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## Session 3: Subverting Kitsch

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### Closing Speech

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展覧会「アラブ現代美術展」の開催に際して、日本とアラブ世界の芸術家の役割を比較する

pop-up mathaf  
@mori art museum

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モリアート・アラブ現代美術館

same-same but different:  
the role of the artist in the arab world and japan

モリアート・アラブ現代美術館

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#### “Arab Express: The Latest Art from the Arab World”

Dates: June 16 - October 28, 2012

Venue: Mori Art Museum (53F Roppongi Hills Mori Tower)

Organizers: Mori Art Museum, The Yomiuri Shimbun

Curated by: Nanjo Fumio (Director, Mori Art Museum),  
Kondo Kenichi (Curator, Mori Art Museum)

Curatorial Advisors: Wassan Al-Khudairi (Former Director, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art),  
Hoor Al-Qasimi (President, Sharjah Art Foundation),  
Ehab Ellaban (Commissaire, the 12th Cairo Biennale),  
Salwa Mikdadi (Former Head of Arts & Culture Programme, Emirates Foundation),  
Muhammad Talaat (Former Director, Palace of Arts, Cairo)



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## Pop-up Mathaf @ Mori Art Museum

### Symposium Co-organized with Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art

#### “Same-Same But Different: The Role of the Artist in the Arab World and Japan”

Mori Art Museum collaborates with Mathaf to present a weekend of events. Arab artists participating in “Arab Express: The Latest Art from the Arab World” at Mori Art Museum, join Japanese artists active worldwide in giving presentations on their art practices, talks, and a panel discussion comparing contemporary art in the Arab world with that in Japan. This exciting program designed to create a new dialogue and cultural exchange between the two regions is a part of “Qatar-Japan 2012,” a series of events celebrating 40 years of diplomatic relations between Qatar and Japan.

**Dates & Time:** 19:00-21:00, Friday, September 28, 2012

13:00-18:30, Saturday, September 29, 2012

**Venue:** Academyhills (49F, Roppongi Hills Mori Tower)

**Organizers:** Mori Art Museum, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, Qatar Museums Authority

**Curators:** Deena Chalabi (Former Head of Strategy, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art),

Kondo Kenichi (Curator, Mori Art Museum)

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#### ABOUT THE POP-UP MATHAF

Since it first opened in Doha in 2010, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art has articulated its vision and purpose not simply through its exhibitions, but also by focusing on different strategies for engaging with audiences in Qatar and beyond. The goal of the “Pop-up Mathaf” has been to engage with international audiences through developing a flexible, engaging platform for multiple voices on art and ideas, and to address a substantial knowledge gap around the contexts for Arab contemporary art. The first “Pop-up Mathaf”, called “Interference”, took place in London in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in July 2011, and included artist talks, workshops, a film screening, a commissioned publication and interactive elements. “Same-Same But Different” is the second “Pop-up Mathaf”, developed in collaboration with Mori Art Museum in Tokyo for a September 2012.

#### ABOUT MATHAF: ARAB MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

The first institution of its kind in the region, Mathaf offers an Arab perspective on modern and contemporary art and supports creativity, promotes dialogue and inspires new ideas. The 5,500-square-meter (59,000-square-foot) museum, located in a former school building in Doha’s Education City, has a collection that offers a rare comprehensive overview of modern Arab art, representing the major trends and sites of production spanning from the 1840s through the present. Mathaf presents exhibitions that situate the Arab world in relation to a larger art context and also offers programs that engage the local and international community, encourage research and scholarship and contribute to the cultural landscape of the Gulf region, the Middle East, the Arab Diaspora and beyond. For more information, please visit: [www.mathaf.org.qa](http://www.mathaf.org.qa)

#### ABOUT QATAR MUSEUMS AUTHORITY

Established in 2005 by His Highness the Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani to combine the resources of all museums in the State of Qatar, Qatar Museums Authority (QMA) is a governmental organization whose remit is to develop museums and cultural institutions and provide an effective system for collecting, protecting, preserving and interpreting historic sites, monuments and artifacts. Under the leadership of Chairperson H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa, QMA is transforming the State of Qatar into a cultural hub of the Middle East. The Museum of Islamic Art, inaugurated in 2008, is the Authority’s flagship project. The organization won further global acclaim with the December 2010 opening of Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. QMA’s goal of becoming a “global leader in the world of museums, art and heritage” will be advanced in the coming years with ambitious, world-class projects, including the Jean Nouvel-designed National Museum of Qatar. For further information, please visit [www.qma.org.qa](http://www.qma.org.qa)

#### ABOUT QATAR-JAPAN 2012

Qatar-Japan 2012 celebrates 40 years of excellent relations between the State of Qatar and Japan. This is realized through a yearlong series of cultural, sporting and business-related activities held in Japan and Qatar. The events highlight mutual understanding, recognition and appreciation of the Qatari and Japanese cultures, traditions and people. Qatar-Japan 2012 also promotes educational opportunities, business relations, economic support and increased cultural exchange between the nations of Qatar and Japan. Qatar-Japan 2012 is led by Qatar Museums Authority, and officially sponsored by Qatar Gas and Qatar Petroleum; the other partners are Qatar Ministry of Culture, Al Jazeera Network, Qatar Airways, Doha Film Institute, Katara, Qatar Ministry of Business and Trade, Qatar 2022, Qatar Foundation, Qatar Olympic Committee, Qatar Tourism Authority, Reach Out to Asia (ROTA), Qatar Friendship Fund, and the Supreme Education Council. To learn more about the Qatar-Japan 2012 project, please visit [www.qatarjapan2012.com](http://www.qatarjapan2012.com)

## DAY 2

13:00-18:30, Saturday, September 29, 2012

■ Navigator: Kondo Kenichi

13:00-14:30

Session 2 **“Tracing History”**

■ Speakers: Hrair Sarkissian (“Arab Express” participating artist) and Koizumi Meiro (Artist)

■ Moderator: Deena Chalabi (Former Head of Strategy, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art)

14:30-15:00

Break

15:00-16:30

Session 3 **“Subverting Kitsch”**

■ Speakers: Zena El Khalil (“Arab Express” participating artist, appearance via Skype) and Sputniko! (Artist)

■ Moderator: Deena Chalabi

16:30-17:00

Break

17:00-18:30

Closing Discussion **“Being Arab and Being Japanese: Different But Not So Different”**

■ Speakers: All speakers of the symposium

■ Moderator: Nanjo Fumio

## Session 3 “Subverting Kitsch”



### Zena el Khalil (Artist)

Born in 1976 in London. Currently lives and works in Beirut, Lebanon.

Zena El Khalil's art addresses issues relevant to politically unstable Beirut. Using familiar materials to produce vibrant work in pink and other bright colors, she links in her work the dreams of Lebanese people with the reality of war. El Khalil works in a diverse range of media, including painting, installation, performance and fiction. Her novel Beirut, I Love You: A Memoir (Saqi Books, 2008) became a bestseller in Lebanon. Her recent major exhibitions include “Hopes and Doubts” at Fondazione Merz, Turin, Italy (2009), “Ou Ali mama’ou Khabar (And Ali Has No Idea...)” at Galerie Tanit, Munich, Germany (2010), and “Beirut ReBirth” at Beirut Exhibition Center, Lebanon (2011). In 2012, she was selected to be a TED Fellow.



### Sputniko! (Artist)

Born 1985, Tokyo.

Sputniko!'s multimedia artworks explore the intersection between technology, feminism and pop culture. Often involving collaborative research with scientists, Sputniko!'s works are critical speculations on the possible future of humanity and technology. Sputniko!'s collaboration project with Cesar Harada, was awarded the “Next Idea” award at Ars Electronica in 2009. After her graduation from Royal College of Art (she majored in Design Interactions) in 2010, Sputniko! participated in exhibitions such as “Talk to Me” at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011), and “Transformation” at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo (2011). Since 2012, she has served as a guest professor at Kobe Design University.



### Deena Chalabi (Former Head of Strategy, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art)

Deena Chalabi developed the “Pop-up Mathaf” in her role as the founding Head of Strategy for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art. From 2009 to 2012, she oversaw the museum's branding, strategic development and communications, and co-curated the inaugural exhibition of Mathaf's permanent collection of modern art from the Arab world. The first Pop-up Mathaf, “Interference,” took place in collaboration with the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London in July 2011 and examined the relationship between art and social change. Chalabi recently became Co-Executive Director, Public Engagement at Alwan for the Arts, a cultural organization in New York City.

## Closing Speech “Being Arab and Being Japanese: Different But Not So Different”



### Nanjo Fumio (Director, Mori Art Museum)

Born in 1949. Nanjo Fumio graduated from Keio University with degrees in economics and also aesthetics/art history. After organizing numerous exhibitions for the Japan Foundation and other institutions, he joined the Mori Art Museum as Deputy Director in 2002, and became Director in November, 2006. His international appointments include Commissioner of the Japan Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, Commissioner at the Taipei Biennale, and Artistic Director of the Yokohama Triennale and the Singapore Biennale. He is a member of CIMAM (International Committee of ICOM for Museums and Collections of Modern Art) and AICA (International Association of Art Critics).

## Session 3

Zena El Khalil (a writer and mixed media artist based in Beirut, Lebanon) and Sputniko! (a media artist based in Tokyo) share a powerful combination of unique aesthetic vision, upbeat attitude and political savvy. Both artists use diverse techniques and technologies along with a heavy dose of sly wit in their work. This discussion will focus on the artists' use of kitsch and humor as a form of cultural activism, their thoughts about gender and feminism in their respective contexts, and the role of local pop culture in the work of a transnational artist.



Zena el Khalil appeared via skype.  
From left: Deena Chalabi, Sputniko!  
Photo: Mikuriya Shinichiro

**Kondo Kenichi** The first speaker for this session is Ms. Zena el Khalil, one of artists whose works are displayed in the "Arab Express" exhibition. Her presentation will be made via Skype. The artist Sputniko! is also on the platform. And Ms. Deena Chalabi will again moderate the session.

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you, Ken. Yes, we are very lucky and excited that Zena is able to join us today by Skype and to have Sputniko! here in person. I am very much looking forward to this session. It has a very different feel, as you can probably already tell, from the last session, and a very different theme.

Zena, I think we'd like to start with your presentation if you wouldn't mind. Each of the artists is going to begin by showing some of their work and explaining their art practice and then the three of us will engage in a conversation. Zena is now in Italy. She has woken up early to be with us today, so thank you, Zena.

**Zena el Khalil** Thank you. Good morning everyone. Good afternoon. Good evening. Thank you so much for having me with you today. Hello Sputniko! I'm a big fan of your work so it's wonderful to be doing this panel with you.

