\footnote{18} This program was organized to provide insight into public art from legal and administrative viewpoints. For this project, tap. Gathered a roundtable of experts from the artistic, governmental, and legal sectors to discuss the challenges that an individual or group might face when attempting to put work out in the municipal realm. The initiative also included a field guide for such an endeavor.

The goals of such projects are to blur the divide between art and everyday people. This is a critical aspect of collaborative, socially engaged, participatory art practices. By connecting with the public, art is momentarily integrated into the social fabric of a community, rather than always being
something that is irrelevant to a majority of people. Through such initiatives that weave together creative ventures with community concerns, artists and arts professionals have attempted to have art viewed as a dynamic part of society. It is an activist dynamic that propels some artists to assume this role. Kester informs of as much:

What unites this disparate network of artists and arts collectives is a series of provocative assumptions about the relationship between art and the broader social and political world and about the kinds of knowledge that aesthetic experience is capable of producing.19

Bishop expresses a similar notion: “artists devising social situations as a dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art more vital part of life.”20 And Bourriaud analyzes the situation in much the same manner: “the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on relations that his work will create among his public and on the invention of models of sociability.”21 Despite disagreements about what kind work is acceptable, the three prominent writers on collaborative art do agree that this kind of practice moves art to a place in which it connects with the society at large. This approach to analyzing artistic praxis has been considered for much of the twentieth century and, in particular, with such modes as happenings and performance art, but also with less obvious examples of objects produced within the movement of minimalism. The relationship of art and life or art and the audience/community has occupied many artists in the last 100 years. As already noted, in places around the MENASA, grassroots arts organizations are often tied to the community in a reciprocal relationship.

4.5 Darat al Funun and Emergent Organizations in Amman

In Amman, artists and arts professionals from around the region are invited to take part in residencies, exhibit works of art, and give talks/lectures. In providing spaces for such events, the longstanding Darat al Funun and other newer organizations in Amman have helped to shift the cultural landscape of the city. Support from the region has been crucial for the development of the arts in Jordan.

Darat al Funun is actually the oldest organization discussed in the chapter. Established in 1988, it has been a mainstay in Amman by supporting
artists and the exchange of ideas. Initiating with small events, the organization has developed into a major institution in the city over more than thirty years. It has sustained its communal outlook as it has grown into a multidimensional platform encompassing six buildings in the Jabal Weibdeh neighborhood and offering a wide variety of programs including exhibitions, talks, seminars, film screenings, residencies, concerts, a space for collaborative and socially engaged art, and publications. These initiatives have benefited artists and arts professionals in the city; however, their scope has reached well beyond national borders and have impacted the regional context of contemporary art.

A significant program at the arts organization is The Lab that encourages innovation and experimentation in artistic practices. Its format is one that allows for varied projects to be presented in the exhibition space or programs to provide an educational context for the development of art. One such activity is the Summer Academy that takes place over the course of one month and is open to participants from Amman and around the world. In 2019, the motivation was to support artists as they might address significant issues prevalent in the Arab world. Participants came from several Arab-speaking nations and territories, including Egypt, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan. The ethos of the gathering was apparently to provide a well-rounded education to artists as they develop their paths as practitioners. The workshop leaders included an artist and art historians to form a support system made up of the practical and theoretical underpinnings of art. Through the multi-pronged approach, students explored both concepts like “home” and “postcolonialism,” as well as delving into the formal aspects of their practices.

Revived in 2019, the Summer Academy had an earlier run. Initiated to commemorate Darat al Funun’s tenth anniversary, the educational platform was developed to provide artistic guidance for young artists from the region through meaningful interactions with an established artist. Syrian artist Marwan, who passed away in 2016 but continues to be one of the best-known practitioners in the region today, led the academy four times between 1999 and 2003. The students in the initial years of the program are now active participants in the art world in the Middle East, and some have become internationally renowned including Tammam Azzam who achieved notoriety for digital images in which he juxtaposed Western masterpieces with images of destroyed buildings in Syria. The structure of the academy appears to have been open and engaging, during
which conversations were had and experimentations were encouraged. The younger practitioners had direct contact with the elder artist.

