

THE GHOST AT THE FEAST

Cairo has artists in abundance, but their work is just not being bought and held by local collectors. Kevin Jones talks to Cairo-based non-profit Beirut about the sizable art collection taking up residence in the city from May

'Untitled', 1992, by
Irf Kovanda. Image
courtesy of the
artist and Kadist
Art Foundation



Cairo is famous for a great many things, but a leading contemporary art collection has never been among them. While local artists abound – the likes of Bassim Magdy, Maha Maamoun, Lara Baladi and Hassan Khan all call the Egyptian capital home – this behemoth city has simply not kicked itself into gear in terms of contemporary art infrastructure. A smattering of recently-founded galleries, a few local collectors, and a handful of independent institutions currently strive to carry the contemporary art flame aloft.

Make no mistake: there is art. The mammoth Museum of Modern Egyptian Art is teeming with works by early 20th century pioneers. Yet Egypt's recent cascade of cataclysms has left this ancient land somewhat scarred culturally. The country is in the process of re-sculpting its national cultural identity post-Revolution, and contemporary art has yet to stake out a place in that rethink.

The reality is that no institution, private or public, currently has a permanent contemporary art collection. This means artists' works tend to leave the country, nabbed by institutions and individuals in the Gulf, Europe and further afield in the wider art market. Egypt is left high and dry, having to settle for reproductions of the work of its own artists. As arts ecosystems go, it is not so much fragile as it is lopsided: the Modern art sector bustles, while scant heed is paid to the contemporary.

But if one independent non-profit has its way, all this may be due to change.

A Guest without a Host is a Ghost is the tantalising name of a project undertaken by the enterprising Cairo-based non-profit Beirut, in cooperation with the Kadist Art Foundation, based in Paris and San Francisco. Only a year old and manned by a trio of curators – long-time Cairo fixture Sarah Rifky, Jens Maier-Rothe and Antonia Alampi – Beirut is a veritable engine of initiatives in

(Above) Non-profit art organisation Beirut, based in Cairo
(Right) Ciprian Muresian's 'Untitled (Monks)' from 2011. Courtesy of Kadist Art Foundation



Cairo's Townhouse Gallery, which hosts exhibitions curated from the Kadist Art Foundation's collection

Cairo's contemporary arts landscape. Its pithily stated *raison d'être* is to 'Consider institution building as a curatorial act,' which has placed it at the fulcrum of cross-institutional initiatives that peel away the layers of what arts institutions actually do – and what they can change.

Reacting to the lack of contemporary collections in Egypt, Beirut teamed up with Kadist, a foundation deeply engaged not only in collecting (its 500-piece-strong collection features such names as Francis Alÿs, Walid Raad and Anri Sala) but also in leading artist residencies. In an upending of the classic artist residency, *A Guest without a Host is a Ghost* sees Kadist's art collection go on a nine-month residency to Cairo. Beirut, currently a collection-less entity, will become the temporary host of a collection that responds to the local context and, ultimately, returns to Kadist enhanced and enriched from the experience.

The title itself encapsulates the richness of the project. A re-appropriation of a Marcel Duchamp witticism he once coined for the foil wrappers of sweets distributed at a gallery show, *A Guest without a Host is a Ghost* foregrounds not only lack (of a collection, of collectors, of institutional frameworks) but also the immaterial nature of the visiting collection.

'We chose the title as a reference to the 'ghostly' presence of original artworks from abroad in Egypt,' explains Beirut curator Maier-Rothe, 'where they most often appear as facsimiles or reproductions.' As such, the collection is a sort of absent presence: it is there, but it floats through.

'A COLLECTION CAN BE A TOOL OF EXCHANGE BETWEEN TWO INSTITUTIONS. IT IS SOMETHING TO SHARE'

