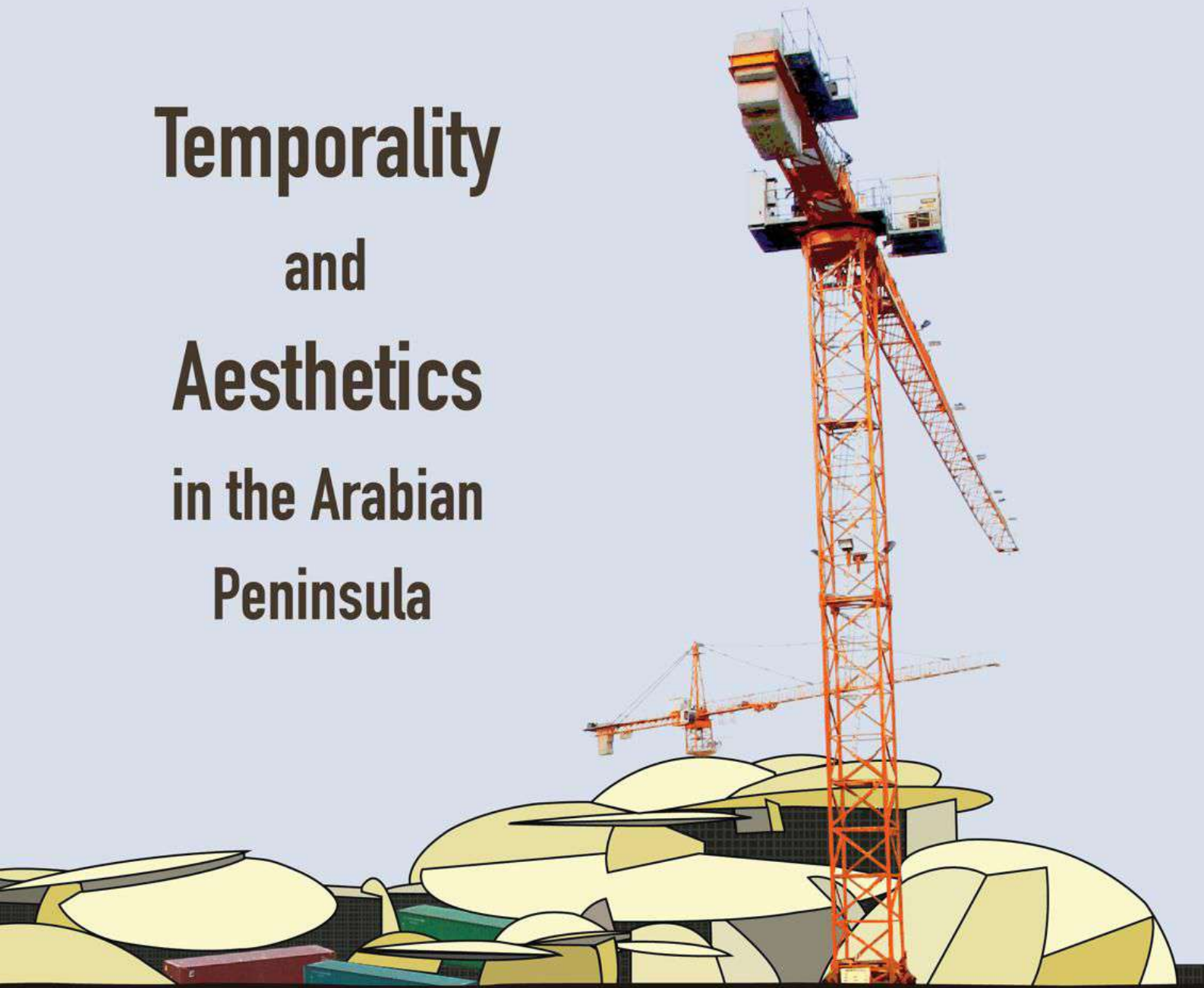


35th Exeter Gulf Conference

7 - 8 July 2025, Reed Hall

Temporality and Aesthetics in the Arabian Peninsula



Conference Programme

Monday 7th July 2025

9:00 – 9:30, Conference Registration, Tea & Coffee

9:30 – 9:45, Welcome Address (Laleh Khalili, University of Exeter)

