RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE CURATOR: CONTEXTUALIZING CURATORSHIP IN JORDAN'S PUBLIC SPACE

A Critical Reflection on Public Space, Artistic Interventions, and the Curatorial Role in Jordan

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Chapter 1: Introduction – Public Space as a Site of Negotiation

Public space is not a neutral or universally accessible domain. It falls under legal, economic, and political authorities that set rules on its use, access, and permitted activities (cf. Mitchell, 2003, pp. 18–20). As in many other countries, state control in Jordan combined with historical displacements and socio-economic differences creates an urban environment where different groups regularly negotiate their presence. Government officials, informal workers, citizens, residents, refugees, cultural practitioners, and everyday people must all navigate their rights to access and use public space (cf. Massad, 2001, pp. 230–235).

While existing research on public space in Jordan has often focused on state surveillance, city planning, and issues of accessibility, climate, and public equity (cf. Ababsa, 2011, pp. 205–231; Parker, 2009, pp. 110–120), less attention has been given to its role as a site for curatorial practice and cultural intervention. This study reflects on curatorial practice in Jordan within a wider theoretical and postcolonial framework.

What follows is a situated reflection, grounded in my personal experience and professional practice within Jordan's urban cultural field. My trajectory from early involvement in public space as a market worker to curating street art projects and, in-between, managing cultural programmes funded by intra-national donors frames my understanding of curatorial agency in this context. This thesis seeks to answer the following questions:

> *How do curators and artists navigate the legal, social, and political constraints that shape public space in Jordan?*
>
> *What informal strategies do cultural practitioners use to claim space and sustain artistic interventions in contested urban contexts?*
>
> *How do donor frameworks, economic logics, and governance structures shape the production and reception of public art projects?*

To address these questions, the thesis employs a postcolonial, ethnographic approach that draws on case studies of Spring Sessions and Baladk Street and Urban Arts Project. These projects provide contrasting examples of curatorial strategy in Jordan's fragmented and regulated urban landscape.

Chapter 2: Literature Review – Public Space, Informality, and Curation in Context

Public space is never neutral. Though often (especially in politics) idealized as open, democratic, and accessible, it is in fact produced through overlapping layers of social, political, and spatial negotiation. Henri Lefebvre's theory of space challenges the notion that space exists independently of social relations. His triadic model of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces frames space as a product of both material infrastructure and symbolic meaning shaped by lived experience, institutional control, and ideological discourse (cf. Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 33–39). Don Mitchell expands on this perspective in his formulation of the "*Right to the City,*" asserting that access to public space must be claimed through struggle. Public visibility, in his view, is never guaranteed but emerges from conflicts over use, legitimacy, and authority (cf. Mitchell, 2003, pp. 18–20).

These tensions are highly present in Jordan, where access to public space is shaped by legal frameworks, social hierarchies, and fragmented infrastructure. While state regulations govern surface-level behaviour, deeper exclusions emerge from how space is planned and maintained. Sidewalks are frequently narrow, broken, or entirely absent. According to municipal policy, responsibility for sidewalk maintenance falls to adjacent property owners, resulting in highly inconsistent conditions across neighbourhoods. A common feature is the "green buffer pavement", a narrow strip often obstructed by trees or perimeter walls rendering it unusable for pedestrians and forcing them into the street (cf. Arab Urbanism, 2024). Public transport remains limited, and the cityscape favours private vehicles. Women's access is further constrained by risks of harassment, and persons with disabilities face systemic exclusion due to steep gradients and non-compliant infrastructure, despite legal commitments to accessibility.

Image: A Thuja Occidentalis sprouting from the centreline of a pavement abutting a residential building in Al-Shmeisani district in Amman. (photo: araburbanism)

Jordan's demographic fabric adds further complexity to the question of access and visibility. As of 2025, the population is estimated at 11.44 million, with more than 85 percent living in urban areas and a median age of around 25 (cf. World Bank, 2024). The population includes people of Palestinian origin, many of whom remain without full citizenship, as well as historically rooted Jordanian communities such as Circassians, Chechens, Armenians, and Kurds. In addition, Jordan hosts over 1.4 million Syrians, and large populations of Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean, and Yemeni asylum seekers and migrant workers, many of whom live in legal and economic precarity (cf. UNHCR, 2024; SEO Amsterdam Economics, 2019, pp. 70–73). This layered demographic landscape translates directly into differentiated experiences of public space, with implications for who is seen, who is policed, and who is allowed to remain.

