



**INTERNATIONAL
CONFERENCE**

**BETWEEN DESERT AND
SEA: THE 20TH-CENTURY
AVANT-GARDES AT THE
MEETING POINT OF
CONTINENTS**

**Department of Art History,
University of York
Berrick Saul Building, BS/005 (Bowland
Auditorium) and online**

19 MAY 2023

10 AM to 5 PM

Organisers:

Professor Michael White: michael.white@york.ac.uk |

Dr Alexandru Bar: alex.bar@york.ac.uk

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the History of Art Department and the Centre for Modern Studies (CModS)

“Between Desert and Sea:
The 20th-Century Avant-Gardes at the Meeting Point of Continents”

19 May 2023

Conference conveners: Professor Michael White and Dr Alexandru Bar

Venue: University of York, Berrick Saul Building, BS/005 (Bowland Auditorium) and [online](#)

Registration is FREE, whether you wish to join in-person or via Zoom, [please register to attend the conference here](#).

This one-day hybrid conference brings together a group of international scholars to present cutting-edge work on avant-garde activities at the meeting point of Africa, Asia, and Europe in the twentieth century. Our aim is to draw a clearer picture of the avant-gardist resonance in this region and thereby bringing its contribution to the history of the avant-garde as a global, transnational affair. Since time immemorial, the region has linked East and West, played a significant part in the cross-fertilization of civilizations, and facilitated exchange between cultures, religions, and philosophies. We therefore aim to debate the dynamics between avant-garde movements and local traditions, the use of the arts for purposes of social action, and the integration of avant-garde practices within national building process. In general terms, this conference seeks to foster critical dialogues regarding the transnationalism of the avant-garde with its multifarious manifestations, its intercontinental collaborative potential, and the way this phenomenon was specifically received by the peoples of the region in connection to its particular cultural, religious and ethnic identities.

At the end of the First World War, the region found itself with a significant number of contested borders making the concept of *belonging* ever more ambiguous for the peoples and diasporas living within several new states. We are interested in exploring how the experiences of diaspora, exodus, and multiculturalism were (re)theorized by artists moving to or from this space and how local artists correspondingly integrated avant-gardist practices into their artistic production. More specifically, in our search for understanding how identity, dislocation and migration were manifested in art, we seek to debate how the concept of avant-garde, inextricability linked to the ideas of innovation, experimentation, and antagonism to authority, could be understood as something both external and internal to the region.

Our two topographical markers for the conference are intended to resonate with the geographical particularity of the region, the themes of the conference and some of the key metaphors of avant-gardism itself. The desert as a frontier, a limit, an absence, an ungovernable space, a place of isolation and nomadism. The sea as a shared resource, a link between peoples, a space for encounter and adventure. To what extent was the avant-gardist imagination only ever constructed on such hopes and fantasies? To what extent does analysing the avant-garde from this viewpoint help us rethink the spatial and temporal concepts at its very heart?

CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

10:00 – 10:15 - Welcome by Professor Michael White

10:15 - 11:00 - Professor Hubert van den Berg (Palacký University Olomouc) - *Exploring avant-garde beyond Europe. Some reflections.* (*Presentation includes depictions of violence and some sexual content)

11:00 – 12:00

Panel 1: Transcultural experiments of modernism

Panel Chair: Nabila Abdel Nabi (Tate Modern)

Dr Amina Diab: *Lee Miller: A Portrait in Egypt*

Dr Ambra D'Antone (The Warburg Institute): *"Art needs the long haul": Group D and the Turkish Avant-Garde*

12:00 – 12:45 - Lunch Break

12:45-13:30 - Keynote: Raya Zommer Tal (Dada-Janco Museum): *The spirit of Dada in Israeli contemporary art.* (*Presentation includes profanity and some sexual content)

13:30 – 14:30 Panel 2:

Reimagining the material world to reflect the unity of all the arts.

