Participations and Interactions: A study of emerging art practices in Saudi Arabia supported by the Saudi Vision 2030

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Abstract

Participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia in the 21st century has become an increasingly important form of art, found in numerous exhibitions and events presented by institutions and artists. Yet little research has been done on the emergence, challenges, and goals of the participatory art practices of artists and art institutions in the Saudi context. Participatory art in Saudi Arabia requires us to create a new critical framework to understand its art historical significance and better understand the phenomenon in a Saudi context (for the viewer and from the standpoint of the artists involved with this approach). A close look at current contemporary art practices shows that there is an ambition to embody an open, if not outright, participatory and interactive experience that encourages public participation. After the initiation of Saudi Vision 2030, Saudi officials noticed that art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia could also be used to foster societal development and to develop stronger international relations of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia globally.

In this context, my research aims to define important fields linked with Saudi Arabian participatory art practices, and closely examine ideas of interactivity and participation. It focuses on the artists' motivations and intentions when presenting these artworks. Ethical issues (both for the institutions and artists) are explored, as well as the position of the institution as the funder for artists and their commissioned work. Questions about the social and cultural factors that condition participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia are addressed, and the different views artists take towards such practices are considered. This will also include a thorough analysis of how the cultural programme Saudi Vision 2030 is affecting the participatory art practices of certain artists and art institutions. Through the examination of these issues, I open up a set of questions that lead to new and original understandings of participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia and critically explore the challenges and goals of key Saudi contemporary artists. To accomplish this task, a qualitative method was applied to examine the role of artists and art institutions. This study has been conducted using a variety of data collection methods, including literature research, visits to exhibitions, and 9 interviews.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.   Research context

Figure 1.1 Manal Aldowayan. Now You See Me Now You Don't, 2020, Accessed 3 May, 2021, *https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/11-now-you-see-me-now-you-don-t/* By photographer Lance Gerber.

Figure 1.2 Zahrah Alghamdi. After Illusion, 2019, accessed 13 May, 2023. https://saudipavilion.org/art/2019-2/. By photographer Italo Rondinella,

In a break form traditional forms of Saudi Art, it is becoming increasingly common for art institutions and exhibitions in Saudi Arabia to encourage active participation, and many galleries are experimenting with and implementing these practices. Manal Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' (2020), exhibited and commissioned by Desert X, AlUla, and Zahrah Alghamdi's installation 'After Illusion' (2019), exhibited in the Saudi Pavilion at the Venice

Biennale, are works that invite spectator participation. In 'Now You See Me Now You Don't', the installed trampolines are invisible until exhibition attendees/participants begin to bounce on them. Similarly, in Alghamdi's work 'After Illusion', the 50,000 handcrafted leather balls vibrate and move when they are animated by the presence of a visitor (these artworks are explained in detail in Chapters 2 and 4, respectively). Following the approach adopted by Aldowayan and Alghamdi, the current study defines participatory practices as various types of art that invite viewers to interact physically with installed objects. It looks at the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia and how these practices are addressed and negotiated by artists and interpreted by art historians, critics, and academics. Such artworks appeared in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century and have gained prominence in the country's contemporary art scene.

A major contributor to this growth in participation was the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 in April 2016 by Prince Mohammed bin Salman. King Salman publicly stressed the significance of art and culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and his support for Saudi artists.[1] The cultural vision for the KSA expressed in Vision 2030 is of "a flourishing of arts and culture across Saudi Arabia that enriches lives, celebrates national identity and builds understanding between people."[2] It is an opportunity to break down the boundaries of and to contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, take on new roles and challenges, and find new audiences for the work. Manal Aldowayan tells us,

> I think it is a general trend now that the museums and institutions, like DesertX, are looking to create new audiences; they are looking at a new kind of art and artist. You don't need to be famous or a classical artist — they are looking for uniqueness, difference, towards being inclusive... I think in general we are going in the right direction and participatory art can be an integral part of inclusion in the art world.[3]

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[1] Sean Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019), 22.
[2] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 5.
[3] Manal Aldowayan, interview by the author, 20 August 2020.

Examples of this new inclusive and participatory approach to art can be found in initiatives developed by art institutions such as the Misk Art Institute, Ithra, and the Ministry of Culture. These institutions have provided funding, support, and resources for artists within Saudi Arabia. This would suggest that artists have become important participants in much larger communities and organisations than those they are traditionally associated with and that this has led to the production of an increased number of participatory artworks.

The artworks considered in this thesis are interactive, participative, collaborative, or a hybrid of these three. The form depends on the extent to which participants can contribute to an artwork's conception, development, and finalisation. There are numerous ways viewers can actively be involved with an artwork. These can include touching an object, entering an environment, clicking on a digital image, or other interactive media features. Yet an interactive installation does not fully exist as an artwork unless it is exhibited and an audience interacts with it.[4] Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds, for example, argue that interaction challenges viewers to become active participants by directly and indirectly influencing them.[5] The former is illustrated when the viewer is encouraged to take action – by touching and moving something, for instance. The indirect influence is more difficult to locate but could be exemplified by a viewer who behaves or thinks in certain ways in response to interacting with an artwork. The diverse installations produced in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century relate to a variety of Western twentieth-century art movements, including conceptual art, performance art, installation art and new media art – which all typically seek to promote discussion, innovate and challenge existing art practices. This is important for Saudi Vision 2030 because such discussion encourages new audiences to become more engaged with contemporary art and its debates and concerns.

2. <u>Research questions and objectives</u>

I ask the following question in this thesis:

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[4] Christiane Paul, *A Companion to Digital Art* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016), 575.

[5] Linda Candy, Ernest Edmonds, and Roy Ascott, *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner* (Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2011), 2.

What are the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory practices in Saudi Arabia, and how are these practices addressed and negotiated by artists and interpreted by art historians, critics, and academics?

I will examine two installations by Aldowayan and Alghamdi, alongside other relevant artworks (discussed in the next chapter). These artworks inspired the research question that this qualitative study sets out to answer. By critically examining the specific practices of Saudi artists, I have created a theoretical and rigorous language to discuss the art currently being produced in the country, whilst also providing additional insight into the role that participation currently plays in the art world cross-culturally. I sought out answers to the following sub-questions:

- How can participatory art practices be defined in a specifically Saudi context?
- What is motivating the current flourishing of a participatory art scene in Saudi Arabia?
- What are the challenges and goals faced by artists who employ participatory practices in Saudi Arabia, and how are they met?
- What forms does participatory art take in Saudi Arabia?
- What has been the impact of Saudi Vision 2030 on art and culture?
- How does the Saudi Vision 2030 relate to the emergence of participatory art in new art institutions in which art is often employed as entertainment?

In examining these research questions, I identify participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia which are at the forefront of emerging forms of audience engagement, participation, and collaboration in art and culture. I explore how participatory art manifests within the specific Saudi context and how it sheds light on the ways artistic practices can be used to prompt debate about the aims of artists in Saudi Arabia and provides insights into how particular communities relate to artworks. This thesis starts by considering how academic research can help to develop innovative ways of interpreting Saudi artworks. The results of the current study will stimulate further investigations in this area on works of art, audience participation, and art's societal impact. In addition, the findings demonstrate how participatory art relates to politics, culture, society, and history. This text will help to develop a more complete appreciation of the participatory practices associated with contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, investigating its historical origins and considering what the future may hold.

The empirical literature sets the scene for this research. The objectives of the research were as follows:

- Articulate the history and present condition of contemporary art practice by Saudi artists relative to the cultural appreciation of participatory practices in philosophical, social, and political settings.
- Extract and present the work of key artists in terms of their principles of operation and their relationships with participants, audiences, and local environments.
- Identify the participatory art practices of key artists and related artists and how they have helped to shape contemporary art in Saudi Arabia.
- Evaluate how participatory practices could precipitate change in both communities and individuals.
- Document participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia through qualitative research.

As this thesis sets about achieving the stated objectives, it prompts further discussion about matters concerning participatory art. The research requires reflection on previous developments to reveal how the current situation came about (see Chapter 3). It is also necessary to anticipate what Saudi Vision 2030 will mean for culture and art in Saudi Arabia. This study features the works of five artists and reflects on how they practice. These artists are Zahra Al-Ghamdi, Manal Aldowayan, Muhannad Shono, Khalid Afif, and Rashid Alshashai. I demonstrate how the art practices of these contemporary artists relate to cultural institutions and the art practices that they promote and embody.

1.3 <u>Research contributions</u>

This research offers the first substantial academic study documenting participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia. As yet, no scholars have explored the development of participatory art practices in the country. The research asks fundamental questions about the relationship between institutions that may support or fund participatory art projects, the artists who create the artworks, and the public who interact with these projects. It reconfigures the expectations of participatory practices and presents new ideas about the purpose and function of this type of work in a Saudi Arabian

context. It invites discussion of how the audience engages with contemporary Saudi art and suggests that it is necessary to reassess the existing theories regarding participatory practice, such those put forward by Claire Bishop and Gustaf Almenberg. It also provides a historical cultural context for Saudi contemporary art to enable a richer understanding of emerging trends.

The research pay particular attention to Saudi artists who focus on participation and engage with formal art organisations, exploring their self-positioning and self-definition relative to participatory art practices. Doing so significantly enhanced my grasp of participatory art across various registers whilst helping me to approach this topic from a broad perspective, rather than perceiving the creation of such works as a passing trend. The research reveals that the government of Saudi Arabia is playing a significant role in the development of art in the country, especially participatory art; those political and cultural factors contributed to the rise of this form of participatory art in Saudi Arabia; and that artists are assuming new roles, taking on new challenges, and reaching new audiences. Through an exploration of ideas and examples of participatory and playful art, this research shows that interactivity becomes meaningful when people share, communicate, and play. The research demonstrates that Saudi society has welcomed these new exhibitions, as is evident from the overwhelming number of people attending events and exhibitions. Saudi Vision 2030 has had a revolutionary impact on many aspects of Saudi society.

1.4 <u>Interactive, participative, collaborative art</u>

1.4.1 History

Up to now, there have been no studies focusing specifically on participatory art in Saudi Arabia. There are books about Saudi contemporary art such as *Edge of Arabia* and online publications such as *Moallaqat* which reference some of the key artworks that I discuss here (e.g. Aldowayan's 'Esmi' and 'Tree of Guardians'). However, they do not specifically address the elements of participation in these artworks. It is vital, therefore, to demonstrate the theoretical relevance of participatory artworks to our wider understanding of art in the KSA *and* relative to the rise of this type of art in the West (particularly from the 1950s onwards). While many articles

and books highlight the importance of the participation of spectators in Western art of the 1960s, this study considers how participation has developed in Saudi Arabia during the twenty-first century. In the first half of the twentieth century, many of the precursors of Dada, Futurism, and Constructivism offered viewers in the West the ability to participate in public events.[6] Spectators often found the expectation that they would participate physically and react in works such as Hugo Ball's Cabaret Voltaire shocking and disorienting.[7] It has been suggested that this early twentieth-century participatory art lies "in the domain of theatre and performance rather than in histories of painting or the ready-made".[8] The innovations in theatre and other types of performance were taken up by visual artists as avant-garde practices that challenged the limitations of more traditional forms of art.

In his book *Notes on Participatory Art,* Gustaf Almenberg argues that the work of Marcel Duchamp, specifically his 'Bicycle Wheel' of 1913, can be seen as the beginning of participatory art.[9] 'Bicycle Wheel' consists of an inverted bicycle wheel mounted on a wooden stool. The work is created from readymade objects found in everyday life to emphasise the subjectivity of our perception of reality. The movable wheel is attached to the static stool to create a non-functional device that invites participation from the audience (although in this work Duchamp was not interested in the creative potential of the spectator).[10] Later, in 1920, Duchamp created a kinetic sculpture, 'Rotary Glass Plates', which also required the spectator's physical activation. The spectator was instructed to turn the device on and stand one metre away from it and observe the image that was produced by the movement of the striped glass plates.[11] Duchamp said that the artwork should be completed by the audience; that the active involvement of the viewer was the last step in the creative process. As he put it, "the spectator…. adds his contribution to the creative act."[12] In this context, the engagement of the audience with an artwork is a fundamental

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[6] Anna Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 4.

[7] Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork*, 4.

[8] Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 41.

[9] Gustaf Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art: Toward a Manifesto Differentiating It from Open Work, Interactive Art and Relational Art* (Central Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2010), 33.

[10] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 36-37.

[11] Filipe Pais, "Experience and Meaning-Making Process in Interactive Arts: The Influence of Play and Aesthetic Distance in Interactive Art Encounters," PhD thesis [University of Porto] 2014, 18.

[12] Marcel Duchamp, *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (Thames and Hudson, 1975), 140.

part of the creative process, in which the audience joins the artist in completing the work. Duchamp's Kinetic Art transformed the spectator into an active element capable of transforming the formal structure of artworks. According to Peter Weibel, Kinetic Art renounced representations of movement for actual movement, and perceptual phenomena became subjects rather than instruments of art, creating perceptual experiences often triggered by the spectator.[13]

In his theorisation of the Situationist International,[14] the French writer Guy Debord explores the reasons why such participation is vital: it is no longer possible for the practice of art to be limited to making objects for the consumption of a passive onlooker. Instead, art must call for action, interact with reality, and take steps to mend the social link.[15] This relates to an earlier debate in the art world. For example, the Russian Constructivist[16] Alexei Gan (1922), argued that the modern world demands a different approach to traditional art-making:

> A time of social expediency has begun. An object of only utilitarian significance will be introduced in a form acceptable to all... Let us tear ourselves away from our speculative activity [i.e. art] and find the way to real work, applying our knowledge and skills to real, live and expedient work… Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat.[17]

Claire Bishop, reflecting on Gan's words, agrees that art needs to be practical and in alignment with the working class, while also inducing solid changes in society and "developing community, networks and sociability".[18] Although Saudi Vision 2030 does not explicitly mention class, it does set out to be a force for what we could call social construction, that is, an

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[13] Margit Rosen et al., *A Little Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961-1973* (Karlsruhe, Germany: ZKM/Centre for Art and Media, 2011), 25.
[14] "The Situationist International was established in 1957 and published twelve issues of a journal, *Internationale Situationniste,* until 1969. Bringing together the Marxist and avant-garde traditions in a critique of the totality of everyday life, the movement developed a project of extraordinary scope and ambition which transcended traditional demarcations between disciplines and at the same time developed an overt commitment to social revolution." Sadie Plant, "The Situationist International: A Case of Spectacular Neglect," *Radical Philosophy,* Volume, 55, 1990: 3.
[15] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 11.
[16] Constructionism rejects bourgeois, individually produced art forms (such as painting), which are based on taste and supplied to patrons, in favour of practices which are integrated into industrial production and created for public display. Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 49.
[17] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 51–52.
[18] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 14.

attempt to "build understanding between people".[19] As we shall see, it is the aim of Vision 2030 to involve all classes of society in Saudi Arabia, as well as to develop international art connections; to ensure that artists working in Saudi Arabia become part of and compete with the international art community. So, these observations by Gan and Bishop are important in this context.

Many art historians are of the opinion that audience participation in the visual arts started with Fluxus, Happenings, and the kinetic art of the 1950s and 1960s.[20] During those decades, there was a surge in participatory and technological art, which was produced by artists such as Nam June Paik, Alison Knowles, Alan Kaprow, and Robert Morris, as well as by the Fluxus movement.[21] 'Magnet TV' (1964) by Nam June Paik, was one of the earliest interactive artworks. It invites viewers to manipulate images on television in real time using powerful magnets.[22] Viewers are also invited into 'Bean Garden' (1976) by Alison Knowles, which consists of a large wooden box that she filled with navy beans; Knowles always uses navy beans in her work. Participants feel the beans between their toes and speak and giggle with other participants. Microphones at the bottom of the container amplify the shuffles. Each movement is audible throughout the exhibition.[23]

Similarly, Alan Kaprow's Happenings in the 1960s involved direct physical participation by audience members, who would take part in and create the work.[24] Artist Robert Morris, one of the founders and theoreticians of minimalism in the early 1960s, stressed the significance of the physical participation of viewers in contemporary sculpture, including viewers' relationships to form, space, and light.[25] Much as Kaprow did at his Happenings, Morris emphasised the importance of the instructions that were given to the participants in his 1971 show at the Tate Gallery. He presented a series of interactive sculptures that examined the relationship between

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[19] Ministry of Culture, *Our Cultural Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,* 2019, 10.

[20] Christiane Paul, *A Companion to Digital Art*, (ed. Christine Paul (John Wiley & Sons, 2016).

[21] Paul, *A Companion to Digital Art,* 4.

[22] Byeongwon Ha, "A Pioneer of Interactive Art: Nam June Paik as Musique Concrète Composing Researcher," (ISEA, 2015).

[23] Sally J Brown, "For Fluxus Artist Alison Knowles, Anything Can Be Art," Hyperallergic, 26 August 2016. https://hyperallergic.com/319150/for-fluxus-artist-alison-knowles-anything-can-be-art/

[24] Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork,* 70.

[25] Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork,* 116.

sculptural space and human physicality. The objects were constructed of beams, blocks, triangles, rollers, spheres and cylinders, all made of industrial materials.[26] He stated," I want to provide a situation where people can become more aware of themselves and their own experience rather than more aware of some version of my experience."[27] These situations depended on chance, time, and the presence of other participants, which together produced an unpredictable outcome or behaviour.[28] As we shall see, this sense of 'playfulness' through interaction, will become very important in the work of the Saudi artists I will discuss later.

I would argue that the second wave of participatory practices in twentieth-century art occurred in the 1990s and was made most visible through the curatorial and critical activities of two important figures in the international art world at that time. In his 1998 collection of essays on *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud sought to highlight the connections between contemporary art and the spectator "participation" theorised in 1960s practices but focused on another aspect of participatory artwork – that it takes as its starting point human relations and their social context, as opposed to autonomous and exclusive art such as painting and sculpture.[29] In addition to playing an active role as curator and director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Bourriaud has encouraged debates about the political potential of participation in contemporary art. Claire Bishop's essay on contemporary participatory practices, 'Introduction/ Viewers as Producers', which was published in her book *Participation: Documents of Contemporary Art*, is a direct response to his position. She argues that practitioners of participatory art hoped that it would prove inspirational by prompting participants to realise that they could determine their own political and social reality.[30] Moreover, removing the hierarchy that distinguished how artists and viewers related to each other was intended to foster collaborative creativity and yield a social model that promoted equality and positivity.[31] Bishop also claimed that the thrust behind participatory art during the 1990s was a combination of community, authorship and activation.[32]

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[26] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Robert Morris* (MIT Press, 2013), 162.

[27] Bryan-Wilson, *Robert Morris*, 161.

[28] Pais, *Experience and Meaning,* 25.

[29] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Nicolas Bourriaud: Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002).

[30] Claire Bishop, *Participation: Documents of Participatory Art* (London: Whitechapel, 2006). 12.

[31] Bishop, *Participation*, 12.

[32] Bishop, *Participation*, 12.

The political potential of participatory art is significant in the Saudi context, especially in relation to Vision 2030 (discussed in Chapter 3).

In parallel with this shift toward 'relational art' in the 1990s, other forms of participatory practices emerged in the developing field of new media. Most recently, the concept of spectator participation has been associated with the exponential rise of user-generated content on the web. Interactive technology allows the spectator to engage with a work of art and make choices by changing the work's structure in consonance with his or her perspective. A pioneer of interactive media art, Myron Krueger, who collaborated in the *Glowflow* project (1969) which was the first exhibition to use the term 'interactive art', explored the idea of a receptive situation, creating work that would interact with the presence of gallery attendees by using controlling devices such as computers.[33] The British computing theorist and artist Roy Ascott examined the importance of participation and interaction between artworks and audiences and believed that interactivity in computer-based forms would have a major enabling effect on the emergence of interactive art.[34] In 1947, Ascott introduced cybernetic art where it became one of the most important manifestations of interactive art. Cybernetic art includes feedback from the object to the viewer, creating an active loop made possible by electronic or digital technologies.[35] Ascott states:

> If the cybernetic spirit constitutes the pre-dominant attitude of the modern era, the computer is the supreme tool that its technology has produced. Used in conjunction with synthetic materials that can be expected to open up paths of radical change and invention in art… the interaction of man and computer in some creative endeavour, involving the heightening of imaginative thought, is to be expected.[36]

Ascott developed an avant-garde theoretical framework of cybernetic vision in the arts that drew on the cybernetic theories of Norbert Wiener, affirming that "interactive art must free itself from

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[33] Katja Kwastek, *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art* (MIT Press, 2013), 8.

[34] Linda Candy and Sam Ferguson, *Interactive Experience in the Digital Age: Evaluating New Art Practice* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2014), 13.

[35] Toby Gifford and Andrew Brown, *Cybernetic Configurations: Characteristics of Interactivity in the Digital Arts* (Queensland Conservatorium Griffith University, 2013), 1.

[36] Randall Packer et al., *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002), 95.

the modernist ideal of the 'perfect object'".[37] This "spirit" of cybernetics guaranteed a reciprocal exchange between artwork and spectator.[38] Also in the 1960s, the artist Edward Ihnatowicz presented his cybernetic artwork 'SAM', which used hydraulics to move its parts in response to sound detected by four microphones that were integrated into its flower-like form. He then created 'The Senster', which used sound and motion sensors to respond to the spectator's actions. This artwork is considered to be one of the most important interactive, computer-based pieces that arose from the cybernetic art movement.[39] In Ihnatowicz's work, the aesthetic appearance of the sculpture was of less importance than how the piece responded to the interacting, performing audience. In my opinion, this is an important shift from the more traditional aesthetic considerations valued in art movements such as minimalism to the almost anti-aesthetic aspects of many examples of post-minimalist art that utilise technology (e.g. Ihnatowicz's 'Sam' and 'The Senster'). Cybernetic art relates to the anti-art aesthetic of Dada and Fluxus and locates the work's aesthetic significance in the interactions it provokes rather than its form.

The accessibility of the personal computer made digital art possible beginning in the 1960s and inspired new types of interactive installations. Artists such as David Rokeby and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer created major artworks that utilised computer technologies to create new art forms that brought together computer technology and new audience experiences. For 'Very Nervous System', 1982–1991, David Rokeby created an interactive sound system that included single light cells and used computer screens that depict graphical representations of sounds associated with participants' movements within the installation.[40] His reflections on this installation were recorded in his 1995 text 'Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media'. In this text, he explained that he considered interactive technology a medium through which we communicate with ourselves: that is, a mirror. For Rokeby, the medium not only reflects us back to ourselves but also alters what it is given, processing and transforming us. He referred to Newton's First Law, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," to suggest that

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[37] Packer et al., *Multimedia*, 96.
[38] Packer et al., *Multimedia*, 96.
[39] Candy, Edmonds and Poltronieri, *Explorations in Art and Technology,* 15.
[40] Ulrik Ekman and David Rokeby, "Transformations of Transforming Mirrors: An Interview with David Rokeby," *Postmodern Culture* 24, no. 2 (2014), https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.2014.0004.

everything is a mirror of sorts, and we discover ourselves in the mirror of the universe.[41] The Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer examined similar ideas in his work 'Body Movies,' 2001, in which the participants make visible a photographic portrait taken on the street in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, that is then projected onto the wall of the Pathé Cinema building.[42] The portraits appear inside projected shadows of the participants that measure 2 to 25 m high, depending on the distance of people from the light sources positioned on the floor. The project was an attempt to "give presence to those who are absent".[43]

Viewing these interactive installations suggests that the type of interaction changes as soon as technology is involved. We can see that there are numerous ways that interactive art advanced as an art form. In utilising new technologies and developing different forms of audience engagement with art, the participant's body becomes enmeshed in social relations through the performance-event. As Roberto Simanowski writes, "Interactive art is considered a shift from facts to events, from offering a message to inaugurating a dialogue".[44] Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook identify interactive art as one of the definitions that falls under the umbrella of new media art, alongside other terms such as 'art and technology, immersive art, multimedia and emerging media'.[45] Both Graham and Cook highlight interactive art's origin in technology and suggest that it is an art form entirely dependent on computer technology. It is true that much interactive art is facilitated by new media technology, and many of the artworks I will discuss can be read in this way. However, it is limiting to see interactive art only in terms of technology. Doing so would negate the existence of non-technological interactive artworks and socially orientated art forms that existed in twentieth-century Western art and are, as we shall see, central to my exploration of the development of participatory art in Saudi Arabia.

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[41] David Rokeby, *Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media* (New York university, 1995), 1. Rokeby's view reminds us of Khalid's Afif's work 'Hear the Sound With Your Eyes' that mirrors/reflects people (see Chapter 2)

[42] Rokeby, *Transforming Mirrors*.

[43] Roberto Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning: Reading Kinetic Poetry, Text Machines, Mapping Art, and Interactive Installations* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 127–28.

[44] Simanowski, *Digital Art and Meaning*, 121.

[45] Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (MIT Press, 2010), 4.

For this research, I am using an expanded interpretation of the term interactive art that includes, for example, works that are activated by touch. According to Erkki Huhtamo, it is "quite possible to conceive complex user-activated interactive artworks that don't require computers at all".[46] Whilst technology may be used to offer innovative ways to experience artworks and promote interaction, it is not the technology itself that is being explored but the artwork–spectator relationship and the social relationships that are highlighted and generated. Much of the discourse surrounding interactive art concerns technological specifics, and such discourse is frequently related to the theories surrounding media art. Those matters are not explored in depth in this thesis because it is not specifically concerned with media studies, and there is no intention to provide a critique of media art. According to Huhtamo:

> Today interactive media is everywhere; its forms have become commonplace. It might be wise to turn attention from the modes and technologies of interaction to the themes and topics they can serve, highlight and criticise.[47]

My research is focused on the social and cultural implications of interactive works.

This thesis sets out to provide insight into the rise of participatory and interactive artworks and the rapidly changing relationship between artwork and spectator in Saudi Arabia by carefully analysing relevant Western art practices in the 1950s and 1960s. That said, it does not attempt to create an East/West binary. Rather, its objective is to contribute to an area of study around shared concerns and important differences within the field of participatory art by creating a theoretical dialogue between different expressions of the phenomena. In this study, I aim to help contextualise and make sense of the phenomena that have emerged in the KSA, paying careful attention to the case studies in their specific cultural context, and applying a thematic methodology. Doing so allows the development of tools that can be used to differentiate between the various types of spectator participation, critically analyse emerging relationships between participants, objects, and artists that result from participatory works of art in Saudi Arabia, and understand cultural specificities of participatory art in Saudi Arabia that have not been examined previously.

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[46] Erkki Huhtamo, "Trouble at the Interface 2.0: On the Identity Crisis of Interactive Art," NeMe, 27 February 2007, https://www.neme.org/texts/trouble-at-the-interface-2.
[47] Huhtamo, "Trouble at the Interface 2.0," 7.

1.4.2 Terminology

Although the lines between interaction, participation, and collaboration in art can be blurred, they all – as critical tools – create situations in which emergent relationships are highlighted (see Chapter 2). To be able to reflect on strategies for, and implications of, participatory artworks in the KSA, it is useful to understand their definitions and I will define here how I am using each term.

In 'Artificial Hells', 2012, and 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents', 2006, in *Artforum* magazine, art historian Claire Bishop made a valuable contribution to the research on participation. In both of these texts, Bishop offers valuable insights into the practices of participatory art and the discourses linked to it. Bishop explains that participatory practices give significant value to what is "invisible", to the "social situation", and to raising consciousness.[48] She tells us that participatory art "connotes the involvement of many people", and is thus a multiple-artistic participatory form, while in contrast, interactivity involves mainly a "one-to-one relationship," namely, an individual interaction between a participant and an artwork.[49] The term 'participatory art' has a much wider meaning than 'interactive art' in the art world. Bishop goes on to say:

> This expanded field of post-studio practices currently goes under a variety of names: socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, interventionist art, participatory art, collaborative art, contextual art and (most recently) social practice. I will be referring to this tendency as 'participatory art', since this connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of 'interactivity').[50]

According to Bishop, it was envisioned that participants in participatory art would be inspired to determine their own political and social reality. Collaborative creation, she argues, dismantled the hierarchy that distinguishes viewers from artists, creating a social model that offers greater

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[48] Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* 6.
[49] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1–2.
[50] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 1.

equality and positivity.[51] The key artworks that are analysed in Chapter 2 demonstrate how the particular form of interaction utilises and reveals different aspects of political and social interactions. Participatory art has broken down the barriers separating consumers from producers by encouraging viewers to become involved and intervene in the production process. Such artworks enable spectators to become actively engaged instead of fulfilling a purely passive role. Both interactive and participatory artworks invite the audience to engage but a notable distinction is that participatory art typically involves members of the public collaborating in the creative processes when producing the work. Whereas interactive artworks invite interaction that will alter the artwork, sometimes involving the use of technology. For my purposes, participatory art can be understood as a form of art that produces an area of critical activity for its audience that involves interaction and treats the audience as an interlocutor and co-creator whose activities bring an artwork to life, regardless of what form the final object becomes. There are various forms that this interaction can take, such as the direct engagement of the audience with the work to alter either its shape or how it behaves, and becoming fundamental to how it is realised. Such artforms invite the audience to actively engage in either creating or experiencing the art.

As I have shown, the terms participatory art, interactive art, and collaboration often appear together and are frequently interchanged, and I draw upon theories relating to all of them as there is significant conceptual overlap. These terms present different important qualities that must be considered in my thesis. That said, I will mostly use the singular term 'participatory art' to include participation, interaction, and collaboration but will make a distinction when any of the other terms are deemed more suitable in a given context.

1.5 <u>Cultural context</u>

For many centuries, Saudi Arabia was inhabited by Bedouins who had to continually adapt their way of life to survive in an inhospitable climate. This history continues to influence Saudi culture. The arid conditions of the desert and the harsh realities of the geography (the 'Empty Quarter' is 2.2 million km^2) dominated life for many centuries. However, Saudi Arabia is also

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[51] Bishop, *Participation*, 12.

home to the two holiest cities in Islam, Mecca and Medina, making the country the birthplace of Islam and the focus of the five daily prayers of all Muslims around the globe.[52]

The united country of Saudi Arabia was only established in 1932. Its name derives from the ruling Al-Saud family. The same year that the country was founded, the first oil discoveries were made, enabling King Abdulaziz to lay the foundations of the modern nation.[53] The wealth afforded by oil revenues facilitated rapid development in technology and education. The latter half of the twentieth century marked the country's transformation from poverty to prosperity.

The historian Nada Shabout has said "Islam remains a vital element in shaping Arab societies. The Islamic heritage still manifests itself in the arts, as it does in culture."[54] Representations of Islamic ideas can be found in Saudi Arabian art. Eiman Elgibreen tried to represent the atmosphere of Islamic faith in 'Does a Face Mask Make a Difference?' (see Chapter 2, figures 2.32, 2.33). We can also find questions and challenges in works by Aldowayan that focus on ritual, repetition, and rhythm in the movement of prayer beads. In Saudi Arabia, religion is very important culturally, so every time artists deal with material relating to Islam, they speak to the heart of viewers. Many of these artists use participation, interactivity, and collaboration as experiential practices. This form of almost ritualistic engagement with religion and art seems particularly suitable to Saudi culture. They bring the body and mind together and activate them simultaneously through acts of contemplation.

Aleksandr Bogdanov viewed culture as "the most powerful weapon for organising collective forces in a class society – class forces".[55] Cultural action implies both a political aim and a deeper understanding of the idea that meanings, symbolic expressions, customs, and languages must be transformed to effect political change.[56] According to Shabout, "culture and nationality play a substantial role in the creation of art. Inherent in the modern creation of status in the need

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[52] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

[53] Amani Hamdan, "Women and Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievements, "*International Education Journal* 6, no. 1 (2005): 42–64.

[54] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics,* 13.

[55] Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 50.

[56] Sharon Todd, "Culturally Reimagining Education: Publicity, Aesthetics and Socially Engaged Art Practice," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50, no. 10 (May 2018): 970–80, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1366901.

to identify unique characteristics of difference. These particular distinctions not only create an identity but, one could argue, add interest."[57] Culture matters for how Saudi Arabia is understood by itself and other countries and thus must be part of any general inquiry into the nature of art. The KSA is currently experiencing a cultural renaissance, although a substantial proportion of the cultural products on offer belong to popular culture and are classified as "entertainment" (see Chapter 4).[58] Art-making, discursive thought, and independent institutions have started to take root within the country's culture and have already begun to produce changes.[59]

1.6 **Research methodology**

This research seeks to gain a better understanding of the latest developments in participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia, paying particular attention to the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory art practices. In addition, it seeks to gain insight on how these practices are addressed and negotiated by artists, and reflected upon by art historians, critics, and academics. To achieve this understanding, I analyse selected practices of contemporary Saudi artists, consider how these practices socially and politically engage audiences, and reveal the challenges that the artists encounter in encouraging such engagement. Consideration is given to how such practices bring about social and political change in Saudi society. This process of change takes place in a communal cultural context, yet such processes are specific to Saudi audiences and communities.

I begin with a close analysis of individual works of art by contemporary Saudi artists to identify the main issues that their works raise (in Chapter 2). In subsequent chapters, I engage in deeper analysis by employing relevant theories and discourses. In doing so, I seek to shed light on the themes of participation and interactivity in a diverse body of contemporary Saudi art. Analysing works of art at the beginning of chapters allows the reader to follow the guiding threads, or main arguments, that organise the rest of the study. This foundation enables me to establish a broader

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[57] Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 146.

[58] The General Authority for Entertainment (GEA) was created on 7 May 2016 by a royal decree in Saudi Arabia. The GEA is responsible for the nation's expanding entertainment sector.

[59] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 163.

context for the subsequent literature review and background information. It is also a useful approach for illustrating key concepts through artwork. Those key concepts, which can be illustrated by specific elements found in art, such as interactivity, embodiment, and play, will be explored in the background and literature review.

This structure facilitates both the analysis of works of art and the integration of different disciplines. In the analysis, art history, cultural studies, visual analysis, and aesthetics can all be integrated. An interdisciplinary approach is particularly illuminating for this topic and broadens the perspective for the subsequent literature review.

In this section, I set out the details of the selected methodological approach and explain the rationale for making that methodological choice. I detail how the necessary data was collected and supported by reasoning, demonstrate why this was appropriate, explain the reasons for avoiding alternative methods, and identify limitations associated with the selected methodology.

To accomplish the aims of this thesis, a qualitative method was applied to examine the role of artists and art institutions in Saudi Arabia as well as identify a deeper understanding of the phenomena. I used a variety of data collection methods, including literature research, case studies, visiting exhibitions, and 9 interviews. Semi-structured interviews were used to spur discussion, and pressing issues identified in them were highlighted in case studies, allowing the artists to use their own words to express their views. I enrich my research design by drawing on grounded theory methods, in which the analysis and development of theories take place after the data collection. This approach was introduced by Glaser & Strauss in 1967 to legitimise qualitative research.[60]

1.6.1 Research philosophy and approach to theory development

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[60] Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies For Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick (U.S.A) and London (U.K.), 1967), 2.

My research draws upon both social constructivism and interpretivism owing to the choice of grounded theory in conjunction with a qualitative methodology.[61] At the heart of participatory art is how the experience of the artwork influences individuals beyond the space of the art, in their everyday life as well as in how they interact with each other when participating in the artwork (explained in Chapter 4). The method allowed to explore the ways in which people make sense of what they experience, and how they work cooperatively to share what they have experienced with the ideas presented.[62]

The philosophical position at the heart of qualitative research is typically interpretivist as it concerns the way in which the social world is experienced, interpreted, constituted, and understood.[63] Each type of qualitative research tackles these aspects differently, with some methods more focused on recording and interpreting experience than others, but all qualitative approaches draw upon at least some of these responses in a multifaceted social context.[64] They offer the capacity to examine and better understand how people attribute meaning to the challenges faced by society; art can be the place where these challenges are expressed.[65]

In terms of approaches, there are two core approaches that can be used to achieve the stated aims for this research topic: the inductive and deductive approach. The inductive approach relies on the observation of specific events to generate broad generalisations.[66] This approach explores the context in which such events were taking place and is most effective when a small sample is selected. In deductive reasoning, propositions proceed from theory to observation and abstract to concrete; in other words, "the deductivist accepts that observation is guided and presupposed by the theory".[67] The deductive approach begins with a theory, develops hypotheses from that theory, and then collects and analyses data to test those hypotheses. However, grounded theory should always be inductive in its approach, which means that the understanding of processes and

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[61] John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009), 8.

[62] Creswell, *Research Design*.

[63] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (SAGE Publication Ltd, 2002), 3.

[64] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (SAGE Publication Ltd, 2002), 3.

[65] Creswell, *Research Design*.

[66] Garima Malhotra, "Strategies in Research," *International Journal of Advance Research and Development.* 2, no. 5 (2017), 172–173.

[67] Malhotra, "Strategies in Research", 173.

phenomena emerges from the underlying data.[68] In the context of my research aim, the inductive approach was applied in the following manner.

1- *Defining important fields linked with Saudi Arabian participatory art practices*. The inductive approach involved examining specific instances of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia. The analysis of these examples revealed common themes, patterns, and characteristics that define Saudi Arabian participatory art, allowing me to develop a comprehensive understanding of it.

2- *Examining ideas of interactivity and participation while focusing on the artists' motivations and intentions*. By using an inductive approach, I examined interactivity and participation in Saudi Arabian participatory art closely. Analysing specific artworks in conjunction with their accompanying interactions and participatory elements allowed me to identify the artists' motivations and intentions. My dual objectives in adopting this approach were to illuminate how Saudi Arabian artists employ interaction and participation as creative strategies and to explore those strategies' impact on the experience of the audience and its interpretation of the artworks. By analysing individual artists' works along with their statements and interviews, I identified some common themes and objectives that inspired their work.