I am going to start with some background about my life and then I will speak more about my work in detail. If we can start with the first slide, please.

**Deena Chalabi** Can you see it? Over here.

**Zena el Khalil** Oh, it's not up. No, that's not the first one.

**Deena Chalabi** That's not the first one? Which is the first one?

**Zena el Khalil** That's the first. No, no go back. The three men.

**Deena Chalabi** The three men okay. This one?

**Zena el Khalil** Yes.

**Deena Chalabi** Okay. All right.

**Zena el Khalil** Okay. This is going to be fun. Wonderful.

I come from a part of the world that is often associated with violence and hostility. But despite my surroundings, I decided at a very young age that I wanted love to guide my path in this life. I grew up between Lagos, Nigeria, and Beirut, Lebanon. May I have the next slide, please?

That's not the – no. Yes.

**Deena Chalabi** They seem to be out of order, so we're going to be playing a guessing game, but it's fun. We'll get to see all of them many times.

**Zena el Khalil** That's okay. I grew up between Lagos, Nigeria, and Beirut, Lebanon. As a child, I was exposed to so many different cultures: The African one around me and the Western one on television. I love both equally. I think what defined me the most was popular culture. Little did I know that this would help me develop a complex but beautiful language: the language of the East and of the West. This important bridge would later steer the visual evolution of my world.

Next slide, please. No, keep going. Keep going.

Okay. Thank you.

Today, my work is a byproduct of political and economic turmoil focusing on issues of violence, gender, and religion, and their place in our bubblegum culture. I try to expose the superficiality of war creating an alternate reality. My weapons of choice are love and humor. Next slide please. Yes. That one was right.

The markets of Lagos encouraged me to look to the streets for inspiration and solutions. I use the materials of everyday life in Beirut. Everything from plastic toys to Kuffiyehs, artificial flowers, and glittery wallpaper, because in my version of Beirut, I see large paintings of suicide bombers next to shops selling lingerie, next to billboards advertising beer, next to cops carrying Kalashnikovs, next to vendors selling the latest pirated Shakira CDs - maybe soon Sputniko! CDs too. Consumerism and war: they are one and the same. The plastic I use in my paintings is made from oil, the same oil that mankind is at war over.

Next slide, please. Okay, that's it.

I use the color pink a lot. Pink: it's like cotton candy. It's fluffy and sweet. Too much of it, though, will leave a bad pain in your stomach. It's quick and superficial. Barbie, GI Joe politics, and Cherry Cola, to me, represent a generation that grew up on pink. My generation is completely embedded in consumer culture. We are the pink generation.

Next slide, please. Okay that's right.

Other than shopping and MTV, there is a beautiful and powerful side to pink. It's the color of nonviolent protest. For example, CODEPINK. CODEPINK is a women-initiated peace and social justice movement, working to end US-funded wars and occupations. Think Pink; Think Pink are working to raise awareness about breast cancer. The pink triangle; the symbol of the pink triangle was once used in Nazi concentration camps to identify homosexual prisoners. It has since been reclaimed and is now used as an international symbol of gay pride and the gay rights movement. Lately in the news, Egyptian-American activist Mona Eltahawy consciously chose to wear a pink raincoat and use pink spray-paint to paint over a racist poster hung in the New York City subways.

I am very happy to have this opportunity to subvert kitsch. It's easy to assume certain things when you see glitter and beads. I live in a world of chaos where dream and reality collide and I don't sleep well at night. It's hard to find security, so I have to create my own. The piece behind me here is from a body of work called *Goods for Gaza*. Can you see it?

**Deena Chalabi** Yes we can.

**Sputniko!** We see it.

## Zena el Khalil

Great. As many of you know, there is a blockade of Gaza by the Israeli army via land, air, and sea. In 2010, a group of activists tried to sail into Gaza carrying much needed supplies and aid for the people there. One of the ships, the Mavi Marmara, was boarded by Israeli commandos and some activists were killed. The army claimed the boats were a threat, bringing in weapons. I was curious. What exactly is this blockade all about? What are the items banned from Gaza? What items caused the death of these activists? I did a simple Google search – Google Sputniko! – and I found the list. The list contains about 2000 items, which include the following: desks, donkeys, A4 paper – so A4 and not A5 – biscuits, goats, ginger... it's a very long list.

I made several pieces highlighting items from this list, such as this one: chocolate. Chocolate is banned from Gaza. I don't use glue in my work. I use tiny little pins, thousands of them. I've developed a type of canvas where everything is stuck on with pins. In a way, it reflects the instability of my region. It's also a reflection of a huge problem we have in Lebanon that some have labeled "collective amnesia." We try too hard to forget our wars too quickly. Our history is constantly being rewritten to suit different political and religious ideologies. At any point in time, one could completely rearrange my paintings to tell a different story. The physical process of using pins puts me into a state of meditation. This active repetition creates an environment of peace around me. While I'm in my studio, I don't worry about bombs dropping. You see, glitter reflects light, and the more color and glitter I use, the closer I am to light, to the source. The pink objects and embellishments are my positive energy. I take aim and shoot them into the heart of fear to negate the negative.

Next slide, please. Okay, back – one back, yes. Okay, this is a giant rotating disco ball I built. It's four meters by four meters. It says "Allah," "God" in Arabic.

It's covered in tiny mirrors. Music accompanies it and you are invited to dance, rather than kill, under the light of God. Disco is preferable.

Next slide, please. Okay. This piece tries to create a bridge between cultures and religions. I am searching for a God that transcends boundaries. Here, I placed Allah in a church in Italy. We lit it up with pink lights and people were invited to come and dance to forget what tears us apart and remember what bring us together. This piece is called *Peace Be Upon You*.

Next slide. Okay. One back, please. Yes.

Most of my work is a reaction to where I live. The Allah sculpture is inspired by a real monument in the northern city of Tripoli in Lebanon. Tripoli has been in the news a lot lately as it's the connecting city between Beirut and Damascus. Here, you can see hundreds of protesters around the monument Allah, which in reality is a large marble sculpture in the middle of a very busy roundabout.

Next slide. Yes.

But in my world, I prefer people dancing around Allah. I think there is a big difference between popular culture and kitsch. Popular culture is an international language. It builds bridges and brings people together. It can destroy stereotypes if used in the right way. It can promote peace because it's so accessible. I strongly believe that my work should speak a language that people know how to use. Peace should be completely accessible. My pieces at the Mori today are a reaction to a propaganda flier that was dropped on us by the Israeli army during their invasion of Lebanon in 2006. I worked to transform an object of violence into a celebration of life by transforming it into something beautiful. I truly believe that humor is a strong tool to tear down walls and love is the foundation that will build our bridges.

Today, poets have become a rare species. In Beirut, war and politics are always at the forefront. There is little support or funding for the arts and free thinkers are often put down, threatened, and sometimes even killed. But, I am very lucky because I have a powerful army behind me, an army of pink.

Next slide, please. Okay, no, one back, back, yes. No, the pink dress, yes. Okay, my pink army.

This is a dress I wear every year during the Beirut International Marathon. I wear this big pink wedding dress and run around the streets of Beirut in an attempt to spread peace and love. I've given flowers to hundreds of people over the past 10 years and even kisses every now and then. Honestly, I don't know if it's working, but I do know that I'm trying my best. The fact that I can still fit into the same dress after 10 years is a great sign.

In 2006, I kept a blog during the Israeli invasion.

With each bomb that fell, I felt more compelled to love. It was a self-defense mechanism. Love would keep me alive and just like Scheherazade, from the *One Thousand and One Nights*, I believe that by up lighting every day, it will bring me a new day. I wrote about life under the bombs, about my best friend Maya who eventually passed away soon after the war ended, about the environmental disasters caused by the war. Two years later, I wrote the book *Beirut, I Love You*, which I am now adapting into a feature film dedicated to Maya.

Next slide, please.

Okay. Beirut is a city I will never give up on and it's something that I think I will continue to explore for the rest of my life. We have a very special love-hate relationship. We always seem to be courting death, walking a tightrope. We live like there's no tomorrow because that way of life has been engrained in us after so many decades of war. But, I do think that as artists, we can change the world we live in. We can help put an end to wars and we can help transform violence.

Next slide.

Yes. That's my grandfather. I would like to close with a story about my grandfather. During the war in the '80s, there was heavy fighting in his village and everyone was evacuated. But he decided to stay. Call it pride, if you will. Huge bombs fell all around him, but with every opportunity he had, he would sneak out and plant a tree in the space where a bomb fell. Today, if you decide to visit him in Aley [ph], you will find a line of beautiful trees leading up to his home. After the war, they renamed his street to Shera' al-Zuhur, Flower Street.

Thank you.

## Deena Chalabi

Zena, that was great. Thank you so much and no technical hitches on the Skype [Unclear]. Without further ado, I'd like to allow Sputniko! to give her presentation. As you will see, I think there are some really interesting dynamics that we will then be able to discuss – hopefully.

## Sputniko!

Okay, all right. First of all, Zena, it's really nice to talk to you today. I'm a big fan of your work too and it's really interesting to see so much in common despite – like I live in Tokyo and you live in Lebanon, but I believe in pink. I believe in pop culture. It'd be interesting to discuss those things later.

I'm going to start by talking about my background. For the translation people, shall I talk slowly? Okay. I'm going to talk a little bit slowly.

I was born in 1985 in Tokyo. My mum is British and my father is Japanese. Both of them are mathematics professors. I grew up as a real computer-science geek, a math geek. I only cared about programming and fiddling with my computer. I moved to London in 2003 to study mathematics and computer science at Imperial College. But then for some reason, after studying maths, I started getting worked up about many, many problems and that led me to go study art at the Royal College of Art.

Some other problems – I had many problems at that time – I was thinking about. Growing up in Japan, I was really dissatisfied about the social roles of women in Japan. Since I was studying science, I realized I was one of the only few women studying science. Since technology is shaping so much of this world, I felt that it was quite dangerous that only few women are working with technology. Also, I was just annoyed with so many things about my own biology – getting pregnant, menstruation, and all these issues – and I really wanted to be a cyborg.

The question I had at that time was: Can technology and science help me solve all of these problems? I'm going to talk about one of the works. It's called *Menstruation Machine – Takashi's Take*, and features a boy named Takashi. I'm actually dressing up as a guy who likes dressing up as a woman. Here's Takashi. He's a transvestite. But one day, he finds he's no longer satisfied merely dressing as a woman; he wants to

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experience menstruation, a very, very vital part of being female. So he builds this machine – a menstruation machine – that lets you experience the pain and bleeding of menstruation. If you look right here, there's a tank that stores 80 milliliters of blood – the average blood flow during menstruation in a week – and that comes down right here. On the stomach, there are these electrodes that induce a very dull pain, that menstruation sort of cramp.

