

AFAC

Crossroads' Second Workshop

September, 2012

Venue: Cimatheque-Zero Production

Cairo, Egypt



آفاق AFAC

The Arab Fund For Arts and Culture
الصندوق العربي للثقافة والفنون - آفاق

Introduction

The first Crossroads workshop was held in Beirut (June) and was addressed to the first batch of Crossroads grantees (6 projects), while the selection of the second batch was taking place, totally to 12 Crossroads grantee altogether. From the very beginning, this program was conceived to offer, in addition to financial support, professional help in the shape of workshops where an advisory program would be implemented with the help of a team of advisors from different cinematic and geographical backgrounds. It also seeks to build on the idea of openness and collaboration amongst Arab societies that was brought about by the latest revolutionary movements. Cairo came up as a natural choice for the second workshop which aimed to get the Crossroads grantees together to present their projects, discuss them with the advisors and create a fertile ground for the projects to develop and blossom.

Eight projects took part in Cairo's workshop (September) – the participation of the remaining 4 projects was unnecessary at this point as they were in different stages of development: Ahmad Ghossein's feature film, *Upside Down*, is in the process of finalizing the script; Karima Zoubeir's short film, *The Wall*, was temporarily shelved by the director while she locks her documentary, *Woman with a Camera* (supported by AFAC's Arab Documentary Film Program); Mazen Khaled's *A Very Dangerous Man* finished shooting and is already ahead of all the other projects, while Djemal Fawzy's *Abruption* had to withdraw from the workshop in the last minute due to personal issues.

The participants for the 2nd workshop included 6 documentary projects, 1 feature-length fiction, and 1 experimental, and shared a common ground: the projects are all in latest stages of development and getting ready for production. The selection inspired us to think of introducing new advisors in addition to the core advisory team we had set up since launching the program (Lebanese filmmaker Ghassan Salhab, Moroccan documentary maker Ali Essafi and Tunisian producer Dora Bouchoucha). American cinematographer Kirsten Johnson was invited to join the advisory team to address the directors' questions and concerns regarding the image just before going to shooting. Danish documentary consultant and critic Tue Steen Muller was also invited on board adding great benefit given that the majority of the projects were documentaries and not forgetting his vast experience of film festivals and the opportunities they offer for films at all stages.

With a team of 20 people - 11 grantees, 6 advisors and 3 members of AFAC team - the workshop kicked off in Cairo on September 17th with a welcome dinner where the directors, producers, and advisors of Crossroads got to know each other informally before the next day's formal meetings.

Day 1

We headed to Cimatheque, an ambitious project unique in the Arab region that aims to collect, archive and screen alternative films and to make them available to film professionals. The atmosphere was energized as the place is still under-construction and well suited to the concept of the workshop addressing film works in progress.

A general presentation of each film project took place, allowing the participating grantees, together with their respective producers if present, to get better acquainted with each other's works. Bahia Bencheikh El-Fegoun (Algeria), Fadi Yenitürk (Lebanon), Mohammad Hassan Shawky (Egypt), Mohommad Rachad (Egypt), Rifqy Assaf & Rula Nasser (Jordan), Sarah Ishaq & Mustafa (Yemen), Hazem el-Hamwi (Syria), Philippe Rizk & Jasmina Metwaly (Egypt). Questions were asked, comments made and some visual material shared to help the directors express more clearly their projects within the 15 minute slot given to each. This was followed

by one-on-one meetings with the advisors which lasted through the entire afternoon. Six rooms were set up to host the meetings, spread on 3 floors, including Cimatheque and Zero Production offices. Lunch and coffee breaks allowed for some discussion and interaction to take place among the grantees, but their interests were more directed towards continuing their focused discussions with the advisors who proved to be very generous irrespective of the time limitations of each meeting.

Day 2

The second day was more charged with Kirsten Johnson conducting a 4 hour session on cinematography. She spoke out of her experience as a DOP on many documentaries but also as a director of two films. The visual samples she chose to screen proved very popular among the grantees, stirring them to raise questions. That said, one of the shortcomings of the session was the difficulty of addressing the specific concerns of eight very different projects, including a feature and a short experimental. Nevertheless, Kirsten's vibrant presence and her ability to connect with the filmmakers turned the session into an interesting discussion about the visual language and the solutions for some of the common concerns related to documentary shooting such as continuity, talking heads, archives and others.

The afternoon was again dedicated to one-on-one meetings which proved to be the most influential on the level of communication according to both the grantees and the advisors. Time was always too short and the filmmakers craved more discussions.

The second day was summed up with the screening of Ghassan Salhab's documentary, 1958. Although improvised, the screening proved to be important as it gave the grantees the chance to connect with the advisors' works. Salhab's film provided an insight into some of the shared topics among the grantees, mainly how to make a film that is very personal also fall into the socio-political context of its place, or how to tell your story while navigating this thin line between the personal and the public.

