CAIRO FICTIONS AND REALITIES

What role have museums played as institutions of knowledge production and distribution? Francoise Vergès exemplifies that the universal museum emerged as a product of colonialism, and of Europe's self-appointed claim to be the guardian of global heritage. For Vergès, this kind of museum cannot be decolonised. It must be disordered and decentralized (Vergès, 2024) — but what about museums on the other side of the knife? How are they connected to the universal museums of globalisation? And how do today's practitioners envision a disorder of these mechanisms through architecture and cultural production?

During this Seminar Week we will visit Cairo and shift perspectives. While leaving Switzerland's borders, we will keep in mind the relationships our local practices and our external view have with our destination. This is the other side of museum collections "coin". By focusing on sites of cultural production, we will learn from Cairo by visiting archeological sites and museums and examine practices of accumulation, appropriation and (de)colonization. We will critically reflect on the effects architectural and cultural practices of the Global Minority may have in relation to Egypt's heritage by considering questions of property, global economies and the belongings of antiquities. Our site visits will be accompanied by contextualizing inputs by expert lectures and workshops during the evenings as well as city walks to deeper understand the contemporary urban fabric of Cairo.

Destination	**Cairo, Egypt**
Cost Range	**Ⓔ (1 000–1 500 CHF) Including flights, accommodation, local transport, entry tickets, tours, lecture and some meals.**
Dates	**15.03.25 to 22.03.25**
Participants	**8–12**
Students Contact	**Filippo Santoni (santoni@arch.ethz.ch)**
Visa	**Please check the Visa requirements based on your nationality on the official website. Options include applying for an e-Visa online, obtaining a Visa on Arrival at Cairo Airport (for eligible nationalities), or applying through an Egyptian embassy/consulate. Ensure your passport is valid for at least 6 months after departing Egypt.**
Travel Insurance	**A travel insurance policy covering Egypt is required for all students. Please make sure your insurance includes coverage for health, accidents, and emergencies while in Egypt.**

Cairo occupies a unique and contradictory status in our collective imagination. From a distant European perspective, an image of a romanticized antiquity long lost, the development of Egyptology, along with contemporary news cycles have created a world in our minds full of contradictions, layers and fictions. Some of these fictions and precedent realities can be originated in the Napoleon-led French invasion of Egypt from 1798-1801, an invasion which was in many ways the very model of a truly scientific appropriation of one culture by another, apparently stronger one. With Napoleon's occupation of Egypt, processes were set in motion between a so-called "East" and "West" that still dominate our contemporary cultural and political perspectives (Ben Mahmoud, Daniel, 2008).

According to Edward Said, the Napoleonic expedition, with its great collective monument of erudition, the Description de l'Egypte, provided a scene or setting for Orientalism, making Egypt and subsequently other territories with islamic majorities viewed as the live province, the laboratory and the theater of effective Western knowledge about the Orient (Said, 1978).
Taking Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as a very roughly defined starting point for the dynamic shift between a global minority and majority, Said describes Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." (Said, 1978)

In this context, what role have museums played as institutions of knowledge production and distribution? Francoise Vèrges argues that the universal museum emerged as a product of colonialism, and of Europe's self-appointed claim to be the guardian of global heritage. She further argues that they are institutions standing on founding pillars of extermination, wealth extraction and privatisation. For Vergès, this kind of museum cannot be decolonised. It must be disordered and decentralized (Vergès, 2024) – but what about museums on the other side of the knife? How are they connected to the universal museums of globalisation? And how do today's practitioners envision a disorder of these mechanisms through architecture and cultural production?

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Sources   Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Vergès, Françoise. 2024. *A Programme of Absolute Disorder: Decolonizing the Museum.* London: Pluto Press.
Ben Mahmoud, Feriel. Daniel, Nicolas. 2008. *Le voyage en Orient 1850–1930 - De l'Age d'or à l'avènement du tourisme.* Paris: Édition Place des Victoires.