Panel Chair: Dr Jonathan Cane (University of York)

Professor Michael White (University of York): *Arieh Sharon: Brno, Haifa, Dessau*

Dr Alexandru Bar (University of York): *Representation of Suffering, Destruction and Disillusion in the art of Marcel Janco* (*Presentation includes depictions of violence)

14:30 – 15:30 Panel 3:

Modern contemporary art in Saudi Arabia

Panel Chair: Dr Ana Bilbao Yarto (University of York)

Haifa Alkthiri (University of York): *The representation of identity in the life and career of Mohammed Al-Saleem (1967-1997)*

Dareen Alorflly (University of York): *The transformations in the characteristics of Saudi Conceptual Art from 1999-2014*

15:30 – 16:00 - Tea/Coffee Break

16:00-16:45 - Keynote: Professor Eva-Maria Troelenberg (Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf): *"The Weight of the World". A Diptych on Paul Klee and Etel Adnan.*

16:45 - CLOSING REMARKS

Biographies - Keynote speakers

Professor Dr Eva-Maria Troelenberg

(Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf, Germany)

Eva-Maria Troelenberg (PhD LMU Munich 2010) is professor for Transcultural Studies at Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf and PI of the ERC Consolidator Grant MEDMACH "Machinery Rooms of the Mediterranean 1800-present". From 2011-2018, she was head of the Max-Planck-Research Group "Objects in the Contact Zone - the Cross-Cultural Lives of Things" at Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence. Between 2018 and 2022, she was Professor for Modern and Contemporary art History at the University of Utrecht. Her main fields of interest include the history and historiography of Islamic art, the Mediterranean after 1800 in its global connections, as well as transcultural museum histories.

Raya Zommer-Tal

(Dada-Janco Museum, Ein Hod, Israel)

Raya Zommer-Tal is the director and chief curator of the Janco-Dada Museum in Ein Hod, Israel since 1988 and curated more than 200 exhibitions. Graduate of the faculties of Art and Studies of the Land of Israel, Haifa University, she received her Certificate in Museology from Tel Aviv University in 1985, and M.A. in Arts from the Department of Art, Haifa University in 2007. Her research and extensive publications focus on contemporary art, the Dada movement and Marcel Janco. She participated in international conferences in Israel and abroad and was a guest curator in various exhibition spaces in Europe.

Professor Hubert van den Berg

(Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic)

Hubert van den Berg is titular professor of literary studies by appointment of the previous President of the Polish Republic, working as ordinary professor in the Department for Dutch Studies Dutch at the Palacký University in Olomouc (Czech Republic), with main research focus on the European avant-garde and issues of cultural exchange. He is the co-editor of the *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde* (2009) and one of the series editors of the long-standing *Avant-Garde Critical Studies* (Brill, Leiden/New York). Recently, he designed for the Olomouc Museum of Art an exhibition *Dutch Angle. Dutch and Czechoslovak Avant-Garde* (2022-23) on the Central-European circulation of visual art, photography, film, and design in the period between the two World Wars.

Biographies - Moderators / Panel Chairs

Nabila Abdel Nabi

(Tate Modern, U.K.)

Nabila Abdel Nabi is currently Curator, International Art at Tate Modern. Previously she was the Associate Curator at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery. Prior to this she served as Gallery Manager (Exhibitions) in The Third Line, Dubai. Nabila has worked on solo exhibitions and facilitated new commissions by artists including Abbas Akhavan, Kader Attia, Omar Ba, Yto Barrada, Karla Black, Kapwani Kiwanga, Amalia Pica and Vivian Suter among others. She has curated the forthcoming Hajra Waheed exhibition *Hold Everything Dear* at the Power Plant, Toronto and was previously Art Editor at literary magazine *The Point*. Nabila holds an M.A. from The Courtauld Institute of Art and a B.A. from the University of Chicago.

Dr Ana Bilbao

(University of York, U.K.)

Ana Bilbao is a lecturer in modern and contemporary art at the University of York (UK). Her research explores histories of exhibition-making, art institutions, and contemporary art from the Global South, mainly Latin America and Southeast Asia. She is interested in extractivism, decolonial pedagogies, and the links between contemporary art and human and environmental rights. She is currently a coinvestigator of the AHRC project "[Can the Arts Save Human Rights?](#)", in partnership with the Centre for Applied Human Rights at the university and other arts and human rights organisations in the UK, Colombia, and Canada. Prior to joining York, she was editor of *Afterall Journal*, a research fellow at Afterall Research Centre at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London, and teaching fellow at the University of Essex. In 2017 she was visiting scholar in the art history department at KU Leuven, Belgium.

Dr Jonathan Cane

(University of York, U.K.)