The Summer Academy aimed to continue in 2020, at the time of writing, with its theme tied to social practice art. With the world in an isolated and socially distanced state of affairs due to the Coronavirus pandemic, the program appeared under threat; ironically, its topic is a celebration of people coming together to address the potential of art to be socially engaging, collaborative, and relevant. In selecting the theme, the educational project points to the significance of such practices for artists in the region. The open call for applicants stated as much:

> Setting them apart from their predecessors, artists today are operating more and more directly within the public sphere, often as part of grassroots initiatives, and expanding into both participatory and interdisciplinary projects, including architecture and environment.22

Aside from programming, the organization has provided a physical infrastructure to encourage interchange and dialogue. The extensive campus includes six historical buildings and outdoor areas that allow for the viewing and contemplation of art and related ideas (Fig. 4.10). The spaces provide locations for exhibitions, talks, film screenings, in addition to a library (Fig. 4.11) and places to sit and read by oneself or chat with others. These zones are critical for the support of artists and arts professionals and the development of innovative art. They are also available for anyone that wants to utilize the space.

Makan Arts Space is a start-up organization that was perhaps possible in the wake of Darat al Funun, as well as the regional arts organizations described above. Townhouse Gallery and Ashkal Alwan are known around the territory and have inspired artists and arts professionals to create similar endeavors in their locales. These already existing initiatives opened up the possibility of undertaking such a venture. In 2003, artist Ola Elkhalidi began a small operation in an apartment in the Jabal Weibdah neighborhood of Amman, the area as Darat al Funun. Its mission was to offer a new space in the city as an alternative to the established and traditional institutions. Makan was to be a site for experimentation in contemporary art and social practice. In the time following its establishment, artists Samah Hijawi and Diala Khasawneh joined its directorship and the three ran the space collectively. As such, from its beginnings, it was a collective of artists rather than a hierarchically organized institution. Its
flexible structure helped to allow for dynamic types of projects, exhibitions, and involvement of the arts community at large. Works of art that would not have been acceptable in other spaces were welcome at Makan. Artist Raed Ibrahim was able to display a deeply personal work that explored societally taboo issues.\textsuperscript{23} He limited the invited audience to friends; however, having a space to create such a project was invaluable to his artistic development. Makan, Darat al Funun mentioned above, and some of the newer spaces available in Amman now provide such venues for hanging out and having dialogues. As already noted, this type of environment is critical in the exchange of ideas and opinions, often leading to the creation of new and unique works of art.

The innovative and experimental spirit of Makan’s mission is found in projects that went beyond the physical space of the institution or
transformed it. One project occupied various parts of the city of Amman: “The Utopian Airport Lounge: An Exhibition of Public Art Projects.” Presented in 2010, the exhibition included the work of local and international artists that were invited to engage with the city. The premise offered this metropolis as a point of transition in the manner of an airport lounge, albeit an ideal one.24 Indeed, the population of Amman is one that is in transition, arriving from outside of the country or departing for another one. A small nation, it hosts a large number of refugees from the surrounding countries and territories. It is perhaps sheltering the most refugees in the world. Meanwhile, many native Jordanians have left for other parts of the world.25 The curator included artists that she believed would be able to develop projects that could engage audiences in varied

Fig. 4.11 Library, Darat al Funun, Amman, May 2017. (Photograph by the author)
urban sites. As a whole, the exhibition sought to address what are our beliefs and preconceptions about utopia.

Another project that attempted to open the boundaries between the institution and its public is “Diwan Makan.” This simple installation offered an opportunity to share stories through conversations, dialogues, and debates that could result in a variety of inspirational ideas, chances for collaboration, and development of new initiatives. In the gallery space, an Arabic-style living room was created. Two artists—Omar Al Zobi and Samah Hijawi—designed the majlis and its furnishings.

In 2015, Makan gave up a physical space and became less active. Its founders continue to be involved in the arts community in Jordan; however, they no longer live there. Those that were involved with this vibrant organization carry forth with the same ethos as Makan. They have started new art spaces or become involved in the latest initiatives in the expanding art world of the city.

One such “institution” is the Spring Sessions. This program took over the physical space Makan once occupied. The mission of the seasonal educational initiative is to foster a collaborative forum for the exchange of ideas. Taking place every spring, the program offers workshops and classes over the course of 100 days. During this time, both emerging and established artists from Jordan and abroad come together to discuss, deliberate, and offer thoughts on art.

