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The Creative Kingdom

Economic reform and art as a new space of Islamic critique in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: Whilst the field of contemporary art has been impeded until recently by Saudi Arabia's blasphemy laws and heavy censorship, the last decade has seen a rapid growth of art networks and institutions. Incidents such as the conviction of internationally lauded artist and curator Ashraf Fayadh in 2015 on charges of apostasy show that Islamic authorities still claim to define what is acceptable and not acceptable in the field of cultural production, but several renowned Saudi artists have started to question the hegemony of the Islamic field. This article discusses these processes in the context of radical economic reform led by the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman. Why do state actors see an investment in art and creativity as a necessity for economic renewal? What role does contemporary art play in strategies to rebrand the negative image of Saudi Arabia? How do artists relate to Islamic narratives and material culture to claim authority in Islamic debates and provide legitimacy for their concerns? By focusing on the interactions between economic reform and new spaces of Islamic critique, the paper aims to shed light on the way in which the drive for economic transformation is remapping the social boundaries between Islamic authorities, the creative economy and the state.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Neoliberalism, Monarchism, Contemporary Art, Creative Industries, Islamicate Contemporary Cultures

Zusammenfassung: Machten noch bis vor wenigen Jahren Blasphemiegesetze und massive Zensur seitens islamischer Autoritäten künstlerische Produktion in Saudi-Arabien quasi unmöglich, erlebte Saudi-Arabien in den letzten Jahren einen regelrechten Boom von Institutionen und Netzwerken im Feld der Gegenwartskunst. Während das Apostasieurteil gegen Künstler und Kurator Ashraf Fayadh zeigt, dass islamische Gelehrte immer noch das künstlerische Feld zu regulieren versuchen, stellen immer mehr saudische Künstler*innen die Hegemonie

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des islamischen Feldes in Frage. Auf Basis von Interviews mit Akteur*innen der saudischen Kreativindustrie stellt der Artikel die Entwicklungen in Zusammenhang mit den radikalen neoliberalen Reformprozesse, die durch den saudischen Kronprinzen Mohammed bin Salman angestoßen wurden. Am Beispiel Saudi-Arabien sollen Grenzverschiebungen islamischer Autorität im Kontext ökonomischer Transformation diskutiert und der Frage vom Verhältnis von Religion und Kreativökonomie nachgegangen werden.

Schlagworte: Saudi-Arabien, Neoliberalismus, Monarchismus, Gegenwartskunst, Kreativökonomie, Islamische Gegenwartskulturen

1 Introduction

Poet, artist and curator Ashraf Fayadh[1] was sentenced to death on November 17, 2015 by a Saudi Arabian court on charges of apostasy (McDowall 2015a), after he had been imprisoned for more than 22 months. According to Adam Coogle, Middle East researcher for Human Rights Watch, who had access to the court documents, Fayadh's conviction was based on the testimony of a few prosecution witnesses, who claimed "to have heard him cursing god, the prophet Mohammad, and Saudi Arabia" (McDowall 2015b), as well as on poems he published in 2008, which allegedly "promoted atheism" (Batty 2015). In February 2016, the death sentence was overturned and reduced to a prison term of eight years and 800 lashes. As part of the verdict, Fayadh was also ordered to announce his repentance to public media. Being of Palestinian origin, Saudi Arabia is Fayadh's home country, even though he is officially stateless. Yet the 35-year-old is a central figure in Saudi Arabia's growing contemporary art scene. He is also a key member of *Shatta* and *Edge of Arabia*[2], two art networks which emerged in the early 2000s.

The conviction of Ashraf Fayadh seems to confirm a popular opinion held in global media and art circles: that art production under Saudi Arabia's blasphemy laws and heavy censorship is virtually impossible. But despite horrifying setbacks regarding artistic freedom, networks and institutions for contemporary art in Saudi Arabia are flourishing (Mohammad 2018), as its galleries and artists have

1 As the article focuses on international media debates, personal names and Islamic or geographical terms which are commonly used in English spelling are given here in their anglicized form without diacritical marks. Some terms less commonly used in international media are offered with an additional transcription.

2 For further information see http://edgeofarabia.com/. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

gained international recognition.[3] The national oil and gas giant Aramco, members of the Saudi royal family, or the Abdul Latif Jameel Group have invested heavily in programs fostering contemporary art. With the opening of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture, contemporary art from Saudi Arabia is expected to gain further national recognition.[4] Through the *Edge of Arabia* network, art from Saudi Arabia has already gained massive attention in western media and with art publics. Since the official launch of *Edge of Arabia* in an exhibition advertised as the "new wave of contemporary Saudi art"[5] and showcasing 17 artists from the kingdom at London's Brunei Gallery in 2008, its exhibitions have become magnets for visitors and media. The growing interest in contemporary art in and from Saudi Arabia is part of a broader trend: in the new global centers of the Gulf States, projects such as the Louvre and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi with its starchitecture by Jean Nouvel and Frank Gehry, the Mathaf: Arab Museum for Modern Art in Doha, as well as the Art Dubai or Sharjah's Barjeel and Sharjah Art foundations exemplify these developments.

