1 Cinematic Friendships: Intercessors, Collectives, Perturbations

Independent and experimental cinema in Arabic-speaking countries, as elsewhere, often arises from affinities, shared interests, and temporary collaborations, characterized by fluidity and adaptability. Friendship is a useful way to think about the flexible and sometimes nonlocal relationships in which experimenting cinema and media art get made, similar to the term *hubs* that Thomas Burkhalter uses to analyze the Beirut music scene's local-transnational networks.[1]

This chapter cannot survey all the sites for training, production, exhibition, distribution, and archiving of experimental media art, in the broad sense this book understands, for there are so many organizations. Instead I present some case studies of cinematic friendships, grounded in concepts of self-organization, metastability, perturbation, and individuation. The guiding question is, "Looking at the various kinds of infrastructures for experiments in Arab cinema, how can we tell which ones best support and sustain an experimental and creative practice?" It's practically a truism that top-down institutional structures are bad for creativity. It's also usually the case that funding comes with strings and imposes unwanted criteria on creative practices. But rather than reject institutions and outside influence out of hand, this chapter examines how creative practice individuates under the influence of these structures. Does it produce more interesting connections? Does its output become more rewarding, more complex? Similarly, though I begin with the assumption, based on observation, that local organizations are best at nurturing creativity, I don't want to fetishize the local.

Friendship, an Emergent Form of Organization

The most radical understandings of friendship cast it as a corrosive force. When Nietzsche had Zarathustra say, "I do not teach you the neighbor but the friend," this characterized alliances among people who reject ideologies of religious and national belonging. Nietzsche defied the Greek ideal of friendship based on hearth and the Christian ideal of friendship based on pity, and instead proposed a concept of friendship as based on taste.[2] The best friendships do not confirm what we already are but

make us become better, that is, they bring out our potentialities. Sometimes this feels painful, because it breaks the shell of our current being to bring something inside us in contact with something outside.

In his small book *Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma*, Hassan Khan gives an example of viewers' responses to two of Sherif El Azma's films that shows that audiences often prefer stable systems that confirm their identity. The audience loved *Interview with a Housewife*, in which El Azma's mother half-unwittingly gives voice to a feminist critique of the family, because it allowed them to "smile that superior smile," Khan writes. They hated *A Prayer to the Sound of Dogs*, dismissing it as the work of a "troubled, dangerous, misogynistic artist" and ignored its formal qualities and metastable structure.[3]

Friendship perturbs our systems: it catalyzes potentials in Gilbert Simondon's sense. Friendship is a force of individuation, channeling a flow of change that produces and continually shapes individuals.[4] Simondon describes individuation as bringing potentials in a metastable system into contact with catalysts outside the system. Not just any contacts will do, though: they need to preserve complexity by actualizing more potential relationships between what precedes us and what surrounds us. If we are stable systems, then good luck to us, for we are as good as dead; but if we are metastable systems, systems out of step with themselves, then we can keep on individuating. "Becoming is a mode of resolving an initial incompatibility that was rife with potentials."[5]

For example, Khan writes that for him, coming from an Egyptian Marxist family, El Azma provided a new perspective: "Sherif El Azma never searched for explanations, he didn't deconstruct the world. Rather, through his actions and commentary, he accidentally provided another lens through which to view it. Biases, prejudices, fears and desires were not anymore proof or explanations of how the class system operated—about who was bad and who was good—but valid driving forces in themselves."[6] El Azma perturbed Khan's system, undermining the received truths that had constituted him as an individual and allowing Khan's creative potential to get in touch with outside forces.

Creative "expression" expresses not something deep within the artist's psyche or the environment the artist observes, but the forces that traverse an individual. Simondon's concept of transduction describes the best potential of cinematic friendships: "the discovery of dimensions that are made to communicate by the system for each of the terms such that the total reality of each of the areas' terms can find a place in the newly discovered structures without loss or reduction."[7] This means that you help others grow by helping them actualize their potentials in widening circuits of relations.

Good friends are intercessors, people who intervene in a story to bring out its incommensurable elements. It might seem that intercessors act as their friends' psychoanalysts, bringing out unconscious content that the other had repressed; but it is more accurate to say that intercessors bring out the world that is latent within their friend,

elements quite beyond their identity: the swarm within. Intercessors act politically to give form to potentials that cannot be expressed in a given ideological framework, so of course they are agents of emergent truths in the Arab world, as elsewhere. Khan identifies paranoia as the operative energy in El Azma's films.[8] Thinking in terms of transduction, we could say paranoia is the awareness of potential connections between inside the individual and outside and the fear that those connections will tear the individual apart. Thus, paranoia is a useful attitude for anyone contemplating a cinematic friendship.

Top-Down versus Emergent Structures

Creativity arises as a perturbation of a system. But relevance is imposed from without. Here is the difference between a hylomorphic system, a top-down structure in which external forces shape culture, and a self-organized system that finds its own shape in relation to a flux of forces.[9] Most people who make art struggle between the desire to be relevant and the wish to create. This struggle is particularly intense for artists in the Arabic-speaking world, many of whom understand acutely that relevance is a reactionary criterion. Institutions of all sorts impose criteria of relevance: artists and filmmakers are demanded in turn to represent the nation favorably, criticize religion, uphold religion, self-Orientalize, critique Orientalism, explain the Arab world to the West, tell stories that everyone can relate to, be authentic, be expressive, be conceptual, and on and on. These criteria are expressed in admission to universities, funding applications, acceptance at festivals and exhibitions, and other gateways. Relevance imposes meaning from outside, and while these may be important meanings and they may be just what the artist wants to do, an opportunity for creativity and experimentation is lost. This chapter is on the lookout for emergent connections.

Creative friendships operate at many levels, including connections between individuals, loosely structured local collectives, alliances that become institutions, and international networks of financial support. The following case studies focus on just a few of the metastable systems of alliance that support independent and experimental media arts in Arab countries. I leave many others out. It would be revealing to study the changing local and transnational relationships centered on Ramallah between the large number of filmmakers and media artists based there, organizations such as ArtSchool Palestine, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Shashat Women Cinema, Birzeit University (where Elia Suleiman, Annemarie Jacir, and Khalil al-Mozian, among others, have taught), independent film production companies, the film festivals that have faced enormous challenges over the years, and funders such as the A. M. Qattan Foundation as well as international nongovernmental organizations. At the Baghdad International Film Festival, founded in 2005 and restarted in 2011, the quantity of short films made in Iraq indicates a creative rejuvenation despite occupation and near-civil-war. In Tunis,

Rabat, Algiers, Alexandria, East Jerusalem, and many other Arab centers, cinematic friendships are forming. To single out one admirably investigative scholar, Anne Ciecko has reported on the nascent film scenes in Bahrain, Jordan, Yemen, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.[10]

Emergent Systems

Emergent systems arise from local or translocal alliances based on affinity or friendship. Some film and art collectives emerged in order to give expression to unheard voices and noncommercial forms, such as Beirut Development and Cinema (Beirut DC), discussed below. Other emergent structures resist even this democratic impulse, which they recognize as a form of instrumentality, and instead work hard to protect creativity from ideology, such as Cairo Documenta, also discussed below. Lebanese writer Fares Chalabi issued a Nietzschean manifesto for the necessary luxury of self-organized art collectives that are not programmatic or instrumental:

> They seem disconnected from the world, and highly narcissistic. This is the case only when we postulate that the sole destination of any action is to solve a problem imposed by the grid, to react to necessities. While if we consider that the self-organized is a solution to escape the encompassing order of necessity and reason, and an excursion in the field of contingency and preferences, the inquiry is void. "What next?" is the haunting question of the self-organized, and not "What for?"[11]

How can art, and organizations for art, find and nurture the energy to create immanently rather than respond reactively to imposed criteria? If they manage to be as radically self-organized as Chalabi describes, how can they avoid falling into chaos? Sometimes emergent systems for independent cinema disperse, or change into something completely different. Sometimes they become institutions; they "striate," in Deleuze and Guattari's term. Top-down systems—commercial, state, and nongovernmental—are attracted to emergent organizations because they recognize an energetic phenomenon of new growth. How can organizations institutionalize and make connections with outside supporters without losing the creative energy that founded them? Simondon's concept of perturbation may help distinguish between institutions that lose (creative) energy and those that manage to sustain it.

Forms from the Top

The hylomorphic attitude treats matter as a formless mass that must be shaped from outside, as clay is shaped into bricks. Can forms imposed on a system from above or outside constitute a healthy milieu for creativity? In some countries, the state imposes a top-down structure for cinematic and media-art production. At the national level,

cinema production in the Arab world has only a few traditional top-down structures for training, exhibition, and funding. Egypt's film industry and the training institutions that feed it have for decades supported a steady production of feature-length commercial films, and its art institutions are thoroughly hylomorphic, as we will see in this chapter. Syria's national film institution, also examined here, controls every step of the production process. More recently, the huge investment in the arts by the governments and wealthy families of the United Arab Emirates constitutes a top-down structure.

The Hylomorphism of Funding

Production, exhibition, and dissemination of moving-image works in the Arab world depend on funding. Do these supporters impose forms according to funders' wishes, or do they develop potentials within a system?

Commercial markets for art and film impose constraints. Some of the funding organizations, such as Screen Institute Beirut (discussed in this chapter) express a wish that filmmakers shake their dependency on funding and pay for themselves through box office receipts, television sales, or gallery sales. However, most of the innovative works I examine in this book could not survive without some form of funding.

Movie making relies on a complex of financial support, including self-funding, private investments, government grants, production support grants, private foundation grants, festival finishing funds, television finishing funds, foreign coproductions, in-kind support, and donated labor. Feature-length fiction and documentary films rely on festival development and finishing funds, which in recent years include the Abu Dhabi Film Festival's Sanad fund, the Dubai International Film Festival's Enjaaz completion funds, the Doha-Tribeca Film Festival's MENA grants (2009–2012), the Sharjah Biennial, and the Rotterdam Film Festival. Beyond a certain budget, most Arab cinema also relies on international coproductions, which channel Western funding to their work.

