



## Resculpting Lebanon's Constitution at the Venice Biennale: A Q&A With Curator Georges Rabbath



Photo Shawki Youssef, courtesy Georges Rabbath  
Curator Georges Rabbath

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The system of national representation at the **Venice Biennale** has come under increasing fire. Some object to the fact that wealthy countries — generally Western ones — have their own longstanding pavilions in the Giardini and the means to participate, while poorer countries cannot afford to showcase their contemporary artists. Others simply think that national boundaries are too restrictive and don't represent the practice of artists today or the nature of life in an increasingly globalized world.

This is the first in a series of **ARTINFO** interviews with art-world figures who are operating outside the Biennale's official channels. **Georges Rabbath**, curator of the canceled Lebanese pavilion, is still planning a Lebanese project in Venice, titled "Lebanon As a State of Mind." It will involve participatory actions at the Danish pavilion and other locations, including a project for which the public can suggest amendments to a constitution that will then be performed by an artist in Venice. Rabbath spoke with **ARTINFO** about the pitfalls — and the benefits — of working on the margins of the official national pavilion system, and how it's appropriate for the Arab world today.

**When did you find out that Lebanon was no longer officially participating in the Biennale, and what reason was given?**

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We found out two weeks ago. I knew something like that was bound to happen — in a way, I knew it from the start — so the name "Lebanon As a State of Mind" was kind of a premonition, in fact, stating that something like that is bound to happen and that it doesn't really change the content. From the start we knew that we had to go through the motions, go by the rules and get in on it, before we were to switch to an unofficial thing. Most of it is not, of course, planned. I tried to plan for different scenarios and for part of it to change due to people making decisions based on their positions or their beliefs. A lot of people oppose the project — even actively trying to disrupt it by creating bad blood around it. And in a way this created an interesting process that I documented.

**Where has the opposition to the project come from?**

From a lot of the actors of the Lebanese art scene. I found out at some point that the Lebanese scene is partly something that has to do with power positions. There are power centers that control access to funds, etc., and also access to patrons of art because they know them, in a way. I don't want to sound too paranoid, but I'm not the only one that's shocked.

**Lebanon hasn't had a government since mid-January. Did that play a role in the country's decision not to participate in the Biennale?**

I don't think so.

**You published a statement of the project called "The Arab States of Mind," and I'm wondering how this title relates to "Lebanon As a State of Mind."**

What is happening now in Arab countries is something that would never happen in Lebanon, because, first of all, we never had an authoritarian regime and never will. In Lebanon we have extreme communities, each

of art, the never has an authoritarian regime and never with an election. We have elections, but they are one warring against the other, but because they are minorities they never have the possibility to get control, and I think Lebanon is the better for it, to be able to live together. So in a way Lebanon is a kind of model for what other Arab countries could try to look for, since after all these upheavals and revolutions what they will be left with is chaos. Total chaos, because I don't think Facebook can help create a constitution or a government. However, through a project like a constitution that I'm selecting for the Biennale, art can help create a participatory project where people can contribute and imagine together a possible meta-narrative of a country. And from there, maybe they can imagine a possible constitution or at least get to a kind of an awareness that maybe there isn't such a thing. Art biennials, especially the Venice Biennale, are the space where you can imagine political models.

#### **Who are the artists participating in the project?**

Most of those who were selected for the pavilion, and there will be new ones too, young ones, who were not part of the official selection. The artists include Ricardo Mbarkho, Shawki Youssef, Cornelia Krafft, and Etel Adnan. Annabel Daou has a beautiful project, but unfortunately we'll have to find a space to exhibit that. We still have a space in Venice, and I have reasons to think that we can still fund it, because there are private funders that are now interested in the project.

#### **Does this ad hoc way of developing your unofficial pavilion change the nature of the project?**

In a way we are at the same time in and out, which creates a performative aspect of asking a question: what does it mean to be there as a national pavilion? What does it mean to exhibit or try to do something authentic when our presence there hangs in the balance with just a stupid letter set by a minister who isn't even from a government that is functioning? Should an art project stop because a letter has been sent? Is an art project not strong enough to be able to continue on its own now that it has a life of its own? We have some artists from other countries who are helping us who can really relate to those questions and use them. That's why in a way Lebanon is not a country anymore — it is a state of mind.

#### **What other countries are involved in the project?**

The Danish pavilion is not officially sponsoring it but they have given us a great deal of help. We have artists from Jordan, artists from Egypt, and I'm also exploring possibilities with artists from Qatar. Jordan and Qatar are countries that don't have pavilions there. And I have an artist from Bahrain who was part of Lebanon's official selection, Camille Zakharia. And artists from New York, and from Holland, in fact.

#### **Is your project intended to challenge the notion of national representation at the Biennale, which has sometimes been called an outdated concept?**

It is, actually. A lot of projects challenge that. The idea is to see what we can give in return. What I think is that at some point a lot of art projects do something on a symbolic level, just put the collection out there and leave it out there. They don't give us as the possibility to relate to it or to run with it. And I think a long-term, ongoing project with a participatory aspect creates that possibility. What I'm trying to ask is not only the question of national representation of art but also of branding of art. I've been hearing a lot, "if only you had a big name or a sexy name it would have been much easier." But, at the end of the day, is it about the name of the artist or is it about the project?

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