The seemingly contradictory strands of Islamic censorship and investment in the field of artistic production in Saudi Arabia, by royal and influential economic actors alike, raises questions about the interactions and boundaries between the fields of contemporary art, politics, economy and Islam. How do royal actors and private donors consider their investment in art institutions beneficial? What is the socio-economic background that nurtures these new artistic institutions and practices? Which are the underlying implications in terms of political and economic developments, as well as identity politics? The emergence of a discourse on creative economy, and of the nation as a brand to be merchandised on a global scale to attract foreign investment, has in particular led to a power struggle between neoliberal reformers and Islamic authorities[6]. This article is based on qualitative research interviews I conducted with twelve actors in the creative sphere of Saudi Arabia. First, however, it will demonstrate how the imperative of transforming

3 For example, one of the pieces of Abdulnasser Gharem was sold at the record price of almost 850.000 dollars at Christie's. See https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/installations-video-art/abdulnasser-gharem-messagemessenger-5422852-details.aspx. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

4 For further information see https://www.ithra.com/en/. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

5 See https://www.soas.ac.uk/gallery/edge/. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

6 I use the term Islamic authorities and the Arabic term for scholars, Ulama (*ʿulamāʾ*) as these terms were most commonly used by my interviewees in English and Arabic interviews to describe those institutionalized bodies of Islamic scholarship in Saudi Arabia who advise the king in his decisions and guard public morality, such as the Council of Senior Scholars (*Hayʾat Kibār al-ʿulamāʾ*). Traditionally, Islamic authorities in Saudi Arabia had the right to define what kind of cultural production is acceptable.

Saudi Arabia into a creative economy struck roots as part of the economic policies initiated to create a post-oil Saudi economy.

2 Towards a post-oil Saudi society: neoliberal reforms and the rise of new economies

The rapid decline, since 2014, in the world market price of oil has drastically brought to light the structural problems of Saudi Arabia's economic model. It has become obvious that Saudi Arabia can no longer rely solely on its oil reserves. Consequently, Mohammed bin Salman, the 33-year old crown prince, has felt urged to accelerate the process of economic diversification and has opted for broad reforms in order to quicker transform Saudi Arabia's economy. In his view, oil is no longer the main asset of the country, but has rather become a major reason for its economic lethargy: "We have a case of addiction to oil in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the part of everyone" (bin Salman 2016). The influential global consulting firm McKinsey & Company published a report at the request of Saudi Arabia's government, perceiving the unstable energy market, population growth and low productivity as the main challenges for the country's economic development (Gassan et al. 2015).

However, bin Salman's agenda does not stop at economic reforms, but aims at a larger socio-cultural transformation in order to enhance productivity and innovation, which marks a radical departure from earlier state-society relations (Ghafar 2016). This policy debate on the future of Saudi Arabia ushered in a major developmental plan, *Saudi Vision 2030*, which reveals not only the ideological underpinnings of the discourse on the post-oil economy, but bears witness to the crucial roles social and creative practices play as an object of politico-economical engineering. On a general level, the goal set for 2030 is to reduce Saudi Arabia's dependence on oil sales, which makes the economy vulnerable to volatile oil prices of the world market; to diminish the unemployment rate; to triple the share of non-oil exports; to increase the number of women among the workforce, to diversify the economy through new investments in renewable energies, and to create a setting attractive for foreign investment (The New York Times 2016). However, one of the major challenges for putting this plan into practice stems from the educational background of the young segment of Saudi society – the under-thirty-year-olds make up 70 percent of the entire population (Hubbard 2017). Spoiled by decades of reliable oil revenues, many young people lack the education, the technical skills and the work ethic for private sector jobs. Therefore, to create millions of new jobs for the underqualified youth is one of the major obstacles of the am-

bitious government proposal. The solution put forward is the establishment of an education system which conforms to market necessities: to improve confidence, creativeness and problem-solving skills, even „critical thinking and philosophy" shall be included in the new high school curricula, as Saudi Education Minister Ahmed Al-Issa has disclosed[7].

These fundamental changes in the field of education shall be supplemented by the creation of new industries in the realm of knowledge, creativity, entertainment and tourism. As a first measure, movie theatres, which had been banned since the 1970s, have been allowed to re-open. Furthermore, a new commission on public entertainment was formed, which "is charged with developing entertainment activities to encourage internal tourism". It declares that a "vision of entertainment for Saudi Arabia" shall be developed "as a strong investment tool that will allow the kingdom to reduce its economic reliance on oil by 2030 and foster Saudi artistic capacities" (Al-Hatlani 2016). The latter shall take on an institutional shape in the form of a higher number of museums, cultural venues and libraries.[8] Even the participation of women in sports shall be encouraged. The current reforms and a reshuffling of the cabinet in May 2016, both of which were inspired by the abovementioned report of McKinsey & Company, indicate that the *Saudi Vision 2030* is far from being a paper tiger, but might actually become a blueprint for the transformation of Saudi Arabia's political and Islamic economy (Ghafar 2016). The new urgency of the Saudi government to reshape the economy offers a window of opportunity for national entrepreneurs, designers, and artists who demand that the state shift its attention towards the creative industries and to a culture-oriented governmentality of the nation. Equating the kingdom's challenges with the problems Western societies faced during the post-Fordist economic transformations in the eighties and nineties, a growing number of young Saudi business people regard fostering new urbanism, cultural tourism, consumption of experience, and design as a central measure to spur new economic growth. The Saudi government has been called on to nurture the younger generation's self-culturalisation and creativity and to educate a generation of architects, designers, media entrepreneurs, software developers and artists. The country's emerging creative class is "on its search for a way to bloom" and to open its "creative closets"[9] – but needs an atmosphere where