Foreign funding and coproduction usually impose production requirements and tinker with a film's content to make sure that it will interest Western audiences. This is why Philippe Aractingi's *Bosta* (2005), hugely popular in Lebanon, was proudly advertised as "100% Lebanese!" Aractingi said, "It is time for us, filmmakers from the region, to be able to film the way we want to, rather than according to a certain frame that is imposed on us by a North-South paradigm."[12] The arrival in the late 2000s of Emirati funding was a boon to Arab filmmakers. Filmmaker Ranieh Attieh compares the strings attached to European funding and Abu Dhabi's Sanad fund in an interview with Jim Quilty, film journalist at the *Daily Star*, Lebanon: "Europeans have these weird thematic agendas. … They have a specific type of content and a lot of rules—this producer from this country must be involved: The project becomes bigger than it needs to be." Attieh also points to the fickleness of European funding: "There were years where they

were interested in Arab cinema. Next year they'll be interested in Asian or Latin American cinema." With Sanad, however, "you give them your budget and what you're going to spend it on and you have absolutely no restrictions on what company you'd use."[13]

Numerous Arab filmmakers join in the praise of Sanad, which Quilty notes gives preference to innovative projects. Makers of shorter moving-image works look to local production support grants, such as Ashkal Alwan's Video Works program (among many others), from organizations that are in turn supported by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)..

It's illuminating to examine some of the funding structures behind many of the arts organizations and individual artists studied in this book. Over the last twenty years, conduits of funding have shifted from Western governments to Western NGOs to Arab NGOs; but most of the cash still originates with Western governments and foundations. The Young Arab Theater Fund, established in 2000 and based in Brussels, supports arts organizations and individual artists. It raises money from the European Union; George Soros's Open Society Foundation; Swiss, French, and German organizations; and the Ford Foundation. Al-Mawred al-Thakafy (Cultural Resource), founded in Egypt in 2003, is in turn supported by a myriad of foundations, many from the Netherlands, France, and elsewhere in Europe, as well as the Ford Foundation, the Soros Foundation, and others. Another financial backbone of a great many artists and organizations whose work appears in this book is the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, founded in 2007. Its donors are an interesting blend of American, European, and Gulf corporations: the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, the Netherlands' Doen Foundation, the Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, Freyssinet Saudi Arabia, Banque Saudi Fransi, and the long-established shipping company Aramex, based in Dubai.

International platforms' well-meaning criteria impose certain forms on the immanent expressions of Arab filmmakers and artists. Al-Mawred's mandate is "to support the independent cultural sector in Egypt, Tunisia, and other Arab countries undergoing democratic transitions."[14] The Young Arab Theater Fund aims to help "independent artists" develop "a cultural space conducive to creativity and critical engagement with their socio-political circumstances."[15] The Prince Claus Fund, established in Holland in 1996, "supports artists, critical thinkers and cultural organisations in spaces where freedom of cultural expression is restricted by conflict, poverty, repression, marginalisation or taboos."[16] The stated goals of the Ford Foundation, founded in 1936, more or less align with those of US foreign policy, including supporting citizen groups and promoting government transparency and democratization.[17]

In chapter 3, I compare foreign funding to censorship, insofar as both apply filters to Arab media arts' forms of expression, and I have criticized it elsewhere too.[18] But I do not want to be too harsh on foreign funders. Funding organizations explain

their motivations and criteria quite clearly, and artists and organizations are adept at working around them. Nevertheless, the corporations and wealthy governments that endow these organizations remain the primary beneficiaries of imperialism, of whose mechanisms Vladimir Lenin's analysis back in 1916 remains spot-on today.[19] The weak economies and poor infrastructures of most Arab countries result from a century of imperialist economic exploitation, in which Arab elites are complicit. As Samir Amin says, "These categories of [Third World] countries have no project of their own but others have projects for them. We can talk about the American project for the Greater Middle East, because there is no Arab project."[20] More recently, Randall Halle's analysis of transnational film funding rings true. Halle points out that part of why art and cinema funding, as well as so much else, are in a dismal state in poor countries is that the economic restructuring demanded by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the European Union dismantled national funding for the arts, as well as so much else. For example, the Algerian economy plummeted after free-market agreements were imposed, beginning in the late 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s, and national film production fell from about thirty-three films per year in the 1970s to two or three films per year by 1995.[21] Moreover, foreign funding often stipulates that the recipient must carry out postproduction in the donor state or purchase equipment from the donor state.[22] Foreign funding is no more than the subsidy these filmmakers are due. Questions of representation (e.g., democracy, women's rights) are subordinate to these economic fundamentals.

Artists, filmmakers, and arts organizers in the Arab world know all this. As curator Sarah Rifky puts it, "The Egyptian state borrows money from the army and the army from the US. It would be bizarre to then say someone is guilty for taking Belgian money."[23] Most people who work for NGOs do too. Directors of arts organizations, desperate for money though they are, refuse certain kinds of funding. William Wells of Townhouse Gallery in Cairo won't touch money affiliated with Israel or the US embassy. Al-Mawred won't take US government funding.[24] Christine Tohme turned down funding from the Ford Foundation when it required her to sign a statement that Ashkal Alwan would not support terrorism. "Does this mean I can't support Iraqi or Iranian artists? I refused to sign it.'"[25]

Continuing in this grumpy tone, I note that it's great that Gulf money is beginning to pour into film production, but the source of that money, in the petroleum economy and the inhumane labor conditions in Gulf countries, also needs to be questioned.

However, keeping track of where the money comes from should not devolve into protectionism. Since 2012 the Egyptian government has targeted arts organizations that receive foreign support as "foreign agents." Moukhtar Kokache, who has worked for the Ford Foundation, attributes it to an "old-school leftist fear of foreign funding, which had its moment in the 80s and 90s, mingled with standard Arab fears of intervention and imperialism."[26]

In 1991 Mohamed Soueid published a list of reasonable suggestions for a sustainable Lebanese film industry. These included requiring TV stations to partially fund Lebanese films in exchange for exclusive broadcasting rights and taxing television advertisements to fund film production. Other Lebanese filmmakers have proposed similar solutions, as Lina Khatib documents.[27] Such reasonable ideas for how the state can support film and art offer some relief to the contradictions of funding.

Hyper-Hylomorphism: The United Arab Emirates

Experimental media production and exhibition are still fairly rare in the Persian Gulf countries. However, those countries are quickly embracing contemporary art, especially under the influence of powerful female patrons. This practice, Salwa Mikdadi notes, has a long tradition in the Muslim world: since the fourteenth century, women have sponsored the construction of mosques, schools, hospitals, and, now, museums.[28] Sharjah was the first emirate to make long-term plans for art and culture, and in 2003 Sheikha Hoor al Qasimi opened the Sixth Sharjah Biennial to new art forms.[29] The Sharjah Art Foundation sponsors works through its production program that go on to feature in the Sharjah Biennale, including many works this book features, such as Basma Alsharif's *We Began by Measuring the Distance* (2009) and Rania Stephan's *The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni* (2011).

In 2011 the Sharjah Art Foundation fired Jack Persekian, director of the Sharjah Biennial, after visitors complained that an installation by the Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil was blasphemous. It featured mannequins wearing T-shirts with texts from a play by Benfodil, in which a young woman recounts her rape by members of the Armed Islamic Group during the Algerian civil war. Persekian's supporters rallied, demanding not only that he be reinstated but also that the biennial permit discussion of the act of censorship. This didn't happen, and a number of people resigned in disgust. As Rasha Salti, one of the curators of Sharjah 2011, put it, "Whatever platform was there in Sharjah was a precarious platform because it's a platform that doesn't support dialogue. … This is the real difference between Sharjah and Beirut, Cairo, Ramallah, the space for discussion. Everywhere works are censored in the region. But elsewhere the censorship leads to discussion."[30] Along the same lines, scholars roundly criticize the new museum complex on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi as an attempt to import culture rather than cultivate it from within.[31] Emirati government and developers chose the flashiest international signifiers of taste and cultural capital in their collaborations with the Guggenheim, the Louvre, and star architects. Critics have also mentioned that local audiences do not comprise much of the attendance at the big new Gulf festivals in Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Doha.

Much evidence has amassed, then, to suggest that the new Emirati art institutions are hylomorphic, that is, they impose a form of culture from outside rather than

nurturing emergent culture from the local community. At a forum in Beirut in 2010, Mishaal Al-Gergawi, a business analyst in Abu Dhabi, and Vasif Kortun, founder of Platform Garanti in Istanbul, pointed out that the Gulf needs midsized arts organizations and artist-run centers that can support local artists.[32] Kortun reported that in 2008, Guggenheim Saadiyat Abu Dhabi developer Tom Francis invited the founders of successful nonprofit arts organizations, including William Wells of Townhouse, Christine Tohme of Ashkal Alwan in Beirut, and himself, for advice. Their proposal emphasized, among other things, the importance of engaging local artists and audiences and establishing an intellectual infrastructure. It will take some more time to determine whether these take root, but the Emirates have a number of emerging centers for critical practice, such as the Global Art Forum series at Art Dubai curated by Shumon Basar, the Third Line Gallery, and innovative curricula at the University of Sharjah, as well as interesting initiatives by the chastened staff at the Sharjah Art Foundation. So maybe Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai—especially the last, with its savory stew of well-educated citizens, international residents, and crass consumerism—will soon be (or already are) metastable systems that catalyze acts of creative individuation.

Mutual Perturbations: Beirut's Environment for Cinematic Experiments

Beirut is famous for its capacity to nurture experimental art practices. *Friendship* is not the first word that comes to mind to describe the relationships that sustain this creative ferment; *rivalry, solidarity,* and *cliquishness* seem more apt. But the criteria for creative friendship I mentioned above describe quite well Beirut's creative environment for experiments in film and video since the mid-1990s. Friends perturb each other, reveal each other's internal populations of potentialities, and immerse those potentialities in stimulating environments.

Lebanon is one of the Arab countries richest in educational institutions for the arts. It lacks a film industry but has numerous higher institutions that teach film and video production. Note that these are not state institutions. During the French Mandate period (1920–1943), Sarah Rogers points out, the state abandoned the arts and it was individuals, "and particularly the artists themselves, [that] galvanized Beirut's creative community."[33] At the Institut d'études scéniques, audiovisuelles et cinématographiques at Université Saint-Joseph and the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts since the 1990s, and more recently in departments at the Lebanese-American University and the American University of Beirut, students learn film and video production, sometimes with an explicitly experimental focus.

Lebanese artists and organizers have long been adept at cultivating creative milieus on small and local scales. One of the earliest was Dar el Fan (House of Art), which Janine Rubeiz founded (as a limited holding company) in 1967. Dar el Fan sponsored conferences and debates, concerts, exhibitions, film screenings, poetry readings, and

plays, exhibiting the work of both Lebanese and international artists. Over eight years, it organized an impressive 150 film screenings, often borrowing art-house film prints from foreign embassies. Located on what would become the Green Line in the Lebanese civil war, Dar el Fan was an early casualty of the war.[34] Yet it remains the precedent for organizers, artists, and a sophisticated public who unite around experimental art forms.

