



On Tuesday February 11, 2025 at 2pm at CEDEJ, **Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė** will be presenting her upcoming book project **In the Cracks of Egypt's Welfare State: Midlife and Literary Self-Making in Cairo**.

Next to books published by Egypt's literary stars, the booths at the International Cairo Book Fair are filled with publications by lesser-known authors. Recognizable by their slim profiles and dramatic covers, these books – mostly self-published – suggest the significance of amateur writers in shaping Egypt's contemporary literary scene, despite their relative obscurity. The culture of amateurism in the arts has been a well-established tradition in Egypt since at least the 1960s. Encouraged by various cultural institutions such as culture palaces, public libraries or youth centers, and cultural services offered in professional organizations and social clubs, literary writing as a hobby had been part of many people's ordinary lives. However, despite the prominence of this practice, little commentary exists on how writing intersects with aging, sociability and other life commitments such as work and family.

In this talk, I will present my upcoming book project on the process of literary self-making among contemporary middle-aged Cairene writers. Over the past few decades, a surge in literary opportunities has transformed literature into a realm where individuals invest their aspirations of success, look for new directions in life, and forge communities distinct from those found in their everyday environments. My research focuses on a specific population of Cairo's literature lovers: middle-aged individuals who have embarked on literary careers later in life. While many of them have primarily written fiction from the comfort of their homes, the thriving scene of Cairo's literary clubs (*al-nadawāt al-adabiyya*) have offered them a platform to step out and establish themselves as writers. Financed by the writers themselves, the literary ecosystem of *nadawāt* thrives within the cracks of the changing cultural paradigms from Hosni Mubarak's era, when the state assumed the role of culture provider, to the current era marked by the growing commercialization of culture.

Based on ethnography in Cairo's literary clubs, interviews and analysis of texts, this project explores the biographical juncture of midlife across three different dimensions: the personal (the construction of literary identities), the spatial (the world of literary clubs), and the artistic (the transition to writing forms recognized as literary). Focusing on amateur literary worlds at the margins of fame and commercial success, this project delves into broader questions about the role of the arts in people's lives.

Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė is a research fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague and associate researcher at the Centre d'Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ) in Cairo. She is author of *Sayyid Qutb: An Intellectual Biography* (2021). Her new project explores literary practices in Cairo from an ethnographic perspective and examines the way they intersect with aging, sociability, and ordinary life commitments such as work and family.