Thus, this research was conducted through an inductive approach, which enabled me to examine specific examples of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia and gain a holistic understanding of them. By examining artworks and their interactivity while also drawing on theories grounded in empirical evidence, the approach helped me generate insights into the artists' motivations and intentions. It is especially appropriate for examining an understudied topic like participatory art practices in a particular cultural setting.

1.6.2 The choice of a qualitative research strategy

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[68] Virpi Timonen, Geraldine Foley, and Catherine Conlon, "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 17, no. 1 (July 2018): 160940691875808, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918758086, 6.

This study adopted the case study method, pairing it with the grounded theory approach to help unpack the phenomenon and develop a framework for explaining the observations within the study's empirical setting. The following sections discuss each approach in detail.

Grounded theory approach

The selected approach for the current study is grounded theory because of its ability to help understand varied and complicated contexts. Strauss and Corbin state that grounded theory "was derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process".[69] Grounded theory (GT) makes it possible to better understand highly complicated behaviour and interactions. This is important given that the current research is concerned with Saudi participatory art. Its novelty, popularity, and abundance of expressive modes require an on-the-ground approach that can pick up on emerging patterns. This theory is a concept- and theory-generating methodology which is capable of working with diverse forms of data.[70] The most common methods of data collection in GT are qualitative interviews, although other methods can also be used.[71] In grounded theory research "the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants" in a study.[72]

Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss in 1967. It adopts an interactionist outlook that is symbolic, and considers the world to be a "product of human participation and negotiation… contributing to the unfolding of social process".[73] It combines a method with a theory, with the method entailing the identification and integration of theories and categories based on the available data and the theory relating to the outcome of that process. The current study utilises the grounded theory method (GTM) whereby social processes are analysed and the empirical truth of reality can be arrived at by interpreting meaning in real-world settings.[74] An

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[69] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 1998), 12.

[70] Barney Glaser and Judith Holton. J. "Remodeling Grounded Theory" (*Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 5, no.2, 2004).

[71] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory," 6.

[72] Creswell, *Research Design*, 13.

[73] Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill Education, Open University Press, 2013), 80.

[74] Haradhan Kumar Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects", (Journal of Economic Development, Environment and People 7, no.1, 2018), 12.

example of this will be given later in this subsection, in the discussion of the annual events Tanween and Noor Riyadh.

Researchers can use the GTM when working with a theoretical orientation obtained from the literature, without going so far as to test hypotheses. Moreover, GT can be used to develop existing theoretical insights, for example, to work with existing literature.[75] The main principle of GT is remaining open to depicting the world as it happens and not overly interpreting data in theoretical calculations. Being aware of existing theories allows for more effective use of the GTM.[76] Those researching GT are advised to ensure that their knowledge of the empirical literature is not allowed to influence this process to avoid the risk that they will artificially direct their data into a priori categorisations in a manner akin to hypothesis testing. Interview guides should have minimal or no structuring and interview questions should be open-ended. Observational protocols can be used to generate data, as long as data are collected flexibly to acquire them as openly as possible.[77]

It is important to recognise that while the selected methodology is very useful, it also has limitations. Grounded theory requires the researcher to invest considerable time and effort in various activities needing to be undertaken at the same time, rather than collecting and analysing the data sequentially as is done when utilising other methods. To promote efficiency, I organised the study by developing a detailed research plan, setting realistic deadlines and describing activities in a systematic order. I was able to allocate time and effort effectively since I had identified and prioritised the key activities and tasks involved in grounded theory research. Additionally, I found it easier to focus on the research process by breaking it down into smaller, manageable steps.

Researchers are required to code and categorise the data they collect, also developing concepts. Those processes will be discussed in the sections that follow (section 1.6.5, the data analysis process).

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[75] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory", 4.
[76] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory", 4–5.
[77] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory", 2.

Case study

The value of case studies to this research lies in their ability to provide detailed insights into a contemporary phenomenon and examine it in a real-world context.[78] Given the paucity of empirical literature concerning art and social change in Saudi Arabia, a case study design was particularly well-suited to the current research. It enabled relevant matters to be identified and evaluated in the real world.

The selected artists for this research approach their work in a range of ways that are informed by their specific surroundings and background. When this became apparent, it was clear that each artist would provide a very distinct case study, irrespective of any shared characteristic they might have. This provided an opportunity to consider interaction and participation in the context of art, and how the case studies of the individual artists could be amalgamated, whilst still acknowledging what makes each practice distinct. The following chapter provides a detailed assessment of the contribution that participatory art has made to the creation of works of art in the Saudi context. In total, seven Saudi-based contemporary artists who have created participatory artworks are examined. The choice of these artists was based on a common thread: each could provide insights into the relationship between artistic practices and audience participation. The artists' works shed light on that relationship because they involve the audience and feature notable shared themes. Little attention has been paid to the role that the art world plays in Saudi Arabia as a setting for artists from diverse backgrounds to come together and create artwork. This study examined that role, however, and selected these artists because their works align with its research objectives.

Because Saudi culture is so distinct, it is necessary to explore the place of contemporary art practice in more general discussions of society and art. I believe that fresh insight can be provided into the practices of contemporary Saudi artists by reflecting on culturally specific participatory practices. This is the stated aim of the current study and the rationale for conducting case studies of five Saudi artists. At present, little is known about their participatory works. This

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[78] Lesley Bartlett and Frances Katherine Vavrus, *Rethinking Case Study Research: A Comparative Approach*. (London: Routledge, 2017), 29.

thesis will provide details of these artists' practices and concerns and identify common themes relating to the different ways in which they work.

By analysing the work of the seven Saudi artists selected for inclusion in the current study, common themes emerge that assist in understanding how audiences interact, experience and participate. Importantly, these are not the only artists concerned with participatory practices in Saudi Arabia; others could have been featured (e.g. Basmah Felemban and Ahmed Angawi). However, the constraints of a thesis meant that the number of artists assessed had to be limited.

In qualitative research, determining the appropriate sample size is less straightforward than in quantitative research. Before qualitative research methods were refined, researchers generally collected data until they reached the saturation point, that is, the point at which no new information was emerging from the research participants. According to scholars such as Tran, Porcher, Tran, and Ravaud, the saturation point is determined by the researcher's judgment and experience.[79] A more scientific approach is taken by Guest, Namey, and Chen; in determining the saturation of data, they address the question of how many interviews are required.[80] According to their research, interviews with six or seven participants are usually sufficient to capture the main themes among a sample population. A similar finding was reached earlier when an empirical study conducted in the 2000s found that new information arises primarily from the first five to six interviewees.[81] In response to these findings, I conducted nine interviews with artists and curators. I believe that with that initial sample size, I reached the saturation point.

1.6.3 Data collection methods adopted for the case studies

The case study approach is central to the current research owing to the need to gain a thorough understanding of the different artworks/artists in a particular context. Robert Yin states that case

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[79] Viet-Thi Tran, Raphael Porcher, Viet-Chi Tran, and Philippe Ravaud. "Predicting Data Saturation in Qualitative Surveys with Mathematical Models from Ecological Research." *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 82 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclinepi.2016.10.001.

[80] Greg Guest, Emily Namey, and Mario Chen. "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research." *PLOS ONE* 15, no. 5 (2020). https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076.

[81] Guest et al., "A Simple Method to Assess and Report Thematic Saturation in Qualitative Research".

studies offer a suitable method when there is a need to conduct an empirical inquiry into a contemporary phenomenon in a real-world setting, particularly if the boundaries between the context and phenomenon are not clearly defined.[82] The current study satisfies Yin's conditions, and the examples it offers will help readers to develop a better appreciation of the factors governing various settings in which participatory art practices occur. I utilise numerous sources, including observations, interviews, audio-visual materials, online material, photographs, and documents.[83]

Documentation

Documentation was obtained for both artists and institutions; the documentation includes articles and books. It should be noted, however, that the case studies do not examine the individual artists but rather their artistic practices and participatory activities. Many of these artists exhibited their works in partnership with institutions, including Edge of Arabia, Misk Art institute, and Ithra. These new institutions have spurred the practice of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, and understanding their critical role in contemporary Saudi art is crucial (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). Art institutions constitute a much newer phenomenon in Saudi Arabia than elsewhere in the world and follow a top-down approach in line with Vision 2030. This approach is an attempt to support the understanding of the art world current in Saudi society and allows the public to engage and make sense of artworks that have already been exhibited by other entities (see Chapter 3).

The participatory practices of Saudi contemporary artists address interrelated questions, but the ways these artists present their art differ greatly. This research argues that what connects their work is a shared desire to engage the public and raise awareness. Thus, their works can be read from a multiplicity of perspectives that intersect with the history of participatory art.

Semi-structured interviews

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[82] Robert Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Sage Publications, 2013), 13.
[83] Mohajan, "Qualitative Research Methodology in Social Sciences and Related Subjects", 12.

Semi-structured interviews encourage a natural dialogue between the interviewee and the interviewer, and this fosters empathy.[84] In response to the answers given, the interviewer can amend their questions and pursue new, unexpected lines of investigation. There is also the possibility of altering the order in which questions are asked or following up on a particular point that the participant raises.[85] Semi-structured interviews are appropriate to the present research because the intention is to focus on certain issues that are raised while affording the participants the chance to explain their opinions and include any additional information that they consider relevant.

Asking open-ended questions during the semi-structured interviews encouraged the participants to talk openly whilst affording them the freedom to discuss topics that they considered important. Mason states that utilising semi-structured interviews provides scope for those taking part to clearly express their opinions, although the researcher must retain the overarching structure of the interview.[86] Semi-structured interviews encourage the participants to offer up information that is original and highly relevant to the research being undertaken. When conducting semi-structured interviews, I followed research protocol by having a prepared checklist of the key matters to discuss through the interview questions. However, I also allowed my discussion with the artists to remain open, allowing other areas of interest to emerge during the interview. Whilst the semi-structured interviews were the main source of data for this research, supplementary data were obtained from a range of sources, including books, articles, and websites. The next section will explain in detail how the interviews were performed during my fieldwork.

- **Research instrument – interview questions**

Formulating the interview questions for this study required the consideration of multiple factors, including the literature reviewed, my research question, and the study's overall objective. Aligning my research goals with these factors assisted me in formulating insightful interview questions that were effective in eliciting the data I sought.

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[84] Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Sage Publication, 2009), 57–58.
[85] Jonathan A. Smith and Mike Osborn, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Sage Publication, 2009), 59.
[86] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 63.

1. Literature Review

A literature review is an essential part of any research study. For this study, I surveyed and analysed recent research in the field. This gave me the knowledge I needed to formulate interview questions. I was also able to determine whether the research literature contains themes, concepts, or gaps that bear on my research question. Thus, I was able to develop my guiding research question by developing more specific questions that aim to build on existing knowledge. The literature review also enabled me to identify areas that may need further exploration.

2. Research Question

My guiding research question serves as the foundation for this study, outlining the contours of my investigation. By carefully analysing my research question into its constituent components and taking relevant factors and variables into account, I was able to determine interview questions that would provide deep insights into my research question.

3. Research Objective

The research objective articulates the overarching goal of this thesis. Thus, this section identifies my expected research outcomes and explains the study's anticipated contributions to knowledge. Each of my interview questions derives from the overarching research goal and is designed to promote a deeper understanding of participatory art practice in Saudi Arabian context. In these interviews, I aimed to gather data that will produce insights relevant to my thesis objective.

I formulated the following questions to guide the interview process:

1. Could you please describe your artworks? In what ways did participants contribute to the work?
2. Why is this type of work important to you (i.e., work that engages the audience through interaction)?
3. What is the value of this type of artistic practice to participants?
4. What is the biggest challenge you face professionally?
5. Do you receive government support or funding from private institutions to create your artwork?

6.   Are you associated with any art institutions? If yes, which ones? Are they state run? For-profit or non-profit organisations? How do you think working with art institutions differs from working independently?

7.   How much influence does international contemporary art have on your practice?

8.   What impact has the Vision 2030 had on Saudi contemporary art in general and on your practice?

9.   In your opinion what still needs to be addressed in terms of engaging new audiences and widening participation in art in Saudi Arabia to fulfil the Vision 2030? Do you think participatory/ interactive art can help facilitate this?

10.   How would you define participatory/ interactive art practice?

This set of interview questions was developed by drawing upon the literature review and considering its research findings in light of my research question and objective. The factors listed above allowed me to construct relevant, focused interview questions that elicited the information I needed to achieve my study's objectives. I also formulated follow-up questions to delve deeper into the participants' responses and explore any emerging themes or unique perspectives that might arise during the interview process.

Conducting the fieldwork

To support my argument in this thesis, I have conducted fieldwork. The fieldwork involved three field trips to Saudi Arabia were aimed at gathering primary research from selected artists and exhibitions using methods such as interviews and exhibition visits. In addition, curators were incorporated into the fieldwork via interviews. The key exhibitions were conducted in Aldahran and Riyadh, and therefore, I arranged field trips to those cities (one trip to Aldahran and two to Riyadh). In October 2019, the first trip was organised to observe the exhibitions at the Tanween festival[87] and gather information from artists, curators, gallery owners, and exhibition organisers. The second field trip, in August and September 2020, was conducted to interview some of the artists outlined in this thesis. I took the third trip to visit the Noor Riyadh festival in March 2021.

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[87] The Tanween Festival of 2019 was showcased with a central theme of "Play," highlighting its significance as a vital element within the realm of creative endeavours (explained in detail in Chapter 4).

Data were extracted through observation, taking photographs, talking to artists, and talking to participants during exhibition visits. The data collected through fieldwork notes, photography, and eliciting artists' perceptions were then analysed through content analysis. By using this methodology, the patterns present in varied forms of qualitative data could be acknowledged and reproduced in a systematic way to address the research questions.[88]

Observing the works displayed in the exhibitions that I visited allowed me to observe while being aware of my role as a researcher. I was able to take field notes, collect documents, and take photographs when permitted; through this process, I obtained the raw data presented in the following chapters. The field notes included specific questions and prompts that I planned to address.[89] I paid particular attention to how the participants interacted with art. Conducting scientific observations and engaging in fieldwork typically requires a systematic approach to ensure accuracy, reliability, and replicability of the findings. In this study, participation was the key concept, and therefore, observations of interactions were key.

Following these trips, I began to reorient my research. Today, Riyadh is becoming a "creative canvas", as stated on the Riyadh Art website.[90] The art scene in Riyadh is booming, although until recently Jeddah was the city in Saudi Arabia best known for artistic production. My field trips to the annual Noor Riyadh and Tanween exhibitions, as well as the existence of events such as Diriyah Jax, the Diriyah Biennale and the annual exhibition held during Misk Art Week, led me to think more about how Riyadh provides certain spaces in ways that are not found elsewhere in Saudi Arabia. Events such as these highlight the city's efforts to cultivate spaces and experiences that encourage contemporary participatory art and engaging the public in artistic endeavours.

The theme of the second Tanween exhibition (2019) was play, which is "a key ingredient in the creative process".[91] This approach enhanced my confidence in dealing with participatory

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[88] Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012), 25.
[89] Creswell, *Research Design,* 181.
[90] "Noor Riyadh," Riyadh Art, 30 October 2022, https://riyadhart.sa/en/noor-riyadh/.
[91] "Tanween over the Years," Ithra, accessed November 12, 2022, https://www.ithra.com/en/special-programs/tanween-tools/tanween/.

artworks in social settings because I was able to enjoy real-world experiences of the artworks in a community setting. The main advantage of this method of research is that it gave me direct access to the culture and practices of artists (see Chapter 4 for further details about Tanween). It was a useful approach for learning first-hand about the behaviour of Saudis who interact with artworks. It helped me to identify and analyse unexpected issues such as those raised by the work of Karina Smigla-Bobinski 'ADA', which invited subversion through play and revealed how national groups could arrive at similar endpoints by different routes (see Chapter 4). For each artwork, I recorded whether the interactions with it were verbal or non-verbal but collaborative for example, an obvious effort to co-ordinate the images or drawings between two or more people (such as in the work of 'ADA' by Karina Smigla-Bobinski and 'Microworld', both discussed in Chapter 4). The gender and ages of the tracked subjects were estimated from sight. All case studies were carried out without questionnaires, because the narrowing of the area of study to interactions between audiences and artworks meant that the relevant information could be gathered by observation alone.

On the second field trip, I conducted interviews with Saudi artists in Saudi Arabia who have influenced contemporary participatory practices. I aimed to gain a better understanding of their perceptions and experiences. Qualitative research methods such as interviews contribute to a deep and rich understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.[92] Semi-structured interviews took place with a total of nine artists and curators participating in notable exhibitions in Saudi Arabia. Initially, it was necessary to identify individuals producing participatory practices in Saudi Arabia and contact them. I contacted a total of twenty-five curators and artists. Then I designed the interviews and conducted interviews with nine of the individuals I had contacted. Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes, during which time the participants engaged in critical discussions on participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia. The interviews were held in July 2020 at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, although I was in Saudi Arabia, it was not possible to meet in person. The interviews were instead conducted via Zoom. Each of the interviews was recorded, transcribed in full, and translated into English.

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[92] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 64.

I made my third field trip to visit the Noor Riyadh in the first year that the festival was held. The "city-wide annual festival of light and art"[93] explores light projections, technological and media art forms, and experiential and multi-sensory activities "to create moments where the viewer can become emotionally connected to the art".[94] Through projections and design interventions, light-based art interrupts daily life and pulls the viewer into a portal of time, fantasy, and architecture. I perceive Noor Riyadh as a platform for framing emerging Saudi artistic practices. According to Sarah Alruwayti, architectural adviser for the Royal Commission for Riyadh City, which organises Noor Riyadh, many of the festival's artworks, as well as the event, are motivated by a desire to encourage public participation. "The festival incorporates a community engagement programme that is curated for both Riyadh's locals as well as for those visiting the Saudi capital for the first time," she says.[95] Talks and discussions are held in the universal language of art to build bridges with the outside world.

1.6.4 Justifications and a summary of the methods used

Justifications for using a qualitative method

There are several reasons why quantitative methods were not applied in the current study. Arguably the most notable is the difficulty of quantifying how people interact with and behave around art. Quantitative methods are ill-suited to controlling and identifying variables and perspectives related to implementation processes or representing them numerically with quantitative methods. Creswell states that quantitative research projects "employ strategies of inquiry such as experimental and surveys, and collect data on predetermined instruments that yield statistical data".[96] In contrast, qualitative research is an effective model that relies on direct experiences of events and makes possible an in-depth understanding of them.[97] When grounded theory is applied, the conclusions will be influenced by the understanding, perspectives, and experiences of those taking part in an event and, therefore, such insight is best provided by

[93] "Noor Riyadh," Riyadh Art, November 9, 2022, https://riyadhart.sa/en/noor-riyadh/.
[94] "Noor Riyadh."
[95] Razmig Bedirian, "Noor Riyadh Lights up Saudi Arabia's Capital with Huge Sculptures and Installations," The National, November 3, 2022, https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art-design/2022/11/03/noor-riyadh-lights-up-saudi-arabias-capital-with-huge-sculptures-and-installations/.
[96] Creswell, *Research Design,* 18.
[97] Creswell, *Research Design,* 18.

applying qualitative methods. Huberman's description of what qualitative methods offer[98] has been adopted to explain the benefits of qualitative methods for my research:

- The ability to identify the different ways that those taking part (the participants) interpret a particular event. My study acknowledged that each artist's interpretation and experience of participatory art was unique. Huberman's use of qualitative methods helped me understand how Saudis interpret participatory art.

- Recognition of how things operate in the real world and how complex certain matters are (e.g. social and cultural factors). Saudi Arabia is often known for its cultural beliefs, and I included that cultural perspective when examining the participatory art practices. To recall Huberman's remarks, a qualitative research method was well-suited to the investigation and helped me understand the role played by cultural factors in participatory art.

- The ability to draw upon the experiences of those taking part – both the artists and the participants. Through qualitative methods, I was able to capture the lived experiences of both artists and participants in participatory art practices. By conducting in-depth interviews and eliciting narratives, I gained extensive insight into participants' experiences, motivations, challenges, and aspirations as well as the processes involved in participatory art. These outcomes enhanced the research's authenticity and credibility.

- The ability to concentrate on interpretations and descriptions by artists and critics. This gave me the opportunity to explore the perspectives and insights of artists and critics with a focus on participatory art. Analysis of their interpretations and descriptions led to a deeper understanding of their unique perspectives and artistic intentions and a better appreciation of the critical assessments of their work. As a result, I have gained a well-rounded understanding of participatory art, including its creative processes, artistic visions, and critical discourse.

- The ability to utilise analytical processes capable of responding to emerging data. Qualitative methods offer flexibility in data collection and analysis, which allowed me to adapt my approach as new insights emerged. Through engagement with participants and data collection, I iteratively refined my research questions and adjusted the analytical

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[98] Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Source Book*, 2nd ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publication, 1994), 10.

procedures. Responding to emerging data enabled me to capture and explore unexpected themes, patterns, and perspectives, which enriched my findings.

• The potential to develop innovative theories and concepts.[99] Participatory art practice is new to Saudi Arabia and therefore, it was important to investigate the practice, initiating conversations and discussions, generating a nascent body of knowledge. With Huberman's qualitative method providing the context, the data and insights from this study were used to develop new theories and explain existing concepts.

Justifications for using grounded theory:

Grounded theory analysis methods were applied to interpret the case study observations. The following benefits of grounded theory justify its use:

• Grounded theory is well-suited for an inductive theory-building approach such as that taken in this thesis. It works particularly well for the observation of emerging phenomena such as participatory art in the Saudi context. Adopting an inductive approach for my research, I closely examined and analysed all observational, documentary, and interview data, allowing the theory to emerge organically from the data. This approach permits the development of a grounded theory that accurately represents the phenomenon under investigation by exposing its unique characteristics, processes, and contextual factors.

• Grounded theory offers adequate scope for acquiring a theoretical understanding of a research topic and, at the same time, supports empirical data. It allows simultaneous reporting on a subject, making it particularly suitable for the present research.

• Grounded theory is well-suited to exploring complex scenarios such as how people behave and interact in the presence of a work of art. It provided me with the opportunity to explore the nuanced aspects of participant experiences, artist intentions, social interactions, and contextual influences. Grounded theory identifies recurring themes, processes, and conceptual frameworks that help explain participatory art practice's complex behaviours and interactions through systematic data analysis.

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[99] Miles and Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 10.

Consequently, I applied grounded theory and obtained data systematically through a combination of case studies and interviews.

Justifications for using the interview method

My ontological position is that people's views, interpretations, understandings, interactions, and experiences are meaningful properties of the social reality that the research questions are intended to discover.[100] Opting to utilise interviews in the research process confers the following benefits:

- The ability to better understand how people behave and react in certain situations. The nuances in Saudi Arabian culture, social norms, and individuals' perspectives can be explored through interviews. Understanding such nuances is critical to developing meaningful and culturally relevant participatory art experiences.

- The collection of rich data for exploring how variables interrelate within participatory art projects. Through interviews, I was able to examine the relationship among various elements, including the participants' background, artistic preferences, cultural identities, and how they engaged with the art project. By analysing these data, I gained a better understanding of the dynamics and relationships within Saudi Arabia's participatory art context, thereby contributing to knowledge.

- The development of insight into the participants' opinions. By interviewing participants, I was able to directly access their opinions, learning about their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives about the art project. Through these insights, the participatory art process can be aligned with the needs, aspirations, and cultural contexts of participants.

- Flexibility, which eases the process of obtaining a better understanding of the scenarios being examined from the perspectives of those taking part. The flexibility of the research process allowed me as a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the specific scenarios, themes, and cultural aspects that are relevant to the art project while also illuminating the participants' perspectives on participatory art projects in Saudi Arabia.

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[100] Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 63.

1.6.5 The data analysis process

Having set out the research methodology, it is necessary to specify how the collected data has been analysed. It is by analysing the data that understanding can be gained regarding the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia, and how these practices are addressed by artists and critics. When analysing qualitative data, it is possible to arrive at innovative theories, concepts, or relationships, thereby making the data meaningful.

Creswell stated that the process of analysing qualitative data is both continual and simultaneous.[101] Consequently, researchers must identify whether information is significant while collecting data. This data collection is motivated by a need for the researcher to select the most interesting cases or those that are particularly appropriate for realising the stated aim and objectives. Corbin and Strauss refer to this as 'theoretical sampling', which they describe as "sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving theory".[102] The process entails a researcher sampling in a manner that reflects the concepts emerging from the data. Frequently, GT research is initiated by sampling for heterogeneity or engaging in purposeful sampling.[103] Theoretical sampling can be undertaken during the early stages in an attempt to better understand the characteristics as well as the potential variation (dimensions) of the concepts and categorisations that emerge from the dataset.[104]

Theoretical sampling is applied to collect the necessary data, and the data are then coded. Coding is arguably the most crucial aspect of data analysis because it helps to ensure that the findings from the interviews have true meaning. Having transcribed the interviews, I undertook coding to categorise the concepts and themes. Strauss refers to three distinct coding methods through which text can be analysed: open coding (in which categories are identified), axial coding (in which categories are elaborated and connected to sub-categories) and selective coding (developing a theoretical scheme). When undertaking data analysis, the initial step is open

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[101] Creswell, *Research Design*, 184.
[102] Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Sage Publications, 1990), 176.
[103] Janice M. Morse, "Developing Qualitative Inquiry," *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 5 (2007): 567–570, https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732307301611.
[104] Timonen et al.*,* "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory," 8.

coding because it offers a way to recognise and label important words. Axial coding is used once the main categories in the data become apparent. During axial coding, it becomes possible to address the critical questions of a given project. Finally, selective coding allows the identification of a core category, which is then related to the other main categories so that a theory can be developed.[105]

Transcripts of the interviews were analysed to provide the necessary data. The analytic process entails reading through all the data to get "a general sense of the information and to reflect on its overall meaning".[106] Subsequently, the data were categorised and grouped into themes systematically. Repeatedly reading through the data made it easier to identify concepts and themes such as Vision 2030, entertainment, influences, and funding. Concepts and codes must be based on the data but also need to be placed in a dialogue with the established knowledge and concepts.[107]

When engaging with participants, I adhered to the requirements of the university's ethics committee. This entailed devising an interview guide that included an initial letter (see appendix A), an interview proposal (see appendices B and C), and suitable questions. It was also necessary to obtain informed consent from each participant before undertaking the interviews (see appendix D for a copy of the consent form that each participant was required to sign). This involved issuing individuals an information sheet before conducting the interviews. The sheet made clear that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time without needing to explain why they were doing so. In addition, the guide specified the participants as well as the dates and times of the interviews. This helped to ensure that the information gathered was well-organised whilst reminding the researcher about what was required.

The interviews were conducted in Arabic, and Arabic was used when transcribing the interviews and making notes. However, it was necessary to write up the research in English, so the transcriptions, categories, and concepts had to be translated into English.

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[105] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory," 6.
[106] John Creswell, *Research Design*, 185.
[107] Timonen et al., "Challenges When Using Grounded Theory," 6.

1.7 Thesis outline

The thesis has five chapters. Chapter 2 analyses specific artworks and artists, focusing on a selection of each artist's work to create case studies that relate closely to the topic of the thesis. It rigorously examines certain philosophies and ideas that are shown to be vital to understanding the growth of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia, examining these ideas in relation to five case studies. Chapter 3 describes the historical and theoretical background of Saudi art and explores how the emergence of new critical conversations has influenced perceptions of art in society. Chapter 4 focuses on aesthetic experience in relation to entertainment, embodiment, and play as a way of better understanding the rise of participatory art in the KSA over the last few years. This aesthetic experience is explored with the help of works by a host of theoreticians and philosophers, including John Dewey, Richard Shusterman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Johan Huizinga. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes by reviewing the main findings established over the course of the research and presenting a theory of participatory art practice relating to artists based in Saudi Arabia.

1.8 Chapter conclusion

Pablo Helguera, writing as both an educator and artist, argues that in the West "many artworks made over the last four decades have encouraged the participation of the viewer".[108] Participatory art is a dynamic form of art that responds to its audience and environment. Unlike traditional art forms, which viewers interact with primarily mentally, participatory art allows navigation, assembly, or participation that extends well beyond purely psychological activity.

Participatory art is a rich and multifaceted field, and this introductory chapter has only addressed certain aspects of it. My thesis focuses on participatory art in Saudi Arabia and contributes to our intellectual and aesthetic understanding of it as an emerging field of interest in this region. Some of the important concerns that emerge in this study are embodiment and immersive experience (Zahrah Alghamdi's 'After Illusion'), transcendence, ideas concerning the readymade and the body (Rashid Alshashai's 'Concise Passage'), how collective voices can be generated and the

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[108] Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 11.

social body takes on significance in collaboration (Manal Aldowayan's 'Tree of Guardians', 'Suspended Together', and 'Esmi'), movement and participation as activation (Muhannad Shono's 'Ala: A Ritual Machine', 'Al-Mars'), and ideas of play, dialogue, and the participant as maker (Khalid Afif's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home'). People have an innate capacity to engage with works of art, which artists have exploited to produce truly participatory practices that include technology and traditional art materials and rely on a sense of playfulness to produce experiences that engage participants.

In the following chapters, the significance of these artworks in the production of contemporary art by Saudi artists is more fully examined. Their social and political implications become visible, along with the considerable transformations in artistic practice in Saudi Arabia that have resulted from the move from traditional art forms to more contemporary expressions. Examining the contemporary artistic practices of Manal Aldowayan, Muhannad Shono, Khalid Afif, Rashid Alshashai, and Zahra Alghamdi, reveals connections among them in terms of audience participation. I argue that the specific characteristics of participatory artistic practice in Saudi Arabia by contemporary Saudi artists produce ways to think differently about art and that these practices are capturing and growing a young Saudi audience (that has little knowledge of contemporary art) by engaging them in various forms of interaction and social collaboration.

The methodological framework that was used to critically analyse the work of contemporary Saudi artists has been explained above and was suitable for carrying out such research. The use of interviews turned out to be an essential way to reach Saudi artists, and the information that was collected revealed themes that run throughout this thesis. This study allows us to recognise important themes, distinguish the many layers of cultural significance within complex works, and demonstrate the presence of emergent forms of interaction and participation in art made by contemporary Saudi artists. An attempt to locate and understand certain important examples of participatory practices in contemporary Saudi Arabian art and place them in a wider, theoretically rich context is long overdue. I will embark on this project in the following chapter.

Chapter 2

Analysis of participatory art practices by Saudi artists

2.1 Introduction

Over the last 20 years, there has been a rapid transformation in Saudi art, evidenced in work that moves away from traditional forms (e.g. painting, sculpture) towards modes of making that include interaction and participation. As we shall see, by utilising participatory practices, the artist creates a new language that requires the audience's engagement, asking them to actively take part in the artwork. In participatory art, it is presumed that the viewers will no longer be passive onlookers and that they will complete an artwork by participating in its realisation.[109] Participatory art in Saudi Arabia requires us to create a new critical framework; the theoretical and philosophical significance of contemporary artworks created in Saudi Arabia has moved beyond the traditional understanding of art in this specific cultural context. Therefore, we need new ways of examining such important artworks. This chapter introduces a selection of these.

This chapter analyses specific artworks and artists from the contemporary Saudi art scene to examine the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia. It looks at how these practices are addressed and negotiated by artists and interpreted by art historians, critics, and academics. It rigorously examines certain philosophies and ideas that are shown to be vital to the understanding of the growth of participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia. I argue that the relationship between spectator and object is transformed in this new participatory artistic expression and that the participatory works that are created require an understanding of the wider inter-relational context. I have selected specific artists who produce works that utilise

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[109] Anna Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork: Participation from Fluxus to New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

participation and share similar thematic concerns (see Chapter 1): works that enable me to critically examine this relationship. Those artists are Manal Aldowayan, Zahrah Alghamdi, Muhannad Shono, Khalid Afif, and Rashid Alshashai.

This chapter also critically discusses the connections between art and audiences in Saudi Arabia and examines how artists understand this relationship. It examines what participatory art practices can be said to signify in a specifically Saudi context. Additionally, it evaluates how various types of interaction become visible through this emergent practice. Through a close reading of participatory works such as Alghamdi's 'After Illusion' and Alshashai's 'A Concise Passage', the analysis critically connects contemporary participatory practices to the Saudi art audience and Saudi society.

The artists and artworks considered in this chapter do not exclusively represent participatory art in Saudi Arabia—discussing all artists who produce participatory art in the KSA would be beyond the scope of this research. However, through the detailed analysis of specific artworks made by Saudi artists from 2010 onwards, this chapter will offer a conceptual and theoretical framework to approach and understand participatory art practices in Saudi contemporary art by Saudi artists generally. I aim to open up a wider critical discussion of this form of art, for which a discourse is currently lacking.

2.2 <u>Zahrah Alghamdi: immersive experiences and embodiment</u>

> Visiting the Saudi Pavilion at the 58th Venice Biennale encompasses walking, tip-toeing, touching, and standing in awe. Visitors will engage with the artwork and relive the experience of creating art. The aesthetic beauty of the installation 'After Illusion'... lies predominantly within the process and experience of creating art itself; it is a journey after illusion.[110]

> -Lina Kattan

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[110]Nada Shabout and Eiman Elgibreen, *National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia's publication for the 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia* (2019), 35.

Zahrah Alghamdi is a celebrated land artist known for her site-specific installations and use of natural materials. Her work focuses on her memory of traditional architecture from South Western Saudi Arabia. The materials she incorporates, such as dried palm leaves, textiles, and natural dyes, blend traditional techniques and contemporary expression. She was selected to exhibit 'After Illusion' (see figs. 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4), a site-specific installation that used natural materials inspired by the artist's sense of home, in the National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The work was commissioned by the Misk Art Institute. In 'After Illusion' Alghamdi explored the opposition between truth and illusion and how something can be both new and familiar. The work asked us to allow ourselves to be free of the obligations that we incur when we take a personal position on various issues; it asked us to transform and become self-aware.[111]

'After Illusion' reflects the uncertainty that the poet Zuhayr bin Abī Sūlmā experienced upon returning to his home for the first time in several years. [112] The work of Alghamdi encourages the viewer to be accepting of ambiguity as a means of facilitating transformation and self-awareness, whilst confronting the limits that cultural representation and historical narratives impose. It drew on oral history from her city and Saudi poetry and presented this material to the public in an interactive way. These immersive installations offer sensory and tactile ways in which the participants can engage with their surroundings, combining the traditional with the modern, and promoting an interplay between individual and collective identities. Alghamdi's installation seeks to bring together the traditions of a specific culture with global influences, creating a discourse that goes beyond national borders and the preconceived ideas that people hold.

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[111] Zahrah Alghamdi, interview by the author, August 22, 2020.
[112] Zuhayr bin Abī Sūlmā's (b.520- d.609) poem features a line which inspired the title After Illusion for this artwork. The poem describes the difficulty Zuhayr bin Abī Sūlmā experienced recognising his home following a period of twenty years spent away from it. It was illusion that enabled him to recognise his home – a state of mind that enables the truth to be accessed, despite the fact that many people mistakenly believe that illusion conceals the truth. A sizeable proportion of the Saudi population believe that old Arabic poetry offers a valuable alternative source of the truth. The pre-Islamic poems called The Suspended Odes or AlMu allaqāt are culturally revered because of the detailed way in which they describe the poet's home, his travels, the relationship with his lover, and his political opinions supplemented with wise words. It is believed that these seven poems were displayed in public at the sacred house of Mecca for allcomers to view, hence the name Al Mu allaqāt. Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 21.

Alghamdi's work combines reminiscences, memories and architectural heritage, encouraging the exploration of personal identities and collective memories.

Alghamdi's installation comprised of 50,000 cotton-filled sheep leather balls which were hung from the walls spread over the floor and the pavilion. She has stated that the natural colour of this material draws a connection with the earth. The material has a special meaning for Alghamdi as she associates it with childhood memories of accompanying her grandfather as he herded sheep. However, what starts as a pure and natural medium requires considerable manipulation before it is ready to feature in the installation because it must be cut, stuffed, sewn, shredded, boiled, dried, burned and unstuffed.[113] It is intended that the different stages serve as intimate performance steps and all of these processes are followed, despite the fact that not all of them are required to achieve the final result because Alghamdi seeks distinct alterations. [114]

According to Lina Kattan, Alghamdi's laborious creative process it is one of the trademarks of her creations. As she explained, once leather has been manipulated, it is not possible for it to return to its previous state because it hardens over time. Similarly, people change as they age and it is impossible for them to return to a previous state. Much like the boiling of leather causes leather to harden, the uncertainties that people face during their lives transform them into different people who are better able to cope with life's challenges. Indeed, it is the challenges people face that make us who we are, whether that be experienced, braver or more resilient. Once these characteristics have become established in an individual, "no other force can undo these transformations", she stated.[115] The leather balls contained sensors that vibrated and moved like creatures when they were animated by the presence of a visitor. In an interview, the artist explained that she hoped to create a warm, soothing atmosphere through lighting techniques and an ever-present soundscape. When the pieces were touched, the sound they emitted grew louder, creating a sensory dialogue with the visitors. This encouraged the audience to explore and connect with the piece intimately.[116]

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[113] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 22.
[114] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 22.
[115] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 41.
[116] Alghamdi, interview.

