

FAAH Curatorial Students Art Exhibition

FACE THE WHITE CUBE: INTERVENTIONS AT THE LIMITS OF THE AUB ART GALLERIES

MAY 3, 2018 - MAY 18, 2018

OPENING: May 3, 2018 at 6:00pm
Main Storage Room, AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby
Museum (Sidani Street, Hamra)

284B Curatorial Course
Student Projects and Locations

ANDREA COMAIR

Face Your White Cube (2)

Main Storage Room
AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum

LOUAI KAAKANI

Collapse the Cube

Administrative Office
AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum

DANIELLE KRIKORIAN

The Power of Intimacy

Outside Vitrine next to the Cafeteria
AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery

NOOR TANNIR

mal'jaa' (Shelter)

Outside Vitrine next to the Cafeteria
AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery



American University of Beirut
Art Galleries and Collections

FACE THE WHITE CUBE: INTERVENTIONS AT THE LIMITS OF THE AUB ART GALLERIES

Face The White Cube: Interventions at the Limits of the AUB Art Galleries, is the title of a series of mini-exhibitions developed by students during the course “Theories, Methods and Practices of Curating” (284B). Each mini-exhibition unfolds or intervenes within a space in some way adjacent to the AUB Art Galleries. The verb “face” was chosen to be interpreted broadly: as a critique of the ideology of the white cube (and its specific context at the AUB Galleries), or as a simple encounter and/or light curatorial exercise on the margins of these galleries. The particularities of display have been determined not only by material constraints (a shortage of dedicated white cube space at AUB) but also by a critical temptation to engage with the problematic of the white cube from within various borderline situations, thresholds and other transitory states within the “museistic” and curatorial discourse. Transitory spaces and states, however, were not chosen to be examined for their own sake (or for the sake, for example, of identitarian investments in various forms of marginality) but in order to better understand the convictions, conventions and constrictions of the notorious white cube. But in order for it to be able to provide “magical” services to a particular category of objects (turning them into art) the gallery desperately requires the support of various subsidiary spaces, forces and processes.

Take the storage room. The storage room is one of the most ill-treated spaces at AUB Art galleries. The room resembles a permanent *Merzbau* (or what Kurt Schwitters called “A Cathedral of Erotic Misery”). Over the years it has collected memories of repressed museistic processes, practices, tools, and materials—all heaped on top of each other, or forgotten in the constant hurry to please, serve and obey the white cube. This particular space is like the Freudian unconscious of the Galleries. However here, instead of repressed instincts, guilty desires, and impulses, one stumbles across abandoned tools, materials, disinstalled artworks, fragments of installations, discarded techniques and other forgotten ingredients of museum practice. The storage “facility” has been waiting for an analyst to reveal something about this gallery’s past (from 2012 forward), and also perhaps about earlier (pre-Oedipal) times, when the building was used for other purposes. Further, if the storage room is the repressed unconscious, the administrative office of AUB Art Galleries is its conscious, constituting the immediate awareness and sense-certainty in the work of the galleries. It is the space from which most rational decisions are made on a daily basis; where logical and well-calculated operations (payments, requisitions, promotions, advertising) materialize into the program of exhibitions and events.

The students in the 284B class have formulated a particular curatorial response to each of the “adjacent” spaces they have chosen. While **Andrea Comair** chose the storage room, **Louai Kaakani** occupied the office of the administrative officer at the Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum. Both projects engage very closely with the problematic of the white cube, and each approaches it differently. **Noor Tannir** and **Danielle Krikorian** opted for the niches in the vitrines of AUB Byblos Bank Art Gallery on campus. Their

projects deal more or less directly with the problematic of the art gallery, focusing instead on the discursive margins of contemporary curatorial practice, or, pursuing more personal interests and a particular way of understanding contemporary curatorship.

Under the title “Face Your White Cube (2)” **Andrea Comair** launches a series of questions: “What is it that we are facing? Are we facing the space itself with its social, historical, and economic context? Would we still be talking about the white cube there? Perhaps not, given that once we enter the gallery we agree to see its pristine white placelessness, and will even agree that the white cube is invisible until told otherwise.” **Louai Kaakani**’s exhibition-intervention entitled “Collapse the Cube” aims at “breaking” the walls of this institution in order to reveal the building’s past role and function. In addition he seeks to comprehend the role of an art gallery within the concrete context of the city of Beirut. **Danielle Krikorian**’s project deals less with the conditions of curatorial production than a more personal art historical interest. The mini-exhibition entitled “The Power of Intimacy” takes its point of departure from a 16th-century miniature of the *Shah Abbas and Wine Boy* that **Krikorian** believes can offer us valuable knowledge with regard to relations of power and desire. **Noor Tannir**’s project is entitled “*maljaa*’ (shelter).” The main goal of the project, which is assembled from visual material collected from the low- and middle-class households and shops of Dahieh in suburban Beirut, is to survey the visual landscape of a particular part of the city and study the process by which early religious images and modes of representation have been appropriated and recuperated for purposes of political mobilization.