In the 1970s prior to the civil war, a generation of filmmakers returned to Lebanon. As Nouri Bouzid describes, they, like other filmmakers from the Maghreb, Syria, and Palestine who had studied abroad, had grown up on Nasserist pan-Arab ideals and lived through the dashed hopes of the 1967 defeat, but also the European radical spirit of May 1968. "When they returned home, they were full of hopes and dreams. But the harsh reality hit them in the face: no resources, no market, no freedom of expression—in addition to the array of accumulated defeats."[35] Lina Khatib, citing Bouzid, rightly sees this circumstance as a barrier to full-blown feature-length fiction cinema.[36] However, these issues became the engine of experimentation in Lebanese cinema. Documentary permitted the use of small-format cameras and, later, video. It also demanded methods for inventively getting at the truth and raised questions of how cinema can negotiate among competing claims for truth: these would inform the explosion of creativity in Lebanese independent media production after the war.[37]

Some of these filmmakers stayed in Lebanon during the war. Cinematic friendships also continued at a distance in work by Lebanese filmmakers who left the country but documented the war in exile. After the Taif Agreement of 1989, Lebanese who had been living in diaspora or studying abroad returned to Lebanon to make films, teach and mentor, and found organizations, including Nigol Bezjian, Vatche Boulghourjian, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Katia Jarjoura, Jalal Toufic, Walid Ra'ad, and Akram Zaatari. They brought practices they had encountered abroad, as when in 1994 Mokhtar Kokache and Rasha Salti curated a festival of experimental video.[38]

Beirut shows that one of the best ways to perturb a scene is to have complementary and competing venues for production and exhibition whose goals and criteria differ. So we see that some organizations, schools, and casual assemblies for making and showing moving images focus on social action, some on narrative fiction, some on personal video, some on formal and narrative experimentation in a cinematic mode, and some on conceptual modes destined for the gallery.

In 1999 a group of film- and videomakers including Eliane Raheb, Hania Mroué, Dimitri Khodr, and Mohamed Soueid founded Beirut DC, in the recognition that a creative, politically committed cinema could only form independent of the state, television, and foreign NGOs. Their manifesto states, "Beirut DC has the aim of giving picture and voice to everyone and above all to the marginalized people and to allow them to freely express themselves so that they may define themselves, their reality and their problems and to broadcast these to the large public with the hope of being able to

induce some change."[39] Beirut DC founded a production center for local film- and videomakers and a festival, Beirut Cinema Days (Ayyam Beirut al-Cinemaiyya), that showcases these productions and an impressive variety of other works from throughout the region. It has sponsored many works that vary widely, but in general it privileges personal documentary and works on social justice.

Meanwhile, in 2001 a group of friends—Pierre Sarraf, Wadih Safieddine, Nadim Tabet, and Danielle Arbid—started the film and video series Né à Beyrouth, which focuses somewhat more on narrative works. Housed at the swish gallery Espace SD in Jeitawi and programmed and promoted in French, Né à Beyrouth had connotations of East Beirut (i.e., Christian wealth and privilege). Karine Wehbé, one of Espace SD's original founders, says, "Our situation was ambiguous, people thought we were rich kids and that the space belonged to us. … But we were completely broke! … There was also a certain animosity concerning our project because we were francophone."[40] Yet from its east side perch, Né à Beyrouth has generated a lot of activity, including the Lebanese Film Festival.[41] Reorganized as a production company, it is able to support independent filmmaking by producing advertising, corporate films, and music videos. Short works rarely get distributed, so it was great that a short-lived distribution company, Incognito, produced a DVD of selected Né à Beyrouth works from 2001 to 2005 for distribution.[42] Now Né à Beyrouth broadcasts selections from the festival weekly on Lebanon's MTV network.[43]

Some of Né à Beyrouth's productions create perturbations, as when they approached Olga Nakkas and Hassan Zbib and asked to screen the unfinished Super 8mm narrative films that each had begun during the civil war, accompanied by live electronic music.[44] The resulting work, *Mon ami Imad et le taxi* (1985/2006), edited by Wadih Safieddine, perturbs relations between the present and the past. The goofy drifter and war-emptied streets of Nakkas's and Zbib's films seem finally to meet appropriate intercessors in the pounding and hallucinatory music, and their colors bleed like rainbows.

Another intercessor in the Beirut cinema scene, the Docudays festival founded by Mohamad Hachem, operating annually with a few missed years since 1999, screens Lebanese, Arab, and international documentaries, usually selecting works that are more conventional in style.

Like other organizers and artists in postwar Lebanon, Christine Tohme has since the early 1990s acted as what Gramsci called an "organic intellectual," organizing projects that create a critical discourse around emerging issues. Tohme's curatorial projects in the early 1990s, and her initial investments and those of Marwan Reshmawi in 1995,[45] led to the creation of Ashkal Alwan (Shapes Colors), the Lebanese Association for the Plastic Arts. Ashkal Alwan grew to dominate the Lebanese art scene, and its central artists shot to international fame. The biennial Home Works series brings together regional and international artists and other intellectuals to create a singular Beirut-eye-view of the world. We might characterize Home Works as a continuing process of

individuation, by which forces from outside draw out certain potentials of the Lebanese art scene. Ashkal Alwan began the series Video Works in 2006, inviting artists to submit proposals for videos that the organization would fund and premiere.

Recently a collective of filmmakers at Metropolis Cinema-Sofil, including Joana Hadjithomas and Hania Mroué, started a theatrical screening series, showing, for example, the bubbly Lebanese commercial cinema of the brief industrial period in the 1970s. They and others have made Metropolis the hub of regional initiatives for distribution and exhibition as the site of MC Distribution and a member of the Network of Arab Arthouse Screens and the Network of South Mediterranean Distributors.

Given the lack of cultural and industrial infrastructure after the civil war and the disinterest of the state, an experimenting, noncommercial model of Lebanese moving-image media had to invent itself. These organizations' inventiveness has inspired others across the Arab world and beyond. It seems that it is the very lack of top-down structures that made this creativity possible.

Metastable Cairo

At the beginning of this century, nonindustrial filmmakers and media artists in Egypt had no context to make and show their work. The Egyptian film industry focuses on popular commercial production whose content is increasingly dictated by the Saudi market.[46] Emerging Egyptian filmmakers began looking to the lightweight, seat-of-the-pants production models of Lebanese short films for inspiration.[47] Sherif El Azma tells me that when he was beginning to pursue his experimental practice, he could not have survived without the example and encouragement of experimental makers in Lebanon. His work could not find a place between the "monolith" of Egyptian industrial, narrative cinema and the visual art world. "Cinema couldn't accept experimental film, and the art scene was where you show Super-8. … There was no space between video art and cinema in Egypt. It's all subject-based or genre-based. Videos opened up another space."[48]

El Azma is referring to a friendly (in the Nietzschean sense) encounter intended to transfer the energy of Beirut's independent video scene to the rest of the region. In 2001, Akram Zaatari and Mahmoud Hojeij invited video artists from throughout the region to Beirut to take part in a week-long workshop, "Transit Visa: on Video and Cities."[49] They prepared the guest list with the goal of mixing perspectives from artists both experienced with and new to video: participants included Ammar al-Beik and Lubna Haddad from Syria, El Azma and Khan from Egypt, Hassan Abou Hammad and Mais Darwazeh from Jordan, Ziad Antar and Farah Dakhlallah from Lebanon, and the rather out-of-place Ghazel from Iran. Zaatari and Hojeij gave the artists creative assignments, such as to mark on their bodies the names of cities important to them. They

met with local filmmakers, artists, curators, and critics; viewed work by local film- and videomakers; and made short videos. Despite Jalal Toufic's dismissal of all the resulting videos as clichés,[50] some of them are lasting gems, and most of the artists have continued to pursue inventive experimental practices.

In Egypt video appeared in private galleries and foreign-funded NGOs before it made it onto the curricula and into the exhibitions of state organizations in the course of the 2000s. Now Egypt boasts a healthy community of moving-image media artists. They navigate the (sometimes) productive tensions between state-supported training and exhibition and nongovernmental arts organizations with closer ties to the international art world.

The center of this tension was, and to a large extent still is, the Townhouse Gallery, founded in 1998 by Canadian curator William Wells in a friendly downtown neighborhood otherwise dominated by auto repair shops. The gallery gets funding from the Ford Foundation, Pro-Helvetia (Switzerland), and other international organizations. Townhouse quickly became a hub of critical and experimental activity. On my last visit in 2013, the thicket of café chairs and tables lining the alleys approaching the gallery was usually packed with people. Many of the artists this book examines have exhibited at Townhouse, often very early in their careers.

In 2000 and 2001, Townhouse, Espace Karim Francis, and Mashrabia Gallery organized the Nitaq festival. This festival launched a first generation of Egyptian video artists and experimental filmmakers, including Khan, El Azma (who won Best Work for *Interview with a Housewife*), and others who would later work in film and video such as Doa Aly, Khaled Hafez, and Wael Shawky.[51] Nitaq ended abruptly in 2001, but from its initial impetus evolved Photo Cairo, a biannual series that exhibits video and installation as well as still photography. Photo Cairo was organized initially by Townhouse and is now run by the Contemporary Image Center (CIC), founded by Hala Elkoussy and Heba Farid. Medrar for Contemporary Art, founded in 2005, focuses on electronic media art. Founders Mohammad Allam and Dia Hamed had learned about contemporary practices at Shady Elnoshokaty's experimental media workshop, discussed below.[52] Medrar organizes the Cairo Video Festival, the annual exhibition The Pick, performances, screenings, and workshops in many aspects of sound and image software and hardware. Like many of the other organizations mentioned in this chapter, Medrar gets funding from the Young Arab Theater Fund, Al Mawred's Abbara Program, and the U. S.-based Foundation for Arts Initiatives.

Townhouse, the CIC, and other NGO arts organizations in Cairo host talks, symposia, and performances; run workshops; and among them hold an extensive library. Their curators present audiences with international tendencies in contemporary art and also make it easy for foreign curators, and foreign scholars like me, to learn about Egyptian artists working in contemporary forms. Townhouse also cultivates African

connections, sharing resources with biennial exhibitions and independent art spaces in Dakar, Senegal, Bamako, Mali, and Douala, Cameroon,[53] and collaborating in a transcontinental video festival, The Boda-Boda Lounge.