Amman's spatial evolution reflects its complex history of migration, urban planning, and socio-economic transformations. Initially a modest town, Amman was designated the capital in 1921 under the British Mandate, with municipal planning emphasizing administrative functions and infrastructural development. The influx of refugees following the 1948 Nakba and the 1967 Naksa spurred the growth of informal settlements, many of which have since become integral urban neighborhoods. From the late 1990s onward, neoliberal urban policies introduced large-scale commercial projects like Abdali Boulevard, marketed as public spaces but often economically and symbolically inaccessible to the broader populace (cf. Harb, 2024).

In contrast, neighbourhoods like Jabal Amman and Jabal al-Weibdeh have become cultural hotspots, drawing expatriates, artists, and institutions for their historic charm and

pedestrian scale. They now host residencies, galleries, cafés, and independent initiatives, forming a central geography for curatorial work. These areas have also gained popularity among Jordanians, especially on weekends, when heavy car traffic and crowded streets transform them into congested, highly social spaces. In response, many residents have converted homes into cafés, studios, or rentals which accelerated commercial activity and altering the neighbourhood fabric (cf. Al-Khawaja, 2020; Hawari & Bader, 2023).

Image: View of Jabal Nadhif from Jabal Amman, 2024. Photograph by Moath Isied.

This heightened desirability has triggered processes of hyper-gentrification. Rising property values and changing social dynamics have displaced lower-income residents and reshaped the character of these neighbourhoods. At the same time, municipal authorities especially through the *Amman Identity Division* actively regulate the visual and spatial language of these districts, controlling signage, murals, and public installations to preserve a curated image of the city. What now appears as a thriving cultural zone is thus shaped by overlapping forces: local aspiration, economic transformation, municipal branding, and international desirability (cf. Al-Khawaja, 2020).

Within this regulated terrain, curatorial work in public space becomes a form of negotiation. The curator often functions as a mediator between artistic vision and bureaucratic language, between community relations and institutional expectations. Nicolas Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics positions art as a social encounter, focusing on the temporary and situational rather than on the autonomous artwork (cf. Bourriaud, 1998, pp. 113–115). Hans Ulrich Obrist's idea of the curator as a "context builder" further emphasizes curatorial labor as spatially and socially embedded (cf. Obrist, 2014, p. 12). In contexts like Jordan, however, these concepts take on additional dimensions where curating has become increasingly professionalized and institutionalized, and calls for recognition of its processual, embedded, and collective nature especially when practiced outside the confines of museums or formal cultural spaces (cf. O'Neill, 2012, pp. 20–22).

This expanded understanding of curatorial labour is deepened by Johanna Montanari's concept of "curated publics." Drawing from her ethnographic research in Jordan, Montanari

shows how visibility, legitimacy, and publicness are not spontaneous but the result of affective and institutional labour. Publics are shaped through the filtering effects of donor logic, editorial framing, and material constraints. Her argument resonates with curatorial practice in public space, where every decision—of whom to include, how to communicate, or how to obtain permissions—can become an act of boundary-making (cf. Montanari, 2023, pp. 198–206).

These tensions are further illuminated in Rim Jasmin Irscheid's analysis of contemporary cultural production in Arab and diasporic contexts. Her concept of "entrepreneurial subjectivities" describes how artists and curators must continuously perform adaptability, professionalism, and institutional legibility in order to access resources and remain visible within transnational funding circuits. These expectations impact how projects are framed, how relationships are built, and how presence is maintained in increasingly temporary and competitive cultural economies (cf. Irscheid, 2023, pp. 160–165). In Jordan, where public funding for the arts is minimal, curators must often translate artistic vision into donor-compliant language, aligning with themes such as youth empowerment, environmental care, or social cohesion in order to secure support (cf. Hawari, 2021, pp. 14–16). This results in a curatorial field shaped not only by creativity, but by administrative navigation and affective resilience.

Together, these frameworks position curating in Jordan not as a neutral or purely cultural activity, but as a form of socio-political labour and post-colonial spatial conditions. The chapters that follow will explore how these dynamics play out in specific curatorial practices through lived experience, fieldwork, and project-based reflection.