7 See: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/gulf/2018/12/06/New-curriculums-in-Saudi-schools-to-include-philosophy-critical-thinking-.html and http://www.arabnews.com/node/1430586/saudi-arabia. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

8 The entire mission statement can be found at http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/11. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

9 For the conference statement, see http://eventful.com/jeddah/events/ejadah-confex-saudi-creative-/E0-001-091023592-6@2016042810. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

its potential can flourish. For the Saudi National Creative Initiative, a network and plat- form which has as its goal to "to identify active Saudi creative pioneers at all levels, while pinpointing their potential and the obstacles they face" and organizes workshops, consultations, and mentoring, the creative industries contribute "to the achievement of the Saudi national strategy for development".[10] While artists played almost no role in the kingdom's political and social agenda in the last decades, producing and consuming art is now regarded as a beneficial component necessary to achieve the Saudi National Strategic Vision 2030 by representatives of its creative economy.

The proposed changes in cultural policies and in the education system seem to be subservient to the higher goal of the plan: to create jobs for the future, to enlarge the private sector, to attract foreign investment, and to establish a dynamic knowledge- and creativity-based economy. But entertainment and artistic pleasures are also portrayed as indispensable components of a healthy society and seen to be instrumental for the consolidation of a middle-class society with global consumerist attitudes:

> "We consider culture and entertainment indispensable to our quality of life. We are well aware that the cultural and entertainment opportunities currently available do not reflect the rising aspirations of our citizens and residents, nor are they in harmony with our prosperous economy."[11]

2.1 "A good Muslim has to think outside the box": Islam and the Saudi creative economy

In October 2017, plans for NEOM were unveiled, a futuristic new city situated next to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba, with an economy based, on the one hand, on tourism, leisure and entertainment and, on the other hand, on the future-oriented sectors of bio- and nanotechnology as well as artificial intelligence.[12] The project has been promoted by the crown prince as a "civilizational leap for humanity". While promoting the idea of the new city, Prince Mohammed bin Salman vowed to bring back "moderate Islam" (Saudigazette 2017) and transform the kingdom through technology, knowledge, and reforms focusing on the influence of Islamic authorities in the country. Landmark rulings in this context were the decision to end bans for women on obtaining driving licenses or entering sport

10 http://www.creativedialogue.net/programs/snci/.

11 See http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/57/. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

12 The project description is available at https://www.neom.com. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

stadiums, new guidelines to curtail the powers of the Islamic police (*muṭawwiʿūn),* and to establish a new authority to monitor uses of the *Hadith*. Saudi Arabia is often described as a theocratic state. Alongside tribal allegiance, the royal family has for decades relied on Wahhabi interpretations of Islam to legitimize their rule and to mold a distinct Saudi national identity. While the relationship between the ruling family and Wahhabi clerics, often described as symbiotic, has for decades been criticized by economic reformers, since the formulation of *Saudi Vision 2030,* the status quo between Islamic authorities and the state has been questioned also by state actors. In a mission statement to the reform program, the reforms are legitimized in an Islamic way:

> "Islam and its teachings are our way of life. They are the basis of all our laws, decisions, actions and goals. Following Islam's guidance on the values of hard work, dedication, and excellence, Prophet Mohammed, Peace Be Upon Him, said: 'That Allah loves us to master our work'. Therefore, the principles of Islam will be the driving force for us to realize our Vision. The values of moderation, tolerance, excellence, discipline, equity, and transparency will be the bedrock of our success."[13]

For my research, I conducted twelve qualitative research interviews with actors involved in the field of art and design in Saudi Arabia during art and design events in the UAE, Kuwait and London: entrepreneurs from the field of cultural or creative industries, artists, designers, and software developers, all Saudi citizens who grew up and live in Saudi Arabia and are younger than 35.[14] In many interviews, economic reform and the changes needed in the educational sector and in the leisure, service and creative industries are considered of highest importance. One of the interviewees, a self-described high-ranking advisor to the General Authority of Culture, sees the role of the Islamic clerics not only as damaging to the future of the nation, but also to Islam. In his eyes,

> "Islam was once a power of progress, of science, of creativity. Go to any Museum of Islamic Art and you see what design thinking is all about. The Islamic world brought the brightest minds together, created new fashion or food trends. These guys were bad-ass. They brought Islam to the jungle and to the highest mountains. And they never stopped inventing, going

13 See http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/node/49. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

14 First, parts of the interviews were conducted during my participation in Sharjah Biennial 2015, the Global Art Forum at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Amricani Cultural Centre, Kuwait 2015, Art Dubai 2015, during programs on Modern Arab Art at Whitechapel Gallery London between 2015 and 2016, during Shubbak Festival London 2017, the March Meeting of Sharjah Art Foundation 2017, and Global Art Forum Dubai 2017, followed up with in-depth one-on-one interviews in English and Arabic. The quotes presented in this article were edited and authorized by the interviewees under the reassurance that their anonymity be preserved.