9:45 – 11:15, Aesthetic and Symbolic Urban Transformation

Chair: William Gallois (University of Exeter)

Roberto Fabbri, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi

Transient / Concrete

Noor Hussain, Georgetown University in Qatar

Between Palace and Petals: The National Museum of Qatar and the Architecture of Nationhood

11:15 – 11:45, Coffee Break

11:45 – 13:00, Temporalities of Oil

Chair: Laleh Khalili (University of Exeter)

Ritika Lal, New York University

Specters on the Horizon: Reading Changing Saudi Landscapes through Cities of Salt (1984) and The Others (2009)

Samuel Martin, University of Cambridge

De-Fossilizing Narrative: Sedimented Histories in Raja Alem's Tawq al-Hamam (2010)

13:00 – 14:00, Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:15, Visuality and Media Scapes

Chair: Ahmed Dailami (University of Exeter)

Ali Alsayegh, independent researcher

The Aesthetics of Sadri Hybrid Media: Ideological Maintenance in a Time of Political Pause

Zoe Hurley, American University of Sharjah

Temporality and Aesthetics of Gulf Social Media Scapes: A Dubai Case Study

15:15 – 15:45, Coffee Break

15:45– 17:00, Tropes and Imaginaries in Cultural Production

Chair: Sabiha Allouche (University of Exeter)

Chandni Sai Ganesh, University of Sussex

Authenticity and the Mallu Shawarma: An Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Keralites in the Gulf

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi, London School of Economics

Critical Difference, Critical Distance: Iranian Art in the Emirati Art World

Tuesday 8th July 2025

9:00 – 9:30, Tea & Coffee

9:30 – 11:00, Transience and Homemaking in Migrants' Lives

Chair: Katie Natanel (University of Exeter)

Nadeen Dakkak, University of Exeter

Oil Modernity, Migration and Women's Time in the Desert Writings of Hanan Al-Shaykh

Saad Latif, New York University

My Mother: Community, Belonging, and the Aesthetics of Migrant Life during Saudi Arabia's Oil Boom

Neha Vora, American University of Sharjah

Multispecies Ecologies of Homemaking in the UAE

11:00 – 11:30, Coffee Break

11:30 – 12:45, Image-Making Politics and Aesthetic Regimes

Chair: Sajjad Rizvi (University of Exeter)

Maryam Almutawa, University of Exeter

The Influence of Western Museum Paradigms on the Heritage Production in Qatar

Ada Petiwala, American University of Beirut

A Millennial Moment: Bhakti Visuality and Gulf Aesthetics at the BAPS Hindu Mandir, Abu Dhabi

12:45 – 14:00, Lunch Break

14:00 – 15:30, Tribute to Professor Sulayman Khalaf
(1946–2023)

Speaker Details and Abstracts

Maryam Almutawa

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Abstract:

The Influence of Western Museum Paradigms on the Heritage Production in Qatar

This paper argues that the formal narratives arising from Qatar's major investments in museums over the past two decades are a product of Western epistemologies of museology and heritage, serving international and touristic agendas rather than local interests. Qatar have been investing heavily in heritage projects to create national branding and to ensure economic diversification strategies, soft power, and national security. Museums projects such as Museum of Islamic Art, Lusail Museum, and the national museum of Qatar plays a significant role in shaping the image of Qatar as a global cultural destination, that can innovate and modernize while preserving local traditions. The epistemological traditions that underpin the dominant heritage discourses in Qatar and across the Arabian Peninsula are largely shaped by Western and to a certain extent local experts who often draw on orientalist perceptions of the GCC. While there is a need to attract foreign specialized labor to help build a vibrant cultural life that generates economic returns, Western hegemony over cultural output remains pervasive across GCC states and is reflected in the perpetual use of similar aesthetic heritage tropes that largely cater to tourist consumption.