Anyhow, I actually built this machine with the help of scientist at Imperial College who is doing research on menstruation and medicine related to females. But I didn't end there by just making a machine. I am pop musician. Growing up in Tokyo, I was surrounded by pop, pop, pop, consumer culture, MTV, and all the things I liked. I guess you know T.M.Revolution here. I really loved T.M.Revolution – a very J pop star – and I also liked Laurie Anderson.

So I wrote a song about this character, Takashi, who makes this menstruation machine and wears it and goes out in Tokyo. I'm going to show a little bit of the video. If you could make the volume a little bit lower because I'm going to talk over it. Menstruation is a very interesting topic to think about in terms of the relationship between technological progress and gender, or social, political backgrounds overall, because menstruation happens to almost half of people on the earth and every month, women suffer from bleeding and pain and hormonal changes.

But actually in 1960, when contraceptive pills first came out, doctors knew how to get rid of menstruation altogether in a very safe way: by taking contraceptive pills every single day you could actually stop menstruation from coming. But at that time, the doctors thought that women would not use contraceptive pills if they stopped menstruating altogether. They deliberately designed the Pill so you take it for three weeks and then rest for one, and you get a fake menstruation that you don't need to get every month. That was 50 years ago, and all these different technologies...

... like space travel, or the internet or bioengineering have since come out, but women are still bleeding every month. More recently, in 2004, some doctors and scientists started to say that maybe this approach was wrong. Now there's a new pill called Lybrel that came out in the US that stops menstruation. You only have to menstruate maybe once a year, but this is only very recent and it's not very widespread in the world.

Also in Japan, contraceptive pills took nine years to be approved, whereas Viagra took only five months. Actually, they approved the Pill three months after Viagra was approved, probably because the old guys deciding which pills to approve got really embarrassed after approving Viagra so quickly. So through menstruation, you can see these things. You think technology develops equally for everyone, but actually it's really affected by cultural, political, or religious circumstances all the time.

Anyhow, in my menstruation machine work, I wanted to discuss those issues and this character is a flip. Instead of a female getting rid of menstruation through technology, I created a male character experiencing menstruation by using technology, so it's like kind of ironic flip. I posted this video on YouTube, because I love YouTube. I almost think that video art is probably better seen, viewed, on YouTube than in art museums, because in art museums, you walk into a room, the video is halfway through and you don't know what it's about. But with YouTube, you just click on a link and you see the video from wherever point you want to start.

Anyhow, I love YouTube, and I love also spreading my work outside of the conventional art environment. When I put this work on YouTube, it went absolutely viral. It was blogged all over the place – Gizmodo, Wired, all of these different blogs – and it was partly because the first news actually misunderstood my work completely and said, "A Japanese guy invented this menstruation machine because he desperately wanted to experience menstruation." It was crazy, and I got comment after comment on my YouTube from people who were absolutely shocked. There were women who thought this was a fantastic idea, and that this Japanese man should be awarded some amazing award.

I loved the comments I got on this YouTube video, which I could never have seen if I'd just shown it in an art museum. In my work, I always, always put my videos on YouTube, because I think that a very important part of my practice is to reach out to an audience outside the conventional sphere of art. I want my work and language to be accessible to people. I also use Twitter. I am a crazy tweeter, and I think – Zena, you know it already – I tweet too much. But, I tweet about my private life, about the works I'm working on or just simple thoughts about any problems occurring at the time.

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Last year, I tweeted about the riots in London, and I would tweet about other news. It's interesting to have conversations with fans and other people.

Okay, anyhow, so I'm going to move on to my next project: this is called *Sushiborg Yukari*. What's Sushiborg Yukari? I wonder, Zena, if you know the word *nyotaimori*? *Nyotaimori* is a practice in Japan of serving sushi on naked women that you only see in mafia films, black-and-white mafia films, but it's a very interesting sort of myth that could happen in Japan. Anyhow, Sushiborg is a futuristic version of *nyotaimori*. She is a *nyotaimori* cyborg. She has a rotating sushi belt circling her waist and she serves sushi to tired-out Japanese businessmen every evening. But actually, Sushiborg Yukari has very advanced intelligence and she feels that she does not want to be serving sushi on her rotating belt every night forever.

So she goes into the kitchen and starts modifying her own cyborg body, attaching these knives, and then one day she goes out to the restaurant, kills everyone around her eating her sushi, and then escapes. I love violent Japanese black-and-white films, and I love all the samurai action, so I shot a black-and-white Japanese mafia sort of samurai film about Sushiborg Yukari. I'm going to show you a very short...

I don't know if you can see it, Zena, but maybe you've seen it already on YouTube.

It was shot in a sushi restaurant in London. To shoot it, I had to go around London looking for people who would play dead for me. I would go up to an Asian guy and say, "Would you like to be a dead person in my film?" Thankfully, I found about seven after a week and it was very interesting filming experience. Anyhow, I don't have enough time, so you guys can watch this on YouTube if you're interested. Okay, I'll stop after the...

Anyhow, that guy is going to be in serious trouble in about two minutes. I'm going to move on to the next slide. I wonder how many minutes I've been talking. Five minutes? Okay. I'm going to skip this work. That's *Crowbot Jenny*. If you Google online, you'll find my work about *Crowbot Jenny*.

I'm going to talk about this work. It's called *Nanohana Heels*, *nanohana* meaning "rape flower" in Japanese. Basically, these are high-heels that contain *nanohana* seeds, and as you walk in these heels, the seeds get planted into the soil. So *nanohana* rape flowers might blossom from your footsteps. It's like the more you walk, the more flowers might blossom. The reason why I created this project is in 2011, as everyone knows, Japan had a very big earthquake and then, as everyone also knows, there was the Fukushima nuclear power plant accident. Now Japan is facing this new problem of radiation, not just in Fukushima, but also in Tokyo and other parts of Japan. I think I was really troubled and really touched by this and felt really sad about everything that was happening. But then I thought it's too easy to create a work of, sort of, desperation or sadness. I thought that those works would not help anyone. I wanted to make a work that had hope, that showed a way the situation might improve. Then, I started really thinking about the nuclear power accident and doing a lot of research. I found out that in Chernobyl after their nuclear power accident, scientists found that rape flowers, when they were planted in the contaminated soil, were able to absorb all the radioactive substances in the soil as they grew. Also, not only did the rape flowers absorb the radioactive substances, but you could also make biodiesel from the seeds, from the oil in the seeds, and you could use this biodiesel to generate clean energy, to produce electricity or move cars.

For farmers around Chernobyl, it was like a new form of agriculture. They couldn't really plant potatoes or other edible plants in the soil anymore, but maybe they could start planting rape flowers there. If you don't plant things in the soil, the soil starts to die off. It's good to plant rape flowers, to decontaminate the soil, and also get the oil from the seeds, make biodiesel, and maybe use that as a new energy source. This thing that the government in the Ukraine and Belarus was doing seemed to me like a possible way of moving on to the next step. They were like seeds of not just of rape flowers, but seeds of hope. Obviously, high heels are not the best way of planting rape seeds in the soil – it would take ages. But I liked this sort of metaphor of walking and planting at the same time. The more you walk, the more flowers might blossom out of your footsteps.

I am still working on this project at the moment. It's not finished. But, again, I am creating this sort of spirit, character, that will walk using these heels. I'm also creating a video that should come out in November. I will send it to you by email, Zena. That's the heel. I wonder if you can see it, but that's how it works. When you press onto the heel, it rotates and the seeds come out.

In the end, although we have very different backgrounds in terms of where we grew up and the topics

we're working with, we do agree – I too believe in the power of pop culture. Since I grew up surrounded by consumer culture and pop culture, MTV in Tokyo, and Tokyo is a very pop city, I feel that this is my real language. Also, I feel that this is the best language to reach out to more people about my ideas or have the discussions I want to have with people.

That's my presentation. Thank you very much.

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you very much. That was fantastic. Yes, as you can see, there are lots of affinities between these two artists. Hi Zena, welcome back to the screen. I have several questions I want to ask the two of you, but before we do that, given the discussion on different contexts and also the fact that you both work in multiple media – Zena does too. She mentioned her book and also the film adaptation of her book that she is working on. I thought that it might be interesting, Zena, if you're willing, to show the trailer that you made for your book, which is an interesting idea in itself – to have a YouTube video about a book. I think it will also be nice for the audience to see a little bit of the Beirut that's such an important part of your practice and your context. Would you? Thank you. If we could have Sputniko!'s computer back for five minutes. YouTube. There we go. It was loading just fine before.

**Sputniko!** Maybe, if I make it small. Oh, it's coming.

[Video Playing]



Sputniko!  
Photo: Mikuriya Shinichiro

**Deena Chalabi** Luckily we have a YouTube expert.

[Video Playing]

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you. I'm sorry about the quality not being great, but I hope that gives you a little bit more of a sense of the city that Zena comes from and the issues that the city has faced. As you can see, these two young women have a remarkably constructive way of looking at the issues that they deal with as artists. The title of today's discussion is "Subverting Kitsch." While they both deal with ideas surrounding kitsch and they are both interested in subverting and subversion and critique, I think the fact that they are both activists and both sort of constructivist is also very powerful and important. I think it's quite unique in some ways.

Both of you have discussed today that you are working in different ways and that your practices span different media in order to be accessible and to have the greatest reach possible. I'm interested though in the reverse so to speak given that we are in a museum context. I want to know a little bit about why you are not just a pop star or writer or filmmaker. What is it about the visual arts and the discourse of visual arts, what does that add to your practice, the object that you make and the process of being in this kind of context?

Sorry, who wants to go first – it's up to you. Zena, do you want to go first?

**Zena el Khalil** Sure.

**Deena Chalabi** Okay.

**Zena el Khalil** I think that, as artists, maybe we move a little bit slower. We have [Technical Difficulty] maybe more time to reflect on things. We have the opportunity to work on having a clear voice that reflects our true personality or circumstances without so much concern about fulfilling specific audience requirements. I think it's a much slower paced world, and there is also the beautiful act of creation when you make something with your hands, the flow of energy that goes from your mind into your hands, and then you see it on paper or you see it as a sculpture. I think, at least for me, there's a lot of spirituality involved in that. It gives a big

sense of fulfillment. Slower pace, more time to think and feel.