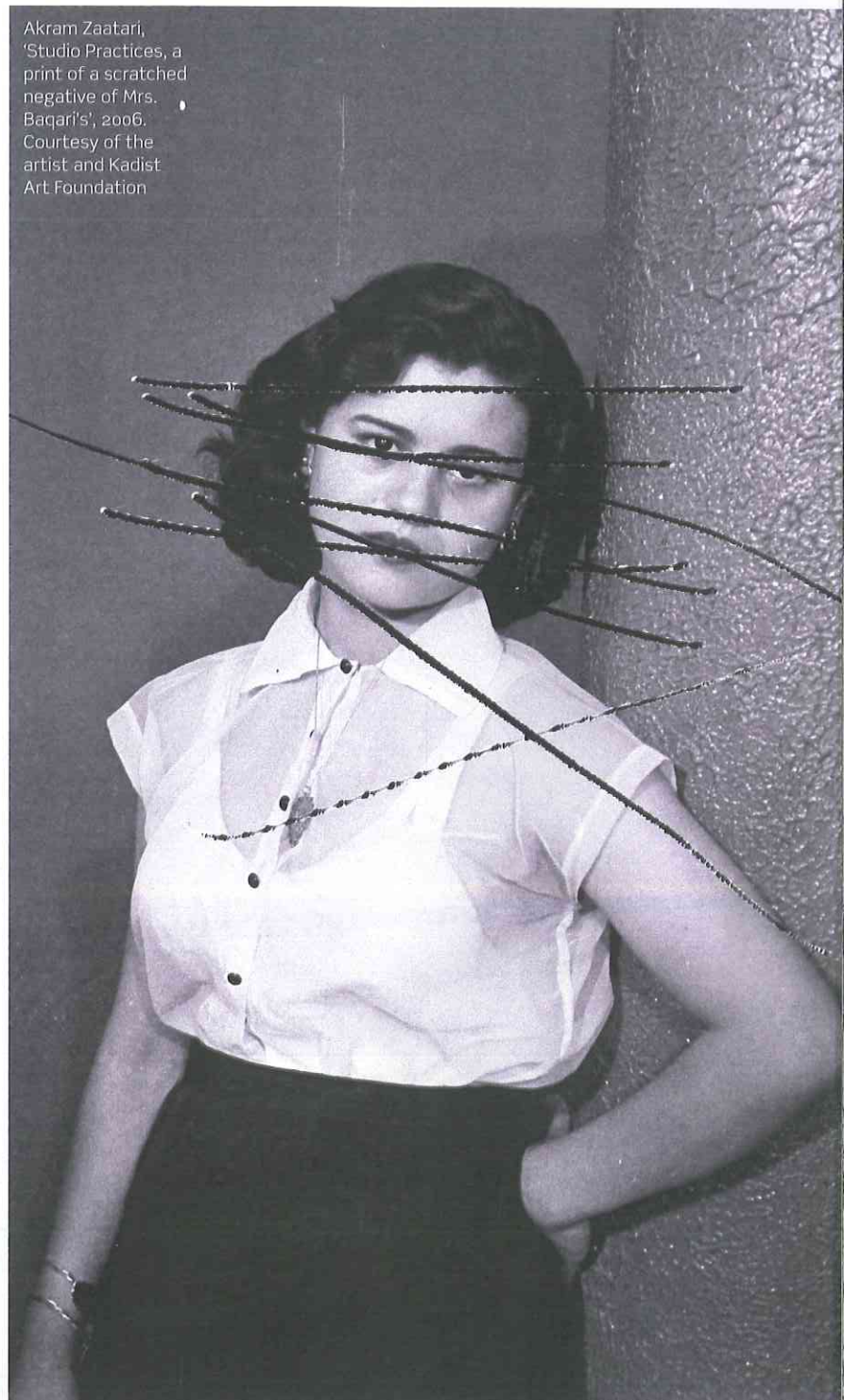


(Above) 'The Nightwatch' by Francis Alys, 2011. Courtesy of Kadist Art Foundation

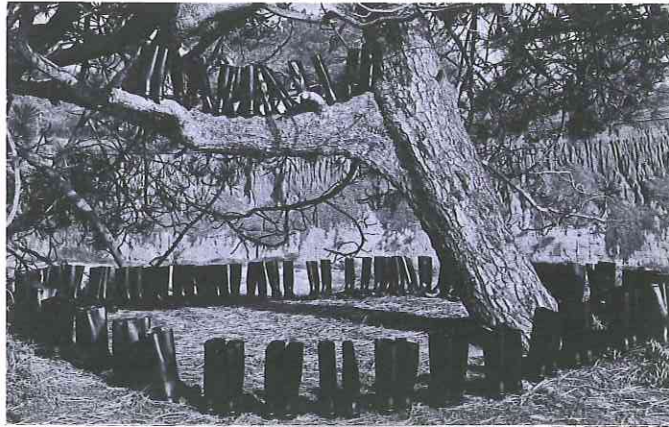
'The collection is completely immaterial,' says Sandra Terdjman, Paris-based co-founder of the Kadist Art Foundation. 'It's very substantial, it represents a lot of money and of course it has a physical presence. But in the end, we don't really see it since it is always in storage. The only thing that's left is a list.' In a virtual twist that would be odd for most curators, Beirut's selection from the Kadist collection was done entirely by pdf.

'A collection can be a tool of exchange between two institutions,' Terdjman explains. 'It is something to share.' Beirut, taking this thought to heart, quickly involved other Cairo non-profits in the project, turning to Townhouse Gallery, the doyenne of independent spaces in Cairo, and the Contemporary Image Collective (CIC), a lens-based media institution founded by a group of artists and photographers in 2004. For the first phase of *A Guest without a Host is a Ghost*, beginning May 6, the collection will take up residence in all three spaces simultaneously, each show honing down the works to a curatorial shape relevant to its specific audience. The Townhouse Gallery will host, among other works, a mini-exhibition by Czech artist Jiri Kovanda, while the CIC will house works by Akram Zaatari and Taysir Bhatniji's *Fathers* series. 'We want this collection to spread,' enthuses Alampi. 'Beirut becomes almost like a collection with a widespread infrastructure.' Programming during this phase includes many talks (Townhouse curator Ania Szremksi hopes to engage the director of the Museum of Modern Egyptian Art in discussion) and screenings at the soon-to-be-opened Cimathèque and the Institut Français d'Egypte.