Chapter 3: Living Public Space – My Dynamics in the Public Realm

As the writer of this thesis, and as a cultural worker and curator, and now as a programme manager at a Swiss foundation, I reflect more deeply on the path that brought me into cultural work and the specific role I now occupy. It did not begin with a structured plan or a clearly defined professional identity. Rather, I like to think of it as something that evolved organically through encounters with people, music, digital media, grassroots artistic interventions, living politics, and the shifting urban landscapes of Amman and the broader region.

Experiences of displacement and a continuous questioning of belonging shaped how I engage with my surroundings. My understanding of cultural practice developed through informal learning, digital and physical participation, and hands-on involvement in collective and often improvised creative processes. Now, from within a philanthropic foundation, I navigate a delicate intersection between institutional frameworks and the kinds of context-responsive, relational practices I was once deep in from the other side. This dual positioning, having worked as a curator embedded in grassroots cultural ecosystems and now operating within a funding institution offers a unique vantage point that is central to this thesis. It allows for a situated reflection on how curated publics are assembled not only through artistic intervention, but also through donor logics, institutional mandates, and political structures. In this sense, the thesis is not only a study of curatorial practice in Jordan's public spaces, but also a critical inquiry into the layered forces that shape what becomes visible, supported, and sustained within the cultural field.

Critically, my perspective on public space and subsequently my curatorial practice was naturally shaped by my positionality as a Palestinian-Jordanian without citizenship. This legal precarity permeated every interaction within public and institutional spaces and highlighted issues of legitimacy, access, and visibility that even if it was not central in themes in my curatorial work.

In the 1990s and early 2000's, my family owned and operated a banana ripening facility on the outskirts of Amman, located in the Central Vegetables and Farmers Market. Since childhood and throughout my early teenage years, I worked there alongside my father, siblings, and cousins. I observed a dense network of vendors and informal social hierarchies that determined how public space was negotiated. Although formally unregulated, this space was structured by implicit rules governing access and belonging. Reflecting through Montanari's lens, I now see clearly how this market space was not simply contested but rather a curated public, actively mediated through informal negotiations of visibility, legitimacy, and economic survival (cf. Montanari, 2023, p. 35).

Image: my brother (left) and I selling sacks of potatoes in 2006-07 in the central vegetables market in Amman.

For the ten years that followed 2013, I joined a local independent theatre institution known for hosting music performances, theatre productions, and experimental interventions. While my official responsibilities focused on communications, programming, and coordination, a significant portion of my work extended beyond the theatre walls. I often had to physically visit public offices to secure permits for cultural events, particularly those taking place in public venues.
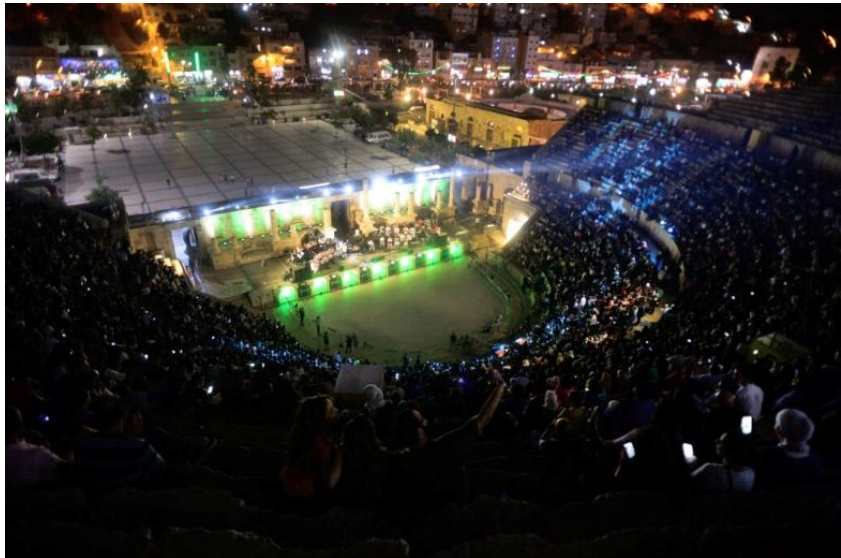
These experiences exposed me to the multilayered bureaucracy surrounding cultural programming in Jordan, where securing permissions is rarely a linear or purely procedural task. Instead, it unfolds through ongoing negotiations with a constellation of public stakeholders, including municipal departments, cultural and security authorities, and informal local gatekeepers. These actors not only authorize cultural activity but also monitor and, at times, influence what is staged, how it is framed, and who it reaches.