It is intended that After Illusion will arouse the visitors so that they become emotionally engaged and reflect deeply about themselves. Alghamdi's installations invite visitors to immerse themselves, cast aside their preconceived ideas, challenge uncertainties and open up to the possibility of being transformed. Visitors are actively encouraged to engage with the installation through the use of sensory elements and tactile materials so that they become immersed in the story that is being told. It will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

The curator in Saudi Arabia played a vital role in emphasising the interactive potential of the artworks selected, encouraging the artists to include interactive elements in their artworks. Eiman Elgibreen, a Saudi art historian and the curator of the exhibition, noted in conversation that she always encourages artists to add interactive elements such as sound, touch and light to their artworks to strengthen the works and help them speak more directly to the viewer.[117] She said to me, "I have no reason to go and drive and be stuck in the traffic just to see things I saw on my phone — and this was my main goal for the Biennale". She went on to explain:

> Interactive art is a form of art that you will never create a true impression of unless you experience it first-hand... No matter how much they tell you about the experience, you can never imagine it unless you were there. It cannot be lived through still images, for example... (it can be imagined in a way through moving images like videos). For this I personally believe the more that artists challenged themselves to add factors to their interactive pieces that *cannot* be transmitted through moving images, the more brilliant they became. They control the environment and the temperature and you feel a certain heat or certain coolness.[118]

By turning art viewing into a more directly interactive and/or immersive experience, the artist, arguably, strengthens our understanding of the piece, and perhaps even inspires the visitor to spend a bit longer with each work. This makes the work more inclusive and widens participation to include spectators who are not necessarily knowledgeable about art.

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[117] Eiman Elgibreen, interview by the author, September 7, 2020.
[118] Elgibreen, interview.

Alghamdi's work projects beliefs, attitudes and values based on cultural identities, memories and heritage. She imagines that in the future, people will be better able to connect the events of the past with the present so that they are more empathetic of societal shifts. She uses art as a means to simultaneously preserve culture and present contemporary developments, suggesting that tradition and history should be approached in a subtle way at a time when events in the modern world are evolving apace. It is possible to interpret this using sensory aesthetic and cultural identity lenses. She navigates the complexities of Saudi Arabian culture, addressing wider cultural factors and conditions through participatory practices that engage with audience perceptions and experiences.

The pioneering way in which this work of art addresses societal engagement and cultural dialogue is highly applicable to the research questions concerning Saudi participatory art. Participatory art is proving to be very popular in Saudi Arabia and the work of Alghamdi is reflective of the factors driving this environment which include a craving to challenge conventions and retake control of the cultural narrative. It is also reflective of the issues that artists encounter when seeking to negotiate cultural expectations and strike a balance between traditional values and modern expression. On balance, Alghamdi's installations are reflective of the ability of Saudi artists to take onboard the prevailing cultural complexities whilst also depicting what the future may hold. As such, Alghamdi successfully reimagines what has gone before whilst embracing the modern, inviting visitors to simultaneously appreciate culture and discover themselves.

There are many different approaches that have been taken by Saudi artists to create participatory art and the installations of Alghamdi represent a unique blend of traditional craftsmanship with modern sensibilities. In this sense, Alghamdi's installations contribute towards the societal advancement and cultural development aims of Saudi Vision 2030. On the global stage, the artwork of Alghamdi is recognised for the innovative ways in which it addresses artistic expression, as well as for its universal themes. Her artwork is not constrained to a particular country or region of the world and helps to initiate discussions regarding cultural heritage, memory and identity throughout the world. Moreover, the fact that Alghamdi was invited to

participate in the Venice Biennale demonstrates that Saudi art is relevant to a global audience. When referring to After Illusion, Lina Kattan stated:

> Saudi artists are concerned with merging cultural traditions and aspects of globalisation, as well as with how these issues affect their recognition across nations. At the same time, they are deciphering hidden cultural agendas and negative stereotypes to voice their agency through art. These self-determined artists are paving the way for future generations to be accepted as equal participants in constructing the global contemporary art scene and are creating a positive change while balancing their national heritage with global developments. Consequently, to fulfil the future Vision of 2030, Saudi artists are reconsidering the rapid-paced changes in the status quo of the Kingdom and reimagining the future of Saudi art.[119]

Figure 2.1 Zahrah Alghamdi. After Illusion, 2019. Image Supplied by Curator Eiman Elgibreen. Photographer Unknown

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[119] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 35.

Figure 2.2 Zahrah Alghamdi. After Illusion, 2019, accessed 13 May, 2023. https://saudipavilion.org/art/2019-2/. By photographer Italo Rondinella,

Figure 2.3 Zahrah Alghamdi. After Illusion, 2019, accessed 13 May, 2023. https://miskartinstitute.org/Exhibtions/Details?q=aWQ9MjE%3D.

Figure 2.4 Zahrah Alghamdi. After Illusion, 2019, accessed 13 May, 2023. https://saudipavilion.org/art/2019-2/. By photographer Italo Rondinella,

2.3 <u>Rashid Alshashai: transcendence, the readymade and the body</u>

As was demonstrated by Alghamdi's installation, artworks can become interactive/participatory by invoking memories and making audiences aware of the physical embodiment of these associations with the work. In the example that follows, these strategies are utilised and strengthened through the use of the readymade (the viewing, experiencing subject relates to these objects in very particular ways) and by further emphasising the presence of the physical body.

We find these approaches in the work of Rashed Alshashai, specifically in his site-specific installation 'A Concise Passage' (2020) (see figs. 2.5, 2.6).[120] The viewer was invited to enter a pyramid which was divided down the middle internally. This experience through our attention to ideas of cultural heritage and our place in the world; the work explored the passage of goods

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[120] "Rashed Alshashai," Desert X, accessed May 26, 2020, https://desertx.org/dx/desert-x-alula-2020/rashed-alshashai.

along ancient trade routes in AlUla city.[121] 'A Concise Passage' was made of transfer/storage pallets for plastic goods – ubiquitous pallets used to move goods throughout the world. It represents AlUla's historical role as a hub for exchanging goods from around the world for those travelling along the Incense Trade Route. The installation was pyramidical in form and reached 15 metres in height. More than 1400 pallets were used.[122] AlShashai forms a pyramid using plastic crates and this shape signifies both the oasis city's previous role as a cradle of civilisation and, notably, its current re-emergence as hub for exchanging ideas and a source of understanding and meaning. As such, AlUla is rapidly establishing itself as a regional hub for culture. The lowest level of the piece was lit at night with powerful pink lights that radiated towards the sky, bouncing off and refracting through the walls of the pyramid. The use of pink provides a positive and cheery monument which reflects the exchange of knowledge, thereby making it a metaphor for the city. Asked about audience interaction with the piece, Alshashai said, "Desert X asked whether climbing the pyramid was safe. I told them it was safe, structurally, but was too high to be climbed. But people climbed it secretly. I know this from their pictures and videos on social media."[123]

Figure 2.5 Rashed Alshashai. A Concise Passage, 2020. https://desertx.org/dx/archive/a-concise-passage. By photographer Lance Garber.

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[121] "Rashed Alshashai."

[122] Rashed Alshashai, interview by the author, September 25, 2020.

[123] Alshashai, interview
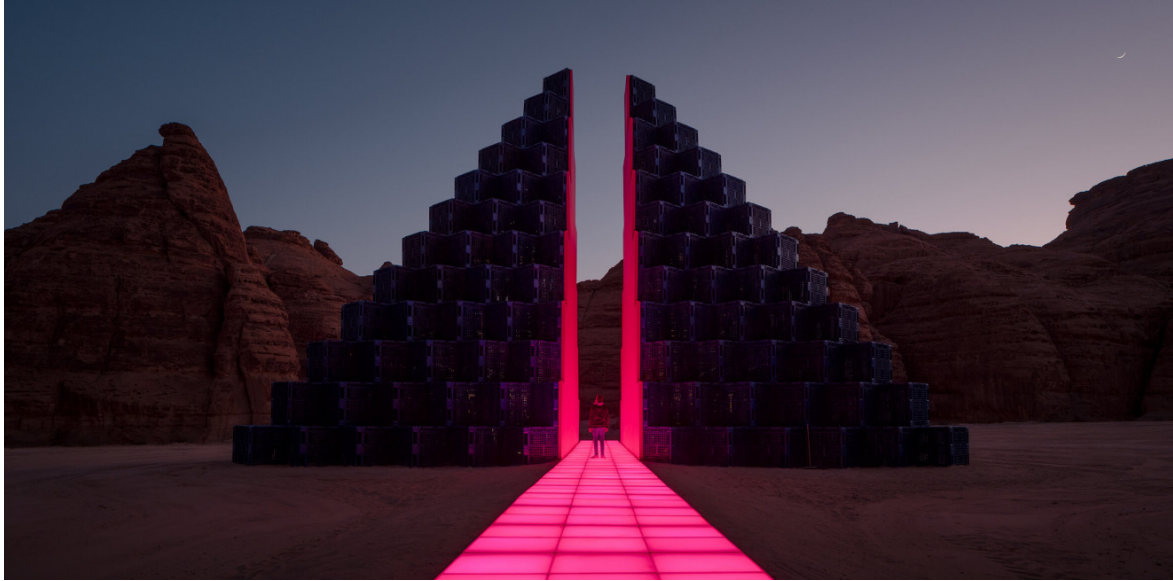
Figure 2.6 Rashed Alshashai. A Concise Passage, 2020. https://desertx.org/dx/archive/a-concise-passage. By photographer Lance Garber.

Figure 2.7 Talal Altukais. Temptation Point, 2015. Image supplied by artist Talal Altukais. Photographer unknown.

The artist applied the idea of interactivity by letting the audience pass through the pyramid, which invites the audience to become part of the artwork. The artist takes abstract concepts and augments physical space with experiences that invite and seduce audience members to become more than spectators. They are within the work, included, enjoying a multisensory experience in

an altered version of reality, which can't help but include people who may not be ready to explore conceptual contemporary artworks. Alshashai explained the importance of interactivity to the piece by insisting that art should be surprising and shocking, and these elements help people get closer to it.[124]

In another of Alshashai's installations, 'Opposite Symmetry', he filled a room with triangular mirrors and readymade prayer rugs that were reflected in the mirrored triangles. The artist utilised found objects as a conceptual means of identifying signs of the everyday that created what he described as a "semantic field" through which philosophical questions, primarily the purpose of human existence and the functions of society, could be explored. Most of Alshashai's works are experiential artworks that connect us in an elemental, sensory manner to our experience of physical space. As we can see in these two artworks, he engaged the audience directly and focused on creating a new experience for participants that would engage them with signifiers of the mundane. His purpose was to facilitate consideration of what might otherwise create tension, namely, the distinction between art and reality.

'Temptation Point' (2015) (see fig. 2.7) by sculptor Talal Altukais similarly relied on the entry of the participant into the work. The portal was its iron-plated vertical poles, which were painted with car paint. The colours, height, and distance between the poles were chosen to have a psychological effect on the participant.[125] Claire Bishop argues in *Installation Art* that artworks such as 'A Concise Passage' and 'Temptation Point' reinforce the audience members' bodily responses and their awareness of how they are positioned in space, whilst simultaneously "activating" the viewer to walk through and around the work.[126] For Bishop, installation art presents elements of interactivity when the viewer enters the work and interacts physically with it, creating a "literal presence" in the space.[127] In other words, instead of imagining the viewer as a pair of disembodied eyes that survey the work from a distance, "installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose sense of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of

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[124] Alshashai, interview.
[125] Talal Altukais, interview by the author, August 15, 2020.
[126] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 6.
[127] Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6.

vision." This insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art.[128] However, Bishop ends her essay with these words:

> These values concern a desire to activate the viewer – as opposed to the passivity of mass-media consumption – and to induce a critical vigilance towards the environments in which we find ourselves. When the experience of going into a museum increasingly rivals that of walking into restaurants, shops, or clubs, works of art may no longer need to take the form of immersive, interactive experiences. Rather, the best installation art is marked by a sense of antagonism towards its environment, a friction with its context that resists organisational pressure and instead exerts its own terms of engagement.[129]

So how is the art that we are looking at in Saudi Arabia different from that described by Bishop? Does it really offer the same experience as a shopping mall or club? It is worth noting that one of the primary aims of Vision 2030 is to build an audience for art (focusing on young Saudis) and give them knowledge of contemporary art, so perhaps artworks such as these tend to be experiential in a direct sense and provide a shopping mall-like experience rather than an experience that challenges the hierarchical structures of society. Saudi art commissioners are endeavouring to enhance public understanding and appetite for future contemporary artworks that will be more challenging – a type of art that Bishop argues is better. Or perhaps the forms discussed here are underappreciated as they are seen from a Western perspective that does not account for the need to attract a Saudi audience before challenging it? We could say that a main component of the Saudi shift toward participatory art is attracting visitors to an entertaining "shopping mall" experience that makes art easily understandable and accessible to all. But does this type of art create something different that is of critical value in the context of Saudi Arabia? I argue that it does, as is evident in my discussion of the artworks in this thesis.

Even though some of these interactions may seem, by Bishop, to resemble the journey through a shopping mall, the concept of interaction turns the art object into an open, expansive, and multifaceted experience rather than a monolithic object with only one truth at its core. The art

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[128] Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6.

[129] Bishop, "But Is It Installation Art?" Tate, 1 January 2005, https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-3-spring-2005/it-installation-art.

object welcomes the viewer as an event and experience, allowing them to bring their life experiences and interpretations to the interaction. In some instances, that interaction will involve almost superficially entertaining the participant (the relationship between art and entertainment is discussed in Chapter 4), and in others, the viewer will be more deeply engaged and challenged. This idea emphasises the behavioural aspects of the viewer in her/his engagement with participatory artworks.

Artworks such as Alshashai's installation 'A Concise Passage' and 'Opposite Symmetry' and Altukais' 'Temptation Point' appear to be "finished" (in that they are solid constructions that do not need to be manipulated physically by audience members), but are nonetheless designed to be *used* by the audience in certain ways. This is a common occurrence in installation art, where the work does not simply aim to be physically appealing or intriguing but seeks to present complex situations, aesthetic questions, and engaging interactive opportunities. If we consider the work of many minimalist artists, we find that the embodied, participating viewer is central to any type or style of art. I direct you to the writings of Michael Fried ('Art and Objecthood'), Donald Judd ('Specific Objects') and Robert Morris ('Notes on Sculpture').[130] These theorists and artists argued that the minimalist art object could be understood as a 'ground' of sorts; a static, abstract form that the active, embodied viewer perceived and interacted with. The locations in which these objects were exhibited (art galleries, etc.) created spaces for these interactions; places for the embodied viewer to experience the objects. The works were, therefore, interactive. They related to the viewer and made the viewer aware of his or her relationship with the objects while the viewer interacted with them experientially in time and space. Viewers walked around, over and under the objects; they encountered them.

Fried, in 'Art and Objecthood', suggested that minimalism focuses on the experience of the observer, whereas modernism is concerned with an artwork's internal relational qualities. Therefore, minimalist works of art cannot be distinguished from a person's experience of his or her environment.[131] Minimalism does not accept the 'siteless' realm that most abstract sculptures

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[130] Michael Fried, *"Art and Objecthood,"* in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and reviews,* edited by Fried Michael. Chicago and London: University of Chicago press, (1998); Donald Judd, "Specific Objects" *Arts Yearbook* 8: (1965); Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture" *Artforum International* 4, no. 6, (February 1966). 42-44.
[131] Fried, "Art and Objecthood."

inhabit, nor does it accept the anthropomorphic underpinnings of conventional sculpture. In the absence of a formal, abstract way of viewing art, the observer is placed in the present. Instead of superficially looking at an artwork's surface to map its qualities, the activated viewer is encouraged to investigate the perceptual consequences of a certain intervention at a particular place. That is the reorientation inaugurated by minimalism.[132]

From this perspective, the material qualities and objectives of 'A Concise Passage' take precedence over its formal aspect, and the beholder remains active. A brief comparison to minimalist art is instructive in describing how art operates on an aesthetic level when apprehended in this way. Minimalist art is often defined by the inclusion of the viewer in the work. As Fried writes, "the experience of literalist [minimal] art is of an object in a situation — one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder".[133] Experienced from without, 'A Concise Passage' includes the beholder to the same extent as most minimalist works of art: the object refers to their shared space and the visual aspect of the work is contingent on the viewer's position in time and space.

We must also ask how this installation relates to the idea of the readymade. The idea of the readymade seems to be important in Alshashai's work, but how does this relate to the materials that are used in his work and those in minimalism, whose practitioners used bricks, building materials, sheets of steel, and other anti-art materials? With the use of readymade, anti-art materials,[134] repetitive forms, and light, can we think of this contemporary art object as post-minimalist?

This wider conceptual, philosophical, and art historical context for the piece helps us to better understand it and equips us with theoretical language that we can relate to the Saudi context. To continue our line of questioning, why has Alshashai chosen this particular form? Is there a history of architectural pyramidal forms in Saudi Arabia? Or does it relate to the Egyptian

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[132] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 38.

[133] Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 3.

[134] For a fuller description of anti-art, please refer to George Dickie, "What Is Anti-Art?," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 33, no. 4 (January 1975): 419–422, https://doi.org/10.1111/1540_6245..4.0419.

pyramids? Has it been chosen for purely aesthetic reasons? Or does its form derive simply from the packing and stacking necessary to commerce and the transport of goods? Through the artist's use of the pyramid, it describes advanced civilisations. Ancient knowledge and wisdom are embodied in it. Plastic pallets have become a significant part of modern trade because they are used to ship goods around the world. Alshashai builds a pyramid from plastic pallets in AlUla, combining these two ideas. It is the pyramid's shape that suggests AlUla's significance, not just as a cradle of civilisation, but more importantly, a rebirth, that is evident from its new role as a centre for ideas rather than goods, and a source of understanding and meaning rather than commerce.

The use of light is also very evocative and cinematic: is this an attempt to portray transcendence or a metaphysical reality? We must remember that these metaphysical responses are based on real, material objects – simple pallets and neon lights. This minimalist use of materials, particularly neon lights, could relate to the work of Dan Flavin, therefore, and the way he plays with the presence of objectively real electrified neon light and the metaphysical associations and atmosphere that it can generate for the viewer.[135] But Alshashai goes beyond purely minimalist concerns in 'A Concise Passage', referencing minimalism's toolkit (ready-mades, repetition, mass-produced anti-art materials, the "activating" role of the viewer, etc.), but creating work that intentionally rather than accidentally invokes the spiritual.[136]

Again, this spiritual dimension is not an explicit concern of minimalist artists and their art. Minimalist artists and theorists emphasise the viewer's cognitive responses, arguing that these responses are purely mental and analytic.[137] Yet 'A Concise Passage' demonstrates that art can go beyond its materialistic, cognitive, and earth-bound elements. The path through the pyramid takes you away, "encourages thoughts around man's legacy, the importance …of our place in the universe", and seems to gesture to the idea of transcendence.[138]

[135] "Dan Flavin 1933–1996," Tate, January 1, 1987, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/dan-flavin-1101
[136] "Desert X Alula (English)", Desert X, May 22, 2020, https://issuu.com/desertx/docs/desert_x_alula_catalogue__english_.
[137] "Minimalism," Tate, accessed October 25, 2022, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/m/minimalism.
[138] Desert X Alula.

2.4 <u>Khalid Afif: the participant as maker, play and dialogue</u>

Khalid Afif is passionate about creating participatory work. Utilising this approach, he has created work such as 'Not Yet' (2014), 'Voice Profiles' (2016), 'The World' (2016), 'Breathe' (2020), 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' (2020) and, most recently, 'Hear the Sound with your Eyes' (2021). 'Not Yet' (see fig. 2.8), was his first participatory project, and was presented as part of an exhibition held by the Misk Foundation. He installed "strange and excitingly shaped canvases" on a machine that rotated them.[139] The visitors were asked to pick colours of their choice and apply them to the canvases, a process that quickly turned from a game into a more measured artistic experience as the participants started realising that they were, in fact, painting. Usually, audiences are not allowed to touch paintings, let alone paint them in an exhibition, so their passive experience became active enjoyment. He told me:

> … I liked how people responded to this interactive work; they actually have ideas that are greater than the artist himself. In all my interactive works, I was ready to interact with the audience. I love to interact with people, and I like to hear their opinions. Every question the audience asks forces me to answer them with another question, and this is part of my goal – to increase my knowledge of the work. I want to measure the state of interaction that occurs between my work and the open space where people interact with it.[140]

During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, when people were forced to stay at home and not interact with each other in person, he created work that required them to participate and communicate with each other from home to make an artwork. In his experiment 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' (see figs. 2.9, 2.10), he hung a blank canvas in his house and covered the whole room with protective cloth. He invited participants to use their phones to interact online and move a paint gun that shot paint over the canvas to create abstract designs. The gun was linked to motors, and the motors had their own programming and code. The idea was that the people were part of the fundamental meaning of the work.

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[139] Khalid Afif, interview by the author, September 11, 2020.
[140] Afif, interview.

Afif was greatly influenced by the computer game Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG).[141] His children communicated with the outside world online through this game whilst in quarantine, and the game inspired him to produce a project called 'Fun-G'. He wanted to document our situation during the pandemic and presented the work live on Instagram,[142] where his audience met and discussed what colours to use and how they were feeling about life during the pandemic. This design was useful for creating user content as well as interacting with a largely autonomous public. For Afif, all of the conditions for interactive art were fulfilled, with the artist, work, participants, and audience coming together to create. He told me, "It was a relief for me; it nullified a perceived threat to my interactive work as it usually requires the physical presence of people."[143]

Figure 2.8 Khalid Afif. Not Yet, 2014. Image supplied by artist Khalid Afif.

Figure 2.9 Khalid Afif. I Am at Home and You Are at Home, 2020. Image supplied by artist Khalid Afif.

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[141] PUBG, which stands for "Player Unknown's Battlegrounds", is a live-streamed computer game of first-person shooter video games. It was released in December 2017 and rapidly experienced a remarkable increase in popularity and number of downloads. Jarrah Al-Mansour, *The Success Behind the PubG Era: A Case Study Perspective.* Volume,18, Issue 6, (American International College, 2019). https://www.abacademies.org/articles/the-success-behind-the-pubg-era-a-case-study-perspective-8825.html.

[142] Instagram is an American photo and video sharing social networking service, created by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, launched 2010.

[143] Afif, interview.
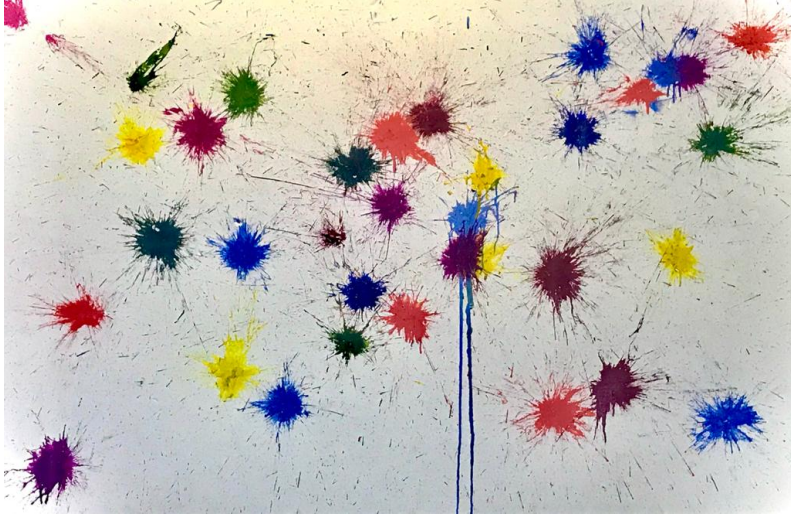
Figure 2.10 Khalid Afif. I Am at Home and You Are at Home, 2020. Image supplied by artist Khalid Afif.

Figure 2.11 Khalid Afif. The World, 2016, accessed 5 December, 2021.http://edgeofarabia.com/artists/khalid-bin-afif.

As previously mentioned, Afif encourages audience participation and cares deeply about the process and the reactions of the audience. He wants his art to reach everyone; to be acceptable in his community and culture, and he attempts to do this by drawing people into the art world through his work. His latest artwork, a series called 'Hear the Sound with Your Eyes' (see figs. 2.12, 2.13, 2.14), was an attempt to engage senses such as hearing as well as sight. In this work, mechanical elements, electronics, and reactive sound technology were employed to convert data

gleaned from the audience into an image. He also used Instagram to communicate with people in a live chat forum. In one of this series of works, made during the Islamic New Year,[144] he collected more than 70 human voices. Participants were asked to say words to welcome the new year, and these greetings generated a drawing that took almost two hours to complete. Afif told me, "The artistic practice which I was exploring is not studio practice, it is the practice of the human being; people are an important part of it. People are important to my work; they are the art; they are creativity. I would therefore call the art I do social art."[145]

Afif's work has increasingly focused on the viewers' experience, introducing them to a new understanding of his work, in the hope of aiding communication between participants about art. Here he talks about the importance of this form of practice for him and Saudi society generally:

> I used to have a band and we would hide our musical instruments inside bags of flour or rice so that no one could find or destroy them. We find a solution or we would have to give up. This was a very challenging situation, and the challenge to create invoked something within me. But how do I present this sense of challenge? This may be the beauty of art… I sit as if I am the only audience for my work and start meditating, and then I see how people interact, and this is the thing that fascinates me more and more.[146]

Technologies and social networking platforms, such as those mentioned, have given Afif a way of relating to and engaging with an audience that was previously impossible. His work takes up the challenges laid out in Saudi Vision 2030, and doing so has opened it up to a much larger audience. In artistic practices such as his, the aim is to create intersubjective encounters between the public, artists, and local contexts. This raises the question of how such interactions alter our cultural understanding of art and change traditional ideas of reception and participation, and what this means for traditional mediators of culture. One could go as far as to say that Afif is one of the few major artists in Saudi Arabia who works with audiences and communities in such a hands-on way.

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[144] The Islamic New Year is celebrated on the 1st of Muharram (the first day of the first lunar month). The Islamic calendar began when the fledgling group of Muslims around the Prophet migrated from Mekka to Medina, which had welcomed them and adopted them. The event occurred in 622 AD, which corresponds to 0 AH after the Hijra.
[145] Afif, interview.
[146] Afif, interview.
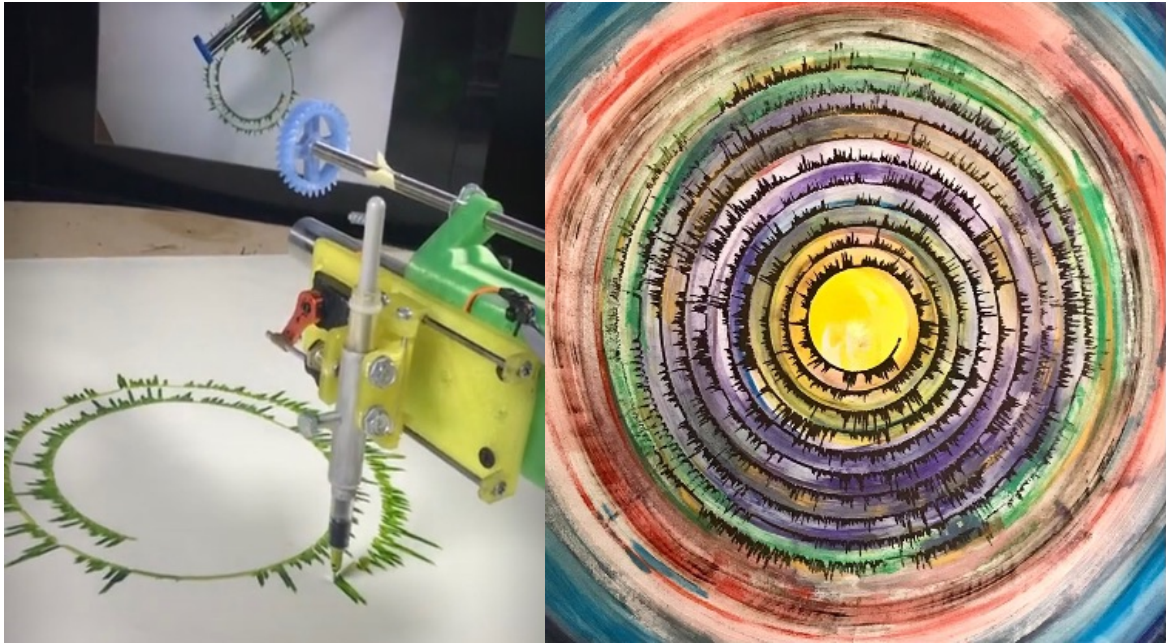
Figure 2.12 Khalid Afif. Hear The Sound with your Eyes, 2021. Image supplied by Artist Khalid Afif.
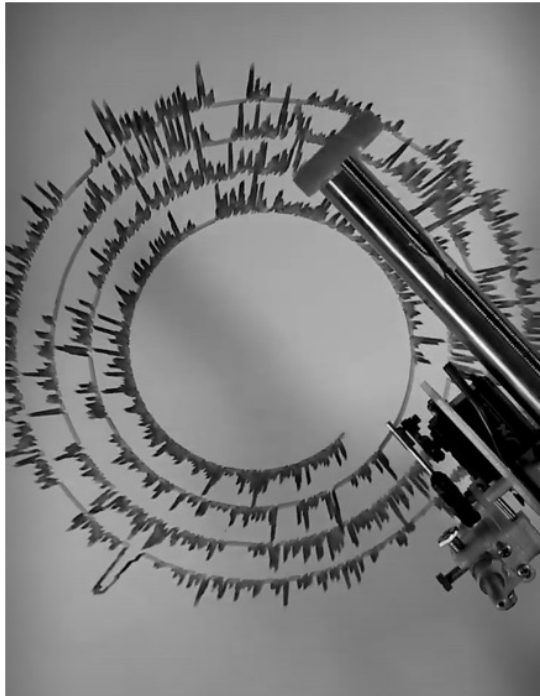
Figure 2.13 Khalid Afif. Hear The Sound with your Eyes, 2021. Image supplied by Artist Khalid Afif.
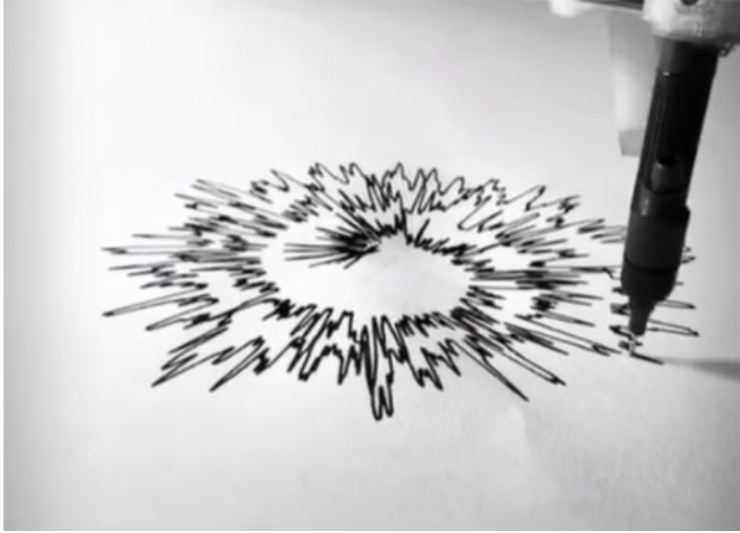
Figure 2.14 Khalid Afif. Hear The Sound with your Eyes, 2021. Image supplied by Artist Khalid Afif.

As previously mentioned, technology is being increasingly used to stimulate interactions with, and participation in, art projects. The media platform Instagram, for example, allows the exploration of current attitudes to artistic expression. By examining the use of technology in 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' and 'Hear the Sound With Your Eyes', the artist implies that we must think critically about how technology and content are united in creative processes. His use of technology affects cognitive and embodied responses in participants who interact with his artworks, opening up creative processes that the exchanges make possible. Those processes will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

In participatory artworks such as 'Not Yet' and 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home,' the focus of attention moves away from the object/spectator dyad to the "act of creating". Gustaf Almenberg says that participatory art is "the beholder in action". In his book *Notes on Participatory Art: Toward a Manifesto Differentiating It from Open Work, Interactive Art and Relational Art*, Almenberg attempts to define participatory art. He writes:

> Participatory art has its exploratory focus, not on line, colour, or form per se, not on light or texture, not on narrative or representation, not on still life or the human figure or on landscape,

but on the very basis for all art: on creativity as such and on the feeling-thinking nature of creativity, as well as on what happens in the creative moment itself.[147]

Participatory artworks extend this logic by acting as props that allow for detailed games with many participants. This not only affects the appearance of the work, but also affects the participants psychologically and physically by involving them in the "thinking games" that are part of the artwork's rules of engagement.[148]

Critical responses to participatory practices that focus on their social impact have increased in recent years. Almenberg contrasts traditional art with participatory art, arguing that the former cannot effectively reflect the unfolding character of the creative process. He tells us, "Participatory art can express the great variety of emotions that enter into the creative moment."[149] For him, participatory art is an exploration within an aesthetic context that helps us examine "many emotional facts of the creative moment as such and of one's own creativity; as opposed to solely contemplating the results of other people's creative moments and creativity".[150] According to Almenberg, it offers participants not only physical involvement but also an opportunity to experience different mental and sensory events that stir up unspecified thoughts, emotions, and social-political realisations.[151] This socio-political approach has an unavoidable ethical dimension, which is a fundamental attribute of participatory artworks.[152] Brown tells us that engaging people with processes and outcomes in aesthetic situations gives the artworks that are the focus of the engagement a socio-political dimension that is, to some extent, "inevitable".[153] These debates are a vital part of the context of my research. The artists I have examined are greatly interested in the public domain and the processes of activating, reflecting, and creating tangible social-political relationships using art.

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[147] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 9.

[148] Kathryn Brown, Mieke Bal, and Margriet Schavemaker, *Interactive Contemporary Art: Participation in Practice* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 5.

[149] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 168.

[150] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 9.

[151] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 131.

[152] Brown, *Interactive Contemporary Art,* 3.

[153] Brown, *Interactive Contemporary Art*, 3.

2.5 <u>Muhannad Shono: kinetic art and participation as activation</u>

Muhannad Shono, an artist who left Saudi Arabia to make work, moved back after Saudi Vision 2030 was announced and concurrent developments in the art world. Muhannad Shono has produced a diverse array of contemplative artworks which range from large high-tech installations to subtle ink on paper creations. Shono invites the viewer to question modern culture and consider new ways of thinking. Shono seeks to tell a story to contemplate what it means to 'belong;' a topic which fascinates him because of his own family's migratory journey and his interest in locations that are no-longer inhabited. He uses tones of black, white and grey and believes in the ability of the line to create.[154]

Shono's work—like that of Afif—opens up a new, experimental space for Saudi contemporary art, namely, kinetic art. Kinetic sensory movements and sound connect us in an elemental manner; kinetic artworks present new opportunities for participation beyond mechanism. This aspect of participatory art has been acknowledged and yet has been explored only superficially (discussed in Chapter 1). Shono presented an interactive work called 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' at Ithra in 2018, (see figs. 2.15, 2.16).[155] It is a speculative work that imagines a situation which is both factual and fictive, yet it relates to the Saudi Arabian relationship with ritual in daily life.[156] He tells us that

> [r]ituals were developed by our species to help us manage our emotions, so if you go through loss or extreme joy or happiness, we need rituals to kind of bring us back to balance and return us to society. We have lost that understanding of ritual, and have become very mechanical, so we kind of do rituals but we don't understand why; we just follow this kind of programme if you will. So, I thought why not exaggerate the situation and create a machine that could perform rituals on our behalf? We pull out these machines to perform rituals that we already have. They are kind of like speculative sculptures. The way they function is that you could do a ritual by yourself by touching the machine; it begins moving and creates a rhythm. But other people who touch similar

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[154] "Noor Riyadh," Riyadh Art, 12 March 2024, https://riyadhart.sa/en/artists/muhannad-shono/

[155] 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' was produced in collaboration with Prof. Manfred Hild of the Neurorobotics Research Laboratory, Berlin, with research funding from the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra).

[156] Muhannad Shono, interview by the author, September 22, 2020.

machines will also initiate this process, and the machines will automatically start to synchronise; they will start to move at the same time, creating a rhythm, a sense of collectiveness and ritual, a ceremony.[157]

The relationship between technologies (however simplistic), repetition, ritual, and belief can be found in various cultures, whether that is in the use of rosary beads or prayer beads or in the prayer wheels or prayer flags in Tibetan Buddhism, where the person benefiting from the religious practice does not even have to be present or actively engaged in a specific practice for them to "work". Shono takes this even further, emphasising the separation between a specific practice and the method or technologies used to carry it out. Can a robot pray for you? What about an AI? 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' asks questions such as these and appears at first to answer them somewhat sceptically. When spiritual actions are devoid of emotional engagement then the practitioner becomes a robot in a sense. Where does spirituality fit into this gutting of spiritual intention? Ironically, one could argue that inviting the gallery goer to interact with and use these devices leads to a process of activation that acts in two directions: the audience works the machine, and the machine, in turn, stimulates thoughts of spiritual practice within the person interacting with it. Audience members participate by placing their hands over each machine and initiating the ritual movement. The data collected from each machine are displayed on the altar wall, depicting the "programmed doctrine" (that is, the doctrine that has been programmed into the machine) together with the different states of synchronicity and activation.[158] These machines can perform individual rituals or automatically synchronise the motion in the space with other machines "to perform a collective rhythmic ceremony."[159]

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[157] Shono, interview.

[158] "Ala: A Ritual Machine." Muhannad Shono. Accessed 10 April 2022. https://muhannadshono.com/a-ritual-machine.