Jonathan Cane is a historian of modern and contemporary art and architecture from the Global South. His BA honours in African Studies was from the University of Cape Town, and his PhD in Art History from the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Following postdoctoral fellowships in South Africa at the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Pretoria, he joined the University of Warwick as an assistant professor. His research fellowship at LCAB extends his existing interdisciplinary work on urban ecology, critical plant studies and queer theory to investigate tree-human relationships in the Anthropocene.

Biographies & Abstracts

Speakers

Haifa Ali Alkthiri

(University of York, U.K.)

Haifa Ali Alkthiri is an art history lecturer at Princess Norah University in Saudi Arabia. She is currently pursuing a PhD researching the question of identity in the life and career of Mohammed Al-Saleem (1967-1979). She is a member of the Saudi Society of Archaeological Studies and the Saudi Science Group of Art and Design. Her achievements include paintings which have been exhibited in Janadriah Heritage and Culture and the Crossroads of Travel and Tourism Investment in 2011. She also worked as a Research Assistant and Head of a foundation year at the College of Art and Design.

Abstract:

The representation of identity in the life and career of Mohammed Al-Saleem (1967-1997)

Al-Saleem's journey to find his identity went through several stages before he reached the distinctive artistic style of "Horizonism". When asked about Al-Saleem's style in 1976, the critic Bikar said, "it is original Saudi art".¹ This presentation will explain the motivations that drove Al-Saleem to focus on specific elements and use them as signifiers to represent Saudi identity. The question is why Al-Saleem insisted on painting the desert and its elements, such as tents and sand, as representative of Saudi Arabia at that time when the country was in the grips of modern transformation and a shift to a more urbanized existence. During the oil wealth period in the early 1970s. Al-Saleem studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence, Italy. This presentation will show the role of Italy in forming Al-Saleem's identity and its impact on his art.

1. Mohammed Alsaleem, The 12th Personal Exhibition of the Saudi Artist M. Alsaleem in the Riyadh Intercontinental Hotel Foyer from 2/1/1976 to 12/1/1976 (Riyadh: The Saudi Arabian Society of Arts, 1976).

Dareen Alorflly
(University of York, U.K.)

Dareen Alorflly is a PhD researcher in the history of art at the University of York. She is an academic with over 15 years of experience in the field of art. Dareen holds a bachelor's degree in art Education and a master's degree in Islamic Arts from King Abdulaziz University. Her research interests include the history of art exhibitions in Saudi Arabia, the roles of artists in developing contemporary Saudi art, light exhibitions, and conceptual works in the Saudi context. Dareen attended many courses related to organising art exhibitions, and she was proactive in attending local art events and visiting the limited art collections locally and internationally.

Abstract:

The transformations in the characteristics of Saudi conceptual art from 1999-2014

This paper examines the transformations in the characteristics of Saudi conceptual art from 1999-2014 and how the conceptual language evolved through the travel of Saudi artists to exhibit outside Saudi Arabia. Through an analysis of artworks produced during this period, it was found that there was a shift from a more general to a more personal, cultural approach, with artists utilizing a range of media, including installation, participatory, and performance art.

The study also explores how Saudi artists who travelled abroad were able to expand their artistic vocabulary, incorporating new ideas and techniques into their work. I argue that exposure to international art scenes allowed Saudi artists to explore new themes, such as identity and social issues, and experiment with different artistic approaches. Overall, the paper provides insight into how Saudi conceptual art evolved during this time and the impact that international travel had on the development of the Saudi art scene.

Dr Alexandru Bar
(University of York, U.K.)

Alexandru Bar is a cultural historian whose work is situated at the frontier between art history, cultural history, and Jewish studies. He is currently a Research Associate with the Department of Art History, University of York. He received his M.A. from Tel Aviv University, Israel (Masa scholarship) and his PhD from the University of Leeds, U.K. (AHRC-funded). His research seeks to clear the way for a renewed consideration of the symbolic substance of Tristan Tzara's and Marcel Janco's Jewish experience and the role it played in defining their national identity. His most recent research project seeks to provide an original account of the life and creative endeavours of Marcel Janco after 1941.