In this environment, *Wasta*, an Arabic term referring to the use of personal connections or influence to gain access, favours, or exceptions within institutional systems played a crucial role in navigating approvals and advancing cultural projects. Wasta often functioned as an informal currency that could accelerate permit processes, grant access to venues, or bypass procedural bottlenecks that would otherwise stall events indefinitely. Yet, while wasta could open doors, it also carried risks, particularly when it disrupted established hierarchies or crossed invisible lines of authority.

One incident that remains etched in my memory involved an attempt to invite an Iranian musician to perform as part of a larger ensemble in an open-air festival in the middle of Amman Roman Amphitheatre. Although he was not a solo act, he was a non-replaceable member of the group. In Jordan, Iranians are generally barred from entry due to the country's political stance toward Iran and its regional affiliations, especially concerning Iran's role in supporting regimes and militias considered hostile by the Jordanian state. Knowing the sensitivities, I applied for a permit to secure him a visa, which required clearance from the General Intelligence Directorate, known locally as al-Mukhabarat, Jordan's most powerful state security agency responsible for internal surveillance, intelligence, and national stability.

Image: The concert in context: Dhafer Youssef at the Roman Theatre in Amman on Monday (Photo: Muath Freij)

When the application stalled at the Mukhabarat for several weeks, we attempted to leverage wasta by requesting support from the Minister of Tourism, whose ministry was also officially supporting the festival. We believed that his backing might help expedite the process. But this strategy backfired. I was summoned unexpectedly for an interview at an intelligence facility at around 4 a.m. and brought into an interrogation room where I was questioned for hours as though the festival posed a threat to national security. The tone was less about the musician and more about the way we had approached the system. The officer made it very clear: our mistake was invoking the minister's support. "This is not how you do it with us," he said. "It's not going to work for you—or for him." What we needed, in their view, was the right kind of wasta, not necessarily higher-ranking, but someone they were comfortable with, someone who operated within their known networks.

The conversation quickly turned personal. As a Palestinian-Jordanian without full citizenship, I was reminded politely, yet unmistakably that I remain in Jordan at the state's discretion, "because your mother is Jordanian." I was cautioned to be more careful with the kind of cultural work I do and the people I invite into the country. It was a sharp reminder of how personal status, political sensitivities, and cultural programming are deeply intertwined in this context.

Growing up without citizenship shaped my experience of public spaces. Jordanian nationality laws prevented me from acquiring citizenship through my mother, significantly restricting my access to education, healthcare, certain employment careers, and full participation in public life (cf. Brand, 1995, p. 67). My relationship with state and institutional spaces was mediated through provisional permits and legal uncertainty, mirroring the precarious experiences of other marginalized communities in Jordan.

Image: Personal identification card issued to sons of Jordanian women—granting limited rights without full citizenship

These encounters, whether negotiating permits in public offices, facing interrogation over programming decisions, or navigating the limitations of my legal status gradually revealed to me the broader structure within which cultural work in Jordan operates. Curatorial practice, as I experienced it firsthand, involved constantly moving between institutional frameworks and informal networks.

Within these donor-dependent environments, gatekeeping became a common feature. Many institutions were shaped by hierarchical decision-making, often concentrated in the hands of one or two individuals who determined programming, access to funding, and the trajectory of artistic collaborations (cf. El-Sharif, 2020, p. 12; cf. Shadid, 2021, p. 9). This environment limited opportunities for emerging curators and cultural workers and for experimentations outside of the subjective scope of these institutions, especially those operating outside established networks. The precarious nature of this system became increasingly visible with the closure of several initiatives I had followed or collaborated with over the years, such as Makan Art Space, Riwaq Al-Salt, and other organisations working in the cultural fields. These closures reflected a broader fragility brought on by financial instability, leadership burnout and internal conflicts, political fatigue, and the steady emigration of key cultural actors.

Still, in the face of these structural constraints. Curators and practitioners developed informal networks of trust, found creative ways to navigate donor requirements, and negotiated the fine balance between community accountability and institutional survival.

