



BIDOUN

With a mix of well-groomed critical irony, qualitative content and an eclectic roster of contributors, the magazine created a sort of "vernacular disorientation," decongesting the stigmatized visions of the region.

Interview by Myriam Ben Salah
Portrait by Tim Schutsky



In an article titled “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontent,” published in *Artforum’s* February 2006 issue, art critic Claire Bishop describes the media’s selective production and dissemination of images from the Middle East, stating that “the typical Western viewer seems condemned to view young Arabs either as victims or as medieval fundamentalists.” As *Bidoun’s* art director Babak Radboy once concurred in an interview, from the general media’s perspective, one might have a hard time picturing anyone from the Middle East doing anything as normal as sitting down for dinner. This is where *Bidoun* came along. For more than ten years now, the magazine has published pieces about Gulfwood, Hafez Al-Assad’s Iron Bladder, Cat Stevens, Naguib Mahfouz’ white linen suits, Egyptian gangsta rap, Pakistani horror porn, Iranian pop music and Larry Gagosian’s Armenian origins among many other gems that one can now access online. Decongesting the stigmatized visions of the region in a post-9/11 context, *Bidoun* offered stories from the perspective of almost (but not totally, or maybe not at all) native informants—or at least those “who grew up speaking multiple languages, maybe all of them badly,” as *Bidoun’s* Senior Editor Negar Azimi puts it.



MYRIAM BEN SALAH What did it mean to run a magazine/project about art, culture and ideas from the Middle East post-9/11? What does it mean to run it now, at a time of Syrian war, global terrorism and ISIS, when brown is definitely not seen as “beautiful”?

BIDOUN There are very few words, very few images that are produced and circulated without a clear reason—especially when they’re about the Middle East. We found ourselves between two arch-narratives that seemed to compliment each terribly well: the post-911 mainstream politics of terror on the one hand, and on the other, its supplement in cultural production: an open-call for Arab perspectives which coincided neatly with the globalization of the art market. That’s not a conspiracy, it’s a current, and we were carried along with it—even if we were facing the wrong way most of the time. But I think it’s a bit different today. I think far fewer people care, and maybe the stakes are higher. As you said, brown is not beautiful.

MBS How would you define a Bidouni today?

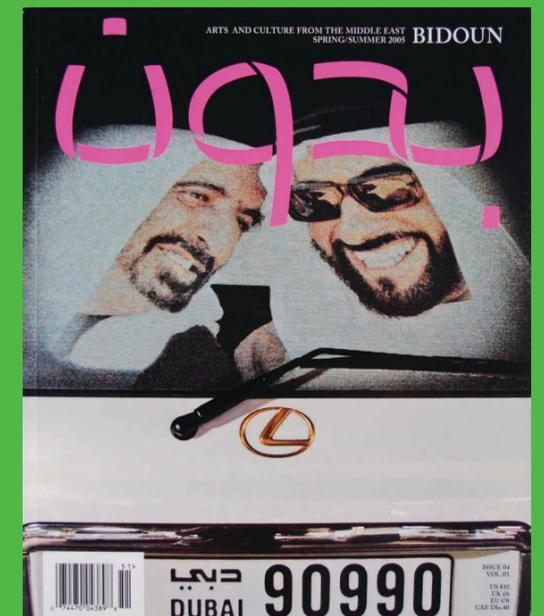
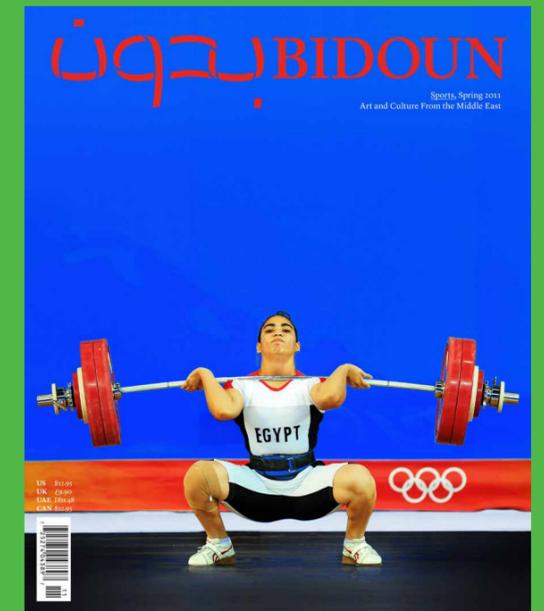
NEGAR A Bidouni is so many things. It’s not really an either/or condition, but more of an ambiguous ETC. It’s not quite a rootless cosmopolitan, though it may well capture that. It encompasses just about any state of hyphenation: a suburban kid in the diaspora; an Iranian obsessed with metal; an Indian dreaming of Fidel. Above all, it’s a sensibility that refuses to sit nicely within the confines of inherited ideas about culture and place. When it comes to debates about identity, a Bidouni tends to reject two extremes: the market-orientalist who blandly celebrates culture and the academic/activist/anti-Orientalist who is above all... grouchy. You know?

