

“CULTURAL EXORCISM” OR ART’S REASON FOR BEING IN REFERENCE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

By: Rima Chahrour

“Art has poisoned our life”. Theo Van Doesburg of the De Stijl wrote in his *The End Of Art* article published in 1925. Doesburg declared that the position which religion took in the Middle Ages is now occupied by art, pointing out the practices of the “arty” aesthetics of everyday life⁽¹⁾. Yet, aesthetics as a form of epidemic particular to art suppresses the practice of making things independent of the ghost of artistic beauty. This text is not interested in venturing into the beautiful or dealing with the guardians of art so to say. Instead, the aim here is the ghost of art as a cultural force. A force that is, however, not replacing religion but functioning closely with and within it. The prerequisites and basic properties for this form of art to be practiced are perhaps most visible today in the region referred to as the Middle East. It is here that the religious, superstitious and the supernatural slip into all aspects of contemporary life.

As an epidemic of the superstitious and the supernatural, art is not dead. Rather, it can be said that art is returning back from the dead (again and again). This is because the structural tensions of the operating systems and networks of contemporary life impose the blurring of art and life so that art expands as life and life mirrors the entanglements of art. Accordingly, art as a cultural force existing within the context of the Middle East region is closely associated with religion and superstition; hence to politics.

“It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.” With this line, Theodor W. Adorno began his book *Aesthetic Theory* in the late 1960s, questioning the possibility of art in the light of the ideological extremism of the Nazis. In the complexity and impossibility of defining art and tracing its relationship to politics, art as a cultural label and experience however still exists.

Art can exist and is existing even without an art market. The market economy of art provides for artists in order for them to live. But, the well-being of artists-physically or mentally-is not the concern here. Rather, the issue in focus is the existence of art as an interaction with the socio-economic and political conditions of its context as a form of “soft power”. The power of art then is not in art itself but its capacity as an instrument for reaching

the deeper arrangements of its social order. In the same vein as Adorno’s questioning of the relationship between art and politics, let us question the possibility of art in the wake of what is referred to as the Arab Spring and the extremism of the new Islamist groups in the Middle East region. In order to examine the purpose of art and artists in the Arab part of the Middle East, art is firstly to be considered as a cultural tool towards social change. This kind of art offers an aesthetic experience encouraging and sharpening critical thinking and creating social change.

The artwork can never be fully autonomous from the structural dynamics of its setting. Thus, while art reflects its context, it also helps shape it. Perhaps the most evident feature of the Arab Spring is its advancement towards engaging art as an expanded means of social resistance. This is presented in the various expressions of art as an engagement with the acts of revolution. On the one hand, contemporary art in the Arab region mirrored the flux of the uprisings, on the other hand, the variety in the forms of art created corresponded to expressions beyond the politics of anger into a more productive approach.

Take *The Revolution Museum* in Tahrir Square as an example. It is an alternative building made of recycled pieces of wood, plastic sheets, ropes and strings. On its not very stable plastic walls, paper drawings, photographs of faces and sometimes bodies of martyrs, flags and banners are taped crudely. Around this museum, protesters sleep in tents or sit on chairs appearing to be an extended part of the museum’s contents. This public artwork is created collaboratively by the collective efforts of civilians rejecting the system of the state. By representing a chronological order of the so called ‘Spring of Egypt’, this museum is firstly asserting the revolution and its events in the collective cultural memory of the nation. Furthermore, the museum, in the middle of Tahrir Square, is in a space occupying the public sphere while also re-enforcing the idea of this sphere as a public area rather than one belonging to the state. Accordingly, The Revolution Museum reclaims the public’s right to their sphere by engaging in the tensions of power between the people and the state. Working against the image of the leader, usually as the all loving, caring father of his ruling



Graffiti in Tahrir Square, Cairo - Egypt

country, which traditionally functions in the public sphere. The Revolution Museum functions as an assertion of the people rejecting the leader and his ruling system. Therefore, the image of The Revolution Museum operates in the exact reverse of the autocratic power. Thus, the power of art comes from a greater authority than art itself, exercising art as a creative instrument in the power-play of political and social life.