Chapter 4: Practicing the In-Between – The Emotional and Institutional Labour of Curating

What does it actually mean to curate in the public sphere of Jordan, not as a conceptual framework, but as lived, day-to-day practice? By the time a mural appears on a city wall, or a workshop unfolds in an empty lot, the curatorial process has already passed through a quiet storm of negotiation, calculation, and anticipation. While previous chapters have addressed public space as a contested and regulated domain, this chapter shifts inward into the affective, institutional, and logistical textures of curatorial labour itself. It is not concerned with defining curation, but with tracing the embodied rhythms of working in the in-between: between artist and authority, proposal and policy, intuition and compliance.

Curatorial work in Jordan is rarely linear. It is relational and recursive and often marked by delays, improvisation, and hesitation. Every wall, event, or gathering is preceded by a series of encounters—some formal, many informal—through which trust is built, access is negotiated, and boundaries are sensed rather than declared. The curator in this context is an affective buffer, a translator of tone, a reader of moods, and often the bearer of risks.

This labour is intensified by the broader shift toward professionalisation within Jordan's cultural sector. While the growth of residencies, institutional partnerships, and grant-based programming has expanded the formal infrastructure for cultural work, it has also introduced new pressures. Artists and curators alike are now expected to articulate their practices in polished formats: project logics, measurable outcomes, "capacity-building" language, and social friendly narratives. Success increasingly depends on the ability to align it with donor vocabulary, institutional timelines, and reporting cycles.

This shift has material and emotional consequences. Much of the curatorial energy is spent on translating artistic ideas into grant proposals or concept notes often under time constraints and without certainty of approval. These documents require more than clarity; they demand a form of strategic optimism. One must anticipate what will resonate, soften what might raise concern, and exaggerate what aligns with trending donor themes: youth engagement, environmental responsibility, social inclusion. While these topics are not inherently problematic, the obligation to constantly perform their relevance shapes how work is conceived and communicated.

As Rim Jasmin Irscheid's research on cultural producers in Beirut suggests, this dynamic is not unique to Jordan. Across the region, the professionalisation of cultural practice has produced what she terms "entrepreneurial subjectivities" (cf. Irscheid, 2023, pp. 160–165). Artists and curators are expected to be self-managing, self-promoting, and permanently available, able to network, mobilize, adapt, and account for their work in ways that satisfy both local expectations and international metrics. This condition may open doors, but it also narrows the space for more intuitive, slow, or ambiguous forms of practice.

In curatorial work, this entrepreneurial pressure manifests as a tension between care and compliance. One must protect the artist's intention while ensuring the proposal is not rejected; advocate for risky, complex work while cushioning it in reassuring language; navigate state surveillance while not alarming donors or institutions. These negotiations are subtle, and their emotional toll is rarely acknowledged. Curators are praised for outcomes, but rarely for the labour it took to prevent a project from collapsing.

The performance of professionalism also introduces new exclusions. Practitioners without English fluency, without social media presence, or without prior visibility in institutional networks often find themselves shut out—not through overt rejection, but through absence of access. The informal, intuitive ways in which cultural work used to circulate are now often overwritten by the demand for structured applications, artist statements, digital portfolios, and strategic plans. The result is a quiet sorting mechanism, where only those who can "speak the language" of the sector—sometimes literally—remain legible.

Yet even within this narrowing, curators adapt. They develop informal infrastructures: WhatsApp groups, shared documents, verbal agreements. They work through personal trust rather than official mandates. They learn to read silences in meetings, to recognize the hesitation behind a "maybe," to differentiate between procedural delay and political concern. The curation becomes not just of content, but of the entire relational field.

This chapter does not seek to romanticize curatorial labour. On the contrary, it aims to mark its precarity. There is little protection for the curator when things go wrong—when permits are revoked, when murals are censored, when partners withdraw, when communities push back. The curator becomes the face of accountability in all directions: to artists, to funders, to institutions, to the imagined public.

Still, something persists. Despite exhaustion, despite co-optation, despite institutional overreach, curators in Jordan continue to operate in the cracks—carving out moments of presence, creating conditions for art to appear, however briefly, in the public realm. It is not a linear form of authorship, nor is it always visible as "work." But it is a form of care. Not the care of preservation or pedagogy, but the care of staying—of showing up, listening closely, and negotiating possibility in spaces where no outcome is guaranteed.

