

***Al-Sadu* as a Way of Understanding the
Sociospatial Practices of Contemporary Art
by Saudi Women**

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Abstract

Whilst contemporary art by women artists in Saudi Arabia has begun to emerge visibly in the international art world, little regional academic research is currently available which situates that work within a critical historical, social, and theoretical context. This thesis argues that this has resulted in a lack of understanding of women artists' work within the international sphere and in the context of Saudi cultural production.

This research's original contribution to knowledge is based on its exploration of the traditional practice of *al-Sadu* weaving by Bedouin women as a way of theoretically and conceptually understanding the sociospatial practices of Saudi women in contemporary art. In doing so, it also initiates a critical conversation about space and society within contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, arguing that current, Western-focussed theories of 'sociospatial practice' can be critically reconsidered and expanded.

Whether out of the general lack of scholarship on Saudi art, or out of a bias against traditional cultural practices, the strong space-making traditions of Saudi culture rooted in the desert have not yet formed the basis of any sustained inquiry into contemporary Saudi art. This thesis, in contrast, argues that art emerging from the desert'—*al-Sadu* weaving in particular—offers a precedent for cultural women's voice and visibility in society which has not yet been sufficiently acknowledged either in studies of Saudi culture, or in the broader discourse on contemporary art.

The argument of this thesis is developed via an exploration of 8 case studies of Saudi women artists' practice. These artists stem from different generations and their work spans multiple media and I argue has influenced the national and international art scene in the last decade, in a myriad of ways. Through these case studies, this research contributes to the development of new debates on current artistic practices in Saudi Arabia, and it thus challenges existing assumptions about contemporary Saudi art, concurrently suggesting new interpretations. This research provides a solid base for future research on women's critical discourse in Saudi culture.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Positioning the Research: The Case of the Alem Sisters and The Black Arch (2011)



Fig. 1.1 *The Alem sisters, 2011. The Black Arch. stone, cast iron, steel, fabric.*
<http://archive.aramcoworld.com/issue/201106/through.the.black.arch.htm>

In 2011, sisters Shadia and Raja Alem represented Saudi Arabia in the Venice Biennale with their installation *The Black Arch* (fig. 1.1). *The Black Arch* occupied the 350 square metre sites of a brick-faced, timber-roofed Venetian palazzo, and was created in stone, cast iron, stainless steel and fabric (Hosmer 2013). It was the product of a close collaboration between two Saudi women artists with different specialisms: the visual expertise of Shadia, who is an installation artist, and the discursive, conceptual intervention of Raja, who is a renowned writer in Saudi Arabia (Hosmer 2013). Within the framework of their genealogical and

interdisciplinary relationship, the two sisters invoked a transnational social, collective space that was concurrently connected with the specificity of Saudi culture, in the form of the Kaaba; the ancient holy stone of Islam enveloped in black cloth, located at the centre of Mecca. The polished orbs of *The Black Arch* duplicated the architectural space of the Venetian palazzo in an infinite array of reflections layered with the addition of projected photographs and oral history audio streams, drawn from their conversations with women in their family including their grandmothers and aunts. Where the orbs and cubes introduced new – yet historically deeply rooted – iconographies of Islam into the Venetian context, the oral histories transmitted contemporary narratives specific to the experience of Saudi women into the world of the international art market.

Underpinned by such visual and audio narratives, *The Black Arch* served as a space of cultural memory and collective experience on the scale of the family, the tribe, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the transnational religious community. The integration of social memory with contemporary art akin to the case of *The Black Arch* offers a point of intersection in the current discourse on Saudi culture and society that is not limited to installation art. The investigation of the production of social space in cultural geography, the critique of gender in gender and sexuality studies, and the position of Saudi women in society, analysed in social, political, and economic studies, all seem to resonate with the landmark exhibition of the Alem sisters in Venice. While not unusual in its deployment of multiple media, *The Black Arch* was arguably progressive in its production of a new space of representation, visibility, and audibility for the lives and experiences of Saudi women.

It could be argued that *The Black Arch* demonstrated that the local cannot be articulated outside of the global within the representational regimes of contemporary art, just as the contemporary cannot be adequately understood without reference to history. Indeed, the great significance of *The Black Arch* is its appearance at a moment in time when, for the first time,

Saudi Arabia had begun to ask with more urgency, what the status of its own traditions of cultural production are, how they may be located, with whom they may be identified, and how the answers to these questions may affect its policy towards the practice of art in the present day. Positioned within the urban fabric of Venice, a city historically defined by its relationship to the East and the Islamic empires, the installation performed as a means of spatial transformation, deepening and expanding what it was possible to imagine within the confines of an exhibition. The potentiality of this sociospatial act by Saudi women artists forms the basis of this research.

1.2 Research Questions and Objectives

Considering *the Black Arch* inspires the main question which this qualitative study sets out to answer, explicitly: **how can the specific properties of sociospatial artistic practices in Saudi Arabia by contemporary women artists produce ways of thinking differently about the socio-politics of space and place, making visible, in turn, multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent, social collaboration?** In order to address this question, I use *al-Sadu* weaving as a case study on the basis that if this traditional practice is critically examined, a more rigorous conceptual and theoretical language with which to speak about contemporary Saudi art which is both extremely specific to Saudi culture and which can also contribute new insights to the study of sociospatial practices in contemporary art beyond the bounds of any one single culture, can be developed. Thus, I additionally pose the following sub-questions:

1. What is understood by the terms 'spatial' and 'social' in terms of artistic practices by women in Saudi Arabia and how might they inform a concept of sociospatial art practice in the context of women's Saudi contemporary art?

2. In what ways can sociospatial practices be understood in the context of *al-Sadu* as a site of cultural production and contemporary art?

By posing these research questions, the overarching objective of this research is to unpack the various ways through which cultural production by contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia gives grounds for rethinking key issues within sociospatial practices of contemporary installation art beyond the local boundaries of Saudi Arabia. This body of research is situated within the context of cultural production in Saudi Arabia today; it can therefore be utilised to frame further research on contemporary art practices in the Kingdom.

According to Fadag (2006), the Arabian Peninsula has remained relatively unaffected by Westernisation and secularisation, and, until the latter half of the twentieth century, its socio-economic structure was based on oasis agriculture and nomadic herding. Desert and town dwellers bartered goods and crafts, but the most collected and celebrated practice was *al-Sadu* weaving, which I have selected as a focus for understanding contemporary Saudi art. Art in the Arabian Peninsula has continued to be designed decoratively, through handicrafts and traditional productions. Arab women have participated in creating art pieces: decorating rugs, weaving tents, and drawing henna on their hands. The artwork of Arab women has been described as a demonstration soft power by scholars such as Fahim (2018) and Al-Senan (2007) since it presents a strong voice in championing women's rights and feelings.

This research aims to increase the visibility of artistic practices that question existing perceptions of Saudi women artists, presenting new findings on the relationship between women, art and spaces in Saudi Arabia, not only for the sake of advancing scholarship on art of the Gulf region, but also to expand and multiply the narratives the wider community of visual studies scholars have available about the history of the formation of contemporary art. The starting point for this project is how research on the arts can contribute to new ways of thinking

and understanding art in the Saudi context. The key aspects and findings of this research will influence further studies relating to art, women and general society, whilst also covering women's connections with historical, social, cultural and political elements. I have a special interest in culture, which I believe has a big influence on our work and lives. In particular, I am interested in looking at Saudi women's installation art through the prism of the traditional practice of *al-Sadu* weaving, as a strategic way to produce innovative ways of thinking about the social politics of space, place and memory. I argue that this will support a holistic understanding of sociospatial practices in Saudi women's contemporary art, with strong roots in the past and rich possibilities for the future.

While the literature of feminism has been helpful in laying out the ground of this investigation, I ultimately chose to work within the discourses and practices of *al-Sadu*, not feminism, as a source of meaning for contemporary art. Installation art has been understood as the "expanded field" of modernist sculpture (Krauss 1983, 31–42), as a "perceptual field" (Crary 2003, 6), or as a critical attitude towards the institutional spaces of galleries and museums (Kwon 2000, 40). The variety of attitudes towards installation art in art writing is diverse. Is 'installation art' thus too broad a term to be useful? Rather than attempting to give an overall definition, installation art will be used in this research as a collection of different threads, some of which weave themselves into the fabric of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia. Not all aspects of the history of installation art may be present in this story and some threads may be visible in Saudi art but not elsewhere. Thus, the overarching objectives of this research are to:

1. Identify and map the extent and background of sociospatial practices adopted by a selection of contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia.

2. Evaluate traditional *al-Sadu* weaving practices as a culture-specific sociospatial practice by Saudi women.
3. Critically compare *al-Sadu* practices with the current Western discourse of social and spatial practices in the context of Saudi art.
4. Identify and understand the emergence of contemporary art practices adopted by Saudi women artists in terms of culturally-specific understandings of *al-Sadu* practices in their political, social, economic and philosophical contexts.

In addressing its research questions, this study will inherently weave new debates on Saudi women's art. This is due to the fact that writing in the context of this thesis means looking back at the past to locate the roots of the present situation, using *al-Sadu* weaving as a way to understand Saudi women's contemporary practices. Further, it is imperative to look forward to the 2030 Saudi art and cultural vision.¹ It will be argued in this research based on fieldwork research in Saudi Arabia between 2014 and 2018, that cultural production in Saudi Arabia is contingent on memory, which in turn, is draws on the collective experience of space and time, inflected by changes in the social fabric of women and men. As such, it is further argued that cultural production intersects with the interests of many social groups within Saudi Arabia, with the interests of the state, and with the broader cultural and political world, which is increasingly interacting with Saudi Arabia through the medium of cultural encounter. The

¹ The government has developed a strategic Saudi Vision 2030 plan at the national level, which proposes long-term objectives using the nation's resources to help benefit upcoming generations across multiple areas of society. The Vision 2030 reform programme aims to reduce the economy's reliance on oil and also attempts to establish moderate Islam. An objective of Vision 2030 is to ensure progress in culture and information and to establish a cultural industry. The government has pledged to support culturally beneficial events by increasing its spending, in addition to providing incentives for local and national investors. Land will be found for cultural events, while talented writers, authors and directors will be given assistance. Additionally, efforts will be made to ensure that a range of cultural media – including museums and libraries – are made available. These projects will support the country's economy and provide further job prospects (Roth 2014).

Venice Biennale is a major example of this, but it also includes other recent Saudi-based art events, most notably the Jeddah Art Fair.

Despite its cultural specificity within the social fabric and histories of cultural production in Saudi Arabia, this research is not insulated from global histories of cultural production. Surveying the careers of the women artists who appear in this study namely, Maha Malluh, Shadia Alem, Manal Al-Dowayan, Zahra Al-Ghamdi, Marwah Al-Mugait, Reem al-Nasser, Dana Awartani and Sarah Abu-Abdallah, instantly demonstrates how deeply interconnected the practices of Saudi contemporary artists are with the cultural institutions and the narratives and practices of art which they embody and cultivate, as well as with those of the West.² The cross-cultural networks of which they form a part, testify to the transnational formation of many Saudi contemporary women artists, demonstrating the impossibility of conceiving of Saudi art as isolated from the West or not bound up in its discourses. Developments within the contemporary practices of Saudi women artists do not take place outside of the broader unfolding of global contemporary art; rather they are woven into its fabric, having the opportunity both of being influenced by the West (and other geographies) *and* influencing them in return.

How, then, does the present work fit within broader discourses on art, space and society in particular discourses on art by women, installation art, and sociospatial practices? Laying out the general scope of these discourses in light of the specific critical literature on Saudi art will serve better to position the current research in relation to the broader field of conversation.

² A selective list shows that Zahra Al-Ghamdi has received a PhD in installation art at Coventry University (Athr 2017), Manal Al-Dowayan is now doing her Master's degree in contemporary practice at Royal College in London, Dana Awartani graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins, London (like Safeya Binzagr who studied there in 1960s (Gronlund 2018)). Awartani has a Master's in Traditional Arts at the Prince's School, London. Maha Malluh received a certificate in design and photography from California State University. Marwah Al-Mugait has an MA in Photojournalism from the University of Westminster and Sarah Abu Abdallah received a Master's in Digital Media at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island (Abu Abdallah 2012).

1.3 Al-Sadu Weaving

Al-Sadu weaving is the oldest form of handicraft found within the Arabian Peninsula. Since the Neolithic period (6,000 BC–5,000 BC), the weaving process has been associated with the traditional Bedouin way of life, necessitated by the unforgiving environment (Ibn Khaldun 1377). The designs reflected (and still reflect) both the austerity of the desert and the struggle to survive in such a harsh environment (Alkhazi 2016, 17). Some stages of this practice require cooperative action between women and men: for example, care of sheep is a common activity between men and women in desert life, but their slaughter and the removal of wool is performed by men (Salaghor 2007). It is the role of Bedouin women to prepare the loom, weave and build the tent (Salaghor 2007). The weaving of *al-Sadu* involves geometric patterns produced on a transportable horizontal ground loom. It provides a linguistic identity linked with poetry and represents the Bedouins' rich cultural heritage. According to Canavan and Alnajadah (2013), the woven textiles prepared by *al-Sadu* were culturally rich heritages and show cultural beauty with the help of attractive patterns and designs showing Bedouin nomadic lifestyles in the desert. The importance of material culture can therefore be effectively presented in *al-Sadu* weaving practices and they provide an important link to different aspects of women's role in cultural production.

Al-Sadu weaving is not the only craft available and undertaken to women. A wide range of skills can be employed in handicraft production, but *al-Sadu* is the most popular practice as it serves as a communal activity for Bedouin women (Alkhazi 2016, 20). Similarly, the Bedouin *beit al-sha'r* is not the only physical space or spatial practice created by women in Saudi Arabia. Examining other spaces and practices, the southwest province of Asir in Saudi Arabia is home to a renowned tradition of *nagash* painting which is practised predominantly by women. The highly coloured, geometrical-style painting of stucco interiors covers the

entrances and thresholds of homes, often deriving its forms from textile patterns. Fatima Abou Gahas is one of *nagash* painting's well-known artists (Al-Hababi 2012). In other important regional traditions of house painting, such as in the *Qut* paintings of Yemeni-influenced southern Saudi culture, Saudi women also play a leading role (Yusuf 2017). Many other spaces may be referred to; women's roles in the essential customs of coffee-drinking, marriages, and poetry, as well as in fortune-telling, and rituals connected to birth and marriage.

I selected *al-Sadu* weaving as a way to understand the sociospatial practices of contemporary art by Saudi women. Because it has three elements that I will argue are crucial to it: artistic practices, space, and society. In other traditional practices such as *al-Qatt al-asiri*, it is a domestic experience in two-dimensional artwork, with the women working on the walls of their homes, while the *al-Sadu* process involves three-dimensional artwork and interactive engagement with space. It further provides a linguistic identity linked with poetry, cultural memory, weaving practices, and Bedouin cultural heritage. This research argues that the importance of material culture can be effectively presented, performed and embodied in *al-Sadu* weaving practices and it provides an important link to different aspects of Saudi Arabian Bedouin society, whilst also pointing forwards towards the spatial and installation art practices of contemporary Saudi women artists (Canavan and Al-Najadah 2013). Al-Najdah (2017) lays down the linguistic definition of the term of intention, meaning the extension or widening of the thing or object, and indicates that the Bedouin used the word *al-Sadu* in all its different meanings, but within a specific purpose.

Theories of space and place drawn from cultural geography accentuate the importance of domestic space and the everyday within society. As Elgibreen (2015) in her thesis on the paintings of Safeya Binzagr notes, Saudi women are again playing a major role in defining domestic space and everyday life through their creation of spaces and aesthetic objects. Salaghor, in her thesis *The Re-invention of Traditional Weaving in Saudi Arabia* (2007),

investigated the elements of traditional weaving in the western region of Saudi Arabia in an attempt to preserve the craft and to open the door for researchers to experiment with new materials and techniques. Hilden (2011), in her book *Bedouin Weaving of Saudi Arabia and its Neighbours*, written during a social change in Saudi Arabia with the first oil boom waning and many nomads settling to take jobs in the oil industry, records the textile crafts of a disappearing culture (Sutton-Vane 2011). Another study by Alkhazi (2016) aimed to explore how the new generation of Kuwaiti youth (those aged between 15 and 21) communicate their rich heritage and instinctive awareness of the cultural craft form known as Sadu.

Al-Sadu house in Kuwait was established in 1979 to preserve the traditional weaving practice and its skills through scholarly work and documentation. One of their publications was a book *ALSADU the techniques of Bedouin weaving* by Ann-Rhona Crichton in 1989, which focuses on the documentary of different type of weaving patterns used by Bedouin women in the Gulf. Only a few people in the Gulf region today, according to Hilden (2010), understand traditional Bedouin weaving, as Bedouins are now settling down in towns and undergoing changes in lifestyle, thereby turning the craft into a rarity. These weavings, which used to dominate the daily lives of those creating them in the Gulf states, now represent a disappearing lifestyle. A lot of young women in Bedouin communities, Hilden (2010, 83) highlights, are now acquiring education and, therefore, consider weaving to be beneath them. This is why weaving is no longer functional, but rather, has undergone evolution, metamorphosing into a decorative and historical art.

Deacon and Calvin (2014, 8) refer to art as a powerful tool in establishing communication among society members. On the other hand, Adams (2005, 2012, 2018) has noted art's political power in providing support for the status quo. Art also has the ability to maintain its influence for a long period of time, resulting in societal change, thereby reminding the society of what prevailed in the past. Tradition is linked to contemporary events by the art

of textile, thus making it an easily accessible medium available for the transmission of experiences. The encryption of textiles is performed with cultural values where history and cultural change are reflected. Alajmi (2013) stresses the need to study the meaning and value of various indigenous art forms by the new generation in order to have their culture and artistic heritage awareness enhanced. Nonetheless, for Alajmi (2013), the basis for knowledge acquisition in visual culture is the cultural experience of the student by way of the production process.

The scholarship which has been produced on *al-Sadu* is vital to the future of the tradition, and more needs to be done both in Saudi Arabia and in other Gulf countries to preserve this traditional practice. Yet it is also clear that *al-Sadu* is treated overwhelmingly as a tradition of the past whose future is conceived only as preservation. The use of *al-Sadu* techniques and social networks by contemporary women artists, in particular Manal Al-Dowayan, indicates that there is a different story to be told in which *al-Sadu* is not only a concern of cultural preservation but a precedent for women's art in contemporary. This is the position taken up in this research, contributing new knowledge within existing discourses on Saudi art and culture, and one which aims to reposition contemporary thinking on the relationship between contemporary Saudi cultural production and the practices of its past, seeing them not as discontinuous but as continuous threads of women's sociospatial practice.

1.4 Women's Spaces in Saudi Arabia

Given the aims of the research to critically intervene in the ways that space and memory are interwoven in the work of Saudi women artists, it is important to appreciate the ways that space is inflected by issues of gender in Saudi Arabia. Contemporary theorizations of (social) space will be explored in detail in the following chapter on *al-Sadu* weaving, as a means of

understanding how social relations are woven together, in part by participating in *al-Sadu* and contemporary art. A useful disciplinary reference point for the spatialization of social relations implied in the phrase ‘social fabric,’ and one which is key to the work that follows, is cultural geography, which brings attention to “space and place, to the spatiality of everyday life at multiple and fluid scales, to landscapes as the re-suturing of human and physical worlds, and to the politics and epistemological implications of these engagements” (Johnson 2013, 1). From this perspective on space, “how the meanings of ‘close’ and ‘distant’ are a compound of degrees of interpersonal intimacy and geographical distance” becomes apparent (Tuan 1977, 50). In fact, “space” and “place” can be understood as constituted collectively, “in terms of social relations,” on levels at which “space, place and gender are interrelated . . . in their very construction as culturally specific ideas” (Massey 1994, 2). Following this logic, this thesis argues that every social fabric—as if it were itself a kind of tent—creates and defines its own form of space determined by the way it’s different strands are related to one another.

In a recent study on young women in Saudi Arabia, Amélie le Renard has summarized the “politicization” of space and gender in Saudi Arabia:

Women’s mobility in Saudi Arabia is political, in the sense that it is at the center of controversies, tensions and repression. It is also political in a broader sense: beyond the debate on women’s driving, changing practices are widely observable in the city, as are the economic, social, and political transformations that influence-- and are influenced by-- these practices. They signify shifting power relations and ways of governing (governmentalities) . . . the increasing access of some urban Saudi women to public spaces in Riyadh and their increasing visibility are embedded in the government’s normative project of reform that notably targets Saudi women. This project is spatialized: it relies on a specific spatial economy (or organization) that opens and closes spaces to different categories of people based on gender (along with class, nationality, ethnicity, and age) (Le Renard 2014, 3).

Le Renard (2014) makes the case for politics to be considered as a determinant of space and it is useful to take note of recent political developments in Saudi Arabia regarding women. Madawi Al-Rasheed has argued that Saudi women have risen to a modicum of prominence in Saudi politics in the wake of 9/11 as part of an effort by the state to exploit their image as the “soft face” of a new cosmopolitan modernity, distanced from the traditional piety which formerly defined women’s place in Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed 2013, 134).³

The ‘project of governmentality’ described by Le Renard (2014) is ‘spatialized’, that is, it takes on a spatial form and enacts its agency by means of creating spaces (as well as boundaries, prohibitions on spaces, openings etc.). These ideas are not limited to a single area of cultural production but intersect with many. Although the research that follows is not a general survey of cultural practices it is nonetheless useful to consider how related media are also dealing with similar concerns—such as film, for example. Within the last five years, the analysis of space from the point of view of women in Saudi Arabia has benefited from the production of the first representations of women’s spaces in film media. One of the most important women’s interventions in screen-based spaces has been the creation of the first ever feature film to be made entirely in Saudi Arabia: *Wadjda* (2013), directed by Haifaa al-Mansour. a first-time female director and starring a young girl as a protagonist, supported by her mother, the film is ground-breaking in terms of both film and women’s voice and visibility within cultural production. *Wadjda* tells the story of a young, adventurous, and feisty schoolgirl who falls in love with the idea of having a bicycle and racing her young schoolboy friend. As she is told many times throughout the film, girls are not allowed to ride bicycles in Saudi

³ Traditionally, across the Gulf region, women’s access to politics has been severely limited. This is not least because their freedom to move is restricted and they do not share men’s access to mosques where political networks and constituencies can be generated (Doumato, 2008, s.v. “Gulf States”). Like the UAE the KSA does not have a long history of elections, the first being held in 2005 for ministerial posts. However, research highlights important positions held by women which include: advisory roles on women’s affairs in the Shura Council; a women’s department of law at King Sa’ud University; in the National Organisation for Human Rights; and in the public services of health and education, notably Princess Al-Jawhara Fahad bin Mohammed bin Abdel Rahman Al Sa’ud, the undersecretary of the ministry of education (Doumato, 2008, s.v. “Gulf States”).

Arabia. However, her perseverance wins out, she eventually overcomes all obstacles, and the final shot of the film shows her riding away down the street of her suburban Riyadh home, beaming with happiness at her new-found freedom to experience the space in which she lives.

Wadjda's longing for a bicycle is clearly a sublimated longing for freedom and mobility within the wider world. Throughout the film Wadjda is often shown running across the street, standing in the direct gaze of men when she ought to be concealing herself, and secretly riding around in small circles on top of the roof of her house. As such, Wadjda's movement sometimes transgresses the behaviour expected of her according to the restrictions of particular places: the home, the street, and school. Her spatial wanderings, journeys, and secret spaces all show that Wadjda's story is a story about trying to find her own space and place in the wider world.

While Wadjda is adventurous in many respects, she is also deeply connected to Saudi culture and traditions, and although there is often tension between her personality and the rules of school and life at home, she is able ultimately to remain attached to her mother, her home, and her society, as well as experiencing new empowerment. One of the scenarios which, as much as any other, shows Wadjda's creativity, inventiveness, and attachment to culture is her weaving of friendship bracelets to sell to her friends at school as a way of making money to save up for her bicycle (Fig 1.2).



Fig. 1.2 Al-Mansour, Haifaa, Waad Mohammed, Reem Abdullah and Abdullrahman Al Gohani, 2013. Screenshot showing Wadjda weaving friendship bracelets. From *Wadjda* (2013), dir. Haifa al-Mansour. Video Al-Mansour et al., 2014.

Wadjda's small act of weaving places her within a long tradition of women weavers of Saudi Arabia who have produced social spaces of agency and creativity through the act of weaving. Wadjda takes care to weave her bracelets in the national Saudi colours to compete with shop-bought ones imported from China. As she weaves them (around her big toe for a loom) she creates a small space of her own empowerment in her bedroom. In essence, this distils the key claim which this research has put forward: that the act of weaving creates social spaces in which women achieve agency and recognition by connecting the threads of contemporary cultural production to those of the past, producing complex layers and genealogies among women.

As will become clear, many Saudi women artists practicing today have a deep and wide interest in engaging the issue of space not just in one but many sectors of Saudi society. Consider Eiman Elgibreen's *Does a face make a difference?* (2016) for example.



Fig. 1.3 Eiman Elgibreen, does a face make a difference? (2013) Photograph prints mounted over limestone bricks, and assembled over a clear acrylic base with a mirror. Overall size: (w.60x l.200 x h.100) cm. Source: <https://eimanelgibreen.com/gallery/dose-a-face-make-a-difference/>

At first sight they all look the same (fig. 1.3). Sixty-four limestone bricks lined up together in a grid formation 4x16. Identical, mass-produced objects from the construction industry, they could come from anywhere around the globe. Their self-similarity, repetitiveness, and simple formal arrangement recall the Minimalist tendency in Modernist sculpture. While they retain the sculptural minimalism and seriality of Minimalist readymades, Elgibreen's bricks have further layers of representation. Each brick, like a small totem, is painted black on one side and bears the photographic image of a Saudi woman's face, cropped to show only the eyes, the bridge of the nose and the edge of her black hijab. The message appears at first to be confusing. Is it that these women are all the same? Are they as unidentifiable as bricks? Should we be shocked by this, or reassured? Are these bricks for building society? Do they offer the possibility of a strong architecture of Saudi women held together by their mutual strength and self-reliance? Is their collective identity essential to the strength of that society? Or should we respond instead to their apparent isolation from one another; not touching, unable to communicate, alienated, all in black and de-individualized just

like the Western stereotype of the Arab woman? Is the point of such a work of art to ‘expose’ (like a harem narrative) the repression under which Arab women live and call upon the West to liberate them? Or is it rather to confront the West, demonstrate the unreadability of the Arab world, and refuse the gaze of any viewer which seeks to make Arab women exotic or mysterious? Or is the point of this work of art, in fact, to bring all these questions together and ask ‘Does a face make a difference?’



Fig. 1.4 Elgibreen, Eiman, 2016. Does a face make a difference? Photograph prints mounted over limestone bricks, and assembled over a clear acrylic base with a mirror. Overall size: (w.60x 1.200 x h.100) cm. <https://eimanelgibreen.com/gallery/does-a-face-make-a-difference/>

On second glance the bricks are all different (Fig. 1.4). Under every one of the 64 bricks is a small photograph of a different Saudi woman as she was when she was a young girl. The faces are charming. Smiling, laughing, calm, playful; the pictures illustrate all the different personalities that any 64 different human beings might exhibit. If these bricks are in some way

substitutes which stand in for the presence of real people (one of the most ancient functions of art and images), they are revealed to have two faces which appear in different ways (Belting 2014).

In certain configurations, the artwork displays both faces; in others, only one. This movability calls for interaction and participation from the viewer and asks them to think about their own relationship to these 64 women. The participatory nature of this form of art is different from what Michael Fried called the ‘theatricality’ of Minimalist art (Fried 1998). Elgibreen’s process for *Does a face make a difference?* was collaborative as she worked alongside different women to create a collective work of art; arguably, its meaning and power belongs to them all. This idea of the artist as someone who works with and through other members of society is central to an understanding of *Does a face make a difference?* As Elgibreen (2016 para. 4) wrote “the images of the young girls used in this sculpture are borrowed from 64 accomplished, conservative Saudi women who wanted to object against any materialistic outlook that may undermine their professional accomplishments if they hold on to their cultural significance.”

As an artist working in three dimensional artworks as part of a socially-engaged practice, Elgibreen does not simply create a work of art; rather she creates a space within which Saudi women are able to express their own intentions, voices, images and experiences. Because of this, their images live in a subversive relationship to the stereotype of the silent, veiled woman. They show that individuality is not mutually exclusive with collectivism and Elgibreen asks the viewer to experience the gesture of this subversion, respecting the fact that for many Arab women, there is no need to break with tradition in order to achieve individuality: they can have both. This is connected to the *al-Sadu* weaving practice as a space for women to express themselves through the collective construction of space and this is what makes this research

important, as it explores these aspects of women's practices between past and present, offering a new understanding of them in the process.

In this light, the function of Elgibreen's artwork can be seen as a way of asking questions about women's place and status in society, which is a central concern of this section of this chapter. It is also about contesting the stereotype that Saudi women's lives are defined by the binary of traditional/repressed vs. modern/liberated. Part of the power of Elgibreen's work is that it encourages the viewer to take on a new role in their experience of art as a result of its participatory design. This role could be defined with reference to one of the best-known feminist artworks in the twentieth century: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. By introducing a wealth of previously overlooked histories concerning women who had made contributions to culture and society, Chicago sought to empower spectators with new knowledge about women in history and connected them with research she had done to find out more about these women's lives (Chicago 2012). The spectator thereby becomes both a participant and a researcher, art becomes education, and this redefines the purpose of art in the twenty-first century (Allen 2011). In the same way, *does a face make a difference?* asks us to become a participant-collaborator in the project of understanding the lives and history of Saudi women and to use art and education to see past the sometimes-stereotyped ideas of society.

The work was inspired by a classical Arabic poem called 'Beauty in the Black Veil'. The poem, written in the eighth century, tells of a man who fell in love with a beautiful woman who wears a black cloak. Before this poem, Muslim women used to wear their cloaks in different colours. However, this poem became popular and made all women wish to be that lady, so they all started to wear a black cloak instead (Elgibreen 2016, para. 3; Brooks 1995). This cultural insight can effect a complete transformation in the way women in the Arab world are conceptualised, which in a broader Middle Eastern context, is so often implicitly defined

by their dress. In the artwork, even the black colour of the bricks is revealed to have multiple layers of meaning, not all of them immediately apparent, when the work of art is not only viewed, but researched. In the absence of easy published references for a work such as this, the process of interpretation has to rely on conceptual, theoretical and socially collective research. It must draw on existing discourses and modify them where necessary, but must also communicate with the artist via their website, speaking to other women with knowledge of the issues, and referring to past artworks by other women artists. Collectively, these social processes can be thought of as sociospatial practices based on research, participation and education. The work of art from this point of view is a collective creation; a deconstructive device; a tool for research; a means of weaving new communities and collective memories – all processes which again evoke the guiding image of weaving as a way of dealing with social and artistic complexity. One might summarise these functions of the work of art as: giving women a space to create, interact and communicate.

1.5 Women's Art: Conceptualising Western and non-Western Trends

In Saudi Arabia, as in the West, there is an ongoing project for women to carry out a re-reading of history that has to a large extent been defined by men (American University 2015). Art by women is less visible in history and literature than art by men, the classic formulation of this predicament being that put forward by Nochlin (1971) in the early seventies in a Western context of feminism. This initial move began a surge in new research aiming to redress imbalanced gender representation in academic research (Nochlin 1971). Research on women's art, either in the West or the Gulf, still requires harder searching and strategic reading of feminist texts for cross-references as part of the ongoing goal to develop a shared

international discourse on feminist knowledge, critique, art, and practice (Gillis, Howie and Munford 2004).

in discussing women's art, which is vital to this thesis, it is thus necessary to highlight its relationship with feminism given that the two are so closely related. It is important to note however, that this thesis argues for empowering women rather than feminist practices per se. One of the key findings of the questionnaires carried out for this project was that the concept of feminism was a problematic one in Saudi Arabia, representing both a horizon of possibility as well as a potentially restricted means of understanding culture. In this respect it is more germane to speak in the plural of "feminisms" rather than the single "feminism," a move which acknowledges the impact of contemporary third wave feminism, in particular its recognition (in contrast to earlier first and second wave feminism) of the plurality of subject positions which women from different backgrounds occupy, particularly in relation to the tendency of some early feminist scholarship to conflate different women's experiences into the homogenising identity of the white, Western woman. Multiple studies have addressed feminist concepts specifically in relation to Islamic cultures and societies, with special attention to Qur'anic studies, leading to the emergence of the term "Islamic feminism." Sarah Ahmed has interrogated the place and status of women in the Qur'an and *tafsir* (interpretations of the Qur'an) (Ahmed, 1992). Other scholars have worked on women in classical Islamic law (Spectorsky, 2010), the concept of "woman" in the Qur'an itself (Wadud-Muhsin, 1992), Qur'anic interpretations of male-female dynamics in Muslim society (Mernissi, 1987), and explicitly feminist styles of Qur'anic exegesis (Hidayatullah, 2014).

From the point of view of feminism as a political practice, histories of feminist interventions and influence in the Islamic world has been documented. Some areas have gathered more attention than others. Egypt and Turkey have been well researched in terms of women's movements (Badran 2009; Misra and Rich 2003). The Western woman does still,

however, represent the primary subject of feminism in the majority of published works. This is a reflection of an imbalance reflecting the generally unequal distribution of intellectual resources globally, and one which points to the need for works to address this imbalance and make visible the work being done now (as well as that which has been done historically) by women outside of the West, inhabiting different discursive and political conditions. A comprehensive feminist history of art in the Gulf region has not yet materialized.

Eiman Elgibreen's thesis has again been important in introducing the work of feminist thinkers to the field of art in Saudi Arabia, drawing especially on the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty. As Elgibreen points out, Mohanty has critiqued feminist discourses which "discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular 'third world woman' – an image which appears arbitrarily constructed" (Mohanty, 1991, 4).

While cross-cultural genealogies of both feminist discourse and artistic practices may be valuable it is important to be wary of flattening out cultural specificities. As Elgibreen herself written, cultural social contexts such as Saudi Arabia require detailed examination of precise ideological and historical contexts "to avoid treating third-world women as a coherent group" (Elgibreen, 2014, 26).

Revisionary feminist accounts of the history of Western art have much to offer an investigation into contemporary art by Saudi women artists, although they cannot be expected to fully account for every global socio-political context. Linda Nochlin, Lisa Tickner, Joan Borsa, Judith Wilson, and Pamela Allara, among many others have put forward important provocations. Their work, and the work of others, has begun to be anthologized in publications that mark the consolidation of the literature on women's art; notable examples in particular include the 2001 *Feminism-Art-Theory* anthology edited by Robinson (2001). Nochlin (1988)

has laid down the central thrust of such literature, and though she is speaking specifically to the ideologies of the West, in light of the above review of literature on the specific patriarchal conditions of Saudi Arabia, her words ring with the possibility of transnational application. Her work, she writes, is geared towards studying:

...the ways in which representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general, artists in particular, and some artists more than others about men's power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women, assumptions which are manifested in the visual structures as well as the thematic choices of the pictures in question (Nochlin 1988, 1–2).

While the explicit discourse of feminism has been taken up vigorously within studies of Islamic literature including the work of Cooke (2004), Baran (2013), Badran (1991) and Moghadam (2002), it has not yet developed a secure footing in the visual arts. As my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia suggests, there is ambivalence about the overtones of feminism in its most confrontational aspect. The present project could have been articulated as an overtly feminist project and aligned itself with the schools of Islamic feminism in Qur'anic studies and social and political history, or with the more confrontational or activist feminist histories of art in the West. These studies do form an important backdrop to the present project but this project remains focussed on addressing contemporary art by Saudi women artists through the terms of the history of art in Saudi Arabia, rather than via terms imported from quite different genealogical contexts. It is perhaps ultimately empowering to discover within Saudi cultural practices of the desert new ways to think about women's voice and visibility in contemporary society and to then observe some of the correspondences which Saudi women's cultural practices may share with global feminisms. Whilst the broader social and political context of Saudi Arabia is acknowledged as a major source of determination in the work of contemporary Saudi women artists, this project approaches artistic practice as a means of empowerment through collectivization, making, creating spaces, engaging with the past, and starting new conversations that can begin to help us think differently and in new ways about art and life.

Ultimately the argument of this research is that it is through a deeper engagement with Saudi traditions that new forms of social engagement, voice, and visibility may be established by women artists. My aim is to test the hypothesis that it is in these earlier forms of Saudi culture that new ways to think about contemporary art can be established, especially if assumptions about ‘traditionalism’ are cast off and a better understanding of the particular social fabric out of which they are constituted is achieved; something which is presented in detail in Chapter 2. While contemporary Saudi art might be seen to engage feminist criticism and theory, I argue in Chapter 3 that it can be explained in more productive ways in relation to the sociospatial practice of *al-Sadu*.

1.6 Beyond Installation Art: Sociospatial Practices

The work of Shadia and Raja Alem has highlighted the importance of installation art as a means of challenging existing spatial orders and inserting new narratives and memories. Yet even the radical practices of installation art have emerged within an unequal context marked by a heavy weighting in the literature towards the West (De Oliveira et al. 1994). This unequal context undermines feminist thinking on the peripheries of Anglo-American-centric discourse, and on the East and Saudi Arabia in particular (e.g. Hooks 1984; De Oliveira et al., 1994). This project will thus contribute a strategic addition to that vacuum by giving higher visibility to areas of art and history which have previously been overlooked by men and by the West and reintegrating them.

Installation art is a form of site-specific, temporary or permanent art potentially incorporating a wide array of traditional and new media which deals predominantly with the observer’s immersive experience in the artwork or the space in which it is situated. Marcel Duchamp’s readymade, produced in the 1910s and beyond, and Kurt Schwitters’s *Merzbau* of

the 1920s are important historical precedents, but installation art became more widely practiced in the conceptual art environment of the 1970s (Rosenthal 2003). The burgeoning literature on the genre of installation art stresses the links it enables between artistic practice and artistic research. According to Cole and McIntyre (2007, 287), “through our experiential rendering of [installation art], we consider how our work and the work of other installation artist-researchers advances knowledge in unique ways, paying attention to the qualities of accessibility, inclusion, audience engagement, and socio-political commitment. “The question of artistic medium is foregrounded by installation art and this is the starting point for the transformation of human issues and relationships targeted by the genre.

According to Oliveira (2015, n, p.) “installation art highlighted significant changes in the understanding of the idea of the “medium”, the institution and the relationship between artists, curators and audiences.” Because of its scale, site-specificity, or temporary nature, installation art has proven resistant to traditional forms of museum acquisition and display, and art historical discourse (Reiss 1999). The literature on installation art celebrates this outsider status and its potential for critique and subversion (De Oliveira et al. 1994). These, and other features distinguish installation art from traditional arts such as painting. Entering into the work of art, the viewer has an immersive experience, and the senses of touch and sound may also be activated. Communication, rather than the experience of a finished art work, is a primary goal (Irish Museum of Modern Art 2015).

Contemporary exhibitions have exhibited installation art from the Middle East, including ‘Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East’ (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), ‘Unveiled: New Art From The Middle East’ (Saatchi Gallery, London) and ‘Contemporary Uprising: Art from the Middle East’ (Nest Gallery, Geneva) but as yet a gap exists in the literature on installation art for published research to be conducted dealing with the specific, local, and global issues of installation art in Saudi Arabia or by Saudi artists.

Some modern and contemporary art criticism and theories draw a strict boundary around installation art as a practice rooted in the cultural construct known as the West. Suderberg (2000, 10) writes that “within art history, installation art [is] a solely Western art-historical construct.” Similarly, Bishop (2005, 13) posits that “in order to keep this book focused . . . there is no discussion of the work of those non-Western artists whose desire to immerse or activate the viewer springs from different traditions.” Yet the idea that installation art can be ring-fenced by any single cultural or geographic boundary should be contested. In fact, the installation art from Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East discussed below will demonstrate that the edges between cultures, spaces and places are always complex, overlapping, and entangled, much like the interwoven threads of *al-Sadu*.

The movement of contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East, such as Manal AlDowayan, Shirin Neshat, Mona Hatoum and others, also questions the idea that installation art can be the property of just one place as a result of the increasingly globalised and transnational nature of their work. Instead, the spaces of contemporary installation art, like the spaces of the nomadic Bedouin *beit al-sha’r*, are often ‘toponymic,’ recording, and working through, the memories of having lived while moving from place to place. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, this means looking at both the cultural ‘roots’ within local cultures and global ‘routes’ that move between cultures (Clifford 1997, 36). In the present research, ‘roots/routes’ can be reimagined as the warp and weft, which together make up a fabric. Together, these threads act productively, changing directions and creating patterns.

Some threads immediately stand out as having particular relevance to art by Saudi women artists, such as *The Black Arch*, described above. The notion, for example, that installation art is ‘site-specific’ implies the recognition that “‘site’ in and of itself is part of the experience of the work of art” (Suderburg 2000, 2). The very presence of women’s images in public space in Saudi Arabia accomplished by *The Black Arch* makes the relationship between

artwork and site part of the artwork's meaning, especially given that the work was exhibited in Jeddah, a city well-known for public art collections displayed at roundabouts. Then there is the idea that installation art represents "an implicit, if not explicit, critique of the formal institutions of art – museums and galleries" (Bird 2001, 2). If it is recalled that the first public exhibition of a woman artist in Saudi Arabia – Safeya Binzagr, in 1968 – excluded the presence of the artist, it becomes clear that Saudi women's installation art exhibits are critical acts towards institutions. More critical still, Claire Bishop has argued that the participatory aspects of installation art can represent "a clash between artistic and social critiques" and that that this clash tends to occur "at moments of political transition and upheaval" (Bishop 2012, 276).

In a challenging current period across the Arab world, the surrounding context of clashing and upheaval illuminates the willingness of some artists to engage with the social context around them by using participatory strategies. These qualities of installation art can certainly be seen in a number of Saudi women artists' work. Site-specificity, institutional critique, and participation are three key ingredients of installation art which emerge in the work considered below. In installation art by contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia we can see the weaving together of cultural strands and that this fabric can help house the future of Saudi women's voice and visibility. By looking at the work of 8 female artists: Maha Malluh, Shadia Alem, Manal Al-Dowayan, Zahrah Al-Ghamdi, Marwah Al-Mugait, Reem Al-Nasser, Dana Awartani and Sarah Abu-Abdallah, I shall suggest some interweaving of concerns among women living and working in the contemporary Arab world. I shall argue that in weaving, multiple threads sometimes follow each other, sometimes diverge, can be knotted together or hang loose, be different colours or be spun from different wools, and the differences between these women do not preclude their being part of an overall pattern. I will further suggest, this concern with the way that things can be interwoven in a manner that supports both difference and sameness, might turn out to be the strongest link between them.

I am engaged in specific questions about women, society, and space. My initial focus was on installation art, because it seemed that Manal Al-Dowayan, Zahrah Al-Gamdhi, Maha Malouh, and others were installation artists, and because my position at the sculpture department at a college of art and design prompted me to wonder about the concept of installation art within the Saudi context. Is there a specific concept for this artistic trend? What is its origin in the spatial practices of Saudi women? Why is there a trend in this field in contemporary Saudi art? What factors helped this? Installation art was useful because it moved away from understanding art (especially sculpture) as an object and instead considered the way in which three-dimensional artworks inhabited space and site. It also brought up the issue of the art institution and its critique. These things are often true of the works I consider and so 'installation art' is not an incorrect term. However, emphasising installation does not give enough attention to the social processes via which things are made. Defining the work of Zahrah as installation art is true in some ways: it is installed in a gallery in an art world context, and it engages with many of the critical institutional practices of installation art. However, this definition sets limits on the way the work is understood. 'Installation art' is not the socially-woven space-making practices which, in my research, are the main factors.

The case of 'site-specificity' is similar, adding value to the understanding of the significance of a work and its broader relationship to society. However, like installation art, it does not tell the full story. In particular, the emphasis on a finished artwork in a single site does not go deep enough into the multi-generational social processes that have led to its creation, and it is these processes which create the collective social memories that I am interested in. This is why I have begun to use the language of sociospatial practice, because it allows the discussion of both space and society in terms of ongoing, shared practices between women in Saudi Arabia. For me, the critical parts of sociospatial practice come from Henri Lefebvre, taking from him the idea that space is an embodiment of social relations. The work of the

cultural geographers Doreen Massey and David Harvey has also been important in highlighting that spaces are always constituted by relations between people over time.

This is particularly important when thinking about the connection between contemporary art and desert practices. Sociospatial practices also emphasise the collaborative or participatory nature of space. This is crucial, because many of the works I am researching are not the product of a single individual. This is where the cultural specificity of Saudi Arabia becomes important. While I am using the language of sociospatial practice drawn from the work of Western writers, it can be seen in a new light in the Saudi context. The newness and contemporary feeling of gendered sociospatial practices in the West seems like something more ancient when viewed in the context of Saudi art. As my research on Bedouin *al-Sadu* shows, Saudi women have a long history of sociospatial practice, and great importance in weaving together the social fabric. In the West, cultural institutions traditionally formed rigid, enclosed structures in centres of power and prestige. For this reason, feminist movements had to violently critique institutional spaces and break down their barriers, because they were locked out. In Saudi Arabia, despite the negative stereotypes in the West, it has traditionally been women who have woven together social and artistic institutions through their weaving of nomadic tents, poetry, house-painting, and many other kinds of social ritual. Lately, however, these traditions have begun to disappear due to urbanisation, social change, and restrictions placed on women in society.

1.7 Research Motivations

As a Saudi woman artist and a scholar with Bedouin roots, I have a keen interest in the developments and movements that define Saudi art particularly those that acknowledge or draw on the genealogy of Saudi roots in the desert. This interest inspired me to pursue a Master's degree in Sculpture Artwork in 2010 and work at the Sculpture Department of the Art and

Design College at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. There, I realised that the general understanding of sculpture, installation art and Saudi contemporary art is limited and there is a disjunction between what is practised and how this is represented in scholarly and academic discourse. Moreover, most literature focuses on Western art movements and theories. Information is also lacking on the contribution of Saudi women in shaping the social and artistic landscape. For this reason, I wanted to focus on Saudi women in art, both individually and collectively, comparing their influence on the global art scene. I believe that my students will benefit from my research, and it will inspire them to carry out further studies on Saudi women in art, while establishing cross-cultural links between women artists around the world.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's socio-political scene has informed my research. I have been encouraged to analyse how women in art have had an impact on the social context. It may be argued that 2017 marked a point of positive progress in the development of issues related to Saudi women due to the myriad of changes that were designed and implemented to improve the social status of local women. This change has been artistically represented following the inauguration of the first women's sculpture park in Jeddah Corniche. Ever since its foundation in 1970, the museum had only displayed pieces from male national and international artists—Arp, Moore, and Calder are all represented by monumental abstract works. The association of these works of art with a vision of Saudi society indebted to Western forms of aesthetic representation is unavoidable given the sheer scale of these works of art and their prominent installation throughout the city fabric, on highly visible pedestals at traffic intersections, in parks, and on promenades. Yet my argument (which is more fully developed in chapter 3) is that such icons stand in 'mute' dialogue with the city since they have no way to connect with the space-making practices which have historically been present in Jeddah and elsewhere in Saudi Arabia. A significant part of the need for new research on Saudi art is therefore to revise this still highly visible narrative of art and to populate the public vision of art in Saudi Arabia

with figures who up until now have been overlooked (including, especially, women artists). I am therefore delighted to have a chance to exhibit my own sculpture in Jeddah sculpture park, and to be able to write about and enter into dialogue with works by Maha Malluh, Manal Al-Dowayan and others who have gradually begun to reclaim public space for women—a project shared by the global project of feminist art studies (Philipsen 2010).