The sessions include workshops that are experimental and experiential, rather than a typical educational encounter. Some organizers formulated a learning environment that involved the mind and body, from mental activities like discussions and readings to physical ones like walking and drinking tea. One such seminar was entitled, “Play is the gun!” Taking a cue from the early education philosophy that encourages play as a tool to learn, the workshop presented ways to engage participants physically to encourage mental development. This included imagining Amman as a giant playground and enacting childlike curiosity. By re-looking at one’s surroundings with naive eyes, the workshop provoked a fresh connection with the city. Another workshop was entitled “Åbäke.” It explored the divide that has come to be in our lives in which eight hours are dedicated to work, eight hours to leisure, and eight hours to sleep. To do so, the organizers requested the participants to react to their situations in their everyday lives. The purpose was to address the question: “What the hell is the difference between art and life?”

A. ALI
For 2018, Spring Sessions was a long walk over the course of weeks and moving from Jordan to Egypt during which time the participants were to determine what kind of art to produce and how to contribute it to the journey. In creating a platform for such workshops, the Spring Sessions encourages an active and open dialogue and experience for the development of artistic practices that are cutting-edge, innovative, and social. Within such a dynamic environment, collaborations could be pursued in which artists and arts professionals might find ways to work collectively rather than individually and connect with the socio-political reality where they live and work.

Perhaps due to the environment created in Amman from such workshops and institutions, as well as the fact that political concerns are on the top of the minds of most residents that have landed in the city escaping from conflicts taking place in the region, new experimental organizations have opened or are currently being planned. Jadal for Knowledge and Culture is one such space that has inserted itself into the Jabal Weibdah neighborhood where Darat al Funun was established, Makan used to exist, the Spring Sessions currently takes place, and several other art institutions are situated. The founder and director is Palestinian and emerges from a political science background. Jadal is a multi-function space that includes a café, gallery, classrooms, and discussion room (Fig. 4.12). Storytelling and communal lifestyles are integral to the institution. Here, the organization offered children in the neighborhood an outlet for learning instead of hanging out in the streets. These newly arrived Palestinian families, perhaps in transition, did not have many options for occupying their children in positive ways. Curious, the new young residents entered the space of Jadal to see what is going on inside. After gaining the trust of the families, Jadal offered classes to the children and involved their mothers and fathers in the organization. It became a symbiotic relationship in which Jadal provided a need for its neighbors and gained an audience for its programs.

The situation in Amman is unique and, seemingly, the missions of and programs at Darat al Funun, Jadal, Spring Sessions, and Makan have reflected the city’s population as a transitory one. The flexible organizational structures are suitable for this as well. In varied ways, each of these organizations addresses the connection between artistic praxis and everyday life. The conventional lines between these cultural spaces are erased. Through developing dynamic sites that connect with the
communities beyond their walls, the four organizations have fostered projects that highlight social interactions. Indeed, it is the relations being built that are more significant than any one project. Rather, it is a holistic approach that connects art and life as one.
4.6 Vasl Artists’ Association and T2F (The Second Floor), Karachi

Further east, in Karachi, the organization Vasl Artists’ Association has found methods to promote and nurture the arts community in the city and the rest of nation, as well as extending artistic expressions to those beyond the realm of art. It has been in existence since 2001 and able to sustain operations for many years even as similar ventures have stopped providing services. The artists and other individuals involved with the group have initiated a variety of means to keep its doors open. Its greatest strength is perhaps through acting as a resource center for the arts in Pakistan. When it began, there were limited avenues for practitioners to find out about opportunities within and outside of the country. Vasl was established with such a task in mind. It wanted to bring individuals involved in the arts together to support artistic production in Pakistan. According to its mission, “The word Vasl in both Urdu and Persian poetry has rich associations, suggesting a meeting with a beloved that is simultaneously physical and transcendental.”33 The romantic notion underlies the foundation of the organization to stimulate creativity, especially in the encouragement of experimental art.

Artist networks are so critical to fostering new approaches to making art, especially in locations where there is little infrastructure to aid in its development. Vasl is part of the larger international group Triangle Arts that is based in the United Kingdom and includes a partnership of associations from around the world. As part of the network, Vasl extends its reach to artists, arts professionals, and institutions beyond Pakistan. As such, it provides a locus of information on Pakistan for those outside of the country through becoming a recognized entity as a source to link with artists. Vasl maintains a list of art institutions in the nation, as well as information on artists associated with the organization. If a curator from London, for example, wants to get connected to young Pakistani artists, he/she would likely contact Vasl as one potential avenue for gathering required data. This could be problematic since the organization would tell about artists in its knowledge and circle. Still, its aim is to be inclusive of practitioners from around Pakistan to facilitate their careers and aid in the expansion of artistic ventures throughout the nation.

