# Diaphanous, diasporal we

## The formative influence of a mischievous journal and its politics of precision

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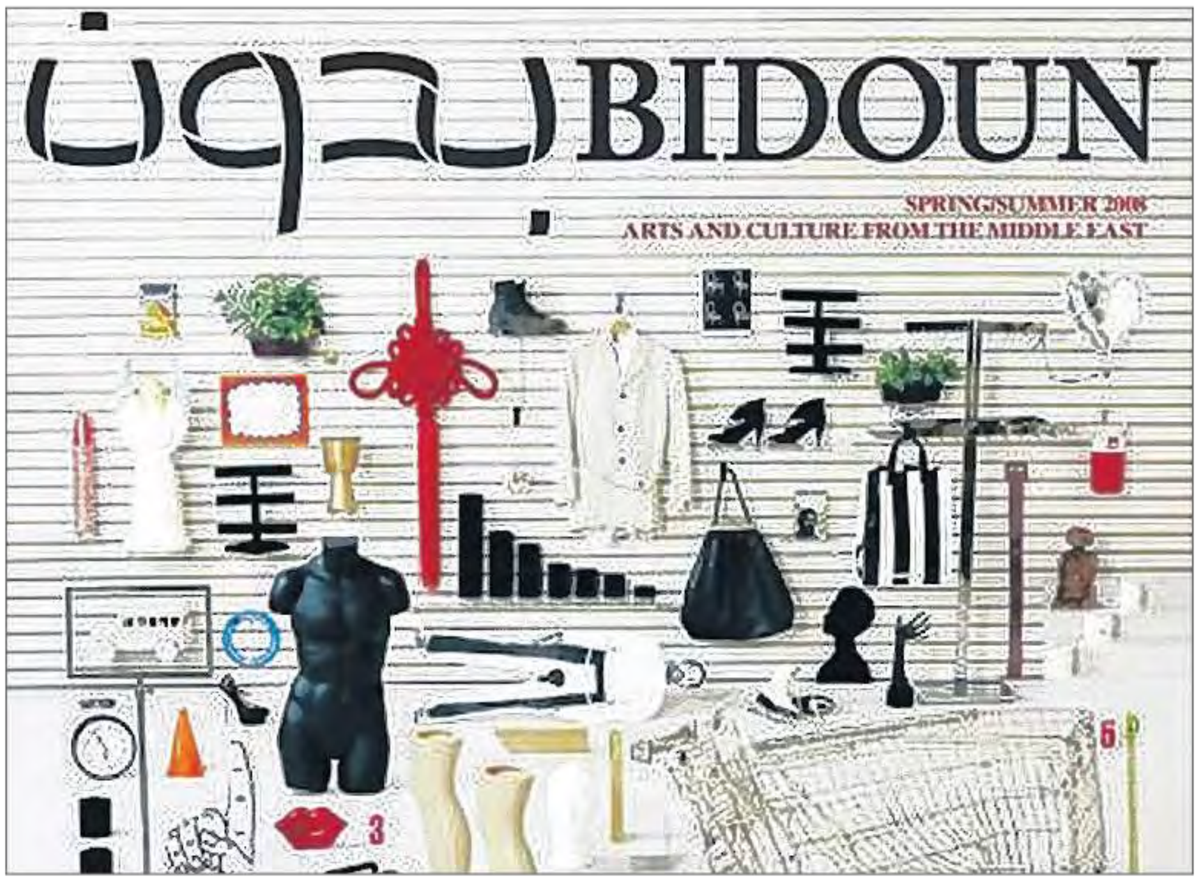


I forget the details – a friend's house, probably, in the late 2000s – but the feeling of the first encounter remains vivid. A thrill of recognition, of belated thirst. People often don't know what they want to read until they read it, and before I found *Bidoun* I didn't know I craved a magazine in English written by people who spoke, or half-spoke, other languages at home. The spark of love may have been lit by Nimco Mahamud-Hassan's memoir of childhood in Somalia, which began: "We lived on Fucking Street, the only street in Hargaisa that had a name (or the only memorable one, anyway.)" Or perhaps it was Sophia al-Maria's loving anthropology of Qatari wedding parties, where "nervous virgins and divorcees take their places on a catwalk that is at once auction house, runway, soundstage, and wilderness".