Fig. 1.5 Bizagr, S. and Mousely, M. (1986). Exhibition brochure. Khulod Albugami

It is imperative to establish and make visible, the strong genealogies that exist within Saudi women’s art production, which are relatively under-researched, not only for those stories themselves, but also for the disciplines of art history and visual studies as large disciplines whose boundaries have for some time been in the process of expanding.⁴ As an example of the

⁴ Many examples of this could be cited. Expansion in the direction of gender inclusivity is clearly one of major relevance to this study (e.g. throughout the work of Linda Nochlin and the many feminist scholars who have followed her), as well as expansion in terms of new geographies (again, of the many examples, the work of

elucidation of genealogies of women's artistic production in Saudi Arabia, the Alem sisters' exhibition completed an important narrative arc that began in 1968 in Jeddah, with the first public exhibition of modern art by Saudi women: the artists Safeya Binzagr and Mounira Moussli. According to Fadag (2006), the 1968 exhibition created a new path for women, giving them unprecedented presence and visibility in Saudi society and opening a channel of communication between them and the exhibition's visitors –albeit within the limited context of the art world which is not fully representational of Saudi society.

While the limits of this event must be acknowledged, and although in the perspective of women's social empowerment in Saudi Arabia overall this can only have limited immediate consequences, it is through such small, yet poignant, occurrences that new discourses and ideas can emerge to weave themselves through the social fabric, highlighting larger patterns as they unfold. Alongside the new presence of women in society, as Gronlund (2018) explained in her article 'Safeya Binzagr: The Woman Who Put Saudi Art on the Map,' the 1968 exhibition explored women's absence from public spaces, since the artists themselves were unable to attend.⁵ By sponsoring and hosting this event, the Saudi government took the first steps towards becoming a patron of the arts and this marked a radical new transformation of the relationship between women, art and the state, as the state for the first time recognised the role of women as artists. The exhibition was officially opened by the Emir of Mecca, Prince Mishaal bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud (Binzagr 1979, 19). Because of this official role connected to the religious site of Mecca, there was another fundamental development: it demonstrated that modern art (and, in particular, art made by women) and Islam could officially co-exist. This gave women artists protection and social acceptance (Binzagr 1979, 20; Long 2005). In addition, the

Anthony Downey on art of the Middle East, or Okwui Enwezor's transnational curatorial projects are both paradigmatic). See Reilly and Nochlin (2007), Downey (2016), and Enwezor (2015).

⁵ At the time, Saudi Arabia maintained strict social and religious conventions, which segregated public spaces so that women and men would not meet together outside of the home. The artists were instead represented on the night by their male relatives.

exhibition had a major effect on girls' education as noted by Binzagr (1979, 20): "the assembly hall of a girls' school was temporarily converted into an exhibition hall for the works of the two artists, and it was only a matter of time after that before art began to be accepted in Saudi elementary, intermediate and secondary curricula."

Thus, shown in a girls' school, the exhibition venue revealed that women's art practice occupied the same territory as girls' education and expressed what can be understood as a causal relationship between the two (a relationship which will be seen to repeat many times in the work that follows). The art exhibition gave women a new presence and visibility in Saudi society and opened a channel of communication between them and the visitors to the exhibition. Alongside the increasing visibility of women in society, the exhibition wove together their absence from public spaces since they were unable to actually attend. As Elgibreen (2015, 10) has noted:

[Binzagr] focused on presenting particular scenes and settings of the life of traditional Saudi women in an attempt to demonstrate how they performed their authority within the hierarchy of their traditional society. These women were observant of the socio- religious norms and expectations of the pre-modern and pre-oil society by staying home and veiled in public. However, Binzagr shows the extended dimension of segregated space by reminding the audience of its active social life, and the hierarchy and multitude of roles within it. This helped her in many ways to negotiate current issues resulting from the new oil-society which eliminated many traditional aspects of women's lives . . . therefore, Binzagr's work achieves more than preserving heritage – it maintains a certain status for women in the collective memory of Saudis'.

The art and life of Binzagr are vital for understanding the overall trajectory of art and society in Saudi Arabia. In her work, the multiple forces of traditional forms of culture, women's spaces, education, memory, social norms and prohibitions, exhibitions, and the role of art as a representation of the social fabric of the nation can be seen to be converging. These forces can be seen operating in different ways throughout the development of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia. Juxtaposed against the historical and socio-political context out of which women's art is made, which has been previously delineated, her work contributes towards an understanding of what is at stake in contemporary Saudi art. It may be however argued that the

story of the 1968 exhibition and the history of women's achievement, development and impact in modern and contemporary art in general, remains unknown in the wider art world. I am thus going to direct my research towards art produced by women, because of these existing gaps which is a major limitation within current understandings of art in Saudi Arabia. The profiles of the artists I focus on are presented below:

Maha Malluh

Maha Malluh was born in 1959 in Jeddah and now lives and works in Riyadh. She began exhibiting her pieces in 1976 (Ayad 2014), and her work was recognised after 2000 when she released contemporary traditions. She had created art images similar to x-rays. Maluh's work underlines the societal struggles, with respect to the shifts from the pre-oil period to the post-oil era and post-modernity. In Saudi Arabia, these periods mark important historical eras relating to social norms, for instance, the Awakening (Sahwah) in the 1980s (Al-Senan 2015). Malouh's art pieces have addressed globalisation, modernisation, collective memory, and commodity culture. This research is inclined towards the spatial practice of Saudi women who are incorporated into her work through assemblages of objects (Jehad and Thalal 2015; Food for Thought series 2015).

Shadia Alem

Shadia Alem was born in 1960 in Mecca. She claims that art is not her profession, but an everyday discovery. She has lived between Jeddah and Paris exhibiting her work since 1985. Initially, she was a painter, where her work massively expanded off the canvas into the space. Most of her work is a documentation of different phenomena and she has invested in projects such as *The Black Arch* at the Venice Biennale in 2011 which was introduced in the beginning of this chapter as important contemporary art. She has put Saudi women's practices in the artworld on the map and she has largely used Arabian Peninsula art and culture to present her

thoughts. Featured in her work is her collaboration with her sister, writer Raja, to produce several works her pieces *Formation 1 & 2* (2010) are particularly notable. The incorporation of Bedouin culture in her artworks are salient for this research, considering how it advances the tradition of weaving in a radical way (Edge of Arabia 2017).

Manal Al-Dowayan

Manal Al-Dowayan was born in 1973 in Dhahran East Province. Although she was influenced by American culture as a result of her experience working with the Saudi oil company Aramco, the focus of her expression is Saudi women. Her artistic themes are centred on active forgetting, collective memory, and archives, and she has worked on pieces that document and archive the history of Saudi women. In fact, in her work, she has referenced *al-Sadu* weaving, inspired by Bedouin women's culture (Batty 2012). Her notable pieces include *Sidelines* (2016) and *Tree of Guardians* (2014).

Zahrah Al-Ghamdi

Zahrah Al-Ghamdi is another notable Saudi artist. She was born in 1978 in Al Baha South West Province and belongs to one of the largest tribes in that area. She later moved to Jeddah and has been active in art since 2009. In her pieces, Al-Ghamdi uses memories of places visited during her childhood. Her notable pieces include *Labyrinth and Time* (2017) and *Inanimate Village* (2015) and she has described her practice as ongoing research into translating the architectural styles of traditional domestic architecture from her city into contemporary installations (Al-Ghamdi 2018).

Marwah Al-Mugait

Marwah Al-Mugait was born in 1981 in Al Khobar Province and later moved to Riyadh. Her artistic works focus on photography and she uses portraits to create intimate stories. Her

art uses exposition and brings up issues that people tend to overlook. Her photography represents fluidity and turbulence, and it aims to heighten the sense of awareness with regard to pertinent issues (Edge of Arabia, 2017). Her notable pieces include the video installation *OUDAH* (2014), the first artwork representing Saudi women's mental health issues (Pabalate 2015).

Reem al-Nasser

Reem al-Nasser, born in 1987 in Jeddah, represents the latest generation of Saudi visual artists. Her work explores themes such as religion, culture, societal behaviours and community beliefs in her region Jizan. She has shown an interest in the social power of women's rights, ceremonies, and social behaviours in domestic space. Her notable work is *The Silver Plate* (2017), which gives representation to the domestic experiences of Jizani women in culture and art (Harris 2017).

Dana Awartani

Dana Awartani is a Palestinian-Saudi woman born in 1997 in Jeddah. She has strong interests in Islamic art, ceramics, stained glass, parquetry, mosaics, and miniature painting. She has used art to bring out themes regarding domestic space, gender roles, and labour. Her art pieces *Went Away* (2017) and *Forgot You* (2017) are included in this research as they represent women's performance in domestic spaces and memory of place (Radwan 2014).

Sarah Abu-Abdallah

Sarah Abu-Abdallah was born in 1990 in Qatif. She is a trained painter although she uses video cameras to record documentaries and creates content for multiple media houses in Saudi Arabia. Abu-Abdallah combines painting, video art, and performance, which critiques

restrictions on Saudi women. She references female experiences and gender roles and explores the social and cultural conditions of contemporary Saudi Arabia. Her notable work includes *Saudi Automobile* (2011) which is included in this research as it serves as an example of soft power, with Saudi women using space to voice their right to drive (Abu Abdallah 2012).

By focusing on the work of these women, I am addressing the clear absences of critical discourse forming an intersection around the production of contemporary art by women in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia in particular). Surrounding this absence are highly developed discourses on Western feminism, installation art, and the power of art to transform society. New critical activity is emerging through exhibitions in the East and the West which have generated the beginnings of critical writing on Saudi art, Saudi artists, and Saudi-specific issues in art. This research will take these absences and beginnings as an opportunity to make a significant new contribution to the history and practice of art.

Writing about Saudi art is still scant however, in recent years, with increased access to digital media and social networking in Saudi Arabia, a booming oil economy, and legal and social reforms under King Abdullah (2005–2015) and King Salman (2015–present), production of and conversations about art have increased rapidly. This represents a definite shift in the status of art within Saudi culture. Often stimulated by exhibitions of Arab art in the West, these articles tend to focus on the emancipatory function of art in societies perceived to limit women's expression and the production of imagery (Wei 2014). The selection of Raja and Shadia Alem to represent Saudi Arabia at the Venice Biennale in 2011 increased the profile of Saudi women artists and generated media coverage (Milner 2012). Likewise, the opening of Riyadh's first public art gallery and cultural hub, Alaan Artspace, coincided with an exhibition of women's art 'soft power' which brought Saudi women artists' names into the debate on art (Aliriza 2014). The documentary timeline in Appendix 1 details existing research on Saudi art. The timeline immediately shows that documentation of artists, art works, art institutions, art

exhibitions, artistic communities, and ephemera related to artistic production in Saudi Arabia is sparse. While this timeline continues to be in progress, and will be updated as new research comes to light, it attempts to show archival presences and absences since 1932, the year of the uniting of Saudi Arabia by King Abdul Aziz.

Documentation is extremely uneven, with little before 1972, the year of a major publication on the works of Safeya Binzagr, in which the artist writes at length about her practice and more than 20 of her key works are reproduced in colour plates. This publication coincided with Binzagr's works being internationally exhibited for the first time and is a milestone in research on Saudi art (Al-Resayes 1999). Binzagr has, perhaps more than any other single figure, been the source of both artistic production and research on art in Saudi Arabia.⁶ After her emergence, there were few subsequent publications on Saudi art until the early 2000s, when she became the subject of Eiman Elgibreen's 2015 research *Image Making: Representations of Women in the Art and Career of Safeya Binzagr, from 1968 to 2000* (Elgibreen 2015). Elgibreen's research was particularly important because it was the first critical survey of existing research on Saudi art in general, and women's art in particular. Elgibreen's thesis coincided with events that saw the emergence of increasing artistic production, exhibitions, institutional infrastructure, and publications on Saudi art. However, much of the research to date has described artists' general style without further explanation of the obstacles that made this achievement deserve study and how it can be understood beyond the artist's statement. It is imperative to note that Elgibreen's work has already performed detailed critical reviews of the available literature and her work is a very important step in the

⁶ I had the privilege of visiting Safeya Binzagr, in her house in 2017. As Binzagr is part of the living history of Saudi art, this opportunity was a moment of personal happiness for me as I was able to connect directly with her history and understand how my own work is part of her story. She was very generous and interested in all the details in her work and has a great interest in documenting heritage in the Hijaz region. She spoke of her view of the establishment of Saudi art, arguing that the presence of the Saudi artist in society confirms the role that women share with men in Saudi Arabia and in the history of the Arabian Peninsula. In her view, they were not totally isolated from what was happening in society, but they were producers and had a role in social participation.

development of a critical historiography of contemporary Saudi art. A summary of those works will be offered here (Elgibreen 2015, 15–16).

The Journey of Saudi Plastic Arts, by Abdulrahman Al-Soliman (2000) is a general survey on the history of art practice in Saudi Arabia, but is more of a history of Saudi art education than of fine art. Al-Soliman (2000) focuses on the role of the state's early art-education institutes and colleges in shaping the development of art in the country, while Maha Al-Senan (2001) is an academic and art historian interested in Saudi women art. Her books offer a more general survey of the style of Saudi women painting as opposed to an analysis of artistic practices within social, historical, cultural and political contexts. Another example is *The History of Plastic Arts in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, by Muhammad Alrosais (2010), the same year Samar Alnassar published her book *Saudi Fine Art Movement Evolution and Development*. She provides some analysis of how the term art was introduced in Arabic culture in another book published in English, *Contemporary Kingdom: the Saudi art scene now* (2014), in which editor Myrna Ayad documented a group of essays written by curators of Saudi contemporary art including chapters about artists, galleries and sponsors. The range of views offered in this text makes it an important resource for issues pertaining to Saudi contemporary art. Vincent's (2016) book *Contemporary Art Photography in Saudi Arabia* aims to understand how contemporary photographs represent the complex Saudi national identity. This study is limited to four case study photographers and it explains the case studies in terms of Saudi culture, making this one of the few works to write about Saudi contemporary art. Most of the media coverage concerning this book, both in Arabic and English, have only offered terse descriptions of the artwork and have not extensively focused on the artist's biography.

Most studies in Saudi art have only been carried out in a small number of areas such as two-dimensional artwork in painting or photography. Other publications, such as *Edge of Arabia*, focus on a limited number of artists and introduce them as representing all of the Saudi

art scene. In general, these books document the milestone Edge of Arabia exhibitions in London, Venice, Berlin, Istanbul, Dubai, and Jeddah and there is an absence of diversity for the artists and analysis as to their practices within the social fabric. This research aligns with that of Elgibreen in her criticism of the existing literature on Saudi art, which she argues, is characterised mostly by a focus on two key facets relating to art and artists: short artist biographies and the role of the state in supporting and establishing Saudi art. I further argue that this approach is riddled with limitations which must be resolved in emerging studies as the status quo is problematic. Explicitly, the prevailing focus on short biographies is not only deficient in terms of offering a holistic appreciation of artists' work, it is also inadequate in addressing both the social and cultural contexts in which works are created. Additionally, the emphasis on the role of the state diminishes the important role of artists as individuals that shape the future development of their art. Moreover, these studies focus on logistical challenges, particularly those faced by key artists, such as a lack of art galleries and schools, and fail to take notice of the ideological barriers that limit the robustness of Saudi art.

According to the timeline (see Appendix 1), since 2003 there has been a greatly increased focus on contemporary art as a direct result of social media. New art institutions have begun to emerge in Saudi Arabia, such as the state-created Society for Culture and Arts, the Riyadh Institute of Arts, and the Al-Hamra Open Air Museum, which provide important precedents for both new Saudi art but also for exchanges between Saudi art and artists in the wider world (Benetton 2014, 34). Via my role as an artist living in Jeddah, and as a result of my contact with experts in Saudi art, I have identified three factors that underpin the increasing focus on contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, specifically in Jeddah. These are: The Edge of Arabia, the emergence of the Athr Gallery, and the establishment of Jeddah Art Week in Saudi Arabia.

Indeed, the most important recent event in the Saudi art world is the formation of the Edge of Arabia collective of artists whose work has begun to be documented in published texts and

exhibition catalogues, as well as online through the movement's web portal (Edge of Arabia 2015; Stapleton et al. 2012). Additionally, the appearance of Jeddah Art Week⁷ has stimulated higher levels of criticism and commentary within the art world focused on Saudi Arabia. However, other elements are severely lacking. As new attempts are made to create spaces in which art in Saudi Arabia can grow, and its history comes to light, the gaps in the past become more visible. As Manjal (2015, 1) writes in a recent review of the group exhibition *Anonymous: Was a Woman* at the Hafez Gallery in Jeddah (featuring both Safeya Binzagr, and Manal Al-Dowayan):

Saudi Arabia's relatively young history is filled with gaps due to poor documentation and preservation efforts, especially when it comes to the many contributions of Saudi women. These contributions have been declared trivial, discarded, and sometimes unjustly attributed to men (i.e. their husbands or fathers). Any information on the role of Saudi women in society comes from previous generations, who retell those histories orally and rely solely on their imperfect human memory.

Manjal's (2015) propositions indeed, raises questions about preservation and documentation. There is little published information on the 1990s, coinciding with the Gulf War and the resultant social upheavals in the region, which took attention from art and culture (Fürting and Ehteshami 2006). This period may represent a general lack of artistic production; it might be understood to be a time when an emergent generation of Saudi artists were either growing up or studying. Alternatively, it may be that there was significant artistic output during this time but it has simply not been well documented and is therefore not well known. In either case, the

⁷ According to Harris (2017) and Mohammad (2018), Jeddah Art Week is a contemporary exhibition, which occurs annually, organised by the Saudi Art Council. The Jeddah Exhibition week first took place in 2014. The 21, 39 exhibition takes place in different parts of the city and the name reflects its geographic coordinates (21.5433°N, 39.1728°E). Credence is given to Jeddah's status as the cultural capital of Saudi Arabia (Smith 2015), as at least 30 Saudi artists and international artists participate in the programme and the success of the exhibition has earned the city a name in arts development. In fact, the city has gained respect for its efforts to promote contemporary art, which has helped in increasing the recognition of art in Saudi Arabia and beyond. 21, 39 was staged in a shopping mall, whereas Safeya Binagr's exhibition in 1968 was staged in a school. The school and the shopping mall are classified as two separate public spaces, which are considered the source of identity and experience. Indeed, the way art dominates these spaces is a clear indication of how creativity evokes social interactions.

artists might prove fruitful sources of oral history and collective memory, whose stories about their experience studying art (often abroad) could be the basis of future research.

With scarce existing research, Elgibreen's thesis increases in importance. It is pertinent for studies of modern and contemporary art in Saudi Arabia to refer to this work as when published, it will become a foundational text in the history of art in the country. Her research has made *this* research possible by locating, organising, critically surveying and sharing the often-difficult access to texts on this subject. This work is vital in connecting together the threads of the Saudi art community and global networks of artists and researchers. Since her work is so important, it is worth presenting some of her key findings here, to show how they leave room for more scholarship to include further areas of contemporary production. Elgibreen's thesis should be consulted directly for a detailed picture of available research on Saudi art. From it may be concluded that there are major absences in the literature on Saudi women artists. They either do not appear, or appear with only the briefest information, showing that not enough research has been done to discover which women artists are working, what art they are producing, where they fit into the story of Saudi art, and how they have contributed to its shape. There are also major absences in the stories of how their art exists in relation to the history of women's cultural practices within Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region at large. Thus, there are major gaps in the available knowledge and the current story of Saudi art cannot be an accurate representation of them, since it excludes a significant portion of the art made there.

This situation seems to mirror one in earlier Saudi society in which women have been considered absent yet were essential to its social fabric: Bedouin culture. While Bedouin women have been seen to play a secondary role to men in Bedouin society (Abu-Lughod, 1985), they were the makers of Bedouin culture, the weavers of the community's tents and the makers of the fabric that held together Bedouin social structure (Hilden 2010). The story of the Bedouin is important because it demonstrates that Saudi Arabia, though cohesive in many

respects, is not homogenous. There are multiple stories of cultural production within the kingdom's history and practices cannot necessarily be generalised. In fact, practices such as *al-Sadu* weaving or *al-Qatt al-asiri* wall painting (*nagash* painting) are specific either to regions or to nomadic peoples. These regional and tribal differences, while often submerged, have not disappeared from Saudi society and are overlaid onto further differences of class, wealth, and education. Thus, references to 'contemporary art by Saudi women' pertain to a tapestry of narratives in which different women's experiences must be adequately respected. In light of these issues, there is a clear need to find ways to increase the voice and visibility of women artists in Saudi art history, which this research seeks to do. It is imperative to respond to the timeline of Saudi art history and available information, assessing the best way to write the threads of discourse which constitute the story of contemporary artistic practices. The work of Elgibreen may be followed via a focus on a single artist. Another response might be to take a period in Saudi history that is under-documented and write a cultural, social history of art during that time, aiming to uncover new archival documentation and gain results through fieldwork and interviews. A third approach, employed here, is to focus on a specific mode of artistic practice and trace its iterations and development within Saudi Arabia.

The two key reasons for taking this approach are a personal interest in space and spatial practice and, significantly, the availability of current research. The timeline of Saudi art is incomplete; however, this should not prevent the connection of art and artists from one period to another since this suggests that it is impossible to identify any connective threads among artists across space and time thus far. This research argues that it is both possible to make these connections, and necessary to do so in order to create a stronger narrative about what characterises the development of contemporary art within Saudi Arabia.

1.8 Research Contributions

One way to approach defining the nature of the contribution to research made by this thesis is to consider how it intervenes within existing representations of women's cultural practice in Saudi Arabia and creates a new position from which to view and discuss contemporary art by women artists. Until recently, in the West, Saudi women had had few chances to represent themselves. In lieu of that, a number of Western women made important contributions by publishing photographic projects which documented Saudi women's cultural production. The work of Dorothy Miller is an example (fig. 1.6). Miller arrived in Saudi Arabia in 1947 to work in the law department of the oil company Aramco. She became interested in photography after meeting chief Aramco photographer Tommy Walters in Dhahran, in 1949 and built an archive of images documenting Saudi life, including *al-Sadu* weaving.



Fig 1.6. "Saudi Arabia: Dorothy Miller Collection." *Aramco Expats: Saudi Aramco Expats*. November 15, 2009. Accessed January 28, 2018. <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/photos/saudi-arabia-dorothy-miller-collection/>.

Miller's photographic practice is an informative view by a non-Saudi woman looking at Saudi women. On the basis of these images we have to ask whether our view of Bedouin desert practices is to some extent constructed and determined by the view of outsiders looking in. Such images can be extremely informative in helping to piece together a visual archive of desert practice (and its disappearance) in the twentieth century- but we must always remember that they represent a particular kind of gaze. It could be said that what defies the emergence of a set of practices in Saudi art that we can truly call contemporary is the emergence of a group (or community) of Saudi women artists whose work represents Saudi women looking at Saudi women. Issues of the gaze and its social constructedness are still very much at stake given the many internal differences between Saudi women- but now, in the contemporary moment, it is Saudi women, rather than non-Saudis- who are largely determining how we see Saudi women's artistic practices.

It is hoped that this reconfiguration of the gazes through which contemporary Saudi art by women is constructed goes some way to redressing some of the issues which have accompanied the direction of the Western gaze towards non-Western subjects. Said's fundamental work on Orientalism has given rise to a widespread literature by both Western and non-Western writers which has critiqued the uses of writing (and representation more generally) in advancing a colonial project (whether or not this was the explicit aim) (see Young, 2004). Saudi Arabia is not free of inner inequalities-- there are in fact many, based on a variety of social conditions, and some of them will come into focus through the analysis of art works which follow. Recognising the inner differentiation of the social fabric of Saudi Arabia is also important to avoid the impression of any one single voice being an 'authentic' voice. My heritage, for example, is Bedouin, that of Safeya Binzagr about whom I write, is within the privileged urban class of Jeddah. Nevertheless, the positionality of research such as this, alongside other contemporary Saudi women scholars--for example, Eman Elgibreen--is

important to recognise for the way it expands the range of perspectives from which Saudi cultural production and its histories can be glimpsed.

Thus, the issue of positionality is an important one for the present research. It is not only a question of *what* is said, but also from which position research is presented. As a Saudi woman researcher and artist performing research and teaching both in the UK and Saudi Arabia I am in a fairly unique position. I speak the languages of both Arabic and English, I am fortunate to be able to move in both circles. I wished to take advantage of my access to these two worlds in order to create new research connections that would benefit both worlds. One of the key elements here is the extent to which I am also engaging with both western art history and its approaches to non-Western art traditions, so as to highlight where we can productively utilise the insights of the former without reducing the latter to a mere object of study or the gaze. I am also an artist myself and I wanted to use my situation within the contemporary Saudi art world to good effect. Throughout I have pursued the idea of contemporary art as occupying a space analogous to the space of *al-Sadu*--that is, both a representational and a social space in which weaving takes places. I am not wholly outside of that space nor wholly inside of it. Ideally, I see my position as weaving in and out of the worlds of Saudi contemporary art and the Western academic world. In this way, I highlight how my own research question is both bolstered by my positionality but also productively challenged.

To date, there have been few studies that have investigated the association between Saudi women's artistic practices, space, and society and this is one of the first studies to investigate these ideas. The original contribution to knowledge made by my research is the generation of new insight with regards to how the traditional practice of *al-Sadu* weaving by Bedouin women in the Saudi desert, offers a way of understanding, theoretically and conceptually, the sociospatial practices of Saudi women in contemporary art. My research also initiates critical conversation about space and society within contemporary art in Saudi Arabia,

and proposes a new argument that current theories of ‘socio-spatial practice’ can be reconsidered and expanded.

This research will be the first time that the work of selected contemporary Saudi women artists has been critically discussed in depth and this is one of its most important contributions to the existing literature. This research will provide a stimulus for critical debates on socio-spatial practices in contemporary arts within Saudi Arabia, by engaging critically with existing theory. The research also contributes towards understanding the tradition of *al-Sadu* in the context of artistic practice, offering a metaphoric understanding of it in a Saudi Arabian context. This is the first study to offer a new understanding of this traditional practice outside of the context of history and preservation, linking it to the socio-spatial practices evident in Saudi women’s contemporary art. It does this by furthering both the understanding of Saudi Arabian art and the reinterpretation of the literature which predominantly focuses on Western theories and art movements. This research has, furthermore, contributed to knowledge by pointing out the need for investigations of this kind and by making an effort to tackle the lack of information about Saudi traditional weaving as one of women’s practices, and one that is interwoven with contemporary socio-spatial practices. It has provided a new insight into Saudi women’s art and into the way it can be understood in both a Saudi and a global context.

1.9 Research Implications

This research proposes that, despite these apparent obstacles, there are strong cultural threads that Saudi women artists have continually returned to in order to produce art that contributes to the social fabric of Saudi Arabia. I argue that these connective threads are spatial in nature and that this emphasis on space and spatial practices makes it possible to tell a coherent story about art by women in Saudi Arabia, which stretches from the Bedouin desert

life before 1932 to the present day. Implicit in this decision is an argument that *contemporary* cultural practices in Saudi Arabia can best be understood in relation to *traditional* cultural practices that run deeper within Saudi culture.

This research will be organised thematically according to different sociospatial practices used by artists at different times. How can the sociospatial practices and questions asked about space by women in contemporary art be grouped and organised? The answer proposed by this research is that the production of art by women in Saudi Arabia can be thought of as marked by a series of major shifts in the way that space has been understood and used within artistic practices: from the desert to the city, from no spaces of public education for women to spaces of public education, and from an unreformed to a reforming space of public engagement. It is argued that three major paradigm shifts can be identified in Saudi art and social fabric. The first paradigm shift pertains to art in Saudi Arabia after the founding of the kingdom. This period was characterised by a shift from the desert to city and from nomadic Bedouin society to a modern nation state, as a result of the discovery of oil circa 1932. This period was concomitant with a major change in the arts as practices such as *al-Sadu* began to disappear. The second shift concerns art in Saudi Arabia following the establishment of public education. The shift in women's position as a result of the introduction of universal education during the 1960s, which enabled privileged women to study abroad, engendered a major change in the arts. Explicitly, this period was concomitant with the painting and documentation of Saudi culture in realist styles, as well as the emergence of abstraction in painting and sculptural practices. The third shift pertains to art in Saudi Arabia after public reform and the availability of the internet in the public domain. A shift in Saudi Arabia's social fabric and artistic practices was evident during this period as a result of major social, economic, and political reforms that allowed women greater freedom and participation in society. This includes publicly available internet, and educational scholarships for women from non-privileged backgrounds to study

abroad. The resultant effect was a major change in art; the social backgrounds of women artists became increasingly diversified and there was a proliferation in research and publications on Saudi art. Installation art and sociospatial practices also characterised this period.

From the desert to the city, from no spaces of public education for women to spaces of public education, and from an unreformed to a reforming space of public engagement: these three shifts help to mark out the sociospatial frameworks within which Saudi art has developed. In conceiving of these shifts an idea of space and as an expression of social relations, this research draws from postmodern geography, specifically, the work of scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, Edward Soja, and Doreen Massey (which is fully discussed in chapter 3). In order to establish a continuous thread of speculation running through these three historic shifts in the nature and meaning of space in Saudi Arabia, this research places a special focus on the traditional women's sociospatial practice of *al-Sadu* weaving among the Bedouin. The anthropologist Lewis Morgan has commented that "the fabric of a people unlocks their special history. language which is silent, yet more eloquent than the written page" (Morgan, 1851,16). Following *al-Sadu's* disappearance, extensive urbanisation arising from the oil economy, and deviation from ancient cultural practices, sociospatial processes have established new spaces in which the insufficient scholarly attention given to women in Saudi Arabia can be challenged. Writing within the context of historical change necessitates an examination of historical development to trace the origins of society today, whilst also reflecting upon potential future developments.

This is a non-linear weaving of the history of art or rather, it is linear, but its lines are woven lines, which do not necessarily travel in straight paths but loop and tie around the multi-directional warp and weft of time and space. This history takes place within the existing landscape of Saudi art history. It works in between the overall threads of history, filling in areas of pattern and information where documentation exists, showing where other areas require

more work. It is also non-linear in the sense that it works thematically across time rather than following a strict chronology. This makes it possible to draw out the connections and interwoven-ness of Saudi women artists across time, all within the framework of asking questions about space: how women occupy space, how they deal with it in art, how space acts as a form of memory, and how space serves as a means of weaving together the social fabric of Saudi society. Focusing on *al-Sadu* also helps to make a targeted intervention into the existing literature on Saudi cultural practices in their traditional aspect, the perspective which has most widely been studied.

1.10 Scope of the Research

This research occurs within parameters which are both strategic and necessary. Some of these limits may continue to encompass the research as it develops from this thesis, others may be broken down as work unfolds in the future. The positioning of the thesis in relation to previous research has already been discussed, similarly the limited focus on 8 artists has also been justified and its limitations acknowledged. Research limitations are the various shortcomings and influences that affect the research study but are not in control of the researcher (Given 2015). Any limitations that the research study encounters must be identified to conduct an efficient research study. In this research study, the findings cannot be generalised. The research study focuses on contemporary art practices by Saudi Arabian women, and is limited to only installation and sculpture art that incorporates sociospatial practices. There is no embedded claim about the universality of women's perspectives globally and the themes drawn out are based on sociospatial practices, not biological gender. Thus, the research study's applicability is limited to Saudi Arabian women and cannot universally be applied to any other population. Getting high quality images of previous artwork in Saudi Arabia is a major problem that limits the research findings. In order to carry out reliable and credible research, a broader

socio-cultural framework of Saudi Arabia is required to discuss its implications for contemporary art development in Saudi Arabia. In order to broaden and enrich Saudi Arabian women's contemporary artwork, there is a need for documentation of past artistic work in Saudi Arabia. While this research is offered as a major contribution to knowledge in the field, and while it has gone to great lengths to find accurate new information, much more work needs to be done in Saudi Arabia to reinforce its cultural patrimony and adequately document artistic practices for the future.

1.11 Research Methodology

The research methodology developed for this research must be situated within the broader context of research on contemporary art in the Gulf region, as well as the particular cultural context of *al-Sadu* weaving, a traditional practice which itself offers new ways to think about carrying out research within a collective environment. The idea of community which is implicit in the act of *al-Sadu* weaving also offers a new way to think about carrying out primary research and selecting samples. The function of this section is to explain in detail the rationale for the chosen research methods in light of the research context. The particular methods that are delineated in this chapter concern: field trips, exhibition visiting, and questionnaires. The choice of these methods will be explained and weaving is further introduced as a methodological concept to define the process of drawing on multiple disciplinary threads to analyse and interpret contemporary sociospatial practices in the context of women artists in Saudi Arabia.

The material and social logics of *al-Sadu* weaving are not only a subject of my research; they are also a performative and tactile way of undertaking it. To that extent the subject of my research has been a significant influence on its methodology. In the broadest sense, *al-Sadu*

can be understood as a model for the formation of a research community. By this I mean to invoke an image of social relations among related, but different, participants whose work is to some extent shared, or directed towards common ends by common concerns of both a social and a formal or artistic nature. The image of such a community of researchers and artists is purposely intended to differ from the image of a research 'sample' selected via a statistical method for the purposes of ideal objectivity (Fink, 2017, 51ff).

It will become a familiar trope within this research that practice, and research are interwoven. Many of the most formative episodes in my fieldwork have occurred during studio visits, in galleries, artists' homes, or during moments of making installations during which conversation has happened in the midst of works of art, often in the midst of the process of creating, or assembling works of art. Far from being coincidental, these scenarios of creativity and conversation have confirmed the discursive logic of *al-Sadu* which is that both creativity and conversation take place simultaneously among the same groups of people. Making the choice to work within a research network built on personal relations and embodied contact to some extent determined my selection of samples for case studies, interviews, and questionnaires. I have not attempted a survey of contemporary Saudi women artists, something far beyond the scope of a PhD. As I have stated, my focus has been not on biographies but on themes, and within those themes I have limited myself to working with artists whom I have been able to contact directly. This is also true for the sample selected for interviews and questionnaires. I cannot claim to have been comprehensive in these samples, but one advantage of sample limitation is that limited samples can be targeted (Daniel, 2012). I have targeted my samples at artists and academics with whom I have been able to establish direct personal contact and, in light of the overall aims of this project to develop the understanding of contemporary Saudi women artists, these targeted contacts form the basis of a research network

which will, I hope, gradually expand, making further kinds of research project possible in the future.

My approach to research has been qualitative and characterized by including both performativity and participation (concepts which will be more critically explored in the research chapters which follow). Two workshops (both in 2017) were organised to support the understanding of how weaving is perceived as a methodology by researchers within the art and design field. The first workshop, entitled 'Weaving/writing/thinking: Visualising research and methodology as an object,' was a co-organised postgraduate writing workshop on experimental approaches to writing research at Birmingham City University by Dr Jacqueline Taylor and myself. It provided a space for researchers as weavers to thread strands of material drawn from my research together into a woven fabric, as part of a participatory conversation about the processes of researching and writing. The 'threads' out of which this woven textile/discourse were made were ribbons printed with text and images from my work, which were fixed at one end on the walls of the space. This provided a three dimensional 'loom' on which to weave. Together, the weavers drew the threads into conversation, reading, viewing, combining, connecting, and sharing connections and ideas with the result that a spatial enclosure gradually began to take shape around the social interactions centred on research.



Fig 1.7. Author, 2017. One of the results of weaving/writing/thinking: Visualising research and methodology at *al-Sadu* workshop. *Beyond Border Conference*, Birmingham City University 2017.

With regard to the second workshop, I was a participant in the Beyond Borders Conference held in 2017 (Fig.1.7). Consequently, following the various interactions, conversations and physical outputs during the workshops, it became apparent that weaving as a methodology can potentially be utilised to make inquiries into other phenomena within the art and design field. In other words, it showed that weaving as a methodology is not restricted to the specific application of *al-Sadu*, but can also serve as a means of disciplinary interaction, of receiving critique, and testing ideas. In the case of the workshop it was the workshop itself which took on the role and significance of an *al-Sadu* practice—as further chapters will demonstrate; other Saudi women artists have also appropriated the format of weaving as a means of carrying out socially participative actions and together these events help to indicate that the paradigm in which this present research takes place is permeated by practice. As such the research is framed by an approach consistent with ‘arts-based research’ in which there is maintained ‘an effort to extend beyond the limiting constraints of discursive communication . . . to explore the potentialities of an approach to representation that is rooted in aesthetic considerations’ (Barone & Eisner 2012, 1). I interpret ‘aesthetic considerations’ to not only be

limited to the production of objects, but also to documents and situations, such as the participatory workshops, interviews, and videos which this research has produced.

The project of archiving modern and contemporary art in Saudi Arabia is a long-term initiative which needs to be undertaken not by a single researcher, but more importantly, a strong network. Following the workshops, I have begun to build archives of images and collages (a type of technique that uses text with images) related to individual artists (participants in the workshops). It can be claimed that this is significant, especially to the visual history of *al-Sadu*, which is considerably under-documented, and suffers from a lack of reliable data (with the exception of the excellent studies discussed in the previous chapter). Although gathering and organising these images was conceptualised as a crucial part of both this research and practice of *al-Sadu*; it was also important to look into other aspects that are also relevant to the research. This includes material techniques to express the interwoven nature of the desert, weaving, the city, contemporary art, the women and public who make and participate in these social spaces, which will be explained further in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. Thus, it can be argued that, based on the above discussions, *al-Sadu* weaving in this research is also used as a methodology.

Al-Sadu weaving requires the use of numerous threads, skills and cultural information, a sense of decorative craft, and instinctive awareness of natural beauty to produce a fabric (Canavan 2013). Traditionally, *al-Sadu* is often woven by women whereby they card and spin wool from camel and goat hair, dye it, set up the loom (also called *al-Sadu*), lay out the warp threads, and begin to weave the weft threads in patterns around them, trimming, patting, and editing as they go along (Sabah 2006). Experienced weavers share their skills and knowledge with younger women, passing on their expertise. At the same time, news is shared, opinions are given and discussions take place. Speaking and making (or, as it were, theory and practice)

happen concurrently. As the women work, the fabric of their lives is woven into a cloth which will then form part of the shelter for the tribe (UNESCO 2011; Cowling 1978).

The lessons acquired from this historical practice play an instrumental role in enriching the methodology of this project. Just like weaving, writing entails bringing together works from different individuals in a bid to bridge the knowledge gaps in society. It also entails working together with experienced individuals in a bid to acquire new skills and knowledge. The interviews, questionnaires, and case studies which follow are all generated out of this research/weaving network. I have purposely chosen to include fellow researchers and artists with whom I have been able to enjoy personal contact and establish mutual connections. If *al-Sadu* weaving provides a template for this kind of work I am also conscious of updating this model by working outside the limits of an individual tribe and weaving together a more expansive notion of the collective. Other examples of this networking practice do exist in the region: the Edge of Arabia collective being a very important example of artists coming together to work on common themes, linked by common affiliations, overlapping backgrounds, collaborative practices, and shared future concerns, whilst at the same time retaining artistic individuality and freedom of movement and working direction. It is important to acknowledge this double relation to *al-Sadu*, as a model, but one which can be altered over time. The logic of *al-Sadu* itself is, in any case, inherently flexible and adaptive to the circumstances of the desert.

Weaving means bringing together threads of different kinds and working them together into new patterns. A woven cloth can often bring together threads drawn from quite distant places and embed them within the weave in new shapes. This idea of drawing together sometimes distant threads into complex patterns is important in this research since it will bring together ideas and material from multiple disciplines: art and art criticism, cultural studies, women's studies, and cultural geography. This multidisciplinary approach is absolutely

necessary to grasp the sociospatial quality of the artworks discussed, whose interest in space and society require searching beyond the borders of art for adequate explanations and weaving them together. As a methodology, this approach to ‘writing as weaving’ draws on ideas developed in cultural anthropology. Tim Ingold’s description of woven lines of knowledge is particularly relevant in this respect:

Instead of a territorial surface segmented into domains or fields of study, we have something more like a rope, wound from corresponding lines of interest. In binding these lines together our aim has been to undo the territorialisation of knowledge implied in the way disciplines are normatively understood, and to celebrate the openness of knowing from the inside. (Ingold 2013, 12)

Accompanying this conception of a project as interwoven threads, is also the methodological idea that knowledge is gained by *doing*; that is, it is produced in a hands-on, physically engaged, direct and participatory way. This respect for the processes that bring artworks into reality shifts the conventional emphasis of art criticism from the treatment of finished objects to the circumstances of their social production. Again, to quote Ingold:

In the study of material culture, the overwhelming focus has been on finished objects and on what happens as they become caught up in the life histories and social interactions of the people who use, consume or treasure them. In the study of visual culture, the focus has been on the relations between objects, images and their interpretations. What is lost, in both fields of study, is the creativity of the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being: on the one hand in the generative currents of the materials of which they are made; on the other in the sensory awareness of practitioners. (Ingold 2013, 7)

In addition, and in light of material culture, Betterton (2004, 3) has proposed that “talking with artists enables a different kind of understanding of practice than one that is gained solely from looking at artworks or reading about them.” Concomitantly, artistic practice is not only an object of knowledge; it is also a way of knowing itself. Research studies on crafts (as opposed to fine art) have also reached similar conclusions, arguing that ‘thinking through craft’ creates a convergence between thinking and doing, theory and practice (Adamson 2007). There is a

growing body of research which argues that “contemporary art practice is now so highly saturated with theoretical knowledge that it is becoming a research practice in and of itself” (Busch 2009, 1). Indeed, social criticism, negotiations, scientific knowledge, archival research, theory, and education have all become part of the practices of artists I study, blurring the lines between practice and research.

The weaving/writing process of this research has also involved crossing cultural and national barriers as I, a Saudi woman, move between Saudi Arabia and the UK, drawing on discourses from both countries. Again, movement is something that weavers know how to work with. The *al-Sadu* tents of the Bedouin are, after all, designed to be folded up, carried on camelback, and opened out again in a new part of the desert. The ability of textile weavers to synthesise different traditions of fabric-making is also well known. Looking at the details of *al-Sadu* cloth, there are many differences from place to place, yet they all share an overall structure (Weir 2013). A woven fabric like *al-Sadu* is also a useful methodological model because it is able to hold different methods within a single structure. This reflects the artist-researcher positioning as a bricoleur, which is crucial in this instance as it supports forming innovative, creative and useful strategies. There are notable linkages here with respect to the notion of the artist-researcher as a bricoleur (Stewart 2007). As Stewart (2007, 12) postulates “the bricoleur appropriates available methods, strategies and empirical materials or invents or pieces together new tools as necessary.” Therefore, it may be claimed that this research is written/woven to represent those differences and similarities.

When looking at a new piece of fabric it is useful to stand back and look at its overall design before examining its details. Thus, the chapters of this research generally begin by reading single works of art by Saudi women artists, using this close analysis to introduce the main ideas and issues of the chapter before analysing further theories and discourses in detail.

This also grounds the research in active processes of looking, a pattern which I, as a researcher, have consistently followed, seeking to shed light on the sociospatial themes I establish from a diverse body of contemporary art by Saudi women. The works of art analysed at the beginnings of chapters help identify the ‘guiding threads’ of each chapter: the main lines of argument around which the rest of the research accumulates. Together, these introductions give a sense both of the threads I am working with, and the methodology I am using to weave them together.

1.11.1 Case Studies



Fig. 1.8 Author. (2017) Collage (2017). mixed media.

In order to solidify the role of ‘weaving’ as a methodology within this research, a number of case studies are used to focus on the practices adopted by contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia. It is imperative to note however, that the individual artists are not the focus of the case studies; rather, their artistic and sociospatial practices are analysed. The case study is primarily utilised to focus on a singular issue within a broad context, offering a contextual and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that encompasses the complexities

associated with the research setting (Yin 2013). Therefore, I have utilised case studies, supported by observations, interviews and questionnaires, to address the complexities associated with understanding and interpreting art in the context of Saudi Arabia, together with transitions in sociospatial practices of women artists.

As a research methodology, a case study “engages in the close, detailed examination of a single example or phenomenon” (Calhoun 2002, s.v. ‘case study’). The purpose is not to set out to prove general laws but to gain detailed information about a limited case that may allow themes or experiences to emerge in relation to the concepts I am exploring. A case study can be carried out with the intention of comparing it with other cases to work towards better definitions and concepts. From this, more general ideas and theories can be developed. An important feature of case studies in this research is that they investigate a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-world context (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017).

Case studies offer opportunities to analyse social phenomena holistically, embedding them within their social, cultural and institutional context, providing a more comprehensive and realistic picture of the issues to be explored (Creswell 1998). The principal disadvantage is that the observations generated in case study research are conditioned by the social and cultural context, and therefore the conclusions can be difficult to generalise. Even so, case studies are useful in establishing theories or hypotheses to test through further case studies, or other research (Creswell 1998). In this investigation, the lack of existing systematic or in-depth research into art and social change in Saudi Arabia, meant that the research problem was well-suited to using targeted case studies, in which issues could be identified, explored and assessed in a real-world setting.

As I began to work in Saudi Arabia, the selective nature of case studies became clearer to me. Case studies can only explore a small proportion of the possibilities and they cannot be

extrapolated to every case. I began to see the tension in speaking about ‘Saudi women’s art’ and the practices of individual artists. Each artist approaches their work uniquely. Also, within Saudi Arabia, the different backgrounds, circumstances, and surroundings of each artist make their experience of art and the social fabric extremely different. This began to alert me to how different each artist’s case study would be, despite the connections between them. This helped me to reflect on weaving as a methodology and how to bring these artists’ case studies together while respecting their differences from one another. In terms of social action and possibilities for the future this is an important question, and its implications in terms of the creation of art works embedded within social contexts will be investigated in some detail in the following chapter. The sample is limited to 8 Saudi women contemporary artists who produced site specific, installation art during the period 2010–2017 within Saudi Arabia. They were selected because they raise questions about how space, places and artistic practices may be understood within a Saudi art context.

The specificity of Saudi culture demands a focus on how the practice of contemporary artists fits within wider discourses on space and society. I argue that culturally-specific *al-Sadu* weaving practices can be used to understand contemporary Saudi women’s artistic practices across multiple generations and across media. This argument will be developed through case studies of 8 women Saudi artists who have been recognised in Saudi Arabia and beyond. However, little research has focused on their work and how it understood in the Saudi art context, especially how it might be grouped and, through an analysis of that grouping, explored for common themes, concerns, and practices across the clear differences of the artists’ work.