For those within Pakistan, the aim of the organization is to contribute a range of prospects to artists for growing their bodies of work, from workshops to exhibitions to residencies. The latter offering is perhaps the
The most significant aspect of Vasl’s five-pronged approach to providing necessary services for the community of artists and arts professionals around the country. In particular, its Taaza Tareen (extremely fresh) residency is geared to recent graduates from art school who are on the cusp of initiating their practices. The young artists are offered a space to live and work, and subsequently share their art with established individuals in the local art scene (Fig. 4.13). Through this outreach program, Vasl provides a support system for those just entering the professional realm. In this critical stage, graduates require guidance about how they can begin in the vocation of art. The organization has facilitated the careers of over 50 artists. In addition to the residency, research grants have been available to past participants of the Taaza Tareen that are selected by a panel of art professionals. Through such means, artists can potentially experiment with forms, materials, and concepts to develop art that is innovative.

The effects of such an infrastructure can include the blossoming of the arts in the nation because artists were supported when they needed it the most in a variety of ways and were free to create dynamic works. Without
such a system, there would be limited avenues outside of art schools for the progressive evolution of an individual practice. Vasl offers a chance to continue the learning process so necessary in experimental art.

The organization has an apartment in Karachi where the residencies can take place, as well as workshops and educational programs to be held (Fig. 4.14). Having a space where individuals can gather is critical to artistic development, as already pointed out in the descriptions of the varied art worlds across the MENASA. These sites allow for the exchange and discussion of topics ranging from simple to complex, from mundane to extraordinary or risqué. For this to be allowed in the conservative society in Pakistan is liberating. It is a safe zone within a potentially hostile environment. The intermediary quality of such sites found in Pakistan and across the region is a key factor for the possibilities that they offer to the arts and society. The prospect of such a liminal space for the incubation of concepts and ideas for artworks is enacted through it being in-between the everyday world and the art academy. Here, there is more freedom to express and experiment, to shock and shake up the fundamentals of what

Fig. 4.14  Vasl Artists’ Association space, Karachi. (Photograph from Vasl Artists’ Association website)
we think we know. For some, this provocation is necessary in artistic expression. It is a role of the artist, according to the art critic Claire Bishop. Yet, to be cautious, the Vasl Artists’ Association is not necessarily attempting to create a provocative situation, but instead it is providing the means for artists to work, discuss, debate, present, and enact; as such the organization is offering services to a community of practitioners.

An organization in Karachi that might espouse provocation is T2F (The Second Floor). The vision of the coffeehouse/cultural space is: “To establish and disseminate sustainable models of coexistence through safe spaces for inclusive discourse and the transmission and evolution of culture.” In 2007, the organization was founded by designer and activist Sabeen Mehmood who paid the price for creating a place for open dialogue. In 2015, she was the victim of a targeted shooting while driving after an event at the café that proved to be too provocative of a topic. It discussed the disappearance of nationalists in the province of Balochistan, Pakistan. Over the last decade, as the movement for independence has grown, thousands of individuals have been detained and never heard from again, some say at the hands of the national government. Despite receiving death threats, Mehmood carried on with the event because that was the ethos of the organization she founded.

In Mehmood’s vision, T2F should be a space for the community to be able to say things they might not in other public settings; they can sing or dance openly; they are invited to take part in discourse; they can present art that might not be accepted elsewhere. The space was to be inviting and invigorating with its availability of books and areas to sit and relax and chat (Fig. 4.15). The café/cultural space continues despite Mehmood’s untimely demise and perhaps because of that very reason. Her legacy continues as events are maintained and the space continues to feed the community with actual food as well as ideas.