This is the terrain of curating I wish to highlight—not as a defined methodology, but as a situated, affective, and often invisible practice that holds the tensions of place, politics, and publicness without resolving them. In the following chapter, these dynamics will become more tangible through the analysis of two specific projects. But here, it is enough to pause and acknowledge the curatorial labour itself: practiced in-between, without guarantees, and always in motion. The question that somehow remains valid is: "Curating for whom?"

Chapter 5: Curating Jordan's Public Space: Case Studies and Critical Analysis

As established in earlier chapters, curators operate within a delicate balance of autonomy and constraint, mediating issues of visibility, legitimacy, and participation. This chapter explores two detailed case studies to illustrate how curators in Jordan construct and mediate publics within a contested urban context, shaped not only by spatial politics but also by the temporal logics of donor funding cycles, institutional expectations, and the increasing projectification[1] of culture.

Spring Sessions: Curating Experimental Pedagogies in Amman's Urban Fabric

Spring Sessions, initiated in 2014 by Toleen Touq and Noura Al Khasawneh, arose as an experimental art residency in Amman, Jordan's capital city, specifically responding to a significant gap in local arts education. Situated intentionally outside formal academic institutions, the residency operated through collaborative workshops hosted in various overlooked urban spaces. This site-responsive strategy included activating locations such as the derelict King Ghazi Hotel in downtown Amman, the Studio printmaking collective, and Culture Street in the vibrant commercial district of Shmeisani.

The programme emphasized informal learning, collective experimentation, and trust-based relationships among participants and mentors. Prominent international and local artists, including Michael Rakowitz, Basma Al Sharif, and Bahbak Hashemi Nezhad, facilitated workshops addressing urban transformation, civic identity, and heritage politics. A 48-hour

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[1] Projectification refers to the increasing tendency in cultural and development sectors to organize work around short-term, donor-funded projects with predefined objectives, deliverables, and timeframes. This mode of structuring cultural production often prioritizes measurable outcomes and visibility over long-term engagement, relational processes, or sustainable practice. (cf. Irscheid, 2023, pp. 162–165).

city walk organized by the design collective åbäke, for example, encouraged participants to reflect deeply on their embodied experience of the city.

Image: Participants during workshop facilitated by Tita Salina & Irwan Ahmett, Spring Sessions 2017. Photo copyright Hussam Da'na.

At first glance, Spring Sessions positioned itself as radically anti-institutional. By avoiding a fixed venue, it sought to evade the bureaucratic entanglements that typically accompany public cultural initiatives in Jordan. This fluidity allowed for spontaneous, contextually responsive engagement with Amman's social and urban fabric. However, this mobility did not liberate the project from external influences. Like many informal curatorial platforms, Spring Sessions remained dependent on donor funding and international institutional alliances, which subtly shaped its internal dynamics and curatorial direction.

Despite its avowed resistance to traditional structures, the project relied on funding from institutions such as the Goethe-Institut, EUNIC, and the British Council. These partnerships required continuous negotiation between curatorial autonomy and donor expectations. Even when financial support came with relatively minimal demands, the administrative realities of applications, reporting, and outcome documentation imposed external logics that had to be translated into the language of measurable success. While I recognize that such processes are entirely standard in donor relations, in the context of public curation this often means that the work must be framed through the donor's vocabulary and logic—possibly altering how it is represented and understood. This bureaucratic labour that was largely invisible to the public was ever-present and had significant influence on how the programme was shaped and communicated (cf. Touq & Khasawneh, 2017).

Access to Spring Sessions was another site of tension. While the open call process ostensibly promoted inclusivity, most participants were drawn from already networked artistic circles. Fluency in English, cultural capital, and familiarity with international art discourses often determined inclusion. This reproduced dynamics that Montanari describes as "curated

subjectivities," in which publics are assembled not through radical inclusion but through pre-existing markers of privilege and legibility to internationalized art systems (cf. Montanari, 2023, p. 142).

Image: Participants reading their manifesto on Utopia at the conclusion of Gareth Evans and Andrea Luka-Zimmerman's workshop at the Muhanna Durra Gallery, Spring Sessions 2017. Photo copyright Katya Ch.