Jessica Winegar, writing in the mid-2000s, detects a whiff of cultural imperialism in this system. She points out that practices like video and installation were introduced to Egypt by Western-trained artists and Western, or Western-educated, curators. She argues that these new forms appear foreign to the majority of Egyptian artists at the same time that they propel their practitioners into the international art circuit.[54] Egyptian artists are torn, Winegar argues, between two institutions: the state and the global neoliberal economy. "Young artists have thus become subjects of two regimes of power. Just as state officials 'create' young artists to prove Egypt's cultural progress, Western curators 'create' young artists in a way that emphasizes Western cultural superiority."[55]

At times the generational difference Winegar maps among Egyptian artists has been extremely clear-cut. Wells reports that when the first Nitaq festival accepted $85,000 from the Ford Foundation, "no one from the older generation would take part. [They] were major players who reject any foreign affiliation whatsoever … and they will never back away from this."[56]

In 2009 Kaelen Wilson-Goldie characterized the state-private bifurcation in a way that shows a definite preference for nonstate institutions:

> Photo Cairo 4 and the Cairo Biennale [which exhibits international as well as Egyptian artists] epitomise the enduring polarisation of the Egyptian art scene. The biennale, renowned for its curatorial confusion and shambolic organisation, represents the official, government-sponsored public art sector of a state where the Ministry of Culture receives the second highest federal budget allocation after the Ministry of Defense. Photo Cairo—young, edgy and conceptually precise—represents an unofficial, fiercely independent alternative art scene that has, over the past decade, earned widespread international recognition for being critical, credible and almost claustrophobically tight-knit.[57]

In 2009 the state-run Cairo Biennale took some risks, hiring as artistic director the young sculptor Ehab El Labban, who exerted more control over the loose selection process, perhaps in response to the fact that nonstate exhibitions like Photo Cairo were eclipsing the Biennale.[58] Also in 2009, the Twentieth Youth Salon, organized in Cairo by the Ministry of Culture to showcase young Egyptian artists, controversially selected a jury of young artists with connections to the international art scene and appointed two members of the jury, Hassan Khan and Wael Shawky, to curate the exhibition.[59] Were these examples of established, state institutions appropriating the creative energy of emergent artists and intellectuals with international reputations? Or were they evidence that old institutions are capable of transformation? Omnia El Shakry, analyzing the Twentieth Youth Salon, pursues these questions by asking how an old hegemonic structure, the nationalist art institutions, can be restructured without falling into the pattern of a new hegemonic structure, the neoliberal "global" art economy. She

proposes that it is most useful to understand the Egyptian art scene not in terms of an opposition between "nationalist" and "neoliberal" but rather as "complexly formed fields that are co-constitutive and exceed their terms of reference"[60]—that is, as metastable systems.

In 2014 the editors of major Egyptian newspapers vowed to support Abdel Fatah al-Sisi's "war on terror," and numerous Egyptian artists declared their loyalty to the regime. Journalists and artists who criticized the regime have been imprisoned or charged with treason. Organizations that receive foreign funding, which includes all the art organizations mentioned here, can be charged with treason. It remains to be seen how the chilling effect of this Egyptian McCarthyism will affect the vigorous volatility of Cairo's art scene.

Independent Schools and Workshops

A recent movement of independent schools and workshops, which harks back to Zaatari and Hojeij's Transit Visa workshop of 2001, reflects the desire to nurture creative practice independent of both state and outside influences. In part, artist-run workshops sprang from a critique of university art teaching. In addition, they help artists develop an independent practice.[61] Given the occasionally reactive responses by foreign curators and scholars, Arab artists are sometimes pushed into the global spotlight before their work has developed sufficient confidence and maturity to survive the glare: workshops create supportive and relatively private environments for artists to determine whether and how they want to relate to global art trends.

Most of the curriculum at Egyptian fine arts colleges is based in modernist painting and sculpture techniques and styles of Western origin. It emphasizes form over concept and tends to be imitative. However, video, like installation and performance, is associated with conceptual and, later, research-based practices that are not part of the modernist academic curriculum. Shady Elnoshokaty recognizes the virtues of the traditional curriculum: "Even though this system had its negative consequences it also paved the way for talented students to try all branches of art (painting, sculpture, design, ceramics, printmaking, wood work, metal work, tapestry, folkloric crafts). … A whole generation of young artists learned to experiment with different media."[62] I believe that one of the best aspects of the traditional Egyptian curriculum can be seen in Egyptian artists' well-informed and knowledgeable use of materials, which distinguishes their artworks from the products of conceptually driven arts curricula.

But the state arts colleges were not teaching media art. Thus, starting in the late 2000s, a handful of artists began to organize independent study programs centered on video in low-budget ventures that combined training, production, and exhibition. Elnoshokaty designed a mammoth experimental media workshop that was taught between semesters at Helwan University's Department of Art Education from 2000 to

2011.[63] Free courses with guest artists introduced students to video, animation, experimental comics, the pinhole camera, puppet animation, and performance art. In 2004 Ahmed Basiony, a sound and software artist, introduced courses in computer graphics and digital audio art. Later Basiony and Noshokaty collaborated with Medrar to offer workshops on computer-based arts. Elnoshokaty emphasizes the grassroots nature of the creative encounter: he would "invite different students, all with different kinds of technical skills, such as someone who is fixing mobile phones in a shop who had these self-taught attributes, alongside someone who was studying in a craft-based creative higher education programme, so that they could meet each other and develop a forum for peer-assisted collaboration."[64]

In 2013 Elnoshokaty opened the ASCII Foundation for Contemporary Art Education to introduce artists to new media in Cairo's working-class suburb Ard el-Lewa. Between the ASCII Foundation and Medrar's workshops in programming and engineering, Cairo is quickly becoming the Arab world's center for electronic media art. The organization is named in honor of Basiony and refers to his last work, *ASCII Doesn't Speak Arabic* (2010). Basiony was killed by a sniper during the Tahrir uprising in 2011.

From 2010 to 2012 Wael Shawky (maker of the brilliant epics *Cabaret Crusades* of 2010 and *Cabaret Crusades: The Path of Cairo* of 2012) organized the alternative educational program MASS Alexandria. His reasons were similar to Elnoshokaty's: state arts education focuses on craftsmanship and form rather than concept and stops at modernism. MASS Alexandria encouraged students in a research-based and conceptually driven process, with weekly seminars on key texts led by curator Sarah Rifky.[65] Each workshop concluded with an exhibition.

While Elnoshokaty, Shawky, and Rifky wanted to help artists become conversant with the research-based and theoretically informed approaches that currently dominate global art discourse, Sherif El Azma was concerned that artists develop an intuitive aesthetic that would resist conceptual dogmas. In 2011 El Azma initiated the five-month workshop Video by the Kilo at Alexandria Contemporary Art Forum. "Alexandria is like a European middle-class freezer," he said, "and these [artists] are like the thawing bits."[66] Avoiding what he called "overeducated bilingual conceptual Egyptians," El Azma invited artists who hadn't worked much in video and encouraged students to start with images, which are more potent with meaning than concepts. He shot and edited the works they dreamed up. This approach was very fruitful for some of the artists, as Mo Nabil and Sarah Samy's startlingly surreal four-minute *Fragments from a Power Nap* (2012) attests.

Ashkal Alwan initiated Home Workspace in 2011 with a similar aim to nurture Lebanese and regional artists, in a ten-month intensive program with resident professors, some Lebanese, some international. Tuition is free. Initially students had to apply and received production grants and private studios. The 2013–2014 program was open to all but without grants and studio. The program is in English, most likely to

accommodate the international faculty. When I visited in summer 2014, it appeared that many of the students were Westerners, attracted to the milieu for innovation that Ashkal Alwan has established.

The coyly named Cairo Documenta, though not a school, should be mentioned among organizations that want to resist Western art discourse while also remaining independent of the state school system. Cairo Documenta pursued an interesting agenda simultaneously protectionist and promotional. Its members, including several media artists whose work I discuss in this book, were critical of the mechanism by which artists who exhibited at galleries like Townhouse subsequently (sometimes) got taken up by the international art scene.[67] In 2010 and 2012, to capture the attention of international visitors to the Cairo Biennale, Cairo Documenta's members, *salon-des-refusés* style, organized their own parallel events in which they curated each other's work. Interestingly, William Wells of Townhouse compares artists like these who avoid the art establishment and the discourse on the MENA region to third-wave feminists who benefit from the work of their forebears.[68]

Individuations in Syria's Documentary Diaspora

Syria provides an especially salient example of the struggle of cinematic friendships. Since 1964, official Syrian cinema has been tightly controlled by the National Film Organization (NFO), which must approve the script and the final film and may also prevent a completed film from being exhibited. Filmmakers who get jobs at the NFO work free from the need to make commercially profitable films and receive salaries and sufficient funding to pay collaborators and crew, making filmmakers, as Kay Dickinson points out, state-supported intelligentsia.[69] The lucky few filmmakers in the employ of the NFO have been able to work with one another from project to project.[70] Most of all, as every scholar of Syrian cinema remarks, the NFO has allowed filmmakers to make complex, beautiful, and remarkably subversive films.[71] Very few of them, which are barely released to Syrian audiences, are seen outside the country and instead languish in the archives of the NFO.[72] Meyar al-Roumi documented the rueful camaraderie among three of the directors of the generation that started in the 1970s, Omar Amiralay, Mohammad Malas, and Oussama Mohammed, in his film *Un Cinéma muet* (2001). These masterpieces of Syrian cinema finally reached their audiences in more than a trickle thanks to the catalytic friendship of writers and programmers, chief among them Rasha Salti, who organized a touring series of their films, "Lens on Syria," which premiered in 2006 at Lincoln Center in New York, and a book of essays by and about Syrian filmmakers.[73]

Amiralay and Malas act as cinematic intercessors in *Le Plat de sardines, ou la première fois que j'ai entendu parler d'Israël* (1997), a film directed by Amiralay and conceived by the two filmmakers together. The film is set in the ruins of Quneitra, the Syrian town

razed by the Israeli army as it withdrew in 1974, now in the demilitarized zone between the two countries. Israel's 1967 victory severed Jawlan (the Golan Heights) from Syria, cutting right through villages and families. Amiralay explains in his gentle voice-over (in French) that the only building that was not destroyed was Quneitra's cinema. Inside the derelict theater, Amiralay inventively restages the childhood memory that gives rise to the title: a little boy stands at a table, the height of his eyes, on which rests a dish of cooked sardines. Their odor arouses an olfactory memory. The child asks why his aunt always serves a big plate of smelly sardines when they visit. She responds, "*Que Dieu maudisse Isräel qui est la cause*!" (May God damn Israel, which is the cause!), and explains that his uncle and aunt were living well in Jaffa until 1948, when they lost everything. Now, living in exile, his uncle fishes for sardines for a living. Amiralay concludes, "So Israel equals sardines for me, and the nauseating odor." His aunt smiles, "Sardines are delicious."