4.7 Conclusion

Townhouse and Ashkal Alwan are two organizations that have achieved a globally recognized status with support from international sources; yet, both remain tied to the local community. What are the implications of such a trajectory that might move an institution from local to global and also from the periphery to the center? The infrastructure that they have is very different to the one found in the Sharjah Art Foundation in the United Arab Emirates discussed in Chap. 3. The latter is an organization
that is arguably quite radical and experimental in its mission despite the fact that the royal family operates it. Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi, daughter of Sharjah’s ruler, is well versed in contemporary art debates and has not shied away from provocative topics in the programming at the foundation. That aspect, in tandem with the solid support it receives from the government has helped to transform it into a force in global contemporary art. This cultural foray shapes an image of the country as progressive and modern. By creating a forum for the presentation of contemporary art, particularly from the MENASA region, through the staging of global art fairs and biennials, the United Arab Emirates has promoted contemporary art and its own brand image. This is especially helpful when there have been many concerns and debates about the status of human rights in the United Arab Emirates, with artists and scholars being denied entry because of the topic of their research in the working conditions of the labor class. Varied developments in the country have been questioned by the global contemporary art world, thereby raising a debate about the support and exhibitions of art there. Lebanese artist Walid Raad was banned from

Fig. 4.15 T2F (The Second Floor), Karachi. (Photography from T2F’s website)
entry into the United Arab Emirates in 2015. He arrived at the airport; however, he never left it until he was put back on to a flight departing out of the country due to “security reasons.” Other members of the group Gulf Labor Artist Association, New York University Professor Andrew Ross and artist Ashok Sukumaran were also denied boarding on a flight bound for Abu Dhabi and visa for Sharjah, respectively. This targeted action was related more to the threat against the exposing of practices at the construction sites in the United Arab Emirates, rather than any perceived security threat according to Sukumaran. In 2011, the existing director of the Sharjah Art Foundation was dismissed and an artwork was removed due to concerns about offending the community in the nation. There was outcry when these actions took place. Even as these have ensued, there is an acceptance of censorship on different levels in the arts perhaps because of the monetary support that the government provides.

Sharjah Art Foundation as a government entity commissions artists to produce cutting-edge works that they might not have been able to produce otherwise.

Townhouse Gallery is at the other end of the spectrum: a low-budget, grassroots organization that the government has rebuked. It has found ways around official attempts to stifle projects at the organization, rather than taking any actions to censor the work of artists. Ashkal Alwan also maintains its community-based quality, even as it grows and receives money from international sources like Ford Foundation. Even with such diversity, the three manage to find common ground in offering platforms to connect people and arts institutions. Sharjah Art Foundation, like Ashkal Alwan and Townhouse Gallery, encourages experimental approaches to making art, specifically ones that involve the community. The three organizations have been linked together in the twenty-first century and have collaborated on projects. Townhouse Gallery is an international partner of Ashkal Alwan.

One potentially problematic quality shared among these three organizations is that they wield a tremendous amount of power in shaping the field of contemporary art in the region. Their particular approach to the production and displays of art has undeniable impact on the kinds of work made and circulated in local and international contexts. The stamp of approval from them could potentially result in the growth of an artist’s career or inclusion in an international exhibition. As such, artists might be tempted to create works that could be acceptable to the organizations in order to vie for an opportunity to exhibit work or partake in some other
opportunity. This underlying influence might compel a false shift in practices. Perhaps more artists are interested in socially engaged art because of the work of these three organizations. Or viewed in another manner, Sharjah Art Foundation, Townhouse Gallery, and Ashkal Alwan have made this praxis possible in the MENASA by supporting artists that utilize it through funding, workshops, talks, and exhibitions.

Despite the authority of these organizations now, it is important to acknowledge that they once were fighting the authoritative voices in their local contexts. As already described in the chapter, Townhouse Gallery and Ashkal Alwan continue to operate as grassroots spaces despite increased notoriety and funding. Even the ruling family’s Sharjah Art Foundation had to reshape the existing conceptualization of artistic practices in the nation and region to more unconventional and experimental modes. The support of cutting-edge art offered artists room to create such work. And, even as artists and others have questioned and challenged actions taken by the foundation, in particular during the Sharjah Biennial in 2011, it has maintained the approval and interest of significant players in the field. Artists continue to want to exhibit there; curators and other arts professionals seek to develop projects and assume leadership positions at the foundation. Sharjah Art Foundation has undeniably provided extensive support to artists across the region despite dubious activities that have taken place at the institution and in the country. So, there is complexity in the relationships that individuals have with the organization and the expectations that they have of it. What is the answer to a problem like the Sharjah Art Foundation? Perhaps an answer has already been found because since the distressing outcome of the 2011 Biennial, such a controversy has not played out again at the institution that has repeatedly attempted to connect with the community both in Sharjah and its local residents as well as with artists and arts professionals throughout the region and world. The problems might now be kept under cover, or the censorship might not be obvious any longer and, as such, the institution continues to be praised for its programming and contribution to contemporary art in the region. As a member of the royal family and apparently a consummate art professional, Sheikha Hoor Ál Qassimi has perhaps forged a path to be able to negotiate this tricky situation in order to maintain operations at the Sharjah Art Foundation. Indeed, all of the groups discussed in the chapter have to balance varied concerns in order to be able to be a vital part of an arts infrastructure that contributes to the development of contemporary art.
Collectively, the organizations in the MENASA form connections with the local and regional individuals and entities to produce experiential situations, which might be considered performative works of art that uncover and examine topical and historical social and political conditions in nuanced manners. It appears that this kind of structure and circumstances allow and encourage artists to tackle the issues affecting the populations of their societies. Perhaps the types of approaches described in the essay are the most effective ways of doing so. As such, artists and arts organizations provide a service to the community.