**Deena Chalabi** Great, thank you. Sputniko!

**Sputniko!** Yeah, I'm quite similar in the way that if I was just a pop star, then I'd have to write songs that sell. If you've heard Japanese pop in Shibuya, it's very different from the kind of songs I write. Because I am in the art world, I am able to really think about the topics I want to discuss. I don't have to think at all about how many CDs I sell. Some people say, "Oh, if you're an activist, then why don't you become a politician?" But I think making art can sort of be compared to being involved in politics. An artist can sort of hack into other people's lives, unexpectedly invite people to, or involve people in, a different kind of thinking in a different space from politics. Also, for me, I like reflecting on things. I like doing research and thinking about what I want to talk about. I think I only get about one or two good ideas a year. You can't really be gushing out like in the commercial world.

Yeah, that's kind of how I see it. I will never be a pop star or a TV personality. I think some of the work... I did do some of those kinds of works and it would bore me to death I think if I had to do that all my life.

**Deena Chalabi** You're also a scientist, so that's a very different kind of brain. It's almost as if art allows you to draw together your fascination with pop culture and your technological background, which I think is really an amazing combination.

**Sputniko!** Yeah. Actually regarding that, the science, when I was studying science, there was a time when I thought shall I solve all these problems as a cyborg scientist, like shall I come up with different technology to transform myself, or shall I become an artist and talk about these problems, and involve more people in my world of different kinds of thinking? There was a time when I was thinking about that. Yeah, I sort of moved into the arts side, but yeah.

**Deena Chalabi** Yeah. I think that one of the distinct commonalities between the two of you is this attempt to make your work accessible. Also the way that you both play with gender I think is very interesting, and I'd love to hear your thoughts about how that plays out in your own work, but also your thoughts about it in relation to one another. Obviously, Zena, we saw several images of yours including the ones in the galleries, but also the ones that you've shown here where you're dealing with a hypermasculinity and sort of critiquing that in the same way that Sputniko!, you're critiquing this sort of hyperfemininity. I'm curious to sort of hear more from each of you about what gender means in terms of your work and as part of a larger social critique.

**Zena el Khalil** It's funny because I never really... in terms of gender, until very recently in my life, I never felt different. I never felt different in my sexuality until I moved to Lebanon and was confronted with the ubermasculinity, the hypermasculinity. At first, it was a big challenge to understand who I am as woman because the perceptions and expectations of being a woman in the Arab world were very different from mine. At the beginning, the artworks I was making were more about questioning my gender, and then with time I realized that the main reason why I didn't [Technical Difficulty] femininity so much was because I was trying to protect myself against this very masculine world around me. Then with time by, let's say, embracing the feminine world through my work, it created a kind of bubble or barrier where I felt a lot more [Technical Difficulty] to express myself through my work and not really through my body. There was an interesting separation between physical presence and the artwork.

For most of my life, I had very short hair and most people thought I was a [Technical Difficulty]. I only started growing out my hair when I started painting and found a kind of sanctuary in that. Then, of course, given the political background of where I live, I don't want to over simplify it, but women give life and, in my part of the world, it's [Technical Difficulty] that are carrying the guns. Now, I'm not saying [Technical

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Difficulty] that they are different because where there is war everyone is involved, but it's just the visual perception [Technical Difficulty] it's very strong, this image of men carrying guns. I realized that in order to combat this violence around me, I have to use my own most powerful weapon. It was something deep inside, deeper than sexuality, maybe the feminine [Technical Difficulty] and by creating works that are super pink and delicate, with flowers, I think it makes a very good [Technical Difficulty] also to the violence around me. In fact, something that was very difficult for me to deal with growing up made me whole.

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you. Sputniko!?

**Sputniko!** In my case, I was born in Japan and grew up in Japan but I had a British mum who is a super career woman. She was teaching at university in Japan and she kept encouraging me to be strong and not be like Japanese women, traditional women. But then, when I'd switch on the TV, I would see a Japanese quiz show saying, which wife would you rather have: (a) a beautiful wife who can't cook, or (b) an ugly wife who's an amazing cook? I'd see this on TV and my nephew, who is only 6, will be skewed towards (a), from a very young age. Then, you see 12-year-old girls dancing in school uniforms as pop idols in front of 30-year-old men. You see this every day growing up. But I was also studying maths, and had ambitions, and studied science at university, and again, people just don't expect a woman to be doing maths. If I'd say, "I'm a mathematician, I'm a programmer," I'd always get a strange reaction. It was almost as if without me realizing, since very young, I was encountering these problems. I don't think I make gender-related works in particular. I think I just pick up on problems surrounding me quite naturally and make works from that.

I think that's how it naturally happened that some things I noticed or wanted to talk about were from my personal experiences of growing up in Japan: having a British mum, studying in Britain, comparing the two cultures, and women in the two cultures. But recently, after having more and more people know about my work, especially in Japan, when I organize an event – a Sputniko! event – I notice that maybe 80 percent of the people who come are young women between 18 to 25 years old, and these girls, a lot of them, tell me that they feel inspired to see a woman creating these works and talking about what she thinks in public in Japan. They come to my events and I can see that they are feeling stronger about how to live their next 10, 20, 30 years in Japan, or outside in Japan too.

That's quite moving. It's a really nice feeling for me because when I was growing up, I always had role models who were often female artists. I quite like Miranda July, Laurie Anderson; I love the riot grrrl movement, like Sonic Youth. Those women really helped me through my youth. It's sort of nice to see that happening a little bit around me in Japan as well.

**Deena Chalabi** Absolutely. I'm sure you're both very inspiring to generations of young women. We are running out time, so I want to make sure that we open up for questions if there are any from the audience. Yes.

**Audience member 1** Thank you for that valuable contribution. I have a question for Zena. Looking at the "Arab Express" exhibits, I was really surprised to encounter the work of a woman from the Arab world who is so active as an artist and is exhibiting her work. I think there are differences among different parts of the Arab world, but isn't it very difficult for women artists to show their work? Is it necessary to have a certain social status, or something?

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you for the question.

Zena, the question – if I got this right, I hope I did – is the lady who asked the question was very impressed by the number of Arab women who took part in the "Arab Express" exhibition here, and she is very aware that different contexts in the Arab world exist. But, she is curious to know what as a woman in the Arab world the social status is for you as an artist and what sort of preconditions you might have had. Was there anything in particular that allowed you to succeed as an artist relative to other women, is that correct? Okay.

**Zena el Khalil** It was very difficult and it's still very difficult. I can't speak for the whole Arab world, it's a big region, but specifically in Lebanon, there is the misconception that women in Lebanon are the most free and liberated compared to the rest of the women around the Middle East. But in reality, we still, on the social level, suffer a lot. For example, I don't have the right as a Lebanese woman to pass on nationality, which means if I marry a foreigner, I can't give him my nationality and my children won't get my nationality. This is one among many issues, but I think that alone says a lot. I am not then really a full-fledged citizen of my own country.

The art world in Lebanon is dominated by men. It was very difficult trying to exhibit my work, also because nobody knew how to explain it or talk about it. I think because of the way it looks and pushes a lot buttons that sometimes people don't want to deal with. I feel that I am still struggling, not just in the Middle East, but also in the world for the same reasons. There still aren't enough platforms to show and share the kind of work that I'm making. That's why I, personally, rely a lot on social media and my website and, lately, Twitter and YouTube. It's definitely a very long journey.

If you compare the prices of Lebanese male artists, the prices that their works sell for, with those of the women artists, there is a huge, huge division. I don't know how you want to define success, but I know for my part, it's not based on monetary value but rather on, let's say, inner fulfillment. I feel that as long as I have the opportunity to keep making what I do, I know that with time and [Technical Difficulty] and hard work, a lot of hard work, I will continue to find the venues to show and share my work. I really believe in the future of technology because, in the last several years – just a few years really – so much has changed. I don't think I would have been able to share my work with so many people if it wasn't for the internet, websites, etcetera.

**Deena Chalabi** Thank you, Zena. And thank you for the question. Anyone else? Okay. Do either of you have a question for the other? You do? Okay.

**Sputniko!** I remember one of the questions you raised before was what we think about whether our works might be misunderstood because of the visual language, although we are intentionally using this visual language, are we in danger of being misunderstood?

**Deena Chalabi** Can I clarify that for the audience?

**Sputniko!** Yeah, sure.

**Deena Chalabi** We were having a conversation earlier about the idea of kitsch and using humor in artwork. If you're an artist who wants to have a wide reach, but is commenting on one's own culture, my question was is there a danger that in using stereotype and humor that it might not be understood outside of the context in which it was developed and is that a concern?

**Zena el Khalil** I think that misperception is a beautiful tool, because you can use it in so many ways. But I think that in contemporary art today, a lot of works require a little bit of context explanation. I think, ultimately, [Technical Difficulty] with the way things are moving now that artists are a lot more connected to their audiences. There isn't the white wall gap that separates them anymore. I think that by using media and playing with misperception, you can work to create an even stronger message and it's part of the [Technical Difficulty]. I think it's a lot of fun. Actually, I was going to ask you the same question, Sputniko! How do you find... what tools do you use to work around the idea of misperceptions and [Technical Difficulty] in your work?

**Sputniko!** Yeah, I enjoy being misunderstood as well. I enjoy misconception. But then, even if out of say 9000 people

who see the work 7000 misunderstand, if 2000 people think, wait a minute, what does she want to talk about, click my website, have a look at my website, or look at my Twitter, then they could sort of get involved in what I really wanted to discuss. I think my works already do discuss what I want to talk about in themselves, but I also like playing with some viral sort of catch in my work, especially on YouTube. Yeah, I use blogs, Twitter, Facebook. It's so much easier to get my message across now that museums or galleries are not the only place to get in touch with the audience.

I graduated from art school just two years ago and until then I was just a crazy person uploading videos on YouTube. I wasn't really an artist. But then, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo and a curator at MoMA saw all my works on YouTube and asked me if I wanted to exhibit. I'd never exhibited outside of school. I thought it was spam, but I thought okay, yeah, I'll show. YouTube really helped me. I didn't even have a commercial gallery at the time. I didn't know how the art world worked, but I knew how YouTube worked. It's a very different generation of artist, completely different from 10, 20 years ago, I think.

**Deena Chalabi** Zena, do you want to respond to that or...?

**Zena el Khalil** I definitely agree and I'm also curious, maybe being a mathematician and spending time in the field of science, what do you think will be the next step after Facebook and Twitter. As an artist, what would be your dream tool, let's say, to [Technical Difficulty] work out there?

