

the stories we tell

engaging archives otherwise

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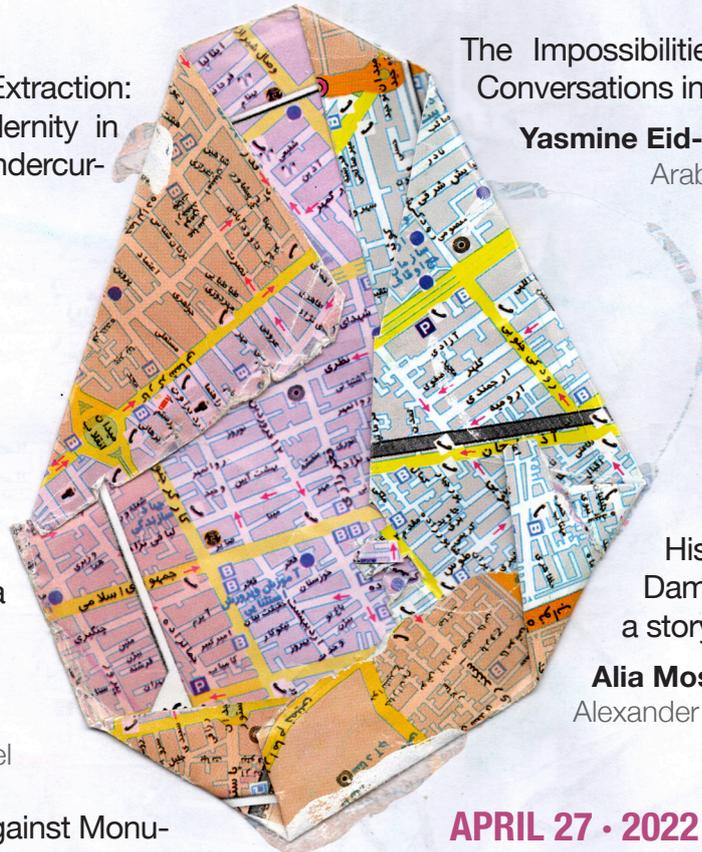
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* All seminars are in Belgium time zone (GMT+2). Ex-
cept the first event in November 3, which will be solely
online, this public seminar series will be both virtual and
in-person at Free University of Brussels at the Meeting
Room/Salle de Réception (3rd floor) of the [Maison des
Sciences Humaines](#). Please register through this [link](#).

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the stories we tell

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the stories we tell matter. it matters not only what they say about others and ourselves but also how we craft them. this seminar series engages scholars and artists of the middle east working across disciplines and national boundaries for a set of crossed conversations on critical and creative archival practices. the current political moment and the ravages of empire across the region demand that we unlearn and rethink forms of knowing to foreground histories and struggles on the margins. we envisage this series as a way to collectively explore methods and approaches at the intersection of social science and art-based research that can nourish and transform historical and ethnographic storytelling. in doing so we consider what constitutes an archive and what are the challenges of producing, collecting and interpreting primary sources – from state collections, canonical texts and journals to family histories, folk songs, audiovisual material, urban sites and seeds.

convened by omar jabary salamanca and sahar saeidnia

Failed But Not Forgotten: Oil Media in Iraq Before 1958

On the one hand, oil propaganda has endured the better part of a century. The images and messages crafted in the middle of the twentieth century by oil companies to celebrate industrial modernization in the Middle East continue to circulate on social media and in collective memory until today. On the other hand, these collections of photographs and films sponsored by oil companies in order to quell anti-imperialist sentiments among the general public in producing countries constitute an archive of failed projects. In this paper, I examine contradictions that emerge from engaging with the media archives of oil company public relations in Iraq, where the revolution in 1958 overturned the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company's efforts to persuade Iraqi audiences that the company's story of oil was also the story of their nation.

Mona Damluji is Assistant Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. As a faculty fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), she is currently writing her first monograph, *Pipeline Cinema*, a history of how multinational petroleum companies shaped local cultural norms and global popular imaginaries of oil and the Middle East through film and media sponsorship in the twentieth century. Her publications appear in *Urban History*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *Jadaliyya* and elsewhere.