> forward. We have to convince people that Islam has answers for the challenges of the future. The Islamic authorities in Riyadh don't understand that Islam allows change. Islam is about pushing you to go further, not limiting you. We're too busy building mosque after mosque in our neighborhoods. I want us to build a mosque on Mars in 20 years."[15]

Another interviewee, a designer involved in "improving the lives of people in vulnerable situations" through "human-centered problem solving and design thinking", stressed that

> "We people in the Middle East live on the remains of cultures that thought they would exist forever. Babel, Ninive, the Persians, the Romans, they all thought they would be here until the end of time. And if we are not careful, all our five-star hotels will also be ruins in the desert. When Muhammad came, he did something completely new. He was thinking outside the box. He surprised everybody and changed the game. This is what we have to learn from Muhammad. We have to stop being self-gratulatory. A good Muslim has to think outside the box. And art is teaching us just that."

A young female expert writing for the magazine *Entrepreneur Middle East* and working as an advisor to the Saudi General Entertainment Authority[16], whom I had the chance to interview during Dubai Design Week 2016, emphasized how much the academic study of Islam has contributed to her changed views on the role of Islam in Saudi society:

> "You grow up with these clear-cut ideas what Islam is and what Islam isn't. But when you dig deeper and do your research, you realize there's a myriad ways to be a good Muslim. I just read Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam*. He makes it clear that Islam has been adapted to so many cultures and ways of life. It's the most diverse religion of the planet. And we have to celebrate that. Once our houses invited wine-drinking poets and African musicians and Buddhist monks and gay dancers. Islam created so much beauty – which contributed to the spread of our religion. Nowadays, people leave Saudi whenever they can. To enjoy life they're off to Dubai or London or Thailand. How can we convince people of the beauty of Islam, when we don't allow beauty in Islam anymore?"

A female artist teaching pottery classes for girls under the age of twelve stressed that creativity is one of the most important elements of Islam.

> "Islam is based on creative thinking. Look at the concept of ijtihad – you have to use your mind, you have to be ready to answer challenges, to react to the problems of a changing world. So to teach our kids art and creativity, to keep our minds dynamic is a religious duty."

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15 Questions around practicing Islam on Mars were discussed during public events introducing the Mars mission of the UAE Space Agency. For the project, see http://emiratesmarsmission.ae and https://mbrsc.ae/en/page/aboutus. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

16 See https://www.gea.gov.sa/. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

Interviewing a young volunteer working in the field of art education, he explained to me that:

> "Allah gave us oil at the moment when we were about to be wiped out from history. It's a miracle we never really appreciated and used in our favor. With the new crown prince there is a chance to make Saudi a powerhouse in science and the arts. Our people are young and smart. We just have to stop teaching them fear and passivity and teach them to open their minds. His highness has already started to fight the corrupt parts in the ruling classes – the next stop is to fight corruption in the name of Islam."

As mentioned in my interviews, cases such as Ashraf Fayadh's motivate many of the interviewees to navigate very carefully between the permissible and the non-permissible in order to not be seen as blasphemous. The interviews show that there is not only a growing dissatisfaction with the role of the Islamic authorities in the country, but a sense that the actions of the Ulama are misusing Islam and endangering the future of the country. In his essay "Putting Islam out of work", researcher Ahmed Dailami (2018) stresses:

> "The regular denunciation of misused or misplaced religion is interesting in this context not because of its common-sense nature – which, incidentally, provides it with great currency and popular purchase – but because it implies that religion has an appropriate place in the social and political order, however ambiguously. The power and influence of Islam, so the argument goes, is not to be cynically harnessed to unfitting ends. If such a consensus is to be taken seriously, it stands in direct contrast to one of the pillars of political Islamism at its peak 20 years ago: that Islam cannot be bound; that Islam is an entire 'way of life,' a wholesale alternative to secular social and political orders. In essence, religion's boundaries in Arab political life are contracting, even when those boundaries remain vague."

In almost all[17] of my interviews, the hopes are pinned to the "rational", "business-minded" crown prince to distance his rule from the "outlandishly overstretched ambitions of the Ulama", as one interviewee put it. Many mention the system of the rulers of Dubai and Abu Dhabi as a model for the kingdom, because decision-making there is seen as more balanced and based on different fields of expertise: "International economic experts, Islamic authorities, health professionals, artists, scholars on family life and happiness, all have their say in decision-making. There is not one voice dominating the other, all have the ear of the ruler", elaborated a financial advisor from Riyadh. Especially the emirate of Dubai just

17 Ten of my twelve interviewees see the changes proposed by prince Salman as positive for the Saudi creative economy. Some emphasized the structural change in the educational system and new possibilities for the creative economy. Others stressed the effect of the newly-founded art institutions and the growing visibility of artists and creative entrepreneurs in the Saudi public sphere.