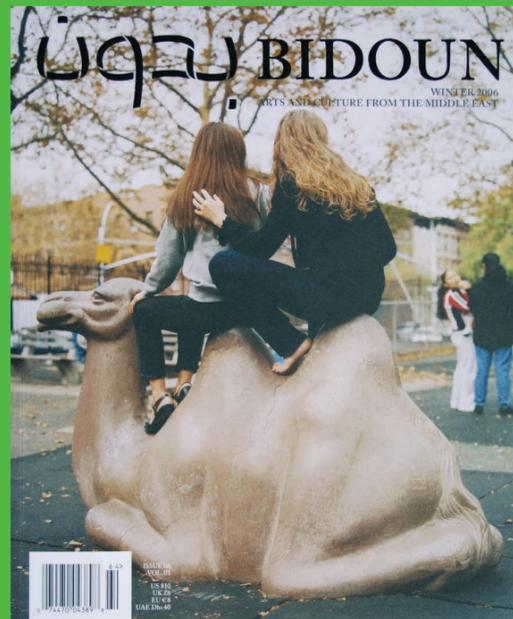
MIKE Not exactly synonymous with Bidouni, but note superstar (Bidouni) Sophia Al-Maria’s coinage of the “chicken nugget” as a “person who has no command over their native language, having been raised by a domestic worker.”

MBS Do you think there is already a “heritage” or an influence from Bidoun in terms of art production within the younger generation of artists? If so, how would characterize it?

NEGAR I think we nurtured the practice of a lot of artists this last decade—by writing about them, by producing their quirkier, more questioning artist projects, and simply by being a psychic “home base” of sorts. When it comes to arts production, there’s definitely a Bidouni sensibility, but it’s hard to define in words! Let me try. The work I’m thinking of is irreverent, very often funny, surprising and almost always personal. It doesn’t take itself too seriously, and it doesn’t fulfill preconceptions we may have about the Middle East. That’s not because it’s purposefully or self-consciously transgressive or nuanced or whatever, but rather because the Middle East itself is a mixed-up pastiche of a geography. There are as many experiences of it as there are people.

MBS How do you rethink the production of images at a time of high-speed circulation of content? Babak, as an art director, being in charge of the visuals, do you experiment towards a shift in terms of politics of representation?





BABAK Representation is a very misunderstood phenomenon—or maybe I misunderstand it. I'm not interested in who is in front of the camera—or, at a certain point, who is behind the camera. For me, it is about who we assume is looking at the picture or reading the text. As the magazine progressed, I tried to imagine a kind of reader and work in solidarity with that person. There were also just some random decisions—pure experimentation and risk-taking and intuition. I was never really invested in the values that define art direction and design as disciplines. Bidoun is very messy and inconsistent.

MIKE Incontinent.

BABAK We were willing to abandon everything from issue to issue to find something worthwhile. As for the high-speed production of content, I think it's created a deeply retrograde environment. It may last forever, but it's not the future.

MBS Do you think the laughter, the levity, the self-deprecation and the kitsch that is so characteristic of Middle Eastern culture is making a comeback?