Archival Regimes of Extraction: Contested Petromodernity in Iran and its Visual Undercurrents

Investigating the relationship between petromodernity and photography and film as embodied technologies of visibility and eradication, this project unpacks the visual and cultural manifestation of this emergent image economy which operated in tandem with the larger petroleum complex. I ask: what visual analysis can we perform to understand the colonial nexus, beyond simply reiterating "the camera's complicity in the subjugation of racial others?". Following oil as an ethnographic phenomenon helps us connect and map different colonial technologies of order and control. Addressing the question of the recovery of the subaltern voice in the context of photographic visibility in the archives, I seek to further reconsider what constitutes presence and absence once we move from the written to the visual document.

By discussing my recent film *One Image, Two Acts*, I will address the formations of early modernist infrastructures of leisure vis-à-vis the broader social engineering project and asymmetries of power in the oil towns of South-Western Iran. I trace the paths in which the oil company's visual regimes of petromodernity were reclaimed and countered by a growing anti-colonial cinema in which oil was a protagonist and cinemas had become the contested emblem of colonial development. In doing so, I seek to further reframe oil not solely as an exchangeable commodity but rather as an archive itself; one that constitutes a web of imaginations, aspirations, and struggles.

Sanaz Shorabi is a research-based artist, filmmaker, and a Fonds de Recherche du Québec Société et Culture (FRQSC) doctoral fellow at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture in Montréal. Her doctoral artistic research is conceived as a series of essay film and documentary-based installation mapping an unlikely geopolitical calendar of political affinities, competing and contradictory national projects wherein oil was both the agent of imperial power and the catalyst for anticolonial political projects, examining the ways in which oil was tasked to navigate the political task of nation-building on the one hand and transnational solidarity during the global decolonization on the other. Her work has been screened and exhibited internationally at 50th International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR), Montréal International Documentary Film Festival (RIDM), Sheffield Doc/Fest, IndieLisboa, Videonale 16 Bonn, Kasseler Dokfest (nominated for Golden Key Award), Images Festival, Centre Clark Montréal, and Beirut Art Center, among others. Shorabi has been supported by fellowships and artist residency awards such as Forum Transregionale Studien Berlin, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, RAW Académie, SOMA Summer School Ciudad de México, Est-Nord-Est résidence d'artistes, and Vermont Studio Center.

Monument Stories: Cities of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula through Monument Biographies

In the 1970s, Aden, Jeddah, and Kuwait City underwent an extraordinarily dynamic period, attracting cultural producers and agents who partook in designing the modern urban landscape of the Arabian Peninsula. Supported by state institutions, these cities reflected the national aspirations that local governments sought to realize through their urban cultural policy. Monuments and sculptures were commissioned to local and foreign artists to beautify public space and commemorate events, leaders, and sites. Albeit grand in size, the narratives behind their genesis remain largely unknown; rarely have there been studies contextualizing their historical, architectural, political, and artistic beginnings and significance. This research retraces the proverbial life and death of these monuments, aiming to develop a multimedia map elaborating the multiple stories that constructed their biography. I will be presenting ongoing protocols practiced within a research-creation collaborative project focused on monument biographies in the Arabian Peninsula. These protocols use and produce digitized archives, filmed field-work notes, remote fieldwork data, maps, and ethnographic audiovisual materials.

Anahi Alviso-Marino is a scholar-researcher specializing in political sociology of visual arts in the Arabian Peninsula and currently a postdoctoral fellow (ingénieure d'études) at the collective "Penser l'urbain par l'image" (Labex Urban Futurs), University Gustave Eiffel/Ecole des Ponts ParisTech. She obtained her PhD at the University Paris 1-Sorbonne and the University of Lausanne, researching art and politics in Yemen; her MA from Columbia University in New York; and her BA from Complutense University in Madrid. She works at the intersection of social sciences and artistic practices and has exhibited her archival and research materials from Yemen, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates in Paris at the Palais de Tokyo (« L'ennemi de mon ennemi » a project by Neïl Beloufa, 2018), and at the Villa Vassilieff ("One of many stories. Art worlds in Yemen", 2017). She has contributed to "Modern Art of the Arab World: Primary Documents" (MOMA, 2018) and "Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East" (Sternberg Press, 2017). Her forthcoming book focuses on art and politics in Yemen. She is currently working on a collaborative research project and multimedia map with Neïl Beloufa charting monument stories across the Arabian Peninsula (Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts).