launched not only an „Islamic Creative Economy“ competition, but also released a comprehensive report on the importance of the Islamic Culture and Art Economy for the future development of the Emirate.[18]

Ahmed Dailami describes these “new strains of conservative yet secular political rhetoric” as “monarchist” and sees them as a reaction to sectarian violence and the politization of Islam. But criticizing the power of the Ulama does not lead to a request for a more democratic or secular political order. As the reactions of pro-Saudi news outlets and social media to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi have shown, the fact that he had ties to the Muslim Brotherhood is used to legitimize his murder, as he was “instrumentalizing Islam to question our ruler”, as one interviewee put it. While the Ulama is expected by many citizens to safeguard Islam, monitor public morality, and have the last say in fields such as art and entertainment, my interviews demonstrate that at least young creative entrepreneurs and artistic practitioners instead expect the ruler to monitor the boundaries between Islamic authorities and the fields of art, entertainment and the creative industries – and to have the final say on what’s morally acceptable or not – even more so as these fields become producers of economically beneficial forms of Islamic knowledge, which the Islamic authorities cannot provide.

2.2 A new picture of Saudi Arabia to the world: artists as national ambassadors

Art is not only a resource for the creative industries and a recreational good in the post-oil leisure economies. It also offers “territorial marketing by spreading a flattering image” (Dumortier 2014, 172) of a city or nation. In her monograph *Branding the Nation: The Global Business of National Identity*, Melissa Aronczyk (2013) analyzes how governments across the globe since the nineties have conceptualized nationalism in new ways and have reoriented their attention from classical forms of power towards cultural politics (Aronczyk 2013, 11). The future of the nation rests on finding a lucrative role in the globally integrated economic system. In a world “where borders and boundaries appear increasingly obsolete” (Aronczyk 2013, 3) policy-makers have turned to experts in branding and public relations to make their nation matter, by modeling a favorable and distinctive national image for an international public of investors, tourists, and high-skilled

18 See: https://dubaiculture.gov.ae/en/Our-Initiative/Documents/Combine_book_Reference.pdf. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

migrants, and fostering "pride and patriotism within the nation's borders" (Aronczyk 2013, 16). Amid global flows of late modernity, national branding offers young and small nations in particular a technique to strengthen national visibility and legitimacy (Aronczyk 2013, 3). It also delivers stories about how to be a national citizen in a globalized world, "in a vernacular that is easily understood by most segments of society" (Aronczyk 2013, 176). In her book *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf,* Miriam Cooke (2014) argues that national governments in the Gulf States invented a new form of cultural brand – "the tribal modern," which combines aspects of global contemporary culture with elements of imagined tribal traditions. Cultural institutions, such as the museums in smaller Gulf States, serve to generate national cohesion and popularize state-led narratives – through use of identarian labels such as "Arab", "Saudi," "Qatari" (Ghanem 2011), or "Islamic", which are all applied also to the field of contemporary art.[19] In the preface of the coffee-table book *Contemporary Kingdom*, published in 2014 in cooperation with the Saudi Art Council to introduce the work of Saudi artists, galleries, foundations, and patrons to the global art public, Princess Jawaher bint Majed Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud writes:

> "[...] I have always had faith that the creative spirit in Saudi-Arabia is alive, and even if muted by circumstance, was striving hard to be heard. The challenges we faced do not stem from any deficit in the creative imagination; our people have always flourished artistically. For millennia, Arabia has had a vibrant culture deeply influenced by language and religion. [...]
>
> I believe that all we have experienced as a nation has strengthened us, adding the complexity needed to transform our personal aesthetic into a universal voice which belongs on the world's stage" (Bint Majed bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud 2014, 6–7).

Her statement emphasizes that artists are seen as expressing more than their individual creative imagination – they represent the creative energy of the nation. As part of the National Transformation Program (NTP)[20], the Saudi culture and information minister Adel Al-Turaifi wants to use arts proactively "to counter negative stereotypes of the kingdom" (The National 2016) and to offer a "new picture of Saudi Arabia to the world", as the media have reported (The Express Tribune 2016). Exhibitions of contemporary Saudi art at the British Museum, the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, or at the United Nations Headquarters in New York (Bregman 2016) were all sponsored by influential private,

19 This can be seen as part of a larger trend: the expansion of the global contemporary art system has given rise to regional networks of institutions, curators and artists, who use national identity markers to label and promote art to certain audiences (Belting and Buddensieg 2013).

20 See http://vision2030.gov.sa/en/ntp. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

royal, and state actors. But acts of censorship, especially human rights violations, such as in the case of Ashraf Fayadh, have put the whole endeavor into question. The influence of Islamic authorities, government crackdowns on human rights, and Islamic censorship in the art sector are seen by many not only as limiting the creativity of the nation's youth, but are also considered bad for business and a threat to the kingdom's economic transformation. In an interview I conducted via Skype with a Saudi female artist on the government's recent crackdown of feminist activists, she stressed that the backlash would "cost the country billions. We're playing into the hands of our enemies. All the bright people are leaving the country, which we just no longer can afford. Censorship and human rights abuses are an act of treason on the future of our youth."