TIFFANY Oh, I don't think that levity ever left—it was just never circulated in or recognized from the outside. It just doesn't get represented in English. The default tenor when writing about the Middle East is explanatory, which assumes a certain audience, a certain set of hierarchies. Making a joke about what's around you means that you can really see what's around you. The world doesn't allow for the possibility that people in the Middle East can see what's around them. It's all top-down, which leaves no lateral space.—and I think that's the only space where funny can happen. Bidoun operates on a different set of assumptions; our default tone is not explanatory, and so we have the potential to be funny. We don't always hit the mark, but when we do, it's really special.

MBS In *Transforming Anthropology* (2006), anthropology scholar Lanita Jabos-Huey studies the motif of the "Arab" as the New "Black." She particularly refers to Comedian Ian Edwards' line about Middle-Easterners delivering African Americans from racism by taking over the burden in a post-9/11 context. What do you think about that assumption, given the current



racial context in the US and in light of your past collaboration with *Transition: An International Review*?

MIKE All of that is maybe a little heavy. But in any case, what originally brought me to *Bidoun* was in fact *Transition*, which was somehow on their radar. *Transition* might seem to have been a very different animal—it was founded in Africa in the 1960s and had academic cache, not least because it was based in the Department of African-American Studies at Harvard—and yet, in a curious way, editing *Transition* was an exemplary preparation for editing *Bidoun*. The key thing about *Transition* was its sensibility. The content could be all over the place; it was more in the mode of a literary magazine, with fiction and travel writing and long argumentative essays, all presented in a fairly fixed design template. The writing could be funny, angry, elegiac, grotesque, wry, perverse and/or rueful—sometimes at the same time—but it was almost always irreverent. Impious, even, whatever your piety. So our guiding principle was a diffuse yet highly particular notion, which we signally failed to define and ended up calling "Transitionliness." Part of what appealed to me about *Bidoun*—and vice versa, I think—was that the *Transition*-ly and the *Bidoun*-ish blurred into and bled all over each other. That shared sensibility has something to do with what Tiffany was saying about lateral space. To see clearly, sometimes, you have to look sideways. As to the first part of the question, it might suffice to say that I doubt anybody's going to be delivered—from racism or America or history—anytime soon. But if one wants to get into these sorts of questions, you could do much worse than to go back to James Baldwin, whose 1972 memoir *No Name in the Street* recollects his black experience in 1950s Paris and his encounters with Arabs at the height of the Algerian war.

MBS Mike, you might be the most representative team member of what an enlarged Middle East can be. What brought you to *Bidoun*?

MIKE I like the idea of being the exemplary Bidouni, as opposed to a henchman of an Iranian art mafia—though I will note that I was born and bred in and around Detroit, which is one of the great Arab-American metropolises. (For a long time, too—one of my dad's sisters' most



treasured childhood memories is eating kibbeh nayyeh at the Lebanese neighbors' house.) It's one of the epicenters of 20th-century black culture, obviously, but it's also a border city, set in the shadow of Canada, which had a fantastic and worldly public culture and media. Detroit was and is a place nearly completely subsumed by its hopes and impediments, to misappropriate a phrase of Chinua Achebe's. All of which seems like a fine vantage point from which to approach the Middle East. 

From 2004–13, *Bidoun* magazine was a distinctive, critical and original voice in the arts and culture coverage of the Middle East. Bidoun Projects is now a non-profit organization whose activities encompass curatorial initiatives, educational programs, artist commissions, talks, performances, books, an itinerant library, and an online archive of avant-garde media.

Myriam Ben Salah is the newly appointed Editor-in-Chief of KALEIDOSCOPE. A curator and writer based in Paris, she has been coordinating special projects and cultural programming at the Palais de Tokyo since 2009. Parallel to this theme survey, she has curated the group exhibition "We Dance, We Smoke, We Kiss," currently on view at Fahrenheit, Los Angeles, through 10 December. Other recent projects as an independent curator include "Cool Memories" at Occidental Temporary in Villejuif; "Shit and Die" in Turin; and "Dirty Linen" at Deste Foundation, Athens.