[159] Shono, interview.
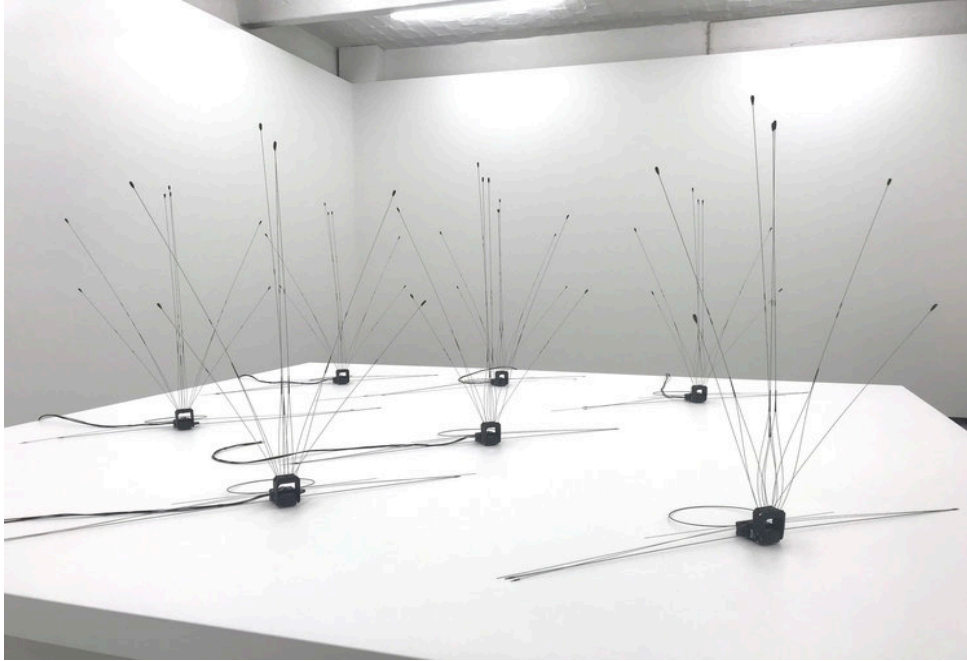
Figure 2.15 Muhannad Shono. Ala: A Ritual Machine, 2018, accessed 13 February,2022. https://muhannadshono.com/a-ritual-machine.
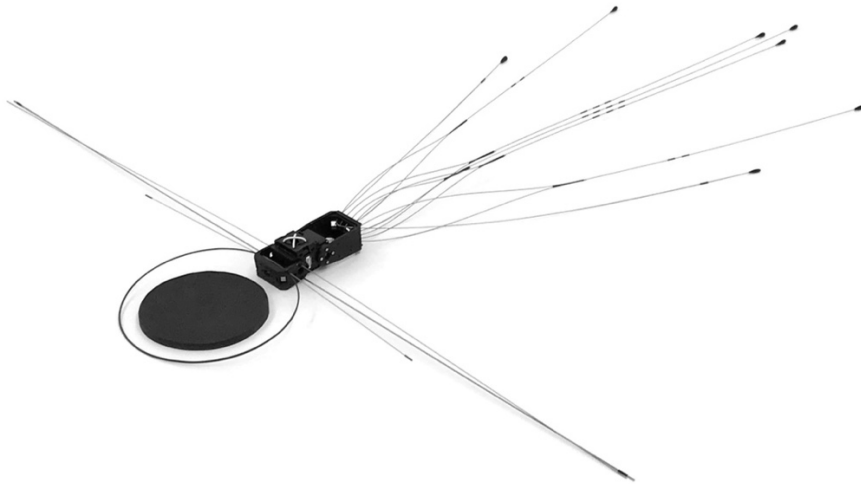
 Figure 2.16 Muhannad Shono. Ala: A Ritual Machine, 2018. accessed 13 February,2022. https://muhannadshono.com/a-ritual-machine.

Figure 2.17 Muhannad Shono. Al-Mars, 2019, accessed 13 February 2022. https://muhannadshono.com/al-mars.

The Saudi Art Council commissioned Shono's 'Al-Mars' (2019) (see fig. 2.17) installation in cooperation with the Neurorobotics Research Laboratory in Berlin as part of the Alobour exhibition under the curatorship of Dr Effat Fadag. The intuitive and responsive technology in this installation was similar to that used in 'Ala: A Ritual Machine.' Of this piece, he says,

> In 'Al-Mars' I imagined the colonisation of Mars by the West, which has been happening since 1960 and through the 1970s – the US has been sending machines to Mars as long ago as the 1960s. And I thought I wanted to play, I wanted to find parallels between when the US first landed on Mars and what was happening in the Arab world. So, I built these "story landers", which were like metallic books of events, carved and etched to tell a story of the event. If you touched them, they would come to life and then stop; they were a living record of events, presenting a different way to interact with narrative and history.[160]

In this work, the data was taken from the machines and the process of interaction was projected onto screens so that people could see their interactive involvement. This kinetic art series of

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[160] Shono, interview.

interactive "creatures" that respond to an audience derives from a desire to experiment and not from being committed to any specific material or technique. The artist was interested in the idea and the narrative and what those narratives and ideas demanded in terms of materials or ways of expression. He hoped the audience would experience this work in a way other than passively looking at it.[161]

Previous artists have examined how what we could refer to as "technologized" religious experiences can be generated in art. We find a similarly humorous and possibly sceptical example of this in the work of Nam June Paik, particularly in 'Buddha TV', 1974.[162] In this sculptural installation, a sculpture of the Buddha is placed in front of a camera and the image is looped on a TV screen that is placed in front of the statue.[163] Although interaction is kept to a minimum here (gallery goers are merely distracting forms passing behind the serene Buddha), the sense of being alienated from spirituality by the use of technology is central to the piece.

Figure 2.18 Nam June Paik. TV Buddha,1974, accessed 11 March 2023. https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/nam-june-paik-in-5-artworks/. By photographer Eric Kroll,

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[161] Shono, interview.
[162] Walter Smith, "Nam June Paik's TV Buddha as Buddhist Art," *Religion and the Arts* 4, no. 3 (2000): 359–373, https://doi.org/10.1163/156852901750359121.
[163] Smith, "Nam June Paik's TV Buddha."

Interpreting Muhannad Shono's artworks involves delving into themes of participation, ritual, technology and cultural identity. Both 'AL-MARS' and 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' blur the distinction between observers of and participants by encouraging the viewer to actively engage with the installations.

The changing roles that rituals play in modern society are explored in Shono's 'Ala: A Ritual Machine,' paying particular consideration to the possibility that ritual practices may be reinvigorated and redefined by technology in the coming years. Shono produced a series of ritual-performing machines that visitors interact with, prompting them to reflect on how spiritual experiences have been commodified and mechanised. Visitors effectively receive an invitation to reflect on spirituality, technology and tradition in a way that makes then contemplate, explore their curiosity and possibly even feel uncomfortable. Shono's artwork reveres tradition but also acknowledges that it is necessary to continually adapt because the world is evolving rapidly.

Shono's artwork is highly relevant at a time when Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is initiating far-reaching cultural and social change and there is growing interest in interactive and participatory art. When people interact with artworks, there is an opportunity for them to engage with cultural identity and heritage in a location that invites them to reflect, talk with others and collectively express themselves. The work could be regarded as a critique of globalisation, consumerism and the loss of cultural heritage, whilst opening up possibilities for tradition to be reclaimed and reimagined in the modern era. Discussions about modernity and tradition are invited by Shono's artworks and they invite visitors to consider the contributions that culture and art make to Saudi society. Notably, these works of art foster social cohesion, cultural exchange and creativity and, as such, are closely aligned with Vision 2030's stated aims.

On the international stage, Shono's artwork is recognised for the innovative way in which it combines tradition with modern technology, as well as for how it encourages people of all cultures to consider and discuss these matters. It is because of its ability to prompt people to reflect on important social and cultural matters in combination with its relevance in the current era and its use of interaction that Shono's art has attracted attention beyond Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, these works invite people to actively erect experience and meaning, thereby presenting a challenge to the established notions of tradition, technology and art.

2.6 <u>Manal Aldowayan: collective voice and the social body in collaboration</u>

Direct participation in the making of the artwork was a characteristic of the social practice of Manal Aldowayan in her earlier works and is a critically relevant model through which to better understand contemporary participatory practices. While the participatory artworks examined here by the previous three artists explored body, dialogue, cultural memory, and experiences, Aldowayan's work focuses on social participation – the social body – and this draws our attention to political and societal problems in the region.

Manal Aldowayan included audiences in her early artworks. In projects such as 'The Choice' (2005) (see figs. 2.19, 2.20), she tells us that the models that posed for photographs for the work were "not just models – they were participants"; she cared about them and their career choices, as at that point only 3% of women were employed in Saudi Arabia.[164] She wanted to document this by recording this important fact in the work, temporarily capturing these women's lives before they continued their life stories. Aldowayan remarks:

> Knowing that women represent half of all communities, their potential and energy become valuable resources for a healthy society. If traditions are used as a tool to suppress and control, our communities will become handicapped. Unleashing women's dreams and embracing their achievements is essential to reach a needed state of societal balance.[165]

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[164] Manal Aldowayan, interview by the author, August 20, 2020.
[165] "The Choice," Manal Aldowayan, accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/30-the-choice-collection/

Figure 2.19 Manal Aldowayan. The Choice, 2005 accessed March 13, 2024, https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/30-the-choice-collection/.

Figure 2.20 Manal Aldowayan. The Choice, 2005, accessed March 13, 2024. https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/30-the-choice-collection/.

The next participatory installation she worked on was 'Suspended Together' (2011) (see figs. 2.21, 2.22). She explains the process behind the piece thusly:

> At that time, before social media, we mostly used email. It was the only way that information could spread easily. I sent out emails for women to participate and 200 women responded. I originally just sent out 20 emails, but they were forwarded and spread. I had requested for these women to send me scans of their documents, and I placed these in the artwork.[166]

'Suspended Together' was an installation that provided the audience with the impression of freedom; it included 200 doves. But on closer examination, the doves appeared frozen, without hope of flight. Looking closely, we see that each dove had a permit document printed on its body – a permit of the type that allowed Saudi women to travel. At that time, Saudi women who needed or wanted to travel had to obtain such a document, which was issued by an appointed male guardian. Aldowayan reached out to a large group of leading Saudi women to donate their permission documents for inclusion in the piece. The installation bore the documents of award-winning educators, scientists, engineers, journalists, artists, and leaders who had contributed to society and succeeded in their careers. In this artwork, participation involved supplying subject matter: personal content for the piece. In the artist's words, "regardless of age and achievement, when it comes to travel, all these women are treated like a flock of suspended doves".[167] Aldowayan's concept of participation has shifted from the corporeality of the body into a wider social and ethical arena. She emphasises the conceptual and political implications of participatory art and its relationship to activism and education. In raising consciousness, she creates a space in which women can share experiences and talk about issues.

Aldowayan's installation 'Suspended Together' considers the themes of collective resilience, interconnectedness and unity. The suspended elements have carefully orchestrated relationships and this is indicative of humanity being interconnected. The materiality of Suspended Together gives it greater texture and depth, encouraging visitors to discuss values, culture and developments. It is intended that those who engage with the installation will experience feelings

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[166] Aldowayan, interview.
[167] "Suspended Together," Manal Aldowayan, accessed October 25, 2022, http://www.manaldowayan.com/suspended-together.html.

of empathy, resilience and hope, prompting them to consider the role that they personally play in society.

Figure 2.21 Manal Aldowayan. Suspended Together, 2011, accessed 11 July 2022. ,
https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2011/manal-al-dowayan/img/16. By photographer Haupt and Binder,

Figure 2.22 Manal Aldowayan. Suspended Together, 2011 Accessed 11 July 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/artworks/36-suspended-together/.

Figure 2.23 Manal Aldowayan. Tree of Guardians, 2014, accessed 11 July 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/17-tree-of-guardians/.

Figure 2.24 Manal Aldowayan. Tree of Guardians, 2014. accessed 11 July 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/17-tree-of-guardians/.

Figure 2.25 Manal Aldowayan. Tree of Guardians, 2014, accessed 11 July 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/17-tree-of-guardians/.

Figure 2.26 Manal Aldowayan. Tree of Guardians, 2014, accessed 11 July 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/17-tree-of-guardians/.

Figure 2.27 Manal Aldowayan. Esmi, 2012, accessed 9 July, 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/13-esmi-my-name/.

Figure 2.28 Manal Aldowayan. Esmi, 2012, accessed 9 July, 2022. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/13-esmi-my-name/.

Continuing with Aldowayan's career, the next major participatory installations she created were 'Esmi/My Name,' 2012 (see figs. 2.27, 2.28) and *Tree of Guardians*, 2014 (see figs. 2.23, 2.24, 2.25, 2.26). Aldowayan intended 'Esmi/My Name' to provoke discussion of the attitudes of Saudi society to women's names. There is a custom in Saudi Arabia that it is offensive to mention a woman's name but Aldowayan stresses that there is no basis for this in Islam or history. Aldowayan uses 'Esmi/My Name' as a tool inviting people to make a group statement about this matter, stressing the need to reclaim women's collective legacy and recognise the important role that identity plays. By doing so, 'Esmi/My Name' is challenging the norms of society whilst encouraging people to reflect on women's role in society. She again focused on woman's issues; visitors engaged in conversations about their past, present and future and thus created "a ripple effect of active preservation".[168] Around 4000 women participated in her artworks during these years in different ways: becoming part of the artwork physically or helping to build or activate it. The artist explains that there are two different levels in her installations. First, there is active participation, in the sense that the women are part of the conceptual process of building an artwork that requires multiple hands, multiple ideas, and the creation of a collective voice that integrates the multiple voices that contributed to its construction — these steps are what she refers to as the "conceptual side" of the work. Second, there is also a "personal side" to these pieces, which she explains as follows:

> Back then, when the idea arose for these installations, I had just become aware of the idea of participation in art and thought that this approach could help me dig deep and deal with many of the themes in my work. Women were very much restricted in their movement in public and in a lot of areas, and I think I found strength in the collective voice rather than in the individual. I mean, I could have built these works by myself, but I felt threatened and scared in doing that. Sometimes people feel empowered by the collective, like when you're with a number of your friends you feel stronger, but when you're alone it's harder. I felt that I was not allowed to use my own voice — at that time people would say "lower your voice, you cannot raise your voice, or reveal your name", those kinds of ideas were very prevalent in our culture. These sorts of

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[168] "Tree of Guardians," Manal Aldowayan, accessed October 25, 2022, http://www.manaldowayan.com/tree-of-guardians-.html.

restrictions led to me working in this way; to focusing on participation and collective voices. Participatory art was for me the easiest way to communicate with the community.[169]

The artist believed that incorporating participation would open much more room for dialogue in her work and make it possible to treat more critical issues. The American artist and writer Suzanne Lacy has presented similar ideas about participation, specifically in relation to public art, which she refers to as "new genre public art." In her book *Mapping the Terrain*, she states that public art is a mode of art practice that is "not built on a typology of materials, spaces or artistic media, but rather on concepts of audience, relationship, and political intention".[170] Lacy is interested in art practices that encourage social involvement and work that highlights the relationship between art and social inclusion. Art critic Grant Kester has also expressed interest in social inclusion in his books *Conversation Pieces* and *The One and the Many*. Kester is particularly attentive to the involvement of dialogue in artwork and exchanges between members of communities. He has examined the social aspects of art as a form of communication and developed a theory of "dialogical art". He postulates that dialogical art is conversational and involves "a locus of differing meanings, interpretations, and points of view".[171] He provides examples of numerous artists that became influential in this area, such as Wochen Klausur, Stephen Willats, Suzanne Lacy, and Hellen Harrison among many others. Kester claims that these artists facilitate new forms of comprehension through innovative and creative dialogue that crosses the boundaries of culture, religion, and race.[172] He writes, "I concentrate on works that define dialogue itself as fundamentally aesthetic."[173] This statement is founded on his belief that conversational exchange is a vital factor even in object-centred modes of practice.

In Aldowayan's participatory work, we find such a dialogical process between participants. The 'Tree of Guardians' is a collaborative installation which features brass leaves upon which are the

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[169] Aldowayan, interview. When we asked why she used interactivity, she added, "I use it because it is necessary because I think about the spaces (especially the old artworks) when women can gather and say something, so to create a space was the first act, and how are these space created, they were donated to me by women's organisations, women universities or women institutions or charity organisations such as Alnahda group or Fatat Alkahleg group in Alshargiya district, they all gave me spaces as a donation and that was something to look at, there is a spaces for women but not every space for her, this is one thing."
[170] Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain*, 28.
[171] Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces* (University of California Press, 2004), 10.
[172] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 1.
[173] Kester, *Conversation Pieces*, 13.

names of women from previous generations of the families of those who participated in the collaboration. As such, the installation helps to preserve the identities of those named on the leaves whilst also recognising the unnamed contributors who assisted by preserving cultural authenticity. The work invites participation and captures the history of individuals, thereby serving as a platform for stimulating conversation and actively recognising the role that women play in preserving culture.[174] Reflecting on this work, Aldowayan suggested that rather than being a sterile exercise in history, 'Tree of Guardians' captures the opinions of young women at this precise moment in time and it is these women who will instil authenticity, culture and knowledge in future generations. [175] The viewers became an active part of the work by engaging in conversation and interweaving their stories with the lives of women from previous generations. Kester's communicative exchanges also help to illuminate 'Esmi' because this artwork required interaction.

Aldowayan's work can be understood as an act of collaboration which aims to erase the difference between producers and recipients.[176] In work such as this, through dialogue and the processes of exchanging and sharing personal histories, certain social and political issues are inevitably addressed, such as the role of women in society and the way that they act as the protectors of tradition (even though they may be locked out of the dominant historical narrative). Such artworks reveal how interactive encounters between individuals, objects and artists generate art from our shared experience. According to Aldowayan, significant benefits are realised when women of various backgrounds have a platform to freely offer their opinions; this helps women to advance by promoting women's issues. [177] Scores of women contributed to the success of these projects and, by documenting the process on social media, they effectively invited other women around the world to engage remotely. By collaborating in this way, women established all-female communities: communities that grew out of their common interest in art and their experience of it. It is important to recognise the social logic behind the process. Notably, this idea of intersubjective space offers an innovative model whereby the efforts of

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[174] "Tree of Guardians," Manal Aldowayan, accessed March 13, 2024, http://www.manaldowayan.com/tree-of-guardians-.html.
[175] "Tree of Guardians."
[176] Dezeuze, *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork,* 6.
[177] "Tree of Guardians."

female artists in Saudi Arabia can be exhibited and encourage discussion. Aldowayan's work suggests another critical angle – that participatory art offers a model for resisting the singular authoring of a work: there is (political) power in the collective act of creating together.

As previously mentioned, Lacy and Kester promoted art practices that encouraged social involvement and conceptualised the relationship that links art with social inclusion. These formal and conceptual advancements within dialogical public artworks present new possibilities for creative expression through participation in Saudi Arabia and help bring intricate social issues to the surface. Producing works of art gives women a platform through which they can offer opinions. Based on the responses generated by my fieldwork interviews in the art landscape of Saudi Arabia, women are enthused by the prospect of using art to convey opinions about social developments and draw attention to their concerns.

When the inaugural Ad-Diriyah Biennale of Contemporary Art was held in 2021, Aldowayan was invited to take part. She used this opportunity to further develop 'Tree of Guardians' by presenting the artwork alongside the drawings of the participants in an attempt to increase the visibility of their participation. In addition, Aldowayan installed a microphone and invited the participants to recount a story about their own mother. This provided an additional layer of participation and resulted in several thousand stories being audio recorded by the end of the Biennale.[178] Participatory projects such as 'Suspended Together,' 'Esmi' and 'Tree of Guardians' demonstrate the importance of the artist as a mediator between art and the larger social sphere. Aldowayan's pursuit of social change drove and facilitated her collaboration with participants. I believe that this method of communicating with visitors was the most appropriate way to tackle social commentary relating to women's issues in Saudi Arabia.

In Aldowayan's latest participatory work, 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' (2020) (see figs. 1.1, 2.29, 2.30, 2.31), presented at Desert X, she moved from practices that involved the participant helping to physically make parts of the artwork to artworks that are activated when people interact with them. She installed a series of 12 trampolines flush to the dusty ground, some more than four metres in diameter. The piece is activated when people jump on the

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[178] "Tree of Guardians."

trampolines. The installed trampolines are invisible from a distance, and their presence is only recognised when exhibition attendees start bouncing on them. This idea of invisibility and disappearance is a major thematic concern in Aldowayan's research and practice. Aldowayan finds a new way of inviting the audience into the piece when participants are invited to "complete" the work by interacting with it physically. But the social and political content are still profound (I discuss the work in greater detail in Chapter 4).

Figure 2.29 Manal Aldowayan. Now You See Me Now You Don't, 2020, accessed 8 March 2023. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/11-now-you-see-me-now-you-don-t/.

Figure 2.30 Manal Aldowayan. Now You See Me Now You Don't, 2020, accessed 8 March 2023. https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/11-now-you-see-me-now-you-don-t/.

Figure 2.31 Manal Aldowayan. Now You See Me Now You Don't, 2020. accessed 8 March 2023.
https://www.manaldowayan.com/viewing-room/11-now-you-see-me-now-you-don-t/.

Eiman Elgibreen's art also examines how female subjects can be represented in Saudi Arabia and the tension between women's repressed or traditional and liberated or modern aspects. In Elgibreen's 'Does a Face Make a Difference?' (2013) (see figs. 2.32, 2.33), each of the 64 bricks conceals a photo of a Saudi woman at an early age. The photos have been selected to exemplify the various personalities of the women as children as they played, relaxed, laughed, and smiled.[179] Some configurations present just a single face, whereas others present two. This requires the person viewing the art to participate by considering how they relate to each of these individuals. The type of participation required by this artwork differs from that of Alghamdi's 'After Illusion' or Alshashai's 'Concise Passage.' Elgibreen collaborated with the 64 participants when producing 'Does a face Make a difference?' and the result was a work of art that is collective and possibly has a meaning that is shared by each of them. To truly understand this

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[179] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2014).

piece of art, it is necessary to consider that the artist has worked with members of the public to produce it. Elgibreen stated:

> The images of the young girls used in this sculpture are borrowed from 64 accomplished, conservative Saudi women who wanted to object to any materialistic outlook that might undermine their professional accomplishments if they held on to their cultural significance.[180]

Figure 2.32 Eiman Elgibreen. Does a face make a difference? 2016. accessed June 2023. https://www.eimanelgibreen.com/does-a-face-make-a-difference.html.

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[180] Khulod Albugami, "Al-Sadu as a Way of Understanding the Sociospatial Practices of Contemporary Art by Saudi Women," (PhD thesis, [Birmingham City University], 2018), 26.
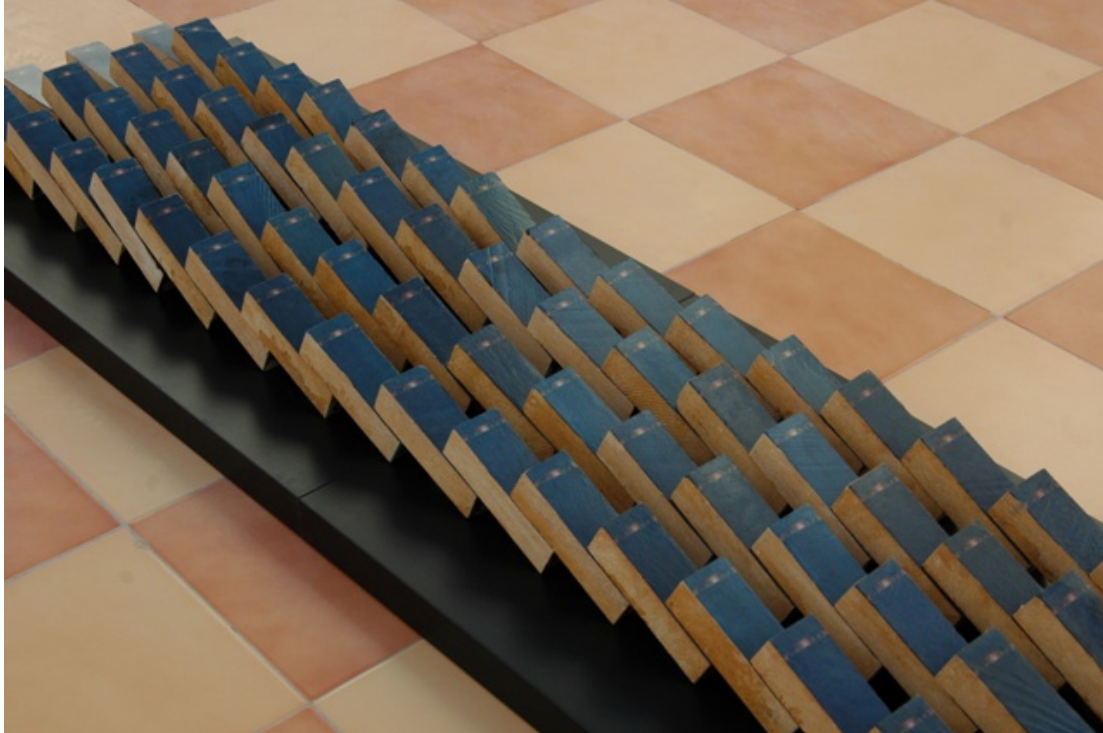
Figure 2.33 Eiman Elgibreen. Does a face make a difference? 2016. accessed June 2023. https://www.eimanelgibreen.com/does-a-face-make-a-difference.html.

Elgibreen's collaborative piece is both an artwork *and* a platform in that it enables Saudi women to represent themselves. Consequently, there is a striking contrast between the images that were used and the archetype of Saudi females as veiled and mute. The images help to convey the message that collectivism does not eradicate individualism. The artist invites those viewing the artwork to witness this subversive commentary and recognise that many Arab women can demonstrate their individuality without having to turn their backs on tradition; individuality and tradition are not mutually exclusive. Elgibreen's artwork demonstrates how women's experiences and practices have changed over time and participatory art has enabled and commented on the shift. Both Elgibreen's and Aldowayan's works rely heavily on the interacting viewer to provide the content of the work, although the artists make the technical and formal decisions. Elgibreen's art offers a means to question the role and status of women in Saudi society. Because her work encourages participation, it invites the observer to assume a different role when experiencing it. It provides an opportunity and an area in which to communicate and engage.

Elgibreen and Aldowayan are among a number of artists who address cultural conditions in Saudi Arabia through participatory artworks. They typically seek to stimulate reflection and discussion and this resonates with the aims of Saudi Vision 2030 to foster a more open and relaxed culture of societal progress in which artists are free to explore new forms of expression. In the Saudi context, Aldowayan's artworks are appreciated for their ability to challenge societal norms and initiate critical conversations. However, on the global stage, her work is primarily recognised for its themes of resilience and unity. On balance, it is apparent that Aldowayan has made a significant contribution in the realm of Saudi participatory art by encouraging people to engage whilst addressing multifaceted cultural factors.

2.7 Theoretical contextualist reflection

Participatory art, as explained in Chapter 1, can be understood as an art form that produces an area of critical activity for its audience that involves interaction and has an audience that acts as an interlocutor and co-creator whose activities bring an artwork to life, regardless of what form the final object becomes. Participatory art allows different types of navigation, assembly, or interaction which go well beyond the purely cognitive. In participatory art, it is presumed that the viewers will not be passive onlookers but rather complete an artwork by participating in its realisation. On some occasions, the audience may be expected to take part in the physical creation of the artwork. For example, Manal Aldowayan, in 'Esmi' and 'Tree of Guardians', and Eiman Elgibreen, in 'Does a Face Make a Difference?' invited the audience to form a sort of production line by building the pieces. Aldowayan and Elgibreen remind us that it is not only the personal involvement of an individual that is important to participatory work (the individual's body, gestures and actions) but also the fact that this individual is part of a network of individuals who interact with each other and the resources provided to them. Numerous contemporary Saudi artists prioritise the process of engagement over the resulting artwork – for example, Muhannad Shono in 'Ala(آلا): A Ritual Machines 'and 'Al-Mars' and Khalid Afif in 'I am at Home and You Are at Home' and 'Not Yet'. Such works of art are experienced slightly differently by each individual who engages with them.

Communication has been evolving and changing since the 1990s globally, including in the region of this research, Saudi Arabia. One of the main drivers for the changes has been digital technology. The computer made a significant impact on art and culture and introduced new ways to achieve interaction. Roy Ascott, who examined the significance of interactions between audiences and artworks, believed that computer interaction would be highly influential in the emergence of interactive art (explained in detail in Chapter 1).[181] Virtual spaces lend themselves to art. New forms of participatory art have emerged, with Afif and Shono at the forefront in Saudi Arabia. As early adopters of interactive technologies, they explored the creative use of computers in their work. Afif told me, "The artist has to address the visitor with the new methods they use, so I use video, television, electronics, and mobile phones. The idea that everything new is forbidden, as it was in our past, is not viable now – especially after the new Vision 2030."[182] I therefore argue that some of the new models of interactivity in art are a result of the rise of new media art, which tends to closely reflect the culture in which it is produced and consumed (see Chapter 1).

The creation of artworks that invite participation is frequently based on the assumption that participating encourages people to assume control over their political and social lives. Saudi works of art can achieve this by empowering people (e.g., Afif's 'You are at Home and I Am at Home', and 'Not Yet') and providing different approaches to interacting with the artwork (e.g., Aldowayan's 'Esmi', 'Suspended Together', and 'Tree of Guardians'). Such works of art prompt the viewer to trust in their ability to create and seek to make them feel empowered through participation.

Religion is a central part of life in Saudi Arabia, so works that challenge, question, and discuss it are taken very seriously. As discussed above, Aldowayan's work 'Esmi', 'Suspended Together' by Aldowayan, and Shono's 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' and 'Al-Mars' contain religious subject matter, especially references to ritual. These pieces demonstrate the relationship between rituals, movement, and repetition and the body. The artists have made their work more accessible to the

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[181] Linda Candy and Sam Ferguson, *Interactive Experience in the Digital Age: Evaluating New Art Practice* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2014), 13.
[182] Afif, interview.

public by referencing culturally specific religious practices; the interactive elements of these works relate to the sense of embodiment that is engendered in everyday religious practice.

The motivations of the artists discussed above to explore participatory practices are rooted in these ideas. First, participatory art engages new audiences through the entertaining, playful qualities that make it accessible. Second, current developments in the art world – especially the introduction of personal computers - have driven artists and curators to pay attention to participatory practices that have emerged in recent years. Third, participatory art provides new dimensions in which artists can express their ideas using the collective voice. Finally, this form of artistic practice values individual input and produces unexpected results. The focus on interactivity helps artists to achieve their mission of responding to the lack of public engagement with contemporary art in Saudi Arabia.

The types of interactivities enabled by the art forms that I have studied – forms that involve experiencing and activating – are often spectacular, making them more accessible. Audiences with little experience of contemporary art can find abstract and conceptual work or that with overtly political subject matter difficult to digest; this is true in many cultural contexts. Participatory practices act as a bridge between the public and difficult subject matter. Intentionally or not, Saudi Vision 2030 has opened up the floodgates for such work by promoting an interactive and participatory approach to making.

The works in this chapter are not only 'looked' at but are walked through and experienced, and they present subject matter and situations that raise difficult questions for the experiencer. They are not "mere entertainment" (although this dismissive category is thoroughly critiqued in Chapter 4), nor as Bishop notes, can they be simply equated with other leisure activities and pastimes.

In analysing these works from Saudi Arabia, it is clear that interaction is a significant component of the production of many contemporary Saudi Arabian artists, even though it is not always its main point or reason for existing. Furthermore, the combination of different types of engagement and interaction is, I argue, its strength as it generously gives the audience many routes into the work. This may not always mean that the work is enormously significant, successful,

antagonistic, or difficult, but this approach has paved the way for more critically resonant work to be created. Simply put, you have to get people in the door before you can educate them and then question their assumptions.

A challenge in analysing these forms of art is that it is difficult to fit them into the developmental trajectory of the pre-existing art historical timeline in Saudi Arabia. Nor are they directly related to the evolution of traditional media such as painting or sculpture. Nevertheless, their practitioners are at pains to locate participatory works within the context of art in Saudi Arabia, although the critical values and even the common language for discussing such art are still under development. This creates an impressive but uncertain set of discussions that overlap with many adjacent theoretical areas.

2.8 Chapter conclusion

Contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, I argue, has moved away from traditional aesthetics found in painting and sculpture to more contemporary forms that are influenced by and engaged with external artistic expressions. This participatory approach to art is inclusive in that it allows more people to engage in the art scene and art activities. In this chapter, I surveyed the work of a selection of interactive and participatory artists, leading thinkers, and theorists to apply the findings to work shown in Saudi Arabia.

In considering the works of these artists, the chapter has accomplished two main functions: 1. It has introduced the participatory artworks of Saudi artists whose work is rarely the subject of sustained critical analysis and who have not been presented together as a group. It has considered the artists, their practices, their materials, their spaces, and their networks, and how their works are related. 2. It has begun to develop a critical conceptual language for discussing these Saudi artists and their work, using a vocabulary that has been drawn partly from existing discourses on participatory art, interaction, and cultural geography. My aim has been to find new ways of describing and critically analysing participatory artwork and the debates that surround it. The next chapter closely examines the emergence of participatory art in Saudi Arabia and analyses the driving forces that enabled the transformation of contemporary art in a Saudi Arabian context.

Chapter 3

Background of art in Saudi Arabia and the emergence of contemporary art

3.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of the visual arts in Saudi Arabia and then explores the rapid growth of contemporary art in the twenty-first century. It examines the emergence of participatory art among artists and art institutions and analyses the forces that drove this transformation and enabled the growth of the Saudi art audience. The aim of this chapter is to identify key discourses in the field of participatory art in a Saudi Arabian context and make sense of the emerging data that focus this study. It also introduces theoretical thinking that frames this research, pointing out different critical approaches to the subject, including sociocultural and sociopolitical perspectives that will enable us to critically examine the issues that surround this emerging trend.

Saudi Arabia has changed dramatically in all its sectors since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030. This vision, only published in 2016, has given a strong impetus to participatory art. Its aim is to build an audience interested in contemporary art by offering participatory and interactive experiences. In the past ten years, artworks that encourage audiences to participate and offer an experience have become increasingly influential and have been promoted by new art and cultural institutions such as the Misk Art Institute and King Abdulaziz Centre (Ithra). This change is described by these institutions as promoting art, the visitor experience, and visitors' involvement with art; raising awareness and appreciation of arts within the community; and developing the

Saudi art community and industry; all of these aims are also those of Vision 2030.[183] While interactivity is increasingly prevalent in Saudi art, there is little research on the emergence of this trend. Most of the literature on participatory art in Saudi Arabia is found on webpages of art institutions and artists and in online magazines (these various digital sources are referenced in this chapter). Besides searching the internet, I gathered additional information on Saudi culture, art institutions and individual artists from books such as *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom* and *Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*.[184]

An examination of the literature shows that little research has been done on the emergence, challenges, and implications of the participatory art practices employed by artists in the Saudi context. To gain a fuller understanding of the emerging forms, I investigated how the social and cultural factors that condition participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia have been addressed and negotiated. I also explored the challenges and goals of participatory art and their implications in the Saudi context. My review of recent literature on art in Saudi Arabia and the emergence of participatory art practices appears below. It focuses on the recent changes in art institutions that have resulted from Saudi Vision 2030 funding, and how the funding and practices, respectively, have impacted artists' work.

3.2 Saudi art

Participatory art did not appear in Saudi Arabia until the twenty-first century but emerged in the West in the 1950s – for example, in artworks associated with the Neo-Dada movement.[185] However, some early examples of participatory and interactive art were created in the 1920s, such as Marcel Duchamp's piece named 'Rotary Glass Plates' (1920) (see Chapter 1). A question

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[183] "About us | Misk Art Institute," Misk Art Institute, accessed 2 February 2020, https://miskartinstitute.org/about; "About Ithra," Ithra, accessed 23 April 2020, https://www.ithra.com/en/about-us-about-ithra/; "Edge of Arabia – Contemporary Art and Creative Movements from the Arab World," Edge of Arabia, 2020, http://edgeofarabia.com/about; "About Art Jameel and its Initiatives for Artists | Art Jameel," Art Jameel, accessed 2 February 2020, https://artjameel.org/about/art-jameel/.

[184] Sean Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture, and Society in the Kingdom* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2019); Stephen Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia: Contemporary Art from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (London: Both-Clibborn, 2012).

[185] Dezeuze, *The 'Do-It-Yourself' Artwork,* 4.

arises: how should participatory art be understood in the context of this research project and the Saudi art scene? Should it be from an international perspective (taking into account the history of Western participatory art) or from the standpoint of Saudi Arabian art history? What do these different perspectives add? As mentioned, participatory art became prominent in the West in the 1950s, but now, due to globalisation, creators are influenced by the internet, global travel, and international artists. Nada Shabout emphasises this, stating, "It has been argued that learning and imitating Western art was a necessary step to compensate for the lack of artistic creativity the Arab artists faced."[186] Yet Saudi art historian Maha Al-Senan cautions that

> [w]e should be aware of cultural differences, diversity, and unique local identities, including in the visual arts. The artistic product is a cultural product that should not be viewed from a Western or Eastern perspective but, rather, in accordance with the region's artistic growth.[187]

Al-Senan explains that as artistic growth is related to environment and culture, the region is "quiet"[188] in relation to social change issues, intellectual developments, and the role that belief and religion play in society.[189] However, Al-Senan notes that many people consider the Arab nations still under colonial influences, although only from a cultural standpoint, and that Americanisation is evident in the Arab world, given the influence of the United States on media and entertainment.[190] Nevertheless, she feels that an understanding of the full scope of cultural movements in the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, is dependent upon subjective interpretations in relation to artistic evaluations.[191] She acknowledges US influence but feels that it has been translated and transformed by local artists. However, I will demonstrate that, due to globalisation, partnerships with international and Western agencies, and the introduction of audience participation and interactivity, Saudi contemporary art must be viewed from both an international perspective *and* through the lens of Saudi history and culture, as I will demonstrate.