I will tackle two focal points: the influence of Western ideologies on Qatar's cultural sector and the substantial reliance on international expertise in cultural projects. While it is necessary for Qatar's globalization ambitions to achieve international artistic collaboration, their impact on the national cultural heritage must be examined to measure the long-term implications presented of forgetting and fading of those traditions. The prevalent dependency of Qatari cultural projects on external influence (international expertise) particularly in curatorial and management roles underscores the importance of balancing international expertise with local talent. As such, this paper emphasizes the need to create a balance between the global and indigenous culture in the cultural projects of Qatar, in terms of investment, budgets, and state attention.

Ali Alsayegh

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Abstract:

The Aesthetics of Sadri Hybrid Media: Ideological Maintenance in a Time of Political Pause

This paper explores how the charismatic authority of Muqtada al-Sadr is aesthetically sustained during a moment of political withdrawal by the Sadri movement in Iraq. At a time when the movement is disengaged from formal politics – eschewing participation in elections and government formation – Sadri hybrid media emerges as a crucial space for ideological maintenance. This study uses virtual ethnography and the conceptual framework of the affective bond to analyse the audiovisual and narrative aesthetics of Sadri media content that venerates Muqtada. Through visual symbolism, affective storytelling, and curated audiovisual style, this Sadri hybrid media constructs a temporal imaginary that sustains political fervour despite the absence of direct political action. The affective bond, which defines charisma as a sense of absolute trust between followers and leader, is continuously reinforced through content that projects Muqtada as a symbol of legitimacy, hope, and authenticity. This paper argues that the current aesthetic strategies of Sadri media reflect the movement’s “anticipatory temporal stage” – a liminal period in which ideological loyalty is nurtured in anticipation of a potential return to political engagement. The paper also situates Sadri digital culture within broader debates on temporality and aesthetics in the Middle East, demonstrating how aesthetic production compensates for, and responds to, shifting political opportunity structures. In doing so, it contributes to understanding how media aesthetics function as tools for political endurance and ideological consolidation in contexts where formal political expression is paused or constrained. By reading the Sadri movement’s hybrid media as both a site of affective cultivation and a temporal performance, this paper illuminates how the cognitive-emotional relationship between a charismatic leader and his affected followers is visually and affectively reinforced during periods of political pause and anticipation.

Nadeen Dakkak

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Abstract:

Oil Modernity, Migration and Women's Time in the Desert Writings of Hanan Al-Shaykh

Lebanese Hanan Al-Shaykh is one of very few Arab women authors who have taken interest in Gulf migration and the experiences of Arab and Western women in the region. Al-Shaykh is known for her 1988 novel *Misk al-Ghazal*, which is set in an Arab desert country, but her personal experience in Saudi Arabia throughout the 1970s also inspired earlier writings, including her second novel *Faras al-Shaytan* (1975), and several short stories. With waged labor being a key aspect of the Gulf migration experience, the uniqueness of Al-Shaykh's fiction derives from her particular focus on middle-class women who arrive as married dependents and who are excluded from the right to be productive like their husbands in a country governed by extreme gender segregation. Even though they are just as transient, the temporality of their experience is distinct, and so is the rhythm of their everyday lives and, accordingly, the nature of their estrangement in the unfamiliar places they encounter. Despite engaging in various forms of unpaid reproductive labor and other activities, Al-Shaykh's women see their time in this desert country as wasted time, and their lives are pervaded by a suffocating sense of boredom and stagnation. When they are not bored, they are represented as extremely ambitious with an unrestrained energy that flows from the desire to make use of their temporary time in the desert. I argue that this energy takes the form of an extractivism that embodies the logic of life for transient foreigners in the Gulf. Al-Shaykh's representation of a gendered state of emptiness and stagnation reveals the particularity of women's encounter with the kind of oil modernity that was being shaped in the Gulf during the 1970s, but like other Gulf migration fiction, it also illustrates how the region is imagined and constructed by Arab writers.

