

Presenter: Nooriyah

Love, lust, music, tarab, activism. These are some of the topics that artists are tackling at Shubbak Festival. Marhaba, I'm your host Nooriyah, and this podcast is a window on contemporary Arab art.

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Hello and welcome to the podcast of Shubbak Festival, the UK largest biennial festival of contemporary Arab culture, showcasing new and unexpected voices alongside established artists. I'm your host Nooriyah and I'll be speaking to some of the brilliant artists that featured in this year's festival taking place in London and online. This is a four part series published weekly so remember to follow your Shubbak Festival on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to keep up with the latest updates. Now, let's talk art, politics, identity and social media.

Presenter: Nooriyah

No matter how difficult this year was, for many of us, we all looked desperately for ways to cope. For many arts, music, film, dance, and other forms of artistic expression were pivotal in passing the long hours spent indoors with no escape. For artists this was no different; creativity battled boredom, frustration and loneliness. Without access to public spaces, some of the artists showcasing their work as Shubbak Festival, utilised all that they could at their disposal. The most important tool of them all? An internet connection,

Iraq-a-Fella

Iraq-a-Fella records taking over the airwaves, Mohammed Abood Uraibi aka DJ MoCity. Special guests today send this out to Hadi live and direct from Montreal, Canada, representing the Iraq-a-Fella records family, exclusively right here on Radio Alhara. Enjoy the next one hour and bless up everyone around you.

Presenter: Nooriyah

This is Iraq-a-Fella radio a global collective of Iraqi artists and curators with members dotted across continents, a project whose entire existence has relied upon the digital ecosystem. The music used throughout the segment is produced by USF Beats one of my favourite music producers who is regularly featured on Iraq-a-Fella radio.

Abdulisms

The idea of the Iraq-a-Fella radio came to life because DJ MoCity was missing Iraqi food in New Delhi. I think we all missed time around each other, time hearing each other's mother tongues, eating our food, just being around our people I think. Music is a strong part of that. One of us in London, one of us is in Dubai. Another one is in Montreal and then MoCity one of the central sort of people is based in New Delhi, India, and ultimately the radio station we broadcast on his Radio Alhara based in Bethlehem, Palestine and we're playing Iraqi music, you know, so I think the globalising efforts of technology they come with pluses and their negatives as well. We've made the most out of a really bad situation, hopefully. And just found comfort in each other I think with such far distances.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Abdulisms is part of SAWA, SAWA, which is a new digital showcase curated by Young Shubbak. He is a London-based British-born Iraqi-Irish Creative Director and digital content producer for Iraq-a-Fella, a collective started as an initiative to raise money for Iraqi children in need of surgery. The collective aims to reshape the representation of Iraq. Iraq-a-Fella radio serves as a way to provide a space where Iraqis can celebrate and reminisce about their shared heritage, free from cliches and harmful narratives.

Abdulism

In the wake of recent events, you know, uprisings in Palestine, uprisings in Iraq. We've grown up with this very normalised notion of that we shouldn't speak on those things, especially as children of the diaspora or people who are outside of those countries. Whether it's due to a sense of that we don't know what's going on there, and we don't we're not the people to speak on it, or whether that's from you know, institutions and media not willing to hear our voice or not willing, or censoring Palestine or calls to free the people there. So I think it's very important for us as Iraqis to represent ourselves, but also not forget the principles that if you like are central to the freedom of all of our people, you know. None of us are free until we all lots of we just got to keep striving and trying to make things that we recognise ourselves and that we see ourselves and see our people.

Presenter: Nooriyah

What I find amazing is that the producers of the show reach out to parents, elders, friends, and members of the diaspora to get some in depth knowledge on Iraqi culture. A collaborative effort, which allows Iraq-a-Fella to be a democratic platform, for those who may not always have access to on

Abdulisms

Episode four, which was a Iraqi rap and Hip Hop episode. I think that one we went to great lengths to make sure all the speakers, all the people we're speaking to were, you know, rapping in Iraqi dialects or rapping in, in a local tongue speaking to local issues. And I really, really enjoyed that episode, I think we got some of the best response from the actual artists in it. That was one of the episodes that we did that felt fresh, that felt like the people who are making this art are the same people that are coming to consume our show to see or hear their art being played. So it was in the wake of the October 2020 revolution in Iraq, where all of these amazing rappers and creatives and artists just suddenly rose to the top and, you know, demonstrated not only for Iraqi society, but the global stage that kids in Iraq are capable. They are just not being given the chance. So we're just trying to sort of bridge the gaps there and, and see where we can fill in. And that's how those themes are driven.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Growing up between London, Doha, and Dublin of Abdulisms' vision is informed by the contrast of worlds spaces, and mother tongues he's long found himself alternating in The plight to connect with the Iraqi community is a personal issue for him and for the rest of the team at Iraq-a-Fella.

