

# INTRODUCTION

WELCOME TO THE INAUGURAL print issue of *Electra Street*, a journal of the arts and humanities published at New York University Abu Dhabi.

The journal takes its name from the nickname commonly used for the street on which NYUAD's first residential building was located, before the opening of the campus on Saadiyat Island. That street's official name is "Sheikh Zayed the First Street," and it also had a number: Seventh Street. According to the English-language daily *Gulf News*, Electra Street "inherited its unusual name from an old video and electronic games shop of the same name that has since shut down." "Electra Street" thus signifies several different ideas simultaneously: a historical moment in Abu Dhabi's past, the starting point for NYU Abu Dhabi, and a specific landmark that cannot be found on any official maps. The design of the journal embodies the ideas of intersection and taxonomy, creating a graphic juncture that draws on and preserves the street's unofficial names.

Following the metaphors embedded in the journal's name, the work we publish guides us to look at the past with fresh eyes, to examine the intellectual and academic histories that inform our present, and to explore the territories that rest outside the boundaries of official maps and conventional ways of thinking.

Both in print and online, the journal features creative and scholarly work drawn from the range of fields included in NYUAD's Arts and Humanities Division: the Ancient World, Anthropology, Arab Crossroads Studies, Creative Writing, Film and New Media, History, Literature, Music, Philosophy, Theater, and Visual Arts. The

journal, like NYUAD's curriculum, is committed to the idea that putting creative artists and scholars in conversation with one another enriches the work of everyone involved.

*Electra Street* adopts a cosmopolitan approach that embraces cultural and intellectual difference and that explores the interplay of both local and global perspectives. For *Electra Street*, local means the two cities to which NYUAD belongs: Abu Dhabi, where it is located physically, and New York, which is the home of the university of which NYUAD is an integral part. Both of these locales are cosmopolitan crossroads, where peoples from all around the world come to work and live. Our goal, however, is to appeal to a readership that includes but moves well beyond the confines of these two cities, and we hope to make extensive use of the intellectual resources of NYU's global network of academic sites, which includes a campus in Shanghai and study centers in Accra, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Florence, London, Madrid, Paris, Prague, Sydney, Tel Aviv, and Washington, DC. Cosmopolitanism can only exist where there are people willing to engage in meaningful conversations across divides of culture, politics, and thought. We hope that *Electra Street*—in its current and future manifestations—will provide the crossroads where conversations like these can take place.

Our first issue begins with a meditation by the noted feminist scholar **Catharine R. Stimpson** on the “inseparability of war and the arts.” Through a nuanced reading of Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, Stimpson argues that the liberal arts give us a set of powerful conceptual frameworks that might enable us to provide better answers to the age-old question of why people continue to go to war one another. She argues that at the start twenty-first century “the liberal arts are better equipped to study war because of new, agile competencies, because of greater diversity, and because of

the deep suspicion of myth contaminating reliable historical narratives.” Her article is illustrated with pictures created in response to Shakespeare’s plays by **Lan Duong**, an engineering student at NYUAD.

The “pluralism and multiculturalism” that animates Stimpson’s piece are also the driving forces behind **Michael Littig and Kevin Riordan**’s account of Theater Mitu’s visit to Mongolia to create an adaptation of the German playwright Heiner Müller’s one-page play *Herzstück* (*Heartpiece*), in collaboration with local artists and artistic traditions. Mitu is a company that practices what it calls “Whole Theater,” a model of theatrical practice that strives to connect communities with performances that are rigorously intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. The production that resulted from their collaboration with the Mongolian recording artist Nominjin was an example of what Littig and Riordan call “theater-as-community,” an ephemeral but transformative experience that has much in common with “a spirit vision, a trance, or a love song.”