Octavian Esanu
284B Course Instructor

FACE YOUR WHITE CUBE (2) – ANDREA COMAIR

“Face Your White Cube (2)” sounds like a Duchampian provocation that should be answered with a single gesture, which turns the entire idea of the white cube on its head. Assuming that would still be possible, such a gesture would become obsolete as soon as it was pronounced. Perhaps instead one could posit an exhibition arguing that the white cube is not really a white cube (we know that already). It’s a “concrete” space with a history which one could re-enact (since as Rem Koolhaas remarked in the nineties, there is not enough past to go around). Or perhaps facing the white cube means activating it phenomenologically, inserting within additional sensory “experience” or using it as facemask which can take on any shape or form or space. Yet here the white cube still behaves as an empty container ready to be filled with content.

What is it that we are facing? Are we facing the space itself with its social historical economic context? Would we still be talking about the white cube there? Perhaps not, given that once we enter the gallery, we agree to see its pristine white placelessness, and will even agree that the white cube is invisible until told otherwise. Or are we

facing the architecture and “ornament” which converted the space (with a place and a history) into a white cube? Or is it perhaps a third thing that we need to face, the substanceless, dematerialized apparatus of the white cube. But “Facing Your White Cube” here will sound like facing commodity fetishism, ideology, institution+ art/artist/curator, capitalism, the singular autonomous artwork etc. Is “Facing Your White Cube” a confrontation with the entire apparatus of the white cube itself? “Your White Cube”? Your? Mine? Less crippling than “The”, yet more disheartening than the impossible “Our”. Maybe this confrontation requires “us” (as individuals) to situate ourselves within a totality to perform a kind of institutional critique of the apparatus of the white cube.

Andrea Comair

AUB Architecture Bachelor’s Student, Class of 2018

COLLAPSE THE CUBE – LOUAI KAAKANI

The spatial model of the “White Cube” has today become the default mode of visualization and consumption of art and of the gallery space. It is a manifestation of the relationship between art and modernity and is both consequence and catalyst of long-lasting, and still very contemporaneously present, modern phenomena: alienation, intellectualization and art-elitism. It is also a space where art can function, be appreciated as, and valued as “art”. Segregating itself from exterior interferences and labeling itself as an “institution”, the cube becomes a center, a museum, a space of discourse and control over art. Seemingly, no exterior force can penetrate it to interfere with that function. “An obstacle to obstacles”, I proclaim it to be, as it repels all that is around it.

Yet as art becomes self-referential (or, if socially relevant, then very distant from the context it addresses), so does the space itself. Its own physicality becomes an obstacle to its self-reflection within a grander context; a pocket dimension immune to those same intrusions. The creation of this inside-outside dichotomy allows the cube to thus remain “white” and clean.

The dichotomy is especially problematic in the context of Beirut, a city scarred and battered by its own imperfections and instabilities. Here, the art-space provides additional layers of seclusion to secure art’s autonomy and affords the spectators the ability to enter a safe haven far removed from the turbulent urban environment.

Why must the sounds and sights of Beirut’s overwhelming everydayness pollute one’s experience of art? Why can we not purify a space of its marks for the sake of art appreciation?

And so, local institutions, such as Beirut Art Center, Sursock Museum and our own AUB Art Galleries, acted upon these inquiries by abolishing spaces of their character. This is especially ironic given that Beirut admittedly provides a wealth of subjects to

tackle through art, art that is then paradoxically amputated from the urban environment that it has been inspired by.

So imagine the question: what if this dichotomy were shattered, or better yet imploded, and the "Inside" and "Outside" of the white cube were to collapse into each other?

This exhibition-intervention aims to break the walls inherently created by the art-space's own physicality, creating within the "inside" geometric constancy of the Cube conditions that could expose or reveal the building's past role and function. Taking the AUB Rose and Shaheen Saleeby Museum's administrative office as a sole space of interest for this experiment, I initiate this dialogue by asking: what was this space used for before it became a white cube that regularly displays art? What was the whole building before it was renamed AUB's "Off-Campus Dormitory"?

The lack of archival material on the building's previous incarnation blurs any attempt at excavating its past. Only from rumors and the "outside" façade can one recognize the building as once having been a hotel, one reputed for its diverse leisurely allowances - for both day and night.