The next section of the film explores a cinematic friendship. Inset on the cinema's empty interior wall we see a black-and-white film playing. It is Malas's film *Quneitra 1974*: a woman stands in the ruins of the devastated town and looks directly at the camera. In a reverse shot, Amiralay looks back toward her, inserting his present-day self into his friend's old film. A conversation on the nature of cinema and memory ensues. Malas, seated in a grassy ruin, says, "It's true that all my films deal with Quneitra. But now I ask myself, is it a film about the conflict or about our cinema, preoccupied as it is with our internal problems?" [figure 1.1] Amiralay replies, "You want me to answer?" (there is silence), and continues, "Mohammad Malas, is your film about the Arab-Israeli

Figure 1.1
Omar Amiralay, *Le plat de sardines, ou la première fois que j'ai entendu parler d'Israël* (1997)

conflict, the Israeli occupation of Jawlan, the destruction of Quneitra, or something else?" His friend still silent, Amiralay continues, "The first time I saw images of Quneitra was in your *Quneitra 1974*. Then I saw it for real when collaborating on your film *Al-Layl* [The Night, 1991]." Malas finally speaks: "It's a pity you never saw Quneitra before. It's true that sometimes reality doesn't protect things. But it seems to me that cinema protects them. If we'd known Quneitra was going to be destroyed we'd have preferred to live and die there, rather than turn it into memories or images on film." A slow tracking shot reveals the abandoned land tangled with barbed wire. "For me it was otherwise," Amiralay answers him. "They planned to invade Jawlan until the Syrians fired back, and then?" The conversation ends abruptly.

The excerpt from *Quneitra 1974* shows a profoundly artful cinematic sensibility. Amiralay seems to be suggesting that the political content of the film was just a means for Malas to make a film, under the auspices of the NFO, that would serve Syrian nationalism but explore the aesthetics of composition, performance, time, and memory. Malas's response seems to suggest that he wouldn't have needed to make films if the 1967 defeat had not happened.

The answer to Amiralay's "And then?" comes nine years later, in a film by one of his students. A voice in Rami Farah's *Silence* (2006) contends that the Syrian government utterly failed its citizens in 1967. Two quite different men mourn the loss of Qunietra, their home town. One man hosts a show on national television, "Our Sons in Jawlan." His ardently patriotic tone on the show contrasts with his heartbreaking conversation (by megaphone) with family members severed from him who now live on the other side of the border in Israel. Another man, who says he is 99 or 100 years old, remembers the events of 1967 with anger and disgust. [figure 1.2] "The army retreated without telling us. Left their tanks and fled. … We heard on the radio that Israel had occupied Quneitra, so the people fled like ants." But it wasn't true. The Israeli army only entered the town four days later, he says, and they found it empty. "If the people had not fled, we would not have lost Quneitra."[74] The younger man tells a more heroic story and refuses to comment on that of his counterpart: "Leave my track to me and his to him."

Le plat de sardines and *Silence* are able to speak directly about the disastrous events in Jawlan in 1967 precisely because they were not made in Syria (and they are banned in Syria). As Salti writes, "All evocations of the Golan, the loss of territory, the displacement of its people, the dispersal of the memory is … deemed subversive because it too [like Palestine] falls under the exclusive dominion of the regime's representation and narrative."[75] Farah produced *Silence* as his graduation film from Amiralay's Arab Institute of Film in Amman. Amiralay was living in exile in France where he produced *Le plat de sardines* and other films with the support of La Sept/Arte.

In 2005 Amiralay returned to Damascus from exile in France, partly out of disillusionment with French attitudes during the second Gulf War.[76] He, Lebanese American filmmaker Hisham Bizri, Egyptian filmmaker Hala Galal, and teachers from the Danish

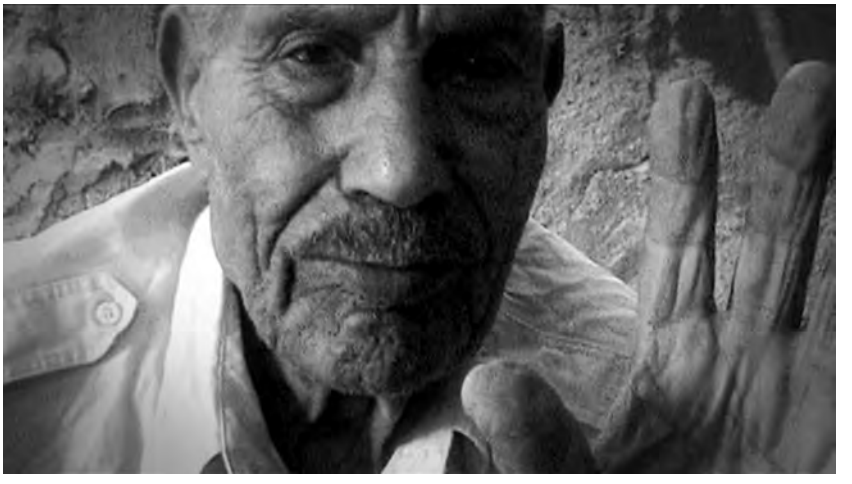

Figure 1.2
Rami Farah, *Silence* (2006)

national film school, Jesper Højbjerg, Jakob Høgel, and Anders Østergaard, founded the Arab Institute of Film (AIF) in Amman. The goal was to produce independent documentaries and "to foster a thoughtful and critical reflection about the principles of innovative aesthetic practices, social foundations, and cultural expressions in Arab cinema."[77] Funding came from the Danish organization International Media Support. The ambitious plan was to train seventy-five to one hundred students per year, beginning in 2005, and for the workshop to become an MFA-granting institution by 2010.[78] AIF fostered the production of some fine films: alumni include Reem Ali and Rami Farah of Syria and Maggie Kabariti and Sandra Madi of Jordan.[79]

Meanwhile some younger Syrian filmmakers were emerging who had studied not at the NFO but in Western countries, or indeed not at all, and had little interest in conforming to the NFO's strictures, including al-Roumi, Orwa Nyrabia, Ammar al-Beik, Joude Gorani, and Diana El Jeroudi.[80] In 2002, with the mentorship of Amiralay, El Jeroudi and Nyrabia (nephew of Oussama Mohammed) founded ProAction Films in Damascus. It became the only independent production company in Syria, focusing on creative documentary. In 2008 ProAction initiated the DOX BOX documentary cinema festival and exhibited works produced at AIF, though some were censored in Syria. ProAction is now a powerhouse of creative independent documentary production, attested by Talal Derki's *Return to Homs* (2013), a staggering vigil with members of the Free Syrian Army, which won the grand jury prize at Sundance. ProAction looks internationally, including eastward, producing films from Iran and Pakistan. Amiralay's film *Seduction* on the Syrian actress Ighraat was in production at ProAction when the

filmmaker died in 2011. Orwa Nyrabia was abducted by the Syrian military on August 23, 2012, for obscure reasons likely related to weakening the national morale, and released on September 12 thanks to international pressure.[81]

In 2008 the AIF relocated from Amman to Beirut in order to benefit from that city's more vibrant film culture,[82] and took the name Screen Institute Beirut. In keeping with the criteria of International Media Support, the organization's goals have become more commercial and television oriented than in its incarnation as the Arab Institute of Film. Unlike Beirut DC and Amiralay's Arab Institute of Film, it tempers a desire to support free and creative expression with the need for professionalization.[83] Screen Institute Beirut is in great health as a center for independent documentary production (and sponsored a number of the films discussed in this book), though plans to turn it into an academy are still on the back burner.

These stories of cinematic friendships and alliances attest to the threads of affiliation that twine around the inspiring person of Omar Amiralay. Each of them generates a milieu that catalyzes creative individuations in different ways, from the Syrian National Film Office to independent production in exile, to the visionary Arab Institute of Film, the courageous ProAction Films, and the pragmatic Screen Institute Beirut.

Revolutionary Friendships

The revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria that began in 2011 focused world attention on moving-image media made in these countries. Artists and filmmakers donated their skills to the struggle. Since the 2011 Syrian citizens' uprising and at the time of this writing four years into the horrific war in Syria, urgent new alliances have formed. An outburst of citizen journalism has captured in numbing detail the crimes of the regime against its people, often at the risk or loss of the makers' lives, and now militias of every political stripe also document and upload their actions. This movement constitutes one of the most important "experiments" with the moving image in the Arab world, but it is beyond my capacities to analyze it. Many scholars are working on it.[84] Instead I will look briefly at some of the ways filmmakers have been lending their abilities to the Syrian war since 2011 and also anticipating the reconstruction of a better society after the war.

Many artists work collectively and anonymously, making very short works and, like their citizen-journalist colleagues, relying on the Internet to disseminate their work. Artist volunteerism involves not only documenting protests but making instructional videos on how to disinfect a wound and how to mount an economic boycott of the regime, as Salti points out.[85] One of the first creative shots fired back at the regime began in August 2011, when Masasit Mati, an anonymous collective of artists both within the country and in exile, got together to create *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator*. Over the months, they uploaded fifteen episodes of this blisteringly funny show

Figure 1.3
Masasit Mati, *Top Goon* (2011)

starring amazingly expressive finger puppets. Acting and micro-camerawork contribute to *Top Goon*'s infectious power. In episode 6, "Skyping Putin," the beaky-nosed Beeshu (a two-inch spitting image of Bashar Assad) at a tiny pink laptop flatters "the Boss" and gets down to business: "Let's talk about our plan to mislead the international community. … No, no, it will not make you look stupid." [figure 1.3] They plan to scare the international community by evoking 9/11 and turn the Free Syrian Army into armed Salafi militias. "Our friends in the Security Council have been very helpful. Oh no, I don't mean you! … And the Goon [his military sidekick] and I will use the Free Syrian Army's Facebook page to identify them. … Kiss Medvedev for me." A record of the Russian national anthem plays and scratches to an abrupt halt. In 2013 the members of Masasit Mati living in Syria moved into the street with a performance in Aleppo called "I Love Acting."[86]

The anonymous collective Abounaddara (named after the figure of a bespectacled man) began posting poignant documentaries of everyday life in Damascus in 2010. After the uprising began, Abounaddara devoted their work to supporting antigovernment fighters, uploading a short documentary each week. They document the increasing frustration of Syrian rebels as foreigners hijack their revolution, their dilemmas over joining religious militias, their anger at the indifference of Western governments. Abounaddara's spokesman, Cherif Kiwan, says, "We're not interested in militants ... and if we do take interest in a combatant we don't show him fighting. We show him at home. We focus on his face, his eyes, his mouth, so that the spectator can get to know

this man. We don't say who he is, what religion he is." Kiwan continues, "We want to show the common humanity between people who are pro- and anti-regime, the people in Syria and the people elsewhere."[87] This neutral statement may be difficult to accept in light of Assad's war crimes in his country, but since the regime protects Syrian religious minorities from extremist groups intent on killing them, neutrality is the safer stance for many people.