**Sputniko!** That's really an interesting question because right now I'm sort of experimenting with that, but in the end, in the real world, you could do a lot more. In my recent projects, I gather people on Twitter. I get a team of people who want to help me through Twitter and then meet them in real life and make work together. Twitter helps me get in contact with a community I could never get in touch with otherwise. Currently, I am working with a bunch of hip-hop rappers in suburban Tokyo. They live in the Adachi District, which is a bit suburban, for lack of a better term.

Have you lived in London? It's a bit like the Hackney of Tokyo. Yeah, have you lived in London? Anyhow, I wrote on Twitter, I want to meet rappers living in the Hackney of Tokyo, and these rappers replied to me and I met them. Now, we're trying to create a new project together. We're trying to create a bus tour of this district. But instead of a bus guide guiding, these rappers will rap about the district. It's a really interesting experience for me because I would never have met them unless I used these tools. I think I'm sort of moving in the real world via Twitter. But, what's your idea of new technology or new ways?

**Zena el Khalil** I think that, definitely, the idea of collaboration and community because [Technical Difficulty] sharing resources, sharing ideas, I think is a healthy environment for creation. I think the whole concept of individualist art, the pop art star, is gone; it's not sustainable. [Technical Difficulty] many movements come and go so quickly, and so many people come in and out of the scene very quickly. I think now, especially given that there's so much noise around us, I see things moving to a more hybrid concept of collaboration and community, and a decentralization of power, the artist not... the artist is still functioning in exhibiting and creating work with or without the [Technical Difficulty] and the curator, that more, let's say, alternative methods [Technical Difficulty] is also difficult. They all work together [Technical Difficulty].

**Deena Chalabi** No, no, final thought?

**Sputniko!** Yeah, it's true. Right now, it's not the age of one singular pop star. It's not like the Michael Jackson days. It's like there are many different communities of popular culture, but many different communities are really much more important now.

**Deena Chalabi** Right, which speaks to sort of the proliferation of the internet because that allows for these

micro-communities to develop rather than... it's bottom-up rather than top-down in terms of how we communicate. But, I think we're going to leave it at that because with this you've brought up two really crucial things. I think that we might return to them in the next session: the idea of the artist as individualist, and the idea of the hybrid. We'll pause there. Again, thank you both so very much for a fantastic talk. Thank you.



Photo: Mikuriya Shinichiro

**Sputniko!** Thank you very much. Thank you.

**Kondo Kenichi** Sputniko!, Zena, Deena – thank you so much. Let's give them another round of well-deserved applause.

Please note that the voice of Zena el Khalil who participated in Skype is interrupted at time. Thank you for your understanding in advance.

## Closing Speech

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**Kondo Kenichi** Welcome to the closing discussion. Our moderator today is Mori Art Museum director Nanjo Fumio, joined by each of the participating artists and by Deena Chalabi.

**Nanjo Fumio** This discussion session aims to bring together and sum up the symposium. We have invited all the speakers from the symposium sessions today and yesterday.

The aim, as I said, is to sum up the symposium, but with so many people, I suspect it will be difficult to reach a coherent conclusion. At the very least, though, I would like to review a number of the themes that emerged.

Listening to the various talks, I gained a firm sense that the works are rooted in an earnest attempt to record something that the artist has experienced and a strong impetus to communicate it and share it with others. That seems fundamentally different from the idea of making art for art's sake.

One of the things behind this is a word that came up many times: identity. This isn't a concept that you come across much in Japan, and if you look it up in a dictionary, there's no real equivalent. Dictionaries tend to suggest an unfamiliar term meaning the state of being identical. That doesn't make any sense in this context.

For long periods of history, the Japanese people went about their lives without thinking about how they appeared from outside. Japan has no land boundaries, so I think it is fair to say that Japanese people really never came into proper contact with others. The issue of what it means to be Japanese is now the subject of a great deal of discussion, but historically, the issue of identity probably never became deeply ingrained.

Nevertheless, the concept of identity goes further than a simple issue of nationality or culture. When you examine it in more depth, you eventually come to the very philosophical question of where do we come from, and where do we go. Gauguin painted many works addressing that topic, and I believe that it is only when someone physically moves into a different society or culture that he or she first becomes concerned with his or her identity and wonders "Who am I?"

I have a feeling that almost all our speakers have personally undergone that sort of experience. The Chim ↑ Pom artists are the only ones both brought up in Japan and working in Japan. All the other speakers, including the curators, have at some stage relocated to a different country or city, whether voluntarily or under duress, and they each seem to have gone through that experience of taking a new look at themselves. At that point, two big questions tend to arise: "What do I want to say there?" and "What sort of language can I use to express it so that it can be understood?"

It may be better not to discuss "identity" and "language" at the same time, though.

I'd like to start with Deena. Please give us your thoughts on the two days.

**Deena Chalabi** Well, let's see, I think I would like to follow up your thoughts, Fumio, with another question. As Ken and I were preparing this symposium based on Ken's experience and also Fumio's experience of seeing exhibitions at Mathaf in Doha as well as my understanding of "Arab Express," with which you are all now very familiar, we were thinking about what the similarities were between the artists, and how we could find aesthetic, formalistic, or emotional connections between them. But, there's often a kind of tacit reference, which is this notion of the West. All of these artists, and as curators we too, experience the fact that we're somehow representing a part of the world which is always very complex and it ends up being reduced in some ways.

I'd like to ask both of you, as the curators of "Arab Express," what your experience was like, how you felt you were going to be able to represent a region through this exhibition. That's one question. Then, my second question to the artists would be how do you feel about being exposed internationally, whether or not you want to represent where you're from, and even Chim ↑ Pom I know is familiar with this seeing they will be exhibiting in Shanghai next week. I don't know who – perhaps, Fumio – would like to speak first.

**Nanjo Fumio** I guess you're asking mainly about the process of selecting artists. Let me start with the result. People who have seen this exhibition have very different reactions. One group says that the exhibition seems to have brought together some very Western art. In contrast, the other group comments that it is very Arab in nature. This is probably a result of the language of expression. I think that the viewers tend to see the vocabulary of contemporary art as being Western. Contemporary art first took off in the West, so when we use similar language, it tends to be perceived as being somehow Western. However, the stories conveyed in the works are totally different from those of Europe and America, so they are perceived as being very Arab. The reaction of viewers seems to differ depending on which of these they were looking at.

So, does that mean that Arab artists shouldn't use a language of expression that can also be understood in the West and in Japan? It's a very simple question.

Alternatively, inverting the question, is it OK for artists to use a language of expression that won't be understood when transported to the West or to Japan? Would it even be understood at all in that situation?

I still haven't given my own thoughts on this, but I should stop here and let someone else have a chance. Ken?

**Kondo Kenichi** Thank you. Yes, one of the interesting things about this exhibition is the unusually wide range of responses from both the general public and from the press. For this conference, we're using simultaneous interpreters to provide both Japanese and English, but English is the common language. It seems to me that contemporary art also has a common language of expression that functions somewhat like the English we are using as the lingua franca for this conference.

First of all there are rules that were created in the West. Those rules can be considered as an arena, and the artists are like the players in the arena. In terms of conversation, English acts as the arena. If we can't use English, we may attempt to participate, but we won't be understood. A similar situation arises when contemporary art is the arena.

One thing I'd like to add may be a little off topic, but I used to think that Japan and Arab countries were very different. However, when I was doing the research for the exhibition I kept finding things that we have in common. For instance, one point that cropped up again today was that Japanese people tend to say they are scared of Arab terrorists, but Japan has its own history of *kamikaze* attackers. We've discussed this in some detail with Deena.

**Nanjo Fumio** I'd now like to ask the participating artists if they have any comments on this topic.

**Sputniko!** On the point about English and the language of contemporary art acting as common languages, today there are a lot of people communicating and sharing knowledge and ideas over the Internet. That's another situation that's only really possible if we all use English. If I only talked about my works in Japanese, the audience that they'd reach would be completely different.

What's more, that applies to more than just art. If scientists wrote their papers in Japanese, their achievements would only be appreciated in Japan. We have to face the fact that they wouldn't be properly communicated elsewhere. It's great that there's local language demand to discover what's happening in the Arab world, but in order to communicate it to the outside world – as this exhibition is attempting to do – it's only natural that a lot of the art uses forms of expression that can be appreciated from a Western or a Japanese perspective.

I was brought up in two cultures, Japan and the U.K. However, when I'm in the U.K., if someone tells me about something fascinating going on in Indonesia, I can't access it if it's only written in Indonesian. As an artist, I see language as a sort of accessibility issue.

English no longer belongs just to England. There's Pigeon English, Singapore English, the English spoken by people in Japan, the English of Korea, the English of China, and the English of France. They're all different, but it's only natural for English to be used as the base when attempting to share knowledge with each

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other.

**Ushiro Ryuta** As Fumio mentioned, Chim ↑ Pom is based in Tokyo. As far as speaking English goes, we' ve not got much further than thinking about it. It's always tough when we do exhibitions outside Japan.

When Ken said that contemporary art functions somewhat like the English, I took that to refer to something other than texts and translations. Whenever we go abroad, we put a great deal of thought into deciding which works to show and how to present our work so that it communicates. Reading the "Arab Express" catalogue, you realize that even though it' s talking about the West or the Arab world, you frequently hear similar talk about Japan.

In the art world, that issue turns up in all sorts of places.

For example, Mori Art Museum will soon be putting on an Aida Makoto exhibition. Aida does some really interesting stuff and he' s very popular in Japan, but he' s never really got much recognition in other countries. There are artists like that all over the world, and it would be wrong to say that they' re not part of contemporary art trends.

The problem is the way that we perceive trends. I don' t think it' s good to think of the West as being upstream, with the trend flowing downstream to reach us. People like Murakami Takashi probably had to make a massive effort to finally make it upstream.

Those sorts of values are not an intrinsic part of art. I believe that art is actually based somewhere deep inside people. Rather than a stream, it' s more like the sea. Things get carried to all sorts of places on the same level, and something unique is produced in the places that they reach. I think that' s more like the sort of flow that we should be thinking about.

**Koizumi Meiro** I agree completely with what Ryuta just said about the stream. If you compare contemporary art with English or a universal language, English has a much more clearly defined grammar. It' s impossible to outdo someone who was born and brought up in an area where they speak that language. You may decide to produce more beautiful English, but that doesn' t necessarily mean you' ll actually be able to. Movies and art are different. Their grammar is not so clear-cut.

Movie director Ozu Yasujiro watched a lot of Hollywood and other American movies, and came to the conclusion that they had no grammar. He decided to create a new grammar of his own. The result was a body of wonderful films.

Art is similar in that it has no grammar at all. Instead of thinking that you' re somewhere downstream, I' m convinced that it's better to consider yourself upstream and shamelessly produce your own grammar.