The majority of these artists exhibited their pieces in Jeddah, considered the centre of the Saudi art market. Some of the artists are members of the Athr Art Gallery for Contemporary Art and the Edge of Arabia collective, two key new institutions in the growth of contemporary art practice in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it is crucial to understand the critical place of the institution

within contemporary Saudi art (as across the Gulf region in general) following the insights of Anthony Downey. Downey has highlighted the paradoxical state of the art institution in the Middle East (as internationally) as both a potentially repressive mechanism of control, and also the site of radically progressive gestures. This has led artists to embark on attempts to ‘preserve cultural institutions as institutions which continually reinvent themselves and their traditions as spaces of self-critique’ (Downey 2016, 16). It must also be considered that art institutions are a much newer phenomenon in Saudi Arabia than elsewhere and may not suffer from the exhaustion of centuries-old institutions. Indeed, as chapter 2 will go on to argue, *al-Sadu* weaving represents a kind of nomadic institution, a space of ‘soft’ power which contrasts starkly with the hard edges and power of governmentality either in post-1932 Saudi Arabia or the Western nation state.

Athr Art Gallery and Edge of Arabia represent distinct iterations of what an art institution is, though they have also enjoyed close relations and collaborations—the 2012 Edge of Arabia show ‘We need to talk,’ for example, was curated by Mohammed Hafiz, one of the founders of Athr Art Gallery. Yet while Hafiz and co-founder Hamza Serafi both have strong corporate interests and personal connections (which benefit and motivate the operation of the gallery itself), Edge of Arabia is formed by a more expansive social network of Saudi Artists who originated in a collective will to build new connections among contemporary artists. The institutional frameworks within which contemporary Saudi artists work, therefore, are far from uniform, and this means that the questions being asked now about Saudi art are also questions about Saudi art institutions. The key intervention of the present work is to think about this question historically, and to delve down deeper into the genealogy of sociospatial practices in Saudi culture in order to connect contemporary art with an expanded notion of its context.

This is not the search for a ‘Saudi style’ but one that respects the differences (often large ones) in contemporary practice. Contemporary Saudi women artists deal with interwoven

questions, but the way they represent their art is different in a myriad of ways. This shows that Saudi art cannot be sampled by looking at one artwork and it is the argument of this research that what connects the artists' work is not a style (much less an ethnic trait) but rather a commonly held concern with space and social practices. As such, the work of these artists can all be read within a genealogy that, at multiple points, intersects with the history of *al-Sadu* weaving. Indeed, *al-Sadu* itself provides a metaphor for the incorporation of multiple strands into a single enclosure, each thread playing its role within the overall fabric, and therefore *al-Sadu* represents an alternative model of collective practice which can be considered in productive dialogue with the other available contemporary mechanisms for producing and displaying art in Saudi Arabia exemplified by Athr Gallery and Edge of Arabia.

As a caveat, the case studies presented in this research are not intended to be an overall survey of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia, nor even a survey of contemporary female artists, which would extend far beyond the scope of a single research project. Through a carefully directed analysis of selected work by 8 Saudi female artists produced between 2010 and 2017, the common themes between these selected case studies represent the three main elements I am interested in exploring: space, society and artistic practices.

It is important to indicate that the selected artists do not represent an exclusive group, collective, or movement within contemporary Saudi art. Indeed, there are other artists whose concern with sociospatial practices could have easily justified their inclusion, such as Noha Al-Sharif, Sarah Al Abdali, Ghada Al Rabea, Dania Al Saleh, Basmah Felemban Heba Abed and others, as I am interested in artwork dealing with physical space. The limits of this project mean that only a limited number of artists can be included. It is one of the exciting parts of this work that the selection of case studies represented here serves only as a starting point for a much broader investigation into sociospatial practices in Saudi art; one that will require many further years of study and, correspondingly, the development of much wider social networks, along

with (perhaps most promising of all) the creation of archives of data substantial enough to make the project thorough and of significance as a resource for future scholars. This archival-scale future project is indeed a project for the future and the present work serves to seed this initiative and supply it with initial examples and theoretical and methodological foundations.

Within this broader overall project there are also other reasons why these 8 artists in particular have been chosen. Their work, conceived of collectively, is both marked by significant shared thematic concerns, and also highly differentiated in terms of practice. Neither of the shared thematic concerns and high differentiation has been adequately acknowledged within current discourse on art by Saudi women artists. Coverage of artists in the media has tended to be geared towards highlighting the signature quality of individual artists' work, while neglecting to establish shared thematic concerns such as socio-politics of space. On the other hand, the diverse cultural and social backgrounds of contemporary Saudi women artists have not been sufficiently explored, nor has the significance of the art world itself as a forum for women with these diverse roots to collectivise around the practice of art-making.

In addition to the previously outlined reasons for selecting these artists, there are also contingent factors at work in terms of the accessibility to, and familiarity with, these 8 artists. These 8 women are among the most well-known to me. Their works and their presence as people have both been accessible to me in my research between Saudi Arabia and the UK. They have featured in exhibitions and biennales which I have been able to visit and study in depth (in Jeddah art week in particular), and they have also extremely generously allowed me to join them in conversation, discussion, and exchange both in person and from a distance through digital social networks. As has already been indicated, and will become ever clearer, the importance of these human networks within the sociospatial practices of contemporary art by Saudi women artists cannot be underestimated. It is something that contemporary practices take from the ancient practices of *al-Sadu* that growth in art takes place over the communal act

of ‘weaving’ together the practices and conversations we share together around art. Chapter 4, which gives a full analysis of the selected artists’ work provides full details about the qualities in these artists’ work which will, I hope, justify the rationale for their inclusion.

1.11.2 Fieldwork

Fieldwork has enabled me to gather primary data to support the argument within this thesis. The purpose of the field trips I carried out in Saudi Arabia were to gather primary research from the selected artists based on methods such as exhibition visiting, interviews and questionnaires. In addition, related curators, and other members of the art world or relevant outsiders that were salient for answering the research question of this thesis were incorporated into the fieldwork via interviews and questionnaires. In total, I conducted two field trips in Saudi Arabia. The first took place in Jeddah city and the second was in both the city of Jeddah and the city of Riyadh. The first trip took place between February–March 2016 and was based on the overarching objective of gathering information from artists, curators, gallery owners, exhibition organisers and those involved in new government initiatives. In the last decade, Jeddah has been at the forefront of developing and showcasing new Saudi art in which women have equal representation and publicity. The second field trip took place between January–April 2017. The purpose of this field trip was similar to the first trip, but with the addition of conducting interviews with some of the artists outlined in the previous chapter.

During exhibition visiting, observation, taking photographs, chatting with artists, and talking to visitors were key conduits for extracting data. The data was collected in the form of pictures, fieldwork notes and perceptions of the various artists, analysed via the use of content analysis. This method facilitates both the identification and systematic reproduction of the patterns present in a diverse form of qualitative data while concurrently addressing the research

questions (Krippendorff, 2012). Thus, content analysis has been utilised to evaluate and interpret the data.

Through observing the work presented in the exhibitions that I visited, I was able to bring my experience as an art world participant and an observer to my fieldwork. This enabled me to observe whilst being conscious of my own position, to make written field notes, collect documents, and take photographs where permitted, which all serve as raw data that will appear throughout the chapters that follow. I have also especially paid attention to the ways in which other participants interact with art. 'Participation' is itself a major concept in this research and so observations on interactions has been paramount, especially in terms of the interaction of women with the art world.

As a result of these trips, I began to re-orientate my research. Jeddah is a city on the edge, on the horizon, where something new approaches. The position of Jeddah at the edge of Saudi Arabia is celebrated in the title of the annual contemporary art exhibition there, '21–39': the geographical coordinates of the city (21.5433°N, 39.1728°E). The field trip made me think more about Jeddah and how it allows certain spaces and places to exist in ways that cannot happen elsewhere in Saudi Arabia. It is regarded as Saudi Arabia's most open city. I documented my field trip in photographs and I present these photographs as a way of weaving together the field trip with the questions it raised and the differences, I experienced between 2017 and 2016.

The third edition of 21, 39's theme was named 'Earth and Ever' and took place in 2016. The Earth element entailed a collective memory of the subconscious mind. It could be conceptualised as a reflection of humanity, as manifested in the environment, through a constant flow of images. It was a chance to reflect on humanity, analyse relationships between humans and the earth, as well as understand how an artistic environment plays a part in shaping

identity and defining the roots of culture. This theme was curated by Mona Khazindar and Hamza Serafi.



Fig.1.9 Author, 2016. Al-Ghat wall painting ©Khulod Albugami. From my visit to Jeddah Art Week 3ed edition 'Earth and After'.



Fig.1.10 Manal Al-Dowayan and collaborating al-Sadu weavers, Sidelines (2016). ©Khulod Albugami. From my visit to Jeddah Art Week 3ed edition 'Earth and After' 2016.

Al Janadriyah, The National Festival for Heritage and Culture in Riyadh, took place in early 2017. I attended the festival in order to meet the women who still make *al-Sadu* and to gain deeper insights into how the craft is practiced, especially in terms of its social basis. Different regions are represented at the festival in terms of arts, crafts, music and dance, over two weeks. The festival takes place on the outskirts of the city centre and the trip enabled me to assess how artists currently working and showing their art in Saudi Arabia are celebrating globalisation while re-examining and re-making cultural traditions, such as *al-Sadu* weaving. The fieldwork was especially important in occasioning meetings with artists, often during the process of their installations when they were at work directly on projects for exhibition. I found that these were moments when many of the key questions opened up by the site-specific installation of a work of art came to the surface and I have documented and discussed this process in Chapter 3.

My second field trip was to visit the fourth edition of *21, 39, Safar*. The theme was introduced by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented and took an education centred approach to understanding the notion of travel and movement. For artists, this represented a movement of learning and growth, through creating a forum for public representation. As such, artists found a perfect opportunity to learn from each other and focused on creating pieces that gave meaning to art.

Through my culturally-specific lived experience as an artist, it seems to me that the Jeddah Art Week *21,39* has, since it started, become a space for framing emerging artistic practices. This view aligns with the perspective of Harris (2017) who suggests that it has provided opportunities for Saudi Artists, both male and female, and resident in various countries such as the United Kingdom, USA, and Dubai, to establish their careers with a

supporting programme. The programme entails a series of talks and discussions that aim to build bridges with the outside world through the universal language of art.

As part of the field trip, interviews were utilised to more directly access the perceptions and experiences of women artists in Saudi Arabia who have shaped contemporary sociospatial practices. Interviews are one of the most common qualitative research methods, which support a richer and more insightful understanding of the research phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2014). Such a guided data collection method, allows nuanced access to the relevant data by implicitly prompting the respondent to offer the required information (Flick 2017). Interviews as a research method, are relatively uncommon in art history (Thompson 2011), but much more common in contemporary art criticism, in producing exhibition catalogues, and, especially, online media platforms. For example, on the opening of the *Here and Elsewhere* exhibition of contemporary Arab Art in New York a series of interviews were documented with the exhibition's curator Massimiliano Gioni (Rae, 2014). In another context, related to the present research, the performance art biennale in New York, *Performa*, publishes an accompanying text comprised of multiple media including photographs, essays, artist's statements, and interviews (Goldberg et al. 2013).

Interviews are important to this research fieldwork, for gaining an understanding of the different viewpoints on a particular contemporary issue. Interviews may range from formal interviews recorded with consent, to ad hoc conversations recorded in notes either as they take place (with the interlocutor's consent) or afterwards in written reflections (Nanda and Warms 2015). For the purpose of this research, semi-structured interviews were chosen, as they facilitate a targeted yet insightful inquiry into the phenomenon under investigation. Scholars such as Creswell (2009) have underscored the appeal of semi-structured interviews within

social and art research, as they enable the respondent to freely express their view while maintaining the boundary of the research focus (Creswell 2009).

In 2017, interviews were conducted with artists: Maha Malluh, Zahra Al-Gamdi, Reem Al-Nassar and Marwah Al-Mugait. In addition to these artists, others including Eman Eljebreen, Abdul Aziz Ashour (Saudi artistic critic), Safeiya Binzagr (earliest pioneer of Saudi women's art), Dr. Hisham Magrabi, (leading artist and academic in Saudi Arabia), Mohammed Al-Munif (chief writer on Saudi Art were also interviewed. It is important to indicate that although most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, some were done via email and phone. The use of interviews has helped to restructure and reframe the concepts around sociospatial practice, which directly fed into the main scope of this research. As I have described above, the interview sample selection was determined by the scope of the personal contacts I have been able to establish, with a view to weaving together a research network. The fact that some members of this research network who participated in interviews also knew each other, and this kind of interaction within the network is clearly important to its function in distributing information.

In addition to interviews, questionnaires offered another means of broadening the scope of the research network at a crucial early stage of the research before the final sample of case studies had been made. The questionnaire allowed me to contact a relatively wide sample of researchers which was a useful early stage in establishing the further development and specificity of the subsequent research. Conducting formal questionnaires is a process that is much less common in art history than in the social sciences (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Questionnaires enable contact with small- and large-scale samples which can produce both open and closed responses, allow for anonymity, may be completed autonomously by the respondent, and can be effective in generating statistics (Babbie 1999). A questionnaire also

allows for anonymity if the respondent wishes to express ideas without being personally associated with them. Furthermore, questionnaires give almost immediate access to the current state of affairs on the ground and enable a picture of contemporary art to be built up quickly. Open questions were used to elicit the broadest and most free-range of personal responses from experts in the field. The idea of open questions was inspired by an earlier questionnaire (The 2009 October Questionnaire, 2009), as it allows respondents to express their views/opinions more freely. The primary scope of the questionnaire survey is to gather information about the current state of art in Saudi Arabia.

In total, 22 male and female artists responded to the questionnaire. Some of the respondents were visiting Jeddah art week at the time, others were based in other cities including Riyadh, Makkah and Dammam. This was especially important in extending the network beyond Jeddah to include other perspectives from different social contexts. All of the respondents were artists and academics in the field of art and design at various stages of their careers, between 30 and 60 years of age, and all of Saudi nationality. The questionnaires were conducted in Arabic and afterwards translated into English. The questionnaire (see Appendix 2) was designed based on themes, which were broken down into smaller questions. As part of the scope of this research, some of the questions focused on understanding the impact of social and spatial practices on art of women artists and evaluating their perceptions regarding women's empowerment and feminism, in the context of Saudi art. It is worth reiterating that the questionnaire was deployed with a specific purpose at any early stage of the research to begin determining key terms and definitions and to assess how they functioned in the contemporary art world. Thus, questions included asking how installation art might be defined, what key issues facing women in Saudi Arabia there were, whether feminism was a key issue, as well as the relation of art to activism. As the appendices show, there were a variety of approaches to answering the questionnaire and one of the most important effects on my own

research methodology, aside from the actual content of the responses, was the encouragement the questionnaire gave to follow up with people in person and use questionnaire responses as the beginning of conversations. In terms of starting a conversation, the questionnaires were certainly a success and the discourse which follows has grown out of them.

1.12 Thesis outline

The overall outline of the remainder of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2, evaluates traditional *al-Sadu* weaving practices, adopted by nomadic Bedouin, as a culture-specific, historic practice by Saudi women which is both spatial *and* social. Through a strategic reading of Western theories of space, place and society drawn from cultural geography, philosophy, and art theory, this chapter asks how the evocation of the space of *al-Sadu* might change the way works of art interact with and inhabit conventional institutions of contemporary art, and how new genealogies within Saudi art might emerge. In Chapter 3, the sociospatial practices in contemporary art by Saudi women are presented, representing a first major study of this paradigm, through case studies of 8 key artists. This chapter will explore ways in which current understandings of, and perceptions towards, society and space have been modified by the emergence of new critical conversations. The last chapter, Chapter 4, summarises the key findings from previous chapters, presents the research outcomes, and delineates a theory of sociospatial practice in art by women artists in Saudi Arabia that weaves together the traditions of Saudi women's sociospatial practices in the desert with the varied sociospatial practices of contemporary art and its relation to the social fabric of Saudi Arabia.

1.13 Chapter Conclusion

The development narrative of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia is interwoven with – and inseparable from – the unfolding of the story of society more broadly. This chapter has shown that in the absence of a highly developed historiography of Saudi art (that is, a history of writing and discussing Saudi art) there is a pressing need for new research to be carried out, published, and to become the basis of new conversations. In subsequent chapters the implications of these stories within the production of contemporary art by women artists in Saudi Arabia will be fully demonstrated. The spatial and social implications of these works of art are becoming clearer, juxtaposed against the massive changes of spatial practice which have taken place in Saudi Arabia as a result of the shift from a traditional nomadic desert society to a modern urban one. It will become manifestly clear in the discussion of individual artworks in the chapters that follow that no simplifications or generalisations can be made, and that, in particular, the binary division between traditional and modern rarely holds as, instead, strands of tradition and modernity bound together in the same fabric are observable

A consideration of gender, education and the public will demonstrate that there is a distinct difference between men's and women's spaces in Saudi Arabia and their different experiences of art practices. Gender difference, it will be shown, has produced differences in education and the occupancy of space which combine to create a difference in social empowerment. In contemporary Saudi Arabia, there is a difference between the gender relations between men and women and power in society, a difference in the experience of education and a difference in the way that public and private space is inhabited. It is therefore possible to speak of a kind of 'women's space' which is different from, but overlapping and interwoven with, men's space, and is a space within which women can find empowerment. This will be confirmed by examining the works of contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia, which are both deeply engaged with the wider social fabric of Saudi society but also

weave together a position which is distinctly related to women. Women's spaces are therefore *multi-layered spaces* which are not isolated from the rest of society but form their own distinct patterns within it, defined by the ways they interact with other parts.

By examining the contemporary artistic practices of Maha Malluh, Shadia and Raja Alem, Manal Al-Dowayan, Zahrah Al-Ghamdi, Marwah Al-Mugait, Reem al-Nasser, Dana Awartani and Sarah Abu-Abdallah, it will be possible to see a continuity among them in terms of sociospatial practice. This research will make the claim that the specific properties of sociospatial artistic practices in Saudi Arabia by contemporary women artists, produce ways of thinking differently about the socio-politics of space and place, making visible, in turn, multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent and social collaboration. The fundamental ground on which this claim rests is a recognition of *al-Sadu* as a precursor practice in which contemporary sociospatial practices are rooted.

As will become apparent, this claim can be justified both in cases where *al-Sadu* weaving is explicitly invoked, referenced, or incorporated, as well as cases where it is not explicitly cited but instead forms either a conceptual space or a model of practice which resonates with other forms of cultural production. Within the history of Saudi art, the desert has often played the role of a conceptual space in which to think through the spaces and places of the national cultural imaginary. Within the conceptual space of the desert, the *al-Sadu beit al-sha'r* (tent) will be presented as an important space in the conceptualisation of women's contemporary art practices. In doing this, both *al-Sadu* and contemporary art will be shown to present complex and empowering models of female subjectivity and creativity; ones that have so far been overlooked or simply not recognised by cultural authorities.

Returning to the sociospatial artwork with which this chapter began it could be said that we are now in a position to enter *The Black Arch*; that is, to cross the threshold which separates

one mode of sociospatial thinking from another. *The Black Arch*, not unlike other installation pieces which will be discussed in the chapters that follow, is an invitation to enter into new ways of thinking about space within the context of women's cultural production in Saudi Arabia. Like the Alem sisters' emphasis on blackness as an aesthetic state which immerses the participant in a new spatial regime, and like the correspondingly immersive audio sequences which accompany and socialise that spatial environment, this threshold-crossing is also one that brings together memories from disparate places, weaving them together.

The methodological framework which is geared towards critically analysing the work of contemporary Saudi women artists has been explained above as a means of justifying the project overall. It has been established that there exists an important correspondence between the idea of weaving as a cultural, historical practice within Saudi Arabia and weaving as a conceptual means of constituting the social fabric of the nation through cultural production, particularly in relation to women and the specific experiences of space which they have. Using questionnaires was shown to be a necessary means of reaching out to Saudi society at large, and although a comprehensive survey would have been out of the scope of the present research, the responses collected form important strands within the argument overall. For the same reason, workshops were also presented as key drivers of the interdisciplinarity of the project overall, and the continuation of this interweaving of discourses will be seen in the following two chapters. Most importantly of all, the methodological rationale of the case study has been presented and justified as the best means of achieving both specificity and breadth. The case study model allows for intensive focus on single artists, but in their multiplicity—much like the blocks in Elgibreen's *Does a face make a difference?* they enable us to think more expansively at the general conditions experienced by artists and their consumers at large.

The two artworks of *the black arch* and *Does a face make a difference?* presented above have begun the task of looking closely and critically at the sociospatial practices that are

concomitant with Saudi women's art, identify common themes, distinguish the many layers of cultural signification which are embedded within them, and arguing for the existence of new forms of space and social fabric which are particular to the contemporary art of Saudi women artists. This calls for the study of contemporary art more broadly to ask new questions of itself by considering a body of material which has never comprehensively been critically discussed. In order to initiate that discussion, it is imperative to achieve a better grasp of the contextual social fabric within which contemporary Saudi women artists are making their work, specifically desert weaving, and to prepare the argument that desert weaving functions as an origin point for a continuous genealogy of sociospatial practices in Saudi Arabia which connects with contemporary art—an argument which counters the implicit assumption that contemporary art in Saudi Arabia represents a break from the 'traditional' past. The formulation of this critical argument leads us to the next chapter: *Al-Sadu* and Contemporary Art: A Reading of Desert Weaving by Bedouin Women as Sociospatial Practice.

Chapter 2: *Al-Sadu* and Contemporary Art: A Reading of Desert Weaving by Bedouin Women as Sociospatial Practice

2.1 Introduction: ‘Houses of Hair’ – The *beit al-sha'r* Analysed as Space and Social Fabric



Fig. 2.1 Al-Sabah, Al-Ghanim and Al-Sultan 1982. The opening of a *beit al-sha'r* showing the *gata*, or *ibjad* (tent divider). *Al-Sadu: The art of weaving among the Bedouin of Arabia*. Kuwait: Fahad Al-Mar zouk Press.

The *beit al-sha'r*, or ‘house of hair’, is a tent woven by Bedouin women in the Arabian Peninsula on a loom called *al-Sadu*. This woven space provides the shelter in which Bedouin life takes place. The tent (*khima*) is woven from dyed goat’s hair and can be easily rolled up and carried from camp to camp, accommodating the Bedouin’s nomadic life in the desert (Salaghor 2007, 37). In Bedouin encampments, each tent (*khayma*) represents one family, and tents (*al-khiam*) of clan families are pitched together in groups known as *hayy* (Wynbrandt 2004, 19). Both the long, thin loom on which the tent fabric is woven and the fabric itself are referred to as *al-Sadu*. In the vast horizontal expanse of the desert, the *beit al-sha'r* is a spatial

environment in which the life of the tribe takes place, produced through the social act of weaving performed by women (Fig.2.1).

At a time when contemporary artistic practices by women in Saudi Arabia are beginning to emerge into public and global visibility, what does it mean to look back at *al-Sadu* and how might this provide a lens to consider sociospatial practice? I argue that it is by looking critically and in detail at the historical precedent of *al-Sadu* weaving in desert Bedouin society that multiple layers of interaction become visible between women's sociospatial practices in contemporary art, and the deeper history of sociospatial practices in Saudi Arabia. Establishing these deep structures of continuity in cultural production by women in Saudi Arabia ultimately answers the current need laid out in the introduction of this thesis, to contribute to discourses on contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia. Neither a narrow ethno-essentialism rooted in ideas about unchanging folk crafts, nor defaulting to Western templates of cultural production, does justice to the practices of Saudi women artists, past and present. This chapter, therefore, proposes a critical theorisation of *al-Sadu* as a Saudi-specific concept of sociospatial practice that both critiques existing ideas about Saudi art and contributes a new model for understanding its past, present, and future possibilities.



Fig 2.2. Bedouin community in Saudi Arabia 1960s. <https://www.aramcoexpats.com/photos/glimpse-of-the-past/>

The *beit al-sha'r* tent is always open: “It shelters against the sun, wind and weather, but it also admits air and light . . . inside, a person is at the same time one with nature and protected from it” (Hilden 2010, 23). Unlike the solid-walled buildings of urban settlements, tents are not closed or locked to the outside; instead, access to them is governed by invisible codes of entry established socially –a feature which immediately resonates with the complex social codes governing access and entry to the spaces of the contemporary art world. In the harsh desert landscape, Bedouin existence is sustained by rituals of hospitality, provided in the form of shelter within the *beit al-sha'r*, bitter coffee brewed in brass pots and dates. Children are brought up by their families in the *beit al-sha'r*; food is prepared and cooked there, and women work at *al-Sadu* looms. It is the centre of the community, around which the group’s camels and goats are kept, and acts as the focal point of Bedouin life (Fig.2.2).

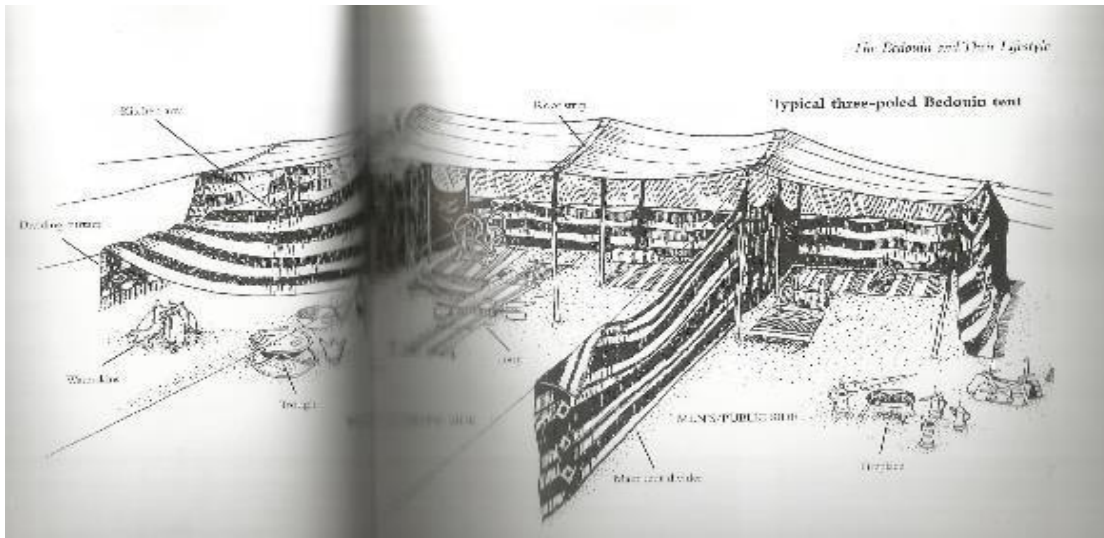


Fig 2.3 Crichton, John. 1989. *The Bedouin tent Structure*.

As I have outlined previously, tent dwelling by Bedouin, in their effort to adapt to the climate and in line with their nomadic way of life, is no longer necessary as a result of industrialisation and improved communications. The varied sizes and widths of tents depend on the specific region involved while at the same time reflects the importance of the individuals who own them (Crichton 1989, 50). Three sections, with a row of poles demarcating them, make up the average house of hair (fig 2.3). A tent's roof, walls and back are traditionally warp-faced with a black hand-spun goat hair or the wool of a dark sheep arranged in long strips that are sewn together. It is possible for the size of the roof or the tent to be as long as 10 to 40 feet (3–12m) with a width of 75 inches (Hecht 1989, 59). Long strips of sheep's wool of approximately 20–25 feet in width and six or seven feet high with blanket stitch used in joining them together, are used in making woven multi coloured and patterned interior dividing curtains known as *qata* or *saha*. The men's and women's sections of the tent are usually demarcated by these interior tent walls, thereby giving the women the privacy, they need for working and entertaining (Crichton 1989, 50; Salaghor 2007, 159). The most highly decorative part of a house of hair is a *qata* or *saha*, reflecting the skills of the women weaving. It is known

by different names such as *Al-Saniaah* and *Al-Okumm*, *Al-Girarah* and *Al-Gattia*, depending on the nomadic tribe to which it belongs.

Traditionally, the first section was that of the men or the *majlis*, with long strips and ornamented flat weave rugs and cushions covering the inside. Pack-saddles for riding camels, lined up the *majlis*, covered with saddlebags or galyaks so that guests could lean on them. The women of the family would have worked on the woven objects. Guns or swords were attached or hung on the tent poles, mainly for decorative purposes, while tribal musical instruments known as rebecs were attached or hung in some tents (Al-Sabah 1982, 16). In the second section which belonged to women, rugs covered the floor, while carpets, blankets and bags accumulated in large quantities against the porch rugs. Large bags known as *idle* for food and clothes, as well as other household goods, were contained in this section. There were also wooden boxes for keeping valuable items and toilet materials, together with leather or palm leaf cots carried on women's shoulders and hung in the women's space. At the women's front quarters would be laid a ground loom known as *natu* or *marathon* used for weaving (Al-Sabah 1982, 16). In the third section, the kitchen, were a kettle and cooker, together with plates and tins. Also found in the kitchen were a quern used in crushing grains and pots used in storing butter (Salaghor 2007, 159).

The fact that Bedouin women are the maker of these woven structures (in the sense that they measure and weave elements into an overall structure according to a plan) has, throughout history, given a special prominence to Saudi women's role in creating these spaces. In *Tents: Architecture of the nomads*, Faegre (1979) asserts that the long, narrow, low form of the Bedouin tent – supported by vertical poles and secured by guy-ropes so as to resist strong desert winds – is an ancient structure reaching back to pre-Islamic and pre-Biblical times (Faegre

1979, 5). This gives the tent and its weaving practices a kind of transcendence which resists over-determination or appropriation by any single ideology, either religious or political.

Under the pressures of development as a result of the expanding economies of Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, the *beit al-sha'r* is also a space threatened by urbanisation, and its use is “becoming increasingly rare”, which has led to renewed interest from scholars (Hilden 2010, 1). Textile specialists such as Keireine Canavan have worked with master weavers to preserve the ancient traditions (Canavan 2013). The women-made spaces of the *beit al-sha'r*, constructed by *al-Sadu*, are therefore caught – like many cultural practices with ancient origins – between a rich history and an uncertain future. At this time of social and economic change, the *beit al-sha'r* also represents a space of thought, a place in which to (actually or conceptually) consider the past, present, and future.

This chapter is an attempt to formulate the *beit al-sha'r* as an important space in the conceptualisation of women’s places in Saudi Arabia and in relation to contemporary art practices. As a space woven by women in which particular aspects of life take place, the *beit al-sha'r* and *al-Sadu* constitute both social and spatial practice. As ancient structures and cultural practices, they give strong roots to women’s contributions to the social fabric of existence in Saudi Arabia. As such, *al-Sadu* and the *beit al-sha'r* present new and compelling models of women’s roles in Saudi society which differ both from pre-reform twentieth century archetypes, as well as the post 9/11 representations of women in the state described by Al-Rasheed (2013, 134): “While invisible Saudi women had previously been visible signs of state piety,” writes Al-Rasheed, “their recent orchestrated and well-managed appearance in the public sphere is a reflection of the state’s quest for a cosmopolitan modernity.” While these “well-managed appearances” that Al-Rasheed (2013, 134) refers to imply an internationally acceptable, ultimately Western-centric view of gender roles within the public sphere, I argue

that it is in *al-Sadu* and contemporary art in which more complex and empowering models of female subjectivity and creativity are to be found; ones that have so far been overlooked or simply not been recognised culturally.

As temporary structures that can be rolled up, packed on a camel, carried over the desert, unpacked, re-assembled, and lived in again, *beit al-sha'r* are moveable spaces and are not fixed to any one place. This ancient functionality, derived from nomadic life in the desert, can be seen to signify, in new ways, in the contemporary context of ‘nomadism’, the concept which Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 420ff) employ to capture the essentially mobile subject of modernity.⁸ The skills of *al-Sadu* – like the famed poetry of the Bedouin – also comprise a cultural inheritance, passed on verbally across generations of women through collective work in which older and younger women communicate, exchange, participate, and create together (Ghadeer 2009). In the context of anthropologist James Clifford’s idea of modernity as the global movement of people and ideas across space (‘routes’) and through time (‘roots’), the *beit al-sha'r* and *al-Sadu* have both ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ (Clifford 1997, 36). As such, they provide us with a path towards developing new conversations about culturally and gender-specific Saudi forms of spatial and social practice. As such, *Al-Sadu* offers new ways to think about art and identity in Saudi Arabia in terms of women’s creativity and mobility.

I propose that traditional *al-Sadu* weaving practices, adopted by nomadic Bedouin, constitutes a culture-specific, historic practice by Saudi women which is inherently both spatial

⁸ Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) theorization of the ‘nomad’ is highly complex and cannot easily or unproblematically be mapped onto the Bedouin. The key part of their theory of nomadism is that the nomad inhabits a ‘smooth,’ ‘deterritorialized’ space which is always shifting and which they also partly create. ‘It is in this sense,’ they write, ‘that nomads have no points, paths, or land, even though they do by all appearances. If the nomad can be called the Deterritorialized par excellence, it is precisely because there is no deterritorialization afterward as with the migrant, or upon something else as with the sedentary (the sedentary’s relation with the earth is mediated by something else, a property regime, a State apparatus). With the nomad, on the contrary, it is deterritorialization that constitutes the relation to the earth, to such a degree that the nomad reterritorializes itself in a way that provides the nomad with a territory’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 421). This is not the place to develop a full reading of Bedouin life and *al-Sadu* in relation to ‘nomadism,’ though this is certainly an area for future theorisation.

and social. Formulating this argument will involve making strategic linkages between *al-Sadu* and contemporary art by means of underlying theories of space drawn from other disciplines, especially cultural geography and spatial theory. I will explore these ideas through the lens of a strategic reading of Western theories of space, place and society drawn from cultural geography, philosophy, and art theory.

Spatial theories drawn from the discipline of cultural geography, among others, posit that spaces and places change over time, that they are dynamic phenomena, altering with the movement of the people who inhabit them. Within the history of Saudi art, the desert has often played the role of a conceptual space in which to think through the spaces and places of the national cultural imagination. Something of the cultural movement identified in spatial theory, for example, was worked out in the ‘horizontalist’ paintings of al-Saleem in the effort to produce a new Saudi spatial imagination in two-dimensional painting; what he called ‘al Afakia-a,’ a ‘utopic imaging of the desert’ (Sotheby’s 2000). In a contemporary artworld which has defaulted to the gallery, the museum, and the biennale as the preeminent spaces of exhibition for art works, what happens if the space in which contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia can be reconceptualised as something unique and particular to Saudi culture, with its own unique genealogy in the social fabric and artistic practice of Saudi women in the desert? And, how may new genealogies within Saudi art emerge as a result? Indeed, by way of this analysis of *al-Sadu* it will become possible to advance the claim that the contemporary artistic practices of Saudi women artists including Maha Malluh, Shadia and Raja Alem, Manal Al-Dowayan, Zahrah Al-Ghamdi, Marwah Al-Mugait, Reem al-Nasser, Dana Awartani, Sarah Abu-Abdallah can, in part, be traced in the historical and spatial processes of tent-making by the Bedouin.

2.1.1 The Sociospatial Practices of the Bedouin *beit al-sha'r*

As seen in Fig. 2.1, the *gata* or *ibjad* (tent divider) is one of the most impressive and complex pieces of *al-Sadu* that make up the *beit al-sha'r*. It is often the largest and most highly decorated piece of cloth in the tent, acting as a curtain to divide the separate spheres of women and men's quarters (Al-Sabah 2006). The *gata* or *ibjad* embodies the gendered separation of men and women and yet it is woven by women, testifying to their skill and energy, adorned by them "with cultural and historical meanings" and symbolising "the prestige of the tribe" (Canavan and Alnajadah 2013, 160). Indeed, master women weavers were given the title (*dhefra*), or 'master', by their tribes to signify their high status (Canavan and Alnajadah 2013, 155).

The *beit al-sha'r* tents woven by Bedouin women record the life of the tribe. According to Canavan and Alnajadah (2013, 158-9), "their emotional sentiments, and simple narratives are articulated via a system of semiotic codes", such as *uweirjan*, the repeated woven pyramids representing the sublimity of Allah or the sand dunes of the desert, as well as 'piles or clusters of dates, or birds' wings.'" Other weaving patterns signify water, the traces of snakes' movements, or the rhythm of camels (Fig. 2.4, 2.5). Each relates to the kind of space in which the women live. The designs "reflect the austerity of the natural environment of the desert" and carry "an emphasis on linear forms" inspired by the horizontal landscape (Al-Sabah, Al-Ghanim and Al-Sultan 1982, 5). The desert landscape, and the experiences and memories it produces for women, are written into the fabric of the *beit al-sha'r*. The weaving patterns are different in shape, size, and technique. These patterns and designs become the symbol of the identity of the tribe and its geographic location based on the symbols that were woven so it is possible to see that a fabric belongs to the desert Bedouin of Sinai or the Bedouin of the Gulf or the Bedouin of Jordan and the north of the Arabian Peninsula (Salaghor 2007).



Fig. 2.4 Al-Sabah, Al-Ghanim, and Al-Sultan. 1982. Pattern designs used in the weaving of a *beit al-sha'r*.



Fig 2.5. Al-Sabah, Al-Ghanim, and Al-Sultan. 1982. Examples of pattern designs used in the weaving of a *beit al-sha'r* named *Al Mesht*, *Al-Uwairjan*, *Al-Mudhakhar* and *Al-Shajarah*.

The symbolic visual language created in *al-Sadu* weaving is a textile visualisation of the “imaginative preoccupation with the desert” found in lyrical descriptions of love, desire, and longing in Bedouin poetry by women – another of the great desert art forms of Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghadeer 2009, 17). Since the *beit al'sha'r* is an aesthetic space which frames and houses the production of Bedouin poetry, it is worth reflecting momentarily on the relationship between weaving and oral poetry. These poems have been interpreted as personal expressions related to women’s experience of desert life. They have also been interpreted as time and space memory, containing (like *al-Sadu* textiles) many references to the desert landscape. As such, the poems amount to what could be called a ‘toponymy’ of the desert landscape – a way of mapping the space of the desert onto the collective memory of the tribe. This could be called

the ‘spatial discourse’ of *al-Sadu*. Al-Ghadeer (2009), quoting Stetkevych(1993,103), notes that Bedouin poems are filled with “names of mountains, dunes, rivers, wells, stretches of desert, tribal grounds, regions” and further that “there are equally unending insistences on motifs of arrival at abandoned camp sites, of departures from the tribal grounds, of sorrow over such arrivals and departures and over the emptiness that always lies before and after them” (Stetkevych 1993, 103 cited in Al-Ghadeer 2009).

Women’s Bedouin poetry is rich with spatial images of landscape and place. Indeed, Al-Ghadeer (2009, 21-22) notes that:

The poems blossom in pastures, rain clouds and patches of lavender ... Bedouin women compose poetry in the desert and about the desert ... [including] many extraordinary images of animals, in which the speaker usually identifies her emotional pathos and sorrow with grieving like a she camel, crying like a thirsty wolf, or desiring to travel like a bird towards her beloved’s camping land.

Other poems give resonance to the atmosphere of the desert through powerful motifs of lightning “which usually arouses the woman’s longing. When lightning flashes in the sky, memory opens up and silence is interrupted” (Al-Ghadeer 2009, 22). In all of these cases, women’s desires are spoken about frankly, in a discourse that situates the immediate signifying terrain of the self in the spaces it inhabits. It must be remembered that Bedouin dialects retain a different status as literary languages to the classical ‘purity’ of Arabic. Bedouin poetry preserves few of the classical grammatical structures of Arabic (Al-Ghadeer 2009, 24). Thus, the spatial imagery described in Bedouin poetry is radical and unusual, outside of the mainstream: nomadic, on the edge much like contemporary artistic practices which equally inhabit marginal or temporary spaces from which they critique and investigate dominant, normative, and central practices in state and society.

Poetry “weighs little” and “is easily passed on”; for Bedouin nomadic poets of the deserts of Arabia, poetry was not a text-based medium but an oral culture (Brown 2004, 21). Even

though the Bedouin poems which have been written down over the centuries are the ones that have survived, these poems were best remembered because they were the ones most often performed, listened-to, and memorised in collective, social acts of discourse. It is difficult to recover what Al-Ghadeer (2009, 22) has called “the voice in the text”, but Bedouin poetry should nonetheless be understood as a spoken art form, performed and heard in the space of the desert environment, in the camp among the *khayma* (tents).

Poetry recitation is also an important factor in *al-Sadu* weaving, since this measured, repetitive, and rhythmic task is carried out by Bedouin women with the aid of mnemonic verses. As is common in many textile-weaving traditions in the Islamic world, the visual plan for the overall image of the fabric design is mediated by the weavers through spoken recitation so that conventional distinctions between discourse and weaving are broken down and brought together. Working together, *al-Sadu* weavers direct and control the patterns of the weave, giving instructions, as well as sharing other aspects of oral culture: telling stories, reciting poems, sharing news, and conversing together.

This could be thought about as a woven spatial discourse, one which complements the spatial practice of the weaving, that resonates closely with the concept of sociospatial practice. It considers both the space-making practice of weaving and the social practice of speaking about it; that is, creating a discourse about space at the same time. It is also during weaving that skills are handed down from experienced weavers to other girls and women, for whom *al-Sadu* represents a social institution of education. Although Bedouin culture is transmitted orally rather than in writing, the creation of *al-Sadu* weaving involves the weaving together of speech and wool whose end product is an architectural space. Like poems, the *beit al sha'r* are also spaces of social memory, open to the desert landscape, moving from one place to the next. Here, discourse, in the form of orality, becomes a spatial element.

The spatial and social practice of *al-Sadu* is an especially appropriate focus for this project. *Al-Sadu* creates an aesthetic space physically constructed and meaningfully decorated by women working skilfully together across generations, who are inherently empowered by their practice within the limits of the communities in which they operate. As such, both the social and spatial practices which constitute *al-Sadu* weaving, and the space itself (both physical and conceptual) of the *beit al-sha'r*, provide cultural 'roots' and future 'routes' for the sociospatial practices of contemporary art made by Saudi women, in which 'space' and 'society' find themselves in a critical relationship. In a society in which cultural traditions and tribal identities have a powerful influence over the way space is constructed and used (even in cities), thinking about the spaces and social configurations created by women in contemporary art and those made by Bedouin women in the desert holds the potential for initiating important new conversations about the meaning of space and society in Saudi Arabia. There are further opportunities to challenge conventional assumptions, thus combating ingrained ignorance about the country's cultural traditions. Ways to think about Saudi art that are in conversation with, but not overdetermined by, the art and theory of the West may also be offered. Altogether, this is the cultural paradigm addressed by this research.

2.1.2 Weaving process in images:



Fig. 2.6 Abdulmughni, Huda. 2017. The interactive of Um Fayez one of the Bedouins weaving in Kuwait to the place during the Sadu weaving process. <https://www.atharna.com/journal/sadu-weaving-in-kuwait>



Fig.2.7 Documentary film about Bedouin life in Saudi Arabia. Bedouin women building a tent in Saudi Arabia in 1959. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB5QIQmD62g>



سَامِيزِي فَرْفَارَةٌ تَسْبِقُ بَنَاتَ الْجَارَةِ
أَخْشِيَةٌ مَكْرُومَةٌ عَادَةُ نَفْسَتَاهُ أَثَلُ الْعَسْرِينِ

Swirl my spindle swirl
Swifter than our neighbour's girl.
Song of Bedouin women.

Fig. 2.8 Crichton, Michael. 1989. Example of Bedouin women singing while they weave as social space.



Fig.2.9 Hilden. Joy. 2010. A woman weaves on a ground loom (*al-sadu*) while members of the family keep her company.

Direct engagement with social relations and their spatiality is certainly a feature of *al-Sadu*, one which has percolated through Saudi women's practices. Indeed, the coexistence of 'space' and 'society' is intrinsic within the apparatus of *al-Sadu*. In Arabic, as Salaghor (2007)

as well as Canavan and Alnajadah (2013) have explained, '*al-Sadu*' means both 'loom' and 'woven cloth'; both the apparatus on which the weaving process takes place, and the cloth produced as a result. The loom is a piece of portable equipment; women are specialists in its use. As an apparatus, the *al-Sadu* loom is technical; it is the site of specific forms of knowledge related to the physical processes of weaving, which have been learned by each woman who weaves. There is a technique to *al-Sadu* weaving, embodied in the interface between the body of the weaver and the apparatus of the loom. Together, the loom and the weaver form a unit which encodes the social history of the art of weaving in the desert. It is a site at which what the Ingold (2013, 1) has termed "learning through doing" takes place, where specific forms of 'knowhow' and participatory, hands-on learning occur, which collectively constitute the nature of the practice and form the body of knowledge passed on over generations, ensuring continuity. 'The weaving' is therefore 'praxical' and a certain type of embodied knowledge exists for the weavers.

Neither the loom nor the weaver can be separated from the wider social fabric in which they are situated, elicited through *beit al-sha'r* –which may then inflect wider topologies in a contemporary and arts-based Saudi context, Weaving takes place within the communal space of the *beit al-sha'r*, and it is common for multiple women to weave together, as if in a desert studio, where inevitably, multiple weavers must interact carefully in order to collectively produce the large expanses of woven cloth necessary for tent architecture. In fact, the *beit al-sha'r* could usefully be thought of as a multi-use space, one of whose uses is as a nomadic architectural studio in which the shelters of the tribe are imagined and woven together by a community of women. As a *proto-studio*, the space of the *beit al-sha'r* inhabited by Bedouin women prefigures the "collaborative work in the studio," partnerships, networks, and "consideration of studio space as a community" which have defined the modern notion of the artistic collective (Uhlig, Lewis and Carpenter 2018, 207).

By describing both the cloth and the loom as '*al-Sadu*', Bedouin culture implicitly acknowledges that the collective and participatory nature of weaving is indistinguishable from its materiality. The social fabric of *al-Sadu* is at once a network of material threads woven together into an enclosure, and a network of connections between women and the tribe at large, which constitute the social basis of the community. Within the architectural enclosure formed by sheets of *al-Sadu*, space is always already social. The threads have been woven together out of collective processes so that, even before people inhabit it with their bodies, it is already inhabited by the gestures of the women who carded, spun, and wove the wool of the tribe's goats and camels into the surfaces of the tent, along with the ideographic signs that recall the spaces and places of the desert which the tribe has passed through and memories of the landscapes previously inhabited. *Al-Sadu* and *al-Sadu* – material and practice, space and society – are inseparable.

Taking on board this analysis of *al-Sadu*, I contend that *al-Sadu* as one of the oldest Saudi art forms, can thus be conceptualised as inextricably woven into the historicity of Saudi art and its practice provides provenance for the social and spatial to be understood – practically and otherwise – as intertwined with one another. Traditionally, 'spatial' and 'social' are understood as two distinct categories that help read and connect art practices thematically across time. The social and the spatial are positioned in this thesis as threads running through the whole tradition of art by women in Saudi Arabia. By looking at artworks in terms of social and spatial practices, my research will develop a specifically Saudi reading of these terms in contemporary art discourse.