By spring 2015, there exists an enormous number and variety of Syrian creative media works. The Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution,[88] an archive that seeks to preserve and make available all the songs, cartoons, banners, poems, and every other art form made by people defying the regime, has collected hundreds of videos. They honor not only the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have been killed since the start of the war but also Syrians' irrepressible humanity, generosity, and diversity.

Bidayyat for Audiovisual Arts, launched early in 2013, is making preparations for after the war is over. It trains and gives financial support to young Syrian and Syrian Palestinian filmmakers in creative documentary and fiction filmmaking. The organization distinguishes its approach from the witnessing rhetoric of citizen journalism, with a conception of documentary that questions simple notions of objectivity and emphasizes care, artifice, and respect for the medium. A member of the collective told Quilty, "It is clear what is happening in Syria. The regime is a criminal regime. It's not our role to provide proof of the crimes. It's our role to tell what is happening to the people."[89] Mohammad Ali Atassi, one of the founders, is the son of a former president of Syria, Nureddin al-Atassi, who was overthrown in Hafez Assad's coup in 1970 and spent the rest of his life in prison without charge or trial. Atassi has long devoted his practice to dissident intellectuals: *Cousin* (2001) on Riad al-Turk, who survived long and harsh imprisonment by the Syrian regime, and *Waiting for Abu Zayd* (2010) on the courageous Egyptian apostate theologian Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd. Atassi and Ziad Homsi's *Our Terrible Country* (2014), Bidayyat's first feature, accompanies activist writer Yassin Al Haj Saleh on his final journey through Syria. This documentary won the grand prize in the international competition at FID Marseille.

The short *Have You Ever Met a Sniper?* (2014), a production of Bidayyat and the collective Sam Lenses by Saeed Albatal and Ghiath-Had, records a morning of antigovernment fighters in a suburb outside Damascus. As they greet and joke with each other, an apartment building not far away spews black smoke, and they don't have much time until one of the buildings they are occupying will be hit. Over shots of the men crawling from room to room of the half-destroyed building they have occupied, reinforcing their positions, a light, haunting song plays ("Oh How the Boat Drifts" by Múm), giving a feeling of unreality. But the shooting is real. A mourning dove sings as Abu Abdu, a good-natured ex-soldier, rides the elevator to the top floor and positions his expensive-looking rifle. As he seeks his mark, he turns on the radio—"There's nothing like listening to Fairouz in the morning"—and the Lebanese singer's voice warbles into the

Figure 1.4
Saeed Albatal and Ghiath-Had, *Have You Ever Met a Sniper?* (2014)

room. In a carefully framed, portrait-like shot, the sniper, his weapon ready, talks with the cameraman about the ethics of killing from a distance and the pain of killing a human soul; this is intercut with shots through the rifle's sights. [figure 1.4] Then while he shoots he takes a phone call from his mother. *Have You Ever Met a Sniper?* does not glorify the fighters but illuminates them with gentleness, irony, and not a little artifice.

Bidayyat's anonymous short fiction *Happiness and Bliss* (2014) is a well-produced and effectively sickening work. A 1993 recording of Hafez Assad, preaching that if you have love and kindness in your heart you will generate happiness and bliss, repeats numbingly. That's not the case inside this middle-class house, a portrait of Assad senior on the wall. A young man lies on his bed eating a banana in a way that connotes masturbation. As his father shaves, his face erupts in bleeding sores. The mother stirs half-smoked cigarettes and girlie pictures into the soup she's cooking and feeds it to her son. When he escapes to the sea by night, there in the moon is the face of Assad. I find that the electronic dance music gives it a slick quality, but *Happiness and Bliss* effectively conveys the sense of being poisoned from within. That the jury members for Bidayyat's 2014 awards were Hala Alabdalla, Rania Stephan, and Ali Essafi, documentarists who emphasize aesthetics, craft, and subjective voice as well as politics, bodes well for the productions to come.

Clearly, then, there has been a surge of activity by Syrian independent filmmakers since the beginning of the war. However, this by no means indicates that war is good

Figure 1.5
Jasmina Metwaly, *Remarks on Medan* (2011)

for creativity. It suggests that Syria's repressive system was already bursting from the inside. In the case of cinema, the system's destruction was propelled by artists who had strong informal connections among themselves and received support from outside.

In Egypt, the Mosireen collective was highly successful at generating effective and informative documents compiled from the many hours of footage citizen journalists donated to them. Their YouTube channel reached millions of Egyptians and conveyed the citizens' points of view to people around the world. Most of Mosireen's members were artists and filmmakers before they became activists. Jasmina Metwaly spent every day in Tahrir Square in 2011, documenting the protests for Mosireen and making more poetic recordings there for her meditative five-channel *Remarks on Medan* (2011). Metwaly says she would not have made the artwork if not for the activism: she was exhausted from the days of testimonies and repetitive actions.[90] Metwaly trained as a painter, and *Remarks on Medan* observes events as they cross the frame of her stationary camera as meditative tableaux, without sound. Seen from above, the protesters come together in a circle; at some points the huge crowd is all motion and color; later they compose wide arcs, kneeling and standing in loose unison as they pray, their banners on the ground. [figure 1.5] One shot is occupied by an enormous tank, at its summit a soldier busying himself with something. Another shot looks up toward a man sitting motionless on a high post, clouds drifting across the blue sky behind him; after some minutes he stands and raises a flag. Because the shots are silent, the multitude of protesters seems moved by a primordial force, while at the same time individual protesters appear both dignified and fragile, and the shots seem to be holding their breath.

Remarks on Medan distills into an artwork what Metwaly observed over the weeks of participating in the protests.

Unlike Metwaly, Mosireen member Tamer El Said maintained a clear separation between his art and his activism. Documenting the revolution for Mosireen may have taken time away from his filmmaking, but, he told me, "I don't feel that I'm late. The time is ours."[91] He added that many bad films got made during the revolution by people who didn't wait.

El Said makes films in an improvisational, process-based manner that doesn't fit the structures of Egyptian industrial cinema. So he, Khaled Abdallah, and Bassam Fayad started the production company Zero Productions, one of a large handful of independent production companies that have formed in recent years. Zero Productions, Hassala Productions founded by Hala Lotfy, and other independent producers have teamed up to try to smash the industrial monopoly.[92] El Said and colleagues also founded Cimatheque, an alternative production center and screening space. When I visited in 2013, the hundred-seat theater, viewing library, and café were still under construction, but Cimatheque was already organizing screenings. Their analog film lab is up and running. In 2013–2014 the organization hosted a nine-month workshop in small-gauge filmmaking, Analogue Zone, a fitting counterpart to Medrar's computer-geek niche, and feted its results in public screenings at the Greek Club.

In 2012 Cimatheque was one of the international hosts of DOX BOX Global Day. That year, as civil war raged in Syria, DOX BOX organizers canceled the Damascus screening and instead planned a worldwide one-day screening on March 15, the anniversary of the start of the Syrian uprising, with the help of ArteEast in New York. On the program of Syrian documentaries were classic works by Amiralay and Oussama Mohammad, independent documentaries by Nidal al-Dibs and Meyar al-Roumi, and works made under the auspices of the Arab Institute of Film. DOX BOX published a preliminary list of venues that gives a good snapshot of organizations that were able to respond to the demand: in Arab countries, the Cinémathèque de Tanger (Tanger, Morocco), the Jesuit Cultural Center (Alexandria, Egypt), the Sudan Film Factory (Khartoum, Sudan), Cimatheque, in collaboration with Mosireen (Cairo, Egypt), and École supérieure d'audiovisuel (ESAV; Marrakech, Morocco). There were also four venues, mostly universities, in the United States and Canada and five in Europe, mostly documentary festivals.[93] I organized a screening at my university in Vancouver. Interestingly (or perhaps due to the connections of my Iranian Canadian research assistant, Fay Nass), it was attended mostly by Syrian Canadians and Iranian Canadians, who noticed numerous points in common between their former governments. It was moving to watch these works in unison with other groups around the world.

DOX BOX continued the practice in 2013 by making new works available online for one day, with support from the Network of Arab Arthouse Screens and ArteEast. They included Reem Al-Ghazzi's *Lights* (2006), which intimately depicts a family eking out a

life on Lake Assad; *4 Questions During the Tea Break* (Iyas Mokdad, 2013), an interview during a quiet moment with a Free Syrian Army fighter; and the heartbreaking *Syria's Children of War* (2013; director unnamed).

Emergence with Internal Energy and Outside Support 1: The Sudan Film Factory

That same day in 2012, an audience in Khartoum saw the Syrian documentaries at the Sudan Film Factory. Talal Afifi founded the Factory at the Goethe-Institute of Khartoum to train young people with no film experience. Sudan is still reeling from the civil war that ended in 2005, which caused the death of over 2 million people and made 4 million people refugees, and from the separation of South Sudan in 2011. It is one of the poorest countries in the world. And there are Sudanese who want to document the everyday life of their fellow citizens.

Between 2010 and 2012 the Factory ran nine workshops in low-budget filmmaking, microfilms, documentary filmmaking, and film criticism. The length of the workshops, five weeks, indicates the commitment demanded of students. Over the two years, participants completed a number of short documentaries, all of them showing sensitive filming and interview techniques. In 2014 Afifi and colleague Areej Zarouq founded the Sudan Film Festival in Khartoum.

Sudan Film Factory's most ambitious film to date is *Nomads* (2012), a documentary produced in a summer workshop, directed by Mohammed Hanafi and edited by the workshop instructor Emad Mabrouk. The Nomads are six men in their fifties who all got bitten by the bug of jazz from their revered guitar teacher, Ahmad Taour, in the 1980s. By day they work in an auto repair shop, and every night they rehearse and study there, writing music on the rough wall. [figure 1.6] The movie documents some triumphs for the band: a performance in a Khartoum nightclub, a recording session,

Figure 1.6
Sudan Film Factory, *Nomads* (2012)

and a jam session with visiting German musicians. Just as the musicians treat their battered instruments with care, so the film is crafted with love and care. The colors gleam like candies. Early in the film, a traveling shot in a verdant field lined with palm trees follows the sound of an up-tempo rendition of Charlie Parker's "Donna Lee" to find Salah, the saxophonist, practicing. Later a sepia-toned music video accompanies the Arabic love song the Nomads were recording: the singer takes a jaunt to the country, posing in front of his pearl-finished green Volkswagen in super-wide-angle shots. Throughout the short documentary, you get a sense of the community of friends and neighbors who care about these musicians and desire that they—and the film about them—should flourish.