## Abdulisms

When we did an episode on like the Iraqi football anthems, it was a nice place for my dad to reminisce on me, because like, we went to a lot of the games together. When we went to like Asian Cup stuff, my dad used to have this habit of, like printing off lyrics for all of these Iraqi football songs, and like, hand them out in the car. I used to hate it when he did it, like when my friends were in the car, and he'd like, give them a lyric sheet, and they're just football chants man. From MoCity's side in New Delhi, it was really endearing to hear him, you know, him and the voice, the voice messages that he shared with us and had on the show between him and his mother, you know. He reaches out to his mom and asked her about football songs, and she sends like nice little voice clips. So for me, I've taken the approach of you know, trying to weave together all these different images of memories and nostalgia that attach to all of the music we're mixing and playing in these episodes. So if you go on YouTube to see some of the previously Iraq-a-Fella radio shows, you'll see like this is all of the stuff that we grew up with in the 90s. There's the TV bars, the static, the quality of music sometimes when we listen to music that's like, from the 1920s, 30s you're hearing a quality of music, that it's just different, it transports you to a different time. The most rewarding part of it has literally just been coming together beyond the music, beyond the radio beyond the format, coming together as a community just to enjoy something together.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Another group who faced similar circumstances, while producing their sets, were the artists who came together to a genre-bending experience from North Africa, of new sound and visuals with a political conviction, which fuses Arabian mixtapes with Maghrebi anthems, graphics and stroboscopic effects, also known as Soundclash. Living through revolutions, uprisings, protests and activist movements, has been a profound experience for most young people in North Africa, which has in turn turn affected the art coming out of each country in the region. This has led to the birth of a new breed of musicians who boldly combine electronica DJing and visuals with politics. This Guedra, Guedra mixtape produced by Abdellah Hassak from Casablanca, Morocco. He's a very special DJ, producer, and explorer of tribal polyrhythms and underground dance floor innovations. His set includes tracks from his new EP Vexillology, a futuristic euphoric album, attacking many racist cliches of savagery and barbarism in Sub Saharan African as well as Amazigh cultures.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Omar 'El3ou' Siakhene from Boumerdès in Algeria mixes classic Algerian tracks with a trip hop framework. He includes poetry and political speeches into his remix themes and regularly composes for the Algerian indie film industry. This music you're hearing is from his set Salam.

Presenter: Nooriyah

From Cairo, Egypt Yara Mekawei is a sound artist and composer of electronic and acoustic music. Her work explores urban environments and connects between mythic past and new technologies. She founded Radio Submarine, an online broadcast programme of

sound art collages from different African cities. In this performance entitled Spaceplane, he is accompanied by video and animation artists at Ahmed Mohsen Mansour, whose work draws on personal and unsettled memories of physical events he has witnessed

Presenter: Nooriyah

Marwen Abouda from Tunis, Tunisia is a multi-disciplinary artists who plays with space perception and emotion in his richly layered works. He describes his artistic approach as the weaving together of dissimilar contexts.

Toufik Douib

Soundclash is a sort of creative and radical take on what is sound and video performance, like the Maghreb and the theme is reflecting on 10 years of the Arab Spring. There's also focus on COVID and how it impacted on visibility or creativity of the artist.

Presenter: Nooriyah

This is the Toufik Douib, an Algerian British curator who conceived Soundclash. He noticed that although there's a large Algerian community in the United Kingdom, not much is known about it. Seeing this gap, Toufik set out to improve the representation of not only Algerians, but also North Africans, which led to co-founding Digi Mina with Elham Khattab, a mapping research and an online platform seeking to connect and present digital artists from MENA region and abroad.

