

CIRCUIT BREAKING

New Approaches to Art in the Arab World

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The Emergence of New Media and Conceptual Art

While painting and sculpture feature prominently in the Arab world—fetching exorbitant prices at recent auctions—the majority of Arab art exhibited in the international scene comes in the form of photography, new media work and installation. An examination of some of the artists, art scenes and events that have shaped the use of these mediums in contemporary Arab art reveals a vibrant history aligned with developments in international trends over the last two decades.

Since photography has been used in the region for over a century, a study of the medium is perhaps best left for a longer, more detailed analysis. Contemporary uses of photography stand as logical extensions of an existing tradition, one that stems from a rich, diverse history. Today, we find links to this lineage in the work of contemporary artists such as Egyptian photographer Youssef Nabil and prominent Lebanese new media artists Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, both of whom have been paramount to the preservation of photographic images from the Middle East and North Africa through the Arab Image Foundation. Poised as one of the leading nonprofit art organizations in the region, the Arab Image Foundation possess a massive archive of photographs from the 19th century to the present and has curated a long list of exhibitions at home and abroad since its formation in 1996. Coinciding with the establishment of this organization in the 1990s was the emergence of a new media art movement in Beirut that set the stage for much of the contemporary work produced in the Arab world today.

Along with Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, a core group of artists, including Rabih Mroue, Lina Saneh, Lamia Joreige and Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, many of whom grew up during the Lebanese Civil war (1975-90), began using photography, film, video art and conceptual work during Lebanon's early postwar years in explorations

of identity, historical memory, and trauma. This small but significant movement was fostered through a handful of independent non-profit initiatives such as Ashkal Alwan (The Lebanese Association for Plastic Arts), which was founded in 1994 and has gone on to organize countless events including several editions of Home Works, one of the most influential art symposiums in the Middle East that includes exhibitions, film screenings, lectures and performances. Under the direction of curator Christine Tohme, the organization is credited with launching the careers of a number of important Beirut video artists.

In Egypt, a similar movement materialized in the late 1990s with a number of artists experimenting in video and conceptual work such as Amal Kenawy, Wael Shawky and Susana Hefuna and was solidified with the establishment of Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, a multidisciplinary arts space that has been the benchmark for contemporary art in Egypt since its founding in 1998. Throughout its operation, Townhouse's founder William Wells has organized workshops, exhibitions and residencies for local and international artists, fashioning a dynamic creative environment where a multitude of influences and practices come together. Some of the art space's notable events are PhotoCairo, the first festival in Egypt devoted exclusively to photography, and the Open Studio Project, which brings twenty artists from around the world to create work in the heart of Cairo.

Consequently, the Beirut and Cairo art scenes have led the way for cutting-edge art that boasts an impressive roster of artists and a small number of projects that support and promote those working in new forms. These cultural centers are in constant competition, vying for the coveted position of international art hub, yet they are forever in conversation through a reciprocal exchange of thought that pushes the bounds of local art and is transmitted through the work of their artists.

A smaller movement formed within the Palestinian art scene despite lacking a centralized location. Essentially

fragmented due to the Israeli occupation, the local art scene is transnational in nature and subsequently international at its core. Curator Jack Persekian and his Al Ma'mal Foundation in Jerusalem have been essential to the development of new media and installation work in Palestine with a residency program, outreach initiatives, a number of festivals and frequent exhibitions. The nonprofit organization was established in 1998 as an expansion of Persekian's commercial art space Anadiel Gallery, which was founded in 1992 and was the first private venue of its kind in Palestine. In addition to fostering local artistic production and exchange, in many ways Persekian has connected Palestinian artists with a world that is otherwise out of reach due to strict travel restrictions. Persekian's residency programs have drawn a steady lineup of local and international artists, while a number of exhibitions have brought the work of non-Palestinian artists to Jerusalem. In 1996, Anadiel's artist-in-residence program gave internationally renowned London-Berlin based Palestinian conceptual artist Mona Hatoum the opportunity to visit Jerusalem for the first time, while New York-Ramallah based artist Emily Jacir generated her highly acclaimed work *Where We Come From* (2003), a series of photographs and text articulating the restrictions imposed on Palestinians living under Israeli occupation as well as those in exile, while in residence in 2002.

