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Exiting violence artistically in Jordan: Garage Art as a Safe Space

Ammar Kandeel

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Garage Art, February 2022, ©Ammar Kandeel

Since the last twenty years, Jordanian society became increasingly affected by the repercussions of the State's external affairs with neighboring countries. There was the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Syrian crisis in 2011, the Arab Spring's democratic challenges, and tensions with the Israeli and American governments resulting from Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century" including the formal recognition of Jerusalem as the exclusive capital of Israel in 2018. Indeed, these events

translated different challenges for the social security, some of which conveyed spectacular forms of violence like physical endangerment and loss of lives during the terrorist hotels attacks in Amman in 2005. Yet other forms of violence have less visible impact for society, such as the gradual radicalization of youth through the jihadist movements, the discriminatory narrative against Arab refugees, and the intensification of some gender-based violence forms like child marriage.

The incrementation of such vulnerabilities makes Jordan a theater of “slow violence,” a violence “that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive (Nixon 2). These violence forms evolve in the time and the life of society. Connected to a reality of diversity and to new societal challenges, the Jordanian civil society is not isolated from the neighboring States’ conflicts in a way that it must challenge a process of meaning construction for the individuals of who they are, a process of re-formation of the self-identity and the identity of the Other. This evolution leads to a reality of “identity-based violence” (Wieviorka 33) that reveals an urgency for a culture of acceptance. The Jordanian social space comes to be seen as an incubator of slow violence but, at the same time, as a place for *other* spaces to promote a culture of diversity and tolerance in order to exit this violence. In fact, during the last years, some social spaces that deemed to be safe for a free speech like universities witnessed cases of gender-based violence and tribal fights. The question of the spaces of expression and knowledge production became a vital mean of exiting violence since 2015.

That year witnessed the mobilization of young fans of the art in Irbid (a northern city of the Kingdom) around a collective initiative that is also known as the MedeArt Association, legalized under the Jordanian Ministry of Culture. At first sight, the association seems to be merely a local collective to produce cultural and artistic material with no connection to the reality of the context of this identity-based violence in the country. This observation may be verifiable when examining the mission of MedeArt before implementation of Garage Art in the basement of a building in Irbid in 2019. Since 2015, the association focused mainly on holding artistic events that takes place in the street (such as The Daraj Festival, the Jalaton project which aims at preserving the Arab musical heritage, including graffiti art form). It provided logistical and financial support to local artists similarly to activities of other national cultural structures in the

capital Amman such as the Haya cultural center, al-Hussein cultural center, or other major cultural actions delivered by the Municipality of Amman.

However, the creation of Garage Art four years after the foundation of MedeArt reflects the association's preoccupation and understanding of the role of art in exiting violence through the creation of safe spaces. As theorized by Western feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, the concept of safe spaces aims to reconsider the role of marginalized and vulnerable social categories in light of the violence they suffer from, bets on the ways of implementing art and culture as preventing hate speech and addressing exclusion in society. As an alternative to violence that reach universities or hospitals, the concept of a "Safe Space" have attracted the local cultural activists in Irbid in terms of how the implementation of a sustainable to offer spaces that can be safe or safer than these other places in society (Campbell et Manning). The adaptation of Western concept to the Jordanian context seems to build on the role of these spaces. They encourage "a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance" (Rachel 24). In fact, MedeArts 's vision of the function of art in Jordan is to be thought of in light of the evolution of the culture of acceptance in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region: "our heartfelt desire was to create a Safe Space for our artists and young people of the local community, since many of them suffer from intolerance and non-acceptance from their society, which is a big issue in our region today." (MedeArts Association, *MedeArts Website*) A physical artistic space that is designed to include a performance and rehearsal area for artists, sitting areas, a café, and an art shop corner becomes a major factor of safety for social actors. Therefore, the mission of MedeArt through Garage Art is not only to provide support to local artists, but also to provide a sustainable space in society to think and respond to violence.