Roberto Fabbri

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Abstract:

Transient / Concrete

It is often noted that Gulf cities embody the notion of transience. The idea, if not the reality, of being able to start again, to be re-imagined and re-modernized. The sense of tabula-rasa has often urged or tempted architects to pursue alternative design processes based on the perception of an ever-present 'now,' with 'history' feeling remarkably recent.

Within this framework, the talk explores Abu Dhabi's ongoing urban transformation. It focuses on Saadiyat Island's plans in relation to the country's strategic vision for a future post-oil economy. In the early 2000s, Saadiyat offered an investment opportunity for upscale residential land and a tourist attraction anchored by renowned museum architecture. Later, the project evolved beyond shaping a new urban fabric, now defining the city's brandscape and contributing to state and societal identities in a country characterized by articulated demographics. The research questions the notion of context, challenging the idea of a tabula rasa, often associated with Gulf cities' transformation. Instead, it studies preexisting conditions that architects, decision-makers, and developers can either utilize or deliberately ignore.

Focusing on the UAE while considering regional and global trends, this paper examines museum architecture through select case studies. Grounded in academic and archival research, as well as professional practice in the region, it forms part of a broader ongoing study. The researcher's work on Saadiyat Island's museums began with a departmental research grant, with early findings presented at the "Art, Materiality and Representation" conference (British Museum/School of Oriental Studies, London, June 2018) and later at "Museums in Arabia" (King's College, London, June 2019). It was further developed in the article "The Contextual Linkage," published in *The Journal of Architecture* (2022). Most recently, in 2024, the study advanced under the Fellowship at the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT. Its latest developments will be presented at the upcoming talk.

Zoe Hurley

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Abstract:

Temporality and Aesthetics of Gulf Social Media Scapes: A Dubai Case Study

While Dubai, the small emirate in the United Arab Emirates, tends to be associated with luxurious social media images of elite social actors, startling architecture, and consumer status symbols, this study addresses the varying temporalities and aesthetics of migrant, domestic, and service workers' everyday digital placemaking via social media. To maintain links with their countries of origin while building local networks via digital placemaking, migrant, service, and domestic workers circuiting the region's social mediascapes via hundreds of different aesthetic languages, images, and temporalities of social media applications. However, there are limited insights into how these temporalities and aesthetics underpinning migrant workers' uses of social media are constituting the Gulf as a destination for working class migration. To address this gap, this study takes the case of the Dubai cityscape to explore migrant, domestic, and service workers' digital placemaking. The central question asks, how can we understand the temporalities and aesthetics of digital placemaking by migrant, service, and domestic workers in Dubai? To explore these issues, a global semiotic framework reorientates traditional notions of the geopolitical context in terms of Dubai's social mediascape. TikTok is taken as a case to explore a corpus of Dubai-related hashtags and content being shared by migrant, domestic, and service workers. The central argument of the paper is that, while Dubai's social media cultures reflect hegemonies of Gulf governance and social media algorithms, they are also infused by workers' affective temporalities and aesthetics, as a form of neoliberal resilience to communicative capitalism and deterritorialization in the social media age. Overall, the study will provide much-needed insights into how social media shapes and is shaped by transnational social actors' temporalities and aesthetics of digital placemaking in the Arabian Gulf.

Noor Hussain

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Abstract:

Between Palace and Petals: The National Museum of Qatar and the Architecture of Nationhood

Within the folds of the newly-built National Museum of Qatar (NMoQ) lies the 100-year-old Old Emiri Palace (OEP), which served as the national museum from 1971 until its transformation in 2019. The OEP stood as a powerful symbol of sovereignty following Qatar's independence from the British and Ottomans. As Sheikh Khalifa once declared, the building was meant "to prove to people, especially foreigners, that we had always been there and did not exist to the world through them."

The NMoQ's new design, by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Jean Nouvel, draws from the natural formation of the desert rose—a reference that has sparked debate. A Qatari scholar challenges the symbolism, citing its association with Western cultural imaginaries, such as Sting's 1999 song Desert Rose. This contrast between local memory and global representation raises essential questions: Who constructs a nation's identity? Is it rooted in lived history, or shaped through aesthetic spectacle? And how do global narratives overshadow local heritage?