In other parts of the West Bank, a number of recent projects such as the Riwaq Biennale at Birzeit University, directed by conceptual artist Khalil Rabah, and the International Academy of Art Palestine in Ramallah, founded with a three year grant from the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2006, are furthering artistic practice, as several seminal artists and scholars work to introduce young and emerging generations to a diverse curriculum while providing exposure to global art. In 2008 the International Academy of Art invited several prominent international figures to guest lecture at the institution, including Mona Hatoum, curator Charles Merewether and New York-based conceptual artist Coco Fusco.

While new media and conceptual art is far from commercially profitable, Arab artists are increasingly turning to such work to explore a variety of aesthetic approaches and a wide range of social, cultural and political issues. Not one topic can be pinpointed as the primary focus of these artists—virtually everything and anything is up for examination. They are at once concerned with the local and global, with many tapping into the imminent anxiousness of living

under constant political uncertainty, as practically every Arab capital is ripe with internal tensions and foreign meddling is at its peak.

Signals from Abroad

In addition to the developments that have taken place within the Arab world, it is crucial to include artists working abroad, as several of the pioneering figures in the fields of new media and conceptual work are either based outside of the region or shuttle between the Arab world and Europe or North America.

Lebanese-Canadian artist Jayce Salloum, for example, is recognized for his important role in the emergence of video art in Lebanon. While living in Beirut in the early 1990s, Salloum produced work that subsequently shaped the ways in which the medium was used to explore and document Lebanon's complex history and its contemporary political turbulence. Salloum's *Talaeen a Junuub (Up to the South)* (1993), a documentary on the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon made with Walid Raad, is profoundly significant to the "postwar" generation of new media artists, while his earlier work *Introduction to the End of an Argument* (1990), produced with New York-based Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman, was groundbreaking in its examination of Western representations of Arabs and a precursor to countless work created by those living abroad. Walid Raad, although based in the US, has frequently worked and showed with his colleagues in Beirut since the 1990s. In many ways, his rising prominence led to a greater international interest in the contemporary Lebanese art scene.

Besides regularly exhibiting worldwide and recently winning a number of prestigious prizes including the Prince Claus Fund Cultural Award, the Golden Lion for the artist under 40 category at the 52nd Venice Biennale, and the Guggenheim Museum's Hugo Boss Prize, Emily Jacir has not only produced a great portion of her work in Palestine, but has also been an active member of the local scene, having taught at Birzeit University and exhibited throughout the West Bank. Jacir currently teaches at the International Academy of Art Palestine.

Others such as Mona Hatoum, who settled in London after the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War prevented her from returning home to Beirut, and Iraqi-British new media artist Jananne al-Ani, who left Iraq at the age of thirteen, are equally remarkable with politically-charged work

that references the Middle East and the experience of living in the West, while concurrently pushing the bounds of contemporary art along formalistic lines. Hatoum's influence is far-reaching, as she established herself in the global art scene early on in the 1980s. Essentially, the evolution of this branch of contemporary Arab art has not been undeterred by international borders.

Propelling the Movement

Today, we find artists strengthening and expanding upon the movements begun in Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine and abroad, as new approaches to art spread significantly across the region. Over the past five years noteworthy events have pushed for a greater inclusion of new media and conceptual art in scenes traditionally dominated by painting and sculpture. Chief among them have been the Sharjah Biennial under the direction of Jack Persekian, the Shantana Workshop in Jordan organized by the international nonprofit Triangle Arts Trust, the Circle exhibitions curated by multimedia artist Hassan Meer in Oman, and AllArt Now's 1st International Video Festival in Syria. Touring programs such as Meeting Points, which take the work of leading contemporary Arab artists to venues in Beirut, Cairo, Ramallah, Amman, and Damascus, have worked to fuse a transnational movement. And while censorship is present in varying degrees throughout the Arab world, artists find new ways to circumvent censors or risk official admonishment for the sake of their work. Many artists, particularly the large number of Iraqi artists now living in exile—an estimated 80 percent—and those in Palestine and Lebanon, work in spite of sociopolitical hardship. Today these experiences are shaping the content of contemporary art on a large scale and can be noted in the work of several established and emerging artists.