According to Garage Art's policy, the space offers protection and support for the freedom of speech of two specific social categories: Women and members of the LGBTQ+ community (MedeArts Association, *Art and People Narrative* 9). To measure the impact of this safe space for social actors, one need to think the of concept of safety in two directions: "safe from" and "safe for"(Lewis et al.). According to this distinction, "safe from" means that the space can be a way to provide protection, while "safe to" insists more on the added value of safety for the individuals'

agency in expressing themselves freely. The safety offered by Garage Art is correlated between these two dimensions. The added value of this space in guaranteeing a free speech for victims of gender-based violence (GBV) is measurable when compared to the association's artistic activities that require a space and that were conducted before the creation of Garage Art. For instance, the Youth Theater project, launched by the association in 2017, took place in Usama al-Mashini theater in Amman, a facility of the Ministry of Culture in December 2017. This project consisted in allowing women and LGBTQ+ individuals to tackle topics relating to gender among other forms of violence such as physical disabilities, social inequality and injustice, and drug misuse. It was based on the theatrical storytelling genre that required many sessions of training by the association *C:ntact*. The story of R.R., a person identifying as a "transgender man living in northern Jordan" (Sammour et Sakran 16), is emblematic of the limits of the performance in an ephemeral theatrical setup for the youth trainees. R.R. says: "It is true that my show is a special one and not open to all for my own security" (Sammour et Sakran 16). This testimony shows that the theatrical space where the theatrical play was hosted was a major challenge for a GBV victim.

The self-imposed restrictions can be explained by the fact that the storytellers performed in a theater that is not defined by MedeArt's vision and policies regarding the public interaction with the GBV victims. This is because the dominant public perception of such stories and narratives in Jordan reduces the maneuvering margin of MedeArts's action in terms of safety for such social actors. This perception is at stake considering Jordan's official practices, despite the absence of legal policies that stipulate restrictions on free expression of LGBTQ+ individuals. After arresting ten LGBTQ+ people for having held a party in East Amman in 2014, the Jordanian authorities banned Mashrou' Leila, a Lebanese band whose leading singer identifies as gay, from performing in Jordan in 2016 and 2017, and blocked access to the online queer-inclusive magazine My.Kali that published in its May/June 2016 issue a real story of a religious man who embraced homosexuality (Mohavedi). With blocking access to this magazine, the official stance of the Media Commission "was not the first time Jordanian authorities had stoked moral panic at the expense of LGBT people" (Mohavedi). It is then understandable that for MedeArts, the official and social rally against LGBTQ+ community is in no way possible to be approached without a

policy that initially requires a proper safe space for the association and specifically, a policy of regulating the relation between queer witnesses and the public.

The implementation of a safe space responds to this problem by defining a sustainable politics of social interaction between the victims of violence and the large public. With the acquisition of an urban parking, the sustainability of a permanent space allows a sustainable social interaction that differs from the ephemeral theatrical performance in the official theaters. This sustainability follows a mechanism of openness. The instauration of culture of acceptance requires for the victims of violence, somehow paradoxically, that safe spaces do not need be closed off in front of the large public despite the potential risk of seeing their experiences and narratives rejected by others. If this method allows a normalization of the interaction, it raises the question whether safety is equivalent to make Garage Art a social conflict free space. Indeed, the space is open to the large public, but this openness is subordinate to a policy of control of the social interactions that imply a “constant monitoring of the visitors in the space” (MedeArts Association, *Art and People Narrative* 9). In addition, the space displays at the entry door a chart that mentions the values and ethics of the safe space: acceptance, respect of difference, violence dismissal in all its forms (verbal, physical, emotional, and psychological), and respect of privacy (see the photo of this article). The difficulty of conceiving safety resides in the definition of what are the acceptable limits of eventual conflicts of views and values of the space visitors.

In conclusion, re-construction of the meaning of identity in Garage Art conveys a significant potential to empower youth voices and builds their confidence to fight identity-based forms of violence. The peace-community strategy based on the inclusion of social actors in cooperative artistic production is paramount, and this is what makes Garage Art an effective structure to exit violence through art. It is a safe space that allows a dynamic and sustainable re-formation of individual and collective identities, and a ground to voice marginalized social actors in search of expression.

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Presentation of the author: Ammar Kandeel is a postdoctoral researcher. He is part of the fellowship program on exiting violence at Columbia Global Centers Amman (January-July 2022). His work covers the Jordanian actual scene of artistic safe spaces besides the artistic and historical narratives of Palestinians.