This paper examines the tension between the historical and the contemporary through a comparative study of the NMoQ's two architectural iterations, alongside Qatar's national libraries from 1962 to 2017. It considers how architecture functions as a language of nationhood, marking a shift from oil-era symbolism on the Corniche to the knowledge-based institutions of today.

Informed by interviews with key Qatari architects, scholars, and planners—Hisham Qaddoumi, Ibrahim Al Jaidah, Aisha Al-Muftah, and Fatima Al Sehlawi—the paper explores generational perspectives on Doha's transformation. It argues that while Qatar's built environment seeks to project a global image, this often comes at the cost of sidelining autochthonous heritage. In doing so, it sheds light on the deeper interplay between aesthetics, identity, and the performance of statehood in the Gulf.

Ritika Lal

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Abstract:

Specters on the Horizon: Reading Changing Saudi Landscapes through Cities of Salt (1984) and The Others (2009)

This paper examines how Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* and Seba al-Herz's *The Others* represent the political economy of oil. *Cities of Salt* depicts the beginnings of the oil industry and its jarring transformation of social values, lifestyles, and the economy; *The Others* depicts a world where Aramco has blended seamlessly into the landscape, and now silently shapes the views, possibilities, and destinies of every character. Taken together, these texts illustrate a larger narrative arc of oil-instigated transformations across temporal and spatial boundaries, from the wadi to the internet-city. *Cities of Salt* shows the physical, economic, and psychological displacement of people as ties to land and kin were severed and replaced by profit-based dependence on the corporation. *The Others* shows social and psychological displacement as the unnamed protagonist comes to be more grounded in the virtual world than the physical. The emerging censorship mechanisms in *Cities of Salt* – particularly as those who rose through the corporate hierarchy gain new means of punishing and censoring those who act against their interests – appear in new state and corporate forms decades later in the world of al-Herz's protagonist, whose internet access is provided by Aramco, and who is constantly forced to self-censor. The recurring specters of the past are memorialized in different ways as the characters in *Cities of Salt* yearn for a past they remember, while the protagonist in *The Others* searches for a silenced, forbidden history. Examining how oppressive structures evolve and develop across temporal, spatial and communal boundaries reveals the production of a particular type of citizen: one that internalizes censorship and bears imprints of displacement and trauma. The specters on the horizon of these texts thus show how past histories remain within transformed institutions, instincts, and behaviors of people, regardless of whether the individuals and events are literally remembered.

Saad Latif

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Abstract:

My Mother: Community, Belonging, and the Aesthetics of Migrant Life during Saudi Arabia's Oil Boom

For some migrants, the Gulf evokes a feeling of nostalgia despite their transience. Consider this anecdote by a Pakistani woman who arrived in 1976, accompanying her husband who had been hired as a lineman for the electric company of Riyadh. Unlike the wives of Western expats, her life was limited to the four walls of her house and taking care of her family. Eventually, she found herself running a secretive home tailoring enterprise, sewing clothes for Saudi women who couldn't afford going to male tailors. Knowing that her husband did not approve, she kept at it because it was one of the few opportunities to socialize with other women and generate income independently. That woman, my mother, speaks of her time in the Gulf as some of her best memories, a life well-lived despite transience and turbulence. Using family histories and a collection of rare photos from the period as the primary source, this paper explores the aesthetics of such lives built by migrants in the Gulf. It raises questions as to what constitutes 'social life' for migrants, how do they cultivate one, how do migrant women struggle to live meaningful lives, raise families divided between the Gulf and 'back home', and the effects of transience on gender roles and marital dynamics. We discover surprising ways through which migrants created belonging, imitating Saudi cultural practices like lavish home-gatherings or desert picnics where migrants could mingle without restrictions. Some migrants ran makeshift rooftop cinemas to screen Bollywood movies, similar to Saudis who traded in bootleg movies. Others engaged in diaspora politics, raising funds for political parties back home. It is a remarkable narrative of personal lives lived within the restrictive contours of the Saudi society from a time past, a uniquely migrant history and aesthetic that is intertwined with the lives and histories of Gulf citizens.