A Decolonial Rage Against Monuments

In 2021, we not only commemorated 150 years of the Paris Commune, but also 10 years of reemerging planetary revolts, that kicked off in Tunisia in 2011. In the same way the story of Communards cannot properly be told without mentioning the fall of the Vendôme Column, the tale of the most recent upsurges of planetary revolt cannot properly be told without mentioning the intensification of what Bhakti Shringarpure (2012) called a "rage against monuments". In the last decade, an archipelago of decolonial rage is spontaneously bursting out worldwide, targeting public statues that until today glorify the legacy of slavery, imperialism and colonization. From the settler colonial states of South Africa, the U.S., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia to the heart of the Empire in France, Belgium, and England, recent protests broke the polis in two. The national heroes sculpted in bronze revered by some, seem to represent contempt, injustice, oppression and clear cut genocide for others, rendering visible a deep societal antagonism, going beyond the classical "left-right" binary opposition. Often dismissed as "merely symbolic", the proposed paper want to look deeper into the entanglement of the symbolic and the more material and infrastructural aspects of this decolonial rage against monuments, wary of the warnings of Frantz Fanon (1961) that in colonial contexts, the economic infrastructure is always also a superstructure. Looking at movements of monumental Revolt in Tunis and Belgium in the light of the commemoration of 150 years of the Paris Commune, it is paramount to question, what is still left of the left and how to reconstruct from this monumental debris new caring forms of planetary alliances and forms of solidarities that could prefigure new ways of inhabiting the world differently, in freedom and dignity.

Joachim H. Ben Yakoub is a writer, researcher and lecturer operating on the border of different art schools, universities and institutions. He is affiliated to the MENARG and S:PAM research group of Ghent University, where he is conducting research on The Rhythm of Revolting Aesthetics in Brussels. He is lecturer at Sint-Lucas School of Arts Antwerp, where he is also promotor of the collective action research The Archives of the Tout-Monde.

Printscapes of Solidarity: Palestine, Art and Revolution in Beirut's long '60s

In the aftermath of the devastating 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and with the rise of the Palestinian Resistance from Lebanon, Beirut's imagined political geography was being redefined as the revolutionary 'Arab Hanoi': a base and springboard for the liberation of Palestine, just as Hanoi was for South Vietnam, and a nodal city in the geography of revolutionary anti-imperialism. Beirut's important infrastructures of art and publishing were politicised in this context, summoning a network of artists and intellectuals—from across the Arab world and beyond—into solidarity with Palestine. The politicization of the role of the artist in society at this particular global historical juncture was productive of new aesthetic sensibilities that were carried in and through the visibility of reproducible printed media, such as posters, cards, stamps, leaflets, periodicals and books. These neglected archives of visual and material culture offer an important lens to explore how transnational anti-colonial solidarity has shaped the revolutionary imagination of the global sixties; and crucially, provide historical insight on the hitherto understudied aesthetics of solidarity with the Palestinian liberation struggle.

Zeina Maasri is a Senior Lecturer and Course Leader of the interdisciplinary BA in War and Conflict at the University of Brighton, UK. Before taking up her post at Brighton, she was both an independent graphic designer and an academic at the American University of Beirut (1999 – 2016) in Lebanon. Her new book, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties* (Cambridge University Press 2020), is the result of a long-time research on the intersection of visual culture, design and politics in the postcolonial Arab world. She is the author of *Off the Wall: Political Posters of the Lebanese Civil War* (IB Tauris 2009) and the curator of related exhibitions and online archival resource (www.signsofconflict.org). Among other publications, Zeina is co-editor with K. Bassil, A. Zaatari and W. Raad of *Mapping Sitting: On Portraiture and Photography* (2002). She is currently co-editing a new book (with Cathy Bergin and Francesca Burke), entitled *Transnational Solidarity: Decentring the Sixties*, forthcoming with Manchester University Press in 2022.

