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## Saudi Arabia Is Planning a Massive, New Arts Center

The Misk Art Institute is the latest, super-ambitious arts organization to originate from the Gulf.

By James Tarmy

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About 15 months ago, the artist Ahmed Mater was given a 10 minute audience with Saudi Arabia's new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

During the meeting, Mater, who'd come to the prince's attention after one of his artworks was presented to China as a state gift, laid out an ambitious proposal: Saudi Arabia, Mater argued, should be an arts hub, a place where the creation and propagation of contemporary art could thrive.

On Monday, Mater stood at a podium in the Trustees Room at the Museum of Modern Art in New York to announce that his proposal would be coming true: The Misk Art Institute, a Riyadh-based outgrowth of the crown prince's multi-pronged educational, social, and cultural Misk Foundation, will have "exhibition galleries, creative spaces, spaces for meetings, workshops, makers spaces, as well as educational programs," Mater said, speaking to an audience that included Glenn Lowry, the director of MoMA.

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Glenn Lowry (left) director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, with Jay Levenson, director of international programs at MoMA (center), and Ahmed Mater, director of the Misk Art Institute in Mada'in Saleh, on a recent visit to an archeological site in northern Saudi Arabia.

Photographer: Stephen Stapleton

Much of the institute is still in the planning stages. There isn't a budget or a rendering of the new building, but a team of architecture firms has been chosen to build the center (Michele De Lucchi of [aMDL](#), [Skene Catling de la Pena](#), together with art production company [Factum Arte](#) headed by Adam Lowe), and the institution's organizers have already laid out an ambitious series of programs that will constitute its outreach for the rest of the year. There will be a new Saudi Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale, an inaugural "New York Arab Art Festival," a multi-week series of exhibitions, performances, programs, and commissions held in October, and an initiative to send young Saudi artists to California via a new educational program called "Create and Inspire."

## Job Creation and Cultural Change

"The way to think of this is that the Crown Prince is 32," says Stephen Stapleton, a British artist who was named the institute's director of international programming. "He's part of a generation that the creative industry is not only part of the economic change—because it's part of job creation—it's also about cultural change."

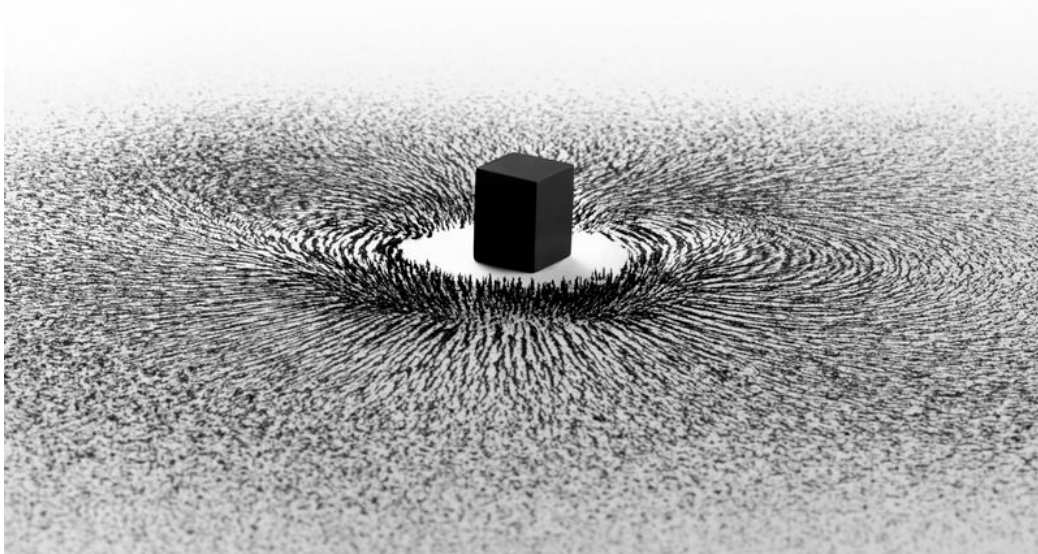
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The arts initiative is just one of multiple programs the crown prince's Misk Foundation has undertaken as part of its Vision 2030, a social and economic modernization effort that aims to touch virtually every aspect of Saudi society. (One of these efforts is a journalism program conducted in partnership with Bloomberg News.)

The Misk Art Institute will be overseen by a board and led by Mater. Much of its staff is in place, and "more than 60 percent of the management positions are held by women," Mater noted, a nod toward the country's increasing push for women's rights. (In September 2017, women were granted the right to drive.)

## Possible Implications

Conceptual components of the initiative remain up in the air. The center will have exhibition spaces, for instance, but it's unclear if it will house a permanent collection. "This is something that's a heavy debate right now within the board," says Stapleton, citing the country's relatively thin collection of contemporary art. "Because there isn't a national collection that ties the modern to the contemporary in Saudi, so it's something that we're pushing for. But it's being discussed; it's not decided yet."



**Magnetism**, Ahmed Mater, 2011, an installation of magnet and iron filings.

Courtesy of Ahmed Mater

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There are profound, if speculative, implications for both the art world and the art market. In recent years, Gulf countries have poured billions of dollars into the market to create their own contemporary and modern collections; should Saudi Arabia and its ambitious, young, stupendously wealthy prince decide to build a permanent collection for the Misk Art Institute, it could prove to be the next major force in the global art market.

On Monday, though, Mater was much more interested in emphasizing the home-grown potential for Saudi artists. “It’s a unique opportunity to combine the energy and authenticity of voices from the bottom up,” Mater said, “with the vision and resources from the top.”