With such engaging activities, Vasl Artists’ Association and T2F in Karachi, along with the dynamic platform of Marrakech’s Queens Collective and Le 18, the current and former grassroots organizations in Amman, Beirut’s well-developed art world of smaller and larger institutions, and Cairo’s eclectic Townhouse Gallery and Contemporary Image Collective have offered ways to bring together art and life and offer art beyond conventional aesthetics, support the telling of anecdotes, and pursue methods to engage and collaborate with the public. They are just a few of the many institutions in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia that have found ways to address these very significant topics; ones that are arguably more critical to investigate in parts of the world beyond the West. In these areas that struggle with colonial legacy and the center/periphery divide that shapes contemporary geopolitics, smaller arts organizations are often embedded in the communities where they exist (ones that prioritize the collective over the individual and encourage the sharing of stories) and thereby suggesting that they do need to address current socio-political concerns of the locale with its residents.

The library/café/classroom/living room seems to be an important locus for such interactions. The institutions included in the essay feature this kind of a space where dialogues can take place. It is where the unique projects presented at the organizations fomented. For example, Queens Collective in Marrakech offers its space as a gathering place for the neighborhood. The workshop spaces at Townhouse Gallery in Cairo allowed for refugees to find a home, at least temporarily. At Darat al Funun, there are both indoor and outdoor areas welcoming of artists and the general public, while at Makan (meaning home), the living room offered a blank slate for the genesis of ideas. The Spring Sessions took over the latter’s space. And at Jadal for Knowledge and Culture in Amman, the café is an inviting place for those in the neighborhood and beyond. Karachi’s Vasl Artists Collective and T2F have physical spaces where artists
have been able to present the most experimental and potentially controversial works in an assuredly safe location within a society that does not always support free expression. In these seemingly innocuous sites, tremendous creativity and change brewed and continue to do so.

Even as these sites are significant, especially on the local level, such practices might not be deemed “artistic.” They would be understood as existing on the level of the “social.” However, is it possible to propose these organizations as a whole as works of art? All of what they accomplish feeds into the infrastructure of artistic practices, whether it is in a very concrete manner through providing a space, or on a much more ephemeral level by nurturing dialogue, exchange, and relationships. Given the situations in many parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia where the establishment does not offer such experiences to encourage the most dynamic and challenging art and might actively discourage it, the organizations described here fill a void through tangible and ethereal aesthetic expressions. They do so in manners that parallel the social relations found in the societies where they exist—communal rather than individual—and, as such, connect together art and life.

The relational aesthetics of Bourriaud can perhaps apply to the organizations addressed in the essay because the line between the role of the artist and institution often gets blurred when considering participatory works of art. Often involving several individuals and groups, artworks that are socially engaged edge into the territory that is typically the realm of organizations. And in the case of the collectives that are embedded within the community, they are often engaged in a dialogical process to connect people and art. Conversation, talking, and interaction are elements of a social aesthetic that these organizations promote. Similar expression is found in the artworks discussed in Chap. 3. Indeed, as discussed in the same chapter, artists that have developed socially engaged, collaborative projects have formulated relational situations in which people interact with each other or aspects of the work over the course of time. Social, relational aesthetics offer conviviality as a manner to investigate sociopolitical dynamics in a given community or across varied parts of the world. Through such a welcoming manner, audiences are eased into issues of concern to the artist, group, and/or community through encouraging an engagement in the project. In this action, a union forms between artists and/or arts professionals and the world around them.
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