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[186] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, 35.

[187] Maha Al-Senan, "An Insider's View of Saudi and UAE Visual Arts," *Asian Academic Research Journal of Social Siences & Humanities*, Volume 1, Issue 35 (2015): 41. Al-Senan is a past associate professor at Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University, past General Manager for the Saudi Heritage Preservation Society and currently a Shura Counil member.

[188] Al-Senan meant by "quite" that Saudi Arabia has never been colonised by other country.

[189] Al-Senan, "An Insider's View," 40.

[190] Al-Senan, "An Insider's View," 38.

[191] Al-Senan, "An Insider's View." 38.

We cannot deny the influence of Western contemporary art but, as we shall see, this influence has been assimilated and adapted to the KSA cultural experience.

To understand Saudi contemporary art, it is essential to understand its relationship to modernism, and how Saudi Arabia changed in a very short time. The KSA is a young country which was united and established in 1932 by King Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud, who is the father of our current king, Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz. For this reason, the visual arts generally, and contemporary art specifically, in Saudi Arabia are very new in comparison to those in many other countries. In the past, there was very little art taught in schools and few art museums, institutions, and dedicated spaces for artists to work. That said, some prominent art institutions *were* instituted in Saudi Arabia, including Dar Al Funoon Al Sa'udiyyah (The Saudi Art House), which was founded by the Saudi artist Mohammed Alsaleem,[192] and the government art institution Prince Faisal bin Fahad Fine Arts Hall in Riyadh, founded in 1985.[193] In 1989, prince Khaled Al-Faisal launched the non-profit art institution Al-Muftaha Arts Village in Abha City, which played a major role in supporting and encouraging artists and the modern arts in the KSA. This institution supported the growth of pioneering Saudi artists such as Ahmed Mater and Abdulnasser Gharem. It constituted a productive community for artists, and "a source of intellectual and artistic energy", as Gharem writes.[194] The art village closed in late 2015 due to a lack of funding but was reopened in 2017.[195]

In an interview conducted for this thesis, Saudi artist and art historian Eiman Elgibreen described the situation of Saudi art, explaining that

> Saudi artists actually started from a very strong position in the 1960s, it was a great start. We even had both male and female artists starting to work at that time, and they had really successful exhibitions; they got recognition right from the beginning. […] After 1990, I noticed that there were fewer and fewer exhibitions, artists started to lose faith in art and stopped producing art. And what happened in 1990 was, of course, the Gulf War. After the war, the economy of Saudi Arabia suffered a lot as they needed to pay the loans and bills to America and other countries.

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[192] Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, *That Feverish Leap into the Fierceness of Life: A Look at Five Arab Cities across Five Decades* (Dubai: Nabeel Printing Press, 2018), 124.
[193] Eiman Elgibreen, *Space: A Tale* (Misk Media Center, 2019), 21.
[194] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 38.
[195] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 37, 59.

This is the period I lived through; I remember very well that the budget for some of the sectors decreased, and I believe that this is when the problem started. It has to do a lot with the economy. So, in 2008 it was a boom period; so many people were wealthy enough to fund exhibitions, and this is when they started again.[196]

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Saudi government tried to raise the status of the arts by launching art institutions, including museums, and, from 1975 onwards sponsoring art study abroad for artists and academics; students were sent to Italy, Egypt, Spain, France, and other countries to earn undergraduate degrees in art.[197] But this was not enough. Artist Ahmed Mater, explains the challenges that Saudi Arabian artists faced, observing that there was a

[…] lack of an environment conducive to practicing art in a way that enhances awareness. The lack of awareness as to the true value of art and its crucial role in the modernisation process. The lack of a formal arts programmes at educational institutions.[198]

Artist Abdulnasser Gharem noted that Saudi Arabia, unlike many other places that produce internationally known artists, has few art schools: "This means that the younger generation is self-taught …. I think we have more barriers to push against, than artists from many other parts of the world."[199]

At the same time that the visual arts were suffering (due to a lack of exhibition opportunities, etc.), artists also could not show work unless they obtained the approval of the relevant ministry.[200] Hamza Serafi, co-director of Jeddah's Athr Gallery, tells us that "There were no precise guidelines as to exactly what was allowed."[201]However, Elgibreen said in a conversation that the permitting process is not the reason for current delays:

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[196] Eiman Elgibreen, interview by the author, September 7, 2020.
[197] Mohammed Alrusais, *The History of Fine Art in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Ministry of Culture and Media, 2010), 58.
[198] Aya Mousawi, *We Need to Talk* (Edge of Arabia, 2012), 120.
[199] Mousawi, *We Need to Talk*, 114.
[200] Henry Hemming, *Abdulnasser Gharem: Art of Survival* (Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2011), 43–44.
[201] Hemming, *Abdulnasser Gharem*, 43–44

To be honest this is not the case because, from the beginning of history, it's [been] a requirement in Saudi that you get approval for what you are showing, and this rule is still in force. If that was the reason [for the delays], then we wouldn't have had another period when the arts flourished after 2007. Artists still cannot show their work … it's all about funding, you need to mount an exhibition, you need to rent a gallery, install lightning, [handle] shipping, publicity and so on ... it's all about funding.[202]

As Elgibreen said, funding is what allowed contemporary art to take hold in Saudi Arabia, and lack of funding caused delays in the past. In retrospect, those cultural and political characteristics might have been responsible for the slow growth of various forms of art in the country in the past decades, including the delayed introduction of participatory art to the KSA.

Traditionally, many artists in the West have considered that conservative environments stifle creativity, but Mater regards such situations as inspirational: "It is more interesting to be an artist surrounded by challenges like ours than to be an artist surrounded by too much choice and unrestricted opportunity."[203] To make sense of this paradox, Sean Foley suggests that it is necessary to transcend the typical binary divisions relied upon by academics and reporters who interpret Saudi Arabia in terms of conservatism versus liberalism or the state versus civil society.[204] He also suggests that it may be possible to change the outlook for popular culture (including art) in the country: "The Kingdom's artists make the surprising intellectual leap of linking conservative Islam with comedy and modern art, genres of culture that are often associated by Westerners with cosmopolitanism and secularism, not to say subversion."[205] Artist Muhannad Shono, like Mater, believes that his generation of artists has experienced social limitations that have inspired extraordinary creativity. "Restrictions and limitations – they actually create more fertile grounds and stronger forms of expression", he says. "If you live in a society that's equitable and fair, that's nice. But what happens to art and expression? It diminishes

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[202] Eiman Elgibreen, interview by the author, September 7, 2020.
[203] Some of Mater's most provocative photographs of Mecca were taken as he flew on a Saudi military helicopter above the city – an experience that would not have been possible had he not secured government permits to film the holy city, the Kaaba, and other religious sites. Winning those approvals was, of course, one of the many impediments he had to overcome to conduct his work in the nation. Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 10.
[204] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 7.
[205] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 7.

because there's nothing to push against."[206] In restrictive situations, artists are challenged to create and that challenge invokes something within them. But how do they convey this sense of challenge? "This may be the beauty of art." as Afif proposed.[207]

I agree with Shono and Mater's interpretations, but Efat Fadag, a curator and the head of the Islamic art department at King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah, explains the recent changes in Saudi Arabian contemporary art differently, framing them in terms of social matters and creativity:

> Mainly, art was practised with the aim of preservation, while commenting on social issues was treated with less interest. Art practice was very limited in terms of expression, as creativity was bound by censorship, not just from a religious point of view, but also from the point of view of tradition and culture. Today in the age of technology, Saudi artists have the ability to critique and to analyse social issues. Saudi artists' works show freedom of expression while staying true to aesthetic presentation.[208]

Relative to such social issues, Saudi female artist Manal Aldowayan indicates the response to her work by Saudi art audiences is less hostile than it used to be. Viewers have begun to move toward understanding and engaging with it, whereas previously it was considered taboo. She says that "this present culture has allowed people to communicate new ideas without being labelled reformist in a dangerous sense".[209] Aldowayan tells us that censorship is not problematic in Saudi Arabia. Her sculpture 'Esmi' (2012) portrayed giant prayer beads with female names (it was made in response to a conservative trend forbidding men to use a woman's name in public) and was exhibited nevertheless. She says, "My art is very critical of social attitudes toward women, and I have never been censored in Saudi."[210]

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[206] Melissa Gronlund, "Saudi Arabia's Muhannad Shono Introduces His 'Monster' at the Venice Biennale," *The National*, 12 October 2022, https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/2022/04/25/saudi-arabias-muhannad-shono-introduces-his-monster-at-the-venice-biennale/.

[207] Khalid Afif, interview by the author, September 11, 2020.

[208] Mousawi, *We Need to Talk,* 111.

[209] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia,* 97.

[210] Daisy Carrington, "Saudi Arabia's Change of Art," *CNN*, 8 May 2013, https://edition.cnn.com/2013/05/08/world/meast/contemporary-artists-saudi-arabia/index.html.

Aldowayan also argues (in relation of the development of contemporary art) that this shift in the realm of art was not about the removal of formal restrictions. Rather, it reflected changing attitudes within Saudi society at a more fundamental level. She adds that most of the censorship that occurs in Saudi Arabia is not imposed by the state or religious institutions: it comes from within the culture.[211]Most people in Saudi Arabia are Bedouin and follow strict traditions and a way of life that has remained largely unchanged for centuries. Most Saudis used to reject many forms of art, including the playing of music in public places, the representation of the human body in sculpture, and the teaching of portrait drawing at schools and universities. [212]

Dina Lutfi, in her article "Challenging Perceptions of Modern Arab Art" suggests that the prohibition of certain images may help to explain why Islamic and Arab art has changed so slowly. Such attitudes have also led Western scholars to perceive Islamic and Arabian art as lagging behind the art of the West.[213] Although Islam has forbidden the depiction of humans in art, this has not been always the case (whether in the past or today). Artists in the Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, have been permitted to draw full-length figures (e.g. *Zaboun*, 1969, by Safeya Binzagr [214]), and cartoons of people and animals that are reproduced in the media and shown at art exhibitions as a means of cultural critique.[215] In this context, we can look back to Islamic art, where Muslim aesthetics were represented through the conceptualisation of forms and rejection of representational images. Nada Shabout observed in her book *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics,* that "the identity of Islamic art was never in doubt" but due to the cultural, political, and economic weakness of the Islamic world, Arab art did not develop as quickly as it should have.[216] In the West, non-figurative art inspired various movements and schools that conveyed different ideas and emotions. Shabout goes on to write:

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[211] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia*, 95.

[212] This was my experience when I was a student; then the study and teaching of representational art became acceptable from 2010.

[213] Dina A. M. Lutfi, "Challenging Perceptions of Modern Arab Art," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7, no. 3 (November 2020): 288, https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921708 .

[214] Melissa Gronlund, *"Safeya Binzagr: The Woman Who Put Saudi Art on the Map."* The National. 28 May 2018. www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/safeya-binzagr- the-woman-who-put-saudi-art-on-the-map-1.726488.

[215] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 8; Lutfi, "Challenging Perceptions of Modern Arab Art," 288; Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, 14.

[216] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics,* 15.

Surprisingly, although the aesthetic revolution of modern Western art expressed such new ideals as the rejection of imitative reality, an analogy between [Islamic and Western non-representational art] was not made. Simply stated, Islamic art respected the same ideals of modern Western art, albeit with one main difference: the Islamic aesthetic revolution, which took place almost ten centuries before that of modern Western art, was formulated based on the perceptual constructs of an Islamic religious ideal. Islamic abstraction is a cultural, intellectual, and communal expression of faith, its main goal being to serve the purity of Islamic monotheism.[217]

We find a kind of erasure of the representational human figure within Western modern art itself, which has undergone a slow process of purification and reduction, with modes of expression gradually removed from each medium.[218] Storytelling belonged to literature, representation to photography; painting, therefore, began to concern itself with its own, specific limitations: colour, form (freed from representation), line, surface, flatness, and the edge of the canvas.[219] It no longer had to concern itself with representing figures (people or objects) and telling their stories; photography, literature, and journalism could do that. Figures are abstracted – twisted and contorted and reduced to geometric shapes or looser organic forms. We see this in Picasso and Matisse, for example, and it is taken to an extreme in the canvases of the Russian Constructivists. Other artists rejected representation altogether, creating purely abstract canvases (e.g. Mondrian and Kandinsky).[220]

We could associate the Islamic art revolution with what happened in Saudi Arabian art in the twentieth century. In the 50s, there was a revival of art, and then, as Elgibreen stated, a decrease in the production of art that lasted until the twenty-first century. This was due, Elgibreen explained, to political and economic factors. Therefore, the Islamic ban on the representation of images did not delay the development of Saudi or Arab art, despite Lutfi's claims. However, we could ask whether the participatory role of the viewer as a figure in contemporary Saudi art acts as an expression of a kind of postmodern aniconism within the culture. Is this aniconism – the

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[217] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics,* 14.

[218] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon" *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 554–560.

[219] Greenberg, *Towards a Newer Laocoon*, 559.

[220] Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Art in Theory 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 754–760.

ban placed on all forms of representation, particularly on the representation of animals and people – problematic for participatory art?

By the era of minimalism, the concept of the embodied viewer as a participant had become extremely important. This can be found in the theoretical writings of Michael Fried ("Art and Objecthood"), Donald Judd ("Specific Objects"), and Robert Morris ("Notes on Sculpture"), for example.[221] These theorists and artists argued that minimal art objects could be understood as grounds of sorts; abstract forms that the active, embodied viewer perceived and interacted with. The locations in which these objects were exhibited (e.g. art galleries) created a space for this interaction, that is, for the embodied viewer to experience the works. These works were, therefore, interactive – but mostly in a passive sense. They related to the viewer and made the viewer aware of his or her relationship with them, and viewers interacted with these objects experientially in time and space. They walked around, over, and under them; they encountered and experienced them.

This engagement and approach to the viewer/participant as an activated element of the artistic experience can be found in the work of many contemporary Saudi artists (some of those works, such as artworks by Alshashai and Altukais, have been discussed in Chapter 2). So, could they represent a kind of aniconism? Could the removal of the figure in modernist art be utilised in postmodern art in a Saudi context, in which the religious and cultural prohibition against representing the human figure can still be felt? So where did the figure go? The figure of the viewer came to be the stand-in for the figurative or representational element in these works.

If we interpret the participatory art of Saudi Arabia in this way, we could argue that these artists are a part of this modernist and postmodernist trajectory and that the prohibition of representation has led to an increase in the production of participatory art in Saudi Arabia, with the embodied viewer who interacts with and activates the work becoming that work's figure. This participatory element increases access to contemporary art and expands the audience for it by inviting viewers to experience their bodies as elements of artworks.

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[221] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood;" Donald Judd, "Specific Objects;" Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture."

3.3 The emergence of contemporary and participatory art in Saudi Arabia from 2003 to the present

> Art is changing its shape because society is changing its shape.
>
> -Gustaf Almenberg.[222]

Beginning in 2016 (when Vision 2030 was announced), Saudi officials became aware that the arts could be used to develop Saudi society and shape outside opinions of the KSA.[223] But changes occurred as early as 2003, with the development of art institutions (previously lacking in the country). These included Edge of Arabia and Art Jameel, founded in 2003; Athrart, established in 2009; the Saudi Art Council, begun in 2013; the Misk Art Institute, established in 2017; and Ithra, founded in 2018. These institutions as well as a few others served as the foundation for contemporary art in Saudi Arabia. Saudi contemporary artists curated landmark exhibitions that were shown in 2008 in London and then in cities such as Berlin, Venice, Istanbul, and Dubai. The title of the exhibition *Transition*, held in Istanbul in 2010, references the extraordinary era of change that young Saudi artists have lived through and the ways that they have documented shifting conceptions of self, culture, society, and faith.[224] These exhibitions were managed by Edge of Arabia, the first modern Saudi organisation designed to support contemporary art. Edge of Arabia was founded by British artist and curator Stephen Stapleton and the two artist–founders of the Saudi Arts Movement, Ahmed Mater and Abdul Nasser Gharem.[225]

Stapleton explains that the organisation started with a group of independents who at that time were not associated with any galleries, museums, or arts organisations. The partners travelled across the country searching for contemporary Saudi artists, aiming to connect them with one another.[226] Because the organisation was established by a group of artists who did not have

[222] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 4.
[223] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia,* 58.
[224] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia*, 268.
[225] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia*, 11; Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 22.
[226] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia*, 23.

substantial economic resources, they needed to get funding from other organisations and businesses. Art Jameel, 2003, has funded and partnered with Edge of Arabia since its inception.[227] Art Jameel is an independent organisation that supports and promotes art, as well as providing support to creative communities and artists in Saudi and Gulf countries and pioneering cultural events such as Jeddah Art Week.[228] It has also supported a new social and exhibition space in Dubai that is utilised for educational purposes. Renata Papsch, the general manager at Art Jameel International, writes:

> Constructive engagement with society is one of our founding principles…. Arts and culture are not "elitist" and we want that engagement to be interactive rather than passive, in that people of all ranks participate in our initiatives. Open discussions and critical engagement are part of all our projects.[229]

Foundations such as Art Jameel, as well as the Saudi royal family and the energy corporation Saudi Aramco, focus on social advancements and artistic development in Saudi Arabia.[230] Together these sponsors and organisations have helped to transform the climate for artists, patrons, and cultural practitioners in the KSA. Subsequently, they paved the way for the foundation of the non-profit Saudi Art Council (SAC), which has been imperative in advancing a more official image of the art world in the country. The SAC is chaired by Princess Jawaher bint Majid bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia.[231] This has meant that contemporary art practices of all kinds have been given an enormous financial boost, which was previously unheard of in Saudi Arabia. The support has been employed to nurture and promote many mediums and aspects of contemporary art, particularly participatory practices.

An important question must be asked about the recent developments in the visual arts in Saudi Arabia, namely, what has driven these transformations? One aspect which illustrates this can be

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[227] "Edge of Arabia," Edge of Arabia, accessed 14 May 2020, http://edgeofarabia.com/about/founding-partner.
[228] "About Art Jameel and its Initiatives for Artists," Art Jameel, accessed 14 May 2020, https://artjameel.org/about/art-jameel/.
[229] Wided Khadraoui, "Future Imperfect: Digitalizing Social Change through Cultural Institutions in Saudi Arabia," Ibraaz, 2016, https://www.ibraaz.org/publications/78.
[230] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 48.
[231] Alia Al-Senussi, "The Local Evolution of Saudi Arabia's Contemporary Art Scene (Identity and Culture in the 21st Century Gulf," *Gulf Affairs* 32 (Autumn 2016).

identified as the role technology and the internet have played in art and culture. Artists Abdulnasser Gharem, Eyad Maghazel, Maha Malluh, and Hamza Serafi credit globalisation, the internet, and social media for recent developments in the Saudi art scene.[232] The internet, as a limitless source of data, has inspired artists to share their ideas and opinions and made documentation and art resources more readily available. Foley explains that at the start of the twenty-first century, the arts in Saudi Arabia benefited not only from new forms of communication technology, including the internet and smartphones, but also from new art galleries and open public spaces.[233]

Therefore, technology has played a general role in facilitating the development of the visual arts in Saudi Arabia, but the major impetus provided locally was Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's economic and social reform plan, Saudi Vision 2030, which was announced in April 2016. The plan expressed Saudi Arabia's long-term goals and expectations for art and culture. It established social and economic policies designed to free the KSA from dependence on oil exports and build a prosperous and sustainable economic future.[234] King Salman publicly stressed the significance of art and culture in the KSA and his support for Saudi artists,[235] and the General Cultural Authority and the General Entertainment Authority were established by royal decree on 7 May 2016. In 2018, the Ministry of Culture was created, and these authorities were united under the roof of the ministry, which launched 11 sector-specific bodies encompassing museums, the visual arts, and the performing arts.[236] The Ministry of Culture is committed to funding and supporting the KSA's arts and cultural sector, both locally and overseas. Its vision encompasses "a flourishing of arts and culture across Saudi Arabia that enriches lives, celebrates national identity and builds understanding between people".[237] The Ministry has set three objectives for the delivery of this vision: 1) the promotion of culture as a way of life; 2) enabling culture to contribute to economic growth; and 3) the creation of opportunities for global cultural

[232] Mousawi, *We Need to Talk*, 115.
[233] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 22.
[234] "Message from HRH Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud | Saudi Vision 2030," Vision 2030, accessed 14 May 2020, https://vision2030.gov.sa/en/vision/crown-message.
[235] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia,* 22.
[236] Ministry of Culture, Our Culture Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2019), 18.
[237] Ministry of Culture, 5.

exchange.[238] Abrar Alkayem, who is the curator and media coordinator of Athr Gallery, tells us that the recent interest of the government in the development of the art industry stems from the noticeable recent advancement of art and social culture in the KSA. The Ministry of Culture has started to increase the support provided to the visual arts (financial, legal, and media support). Previously (in the past decade), Athr experienced long-term difficulties and, contemporaneously, many art galleries were shuttered; Vision 2030 offered new possibilities.[239]

The cultural initiative had a major impact on the art scene in Saudi Arabia. The opening of art institutions helped artists to develop and it created exhibition spaces. One of the Saudi Arabia's most notable non-profit art organisations is the Misk Art Institute, launched in 2017, and it is a subsidiary of the Misk Foundation, established by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2011.[240] The Misk Art Institute, which aims to attract youth, is intended to develop into a leading platform for sociocultural development in the KSA.[241] It focuses on the training and advancement of individuals working in the Saudi art world, which developed spontaneously over the past 5 years and is growing due to social media that enables international networking.[242] Misk has evolved a distinctive approach to art and has organised huge art festivals, including exhibitions in Riyadh City and Jeddah. The institution features many participatory activities, interactive exhibits, and art education programmes for adults and children. One of Misk's notable initiatives was the Hakaya Misk festival, which offered activities and opportunities for social engagement through performances, exhibitions, workshops, and live events in many cities in the KSA.[243] The Saudi artistic movement and Vision 2030 have been central to the process of creating an indigenous entertainment industry, with Misk sponsoring important artistic festivals.[244] This emerging art platform testifies to the current government's support for the arts.

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[238] Ministry of Culture, 19.

[239] Amna Alhalaby " احدثت وغيرت المنظومة المجتمعية ٢٠٣٠: القيم ابرار ، آثر صالة في الاجتماعي والتواصل العامة والعلاقات الاعلام منسقة. *Laha Magazine*, 21 December 2019, https://www.lahamag.com/article/141784-العامة- منسقة-الإعلام-والعلاقات "ثوره. غيرت-القيم2030-أبرار أثر-فيصالة-الاجتماعي-والتواصل.

[240] This non-profit organisation existed before Saudi Vision 2030 but had little funding.

[241] Anna Cocks, "Crown Prince Mohammed Adds Art, Silicon Valley and Movies to His Saudi Reforms as Wahabi Influence Wanes," *Art Newspaper*, 30 January 2018, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/crown-prince-mohammed-adds-art-silicon-valley-movies-to-his-saudi-reforms-as-wahabi-influence-wanes.

[242] Cocks, "Crown Prince Mohammed."

[243] "Misk Art Institute," accessed 14 May 2020, https://miskartinstitute.org/events/hakaya-

[244] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia,* 169.

Another important organisation, mentioned earlier, is the King Abdul-Aziz Centre for World Culture (Ithra), which has been described on its website as the heart of the Saudi Kingdom's mission to "empower human development and beyond by inspiring people to learn, create, and collaborate… [to] provide new engaging platforms".[245] Ithra, which is supported by the national oil company Aramco,[246] reminds us of the problematic relationships of most of these public cultural institutions with oil companies and corporate sponsorship.[247] The institution can be described as a multipurpose cultural centre that has been formed to foster the understanding of arts, innovation, science, and literature and offers facilities such as the Idea Lab, Knowledge Tower, a library, Great Hall, Ithra Theatre, Energy Exhibit, Children's Museum, and a visual arts exhibition space. All of these facilities are designed to enhance the visitor experience as envisioned in Vision 2030.[248] Over the last few years, Ithra and a few other art institutions have collaborated with international artists and institutions, enabling a rich cultural exchange. This was evident during my visit to the Tanween event at Ithra in October 2019 (which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter). The festival featured a collaboration with international interactive artists such as German artist Karina Smigla-Bobinski and institutions from Europe and America.[249] In an interview, Farah Bushlaih, the current curatorial director of Ithra, and I discussed the absence of Saudi participatory artists. She explained that there were a limited number of Saudi artists capable of making such work. She also explained that Ithra collaborated with international institutions to attempt to remedy this lack. Bushlaih said,

> There is a huge gap in knowledge when it comes to the qualifications needed to be able to create these sorts of experiences, so we co-develop projects. In this process of co-curating, when I collaborate with these companies, the work that is created is not solely due to the influence of the

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[245] "About Ithra."

[246] One of the goals of Vision 2030 is to establish a national strategy to enable social responsibility to transform this bid from improvised, spontaneous action into systematic action characterised by sustainable developmental impact ("The strategy of social responsibility for companies in Saudi Arabia," government file). Aramco mentions Ithra as one of their initiatives in the domain of social responsibility. "Social Responsibility," Aramco, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.aramco.com/en/Investors/Environmental-social-and-governance/social-responsibility.

[247] A Western example is the work of Liberate Tate, a network dedicated to engaging in creative disobedience against Tate until it drops its oil company funding. "Where It All Began," Liberate Tate, accessed October 28, 2022, https://liberatetate.org.uk/about/.

[248] "About Ithra."

[249] The Spanish company Creative Dialogue collaborated on Genetic Moo's 'Architects of Air' and 'Microworld'. "'Somewhere between a Womb and a Cathedral,'" Architects of Air, accessed October 28, 2022, https://www.architects-of-air.com/home.

collaborating company itself. The work is also directed by what we need and what we want to exhibit, highlight, and showcase. Their knowledge and expertise are very important in the transfer of knowledge, and it is very important for us to be able to take the opportunity to engage with this subject matter, interactive art, and learn from experts. This helps our own local talent, and lets us share knowledge with our local audience. It expands the interests of our local society and introduces them to new career opportunities. It introduces them to new pathways.[250]

As Bushlaiah notes, the collaborating institutions form beneficial relationships. However, partnerships with local artists and community groups are also be part of this knowledge exchange and help to shift the focus to what is relevant to the local audience. For example, a joint programme in Ithra included an exhibition devoted to artist Abdulnasser Gharem, which was held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. A ten-city US tour, undertaken by Saudi artists was also part of the programme.[251] In 2016, Ithra invited Culturunners to produce and organise a cultural diplomacy initiative between the KSA and the US. It featured a series of exhibitions throughout the US, as well as a residency in New York and visits for artists and curators between the two nations. Culturunners is an independent art organisation launched in 2014 by Edge of Arabia in partnership with Art Jameel and co-founded by Stephen Stapleton.[252] Its main purpose is to promote the work of Saudi artists who engage international audiences by presenting inspiring alternative imagery of the nation.[253] Many of the aims of these collaborative ventures have been met, especially the promotion of the work of Saudi artists abroad.[254]

A successful example of collaboration with international professionals involved the Saudi Art Council, which invited Vassilis Oikonomopoulos (the assistant curator for international art at Tate Modern) to organise a programme at the annual event 21,39 in 2018. This event included exhibitions in Jeddah City at three venues, educational workshops, visits to artists' studios, and commercial gallery openings. A similar initiative was the Royal Commission for AlUla's work to deliver interactive installations at AlUla's Tantora festival in March 2020. The artistic director

[250] Farah Bushlaiah, interview by the author, 26 August 2020.
[251] Gareth Harris, "*What to See at 21,39—Saudi Arabia's Contemporary Art Festival*" *Art Newspaper*, 9 February 2018, https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/what-to-see-at-21-39-saudi-arabia-s-contemporary-art-festival.
[252] "About Culturunners," Culturunners, accessed 15 May 2020, https://culturunners.com/about.
[253] Foley, Changing Saudi Arabia, 49.
[254] For more about Culturunners, see http://edgeofarabia.com/publications/bridges-tour-catalogue.

and co-curator for Desert X, Neville Wakefield, stated that the exhibition would enable local artists to work together and with international collaborators to foster artistic exchange and dialogue among different countries and cultures. This was also reinforced by Raneem Farsi, Desert X AlUla's co-curator, who noted that diversity in backgrounds, concepts, and themes in an exhibition can produce more meaningful cultural exchanges than merely crossing a border.[255] Desert X AlUla provided a platform for the artistic community in the KSA to cultivate new audiences and create inclusive contemporary art practices that drew on the specific cultural context of AlUla. The participatory artworks commissioned for Desert X AlUla, including 'A Concise Passage' by Rashid Alshashai (discussed in Chapter 2), and 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' by Manal Aldowayan (analysed in more detail in Chapter 4), are important to my study.

The cultural vision document for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia states that

> [i]nternational cultural exchanges can build understanding across the world. The Ministry's aim is to drive forward the Kingdom's involvement in cultural dialogue. This will bring the best of international culture to the Kingdom, whilst also enabling the Kingdom to export its unique and diverse culture to the world.[256]

Organisations such as the Royal Commission for AlUla, the Saudi Art Council, and Ithra provide support for planning and commissioning to additional organisations that sponsor international collaborations. The initiative is remarkable for its scale and inclusion. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 mirrors UNESCO's focus on "Building Cultural Bridges"[257] in its desire to harness the potential of the youth to build cultural relationships and facilitate intercultural dialogue worldwide.[258] But what happens when ideas migrate and are translated into a local context and what are the conditions that allow this to occur?

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[255] Bryan Shim, "Desert X Alula Sets Art Across the Heart Of Historic Saudi Arabian Trade Route," *Designboom*, 31 January 2020, https://www.designboom.com/art/desert-x-alula-heart-of-historic-trade-route-saudi-arabia-01-31-2020/.

[256] I would argue that this has happened at the exhibition organised in London by Edge of Arabia and Culturnners by Ithra as well as at the Saudi pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

[257] "Manifesto," accessed 22 May 2020, https://ksaforunesco.org/manifesto/.

[258] "KSA for UNESCO," https://ksaforunesco.org/media/2019/10/ksa-for-unesco-program-EN.pdf, 7.

3.4 Institutional top-down approaches

As part of the social and cultural reform plan (Saudi Vision 2030), the KSA has taken a top-down approach to the development of the art and cultural sector. William Easterly defines a top-down approach to institutions as an approach "determined by laws written by political leaders".[259] That is to say, one starts with the general picture and then moves to the specific details.[260] The top-down approach offered by Vision 2030 is an attempt to support Saudi society's understanding of the art world and allow the public to engage with and make sense of existing data. Given that Saudi Arabia is a young country in a world surrounded by almost unlimited art practices and information, top-down structuring could be a useful approach to quickly put the Kingdom on the same path as (to help it 'catch up' with) the international art scene. However, the rapid adoption of foreign practices could obscure the ability of the country's artists to understand and perceive the world in different, new, localised ways. Key Saudi art institutions present advanced, knowledge-based information, as evidenced by their sophisticated exhibitions, events, and art festivals. Saudi Arabia has the passion, money, and ambition to develop the visual arts in the country, guided by knowledge and expectations. Undoubtedly, Saudi art institutions have been subject to questions now, but I have limited myself to examining the relationship between them and the artists who are the subjects of my case studies.

Many of Saudi Arabia's arts institutions began as grassroots organisations, that is, started at the bottom. A bottom-up perspective "sees institutions as emerging spontaneously from the social norms, customs, traditions, beliefs, and values of individuals within a society, with the written law only formalising what is already mainly shaped by the attitudes of individuals."[261] Most Saudi artists' practices (and Saudi art institutions) developed from the bottom up. This was due to a lack of opportunities at schools and universities; artists had to take the initiative. Many were self-taught and took creative courses on the internet or studied abroad or created art groups to

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[259] William Easterly, "Institutions: Top Down or Bottom Up?" *American Economic Review,* Volume, 98. Issue, 2: (2008), 95.
[260] Easterly, "Institutions," 95.
[261] Easterly, "Institutions," 95.

learn from one another and share resources. For example, the artists in Almeftaha village were committed to building an artistic movement at home, from the bottom up, with institutions and themes that were recognisable to their countrymen.[262] Similarly, the Edge of Arabia developed from the bottom up. As artist and founder Stapleton described, it was started by a group of artists who were not associated with any galleries or art organisations: "our enterprise was to be bottom-up only because there was no top."[263] Before Vision 2030, much of the Saudi art scene had grown from the bottom up. In contrast, the new Saudi art institutions are growing from the *middle* upwards, according to patron and academic Alia Al-Senussi; she is referring to the middle-class artists and practitioners working amongst the professional classes.[264] Subsequently, these individuals were able to advance their work with the help of wealthy Westernised patrons, developing their art into a cultural movement with the support of cultural institutions.[265] But can independent grassroots organisations such as Edge of Arabia and Athrart continue to grow alongside larger institutions such as Misk and Ithra that benefit from major financial and political support? Can they work together?

The political branding for Saudi Arabia that is part of Vision 2030 ploughs money into larger institutions, allowing the utilisation of expensive technologies and helping them and the artists associated with them to develop. Ahmed Mater, the co-founder of Edge of Arabia and former manager of Misk Art Institute, appreciates with new art system:

> As Saudi artists, we seek to find a system and platform relevant to our local context, we seek to preserve and nurture our communal voice. Because we know that only through a solid, paced and strong movement can we make our way upstream, against the current of society and its potential to materialism. We are full of nervous optimism about the potential of this real movement. We believe that art galleries, institutions, organisations, ministries, patrons, local and social media can support each other to instigate and develop a movement that will become part of the change needed in this society.[266]

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[262] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia,* 38.
[263] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia,* 23.
[264] Alia Al-Senussi, "The New Saudi Arabia: A Kingdom Embraces Soft Power," *Panopto*, 2018, https://brown.hosted.panopto.com/Panopto/Pages/Viewer.aspx?id=21c5a241-9430-4298-8c01-a974012ddb3c.
[265] Al-Senussi, "The New Saudi Arabia."
[266] Ahmed Mater, "A Manifesto for Saudi Art," *Ahmed Mater*, accessed 22 May 2020, https://www.ahmedmater.com/essays/a-manifesto-for-saudi-art-1.

These new institutions focus on supporting Saudi artists through funding, organising exhibitions, and creating artist residencies in Saudi Arabia and abroad.

3.5 The art audience in Saudi Arabia

The public's attitude towards art has dramatically changed in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century. First, improved internet access has helped educate the public about international art and art in general.[267] Second, Saudi artists, curators, and lately the government have tried to engage the public in conversation and educate them about art. For example, the curator of the 2012 exhibition *We Need to Talk*, Mohammed Hafiz, explained that he wanted to create a narrative that was relevant to the local audience: "The audience here is relatively new to contemporary art, which means we have the responsibility of making the show as accessible as possible."[268] In other words, he wanted to engage the audience dialogically, creating conversation around the exhibition. This kind of engagement is taken even further when art becomes interactive/participative; exhibitions of this sort are discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.[269]

Besides exhibitions, public art (a term used to describe installations and sculptures placed in public places)[270] can be used to promote art to society at large. For example, during Jeddah Art Week in 2015, public art in the form of paintings and sculptures borrowed by the Saudi Art Council was placed throughout the city and at Jeddah's Al Hamra Corniche Open Air Museum. Juan Miro, Henry Moore, and Alexander Calder were among the artists whose works were presented.[271] In 2015, Art Jameel invited artists and curators to be involved in a public art project called *Connected: Arts in Airports.* Works by local and international artists were shown at airports in different Saudi Arabian cities. The aim was to bring Saudi Arabian arts and culture to

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[267] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia*, 95.

[268] Stapleton et al., *Edge of Arabia,* 281.

[269] It echoes the Tate Modern's 2000 objectives. Look at the Turbine Hall commissions, marketing strategy, community outreach, etc. See "Turbine Hall at Tate Modern," Tate, accessed November 1, 2022, https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/turbine-hall.

[270] Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 19.

[271] Nouriah Al-Satti "Jeddah Art Week 2015: Fast Forward Exhibition | Style.com/Arabia," Vogue Arabia, 26 January 2015, https://en.vogue.me/archive/culture/jeddah-art-week-2015-fast-forward-exhibition-curated-by-bashar-al-shroogi/.

the community *and* the world through the airports. The exhibition was open to millions of arriving and departing visitors who experienced art made by artists from different parts of Saudi Arabia.[272] Although airports are controlled spaces that only certain people such as travellers have access to, public sites nevertheless address an audience that has not actively chosen to view artworks.[273] They blur the boundaries between private art spaces and the public domain.

A good example of this is the current governmental project Riyadh Art, which was launched by King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz in 2019 and is part of the Vision 2030 initiative.[274] It aimed to transform the city into an open art fair by placing more than one thousand works of art in different areas of Riyadh, presenting interactive galleries in city squares, commissioning installations, and holding an annual festival featuring participatory artworks.[275] This project is in process, and it is too early to assess its impact. In March 2021, Riyadh Art initiated the Noor Riyadh project which is "a new citywide annual festival of light and art that nurtures creativity, promotes talent and delivers awe-inspiring experiences", as explained on Riyadh Art's website.[276] This programme included major public art installations such as 'Light Upon Light: Light Art Since the 1960s'. These installations were presented across Riyadh. A selection of artworks from Noor Riyadh will be discussed in Chapter 4.

As a result of all these efforts, the number of people who are willing to attend art exhibitions and events and visit museums has increased exponentially. Hakaya Misk *2*, an art event organised by the Misk Foundation at Riyadh International Convention & Exhibition Centre in 2017, attracted over 30,000 visitors on the second day of the event.[277] The Misk Art Festival counted over 100,000 visitors throughout the four days that it was open in 2017 (April 4–7).[278] Ithra's second

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[272] Art Jameel, "In Collaboration with the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) Art Jameel Launches 'Connected: Art in Airports' Exhibition in Dammam," Art Jameel, 2016, https://artjameel.org/assets/uploads/sites/2/2017/02/Art-Jameel-AIA-Dammam-Exhibition-English.pdf.