A gallery owner and curator involved in educational programs with students and pupils identifies the main problem as the fact that:

> "Oil has made us lazy. Never have Arabs contributed so little to the global economy as today. Our voices are not heard, our faces not seen, our stories not told. We once had the world's best artists, architects and craftsmen. We influenced every culture from Europe to China. And now? We're back in the time of unbelief (Jāhilīyah). We don't believe in god because we don't believe in ourselves. We are wasting our talent and are crushing our youth."

> "Saudi Arabia is now at the crossroads. On the one hand, many people are fascinated with the past and hope to find answers for the future in our heritage. The others see the answers in global capitalism and hyper-consumption. What this country needs now more than ever is a youth rooted in our heritage, but with an open mind to question that heritage, and the creativity to adapt our heritage for the 21st century", a person involved in the 21, 39 program in Jeddah pointed out. "If the Ulama are safeguarding our heritage, then they safeguard the wrong part of our heritage. Hard work, openness to change, creative thinking and making money has always been part of Islam."

The interviews I conducted highlight the role these artists and creative entrepreneurs see for themselves in a changing Saudi Arabia. They question the country's Islamic authorities and the status quo between the Ulama and the state not as secular, rebellious figures but, as one interviewee described, "deeply religious Saudi citizens". As my interviews presented in this article have shown, all interviewees supported their claims for more artistic freedom and less Islamic censorship not only with economic arguments, but substantiated their views by relating to Islamic scholarship or history. Several interviewees framed the country's current economic situation as un-Islamic, and stressed that the idea of artistic Islamic knowledge production is not against Islam, but part of Islamic heritage. By referring to Islamic narratives and material culture to give legitimacy to their concerns, they not only request a lessening of the Ulama's influence in the fields of creative industries, entertainment and arts, in addition they also formulate

Islam-based forms of futurism, challenging Islamic authorities in a broader sense.

2.3 Does art steal away time from prayer?

As already mentioned, voices demanding civil and minority rights have always existed in Saudi Arabia. But while in the past these voices were always marginalized, the pressures of economic reform initiated by the government are now leading to a shift in the power-relations between different social fields and to a valorization of formerly negligible forms of social capital. Nothing exemplifies this rise of artists more than the career of Ahmed Mater, one of the most influential Saudi artists. In November 2017, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman launched the *Misk Art Institute*, a new institution set to "become Saudi Arabia's leading platform for grassroots cultural production, diplomacy and exchange" (Rasooldeen 2017). The Crown Prince himself appointed Mater as head of the new initiative. Born in 1979 and raised in Rijal Alma (Stapleton 2010b), Mater had his first contact with artistic practices through his mother. Herself a calligrapher and painter of traditional houses, she introduced him to different local and Islamic art practices, which she saw as "a way to preserve his culture, his heritage and his religion" (Stapleton 2010b, 19). The family's move from Rijal Alma to the *modern* provincial capital Abha brought Mater to question the values of his upbringing – a starting point for his critical reflection on art and society in Saudi Arabia. At the age of 19, he enrolled as a medical student at the Medical College of Abha. While pursuing his studies, he also started to work in a studio in Al-Meftaha Arts Village, which was under the patronage of Prince Khalid Al-Faisal (Stapleton 2010b, 20). The physical space of the art village and a collaborative spirit between its artists helped him develop his own artistic voice, drawing on his tribal Aseeri identity, his scientific training and Islam. His "double life" as a doctor and an artist pushed him "to explore humanity, in an era of religious, political and cultural turmoil" (Stapleton 2010a, 27). Together with Abdulnasser Gharem and the now-imprisoned Ashraf Fayadh he also founded the artist group *Shatta*, whose first show was a major success – and a scandal at the same time. Mater works in a broad range of mediums, from photography and calligraphy to video, installations and performances, through all of which he explores the shifts in Islam and transformations of Saudi society during his lifetime. In an essay for *ArtAsiaPacific*, he elaborates:

> "The country, and Islam as a whole, is now punctured with factions and sub-factions. Even if you are close to the subject, it is hard to follow. The main thing to bear in mind is that each of these strands is founded on a *human* interpretation of the Holy Qu'ran. There are endless

> possibilities for interpretation of this book, and each is subject to inconsistencies and subjectivities because, as humans, we bring our own experiences to the reading. There is also so much potential for deviation from the origins of Islam within this complex structure, inevitably leading to resentment and enmity between factions and sects, which in turn generate unrest and a landscape of misshapen identities within which I, and my contemporaries, create our work." (Mater 2015)

Mater explores the ambivalent role of Islamic thinking, which dominates Saudi education. Mosques are still the country's main educational institutions, sheikhs, imams and muftis the "foremost teachers" (Mater 2015) of the country's youth, and the Friday prayer the most highly valued educational program. While he stresses the importance of a "homegrown education system" in opposition to the "imported" knowledge economies of the other Gulf States, he observes a lack of a "neutral" educational system that focuses on individual development, and is neither shaped by economic nor religious agendas. Art education in particular could offer such a third space:

