

Press Release

FORGOTTEN ENLIGHTENMENTS

New exhibition from HALLE 14 tells unknown stories of Islam

Press conference: Thursday, April 25, 2019, 11 am (Preview of exhibition with curators and artists)

(February 21, 2019) The centre for contemporary art HALLE 14 opens the group exhibition »Forgotten Enlightenments« on the occasion of the Tour of the Spinnerei Galleries on April 27, 2019 at the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei. Through international artistic positions, this exhibition is dedicated to the innovative and illuminating aspects of the history, culture, and presence of Islam.

From the Western perspective today, »Islam« and »enlightenment« seem to be in the greatest possible contradiction with one another. But this view ignores history. For while Europe was in the deepest Middle Ages, the arts and sciences flourished in the Islamic world. Islamic scholars led an »eastern renaissance« and developed modern algebra, revolutionised the pharmaceutical and medical sciences and founded optics, among other activities. The rediscovery of ancient philosophy in Europe would be unthinkable without Islamic libraries. Although Western modernity benefited to a not inconsiderable degree from the scientific achievements of the Aristotelian-rationalist currents of thought of Islam, it was devalued or denied for centuries.

In times when Islamism, populism, and nationalism threaten emancipation and diversity, the exhibition project »**Forgotten Enlightenment. Unknown stories about Islam in contemporary art**« brings artists from Morocco to Pakistan and Great Britain to Saudi Arabia to the art centre HALLE 14 in the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei with the aim of collectively mapping out the cultural connections between the Orient and the Occident in a millennia-long project of enlightenment.

What significance does the rich Islamic heritage have for artists shaped by Islam? How do spiritualities such as those of Sufism connect with current aesthetic, societal, and social issues? How do young artists defend themselves against despotism and the rhetoric of war, as well as against stereotyped images? With whom do they solidarize and which future-oriented, social and historical alternatives are they designing? The artistic works in the exhibition seek answers and encourage exploration and dialogue with Islam.

The three-month residency of Cairo artist **Islam Shabana** began in February at HALLE 14. He is working on location on a project on the subject of the exhibition. Islam Shabana works mainly in the field of digital media and deals with questions of alchemy, neuroscience, the history of science, and Sufism in Islam. A self-taught artist, Shabana founded the interdisciplinary art and design collective Alchem Studio and has participated in several group exhibitions in Egypt and Germany as well as numerous festivals (including CTM Festival 2018, Berlin).

To prepare for the exhibition, a **four-day workshop** will be held in Cairo from March 6–9 with selected artists, specialists, and the curatorial team. The program includes excursions to historical monuments such as the Nilometer or the Center for Documentation of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CULTNAT). The workshop will conclude at the Goethe Institute Dokki in Cairo on March 9th with a public panel discussion, the film »Spin« by **Ginan Seidl**, and a sound performance by **Yara Mekawei**.

EXHIBITION FACTS:

Exhibition Title: Forgotten Enlightenments – Unknown Stories about Islam in Contemporary Art

Curators: Michael Arzt (HALLE 14, Leipzig) & Elham Khattab (Out of the Circle, Cairo)

Artist-in-Residence: Islam Shabana

Opening: Saturday, April 27, 2019, 3 am

Duration: April 27 until August 4, 2019

Press Conference: April 25, 2019, 11 am

Autumn Tour of the SpinnereiGalleries: April 27 & 28, 2019

Opening hours: Tue–Sun, 11 am–6 pm

Entrance fee: 4 €, reduced 2 € (free on Wednesdays)

Location: HALLE 14 – Centre for Contemporary Art

Address: Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei, Spinnereistr. 7, 04179 Leipzig, Germany

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PRESS IMAGES:

Download in high resolution: www.halle14.org/presse.html



Azadeh Akhlaghi, Tehran – Mirzadeh Eshghi, 3 July 1924, 2012, Digital Print on photo paper

ABOUT

HALLE 14 – ZENTRUM FÜR ZEITGENÖSSISCHE KUNST | LEIPZIG

As a non-commercial art centre, **HALLE 14** is a space for the presentation of, reflection on and communication about contemporary art. It has been operating since 2002 in a listed historic industrial building on the grounds of the **Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei (Cotton Spinning Mill)**. With the conscious intent of highlighting the »luxury of emptiness«, an initiative of art enthusiasts created unique spaces in the generous halls of this late 19th century industrial building. The dense artistic sociotope of the Spinnerei – with over a dozen galleries and project spaces, 130 artist studios, numerous other creative offices, a cinema, a café and more – combined with the countless off-spaces in the surrounding neighbourhood create an enriching environment. www.halle14.org

