

BY KARIM KATTAN

Depending on the people involved and the nature of the situation, the Arab world can mean a lot of different things to different people – often it is shorthand for one specific country, or for a vast geography of loosely related places. More often than not, it doesn't really mean anything at all. “What is the Arab world?” – when asked, this worn-out question mostly foregrounds the overbearing influence that hegemonic powers are exerting to define the myriad cultures and societies as this imaginary region. But here, I'll use the term “Arab world” as if it refers to something that actually exists.

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When you come from that place, it is difficult to not let yourself be taken over by a form of despondency, something like fatigue, exhaustion or just plain old despair. This is not to mean that the countries comprising this imaginary land are doomed or essentially broken, but quite the opposite, in fact. The Arab world is as vibrant as ever and most countries have, especially in the field of culture, a cohort of people, institutions, communities, spaces, that are exciting and unique.

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In an attempt to locate some of this place's supposed shared specificities, myself along with a range of the people that make up these cultural scenes, were invited to come together for four days last summer in Delphi, Greece. The “Accomplices” gathering organized by Mophradat in the prophetic site of Delphi, urged everyone there to ask themselves: “Where is the future?” Instead of framing the question in terms of a conventional “what” the future is, we were to ask ourselves where it is or might be located. Confirming what we all already knew: the future is already *here*, with the good, the bad, the catastrophic and the beautiful, we just have to find it.



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During our time together as we searched for answers, instead we often kept coming back to the same uncertainties: What is the use of what we practice? How do we make sure that what we call culture or art is not limited to a circle of the happy few who have access to mobility, or capital, or foreign languages? How do we burst the proverbial bubble in order to participate, truly, in the present and the future of this so-called world?

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I cannot remember exactly which tarot cards Sarah, an artist and occasional fortune-teller, drew on the last day of our gathering as she tried to read to and for the room. I do remember, however, that each card was like a punchline, a joke, pointing to each of us both our failings and our ideals, the hypocrisies we all live by, and the strengths that we can muster alone and together. The relevance of the tarot cards, obscure and sometimes unclear, grew tantalizing as they revealed a potential narrative, an illustration, of the issues we had been discussing all along, and framed our search for those lands of the future.

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During my talk, also on the last day, I said that I would try to take in the spirit of disaster, that is when a star, an *astrum*, deviates from its trajectory. The Arab world, from all the conversations that I'd heard during the four days, appears to be in constant deviation (stars collide or are unhinged, and are generally absolutely unreliable). I kept thinking about what the word "Arab" and the word "world" could possibly mean to us together. I chose to retain "Arab" (it has its conveniences) and opted to pluralize Arab worlds. I came to no satisfying conclusion, however. Save perhaps, I thought as Sarah drew



the tarot card of the Fool, that we shared a couple of stars and deviations that made us attuned to each other. Insofar as there are “worlds”, they are a shared landscape of “possibles.” The form of our gathering itself, open-ended and vulnerable, sometimes pleasantly chaotic, created a space that felt full of surprises, of hidden worlds to uncover. Everyone participating was careful, sometimes to a fault. This led to enriching conversations and disagreements both during the presentations proper and the in-between moments.

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The rough edges of “Accomplices” came to be the thing I remember the most: The uncertainties and hesitations which were analogous to what we all do in fields ruled completely by unpredictability. I do remember that as Sarah drew the Fool card from her deck, everyone laughed. Indeed, the Fool is a reckless but uplifting character, insufferably naive yet boundlessly optimistic – he just has to be careful not to fall into the abyss that spreads before his feet.

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From these edges, rough or otherwise, emerged worlds, preludes to relationships and to transformations, that are undeniable as even the most jaded of attendees like myself had to acknowledge. I think the most powerful aspect of this experience was that it had us guessing, at every turn, what was going to happen, what sort of conversations would take place on what subjects, and how they would be explored.

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On our first day there, Amal, another of our fellow accomplices, made us all head out to the nearby temple of Athena Pronaia to participate collectively in a small ritual. She asked us to



write our wishes on scraps of paper and burn them. It was not so much about willing these desires to come true, but rather about participating, together, in a community of ideals. This constructed ritual, a sort of playful yet serious affair, reached its conclusion as we burned our papers that evening on a barbecue back at the Annex of the School of Fine Arts, where the four-day meeting was being held. Tellingly enough, as we gathered around the fire, someone commented about the burning wishes, "They smell like fish." Others, standing nearby, discussed the shape of the moon, trying to figure out if Ramadan had come to its end. Alas, our slightly deviated satellite would not yield its shape easily, and we were all left guessing what it was trying to tell us.

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Karim Kattan is a writer who lives between Bethlehem and Paris, where he is completing a PhD in comparative literature.



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