Akram Zaatari, 'Studio Practices, a print of a scratched negative of Mrs. Baqari's', 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Kadist Art Foundation

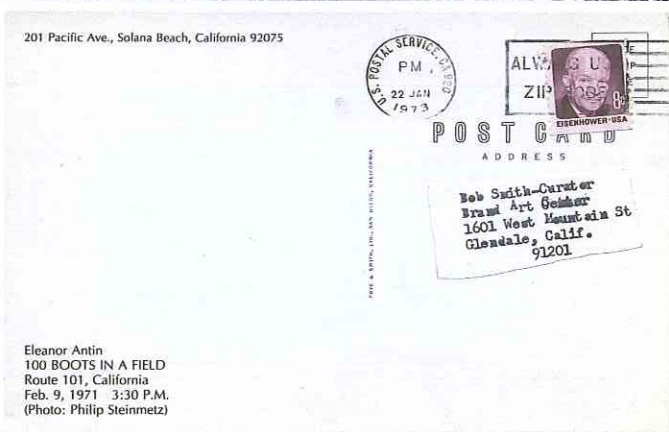


(Right) Eleanor Antin's '100 Boots', 1971-1973. A selection of 10 original postcards. Each postcard is addressed to "Bob Smith, curator". Courtesy of the artist and Kadist Art Foundation



The second phase draws the collection even deeper into the fabric of the city. The works will be lent to schools and universities, at the disposal of students via workshops, but they will also be welcomed by the few private collectors active in the Cairo ecosystem. These collectors, for example, will host specific pieces in their homes in exchange for organising events in response to the work, delving into the specifics of a piece, but also tackling bigger questions about what contemporary art is and what constitutes patronage. 'The idea is to see the works more than once,' explains Alampí. 'They show up over and over again in different display formats within different narratives.'

This is clearly what differentiates *A Guest without a Host is a Ghost* from a run-of-the-mill temporary exhibit that would travel to a city on an international tour. Also, given that a commissioned work from the Cairo sojourn will become a new entry in the collection, a tangible addition is built from this exchange. 'Kadist is an institution that is interested in making works live,' remarks Alampí. They may be ghosts, but these works are part of a concerted, multi-voiced thrust to demarginalise contemporary art in Cairo, which may one day be able to add a robust contemporary art cache to the reasons it is famous.



Eleanor Antin
100 BOOTS IN A FIELD
Route 101, California
Feb. 9, 1971 3:30 P.M.
(Photo: Philip Steinmetz)

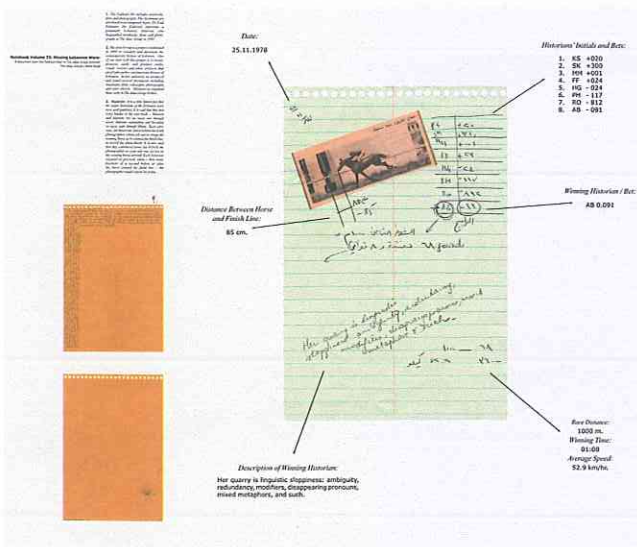
HIGHLIGHTS OF THE KADIST COLLECTION

Francis Alÿs' *The Nightwatch* (2004) documents a fox wandering through London's National Portrait Gallery, an unexpected guest among a collection. *Untitled (Monks)* is Ciprian Muresan's 2011 video of ersatz monks copying artworks and texts from an exhibition catalogue - a direct reference to the alter-egos of artworks that inhabit a collection-less city.

The cornerstone of the Townhouse's vast space will be work by Czech artist Jiri Kovanda, known mainly for his discreet yet intrusive 'actions' since the 1970s. 'I've been having a lot of discussions with local artists I work with about this art of everyday life, this performative practice that happens but no one sees it,' says Ania Szremiski, Townhouse curator. The CIC will feature several outtakes from Akram Zaatari's series of Hashem al Madani's studio portraits in '50s, '60s and '70s Lebanon.



(Top) Work by Eric Baudelaire. (Above) 'Théâtre de poche', 2007, Aurelian Froment. Courtesy of the artists and Kadist Art Foundation



(Above) Walid Raad/ATLAS GROUP 'Missing Lebanese Wars, Linguistic', 1996-2002. Courtesy of the artist and Kadist Art Foundation