OUT OF THE CIRCLE | KAIRO

Out of the Circle is an independent artistic, cultural and social initiative, supporting young contemporary Egyptian visual artists, launched in 2007 by Art Curator Elham Khattab. The initiative is based on 3 applications: arts management for contemporary Egyptian artists, arts and crafts classes for children and community development through art projects. The idea started during a visit to Syria in 2007 and was stimulated by the lack of interaction among Arab visual artists at that time. The artist's work is defined by the environment, in which he lives. Hence, it is the main source of inspiration next to the experiences he lives. Therefore, it is crucial that the artist is exposed to rich, diverse and numerous environments in order to enrich his work. Hence, the initiative was launched to help artists get out of their circle to explore different environments and experiences; to open new horizons within their environment and consequently enrich their artworks and enhance their careers as artists. www.outofthecircle.org

DETAILED CONCEPT

Today, »Islam« and »enlightenment« seem to be in the greatest possible contradiction with one another. However, to demand that Islam must – as the Christian lands of the 18th century did – undertake a process of enlightenment, is to ignore history. However, to demand that Islam must – as the Christian lands of the 18th century did – undertake a process of enlightenment, is to ignore history. In the Middle Ages and Early Modern Era, while witch burnings, heretics' trials, book bannings and religious wars were taking place in Europe, the arts and sciences were flourishing in the Islamic world. In the 9th century, philosopher Abu Yusuf al-Kindi called for studying the ideas of other peoples. Polymaths like Abu Raihan al-Biruni and Ibn Sina (Latinised: Avicenna) spearheaded an »eastern Renaissance« in Central Asia 1000 years after Christ, established the principles of trigonometry and algebra, developed algorithms and astrolabes as well as the basis for modern medicine.

The rediscovery of the classical philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in Europe would have been unthinkable without Islamic libraries and scholars. Thus Raphael's fresco »The School of Athens« pictures the Andalusian lawyer, doctor and influential commentator on Aristotle Ibn Rushd (Latinised: Averroes). According to Muhammad Sameer Murtaza, the West is indebted to Muslims not only for learning about the »Ancients« but also for the experimental spirit, which was still a foreign concept to the Greeks. The Quran itself calls for increasing knowledge through the observation of nature. Western modernity has benefited from the scientific achievements of these Aristotelian-rationalist currents of thought from Islam. Its extent can hardly be overestimated, but over the centuries they became devalued, denied and invisible.

The Quran also calls for tolerance to society's diversity. The basis of the pre-modern Muslim society was a »culture of ambiguity« (Thomas Bauer) that allowed Middle Eastern, Persian and Indian influences to combine. Legal theory made it possible for multiple settlements and legal principles to stand in parallel with each other. Commentators on the Quran and philosophers could present a multiplicity of interpretations and arguments without having to privilege one reading. Socially there were also several, more multifaceted role models available: »It was a society in which there was no

mainstream, but rather niches, [...] in which Sufis could turn in their circles undisturbed while astronomers tried out new theories about the movements of the planets [...]. (Frank Griffel)

In the wake of European imperialism and colonialism, Islamic societies have made considerable efforts to adapt to the European model of progress, modernization, industrialization and education – sometimes to the point of self-abnegation. Some Countries have cut themselves off from their own intellectual tradition and literature through the introduction of the Latin alphabet. In this sense, fundamentalist Islam is a child of modernity, rejecting the ambiguity of pre-modern Muslim societies just as it does Western modernization.

During times in which Islamism, populism and nationalism threaten equality and diversity, a new, 21st century project for an »exit from self-incurred immaturity« is not only urgent, but also vital. The goal is to map out the cultural connections between East and West in a millennia-long project of human enlightenment. What significance does the rich Islamic heritage have for artists from Muslim-majority countries or for artists with a Muslim background? Can classical forms such as ornament, mosaic, shadow theatre or miniature be interpreted in a contemporary way and expanded with new technologies such as video, computer and sound art? How do spiritualities such as those of Sufism connect with current aesthetic, societal and social issues? How do young artists defend themselves against despotism and the rhetoric of war, as well as against stereotypical role models of gender, origin and faith?