Samuel Martin

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Abstract:

De-Fossilizing Narrative: Sedimented Histories in Raja Alem's Tawq al-Hamam (2010)

The Saudi Arabian novelist Raja Alem's *Tawq al-hamam* (2010) is a detective story in which two murders are investigated: the literal murder of a young woman, and the figurative, although no less significant, murder of Mecca. In the decade before the novel's publication, the Saudi state demolished early Islamic and Ottoman-era heritage sites across Mecca to territorialize its particular historical narrative. The novel, I argue, responds to this so-called 'development' by mobilizing archives of material culture, like collections of photographs and repositories of salvaged artefacts, to construct a rhizomatic counter-history to the state's hegemonic narrative. This paper begins at the novel's end, with an examination of the developer's dystopian designs for Mecca, designs that embody a syncretism of hypermodern architecture and pre-Islamic paganism. This 'double vision', at once archaeological and futuristic, I argue, ironically reproduces the fossilized temporalities of oil and thereby reveals the 'sedimented script' of petromodernity. This paper then explores the spaces that have been excluded from that design and analyses how Alem dynamizes these archival sites, specifically the photographic archive, through intertextuality and critical irrealist gestures to memorialize Mecca's past and document the erasure of spatially inscribed narratives. This erasure is an act of creative destruction that necessarily generates material and discursive waste, so I conclude by reading the landfill threatening to consume Mecca as a monument to consumption and as sedimented historical record of modernization as a process of hegemonic enforcement. I argue that Alem's apocalyptic representation of this waste site challenges the opaque, plastic surface of petromodernity, to expose the toxicity and texturedness of such edifices. Methodologically, this paper sits at the intersection of the energy humanities and waste studies and offers ecocritical insights into a novel that has not been studied from this angle before.

Ada Petiwala

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Abstract:

A Millennial Moment: Bhakti Visuality and Gulf Aesthetics at the BAPS Hindu Mandir, Abu Dhabi

The 2024 opening of the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan (BAPS) Hindu Mandir complex in the Emirati capital of Abu Dhabi has been cast by its founders as a “millennial moment” and a “first in the history of humanity.” Official mandir discourse, whether through its branded content or its on-site audiovisual immersive show “The Fairy Tale,” plays with temporal registers and symbolisms emerging from Indian, Emirati, and BAPS foundational history as it attempts to mythologize the temple’s origins. At times, the temple is positioned as a miraculous answer to a specific “prayer in the dunes of Sharjah” made by the Hindu sampradaya’s then-leader Pramukh Swami Maharaj in 1997 for a “mandir in the middle of the Arabian desert.” In other moments, the visionary leadership of the usual suspects—Sheikh Zayed and Narendra Modi—as well as more surprising characters—Confucius, Albert Einstein, and Nelson Mandela—is baked into the timeline of temple realization.

This paper explores the BAPS Hindu Mandir as a site where Bhakti visuality (Packert 2019) and Gulf aesthetic regimes meet and produce a new visual-temporal script around India and the UAE’s transnational heritage and future. A key site in the UAE’s National Tolerance Program and Modi’s New India project that claims “transnational geography as a Hindu civilizational realm” (Mathew 2021, 15), the temple’s remixing of nationalistic lore, religious imagination, architectural elements, and signage both underwrites these official, inherently violent projects while also standing beyond them as a unique BAPS prestige build. I argue that the hodge-podging of textual, visual, and architectural elements that come together at the temple site—similar to the India Pavilion at Expo 2020 Dubai—frame the UAE’s geography and future as cosmologically bound up within India’s evolution as a global Hindu civilizational force rather than simply submitting to the UAE’s official rhetoric of tolerance.