Toufik Douib

I think every every artist statement is political because it comes from a place of truth because it reflects, you know, their society, their experiences. And when it comes to identity, there's there's a lot to say about the, you know, the Algerian image and visibility as well. And I think the artists, especially the current art scene, they really, really bring in different narratives. We often reflect on the French Algerian history but I see that nowadays, more and more artists reflect on like the place of Algeria, within the Maghreb, Black Lives Matter. You know, globalisation also has has a take, but also the artist has realised they have powerful voice, and I think we can see it in different disciplines. Obviously, as I mentioned with digital art, it became easier to use the platform and on social media, and many initiatives about the sense of identity and archiving history.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Toufik worked extensively with artists to create the project through online spaces. And while he believes that social media and digital spaces allow for more international collaboration, they can also bring different forms of limitations.

Toufik Douib

I can say there was a challenge in the process of producing the works. And censorship was one of the challenges. For example, the Tunisian artist who shows in his work, personal footages of demonstrations, riots from the very first days of the Arab Spring, back in 2011, in Tunis, he really was careful because this photo was his showing these work in artistic setting. So he had to work and really edit the visuals. So we do not necessarily see the images as they were shot at the time of you know, can see police we can see in the streets

of Tunisia and he was really really cautious about what he wants to deliver. At the same time maybe in Algeria, you know, we have, till today actually internet cuts that are seen by many as a way to prevent people from sharing thoughts. And it was quite challenging for the artist to even send me his video when he finished recording because of really, really poor internet connection. So there was you know these challenges that reflect and at the same time bring the more powerful work when I see the you know, the underlying process that went through each artist.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Toufik told me that the artists found it really difficult to create without the access to public space, with Guedra, Guedra even opening his own living room to audiences excited for such an intimate gig.

Toufik Douib

Abdellah Hassak says in his performance, a year of creative struggle can lead into a cultural democratisation or revolution. The works, as I mentioned, reflect on 10 years of Arab Spring, but also where we are at now. And this huge take on COVID and how the artists continue working, producing and we can see that in the performances.

Presenter: Nooriyah

In this year's lineup, Shubbak put the focus on Saudi female artists in an online exhibition, focusing on the concept of movements. Image and Movement features, artists are Ahaad Alamoudi, Balqis Al Rashed, Sarah Brahim and Marwah AlMugait who investigate the human body as an expressive tool.

Balqis Al Rashed

I come from a culture that really, really valued their privacy and were really weird about their public exposure. This work really allowed the public as well to express themselves. It wasn't just like a mode of self expression for me. It was like a collective space where we can all express ourselves. So with that, it like came with it, like like a lot of criticism came and a lot of also praise towards the work and it really belonged to the public eventually, like I had no control over how it was being perceived.

Presenter: Nooriyah

This is Balqis Al Rashed, who some of you may know. She's the Saudi artist who is best known for A State of Play, a meta-performance based video series, which went viral in 2014. In the clip, she has seen hula hooping while wearing a niqab. The artwork combines the hoop which is essentially a child's toy with what appears to be a veiled woman which at the time, was the most recognised cultural signifier of womanhood in Saudi Arabia. The artist sees her work as foreshadowing the shift in attitude towards entertainment in Saudi Arabia, that we are witnessing today.

Balqis Al Rashed

Power is about for me, it started with initially from the idea of play, so it's a play is an activity that is free of power, essentially. So it's free of inhibition, or like it's like it's it's impulsive, and free from rules, and it allows for new connections to be made and new

possibilities to be generated. But I just feel like when judgement comes in play, that's where power comes up through the gaze or through laws or rules and regulations. If I'm denied play, then I am forced into compliance or I'm forced into acting out.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Her work challenges the gaze through preconceived notions of womanhood, identity and public exposure.

Balqis Al Rashed

When I moved to Saudi from 17 years living in Lebanon, the first thing that I observed the absence of a woman in the public sphere, and my inaccessibility to public spaces as well in the city, as a woman. So I was curious to know, like, where do women exist? Like, where are women more visible in the city, and it's happened in public and private spaces, mainly, so it raises questions of like, how is invisibility performed in public spaces, and it's through the veil.

Presenter: Nooriyah

She says social media represented a loophole in the dichotomy of public and private space that gave her the freedom that she would otherwise not have.