In the context of the Arab region, the image of the leader infiltrates everyday life. It dominates the public sphere and oppresses any attempts to raise objections against the state. Images, posters and banners of leaders next to white doves, flowers and children are targeted at the public sphere, occupying it as a symbol of stability, ultimate power and a constant reminder that the leader is in control. The image of the leader as the 'Godfather' announces power and imposes fear. This is reflected in the works of Arab artists who usually, and specifically before the revolutions, have tended to forcefully avoid the topic.

The Syrian artist Ammar Al-Beik's work, for example, depicts the image of Assad as an actual lion, playing on the literal translation of the name of this particular leader into the symbolic image of its meaning. Only then, the artist is perhaps comfortable to picture/ imagine the leader in defeat: with a spot of red paint dripping from the animal in the mixed media painting entitled *Al-Houla Massacre*. Probably one of the greatest achievements of the Arab Spring is interrupting this godly image of leaders and thus breaking the fear of the leader and state. During the demonstrations, the iconographic image of the various leaders that were projected into public spaces became a target for destruction: torn down, burnt and stylized into various forms of animals and devils. For example, the artist J.R. replaced a number of the public portraits of Ben Ali with photographs of ordinary Tunisian people. By doing so he communicated a shift in the structure of power giving significance to the people rather than to the absolute ruler. The Arab Spring bluntly flipped the image of the leader as the guardian of stability. Angry demonstrators raised posters of Arab leaders with their faces crossed, reading slogans such as 'Wanted', 'Criminals' and 'Go Away'. Posters against the system and supporting the revolutions operated effectively as propaganda art, presenting creative messages of resistance. The posters of the revolutions spread around the walls of Arab cities reclaiming the public space from the control of the authorities. Spray paint and graffiti art also had a remarkable outbreak during the uprisings and their aftermath. Graffiti names like Sad Panda appeared in Egypt, with the image of an observing panda repeatedly criticizing the military. Triggered by the army posters which had been published as propaganda protecting the army's own image, Sad Panda's work aimed to reflect the hypocrisy of such power institutions. The panda was once sprayed on a wall in a scene depicting the panda watching a soldier put a baby on a bonfire. By creating such a scene, the artist provoked the public to re-question the army's position and role throughout the events. Furthermore, the panda became an active image of resistance contesting the visual propaganda of the army. Art during the uprisings is activism and an agent of change: artists and protesters organized events intended as messages of resistance, awareness and

defiance. For example, the graffiti artist MoFA or Ganzeer/Mohamed Fahmy, planned, along with a group of activists, volunteers and other protestors, the *Mad Graffiti Weekend* in Cairo. With Graffiti being essentially considered as a form of vandalism, its message of defying the state is thus doubled.

A slogan reading "Now it is your turn doctor" was sprayed in Damascus after the downfall of Mubarak in Cairo. However, like most politically charged slogans across the Arab region, it was quickly covered up but not before it was attributed to Spray Man. Spray Man was later identified as Ahmad Khanji whose nickname was chosen after a character from the show *Spotlight* who is jailed for his graffiti vandalism. For every attempt or even thought of spraying graffiti, the guards in the character's prison would cover his cell in white paint. The act of spraying graffiti and covering it up are examples of two power poles which use art as a tool for fighting against each other. During the Arab revolts, street art became a constant reminder of the people's power and voice against injustice. Artists also commemorated the civilians killed and jailed by the security forces of the state. Among the recurring themes of the art of the Arab revolts is women's rights. For example, a mural in Egypt depicted the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Salafi Islamists as zombies devouring the corpse of a woman. The hallmark of this topic is the symbol of the infamous blue bra. This began after a veiled Egyptian woman was beaten unconscious by the military forces in Tahrir Square who tore off her garment and revealed her blue bra. This bra became a symbol used in the visual dictionary of the revolution and the woman became a political symbolic of a heroin of the nation. The increasing sexual assaults and various violations of women's rights during the flux of the uprisings, along with the spreading of greater publicity by Islamists groups than in the past around the region, has led to greater intolerance and harassment of women deemed as immodestly dressed. The blue bra was used in several artworks, like in the painting of the Moroccan artist Zakaria Rahmani, as well as in various posters, graffiti walls and even in online posts through blogs and the social media. In much the same way as public walls expressed anger, criticism of leaders and their systems and raised public awareness, the digital walls of social media also played a significant role in provoking social change. The mental and social territory of the Arab revolutions effectively incorporated digital creativity, sustaining intellectual attention and further contributing to political discourses through artistic posts. The results ranged from poetic writings, manipulated images and slogans, to the organization of events which led to demonstrations which are in many ways a form of performance art. One of the prominent examples of an online art performance is attributed to the Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal under the title *Shoot an Iraqi*, which he later changed to *Domestic Tension*. For a month he sat in a room with a camera fixed on him and through which the public could watch him online and fire a yellow paint ball through their computer command. The Average number of paint balls shot at him per day was estimated to be 40,000. The artist stated that his work is meant to be a message against the inhumane brutality and ease of killing during war time. However, many people have perceived this work as an opportunity to play games with technology or even to practice their discrimination against Iraqis and Arabs in general. Nonetheless, a work of