In the years after 9/11, when Western coverage of the Middle East was at best lacking in nuance, at worst hysterical, Lisa Farjam described her corrective mission as founding editor: "we have nothing that speaks to our micro realities". Into the void came *Bidoun*, which means "without" in Arabic and Farsi. What it proposed was not to be exhaustive but to play – not least with expectation. Against clichés of strife and oppression, *Bidoun* offered everyday mischief. Against orientalism it offered disorientation. The cover of issue one, a broom wrapped in a blue scarf as if in a hijab, announced a kind of anti-*National Geographic*. This was not a woman in need of saving, except perhaps from the fundamentalist within: the cleaning nut. (The broom's blond bristles also heralded an enduring preoccupation with hair.)

*Bidoun* bills itself as a magazine of arts and culture from the Middle East, but its scope is less a question of latitude than one of attitude. In the same way that many places on earth feel themselves to be caught between East and West, *Bidoun*'s remit is wider than it might appear. A Swiss parfumier turns out to be Osama bin Laden's half-sibling. Steve Jobs's biological father was from Homs. There was a sensibility, less earnest than *Artforum*'s, less white than *Cabinet*'s. Scholars were invited to let their hair down (the sociologist Fatima Mernissi contributed a recipe for aphrodisiac fish), stars to reflect on their youth. There were recurring themes: converts, misfits and mash-ups, niche sports, false starts, false prophets, the future, the arcane – rubrics that might be called Borgesian, had Borges not drawn many of his ideas from precisely this kind of material.

Under the editorship of Negar Azimi and Michael Vazquez, the magazine hit its stride. Reviews of contemporary art thinned. In came essays of rare intensity and range. They were voracious, personal, strange, often wildly funny, the learning lightly worn, the prose sometimes baroque (double negatives were not not frequent; paragraphs loved to turn on a buoyant "and lo"). Genres were there to be bent. A long study of Wikipedia administrators read like a thriller. And the look! Babak Radboy, as creative director, kept up a jury-rigged glamour: of one cover I remember only a blinding sheet of glitter, like the name of God.

To grow up half-Arab in Europe, or so it was for me, was often to feel compelled to choose. From *Bidoun* there was permission to bring everything to the table. Gary Dauphin's meditation on the word "glory" moved from medieval translations of the Bible to his own teenage years among Haitian exiles in Queens and late-night musical epiphanies on the radio, "seismic waves carrying back echoes of pharaonic riches". *Bidoun* allowed people to write about experience as if it was fiction, to find the epic quality in their own lives. It hollowed out a place to put the stories that are somehow too weird to be reportage and yet are true, all the things that happen on the way to the story: "We had been trying for a week to see Rashid Dostum, one of the most notorious of the Afghan warlords ..."; "I was in Cairo, trying desperately to interview the ageing pop star Ahmed Adaweya ...".

It is only a passing irony that a magazine so sceptical of cultural purity, so jealous of the right to be unrepresentative, should have garnered a following that feels like a tribe. It made a home for what Sophia al-Maria called "the diaphanous, diasporal we". I can't be alone in having found it formative, and not just as a reader: it was in *Bidoun* that I first saw something I had written published – a profile of a Malaysian astronaut who lifted off during Ramadan, prompting his country's fatwa council to issue a *Guidebook for Muslims in Space*. One of my favourite issues was "Objects", which seemed to embody the magazine's politics of precision, its refusal to generalize. Instead of vague surveys of Egyptian literature, we had "Naguib Mahfouz's White Linen Suit". Not sweeping views of Iraq, but one Chaldean church in Detroit (the author of that piece, Rachel Aviv, is not alone in having gone on to write for the *New Yorker*).

A reluctance to be pinned down, however, does not mean apathy. *Bidoun*'s commitments were no less strong for being slant. After *Vogue* ran a puff piece on Asma al-Assad which described the household of Syria's dictatorial first couple as "wildly democratic", *Bidoun* simply reprinted the spread without commentary against a red background (the original article has since been scrubbed from the internet). Political analysis came wrapped in prose too entertaining to be called punditry: "the neocons", wrote Anand Balakrishnan, "have about them the whiff of the middle-school war-gamer, the high-school debater, and the barely pubescent science fiction reader". Egypt is an enduring concern: one issue was entirely devoted to the 2011 revolution.

If this piece has an elegiac tone, it is because the last print issue came out in 2013. Its fifteen-year archive is now online, however, and over time the project has grown arms, curatorial and otherwise. There was an itinerant library: a catalogue of misrepresentations, from pulp matter to monographs, of "the vast, vexed, nefarious construct known as 'the Middle East'"; one section consisted only of books titled *The Arabs*. There is a video archive, curated by Tiffany Malakooti. There are playlists to get lost in. One was compiled by *Ma3azef*, an excellent website of music criticism in Arabic that calls itself "the first and last magazine of its kind". I can think of another.