Day 3

Approaching the last day, the schedule was the most intense. Tue Steen Muller presented a case study by screening an amazing documentary entitled The Argentinean Lesson. The choice was very peculiar as the film hit on most of the major elements addressed by Crossroads projects. The documentary was very personal, merging the lines between documentary and narrative, incredibly aesthetic, meditative, and very human. "It was a documentary about life," said most grantees when Tue later asked them what they thought of the film. Tue succeeded in integrating the filmmakers into the process of dissecting the film, sometimes shot by shot and sequence by sequence. He shed light on the hidden craft of narration, storytelling, such as holding back on details, revealing emotions, and the continuous use of visual language to transfer feelings, facts, and observations. In response to Tues's emotional exercise, additional one-on-one meetings were held upon request by advisors or grantees.

The afternoon was loaded with two main events: Ibrahim El Batout's film screening and post-screening discussion and a panel on Arabic film screening and distribution in the Arab world.

El Batout's second feature, *Hawi*, was very suitable to the nature of the workshop and the program. He is a filmmaker who insisted on making "his" film in his own way, regardless of any obligations or protocol. The film is based on improvisation, working with non-professional actors and crews following only very loosely a rough written script. El Batout presents a very different kind of film. Regardless of whether his film is appealing or not, the discussion with El Batout was certainly electrifying. His free vision of cinema as an

ongoing work in progress where the process matters more than the end result was uplifting to the emerging directors of Crossroads. Grantees are so often battling with contradictory ideas about filmmaking and cinema, finding funding and engaging audience that it was refreshing to deal with a purist, a filmmaker driven by the artistic process itself. In addition to that, El Batout also spoke a bit about his new feature, *Winter of Discontent*, which had just world premiered at Venice two weeks earlier.

The panel discussion on film distribution in the Arab world was attended by a number of filmmakers and producers who shared their views and visions on this hot topic. For AFAC, this was the natural discussion as distribution of Arab films inside the Arab world is one of its top priorities. After seven years of supporting the development, production and post-production of some 115 independent Arab film projects, AFAC is focusing on the distribution challenge and leading the way in research and designing support. The two-hour discussion was barely enough to cover the existing viewpoints, yet it showed the great deal of interest in the subject and a real desire to go a step further with an action plan. The main distinction was made between “screening” and “distributing” films. The first is a process of defining a way to screen films, for example through festivals, cine-clubs, special presentations, etc. The latter calls for a business plan, a distributor, a calculation of expenditures and profits. While many were not hopeful about Arab films reeling in the money that would be needed to cover production costs, they still believed in the possibility of playing the market’s game and finding a niche. They stressed the importance of promotion, word of mouth and the support of national televisions in addition to the need for funds designated for distribution.

This brought on a twist in the discussion: Do we even have film distributors in the Arab region? Do we have enough theaters? Can an independent film compete with big mainstream productions? Some speculations were more optimistic than others, calling for a full-fledged plan to attract viewers especially those with no or pre-conceived ideas about independent or “festival” films.

At the other end of the spectrum was a group of film professionals calling for alternative ways of distribution. Could a network of independent theaters in the Arab world be created allowing films to circulate and get screened at the same time? Online platforms were touched upon in the discussion but seemed farfetched as a solution due to questions of rights and the filmmakers’ concerns about quality of dissemination.

In conclusion, the discussion was an exercise in assessing the challenges of film distribution and a summing up the existing points of view, emphases and potential strategies. A suggestion of a more profound forum for film professionals to discuss the topic was called upon towards the end of the discussion, one where the plans and recommendations can be developed and implemented rather than remaining stuck in the vicious circle of complaining about difficulties and repeating the same ideas.

Conclusion

A feedback session was held on the last day with the advisors and grantees reflecting on the workshop and its activities. The session yielded the following ideas and suggestions:

On Structure

- Extend the workshop more than three days (depending on the number of projects/grantees taking part).
- Keep the duration of the one-on-one sessions for one hour but have the same advisor sit twice with each grantee as after the first many ideas come up.
- A short break between one session and another (mainly for the grantees.)
- A meeting for the advisors after they had met all the grantees once.
- Screening sessions for the grantees where each can show a previous work of his own.
- Grantees pitch their projects to each other.
- Small group meetings with 3 or 4 grantees meeting simultaneously with the advisor.
- Allow for a mini feedback session mid-workshop.

General Ideas

- Make available the previous works of the advisors to the grantees and vice versa.
- Have the grantees read each others' projects ahead of the workshop – or at least make them available.
- Promote the program as a collective project and have the grantees be present in festivals as a group
- Create a poster and a booklet for Crossroads
- Have structured thematic screenings and presentations
- Group discussions moderated by advisors

Suggestions for technical sessions

- On funding resources
- On use of sound
- On producers & production
- On archives
- On marketing - a mini post-production market where we can invite distributors/sales agent/TV editors