2.1.3 Defining ‘Social’ and Spatial’ in the Context of this Research

Conceiving of my research this way calls for the key terms ‘space’ and ‘society’ to be defined and theorised. *Al-Sadu* prompts the conceptualisation of contemporary art practices by Saudi women as potentially both social and spatial practice. I have described *al-Sadu* as a ‘spatial’ and a ‘social’ practice and this requires justification even if it may appear a fairly obvious choice of words. What are ‘social practice’ and ‘spatial practice’? In order to more fully understand these threads, it is necessary to step back and define these key ideas, map out their complexities, and engage with some of the ways they have already been theorised and developed as critical tools for exploring cultural production, before re-mapping them back onto contemporary art practices by Saudi women. Doing so will help integrate the discussion of contemporary art practices by women with the broader international discourse on space, art, and society, enriching that discourse with an understanding of a new cultural legacy that is largely absent from existing narratives. Accomplishing this project means filling in the absences and lacunae of current discourse which has not systematically addressed contemporary Saudi art in terms of its deep structures, abiding themes, and socio-political concerns, particularly related to women and art by women. What is being called for is an expansion of existing narratives to become alert and responsive to the contemporary artistic practices taking place in the Gulf region, and to break down conventional barriers, which have produced artificial blind spots in contemporary arts discourse.

If the process of reading and interpreting *al-Sadu* as both a social and a spatial practice can inspire the consideration of the history of art by Saudi women as the weaving together of the two threads of space and society, then a new theory of Saudi art becomes possible. If *al-Sadu* is looked at on its own terms, just as *al-Sadu*, as weaving, as Bedouin, as coming from the desert, as poetry, as nomadism, it appears to be a cultural practice which deeply and fundamentally, is spatial practice and social practice.

Because *al-Sadu* is performed by women, it grants women a foreground role in the production of social spaces within the Bedouin community. It is therefore important to establish the spatiality and sociality of *al-Sadu* in social and spatial terms, without importing contemporary art discourse terminologies as foreign explicative mechanisms. It thus becomes possible to assert the following hypothesis: that cultural practices by women in contemporary Saudi art represent forms of social practice and spatial practice which stand in a genealogical relationship to the earlier art of Bedouin *al-Sadu* weaving practiced by women in the desert. Stating these things about *al-Sadu*, space, society, and contemporary art is the hypothesis which serves as the justification for the present research, asking to what extent the contemporary theoretical concepts of social practice and spatial practice can help to understand contemporary artistic practices by women in Saudi Arabia in light of a historically rooted tradition of women making spaces in the desert societies specific to Saudi Arabia. The function of theory in this case is thereby to establish the grounds on which links between *al-Sadu* and contemporary art can be created.

If this is granted, then it becomes possible to inhabit a position from which it can be asked: what is space more generally, what do we really refer to when we speak about the space of *al-Sadu*, and what is the specific meaning of ‘social’ in *al-Sadu*? Furthermore, how do we see these definitions of space and society drawn from *al-Sadu* operating in contemporary art? At this point it becomes necessary to more carefully define what is meant by ‘spatial practice’ in the context of *al-Sadu*, and how that serves as a potential way to understand – theoretically, politically, economically, and philosophically – Saudi women’s contemporary practices. Explaining why this language is appropriate in the context of the woven tents of the Bedouin means arguing that what they do might justifiably be seen as having an important – or even necessary – relation to the work now being created by contemporary Saudi female artists. Making this argument means not simply thinking of the work of *al-Sadu* weavers as (critical)

sociospatial practice according to how those terms have already been defined, but rather, considering how those terms might be expanded in meaning, or knotted together with others, in order to accurately explain the contemporary cultural situation in Saudi Arabia.

2.1.4 Domestic Space, Home, and the Everyday: Documentation of Traditional Social Practices in the Art of Safeya Binzagr



Fig. 2.10 Alriyadh. 2016. Social life outside a Bedouin tent. <http://www.alriyadh.com/570356>

The *beit al-sha'r* is not a general kind of space; it is a home in which people live and carry out their lives. As such it expresses the life of a group, but is also affected by the many differences between its various inhabitants. This sense of the tent as a domestic space is captured in the Qur'an:

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ بُيُوتِكُمْ سَكَنًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ جُلُودِ الْأَنْعَامِ بُيُوتًا تَسْتَخِفُّونَهَا يَوْمَ ظَعْنِكُمْ وَيَوْمَ إِقَامَتِكُمْ):
(وَمِنْ أَصْنَافِهَا وَأُوبَارَهَا وَأَشْعَارُهَا أَتَانًا وَمَتَاعًا إِلَى جِينِ)

(‘And Allah has made for you from your homes a place of rest and made for you from the hides of the animals’ tents which you find light on your day of travel and your day of encampment; and from their wool, fur and hair is furnishing and enjoyment for a time’) (Quran.com 2016, Sura an-Nahal, 16:80, Sahih international version).

Of all the meanings of ‘space’ and ‘place’, the idea of space as a home and as a domestic space are closely connected to the essence of a Bedouin tent. The Qur’an is clear that the tent furnishes a space for the ‘enjoyment of time’, and one which can be picked up and carried lightly on a ‘day of travel’. Documentary footage from Bedouin encampments in Saudi Arabia shows how the tent serves as backdrop for children to play in, coffee to be consumed, and the work of weaving to be carried out.⁹ The tent also brings the interior space that houses the family into open contact with the exterior landscape (Weir 2013).

Given that the *beit al sha’r* has been woven by women and inscribed with the memories of the tribe through *al-Sadu*, the worlds of art and life are, in a way, brought together in the form of the Bedouin tent. This differentiates it from the spaces and places of modern art and society as they are generally understood.¹⁰ It also brings the tent into association with other comparable social spaces from the pre-oil-era Saudi society, many of which can be glimpsed in the paintings of the Saudi female artist Safeya Binzagr. In her work, the urban domestic interiors of the old architecture of Jeddah, women’s toilets, the urban courtyard where domestic work is performed by women of mixed classes, the *souk* (market), the urban tea party, or the Bedouin dance are evident. In contrast, (with some exceptions such as the home studio) spaces and places of artistic production such as studios, galleries, and museums have not normally been considered domestic or everyday spaces. However, the idea of sociospatial practices being formulated here stems from the kind of spatial practices described in both ancient sources like the Qur’an and contemporary sources on Bedouin life in the desert.

⁹ See for example, Huntley Film Archives (2016) available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c9HebwJeg5U>

¹⁰ Without digressing here, it is necessary to state that there is a conventional history of art and society which is based on the model of Western development. This narrative is the foundation of most modern art histories but has been increasingly contested. These histories are dominated by art produced by Western artists in European and American cities for royal patrons or bourgeois publics, mostly by male artists. The idea of sociospatial practices produced by Saudi women artists with some degree of participation by other members of society offers an alternative idea of what the spaces and places of art might comprise.

Safeya Binzagr (b. 1940) serves as a key source for visualising what women's spaces in Saudi Arabia have looked like in the past. Additionally, Eiman Elgibreen's knowledgeable and culturally informed readings of Binzagr's work enables an understanding of how domestic space has played a vital role in Saudi women's experiences. Employing a methodology linked to Roland Barthes's theory of the cultural connotations of signs, Elgibreen (2015) opens up the complex ways that women are depicted inhabiting domestic and non-domestic spaces in one key painting from Binzagr's *Marriage* series, *The Slipper Carrier* (1969) (Fig 2.11).

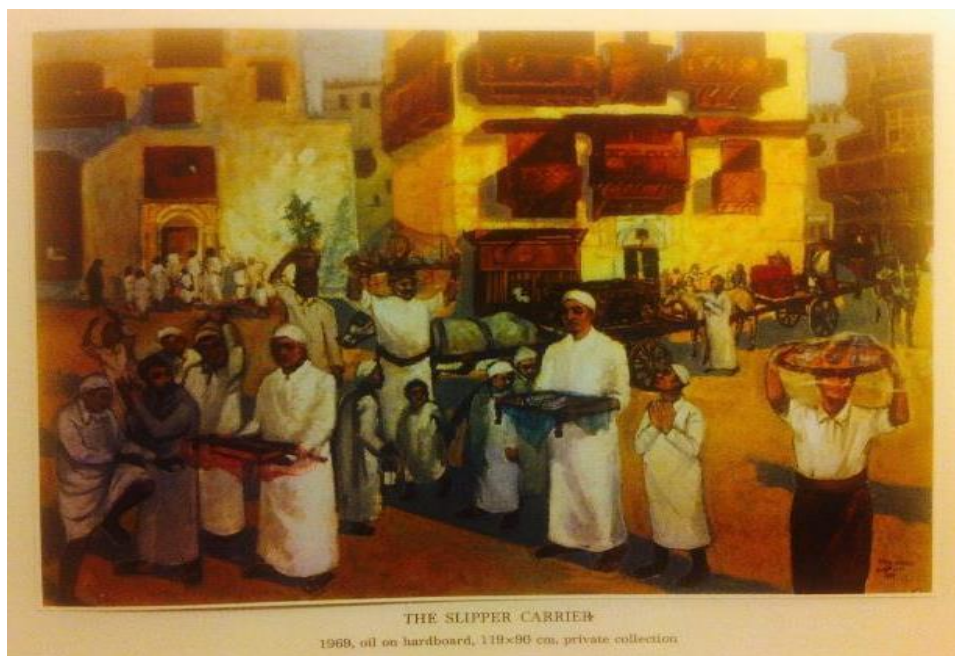


Fig. 2.11 Binzagr, Safeya. 1969. *The Slipper Carrier*. oil on hardboard. Private collection.

The Slipper Carrier is notable for depicting a “ceremony in a public space”, and its subject is “the old custom of sending the *dabash* (the bride's trousseau) to her future house in a festive procession,” a ceremony popular “from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century” (Elgibreen 2015, 64). Elgibreen (2015) explains the various roles of each member of the procession and the significance of the objects they carry. She situates them within the spatial context of the Jeddah streets. What is most striking in her analysis – and what makes it so

important for writing about women's spaces in Saudi Arabia in general – is her depiction of the ways the women can command public space not merely by their physical presence, but via aesthetic objects which signify their presence even when they themselves are absent. This applies both to the scene depicted in Binzagr's painting, where a woman's social power is represented by the procession of her marriage trousseau through public streets, and to Binzagr's art itself, which conveys her identity in spaces where she is absent. Even in cases where women are present (such as in Bedouin life), aesthetic objects such as *al-Sadu* give them further voice and visibility. Elgibreen summarises her analysis of *The Slipper Carriers* as follows:

The scene not only suggests a celebration of women's right to embrace their femininity on certain occasions, as a popular cultural practice it also provides visual evidence of their socio-economic efficiency and authority. The painting, and the actual ceremony, are both about collective economic and moral power: the power of the class that the bride derives from her family's socio-economic status, and the power of virtue that entitles her to enjoy this position and bring honour to her family. (Elgibreen 2015, 69)

In essence, women become present in public space by transforming it into private space through the deployment of aesthetic objects. Looking carefully at the lattice-work balconies, Elgibreen (2015) notices how different kinds of women are clearly visible behind as spectators of the scene taking place. Indeed, an analysis of the painting depicts the women behind the most ornate balconies (which it is suggested, signifies wealth) wearing brightly coloured, expensive clothes. Concurrently, others in the simpler houses towards the left of the painting can be seen at open balconies dressed in more modest black and white clothes and veils. There is even a woman (presumably of a lower class) on the street itself on the far left, identifiable because she is wearing black clothes. This is in direct contrast to the dressing of Saudi men, who always wear white in public.

Through crucial insight about the nature of the veil as “portable architecture”, Elgibreen (2015, 71) assists in understanding how women are able to transform Saudi public space into

domestic space. “Less privileged women,” she writes, “had to maintain their privacy when going out by wearing different forms of the veil, which worked as *a mobile home*. In other words, the more the borders of the home were removed, the more women covered their bodies” (Elgibreen 2015, 71).¹¹ Thus this painting provides one example of how sociospatial practice can be manifested within Saudi society, drawing from an urban context in Jeddah. Elgibreen (2015) also observes that comparable but not identical systems of space and place have traditionally existed in Bedouin society. “In Bedouin society,” she argues, “staying home did not represent the highest level of authority as it did in urban society in Jeddah” (Elgibreen, 2015, 73).

Since in Bedouin tents the face mask is the only border separating women from men in desert life, Binzagr identified authoritative Bedouin women by focusing attention on their face masks in different ways. These women are shown to be most influential when depicted working outside. Since Bedouin women are expected by their society to be the main contributors of livelihood, they were entitled to the same level of authority and respect when meeting that expectation (Elgibreen 2015, 73). Bedouin society therefore places an even greater emphasis on the role of women in the creation of space and place through their work. Binzagr’s paintings convey this in different ways, such as in the portraits (mentioned by Elgibreen) in which Bedouin women are shown wearing extremely ornate and precious masks covered in coins – a form of portable wealth suited to Bedouin life (Fig. 2.12).

¹¹ Elgibreen cites the work of the anthropologist and women and gender studies scholar Lila Abu-Lughod as the source of this inside in the veil as mobile architecture (See Abu-Lughod 2002).

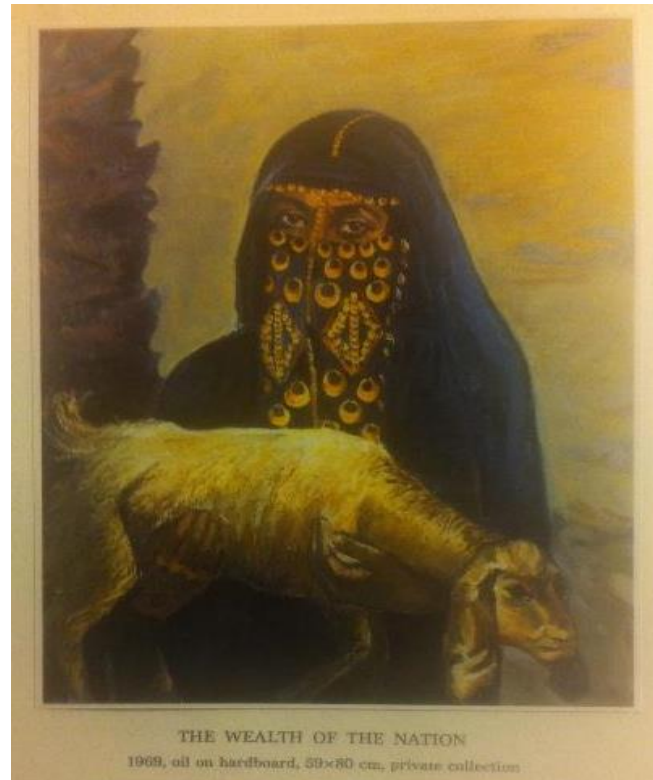


Fig. 2.12 Binzagr, Safeya. 1979. *The Wealth of the Nation*. oil on hardboard. Private collection.

More relevant for the present context are images depicting Bedouin women in the spatial context of *al-Sadu*.

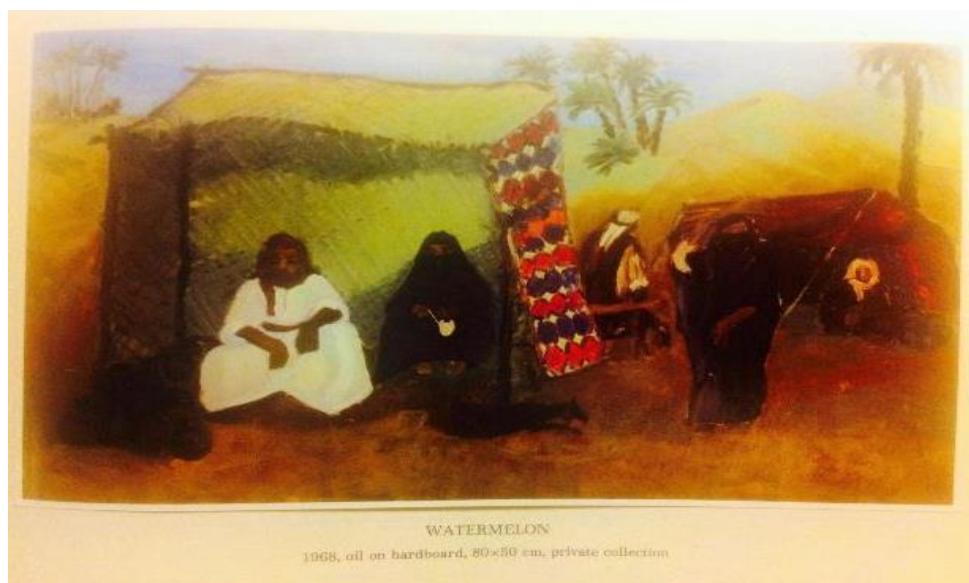


Fig. 2.13 Binzagr, Safeya. 1968. *Watermelon*. oil on hardboard. Private collection.

Fig. 2.13 portrays a Bedouin woman seated within a tent made partially of *al-Sadu* woven cloth, in the act of spinning yarn for *al-Sadu* weaving (the small white object in her hands is a spindle). She occupies the same space as the male figure, her husband, who appears idle. Elgibreen (2015, 90) remarks that Binzagr's work tends to "marginalise the male figure" in the context of cultural representations in order to emphasise the visibility of women. In this image, women are presented as the inhabitants and creators of spaces which are both public and domestic. Women are made visible through their presence, through the aesthetic and functional objects they have created (the *beit al-sha'r* in the picture), through the act of creation (spinning yarn), as well as through the act of selling watermelons and contributing to the family's economic welfare. Thus, Binzagr's paintings demonstrate how women can be empowered in space through their creative work.

At present, research has not uncovered any works by Binzagr that directly depict the practice of *al-Sadu*; this is surprising, given that *al-Sadu* would appear an ideal subject for the artist. It could be that such paintings exist, but have not yet been exhibited. Alternatively, *al-Sadu* may be absent from Binzagr's work because she is not Bedouin, and her roots are in the old urban life of Jeddah (Gronlund 2018). However, the fact that she did make other representations of Bedouin life (including *Watermelons*, the portraits, and an image of a Bedouin dance) makes this explanation unlikely. Nevertheless, by focussing on *al-Sadu*, the ideas present in Binzagr's work can be extended into new, but related, realms of women's space. Yet one may also critique the two-dimensionality of Binzagr's paintings, or perhaps it is rather the medium of painting, for remaining within the realm of representations of space rather than creations of new occupiable spaces in three dimensions, or sociospatial practices themselves. From this position, Binzagr's work would be viewed as a major step forward in identifying spatial conditions as the locus of women's roles within the socio-politics of space a necessary, but incomplete, intervention into women's spaces. By representing traditional

space, her paintings also foreground the need for new sociospatial practices which can exist within the changed contemporary conditions of modernity, responding to those conditions, but also bridging the gap between them and traditional spaces of women's sociospatial agency.

2.1.5 Bedouin Genealogies: Bridging the Past and Present

The realities of Bedouin life, portrayed in Binzagr's art and elaborated on by Elgibreen (2015), can then be understood as anticipating some of the ways that domestic space has begun to be included in discussions of contemporary art. Making this connection means building a bridge between the traditional artisanal practices of Bedouin women – as well as the use of aesthetic objects to make women present in traditional Saudi society – and contemporary art practices that emphasise domestic space as a place of creativity and representation.

Art in Saudi Arabia has not been kept strictly separate from everyday life, women, and the domestic sphere (Al-Senan 2007). Papastergiadias (2006) is one of a number of writers who has sought to re-situate contemporary art within the spaces of the everyday; spaces where art has always existed in Bedouin and other Saudi contexts. "The placement of art in everyday surroundings", he writes, "and the use of everyday materials in art", has become common (Papastergiadias 2006, 15). In fact, the optimum methodology in contemporary art practice is defined as "small gestures in specific places" (Papastergiadias 2006, 15, 81). Rather than a retreat from the experience of globalisation, this focus on the encounter of art with place and the everyday, is an attempt to understand how "complex histories of visual traditions" formed in local places are linked to global debates and part of transnational dialogues on art, community, politics, and space (Papastergiadias 2006, 8). In a sense, this movement in contemporary art seeks to re-situate art in the West in a place which more closely resembles, or values, the place where art – like *al-Sadu*, *nagash* painting, or Bedouin poetry – has always

existed in Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia is often considered to lack a history of modern art, in this respect it actually occupies a place with respect to women, domestic space, and the production of art, which the West is itself seeking to find.

The space of the everyday has been overlooked, in the West and elsewhere, by various attempts to impose external economic and cultural orders. These might include, for example, a capitalist mode of production or a system of male guardianship. Where systems like capitalism or guardianship might attempt to impose control on the general conditions of a living subject, the sphere of the everyday generally evades attention. For this reason, the French philosopher Michel de Certeau refers to everyday strategies having as their goal “therapeutics for deteriorating social relations” which “make[s] use of techniques of re-employment in which we can recognise the procedures of everyday practices” (Certeau and Rendall 1984, xxiv). Certeau’s position assumes that the ‘everyman’ subject of his work lives under ‘deteriorating social relations’, and that these require some form of amelioration provided by ‘everyday practices’. If both *al-Sadu* and installation art are understood as (at least potentially) everyday practices, then they may also be conceptualised as contributing to a new priority for social relations within contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Sociospatial practices such as *al-Sadu* within a Saudi context may result in everyday spaces, but as Papastergiadis (2006) elucidates, this does not exclude them from the world of art. In fact, a growing body of research (much of it by women scholars)¹² shows that everyday spaces, such as the home, have often been used strategically by women artists to create art.¹³

¹² See for example, Hilden (1991).

¹³ For example, Binzagr’s house is a home, a studio, a museum and a school. It brings together the functions of living, memory and education. It also places the space of art within the space of the family and suggests modes of exhibition and display that are different from those developed elsewhere in Europe, the West and beyond. This is also reflected in her wish to provide education at her home to Saudi children.

For example, Imogen Racz opens her recent book *Art and the home: Comfort, alienation and the everyday* (2015) by writing:

a major theme in post-war art has been an engagement with the home, not only to explore our personal, social and cultural relationships with the spaces in which we dwell, but also to consider how homes and houses have been implicated in political and economic strategies. (Racz 2015, 1)

Notably, it is work by Cornelia Parker, Rachel Whiteread, Grayson Perry, and others that partakes of what Krauss (1979, 30) calls the “expanded field of sculpture” – three-dimensional works challenging conventional gallery restrictions – that Racz (2015) relies on to distinguish the space of art and the home in a Western context. In this thesis, the weaving of tents by women through *al-Sadu* in the *beit al-sha’r* enables an analysis of how art engages with the home. The common adage ‘home is where the heart is’ is indicative of the idea that the ‘space’ of the home is a particular kind of space, an idea that phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard explores with minute attention to detail in *the poetics of space* (Bachelard 1994). For Racz (2015), too, this phenomenon about the space of the home defines individuals’ relationship to works of art about home:

The home both contains us and is within us. The overall scale of the dwelling, its thresholds and internal spaces are all related to the scale of the body . . . we hold these material and physical memories within us, and so when viewing sculptures there is an instinctive dialogue with these internalised tactile, spatial, and haptic knowledges. (Racz 2015, 2)

Returning to the way that the *beit al-sha’r* is occupied by Bedouin people (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3) and the weaving of the tents by women through *al-Sadu*, it becomes evident how the experience of the tent and the experience of sculpture are brought closer together. The space of the home (whether a ‘Western’ home, as portrayed by the artists that Racz (2015) studies, or a Saudi home) is always already a kind of space located both inside and outside of the viewer, and is therefore inherently participatory. Both the *beit al-sha’r* and contemporary art which engages with the home, therefore, create spaces of conversation and representation about relationships

in society. Rather than oversimplifying the identity of their inhabitants (as Tuan's early work tended to do), both the *beit al sha'r* and the spaces and places of contemporary art can engender a nuanced understanding.

2.2 Theorisations of Space in Cultural Geography, Sociology, and Philosophy

The study of Safeiya Binzagr's art practice in combination with the Bedouin desert art of *al-Sadu* lays down the foundation for a set of sociospatial practices which are particular to the cultural context of Saudi Arabia, and which provide a unique set of 'roots' and 'routes' with which to connect the contemporary art practices of Saudi women artists. It is connecting these two paradigms of cultural production or rather, making visible the connections between them, which forms a defining purpose of this research. Rather than propose that these connections are to be explained by what would be termed in the discourse of ethnography an abiding 'ethnos', or ethnic spirit, this research instead proposes that a concern with the socio-politics of space in Saudi Arabia can be identified, thereby bridging quite different, and contingent, historical circumstances, in which women have played an important, yet often under-recognised, role. Thus, in order to fully reinforce this claim, it is necessary to establish the theoretical basis of these sociospatial practices so that their continuity over time becomes visible. This is where global theories of space and society are useful, and the following sections will range widely across contemporary conceptual thinking about space in order to justify the basis upon which sociospatial practices of contemporary art may be accepted as essentially continuous with the sociospatial practices of the desert.

As an environment interwoven with the memories of its people, the Bedouin *beit al-sha'r* is both a space and a place and as such, can be understood as a moveable *milieu*. One early but relatively recent description of how humans occupy space and place can be found in the work

of cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, whose ideas have been the basis for work by many other writers, who have changed and modified them in ways that will be explored later in this thesis. Tuan's (1977) remarks on establishing the differences between 'space' and 'place' seem well-suited to the context of the Bedouin in Saudi Arabia: "If we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place" (Tuan 1977, 6). This is certainly true of the 'space' of the desert and the 'place' of the *beit al-sha'r*: one allows movement, the other allows pause, which transforms the desert environment into a place that can be inhabited. Tuan (1977, 35) further argues that space is transformed into place in the presence of the human body, since "the human being, by his [or her or their] mere presence, imposes a schema on space"; though when humans inhabit space together, it is their collective presence and relationships that become reflected in the way the world is divided into spaces and places."

Tuan's (1977) model of space and place as reflections of social organisation is helpful in understanding the kinds of spaces and places I am interested in within Saudi Arabia. However, his way of describing spaces and places also risks simplifying them into expressions of the dominant social order, and can result in an 'us and them' mentality between different cultures: this space is 'ours', not 'yours'. Also, Tuan's (1977) model does not answer certain important questions: how do different people occupy the same spaces and places? What happens to places when they change over time and do not remain static? Furthermore, we need to move beyond a general idea of space and place across times and cultures to arrive at a more specific conception of what kinds of spaces and places might constitute the sociospatial practices of Saudi Arabia's future. To begin this journey, it is imperative to examine the spaces of Bedouin life in the desert, particularly in terms of the ways they are occupied, organised and experienced by women.

The work of Massey (1994) has been essential in bringing to light the dynamism of space as a phenomenon undergoing constant change, and which has different meanings to different inhabitants. Massey (1994, 1) posits:

Space may call to mind the realm of the dead of the chaos of simultaneity and multiplicity.

It may be used in reference to the synchronic systems of structuralists or employed to picture the n-dimensional space of identity. Likewise, with place, though perhaps with more consistency, it can raise an image of one's place in the world, of the . . . disputed . . . deep meanings of 'a place called home' or, with much greater intimations of mobility and agility, can be used in the context of discussions of positionality.

Comparing Massey's (1994) account of space with Tuan's (1977), it becomes apparent that she references space's 'multiplicity' and many dimensions of 'identity'; she also emphasises the 'mobility', 'agility', and 'positionality' of place. Conversely, Tuan's (1977) approach draws a strict contrast between space as movement and freedom, and place as stasis and security. It is rooted in the experience of a perceiving individual, whereas Massey's (1994) account (influenced by Marxism) is based on a collective understanding of space and place "in terms of social relations" (Massey 1994, 2). Moving further in this direction, Massey (1994, 2) describes the "levels at which space, place and gender are interrelated . . . in their very construction as culturally specific ideas." Thus, space, place, and gender are all constructed differently according to the different societal relations of different cultures. The significance of this insight for a project on women's spaces in Saudi Arabia is that it provides a critical framework within which culturally specific women's spaces and places can be critically analysed.

Drawing from theories of physics and biology, Massey (1994) further argues that space cannot be separated from time. Physical disciplines therefore use 'space-time' as their unit of analysis, a phenomenon which, like 'nature', is composed of a constantly changing set of spatial relationships that are never still. In Massey's (1994, 3) words, space-time is "a

configuration of social relations” which may be conceived of “as an inherently dynamic simultaneity.” One further move connects space-time to power: “Since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (Massey 1994, 3). Later, Massey (1994, 149) puts this even more sharply, speaking of the “*power geometry*” differentiating people’s varying experiences of global flows and interconnection.

Applying these concepts to the notion of sociospatial practices, it may be argued that they constitute constantly changing configurations of power and meaning in the social relations between, or involving, women in Saudi Arabia. Following Massey (1994) a step further, sociospatial practices may be seen as convergences where a multiplicity of spaces can be seen “cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism” throughout the wider world (Massey 1994, 3). Any instance of sociospatial practice is, therefore, not isolated, but presents one set of spaces among many other related global spaces. When the geometry of many different socially constructed spaces interacting with one another dynamically across the many different scales of magnitude is considered – from an installation artwork to an entire kingdom –the realm of politics and history becomes relevant. In this way, Massey’s (1994) approach becomes consistent with the approach of this project, which asks how the sociospatial practices of Saudi women artists produce new ways of thinking differently about the socio-politics of space and place making, drawing from multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent, and social collaboration.

The idea of multiple layers of interaction fits with Massey’s (1994) description of space-time as inherently dynamic, always undergoing change. However, this is not the only way of thinking about space. In contrast, space may be imagined as something absolute, static, fixed and permanent. Nationalism, regionalism, gender or racial segregation, or segregation of

the sacred and profane are all ways of attempting to “fix the meaning of particular spaces, to enclose them, endow them with fixed identities” and to claim them as belonging to one group or another whilst excluding others who do not belong (Massey 1994, 4). Often, this attempt to fix the meaning of spaces is also an attempt to attribute an essential and unchanging identity to the social relationships inside the spaces. However, according to Massey (1994), this is ultimately impossible, because places are always partly defined by what they do *not* include. Relationships stretch beyond any individual place: “The global [is] part of what constitutes the local, the outside [is] part of the inside” and so “places viewed this way are open and porous” (Massey 1994, 5). Such a realisation is extremely important for the definition of sociospatial practices, which embody change and openness towards society; though they may have strict horizons, they are not immobile. Saudi women may live within the limitations of a patriarchal society, but they consume global goods, watch pan-Arabic television, may be educated abroad, speak English or other non-Arabic languages, and participate globally in social media networks.

The complexity of space and place is becoming clear. There are different ways to express this complexity and one of the terms which aids in understanding the different kinds of space that exist is ‘frames of reference’. Since the 1970s, the influential geographer David Harvey has worked with an idea of space as being composed of different frames of reference: “absolute space, relative space, and relational space, all of which may be useful ways of describing any particular space, and none of which can claim to be the only way (Harvey 2009, 126). For example, when speaking of sociospatial practices, it makes sense to consider absolute space; where these spaces are on a map. It is clear that Saudi Arabia is internally differentiated, with many different provinces, districts, cities, and settlements, which can in turn be broken down to smaller spatial units and mapped. The relational view of space goes further and suggests that there is another way of thinking about space in addition to absolute or relative

space. “The relational view of space,” Harvey suggests, “holds there is no such thing as space outside of the processes that define it. Processes do not occur in space but define their own spatial frame” (Harvey 2001, 123). This removes the ‘emptiness’ that separates apparently distant spaces or places within absolute space. Instead, every process creates its own kind of space: patriarchy produces patriarchal space, which might rub up against the sociospatial practices of women which resist constraint. Rather than having to choose one of these frames of reference, Harvey’s (2001) work keeps three different ideas of space in play concurrently. Harvey’s (2001) work is compatible with that of Massey (1994), since she too recognises the ‘multiplicity’ of space as well as its Deleuzian, dynamic and ever-changing nature.

Many of the thinkers discussed here hold some connection to Marxism. Their attempts to define the complexity of the space in which humans exist are often made in light of a recognition that space is affected by power. Harvey’s (2001) relational account of space gives a sense of how space is the outcome of certain processes, not a separate, absolute category existing beyond all objects. In *the Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre extends this argument by asserting that “space embodies social relations” (1974, 27), and that “[Social] space is a [social] product”. The space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power (Lefebvre 1974, 26).

As such, different places may be said to have produced different spaces at different times. This realisation is key, because it enables the spaces produced in both *al-Sadu* and women’s contemporary art practices as socially produced spaces particular to Saudi Arabia to be considered. “Every society,” Lefebvre asserts (1974, 31), “and hence every mode of production . . . produces a space, its own space.” Thus, traditional Saudi society has its own spaces, as do the modernising, Westernising parts of society in Saudi Arabia, the Bedouin

societies of the desert and the social networks that are emerging around contemporary art practices. While Lefebvre (1974, 26) emphasises the dominating role of spatial production, he is also clear about the fact that socially produced space “escapes in part from those who would make use of it’ and moves towards an ‘uncontrollable autonomy” which indicates the socially progressive potential of space.

As a Marxist, Lefebvre (1974) is committed to the idea of revolution as a means of social change. While this is not relevant to every social situation, it is nonetheless clear that socially produced spaces are contested – some individuals may use them to control or assert power over others, and others may use them to escape from domination. Thus, women’s spaces can be understood as an embodiment of social relations, or as ‘socially produced spaces’, which is a necessary step in linking women, space, and empowerment in contemporary Saudi Arabia. As a theory of the social production of space in general, Lefebvre’s (1974) work is helpful in setting the overall research perspective in which this study of contemporary sociospatial practices by Saudi women artists is situated.

In an essay entitled ‘Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias’, Foucault (1986) narrows that perspective to contemplate the specific ways that different spaces are organised. He constructed his argument on the verge of the digital age, aware that information technology was becoming the paradigm of spatial organisation in society. He refers to the modern problem of space as the problem of ‘the site’ a word that obviously resonates with the site-specificity of installation art. He states that “the site is defined by relations of proximity between points or elements; formally, we can describe these relations as series, trees, or grids,” essential in “the storage of data or . . . calculation in the memory of a machine” and “the identification of marked or coded elements inside a set” (Foucault 1986, 2).

As well as a function of computer systems, Foucault (1986, 2) views the 'site' as crucial in human organisation and its different types of "storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements." Where site-specific installation art is concerned, Foucault's (1986) theory of sites has obvious relevance; the emergence of both his idea and of site-specific practices in art can be taken as an indication that the idea of the 'site' is an important one for thinking about space. The correspondence between information, data, networks, and spatial organisation will be taken up again in later writings on space.

Remaining with Foucault (1986), however, brings out a more traditional, yet illuminating, metaphor to define space. The sociospatial practices of contemporary art clearly form a sub-set of space: a region or realm which makes up one area among many. Massey (1994), Harvey (2001), and Lefebvre (1974) all acknowledge the multiplicity of space and the relationality between different spaces. However, the sociospatial practices of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia constitute a *particular* kind of space, just as a site-specific installation art work is also a particular kind of space. Much of Foucault's (1986) work is concerned with knowledge or practices in some way 'on the edge' of normality; focusing on that which is deviant, subversive, or marginal rather than mainstream. As such, he is particularly interested in defining a type of space in which "all the other real sites that can be found within [a] culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 3). Foucault calls such spaces 'heterotopias. Their key characteristics are that they: (1) represent other cultural spaces (as in, for example, a theatre); (2) contest other cultural spaces (for example, as in places of illicit sexual acts); and (3) invert other cultural spaces (as in a cabaret – both 'underground' and satirical). To exemplify heterotopias, Foucault (1986, 2) uses the image of the mirror; an object that is both a place in itself and a representation and reversal of other places:

In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

Women's sociospatial practices may be considered in the light of Foucault's (1986) notion of heterotopias. They are marginal in the sense that, simply by virtue of being women's spaces, they do not represent the mainstream or the normal. They become representational whenever they give women a voice or a way to represent themselves. Because they give representation to women (who are marginalised) within Saudi Arabia, they exert the kind of 'counteraction' that a mirror exerts on reality, framing it slightly differently. Like mirrors, women's sociospatial practices may also be virtual, online spaces with no material existence. Reflection can take place within these spaces to varying degrees, enabling women to 'come back toward themselves' and reconstitute themselves. They are both real and unreal, mixing together absolute, relative, and relational spaces, socially produced, embodying social relationships, expressing geometries of power. Thus far, the cultural geographers included in this discussion on space have written about cities, regions, diasporas, and communities, but not extensively or directly about art. Nevertheless, it is crucial for this project to think about women's sociospatial practices as brought into existence through relations of cultural production.

One of the last statements of German philosopher Martin Heidegger offers a way of connecting art to discourses on space. *Art and Space* (1973) was delivered just as installation

art was emerging in the late 1960s, and although Heidegger (1973) spoke purely theoretically and without direct reference to the contemporary art scene, his expansion of three-dimensional art into the field of space – as something to be defined philosophically – fits with Krauss' (1979) notion of the expanded field of sculpture. Heidegger's lecture approached art and space through sculpture, arguing that "sculpture would be the embodiment of places" (Heidegger 1973, 7). Here, space itself is conceived of as a kind of 'clearing-away', a removal of wilderness in order to create a dwelling place for human beings. Heidegger (1973) used the geography of his native Europe to imagine a wooded landscape in which spaces are cleared out, but in the context of this research, the pitching of a *beit al sha'r* could be equally viewed as a shelter that creates a dwelling place not by clearing away but by enclosing. The clearing process 'yields places', as if places are allowed to emerge out of space. Again, this is precisely what happens in the creation of a Bedouin camp and its *hayy* (collection of tents). "Place always opens a region", which is like the camp, "in which it gathers the things in their belonging together" (Heidegger 1973, 6). Echoing the work of Tuan, Heidegger (1973) equates the conversion of space into place by the presence of human habitation, professing that, "places, in preserving and opening a region, hold something free gathered around them which grants the tarrying of things under consideration and a dwelling for man in the midst of things" (Heidegger 1973, 6).

In this way, Heidegger's (1973) work corresponds with that of the other theorists discussed in this section, to the extent that he has rejected the idea of a Cartesian or Newtonian kind of space, which is empty and perfectly measurable. Instead, space is physical, like an environment. Sculpture thus has the potential to embody places. Thus, it is "a disclosing of regions of possible dwellings for man, regions of the possible tarrying of things surrounding and concerning man" (Heidegger 1973, 8). This is a spatial theory of art. The point of such art, for Heidegger (1973), is not to 'mean something' (he does not speak about meaning or signification), but rather, to disclose a spatial region or a place in order to let it be considered

and inhabited by people. Whilst this points towards the spatial practices of the *beit al-sha'r* created by Bedouin women, it also points to the kind of spaces created by contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia. As a flat, optical medium, however painting generally provides limited opportunities for viewer participation or experiences of embodiment, performance, participation, and exchange within a space. Patronage, conversation and collaboration in the artist's studio are all ways that this can happen, but the history of art in the twentieth century has shown that installation art has offered more radical ways than (traditional) painting to reimagine the interaction of artist and viewer within society. Within the cultural history of Saudi Arabia, the *beit al-sha'r* offers a deeply ingrained history of place-making and site-specificity with which contemporary sociospatial art practices by women can be profitably connected, lending the weight of tradition, and asserting the strong history of women's participation in their shaping of the sociospatial practices of Saudi society.

In order to consider how Saudi women's art might be understood as a sociospatial practice however, it is necessary to ask whether *al-Sadu* can be spoken about as spatial practice and social practice, and what is to be gained by introducing these key terms and using them to describe the subject under investigation.

2.2.1 Towards an Understanding of Sociospatial Practice

Sociospatial practice is proposed in this research as the mode by which contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia interacts with, and changes, the social politics of space and place, making visible multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent, social collaboration, and gendered forms of subjectivity. Against this backdrop, what, though, constitutes 'sociospatial practice'? Where does this term come from, and why is it the right one to use to describe the work of the contemporary Saudi women artists discussed herein?

The term ‘sociospatial practice’ is one of several closely linked terms, which have emerged in the early twenty-first century to reflect radical changes in artistic production through the work of scholars such as Abdelmonem (2016). ‘Site-specific’ art, ‘environmental’ or ‘land’ art, ‘performance’ art, ‘participatory’ or ‘relational’ art all describe artistic production that, since approximately the 1960s, has dealt less with objects produced by an artist, and more with the spaces, places, and people with which artists interact. Even a seemingly normal activity such as walking in the city can be conceived as a sociospatial practice. The authors of a text on the representation of women in contemporary art, for example, refer to the French social theorist Michel de Certeau in order to describe how walking “traces the body onto its environment, inscribing 'space' with the palimpsest of that encounter with the body whose necessary absence allows that space to become the place of memory, a symbolic spatial structure from which subjectivity might emerge” (Waxman and Grant, 2014, 81).

As something that a human agent does, walking is a ‘practice’. As something happening in space, walking is ‘spatial,’ and, as a spatial practice which relates the walker to the larger collective spaces of the city, walking is also ‘social’. In one sense this definition appears to open up ‘sociospatial practice’ to include just about anything and this is beneficial since it indicates the essential openness of the term and its freedom from strict limits. Some writers have chosen to qualify ‘spatial practice’ with ‘critical’ in order to indicate that the spatial practice has a definite agenda, linked to a culturally and historically specific conception of the function of art as critiquing social and political structures (Rendell 2006). While much of the art which will be discussed in this research is indeed critical, ‘critical’ has been left out of the term ‘sociospatial practice’ since what it means to be ‘critical’, how ‘criticality’ is practiced, and whether sociospatial practice can do other things, must be critiqued in the context of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia. As Joselit (2017) has remarked, ‘criticality,’ ‘critique’ and ‘subversion’ all emerged in the 1980s as particular ways through which some

artists began to absorb the role of critics in their practice. These terms tend to connote, in Joselit's (2017, 19) words, "revolutionary destruction divorced from its compensatory utopian promise." This revolutionary/destructive way of understanding critique may not be so effective as the other forms of critique suggested by Joselit (2017): critique may be as much about "producing an audience as it is about producing a message" and consist not of destroying but "inventing new categories of analysis that allow for the invention of new kinds of objects" (Joselit 2017, 19, 20).

Making subtle adjustments to terminology will be one way in which this research is able to contribute to a reworking of language and concepts for discussing contemporary art. It does this by bringing these terminologies into conversation with networks of artistic production and cultural history from which they have so far been distant. The idea of sociospatial practice relies on the foundational insights of Lefebvre discussed above, centred on the concept that 'space embodies social relations' (Lefebvre 2009, 27). Neither inherently dominating nor inherently autonomous, socially produced space embodies the complexity of social relations. This means that when artistic production in Saudi Arabia is conceptualised as 'sociospatial practice' it is understood as working through and among social relationships embodied in space.

Looking at the work of women artists in Saudi Arabia, the sociospatial quality of the art becomes evident. Explicitly, well before twentieth-century spatial theory and cultural geography, artistic production by women occupied a place in Saudi society which was inherently a social production. It continues to be, although in different ways, and the value of spatial theory is that it provides a way of approaching sociospatial practices in art with criticality and a sharpened understanding of how space is produced by society. While 'critical' is not being attached to the term 'sociospatial practice' here, it *is* vital to be critical of

sociospatial practice. Here ‘critique’ means something different from what Joselit (2017) suggested as the subversive/destructive/revolutionary quality of ‘criticality’ in postmodern art. Instead, ‘critique’ here retains more of the meaning it had in the historical context of the modernist *avant-garde*, where, as Elkins and Newman (2008) have shown, theorists such as Theodore Adorno (1969) saw criticality as a property of art and writing about art which mediated the relationship between the spectacle of mass entertainment and society at large (Elkins and Newman 2008, 31–32).

For Adorno (1969) and Lefebvre (1986), society was under threat from the misleading spectacle of images produced by modern capitalist modes of production which produced false consciousness in the masses. The function of critique in this world was to mediate this relationship, block it, question its assumptions, and break down its power to dominate people. In more general, practical terms, this position gave legitimacy to basic procedures of questioning texts and images, inquiring into their hidden agendas, discussing their ideological motives, and asking on whose behalf, and why, they spoke. In these senses, this research takes up a ‘critical’ attitude towards sociospatial practices in a Saudi-specific cultural context, as well as to texts written about them. However, it is itself critical of the subversive/revolutionary interpretation of what critique means as such questions have been primarily addressed within Western discourse. One of the primary contributions of this research, is thus its co-optation of the concepts delineated above in an Arab/Saudi-specific context, to show how the sociospatial practices of contemporary Saudi women artists might be seen as offering new models for understanding what it means to be critical in, and about, art.

2.2.2 Sociospatial Practice and the Disappearance of *al-Sadu*

Al-Sadu offers a culturally-specific articulation of critical sociospatial practice and lays the foundation for a new theory of contemporary art by Saudi women. This spatial sensibility that is concomitant with *al-Sadu* weaving, which recognises the interwoven nature of memory and place, may be particularly pronounced in nomadic cultures, and thus is particularly relevant in the context of Bedouin art. According to Drnona (2010, n.p), “many itinerant nomads describe places as ‘entities’ with a particularity that makes them fill, blend and seep into those that visit them with their feelings and emotions.” Thus, place and space are interwoven concerns in art by, and related to, Bedouin women.

Though writing in quite a different context, the French historian Pierre Nora (1989) has reflected on the nature of space and memory in ways that have been widely applied to other topics, and are relevant here to the idea of sociospatial practice and the connection between *al-Sadu* and contemporary art. Nora (1989) focused on periods when traditional cultural memory finds itself at a crossroads with history. Distinguishing ‘memory’ from ‘history’, he described living memory as something embodied in collectively performed acts and gestures passed down from person to person; in contrast to the official, document-based practice of history, which primarily serves institutions.¹⁴ At a time in Saudi Arabia when many groups of traditionally nomadic and verbally-communicating Bedouin are resettling in urban centres, such a tension between the ‘memory’ of the desert and the official ‘history’ of Saudi Arabia as it modernises may also be at work today.

¹⁴ An enormous literature on the subject of memory and history exists which is not possible to fully engage with here. Spalding and Parker (2009) lay out the main arguments. In terms of the Middle East region and the Arab world at large, a number of studies have dealt with forms of religious memory bearing on sacred sites in the region; the memory of diasporic communities in relation to displaced homelands; and the memory of places destroyed by conflict. More closely related to the present context are works specifically on memory and women’s practices in the Arab world, mentioned in the following discussion.

