The Universal Language of Art

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On November 9th 2019, Germany and the world celebrated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. I remember that night in 1989 vividly, even though I absorbed it through TV as a teenager. An era of psychological and political division came to an end. For the historian Eric Hobsbawm, it marked the end of the “short twentieth century.”

But, over the last few years, it feels as though new walls are going up: physical walls, technological walls, and emotional walls. It led the academic Timothy Garton Ash to describe this moment as being like “1989-in-reverse.”

Eric Hobsbawm’s 1994 book, where he introduced the idea of the “short twentieth century,” was titled The Age of Extremes. Does this apply to our present moment, too?

We are also in the Age of Extreme Technology. It’s important to remember that technology is at its most powerful when it’s no longer noticeable. When it’s indistinguishable from air or water. The effect technology is having on us — as individuals, as communities, as a species — is uncharted. Technology often feels like the symptom and the cause of our current age of extremes.

A previous World Majlis, convened in London, dealt with this very issue. It asked, “How can developments in augmented reality and mirror worlds impact our collective futures?”

The World Majlis conversation that I hosted in Dubai essentially followed on from there, to ask: “What is the role of the arts in our era of change?”
In the World Majlis session entitled, “The Universal Language of Art,” I wanted to explore with my guests whether the arts possess some kind of super power, an antidote even, to today’s forces of division, disorientation and disinformation?

The discussion began with the notion of “empathy,” which comes from Greek: “em,” meaning “in”; and “pathos,” meaning “feeling.” To have empathy means to enter someone else’s feelings, like a journey into another person.

The novelist David Foster Wallace once said that fiction is so important because it allows the reader’s consciousness to inhabit someone else’s, intimately. And this is what makes literature an “empathy machine.” Proponents of virtual reality today also use this term: by donning a VR headset, you temporarily leave your own body and enter into another’s.

Recently, filmmaker Alejandro G. Iñárritu made a groundbreaking VR experience called CARNE y ARENA (Virtually present, Physically invisible). Visitors were transported to the US/Mexican border, and experienced, first hand, what it is to be a Mexican migrant caught in the dead of night by US border military police.

In our Majlis session, Dr Louise Lambert, a UAE based psychologist, reinforced existing studies, which positively relate arts engagement with better health, wellbeing, and tolerance. There are, she says, measurable effects of “awe” and “inspirational” on the human mind.

The pilot project “Heritage in Hospitals” created jointly by University College London Museums and Collections and University College London Hospitals Arts proposed a novel research project: to take museum objects to patients’ bedside and to assess whether handling museum
objects has a positive impact on patient wellbeing. The idea goes back to the 17th and 18th centuries.

Another participant, Rayya Fathalla, Director of Engagement at Expo 2020, talked about her previous initiative entitled “Art-Abled,” for the British Council. It engaged over 5000 children and youth of determination as well as their carers in workshops, exhibitions and performances over 7 years highlighting the importance of art as a tool for communication and healing.

Rayya also brought up the urgent need for governments in the Arab world and Middle East to implement the arts into formal education at school. Without this kind of early integration, the arts will remain peripheral, and be perceived as supplementary to more “serious” subjects and pursuits.

This impassioned call echoed Ali Baba’s founder, Jack Ma, at the World Economic Forum, Davos, in 2018, where he made it passionately clear that the world needs its future students to be trained in the humanities, and not just maths and sciences. Machine learning and robotics, Ma said, will be able to crunch numbers and assemble products faster than any human can keep up — but they are still a long way away from the complex processes of thinking, or feeling, such as empathy. Is it a coincidence that before founding Ali Baba, Jack Ma used to be an English teacher? I don’t think so.

It makes me wonder: we may need as many philosophers, artists and writers at technology companies as we do coders. I was pleased to hear that one of the technologically minded observers at our Majlis, Deirdre O’Reilly (Business Director Expo 2020, SAP MENA) agreed with this proposal.

Saudi Arabia, and its Vision 2030, could be an amazing test case for cultivating the arts alongside technology, entrepreneurship and tourism. Her Royal Highness, Princess Lamia Bint Majed AlSaud, participant of the Majlis, spoke about the dizzying changes taking place, and how AlWaleed Philanthropies support arts and preservation in a number of initiatives, from Afghanistan to the Louvre. She sees
the arts as an integral force in catalysing Saudi Arabia’s predominantly young populous towards a diversified future.

Antonia Carver, Director of Art Jameel—a contemporary art organisation with Saudi roots that have venues in Dubai and Jeddah echoed this societal function of the arts. Antonia said, “We fundamentally believe that the arts have a kind of superpower of really starting a conversation that’s open ended, that’s exploratory, that’s experimental, and that brings a certain kind of visibility to the most complex issues of our time.” When societies have accelerated as fast as they have in the Gulf, from generation to generation, and with such mixtures of cultures living side by side in new ways, Antonia stressed that the arts can form a common space for these distances to meet and learn from one another.

“It is a place for stories,” is how Isobel Abulhoul, founder of the Emirates Festival of Literature, described the UAE. She emphasised the long history of Nabati poetry, and oral traditions of story telling, the way this forms a deep basis for empathy and understanding of the Other which she has experienced over the 50 years being resident in Dubai. “That is the power of poetry,” Isobel said, “that is the power of language. We could not live without it.”

As to whether the arts are a universal language? Lebanese poet Zeina Hashem Beck believed that “the universal is found in the specific”: in specific people, places and the words they use to describe their struggles and their solidarity. Emirati novelist Maha Gargash, agreed with this belief, and gave us a special insight into the first UAE opera to be performed at Expo 2020, for which she is the librettist.

Syrian choreographer/dancer Lana Fahmi and UAE based photographer Katarina Premfors came full circle, with their experiences of witnessing individual and social change through the power of art. Both dance and photography may lay claim to being two of the most universal artistic forms: communication that doesn’t require spoken or written language.
At the end of our Majlis conversation, I was reminded that human history has been shadowed by the arts: we make sense of the past through its paintings, its dances, its stories, and its monuments.

And how do the arts manage to do this? It shows us things we may not normally see. It tells us things we may not customarily hear.

It witnesses events, both beautiful and terrifying, that otherwise would slip from our attention, and subsequently, from our collective memory.

Without the arts, even more invisible walls would go up. We need the arts to ensure we are connected across borders, old and new. To ensure we remain connected with ourselves.