The fact that Sudan now has a small well-trained community of filmmakers adept with digital media has not sat well with the Sudan Filmmakers Union. Upon the premiere of the Sudan Film Festival, the union published a statement critiquing the organization on the grounds that Afifi lacks a film degree, the Factory filmmakers are not members of the union, and digital films are not true films.[94] The union's reaction echoes the fierce opposition to independent cinema among industry filmmakers in Egypt in the 1990s.

In short, Sudan's nascent independent film movement is finding its shape in a complex milieu characterized not only by poverty and political unrest but also by the tension between the state, and the creaky official organization it supports, and a funder from the outside.

Emergence with Internal Energy and Outside Support 2: The Cinémathèque de Tanger

The Cinémathèque de Tangier began as a work of love among friends: an act of mutual care and bold imagination. When the Cinema Rif, an art deco cinema on the lovely Grand Socco in Tangier, was scheduled for demolition in 2003, Yto Barrada and Bouchra Khalili bought the lease with an idea to make it a cinémathèque. They felt sure that the people of Tangier wanted to go to the movies, see alternative cinema, and, in some cases, learn filmmaking. The Rif was one of many grand old movie theaters that audiences had almost entirely abandoned. In Morocco, commercial cinema from Hollywood, India, and Egypt dominates the movie theaters that remain open, and most viewers stay at home to watch satellite and pirated movies. "Grass-roots nonprofit [organizations] like ours are popping up across the region, because the state has left culture orphaned, and artists are among the people who feel a responsibility there," Barrada says.[95] Funders include the Prince Claus Fund, the Jan Vrijman fund of the documentary festival IDFA, the Amman-based Foundation for the Future (which gets its funding from European countries, Jordan, Turkey, and the United States), and, stylishly, the Fonds de dotation Agnès b.

Khalili and Barrada relate that they founded their archive of the Moroccan cinematic heritage with the humblest of artifacts.[96] They literally pulled the Cinémathèque's programming out of the garbage, going through Super 8mm reels at the Tangier flea market, as Khalili says: "Hence the whole idea that we had to go through the garbage cans, the attics, where a whole part of our history is nesting, a part that remains unknown to us because it was never shown: family films, anonymous archives, including from the colonial period. Putting a collection together also meant piecing our collective family album back together."[97] She points out that since her family did not keep photographs, she looked at the photographs that Gabriel Veyre shot in Morocco in the 1930s to imagine what her grandmother looked like as a child.[98]

The Cinémathèque's programming is breathtakingly varied. A glance at the spring 2013 programming shows features by Yash Chopra, Harmony Korine, Nabil Ayouch, Iranian cinema, classic Hitchcock, Chris Marker, and Elia Kazan; plenty of children's programming; recent North African/diaspora features such as Mocine Besri's *Les mécréants* (2011), Rachid Djaidani's *Rengaine* (2012), and premieres of works by film students in Tétouan. There were also recent Hollywood releases like *Argo* and *Skyfall*, but interestingly there seems to be less demand for these. "We showed Harry Potter and everyone had already seen it on pirate DVD," Barrada said a few years earlier. "So it's funny how the less obviously commercial stuff seems to find its audience."[99]

The Cinémathèque has a popular café with outdoor seating on the Grand Socco. Women feel at ease there. Barrada points out that "social mixing doesn't happen much here. Cafés are mainly for men here, so ours is a shelter, a place of exchange. Lots of projects are born here."[100]

The Cinémathèque has offered occasional workshops in documentary filmmaking for amateurs, called DocMaroc. The resulting brief works are precise and audiovisually sophisticated. Some of these students continue to work in documentary. Saïd Gougaz, who made a sensitive portrait of a shoemaker with DocMaroc in 2007, now makes public interest films, such as the cheerful and beautifully photographed *Caravane Lamhabba* (2009) to document a traveling caravan of artists and health workers who travel among villages in Ouarzazate. Karima Zoubir made the four-minute *Nora* with DocMaroc in 2007, about a troubled girl who found confidence working in a women's weaving cooperative. Five years later Zoubir's 59-minute documentary *Camera/Woman* (2012), about a Moroccan woman who films weddings, was featured at IDFA in Amsterdam, and in 2013 she participated in the Berlinale Talent Campus.

Searching for Friendly Distribution; Aspiring to Get Paid

All over the world, experimental media artists are producing more work at the same time that paying venues are diminishing, and facing the decision of where their work is better placed: in the movie theater or in the gallery. These problems are especially

challenging for those in Arab countries, who struggle to get their work seen and to be paid for it. As Samirah Alkassim noted in 2006 regarding what she calls the Arab avant-garde, "Most of these filmmakers have difficulty showing their work in their countries of origin. One has to be attending a film festival in Rotterdam, a biennale in São Paulo, an art gallery in Paris, or"—and here Alkassim points to a difficulty in distribution that remains an issue—"has to have enough bandwidth to download a compressed video file if the work is stored on the Internet."[101] Since then increasing numbers of festivals and single screenings in Arab cities have made these works somewhat more visible in their own countries, but distribution remains a problem.

For these works that move between theatrical, gallery, online, and, sometimes, television contexts, it's useful to look at four models of dissemination and their relevant structures of remuneration, or lack thereof. Lucas Hilderbrand's useful history of video markets and distribution notes a divide that stems from the early days of video art in the late 1960s. Some artists showed their work in galleries as art commodities for sale; others believed that video, as a reproducible medium, should circulate freely. Three routes developed, all of them still active.[102] One is the model long established in the film world: sales and rentals through nonprofit distributors. Distribution prolongs the life of films screened theatrically. Nonprofit distributors pay decent fees to artists, and often their price lists distinguish between educational, screening, and exhibition rental, and educational and archival purchase.[103] The biggest problem is that, until recently, there were no distributors based in the Arab world. But this is changing. Production companies are increasingly becoming their own distributors: Abbout Productions, founded by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, is a successful example of cinematic friendships that carry through the entire filmmaking process, from preproduction to sales, producing and distributing the works of Ghassan Salhab, Vatche Boulghourjian, Mohammad Malas, and others. MC Distribution, based at Metropolis Cinema in Beirut, carries Lebanese and international independent films for regional distribution as well as promotion and sales for festivals, television, and video on demand (VOD). MC and many other friends of cinema came together in 2012 to form MEDIS, the Network of South Mediterranean Distributors. Some members represent independent production companies, like Annemarie Jacir of Philistine Films in Jordan, Nabil Ayouch of Ali'n Productions in Morocco, Rula Nasser of The Imaginarium in Jordan, Hachemi Zertal of Cirta Films in Algeria, and the venerable Egyptian independent production company Misr International established by Youssef Chahine. NGOs such as Shashat Women Cinema in Ramallah, exhibitors including Metropolis in Beirut, Cimatheque in Cairo, and the beautifully refurbished Le Colisée cinema in Marrakesh, and regional television companies are also represented. And Mohamed Hashem of Docudays is working on an Arab documentary network.[104]

Meanwhile, a number of distributors in the West carry Arab works. Arsenale in Berlin, Heure Exquise! and Lowave in France, Montevideo in Amsterdam, Third World

Newsreel in New York, Video Data Bank in Chicago, and V Tape in Toronto feature experimental works from the Arab world. The most important feature film distributor for challenging works is Arab Film Distribution in Seattle, and there are many others, such as New Yorker Films and First Run/Icarus in New York and Mongrel in Toronto. The rise of niche VOD companies such as MUBI is also giving global audiences more access to some of these hard-to-find films.

For many of the experimental artists and filmmakers to whom this book is devoted, it's a thorny decision whether one's work is better served by theatrical screenings or gallery exhibition. Some, like Sherif El Azma and Gheith Al-Amine, proudly call themselves experimental filmmakers and prefer to show their work in festivals and properly darkened theaters. But others think along the lines of Akram Zaatari, who writes, "The film world has grown too big, and so many filmmakers don't find a place in it, they seek other territories. Let's call it voluntary displacement. Where else other than a museum would you find a possibility to value a 5 minute work, in time and space. … There is a feeling that the museum has become the place for dedicated film thinkers who have no place anymore in the film world."[105]

Thus, many artists prefer or aspire to exhibit their moving-image works in galleries and sell them as limited editions. These sales, in the thousands rather than the hundreds (or tens) of dollars or euros, allow artists to recoup the costs of production and make some profit. The downside to the gallery model is that it is exclusive to a very few artists and makes the work available to small audiences. A very few of them are paid very well for their work, or they also sell visual art objects, such as photographs, and this subsidizes their video practice. Hassan Khan, whose work is represented by Chantal Crousel Gallery in Brussels, writes candidly, "Screening and exhibition contexts either do not pay or pay a symbolic sum. However if the piece is sold as a limited edition (certified and signed by the artist) the price is usually satisfactory. There is not a set standard but the price is vaguely pegged to the market—therefore the way my career develops (as well as the piece's duration, scale, reputation) affects the price of the piece."[106] (Hilderbrand writes that the price is calculated to be three times the production cost.)

Hilderbrand's third category is grassroots distribution: self-distributing, or giving one's work away. Given the lack of distribution, some Arab film- and videomakers make their work available free on online platforms, filtered like UbuWeb, unfiltered like Vimeo and YouTube, or on their own sites. The goal is simply that the work be seen and also that a potential programmer or curator will contact the artist to show it. (In that eventuality, shipping with couriers is exorbitantly expensive, but at this point, many filmmakers can't take advantage of transferring high-quality copies of their works digitally.) Bashir Makhoul argues that distribution on the Internet is a boon to the especially isolated artists in the Occupied Territories.[107] Chapter 13 takes a long look

at the means and consequences of uploading low-resolution files to reach audiences around the world.

Since 2013 it has become easier for artists to make previews available online, sometimes protected with passwords on Vimeo. Uploading video is not easy in places where bandwidth is low and power cuts are frequent. In 2013 the Beirut International Film Festival requested that submissions be mailed in on DVD because the Internet is too slow to watch streaming video.[108] Trouble also arises from the fact that YouTube, which is owned by the anthropophagic Google corporation, claims ownership of videos uploaded on its platform and tracks the behavior of users. Let us also keep in mind that streaming video online consumes massive amounts of bandwidth and energy. Sending a DVD by mail is the greener alternative, and likely will be so until corporations adopt more energy-efficient servers.