Having moved away from the desert, nomadic peoples' participation in modernity places their traditional spatial praxes and ways of remembering in jeopardy. This is evidenced by the sharp decrease in women practicing *al-Sadu*, documented by the fieldwork of Hilden (2010) and Canavan (2013). Nora (1989) observes that at similar moments of transition in other histories, what he calls '*lieux de mémoire*' ('spaces of memory') have appeared, where "memory crystallizes and secretes itself" in a spatial form (Nora 1989, 7). In his context, *lieux de mémoire* are deliberately produced sites of memory where desperate attempts to remember what is quickly disappearing are made, in forms such as museums, cultural centres and historical re-enactments. I would argue that, presently, *al-Sadu* is disappearing into just such a '*lieu de mémoire*'; in fact, the very existence of an *al-Sadu* house in Kuwait (the location for Manal Al-Dowayan's *Sidelines*) may be conceived of as *lieu de mémoire*. In the 1980s, Hilden (2010) was still able to study *al-Sadu* primarily in the desert, whereas the newest research has mainly been conducted in collaboration with '*lieux de mémoire*' such as the Al-Sadu Weaving Co-operative Society; Sadu House, Kuwait; the National Museum of Qatar; and UNESCO.¹⁵

Within Saudi Arabia itself, the Al-Janadriyah national festival for heritage and culture in Riyadh serves as a memory of place for *al-Sadu*. In February 2017, I visited this festival to meet with women who still make *al-Sadu*. The festival, arguably itself *lieu de mémoire*, is a microcosm of Saudi Arabia, with different regions of the country represented by their arts, crafts, music, dance and food. The festival takes place on the outskirts of the city centre over a

¹⁵ In a different but related context, in the United Arab Emirates, UNESCO has become involved in raising awareness about the traditions of *al-Sadu* weaving as practised there (UNESCO 2011). As Kharoub writes: 'The inclusion of the UNESCO World Heritage Organisation on the list of intangible heritage of mankind . . . represents a victory for the state, and shows the extent of interest in this craft, which passed several centuries. It also shows the extent of its fear of extinction, especially in light of the fact that it is a modern state that, despite all the temptations and technological development, managed to preserve the existence of the traditional crafts inherited from it, including the Sadu, In the UAE, as the needs of people in the post-oil era change . . . The Sadu industry is no longer widespread in the UAE and the Gulf in general and has become a hobby practiced by some women who inherited this industry from their mothers and grandmothers. This is why the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture and Heritage (ADACH) has acted to preserve and revitalise this craft. Undoubtedly, the adherence of some women to this profession is due to the nostalgia of the past, where the mothers used to do the Sadu and the simple hand-made furnishings of the house' (Kharoub 2018).

period of two weeks. The women who make *al-Sadu* at the festival work on a commission-basis and have stopped making *al-Sadu* daily. One weaver had started an *al-Sadu* factory but closed down as a result of a lack of demand (Fig 2.14-2.15).



Fig. 2.14 Author. 2017. Bedouin *al-Sadu* weaver. Al-Janadriyah national festival for heritage and culture.



Fig. 2.15 Sadu stall; demonstration of wool carding; threads and loom; completed camel riding equipment. 2017. Al-Janadriyah national festival for heritage and culture, Riyadh.

These women provide a different view of women in Saudi Arabia, and the contrast between the *al-Sadu* weavers in Riyadh and the contemporary artists in Jeddah (who I visited on the same trip) seemed sharp as I moved between each place. Historically, *al-Sadu* gave women a status, voice and visibility in Saudi society, which they are now losing. The reality of

the dwindling practice of *al-Sadu* seemed visible in the contrast between the new contemporary art world in Jeddah – crowded with people and installations – and the comparatively less busy spaces of the festival. The weavers who came to the festival expected that it would provide opportunities for sale, but there seemed to be less interest in these products than they had hoped. There now seems to be a disconnection between the spaces and memories of the desert and the spaces of the city, between *al-Sadu* and contemporary Saudi culture.

The image of the *al-Sadu* weaver (Fig2.14) led me to think deeply about history, memory, change, and my own position as a researcher. There is a kind of sadness in this image; compared to images of contemporary art biennales in Jeddah, in which crowds of people interact in a social environment; this *al-Sadu* weaver is still, focused and alone except for her creations. During my fieldtrips, I realised that my research is imbricated with the deep changes in Saudi culture from the desert to the city. There is no way to stop this change; in many ways it has already occurred. It is also clear that there is now a great difference between the lives of female Bedouin *al-Sadu* weavers and those of contemporary female artists. The 8 women whose work will form the basis of the case studies on contemporary art in this thesis come from very different backgrounds and, for the most part, occupy separate social spheres. Few, if any, Bedouin women born and brought up in the desert and trained to weave *al-Sadu* have become contemporary artists operating in the global contemporary art world. I am Bedouin, but I was born in the city, not the desert; I remember the traditions and culture of the desert from my grandmother. As a woman with ‘roots’ in the desert and ‘routes’ which connect the Saudi desert with the Saudi city – and beyond that, Western academic institutions and networks – I position my role as being one through which it might be possible to knit together the cultural memories of weaving in the desert with contemporary art.



Fig. 2.16 Author. 2017. *al-Sadu and the desert collage*. woven paper.

After the completion of fieldwork carried out in 2017, I began to try to incorporate these ideas through collage. Here, the *al-Sadu* weaver is hovering between presence and absence. In one sense she is made present and woven into the landscape; she is part of it and it is part of her. However, in another sense, she is disappearing, becoming invisible as the oil landscape is woven in to cover her image. Like the photographs of contemporary *al-Sadu* weavers, this image helps to evoke the problems and transformations of space, culture, and society that are ongoing in Saudi Arabia and in which the figure of a Saudi woman weaving – whether she is weaving wool or text – may play a significant role.

2.3 Conclusion: Sociospatial Practice as a Connection between *al-Sadu* and Contemporary Art

In conclusion, the function of this research must be recalled, of attempting to resituate the present and the past in relation to each other, of theorising the relationship between space and society from within the particular cultural context of Saudi Arabia. The words of Safeya Binzagr, are useful here, who has perhaps done more than any other Saudi woman artist to deal with these questions describe the situation as she found it in the 1970s, and one which still exists, but in which there are now thankfully more voices:

The educated people, although they understand the purpose of my questions and the idea of my work, do not know the answers. The older, ordinary people who lived during that period do not understand why I insist on knowing more details than they are able to give me, and they cannot suggest other sources. They have no artistic or historical perception. The Bedouin masks which used to pass from mother to daughter have been sold or given away, because they are no longer worn. And the young members of the Bedouin families recently settled in towns have so much to catch up on that they have no time for listening to their grandmothers' stories, and therefore cannot help. Many people do their best, but what information they can provide is often not enough for my work. In London, as in Saudi Arabia, there is no librarian specialising in this field to direct me to relevant sources, and there is no bibliography with which to locate the many books which may have a page or two of information . . . there are so many things from the past I still want to capture. (Binzagr 1979, 11)

What does it mean to write about the present in relation to the past? What does it mean to write about contemporary Saudi women artists in relation to Bedouin *al-Sadu*? In a discursive environment where the ideas of loss and disappearance predominate to create a climate of lamentation over the disappearance of older traditions, this research offers the prospect of continuity amidst change—continuity, that is, by means of transformation not of replication. If older forms of sociospatial practice appear to have disappeared, this need not mean the disappearance of sociospatial practices themselves. It may be that they have not disappeared, but rather transformed. This research formulates this proposition by identifying contemporary forms of art by women and assimilating them to a long-standing cultural tradition

in Saudi Arabia. Neither the tradition nor the art form is left untouched by their interaction: each modifies the other in important ways. However, the interrelationship between contemporary art and Saudi traditions of sociospatial practice and weaving performed by women provides a way of imagining the weaving together of desert culture with contemporary art. The prospect of doing this is not nostalgic; it is not overtly nationalist, nor is it a simple case of Westernisation. Rather, it captures the complex negotiation that is taking place in the lives of Saudis in the present historical moment. The subject of this research has recently developed; its future remains to be written. Nonetheless, having identified a possible route by which different cultures may weave themselves together, my research makes a specific proposal about how contemporary art in Saudi Arabia might deal with the conditions of the present in order to create positive change in society through art.

The question then remains of how, and on what basis, to establish and describe the connections between the sociospatial practices of *al-Sadu* and the sociospatial practices of contemporary art. What this chapter has argued is that the historic practice of *al-Sadu* can be conceptualised as a set of interwoven practices which together constitute the art form and weave together a resulting social fabric. These are the ‘threads’ of *al-Sadu*—not only, literally speaking, the wool out of which the tents are woven, but, understood more abstractly, the connective fibres which define the world of *al-Sadu* overall. The first of these can be understood as ‘weaving dust,’ that is, weaving architectural enclosures out of the desert environment itself, producing a flexible, portable architecture that moves through the ‘routes’ of the desert, creating shelters for social life and collective memory. The second thread can be understood as ‘collection process’—the means whereby artistic practice becomes a means of gathering and storing social and environmental information, as seen in the toponymic patterning of *al-Sadu* cloth with a collection of signs (dates, sand dunes, palms) which encode the memory of the tribe. The third thread interwoven with the others is ‘experiences of domestic

space' which attaches closely to the body, to shared rituals and practices within domestic space and women's communities, and to performance as a mode of establishing the social fabric through a continuous series of shared gestures constitutive of the weaving process. Finally, 'social participation,' is the fourth thread which holds together the essential relationship between *al-Sadu* weaving practices and the social fabric of the community at large, meaning that actions performed in the realm of weaving reach out to, and influence, issues within the broader social context.

These four key threads weave themselves through time and space, constituting a continuous fibre of sociospatial practices which connects the present with the past. The patterns which result from the interweaving of these threads undergoes change and transformation, but this thesis argues that these four threads provide a strong basis for grasping the continuities between *al-Sadu* and contemporary art. If these continuities are grasped then Binzagr's tone of lamentation can be reassuringly changed to one of positive optimism that the work being produced now modifies and advances that of the past, moving towards new and exciting social and artistic futures.

Chapter 3: Analyses of Contemporary Art Practices Adopted by Saudi Women Artists

3.1 Introduction: issues faced by women in Saudi Arabia

There exist a variety of interpretations within Saudi Arabia about the issues facing women in particular. During my fieldtrip, I posed the question “Do you think women in Saudi Arabia are facing any particular issues? If so, what are these issues?” to a range of Saudi women working in the art world—either as gallerists, curators, artists, or academics. As protagonists within the art world, these women’s perspectives frame the social context in which contemporary sociospatial practice is engaged. Approaching the analysis of these art works, it is key first of all to be aware of the debates and issues with which they intersect. Below are some of the responses presented are elicited:

Yes. They face social issues that have their roots in Saudi customs and traditions and certain conservative Islamic currents that have damaged understanding of the religious prescriptions given in the Quran and the Sunna. These include guardianship and women’s rights in marriage and divorce. Many women face problems in the justice system due to the lack of a fixed women’s law.

Saudi women occupy an elevated position in the minds and reality of society generally. They have a status of respect and appreciation bestowed upon them by the teachings of the Islamic faith and the perfect example of the prophet. They are considered by wise men as a whole which cannot be divided or increased. If there are some on the fringes of society who oppose this, it is because of mistakes in social practice rather than in the origins of the law and belief which happens as a result of obedience to obsolete traditions. In the present time the role of women is emphasized along with their existential sovereignty according to the original Islamic concept, which works by preserving the value of their existence as mothers, sisters, wives and daughter’s which society is proud of.

Women suffer from patriarchal society in general. From the perspective of the public they remain female objects. When men accept that they are cultural, and scientific beings and they are treated with full respect, we will have resolved many issues.

Certainly. There are many issues and it is not easy to mention them all. It suffices to mention their right to drive a car and their lack of rights in terms of divorce, children and financial support.

Yes. These are the issues: the make-up of Saudi society and its attitudes towards female creativity; the rigidity of some members of society regarding female participation in artistic work; the lack of a clear understanding of the extent to which Saudi women can benefit from art.

This is a question that requires clarification of the problem. Women in Saudi Arabia are like women in any part of the world apart from in terms of the values and traditions to which they belong. These have been turned into issues by outside influence. Reality reveals the truth of Saudi women. The greatest testimony to the fact that they have overcome these intimations and accusations is that they have entered the Shura Council.

. . . There are a number of problematic issues which arise from a culture of dismissal and doubt in women's abilities and their continual suffering in every stage of life. Women experience restrictions and pressures and have perpetually sought to obtain their rights throughout human history . . .

. . . The biggest problem faced by Saudi women are the restrictions on thought that result from conservative opinions which are not stipulated by the holy texts and Quran which respect women . . .

Every woman in the world has issues and in Saudi Arabia they have a number of problems. Some of these include: marital violence, divorce and a dismissive attitude towards women in some tribes amongst others.

As the excerpts presented above suggests, the responses of women interviewed varied considerably from terse to very nuanced and critical. As the selection above further demonstrates, the responses depict a wide spectrum of tone, references, and emphasis. All but one of the research participants agreed that women in Saudi Arabia face particular issues, while the majority framed these issues as a problem between “women” and “society.” The themes of “roots,” “traditions,” “customs,” and “culture” emerged in multiple responses as being

contested spaces. In fact, a number of responses created careful and very useful descriptions of what seemed to be a thematic concern: on the one hand, about the respect for culture and collective identity in accordance with Saudi tradition, and on the other hand a disagreement with the way that these traditions are being misused by some in society.

Almost all respondents underscored this purported misuse of tradition particularly with reference to the male guardianship¹⁶ of women or as one respondent asserted, “the rigidity of some members of society regarding female participation.” Others explicitly used the word ‘patriarchy’ or complained of being ‘chaperoned.’ In other responses, women referred to inter-tribal rivalry, or spoke against being treated as ‘objects.’ Nevertheless, a number of responses underscored the fact that women did enjoy status, visibility, and even prestige within society. In some of the more nuanced responses, the issues were seen to exist because of prevailing social practices that run counter to the law and Islamic religious beliefs. This is a viewpoint that has been shared by scholars such as Al-Rasheed (2013) and Moaddel (2006), who situate unequal gender relations in Saudi Arabia with the context of social as opposed to Islamic tradition.

The insight provided by multiple women suggest a more universal struggle for women’s rights across *all* societies, thus in this context, the repression of women’s rights is conceptualised as a global as opposed to culturally-specific challenge. This perspective aligns with the research of Barrett (2014), Kaushik (1985) and Delphy (2016) and which speaks of the

¹⁶ The concept and practice of male guardianship or *mahram* over minors is deeply rooted in Saudi culture, more so than in other Islamic cultures of the Arab region at large (Al Alhareth et al. 2015). Guardianship affects women’s access to legal and medical assistance, to property, finance, education, and the police. The practice and theory of guardianship have connections to Islam and its interpretations but are also heavily influenced by traditional customs peculiar to Saudi Arabia. Since Saudi Arabia’s emergence into the global community in the wake of the discovery of vast oil reserves in the 1930s (coincident with the unification of the kingdom by Ibn Saud), the issue of male guardianship of women, and of women’s rights in general, have received sustained, and frequently critical or even sensationalist attention in the Western press (see for example: Lee 2011; Murphy 2014; The Week 2015).

universality of the oppression of women. In the Saudi context guardianship, gendered spaces and the diversity of the social fabric greatly impinge on women's role and status in society.

Some of the thoughts of Saudi women on the nature of the society in which they live are expressed above and they indicate that some discussions are already taking place about what the nation's key social issues are. It is into this existing conversation that the following research wishes to position itself. That is why the research question of this thesis is focussed on 'ways of thinking differently,' ways of thinking with others about key ideas, and collectively rethinking and reimagining their implications.

In this chapter, I critically discuss the relationships between women, space and society in Saudi Arabia through a more developed understanding of sociospatial practices in selected key works by Saudi women artists through the lens of *al-Sadu* weaving. In regard to the overall research question of this thesis which concerns how the specific properties of sociospatial artistic practices in Saudi Arabia by contemporary women artists produce ways of thinking differently about the socio-politics of space, this chapter critically investigates what 'sociospatial practices' really mean when encapsulated in specific works of art. Further, it assesses how, with reference to specific works of art, multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent, social collaboration become visible through sociospatial practice. In this way the analysis critically describes a genealogy which connects contemporary practices to Bedouin *al-Sadu* weaving in the desert.

The selection of artists and artwork in this chapter is not wholly representative of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia and of all contemporary women artists in the country; such a focus would be far beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, via the specific and directed analysis of select work by Saudi women artists produced between 2010 to 2017, this chapter

will offer a conceptual and theoretical framework that can be used to understand sociospatial practice in contemporary art by Saudi women artists in general, opening up the way to a more extensive critical discussion of contemporary art by women artists in Saudi Arabia which is currently lacking in available discourse. It also offers a platform for rethinking the very idea of sociospatial practice beyond the borders of the Saudi context.

In the previous chapter, spatial and social practices were shown to be indivisibly present in *al-Sadu*. This analysis of *al-Sadu* has set the critical conceptual framework with which this chapter now approaches contemporary art by Saudi women artists, as a new series of engagements with space and society in the context of contemporary Saudi culture, politics and society. I propose that the integration of space and society is key to understanding contemporary Saudi women's art, and this research argues that this art develops the theories of space proposed by Lefebvre (1974), Harvey (2001), Massey (1994) in relation to a specific cultural and social context. In particular this research will unpack the interarticulation of space and society within artistic practices encapsulated in Lefebvre's formulation that "(social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre 1974, 26). Nevertheless, just as Lefebvre uses parentheses to express the ideas of space and society as both distinct and joined together, this chapter will discuss spatial practice and social practice as inseparably intertwined in the internal composition of select artworks by Saudi women artists. This arrangement will facilitate a deeper engagement with the theorisation of space and society.

All of the works of art in this chapter, will be analysed in relation to the nature of spatial organisation, how space is inhabited socially, and the memories which bind it into the broader socio-historical fabric of Saudi Arabia, and especially within the historical cultural practices of *al-Sadu*. Within these works, a variety of ways of dealing with space and society can be identified, including the recording of the complex urban fabric of Saudi Arabia's cities, the collection of found objects, and the mapping of space through performative practices of the

body. These distinctions are not designed to exclude, but rather, to increase the precision of the language used to describe women's artistic practices in contemporary art. All of the works described in this chapter employ sociospatial practices. For the artists cited in this chapter, both space and society are important parts of their practice; all of these works are spatial, and all are social. However, there is such great variety within these works—as well as in their mediums—that the relative emphasis on, or prominence of, their spatial or social elements also differs.

The artworks I refer to are ongoing processes rather than finished objects. They may originate in the artist's studio and emerge from a fixed period of creative practice, but they are not understood as having reached a final state at that time. Instead, they go on to be exhibited and interacted with in social spaces—sometimes in multiple places—and these processes become part of their sociospatial identities. Still, different artists, at different times, place different emphases on either the spatial or the social aspects of their work; correspondingly, in writing about them, it makes sense to distinguish whether spatial or social concerns appear to matter most; it will be argued via my analysis that these concerns are not mutually exclusive and are sociospatial in nature.

The previous chapter began by exploring the spatial practices of *al-Sadu* with an image of the *ibjad* (tent divider) of a *beit al-sha'r*, the woven architectural element that defines the space of the Bedouin community. This chapter begins with a similar woven fabric to define the installation space of a contemporary art gallery, namely, Shadia and Raja Alem's *Formation 1&2* (Fig. 3.1).



Fig. 3.1 Alem, Shadia and Alem, Raja. 2004. Formation 1 & 2 'Negative No More' (2004) (2010). Black veil cloth, photo negatives, hand sewing. <http://shadiaalem-rajaalem.com/shadias-artwork/negative-no-more/formation>

The weaving together of cultural memories was earlier argued to characterise the sociospatial practice of *al-Sadu*. In this work of art by two sisters' cultural memories of a different sort—photographic negatives—are also woven together into a spatial installation.

Repeating the family relations (what Lefebvre (1974, 32) would call ‘the social relations of reproduction’) essential to the continuation of skills in *al-Sadu* and Saudi culture at large, sisters Shadia and Raja Alem have produced a series of spatial works that frame an essentially new approach to contemporary art by Saudi women. The work presents a “new” approach since it marks (along with a number of other installation pieces referred to below from the early 2000s) the beginnings of the widespread use of installation art by Saudi women artists, distinct from the flat, pictorial work of earlier generations (Safeya Binzagr, for example). The collaborative and genealogical elements of the Alems’ work also indicate the ways in which this new approach to space is interwoven with an investigation into the social content of art and the relationships it embodies.

In *Formation 1 & 2*, new, temporary, occupiable spaces are woven by the Alem sisters from images drawn from the urban landscape around them. While the strips of photographic negatives may at first suggest lengths of film, closer inspection reveals the discontinuity of the images (they are not stilling from a continuous sequence), suggesting that the installation follows more the logic of an *al-Sadu* weaving in which discrete signs or blocks of geometrical patterning (sometimes referring to the topography of the desert) are woven together in strips. The tall, room-sized installation fills the space, surrounding the viewer like a tent akin to a *beit al-sha’r*, marked by long bands of internal texture, as if it had been woven on a loom. Where Bedouin women embellish their weaving with small symbols—piles of dates, sand dunes, birds—the Alems use miniature photographic negatives in a modern recurrence of traditional practice. Here, a visual culture (photography) replaces an oral one (Bedouin poetry) as the primary medium for recording collective memories. However, the signs shared among the women are communally understood; they sew the Alem sisters together with the other women in the negatives, and with the women who come to the gallery to view the installation. The fact that the support cloth is the kind of black cloth used for veils also brings into play an idea about

the proximity of the image fabric to the body itself, though now on a scale which is architectural, exceeding the dimensions of any single wearer and suggesting instead the enclosure of a collective group (something which will be seen to operate also in Manal Al-Dowayan's work). Able to be folded up, packed away, and transported to different exhibition venues, *Formation 1 & 2* follows the pattern of a Bedouin tent as it moves around the landscape, opening and closing to allow its inhabitants to socialise, communicate, enjoy public space, teach, and share memories.

Installation art cannot be reduced to a narrow set of characteristics. However, *Formation 1 & 2* shows that some of the key features of women's sociospatial practices defined in Chapter 2 and visible in *al-Sadu*, can be seen resurfacing in contemporary women's art. The soft, flexible, woven, temporary, and portable space of the tent could be conceived as offering the possibility of a discrete set of spatial practices within the overall context of spatial practices within Saudi Arabia (Figs. 3.2 and 3.3). Drawing on the dichotomy of 'soft' and 'hard' power developed in the recent context of gender concerns within contemporary politics can help position the potential social implications of these woven spaces. As Sharma has written in relation to the emergence of 'soft' power as a political strategy, 'soft' power is 'noncoercive,' its currency is culture, and it operates through diplomacy and history rather than the brute force, coercion, and lack of equal dialogue characteristic of 'hard' power (Sharma, 2016, 46). Mary Beard, likewise, has polemically positioned women as cultural producers whose work—in art and politics—has posed alternative 'soft' modes of social organization compared to the 'hard' edifices of patriarchy emblemized, for her, in the architecture of the Classical world which became the template for the design of civic and urban spaces globally (Beard, 2018). The tent, in contrast, as a temporary, flexible spatial environment/enclosure, might be reconceived as a 'soft' institution with its own genealogy in the traditional desert practices of the Bedouin. As such, it stands in contrast to the 'hard' urban institutions of museums and galleries, produced

by nations and markets, that have traditionally promoted patriarchal forms of power. While the softer architecture of tents is not excluded from such spaces, tent-type spatial practices create alternative spaces within existing spaces. It is possible that recent discourse on the nature of ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ power might be mapped onto these different spatial practices; in this context, tent-type spatial practices can be described as the nesting of spaces of soft power within the spatial regime of hard power.

Recalling Lefebvre (1974, 31), it could be maintained that “every society—and hence every mode of production with its sub-variants—produces a space, its own space.” Saudi Arabia produces its own space, and within this space are sub-variants. Again, following Lefebvre (1974, 32), it can be said that each sub-variant of space possesses a particular configuration of *the social relations of reproduction* (“the bio-physiological relations between the sexes and different age groups, along with the specific organisation of the family”) as well as *the relations of production* (“the division of labour and its organisation in the form of hierarchical social functions”) (Lefebvre 1974, 32). Thus, according to this logic, it is possible to presume different relations of both reproduction and production in, for example, the ‘hard’ spatial practices of the urban institution, and the ‘soft’ spatial practices of the woven installation although as a caveat, an analysis of Formation 1 & 2 suggests the possible interweaving of both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ spatial practice, as the installation is complicit with the gallery. In the foregoing discussion of the *beit al-sha’r* however, different relations of both reproduction and production are assumed in which the flexible, woven form of the enclosure permits particular relations between the sexes and between the women who labour to produce art work which constitutes the space, in contrast to, for example, the official bureaucratic production of Jeddah art week.



Fig. 3.2 Author, 2017. Zahrah al-Ghamdi, work in progress on *Labyrinth and time*.



Fig. 3.3 Abdumughni, Huda. 2017. The interactive of Um Fayez one of the Bedouins weaving in Kuwait to the place during the *Sadu* weaving process. <https://www.atharna.com/journal/sadu-weaving-in-kuwait>

Looking now at *al-Sadu* and contemporary sociospatial practice together, in Figs. 3.2 and 3.3, two women closely attend to the work in front of them. On the first is contemporary Saudi artist Zahrah al-Ghamdi, photographed in 2017; on the second, Um Fayez, a Bedouin *al-Sadu* weaver, photographed in the same year. Their hands are positioned at definite points within complex structures woven out of multiple elements; there is both pattern and formlessness. The pattern appears to have been woven out of the unformed (but prepared) raw materials nearby. While the gestures of the women appear to be precise and directed towards

the manipulation of small areas of detail, the total work in which they are engaged is extensive. This testifies to the time spent working, gesture by gesture, to create a space large enough to surround the body (and the bodies of others). Thread by thread or length by length, the women's gestures define linear compartments which divide up extensive, shallow spaces. One sits bent over the *al-Sadu* loom, weaving a textile whose flatness corresponds to the flatness of the desert floor. The other stands, elevated on a step ladder oriented vertically at 90 degrees, moulding together a piece of installation art whose magnitude corresponds with the vertical support of a former commercial building.

The lives of these women overlap, although their backgrounds are different. The contexts in which they work are also different, but similarities emerge in the grain or texture of their techniques, in the kind of spaces they are making, and in the social possibilities of congregation which their work provides – in the form of either a woven cloth shelter or carpet in a domestic space (desert or urban), or a spatial installation within a public gallery. In both cases, the women's work is strongly spatial in practice. As art installation, each piece has a temporary quality: it will exist in one space for a specific duration, then be taken down and possibly transferred to another space. The movement of these spaces will also correspond to people's interactions with them: they are sociospatial (it is not clear exactly what the weaver is weaving – it could be a hanging, a tent element, a strip of carpet, camel-riding equipment – but regardless of its scale, it will be suited to particular social functions).

What, then, is the relationship between these women, ways of working, spaces, and the social practices involved both in their making and their use? The theoretical framework proposed in the previous chapter on Bedouin *al-Sadu* weaving has resulted in a basic understanding of *al-Sadu* as being both a spatial and a social practice. The work by which *al-Sadu* is produced contains these two elements of space and society woven together. Although I argue that the spatial and social nature of *al-Sadu* is self-evident, it can also be spoken about

productively using language and discourses developed in a variety of other contexts, including Western critical discourses on cultural geography.

The issue of art institutions is particularly pressing in contemporary Saudi Arabia, a kingdom whose institutional history and development cannot be read according to European and North American narratives of nations, publics, and museums. The story of the development of institutions is inseparable from the development of the artistic forms which appear in them. One reason why installation art has been popular in Saudi Arabia has to do with the country's lack of traditional art institutions. Stephen Stapleton, an English artist and curator involved in the formation of the Edge of Arabia collective of contemporary Saudi Arabian artists, notes that "due to the lack of available galleries and exhibition spaces in Saudi", it has been easier to bring art to the people, "in the form of performances and interventions within their communities" (Stapleton et al. 2012, 23). Stapleton focuses on a different form of artistic work, however there are notable parallels and resonances with respect to installation art: the notion of intervening within the community and breaking through the traditional spatial organisation of galleries and institutions has been essential to the histories of installation art, site specificity, and more recently I argue, the emergence of sociospatial practice. This does not necessarily mean that, in contemporary Saudi women artists' work, the gallery itself is abandoned. Indeed, the gallery remains a vital space of intervention. Yet what is transformed is the gallery's relation to broader urban and desert sociospatial practices. Rather than being separated from these other histories, the gallery has been (through works such as *Formation 1 & 2* and *Labyrinth and time*) brought into the story of sociospatial practices in Saudi Arabia. It is as if the gallery has become another (and not the first or the final) destination which the nomadic trajectory of sociospatial practices have come to occupy in the present historical moment. Just as sociospatial practices in Saudi Arabia did not originate in the gallery, so they may, in the course of their development, begin to move outside the gallery and into new spaces within the

cities, homes, and the desert—something that will be highlighted in some of the works which follow (for example Reem al-Nasser’s documentation of domestic space, and Sara Abu Abdullah’s interventions in the street).

Thinking of ‘socio-spatial practice’ in this sense is useful because it offers a flexible yet definite language with which to discuss a shared group of practices that are nonetheless extremely diverse. For example, Zahrah Al-Ghamdi may begin a work by creating her wall installation in solitude, focusing on the particular spatial concerns of the gallery space and the microcosmic space of her reconstruction of urban labyrinths. However, I argue that the social relations implicit in these spatial practices become both more nuanced and more visible as the genealogies of these spaces are understood, recognised and interacted with by visitors whose own agency and presence as subjects increases the layers of texture belonging to the space. Similarly, works by Manal Al-Dowayan may begin as conversations, workshops, and collaborations with artisans or members of the public, but they quickly become spatial as these participatory engagements begin to take on physical form through the production of mixed-media objects with definite and purposeful spatial qualities, which are afterwards exhibited in gallery space. The term ‘socio-spatial practice’ is offered as an overall conceptual language, one flexible enough to encompass both of these modes (and others like them), yet specific enough to target the particular artistic, cultural, political, and historic concerns that emerge from a discourse on space and society in contemporary art by Saudi women.

As I will demonstrate, contemporary artistic practices of Saudi women are interwoven with prominent social issues of Saudi Arabia, precisely because their critical engagement of spaces (the desert, the home, the gallery, the city) through art connects their work to the inhabitants, users, and subjects of those spaces. Just as modifications to the structure and form of *al-Sadu* weaving cannot help but have consequences for its occupants, so the modification of social spaces through art inevitably affects the way people relate to one another when they

come into contact with those spaces. Specifically, women are using artistic platforms to highlight key social issues to strengthen their position in society, and even within the limited field of the art world, contemporary artists' sociospatial practices serve to catalyze conversations about social change as community ideas are articulated and made available for wider dissemination and discussion in the form of art (Pabalate 2015; The Guardian 2016).

In order to explore these fundamental concerns further, this chapter will now take up the four key threads of *al-Sadu* and follow their development through contemporary art. Highlighting each of these threads in turn will allow for focused consideration of specific social and artistic issues, while cumulative building awareness of the layers of interaction, historical precedent, and social collaboration which characterise Saudi art.

3.2 Weaving dust: Architecture, space, and memory—Zahrah Al Ghamdi

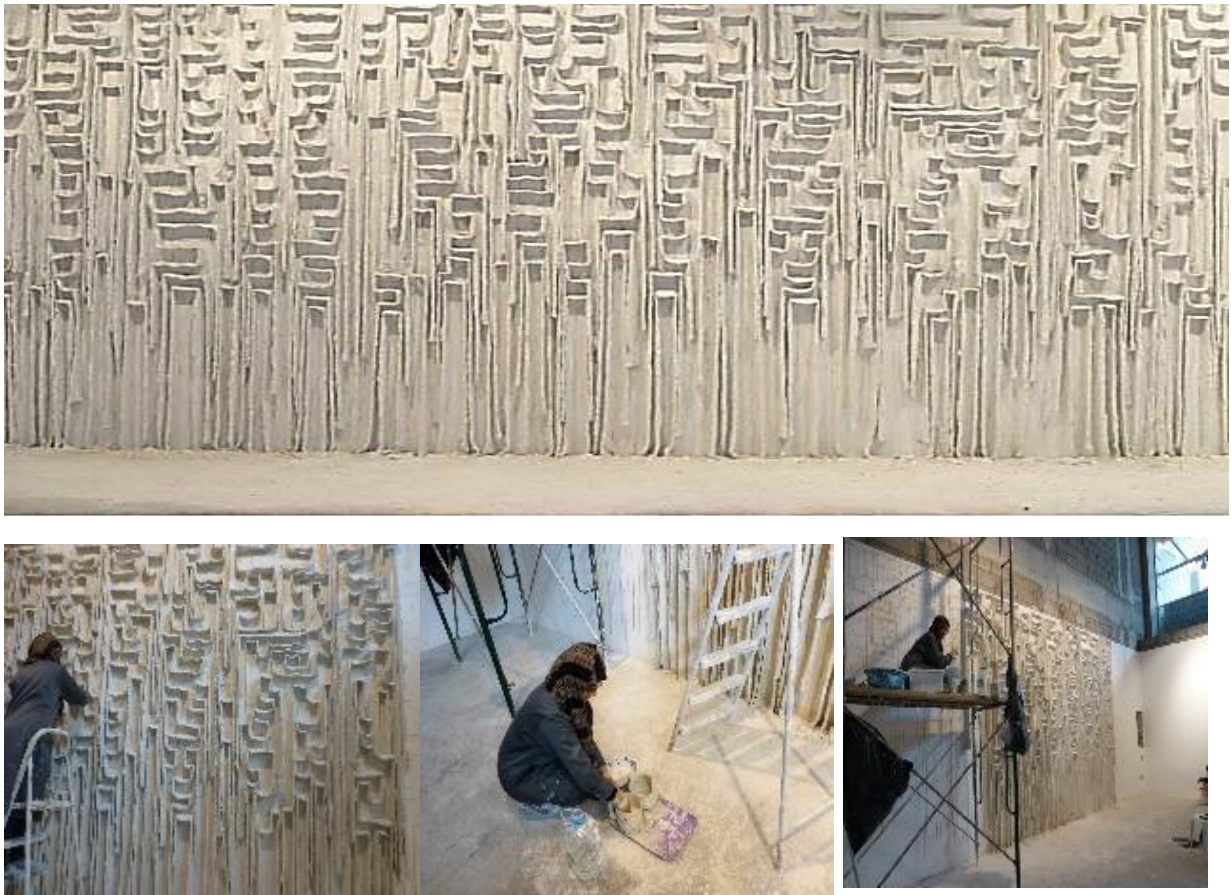


Fig. 3.4 Al Ghamdi, Zahrah. 2017. Labyrinth and Time. Sand, cotton, water. Approximately 2.5m x 5m. Goldmor Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. taken by Author.

A woman stands on a stepladder in front of a wall, holding a bucket of wet plaster. Inches away from the thick surface, she reaches her bare hands into the milky substance and transfers it onto the wall. The excess plaster drips from her hands down the sides of the bucket and her encrusted stepladder, splashing her grey workman's coat and adding to the layer of plaster on her feet. She works very close to the wall, spreading the quick-drying material onto the sides of narrow, rectangular strips running vertically from top to bottom, creating a look similar to walls in a labyrinth or city. She is both visible and invisible: as strangers looking on, we may not recognise her, covered in work clothes and plaster. But in another sense, there is something about what she is doing that everyone will recognise: she is working, finishing, structuring, shoring up—building the physical space in which we stand. Hers are the space-

making gestures of builders everywhere, on construction sites, roads, and around buildings almost anywhere that human beings inhabit, create and maintain space. These gestures are precise: the plaster is directed with particular attention and speed to certain areas of the structure, and watching her, one begins to understand the complexity of the surface she is working on. Vertically oriented and in shallow relief, it reaches up from the ground to rise taller than head height, but unlike an ordinary wall, it is mapped with what looks like the plan of a city from above, partially filled in to the right, traced out faintly to the left. It is a wall of walls, a surface of passageways (in which we can imagine walking and exploring), open areas, and enclosures that suggest homes, streets or squares. As the camera pans upward, it becomes apparent that the wall is positioned in front of another, different kind of wall. Entirely flat, made of breeze blocks, cement and concrete, it is recognisable as the generic wall of the global urban construction industry. It could exist anywhere.

These two walls—one enclosed by the other—are located in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; with these cultural coordinates, it is possible to better see what the two walls represent. While the breeze blocks of a modern shopping-centre-turned-art-gallery tell a story about mass urbanisation and the transformation of the city by oil wealth, the plaster wall in the process of being built has different resonances. The density and irregularity of the structure and its plaster, cloth and sand material resonate with older, traditionally Saudi forms of domestic and urban architecture. It is as if one way of place-making were being remembered and enacted in front of another.

The proximity of this older pattern of architecture to the breeze blocks reproduces the clash of old and new urban mediums in Jeddah. What is observed is not a simple reproduction of an older form of architecture in front of a newer one, but rather, the space-making practice

of an artist whose creation produces a critical tension in the place where one wall meets another.

As Al-Ghamdi (2017, para. 7) explains:

By creating an echo of the past, I pull this history into contact with the contemporary situation, seeking to throw light upon the recent drastic movement in architecture away from traditional techniques, materials, and resources. I use my memories of places related to my childhood, but also express my memories in the act of 'creating'. I draw on an idea of 'embodied memory' through particular gestures. In my project, I propose that 'home' is more than just a house, a name or number on a street. It is actually a construction of life and identity, where our personality is constructed.

Al-Ghamdi's work, *Labyrinth and Time* (2017, see Fig. 4.4) and the process of its creation are a particularly clear illustration of the principle that "space is materially produced" (Castells 1997, 115). In approaching Al-Ghamdi's (2017) work, I argue that it is important for viewers to grapple with and rethink their basic assumptions about both space and society. *Labyrinth & Time* (2017) is obviously spatial, but what is its spatial nature, its 'spatiality'? Does it occupy a space? Does it create its own space? What kinds of spaces might these be? Are they empty, container-like spaces, or are they thicker, more material kinds of space? How are these spaces produced, or do they exist naturally? What are the consequences of creating such spaces within the contemporary art world?



Fig. 3.5 Al-Ghamdi, Zahrah. 2015. Inanimate Village. Sand, cotton, stone. Approximately x m. Great Court, British Museum, London.



Fig. 3.6 Al Ghamdi, Zahrah. 2015. Inanimate Village, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

In July 2017, Al-Ghamdi created a temporary installation of sand and coloured stone, called *Inanimate Village* (see Fig. 3.6), in the Great Court of the British Museum. This work was first installed in Jeddah in 2015, followed by an installation in Dubai in the same year, before moving to London in 2017. Al-Ghamdi's (2015) website conceptualises her work as a "resonance of nostalgia and community" although it does not explicitly make any connections to a specifically Saudi context. It is argued that "by refusing to provide any specific Saudi context for the work, this haunting takes on more potential, suggesting that it could be read in relation to the destruction of buildings and cultures anywhere."

Inanimate Village (2015) represents different aesthetic experiences for the artist and viewers and creates an experience across time and memory between Jeddah, Dubai, and London. The work also offers the artist freedom of expression and the opportunity to share her memories of her forgotten village in southern Saudi Arabia. In light of the changes taking place in the construction of modern Saudi architecture, new construction is necessarily accompanied by demolition, resulting in the loss of many of the architectural and heritage landmarks which reflect the history and identity of the place and its people.

During my interviews with Al-Ghamdi, I asked her about what memories she wanted to reflect in her work and she responded as follows:

In my current work, I reach back towards the memory of these spaces, their personal associations and wider cultural significance. By creating an echo of the past, I pull this history into contact with the contemporary situation, seeking to throw light upon the recent drastic movement in architecture away from traditional techniques, materials, and resources. I use my memories of places related to my childhood, but also express my memories in the act of 'creating'. I draw on an idea of 'embodied memory' through particular gestures. In my project, I propose that 'home' is more than just a house, a name or number on a street. It is actually a construction of life and identity, where our personality is constructed. While some argue that the development of globalisation and postmodern architects in Saudi Arabia has been positive in encouraging trade and creating more sustainable environments, my own standpoint is that in this

development of new architectures, earlier regional styles, materials, and techniques have been lost. It is this loss that I aim to engage with in my work.

The act of reconstituting the physical materials of these destroyed spaces within the spaces of art institutions therefore turns installation art into a practice of cultural spatial memory. The woven trails of sand and dust become like sites of archaeological investigation where the recent ruins of the immediate past are spread out before being forgotten. Like the desert itself, whose nomadic sands shift and change over time, turning spaces into memories; the changing sands of the urban environment are now recorded by the artist in toponymical acts that recall the weaving of place names and signifiers into the cloth of *al-Sadu*.

It is important to emphasise this sense of history, which inflects all of Al-Ghamdi's practice. She consciously formulates her practice in terms of its relationship to the past, presenting an image of the contemporary that is always archaeological; a very different image from the fantastic glass and steel futures promoted by real estate developers in Saudi Arabia's major urban centres, largely derived from Western models of urbanisation. With her focus on the traditional domestic architecture of the past, Al-Ghamdi also locates the focus of architecture not in the national or multi-national corporate development office, but knit within the social fabric of the people. She writes that in her practice, she aims "to create a body of work that reflects the memory of past traditional domestic architecture from southwestern Saudi Arabia and explores this memory with a particular emphasis on the poetics and complexities of mental, physical, and emotional space" (Al-Ghamdi, 2015, para. 4).

The reaching out of the woven threads of dust which constitute the materiality of the project is signalled by the absence of any kind of boundary in its installation in Jeddah. The work is essentially continuous with the space of the observer, much as the *al-Sadu* tent offers a social structure continuous with the space of the desert. Barriers

separating spaces do exist, but they are ‘soft’ as opposed to ‘hard’—that is, they take the form of flexible partitions controlled by social relations, rather than physical limits. It is all the more significant, therefore, that when installed within the archetypal ‘hard’ museum space (the British Museum), Al-Ghamdi’s work was fenced off (fig. 3.5) from the great court at large. In this putatively shared, open, public space, the installation was ringed by a security fence, which both highlighted the museum’s awkwardness in dealing with an installation piece that transgressed the lines between art and life, and its tendency to frame works of art as cultural specimens which exist in an essentially Other space from the London museum. *Inanimate village* thereby made visible the opposition between two kinds of space within the museum, highlighting the imbalances and incongruities within the global contemporary art world in which art works and museums sometimes uncomfortably have to share the same space.

Through her work, Al-Ghamdi (2015) creates places out of ruined spaces. In one of the foundational texts on art and space, Heidegger (1969, 6) writes that “place always opens a region in which it gathers the things in their belonging together . . . in preserving and opening a region, [places] hold something free gathered around them which grants the tarrying of things under consideration and a dwelling for man in the midst of things.” Place-making seems a fitting description of Al-Ghamdi’s (2015) work because she ‘gathers things in their belonging together’ which had been separated by the demolition processes of urban development. While the installations she creates are ephemeral, they bring things together where they can belong for a short while before they are swept up and taken away again. It is also true that, during their brief existence, they can point to the discontinuity of spaces, the sometimes-uneasy adjacencies which are to be found within the contemporary artworld.

Al-Ghamdi has described her own practice in terms of history, narrative, and architectural structure:

The main significance of the work... is as a trace of architectural structure, rather than any specific architectural references, creating an effect of melancholy and loss. There is also the sense of the work as a 'trace' of something that existed or exists elsewhere, suggesting perhaps that we can never have access to the full presence of meaning. The trace could be understood as something that undercuts a clear opposition between the presence of architectural forms and their destruction as absence. It suggests instead that with such destruction, something always remains to haunt histories and narratives that come in their wake.

She describes her practice, not as installation or site-specific art, but as a form of art that deals with space and place; her work is architectural, but not architecture. One notable element of this work is its ability to engender participation and interaction between artist and audience. Al-Ghamdi (2015, 2017) was able to open a space for dialogue between herself and her memories, her position between the forgotten villages and the multiple art institutions in which she has reconstituted these memories in Jeddah, London and Dubai. Through this work, certain important elements of contemporary sociospatial practices have become clear: first, that the artist's understanding of space should be considered the most important element in building their work; and second, absorbing the artist to experience the aesthetic building their work. With multiple locations and different equipment in each city, Al-Ghamdi (2015, 2017) was able to interact with space both physically and intellectually. She did not send her artwork ready to be installed on-site, but brought her tools with her, allowing her interaction and presence to become woven into the space of the installation in a manner that recalls the on-site labour of *al-Sadu* weavers.

The piles of granular substances in Al-Ghamdi's (2015, 2017) works are materially complex. Like the findings at an archaeological site, they combine multiple substances. The ordering principles which structure our daily lives—time, space, social norms and relationships—are mixed together in the dust. One of the best-known examples of installation

art was Anish Kapoor's 1980s display of coloured pigment sculptures, whose complex geometric forms appeared to defy their material nature as piles of fragile dust (Baume 2008). While apparently purely geometrical, these powder forms originated with Kapoor's experiences of the use of coloured pigments in religious festivals in his native India. Al-Ghamdi's (2015, 2017) work shares this use of insubstantial materiality in installation art. Yet where Kapoor's sculptures create cultural significance referentially—the colours and materials reference cultural practices—Al-Ghamdi's (2017) dust is itself archaeological. It was not manufactured commercially, but excavated from a site of human habitation; it is defined not by its standardised consistency, but by its diversity and inscrutability. The number of elements in the dust is indeterminate, although the most obvious elements include stone, brick, cement, cloth, and pottery. As Marder (2016, 44) evocatively describes, “dust constitutes a substance of incredible heterogeneity whose composition includes the dust of the body, cities, plants, other animals, microorganisms, and the cosmic dust of asteroids.”

Examining the composition of Al-Ghamdi's (2017) work leads to the reflection that the dust she uses engenders sociospatial practice: it is the dust of society and the spaces it inhabits. It is a collective, radically disorganised medium, mixing and rendering indistinguishable the categories of gender, social class, wealth, age, place, and time. Rather than referring specifically to any one of these things, the archaeological sociospatial practice that emerges from the use of dust in Al-Ghamdi's (2015, 2017) installations is instead a complex sociospatial trace of human and non-human life. Thus, while Al-Ghamdi's medium is dust rather than wool (even though traces of wool do appear), it still makes sense to understand her process through the conceptual lens of *al-Sadu* weaving—a practice which, after all, rises out of the dust of the desert. Both are forms of sociospatial practice, both work a material which is essentially ‘soft’ in nature, both produce social spaces, and, as temporary structure, both engage with cultural memory and disappearance, and both, therefore, generate debates about the place of certain

spaces within the broader context of society. Both *al-Sadu* and Ghamdi's weaving of dust share a powerful insistence upon the materiality of memories.

3.3 Collection Process: Space and Cultural Memory—Maha Malluh

It is as a response to the continual disappearance of spaces and places once occupied that both *al-Sadu* and contemporary art practices have developed strategies of memory. This strand of memory weaves its way through both *al-Sadu* and contemporary artistic practice. Al-Ghamdi's installation artworks rely on the collection of found material that has archaeological significance within the history of Saudi Arabia. The dust is not precious in any usual sense, but its value as history becomes revealed when the artist works with it to create new, temporary places within the spaces of art institutions. The role of the artist as an archaeologist of contemporary life, as a place-maker and a collector of materials out of which other places can be made, is an important framework with which to understand the direction of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia, and the ways in which it is practiced. While the materiality of the medium and its installation within existing exhibition spaces can be one way of provoking debate about space, another means is through collection practices which bring together the signs and traces of the world through which the artist/weaver moves. Consider, for example, the studio space of Maha Malluh, a contemporary of Al-Ghamdi.



Fig. 3.7 Maha Malluh Studio. 2017. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

I visited Malluh at her studio in 2017, during a time when she had begun collecting found objects to be repurposed for installation art, and was able to document her workspace and to share images of her practice. The studio (Fig. 3.7 and Fig. 3.8) is empty, but full of the evidence of habitation. It is as if someone who has been working there has just left for a moment—a chair is turned at an angle, desks and tables hold piles of organised material, cupboard doors stand open—some kind of process is taking place. Rather than working with material through sculptural processes and tools, which create their own particular studio environment, Malluh’s process looks at first glance more like that of an archivist.