Abstract:

Representation of Suffering, Destruction and Disillusion in the art of Marcel Janco

This essay focuses on the artistic response of Marcel Janco, architect, and fine artist, when faced with the antisemitic horrors of the Holocaust in Romania. He was a witness to the violent events that took place during the Legionnaires' rebellion and Bucharest pogrom in 1941 when even his brother-in-law, Michael Goldschlager, was kidnapped from his house and murdered at the Străulești Abattoir, mutilated in such way as to mock the Jewish kashrut ritual. These events convinced Janco to leave Romania for good in early 1941 for Palestine. The image of the assassination of his brother-in-law deeply shocked the artist in such a way that he produced a series of apocalyptic drawings after he settled in Palestine. These drawings come to sustain a collective Jewish memory of Holocaust survivors who settled in Palestine, Janco's memory itself being reused and other people's memories refashioned.

My analyses offer a new understanding of how the antisemitic events experienced in Romania shaped Janco's programmatic statements about the social and ethical notions which underline all his artistic endeavours once in Palestine. Given that Janco redefined his identity once in Palestine whilst attempting to understand what 'home' was for him and where he could find his own place, my essay explores, with the aim to create a more comprehensive understanding of Janco's identity as a Jew, the role played by suffering and disillusion in his exploration of his inner world.

Dr Ambra D'Antone

(The Warburg Institute, U.K.)

Dr Ambra D'Antone is a historian of modern art and art historiography of Turkey and the Middle East. After completing her PhD at The Courtauld and Tate on Surrealist art and thought in Turkey and Syria, Ambra is currently working as a Research Associate of the Bilderfahrzeuge group at The Warburg Institute, preparing a book on Turkish art historiography of the Early Republican period. Her new article "An Inside Look at Yüksel Arslan's Outsider Practice, 1955-1964" is forthcoming in 2023 in *Art History*.

Abstract:

"Art needs the long haul": Group D and the Turkish Avant-Garde

In 1933, on the tenth anniversary of the Turkish Republic, a group of artists founded Group D (*D Grubu*) in Istanbul. Taking the fourth letter of the French alphabet as its logo, the group claimed its position as the fourth art collective to appear in the country, in relation to a perceived history of Turkish art which was increasingly being periodised. 'D' was also a signifier of the artists' announcement of a new generation of painters, who integrated intellectual concerns to artistic practice. Using vanguard terminology, its founders claimed that what distinguished D Group from its predecessors was a unifying aesthetic: the painters of D group came together "in revolutionary and combative ways", sharing the same understanding of art.

Nonetheless, Group D opposed a direct alignment with European avant-gardes, reflecting a widespread trend of criticism in Turkish art and philosophical writing against what was felt to be an encroaching Western model of modernity. Most poignantly, a group of Turkish intellectuals, formally articulating the relationship between East and West within Turkish modernity at large, appointed Turkey as "the Other West". In this paper, I challenge a monolithic analysis of Group D's vanguard stance by considering the group's early exhibitions and visual productions in relation to the simultaneous theorisations of 'the modern' in Turkey and in the context of a performative re-narration of the Turkish nation perpetuated by the Atatürk regime. In particular, I reveal how the group's determination as "Turkey's first avant-garde", which is still operative today, went hand in hand with systematic translation, copying and repurposing of earlier forms and traditions, casting doubt over Europeans modernist notions of originality and linear progression.

Professor Michael White
(University of York, U.K.)

Michael White is a Professor of History of Art at the University of York, where he specialises in the history of European avant-garde art, architecture, and design. He is best known for his publications on De Stijl and Dada, this dual interest initially prompted by his doctoral research on the artist Theo van Doesburg. His books include *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester UP) and *Generation Dada: The Berlin Avant-garde and the First World War* (Yale UP), alongside many articles, catalogue contributions, essays, and exhibitions on artists such as Theo van Doesburg, George Grosz, Piet Mondrian and Kurt Schwitters. His current research projects focus on the legacies of the avant-gardes and the intersections between art and law.

Abstract:

Arieh Sharon: Brno, Haifa, Dessau

Since the publication in 1976 of Arieh Sharon's *Kibbutz + Bauhaus: an architect's way in a new land*, a substantial literature has examined the connections between the architect who did more than most to give the state of Israel built form and his training in the late 1920s at Germany's famous art school. Much of that literature justifiably focuses on the complex and contested reception of European modernism in Palestine/Israel. This paper will consider aspects of that reception yet to be resolved and how they enable a challenge to the accepted narrative of the Bauhaus as moving from a craft-based utopian community to a machine-oriented design unit.