Sometimes scholarly and artistic breakthroughs occur as a result of going away from one’s customary milieu, from leaving “home” to explore situations that seem “foreign.” Sometimes, however, as **Ankhi Thakurta** argues in her essay “An Inside Job? Revisiting Disciplinary Conceptions of ‘Native’ Anthropology,” breakthroughs occur when one returns home. Turning the cultural anthropologist’s interpretive lens back on the Bengali American community in which she was raised, Thakurta discovers that “all researchers possess multiple identities that both connect them to and disconnect them from their sites of research.” Interrogating the idea that an anthropologist’s academic perspective invariably makes returning “home” an alienating experience, Thakurta argues that her experience has given her a way of reconceiving familiar dichotomies—like “inside” and “outside,” or “self” and

“other”—in ways that might push forward the discipline of “native anthropology”.

Reconceiving an academic discipline is also the project of “Arab Crossroads Studies at NYU Abu Dhabi” by **Justin Stearns**, which examines the rationale for creating a new kind of “area studies” program for the twenty-first century. Stearns emphasizes that any program called “Arab Crossroads” must take into account the diversity of groups currently associated with the term “Arab,” while “recognizing that the nature of this diversity varied according to time and place.” Offering a brief history of “area studies in the American academy” that reveals why so many scholars regard this approach with a mixture of suspicion and fatigue, Stearns argues that “area studies” remains “a productive place from which to study transnational and transregional influences, flows, and connections.”

Each issue of *Electra Street* features an in-depth interview with an artist whose work exemplifies the virtues of boundary-crossing of one kind or another. This inaugural issue features Yasser Alwan, an Iraq-born photographer who has made Cairo both his home and the subject of his life’s work. Alwan’s photographs of ordinary Egyptians use a seemingly old-fashioned technique—non-digital black-and-white portraiture—to shed new light on the life of Cairo and the conditions that led to the Arab Spring there. As Shamooun Zamir puts it in the introduction to the interview, “Alwan’s images arise out of a sustained relationship with particular locales and very often also with particular individuals. Alwan takes his time in the streets of Cairo, its cafes, its factories and work places, its bus stops and parks. It is this sense of a true inhabiting (so much more than a hanging around in the hope of a good shot) that finds its fulfillment in the human face sedimented with time and experience in the portraits.” The interview is illustrated with examples of Alwan’s Cairo series.

Short stories by **Jennifer Acker** and **Joey Bui** explore the difficulties of reaching out across divides of age, sexual preference, and culture, and demonstrate the ways that a creative voice can be enriched and reinforced by academic rigor. Acker and Bui present us with stories about people who have been, one way or another, trapped by the worlds in which they live, and while the lives themselves may seem suffocating, the work itself opens us up to new modes of experience. **Sachi Leith's** work offers us similar portraits, but in the compressed form of poetic lyric.

Like Stimpson, Thakurta, and Stearns, philosopher **Matthew Silverstein** meditates on the nature of his discipline and charts a new direction for thinking about abiding problems. Silverstein introduces us to metaethics, a nascent field with contemporary analytical philosophy. In contrast to ethicists, who “see themselves as participants in our ethical practices,” metaethicists, according to Silverstein, “see themselves as standing *outside* of our ethical practices, looking in.” Silverstein’s work is an attempt to move beyond the impasse created by the form of metaethics that he finds to be most powerful—constructivism—but that has difficulty articulating why practical thinking that is philosophically “consistent” sometimes falls short of being “good” practical thinking. Positioning himself against the idea of relativism, Silverstein ventures what might be called ethical approach to metathics.

The issue concludes with **Nathalie Peutz's** essay “Traveling through the GNU,” adapted from an address delivered to NYUAD’s second group of incoming students in 2012. Taking as her twin points of departure Amin Malouf’s novel *Leo Africanus* and a bike trip from Europe to the Middle East that she took before beginning her doctoral studies, Peutz advocates an approach to liberal arts education that asks students and teachers to “take risks—intellectual, emotional, creative.” She urges us all to become

“traveler-scholars” who are unafraid to cross disciplinary boundaries and embrace cultural difference.

The work included here offers a compelling portrait of how the arts and humanities inform and enrich each other; together, these pieces make an argument on behalf of the continuing vitality—and the vital importance—of the liberal arts at the start of the twenty-first century.

—*Deborah Lindsay Williams and Cyrus R. K. Patell*