Despite these contradictions, Spring Sessions succeeded in creating a space for experimental cultural practice in Jordan's formalized and often restrictive cultural ecosystem. Through its iterative structure, responsive pedagogy, and attention to lived urban dynamics, the programme fostered a form of curatorial practice grounded in dialogue, collaboration, and community—a curating that was simultaneously educational, affective, and spatial.

Baladk Street and Urban Arts Project: Curating Through Informal Choreographies

Baladk Street and Urban Arts Project, launched in 2013 by Al Balad Theater, became one of the most prominent street art initiatives in the region, transforming walls across the capital city into large-scale murals. During my eight-year tenure as curator (2014–2022), the project evolved into a sprawling, organic curatorial experiment that reached into diverse areas of the city, such as Jabal Amman, Jabal Al Weibdeh, downtown area, Marj El Hamam, Sweifeieh and Hashmi Al Shamali. What distinguished Baladk was not just its visual output but the way it operated, its informality, it was intuitive, and relationally specific. It was a project driven but fieldwork, improvisation, and negotiated trust.

Image: Children playing on a makeshift swing in front of a Baladk mural in Hashmi Al Shamali. Photo credit: Moath Isied

The process often began with what could best be described as chaos theory in curatorial practice. We did not work from a master plan of target certain neighbourhoods. Instead, the equation was simple and unpredictable: an ok wall, access to a lift, acceptance by the community, and permission from the landlord and no veto from the municipality. These elements had to align, and when they did, we moved quickly. This method might seem disorganized, but in fact, it followed a deeply contextual logic, one where pattern and order emerged from the seeming randomness of urban conditions. As in chaos theory, small variables could tip the balance: a landlord's mood, power lines too close to the wall, or wall surface too rough, or as simple as a car parked where the lift is supposed to stand, or the quiet tolerance of the city authorities. What resulted was a fluid curatorial process responsive to the terrain it encountered that we always had to have back up walls for participating artists.

Over time, this model produced murals and relationships. Hashmi Al Shamali, for instance, became a recurring site where over twenty murals were created. Each successful wall there made the next one easier. We became known to the residents, trusted by the community, and increasingly embedded in the neighbourhood's social fabric. But this was not limited to Hashmi. Baladk operated wherever the conditions allowed. The curation extended to how walls and artist proposals were matched. Each year, over fifty artists from around the world applied, while fewer than fifteen could be accepted, including the local artists. As I moved through Amman, I carried these proposals in mind, mentally aligning artists with walls. Curation in this context became a form of urban choreography, fitting artistic concepts to walls as I drive by, layering proposals atop provisional canvases.

This "projectification" of Baladk's annual festival structure—its need to submit proposals, deliverables, and post-event documentation—reshaped how risk, participation, and success were defined. It also produced a rhythm that privileged short-term, high-visibility outputs over longer, slower engagements. Artists were selected through an open call, but the balance between local and international visibility often leaned toward the latter, raising questions about equity and representation.

Yet this improvisational freedom was constantly tempered by institutional and political constraints. Local artists frequently expressed frustration at feeling overshadowed by international artists. Al Balad Theater, while the initiating institution, occasionally intervened in curatorial decisions, barring artists or redirecting themes based on subjective judgments on their proposed sketches and nepotism played an active role as well. Donors and embassies further shaped the project by mandating that their funds support artists from their own countries or reflect thematic priorities aligned with diplomatic agendas: such as children's right to play, green cities, or women's empowerment. These interventions turned curating into a negotiation across many axes: political, institutional, and interpersonal.

One episode that vividly illustrates these dynamics was the 2021 mural The Column, painted by Spanish artist Jofre Oliveras and Jordanian artist Dalal Mitwally. Installed between Amman's Citadel neighbourhood and downtown, the mural portrayed a Jordanian man bearing a Nabataean-style Corinthian column—a reference to Petra and an emblem open to multiple interpretations: strength, burden, or the invisible labour of those who built the city, particularly the Egyptian workers long employed in Jordan's construction sector. Originally, the figure wore a red-and-white Hatta (Jordanian keffiyeh), a culturally specific headscarf.