Balqis Al Rashed

I found that techno social like lines with the social media, being at that time, like, accessible first to everyone. Everyone who has a phone and has an internet connection has also equal opportunity for visibility and for them to be witnessed. And this is a question that I had like, where are women being witnessed and represented? So I felt like because I found that loophole between the public and the private at the time, I decided to move the private which is me hula hooping in a private space into the public, which is the internet. Because I viewed the internet or social media at the time as our public streets like this was a way that I can access the public without compromising my identity as well. So the veil here and the ambiguity of the veil plays a really important role. In a way there was a subversive way to to challenge the limitations of the public. Also because I presented the work into the public sphere that generated an engagement and participation with the public and that is I feel the power of the work.

Presenter: Nooriyah

In 2016, Instagram featured a video from the series a State of Play, generating over 5 million views on Instagram alone, and El Rashed was the first Saudi artist to be featured on Instagram's official account. The response to the viral video series positioned it at the threshold of praise and criticism, the ambiguity of the niqab transformed the work into a viral meme that was copied, reproduced, manipulated, degraded, diluted, misrepresented, and completely taken out of context. The absence of absolute control on the internet further led to the deterioration of the representation and the authority of the artwork.

Balqis Al Rashed

It provoked something in the public it provoked them, at least to share it to comment on it to also create memes out of it, people were taking the video, changing the music, adding their own live texts on it, and it became like, that also became part of the public performance. But then, a few years later, in 2016, the work was featured on Instagram's official account, and on that platform, or that account alone or that post, generated 5 million views and generated a lot a lot of dialogue as well around around me as an artist. Because now my name was attached to the work and I was like, I came out as like a Saudi artist, it doesn't seem like a, an innocent gesture from my end it was psychologically loaded. And I feel like that's when the conversation started becoming really interesting. And I really enjoyed the live feedback that I was I was receiving from the public. So it really kind of fueled the different iterations of the State of Play throughout the years.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Later on in December 2018, her Instagram account was taken down by the social media platform, quote unquote, due to its 'expressive artistic nature', this brought up many of the issues that Balqis has been exploring through her art. What makes you invisible? Who controls your platform? How is power given and taken away?

Balqis Al Rashed

This is the maybe the core of performance art that we are using our bodies and movement to act out something that we cannot express in language. So in a way, because I am, I work with the public and the private and I allow the personal to penetrate the public sphere and by embodying the disruption, I became, I became the artwork. But I feel like this is the trick, the tricky thing here about penetrating the public with the private. So I feel like I pushed the boundaries of the private and the reaction led to the public termination of my account.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Understandably, this experience changed Balqis' perception of social media,

Balqis Al Rashed

It raises questions about how like if social media is a sustainable, safe space for us to connect and communicate, especially that it is mobilised by a power and a system that is designed to isolate us rather than connect us. And you see that through the online bullying and the trolling and the spread of misinformation. Like it's become a less democratic and safe space, then the time that especially in 2014, when I started this work, like I still find it to be a powerful tool that can connect us, but I question our dependence on it. Now that we know how powerful it can be, and how it can be used to isolate and alienate us from one another. So I feel like this is exactly what happened when my Instagram got terminated, is that I felt so alienated although like nothing really changed. I still exist.

Presenter: Nooriyah

Balqis' art is her body, her body is her art. So the final products of State of Play tackles the important issue of visibility, and invisibility of women's bodies and their agency.

Presenter: Nooriyah

The digital sphere has allowed for a maximisation and democratisation of our spaces, allowing people from across the world to contribute, enjoy and create art no longer tied to physical geography. This year in particular has taught artists the real meaning of resilience and survival, adaptability and innovation. The digital sphere can provide artists with exciting new developments from bringing together dispersed communities like a Iraq-a-Fella radio to a new curatorial projects spanning across countries like Soundclash to artists like Balqis, who use social media as a subversive space, which is outside some government's restrictions, censorship, and artists exploring film and livestream in the absence of physical performance spaces. Thank you for listening to the Shubbak Festival 2021 podcast series. This podcast was produced by Nooriyah and Gaia Caramazza. You can find out more about Shubbak at [www.shubbak.co.uk](http://www.shubbak.co.uk) and don't forget to like subscribe and leave a review if you liked this episode.