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Imagination is not bound by time or place. Works of art, though conceived and produced in a specific place at a specific moment, travel in time and space. Ali Hassoun, a Lebanese artist trained in Italy, painted "The Disquieting Museum" inspired by "The Disquieting Muses" created almost a century ago by the Greek-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. This spring, the former painting was shown at an exhibition of "Arab Artists between Italy and the Mediterranean" aimed at bridging the cultural divide separating the West from the Middle East (cover).

The exhibition is but one example of how art is promoted as a means of overcoming national, cultural, ethnic, and religious differences. Music and visual arts, not bound to verbal communication in a specific language, seem particularly suitable for such a purpose. Thus, the performance of music was and still is an occasion where people of different religions and ethnic backgrounds meet each other (Zubaida, p. 6). Interestingly, government institutions and funding organizations have also discovered this potential of art and accordingly sponsor multicultural projects. While this might be laudable, cosmopolitan experiences should not be reduced to such representations alone.

As Maurizio Albahari argues, existing asymmetries may be recreated when majorities ask minorities to engage in multicultural dialogue, since dialogue can only be thought of once salient differences have been established in the first place (p.12). Moreover, intercultural and cosmopolitan experiences may just as well take place in unadvertised everyday communal life. And what if art gets taken up to prove membership in humanity, and treated as a bridge to humanity's common ground? Raising such questions, Kirsten Scheid argues that people should not be applauded for applying notions of art-making in "unexpected" places (p. 14).

But art is not always understood as multicultural or interreligious; it can also propagate national, ethnic, or religious identity. National governments promote art as a way of creating and reinforcing national awareness. Such a vision of art may coincide with the wish that art may enlighten people and build a civilization, raising the cultural levels of a supposedly "ignorant" population. Increasingly, not only secular, nationalist governments, but also more devout actors promote art in order to raise standards of civilization and morality. Reformist preachers today argue not only that art is not reprehensible, but that it may even be central to religious practice, and a tool for spreading the message of Islam (Winegar, p. 28).

In promoting art as something that can bring people closer to God, these reformist preachers deviate from

earlier critical discourses. Such discourses, although not totally forbidding art, put limitations on the creative process, for example, by banning certain forms, performances, or audiences. They also influence the genres that are made (Barendregt, p. 24). Female Muslim performers, in particular, feel compelled to deal with a discourse that considers them immoral and un-Islamic (Gazzah, p. 26).

If art can be seen as something that may rectify a society's problems and edify people, it can also be seen as reflecting a critical stance towards existing governments and societies. Some artists feel the need to document issues of contemporary society in their work, and to offer social or political criticism (Bank, p. 18). Others aim to change existing images of Islam and Muslims, i.e. by making films like *Ayat Ayat Cinta* to show the compassionate face of Islam (Van Heeren, p. 20).

Art can be a powerful catalyst precisely because of its ambivalent nature; it cannot be reduced to one single meaning, but produces multiple meanings at the same time. It is always created in a certain time and place, but can transcend boundaries of language, nation and religion. Art has always incited complaints on the basis of morality, but may also improve ethical standards. It can readily paint utopian visions, as well as bleak pictures. And just as it opens up new possibilities for battling stereotypes, it can also create new ones. This should remind us that art does not just represent how things are in the world but actually contributes to the shaping of our world.

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