> "Although many in Saudi regard art education as a luxury, I see it as a necessity. Learning to create and appreciate conceptual, collective, social and visual representation, interpretation and understanding may be more important than ever to the development of the next generation. Art also has the potential to inform all areas of society. Feeding into every profession and cutting across racial, cultural, social, educational and economic barriers, it can foster true understanding, open thought where fear has no place and, as a result, promote a culture of awareness and acceptance." (Mater 2015)

Mater's comments correspond to a narrative which German cultural sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2014) analyzed in his book *Die Erfindung der Kreativität* – that is, the emergence of creativity as a central dogma of global late capitalism, from the field of "creative industries" and the "experience economy", through ideals of "affective labour" and the "entrepreneurial self" to the rise of "creative cities". Reckwitz explores the normalization of creativity in post-Fordist economic imaginaries "as a generally desirable goal for everyone and in every area". In the process of the normalization of creativity, the artist becomes not only a role model for the creative economy but for society as a whole. Through the new Saudi creative industries and influential actors such as Ahmed Mater, the global narrative around art and creativity gets naturalized for a Saudi setting. Openly criticizing the view of Wahhabi clerics who judge art as *haram*, as "something that steals your time away from prayer", Mater sees art not only as a reflexive tool for innovation and progress, but also as an inherent part of Islamic history and heritage. A landmark exhibition organized by Edge of Arabia in the Saudi city of Jeddah in 2012 typifies the approach of Saudi artists such as Mater in discussing pressing social issues by referring to and referencing Islamic narratives and visuals. Called

"We Need to Talk", the exhibition – which was pre-censored and approved by Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Culture and Information – featured more than 40 works of 22 artists, including 10 women.[21]

One of the exhibition's most discussed works was *Esmi – My Name* by female artist Manal Al-Dowayan (2012). The installation, comprised of giant Islamic prayer beads, was the result of a series of workshops and ventures of connection with women via Facebook. Starting out with the slogan "Do you want to be an object? If not, then teach your children to say your name", Al-Dowayan gave 150 women the possibility to write their full names on large beads made of maple wood. These beads were later threaded together to become room-filling prayer beads – by female Bedouin artisans specialized in these techniques. Referring to the patriarchal male tradition in Saudi Arabia of not mentioning female relatives' names, and in this way erasing them socially, Al-Dowayan not only visually connects the female names with the names of god, whom the prayer beads are traditionally reserved for, she also relates her artistic practice to a Hadith, in which Muhammad mentions the name of his wife. Another art work, *The Stamp (Inshallah)* by Abdulnasser Gharem (2012), criticizes the use of the phrase referenced in the title, which means "god willing" in Arabic, which he asserts leads to a delegation of responsibility from the individual. Above this central phrase in English and Arabic, the artist placed the demand "Have a bit of commitment" – criticizing a lack of motivation and willingness to take responsibility in Saudi society. Despite the fact that the artistic field has long been controlled and censored by the Islamic field (and that it partly still is), an exhibition such as *We Need to Talk* shows the growing confidence of Saudi artists not only to push back against religious censorship, but to intervene directly in the field of Islam by questioning Islamic mores and authorities themselves from an Islamic perspective.

Ahmed Mater's artistic examination of the *Hajj* exemplifies these strategies further. Fascinated by the physical attraction, the "almost magnetic pull" his grandfathers described when approaching the Kaaba, one of his first artistic endeavors was an installation and series of photos that took their stories literally: using two perfectly black magnetic and iron shavings, he recreated the scene of pilgrims being drawn to the Kaaba.[22] The work was later part of the British Museum's much-discussed exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam,* which deliberately blurred the line between the educational and Islam by designing the

21 For further information, see http://edgeofarabia.com/exhibitions/we-need-to-talk-jeddah. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

22 See https://www.ahmedmater.com/magnetism. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

exhibition as a "spiritual" experience[23]. While some early works focus on the emotional quality of the Hajj, Mater's on-going project *Desert of Pharan* opens up a much more critical conversation about the contemporary practice of Hajj. The project documents the rapid change of a city "bristling under the weight of its own dramatic symbolism" (Mater 2016c, 576) in an age of mass pilgrimage. While Mecca has more than a million inhabitants, the Saudi government – with the agreement of the Islamic establishment, as Mater stresses – transforms the old cosmopolitan city with its diverse cultural and Islamic heritage into a global city full of immigrants and businessmen, an expression of a form of capitalism that Mater sees as opportunistic. Ninety-five percent of the city's historic architecture has been demolished. Since 2008, after his first pilgrimage to Mecca since his childhood, Mater has been engaged in a decade-long research and documentary project exploring the mental, physical and spiritual impact these transformations have for the Muslim *Ummah*. For Mater, the transformation of Mecca not only affects architecture and heritage, but also the "spiritual health of the Muslim community" (Mater 2016c, 577). Protecting Mecca and its heritage is a duty in Islam, connected to the Qur'an (Angawi 2016, 592–93). As a doctor and artist, Mater describes his practice of photography as a form of X-ray: it can be used as a 'prognosis' of the condition of a city or society. In the publication *Desert of Pharan* he makes reference to a Hadith: when the people around Mecca start building skyscrapers, that would be a sign of the end of times – a comment which transforms the project from a cultural commentary to an artistic vision with eschatological dimensions (Mater 2016b, 123). In an exhibition of the project as part of Sharjah Biennial 11, Mater laments not only the destruction of public space but also the commodification of Islam's most important mosque. Being near the Kaaba is now a matter of money: a hotel room with a view of the Kaaba can cost up to 3,000 USD a night. Furthermore, the furnishing of the hotel rooms can be seen as blasphemous, as the chairs in the room are not turned towards the window with a view overlooking the Kaaba but instead to the onlooker – if a person would use the chair shown in the photo, he or she would turn his or her back to the sanctuary (Mater 2011–2013). How can the magnetism of the city, explored in his earlier art, the "intimate ritual," survive "against the backdrop of brutal development driven by a late capitalistic machine"? Can the "precious core tenets of Islam" compete with the new world of luxury and mass consumption on offer right next to the Kaaba (Mater 2016a, 207)? While many Western art critics focus on the project as a commentary on globalization, neoliberal capitalism or the destruction of