In recognition of this new crack in the art gallery's purity (and in recognition of the efforts to hide it so well), I not only aim to collapse the "inside/outside" dichotomy of the White Cube, but I choose also to condense the division "artist/curator" into that of the producer. The display, combined with audio recordings of interviews with locals and alumni, acts as a forceful embodiment of that dismissed history. Thus, it acts as more than a collapse of space and functionality: it acts as a collapse of time and perception.

May this exhibition present you with an attempt to lift the curtain from a particular White Cube and look into the environment that surrounds you as you read this; an exhibition that revisits the gallery as what it once was, before the gallery's institution reimaged the hotel as an art-space.

Welcome to the collapse of the cube!

Louai Kaakani
AUB Studio Arts Bachelor's Student, Class of 2018

THE POWER OF INTIMACY AND غزل – DANIELLE ANDREA KRIKORIAN

May life grant all that you desire from three lips, those of your lover, the river,
and the cup (Poem, 1627).

Glorified by military victory and a strong economy, the Persian Empire flourished under Shah 'Abbas I. The Safavid ruler was cunning, charismatic, and a prominent diplomat,

establishing Persia as a central and homogenous state.¹ Isfahan became the capital and the Shah enforced Shiism as a form of spiritual unification.² Yet, as an important religious figure and Muslim ruler, he did not have overly public portraits, sculptures and coins of his likeness.³ Depictions of the Shah can be found in his private miniatures, which are often hidden, dismissed and dubbed as secretive homoerotic fantasies. In contrast, other Islamic and Persian miniatures in manuscripts and private albums are seen as representative of the ideals of their epochs. Gardens, fabrics, colors, and calligraphy have been used to convey ideas of power, sovereign legitimacy, and beauty. It is in this context that the exhibition *The Power of intimacy and غزل* attests that Shah 'Abbas the Great's intimate miniatures are indeed a testament to his glory. The question remains, how are those intimate miniatures powerful in their representation of Shah Abbas' political and religious power?

The intimate miniatures are powerful as they weave an intricate image of Shah 'Abbas I as a powerful ruler surrounded by wealth and luxury. Indeed, the portraits of the Shah were conceptualized to rival the kingship of the Ottoman and Mughal Empires. The Shah himself was a supporter of art.⁴ The miniatures were conceived in order to accentuate his complex character and the nuances of his rule. Paintings of the early seventeenth century portray him in court and in leisurely and intimate settings surrounded by his courtiers.⁵ The Shah appears as a luxurious and influential ruler who is able to enjoy the sensual pleasures of life. In Shah 'Abbas' own Album painting entitled *Shah 'Abbas with a Page Boy* (1627), Muhammad Qasim depicts the Shah in a subdued but relaxed state. The ruler is both serene and alert in his pleasure garden. He is being seduced by a page boy and surrounded by goblets of wine. The miniature portrays Shah 'Abbas as both vulnerable to the page boy's touch and in control of his actions. His hand grips the wrist of the page boy. This state of luxury and complexity – where the wealth of the pleasure garden can be marveled at, and the Shah's controlled struggle can be observed – is expressed in the exhibition through a gesture of deconstructing the miniature performed by the curator.

The gesture aims at emphasizing the sensual intimacy in the recognizable image of the Shah, regarded as a key religious figure of Shiism and a strong ruler, in control of an empire and of his own vulnerabilities and desires. Contrary to the popular belief, there was a sharp contrast between Islamic law on the one hand, and Persian poetry and Persian erotic painting on the other. *غزل* (ghazal, short sonnet like lyrics) condoned homoeroticism, which was almost its only amatory subject. This was partly due to the seclusion of women, and the conception of the lover and the beloved. The subject of the poet's love was a youth, a young or prepubescent boy *pesar*. His beauty was unmarred, with soft round cheeks and delicate features. During the late classical period, and especially at the time of the Safavid dynasty, the poet lover transforms from a strong and imposing lover into a humble supplicant one. The beloved youth is coquettish and seductive. This passionate love is not merely about power struggle but an exclamation of beauty, glory, and splendor.⁶ This can be seen in Qasim's depiction of the Shah wherein the Shah's humble and quiet demeanor is a bow and an ode to the magnificence of love and life, which he can readily enjoy. By showcasing these images in small sizes, along with luxurious scents, "The Power of intimacy and *غزل*" reflects upon the context

of their intimate origins, and the complexity of Shah Abbas I's strength and piety. The juxtaposition between control and supplication is a manifestation of the Shah's strength in front of God's resplendent world. The dedication painted in Shah Abbas with a Page Boy (used as an epigraph above) is a testament to this ode, representative of love, paradise, life, and hope. The lover, the river, and the cup connote what the world has to offer in sensuality, spirituality, and power. In those three lips, intricately depicted in intimate miniatures, and de-constructed in "The Power of intimacy and **عزل**", the nuances and complexities of Shah 'Abbas I's kingship are revealed.