Of course activist work, such as that of Abounaddara and Mosireen, circulates on YouTube without expectation of pay.

A fourth model of distribution is through television broadcasting. A number of the films discussed in this book, both fiction and documentary, have been broadcast and even commissioned by TV corporations, such as Arte in France and Al-Arabiya in Dubai, where Mohamed Soueid programs documentaries (earlier he commissioned documentaries for the O3 corporation). In 2013 Al Jazeera initiated the "Free Lens" series that welcomes somewhat less conventional documentary styles.[109]

Organizing films into programs solidifies cinematic friendships by giving individual works company and increasing their visibility. A great example is Arab Shorts, a project coordinated by the Goethe-Institut Cairo. It began as a three-year festival, from 2008 to 2011, with thematic screenings organized by invited Arab programmers. The resulting collections were made available online for a couple of years. Then they were taken down and, in most cases, are now distributed by Arsenale in Berlin. Marcel Schwierin, the project coordinator, confidently states: "The future of short films is on the Internet."[110] The *Arab Shorts* book can be downloaded for free from the Goethe-Institut's website.

Many artists and filmmakers combine all the distribution methods: theatrical distribution, gallery, grassroots, and television. Some, like Zaatari, sell their works through galleries (the Sfeir-Semler Gallery, in Zaatari's case) and also distribute them at reasonable cost through nonprofit distributors. Some deal with the combined dilemma of making their work visible and getting paid for it by combining free and purchased access to their work. Maha Maamoun, for example, exhibits some of her work in low resolution online and sells it in limited editions through her gallery. Some galleries strictly prohibit even educational screenings of artists' videos, as it damages the value of limited editions. I have been able to convince a number of gallery artists to let my university library buy their work, with a watermark stipulating educational use.[111]

The Cautious Friendship of the Archive

The question of educational use leads us to the archive. An archive is the bulwark of national cinematic heritage. Archivists tend to be touchy about giving researchers direct access to their holdings, so there's no guarantee that filmmakers and artists will actually be able to make use of archived materials. It's a ready irony that the majority of early films recording aspects of Arab society are owned not by Arab archives but the archives of the countries that once colonized them. In France, for example, the Centre National de la Cinématographie has 820 French colonial documentaries on nitrate made between 1896 and 1955.[112]

Official film archives in Arab countries will likely eventually be a resource for filmmakers, but this is not the case now. These institutions juggle many mandates. They wrestle with the archivists' dilemma between preservation and exhibition. They work to restore and reopen some of the grand old cinemas long closed; for example, the Cinémathèque Algérienne has been reopening the theaters in its national network, so that Algerians can see Algerian films,[113] reversing the pattern in which Arab art films screen in international festivals but not at home. They locate, acquire, catalogue, preserve, and restore films. They may digitize them in high resolution for preservation, and choose a few to digitize in low resolution for public access. They issue permits for shooting and pester filmmakers to deposit their films.

The Cinémathèque Algérienne, archive activist Léa Morin writes, had a glorious beginning in 1965 after Algeria gained independence from France.[114] Its holdings include the initial collection begun in the 1920s by the (French) Educational Cinema Offices; films donated after independence by the French and Soviet governments; and Arab, African, and Middle Eastern films collected over a long period. The archive of the Centre Cinématographique Marocaine (CCM) includes national feature films, 45 hours of reportage from 1905 to 1957, and 550 hours of French and Moroccan newsreels from 1958 to 2003.[115] They are all catalogued and preserved, with plans for restoration, and ongoing digitization. The CCM has a useful though incomplete online registry of Moroccan filmmakers.

The most sprawling Arab film heritage is that of Egypt, whose holdings as of 2008 included 3,100 fiction films and 3,500 documentaries dating to 1923.[116] Unfortunately, much of this is privately owned, especially since the Saudi satellite behemoth Rotana bought 1,600 negatives of classic Egyptian films—more than 40 percent of Egypt's cinematic heritage—for exclusive broadcast on its Rotana Cinema channel.[117] The staff of the Memory of Modern Egypt repository at the Library of Alexandria, launched in 2008, are working to make available a vast collection of photographs (whose online presence is already very rich), thousands of audio and video recordings, and other materials like news clippings and maps.[118] The curators exhibit the collection in a way that "move[s] away from the easily consumable 'image of Egypt.'"[119] The library's

focus on digitization means that no physical archive is available; users must rely on the computer interface. When I visited the site in May 2014, a few dozen clips were available, from French and Egyptian newsreels and Egyptian (and at least one Kuwaiti) TV shows. Image quality is poor. In the Egyptian context, I must mention the tireless work of the archive activists at Cairobserver, who keep track of Egyptian cultural disasters and advocate for socially responsible archiving.[120]

In Tunisia the Filmothèque Nationale holds over 3,000 films and the Établissement de la Radio et Télévision Tunisienne has 2,500 hours of documentaries and 6,000 hours of news: they need to be inventoried and preserved. The Lebanese National Cinémathèque, created in 1999, holds 2,300 reels but faces all kinds of problems.[121] The Palestinian Ministry of Culture in Gaza has managed to repatriate some of the films made by the Palestine Liberation Organization; they need restoration and archiving.[122]

A filmmaker seeking images of Palestinian life before or after 1948 would probably find useful footage at the Israel Film Archive. Its mission statement is to serve Israeli national interests, but the archive does hold films made prior to 1948, and it requires that all Israeli-funded films, which includes many Palestinian films, be deposited—though, as with any other archive, whether filmmakers actually do deposit their work is another question. The Israel Film Archive has been digitizing some of its collection and making it available on DVD.[123]

What about television archives? As in most other parts of the world, private TV stations archive news and films only for internal use. A 2004 study of archiving practices at the eight Lebanese television stations found great variety in the quality and professionalism of their storage and cataloguing, to the degree that their collections were not marketable. The author of the study, Gladys Saade, urges that a public commercial television archive be created to conserve the national patrimony "by forming a legal deposit system and respecting the authors' rights."[124] At that time, the state TV station, Télé-Liban, was the only one considering creating an online data bank. Subsequently Fondation Liban Cinéma (founded in 2003) has been working to restore, subtitle, and digitally transfer 16mm movies from Télé-Liban's archive.[125]

It's necessary to distinguish between accessible archives and usable archives. Accessibility tends these days to get conflated with digitization and digital distribution. But the current rhetoric that digitization will give everybody free access to moving-image media is untenable in even the wealthiest countries with the most up-to-date infrastructure. An accurate high-resolution digital scan of a film is expensive and requires a lot of storage: 1.5 to 6 terabytes in the case of a 90-minute 35mm film, depending on resolution. In fact, according to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, long-term storage of digital cinema currently costs five to seven times what it would to store the same amount of information on film.[126] Of course, consumer-grade copies are lower resolution and suffer from compression, but they can still be useful.

Most artists and filmmakers seem to prefer to get their hands on moving images by appropriating them from available consumer media—VHS video, DVDs, online videos, and books—legal rights and image quality be damned. Like Barrada and Khalili, some search flea markets for precious cans of film and VHS tapes, as we'll see in chapter 8.

Nongovernmental archives are more accessible to artists. The first of these organizations to spring up is the now-venerable Arab Image Foundation (AIF), founded in 1997. In 2010 the AIF, the Cinémathèque de Tanger, the Association for Arab Music and Archiving, and the Arab Center for Architecture banded together to form the Modern Heritage Observatory. Another member is UMAM Documentation and Research, founded in 2004 by Monika Borgmann and Lokman Slim. UMAM focuses on archiving all kinds of documents of the Lebanese civil war, in light of the government's official neglect of this history, and making them available online in Arabic and English. Located in Harat Hreik, a neighborhood in Beirut's Hezbollah-dominated southern suburbs, UMAM is vulnerable: many of its holdings were destroyed by Israeli bombs in the July War of 2006. UMAM gives artists free access to its holdings.

Organizations that support and program media art are increasingly becoming archives by default on the basis of their extensive but fragile holdings. This circumstance raises controversy because it saddles NGOs largely supported by Western donors with responsibilities that the state should bear. As Salwa Mikdadi notes, although NGOs are more imaginative and flexible than government institutions, they cannot replace them.[127] Nevertheless, the Cinémathèque de Tanger is also transforming its collection into an archive: both it and Ashkal Alwan are members of Modern Heritage Observatory. Institutionalizing a collection as an archive also combats the unethical behavior of some of the scholars and curators who descend on these organizations—for, unfortunately, the people most prone to pirating Arab experimental cinema are the very ones who should be protecting it. In 2011 Christine Tohme of Ashkal Alwan wrote,

> On many occasions people have taken DVDs, even DVDs that we have inscribed with a watermark saying that it's a viewing only copy, and shown them in festivals; other people have documented events in [the biannual festival] Home Works without our permission and presented them as videos in screenings or festivals. … People who engage in this kind of practice clearly lack the ethical conscience towards building a mature cycle of production: the more you pay artists for showing their work in different contexts, the more it supports and encourages productions of new works.
>
> Not only this but it seems some people use the Ashkal Alwan library as a way to quickly and cheaply build their own archive: last year we had a couple of cultural managers or art professors who came to the space and asked for many films—one person asked for around 40 titles because she wanted to screen them for students.[128]

Now, in 2015, Ashkal Alwan is digitizing its collection of fragile DVDs so that visitors can view the works in the collection it has so laboriously amassed but not be tempted to steal them. Beirut DC has a similar policy. The Cinémathèque de Tanger

began digitizing its collection in 2011. Beirut Art Center for several years has made its extensive archive of Lebanese and Arab media art available for viewing through a central computer. A problem I noticed on a visit in 2012 is that the system needs to be restarted when one of the frequent power cuts occurs.

The case studies in this chapter have begun to answer the questions with which I began. Creative individuation begins at home but almost always requires support from outside. We can analyze arts organizations in terms of the healthy milieu they foster for creative individuation. Organizations that are shaped from the top down or the outside in, whether by state, commercial, or neoimperial forces, tend to lack the complexity that comes from grassroots initiatives. On the other hand, too much chaos destroys a delicate creative ecosystem. Somewhere in between are artistic milieus that are metastable: evolving in response to a flow of internal and external forces. Sometimes cinematic friendships run their course, and that can be just fine. Sometimes they cohere into institutions that, in spirits of friendship, help artists keep on being out of step with themselves.