Chandni Sai Ganesh

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Abstract:

Authenticity and the Mallu Shawarma: An Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Keralites in the Gulf

Over 3.5 million people from India's southern state of Kerala presently live and work in the Gulf Cooperation Council, where they form a significant portion of the region's migrant population. While mass migration from Kerala to the Gulf can be traced back to the "Gulf Boom" of the 1970s, some evidence suggests that Keralites (also known as Malayalis) had arrived in the GCC by the 14th century, if not earlier.

Although the depiction of the exploited Malayali labourer monopolises public imagination, Keralites have begun to disrupt this monolithic and sensationalised caricature through art, film, literature, and food. The Mallu shawarma, a uniquely Malayali twist on the "Middle Eastern" delicacy, thus challenges claims to authenticity and authority in the GCC.

Utilising Paul Gilroy's theory of authenticity, this paper examines the Mallu shawarma as a symbol of the diaspora Malayali experience in the Gulf, one which embodies the GCC's socioeconomic power dynamics and complicates an otherwise straightforward racial hierarchy. It makes visible the entangled forms of cultural production amongst diaspora Gulf Malayalis as plural and nuanced actors with agency, both in the GCC and in Kerala. The paper concludes with a call to critique the binary representations of the Gulf as either the epicentre of ultramodern luxury or tribal monarchy—like the Mallu shawarma, the region is layered and unruly.

Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi

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Abstract:

Critical Difference, Critical Distance: Iranian Art in the Emirati Art World

Since the early 2000's Iranian art has reached a global market via the UAE and particularly Dubai. Despite the success of both homegrown and diaspora Iranian artists in the UAE, art world actors in Iran frequently levy two distinctive kinds of commentary at the Emirati art world. On one hand, the art work on display in the Emirates is criticized as decorative and superficial. On the other hand, acknowledgement of the rapid expansion of arts infrastructure expresses praise and comparison with the on-the-ground realities in Iran. While the critique levelled by Iranian art world actors articulates a mix of admiration and dismay at both the geographic and temporal expansion of the UAE art world, embedded within is a hierarchy that places Iranian art at the top and forecloses deeper engagement with more critical practices presented locally.

Using data drawn from fieldwork and interviews with art dealers and artists in the UAE and Iran this paper outlines how these two forms of commentary reflect broader tropes about the UAE that circulate within the Iranian art community; of a market-focused and thus uncritical location that has successfully built an art world through adherence to neoliberal ideals of free trade. This paper explores how such commentary obfuscates the complex realities of art world actors working on the ground in the UAE. I articulate how they also navigate inter-regional political tensions between Iran and the UAE which subtly inform the display and critique of Iranian art in Dubai. I also suggest that dismissive tropes about Gulf expansion stunts cross-regional solidarities and investments in art across the Gulf and wider Middle East.

Neha Vora

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Abstract:

Multispecies Ecologies of Homemaking in the UAE

What does it mean to inhabit urban space with others within a context of transience and precarity? This paper explores how human residents of UAE cities, the vast majority of whom are not able to settle permanently, produce home alongside and through their interactions with cats, birds, plants, and each other, within ever-changing urban landscapes. Gulf cities are most often understood through their built environments, through looking up at skyscrapers or through examining maps full of iconic structures. In contrast, my research encourages us to look down; through “cat walks” and other movements within urban space, I explore the micro-architectures and temporalities of care through which urban residents create relationships with each other and stake claim to the city. Often considered aesthetically unwelcome or even as trash, these micro-architectures are important aspects of multispecies home-making and ways that residents stake claim to urban spaces and organize their daily lives in the UAE. I explore how cat (and other nonhuman) care not only produces human-nonhuman kinship but also becomes a site to transgress as well as reproduce existing gendered, classed, and raced social stratifications. More broadly, the talk uses the Gulf context to challenge the idea that “home” is not possible within conditions of supposed temporariness, that “home” is supposedly always fraught or elsewhere for Gulf immigrants. Exploring the material artefacts of multispecies care in UAE cities encourages a rethinking of what homemaking means, and an unsettling of binaries between migrant and nonmigrant everyday experiences of precarity and (non)belonging.