Since the late 1990s, Palestinian conceptual artist Rana Bishara has been using unconventional materials such as cactus, chocolate and balloons in installations and performances that evoke the tragic loss of lives, land and heritage resulting from the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Bishara is part of a significant group of Palestinian artists living and working under the Israeli state in Galilee, Jerusalem and coastal cities such as Haifa. Within the Israeli art scene, these artists are given few opportunities to show their work, while restrictions on those carrying Israeli identification limit the extent to which they can work in the Arab world. Conse-

quently, many, like Bishara, opt to exhibit outside of the region in Europe and North America.

While profoundly sorrowful and acutely introspective, we find a command in her work that is ferociously defiant and boldly forthright. In the installation *Blindfolded History* (2003), Bishara employs dozens of photographs of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as documented in the media. Silk screened on thin rectangular glass panes using chocolate, the artist creates a fragile, yet stark chronicling of the daily toll on Palestinians. The title calls to task international media outlets and their continual omission of the Palestinian narrative, while underscoring the delicate nature of survival. Once dry, the chocolate is reminiscent of blood. In one glass pane, an image shows an elderly refugee couple sitting desolate in a tent. They sit in contemplation, their faces worn with age and destitution. The picture is unclear and fading in some areas, perhaps a result of the silk screening process, yet it implies a vanishing image, a weighty comment on Israeli attempts to erase Palestinian culture and society.

Using popular culture as a point of departure, the video works of Copenhagen-based Palestinian new media artist Larissa Sansour take a unique approach to addressing the Palestinian situation. In pop-inspired short films such as *Bethlehem Bandolero* (2005) and *Happy Days* (2006), Sansour creates carefully constructed narratives of Palestinian heroines playing out extraordinary lives in the occupied West Bank. *Bethlehem Bandolero* shows Sansour as a pistol-toting bandit outfitted in a large red sombrero and polka dot bandana. As she struts through the cobblestone streets of Bethlehem, her strides are accompanied by fast paced surf guitar music, sounds that give the video a lighthearted feel and inject an element of kitsch. Her final destination is the massive wall Israel has built surrounding and cutting through parts of Bethlehem, an ominous abjection that threatens to suffocate the town. As she comes upon the structure, Sansour prepares herself for the ultimate showdown.

In *Happy Days*, similar references to American popular culture work to underscore the outlandish ways in which the occupation is justified within Israeli society. Sped up footage of Sansour in the West Bank is set to the theme song of the 1950s-inspired television show *Happy Days*, which portrayed an "all American family" living an innocent life without a care in the world. Sansour adopts this care-free attitude as her character's adventures guide the viewer through the everyday struggles of Palestinians and the pitiful attempts at normalcy by Israeli soldiers, who appear as

though bored with their brutal tasks. Cutting and poignant in her clever uses of popular culture, Sansour adeptly juxtaposes violence with the ordinary, suggesting the deadly apathy of the international community, as it remains submerged in the mundane.

New York-based Iraqi artist Wafaa Bilal also uses popular culture and technology in biting new media works that are overtly political. Having escaped persecution under Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1990s, Bilal eventually immigrated to the US and has remained in exile ever since. Interested in new uses of online technology, several of Bilal's recent works engage viewers through interactive programs that link the artist and his work to a worldwide cyberspace audience.

In 2007, the artist garnered international attention with *Domestic Tension*, a multimedia work that incorporated computer-based technology, performance and installation. Creating an automated paintball gun that could be fired by viewers over the internet, Bilal locked himself in a small room of an art space in Chicago and lived in front of a webcam and beneath the line of fire for a month. He restricted himself to surviving off of food that was donated to him by visitors to the gallery. Bilal developed the work after learning of a Colorado soldier whose job it was to remotely fire missiles into Iraq under the current American occupation. After a month of living in the gallery space, nearly 60,000 people from all over the world shot at Bilal via the online project. In the end, despite igniting considerable controversy, *Domestic Tension* underscored the vulnerability of Iraqis living under the constant threat of violence and the perpetual instability resulting from endless war.