Tokyo Posters: Pedagogies and Archives of Solidarity

In 2017, a poster collection was found in a house at the outskirts of Tokyo, the collection contains 30 posters, representing different struggles from around the world, and accumulated through the times, 60s, 70's & 80's by a Japanese solidarity movement. The poster collection was scanned and analysed as an educational source for transnational knowledge, observations and interventions on this process has been collected and will be presented in this seminar.

Subversive Film, formed in 2011 and based in Ramallah and Brussels, is a cinema research and production collective that aims to cast new light upon historic works related to Palestine and the region, to engender support for film preservation, and to investigate archival practices and effects in these gestures of redistribution. Their long-term and ongoing projects explore this cine-historic field including digitally reissuing previously-overlooked films, curating rare film screening cycles, subtitling rediscovered films, producing publications, and devising other forms of interventions.

Mohanad Yaqubi is a filmmaker, producer, and one of the founders of the Ramallah-based production house, Idioms Film and is currently a Resident Researcher at KASK, School of Arts Gent.

Reem Shilleh interlaces research, moving image, curatorial, editing, archival and writing practices to question the infinite formations of memory and collectivity. Both Reem and Mohanad are co-founders of The Kitchen in Brussels.

Reading with Children of the Nakba

One oft repeated lament of historians of education and childhood is the difficulty of archival retrieval. Despite children being the lynchpin of so much social life, both past and present, their imprints can slip past capture. By way of a close study of one textbook in the early post-Nakba period, this talk will ask and try to answer three questions: What forms of archival collection are required to trace Palestinian children after the Nakba? Which children made themselves (or were made) visible? What are the consequences to this archival retrieval, conceptually, historically, politically? In aiming to write a story of schooling on the run, in displacement, under subjugation and dispossession, this talk argues that perhaps archival methodology is not so much, or only, in the finding or reading against a stable archive or collection, but in conjuring it into being, in unearthing ordinary treasures of extraordinary life.

Mezna Qato is Margaret Anstee Fellow at Newnham College, University of Cambridge. She is completing a book on the history of education for Palestinians, and convenes the 'Archives of the Disappeared' research network at the Centre for Research in Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities, at Cambridge.

The Impossibilities of Representation: Frictional Conversations in Burj al-Shamali Camp

Frictional Conversations is based on an extended stay in Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp southeast of Tyre, in southern Lebanon, where I lived between 2006 and 2011, and have been working since 2001. During this time I developed and gathered – in collaboration with camp residents – an extensive digital collection of family and studio photographs, which also includes videos and audio recordings. By combining research, conversational practice, and performative interventions, Frictional Conversations extends the concept of the photographic image, - by dematerialising and rematerializing it differently - and questions the iconography of the Palestinian refugee. Being with, re-viewing, orally extending and performing the photographs are means of asking different questions: What status can photographs of a camp in a chronic state of exception have? How can the different (her/his)- stories of Burj al-Shamali residents be presented without being instrumentalised or fixed in one place (as victims or witnesses)? How can one create a collection which retains its potential to resist institutional archival practices? To approach these dilemmas, the photographs of Burj al-Shamali are considered agents rather than documents and memory devices. Their agency is given a context to unfold, not only to address questions of ownership, responsibility, and circulation, but to also retell the past in a way that opens up to possible futures.

In her practice **Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh** explores potentials of human agency through engaging in experimental, collective work processes. These include (counter-)archiving practices such as the negotiation around a potential digital archive (re)assembled in collaboration with inhabitants of Burj al-Shamali, a Palestinian refugee camp near Tyr, Lebanon, and radical pedagogical projects such as Ses Milanes-créixer a la natura, a self-organised forest kindergarten in Bunyola Spain, using nature as main infrastructure. Photography often acts as a medium for her to communally investigate notions of collectivity, power and endurance: for example, in her engagement as a member of the Arab Image Foundation (arabimagefoundation.org), a practitioners-led archival institution, and as a focus in her PhD in Art Theory and Cultural Studies from the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna (2018).