**Nanjo Fumio** This's fascinating. Do any of the non-Japanese speakers have a comment?

**Hrair Sarkissian** I have an issue with being categorized as a Middle Eastern artist, for example, because it' s a tag placed on us that separates us from others. An artist is an artist wherever he does his artwork. We never hear "French artist" or "English artist," but we hear "Middle Eastern artist." I think it builds a wall between East and West. It also affects the work the artist produces, because he' ll tend to focus only on the Middle East, because this is what the market wants. This is a problem for me.

**Nanjo Fumio** Taking that further, some people feel very strongly that categorizing art by area is inherently wrong. There are even curators with a strong view that categorization by country or region is inappropriate. In circumstances like that, the approach is to decide on a theme and bring together artists from all sorts of places who fit in with that theme. Exhibitions focusing on somewhere like India or China are a no-no. Deena, do you have anything to say about that?

**Deena Chalabi** Yes, I was actually having a similar conversation with another curator here at the Mori earlier today about this, and about the fact that curating by region sort of negates the individuality of the artist and their practice, and the universality of the artwork. But at the same time, when there have not been a lot of contemporary cultural relationships between regions, it does make sense as a form of introduction to begin with such an exhibition, simply because that' s the way the market is structured. But, I think it is the role of museums that are outside – to some degree – of the commercial world to avoid this.

The market often dominates. The global art market is not a single entity. It contains lots of smaller markets. I' m not sure what it' s like here in Japan, but in the Middle East, you find that collectors are often interested in collecting art from their own countries. You' ll have an Egyptian collector who wants to build a collection around Egyptian art, for example, or an Iranian collector who wants Iranian art. That' s one of the reasons why, on a smaller level, artists will play into that.

There is now, increasingly, a market in the West for art from the Middle East. This is something that I have talked about a lot with Wassan Al-Khudairi, the former director of Mathaf who is here with us today: the inclusion of signs and symbols that represent the Middle East, whether it' s Arabic calligraphy or something else. This is something that almost feels like a destructive force. At the same time, there' re plenty of artists who choose not to do that. One of the things that we wanted to do with this program was show the very affinities that rely not on location or geography, but on a similar approach to artistic practice.

I think that moving forward, it' s important for exhibitions to continue to do that. I recently saw an exhibition by another Mori curator, Mami Kataoka, at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco titled "Phantoms of Asia," which is about spirituality across the continent. Again, that poses an interesting question: What is Asia? This is a question that I think is becoming ever more complicated here. We are here because of a historical trade relationship between Qatar and Japan, two opposite ends of a large continent. Questions about what these two places have in common, what these two sides of Asia have in common, are something that I think will be asked more frequently as the market, both the art market and the general economy, expands. Okay, that's enough from me.

**Nanjo Fumio** Does anyone else want to say something?

**Koizumi Meiro** On the issue of differing visions, when I saw the "Arab Express" exhibition, I had a strong sense of bias. I' ve never been to the region, so I got a powerful feeling of fantasy, and viewed the works based on my own imagination.

Ideally, I think you have to say that rather than categorizing by vision, categorize by the individual. Nevertheless, perhaps world technology has not got that far yet, and the world is still far too broad to achieve that ideal. There are still lots of places that we don' t know, so it' s only reasonable that we perceive them as being like fantasy.

**Nanjo Fumio** From the perspective of someone who organizes and runs exhibitions, I am convinced that there ought to be many different types of exhibition. I' m fully aware of the criticism of area/motto exhibitions, but I think you can say that a freer range of exhibitions pays off by producing a richer cultural scene. It does that by providing a greater variety of perspectives.

Leaving this issue aside for a moment, there' s another issue that was touched on a little while ago – perhaps we should call it "diaspora." Could I ask for your thoughts on that sense of looking in at yourself from the outside.

Do you feel that you were able to get a better view of yourself by moving into a different culture or society?

That the experiences you had by living outside of your home country, in a different context, or a different society, led you to question your identity or whatever?

**Halim Al Karim** Really I didn' t feel any difference being inside or outside Iraq. Nor do I feel I have a problem with language,

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even though I am not very good at English, or at Arabic for that matter. I lived in Holland for about 15 years and I really resisted learning the language. By law, you cannot become a Dutch national or get a Dutch passport unless you speak Dutch, but I kind of faked my situation to the jury, and they gave me nationality. I put cotton in my teeth and I told them that I lost my teeth and cannot talk, and with my wife and daughter there supporting me, the government believed me and gave me nationality.

Most of my life I've lived within myself, but even when I emerge from that state, when I step out of that situation, I really don't feel that I am any different. That's why I feel really lucky that I speak, I think, a universal language through my work. I don't need to explain and therefore don't constrain my work. If I know the language, and if I speak English or Japanese, I will blah, blah, blah about my work, and that would constrain the ideas; it would lead people to think about it in the same way I'm thinking. But, when I am not speaking any language and when I'm not talking about my work, I feel that I help people to be more free with their imagination and with their point of view – and I've met many people like this. It's not only me. There is a real hidden language that everyone can understand and feel through art or through behavior or through many things.

**Hrair Sarkissian** In my case, because I grew up in Syria, everything until I left in 2008 had been censored. We didn't have libraries that contained art books, especially contemporary art. In the fine art academy "contemporary art" ends with Picasso. Everything after Picasso is not considered as art. There was censorship, of course, in whatever you do. As an artist, it meant your work could have nothing to do with religion or politics. These two subjects are taboo. I think once I got out, the first thing I wanted to do was just benefit from the freedom and the access I had to books. This, for me, was like an entirely new world, just to have knowledge of what is going on in other parts of the world. I'm still enjoying this. At some point, I'm sure I will start to change, and perhaps work on or do things that exceed my territory.

**Deena Chalabi** My situation is different. I am completely diasporic because I was born and brought up in London. I'm only a quarter Arab: I have an Iraqi grandfather. Otherwise, I have a Turkish grandparent and Indian grandparents. I didn't feel Arab at all growing up. It didn't mean anything to me. I don't speak Arabic properly. But, the way I became interested in the art from the region was that I went to Doha and to Qatar and I met Wassan, the director of Mathaf, and I saw through her, through experiencing the collection that became Mathaf, a history of modern arts in the Arab world that I had absolutely no idea had existed. Art from the late 19th century, art from the '20s in Egypt, art from Iraq from the '50s and '60s, I mean it was really powerful, incredible work. I realized this was a really important story that the world needed to hear, because it felt like the world was starting to learn about contemporary art from the region, but this sort of older history really hadn't been brought to light.

That's why I became involved in the museum and I was very proud and happy to be a part of that process, because for me, not speaking Arabic and not having had any sense of connection to the culture, all of a sudden I had a visual connection to the culture that felt much more accessible. That's what I think the power of modern and also contemporary art can do. It can create these sorts of visual linkages and affinities through work that then come to reflect things in common. But, I'm curious. As I have learned more also about the contemporary art scene, I have realized that for a lot of artists – I mean, Hrair just give an excellent example – modern history of the region – of art history in the region – is not well known by a whole generation of artists.

Something I am interested in and also knowing about from the Japanese side is: I know that there was a questioning of modernity that emerged in the early 20th century was something of a Pan-Asian conversation, but would you, contemporary artists in Japan today, have an interest in learning more about that sort of modern art history? Is that something that's relevant to your practice? Yes, anyone?

**Koizumi Meiro** I'm sorry, what's the question?

**Deena Chalabi** The question was is history – Japanese modern art history beginning from say Japanese art as it went to the West and then came back, and how Japanese artists started to formulate a response to the West from say

the early 20th century, that historical story – something that you find relevant to your work today or is it something that feels completely different from what you are doing?

**Ushiro Ryuta** You mean from the perspective of the relationship between Japan and the West?

**Nanjo Fumio** How relevant do you consider the history of painting in modern period Japan to be to your work?

**Ushiro Ryuta** I think you could say that most Japanese artists consider it to be relevant.

We're a little unusual in that sense, because we hardly knew anything about art at all. I've recently been discovering that Japan was a lot more insular than I'd realized, but on the other hand, subculture such as manga and music and the interesting art that you find in Japan have come to look rather identical.

At the beginning I had virtually no interest in issues such as how Japan had interacted with the West to result in current trends, or how Japan began to express its identity. I was far more concerned about simply doing something interesting. I dropped out of school, so I never had the opportunity to learn about art or contemporary art in the classroom. My interest began with things like fashion and bands that you can see without learning about them at school.

We are probably unusual. A large number of Japanese artists give a good deal of thought to history and many go on to put into practice what they have learned from it. That's my impression.

**Nanjo Fumio** Sputniko!

**Sputniko!** I also have a different background to most Japanese artists. I didn't study art in Japan, and I knew nothing about it. Like Ryuta, I was influenced by Japanese subculture, such as manga and movies. One important point, though, is that Japan's subculture and pop culture include a lot of very sophisticated stuff. I found it very interesting, so I absorbed a great deal. In my case, that is a lot more real than the history of art being brought to Japan from the West. Rather than making an effort to produce Western art, I was viewing and absorbing the real culture. In that sense, it's subculture and pop culture that I tend to focus on.

Apart from that, the significance of countries – such as Japan and the UK – seems to be gradually fading. A little while ago we were talking about being downstream or in a sea, and I think that English itself is being broken down into simple tools. I suspect that contemporary art will be broken down in the same way. Rather than being seen as something that began in the West, it will be increasingly subdivided. I only spent a little more than a decade in Japan, so although my work has Japanese characteristics, it also has characteristics from my time and experiences in London. Wherever in the world you go, you can't help characteristics from that environment appearing in your work. Even if you lived on the Moon, Moon characteristics would be sure to appear. That's my stance on this topic. Nevertheless, just like Ryuta, I've not had an education from a Japanese art college, so this doesn't necessarily apply to all artists.

**Nanjo Fumio** Meiro, what about you?

**Koizumi Meiro** I didn't get an art education in Japan either.

**Nanjo Fumio** On the basis of this small sample, it seems as though not getting an art education leads to becoming a famous artist. If you attempt to become an artist by pursuing the modernist studies that are typical in Japan, you risk being constrained by what you have studied and becoming unable to produce anything new. In theory, anyway.

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**Koizumi Meiro** Personally, I was interested in modern Japanese history rather than art history, and I read a great deal. I'm still not really sure how art came to be involved. In fact, I'm sometimes asked how the art fits in, and it's frustrating being unable to reply. It's a question I'd like to be able to reply to.