Correspondingly, Jordanian artist Oraib Toukan has used interactive installations to explore contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts and their direct relation to larger global issues. Known for her politically-charged provocative work, she is a leading figure in a small but significant new media and conceptual art movement in Jordan. Toukan's installations, videos and photographs reflect her searing criticism of the current state of affairs that has pockmarked the Arab world in intricate and meticulously crafted works that are pushing the definitions of art in the Kingdom today.

Residing between New York and Amman, Toukan is immersed in two vastly different sociopolitical worlds with colliding views of the Middle East. The artist's installation *The New(er) Middle East* (2007) uses an interactive puzzle in the shape of a territorial map recalling the US's proposal

for a "New Middle East." Working from a scientific definition of memory as "the ability of a material to return to its original shape after being subject to deformation," Toukan superimposed American Colonel Ralph Peter's outline of "how a better Middle East would look." By doing so, the artist constructs a map in which the viewer can reconfigure his/her own borders and territories according to individual preference. Amidst a backdrop of American foreign policy that has ruptured the Arab world, Toukan's work is a sharp, politically subversive comment on the presumed malleability of international borders under the audacious self-aggrandizing thinking of world powers.

Exhibiting in the West

By the early 2000s, a number of new media and conceptual artists from the Arab world had become fairly known in the international art scene. Recently in the West, such artists are regularly included in exhibitions intended to provide insight into the sociopolitical and cultural realities of the Middle East. A great portion of these shows are curated by Western cultural practitioners, often resulting in a distinct view of the Arab world.

This interest has come with three major flaws: a handful of works by a select group of artists that are recycled through multiple exhibitions and venues, a specific analysis of contemporary Arab art that is misguided, uninformed and politically biased, and the unfortunate exclusion of not only other artists important to the fields of new media, photography and installation but the omission of a significant history of painting and sculpture.

It is important to note that the vast majority of these exhibitions seek to place work within either a politicized or depoliticized context, both of which frequently bypass the political stances of the artists themselves. A recent example of this is "Zones of Conflict" an exhibition organized at Pratt Institute in Manhattan by London-based curator T.J. Demos that included Emily Jacir, Lamia Joreige, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Walid Raad and Ahlam Shibli. In his catalogue essay, Demos initially places the featured work within the context of a widespread binary global conflict "between a crusading imperialism, on the one hand, and a transnational Islamic militancy on the other, proposing worldwide civil war between right-wing forces driven by an infuriating mimetic rivalry defying resolution". Despite the

fact that none of the Arab artists included in the show are concerned with such political agendas, Demos argues that the exhibition “foregrounds artistic responses that defy this current double bind, neither surrendering to the patriotic defense of freedom...nor capitulating to the zealotry of the religious warriors...” This type of discourse has become typical of Western exhibitions featuring Arab art, with post 9/11 hysteria informing understandings of the Arab world.

Few exhibitions have successfully presented new media and conceptual art from the region. The rare exceptions have been those such as “Coding: Decoding” at Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center in 2006, curated by Denmark-based Lebanese artist Khaled Ramadan. Including over forty artists from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Bahrain and Kuwait, Ramadan’s exhibition provided an important and rarely seen look into the various currents of the contemporary Arab video art movement. Fortunately, his intimate knowledge seems to be impacting the direction of these Western exhibitions. In 2007, the large-scale Middle Eastern-centric London program “In Focus,” which included “This Day,” a video art series at Tate Modern, not only included Ramadan as an artist but clearly turned to him for curatorial inspiration, as many of the artists featured in its events were from lineups of his previous exhibitions. Ramadan is part of an evident group of cultural practitioners whose curatorial and scholarly contributions are due to remedy the current Western trend of curating the Middle East, providing a clearer, more nuanced understanding of the many cultural and sociopolitical factors that define contemporary art in the region today.