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Could the Archives Lie? The Disappeared Train

An examination of a particular extension line of the Hijaz Railway that used to run from Jerusalem to Ramallah-al Bireh, a district of Palestine. The line was crucial for the war effort on the Palestinian front, enhancing the transfer of both troops and equipment. This particular part of the railway, however, has completely disappeared from documentary evidence. Its existence can only be traced back through wedding songs celebrating the «Bireh Babor,» which indicates the opposite of the collective denial of its possibility. How can an entire section of the railway disappear without tangible traces that attest to its former existence in the archives? In this presentation diverse materials, such as aerial photographs from the Bavarian State Archives, private letters, and folk narratives, are used to search for the lost section of the railway track.

The sociologist **Salim Tamari** draws upon archival materials and personal diaries, and has produced numerous studies documenting and analyzing Palestinian society. Books by Tamari include *The Great War and the Remaking of Palestine* (2017), *Year of the Locust-A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (2011), and *Mountain against the Sea-Essays on Palestinian Society and Culture* (2008). Tamari is the editor of the journal *The Jerusalem Quarterly*. He is currently Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Palestine Studies in Ramallah and Visiting Professor at Columbia University, New York.

Ways of telling: Historicizing Egypt's Aswan High Dam (1960-1970) as a story within a story within a story

In this talk, Alia Mossallam reflects on the challenges of telling the story of the building of a dam, without reconstructing the dam itself; a narrative of narratives, a hegemonic ideology presiding over all alternatives; a concrete structure that inundated indigenous knowledges in the presence of its hydro-electric sciences. Instead, Mossallam attempts to tell the stor(ies) of the Aswan High Dam as refracted through the politics, hopes and losses of those who sacrificed their lives to build it, and those communities who were sacrificed and displaced for it to be built. What does popular historiography offer us in understanding the shifts in ways of knowing, and ways of telling – and how can we draw upon the architectures of these fluid narratives? A story that is an intersection between various historical tracks; from the third world liberation movements to a nationalist high-modernist project, to the possibilities of social mobility and the catastrophes of displacement. One story cannot be told without the other; instead, we have a story within a story within a story.

Alia Mossallam is interested in songs that tell stories and stories that tell of popular struggles behind the better-known events that shape world history. She is currently a EUME fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Berlin, writing a book on the visual and musical archiving practices of the builders of the Aswan High Dam and the Nubian communities displaced by it. As a visiting scholar at the Lautarchiv of Humboldt University, she has also started a new project tracing the experiences of Egyptian and North African workers on the various fronts of World War I through the songs and memories that recount their struggles. Some of her writings can be found in *The Journal of Water History*, *The History Workshop Journal*, the *LSE Middle East Paper Series*, *Jadaliyya*, *Ma'azif*, *Bidayat* and *Mada Masr*. She has tried her hand at playwriting with David Grieg, Hassan El-Geretly, Laila Soliman and written her first short-story "Rawi" with 60 pages. An experimentative pedagogue, she founded the site-specific public history project "Ihky ya Tarikh," as well as having taught at the American University in Cairo, CI-LAS, and the Freie Universität in Berlin.

Seed Conservation; Creating New Worlds

In a time of growing conversations about climate change and conservation, many of us find ourselves frustrated at the lack of attention to one of the most important pillars of sustainability: social justice. Terms such as sustainability, food security, and food sovereignty have become staples to ecological discussions but what do they actually mean in the real and practical realities of communities who have for decades- and sometimes centuries- suffered incredible injustice. How can we design a new future for food when we are still shy about talking about political and social justice more boldly? More importantly, how can our past and current experiences inform us about our future and perhaps help us design a better vision for our future? These themes will be the underlying threads of this conversation with Vivien who will use story and seed as vessels for transformation.