**Nanjo Fumio** Selection committees can be interesting on this point. Sometimes one of the selectors will declare that contemporary art requires the artist to gain a good awareness of our past art and produce contemporary works in that context. Another selector will then oppose that idea, insisting that something new can be produced from zero. There's a massive difference between those two attitudes!

On the issue of modernization, there is a great deal of discussion between academics as to what part of Asian art represents modern art. This debate has been ongoing since the 1970s. Japan underwent modernization at a very early stage, and that affected other countries in the vicinity. That is why we see the phenomenon of things arriving in Asia from the West via Japan, and then spreading through Asia. Some countries may object to this perspective, but it happens to be true.

One after another, different countries were influenced by Western modern art and began to produce their own art. What is interesting is that the resulting art is different in each country. This led to the suggestion that modernization had more than one form. In other words, the process of modernization differed for each country, region, or area with a different historical background.

However, the concept of modernity is universal. Modernism arose because there ought to be a single standard that could be applied wherever you go. This is contradictory. If different plants emerge from the seeds of modernism planted in different places, that result contradicts the original concept of modernism. Nevertheless, that is what seems to have actually happened, according to many in Asia, where there is a lot of debate on this issue. The debate seems to keep going without reaching a conclusion.

There have been many attempts to verify this, and theories about this situation are frequently heard in Indonesia, the Philippines, and other places. It would be interesting to base some of our discussion on those debates, but at the same time, as was mentioned earlier, there is probably no need to be constrained by the past. That's how it seems to me. I would like to hear the Arab artists' thoughts on this, but Chim ↑ Pom seems to have something to say first.

**Ushiro Ryuta** It's nothing really. I just wanted to say that when I saw the "Arab Express" exhibition, I commented to Ellie that it was a good exhibition. At that point, I wasn't thinking about the influence of the West at all, but reading the catalogue made me realize that such effects were being examined. I guess that the curators were thinking of that from the start, and that is why the exhibition turned out like it did.

My impressions of the exhibition were that rather than the historical aspects, it was what is going on in the Arab world now that caught my attention. That links in with what is happening at the same time in the rest of the world, and I found myself reacting powerfully, even though I didn't have a deep understanding. It somehow felt very close to home.

The seriousness of the exhibition was great. It was good and solid, not at all frivolous like a lot of recent exhibitions. However, what I'm talking about now is just my feelings about the exhibition. Those are just side issues. The main issue is that the exhibition successfully crosses national borders to communicate and engender feelings for the way that people of our day and age are living and are pushed around by politics.

**Nanjo Fumio** That's an excellent comment. Let's take it further and look at some more essential aspects. Does anyone have any comments here? How about Halim or Hrair?

**Hrair Sarkissian** Well, I think the most important thing from this exhibition is the message that the Japanese audience gets from our works. And for the artists who are participating in the exhibition, it's also – I mean, for me, it's so interesting just to be here for the first time in Japan for the purpose of showing my work, which is, for me,

so much more interesting than to come to Tokyo just for tourism. I was telling Meiro just before that I feel so much more enriched now having met Japanese artists and seeing their work, because I've been very disconnected from this part of the world and know very little about what is going on in your art or in other things...

**Nanjo Fumio** Halim, do you want to say something?

**Halim Al Karim** About the show?

**Nanjo Fumio** What do you feel is important about the show?

**Halim Al Karim** To be honest, I really don't think that this show or any other show will change much just because people, for example people in Japan, see Arab artists or Arab artworks in an exhibition. I think people have become lazy in recent years or maybe they were lazy from the beginning. We don't need to let them know about the Arab world or to share thoughts just through art. There are many ways we can communicate and understand each other. It's not just through this show, because just think, how many people will actually see through the show? But, the street is full of Arabs and Africans and normal ordinary people; they can understand each other, and do not only through art or one exhibition every 200 years maybe. I appreciate this show, really, but it will not make a big difference.

**Hrair Sarkissian** How would you communicate in the street if you don't speak the language? I mean we are not here only to see Africans and Arabs, but also to mingle with Japanese culture and meet Japanese people, not only in an art spheres of course, but also in public places. If I don't speak Japanese and the other person doesn't speak English, how would I communicate? For me, it's true that I do what I do because I want to convey a message about what's inside of me, so that's why I do art. But it's not enough to just look at who is out there; it helps to talk with them also.

**Halim Al Karim** Yes, of course, it will help. I am sure about it. But, what I mean – I meant that there are many ways also to communicate.

**Hrair Sarkissian** I mean I don't have these broad facilities to communicate; I can only communicate in this way.

**Halim Al Karim** Okay then do it, nobody is stopping you.

**Hrair Sarkissian** Yes okay.

**Halim Al Karim** Yes continue doing this.

**Nanjo Fumio** We're still enjoying this discussion between ourselves, but I'd like to take some questions from the audience, too. All the speakers are here, so this is an opportunity to ask questions about what you've heard during the various sessions.

In the center. Yes. Please press the switch so that we can all hear.

**Audience member 1** There was talk of a common language and talk about identity. What emerges from the artist's experiences is important. At the same time however, there is one more thing to consider. Since the art is communicating to others, I guess that each of the artists takes the stance of creating what is sought after. For Japan, that means works that are acceptable to Japanese people, and for the Arab region, works that are acceptable to the people there. Do you agree that to some extent that is what you are creating?

**Nanjo Fumio** That's an interesting question. Meiro, I'll come to you in a minute but first I'd like to ask the Arab artists. Hrair, did you catch the question?

**Hrair Sarkissian** Well, when I do a work, I don't take into consideration whether the public will get it or not. For me, the most difficult part is how I deal with the work itself. Of course ultimately there will be some who will get it and there will be others who won't. But, I think this is ... I mean even if you write an article or write a book, people will get or not get your ideas. I don't think that artists should put to consideration how the audience will accept it. I think he should be just true with himself.

**Nanjo Fumio** Any comment to that?

**Halim Al Karim** Can you repeat the question please?

**Nanjo Fumio** When you make art, do you consider the audience and particularly, the audience in a specific country or culture, or the place you came from?

**Halim Al Karim** Yes, I keep in my mind always that I should produce art not only for the people who live around me, not only for Iraqis, or for Arabs, or Europeans. Always, I have this guideline to do something that even animals will understand or enjoy, not only people.

**Nanjo Fumio** It means that you think of a very wide audience, not a particular one?

**Halim Al Karim** Yes, always. I really don't see any difference between any people.

**Nanjo Fumio** Particularly, not for the market.

**Halim Al Karim** I'm lucky I sell a lot. But, I never make work just because I know people will like it and buy it. Although when I produce my work I always have in my mind certain guidelines. I don't want to repeat what I said, but I never make work for a special audience. I am also serious when I say that I produce my work not only for human beings, but also for animals. I really believe that they enjoy it and understand it.

**Nanjo Fumio** Meiro. Over to you.

**Koizumi Meiro** When I spent two years in the Netherlands, I was in a context where there were a lot of foreign artists. The situation forced you to think about that sort of issue. Since the artists had gone there to show their work as the guests of a Dutch institution, we automatically felt under some obligation to meet expectations in some way. Japanese artists felt that they needed to produce work that was somehow characteristic of Japan, and artists from the Middle East felt the same way too. We tended to feel that that was what was expected. Seeing that works of that sort were appreciated, I started to worry about whether I would have to create

that sort of work.

However, if you are over-influenced by exoticism, as an artist, you are likely to be unhappy with the result. That would be a source of frustration.

The artists who made progress from there seemed to be those who reached some sort of settlement and found their own route to happiness within their own range.

**Nanjo Fumio** Thank you. Is that OK? Next question please.

**Audience member 2** On the subject of language and identity, when you are producing art, how do you express the essential and universal aspects that are shared by all human and animal life?

**Nanjo Fumio** Could I ask you to repeat that. Just the question, please.

**Audience member 2** What sort of attention do the artists pay to universal aspects that transcend language and race?

**Nanjo Fumio** Did you get that? Chim ↑ Pom.

**Ushiro Ryuta** This overlaps with the response to an earlier question and to the talk yesterday, but looking back to the earthquake and associated disasters last year, the works we created at that time had a very clear audience. At the time we talked about it being for future generations. We felt that people in the future would hold Japan and us responsible for such a big disaster. We felt that doing nothing at that point would result in unhappiness for our country. We don't normally think that far when we make something, but on that occasion there was a strong sense of being pushed by the audience. Just now we heard of a case where expectations diverged from what the artist wanted to make, but there was none of that in our case. The expectations we felt were a tough hurdle to overcome, but simultaneously, it was where we wanted to go. For me, it felt different from all the art I'd been involved in before. I don't know whether you'd describe that as universal, but I definitely sensed something historical.

**Nanjo Fumio** So, at the highest level, there was no discrepancy between expectations and what you wanted to create. Is that right? Am I correct to assume you are suggesting that making it leads to producing something universal?

**Ushiro Ryuta** We're entertainment-oriented, so expectations are very important. If people are hoping for something that we don't want to do, we just completely ignore it, but when future generations are screaming out for us to do something even more amazing, it dovetails extremely well with what we actually want to do. There is some of my own motivation in there, too.

**Ellie** We don't always need to do anything so amazing. I suspect that, as Ryuta said, expectations probably coincide with something that's already there inside you. If you think about it, the only way of discovering the expectations of people 50 years or 100 years in the future is to imagine them. Those people don't even exist yet. For that reason, I believe that in the final analysis, you are attempting to communicate something from your own internal viewpoint. For that reason, I don't think you can actually be pushed around by expectations that come from inside you.

**Ushiro Ryuta** As you can see, Chim ↑ Pom group solidarity is constantly ...

**Nanjo Fumio** There seems to be a slight divergence of views here.

**Ushiro Ryuta** We're a group of six people, so there are always discrepancies in what we say. However, when a good idea emerges, we all agree. That's not because of any fetishism. It's a hurdle that shows us we've found an interesting idea.

**Nanjo Fumio** Do you feel that you're all creating something together, as was discussed in the afternoon session?

**Ushiro Ryuta** At the very least, we think it's important to all share the feeling that something is interesting.

**Ellie** Hmm.

**Ushiro Ryuta** There's not much point in Chim ↑ Pom just talking about something between ourselves.

**Ellie** My personal interpretation is that rather than six individuals gathered together to create a work, we are acting as a single conscious entity. Whether you look at it objectively or look at it from an internal perspective, Chim ↑ Pom has an exquisite balance. It really doesn't feel like six individuals doing a project together. That's right, isn't it?

**Ushiro Ryuta** Hmm. I think we'd better save that discussion for later.

**Nanjo Fumio** But you do sense some sort of shared awareness?

**Ushiro Ryuta** That applies not only to Chim ↑ Pom, but also to history and to the laws of society. Everyone is heading towards the same destination, or everyone has the same expectations. I really like that feeling, and I actively look for it.