[273] Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (MIT Press, 2010), 226.

[274] "Riyadh Art," accessed 16 January 2020, https://www.riyadhart.sa/en/.

[275] The Noor Riyadh project included 18 Saudi artists and 42 international artists.

[276] "Noor Riyadh," Riyadh Art, 30 October 2022, https://riyadhart.sa/en/noor-riyadh/.

[277] "33 Thousand Visitors on 3rd Day of Hakaya Misk," Misk Foundation, 17 August 2017, https://misk.org.sa/en/blog/33-thousand-visitors-3rd-day-hakaya-misk/.

[278] "100 Thousand Visitors at Misk Art in 4 Days and Artists Look Forward to Next Session," Misk Foundation, 9 April 2017, https://misk.org.sa/en/blog/100-thousand-visitors-misk-art-4-days-artists-look-forward-next-session/.

Tanween Festival in 2019 welcomed its one-millionth visitor from the KSA and abroad.[279] The increasing interest of the Saudi audience in different forms of art is reflected in these vast numbers. Since these are new institutions, galleries, and organisations, it seems fitting that audience numbers be used as an early indicator of success. The numbers show that more people are engaging with art than was formerly the case in Saudi Arabia.

3.6 Saudi artistic practice (materials and techniques)

> Growing up in Saudi, there was no real visual arts culture and it was very difficult to find art books. A lot of the art we did have was merely an imitation of European art. However, what we did have was a very strong tradition of poetry, performance and storytelling. This element of performance is an art form in itself, and there is a lot to learn from rituals.
>
> —Abdulnasser Gharem (in an interview).[280]

Saudi art has a particular cultural aesthetic and has undergone modern transformations. In the first half of the twentieth century, Saudi artists were heavily influenced by Western schools of modern art such as abstraction, cubism, and surrealism.[281] This influence varied due to the artists' social and educational backgrounds, the countries they studied in, and their openness to other cultures. However, the current generation seems to have adopted postmodern conceptual and multimedia approaches. Artists such as Abdulnasser Gharem, Faisal Al-Samra, Shadia Alem, and Manal Aldowayan have moved toward Western-influenced photographic and conceptual art and achieves a more global (Western) reach.[282] Al-Senan argues that most contemporary Saudi artists are lacking in their knowledge of art history, including regional art history, and mainly are familiar with local and international contemporary art. In the absence of the academic study of art, its movements and concerns, many people who have become artists in Saudi Arabia trained in other academic fields such as engineering and design. This education has

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[279] "Saudi Aramco," accessed 16 January 2020, https://www.saudiaramco.com/-/media/publications/arabian-sun/2019/2019-41.
[280] Mousawi, *We Need to Talk,* 114.
[281] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 34.
[282] Al-Senan, "An Insider's View," 46–47.

inclined them toward utilising electronic tools in their work (including computers and computer software).[283]

According to Dina Lutfi, modern Arab art is distinguished from traditional art by its flexible techniques, ideas, and styles, as well as the fact that is not easily classified. Developments in the history of modern Arab art are the result of efforts made by individual artists that reflect the media they use, their practice, their education, and their geographical location. There are numerous experiences and styles among Arab artists, and some have combined recently acquired knowledge of Western contemporary art with content that reflects their culture.[284]

We can consider a position put forward by Saeed Tawfeeg. In his book *Universal Art and the Art World*, he asks a series of important questions: Can an artwork be purely local? What would happen if art was confined to depicting the peculiarities of a people or a country rather than expressing the human condition? Here art is stripped of its universal value, and there is no room to talk about Art (with a capital A) – it becomes quasi-art. Tawfeeg argues that when art is reduced to a local expression it also loses one of its major ontological qualities: its ability to communicate universally. In this way, it is hamstrung by its reliance on its particular national context. The idea of universal art is not antithetical to the inclusion of local characteristics but rather fused with them in the specificity of a soul.[285] Universality in art, then, is the ability to communicate a distinct spirit through the language of art. By portraying the general in the particular, Tawfeeg argues, the greatness and mystery of art are revealed.[286] Flexible and generous yet transcendental theories such as this ask us to be sensitive to the particularity of participatory art in Saudi Arabia while locating it internationally, giving it a universal significance.

3.7 Chapter conclusion

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[283] Al-Senan, "An Insider's View," 49.
[284] Lutfi, *Challenging Perceptions of Modern Arab Art,* 298.
[285] Saeed Tawfeeg, عالمية الفن وعالمه (2017, 61), الدار المصرية اللبنانية.
[286] Tawfeeg, عالمية الفن وعالمه, 62.

This chapter investigated the changing situation in contemporary art in Saudi Arabia and the driving forces behind the transformation, including the political and cultural factors that led to the emergence of participatory art in the KSA. An awareness of the cultural background that participatory art projects in Saudi Arabia emerge from helps us to understand why certain forms of interactivity came to the fore, why certain artists were involved, and what motivated the creation of various institutions.

I believe that the government is playing a large role in the development of art in Saudi Arabia – especially participatory art – as I explained in depth in this chapter. Saudis have welcomed the new exhibits that have been encouraged by the government as is evident from the number of people attending exhibitions and events. Vision 2030 has had a revolutionary impact on many aspects of Saudi society, including art.

In the last twenty years, modernisation has infiltrated every aspect of everyday life in the KSA, and contemporary art in Saudi Arabia should be understood in relation to political, economic and social changes. Modernisation can also be witnessed in the work of artists and the art institutions that support them. The works displayed in the Shattah exhibition of 2004 in Jeddah were strikingly non-traditional, exhibiting the influence of the digital revolution and the internet.[287] Access to up-to-the-minute technology made available by funds from Vision 2030 has also had an impact on the types of works that can be made and exhibited, with large art institutions now being able to exhibit art installations that require high production levels. As we have seen, many participatory artworks have been created by artists and commissioned by art institutions and curators in recent years – work that aims to actively engage Saudi society. Manal Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me, Now You Don't' and Rashed Alshashai's 'A Concise Passage' (both discussed in depth in Chapters 2 and 4) at the 2020 Desert X in AlUla are good examples of this.

In the art sector, the KSA government seems to be a modernising, liberal agency that is attempting to work with a reluctant or conservative public. It could be said, therefore, that the regime's new narrative, as presented by the Ministry of Culture, is aimed at achieving a unique sense of national identity in Saudi Arabia and creating a new Saudi culture. It is apparent that the

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[287] Hemming, *Abdulnasser Gharem.* 43–44.

government appreciates the potential for artists to serve as "organic intellectuals"[288] and represent society. Artist Ahmed Mater, for example looks at society at the grassroots level and ask questions concerns "[a]uthenticity, identity, a sense of time, place, [and] belonging."[289] According to Foley, these are the types of political matters that an intellectual like this Saudi artist can explore through the language of culture. Foley also noted how important it is that individuals outside of the country's traditional intellectual elite express feelings and experiences through the language of culture that the majority understand but are unable to articulate easily.[290] It is important to note that art and society in Saudi Arabia are characterised by the diverse range of social norms, social spheres and belief systems that coexist alongside traditional political structures.[291]

The developmental narrative of contemporary art by Saudi artists is inseparable from the broader story of Saudi Arabian society. This chapter showed that in the absence of an art historical literature on Saudi contemporary art, there is an urgent need to conduct and publish new research to develop new conversations. The next chapter will unpack some of the major theoretical and philosophical issues surrounding participatory art in Saudi Arabia. It will focus on the aesthetic experience in relation to entertainment, embodiment, and play so that we can better understand the rise of participatory art in the KSA over the last decade. It will examine specific theoretical aspects of this discourse: the ideas about participatory art that are held by Saudi artists.

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[288] Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci aptly describes organic intellectuals as those who emerge from the community and use critical thought to direct the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (International Publishers, 1971).
[289] Ahmed Mater, *Desert of Pharan* (Baden, Switzerland: Lars Muller, 2016), 579–580.
[290] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 23.
[291] Foley, *Changing Saudi Arabia*, 6.

Chapter 4

A theoretical investigation of aesthetic experience in relation to entertainment, embodiment, and play

4.1 Introduction

This chapter unpacks some of the major theoretical and philosophical issues around participatory art in Saudi Arabia. I focus on aesthetic experience in relation to entertainment, embodiment, and play so that we can better understand the increase in the production of participatory art that has occurred in the KSA over the last few years. To do this, I turn to the work of several theoreticians and philosophers, including John Dewey, Richard Shusterman, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Johan Huizinga.

Both art and popular culture are currently flourishing in the KSA, which led me to ask if there is a relationship between the two. Are the newly founded government-funded Saudi art institutions promoting the idea of art as entertainment, that is, art as a leisure activity? If so, what impact does this have on the type of art being produced and Saudi artists' art practices? What does it mean when art and entertainment interact and overlap? Discussing these topics will go some way to explain why contemporary participatory works are so popular in Saudi Arabia and the implications of their popularity. I examine why there is a trend toward producing art that seems to be pleasurable and entertaining in sometimes simplistic or immediate ways. Works such as Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' and Afif's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' (explained later in this chapter) invite the audience to experience them. They give immediate pleasure and are both entertainment and high (contemporary) art – both of which were previously absent in Saudi Arabia.

The philosopher John Dewey regards art as an experience. We can use his theory to develop our understanding of participatory art. Dewey stresses that a work of art is an experience realised between the artwork and the subject, and he believes that sensuous and cognitive perceptions combine to produce aesthetic experiences.[292]

To strengthen this argument, I include ideas put forward by the philosopher Richard Shusterman, who extends Dewey's theories and examines the etymological and historical basis for evaluating art and cultural experiences. Shusterman focuses on the relationship between popular culture and high art and argues that entertainment need not defend itself against high art nor be subservient to it.[293] Crucially, rather than regarding entertainment as being in opposition to art as Bishop does (see Chapter 2), Shusterman argues that it can be a core element of art, play, and popular culture. This view is adopted here because it helps to explain why a certain type of participatory art is currently popular in Saudi Arabia.[294]

We must also remember that it is an embodied subject that plays and interacts with art. When engaging with participatory works of art, the body of the viewer assumes a central role. This is an active role entailing work and means that the eyes no longer assume the central role in interacting with art. I refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology to understand the nature of experiencing participatory art: embodiment reclaims the body from being merely a biological object and binds the body to the mind. I briefly examine how this relates to identity, particularly what can be understood or explained as the Saudi identity.[295] How can Merleau-Ponty's theory be characterised, and how does this relate to embodiment and play and, by extension, participatory art?

Play is a key dimension of many participatory Saudi Arabian artworks – for example, in Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' and Afif's 'You Are at Home and I Am at

[292] John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2005), 1.

[293] Richard Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 43, no. 3 (January 2003): 90–91, https://doi.org/10.1093/bjaesthetics/43.3.289.

[294] Shusterman, "Entertainment," 90–91.

[295] Vision 2030 describes the main features of Saudi identity: "The people of Saudi Arabia embrace many social values influenced by their Islamic values which preserve the Kingdom's ancient customs and traditions. These values include: generosity, courage, hospitality, and maintaining strong family relationships." "People & Culture," Vision 2030, accessed 11 November 2022, https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/thekingdom/explore/culture/.

Home'. Thus, it is important to examine how the idea of embodiment relates to this new aesthetic, of which play is an integral aspect. Participatory art tends to elicit sensory responses and require physical activity.

I explore how playful participatory art practices can be defined and understood in a Saudi context and why is play important to the experience of art in Saudi Arabia. I also ask whether play and the physical manipulation of art are more than symbolic gestures. I argue here that inviting an audience to behave playfully is a powerful way of bringing about discursive thinking, even though the idea of play is not traditionally (either globally or locally) seen as serious in the context of art (discussed in detail in the following sections). I also argue that there is an important social aspect to play because it serves people's need to connect with others. Looking at play and interactivity allows us to explore the rapid expansion of social networks and the cultural changes that have arisen from Saudi Vision 2030.

4.2 Entertainment and the role of cultural organisations

Munira Al-Qadiri, a Kuwaiti artist and filmmaker, says that we must abandon all previous conceptions and look at Saudi art and culture afresh:

> There is a serious cultural renaissance taking place in Saudi Arabia… much of this activity can still be situated in the realm of popular culture and be classified as "entertainment" but the seeds of art making, discursive thought, and independent institutionalisation have been sown, and we can already start to see them taking hold.[296]

These seeds of "discursive thought, and independent institutionalisation" could be seen at the Tanween exhibition in Ithra and DesertX AlUla, both discussed in this chapter.

Whilst extensive research on the humanities has been conducted in the field of Middle Eastern studies, most scholars have focused on religion, literature, politics, and history, whilst relatively

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[296] Monira Al-Qadiri, "Future Imperfect: The Saudi New Wave | Digital Landscapes and Future Institutions," Ibraaz, 2016, https://www.ibraaz.org/publications/77.

little attention has been paid to visual culture and art.[297] Consequently, there is a need to establish the nature of the relationship between high art and popular culture (entertainment) in Saudi Arabia. This is especially important at a time when attention to the art, entertainment, and visual culture of Saudi Arabia is growing around the world. Since the turn of the millennium, numerous positive developments have occurred in the world of Saudi art. Saudi Arabia has taken a top-down approach to developing its cultural assets and other elements of Vision 2030 (discussed in Chapter 3). The KSA is acting upon its plans to create a country that is outward facing, and a key element of this process is the promotion of entertainment and culture as we are told in the Vision literature:

> 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.[298]

Similarly, local governments have increased their promotion of cultural pursuits, lending support to the overarching national programme from within. There is a longstanding tradition in Saudi Arabia of heritage and folk festivals offering parades, poetry, music, illuminations, and other cultural performances and attracting large numbers of attendees.[299] Among the most notable examples of such festivals are the Souk Okaz Festival, the Al-Janadriyah Cultural and Heritage Festival, and the Jeddah Al Balad. Also, several public-sector arts organisations have been established recently. Ithra, one such organisation, receives funding directly from Saudi Aramco and hosts the Tanween Festival annually. This improves access to art, facilitates the transmission of intangible cultural content, and enables experiences in a way that promotes learning.[300] Farah

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[297] Haytham Bahoora, "Locating Modern Arab Art: Between the Global Art Market and Area Studies," *Review of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (2020): 25–36, https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2020.15, 26.

[298] Saudi Arabia Ministry of Culture, *Our Culture Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (2019).

[299] Heba ElCheikh and Eckhard Thiemann, "Art in the Public Realm in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - British Council," 2018, https://saudiarabia.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/j181_art_in_the_public_realm_report_saudi_arabia_a4_final_web.pdf.

[300] Ryohei Nakatsu, Matthias Rauterberg and Paolo Ciancarini, "Entertainment, Culture, and Media Art," in *Handbook of Digital Games and Entertainment Technologies* (Springer Science+Business Media Singapore, October 2017), 725–76, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-4560-50-4_16 , 6.

Bushlaih, the curator of the Great Hall in Ithra,[301] says that the founding principles of Ithra include the facilitation of interactive and participatory art:

> Ever since we opened Ithra, and we started programming, we always took into consideration the importance of interactivity. It was something imbedded within our goals of what programmes to create.[302]

Misk Art Institute was established in 2017, a year after the announcement of Vision 2030, and charged with delivering citywide art weeks across the country. In the following year, Ithra was established. Events such as these were designed to encourage attendees to interact and engage in direct participation.[303] The Saudi government also has invested heavily in expanding the space available for public displays of art, such as Riyadh Arts, a national public art initiative in KSA (discussed in Chapter 3). This initiative has encouraged the growth of participatory practices and the creation of works such as Saeed Kamhawi's 'Zoleat Omy' (2021) (see fig. 4.1), which was presented at the Noor Riyadh festival organised by Riyadh Art. Visitors were invited to stand on a twelve-piece carpet of light – a carpet that the artist's father had given to his mother on their wedding day had been digitised to highlight conservation and tell personal stories.[304] Such interactive displays, incorporating audience participation and interaction, have been employed to fill the increasing demand for memorable and enjoyable exhibition experiences.

November 2022 marked the second annual Noor Riyadh festival of light. A total of 120 local and international artists participated in the exhibition, which was organised by Riyadh Art under the theme "We Dream of New Horizons," which appeared at 40 locations in the city.[305] By showcasing Riyadh's natural landscapes and cityscapes, the festival objectives to create joyful experiences for Riyadh residents, said Khalid Al-Hazani, Riyadh Art's programme director.[306] According to Al-Hazani "The reality of Noor Riyadh 2022 is that through a sense of wonder, the

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[301] The Great Hall is a space for hosting exhibitions and events in Ithra.

[302] Farah Bushlaiah, interview by the author, August 26, 2020.

[303] Another such event was the Tanween festival in Ithra that exhibited the artwork ADA by Karina and other works that have been discussed throughout this thesis.

[304] Riyadh Art is the first national public art initiative in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

[305] Alturki, Nada "A liminal space: The soft power of Saudi's growing art scene" *Arab News,* 18 November 2022. https://www.arabnews.com/node/2202121/saudi-arabia.

[306] Alturki, "A liminal space: The soft power of Saudi's growing art scene".

artists are exploring the use of illumination, luminosity and their own encounters with materials as staging relations to otherness and hope in the form of light,". He added "Our main purpose is to reach the widest audience possible, going beyond traditional art audiences to the wider public,".[307] According to Saudi artist Bashaer Hawsawi, engaging the public more with the local art scene is the first step toward greater changes in attitudes towards art in societies.[308] From Bishop's perspective, some of these experiences may only provide the type of pleasure that walking through a shopping mall invokes (i.e., they lack the explicit social-political bite that Bishop thinks art should provide). But as we shall see, this approach is important and effective in prompting new audiences to engage with art in the Saudi Arabian context, where gentle and familiar methods of engagement are necessary and socio-political content cannot be explicit. The following section examines the concept of entertainment and its role in art.
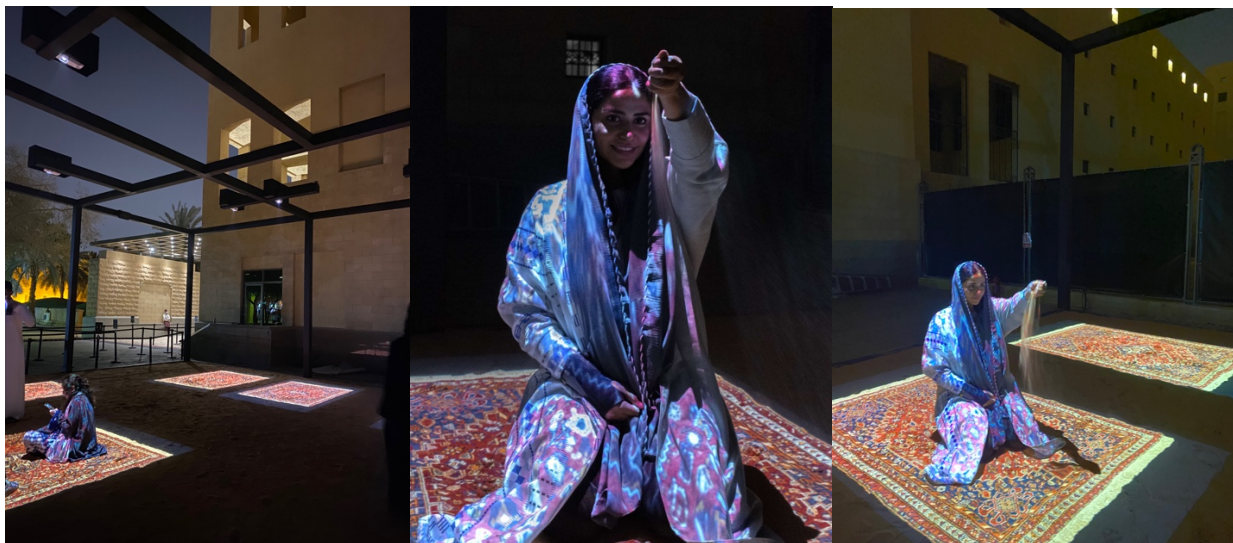
Figure 4.1 Saeed Kamhawi, Zoleat Omy, 2021. Author's photographs.

4.3 Theorising entertainment

The advent of mass media provoked discussion in the West from the 1960s about the respective values and contrasting characteristics of fine art and popular art. However, no such discussions

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[307] Alturki, "A liminal space: The soft power of Saudi's growing art scene".
[308] Alturki, "A liminal space: The soft power of Saudi's growing art scene".

have taken place in the context of Saudi Arabia.[309] The analysis that follows concentrates on how various forms of art are valued and what purpose participative and interactive art serves in the KSA. Whilst extensive efforts have been made in the West to improve people's grasp of what culture and art are and how they can be experienced, valued, and participated in, cultural policy consistently places more value on high culture than popular culture.[310] Looking at this situation from a Western perspective helps us to understand the emergent situation in the KSA.

In 2003, Richard Shusterman wrote an article called 'Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics', in which he positioned himself at the centre of the ongoing discussion of how popular culture and high art relate to each other. He opined that a fundamental distinction between art and entertainment had been overlooked.[311] Shusterman emphasises the philosophies underpinning the concepts and theories of entertainment. He suggests that discussions about them assert that high art is either in some way superior to entertainment (and that entertainment draws upon high art but in the process corrupts high art) or that the two are opponents, each operating in a bubble with distinct standards and rules. He finds neither of these explanations satisfactory. Rather, he advocates "meliorism"[312] as the centre ground separating celebration from condemnation. This approach considers entertainment neither defiant of high art nor subservient to it.[313] Instead, entertainment is viewed as a productive dialectic, combining elements of distraction, diversion, amusement, cultural expression, focused attention, and concentration.[314] Crucially, this theory considers entertainment to be a core element of art, play, and popular culture – a critical synchronistic aesthetic position adopted by many of the artists I have discussed.

Shusterman discusses Hannah Arendt's arguments that entertainment has utility in society because it provides a commodity that people enjoy consuming. However, Arendt laments that

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[309] Beth Juncker and Gitte Balling, "The Value of Art and Culture in Everyday Life: Towards an Expressive Cultural Democracy," *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 46, no. 5 (2016): 231–242, DOI:10.1080/10632921.2016.1225618

[310] Juncker and Balling, "The Value of Art and Culture", 1.

[311] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 290.

[312] Meliorism: recognises popular art's flaws and abuses but also its merit and potential. Meliorism holds that poular art needs improvement because of its many failings, but that it can be improved because it can and often does achieve real aesthetic. Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 289.

[313] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 291.

[314] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 293-294.

mass entertainment is troubled by its "noisy futility", whereas art results in permanent things being created – things that endure in a culture distinct from the requirements of biological life, offering value and beauty that place them in an eternal world of freedom.[315] Furthermore, Arendt suggests that whilst entertainment is necessary because people need amusement, it does not constitute a cultural or aesthetic pastime. Rather, entertainment is a commodity that people consume for enjoyment, and these enjoyable experiences are consumer products intended to be used up. [316] Conversely, art is not used up but appreciated in a process of disinterested contemplation. Rather than being functional, art is durable. Essentially, Arendt believes that entertainment is a means for perpetuating and enhancing human life, whereas art has pure ends and intrinsic value, "things which exist independently of all utilitarian and functional references, and whose quality remains always the same".[317] As far as Arendt is concerned, the beauty of art lies in the fact that it is non-perishable, whilst entertainment poses a threat that could undermine the permanence and enduring nature of art, resulting in it becoming yet another commodity for people to consume and dispose of.[318]

Arendt's views are in line with those of the philosopher and cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, who argues that art should be autonomous, abstract, and unsettling, rather than pleasing and fun. "Fun is art's punishment," he writes; it takes away art's identity:

> The ridiculous, as a barbaric residuum of something alien to form, misfires in art if art fails to reflect and shape it. If it remains on the level of the childish and is taken for such, it merges with the calculated fun of the culture industry. By its very concept, art implies kitsch,[319] just as by the obligation it imposes of sublimating the ridiculous it presupposes educational privilege and class

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[315] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 305.

[316] Hannah Arendt, "*The Crisis of Culture*," in *Between Past and* Future (New York: Viking, 1961), 197–226.

[317] Hannah Arendt, "*The Crisis of Culture*," 215–216.

[318] Hannah Arendt, "*The Crisis of Culture*," 207, 218.

[319] He refers to low art or popular culture as kitsch. "Kitsch", as he used the term, was every kind of mixture of all the different types of popular culture. It was associated with hobbies or undemanding ways of entertaining yourself. The rise of kitsch, he argues, was due to industrialization and occurred at a moment in capitalism when it was needed to make life feel pleasanter. This is why, until the 1960s, many art historians, philosophers and theorists wanted to create a distinction between art and kitsch; there were political reasons behind their arguments.

structure; fun is art's punishment for this. All the same, the ridiculous elements in artworks are most akin to their intentionless levels and therefore, in great works, also closest to their secret.[320]

For Adorno and Arendt, separating art and entertainment is imperative: art is not about enchanting the audience, but disenchanting them, in a sense. Art is not "palliative" for Adorno; it should wake us up from our slumber: "Art disenchants the disenchanted".[321] It refuses to be just another object or commodity in the world. Art should throw a stick in the wheel of how things usually work in everyday reality, namely, disrupt what is unexamined or unquestioned. Adorno and Arendt believe that art has a revolutionary potential and can introduce viewers to abstract ideas that don't immediately appeal to them or make their situation in life bearable; that art can make you think and become conscious of your sociopolitical environment.

Shusterman's argument comes down to this: Is art autonomous, is art just about art or is it about popular culture? Is it created for its own sake? Also, does temporary art have any value? He argues that art need not be autonomous and eternal to be appreciated or give pleasure. But he spends little time discussing why many theorists and philosophers wanted to separate art from life or high art from popular culture. When art at least attempts to free itself from immediate, everyday concerns, it moves away from the possibility of being used for propaganda. It is not simply reactive. Is this a utopian idea or a practical one? Can art free itself from its context in this way?

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[320] Erica Weitzman, "No Fun: Aporias of Pleasure in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory," *German Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (December 2008): 196, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-1183.2008.00016.x. Weitzman also explained: "The promise of happiness that art makes must remain 'ever broken,' lest it compromise that promise in the immediacy of a happiness which is anyway already irresponsible, illusory, or impossible. To actually 'have fun' – were such a thing attainable – renders the aesthetic experience null and void. And yet it is a striking inconsistency or at least overdetermination within Adorno's terminology that 'fun' does not just signify the socially mandated and mass-psychology-conditioned pseudo-pleasure of the culture industry; at times 'fun' also signifies something that might (cautiously) be called real pleasure, uncritical and affirming though this pleasure may be. In these cases, 'fun' is the collapse of aesthetic distance, the total integration of the spectacle and life" (192–193). She goes on to suggest that "if art must preserve an absolute freedom of form to maintain itself as art, 'fun' as well as play, pleasure, and effects of all kinds- must, however paradoxically, be allowed to be included in its repertoire. And if a 'voluptuousness' of life is at all politically desirable beyond its mere promise, then art as experience may perhaps reclaim a tenuous and risky place in the study of aesthetics" (200).
[321] Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno, and Rolf Tiedemann, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 58.

Shusterman describes himself as a pragmatist philosopher.[322] If pragmatism attempts to evaluate theories based on their practical application and success (based on the success of art created in the last 60 years or so), then the author would be correct in stating that the entertainment derived from popular culture's influence on the arts *has* been a success story. But, in following his argument for valuing the transitory nature of things, this state of affairs (and his judgement) may also be temporary, fleeting. If his argument is that different times call for different definitions of art, then we must agree. But this does not stop us from asking why this has come about, that is, why popular art and high art have been combined so successfully at this moment in Saudi Arabia.

This could relate to ideas of globalisation: the fact that high and low art from many different cultures can be used as subject matter, and the de-contextualisation of the sources brings with it a sort of flattening out of the highs and lows. This also relates to the late capitalist moment that we are living through, which emphasises novelty and has deconstructed any idea of authenticity. In a globalised world, especially a world linked by internet, an artist who wants to make art inspired by geometric patterns from mosques in Riyadh can Google this, appropriate the image, and use it without any reference to its social, political, or religious context. One can disregard the specifics of a culture – its ideas of the sacred, for example – and use components of it in any imaginable way. But why is this happening or what does it means when this happens? De-colonising the mind (by looking at Saudi culture and Saudi high art from a Saudi perspective), and valuing the locals does not mean that returning to the source of a culture's particular version of art has to somehow reify origins, cultural specificity, or purity.[323] Appropriation, re-appropriation, and even misappropriation can be ethical acts when the sources of one's work are acknowledged, respected and worked through.

There is a sense that Shusterman is trying to reduce everything to the same kind of cultural soup, everything is jumbled together, and this idea betrays the very real distinctions between art and entertainment that fuel both industries. The problem is not that we should make high art more entertaining as this has happened already. The question we must ask ourselves is why this is

[322] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 289.
[323] One can argue that an authentic Saudi art can no longer exist as one would have to pretend that the rest of the world didn't exist and that traditional forms were themselves in influenced by other cultures.

happening. What are the implications? Does this situation represent a dumbing down of culture? Making a distinction between cultural expressions need not be a bad thing, but losing the ability to *make* these distinctions could be. To master abstract thought (to be able to assess and judge something without it being merely limited to personal taste) is liberating rather than limiting; an art education can be enriched rather than harmed by this approach.

High art and popular culture (entertainment) in Saudi Arabia is expressed through the new emphasis on interaction and participation. Institutions, curators, and artists provide an entrance into high art by making it more accessible through engaging and entertaining exhibitions.[324] The reason that Shusterman's argument has value in the Saudi context is that both high art and popular culture are growing exponentially in the KSA, as I mentioned before. There was a modernist influence in Saudi art in the 1960s, which was evident in the work of artists such as Dia Aziz Dia and Muhammed Siam[325] (discussed in Chapter 3), but it wasn't supported. It was very much a fringe concern rather than penetrating the broader culture.[326] Furthermore, there was little audience for contemporary art or art generally in Saudi Arabia previously and few art institutions and art galleries. I therefore suggest that in Saudi Arabia it is important to promote art that is accessible (welcoming and entertaining) to engage new audiences.

Saudi artist Manal Aldowayan is sceptical of the trend to make high art entertaining but acknowledges its existence. The mutual rise of popular culture and high art and the way they are brought together through the ideas of participation/interaction and entertainment are problematic for her. She wants to ensure that there is still a distinction between the spheres.

Aldowayan says that giving people what they already know rather than challenging or inspiring new thoughts is not her goal as an artist. She told me that "watching an artist draw and paint is meaningless and [a] poor way to demonstrate inclusivity".[327] During our interview, she stressed that artists, academics, and curators should protect the idea of art and work on what we want our art environment to be. She added that art has an underlying message; it makes you think and ask

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[324] Similar to those offered by the Tate Modern (e.g. the Turbine Hall commissions of the last 20 years).

[325] Alrusais, *The History of Fine Art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,* 194–97.

[326] Bardaouil and Fellrath, *That Feverish Leap,* 124.

[327] Aldowayan, interview.

questions, and this is what makes it successful. Art gives people access to ways of thinking abstractly that exceed those offered by entertainment.[328]

4.4 <u>Embodiment</u>

This thesis seeks to better understand the critical potential of participatory art. More specifically, it asks how the body's potential for disruption might be conveyed, activated, and contextualised in Saudi participatory art. When engaging with participatory works of art, the body of the viewer assumes a central role. The invitation to physically interact indicates that viewers can alter the work's physical form. For instance, it may be possible for viewers to intentionally or unintentionally move a sculpture: a viewer could move parts of the sculpture, or the sculpture could move, depending on the viewer's movements. For example, Muhannad Shono's 'Al-Mars' and 'Ala: A Ritual Machine' move in response to the movements of the viewer. Similarly, Zahrah Alghamdi's 'After Illusion' enables people to hold pieces that move and vibrate as if the object were alive. In some instances, the viewer is required to make a physical effort to see the artwork – as in Rashid Alshashai's 'A Concise Passage', in which the viewer enters a pyramid that has been split in half. The viewer is required to move physically, which makes them very conscious of where they are. At the Tanween exhibition discussed later in this chapter, viewers have to make the effort to change the displays and frames.

Whilst they are beyond the scope of the current study, contemporary participatory artworks produced in the West often utilise the presence of the viewer's body. We can find many useful and relevant approaches to art making in the works of Myron Krueger and David Rokeby. Both use the viewer's body in interactive ways to engage with their art.[329] Carsten Höller points out that interactions with the so-called visual arts involve a variety of somatic senses in addition to visual perception.[330] For example, Holler's 'Test Site' (2006) (see fig. 4.2) features sculpted slides that viewers experience through their bodies. Such participation and interactivity embody

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[328] Aldowayan, interview.

[329] Myron Krueger, "Responsive Environment," (AFIPS'77, 1977); David Rokeby and Liz Wylie, *David Rokeby: Very Nervous System* (Kelowna, BC: Kelowna Art Gallery, 2013).

[330] Richard Shusterman, "Aesthetic Transactions: Pragmatist Philosophy through Art and Life/Aesthetic Transactions: Art et Philosophie à l'État Vif" (Aesthetic Transactions, 2012). https://aesthetictransactions.webs.com/

interaction. There is not a clear distinction between the human body and the artwork; instead, they are perpetually intertwined in dialogue.[331] Experiences such as these place the human body and all of its sensory organs in the foreground. The participant engages a phenomenological body and creates importance from the fact of their *being in the world.*

Figure 4.2 Carsten Holler. Test Site, 2006, accessed 3 March, 2021.
https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/oct/08/art3. By photographer David Levene.

We can employ a phenomenological approach, specifically the philosophical theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to better understand this. By bringing to the table these accounts, it is anticipated that a useful vocabulary and specific concepts will emerge that can be used to derive meaning and describe how a person experiences their surroundings and their encounters with participatory art. Embodiment is a complicated concept that has attracted the attention of numerous theorists and philosophers. Consequently, many definitions of embodiment have been proposed. The embodiment paradigm is the integration of the mind and body. Thus, embodiment may challenge

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[331] Mark Windsor, "Art of Interaction: A Theoretical Examination of Carsten Höller's Test Site", in *Tate Papers* 15, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/15/art-of-interaction-a-theoretical-examination-of-carsten-holler-test-site, accessed 7 November 2022.

the idea of mind and body duality. Embodiment can be interpreted as the physical manifestation of a thing that is usually intangible, such as a notion, thought, or affect.[332] Alternatively, embodiment can be regarded as being in an active relationship with one's environment.[333] When considering the term "embodiment," mind and body are treated as a single entity. There is a unique character to the engagement of viewers with their environment in multimodal artworks. Professor Erkki Huhtamo, a media archaeologist, states that "Interactive work challenges one to undergo a transformation from an onlooker to an 'interactor,' an active agent."[334] Paul Dourish has suggested that the body's epistemology indicates the existence of an embodied model of cognition resulting from how people learn from bodily experiences. He offers the following explanation:

> Embodiment is not a property of systems, technologies, or artefacts; it is a property of interaction. It is rooted in the ways in which people (and technologies) participate in the world. […] Our actions cannot be separated from meaning, which both make our activities meaningful and is itself transformed by them. Embodiment is about engaged action rather than disembodied cognition; it is about the particular rather than the abstract, practice rather than theory, directness rather than disconnection.[335]

According to Dourish, because knowledge derives from experiencing certain situations, it also plays a role in muscle memory and bodily re-enactments. As such, it is possible to make the case that interactive art is only able to exert influence if the participant engages bodily.

To understand the role of embodiment in the experience of participatory art, I adopt a similar approach to the phenomenological method of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whereby the body is considered a physical, sensory, interpreting and experiential organism. Merleau-Ponty recognises the importance of embodiment and direct contact with the physical world as the basis for

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[332] Kenny Chow, *Animation, Embodiment, and Digital Media: Human Experience of Technological Liveliness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 64.

[333] Nathaniel Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance* (Gylphi Limited, 2013).

[334] Erkki Huhtamo, "Trouble at the Interface 2.0. On the Identity Crisis of Interactive Art," 2007, an expanded version of an essay that appeared in *Framework, The Finnish Art Review* 2 (2004), http://www.neme.org/591/trouble-at-the-interface-2.

[335] Paul Dourish, *Where the Action Is: The Foundations of Embodied Interaction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 189.

phenomenology. In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, he brings out a necessary dimension of the current discussion. Phenomenological research considers embodiment to be a core aspect in theoretical debates.[336] Hubert Dreyfus states that Merleau-Ponty identified three levels of meaning in relation to embodiment: the first concerns the body's physical structure; the second concerns skills being embodied and the ability for events that have been experienced to be recognised; whilst the third relates to cultural influences that endure. All three of these are of equal importance when referring to experiencing art that requires physical manipulation and their influence on how participants behave during the process of engagement.[337] Moreover, a core element of embodiment (associated with how people imagine and create) relates to the aesthetic realm, extending merely beyond skills that can be learned.[338] People interpret their surroundings and make sense of them by means of bodily experiences. There are activities that can be taught to bodies and these are influenced by the prevailing cultures in addition to their senses and physicality. It is as a result of engaging and making contact that it is possible to sense the physical world.

People exist in a particular time and space and it is the world they experience that embodies them. Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, asserts that phenomenology suggests that direct lived and felt experiences should be relied upon when referring to our existence in the world, and should precede the intellectualisation of the world we engage with.[339] Merleau-Ponty continues by stating that it is not what a person *thinks* that determines the world but rather what they *live through*.[340] Therefore, phenomenology entails gaining an appreciation of how people perceive and engage with the world.