Vivien Sansour is an artist, storyteller, researcher and conservationist. She uses image, sketch, film, soil, seeds, and plants to enliven old cultural tales in contemporary presentations and to advocate for the protection of biodiversity as a cultural and political act. Vivien works with a global network of farmers and seed advocates to promote seed conservation and agrobiodiversity. As part of this effort, she founded the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, with the goals of finding and reintroducing threatened crop varieties and to collect stories to assert the ownership of seeds by communities. Vivien is an avid lover of nature and the arts. She has sprouted many projects out of the Palestine Heirloom Seed Library, including her co-founding of El Beir, Arts and Seeds studio in Bethlehem, the Traveling Kitchen project, and several other collaborative projects internationally. The Seed Library and its associated projects are now located in the village of Battir, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Palestine. As an artist and sought-after speaker, Vivien has been invited to showcase her work at venues both locally and globally. These include the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven, the Berlinale film festival in Berlin, and the Chicago Architecture Biennale. Her performance, *Autonomia*, was selected for the closing of the 2019 Venice Art Biennale. For more infos about Sansour's projects visit her website at www.viviensansour.com

Cousous: Seeds of Dignity

Couscous, with its various recipes, constitutes the staple food of all of the populations of the Maghreb, including Tunisia. It is for this region what rice is for most of Asia. Visitors to Tunisian homes are invariably received around meals of couscous. But while wealthy households typically have a variety of additional meal options on hand, poorer ones often rely solely on couscous—even “naked” or plain—for daily sustenance. Beyond representing traditional norms of hospitality, a dish of couscous is also rich in information on the economic, social, cultural and ecological circumstances of those who produce and prepare it. The documentary *Couscous: Seeds of Dignity*, which focuses on the political, social, economic and ecological conditions of cereal and couscous production, demonstrates how the food question is in fact at the heart of the issue of individual and collective human dignity as well as local and national food independence and sovereignty. The film « *Couscous: Seeds of Dignity* » is an invitation to open, serious and collective debate on the policies of food dependency pursued by all Tunisian governments from the end of the French colonial era until today, six years after the fall of the Ben Ali regime. Dignity is not a slogan; it is a condition of life. Without food sovereignty, dignity is no more than an abuse of language. And without an independent and dignified peasantry, there can be no collective dignity. In the end, a healthy serving of dignity can also be found in a plate of couscous. collaborative projects internationally.

Habib Ayeb is a geographer, researcher, documentary filmmaker, and president of the Tunis-based Observatory of Food and Environmental Sovereignty [OSAE by its French acronym]. OSAE has been working to foster social science research around agrarian questions, particularly in Tunisia, that have traditionally been studied by engineers and technical experts. OSAE also works to connect small farmers and rural populations with urban populations through workshops, conferences, field trips and study sessions. Ayeb's most recent book, coauthored with Ray Bush, is entitled *Food Insecurity and Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa: Agrarian Questions in Egypt and Tunisia* (Anthem Press, 2019).



L'Observatoire des Mondes Arabes et Musulmans (OMAM) est une entité d'études transdisciplinaire faisant partie de la Maison des Sciences Humaines, avec une dynamique de recherche commune autour de questions transversales secouant les mondes arabes et musulmans contemporains.

OMAM a comme mission de formation à la recherche, d'accueil et de dissémination du savoir. Les terrains de cette entité s'inscrivent dans une aire géographique vaste, allant du Maghreb au Machreq méditerranéens (Turquie et Israël inclus), de l'Afrique subsaharienne musulmane (notamment le Soudan, le Tchad, le Mali et la Mauritanie) et du Golfe persique (Iran et Monarchies du Golfe). Les thématiques d'OMAM portent sur la littérature, la culture, l'art, l'histoire, la politique, la société et la religion dans les mondes arabes et musulmans. Haut lieu de confrontation théorique et méthodologique, OMAM accueille des projets de recherches, des séminaires, des colloques et des formations destinés au public académique et organise des conférences ouvertes au grand public.

The **Observatory of the Arab and Muslim Worlds** (OMAM) is a transdisciplinary study entity that is part of the Maison des Sciences Humaines, with a research focus around transversal issues shaping the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds.

OMAM's mission is to train for research, to host and disseminate knowledge. The fields of study of this entity cover a vast geographical area, from the Maghreb to the Mediterranean Mashreq (including Turkey and Israel), from Muslim sub-Saharan Africa (notably Sudan, Chad, Mali and Mauritania) and the Persian Gulf (Iran and the Gulf Monarchies). OMAM's themes cover literature, culture, art, history, politics, society and religion in the Arab and Muslim worlds. As a place of theoretical and methodological confrontation, OMAM hosts research projects, seminars, colloquia and training courses for the academic public and organises conferences open to the general public.