23 See https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/themes/hajj/modern_art_of_hajj.aspx. Retrieved January 6, 2019.

heritage – all issues *Desert of Pharan* explores –, it is important to take into account that his critique and art practice is Islamically motivated: by openly and directly criticizing the Islamo-industrial complex that has controlled Saudi Arabia during the oil boom – symbolized by the combined Islamic purification and ruthless modernization of Islam's holiest city – Mater takes on the role of the Islamic critic himself, carving out a new role for artists in the country and putting the relations between the fields of Islam and art upside down: Mater is neither the victim of Islamic censorship nor a secular critic of Islam, but an Islamic critic himself.

Another part of the project called *Labors of Faith* looks into the exploitation of Muslim migrant workers and their religious sentiments through Saudi construction companies. Mater denounces the living conditions and wages of these workers, "attracted by the promise not only of work but also the unique, deep honor of working and living in Islam's holiest city", as shameful, a sharp contrast to the "sanctified site of supreme religious experience" (Mater 2016d, 166f.). Ahmed Mater himself describes the project *Desert of Pharan* as "more than art," as a "prayer for Mecca" (Mater 2016c, 580), through the thousands of photographs he took during his years mapping the seismic shifts in Saudi society and their effect on individual Muslim piety. His work experiments with modes of political, social, economic, and Islamic critique, reimagining forms of social engagement. This does not imply that the boundaries between Islam, art, and politics are completely blurred. Anthony Downey rightly observes:

> "For art to maintain its critical powers in relation to politics, it must, somehow paradoxically, adopt a radical position within society and yet refrain from using the often reductive terms of political rhetoric. [...] Although artists often utilize the principles of activism, a clear distinction between art and activism nevertheless remains, inasmuch as the former is not always accompanied by any clear intent or indeed ambition to bring about change." (Downey 2014, 14)

In the same way, art in the neoliberal world resists the complete integration into the post-Fordist accumulation regime; it equally has to refuse a mechanistic subsumption to the political and Islamic. Both enable it to emerge as a crucial practice of critique through which "horizons of possibility for civic imaginations" can emerge. In an interview, Ahmed Mater stresses that instead of "making political art, or art about science or religion, it's important to include everything that surrounds you and not to construct mental partitions in your head" (Hemming 2008).

3 Conclusion: artists as pious citizens

As the article has shown, art practitioners and members of Saudi Arabia's creative class are seeking out a new role in the country's transformation into a post-oil economy. By promoting art as a resource for the creative and knowledge industries as well as the leisure economy, but also as a tool to rebrand Saudi Arabia for international visitors and investors, they are employing their new role as national representatives of Saudi creativity to widen their agency. By taking on the role of the concerned pious Saudi citizen acting in defense of Islam, national heritage, and a Saudi youth that has to be prepared for the challenges of the future, they are exploring a new role for artists and the creative class in Saudi Arabia.

The case of the creative class in Saudi Arabia shows how neoliberal reform is not only affecting the country's economic sphere: it also leads to a renegotiation of the boundaries between Islam, the state and other social fields. While Islamic authorities are seen as problematic figures, keeping the country locked into a rigid, unchanging social system, the country's creative class is offering a perspective on Islam, heritage and art not shaped by conflict but suitable for the ruler's *Saudi Vision 2030*.

While individual journalists, artists, activists and Islamic figures criticizing Prince Salman's policies are still victims of persecution, my interviewees reported that many members of the Saudi creative class see this new strand of neoliberal monarchism as an opportunity. As the article has shown, research contextualizing the shifting boundaries between Islam and other forms of knowledge production in Saudi Arabia has to take into consideration the broader reconfigurations of the political economy. Frameworks of artistic rebellion, liberation, or emancipation do not grasp the power-struggle between the Islamic authorities and the creative class, which has to be understood not only in terms of opposition, but includes strategies of appropriation and accommodation: social conflicts arise not only between Islamic and secular positions, but inside the Islamic field around questions who is in the position to define Islam. Saudi artists are actively seeking a role in the kingdom's economic transformation to gain agency in the renegotiation of the Islamic field. The discourse of economic necessity and rationality is showing itself to be a much more powerful tool for the transformation and fragmentation of Islamic authority in Saudi Arabia than discourses on human rights or individual freedom.

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