According to Merleau-Ponty, being-in-the-world must have a biological embodiment in the world. As such, it is having a physical body that makes us who we are. The phenomenological body performs a mediating role between internal and external experiences. Merleau-Ponty opined that it is not entirely interior experience that is responsible for a person's human-like

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[336] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
[337] Hubert L. Dreyfus, "The Current Relevance of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment," 1997 (www.focusing.org/apm_papers/dreyfus2.html).
[338] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception.*
[339] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* xviii.
[340] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* xviii.

qualities. Instead, such qualities are derived from how people relate to and connect with the external world. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception is a means to realise the truth; one "should be looking for what makes that experience possible instead of looking for what it is".[341]

When the person participating engages directly with an artwork without using words or rules, the result is an experience involving "radical reflection" or reflection on that which has not been reflected.[342] According to Dewey, this corporeal apparatus is related to intellect, and any attempt to separate the mind from the body would result in lived experiences becoming dull and limited.[343] It is the participant's interaction with the work of art and even their physical presence that utilise an influence of the artwork as well as how it is perceived, resulting in an experience that has meaning in a unique way. Consequently, the fundamental concept of a phenomenological body and embodiment goes beyond our desire to appreciate experiences theoretically to extend them to others who participate as embodied beings in the world.

In 'Body and the Arts: The Need for Somaesthetics,' Shusterman supports Merleau-Ponty's position by arguing that the body should be considered a core aspect of human performance and perception. When considering how art is experienced, we must keep the body in mind.[344] Somaesthetics, devised by Shusterman, is a field that spans numerous disciplines and combines sensuous and cognitive perception. He tells us in 'Thinking Through the Body. Essays in Somaesthetics' that

> Art enchants us through its richly sensuous dimensions, perceived through the bodily senses and enjoyed through embodied feelings. Yet philosophical aesthetics largely neglects the body's role in aesthetic appreciation. […] Building on the pragmatist insistence on the body's central role in artistic creation and appreciation, somaesthetics highlights and explores the soma – the living, sentient, purposive body – as the indispensable medium for all perception.[345]

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[341] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception.*, xviii.
[342] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 254.
[343] Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 22-–3.
[344] Richard Shusterman, "Body and the Arts: The Need for Somaesthetics," *Diogenes* 59, nos. 1–2 (2013): 7–20.
[345] Shusterman, "Body and the Arts: The Need for Somaesthetics" 3.

According to Shusterman, somaesthetics regards aesthetics as a diverse area relating to performance and sensorimotor perception because it is necessary to act to perceive, and perceptions prompt us to act. It also confirms the need to engage in practical exercises and the contribution of aesthetics in enhancing perceptual skills and how they are applied in practice.[346] Human perception is an active process that entails action. We must act to be able to perceive the world we live in, and this activity can involve the whole body, not only the brain.

Keeping in mind the issues considered above is especially useful when evaluating artworks that require audience participation. Therefore, the following section sets out a conceptual grounding to describe certain aspects of what people experience when engaging with participatory artworks. The intention is not to suggest guidelines for describing the experiences of spectators but rather to demonstrate the merits of using certain phenomenological ideas in aesthetics. A major artwork by Zahrah Alghamdi, discussed below, draws out certain important concepts. I will employ the theories of a selection of relevant theorists to unpack her work.

4.5 After Illusion

Zahrah Alghamdi's 'After Illusion' (see fig. 1.2), is designed to engage the senses. For instance, lights stimulate the eyes, there is a scent of burnt leather, and audio recordings play when participants are invited to touch 50,000 handcrafted leather balls, which respond to touch by vibrating, creating an animated effect. The visual effect is one of physical displacement, thereby altering the spectators' perspectives, and the environment makes careful use of colour and light that differ from the norm. Alghamdi explained to me that the lighting made the atmosphere warmer and that, although the sound was already there, it became louder when spectators touched the leather balls so they might feel as if the creatures were talking to them.[347] In a catalogue that features 'After Illusion', art historian and exhibition curator Eiman Elgibreen tells us:

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[346] Shusterman, "Body and the Arts: The Need for Somaesthetics" 10.
[347] Zahrah Alghamdi, interview by the author, 22 August 2020.

Alghamdi explains that her constant motivation is the pure joy she finds in discovering a new life for her medium, a feeling that is reinforced when she succeeds in building mysterious spaces for her audience to experience; spaces through which she invokes new journeys that also express memory and illusion.[348]

Her site-specific piece After Illusion is based on experimentation and playfulness, as well as on exploration of time and place. Spectators experience the full effect of 'After Illusion' when they walk or move around; the experience unfolds during their action in the physical space. Exploring the environment of the artwork short-circuits their spatial orientation. What is seen, including the size and shape of the object surrounding the spectator, is distorted. The intention of this artwork is not to enhance human faculties; instead, it serves to make the processes of perception more visible. In effect, it makes people more aware of how they perceive and sense the world.[349]

As observed by Elgibreen:

> After Illusion... thus constructs a cosmos of opportunities to question perception and unpack realities. As one enters Alghamdi's constellation of objects, one encounters a magical space animated through light and sound: a swirling wave of playful and mysterious beings that engulfs the viewer in an immersive relocation; a virtual reality of the unknown. This interaction can induce a positive and happy experience, or a negative and foreboding one. Much depends on viewers' expectations and to what extent they are willing to forfeit what they know.[350]

It is possible to interpret this as a creation of embodied images which support the paradigm of affectivity. The aesthetic experience is developed by exploring the spatiality of our internal and external bodies while experiencing disorientation of the senses. It is not normally possible to access these spaces because we position our bodies to walk, catch, or pick something up automatically without considering these actions in isolation. This relates to Dewey's theory, which sees aesthetic experiences as derived from the body. Subjectivity is determined by our

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[348] Nada Shabout and Eiman Elgibreen, "After Illusion," in *National Pavilion of Saudi Arabia's Publication for the 58th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale Di Venezia* (2019), 22.
[349] Shabout and Elgibreen, "After Illusion," 22.
[350] Shabout and Elgibreen, "After Illusion.," 22.

senses, but our senses are not limited by the human organs – they are informed by mental concepts associated with emotions and relationships.[351]

Experiencing these works can directly affect the spectators' physical states (both internally and externally) by stimulating particular actions that bring about affectivity, thereby making them aware of their internal physical state. Lina Kattan takes up some of these ideas and writes "Hence, visitors of the pavilion are encouraged to interact intimately with the installation at their own pace. This intimacy is intensified by the low-lit atmosphere, which in turn stimulates viewers' sentimentalities". [352] She added that great care was taken to produce a complete experience, by making use of lighting to highlight the protruding pieces, and offering tactile engagement to create a greater sense of presence.[353] Kattan regards the work of Alghamdi to be especially sensory with the spectator engaging with the artwork in a way that is unexpected, taking the concepts of memory and time to a whole new level, whilst creating a perception that life can be extended beyond the creation of artworks. In addition, those viewing the work of art can hear the sound of it being made which assigns importance to the sounds in the atmosphere that may otherwise be disregarded as being insignificant. Kattan tells us, "playing these sounds enables viewers to indulge in the art-production experience, which transforms their role from passive spectators to engaged participants."[354]

The way 'After Illusion' explores vision, bodily space and movement resonates with certain instances of embodiment that are mentioned by the American and South African artist, Nathaniel Stern in his book *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*. Stern believes that the focus should be on how interactive art influences the possibility of embodiment: how we move, think, and feel with the artwork. He asserts that a body can only move-think-feel if it continually changes and that "situates embodiment as always performed: emergent and relational".[355] Moreover, Stern regards a body experiencing sustained embodied activity (when engaging with interactive artworks) as an "implicit body". He investigates what he refers to as

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[351] Katya Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities* (London: Routledge, 2007), 63.

[352] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 41.

[353] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 41.

[354] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 41

[355] Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment: The Implicit Body as Performance*, 67.

"potentialised art" – artworks that have the potential to maximise materiality, transformation, performativity, embodiment, affect, or amplification.[356] Art that is potentialised heightens our awareness that we can move-think-feel when engaging with an artwork. As Kattan explains:

> In fact, when entering the space, visitors instantly become part of the installation, an engagement that can be further enhanced by touching or moving around the work, and that can be experienced on both an intimate and a collective level. The active role of the visitor is further deepened by the simultaneous stimulation of all the senses: sight through light and materiality, hearing through sound recordings, smell through the odour of burnt leather, and touch through tactility.[357]

Stern asserts that it is a "situational framework for the experience and practice of being and becoming".[358] Stern hopes that we will be made more aware that relationships can influence how we move, think, and feel when engaging with interactive artworks.

Returning to the work of Merleau-Ponty, we can see how is ideas are vitally important to understanding Alghamdi's work. He argues that the visual, tactile, and motor elements of the body are not simply coordinated but synthesised:

> I do not translate the 'data of touch' into the language of seeing or vice versa – I do not bring together one by one the parts of my body; this translation and this unification are performed once and for all within me: they are my body, itself.[359]

He emphasises that we never have an isolated visual or tactile experience. The tactile experience, like the visual experience, is regulated by all the senses simultaneously and continuously:

> A certain tactile experience felt in the upper arm signifies a certain tactile experience in the forearm and shoulder, along with a certain visual aspect of the same arm, not because the various tactile perceptions among themselves, or the tactile and visual ones, are all involved in one intelligible arm, as the different facets of a cube are related to the idea of a cube, but because the

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[356] Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment*, 206.
[357] Shabout and Elgibreen, *After Illusion*, 42.
[358] Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment*, 7.
[359] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,*173.

arm seen and the arm touched, like the different segments of the arm, together perform one and the same action.[360]

The unity identified by Merleau-Ponty is perceptible when interacting with new media artworks. As we have already seen, the experience of 'After Illusion' removes the normal sensorimotor patterns of vision by displacing the habitual position of our source of optical vision. What is apparent from eye, neck, and head movements is a disconnect that frustrates our ability to perceive and results in an absence of experience. This disrupts what is typically united and perpetuating, revealing an internal haptic space that has always existed but usually goes unnoticed.

The analysis above confirms that the phenomenological body is central to how interactive/participatory works of art are experienced. Therefore, the phenomenological body is more than merely a mechanical vessel that manoeuvres a person's senses and brain between geographic locations. It is also a complicated dynamic unit that is simultaneously incorporeal and corporeal. Body and mind are inseparably linked, and this unity comes into being in continuous contact with the world. Merleau-Ponty, Stern and Shusterman stress the necessity of reflecting on this unity and the way it relates to the outside world to comprehend how people perceive and exist in the world. Analysing 'After Illusion' has allowed the compilation of a series of phenomenological concepts that can be utilised in subsequent analyses of interactive/participatory artworks.

Lastly, according to Merleau-Ponty, embodiment as a living creature is required for existence in the world. Therefore, it is our physical form that denotes what we are. I would propose that the Saudi artists I have interviewed and whose works I have introduced in this research are concerned with how people are "tightly held in the world" and yet simultaneously are unable to perceive how they are involved in the world.[361] By participating directly in artworks, they are invited to reflect on that which has not been reflected on previously.[362] The participants' actions and even their very presence have an impact on the work of art as well as how it is perceived,

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[360] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 175.
[361] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 247.
[362] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* 247.

yielding an experience that is both meaningful and unique. The concepts of embodiment and the phenomenological body are not just theoretical concepts, they are directly at play when a subject interacts with a work of art and becomes aware of the complexities of their embodiment as subjects in the world. This can be seen in 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' by Aldowayan, which encourages women to participate in the public sphere, share ideas, and express their opinions. In the culture of Saudi Arabia, this could be considered an emergent condition. This will be discussed thoroughly in the following section.

4.6 Playful art experiences

As previously above, the idea of fun has become a central motif in Saudi Arabian art during the last five years. In this section, I move the argument from the theoretical and philosophical to a more personal account of how some of these ideas are combined with the idea of play. In 2019, at the Tanween Festival at the Ithra Centre, play was the chosen theme. The festival provided an opportunity to explore play in art and a gallery setting "to encourage creative thinking and advance knowledge".[363] Immediately upon entering Tanween, I recognised that this art space was unlike any other that I had encountered. Initially, it was not apparent what the difference was, and I did not dwell on that at the time because so many artworks attracted my attention. However, it was clear that Tanween was a place of fun. I was surrounded by noise that suggested life, participation, and action. Importantly, it was not the artworks producing that noise but rather the activity of those attending and participating. Experiences that people find absorbing transport them to a different place. The participants contorted their bodies in unusual ways as they ran, jumped, and flew in digital and non-digital settings. As they did so, they laughed and discussed the experience with others.

The Tanween exhibition featured a collaboration with international artists such as Karina Smigla-Bobinski, who presented her work 'ADA' (2019) (see figs. 4.3, 4.4).[364] This sculpture was designed to move in response to viewers' actions, and the movement of the large balloon (filled with helium, spiked with charcoals) was re-coded into charcoal drawings on the gallery

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[363] "Tanween," accessed 2 February 2020, https://tanween.ithra.com/en/.
[364] "ADA Drawing," accessed May 26, 2020, https://tanween.ithra.com/en/programme/2019/ada-drawing/.

walls. Lines and points are constructed in incalculable intense and expressive composition. Smigla-Bobinski noted:

> In my art, participation is very easy and is led by intuition. I create my artworks to work on this primary level – the level of interest. The participant immediately uses the body or intuition to tell them how to use the artwork and how to behave.[365]

When I visited the piece at Tanween, I was strongly aware of this, and also saw how inspiring and enjoyable it was for everybody who interacted with it, as Smigla-Bobinski had hoped that it would be. In my observations, I noticed that children were very engaged with the work and enjoyed playing with the large balloon. Older visitors held back. Smigla-Bobinski also noted that visitors in Saudi Arabia interacted with the piece in a very specific, reserved way, and took longer than usual before beginning to engage with the work: "people need to break through" she said.[366]

Smigla-Bobinski's interactive installation 'Kaleidoscope', also exhibited at Tanween (see fig. 4.5), is another example of a work altered by participation. The piece functioned as a huge light box that could be walked on. Cyan inks left marks on the surface that recorded pressure from fingers, footsteps, and full bodies. Each movement on the interactive surface of the 'Kaleidoscope' produced new images.[367] Smigla-Bobinski decided to make both 'Kaleidoscope' and 'ADA' playful and involve the body. She explained that one of her reasons for doing so was

> because in our time now we try to deny the body, we try to make it only something that we have to show to others like when we dress very beautifully, or arrange our hair beautifully, and this is something that is not really true and the body is something very crucial for us. We *are* the body, and we get all our experience or our knowledge *through* our body, so I decided to use the body for this; then you get a totally different participation with art.[368]

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[365] Karina Smigla-Bobinski, interview by the author, 31 August 2020.
[366] Smigla-Bobinski, interview.
[367] "Kaleidoscope, Karina Smigla-Bobinski," accessed May 26, 2020, https://smigla-bobinski.com/english/works/KALEIDOSCOPE/index.html.
[368] Smigla-Bobinski, interview.

Figure 4.3 Karina Smigla-Bobinski, ADA, 2019. Author's photograph.

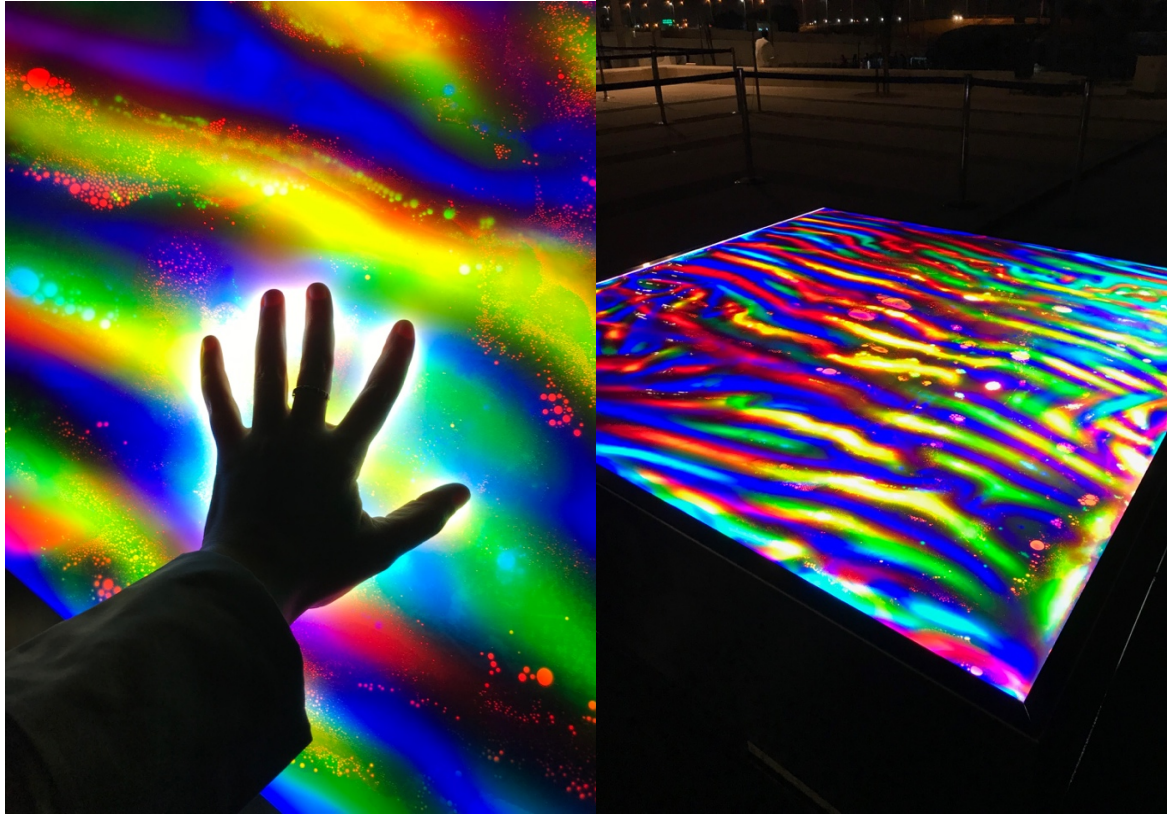*Figure 4.4 Karina Smigla-Bobinski, ADA, 2019. Author's photograph.*

Figure 4.5 Karina Smigla-Bobinski, Kaleidoscope, 2019. Author's photographs.

The centrality of the spectator is a major element in this process, specifically her or his body. These artworks create situations that disrupt, enhance, and alter embodied experience in ways that draw attention to our varied relationships with structures and physical matter.[369] Interactive art, as Nathaniel Stern defines it, draws attention to our bodies and, through play, to the objects that the world has to offer. It is evidenced in 'Microworld' (2019) (see figs. 4.6, 4.7, 4.8) which was exhibited in the Children's Museum in Tanween. This digital artwork by the international company Genetic Moo presented a room full of interactive screens that one could play with and explore.[370] The digital ecosystem was inspired by complex processes in nature. A series of sensors detected motion, colour, sound, and light and fed this information to computer programs. The software applications generated new patterns of activity that were projected around the room in response to the movement of the participants' bodies. Interactive art creates a situational framework for the experience of existence; moving-thinking-feeling in the interactive space

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[369] Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment,* 4.

[370] "Tanween," accessed 26 May 2020, https://tanween.ithra.com/en/programme/2019/microworld/.

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embodies the artist's practice.[371] Moving, thinking and feeling are related to the process of embodiment (discussed earlier in section 4.4), and interactive art highlights the processes of the subject's incorporation and expression of physical and mental actions. Media theorist Ryszard W. Kluszczynski describes this aesthetic process as a major aspect of interactive activity. He writes:

> An interactive artwork takes on the shape of an event. An artist does not make a final, completed piece of art, instead produces an area of activity for the receivers, whose interactive actions bring to life an artwork-event. Regardless of what shape the final product of an artist's activity takes on, an interactive artwork finds its final formation only as a result of the participative behaviour of the viewers.[372]

According to Kluszczynski, audiences who take part in experiences through embodied action are essential to interactive art. Through physical action, the participant in an interactive installation activates the space of experience and is part of an aesthetic exchange.

Visitors enjoyed such an experience in Architects of Air's monumental 'Luminaria' founder Alan Parkinson (see fig. 4.9). It immersed visitors to Tanween in radiant colour that came from the daylight shining through the luminarium's fabric. Visitors removed their shoes before entering an airlock and, once inside, they followed a map to explore the installation. Alternatively, they could sit back and enjoy the ambience, which was enhanced by a subtle, specially composed soundscape. 'Luminaria' was inspired by natural shapes and geometric forms.[373] The innovation consisted of inspiring domes and winding paths that formed a maze. Audience interaction and interactivity among users are fairly high, it can thus be enabled by interactive and participatory art, even if user interaction is not intended. Art experiences such as these are new to Saudi Arabia, where the idea of an audience experiencing and participating in forms of art that involve touching an object, entering an immersive environment, and drawing and becoming part of an artwork is novel. Most of these playful exhibits in Tanween involved

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[371] Stern, *Interactive Art and Embodiment,* 7–8.
[372] Ryszard Kluszczynski, "Strategies of Interactive Art," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture.* Volume 2, 2010, 1.
[373] "Somewhere between a Womb and a Cathedral," accessed 8 November 2022, https://www.architects-of-air.com/home.

international collaboration, but major interactive artworks were both presented *to* and enjoyed and created *by* the people of Saudi Arabia.

Figure 4.6 Genetic Moo*, Microworld, 2019. Author's photograph.*

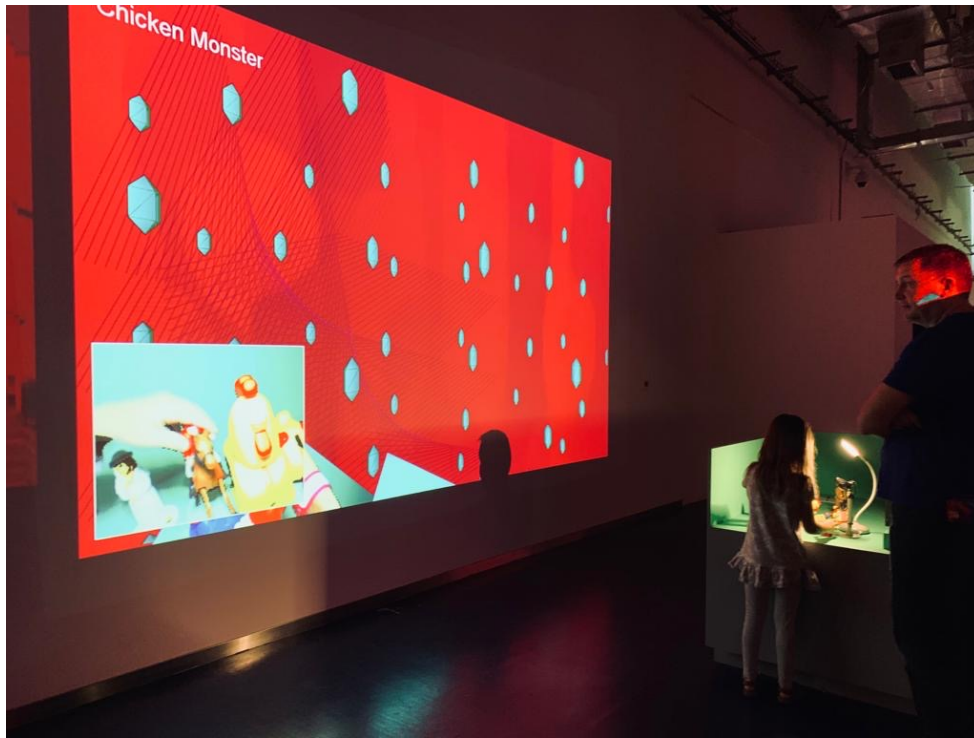*Figure 4.7* Genetic Moo*, Microworld, 2019. Author's photograph.*

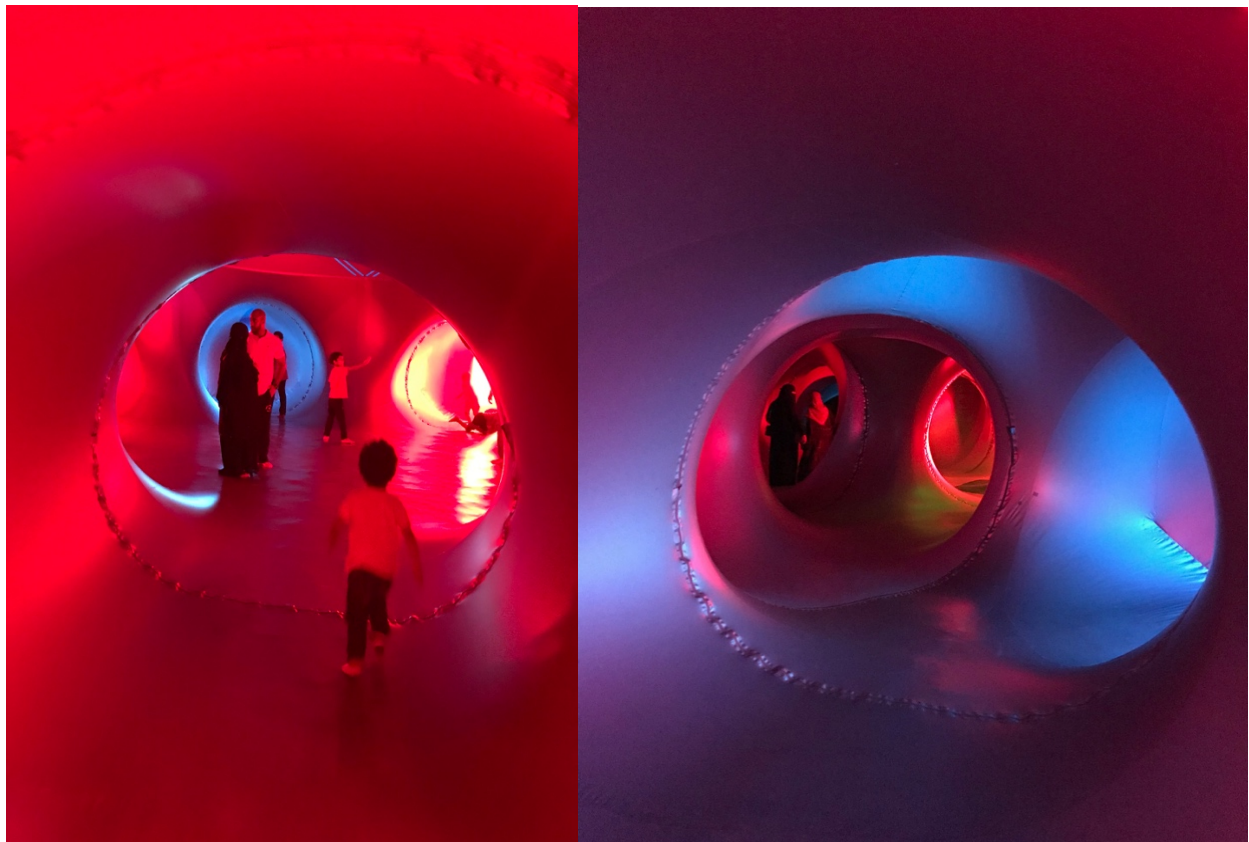*Figure 4.8* Genetic Moo, *Microworld, 2019. Author's photograph.*

Figure 4.9 Alan Parkinson, Luminaria, 2019. Author's photographs.

Play is a key dimension of many of the participatory Saudi Arabian artworks that I have discussed. These artworks tend to elicit sensory responses and require physical activity. This research asks how participatory art practices can be defined and understood in a Saudi context and what is motivating the creation of participatory art in Saudi Arabia. We could also ask in this chapter whether bodily play and the physical manipulation of these art objects amount to more than symbolic gestures. There is a strong association between play and childhood, and play is more closely associated with entertainment than art. Participatory art is often used to explore play, thus addressing play's social function and the meaningful place it assumes in a person's social life as a way of engaging and experiencing the world. This section of my thesis also considers how the role of action in play enables agency, stimulation, relief, meaning, and social interaction in Saudi Arabia.

The impulse of play has the same nature as aesthetic experience. Friedrich Schiller, a German philosopher of the eighteenth century, believed that the problematic human duality could be resolved through the impulse to play. He supposed a relationship between play and art: "With beauty man shall only play, and it is with beauty only that he shall play".[374] Schiller regards play as a core aesthetic category.

It is difficult to arrive at definitions of play in contemporary play theories without referring to Johan Huizinga's seminal work, *Homo Ludens*. Rather than seeking to describe the various types of play in detail, Huizinga sought to better understand play as a cultural phenomenon and presents a definition of culture as a construct that derives from play.[375] Huizinga distinguishes between the various forms of play, and his definitions remain relevant today; indeed, they are employed here. Different cultures assign different meanings to the word "play," and some languages have numerous words that refer to the various dimensions of play.[376] Irrespective of the slight differences in the way the word is utilised, Huizinga offers a definition which encapsulates it:

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[374] Paulius Petraitis, "Video Games as Objects of Art: Revival of the Play-Element in Contemporary Artistic Practice," *Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis* (2012): 104.

[375] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

[376] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 28-45.

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is different from ordinary life.[377]

Whilst this definition may be wide-ranging, certain core features of play are commonly evident in participatory art experiences. Huizinga suggests that people are free to choose when they want to play. This relates to a core element of play: that it is distinct from ordinary life. Therefore, play has no place in "real life" and instead consists of standalone moments. Once in the magic circle, real-world rules do not apply. However, art also steps away from real life in modernist accounts.[378] Is Huizinga's conception of play modernist in its reliance on binary ideas of play and non-play and play and life?

In Manal Aldowayan's participatory work 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' (2020), exhibited at Desert X (see fig. 1.1), the artist installed a series of 12 trampolines dug into the ground, some more than four metres in dimension. This work was an attempt to represent the water reserves, puddles, and wells where camels and people used to drink – waterholes that have disappeared.[379] This idea of invisibility and disappearance is a major thematic concern in Aldowayan's research and practice. The artwork is activated when people jump on top of it, touched or laid upon. Through the use of lightning technique, the trampolines become moon circles in the evening as people interact with them. The trampolines are invisible until exhibition attendees start bouncing on them. Aldowayan mentioned that the initial absence of visual stimulation in the piece was unimportant; "the visuality and the body that activated the artwork were the most important

[377] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 28.
[378] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 28.
[379] I pair the story of Aldowayan's work with that of the art historian and curator Miwon Kwon who authored the book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity.* Kwon's theories move beyond site specificity. According to Kwon: "[...] the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate." Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2002), 26.

elements."[380] For her the work occurs at the moment the participant experiences it, and nothing remains afterwards.[381] In an interview, she told me that

> [t]here was a very unique energy in those spaces when women gathered, and the Saudi men showed their childish side – there is a certain image of what a man and a woman in Saudi Arabia look like. There is a seriousness, there is religion, patriotism, so you never see the silly side, the childish side, they are never portrayed in this way. Capturing this moment was very interesting to me. When these artworks are no longer activated by human interaction, they become something different and are treated respectfully as precious objects.[382]

Aldowayan opens up possibilities for the critical consideration of identity through play.[383] She creates a space of creativity based on pleasure, fun, and phenomenological knowledge. Focusing on leisure allows people to play with their surroundings. Aldowayan refers to identity as a means for people to express themselves whilst perceiving what is around them. It is typically the case that many aspects of a person's identity are determined at birth by features such as sex, ethnicity, and physical characteristics, but some elements of identity evolve over time.[384] For instance, a person's identity can change as a result of their experiences. However, it is also true that a person's identity is likely to have a bearing on their decisions (e.g. whom they choose to be friends with and their political beliefs).[385] Artists often produce art that is intended to question, explore, and/or express identity. We would ask here how these ideas of embodiment relate to a

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[380] Manal Aldowayan, interview by the author, August 20, 2020. Gustaf Almenberg refers to this interaction as the "act of creating", and argues that it is the basis of such works. It not only affects the appearance of the work but also affects the participants physiologically and physically by involving them in "the feeling-thinking nature of creativity" that are part of the artwork's rules of engagement. Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 10.

[381] Nadin Khalil, "Reading Saudi Contemporary Artist Manal Aldowayan Re-Examines Shifts in Power and Perceptions Ahead of a Major Solo Exhibition Opening This Month," *Vogue Arabia,* June 2021: 119–121.

[382] Manal Aldowayan, interview by the author, 20 August 2020.

[383] Mandoki argues that the subject's identity is always social and depends on others for its consolidation and that it is a structure that is built and protected and can even outlive the subject. Our identity is shaped by others because it is a product of negotiation and presentation. "Identity is what begins at the mirror phrase pointed out by Lacan, the discovery by the infant of his or her image as an object in the mirror, the sense of being seen from the outside. Later it involves in the awareness of owning a certain appearance, exercising a profession, belonging to a certain family or ethnic group, nation or religion. Identities maybe personal or collective and we become members of society only through them". Creating an identity is not just a semiotic process that expresses who one is or what one wants but also an aesthetic process because we aim to be appreciated and accepted by others. Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 57–58.

[384] Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 57-58.

[385] Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 57-58.

Saudi body, experience, and identity and how play has helped Saudis recognise the greater complexity of their identities or roles when in a public space.

Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' has helped to redefine what can be achieved in terms of art in Saudi Arabia. Works that encourage playful interaction help to chip away at cultural and social barriers. Progress of this nature is by no means inevitable in Saudi Arabia, Aldowayan has said, "people are nervous at first, but I've seen young and old now have a go".[386] Her work is representative of the conceptual space that could be regarded as an emergent condition in the culture of Saudi Arabia when women are free to be seen in public, express their opinions, and share ideas. This is an important space in which women-led transformations can be fostered through interactions and playfulness. Art has a role to play in providing suitable spaces for individuals to explore new types of expression. Whether it involves making art (such as in Aldowayan's earlier works 'Tree of Guardians', 'Esmi', and 'Suspended Together', explained in Chapter 2), or bouncing on a trampoline, play provides an outlet for stimulation, relief, and agency in Saudi Arabia. Aldowayan's artworks can provide insight into how people live their lives and the social context in which they find themselves at a specific moment. Aldowayan states:

> My artwork had to transition with the changes in Saudi because I feel compelled as an artist to address this transformative moment. As women are being pushed to participate in the public sphere, it's time to readdress our bodies, spaces, as a counter-public of sorts, imbued with strength and voice, but now that's been disrupted, too. I don't know if the millennials feel this fire, because they've not experienced the same thing.[387]

Interaction with participatory art can be viewed as "a game, whose forms, patterns, and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence".[388] Play lies at the heart of experimentation, and it can be both disruptive and creative, enabling

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[386] Oliver Basciano, "Saudi Artist Manal Aldowayan Unveils New Piece of Land Art Addressing Water Scarcity in Al Ula," *The National*, 2 February 2020. https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/art/saudi-artist-manal-aldowayan-unveils-new-piece-of-land-art-addressing-water-scarcity-in-al-ula-1.971513.
[387] Khalil, "Reading Saudi Contemporary Artist Manal Aldowayan."
[388] Bourriaud, *Nicolas Bourriaud: Relational Aesthetics*, 11.

people to question ideologies, cultural values, and how the world functions.[389] Huizinga wanted to show how we can identify the ludic element in social and cultural activities, and where we can find play in thoughtful events as the cognitive and religious.[390] He asserts that play "adorns life, it broadens it, and to that extent it is a necessity both for the individual, as a function of life, and for society, because of the meaning it has, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in brief, as a function of culture".[391]

4.7 Playful art and "seriousness"

Some critics argue that playful interactive art should not be taken seriously. Critic Regina Cornwell believes that playful interactive art lacks seriousness because it prompts frivolous play and fun. The merits of play often go unrecognised and it is mistakenly dismissed as something that does not deserve to be taken seriously. In her article 'Artists and Interactivity: Fun or Funambulist?', Cornwell asserts that interactive art and video games become one, describing the gallery and museum as a place of "twisted fun aimed to please [and] not disturb or bother or displease or cause a middle-class audience to think".[392] She suggests that Marcel Duchamp provides a "counter-model for artists in the field of interactivity" that brings depth to art over time and asserts that art takes time to understand.[393] Such an argument can easily be made by pointing to Duchamp's method of utilising ready-made everyday items; this approach helps to challenge the assumptions that people have about art and prompts many questions. Duchamp struck a careful balance between play and serious art. According to Cornwell, Duchamp was:

> A funambulist – a tightrope walker – balancing language and imagery full of puns and irony, a player and a worker. Artists in the interactive field must learn to master the tightrope which computer technology dares them to do in a fun-filled and contentious world to keep seriousness alive.[394]

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389 Aldowayan, interview.
390 Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 90.
391 Mandoki, *Everyday Aesthetics*, 91.
392 Regina Cornwell, "Artists and Interactivity: Fun or Funambulist?" In *Serious Games*, ed. Carol Brown and Beryl Graham (London: Barbican Art Gallery/Tyne and Wear Museums, 1996), 1, http://stare.com/beryl/serious/other/rcessay.htm.
393 Cornwell, "Artists and Interactivity," 4.
394 Cornwell, "Artists and Interactivity," 4.

According to Huizinga, there is a general tendency to oppose seriousness and play but transitioning from "play is non-seriousness" to "play is not serious" can wrong-foot people because some forms of play are indeed serious. [395] Moreover, Huizinga states that it is possible to achieve a form of beauty through play that seriousness is unable to deliver.[396] Rather than being in conflict with seriousness, play is a thing unto itself, Huizinga asserts. It resides on a higher order than seriousness because, whilst seriousness attempts to preclude play, play can include seriousness.[397]

Play has formed a major aspect of some art movements. What follows is by no means a thorough examination of the role of play in art, but it is important to highlight some significant historical examples of the relationship between play and art. This overview expands on these movements' uses of interactivity, bringing play into the theoretical arena. Fluxus artists, for example, frequently sought to engage viewers through play. The artists of Fluxus questioned whether play in art was authentic art because "it undermined the seriousness of high art, and pointing irreverently instead to intentionally creating everyday action and experiences".[398] Fluxus artists recognised that play lies somewhere between the absurd and the serious, and they made use of play when producing serious art. Situationists also used play strategically to question the basis of capitalism which seeks to distinguish between work and leisure.[399]Allan Kaprow argues that artists had a responsibility to demonstrate that people can play beyond the constraints of "competition, authoritarianism and a Protestant work ethic".[400] Art should reflect the wider world; because playfulness features prominently in the world, it should be explored by art. According to Mary Flanagan, "Historians who see representational practices as mirrors of culture can also look to play for cultural clues, paying special attention to the intersection of play and art."[401] The works being considered here cannot be described as superficial.