Documentation of Malluh’s work in press reviews of exhibitions has focused on the final object, not on the process of creation. A case in point is Art Basel 2015. The context in which these works are normally encountered is in the gallery, or the gallery publication where they are photographed as finished objects, complete and ready for sale and circulation within the contemporary art market. However, this way of looking at the work limits its dimensions. This is especially true for Malluh, whose work tells a richer story in terms of its process. This

has been largely absent from writing about Malluh, and artists in general and this chapter provides greater visibility to the complex artistic and social/collaborative processes which comprise it. In Malluh's work, an examination of process can be approached from the point of view of *al-Sadu*, where finished work is inseparable from process and inhabitation. This is the impact of using *al-Sadu* to talk about contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia: process, product, and participation cannot be separated. At first glance, Malluh's work seems to fit simply into the category of installation art; however, reflecting on her work through the lens of *al-Sadu* will open up new ways of thinking.

Importantly, the starting point for examining Malluh's work is thus not the gallery but the studio, as it is the social space in which work comes into being. Malluh's studio is in her home, incorporated into a domestic sphere; an act which, in itself, transgresses the conventional boundaries between work and life, and resonates with new theories about the relationship between home and art (it should be noted that Safeya Binzagr, and Zahrah Al-Ghamdi also both have studios at home). The home can therefore be considered as a significant site of artistic production for these Saudi women artists (and perhaps others), not so much as a poor substitution for an external studio (as if that were preferable) but rather as a culturally rich environment already marked and saturated with meaning. The home also relates to power structures as it serves as a sphere defined by freedom from cultural traditions such as guardianship.

“The placement of art in everyday surroundings,” according to Papastergiadias (2006, 15), “and the use of everyday materials in art” has become common. In fact, the optimum methodology for Papastergiadias in contemporary art practice is defined as “small gestures in specific places” (Papastergiadias 2006, 15, 81). For Racz (2015, 2), too, this phenomenon of the space of the home defines relationships to works of art which focus on home:

The home both contains us and is within us. The overall scale of the dwelling, its thresholds and internal spaces are all related to the scale of the body . . . we hold these material and physical memories within us, and so when viewing sculptures there is an instinctive dialogue with these internalised tactile, spatial, and haptic knowledges.



Fig. 3.8 Maha Malluh, Studio. 2017. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

In Malluh's case, not only are her home and studio interwoven spaces; her spatial practice is itself based on the collection and arrangement of objects whose lives have often been spent in other people's homes.

In fruit boxes, cassettes look like fruit (Fig. 3.8 and Fig. 3.9). Pink, yellow, pale blue, white, with flashes of red; the boxes are piled high with morsels sorted according to colour. Uncountable and abundant, they fill up the tables and stand stacked on the floor beneath. From my observations, what is most striking about these objects is their colour and quantity, and the sensation of synaesthesia that comes from seeing these colourful piles of recorded noise

arranged in boxes like fruit, whether in their ‘raw’ state awaiting incorporation into finished works of art, or framed and exhibited. The artist’s studio has become a storehouse for raw aesthetic materials. In other photographs, the cassettes appear as something more like a ‘stash’: bundled into rubbish bags, they seem even more numerous, but this time disorderly, filling the amorphous spaces of containers used for objects that are part valuable, part valueless. They could be arranged this way for storage, or just as easily for disposal.



Figure 3.9 Malluh, Maha. Food for Thought—Jehad & Thalal .2015. Vintage cassette tapes and two wood bread baking trays. 60h x 110w x 10d cm each tray (120h x 1102 x 10d cm).

Malluh’s collections of cassette tapes are an archive of ephemeral culture in Saudi Arabia, and her treatment of them transforms the role of the artist into a collector, an archivist, a ‘bricoleur’. The cassettes document a rapidly-disappearing moment in Saudi cultural history and an act of media archaeology. The notate, as it were, the places, or ‘topoi’ of the media landscape as the artist moves through it, selecting and recording as she does. From the 1980s through to the early 1990s, audio cassettes were a common medium for circulating religious talks and lectures by senior clerics, recorded at mosques and universities, and were distributed across the nation, often for free, or next to nothing, in streets, stalls, and shopping malls (Ayad 2014). The talks would be heard in people’s cars, or played at home on cassette players, or on

the radio as a communal background audio ambience. The objects relate to a pre-digital, pre-social media moment in the history of Saudi Arabia, when audio cassettes offered the primary means of reproducing religious ideologies across the country before the internet offered global media access. As such the tapes testify to a strong oral culture which might be understood as continuous with older forms of spoken word predating the audio cassette. It is important to underscore this combination of audio and visual qualities in Saudi culture—one which, ultimately, has its roots in the oral cultures of the desert. While both *al-Sadu* tents and contemporary art installations have strong visual spatial identities, it must not be forgotten that their spaces also resonate with, and are made perceptible by, sound. As the *al-Sadu* tent is enlivened with the voices of the weavers and their families, so the audio sermons recorded on these cassettes form part of the sonic background culture of the recent past.

With the advent of digital media, however, these material cultural objects have rapidly become obsolete, as have the cultural practices which accompanied their place in Saudi life. Malluh's recovery of the cassettes therefore represents an act of cultural reclamation, a return to a suppressed past and a willingness to embed this cultural moment within collective memory simply by storing, ordering, and preserving the objects (Ayad 2014).

Malluh does not intend to play the cassettes; they remain mute. Their messages of religious orthodoxy are left slowly deteriorating on the magnetic tape, but the objects are preserved as a record of cultural practice. The choice to display, but not to play, these artefacts is a critical act. Some of history must be kept; some must be lost. Culturally specific to a moment within Saudi history, Malluh also reinserts the tapes into an artistic discourse through their minimalist arrangement, after careful sorting, in grid forms. While the individual units are not purely geometrical, they are organised by an order of seriality in keeping with the general principles of minimalist composition. In fact, this integration of minimalist practices of

composition with every day or representational media is in evidence in the practices of multiple women artists in Saudi Arabia.

However, the cultural origins of serial compositional practices cannot fully be explained in reference to American minimalist sculpture. To do so would be to commit the error of assuming Western modernism is the only, or dominant, context of sociospatial practices in which these works of contemporary Saudi art should be understood. While Malluh's work clearly does engage in a dialogue with minimalism, the spatial composition of these mural-sized banks of cassettes could also be connected (via a different set of roots/routes) to other, specifically Saudi, spatial practices. The compact geometrical ordering of *al-Sadu* weaving has been seen to form an important precedent for the labyrinthine spatial organisation of Al-Ghamdi's (2015, 107) work, and here too the *al-Sadu* logic of composition in bands with a limited palette of alternating colour blocks is also evident. Another traditional Saudi spatial practice specifically practiced by women which could well provide another genealogy for this work is the unitised composition of *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri* painting (Fig. 4.10). Deriving from the Asir region in Saudi Arabia, *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri* emerged out of the decorative patterning of quartz stones set within the masonry of houses before evolving into an autonomous painted decorative scheme applied by women onto interior surfaces using a fresco technique (the only easily accessible, major study of *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri* painting is Mauger and Marshall 1996). The insertion of quartz blocks into the stone matrix of a wall parallels the insertion of cassettes into blocks, whose pale, white and coloured surfaces are not dissimilar to those which predominate in *Qut*.



Figure 3.10 *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri* painting. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/al-qatt-al-asiri-female-traditional-interior-wall-decoration-in-asir-saudi-arabia-01261>

Identifying the roots and routes of contemporary spatial practice in older forms of women’s artistic practice in Saudi Arabia has important consequences for the ways in which contemporary art in general is integrated into the sociospatial practices of the Saudi nation. In earlier chapters, the ways in which the issue of cultural production is one which concerns the Saudi state has been discussed, and it has been established that there is a pressing need to critically position women’s space-making practices in ways that neither essentialise nor Westernise cultural production. The predicament that traditional art forms face is described by Fillitz and Saris (2015, 155) specifically in relation to *Al-Qatt Al-Asiri* painting when they observe that “the new colors on the walls of Asir’s tower houses are no longer made of organic local materials, but utilize imported chemical stuff that is applied by hired male labour from Pakistan rather than by local women.” At the same time as the social relations behind traditional

Al-Qatt Al-Asiri spatial practices break down, the style is appropriated by the Saudi state as a sign of authenticity; Fillitz and Saris (2015, 155) note that “the pattern appears on the decoration of an amusement park in Riyadh.” If this turn of events is to be resisted to some degree, if alternative sociospatial practices are to be identified that do not totally disengage women artists from cultural production, it is essential that genealogies, and therefore continuities, are established between traditional space-making practices and contemporary art such as that by Maha Malluh. The candy-coloured surfaces of the cassette arranged in grids provide a counterpoint to the silent voices encoded in their tape. Seen in studio photographs from above (as opposed to gallery shots, which show them mounted vertically on walls), they are laid out in trays (Fig. 3.9), which Malluh collects from bakeries around the city. The title of the piece, *Food for Thought*, describes a process in which sound is changed into food, art becomes nutrition, and the artist is a baker of culture. This reconfiguration of the artist’s role cannot help but situate her directly within the social networks of the city. “Food is one of those things that brings people together,” writes Malluh (2015, para.4). She further opines that “in *Food for Thought*, the baking trays, which would have once cradled scrumptious bread, are instead carrying passé cassettes. It is through listening to these audio cassettes that people gather” (Malluh, 2015, para.4). Malluh’s own documentary photographs show the process of her work developing between her home studio and the everyday spaces of Riyadh.

Malluh has explained the process of her work in a further iteration, this time using cooking pots (Figs. 3.11 and 3.12):

I have been interested in material culture for a very long time. I collect objects, in which I find aesthetic beauty, from everywhere I go. I once came across a large number of pots with burnt bottoms. After collecting them and hanging them on my studio wall—just as has been done in the gallery space—I became fascinated with the scratches, marks and thick layer of burnt grease that was enveloping these pots. At the same time, I was conducting research for another project after a trip to the desert. There I learned that there are many historical sites around Riyadh mentioned in the poems and that these places are actually located around

my father's hometown near Riyadh, where I live. So, reading about the al-Muallaqat and looking at these hanging pots makes me think how precious the stories are that these pots tell me—in the same way as the hanging poems in Mecca, which tell us stories about pre-Islamic Arabia. (McNay 2016, paras. 9, 10)



Fig 3.11 Malluh, Maha. 2015. *Food for Thought series*. 233 burnt pots 4.40m x 10 m, Saatchi Gallery, London.



Fig. 3.12 Malluh, Maha. 2017. *Food for Thought series*. 11 burnt pots. Louvre Abu Dhabi.

What might appear to be an abject, cast-off object to be quickly forgotten is recovered by Malluh into one not only with social significance, but poetic resonance. Indeed, “old aluminium pots, these ones here which have come from various flea markets around Saudi Arabia,” observes Krinzinger, “have been used throughout history by Arabs both at home in urban areas, in Bedouin tents, and also more recently in restaurants, as cooking vessels” (Art

Basel 2015, n.p.). The long-lasting cooking pots acquire a patina of use with age, picking up the lives of the people who use them, and become layered with the grease of cooking, turning them into inscriptions of the urban fabric within which they inhabit. Again, what I argue is at stake here is art as a document of collective social practice performed in space, creating memories which connect the contemporary Saudi urban world to its desert past. There is certainly nostalgia in this treasuring of the discarded utensils of the past, and some critics have chosen to see in this work “a visual poem, in tribute to classical Arab poetry” (Cotter 2017, n.p.). Yet, other interpretations emphasise that her work:

... reflects societal struggle, as it shifts from the pre-oil period (pre-modernity) to the post-oil period and post-modernity . . . covering the most important historical eras regarding societal norms, such as the Awakening (*Sahwah*) in the 1980s, which took place at the same time as the Afghani war with the former Soviet Union (Al-Senan 2015, 536).

Yet I would argue that describing Malluh’s work as a ‘reflection of societal struggle’ does not go far enough in accounting for the social significance of contemporary art in Saudi Arabia. More than a reflection of what is already happening elsewhere in society, Malluh’s work—like that of al-Ghamdi—in fact produces spaces which are both new and old. They are new in the sense that they exist within contemporary structures and networks of global art where they open up space for Saudi art to become visible and its voice to be heard, and old in the sense that they bring back to the fore artistic functions which were previously filled by women in pre-oil Saudi Arabia—in *al-Sadu* weaving practices above all. The alignment of Malluh’s work with a single ideological position, or its role as documentation, is therefore secondary to its primary importance as the production of space out of social relations brought together through collection practices which themselves are interwoven with the deeper threads of artistic practice in the history of Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Experiences of Domestic Spaces: Performance, Body and Voice—Reem Al-Nasser and Dana Awartani

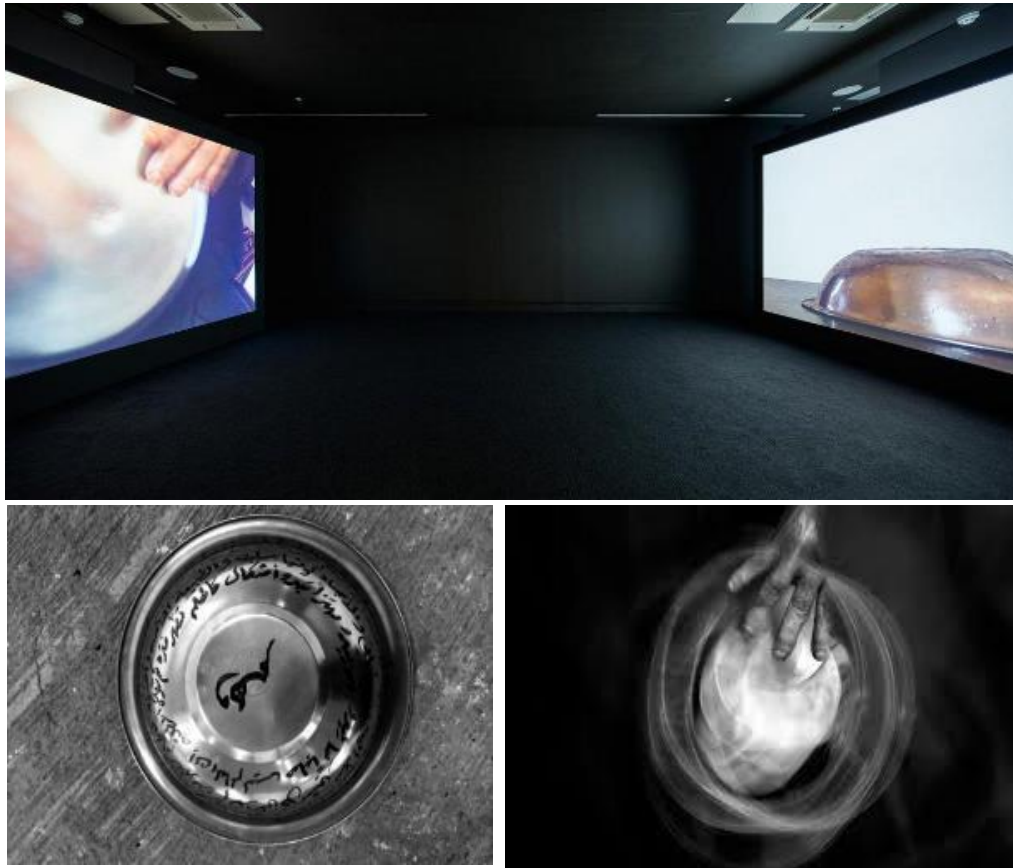


Fig. 3.13 Al-Nasser, Reem. 2017. *The Silver Plate* (2017). Video. <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/how-saudi-artists-aim-to-shift-perceptions-1.609841> Coloured sand and video. Source: Mosaic Rooms, London.

Domestic space as a realm of aesthetic production and social discourse is encapsulated in the art of *al-Sadu* and an important concern of Saudi women artists working in a variety of media today. Although the media are different, their roles may be closely aligned. In the darkened enclosure of a video installation, for example, we might project the space of the *beit-al-sha'r*, an equally intimate place in which domestic rituals become illuminated. It is this concern with domestic space that forms a third thread connecting *al-Sadu* practices to those of women artists working today in Saudi Arabia.

Another cooking vessel; this time the cooking pot is new, shining, and polished, and occupies two wall-sized screens between which the viewer stands. On one of the screens,

cooking pots are shown held in the hands of Saudi women in an interior space, but instead of cooking with them they sing, using the pots as resonant percussive surfaces to accompany their song. From the other screen comes a different kind of rhythm: this time the monotonous sound of water dripping on the metal surface (Dabrowska 2017). The viewer is caught between these two antagonistic representations of the pot: it is both the instrument of a collective domestic ceremony and a symbol of ennui and repetition.

In Al-Nasser's work as shown here (Fig. 3.13), video has taken on the role of animating the found or collected objects. Whereas Malluh evokes the memories of space, place, and society through the indexical trace of the burnt grease accumulated on the object and its very physical materiality, here al-Nasser films the pots, coating them, as it were, in a 'film' of performance so that this everyday object takes on a new life through the artist's representation of it. Al-Nasser comes from the Southern Jizan region of Saudi Arabia, and the domestic ritual taking place in the video is specific to that place. It is traditional in Jizan for women to sing together during marriage formalities—both in preparation for the event and during the actual ceremony. As the moment when a woman will leave her home and move into a new one, these collective rituals serve to mark her transition from one space to another (Seaman 2017). Seen from the overall perspective which is developing, this production of space through the social relations of Saudi women finds a correlative both in the paintings of Binzagr, and in *al-Sadu*.

Al-Nasser is carrying on with videoing the work that Binzagr did in painting fifty years ago: documenting the cultural practices of women in Saudi society, using the media, networks, and institutions of the art world to represent aspects of Saudi women's sociospatial experience, with a special emphasis on domestic spaces. While the two video streams play, a recorded voice track repeats the words 'near and far' in Arabic. This is the most obvious dialogue. Its repetitiveness reflects the dripping of the water on the pot, de-familiarising the objects seen on the screens so that one begins to question what is 'near' and what is 'far'. Perhaps in the most

literal sense it is the domestic space occupied by Saudi women which is both near and far—near because one is surrounded by it in the gallery space, yet far because this is a representation, and the reality lies in a space which is completely separate and distinct from the institutional space of the art gallery, the Mosaic Rooms in London, where the videos were shown in 2017 after first being exhibited in Jeddah art week earlier in the year.

The audio is reminiscent of the discourse that is concomitant with the production of space such as the conversations that take place around the *al-Sadu* loom, or the Bedouin stories related in the Alem sisters' *The Black Arch*, whereby the presence of the voice is equal to the presence of visual signs within social space.

Both in terms of documentation and provocation, Al-Nasser's work serves as an example of the emergence of performance as a central tenet of contemporary art by Saudi women. Performance is introduced through the presence of the body: the hands that play the pots, and the images of women singing together. This relates to, but also extends, the work of al-Ghamdi and Malluh, since it underlines the function of the artist as a collector, but also emphasises social collaboration in the broader social fabric of female cultural practitioners. It also utilizes the unique property of the medium of documentary video to place the viewer intimately within a domestic space without actually being there. In that sense the work of art can be understood as a means of dislocation, a critical tool for the re-siting of the viewer in order to see things differently.



Fig. 3.14 Awartani, Dana. 2017. *I went away and forgot you. A while ago I remembered. I remembered I'd forgotten you. I was dreaming* (2017). Coloured sand and video. Mosaic Rooms, London.

Al-Nasser is one of a number of contemporary women Saudi artists who have employed domestic space as an arena for investigating new artistic practices. The *Shift* exhibition at London's Mosaic Rooms (2017) introduced work by al-Nasser, al-Ghamdi and Dana Awartani. The gallery context is significant: it is a converted domestic house, and these institutional spaces are made to resonate with the work of the three artists, which, in each case, introduces a second space within the gallery walls. Awartani's work (fig 3.14) show the installation of her work: a domestic room-sized sand sculpture, formed by the minutely controlled deposit of coloured sand onto the existing floor according to the patterns of Islamic tiles. In an adjacent

space a video plays of Awartani sweeping up the sand floor in a previous iteration of the piece (Seaman 2017).

These works draw together multiple threads about female artists, materiality, labour, performance, and memory. Once again, Awartani shows the central importance of domestic space as a scene of contemporary art production by women in Saudi Arabia. In both national and international contexts in which Saudi women have not found public visibility or recognition, the home has taken over the role of hosting cultural memory; whether the tents of the Bedouin, or the domestic living rooms of urbanised Saudis. It is important to recall the overall ways in which space is conceptualised in order to help situate these artistic interventions. One key aspect of this theorisation of space relates to the issue of space and power. As Massey (1994, 3) has written, “since social relations are inevitably and everywhere imbued with power and meaning and symbolism, this view of the spatial is as an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification.”

The idea of a ‘social geometry of power’ is especially fitting for Awartani’s work because it uses geometry in such a specific way to define space. One is used to seeing these tile geometries in the context of Islamic art, and generally it is their hard, glazed, luxurious surfaces that are so astounding, often deriving from sites of antiquity. The survival of those solid ceramic fragments testifies to the enduring power of Islamic culture. Many of those tiles are indeed domestic, and therefore related to Awartani’s work, but the crucial development which she has made possible is the association of a ‘hard’ geometry with an ephemeral spatial arrangement: sand.

The connection here with al-Ghamdi’s work is with a ‘soft’ paradigm of artistic practices which includes both weaving and work in sand. Ephemeral in nature, these materialities must be continually refashioned by repeated performances of labour, especially after having moved

from place to place in their nomadic existences. Rather than being a disadvantage, this ephemerality introduces the requirement for elements of performativity. Indeed, Awartani's sweeping of the sand becomes a durational performance of great beauty as the meticulously constructed floor is slowly and un-nostalgically brushed aside, like so many of the ephemeral cultural creations of Saudi women. It must be remembered as noted in Chapter 2, that the domestic space is a space of both remembering and forgetting: a *milieu de mémoire*. Memories are kept alive there and passed on from woman to woman, generation to generation, but so much of what has been produced in those spaces disappears from view and acknowledgment in the wider social fabric of the artist. It is the work of Awartani's art to prolong the life of that culture through contemporary art.



Fig. 3.15 Al-Ghamdi, Zahra. 2017 *Cell of the City Cloth and earth*. Mosaic Rooms, London.

This work calls for broader questions to be asked about the presence of the body in contemporary art by Saudi women. What place does the body have in relation to the spatial and the social? Key theories of space, some of which were discussed in Chapter 2, have begun with

the assertion that space itself originates as a phenomenological emanation of the body. Tuan (1977), whose work has been influential for contemporary thinkers on installation art and public art, asked: what is the process by which space is transformed into place? For him, the answer is simply in the presence of the human body, since “the human being, by his [their] mere presence, imposes a schema on space,” though when humans inhabit space together it is their collective presence and relations with one another which become reflected in the way the world is divided up into spaces and places (Tuan 1977, 35). The idea of the body, whether individual or collective, as mediating between space and place, offers a way to begin to imagine the importance of both the artist’s body in the processes of creation which create spatial practices, and the bodies of the audience or public, which interact and participate with the finished works.

Conceptualising the body as positioned between space and place has consequences for the social and historical significance of women in Saudi art and its projection in international contexts and institutions. Indeed, it may also point towards broader questions about the visibility and agency of women in Saudi society beyond the immediate, relatively limited world of art. Viewing al-Ghamdi’s *Labyrinth*, it became clear that the differentiated and encompassing surfaces of the installation art were inseparable from the physical presence of the artist and her labour in producing the outlines of space, as part of a prolonged reflection on the architecture of Jeddah and its embodiment of collective memory. The gestures of the body were embedded in the shallow striations of an urban mapping, so that the work of art became a city of gestures. Being with Al-Ghamdi and documenting her installation of the work enabled documentation of her spatial practice, which helped to emphasise and record the artist’s visibility, even after her physical body had detached from the artwork, leaving only its traces behind. This inevitably raises the issue of whether my own position as researcher was privileged, and whether these observations would have been possible to make had I

encountered the work as a member of the public. Looking closely at the installation (which its wall-sized scale invites visitors to do), any one might have clearly discerned the physical traces of labour, and have speculated on the nature of the work needed to be performed by the artist. On the other hand, the work of art never exists in isolation, and the need for critical discourse about art requires that new texts and arguments be circulated in order to enrich debate about, and share information regarding, sociospatial practices. In this way, the present text gains in value as an archive and document of the process which went into the production of art works. This recognition indeed gives emphasis to the need for artist and researcher to collaborate in the dissemination of both art and ideas, using their privileged positions to reinforce new ways of thinking and speaking together about art.

The practice of performance art serves to keep the visible presence of the body at the forefront of its reception, and this multiplies the claims that can be made by and about women's presence in contemporary Saudi art. Given the fact that neither Binzagr nor Moussli were physically present at their 1968 exhibition, the appearance of Al-Ghamdi as not only a visitor to her own exhibition space, but as its creator, indicates that significant change has begun to take place in the ways in which Saudi women participate in the art world. Even if the public viewer has not had the privilege of witnessing Al-Ghamdi at work, the indexical traces of her performative labour are manifestly present in the materiality of her installation. *Al-Sadu* is a sociospatial practice in which spatial and social practice are both simultaneously present and 'inter-articulated', that is, joined or woven together. This was established in Chapter 2. Any discussion of social practice in the specific cultural context of Saudi Arabia raises questions specific to the way Saudi society is structured and represented both within and outside its borders, and also asks for a position to be taken in regard to this.

Eiman Elgibreen's thesis on Safeya Binzagr, is again crucial in formulating this position (which is not widely recognised as strategic within existing literature). Elgibreen (2014)

explicitly argues that Binzagr serves as a significant case not only because of her respectable position within Saudi Arabia but also via the way, through her art career, she has instigated a change in the status of Saudi women in the context of the collective memories of Saudis. Eligibreen (2014, 8) emphasises how Binzagr has been able to do this “without clashing with society’s socio-religious norms... the conservative nature of Saudi society neither limited the artist’s sense of control, nor forced her to overtly conflict with its norms.”

Narratives which extol the confrontational quality of some feminist artistic practices in the West construct the history of social practice and performance differently. Many examples could be cited here. Rebecca Schneider’s *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997) opens with a case study of the well-known counter-patriarchal activism of the Guerrilla Girls who purposively adopt aggressive costumes and personas to combat the aggression faced by women confronted with patriarchy (Schneider 1997, 1). The exclamatory title of the 2007 exhibition curated by Cornelia Butler (2007), along with its extensive accompanying catalogue—*WACK: Art and the feminist revolution*—encapsulates the confrontational/revolutionary guise in which Western feminist art of the 1970s is often framed (Butler 2007). Broude and Garrard’s (1996) *Power of Feminist Art* is another survey study which explicitly frames art by women artists in the West in terms of an open struggle with power. In light of this way of presenting art by women, Eligibreen’s (2014) analysis of Binzagr suggests a differently accented account of art as effecting change through the creation of collective memories, offers a slightly adjusted perspective from which to approach sociospatial practice in contemporary art.

In this way, *al-Sadu* offers both a culture-specific point of social/historical origin for the collective creative practices of socially-engaged, contemporary Saudi women artists, and an imaginary space in which contemporary social/artistic practice can be conceptualised, theorised, and (perhaps most importantly) projected as a direction for future development. At a moment when contemporary art by Saudi women is emerging from the periphery thus gaining

national and international visibility and being exposed to new institutions and markets, and at a time when Saudi culture and society themselves are rapidly changing, and significant shifts and developments are likely, it is important to think deeply about the specific cultural, social, and historic contexts in which Saudi women artists work.

Framing the work of Saudi women artists need not limit this conversation to a narrow ethno-nationalism. Pointing to the rich, culturally-specific histories of women's production of social spaces in Saudi Arabia only helps to multiply the number of possible future interventions. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the majority of artistic practices described in the published literature on the subject of how to define social practice within the arts have been drawn from artists working in Europe and America. For example, while a key recent publication on sociospatial practice gestures towards inclusivity with chapters on diversity and otherness, Western artists and critics are still disproportionately represented, and women artists from the Gulf do not appear (Schalk, Kristiansson and Mazé 2017).

This does not mean that artists from other parts of the world have been irrelevant to the global development of social practice as art. Rather, it lends particular importance to the current work, since there is evidently a need to address the no-less-important histories of socially-engaged artistic practice in other parts of the globe and the global imbalance of representation which currently characterises published research. Doing so serves the important aim of renewing debates on this subject and resisting the formation of new norms that either exclude, suppress, or misrepresent traditions outside of the mainstream. As the works discussed in this chapter show to varying degrees, acts of creative resistance and renewal need not always take the form of agitation or unrest, but may just as well emerge from the patient, intense collective labour of women working together and sharing their skills with others.

3.5 Social participation: Manal Al-Dowayan, Marwah Al-Mugait, Maha Malluh and Sarah Abu Abdallah

Direct participation in the weaving of the social fabric is characteristic of the sociospatial practice of *al-Sadu*. If *al-Sadu* is to be a critically relevant model through which to better understand contemporary practices this participatory aspect of its nature must be explored in further detail as one of the four threads which constitute its continuity through time and space. While the previous three threads have explored cultural memory, collection processes, and experiences of domestic space, the following section focuses in on the facts of social participation which some works of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia have engaged.

In the work of Manal Al-Dowayan, the production of ideas about the future, and the production of possible future realities, are deeply interwoven with threads of the past (Fig. 3.16).



Fig. 3.16 Al-Dowayan, Manal. 2014. *Tree of Guardians*. Brass leaves, ink, fish wire, paper, sound recordings. <https://www.manaldowayan.com/>



Figs. 3.17 Al-Dowayan, Manal. 2014. details from *Tree of Guardians*. <https://www.manaldowayan.com/>

First exhibited at Jeddah Art Week in 2014, in the same former shopping mall galleries in which Al-Ghamdi's *Labyrinth and Time* was exhibited three years later, Al-Dowayan's *Tree of Guardians* (Figs. 3.17) filled the interior site with catenary chains of golden leaves. This language of hanging and suspended forms, the use of the installation to produce a space for conversation between the memory of these women and the audience, and the basic twining technique of fixing the leaves with wire threads provides the basis for a justifiable comparison between contemporary artistic practices and the architectural scale and social significance of *al-Sadu* tents in the desert. The connections are not merely structural, however (Figs. 3.16 and 3.17).

A closer look reveals that each leaf contains a portion of flat surface which has been written on. To anyone who can read Arabic these words are immediately seen to be women's names; one interpretation of this might be that it suggests the intended audience for the work. Standing below the installation, these names multiply by the dozen, transforming the iridescent brass canopy into a semantic field. While the title of the work may provoke a general sense of the atmosphere of protection offered by these collected names in the context of an international art fair, familiarity with Saudi culture in 2014 would raise what was then a pressing social, cultural, and political issue: the institution of *mahram*, or male guardianship. The broader cultural implications of *mahram* have been briefly introduced in this chapter, as well as its

recent partial removal from law amid continued campaigns for its total dismantling, but in 2014 these reforms had not yet occurred. By evoking the issue of guardianship, Al-Dowayan's work resonates with some of the most urgent issues related to women in the public sphere.

However, this is not to say that *Tree of Guardians* represented a work of aggressive Islamic feminism. Rather than seeking a spectacular, direct confrontation with patriarchy, Al-Dowayan's work instead instigated a social practice whose effect took root within the lives of women participants. The origin of the installation lay in a series of organised social events during which Saudi women (who live under conditions of direct or indirect, explicit or implicit, male guardianship) were invited to inscribe the names of their *female* guardians on the brass leaves. These events were a result of extensive research, which saw the participation of around 400 women who were asked to answer two questions: 'When do women disappear from memory?' and 'What is active forgetting?' Al-Dowayan explained: "In Saudi Arabia, family trees do not include women" (Roth 2014, para. 4). Not a legally recognised position, female guardians were instead constructed in this piece as an autonomous and freely elected realm of women's solidarity with one another. According to Al-Dowayan, "only very few women could recollect by name any female relative going back beyond four generations" (Smith 2014, para.4). Al-Dowayan further posits that "it is as if they have disappeared, been erased from memory. This is an act of preservation," (Smith 2015, para.4). Women wrote the names of their mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and aunts. Together the leaves constituted a tree of guardianship by women, for women. Importantly for this project it impacted on the women participating in it, as well as on visitors when they moved around and started thinking about their own female family tree.

Three years before *Tree of Guardians*, Al-Dowayan created another installation piece, called *Suspended Together* (Casal-Data 2013) consisting of a flock of porcelain doves

suspended on wire from the ceiling, with other doves gathered on the floor (Fig. 3.18).



Fig. 4.18 Al-Dowayan, Manal. 2011. *Suspended Together*. Porcelain, wire. <https://www.manaldowayan.com/>

While the doves hold strong iconic implications for freedom and peace, these figures were used here as placeholders for women, each dove carrying on its body a permission document that allows a Saudi woman to travel. Seen from a distance, the installation gives the impression of freedom and movement. Going closer, one sees that the doves appear frozen, hanging in space without any hope of free flight. Just as Al-Dowayan invited Saudi women to inscribe their guardians on the suspended leaves of *Tree of Guardians*, the documents were donated by women in Saudi society. The doves in *Suspended Together* are shown with their wings outstretched as if in flight. They form a suspended community of women united by their movements. In this sense, the installation might be an image of freedom, but conversely might be read by women as a reminder of their constraints, showing that they are not free but similarly

tied and subject to permissions and legal documents for women. Female observers of the artwork, upon entering into the space of the installation, may find resonance with these doves, who serve as reminders of the patriarchal Saudi society within which they find themselves, and may feel part of a larger community of Saudi women.

Likewise, in *Tree of Guardians*, the community is produced by a collective enunciation in the form of the leaf, the name. In this respect, *Tree of Guardians* might be compared to seminal works of Western feminist art, which have worked to reclaim the buried lineages of women in history and culture, such as Judy Chicago's famous *Dinner Party* (Chicago and Lucie-Smith, 1999). Indeed, the act of naming might be considered a transcultural practice of recognition, establishing social presence and visibility through memory and networking. At first less imposing than Chicago's monumental installation, Al-Al-Dowayan's practice is situated within a very different context of custom and law.



Fig. 3.19 Al-Dowayan, *Manal*, 2014. *ESMI - MY NAME* (2014). Medium: Maple wood beads with natural wool rope hand made by beduin women. Size 4 meters long. <http://www.manaldowayan.com/my-name.html>



Fig. 3. 20 Al-Dowayan, Manal. 2012. ESMI - MY NAME workshop. <http://www.manaldowayan.com/my-name.html>

Esmi, a third work by Al-Dowayan in this paradigm (Figs. 3.19 and 3.20), is also centred on the act of declaring a woman's name, the issue of the lack of documentation of women, the state of disappearance and exploring the issues of the preservation of a woman's name. The artist talks about Saudi women's issues in daily life, and in this work, she discusses one of the traditions of some tribes in Saudi Arabia: men not saying their mother's name.

The artwork is a large-scale group of rosary-like string of beads, used by Muslims to count the times they praise God, with each bead bearing the names of Saudi women who were invited by the artist to a workshop. Through creating this emblem of religion and associating the names of women with it, Al-Dowayan protests the cultural mandates that silence the names of women in contemporary Arab society. The work is meant to encourage women to embrace their identity and instils a sense of empowerment (Elkamel 2012).

Al-Dowayan ran three workshops during December, in AL Khobar, Riyadh and Jeddah, during which she met with over 300 women who wrote their names on the large beads that ultimately make up the piece. The women included career women, award winning scientists, artists, mothers and grandmothers (Roth 2014). Women inscribed their names on wooden beads strung on ornamental woven threads, forming another architectural enclosure which could be inhabited and which itself presented a powerful figure of collectivism to the viewer. Given that wooden prayer beads are a feature of Saudi culture, and given that women are colloquially spoken about as ‘diamonds’ threaded on jewellery (and thus highly valued in a social economy of exchange), the immediate resonance of the form of the installation was pronounced (Al-Dowayan 2014).

Al-Dowayan’s work is community-focused in the way it engages women from different sectors of Saudi society, effectively mobilising the differences which exist between women’s different social backgrounds and producing a space in which they are able to meet and share experiences. As an artist with the freedom to move and travel, she did not produce these artworks as personal experience but rather, she uses her art to speak about other Saudi women’s experiences and issues. Al-Dowayan is able to carry out her critical practice without directly clashing with traditional social structures. Through her work, women who are otherwise absent from social representation and unable to express themselves openly due to political and social constraints, are able to inhabit pockets of space which operate differently from the norm, even while they are embedded within it.

As Al-Sudairy (2017, 55) has discussed in the context of women’s literature and publishing in Saudi Arabia, until very recently it was generally considered taboo to speak a woman’s name in public, and forbidden to set it in print. The ritualised exclusion of women’s identities (which has no basis in Islam) makes the collective social act of exhibiting women’s

names through installation art a radical act. Their names are not the names of the famous or elite; they are simply women of different backgrounds and ages coming together for the purpose of artistic expression, making a collective social statement using culture as their medium of exchange. Al-Dowayan's (2014, n.p) instructions to the participants described the *Tree of Guardians* project simply:

This is a family tree but from a female perspective. Men have put forward a vision of Saudi Arabia's social history that is influenced by external factors, such as political and social relations. But women have a different history . . . and we are trying to promote Saudi customs and traditions from women's perspective.

In addition to the physical medium of the wooden beads, participants also used social media to share their work, eventually encouraging women from around Saudi Arabia to participate in a trans-locational network of naming, with the participant sharing their images and opinions about the project to encourage still more to speak about their experiences. This is not only the case with Al-Dowayan's work; from my observation other artists are using twitter and Instagram pages to share opinions and reach larger audiences (Fig. 3.21).



Fig. 3.21 Al-Dowayan, Manal. 2012. *ESMI - MY NAME*. participants using social media to continue conversation about the topic. <http://www.manaldowayan.com/my-name.html>

Tree of Guardians, *Suspended Together*, and *Esmi-My Name* are all, in Pierre Nora's (1989) sense (discussed in Chapter 2), '*milieu de mémoire*'. While '*lieux de mémoire*' exist to

enshrine cultural memories which have died out, *milieux de mémoire* are alive with current activities, renewed by repeated gestures through the participation of many people, who ensure that the genealogies of culture are continually evolving (Nora 1989, 12). Accordingly, one of the possible functions of the contemporary installation space may be as an environment of memory; a way of understanding space which shares an affinity with the way that it is understood in cultural geography and performance studies: as socially constructed. Indeed, the critical work of Joan Gibbons (2015) and Lisa Saltzman (2006) has thematised the role of memory in contemporary art as a reflection on past trauma, the externalisation of autobiography, re-enactment, the ordering of knowledge, and monumentality (Gibbons2015; Saltzman 2006).

Contemporary Saudi art has not yet been theorised within this context, but the works discussed here dwell upon the social act of memory, marking spaces as a form of collective memory, and the pursuit of social visibility through the public witnessing of genealogies. Recalling that Bedouin *al-Sadu* weavers could be known as ‘masters’ whose names were not only known but celebrated, and recalling both that the act of weaving and the woven social fabric of the tent were occasions for Bedouin women’s spoken poetry, as well as the interweaving of personal styles into the threads of the *al-Sadu* cloth, it is possible to situate Al-Dowayan’s work within a much deeper tradition of naming and remembering through collective sociospatial practices in Saudi Arabia. Naming thus becomes a performance facilitated by contemporary social practices in Saudi Arabia, which carries out the work of restoring women’s presence within public memory. In this sense, contemporary artistic practice serves as a living archive, a means of remembering and sustaining intergenerational genealogies of women, setting a precedent for the wider acknowledgement of their voices and visibility in Saudi society.

Al-Dowayan (2014, para. 1) has noted that creating platforms that offer women of different backgrounds and ages the autonomy to express perspectives and opinions is highly rewarding, as it provides a vital contribution towards women's progress. Dozens of women collaborated on these projects, and their participation was highlighted through social media, encouraging women across the globe to participate virtually. Working together, these women formed communities that were inter-subjectively knit together through their shared experience of art. The social logic of this contemporary artistic practice deserves recognition. Indeed, it is this conception of intersubjective space as a material extent constituted in the collective making practices of women which I argue serves a new paradigm within which current interventions of contemporary Saudi women artists can profitably be considered.

It is also a logic of practice which ties contemporary art back to *al-Sadu*. In this respect it is valuable to position the logic of weaving within an anthropological context, that is, within a context that affirms the connection between collective practices of making and the constitution of a larger social fabric (structure). Indeed, this is often how weaving has been understood in anthropology, from as early as the work of Malinowski (cited in Urry 2016, 33), who described the “imponderable yet all important facts of actual life’ which are ‘part of the real substance of the social fabric, [and] in them are spun the innumerable threads which keep together the family, the clan, the village community, the tribe.” More recently, Crossley (1996, 173) has theorised fabric as the material basis of “social becoming”, not only as a metaphor, but as a social network with a material basis in physical manipulations and transformations of space.

Weaving the fabric of social becoming produces intersubjective relations, which “holds us all together in an identifiable group or unit,” and “conjures up an image of multiple overlapping and intertwinings, organised and arranged in different ways,” connoting “a sense

of unity and strength which is achieved by way of this overlapping” (Crossley 1996, 173). In this way, anthropological explanations of social connections provide a conceptual bridge between the social practice of *al-Sadu* and the social practice of contemporary art in works such as *Esmi*, or *The Tree of Guardians*. Fully appreciating the significance of these works as agents of social becoming within the social fabric of Saudi society requires that the force of weaving as an intersubjective practice is acknowledged within the way that contemporary Saudi art is conceptualised.

Theories of participation and relational aesthetics assist in conceptualising the spaces of installation art produced by contemporary Saudi women artists, linking their practices to wider contexts of sociospatial practice. Yet it would be inaccurate to present the work of contemporary Saudi women artists as merely an instantiation of already-existing concepts and theories of art. I argue that existing concepts and theories of sociospatial practice delineated in the previous chapters only partially explain the significance of contemporary sociospatial practice in Saudi Arabia. In both their explicit and implicit evocation of the spaces produced by women in Bedouin society, the works considered here offer a distinct contribution to the understanding of sociospatial practices which has not yet been recognised as such, and which it is the aim of this research to highlight and bring into conversation with existing discourses.

The Saudi-Arabian region has become the subject of much attention across the globe, with increased focus on representation and Arab media. Recently, women's participation in the domain of culture and art has gained substantial recognition, as artistic practices adopted by Saudi women reflect their views concerning their rights and identities within the conservative societies of the Arab region (Byerly and Ross 2008; Milner 2012). Women’s artwork provides them with a voice and a platform to express their views. The responses collected during my fieldwork via a survey of the Saudi art world, suggest that Saudi women are motivated by the

idea that art practices might enable them to express opinions on social issues and highlight the prominent social problems they face.

The work of contemporary Saudi women artists is most often interwoven with prominent social issues such as guardianship, the right to drive and travel, the absence of women's documentation, and their absence from history and lack of awareness in talking about social problems or personal experiences, which have gained attention directly as a result of these interventions.

In this context, artist Marwah al-Mugait has made a series of video art pieces under the title *Oudah*, centred on depicting the healing procedure of seeking reconciliation concerning suspended childhood memories, emotions buried deep in the subconscious, and answering questions in order to translate these emotional conflicts into a visual journey (Byerly and Ross 2008; Milner 2012). Al-Mugait's work has shifted from commercial photography into a conceptually layered body of work concerned with portraying individual narratives, providing the audience a confidential glimpse into a private moment. This work, according to her artist's statement, "focuses on exposition: shedding light on things that people overlook or discard' and presenting a forum within which discussion of these issues might take place as a result of their public representation" (Al-Mugait 2017, para. 3). (Fig. 3.22 and 3.23).



Fig. 3.22 Al Mugait, Marwah. 2014. *Oudah* video installation. Sigh exhibition. <https://destinationksa.com/marwah-al-mugait-sigh-exhibition/>



عودة Oudah
2014
Metal Print
100x58 cm

3.23 Details from video installation

Oudah combined stills of captured motion developed from an exploration of internal regression, through which the artist manifests the struggle of dealing with both destructive and creative sides of the experience of subjectivity (Al-Mugait 2014). The videos feature Raha Moharrak, the first Saudi woman to reach Mount Everest and an iconic figure within

contemporary the Saudi media imagination, exhibiting the art world's willingness to engage contemporary social contexts.

While this work could be described simply within the immediate context of its production and exhibition, I would like to argue that a deeper conceptual and theoretical reading of this (and other works of contemporary Saudi art by women) can extend our interpretations of them beyond surface-level descriptions, which come and go with the calendar of the changing exhibitions of the globalised art world in which new Saudi artists are very much embedded. Given that the first exhibition of Saudi art, by either a man or a woman, included the work of Safeya Binzagr and Mounira Moussli in 1968, and that it took place by means of a strategic appropriation of an existing space of women's empowerment (a girl's school), a critical historical perspective is already available in which to situate Al-Mugait's work and all Saudi women's contemporary art.

It is within this historical setting that Al-Mugait's work can be seen, thereby redefining the spatial typology of the contemporary art gallery as a space of visibility, expression and empowerment for women within a limited social context, and restoring the space of the *beit al-sha'r* within urbanised Saudi culture. While this might be considered true of any exhibition, the significance of the exhibition of a Saudi woman artist, and the exhibition of works treating women's mental health issues, cannot be underestimated. It may be that in Western contexts neither of these factors now appears to be challenging, yet in Saudi Arabia, where the very visibility of women in public is not a given (still less the acknowledgment of their interior mental lives), the mere exhibition of al-Mugait's work redefines what is possible in the contemporary Saudi art world.

The Riyadh gallery in which Al-Mugait's exhibition was installed in 2014 does not resemble the woven enclosure of an *al-Sadu* tent in the way that Al-Dowayan's installation artworks specifically evoke the woven materiality of *al-Sadu*, but functionally, the gallery

space becomes a semi-public forum in which female artists may find an audience for the expression of intimate sensibilities. In the same way that the formal openness of the *al-Sadu* tent invites entry and participation (though mediated by distinct codes of access), so the gallery space is publicly open, yet mediated by its own inherited codes of spectatorship and participation within the art world. Such a space is not inevitable within Saudi modernity, where (as has been noted) the enunciation of women's names, their public appearance, and their freedom to fully articulate themselves are limited. Yet al-Mugait's work restores a *lieu de mémoire* of the desert, substituting the culture of oral poetry as an expression of the deepest shared sensibilities of desert life—frequently, as noted in Chapter 2, dealing with themes of loss, memory, and pain—with visual poems that narrate contemporary experiences of depression.

By bringing images of mental illness into public visibility, *Oudah* helps to initiate conversations within the gallery space, effectively spatialising discourse. Where the weavers of the *al-Sadu* Bedouin tent knitted their discourse into ideographic figures in the cloth while they sat and worked and talked, here Al-Mugait mounts an installation of video imagery within a new kind of space in Saudi culture, where women's issues are made visible and open to speech. Thus, even without direct material connections with *al-Sadu*, Al-Mugait's work instantiates the conceptual space of a *beit al-sha'r*, a space which thereby might be considered an emergent condition, contingent upon the presence of women's voices, stories, visibility, and exchange. It is therefore the function of art within this purview to provide new spaces in which new subjectivities can find new forms of expression, weaving together new publics.