**Nanjo Fumio** OK. Let's stop there or the discussion will end up being hijacked by Chim ↑ Pom. Are there any more questions?

**Audience member 3** I've really enjoyed both the exhibition and the symposium.  
I'd like to ask both the Japanese and the Arab artists how they interpret the concept of "real."

From a Japanese perspective, the situation in the Arab region that is expressed through these works seems extremely tough and painful to observe. Despite that, the methodologies of contemporary art communicate that situation to us very smoothly. As a result, the works were very easy to understand and the exhibition was a wonderful experience.

However, there's a risk that this could lead on to cynical consumption. It could just be seen as well thought out, and then forgotten. Living in Japan and viewing works by Japanese artists, the last war has been cynically consumed by the subculture, and that seems to be the only place that artists are seeking reality. That is almost a polar opposite of these Arab artists, who are making an enormous effort to convey a very real situation in a humorous, cynical, or kitsch manner. Each of the works has life in it. They do a very good job of communicating what the Arab region is like today. The art expresses its message so well that it could even be called social realism.

**Nanjo Fumio** Did you understand the question? Halim, did you understand?

OK. How about one of the Japanese speakers?

**Koizumi Meiro** My feeling on this is that each artist creates works based on what is visible from his or her own viewpoint. Whether those works are consumed cynically is surely a curation issue. If you ask the artists, all they will be able to tell you is that the works are a reflection of what they feel from day to day.

I find it a little difficult to understand what "real" or "reality" means, but I have a feeling that it can only be something that comes from your own body. In terms of how it is consumed or how it is used, it is the curators who need to be asked about how the art is consumed.

**Nanjo Fumio** It's not just a curation issue. Journalism, markets, and galleries are also involved. In fact, I think it's an issue of how the infrastructure of the art world as a whole takes in and consumes the art. Does anyone else have a comment?

**Koizumi Meiro** At a recent exhibition a curator talking about the Arab Spring was complaining that Egyptian artists are focusing too much on that topic. I found that difficult to accept.

**Nanjo Fumio** Was that a Japanese curator?

**Koizumi Meiro** No, it wasn't. As an artist, I don't think that you can criticize the creation of art on the basis of what resulted. The work itself is the result. You begin with anger, doubts, or uneasiness, and they provide motivation that is eventually expressed as a work. When something shocking occurs in front of you – like Chim ↑ Pom and the nuclear disaster – it's only natural that it motivates you and inspires a process of creation. When something like that happens, many artists will produce work based on it, and some of those works are likely to be exciting from an art perspective. Some say that you shouldn't use the same subject as other artists, but I am convinced that if you want to create something, you shouldn't hold back. Of course, I'm saying this from an artist's perspective. How you make good use of the resulting art is a curation and marketing issue. That's my belief.

**Nanjo Fumio** Does Chim ↑ Pom have anything to say about that? You already said a lot yesterday about what reality is.

**Ushiro Ryuta** I often use the "real" concept, but I tend to use it loosely, more for its atmosphere.  
[In Japanese, the equivalent term is *genjitsu*.] The dictionary definition is of course important, but I tend to think of "real" as meaning something like "Hey, we're alive" or "Hey, this is our life." This probably links back to the first talk, but when I saw Halim's presentation yesterday, it was definitely some sort of universal language. There was something about his presentation that made it extremely easy to comprehend.

I'm no good at communicating in English, but rather than focusing on the English, just looking at Halim's works gives you a powerful appreciation of what people find attractive about him. When I examine what made them so easy to understand, the answer is that there was something very "real" about his works. They are a potent expression of things that I also feel, and of an immediate, directly connected "reality." The works are beautiful, too, but it's the human imperfection behind the beauty that got through to me.

What's important here is that I don't see a simple journalistic approach of "photographing what's actually



Photo: Mikuriya Shinichiro

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there” as being “real.” What I realized yesterday was that I feel a work is “real” the moment I see it and communication is achieved.

**Nanjo Fumio** I recall a foreign curator recently commenting that the works of Japanese artists haven’ t changed very much after the earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident, and wondering why that was. Chim ↑ Pom reacted immediately, with a work related to the nuclear power station, but I share the impression that other Japanese artists produced works that weren’ t very different from before. Personally, I would have been happy with more change, but there doesn’t actually seem to be much difference.

So, does the question of whether a work is consumed belong to the consumption side’ s perspective? I suspect that it does. Do any of the Arab speakers have anything to say?

**Halim Al Karim** Please tell me the question again.

**Nanjo Fumio** The question is that sometimes artworks that reflect reality are consumed by the market more readily, and what is that “reality” for you?

**Halim Al Karim** I see reality as like one hour ago. I feel it. I feel it in the work of Hrair, his photographs of libraries. I see in his work the real fake history that politicians and many others try to create – always trying to fake history and to... I don’ t know how to explain it, but because I work with this subject too, I see that he succeeded in his work when he photographed the libraries. This is real for me. When you become sure about something, this is the real one, you are sure about yourself, about your behavior, about the reality of the fake things too, you see the lies and fake history – that too is real. But I think maybe I’ m the last person someone should ask about reality.

**Sputniko!** There’s probably not much time left, but I’d like to talk about the question concerning cynical consumption. I also found the “Arab Express” exhibition very interesting, but its clearly very different from journalism. The art is not simply attempting to convey what happened. For instance, consider the work – I’ ve forgotten its title – where the moment of an air strike is photographed from a balcony. The artist personally encountered that moment when he got up one morning. I think that’ s a case of the universal expression we were discussing a little while ago. The artist is a human just like us. He must have been struck by the terror of what happened right in front of him that morning. From a Japan perspective, it’ s as if you were photographing the nuclear plant at Fukushima, and all of a sudden a wall blew off. The sense of terror must have been similar. The terror experienced by the artist occurred in a completely different place, but the two incidents are instantaneously linked. That’ s the sort of thing that I think makes art “real.”

There may be some people who consume the exhibits cynically, but that didn’ t cross my mind. Unlike journalism, these works seem to appeal to something universal that all humans have. That’ s my view, anyway.

**Nanjo Fumio** There’ s another issue that fits alongside this debate: the term “exoticism.” It concerns the atmosphere of an unfamiliar land. Art is easier to sell if the subject is something strange that people are unfamiliar with. That phenomenon has been known since early times. Simply put, unusual things sell well.

The phrase “fujiyama geisha” was often used to describe art exported from Japan. Behind such art is the producer’ s attitude that the art will be appreciated if it depicts Mt. Fuji or geisha. That’ s the sort of approach that emerges if you are creating art for the purpose of selling it. At the other end of the scale, there are people who think that works depicting today’ s realities are real art. I think that’ s what we are talking about. It’s a matter of description, isn’t it?

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**Ushiro Ryuta** By the way, there’ s one observation I’ d like to make. As I pointed out a little while ago, this exhibition has a heavy, serious atmosphere that impressed me. As we went round the exhibition being lectured about all the things that are happening, we came to a work where we were told that the artist is already dead. That was a shock! Then, when we reached the end, there were airline posters inviting us to fly to the Arab world. My reaction was “No way!” but Ellie had the opposite reaction. Having seen the exhibition she really wanted to go. This isn’t really related to consumption, but it was a surprise to see such a difference in our reactions.

**Nanjo Fumio** Oops. I don’t think the airline’s going to like that.

**Ushiro Ryuta** No, I was only pointing out that the difference was interesting.

**Nanjo Fumio** It’s certainly true that people seem to view this exhibition in many different ways.

We’ ve been taking questions from the audience, but now I’ d like to return to the speakers. Do any of the panelists have questions? Deena, you’ ve been quiet for a while. If you have any questions for the artists, now’s your chance.

**Deena Chalabi** No, I feel I have spoken far too much today already.

**Nanjo Fumio** Is that so? OK. We only have until 6:30, so I would like to bring the discussion to an end. There have been a lot of comments, but at the very least we can agree that the exhibition has attempted to introduce Arab artists to Japan on such a large scale for the very first time. There are of course deficiencies in many areas, and there may have been areas where the focus has been oriented too far in some direction or other. Nevertheless, I believe that exhibiting art from this sort of new perspective, and through the art, showing the society and culture that lies behind it, is something that Japan ought to do more often.

One viewpoint holds that today’s Japan is a country that has been closed off. If that’s the case, here in Japan it is surely important to open minds to as many countries as possible, to view all sorts of different things, and to gain an understanding of reality. We each need to have imagination, too. The works we view are not interesting unless we can bring our imagination into play. In that sense, we each need to make an effort, too.

At the same time, understanding the works involves more than just appreciating them with our senses. Listening and reading up on the backgrounds to the works is a part of gaining understanding. That deeper understanding enhances our sensory appreciation of the works, too. I would like to think that this approach will help to open up the senses of this insular, island country. For “Arab Express,” having our Arab friends and colleagues come and see Japan in a number of different ways has been a particular benefit. That’s been excellent, and very significant, too. This sort of bidirectional relationship is vital. And with the help of the Qatar Museums Authority, we’ ve been able to bring a good number of people to Japan for this event, too. We were also able to invite many artists to the exhibition opening. These opportunities have each enabled the visitors to see something of Japan, and to meet and talk to Japanese people. This approach has produced new understanding. I am convinced that these results are a significant benefit of this sort of exhibition.

For the research that led to organizing the “Arab Express” exhibition, I visited Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art with Kondo Kenichi, who is a Mori Art Museum curator. In fact, we made two or three visits. At that time, Wassan Al-Khudairi was the Director of Mathaf. We’ re pleased to have her here today, sitting over there in a yellow dress. Wassan was a great help to us, and we spent a great deal of time talking about this exhibition. While we were at Mathaf we also met Deena Chalabi, who moderated the sessions today. Deena has also provided a great deal of advice and given us introductions to many useful people. Mathaf was also useful because of the large number of works that we were able to view and study. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Wassan and Deena once more for all their help and advice. Wassan, would you please stand up?

We haven’ t run out of things to discuss, but we have had some very interesting discussions and acquired

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some useful information. I would like to give thanks to each of the participants. Thank you very much. Last of all, I would also like to thank everyone in the audience for taking the time to attend this event. Thank you. That brings my role to an end, so I will hand the chair over to Ken.



All artists and moderators participating in the program have finished the full schedule of the symposium.  
Photo: Mikuriya Shinichiro

**Kondo Kenichi** Thank you. On that note, I would like to bring this two-day symposium to a close. To finish, please join me in one more round of applause for the participants.