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[395] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,*11.
[396] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 14.
[397] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,*45.
[398] Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 101.
[399] Dezeuze, *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork*, 12.
[400] Dezeuze, *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork*, 12.
[401] Flanagan, *Critical Play Radical Game Design*, 21.

Play is a distinct way of experiencing the surrounding environment; it gives meaning to an individual's social interactions. In addition, play can enrich life, providing social, spiritual, and expressive associations that enliven culture.[402] Another serious aspect of play is put forward by Filipe Pais in his thesis 'Experience and Meaning Making in Interactive Art'. He proposes the notion of "social play" – play that briefly emerges from the relationship between people when there are or are not specified rules.[403] In participatory/interactive art, play is most closely associated with moving, contorting the body, changing perceptions, and short-circuiting the senses. Such settings effectively govern how the participants interact with the work of art whilst simultaneously bringing about interpersonal engagements. As Claire Bishop asserts (of work that has a more contemporary, relational character), various installation works create interactions among participants to "set up functioning 'microtopias' in the here and now" and generate face-to-face communication.[404]

Khalid Afif's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' (discussed in Chapter 2) is a good example of how participatory art can foster social play. In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Afif created work that required people to participate and communicate with each other to make a work of art from their homes. He invited participants to use their phones to interact online and move a paint gun that shot paint onto a canvas he hung in his house to create abstract designs. He also programmed motors to control the gun. PUBG (see Chapter 2) inspired him to produce his project Fun-G. His audience met live on Instagram and discussed what colour to use and how they were feeling about life during the pandemic. This group-participation model is useful for creating user content as well as for interacting with a largely autonomous public.[405] However, it was the social aspect of play that caught Afif's attention. People engaged with Afif's work in a semi-solitary way which involved being left alone with the art for an extended period. Yet there was a distinctly social element to playing Fun-G. Remote engagement with other people who

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[402] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 9.

[403] Filipe Pais, "Experience and Meaning-Making Process in Interactive Arts: The Influence of Play and Aesthetic Distance in Interactive Art Encounters," PhD thesis [University of Porto] 2014: 138.

[404] Bishop, *Installation Art*, 102-16; The term microtopia was first mentioned in Nicolas Bourriaus's Relational Aesthetics. Microtopia means that artists should create a realistic situation rather than seek imaginary and distant utopias.

[405] To read more, Participation: Kris Rutten, "Participation, Art and Digital Culture," *Critical Arts* 32, no. 3 (April 2018): 1-8, https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2018.1493055, 3.

found the endeavour meaningful provided an opportunity to discuss the project and reflect on it verbally.

Huizinga refers to people being "apart together" when playing, noting that after playing a game, they recognise that they have shared an experience with others in the circle: "…the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game".[406] When a group of people are "apart together," their experiences of playing are shared, and the meanings derived from this play are only relevant within the time and space associated with that play. It is the feeling of "apart together" that Afif generated in 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home', which contributed to the formation of social play. Afif emphasised how his art triggers a link between individual and collective experiences.[407] Gregory Bateson, in 'A Theory of Play and Fantasy' (1955), approached play as a form of communication. He classified human oral communication as metalinguistic and metacommunicative; the former is the language and the latter is the relationship and communication process between the speakers. According to Bateson, play only happens if the individuals involved are capable of metacommunication to exchange signals that carry the message "this is play".[408]

Playful artworks help to initiate social interaction and engagement with the external environment in ways that make people experience what it is to be human. This is especially important at a time when people in Saudi Arabia are experiencing considerable change in their social, domestic, and working lives. As a result, the selected artworks in the thesis go beyond making political and social statements about space; rather, they reflect a specific period in politics and the development of society.[409] At a time when social relationships have become increasingly important for managing change in Saudi Arabia, people have welcomed the opportunity to engage with participatory works of art to satisfy their need to connect and derive social meaning. Society, as a set of relations that are in constant flux, is permeable and adaptive and reacts to

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[406] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens a Study of the Play-Element in Culture,* 12.
[407] Khalid Afif, interview by the author, 11 September 2020.
[408] Katarzyna Zimna, *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art* (I.B.Tauris, 2014), 15.
[409] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* 2.

wider global developments. The interactive artworks that I studied symbolise this act of construction and the process of creating meaning and significance.

The concept of play adopts a central role by combining the explorations of participants to the development of creativity. We can see this also in Afif's 'Not Yet' (2014), with its rotating canvases (explained in Chapter 2).[410] The visitors were asked to apply colours of their choice to the canvases, and the experience gave them active enjoyment. This relates to Huizinga's equation of play to meaning; one way to attribute meaning to participatory works of art is for play to serve as an educational tool that influences how participants behave – it fosters creativity.[411] When a person plays with a work of art, they create new meaning that extends beyond their conventional life. Both the artwork and the interacting subject are changed; the generation of meaning and significance is enacted. 'Play' means, as Katarzyna Zimna states in her book *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art* "orientation towards the process, experimenting, stepping into different 'realities', treating viewers as playmates and changing identities".[412]

Such works of art invite those participating to converse and discuss them. Many interactive artworks have social and relational dimensions, and interpersonal engagements become determinant in triggering aesthetic experiences. Nicolas Bourriaud state that "the artist sets his sights more and more clearly on the relations that his work will create among his public and on the invention of models of sociability".[413] To this, artists seek to arrive at models of how social play can be meaningful. Shusterman points to this "social dimension" that is "often obscured".[414] He observes that it is often assumed that the enjoyment of art or entertainment is merely subjective and individual. However, he continues, "When we experience joy, we typically want to share it with others; and we can share our aesthetic pleasures in the same way we share an aesthetic experience." He claims that "Aesthetic experience gains intensity from a sense of sharing something meaningful and valuable together and this includes the feeling of shared

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[410] Khalid Afif, interview.

[411] Louise Lazzari, "Art and Play: Designing Ludic Interactions within the Art Field", (Aalto University. School of arts, Design and Architecture), 2015: 17. http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:aalto-201603291480.

[412] Zimna, *Time to Play*, 1.

[413] Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, 28.

[414] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 304.

pleasures."[415] Shared pleasure is a dialectical relationship between artist and audience via the object/situation and between audience members as social participants. The result of extending art into the social field is that a distinct means of experiencing the external environment becomes normalised into a daily routine. At this stage, there would be no spatial distinction between play and art in daily life.[416] Rather, playful art would have an important role in shaping the politics and social norms of Saudi Arabia.

Finally, it would be wrong to assume that pleasure lacks purpose or meaning. Shusterman observes that "pleasure's importance is often intellectually forgotten, since it is unreflectively taken for granted".[417] The seriousness of play in the context of art must not be disregarded because, as noted by Sutton Smith: "Civilisation may be gradually transforming itself to the point that it can indeed admit that play is as fundamental to life as survival and religion".[418] A transition is underway whereby works of art are less likely to attempt to make statements and more likely to provide experiences or stimulate certain behaviours.

These are not mutually exclusive aims, of course, but the experiential, interactive approach has come to the fore in much Saudi Arabian art. During the twentieth century, art was *seen*, but in the twenty-first century, it is increasingly being *experienced*. Such attempts to produce playful experiences form part of how we evaluate what surrounds us in an increasingly interactive way. This is evident in many areas of life, including malleable architecture, how games and theme parks are designed, and interactive designs on the internet. In each case, the intention is to give the user an experience.

4.8 Theoretical contextualist reflection

As mentioned earlier, Dewey's conception of art as experience is vital to our argument. He asserts that the experience that occurs between the artwork and the subject *is* the work of art.[419] What Dewey – and the scholars quoted above – argues is that aesthetic experiences are

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[415] Shusterman, "Entertainment: A Question for Aesthetics," 304.
[416] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 19.
[417] Richard, *Body and the Arts,* 11.
[418] Brian Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 67.
[419] Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 1.

characterised by a mixture of sensuous and cognitive perceptions. Ultimately, aesthetic experiences are valuable and meaningful and deeply experienced, and we give in to them.[420] Shusterman and Dewey state that aesthetic experiences combine body and mind, interpretation and understanding, meaning and presence. Whilst not ruling out the interpretive approach, they note the significance of sensuous bodily perceptions when experiencing art that has true meaning.[421]

Michael Hammel writes, "if you do not touch an interactive work, you will have no experience of it, but if you do, you might get more than you bargained for".[422] A common aspect of interactive/participatory art is that the artwork/object offers an experience of a new kind of relationship. The experiences of participants may vary, of course, due to the artist's objectives and the kind of artwork, and the experience may be one of pleasure or frustration. This range of experience might be induced by many forms of interaction that art can offer. Dadaist artists were committed to experimenting and "probing experience itself" to transcend aesthetic pleasure and influence people's lives; to get the audience to see and experience things differently.[423] The term 'experiment' was also used by the Situationists in Europe for activities that were defined as "situations" that created new experiences for the participants in their daily lives.[424]

Kwastek tells us that the participant experiences a process of understanding that can have a lasting effect: "Art is knowledge and experiencing an artwork means sharing in that knowledge".[425] She added that the artwork has a presence that becomes an experience that changes the participant who experiences it.[426] Art as experience, as separate from art as artefact or object, builds public consciousness and influences the norms of the wider art world.[427] This experimental tendency takes many forms in Saudi Arabia. Some artworks, for example, follow scientific protocols such as those shown at the Science Museum in Ithra. 'Microworld'

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[420] Juncker and Balling, "The Value of Art and Culture," 19.

[421] Dewey, *Art as Experience,* 22.

[422] Dominic Lopes, *A Philosophy of Computer Art* (London: Routledge, 2019), 28.

[423] Almenberg, *Notes on Participatory Art*, 47.

[424] Dezeuze, *The "Do-It-Yourself" Artwork,* 9.

[425] Kwastek, *Aesthetic of Interaction,* 50.

[426] Kwastek, *Aesthetic of Interaction,* 50.

[427] Candy and Ferguson, *Interactive Experience*, 2.

encourages participants to explore the world through physical activities and experimental situations that may disorient them.

Artists of the twentieth century in the West experimented with participation and play to expand their artistic tools and create different ways of interacting with the audience.[428] Both Saudi Arabia and the West have relied on entertainment or play in art making, and this could be seen as a strategy to avoid traditional bourgeois mores and assumptions about how art "works" – through disinterested engagement. Incorporating play and entertainment helps to ensure that the audience is active rather than passive. There are various ways in which an audience can be motivated to engage, including invitations, surprises, and shocks. Encouraging play helps to ensure the artworks are not viewed merely as commodities alongside other modern products; this approach can also be interpreted as a signal of anti-commercial sentiment.[429]

Because the Saudi audience is a very new art audience, the approach put forward by Vision 2030 seems appropriate: it builds engagement, excitement, and interest. This approach is at least formally similar to that taken in the West by Fluxus and the Happenings of the 1960s, even though those movements were more concerned with exploration and experimentation for their own sake and were bottom-up rather than top-down artistic movements. But, of course, the political concerns were very different and the particularities of the Saudi Arabian context create a unique context for new work.

Men and women in modern-day Saudi Arabia experience markedly different lives, given gender relations, education practices, and differences in how private and public spaces are occupied. Whilst a "woman's space" may overlap with a "man's space", the two are very different. However, being in a woman's space can give women a sense of empowerment. As we saw, Aldowayan creates an important space for women-led transformation, opening an arena in which they can explore their roles and visibility through interaction and playfulness in connection with her artworks.

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[428] Zimna, *Time to Play*, 93.
[429] Zimna, *Time to Play*, 93.

This research considered how spaces for participatory art suit a certain socioeconomic moment, as well as how the Saudi population can benefit from engaging with these spaces. Having explored art that is participatory and playful, it is apparent that play is central to both human life *and* culture. Huizinga asserted that play is much "more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or biological activity. It is a significant function… there is some sense to it".[430] Play also has an important social aspect because it serves the human need to connect with others. Spaces dedicated to experimental art enable people to connect socially. Those entering experimental art spaces are encouraged to play, and this can lead to social interaction through participation, interaction, and intersubjectivity. Huizinga suggests that play offers the means to withdraw from reality to experience "a higher social order" in a way that can confer benefits in terms of escaping the monotony of daily life, whilst also creating an opportunity for self-improvement.[431]

Interaction, entertainment and play are part of our daily lives. Play is an effective means of exploring interactive experiences because it is a building block of cognition, technology, society, and culture. By appreciating how movement, embodied cognition, and play interrelate, it is possible to devise a series of interactivity principles for interpreting a wide range of interactive experiences. These principles can be used to explore the rapid expansion of social networks and the cultural changes that have resulted from the Saudi Vision 2030.

Contemporary Saudi artists use participatory technologies to generate meaning as well as invoke experience.[432] Developments in digital communications alongside new types of content creation have transformed the model for active participation in cultural art in Saudi Arabia. This is evident in Afif 's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' and 'After Illusion' by Alghamdi. New technologies enable artists and art institutions to engage in dynamic ways with their audiences. As a result, the conversations that artists and institutions can have with their audiences have been transformed, affording considerably greater scope for audiences to dictate the conversations.[433]

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[430] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1.
[431] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 13.
[432] Zimna, *Time to Play*, 166.
[433] Khadraoui, "Future Imperfect: Digitalizing Social Change."

Saudi government directives support participatory art practices as part of the government's goal to promote creativity, open access to art, and to encourage as many people as possible to engage in the ongoing transformation of Saudi art and culture. In the past, the general public had little interest in visiting art galleries. For this reason, institutions, such as Ithra, developed a cultural content which utilises interactive exhibits to promote art to local families.

It seems that some Saudi artists are moving to participatory practices because institutions are directing them to make such works. Some of the Saudi artists that are involved in Vision 2030 have noticed that it takes their work in a certain direction by emphasising the idea of access and interactions with the general public; they may feel the influence of the institutions in their work. Rashid Alshashai says that "once there is an event or a project, you have to do specific things or ideas, for the institution to support it…Saudi mainly supports massive projects with specific artworks and methods".[434]

These artists hope to get a patron who supports their independent art practices, but art institutions can issue quite specific directives that they have to follow. How do they navigate in the face of such expectations? How can they accept commissions *and* do their own thing? The tensions between these objectives will affect the content and aesthetics of their work. Manal Aldowayan tells us "we are now at the beginning and the beginning is all commissions, they give you money for something. Our ambition, and it will happen, is that we will receive money without commissions for us to make our artwork.[435]

4.9 Chapter conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to achieve a deep understanding of the main issues surrounding participatory artworks in Saudi Arabia. We discussed and investigated the aesthetic experience relative to entertainment, embodiment, and play to understand the rise of participatory art over the last few years in the Saudi Arabian context.

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[434] Alshashai, interview.
[435] Aldowayan, interview.

Two types of art are being promoted at present, high art and art as entertainment (a binary that is critiqued by Richard Shusterman), and artists must try and locate themselves on this difficult terrain. I would argue that all types of engagement are utilised in the Saudi experience of art, and this research demonstrates that the binary of entertainment/high art does not hold up in this context. I propose that the entertainment aspect of art engages and develops audiences, and more informed audiences make possible reflective critical engagement. Works such as Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' and Afif's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home' invite the audience to experience them and give immediate pleasure. In addition, they inspire discursive thinking and provide both entertainment and high (contemporary) art – types of art previously absent in the KSA.

We must also remember that it is an embodied subject that plays and interacts with art. The body of the viewer becomes central in participatory art. A role such as this entails active work, embodied work that opposes the centrality of the eyes. To understand the nature of experiencing participatory art, I referred to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of phenomenology, in which embodiment reclaims the body from being merely a biological object and binds the mind to the body. Ideas of embodiment that relate to a specifically Saudi body and its experience have been discussed. This has helped redefine what Saudi Arabia can achieve in art. Physical interaction can help break down cultural and social barriers. In this sense, art provides individuals with appropriate spaces to explore new forms of expression. In addition, I briefly discussed how this relates to Saudi identity and theories of play and participatory art. I drew on Johan Huizinga's analysis of play, which I argue is a key dimension of many Saudi Arabian participatory artworks, and I argue that persuading an audience to behave playfully is a powerful way to inspire discursive thinking, particularly in the Saudi context.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the research that was undertaken for this PhD, focusing on the overarching research question and how it has been addressed. It demonstrates how the research findings presented have made original contributions to the current literature and a new analytic, conceptual framework has emerged. To reiterate, my aim was **to examine participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia through the analysis of artworks, artists, and organisations at the forefront of emerging forms of audience engagement, participation, and collaboration in art and culture.** The literature suggests that Saudi contemporary art practices are not well understood within local Saudi culture, so this thesis addresses this and seeks to develop new knowledge around the significance of participatory art practices in the country.

Five case studies were presented that examined different artworks, presenting analyses that answered the following question: **What are the wider cultural factors and conditions of participatory art practices in Saudi Arabia, and how are these practices addressed and negotiated by artists and interpreted by art historians, critics, and academics?** The critical examination of such practices provided insight into the role that participation plays in the art world cross-culturally, and also put forward a highly theoretical and rigorous language for discussing the art being produced in the country. Additionally, several sub-questions were raised and answered:

- How can participatory art practices be defined in a Saudi context?
- What is motivating the current flourishing of a participatory art scene in Saudi Arabia?

- What are the goals of and challenges faced by artists who employ participatory practices in Saudi Arabia, and how do they meet those challenges and achieve those goals?
- What forms does participatory art take in Saudi Arabia?
- What has been the impact of Saudi Vision 2030 on art and culture?
- How does the Saudi Vision 2030 relate to the emergence of participatory art in new art institutions in which art is often employed as entertainment?

I suggest that this thesis contributes to the emerging vocabulary of participatory and interactive experiences in the visual arts in Saudi Arabia that involve audiences and artworks. This interactive vocabulary was informed by phenomenology, theories of embodiment, theories of art as experience, and play theories as I explored how participants become active elements of the artist's palette. Through case studies and the development of research and theories put forward by Richard Shusterman, John Dewey and Johan Huizinga, this research presents a selection of theoretical findings which focus on different ways participatory artworks engage audiences. As mentioned above, a conceptual framework for participatory art in Saudi Arabia emerged by analysing these theories and applying them to suitable artworks. This approach will be useful for contemporary Saudi artists, curators, and institutions, and contributes to a global or culturally inclusive critical framework for participatory practices. It was therefore important to find, adapt, and create a theoretical framework and lexicon that would enable a deeper understanding of these contemporary practices. Based on this theoretical approach and the rigorous analysis of significant examples of participatory art (in Chapters 2 and 4), major contributions have been made to the existing literature. These will be discussed in the following sections.

5.2 Contributions to knowledge

First, this thesis offers a primary, substantial academic study that documents participatory art practice in Saudi Arabia – it is the first study of its kind. Second, it asks fundamental questions about the relationship between different stakeholders in contemporary art in Saudi Arabia: institutions that may support and fund participatory art projects, artists who deliver these projects, and members of the public who participate in and interact with the artworks. The

research rethinks the significance of participatory practices and presents a new understanding of the purpose and function of this type of work in the Saudi Arabian context.

The research features the works of several artists – Manal Aldowayan, Muhannad Shono, Khalid Afif, Rashid Alshashai, and Zahra Alghamdi. A study of these Saudi contemporary artists' art practices is presented which considers how they relate to cultural institutions in Saudi Arabia and how their approaches relate to historical and contemporary ideas in Western art. Some of the important concerns that have emerged through this study are embodiment and immersive installation, (Zahrah Alghamdi's 'After Illusion'), transcendence, ideas concerning the readymade and emphasis on the presence of the physical body (Rashid Alshashai's 'A Concise Passage'), how collective voices by women can be generated and the significance of the social body in collaboration (Manal Aldowayan's 'Tree of Guardians', 'Suspended Together', and 'Esmi'), movement and participation as activation (Muhannad Shono's 'Ala: A Ritual Machine', 'Al-Mars'), and ideas of play, dialogue, and the participant as maker (Khalid Afif's 'I Am at Home and You Are at Home'). These participatory practices integrate technology, traditional art materials, and a sense of playfulness to produce experiences that engage participants.

The research was conducted qualitatively, using theories (secondary data) and case studies (primary data), the latter involving field trips to collect data through interviews and exhibition visiting. By employing interviews as a means of reaching Saudi artists, I was able to weave important threads of information through this thesis; they are an essential part of the work. Visiting exhibitions was also one of the ways in which the project's interdisciplinarity was demonstrated.

The motivations of Saudi artists to explore participatory practices are rooted in the following ideas. First, participatory art engages new audiences through entertaining, playful qualities that make it accessible. Second, artists and curators have been paying attention to participatory practices that have emerged in recent years due to current developments and transformations in the world of art – especially the introduction of personal computers. Third, participatory art enhances the artists' ability to convey their ideas by utilising the collective voice. Fourth, this approach values audience input and produces unexpected results. Fifth, the focus on interactivity addresses the mission of artists working under the direction of Saudi Vision 2030, which is

designed to improve communication between art and the public to spur the development of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia.

Participation, including interactivity – experiencing and activating the work – can occasionally produce dramatic effects, which, I have argued, make art more accessible. Abstract and conceptual art or art with overtly political themes may be harder to approach and understand for Saudis without deep knowledge of art. Of course, this type of "inaccessible" art can be found in many cultural contexts. That said, participatory practices tend to bridge the gap between the public and difficult topics, and Vision 2030 has intentionally or unintentionally opened the floodgates for such work through its support for interactive and participatory works. Highlighting this development is an important emergent aspect of this work.

Religion plays a central role in Saudi Arabian culture, so works that challenge, question, or discuss it are taken very seriously. Aldowayan's 'Esmi', and Shono's 'Ala: A Ritual Machine', and 'Al-Mars' all contain religious subject matter. These pieces demonstrate the relationship between ritual, movement, and repetition in relation to the body. The participatory elements of these works have a strong relationship with the sense of embodiment already embedded in religious practice in everyday life. Thus, one could argue that these artists have made their works more accessible to the public by referencing culturally specific religious practices.

Globally, communication has evolved and changed since the 1990s, and Saudi Arabia has participated in this evolution. This change has been driven primarily by digital technology. Computers have had a significant impact on art and opened up new ways of achieving interaction. As virtual spaces become more prevalent, new forms of participatory and interactive art are emerging. As was demonstrated, Afif and Shono are pioneers in Saudi Arabia in this regard. In their work, they explore creative ways to use computers and were early adopters of interactive technologies. Through new technology, artists can create innovative ways to experience art. Saudi artists' practices presented in this thesis combine art with the digital language of technology to create an aesthetic that requires and creates interaction.

In Chapter 3, the driving factors behind the changing situation of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia was explored. It became evident that political and cultural factors contributed to the rise

of participatory art in the KSA. Cultural context thus plays a crucial role in understanding participatory art projects in Saudi Arabia. It helps to provide a deeper understanding of why certain forms of participation emerged, why certain artists were involved, and what motivated various institutions to support participatory art.

Over the last twenty years, all aspects of everyday life in Saudi Arabia have undergone modernisation, and contemporary art should be understood in light of recent political, economic, and social changes. The availability of the latest technology (made possible through funding from the Vision 2030 project) has also contributed to the type of work that can be made and exhibited, with large art institutions now showing sophisticated participatory/interactive art installations and artworks. Recently, many art institutions and curators have created and commissioned participatory artworks to increase their accessibility and reach a larger Saudi audience.

The government plays a significant role in the development of art in Saudi Arabia, especially participatory art. Saudis welcomes these new exhibitions, as is evident from the overwhelming number of people attending events and exhibitions. Vision 2030 has had a revolutionary impact on many aspects of Saudi society. I would suggest that the KSA government appears to be acting as a modernising, comparatively liberal agency working with a reluctant or more conservative public. It could be said, therefore, that the regime's new objective, as represented by the Ministry of Culture, is to achieve a unique sense of national identity in Saudi Arabia and create a new Saudi culture. It is apparent that the government appreciates the potential for artists to serve as "organic intellectuals"[436] and represent society. Additionally, a number of institutions and festivals such as the Misk Art Institute, Ithra, and the Ministry of Culture have provided funding, support, and resources for artists in Saudi Arabia. This would suggest that artists have become important players within much larger communities and organisations than one would traditionally associate them with, leading to an increase in the number of participatory artworks produced by artists.

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[436] Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci aptly describes organic intellectuals as individuals who emerge from the community and use critical thought to spread and direct the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1971).

A narrative of contemporary Saudi Arabian art is inextricably linked to the narrative of Saudi Arabian society as a whole. It was shown in Chapter 3 that new research must be conducted and published to develop new conversations, given the paucity of literature and discussion on Saudi art.

Chapter 4 addresses how participatory art spaces are suitable for a particular socioeconomic moment, as well as how Saudi citizens may benefit from engaging with these spaces. Through exploring ideas and examples of participatory and playful art, it became obvious that play is an integral part of the human experience and culture. Play serves a social purpose in that it allows people to connect with each other. Thus, participatory artworks facilitate social interaction by encouraging those entering experimental art spaces to play. I propose that interactivity becomes meaningful when people share, communicate, and play. In my observation, when audiences interact with participatory artworks, they are frequently chatty and sociable with their friends and even strangers. Play is essential to socialisation; it fulfils people's need to connect and derive social meaning at a time when social relationships are becoming more important for managing change in Saudi Arabia. This was demonstrated, for example by the audiences who interacted with Aldowayan's 'Now You See Me Now You Don't' or participated in Afif's project 'I am at Home and You Are at Home'.

We live in a culture that values interaction, entertainment, and play. Play is a building block of cognition, technology, society, and culture, and I believe that it is a crucial element of a framework through which to examine participatory art practices. To interpret a broad range of these experiences, it is necessary to appreciate how movement, embodied cognition, and play are interconnected. These interactivity principles offer the means to explore the rapid expansion of social networks and the cultural changes that have resulted from Saudi Vision 2030.

In Chapter 4, I explored the positive effect of government directives on examining these questions and opening them up to debate. Traditionally, the general population has shown little interest in visiting art galleries and museums, but by promoting creativity and creating access, the Ministry of Culture is encouraging as many people as possible to participate in the ongoing

transformation of Saudi art and culture.[437] Some artists, it seems, are moving towards participatory practices in response to the institutional pressure to make such works. A number of artists participating in Vision 2030 have noticed that it takes their work in a specific direction by emphasising the idea of accessibility and public participation. However, these governmental and art institutions can mandate guidelines and goals that impact both content and aesthetics.

In some cases, such limitations have become opportunities or channelled artistic exploration and experimentation into new areas. First, institutions restored funding for artists to produce certain types of artwork – specifically, participatory art – leading more artists to create participatory artworks. Second, lack of knowledge about contemporary art among the Saudi art audience led to the emergence of participatory art, making art more accessible and developing the audience. Third, the rarity of spaces in which women could express themselves meant that participation and the opportunity to be part of a collective voice presented a unique opportunity. Finally, social and cultural restrictions forced artists to find alternative ways to express their opinions.

Based on my case studies, the participatory artworks created by Saudi artists and described in the analysis have, in conjunction with new insights into theoretical formulations, provided answers to my research questions. The research provides a framework of concepts and terms that will be of value to artists. Furthermore, this research provides a platform for breaking down boundaries in contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, where artists are assuming new roles, taking on new challenges, and developing new audiences.

I argue that Saudi Arabia is experiencing a shift from the production of artworks in traditional forms to those that create experiences and behaviours. With the latter type of art, artists are changing audience behaviour and perceptions of what an art exhibition can be. The participatory artworks examined in the case studies reflect a wider change, in which cultural changes in a variety of fields are shifting the focus from consumerist to experiential. The case studies illustrate a methodology by which art generates moments of encounter and connection. Through this relationship, visual and auditory dialogues are established between art and the audience

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[437] Ministry of Culture, *Our Culture Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 25.

(sometimes through technology). The interactivity found in recent artworks reveals new ways of thinking and involving audiences in aesthetic content. The relationship between spectator and object is transformed through participatory art, requiring us to pay attention to the wider theoretical and cultural context activated by these interrelationships.

5.3 Concluding words

Engaging in an interaction means investing time and energy – it means being present in the moment. The artworks discussed in this thesis allow participants to connect emotionally and socially with people and ideas in new ways. Participatory practices can enchant, entertain, and tease audiences, linking, looking and doing. Art like this does not require new technology but rather creates new ways for people to engage, understand, and connect with one another. As we go about our daily lives, many social limitations are placed on us, but once we accept the invitation to participate, we become open to our surroundings. In this way, participation can break down social barriers, which makes it transformative.

I have confidence that my research findings will provide future Saudi artists and those working in fields beyond contemporary participatory art with a critical framework for understanding participatory art in Saudi Arabia.

5.4 Outline of future work

This study explored why some traditional artists have shifted to participatory art practices to produce new work. Considering this idea, we may be able to open up further investigation into the shift to participatory art practices. Studies in this area will be of great interest not only in the arts but also in the social sciences, where information gleaned from this study could be interpreted via other disciplines such as sociology.

Another way to advance this research would be to expand it by conducting further case studies, including other practices and approaches to art making. A comparison could be made to the findings of this thesis and would help to pinpoint the differences and similarities among participatory artworks. Analysing the work of the five Saudi artists included in the current study

allowed the identification of common themes, which are key to understanding how audiences interact with, experience, and participate in participatory art. However, these are not the only Saudi Arabian artists engaged in participatory practices. There are others who could have been included, such as Basmah Felemban and Ahmed Angawi. For practical purposes, a limit and to be imposed on the number of artists assessed. This study should be considered an initial investigation into participatory practices in Saudi art as further research will likely be necessary.

Furthermore, the concept of play described in Chapter 4 deserves further exploration, in particular how play relates to meaningful interactions with artworks. Such an investigation could include a deeper exploration of how play and meaning are generated in participatory art. If we move beyond the idea of "playing in the gallery", interactivity in art – as a way to connect people to public spaces and the city itself – might be an interesting area for research, especially if focused on the use of technology by artists in public spaces. What changes will be brought about by responsive technology in these areas?

My experience as a lecturer in the Department of Visual Art at Princess Nora bint Abdulrahman University, Riyadh, KSA, leads me to anticipate that some of the information provided in this thesis could be included in the curriculum for higher education courses offered in Saudi Arabia. Students in higher education would benefit from studying the theoretical and philosophical implications of participatory art, new media, multimedia, and installation art.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Initial letter

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10.07.2020

Re: Bushra Alghamdi

As Bushra's supervisor I approve of her research field trip in Saudi Arabia.

There is currently a large body of research that focuses on contemporary interactive art in international museums and art institutions, but there is little research concerning this topic that focuses specifically on art institutions in Saudi Arabia.

In order to gain a fuller understanding of this emerging form it is necessary for Bushra to engage in a series of interviews with artists and art institutions to investigate how the social and cultural factors that condition interactive art practices in Saudi Arabia are addressed and negotiated, and explore the challenges and goals that interactive art has in the Saudi context.

Sincerely,

Dr. Kate Allen
Associate Professor
University of Reading

Appendix B: Interview proposal (English)

Interview Proposal:

Research Title: Interactive Art in Saudi Arabia and their Entanglements with Art Institutions

ABSTRACT

There is currently a large body of research that focuses on interactive art exhibited in international museums and art institutions, but there is little research concerning this topic that focuses specifically on art institutions in Saudi Arabia. To gain a fuller understanding of this emerging form, I aim to investigate how the social and cultural factors that condition interactive art practices in Saudi Arabia are addressed and negotiated, and will explore the challenges and goals that interactive art has in the Saudi context. This thesis seeks to explore the impact of interactive exhibits — commissioned by institutions in response to the Saudi "2030 Vision" — and the influence this has on grass roots artists, and local communities, an affect that helps put contemporary art in Saudi Arabia on an international stage.

I explore how and if interactive exhibits are able to promote grass roots participation in contemporary art, build new audiences, widen participation through interactive exhibits and linked educational programmes, whilst capturing the imagination of a young, digitally literate Saudi demographic. This research will be based on two case studies, namely, the Misk Art institution in Riyadh and the King Abdul-Aziz Centre for World Culture (Ithra) in Dahran. My research also engages with issues related to the integration of educational programs and interactive exhibits, as well as the role that partners and international collaborations play in the rise of interactive art in these institutions.

Defining the term 'Interactive art' for the purpose of my research project:

Interactive art, when viewed in the context of interaction, could simply mean a form of art which involves audience participation. There are numerous ways viewers can actively be involved with an artwork. This can include touching an object, entering an environment, clicking on a digital image, or other interactive media features. Interaction also might occur between people, between machines, between people and machines, or between people and artworks.

Bushra Alghamdi, postgraduate student, School of art and design, The University of Reading, Reading, UK.

Appendix C: Interview proposal (Arabic)

نبذة مختصرة

بالرغم من وجود مجموعة كبيرة من الأبحاث التي تسلط الضوء على الفن التفاعلي المعروض في المتاحف والمؤسسات الفنية الدولية، الا انه لا يوجد الكثير منها والتي تركز بشكل خاص على المؤسسات الفنية في المملكة العربية السعودية. للوصول الى فهم كامل لهذا الفن الناشئ في المملكة، فإن هذا البحث يهدف الى دراسة العوامل الاجتماعية والثقافية التي كان لها دور فاعل في ظهور الفن التفاعلي، بالإضافة الي البحث في الأهداف والتحديات التي واجهت هذا النوع من الفن في المملكة العربية السعودية. تهدف هذه الرسالة أيضا إلى دراسة الاعمال الفنية التفاعلية ــ التي ساهمت في ابرازها عدد من المؤسسات الفنيةــ وتأثيرها على الفنانين السعوديين، والمجتمع المحلي، والذي بدوره يصل بالفن السعودي المعاصر للعالمية استجابة لرؤيه ٢٠٣٠.

في هذه الرسالة سوف يتم دراسة ما إذا كانت هذه المعارض التفاعلية قادرة على تعزيز المشاركة المجتمعية في الفن المعاصر، وبناء جماهير جديدة، وتوسيع مشاركة الجمهور في المعارض التفاعلية والبرامج التعليمية المرتبطة بها. لإنجاز هذه المهمة تم تطبيق طريقة نوعية لدراسة دور المؤسسات الفنية المعنية، ومن ثم سيتم استخدام النتائج للتحليل والمناقشة. هذا البحث يعتمد على دراسة حالتين هما: مؤسسة مسك للفنون بالرياض ومركز الملك عبد العزيز الثقافي العالمي (إثراء) في الظهران. وذلك لدورهما الفاعل في نمو الفن التفاعلي على المستوي المحلي والتعاون الدولي.

تعريف مصطلح "الفن التفاعلي" لهذا البحث:

الفن التفاعلي يمكن أن يعني ببساطة شكلاً من أشكال الفن يتضمن مشاركة الجمهور. توجد طرق عديدة يمكن من خلالها للمشاهدين التفاعل مع العمل الفني، يمكن أن يشمل ذلك لمس العمل الفني، دخول مساحة او بيئة معينه او النقر على صورة رقمية أو وسائط تفاعلية أخرى. التفاعل قد يحدث ايضا بين الناس، بين الآلات، بين الناس والآلات، أو كما تم ذكره بين الناس والأعمال الفنية.

بشرى الغامدي، طالبه دكتوراة، جامعة ريدينق، ريدينق، المملكة المتحدة.

Appendix D: Consent form

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Kate Allen (supervisor): k.allen@reading.ac.uk

Bushra Alghamdi: |

Researcher: Bushra Alghamdi

Interviewee:

Information Sheet

Title: Interactive Art in Saudi Arabia and their Entanglements with Art Institutions.

Aim: I aim to investigate how the social and cultural factors that condition interactive art practices in Saudi Arabia are addressed and negotiated, and will explore the challenges and goals that interactive art has in the Saudi context. It also seeks to explore the impact of interactive exhibits — commissioned by institutions in response to the Saudi "2030 Vision" — and the influence this has on grass roots artists, and local communities, an affect that helps put contemporary art in Saudi Arabia on an international stage.

Arrangements: Interviews will be recorded and notes will be taken, then later it will be fully transcribed and transulated (if needed).

Researchers: Kate Allen has supervised the interview devised by Bushra Alghamdi. Bushra will explain the aims of the interview, and how the questions should be answered.

Your task: You are asked to answer a set of questions by face to face, online meeting or by Email. None of these questions is compulsory. By returning your answers, you are giving your consent for the information you provide to be used in writing the dissertation and attributed to you. It will also be used in my website: https://www.saudi-interactiveart.com

Confidentiality: Purely for University records, you must supply your name and email address. This information will be stored securely by the Department of Art for five years.

Ethical review: This application has been reviewed by the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct.

Contact details as above and e-mail.
Interviewee name: Signature:
Email address:

www.reading.ac.uk

Appendix E: Case study letter

University of Reading

16th October 2019

RE: Bushra Alghamdi | Attendance at Tanween

To whom it may concern,

Bushra Alghamdi is a research student on the PhD. Art program at the University of Reading. In this capacity, she is attending Tanween with the aim of producing a case study about the Ithra - King Abdulaziz center for world culture. It is our hope that she is can have your full support in pursuing this, as it is vital for the completion of her research project.

Regards,

Dr. Pil Kollectiv
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