If space is the expression of social relations, then changes in the organisation and contents of a space imply the reconfiguration of its social fabric. Art has always played a particularly powerful role in the symbolic organisation of urban space, particularly through displays of public sculpture, which fulfil a variety of functions from commemoration of past

people and events to expressing power and sovereignty. Because they are placed in the public realm, public artworks have an immediate relationship to the social fabric that is part of the space it inhabits, whose effects can be both temporary and long-lasting. The emergence of the contemporary art gallery within Saudi culture since 1968 has spelled out one part of the story of art and social change within the kingdom, offering a possible pathway to trace the emergence of new urban sociospatial practices in dialogue with the old sociospatial practices of the desert. The introduction of public sculpture programmes, and particularly the work of women sculptors within them, testifies to a further negotiation between art and society conducted within the open spaces of the city.



Fig. 3.24 Malluh, Maha. 2014 Food for Thought (2014). Metal cooking pots. Source: <http://www.sculpturesofjeddah.com/sculptures/detail/food-for-thought-abraj#>

The idea of the city as a space for social engagement invokes a rich history of critical thought, but the idea of ‘social sculpture’ stands out in relation to Malluh’s work. Beuys (cited in Forrest and Scheer 2011, 13), who coined the term, maintains that the objects he creates “are

to be seen as stimulations for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke thought about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone.”

Malluh’s description of her sculpture series as thought provoking corresponds with this conception of art as a stimulation of speculation about the social function of sculpture in its specific relationship to the ‘invisible materials’ used by everyone; that is, the overlooked, everyday materials of food used by Malluh (or cloth, or dust used by Al-Dowayan and Al-Ghamdi). These are the ‘invisible materials used by everyone’, the collective process of thinking and conceptualising which is as common and necessary as eating. The idea of ‘everyone’ being an artist was important to Beuys, and it may be interpreted that it is also clear that for Malluh, art is not only for a select audience but something that concerns many areas of the Saudi social fabric. Her use of common, inexpensive, and familiar objects makes her work straightforward and relatable, creating complexity out of simple units.

In 2014, Malluh produced a further iteration of the *Food for Thought* project discussed earlier in Chapter 3 (Fig. 3.23). A group of three obelisks of stacked cooking pots were erected to differing heights, each pot paired with another to produce a spherical building block reminiscent of the minimalist stacks of Donald Judd, or Barnett Newman. This spectacle of the labour of women in public space is powerful within the context of an urban fabric that almost uniformly suppresses the visibility of women’s bodies in public.

The site of this iteration of *Food for Thought* (2014) is also highly significant since it represents the first-time sculpture by a female artist from Saudi Arabia has been installed in the city of Jeddah. The significance of this event must be carefully considered in relation to the history of exhibitions of women’s work in Saudi Arabia. This idea of ‘the public’, however, is limited, since the 1968 exhibition was held in a girls’ school, which is not a civic space. It means a great deal, therefore, for Malluh’s sculpture to be installed outside of the Al-Anani

mosque in Jeddah. As an acknowledgment of the role of women in determining the nature of social space, the installation of this sculpture helps to increase the visibility of women in Saudi culture. This is achieved, not only by association with Malluh, the artist, but also through the pots themselves, which instantiate the human gestures of the women who cooked with them.

Following Beuys's(cited in Forrest and Scheer 2011, 13) definition of "social sculpture" as that which provokes thought "about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone," Malluh's work does indeed serve to redefine that sculpture can be embedded within a Saudi context, especially in the city of Jeddah where, until very recently, all of the (many) major works of public sculpture were by men. In effect, then, this piece of 'social sculpture' reframes unequal gender politics by creating a new social space within the urban fabric of Jeddah within which the weaving of the social fabric is adjusted to accommodate the presence of the artist. Within this space, women, who utilise the objects encapsulated in the artwork through activities such as cooking, are also represented, albeit anonymously. In the public context of Jeddah, outside the mosque, it is perhaps possible to also see in these pots an acknowledgment of Saudi women as the 'feeders' of Saudi society, both literally, as cooks, and figuratively, as thinkers who feed the mind.

There is an adage that suggests that good food and conversation are best when they go together and one may argue that this is also the case with art. Malluh's equivalence between food, art, and thought is extremely important in establishing the sociospatial basis of contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia. Malluh (cited in Edge of Arabia 2018, para. 1) herself has stated that "capturing this visual history also reflects an oral history, where coming together to cook and share food also brings with it the telling of stories, histories, anecdotes and tales." There could be few more evocative and powerful sites to perform this commentary than the forecourt of an important mosque in the city of Jeddah. In effect, the site-specificity

of the sculpture works by moving one social space into another, translating the domestic sphere into the public sphere, evoking the many threads out of which the social fabric may be woven, and foregrounding the role of the artist as the initiator of such discussions in public.

. *Food for Thought* (2014) naturally becomes implicated in these issues by virtue of its position within the topography of the city, which highlights the visibility of its female creator but also subjects the artist to the governing spatial protocols of public space, which cannot help but align Malluh's project with the interests of the state, thereby potentially limiting the opportunity of producing open critique. Occupying a portion of public space outside, but within sight, of the mosque, Malluh's public sculpture enjoys partial freedom from regulation simply by virtue of its publicness.

While public space does not represent a place of universally equal access, it does afford a site at which what Massey (1994, 3) called the "ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" of social relations can be negotiated. The definition of Malluh's sculpture as 'social sculpture' is particularly appropriate given that it is one of the few public sculptures within Jeddah's outdoor city-wide sculpture park which directly addresses the social practices of Saudis. Farsi (1991) has documented the impressive array of modernist sculpture that occupies the city, including works by Henry Moore, Jean Arp, Alexander Calder, and Jacques Lipchitz, among others. Yet from investigating their materiality and making processes, these imposing abstract monuments are in mute dialogue with the surrounding city; they are, in effect, asocial as objects. In contrast, Malluh's work is a social sculpture: it is constituted out of the material fabric of the social life of the people (their cooking pots) and concerns the social practices and memories which give these mundane objects their power. By occupying a position within the overall citywide sculpture collection, Malluh reopens a position in society for female creators that recalls the social centrality of the *al-Sadu* weaver of social tent sculptures situated in the nomadic spaces of the desert.

It can be asked again: what is the *beit al shar'a*, the tent of the Bedouin *al-Sadu* weavers? The argument of this research is that, while this structure represents a historically-specific formation of Bedouin culture, it can also serve as a conceptual model for other kinds of spaces in which women attain voice and visibility through their work as weavers and creators of wefts that actively and significantly shape the social fabric. The tent is therefore more important as a particular kind of space within which social practices can take place than for it happening to take the specific form or typology of a tent. The *beit al sha'r* may be a tent; a site-specific installation; the milieu in which a performance takes place, or a social sculpture. Thus, to be considered a contemporary art that utilises aspects of the *beit al shar'a*, these sites need not have tent-like architectural features, although they often do in the sense that they provide enclosure for the human body. What is essential is that they are recognised as sites of sociospatial possibility for women through artistic practice.

The human scale of Malluh's work, with its cooking pots stacked up like totems at roughly human height, as well as the palpable traces of human contact which surround the well-used utensils like an aura, lend the pot stacks the peculiar quality of objects which bear the social trace of long periods of human use. It might be said that the cooking pots are particularly social, not only because they are sited within a social space, but also because they invite an inter-subjective response given that they possess an indexicality through traces of its use as bound up with its making and materiality. This becomes clear when Malluh's work is compared with that of the Indian artist Subodh Gupta, who also uses cooking utensils.



Fig 3.25 Gupta, Subodh. 2007. Spill stainless steel. Saatchi Gallery, London.

While, in some works, Gupta, like Malluh, displays used pots, at other times brand new shining pots are displayed. Without the patina of use and other forms of possession such as dents, the shining mass of metal presents a very different spectacle (Gupta 2013). Nevertheless, both artists' work may be considered social practice and this is particularly important for its anthropological interest in food cultures which—in both Saudi Arabia and India—have retained very strong local and regional collective cooking traditions compared to the West.

The importance of 'social practice' as a concept is its embrace of multiple approaches to making art, all of which are socially engaging, although this may take many different forms and occurs outside of any generic or medium-specific definition. Courage (2017, n.p.) has noted how participation, collaboration, situated practice, relationality and dialogue are all terms associated with social practice. In the same way that Jane Rendell and Markus Miessen highlighted the critical aspect of spatial practice, Courage (2017) also underlines the critical

nature of social practice, meaning that it actively engages in challenging existing definitions of art and how it relates to society. In its insistent attention on the relation between art and society, social practice “is centrally located in the social aesthetic where meaning is collectively created via inter-subjective encounters” (Courage 2017, n.p.; cf. Bishop 2012, 257). As such, the body and its relation to other bodies—as well as the relation of the body to its surrounding environment—are fundamental to social practice, which is rooted in a material basis of inter-subjectivity (Crossley 1996, 173). Within the Saudi context, as stated above, the *beit-al-sha’r* remains a strong conceptual paradigm within which to think and articulate new debates about these questions, in particular because it is a fundamentally social space which accommodates different people while at the same time uniting them under a common surface and shared rituals of living.

Theories of social practice are diverse, but norms do exist, sometimes to the exclusion of alternative points of view. Within current writing on social practice, it might be argued that those practices which display a spectacular and sometimes aggressive approach to existing authorities have gained special visibility. This is surely true in Bishop’s (2014) work, which has emphasised the politically confrontational nature of social practice (as well as also offering important work on education). Nato Thompson’s *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011* features an image of a protestor violently confronting armed police, and Boon and Levine’s recent *Practice* anthology is typical in containing prominent sections on revolutionary practice (2018). This is not to say that all Western feminist practices are confrontational—indeed, the work of many artists makes this obviously untrue—Francoise Dupre’s being just one example, related to the current research in terms of its basis in textiles. Nevertheless, while I do not wish to argue that approaches emphasizing confrontational trends within feminist art and theory are invalid, but rather that the field of art criticism in general may be at fault for over-representing some forms of practice at the expense of others—especially those of non-

Western parts of the globe—which may consequently be viewed as outside the mainstream and of peripheral interest. Within other, but related contexts, Western feminism has come under critique for its over-representation of the white woman’s body, most notably from Black cultural studies (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989).

Social practice is open to interpretation, and this continued play of definition and redefinition through repeated conversations between changing voices is important in preventing norms from becoming too entrenched. In the context of art, one strand of the definition of social practice which has often been occluded is that of continuity over time. Yet the phenomenon of handing down knowledge from person to person is intrinsic to social practice: “the know-how of the present practitioners and teachers is handed on to the would-be practitioners. Some of the handing on takes place by explicit teaching; much of it takes place by modelling” (Wolterstorff 2017, 88). Wolterstorff (2017) based this insight on Alisdair MacIntyre’s 1981 work *After Virtue*, which focused on philosophy, not art, but which provided a foundation for contemporary notions of social practice in art. Wolterstorff (2017) quotes an excerpt from that text that further inscribes the importance of learning and tradition within social practice, but one which has tended to be neglected within studies of social practice in art: “To enter into a practice is to enter into a relationship not only with its contemporary practitioners, but also with those who have preceded us in the practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point” (MacIntyre 1981, 181, cited in Wolterstorff 2017, 88).

In this sense, a practice is social, not because it directly confronts an existing social structure with the implicitly aggressive logic of criticism, but because it binds together its own forms of social collectivism out of repeated inter-subjective activity. In situations where outright confrontation may be either impossible or undesirable, these forms of creative social

practice can achieve critique through the production of space and the creation of dialogue. This is not to say that confrontational acts do not take place within the social practice of Saudi women artists. Indeed, it would be a misrepresentation to assume that Saudi women (or Muslim women in general) are consigned to an essentially passive and disempowered place within the social fabric. One artist whose work proves the efficacy of obtrusive action is Sarah Abu Abdallah. Her practice, I argue, again redefines the notion of a Saudi sociospatial practice which can be read profitably in relation to the genealogy of Bedouin space-making social practices. Its further points ahead to as-yet- unmapped territories, and therefore reaffirms the thesis which this chapter promotes.

One social issue that has been explicitly highlighted in art practices by Sarah Abu Abdullah is the right to mobility, embodied in the right to drive a car. (Fig. 3.26 and 3.27).



Fig. 3.26 Abu Abdallah, Sarah. 2012. Saudi Automobile. Video documentation of performance; Car installation. <https://universes.art/sharjah-biennial/2013/tour/bank-street/05-sarah-abu-abdallah/>

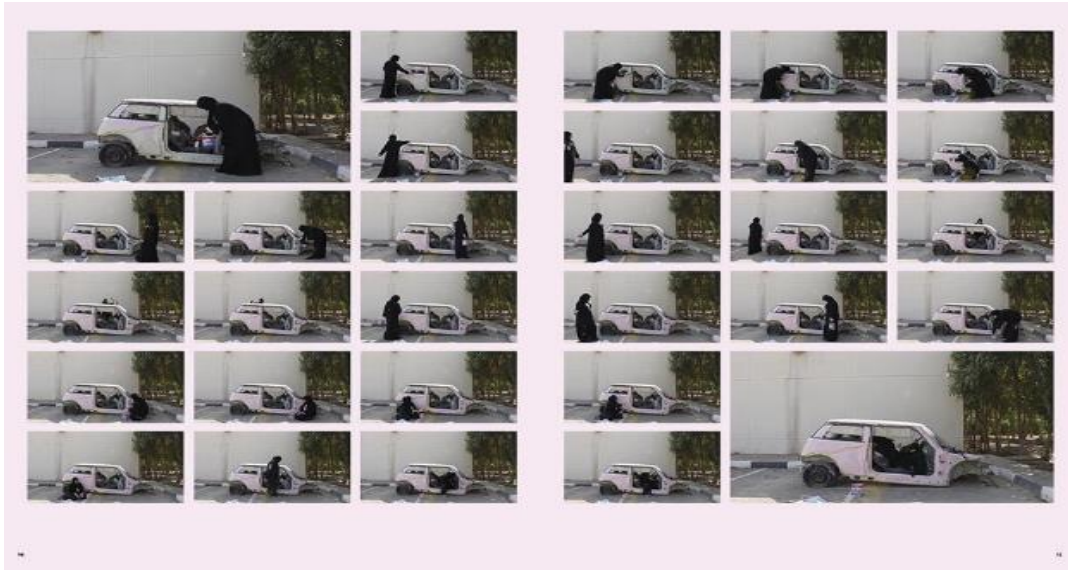


Fig. 3.27 Abu Abdallah, Sarah. 2012. *Saudi Automobile*. Video documentation of performance; Car installation. <http://www.yvimag.com/portfolio-item/yvi-magazine-8-liberation/>

The restriction imposed on women forbidding them to drive has been well documented, arguably obsessively, in the international press.¹⁷ Despite having been permitted to ride camels in the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the exclusion of women from the freedom and independence of driving had become a great frustration to many, and was a much-discussed issue within Saudi Arabia (Weston and Fowler 2011, 512). It is within this sociospatial context that Abdallah's work must be understood. *Saudi Automobile* involves Abu Abdallah painting light pink paint on a wrecked car in order to express a defiant gesture against the prohibition of Saudi women drivers which implicitly makes mobility accessible only to men (Abdallah, 2012). Thus, the work sheds light on the mobility restrictions experienced by women in Saudi Arabia—an issue which in 2017 was resolved through King Salman's declaration that women could obtain a driving license. In June 2018, the ban was officially lifted. Again, it would be a valid, and useful, investigation to assess the extent to which artistic practices might have

¹⁷ A book-length account of the issue is provided by Sharif and Issaq (2017). Formerly, only men were permitted to acquire driving licences, and while there was not a formal ban on women's ability to driving, they did not have the legal means to acquire licenses. Thus, women risked being arrested for driving in public.

influenced public discourse and ultimately legislative action on this key social issue. Attempting to measure such a transformation is beyond the bounds of this research; instead, the focus is rather on the existence of sociospatial practices in which these issues can be dealt with openly in public.

What is certain is that the appearance of Abdallah's work demonstrates the collaborative networks of women artists and curators that are so often necessary for works to not only exist in themselves, but also to inhabit spaces accessible to wider publics.¹⁸ In this respect, the production of shared spaces in contemporary art is shown to be necessarily the production of women working together and a key example of women taking leading roles within the formation of cultural institutions in Saudi Arabia; something still more remarkable in Saudi Arabia than other nations in the Gulf and beyond. While damaged, the car is still able to move. Though it has lost its original mechanical mobility, by being inserted into the context of the contemporary art gallery, it has gained another form of circulation, or nomadism. "I don't call for extreme freedom," Abdallah has written, "but we grow up at a very young age here and the more you grow up the more you realise you will never have full custody of your life" (Milner 2012, para.13). It might be argued, therefore, that, faced with this absence of 'custody' (that is, self-determination) in society, women have turned to art to reclaim it. Art thereby presents an emancipatory mechanism through which it is possible, not only for social issues to be raised, and new forms of discussion to be generated, but for women to determine their own sociospatial environment. If this is indeed what was achieved in *al-Sadu* among the Bedouin (which is the argument advanced here) then, in the absence of *al-Sadu* in modern urban Saudi Arabia, contemporary art provides an alternative sociospatial practice in which this might be possible.

¹⁸ Video installations of the work were exhibited at Alaan Artspace, set up by Neama al-Sudairy, an avid collector of contemporary Middle Eastern art. She aims for the centre to become a platform for debate and education about art, as well as a showcase for the best work by both male and female artists (Milner 2012).

What is especially important is that Abu Abdallah's social gesture is focused on a transformation of space, in the sense that it transgresses the prohibition placed upon women's access to vehicles. This is linked to the underlying claims which are put forward in this chapter. The car, in some respects like a Bedouin tent, is a portable, nomadic enclosure. It implies a condition of mobility, as opposed to being sedentary. This is not merely a figure of speech or an analogy, but a purposeful claim that art can evoke historic genealogies which are crucial in redefining the nature of space and society. Like a Bedouin tent, the car is both a practical enclosure optimised for mobility within a certain environmental terrain in which it is required to perform, and also the site of social negotiations within the life of the community. In this sense, the car and the tent have had radically different specific social histories in Saudi Arabia and embedded power structures, which exploring the car through the lens of *al-Sadu* can reconceptualise. Indeed, it was only during the course of writing this research that the historic reform was made which legalised women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia (Hubbard 2017).

Perhaps, whilst the influence of Abdullah's work in shifting debates about women's right to drive is beyond the scope of this thesis, understanding the work through my analysis nevertheless makes visible these issues and brings them into the social sphere on material and conceptual levels. As a caveat, the claim here does not rest on the direct ability of sociospatial artistic practice to influence social and political reforms, which in any case have no single cause. Even while it may contribute positively to social and political reform and to women's empowerment, sociospatial artistic practice has another effect, which is that it enables developments in the contemporary social fabric to be positioned in relation to—woven together with—the sociospatial practices of both the recent and the distant past, evoking genealogies and establishing lineages between past and present. This emerges as the key claim embedded in the art discussed in this chapter and gains importance in the current historical moment; a time when culture has emerged high on the agenda of the kingdom as a means of structuring

future social and economic growth. This process therefore makes urgent the endeavour to establish the roots of contemporary women's art within the historic fabric of Saudi Arabia's culture.

Sociospatial practice can be argued to be a form of collective memory. It is argued that it makes possible, the connection between the installation of a contemporary social sculpture by a living Saudi woman artist and the lives of countless anonymous women whose creative labour has contributed to knitting together the social fabric in which Saudi women and men live and work today. While the contemporary art institution in Saudi Arabia (as much as anywhere else) partakes of the architectural logic of the generic white cube (whether in Jeddah, Singapore, New York, or Moscow), a broader and deeper understanding of space reveals resonances which were perhaps not previously perceived. The existing languages of social and spatial practice, collaboration and performance help to frame these ideas, but they have not yet fully adapted themselves to the specificities of all cultural contexts. This chapter has been an attempt to re-situate those existing languages and contribute new layers of understanding in the process, in the hope that formulating a critical theory of contemporary sociospatial practice in art by Saudi women will contribute to new conversations, debates, and opinions whose diversity and publicness is essential to the growth of both art and women's visibility within Saudi Arabia.

Seeing the installations and performance of contemporary women artists in Saudi Arabia as a reimagining of social spaces which have previously borne significance within the fabric of Saudi culture makes possible the connection between social spaces inhabited by visitors to contemporary art institutions and the first appropriations of women's exhibition. Thinking more broadly still, it makes possible the continued interwoven connections between the work of Bedouin women in weaving together architectural spaces of social collectivism, and the sociospatial practices of contemporary Saudi women artists today. In the absence of

existing research on the possible resonances of contemporary art by Saudi women, this chapter has attempted to establish a new footing on which further studies of this art can be constructed.

If a search for a single work of art which encapsulated and evoked these claims were to be made a work of art by Al-Dowayan (2016): *Sidelines* (Fig. 3.28) will suffice.



Fig. 3.28 Manal Al-Dowayan and collaborating al-Sadu weavers, *Sidelines* (2016). Woven cloth. Beit al-Sadu, Kuwait.

Al-Dowayan's *Sidelines* can be seen as a fitting and comprehensive representation of the topic under investigation. In this work, with its encompassing spiral curves, there is a harmony between the enclosure and the women, expressed through the outline of an architectural enclosure. The women accentuate the feeling of solidarity. At the same time, the work refers to the concealment and isolation experienced by many women in traditional societies. The work is especially interesting because it lacks a threshold between private and public space and in this way, comments forcefully on the enclosure of women within patriarchal spatial structures. For the viewer, this artwork could be interpreted as encapsulating

the feminist theorist Judith Butler's ideas about knowledge as a type of performative activity (Butler 1999). Rather than focusing on content, this artwork encourages active political and aesthetic engagement. It also references spinning—an important element of the process of weaving, traditionally practised and passed down by women. This resonates with Butler's (1999) conceptualisations of gender as a role that entails the performative repetition of acts associated with being male or female. These associations are derived from social norms which legitimise and perpetuate binary classifications of gender (Butler 1999).

The cyclical and seasonal migrations undertaken by nomadic tribes are also evident in this work, and the desert environment would be reflected (as it is above) in the natural beige, white, brown and black colours of camel, goat and sheep hair. Despite the lack of initial context, the image can be interpreted to represent a social space that has allowed these women to gather and interact in a diverse setting. Al-Dowayan has collaborated with fellow *al-Sadu* weavers to develop this installation art piece, attempting to represent an empowered role of female artists against social, cultural and economic forces (Al-Dowayan 2018). This initiative also expresses respect and a desire for knowledge about unique cultural traditions that are easily erased in the rush to modernise.

At a time when *al-Sadu* weavers are facing disempowerment as a result of the disappearance of the traditional social, cultural and institutional context of their space-making practices, collaboration with contemporary networks of artistic producers raises the possibility of reasserting their social agency as providers of meaningful, shared, and empowering spaces for women. The evidence presented here is believed to be sufficient to make this claim plausible, and on that basis the following, final, chapter will reflect upon the analyses of sociospatial practice in contemporary art by Saudi women artists and the possibility of

articulating a new understanding of art, space, and society of lasting importance for the study of Saudi art.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

As a whole, this chapter has explored how sociospatial practices of Saudi women reflect prominent social issues and how women have used artistic platforms to highlight key social issues to further strengthen their voice and visibility in society. In the field of contemporary art practices, with a particular focus on women's practices in Saudi Arabia, the Arab region gained considerable global attention after the period of the 9/11 attack on the United States. The renewed focus was centred on Arab representations and media. Eminently, the creative domain is a pivotal field within the arena of which gender politics and identity play a crucial role, especially in the contemporary era where there is rising demand for cultural products from Arabs by the increasing youth population in the area (Al-Senan 2013).

From my analyses, I have articulated that these artists' works are social and spatial; whilst these take different relations, they are also sociospatial. However, there is a substantial variety in their works, and their working patterns and practices also differ depending on their relative emphasis on, or the relevance of, the social and/or spatial elements. This has been shown, for example, in the prominent use of participatory practices by Manal Al-Dowayan, in contrast to the archival, collecting based gestures of Maha Malluh, or the site-specific architectural interventions of Zahrah Al-Ghamdi. None of these works are reliant on any individual finished objects, but are, rather, consistent processes which might originate from an art studio or emerge from a definite period of creative practice without being considered to have reached a final state (Martin, El-Sheikh and Makled 2017). This is even true with a public sculpture such as *Food for Thought*, whose material traces of human labour are not 'frozen' by being put on display but rather kept alive from being submerged within the flow of people in and around them in public space. Thus, the artworks continue to exhibit and interact with social

spaces after (sometimes long after) their final assembly, and such practices continue to be constituents of the sociospatial work life.

In the case of *Food for Thought* (2014), the temporality of its continued social interactions will emerge over the long duration of its occupation of social space. In the case of other site-specific works exhibited at Jeddah art week, or installations which are able to travel across the circuits of the international art market (Al-Ghamdi's *Labyrinth*, for example), the period of their exposure to the public is shorter. This begins to introduce the question of the existence of adequate cultural institutions in Saudi Arabia that are capable of providing public spaces within which the sociospatial practices of women artists can find more lasting exposure (an issue taken up in the concluding chapter of this thesis). Exceptionally, many of these works have been incorporated at multiple places and multiple times. Each of these incorporations are considered to be an element of the sociospatiality of the work. As they move throughout Saudi Arabia and the globe, the works take on a nomadic aspect, accumulating, like a *beit al-sha'r*, a toponymal afterlife.

The sociospatial practices exhibited in the works of art discussed here often incorporate tactics of empowering people without, or with little, power; including the excluded classes so as to achieve remarkable and radical transformations of women's voices and visibility, even within the limited context of the art world. However, these are not adequate or quick solutions to long-term problems. The contradictions and disputes between problem-solving and artwork, filling the gaps between socially ignored groups and privileged institutions, and the necessity of developing innovative and appropriate critical and cultural context for such practices, are some of the problems that still require further attention. This notion is being increasingly acknowledged within press coverage of the Saudi art world (see for example Mohammad 2018).

The aim of this chapter was to explore ways that contemporary art by women artists in Saudi Arabia can be understood as a sociospatial practice through the lens of *al-Sadu* in the absence of any existing established critical framework. The initial intuition that understanding contemporary art by women in Saudi Arabia in relation to the sociospatial practices of Bedouin women's practice *al-Sadu*, has been supported by the work of the eight women artists considered in this chapter. In considering the works of these women artists, the chapter has accomplished three main functions:

1. To introduce the work of contemporary Saudi women artists whose work has rarely, if ever, been the subject of deep and sustained critical analysis, and especially has not been introduced together, as a network, a collective, or a group. The chapter has introduced these women, their practices, their materials, their spaces, their networks, and their relations to each other.
2. This chapter has not only introduced the work of these artists, it has *represented* that work, and framed it in particular ways. The work has been analysed and thematised, it has been presented in a particular way by situating it not only in relation to the contemporary world but, most significantly, in relation to the history of cultural practices by women in Saudi Arabia. This is not only true of the immediate past in terms of path-breaking women artists such as Safeya Binzagr, but also in relation to the much broader and deeper historical tradition of social space practices by Bedouin women in *al-Sadu*. There may be other ways to frame and speak about the work of these artists, but this chapter has purposefully aimed at situating them in relation to this historical perspective, and, by doing so, has established the binding and abiding concern with cultural memory in this art.
3. Thirdly, this chapter has begun to develop a particular critical conceptual language with which to discuss these women artists and their work. This language has been drawn

partly out of existing discourses on installation art, sociospatial practice, participation, performance, feminist theory, anthropology, and cultural geography, and its aim has been to find new ways of describing and critically analysing this work and the debates about women, space, society, and memory which it has produced.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

4.1 Introduction

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the journey of this research with a particular emphasis on the overarching research question and the way in which it has been answered. This chapter further discusses the original contributions that have been made to the existing literature in light of the research findings of this thesis. To reiterate, the aim of this research was to examine the role of specific properties of sociospatial artistic practices in Saudi Arabia by contemporary women artists, in producing ways of thinking differently about the sociopolitics of space and place making. This objective entailed multiple layers of interaction, historical precedent, and social collaboration. The literature showed that there is a lack of understanding of Saudi women's contemporary practices within the local Saudi context.

The rationale was thus to seek a framework that could support a nuanced and in-depth understanding of these contemporary practices. It was argued that these contemporary practices could be analysed via the prism of *al-Sadu* weaving. The research study was approached qualitatively using theories (secondary data) and case studies (primary data), which consisted of fieldtrips for the purpose of gathering data through exhibitions, interviews and questionnaire surveys. The analysis (Chapter 3) showed that there is a connection between *al-Sadu* and the contemporary practices of women artists to be understood within the context of sociospatial practices. Based on the analysis, this research study suggests that a number of contributions have been made to the existing literature; these are delineated in the subsequent section.

4.2 Contributions to Knowledge

The first contribution to knowledge in this thesis pertains to the use of *al-Sadu* as a conduit for understanding the production of Saudi contemporary practices. Secondly, this study develops a new approach for understanding sociospatial practices via the contemporary practices of women artists. To the knowledge of the researcher, this thesis marks the first study of contemporary artistic practices by women in Saudi Arabia. This can simply be explained as a result of the historic crossroads at which cultural production in Saudi Arabia now finds itself. At the time of writing, in 2018, exactly 50 years have passed since the first public exhibition of contemporary art by women artists was staged in Saudi Arabia. Such a moment presents itself as an important time to reflect on what has changed over those 50 years, but more importantly, what continuities can be observed between that crucial moment in the history of women and art in Saudi Arabia and the present day.

It is on the basis of such continuity, overlapping, and interweaving, that the sociospatial practices of *al-Sadu* can be considered something different from heritage preservation. My claim redefines the ways in which *al-Sadu* should be examined: through a multidimensional and prismatic lens that enables dialogues between ideas and practices. An example of such a way of thinking can be seen through the work of an artist such as Safeya Binzagr, whose works retain a vital influence on the way women's agency in space exerted through their sheer physical presence, as well as vicariously through aesthetic objects are understood (see Chapter 2 and 3). Binzagr's work is not merely interesting as a heritage from a previous period in modern art; it is also a living source of continuity that enables continued threads to be passed between the desert practices she documented and the present. In this sense, it is difficult to imagine, for example, the work of Zahra Al-Ghamdi on memory and architecture without the work of Binzagr. Rather than seeing a clean break between cultural heritage, the modernist painterly traditions of the 1960s, and contemporary installation art, this research has provided

the grounds to trace thematic continuities between all three paradigms. Thus, it may be claimed that the history of art might be interpreted in Saudi Arabia according to the thematic logic of sociospatial practices. This will provide the grounds for a richer understanding of the contribution of Saudi women to cultural production, and this may lead to further knowledge within the art world, more diverse debates and arguments, and a more complex overall conception of what it means to produce art in Saudi culture both today and tomorrow.

The stakes of these debates can potentially provide social significance. It has been noted on multiple occasions throughout this study that caution should be made in projecting the ideas and debates framed within the sociospatial practices of contemporary art upon society. The Saudi contemporary art world has been acknowledged as ultimately a limited area of general engagement by Saudi women at a national scale. This, though, is by no means a reason to discount it, or to limit the possibilities for its continual development. Through this study, a number of factors, which contribute to Saudi women artistic practices were identified, and they will be explained in the subsequent sections of this chapter. These factors also emphasise the potential audience benefiting from this research study.

———The first factor pertains to education. Indeed, the story of Saudi women's art is inseparable from education. Explicitly, the very fact that the 1968 Binzagr and Moussli exhibition took place in a girls' school, combined with the participatory research works of, for example, Manal Al-Dowayan, shows that the creation of sociospatial practices by women artists in Saudi Arabia is deeply engaged in educating girls and women. This is, as Chapter 2 demonstrated, intrinsic to the tradition of *al-Sadu* weaving, which requires that older women sit and work with younger women, that the technical mastery of the craft is in constant circulation, that every act of creativity involves the exchange and sharing of knowledge, and that the collective social fabric is produced out of the collective gestures of a diversity of

women working together. As one of the women to have benefitted from the education reforms in Saudi Arabia, which have made it possible not only to receive a school education (a relatively recent phenomenon for Saudi girls), but also to have the opportunity of studying abroad and travelling relatively freely to embark upon research and conversations, I can also present this research project itself as a participatory and to some extent collaborative product of sociospatial practices which themselves relate back to *al-Sadu*. *Al-Sadu* is research as well as production, theoretical and discursive speculation, as well as cultural creativity. This is, at least, the claim of this research, that sitting down together to talk and weave represents, for the history of art by Saudi women, a centrally important scenario for cultural production.

This emphasis on education also reconfigures the role and contribution of academic research within the Saudi context. For it to maintain a genuine relationship to the social fabric with which it has engaged critically, the research presented here must play a part in weaving together the threads of space and society in Saudi Arabia. As an artist/researcher I have presented my own practice in limited ways, highlighting episodes of collaborative research and workshops which, with the participation of other researchers, have seeded important parts of this work. The materiality of this work has been important and, in the research-as-weaving workshops I have held, practice and research have become woven together. The future of this research must continue to grow in that direction through exchange, particularly with my colleagues and students in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it is within the context of the Saudi arts education system that this research may find its most immediate reception as the ideas, artists, and art works discussed here will be especially relevant to those who are presently engaged in learning about and teaching the art of Saudi Arabia, particularly that produced by women.

———The second factor concerns cultural institutions. The existence of these scenarios cannot occur without a complementary institutional culture. All of the works considered in this study

have occupied an institutional context, the artist's own home/studio, a private Saudi gallery, a biennale, or a gallery abroad. Sociospatial practice has been defined as both social and spatial, and therefore integrated into the broader social fabric. It is important to recall that the reading of sociospatial practice in the work of Saudi women artists put forward in this study is proposed at a time when the Saudi state has publicly promised its support for new and emerging cultural institutions and industries. Such a historic moment is a juncture which offers great opportunities, but also one that creates the need for critical reflection on the relationship between the state and the artist mediated by the cultural institution. Anthony Downey has framed the predicament of globalisation by remarking that it is prone to "co-opt cultural economies into the realm of a privatized, overtly politicized ethic of production, exchange, and consumption" (Downey 2016, 16). On the cusp of change, this model of globalisation represents a course that Saudi Arabia might take, but one from which, as a result of its strong conservatism and traditionalism, it continues to hold back.

If the cultural institution may represent an instrument of oppression by dominating and controlling access to who or what becomes visible (as has certainly been the case in Saudi Arabia given the historic absence of state support for public art exhibitions), it also represents the possibility of access to art, the preservation of traditions, and the provision of education, all of which the Saudi state has also begun to champion through its recent investments and pledges as part of the Vision 2030 programme.

The works which have been presented here might be considered to further this process of self-critique by modifying the spaces in which they are installed, occupied and transformed through their repeated gestures of creativity and intervention. Creating spaces and transforming others can perhaps be seen as the essence of sociospatial practice, whether embodied in the weaving of houses of hair in the desert environment in which the social life of a tribe may be

housed, or weaving together contemporary spaces within the city, the gallery, and the museum which provide a place for social relations to be reflected upon and new ones to take shape. Therefore, for the present time, Saudi Arabia might need more spaces in which such transformative sociospatial practices can be accommodated to ensure the continual process of self-critique, reinvention, memory, reflection, and education.

———The third factor pertains to cultural memory. A major finding of this research was that culture is often produced in the domestic spaces of the home as it is in the institutionalised setting of a gallery. For instance, the paintings of Safeya Binzagr, (see Chapter 2), the video installations of Reem al-Nassar (see Chapter 3), the performances of Dana Awartani (see Chapter 3), and the installations of the Alem sisters (see Chapter 3), home, family, and the domestic are evoked through gestures on intimate and everyday scales. Using the theory of Pierre Nora, in this study, such spaces of cultural memory have been described as *milieux de mémoire*, that is, spaces of living memory in which the participation of many individuals contributes to a continually evolving memory. The act of memory is always a performance; it may be repeated many times, but each time is different. Different protagonists will remember differently, and in the interaction of these memories change and transformation are always taking place. If memory can be said to have materiality-- and this is an important claim of the research here-- then art takes on particular significance in giving form and shape to collective memories.

It can be claimed that this research has provided a foundation, in which the sociospatial act can be conceptualised to explore the history of art by Saudi women. While the desert has become a memory for so many Saudi women and men who now live fully urbanised lives, the memory of the agency of women as weavers of sociospatial practice is continued through the world of contemporary art. For example, looking at Zahra Al-Ghamdi's work upon her wall

sculptures, or Dana Awartani laying out floors of sand, or Manal Al-Dowayan collaborating with *al-Sadu* weavers, the continuation of sociospatial practices in which Saudi women have made art can be witnessed. Recognising this should overturn any notion that women in Saudi Arabia are consigned, whether conceptually or actually, to an inferior role in society. Instead, it should be acknowledged, that it is through the deep traditions of sociospatial practice that women in Saudi Arabia achieve voice and visibility.

———Based on the above contributions, it can be seen that this research provided a holistic understanding of Saudi women’s contemporary art practices as well as suggested new ways of thinking related to sociospatial practices. More importantly, this study suggests a number of future works, which can build upon the ideas developed in this research. Firstly, there is the need to further investigate Saudi art through a richer understanding of its cultural roots where this study used *al-Sadu*, for example. In other words, other crafts, materials or different forms of arts may potentially lead into other significant findings that contribute to Saudi art and perhaps explain complex phenomenon. Further, the focus of this research study was on Saudi women’s contemporary practices, but future work can adopt a similar focus by taking Saudi men into consideration. This may reveal further findings and perhaps explain other associated complexities within sociospatial practices. Further research is also needed in order to explore the contemporary practice by artists through the lens of traditional practices such as *al-Sadu*, and whether this can contribute towards a richer understanding of culture, place and space.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - Art in Saudi Arabia

Art in KSA

The first fine exhibition held in KSA 1935	was in Jeddah for artist Mohammed Saeed Rasem
Fine Arts Scholarships 1960	To Roma and Egypt
First Saudi art exhibition March 1965	
Establishment of the Institute of Art Education for Teachers in Riyadh 1966	
Open Air Museum 1970	the museum is one of the largest of its kind. The massive display includes sculptures, paintings and fountains that are found throughout the city.
The establishment of the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts in 1973	
Gulf Cultural Week in Paris 1981	
The Gulf Cultural Week in Tokyo 1985	
And the exhibition of Fine Arts of the Youth of the Gulf Cooperation Council 1989	
Artists House 1993	
Edge of Arabia 2003	
Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives (ALJCI) 2003	To inform you briefly, Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives (ALJCI), the corporate social responsibility arm of ALJ, was founded in 2003. Five initiatives were born and are up and running successfully to do with job creation, education, arts and culture, social and health well-being, and last but not least research and activities in the area of poverty alleviation. Accessed November 22, 2017. http://edgeofarabia.com/exhibitions/rhizoma-generation-in-waiting .

Historical events

- **Foundation of KSA**
23 September 1932

- **Discovery of Oil**
4 March 1938

- **First Arab-Israeli War**
15 May 1948 - 10 March 1949

- **Education System**
1953

- **King Saud**
9 November 1953

- **Saudi Arabia Abolishes Slavery**
1960

- **King Faisal**
2 November 1964 - 25 March 1975

- **1st oil boom**
1969 - 1980

- **King Khalid**
25 March 1975 - 13 June 1982

- **Grand Mosque Seizure**
1979 - 1980

- **King Fahad**
13 June 1982 - 1 August 2005

- **Gulf War 1**
1990 - 1991

- **Allow the public to use the Internet**
Approx. 1998 - 1999

- **second oil boom in three decades**
2003 - 2013

- **Iraq War**
March 20, 2003 - December 18, 2011

- **King Abdullah**
1 August 2005 - 23 January 2015

- **Saudi-led intervention in Yemen**
2015 - Present

- **King Salman**
23 January 2015

<p>Jeddah Art week 1st edition 4 January 2014 - 10 April 2014</p>	<p>Moallaqat & Past is Prologue Curated by Aya Alireza & Raneem Farsi</p>
<p>Jeddah Art week 2ed edition January 2015</p>	<p>Fast Forward, Curated by Bashar Al Shroogi</p>
<p>Jeddah Art Week 3ed edition 10 February 2016 - 10 May 2016</p>	<p>Earth & Ever After Curated by Mona Khazindar & Hamza Serafi</p>
<p>Jeddah Art week 4th edition February 2017 - May 2017</p>	<p>safar Sam AM Bardaoui & Till Fellrath</p>
<p>Open Air Museum December 2017</p>	<p>First time to open sculptures park by women</p>

Women's art in KSA

- **Safeya Binzagr (DOB)**
1940

old city of Jeddah ,West of Saudi (Al-Hijaz a region)
She was educated in Egypt and the UK.
She has exhibited since 1968
Lives & Works Jeddah.
- **Madeha Alajroush**
1955

all started in the '70s, I was working and therefore extra money to spend; and so I bought myself a camera. As you can imagine, it was all analog in those days. My first experience shooting was at a cousin's wedding and that was a major flop. I didn't know until the rolls of films were developed that all the prints were black. That's when I decided to properly take a course on photography in the US. From the wedding to eventually finding my work at one time in all of Riyadh's billboards."
Pabalate, Jou. "Madeha Al Ajroush Scratching the Surface." Destination KSA. March 01, 2017. Accessed November 23, 2017.
<https://destinationksa.com/madeha-al-ajroush-scratching-the-surface/>.
- **Maha Malluh (DOB)**
1959

in Jeddah, she is from Riyadh Najd region. Central of Saudi Arabia
She was educated in Riyadh, K.S.A. &U.S.A.
She has exhibited since 1976
Lives & Works Riyadh.



<p>■ Shadia Alem (DOB) 1960</p>	<p>in Mecca, a conservative typical family</p>
<p>■ Manal Al-Dowayan (DOB) 1973</p>	<p>in Dhahran, in the East of KSA a former ARAMCO employee who is now a leading full-time multi-media visual artist</p>
<p>■ Zahra Al-Ghamdi (DOB) 1978</p>	<p>Al Bahah is a city in the south west of Saudi Arabia. She has exhibited since 2010 in Saudi Arabia, Dubai and the UK Her work explores memory and the past in traditional architecture. She was awarded her PhD at Coventry University, UK teaches art at the King Abdulaziz University- Jeddah.</p>
<p>■ Eman Elgibreen (DOB) 1981</p>	<p>in Al Hada , raised in Riyadh She was educated in K.S.A and the UK. Lives & Works Riyadh.</p>
<p>■ Dana Awtarani (DOB) 1987</p>	<p>a Palestinian-Saudi artist born and raised in Jeddah She was educated in UK studied at Central St Martins and The Prince's School of Traditional Arts. Her work has been exhibited since 2010 in Saudi Arabia, the Venice Biennale, San Francisco and the Kochi Biennale. Awtarani uses traditional craft techniques to produce contemporary multi-media works Lives & Works Jeddah.</p>
<p>■ The Saudi Arts Center 1988</p>	<p>established by Princess Nora Bint Badr and the artist Mona Al-Gosaibi in Jeddah a gallery which provides classes in painting and drawing specifically to girls</p>
<p>■ The opening of Darat Safia Bin Zaqar 1995</p>	<p>an art exhibition that presents all its works to the general public</p>
<p>■ Maha Malluh Sculpture 2011</p>	<p>After 30 years first artwork display in Jeddah open air museum</p>
<p>■ K.A PhD 30 September 2014 - 30 September 2018</p>	
<p>■ Anonymous: Was A Women exhibition 2015</p>	<p>Anonymous: Was A Women exhibition at the Hafez Gallery in Jeddah Hafez Gallery ?</p>
<p>■ Honoring Safiayah Feb 2017</p>	<p>Janadriyah31 festival had honored a cultural figure every year at the national level. King Salman decorated prominent Saudi figures Safiyyah Bint Saeed Bin Zaqar with King Abdulaziz Medal of the First Class on the occasion.</p>

First Women's Exhibition

April 1968

By Safeya Binzagr and Mounirah Mosly held in Jeddah at Dar al-Tarbiya high school. Safeya had herself planned and organized the successful event. Since there were no specialized galleries at the time, she had to set up the classrooms of this girls' high school and furnish them as much as needed to make them adequate enough to host that event.



The first woman solo exhibition

1970

Safeya Binzagr

Safyah solo exhibition in London

1973

Saudlaat

2005

an art platform that focuses on Saudi female artists

Soft Power Exhibition

26 September 2012 - 10 October 2012

The exhibition shows works entirely created by women, who are both diverse methodologically and in terms of their artistic style. Further, the founder, creative director and chief curator are all women.

Manal AlDowayan ,Sidelines

2014



I remembered I'd forgotten you by Dana Awartani

Approx. 2017



The Silver Plate by Reem Alnasser

Approx. 2017

video installation. Interested in the social power of women's rites, ceremonies, and social behaviours in domestic space using ordinary objects. she is from Jizan in Saudi Arabia. Her work is informed by personal experience and close observation of the themes of movement and mobility and cultural change. She has exhibited in Saudi Arabia including at 21,39 earlier this year.



Labyrinth and time by Zahrah Al Ghamdi

Feb 2017 - Approx. May 2017

sand, cotton, and water, approximately 2.5m x 5m, Goldmoor Gallery, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

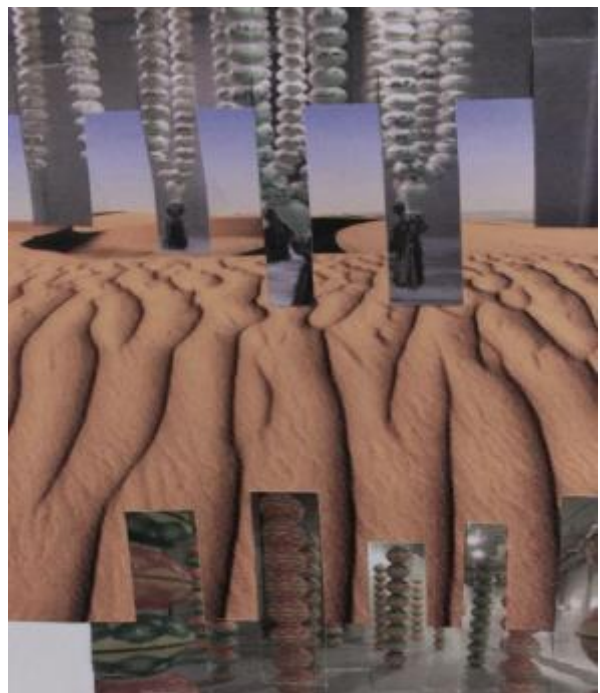


Shift

1 July 2017 - 2 September 2017

women show of artists from Saudi Arabia. Featuring Dana Awartani, Reem al-Nasser and Zahra Al-Ghamdi.

Appendix 2 Author' works











Appendix 3 Questionnaire on Contemporary Art and Social Change in Saudi Arabia

This initial questionnaire has the primary function of identifying figures for further research, which will be through conversations and interviews. It will indicate what proportion of people hold women's issues to be centrally important to the way they understand the contemporary world, and also identify those who consider installation art to be an important theme. The questionnaire will also garner a series of provisional, crowd-sourced definitions of this study's main terms: installation art and feminism. Establishing this crucial data will take the study to a place where a second phase of fieldwork research can be planned, targeting those individuals who will be able to and would like to offer more information?