Image: The original red-and-white headscarf detail from The Column mural, which triggered intervention from the authorities. credit: Persona Collective

Although I was not the curator of this mural, and my role was more of a fixer and facilitator, I still bore the full weight of logistics and coordination. And when the mukhabarat (Jordanian intelligence services) wanted to reach someone, they contacted me. I began receiving repeated phone calls requesting changes—not because the artwork was deemed too forceful, but because of the fear surrounding how it might be interpreted. The authorities asked that the hatta be repainted in plain white, expressing concern that the red pattern could be construed as politically charged or partisan.

I was pushed into a corner. After exhausting negotiations with the artists and repeated pressure from authorities, I persuaded the artists to modify the piece. This led to heightened tensions. The artists were understandably upset and later criticized my role publicly.

This episode reminded me that curators are often caught between competing forces, held accountable both by the state and by artists. As Paul O'Neill notes, the curator "carries the burden of responsibility for the conditions in which art is produced and received" (cf. O'Neill, 2012, pp. 58–60).

Image: Repainting the headscarf in plain white — a decision I was pushed to enforce after repeated pressure from the intelligence services. I was the one who ultimately asked the artists to cover it. Image credit: Persona Collective

This episode, like the entire arc of Baladk, underscored that curating in public space is not merely a spatial act, but a temporal and emotional one. It means responding to shifts in power, mood, funding, and weather—both literal and political. Montanari's idea of "curated publics" becomes particularly relevant here: the murals curated publics not only through their themes, but through their visibility, their framing by donors, and their gradual absorption into forms of cultural tourism and urban branding.

As Rim Jasmin Irscheid argues, cultural production under such regimes is defined by a "temporal politics"—short-term visibility replacing sustained engagement, affective exhaustion replacing institutional stability, entrepreneurialism replacing collective authorship (cf. Irscheid, 2023, pp. 162–165). Curators become project managers, translators, and emotional buffers—assembling publics, managing risk, and maintaining care within a system that rarely acknowledges its toll.

What emerges across Spring Sessions and Baladk is not a stable model of public curation, but a shared condition: navigating precarity, performance, and possibility. These projects show that curating publics in Jordan is never simply about inclusion. It is about making

presence possible within constraints (temporal, financial, legal, and emotional) and sustaining it, even briefly, through improvisation and care.

Conclusion

Curating Futures: The Ethics and Possibilities of Public Narration

What emerges across the case studies of Spring Sessions and Baladk is not a single curatorial model, but rather a set of entangled practices that are strategic, improvised, and deeply relational. Public curation in Jordan cannot be separated from its context: it is shaped by security anxieties, donor frameworks, uneven geographies, and overlapping crises. Yet within these constraints, curators continue to assemble publics not as fixed audiences, but as fragile moments of encounter between artists, communities, institutions, and spaces.

To curate in public is to work in motion. It is to mediate between aesthetics and logistics, artistic freedom and regulatory compliance, the aspirations of artists and the hesitations of authorities. It is, as the experience of The Column or the careful shaping of Hakaya's narratives reveal, to be accountable not only for what is shown, but also for what is excluded or transformed in the process of making work public. This responsibility is often silent and unthanked, and it does not always feel fair. But it is also what makes public curation a deeply ethical practice—because it demands care, reflexivity, and a constant negotiation with power.

Curators in these contexts must learn to read walls, interpret unspoken rules, translate artistic visions into diplomatically viable forms, and navigate the affective tensions that arise when projects are compromised. They must learn to hold space for contradiction: to honour the artist while protecting the project, to amplify voices without reducing them to donor slogans, and to accept that sometimes, the work lies in sustaining relationships rather than producing outcomes.

If the thesis began by questioning what it means to curate in contested urban contexts, it ends by proposing that curation is itself a form of storytelling. Not a story of mastery, but of proximity, of being close to people, places, and the messy realities they inhabit. To curate, in this sense, is not only to assemble publics but to be assembled by them. It is to learn to listen, to adapt, to stay with discomfort, and to remain accountable to the stories we help bring into visibility.

In a region where public space is both a stage and a battleground, curators are not simply facilitators of culture, they are mediators of vulnerability, of possibility, and of care.

This thesis does not aim to produce a fixed model of curation, but to foreground a situated, reflexive mode of working, one that resists simplification and insists on proximity, care, and accountability. From my position as a practitioner navigating both grassroots and institutional spaces, I hope this reflection contributes to a broader understanding of curatorship as an ongoing negotiation between people, politics, and publicness.

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