Danielle Andrea Krikorian

Art History Bachelor, Fine Arts Bachelor, AUB Class of 2018

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Vahid Alaghband, "Iran Heritage Foundation Foreword." *Shah Abbas' The Remaking of Iran*, edited by Sheila Canby. London: The British Museum Press, 2009, 2.
- ² Rizvi Kishwar, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas: Prayer and Likeness in a Safavid *Shanama*." *The Art Bulletin* 94, no. 2 (January 2014): 226. Alaghband. "Iran Heritage Foundation Foreword," 2.
- ³ Neil MacGregor, "Director's Foreword." *Shah Abbas' "The Remaking of Iran,"* 3.
- ⁴ Alice Taylor, "Contemplating the Other: 'Isfahan Style' Miniatures." *Book of Arts of Isfahan*. Malibu: The J/ Paul Getty Museum, 1995. p.22.
- ⁵ Rizvi Kishwar, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas: Prayer and Likeness in a Safavid *Shanama*." 226-27.
- ⁶ "Homosexuality III. In Persian Literature." *Encyclopædia Iranica* XII, no.4 (2012): 445-448. XII, no. 5 (2012): 449-454.

IMAGE SOURCE

Tabbagh, Claire. *Shah Abbas and his page*. 2007. HYPERLINK "<https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/shah-abbas-i-and-his-page>" <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/shah-abbas-i-and-his-page>

MALJAA' – ملجأ (Shelter) – NOOR TANNIR

"Maljaa' – ملجأ" (shelter) is an exploration of Shi'a visual culture of Beirut, using its images, discourses, and promises to reveal grander truths with regards to ideology, alienation and authority. This mini-exhibition draws on visual material collected from the low and middle-class households and shops of Dahieh in suburban Beirut. Shelter studies the resuscitation of distant past religious iconographic traditions, and their co-option, transformation and adaptation for contemporary political functions, such as fulfilling promises of salvation and safety for certain segments of populations of Lebanon. The main scope of the project is to survey the visual landscape of South Beirut in order

to study the process by which early religious images and modes of representation have been appropriated and recuperated for purposes of political mobilization.

Religious paintings encountered in the urban space of South Beirut depict historical events of the sacred past. These images, which can be analyzed using Western art historical conventions (such as landscape, genre painting, and portraiture), often serve as reminders of truth, and promises of hope and an honorable after-life. Both landscapes and portraiture often fail to stay within the disciplinary borders of their genres tending towards story-telling. They tell, over and over again, stories clothed in a new visual language in order to assure not only a different sense of religious identity, but also, to provide a heightened sense of communal security. The stories of Ashura and the Battle of Karbala, for instance, are not only signifiers of past religious heritage but also re-emerge today in the contemporary context as symbols of independence, or even as hope for escape from modern alienation. In such depictions – when they serve as home decorations where the past and present are entangled through memories and stories – they often could be seen as the “scream of a house”, as metaphors for the Shi’a subject, seeking discharge from the estranging effect of a big contemporary city.

The portraits of the spiritual leaders, for example, often appear as the end-point of a typical interior decoration in South Beirut. The leader’s gaze exaggerates and makes transparent the surreptitious course of ideology and of political power. Without the portrait, ideology is implicit; with the portrait it becomes unequivocal and explicit. With the presence of symbolic and visual attributes, ideology is heightened, clarified and actualized, and the portrait serves as a warranty of safety.

It is this problematic that is brought within the context and content of the white cube. The white cube, on the outside, is a promise of artistic safety. A juxtaposition is brought forward through the display of political kitsch – promising spiritual and religious safety to the believer – against the white cube’s promise of artistic autonomy to the artist, critic, and the audience. But, in the same way in which the white cube is only a symptom of the inevitably modern alienation, the visual attributes of Dahieh only could provide a promise of safety and salvation today. It is the promise of every ideology.

The mini-exhibition thus creates a heightened discrepancy between comfort and disorder, shifting the narrative from power, charisma, and authority to notions of safety and shelter. It does so by putting alternative, locally-made genre paintings and portraits, as well as reproductions of the staples of this culture, on show. The display also aims at highlighting an alternative art market – and a household curating – that is both present and persistent in parallel to the dominant and “professional” art markets and art world of Beirut. That being said, the exhibition brings to light a discourse that is alternative and often emasculated; through its sheer presence, a critique of the white cube begins to grow.

Noor Tannir
AUB Art History Bachelor Student, Class of 2018