The contemporary art world in Saudi Arabia is growing. At the same time, Saudi society continues to evolve. Artists have investigated social changes in their art in different ways and with different mediums, producing a variety of responses. My research seeks to ask how contemporary art might serve as a tool for social change and initiate an important dialogue between contemporary artists and the viewer. Part of that research is to seek the ideas and opinions of artists, curators, academics, social workers, thinkers, and organisers, in order to build a picture of contemporary art and society in Saudi Arabia now. This will lead towards increasing the knowledge and information available on art and society in Saudi Arabia today. Your participation in this process by responding to the below questions would be very much appreciated. Please feel free to offer your ideas anonymously or, if you wish, please write down your contact details.

Name: _____
Age: 20-30 31-40 41-50 51-60 60-above
Gender: Female Male
Occupation:
Education level: postgraduate undergraduate other:.....
Position: Artist Curator Art director academic other.....
(you can choose more than one)
Email: _____
Contact _____ phone: _____

Questions related to Saudi contemporary art and installation art:

How would you define installation art?

One of the major aims of this research is to provide a new definition of the term 'installation art' based on practice in Saudi Arabia and outside the West generally. This question aims to 'crowd source' definitions by testing how 'installation art' is being used and understood in the Saudi artworld. These definitions will later be set alongside literature reviews already undertaken.

If you were to name one Saudi contemporary art work what would it be? Why did you choose this work?

It is anticipated that the respondents to this questionnaire will be familiar with a great many works of art and deal with them every day. This question aims to encourage the respondent to reveal their standpoint on art through art itself. The answers will collectively create a 'bank' of art works representative of this particular sample's preferences and serve as a good starting point for defining contemporary art practice in Saudi Arabia.

Questions related to Saudi women's issues/feminism:

What is your opinion on the issues facing women in Saudi Arabia?

This open question implies that there are women's issues in Saudi Arabia, but allows the respondent to freely define what they think those issues may be. *Mahram*, the system of male guardianship, is argued in this research to be the major constraining force on women in Saudi Arabia; however, it is more objective not to imply that guardianship is the sole possible answer to the question. Responses may confirm this research's emphasis on *mahram*, or suggest alternatives.

Are you a feminist? Whether you said 'yes' or 'no,' what is your opinion of feminism?

The directness of this question follows to a degree the penetrative style of feminist inquiry. The question is direct and potentially confrontational but it is designed to be so. The question will test how or whether the term 'feminist' is used by participants in the art world, evaluate its significance, and inquire into the connotations it may carry. It may also provide a space for debate over feminism/Islamic feminism to take place.

Questions related to art and social change/activism/art and society:

In your opinion, what is the role of art in society?

It is expected that this question will elicit diverse responses representing the different positions that the artist is considered to take in Saudi society today. This is a question that has been repeated throughout art history, covering many different periods and places and is perhaps one of the central questions of art history as an academic discipline. It is the aim of this research to begin answering that fundamental question and it therefore has an important place in this questionnaire.

Could you name any Saudi artists who are activists?

As in other questions above, part of the function of this questionnaire is to carry out some of the basic work of collecting and documenting contemporary art in Saudi Arabia which has not yet been done. Determining which artists may be considered "activists," that is, clearly engaged with social issues, is an important part of that work. The word "activist" is used advisedly, knowing that it can connote political radicalism but it is hoped therefore that artists named here will have a strong, rather than a tenuous, relationship to the political.

If there is anything else you would like to add please feel free to write it here.

Appendix 4: The 2009 *October* questionnaire

Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”*

The category of “contemporary art” is not a new one. What is new is the sense that, in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment. Such paradigms as “the neo-avant-garde” and “postmodernism,” which once oriented some art and theory, have run into the sand, and, arguably, no models of much explanatory reach or intellectual force have risen in their stead. At the same time, perhaps paradoxically, “contemporary art” has become an institutional object in its own right: in the academic world there are professorships and programs, and in the museum world departments and institutions, all devoted to the subject, and most tend to treat it as apart not only from prewar practice but from most postwar practice as well.

Is this floating-free real or imagined? A merely local perception? A simple effect of the end-of-grand-narratives? If it is real, how can we specify some of its principal causes, that is, beyond general reference to “the market” and “globalization”? Or is it indeed a direct outcome of a neoliberal economy, one that, moreover, is now in crisis? What are some of its salient consequences for artists, critics, curators, and historians—for their formation and their practice alike? Are there collateral effects in other fields of art history? Are there instructive analogies to be drawn from the situation in other arts and disciplines? Finally, are there benefits to this apparent lightness of being?

—Hal Foster for the Editors

* This questionnaire was sent to approximately seventy critics and curators, based in the United States and Europe, who are identified with this field. Two notes: the questions, as formulated, were felt to be specific to these regions; and very few curators responded.

Questionnaire answers

If you were to name one Saudi contemporary artwork, what would it be? Why did you choose this work?

1. "Tree of Guardians" by Manal Al-Dowayan

It is an outstanding work in terms of its concept, execution and medium

The concept of the work is based on a social problem faced by women whereby women are not included in family trees.

2. "The Overturned Ladder" by Bakr Shaykhoun

It was the first work by a Saudi artist to catch my eye in a surprising way and its concept was pioneering at the time.

When I saw it, I felt that the work was daring and professionally executed and because of this I will never forget it.

3. "Paradise Has Many Gates" by 'Ajlan Gharim 'Ajlan

I chose it because of its depth. I consider it an arresting work even if the viewer is not interested in art. Also, its execution is excellent.

4. If I were asked to name an artistic work, the most important thing is that it has an effect on the viewer because it is very important that the concept of the work is creative.

5. The experiment "Personal Development" by the Saudi artist Ahmed Mater

It discusses the most important changes in the life of a person and reflects their impact on our way of thinking and behaving.

6. Perhaps Bakr Shaykhoun because he is a pioneer. At the moment I also find the works of Abdelnasser Gharem fascinating

7. "The Plane" from the "Balance" collection by the Saudi Artist Ahmed al-Ghamidi: simplicity, ease of reception by the viewer and a powerful concept

8. Works which have true intellectual content and orientation because they convey an identity which reflects the personality of the artist and their society

9. "School Desks" by the artist Mahdi Jareebi because it documents the notes children scratch into desks which remind us of those that used them in the past

10. The photographic series "I" by Manal Al-Dowayan

11. The most recent works by Abdunasser Gharem

12. Any artistic work which adopts a contemporary method and approach, is not a copy of modern schools and which reflects the Saudi identity

13. "Magnetism" (2010) by the artist Ahmed Mater. I chose this work because of the simplicity of its presentation and the depth of its meaning

14. Contemporary Saudi art is in a state of continual development and good and effective experimentation. It is better for contemporary art works to not be named so that viewers can identify their meaning based on their visual content

15. The works of the artist Abdunasser Gharem due to their concepts and the way in which they are presented

16. There is not a specific work but generally I am attracted by artistic works that embody religious and cultural identity and represent them in a simple, clear and individual way

17. "Stamp" by Abdunasser Gharem. The work speaks about the misuse of religion

Many of the issues in Saudi society do not come from religion but the misuse of religion. It is important for artists to express social issues through their art

18. "The Message" by Abdunasser Gharem is a complete work in terms of its concept and execution and is more advanced than other contemporary Saudi works. It is very important in contemporary art to develop the concept of the work so that it constitutes a new contribution and a different perspective
19. There is no contemporary Saudi artistic work that is "contemporary" in the true sense of the word or that can be described as art, including abstract art. All of the experiments we have seen are frivolous, chaotic and involve the misuse of terminology. They have harmed the concept of modern art and modernism and the cultural and artistic scene in general. They have afflicted the Saudi visual art scene in the context of a chaotic environment characterised by an absence of artistic discipline, standards and frank criticism. Its standards have been undermined and we have entered a state of terminological and conceptual quackery. Terrible art, earth art, installation art, video art, confused diagnosis, neo-totemism and post-symbolism: big names for small ideas. Conceptual art in particular was inflated and grew until it came to dominate the scene, not on the basis of understanding, study, conviction, systematic training or philosophical belonging, but rather a desire for change, copying, a gloominess of vision and a sluggish sense of beauty – because it was easy to produce and provided a way to become famous with no effort. They brag of their familiarity with European artistic techniques as something essential and important on account of their prevailing influence and central importance. They completely immerse themselves in Western artistic culture which can include heresy and immorality and stand in opposition to religion, customs and politics. It is unlike our traditions and it does not accord with our beliefs or customs. Many artists, especially embossers, unable to find a place in the Saudi visual arts scene, who were wandering lost in the corridors of art, began experimenting and exhibiting at events in shopping malls, where art was used inappropriately and became art for those who do not appreciate art. The reason for this was the chaos of the Saudi visual arts scene, and their ignorance of this kind of art and its methods and ideas. They did not follow its innovation and evolution making the argument of renewal and development. All of the exhibitions were modest with ideas adapted from works shown at major exhibitions in the Arab world or internationally or copied from the internet and books with a change in the title or the materials, colours or techniques used (to escape from the problem of copying and theft) and then perfumed with Oudh oil, wormwood or ambergris to give a local touch. Their execution is primitive and the presentation superficial; some are decorative works made with waste materials such as paving slabs, restaurant tables, students' pipettes, building rubble and scraps from tailors and ironworkers. This has harmed original work and will never belong to art or conceptualism.
20. The works of Ahmed Mater and Mohammad alGhamidi because they fit the description and are contemporary in their ideas and execution

How would you define installation art?

1. It is art connected with the idea of being executed in space

Artists should understand the concepts of space, shadow, light and mass.

It is distinctive because artists are not restricted to a particular medium or size

The positioning of the work in empty space gives the viewer the opportunity to move around the work and to become a part of it

2. One form of contemporary art which is based on expressing an idea beyond a picture frame, created in free space with the goal of communicating an opinion or issue in an attractive way
3. It is a three-dimensional work of art, usually created to be shown in a previously specified location which attempts to create a dialogue with its surroundings. As such, the viewer considers not merely the work, but also its surroundings.
4. It is art which relies on real space and makes it an essential part of the work of art. It does this by organising elements and components of the work of art within a specific area of space, in an exhibition room or an empty or exterior space, to give it a clear artistic meaning with regard to the importance of space as an essential component of visual art and the conceptual transformation from the illusory space of traditional art to space communicating the content of the scene or the message contained in the work
5. I believe that artists that are successful in installation art are those that are able to make the viewer a part of the work and make the audience feel that the form is reality and use technology in the service of the work and its concept.
6. It is making the best use of space to exhibit a particular work. The space should suit the work. For example, some works should not be shown in wide open spaces because they lose their value while the reverse can also be true.

It means making the best use of space and its characteristics for every part of the work

7. Very few people are academic experts in this field and we do not have an academic specialism in the fine arts
8. It is creating an artistic work which explores the relationship between the artistic assemblage and the space around it
9. It is art situated in interior and exterior spaces

Usually it consists of artistic works which are larger than normal and sometime also temporary

10. Executing a work of art in space and making the space a part of the work
11. It is work which is completed by the participation of the audience
12. It is art which involves audience participation which is connected to the work of art
13. Installation art differs from sculpture and drawing because it contains multiple elements within a specific space. The viewer can be a part of it
14. Work which involves interaction between the audience and the space
15. It is post-modernist art in which the role of the artist is to position different artistic elements within a specific space with the purpose of involving the audience in the work and reflecting social concepts and ideas
16. Everything that is executed in space, in emptiness
17. In my humble opinion it offers an ambivalent interpretation of artistic reality. I consider the connection of art to space as an expression which stimulates the imagination

To offer a summary definition, it is bricolage by means of the imagination and often finished objects are equivalent to space. It is produced by means of imaginative bricolage before its completion

18. Installation art is intentionally bringing together parts of artistic works with layers of the self and physical awareness of the body. This means that the environment and objects around the work become part of the artistic experience as a whole

19. It is art which rests upon transforming the concept of artistic beauty into an expression of a concept and turning it into an objective and a tangible reality. It is a total reversal of the traditional relationships of the artistic work. There is no interest in the work itself or adherence to traditional and known artistic principles, rules or terminology with regard to composition, mass, appearance, colour and its artistic effect, standards, aesthetic and sensual values or the craft of the artist. Using multiple media and materials, this art form has passed through a number of phases, experiments and thoughts as well as a number of variants and approaches. It has collided with the fields of literature, poetry, cinema, theatre, science and philosophy. It appeared after the Dada movement in Europe in the mid-1950s and spread to North and South America, Russia, Western Europe, China and Japan. It was controversial and faced both acceptance and rejection, especially in Europe and America which in recent years have begun to return to traditional art and portraits because opponents consider installation art absurd and a waste of time, effort and money which vanishes immediately following its exhibition and cannot be acquired by museums or collectors. It reached the Arab world at the end of the 1980s and began to invade the Saudi artistic scene at the beginning of the present millennium.

20. It is three-dimensional art which exists in space

It is an extension of sculpture which has moved beyond mass and a base to become sculpture in open space

It provides artists with a broad palate for expression but at the same time they must be conscious of the relationship of mass, light and space and their relationship with other elements

It is distinguished by the fact that it is art that viewers can participate in and where interaction with viewers provides a further dimension

21. Installation art is building a work in space. It helps the artist to use diverse media.

It is a type of three-dimensional art which uses models, images, sound or video.

The basic focus of this type of art is a concept and the extent of its impact on the viewer

22. Installation art is a trend within postmodern art. It is based on the interaction between the artistic work and the viewer, in accordance with the vision of the artist. It means truly working in space and making the space a part of the artistic work

23. It is art which creates three-dimensional works in space and permits those who are knowledgeable about art to enjoy it in different ways from different angles

In your opinion, is there a role for art in Saudi society? If so, please explain

1. Yes, there is a role for art in Saudi society. Many artists have presented works about topics which serve society and held workshops and exhibitions involving children and people with special needs

2. I believe that art in Saudi society is elitist and restricted to artists and a small number of enthusiasts

It has not reached society in an appropriate way and media interest is restricted to publishing news of exhibitions or prizes

I have yet to see a programme focused on educating society about art and as a consequence art has not reached the public and is not given the attention it deserves.

Genuine artists are not known in the media and receive little attention. Many of them do not use modern social media and have no interest on it. As a consequence, their achievements and creativity fail to go beyond the studio.

Artists cannot be excused for the limited reach of their work because they have not worked to publicise their works and artistic culture or to bring it to the public to even a limited degree.

3. Yes, there is an important role for all forms of art in Saudi society. This is especially true at the present time as Saudi Arabia is going through a revolution in all forms of visual art which are rapidly opening up. Unfortunately, this has not been accompanied with artistic education. This has meant that the revolution has had many negative effects in addition to the positive effect of many exhibitions being held.
4. Yes, art has an important role in all of its forms in Saudi society, although there are many cultural and social and religious restrictions which limit its impact and distribution.
5. Yes, art has an unseen role in Saudi society. The arts have long provided employment and beauty in the surrounding environment. They communicate conceptual messages through symbols and images in accordance with society's emotional needs and need for beauty in its environment and surroundings
6. To a certain extent

This role is not desired and when it is seen it does not go beyond individual cases which serve previously specified personal or institutional objectives. Art does not generally serve social issues or trends.

7. In my opinion art does not have a significant role. Art advances slowly

Its role is minimal and restricted to artists themselves because there is no culture of art in society. Artists merely influence each other

8. The role of art is to reflect the culture of society and is the nation's most important ambassador, able to speak all of the languages of the world

There are individual efforts which reflect our society through art and introduce it to the world. We work hard with our writing to know art and to teach society to understand its importance since it represents a refined aspect of civilisation which represents us not only to local society but to the world. Unfortunately, however, art currently does not fulfil the role desired of it due to a number of reasons, the most important of which is the failure of official institutions responsible for this area which lack expertise in organising and supporting art.

9. No, it does not have a role because society has no contact with art and is concerned with other issues

10. I remain sceptical due to restrictions on freedom of expression which may present artists in society with many red lines which are very difficult to cross.

Artists may be able to challenge these lines through intelligent and subtle messages to the ordinary viewer but in most cases this message goes to the elite that does not need to change its way of thinking

11. Depending on the art form. Traditional arts do not play a significant role but artistic production which uses modern technology such as YouTube clips has an important role in exploring social issues
12. It has had a major role during the past five years, as a result of an attractive professional gallery and the Saudi Arts Council. Other galleries, however, are at an amateur level, as are associations which support young people and beginners interested in art
13. Yes, but to a variable extent. There is a significant gap between those who are interested in art and followers of art in all its forms. This is due to the lack of logistical support from government and civil society institutions for art and artists.

14. Yes, art plays a prominent role in Saudi society. The western, central and eastern regions are centres for art, followed by ‘Asir Region as a result of the opening of the “Muftaha” touristic village for the visual arts. From the academic perspective, the first department for training in the arts was opened in King Saud University in Riyadh over 50 years ago. Subsequently departments for training in the arts spread throughout Saudi Arabian universities and have recently developed in a remarkable way in terms of producing artists, designers and engineers specialising in the fields of art and design. This reflects a change in Saudi society’s understanding of art
15. I consider that the role of art is extremely limited in Saudi society for a number of reasons.

These include the issues of prohibitions, dismissal of the value of art and artists, the lack of a culture of art appreciation, a lack of private visits to artistic exhibitions and an absence of exhibition spaces and art museums

16. The role of art continues to be limited in Saudi society due to the small size of the segment of the population which is interested in it
17. There is no doubt that art has an important role in Saudi society but there is a degree of backwards movement from some. This can be attributed to the absence of the arts in general and particularly in public spaces. Instead art is only found in galleries and exhibition spaces in universities.
18. I can separate my answer into two parts: the role of art within Saudi Arabia and its role beyond it. Unfortunately, art is largely invisible within Saudi Arabia without exerting individual effort. It could play a clear and important role outside of Saudi Arabia in conveying a positive image of Saudi heritage and culture in other countries, for example through exhibitions and those interested in art, its appreciation and ways of displaying it
19. Certainly, art has a role but it has yet to assume its appropriate position in Saudi society.

The appearance of art described as art in all of its forms is still considered recent Saudi society is accustomed to handicrafts which are a part of daily life. The appearance of the arts constitutes a transitional stage that needs more time and effort from artists. Art is studied to a basic level in art classes in schools and art colleges. Studying and writing about art is also a new phenomenon which means that society needs education to develop awareness of its importance

20. It has a limited role due to the gulf between artists and society and the absence of education channels for the public about the visual arts which would bring artistic culture to society and make it aware of and understand visual art. There are also no specialised critics
21. It has a small role rather than a major one and does not cause significant change in society

Art exists separately from society

Artists can engage with social issues in their works but not everyone in Saudi society has the artistic education necessary to appreciate the different kinds of art, by which I mean contemporary art forms. Most of society favours classical and traditional art and realist painting. Completing the work of creativity depends upon the artist, work and recipient. The missing link remains the public’s lack of awareness of the importance of the arts and their role in society

There is hope, however, with the emergence of a generation of cultured young people which practices the arts and produces contemporary art. Therefore, with time, the relationship will change and art will take on a major role

22. The arts are public like other phenomena. They are a human phenomenon, and thus result from and influence social reality. Visual art in Saudi Arabia appeared where conditions were appropriate. During the years between its emergence and the present day, it has not been influenced like other phenomena by social changes and the development our country has seen, particularly during the past two decades in areas such as storytelling, poetry and music. Despite the existence of supervisory bodies and exhibition spaces, the fact that many exhibitions have been held, and the presence of over 4975 artists, the arts have failed to keep pace with the rest of the world and with changes in neighbouring countries. This is due to a lack of official recognition of art as art, a dismissive attitude towards it, the existence of many barriers and red and yellow lines, threats and prohibitions, an adherence to the Islamic philosophy of art and Arab conception of art, and servitude to customs and traditions, courtesies, reverence and undeserved praise. It has not taken steps forward in the art world and its aspirations and hopes have not been realised by establishing art institutes, academies and centres. All of the exhibitions follow traditional and formulaic approaches and fail to deliver experimentation and innovation. They do not add anything new to artists or to art. Artists are trapped in a whirlpool of changing from one school of contemporary art to another, searching for their artistic identity through pre-existing artistic approaches and techniques, utilising them in their works as a way to obtain success and recognition as artists. There are no important experiments that attract attention. The greatest disaster is that the supervisory bodies contribute to this misery and retrogression by failing to support artists materially or morally. They are not interested in creating the infrastructure and putting in place the ideas, plans and projects necessary to support the development and spread of visual art, or in overturning the obstacles and restrictions which inhibit its progress. This is needed in order to bring the arts to the level of a movement in the full sense of the term with a founding logic, and which brings together and builds upon rich traditions of thought, technique and content with a clear conceptual and philosophical approach. Artistic institutions and cadres accompany the cultural scene in Saudi Arabia, in the context of the evolution of life and the winds of change in the art world. All of the official and private exhibitions that are held across the country each day end with the end of the event and are not documented in books, a database, or an encyclopaedia of artists. This does not encourage writing and research about art. Nor are there any museums to record serious experiments and early versions and to strengthen the status of artists and promoters of art as creative individuals in society. A very important issue in the development of art is that society itself has no interest in it and considers it a game and waste of time. In some societies it is viewed as a taboo and a sin. The proof of this is that only religious images, verses of the Quran, sayings of the prophet and homilies are to be found in people's homes and it is extremely rare to see visual art. People understand art as graffiti, loose tiles, fraud and drawing pictures which are then exhibited and sold. They do not consider that art is an important aspect of and way of life which springs from the lives of people. It speaks to them and assaults

their senses and emotions and therefore inspires a great deal of their heritage, individuality and meanings. It expresses their experience and represents their environment, society and reality as well as their relationships with their surroundings. It provides a living image of this reality and is the safe storage place of people's history and civilisation. It is the mirror of nations' cultural heritage, customs and tradition. It is the window through which the world sees civilisations, arts, cultures and the advancement of people. It is what allows people to perceive with their eyes and hearts the feeling of natural beauty, pleasure and transformation and gives hope in heavenly miracles and coming close to and thanking God. Finally, art plays an important role in serving humanity and the national economy. All companies and manufacturers in the world put artistic methods at the top of their priorities in the production of any commercial product. They emphasise innovation and modern design, a beautiful appearance, proportion of form and harmony of colours before studying economic feasibility. This is because they are some of the most important factors in terms of attracting consumers' attention, and the success of the product. Consumers are attracted by beautiful forms, innovative design and harmonious colours, before they know the nature of the product, the technology used, its price or value or the benefits it brings. The saleability of product comes from the success of the company and is thus in the interests of the nation. Visual art continues to circulate amongst a narrow group consisting of artists and a minority of intellectuals due to the idea, which has been promoted in society, that art is an inconsequential way of relaxing and a hobby practised in schools.

Can you name any Saudi artists who you think are activists?

1. There is no concept of a social activist artist in Saudi society

Artists need to understand the role of the artist in society and must express its issues

2. Abd el Haleem Radawi

He called for peace for a period of time in his works which were exhibited in most nations across the world.

His work was distinguished by the inclusion of religious and social symbols such as the olive branch and dove of peace, as well as text

Through them he worked to promote his goals

3. I do not think that our artists are sufficiently close to all sectors of society
4. The artist Ahmed Mater and deservedly so
5. In my opinion there are no activist artists in our society. Our artists follow their own orientations rather than those of society

An activist is someone who searches for the needs of the minority and represents their voices through their artistic work and does not work merely for their own reputational and financial gain

6. Personally, I do not know of any activist artist. Mostly they are interested in art as a commodity

It is within an artist's rights to do this, but the more important part is usually not seen, and if it is then it is only to a minimal degree

7. Very few artists tackle local social issues because this type of art requires a great deal of experience and expressive ability. However, the artist Doya Aziz Doya has created

a number of works that represent our society with its customs and traditions rather than his own issues

8. The artist Abdelnasser Gharem

He has tackled a number of social issues through his artistic ideas and works, including “taken”, “stamp” and “message” amongst others

9. I do not know of any artist that could be described in this way due to the absence of a goal towards which they are striving. Reality shows that artistic activity can be divided into two parts: one aesthetic depending on traditional inspiration from embossing and the like; and the other searching for novelty and experimentation. Some artists do however participate in social occasions when called upon to do so

10. Abdelnasser Gharem is the most prominent artist in this category. This is because he chooses controversial topics which people either refuse to talk about or ignore. This means that he tackles issues which many people refuse to discuss.

11. There are none

Being a social activist artist means producing works which serve society and express its issues. There are artists that have produced works about society but producing one or two pieces does not make them a social artist. A social activist artist must focus in his work and career on social issues over years and multiple artistic projects

12. In my opinion there are none

For us to describe an artist as a social activist I think they must focus in their artistic work on social issues and expressing them

In my opinion when an artist presents one or two works about an issue in society, that does not give them the title of social activist

Being a social activist artist requires spending time in society and on the street interacting and talking with people, shedding light on issues and problems faced by society and attempting to find a voice for those who have no voice to talk about their problems

13. In my opinion there are no social activist visual artists in the true sense of the word who have artistic value in their work which distinguishes them. However, there are conscious attempts by some artists which reflect modern ideas, serious experiments, important first steps and their perpetual search to create solid artistic traditions and find their own original and distinctive approach. These might represent the features of a Saudi visual art movement worthy of appreciation and praise. It is not influential however due to the lack of a solid theoretical understanding of the nature of this practice, the absence of fixed ideas about the nature of approaches employed by artists, and the extent to which they are serious in their generosity. There is also no idea organising their output and experimentation and enriching their experience. Original art is scattered due to the lack of serious oversight and interest from the arts' supervisory bodies and neglected since it is not categorised, documented, or stored in museums. The reason for this is that Saudi visual arts are still in their adolescence in comparison to the Western world which has been producing contemporary art for over 600 years while Egypt, our neighbour, has been doing so for 100 years. They have art institutes, schools, academies and associations. Despite the fact that contemporary art has been produced in Saudi Arabia for over half a century, there have been no attempts to develop and move beyond standard models, technical exercises and a generally miserable situation. Art in Saudi Arabia continues to suffer from a lack of artistic identity and

weakness of personality. This means that its individuality and distinctiveness is lost. Originality consists of disruption and blending. Most works however consist of copying, transferral or borrowing from here and there and they do not break away from the prevailing artistic trends, movements, methods, modern artistic achievements, the dominance of the European approach in its essence and appearance, and taking advantage of the experience of Arab, particularly Iraqi, artists in using their heritage in building images and using the metaphors of popular language and the Arabic script. This is because when Saudi artists open their eyes, they only see mature European art. This can be attributed to the lack of local artistic role models and to the rupture between us and our ancient heritage and civilisation. Our civilizational heritage has been lost due to the absence of manuscripts, documents, images, and written and eye-witness testimony that attest to that artistic civilisation, as well the lack of museums dedicated to it. When such artefacts are found, they are either held in storage or destroyed on account of the fact that they are heretical and the work of Satan! We also lack experts, academics and researchers specialising in our ancient heritage and the history of its visual arts, nor are there institutes, colleges of books focused on the arts (the sole task of artistic training colleges is to produce teachers and professional artists). There is also intimidation and threats for young people and children. All of this means that art is marginalised and dismissed by society and intellectuals. It continues to attempt to stand on its own two feet and to move forward through the efforts of artists that are self-taught, have studied abroad or taken basic courses run by enthusiastic foreigners. Therefore, every artist follows their own path according to their circumstances and resources to satisfy their desires, develop their artistic skills, learn from the study of the arts, their techniques and schools. Most remain trapped in a whirlpool of shifting from one approach to another, from school to school and current to current in the schools of contemporary art, whether they begin with technique or subject matter, the method or the idea. This is not in the pursuit of learning and knowledge; rather they are searching for their artistic identities through pre-existing artistic approaches and techniques which they incorporate into their works as a kind of artistic production to gain recognition as artists. They resort to borrowing, copying or a combination of the two! They reproduce the works of other artists in different circumstances, using different colours and making one figure smaller and another bigger. They tackle issues from their environment believing this will make their work original, in the absence of specialist education from institutes and academies and conscious criticism. What we hear in public is a mere illusion created by the media, articles written by amateurs, the masses behind the scenes and the dominant voices claiming that there is a visual arts movement and there are pioneering and international artists! It lacks precision, credibility and information indicating the truth and nature of legitimate artistic production. Viewers and those interested in art are trapped in a dense fog and surrounded by mockery and sarcasm from conservatives, pragmatists and insiders. This media momentum runs counter to reality but is stronger than it in terms of quantity if not in quality. It represents a great danger to the long-term future, to researchers studying human civilisations, to the visual arts, and to viewers. It makes it difficult to see, and its negative output influences the history and audience of art. It positions practitioners and researchers in a situation of

conflict, confusion and personal struggle. It frustrates and incapacitates them, causing further deterioration. It will result in marginalisation and a negative understanding of art by society and intellectuals and will broaden the gap between art and the public, in the context of a lack of standards, researchers in the arts, books and reliable visual media.

Do you think women in Saudi Arabia are facing any particular issues? If so, what are these issues?

1. Yes

They face social issues that have their roots in Saudi customs and traditions and certain

2. conservative Islamic currents that have damaged understanding of the religious

3. prescriptions given in the Quran and the Sunna
These include guardianship and women's rights in marriage and divorce. Many women face problems in the justice system due to the lack of a fixed women's law

4. I believe that the problem is in society. Even today there are people that believe they are the guardians of women's thought and this restricts their creativity

5. Yes

Social issues affect the way in which they are treated which affects their lives. For example, they must be accompanied by a chaperone in order to attend court

6. Saudi women occupy an elevated position in the minds and reality of society generally. They have a status of respect and appreciation bestowed upon them by the teachings of the Islamic faith and the perfect example of the prophet. They are considered by wise men as a whole which cannot be divided or increased. If there are some on the fringes of society who oppose this, it is because of mistakes in social practice rather than in the origins of the law and belief which happens as a result of obedience to obsolete traditions. In the present time the role of women is emphasised along with their existential sovereignty according to the original Islamic concept, which works by preserving the value of their existence as mothers, sisters, wives and daughter's which society is proud of

7. Certainly

There are many issues and is not easy to mention them all. It suffices to mention their right to drive a car and their lack of rights in terms of divorce, children and financial support

8. Women suffer from patriarchal society in general. From the perspective of the public they remain female objects. When men accept that they are cultural, and scientific beings and they are treated with full respect, we will have resolved many issues

9. Yes. These are the issues:

- a. The make-up of Saudi society and its attitudes towards female creativity
- b. The rigidity of some members of society regarding female participation in artistic work
- c. The lack of a clear understanding of the extent to which Saudi women can benefit from art

10. Yes

Many rights and social issues

11. Yes

12. This is a question that requires clarification of the problem. Women in Saudi Arabia are like women in any part of the world apart from in terms of the values and traditions to which they belong. These have been turned into issues by outside influence

Reality reveals the truth of Saudi women. The greatest testimony to the fact that they have overcome these intimations and accusations is that they have entered the Shura Council

13. The issues faced by Saudi women are numerous and complex. Saudi women are not like those in other parts of the world (I cannot speak about this issue as I am not a social researcher or expert in women's issues). However, from my personal perspective as an artist, I have tackled women's issues in most of my artistic works over the past 50 years ("Deprived of Choice", "Victims of Ruins", "Without Features", "The Woman is a Problem", "Lost Love", "Truly they Search", "The Masculine Society" and "Pondering Woes"). I have found women to be my main focus and the centre of my interest and concern and I have been amazed by exploring their social reality. There are a number of problematic issues which arise from a culture of dismissal and doubt in women's abilities and their continual suffering in every stage of life. Women experience restrictions and pressures and have perpetually sought to obtain their rights throughout human history. Regardless of their level of education and liberality, and despite having reached the highest levels of employment and work, women continue to suffer from unfair treatment, tyranny, wrongdoing, ingratitude, revenge, violence and cruelty in a society which respects only men. Men enjoy their rights and position in society. Women are ground down more than any other group on the face of the earth and made to suffer. They endure threats, menaces, harm and a lack of respect and their fate is always in the hands of men that control them as they see fit. They are required to not act, move or take decisions without a man, regardless of his lineage or relationship, even if he is a child. When women wish to deal with essential matters such as an appointment with a doctor or buying bread and milk, they must humbly wait and go with a man. When they do go out with men, they walk in fear, stumbling and dragging their limbs on the ground. They have no voice or feelings, dress in black from head to toe and are afraid of people's looks and what they say. Their concerns and suffering remain inside them along with their screams, tears and pain, buried in time and stored in the depths of their minds. They are totally powerless. At home, their sighs are absorbed by closed walls. They await sealed fates and live at the mercy of male power. Only men are granted magnanimity and physical strength. Their role is to earn an income, defend and resist aggression, protect from calamities and solve problems, difficulties and challenges. This social reality depends upon a culture of containment, exclusion and coercion to rely on men, the marginalisation of the role of women in thinking, and doubt in women's abilities, regardless of their level of education and liberality. It means holding back their personalities and convincing them that they need men more than men need them and that they are objects for men to use. Under this cover, women are placed under tight supervision and many restrictions are imposed on the basis that they lack religion and rationality. This results in the loss of their right to work and independence and the imposition of restrictions on their thought and behaviour. This results in the loss of half of humanity's capacity in general, which has a negative impact in cultural, economic and social terms. Women in these societies are thus made into an instrument to bear the

sins of men along with their mistakes and stupidity. They are the victims of pressure from their families and society and the issue is deep and complex. Women's suffering and concerns remain within them and their screams and tears and pain are a black mark on the history of humanity, buried in the deepest corners of their minds. In the context of society's insistence on its customs and traditions and on its concepts and beliefs, women will not escape from this problem

14. Yes

Women suffer from problems in the way in which they are treated by society, especially when society follows the idea of the customs and traditions and conservative opinions

Women in the Islamic faith have a significant role and Islam grants them significant rights. However, the interpretation of those rights by those who hold conservative opinions have placed many restrictions on the lives of Saudi women.

The biggest problem faced by Saudi women are the restrictions on thought that result from conservative opinions which are not stipulated by the holy texts and Quran which respect women

15. Every woman in the world has issues and in Saudi Arabia they have a number of problems

Some of these include: marital violence, divorce and a dismissive attitude towards women in some tribes amongst others

16. No

17. I do not know

18. Every woman in every society has issues

Do you think feminism is relevant to Saudi Arabia? Please explain why

1. Yes, it exists but in different forms and to a lesser extent than is seen elsewhere

Feminism has not appeared as a clear movement but has been seen in women's demands to be able to drive and work. It continues to grow slowly

2. Yes, women are present and strongly so

Anyone who follows the participation of men and women in exhibitions and visual art events will find that women represent the largest group

Men have more personal exhibitions and international collaborations

3. No

4. No

5. I don't know

6. The feminist movement in Saudi Arabia has become the principal engine of change in society. This has happened as a result of their pioneering steps in science, the economy, the media and all fields

7. To a certain extent

8. No

9. If you mean an artistic feminist movement then no. But if the question is about a feminist movement for women's issues then yes, there is a movement which I consider strong in terms of its content. However, in terms of progress and forward movement, the movement is weak because it has clashed with the barrier of religious people, certain customs and traditions and the system

10. Certainly, the feminist movement has established its presence and deservedly so during the past few years. Saudi women have become aware of what they have and what they must do. They have demanded their rights with courage and confidence, for example:

The “status card” which they did not have in the past

Repeal of the “guardian” law

Their demand to drive

Entering the Shura council

And recently, their right to be nominated for regional councils

11. In the current technological developments in 2016, women have begun to take a respectable place in artistic participation in a notable manner

Artistically gifted women will make a notable impact

12. Yes, because they are participating and creative in all fields and especially in the arts. This includes drawing, sculpture, digital design and others

13. I don’t know

14. Perhaps

15. Yes, it is present in all fields and places. The proof of this is their participation in regional and Shura councils

16. Of course, not

This is because Saudi society adheres to a system that does not allow foreign organisations that are not registered in Saudi Arabia to conduct any work that is not permitted after the principal aim of the organisation has been studied

17. I cannot speak about this issue because I am not a social researcher or an expert in women’s issues. But from my perspective, there is no attempt from women within Saudi Arabia to do away with the restrictions placed upon them, and particularly male power. This is due to a number of issues: religious, doctrinal, regional, tribal, social and personal. Women themselves are satisfied and convinced with this situation, due to anxiety, fear of punishment, problems, depression and intimidation from their families, society and power. This makes obtaining their legal rights impossible. For example, when the government allowed women to vote and run in regional and Shura council elections, many people stood up to obstruct them, including women themselves as well as many men. When the discussion about women driving began, opinions ranged from support to opposition. Many women, however, stood up to oppose it, saying that they were comfortable and happy with sitting in the back seat of the car and using a driver, that they were honoured and supported. Driving is very important in the life of society, especially given the lack of public transport and the difficult conditions, poverty and destitution endured by many families who are unable to employ drivers. What can a powerless woman do when she is in need, in a remote location in the middle of the night? You will say “take a taxi” but this means is in the hands of men and thus the problem remains in the hands of men.

18. Yes

It exists but it is neither large nor well organised

There are attempts to tackle women’s issues in society

We cannot compare the Saudi feminist movement with feminist movements in other countries because Saudi women live in a culturally and religiously unique society

Women in Saudi society live in a wide range of environments such as cities, villages and suburbs

Each of these societies has its own geographical location and traditions and customs

With the increasing number of educated women in Saudi Arabia, and women going to work and study abroad, I believe that the movement will change and become more clearly defined and play a larger role

19. Yes, it exists

In literature and social studies

20. There is a feminist visual arts movement but it is limited to individual artistic practice.

There are no specialised bodies organising these contributions or the movement

21. No

How would you define feminism?

1. It is a movement demanding that women obtain their rights and equality with men

2. The feminist movement

The ability of female artists to collaborate effectively with individuals and associations and put forward their ideas and creativity to society and to stand up to society. This has produced a strong feminist visual arts movement

3. I don't know

4. It is a group of political, ideological and social movements that collaborate with one goal: defining, establishing, and realising political, economic, personal and social rights for women and equality with men

5. Any person, whether a woman or a man can establish themselves in all artistic fields

6. I will provide two definitions, one which I would like to see and one based on what I see in reality

The first is a case of escaping from the confines of chronic dependence and from the tyranny of submission to find the independent role that necessity requires. The other consists of restructuring local dependence but following the example of a distorted understanding of western dependence

7. It is a group of women putting forward opinions and ideas they think are lacking in their society on the social side and fighting for their rights on the legal side
It is an attempt to change society's view of women with regard to a number of issues

8. The feminist movement is the presence of women and the influence of women in society by means of their artistic production. Female artists should be aware that their artistic tasks have gone beyond the range of their homes

9. Ensuring women's rights in the context of Islamic law

10. The striving of a group of women to participate or produce change in any field

11. I have no idea

12. It is a movement which strives to give a voice to women and express their issues, even if it is through the voice of a man
The feminist voice represents a response to the excess of men in a society based on separation of the sexes in which men are totally dominant. In this society the feminist movement is a reaction more than an action

13. It is a movement which strives for equality with men in a patriarchal society

14. It is a revolutionary movement against men. It strives for justice and equality with men in all things

15. The feminist movement is limited in its impact and influence

16. It means recognising that women have rights and opportunities equal to those of men, on different levels of life in terms of both knowledge and work. As for the theory that

calls for equality of the sexes in political economic and social terms, as a movement it strives politically to support women and their concerns and to eliminate the discrimination between the sexes from which women currently suffer

17. I cannot speak about this topic because I am not a social researcher or expert in women's issues. I am an artist and interested in art. However, in my humble opinion, the concept of "movement" is a collective organisation that strives to set out specific problems and participate in finding solutions to them. With regard to the feminist movement, I believe that its main goals are: changing thoughts, opinions and ossified mindsets; doing away with traditions and customs; breaking the chains of patriarchal power; demanding rights held by a billion and a half women; realising the principle of equality; implementing Islamic teachings (the most honoured of you in the eyes of God is the most righteous); achieving humane treatment; overturning attitudes and practices built on wrongdoing, persecution, intimidation and exclusion and eliminating derogatory attitudes, in exchange for respect and mutual agreement and treatment in the spirit of the age. God helps women in ruminating on their pains

18. It is a women's movement that calls for women obtaining their rights

It is very important that we understand that the feminist movement is influenced by the place in which it is located

Thus, the feminist movement in Saudi Arabia is not the same concept as in India or America There are similarities and differences

19. It is a movement to break the barriers and obstacles that prevent women's participation in society and demands their rights

20. A group of female artists that strive to bring female visual art to an outstanding position

Interview Questions

- What is the purpose of art in society?
- Can art produce social change?

Questions about art and memory

- Do the artists feel any connections with Saudi artists of the past?
- Is contemporary art related in any way to the desert art of the Bedouin? Do the artists feel any connection to Bedouin weavers?
- Is art a form of memory? Is it a way of remembering the past, or of keeping the memory of the past alive, to stop it disappearing?

Questions about art, women, and society

- Does art have a particular relationship to women? Can art help women express their presence, opinion, ideas in society? Can art change the presence of Saudi women in society? Does women's situation need to be changed?
- Does art produce positive social change? Do the artists feel they can use art to create change?

Questions about space

- What kind of art is best for communicating with audience and society?
- What kind of spaces does art create? How does art relate to the site in which it is produced or exhibited?
- How does the space of art relate to public spaces? Is art an intervention on public space, does it create a new space? Are things possible in the spaces of art that are not (or not yet) possible in public space?

Appendix 5: Conferences and Workshops

- *Women art and histories from the Middle East and North Africa: Proceedings of the British Academy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019 (forthcoming).
- “Weaving/writing/thinking: Visualising research and methodology as al-Sadu.” Paper presented at Beyond Borders book, 2018, PGR Studio Birmingham City University.
- “Weaving the Social Fabric: Art and Women’s Education in Saudi Arabia.” Paper presented at the 12th International Conference on the Arts in Society and the Arts in Society Research Network, The American University of Paris, France, 2017.
- “Weaving borders: weaving as research process” Paper presented at Beyond Borders, 2017, PgrStudio Birmingham City University.
- Weaving/writing/thinking: Visualising research and methodology as object at ‘Experimental approaches to writing research’ Postgraduate workshop organised by PGR Studio Birmingham City University, 2017.
- Speaker at a Panel Discussion: As noted/unnoticed: Cultural Production of the GCC, Moderated by Dr. Antony Downey, Birmingham City University, 2017.
- “Installation art in Saudi Arabia: Manal Al-Dowayan’s Tree of Guardians.” Paper presented at the Feminist Activism: Imagination & Social Change Conference, Centre for Women’s Studies, York University, 2016.
- “Al-Sadu: weaving spaces of memory and empowerment for women in contemporary Saudi Arabia.” Paper presented at the Spatiality and Temporality International Conference, Interdisciplinary Research Foundation London, 2016.
- Installation artwork at the “How to Play Knowledge?” Conference organised by PGR Studio, Birmingham City University, 2015.
- Installation artwork at the 8th Saudi Students Conference, Imperial College London, 2015.
- Poster Presentation at the 7th Saudi Student Conference in Edinburgh UK, 2014.

Research Glossary

Al-Sadu weaving

This technique has been practised by Arabian Bedouin for many centuries without much change. The fabric is woven by women on horizontal looms no more than three foot wide. Larger pieces are assembled from strips. These are mainly used as rugs, blankets, tent dividers and bags. Many pieces show multiple weft-faced and warp-faced techniques and design. The textiles produced in the Arabian Peninsula (mostly unknown in the West) became objects of academic study from the 1980s via the work of John Topham and Joy Hilden.

Bedouin tent

The term Bedouin has referred to a way of life and to Arab inhabitants of the desert since the Middle Ages. Bedouin tents are generally portable shelters of cloth or skins, supported by poles and ropes and essential to a nomadic lifestyle. The cloth for weaving the tent is derived from the sheep, goats and camels herded by the Bedouin. Traditionally, southern Bedouin do not use black tents, which are associated with camel herding.

Contemporary practices

Contemporary art practice is usually regarded as that which is presently being produced and which follows the Modern and Post-Modern art movements of the early twentieth century. Contemporary practices are experimental, utilising technology and appropriating elements from multiple disciplines and sources. Dynamic and diverse, contemporary practices work with subjects, concepts, methods and materials that often defy definition. A uniform ideology or organising principle is lacking. The topics of contemporary practice often reflect current issues and debates and rely on the viewer to discover value, since it is rarely correlated with empirical visual experience.

Performance art

This refers to a public art form—usually live and non-narrative—that combines elements of performing and visual arts, static and mobile, before an audience which becomes an integral part of the artwork. The artist is no longer the sole arbiter of meaning and the audience is often collaborative. The performance may be planned or spontaneous and this sort of art has its roots in the early twentieth century emergence of anarchic movements such as Dadaism.

Space in art

The sensation of depth or space is an important facet of visual art. An artist can arrange her/his elements to create this sensation. Spatial organisation in Western art is recognised as having seven systems: Classical, Renaissance, Baroque, Primitive, Conceptual, Empirical and Relativistic. In each of these periods' artists worked to express the spatial concepts of their era. The organisation of space in a work of art can express not only the ideas of the artist but is often linked with the dominant ideology. Human figures, for instance, can be scaled and placed to represent hierarchy, rather than observable factors. Since the early twentieth century, the depiction of space in art has become more personal and arbitrary.

Society

This usually refers to an aggregate of people living together in an ordered community: an association which lives under the same government or organisation, often with a common purpose. According to Plato, society is only possible when individual members exhibit some

self-restraint. There are numerous philosophies which further define the relation of an individual to her/his society in terms of duty and rights. The family is regarded as the smallest unit of society within the state.

Site-specific art

This generally tries to connect art with everyday life and to encourage participation and a dynamic relation between viewer, space and art. Early installation art tended to be unrepeatable and site-specific and to act as a critique of the increasing commodification of art and the restrictions of museums and galleries as spaces. Such art is often perishable and ephemeral. 'Site-specific' is a flexible term, but this art aims at a totality and a uniqueness of experience for the viewer

Social art/practice

This refers to a socially engaged form of art that carries an aesthetic of human development and interaction. Rather than developing from market-driven changes it critiques capitalist logic. In place of creating a specific art work that has monetary value, social art aims to create a process for social change. Such art can be a long-term project or it can have immediate, but ephemeral, impact. It derives from the inclusion of process and context into aesthetic value which is no longer linked to a single product. Such art re-defines the role of the spectator and that of participatory art.

Spatial art/practice

This term emerged in 2003 to describe practices that emerged between architecture, art and critical theory. It reflects the importance of space and site as a locus for engagement and can refer generally to site-specific art, but more narrowly to define practices that intervene into place as a critique. Working outside physical boundaries, this interdisciplinary movement has reformulated the way art, especially in cities, is placed and consumed.

Social fabric

This refers to a mutable set of social expectations which are based on common ideals, norms, understandings and help to promote community. It emerged from a study of space, structure, social relationships and material conditions by the German sociologist, Georg Simmel in the first decades of the twentieth century. His ideas have been developed in work on materiality and social structures within the relatively new discipline of the sociology of space.

Sociospatial practices

An interdisciplinary understanding of how space is used socially has become central to much theory about gendered social practice. This term links the realms of art and architecture with a focus on material and conceptual opportunities, and with an agenda that often includes issues of access and justice rather than profit. Investigating the sociospatial practices of traditional communities has become crucial when these groups have been displaced as a result of industrial and technological development.