1. Al-Houla Massacre, 2012. Mixed Media, 400 cm x 150 cm. Courtesy of Ayyam Gallery.
2. The Resistance Museum in Tahrir Square, Cairo

art present in the public sphere is always interacting with the conditions of its context, thus it is never free from the complexity of different cultural conceptions. "Hardly any art is as purposeless as a bird's song," William Pickens wrote in his article *Art and Propaganda in The Messenger* published 1924. Relying on the social, economic and technical settings of its production and presentation, art then is used as a refinement of the powers reflecting and exercising the authority of their social arrangements.

The creative nature of art and that of power maintain an elasticity particularly associated with the domain of politics. This is because politics has, for too long, expanded beyond matters of governing and into the operating systems and relationships between a varieties of different fields. Therefore, through reading contemporary art in reference to its context, it is possible to redefine the purpose of art and artists as contributors to social change in the Arab regions. In turn, it is perhaps possible to obtain some answers and propositions on the questions raised by the arts.

Yet, it has been claimed that 'art is dead' for quite a long while now, since at least 1826 when Hegel announced that art's role will be suspended by religion firstly and then by philosophy. Thus, the situation suggests that if art is to be saved at all, it must exceed its necessary self-delusion as a transcendental force associated with the supernatural. Art and politics are still delusional domains functioning on self-contradiction and the liminal space of possibilities. With the sugar-coated dress of art wrapping visual contestation and the power of propaganda, it is then possible to persuade the public of art's specific role in social change. However, in the Middle East region, the supernatural forces are planted in a rich soil of superstition closely linked with politics and everyday life. Thus religion, philosophy and politics operate together, overlapping as fields of each other. It is for this

reason that the term Cultural Exorcism³ has been used here as a form of invisible power which reflects the productive function of art in contemporary Middle Eastern society. I will end this text with the following artist statement on the piece by the Iraqi artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji, for his work *Sisyphus goes on demonstration*. "You are to suffer, to carry your burden and the weight of your existence on your back forever. And on this rough road you are to travel. You walk, with blackness round your eyes blocking your entire vision, and a hole in your head preventing you from knowing, You are not to learn, to see or to understand. You are to travel the path Sisyphus, this is your fate and this is how you are destined to exist."

ABOUT THE WRITER

Rima Chahrour (B.F.A., M.F.A., M. Phil.) is a Lebanese artist and researcher based in London. She is currently completing her practice-based Ph.D. in Fine Art at the University of Southampton, on the 'Arab Muslim' doll as a site for cultural contestation in contemporary Lebanon. Her work focuses the relationship between art and superstition, aiming to confuse assumed cultural boundaries and provoke pre-received knowledge through art interventions. Her interdisciplinary practice ranges from creating flat and three dimensional objects and interactive installations to performance art. She has exhibited and performed in different places including London, New York, Dubai, Beirut and Paris. Her upcoming lecture-performance will be featured in The Global Prayers Congress at the Haus Der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, presenting with Professor AbdouMaliq Simone (14-16th November 2013). Rima is also a founding member of THE FREAKS Lebanese artist collective. www.rimachahrour.com



Graffiti in Cairo walls

End Notes

1. De Stijl, series XII, no.9, Leiden, 1925. From Joost Baljeu (ed.), Theo Van Doesburg, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974.
2. Joseph Nye, Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power, New York: Basic Books, 1991.
3. August Jordan Davis in conversation describing my work, 2013.
4. <http://vimeo.com/51407903> (accessed 30 September 2013)