Youth Salon

By Lina Attalah

For the past 20 years, the Youth Salon in Egypt has been an avenue for emerging visual artists to exhibit their work in one of Cairo's colossal exhibition halls. Setting foot in the salon registers for many young artists as a point of departure on the trajectory of professionalizing their practice. At points in time, the salon was home to concepts of developing 'national art' with one of the government's art institutions supporting artists in their quest to move the nation's art forward and to position it in the international art arena.

But this year's show brought something of a novelty to the annual function. A zealous jury used solid curatorial parameters in selecting the works to be exhibited. The product was a collection of 100 selected works out of 1200. The event, with the processes, controversies and products associated with it, provided a microcosmic lens to the agency of contemporary art practice in Egypt amidst a varying degree of interventionist cultural policies and political ecosystems.

Independent curator Salwa Mikdadi reminds us how for a long time the visual arts were somewhat engineered into the nation-wide project to establish a post-colonial modern state in Egypt. The product was an emancipation of different art forms manifested in the introduction of art education, as well as production that ventures into exploring questions of national identity. In the more recent past, the youth salon functions as part of this contentious relation between art and a quest for modernity.[1] "In an effort to revitalize the visual arts, long burdened by government bureaucracy, the Youth Salon was established in the late 1980s to support emerging artists whose work in installation, video, and photography could not survive without institutional support."[2] In a seminal review of the 20th Youth Salon, historian Omnia el-Shakry views the novelty of the selection process and the curatorial strategies involved, through the paradigm of 'creative sovereignty', "…the debates surrounding the 2009 Salon illuminate the contested nature of artistic and curatorial sovereignty in the shadow of the legacy of state socialism and a purportedly democratic mass culture of artistic consumption and production."[3]

Three members of the jury communicated this novelty to the public in a controversial panel discussion, which they were adamant on organizing in an attempt to raise a debate, rather than work in isolation. During the panel, artist Wael Shawky, who was on the jury, reverses the traditional concept of the artist's empowerment by giving an adequate explanation to the exclusion of many applicants from the show, "The aim of the salon was to conceive a strong exhibition that has a position in the contemporary art movement in Egypt and to encourage the youth. We tried to do both," he says. While aiming to put a strong exhibition together, the concept of encouraging artists is unpacked; an artist has to be dealt with professionally and critically, rather than selecting his or her work blindly as a means of support. Only by judging artists' works through a series of conceptual and curatorial considerations can they be respected and treated as real artists.

Artist Hassan Khan, one of the three jurists behind the salon's new attire, expounds in an interview about those curatorial considerations: "[We were looking for] a personal language, or the beginning of a personal language, in which the artist is not necessarily reproducing, but rather creating a real engagement. The work has to be more than just a gesture." Besides their individual values, the artworks have also to be seen in relation to certain contexts.

1 Mikdadi, Salwa. «Egyptian Modern Art». In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.Online: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egma/hd_egma.htm. Viewed on 25 July 2009

2 Ibid

3 El-Shakry, Omnia. "Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt's 20th Annual Youth Salon". In E-Flux. Online: http://e-flux.com/journal/view/70. Viewed on 25 July 2009.

During the panel, curator and artist Bassam el-Baroni further articulates the jury's curatorial intervention into this year's show. For him, while such functions are usually rationalized for political, social and philosophical reasons, in Egypt, the philosophical-critical dimension is usually missing. This criticality is the overriding paradigm in viewing the presented works and envisaging them as part of the exhibit. Like Khan, el-Baroni emphasizes how the originality of the work is key, amidst a prevalent malaise of lack of authenticity, whereby a work can be identified as following the techniques of an art school while it is a reproduction of an already conceived model. Those reproductions, often become "the photocopied image of a faint modernity," to use el-Baroni's words. Another problematic of expression lies in overt symbolism, where symbolism carries the artistic value of the work rather than the real issue which the artist is insinuating. In those cases, the lack of a well-expressed, truthful and profound engagement with an issue makes the work void of value through which it can be evaluated. This symbolism often brands the work with closed discourses of folklore, propaganda and orientalism, alongside their "contemporary offshoots" as Khan puts it, namely feminism amongst others. Shawky traces the origins of the practice of unauthentic reproduction and overt symbolism into a bigger geo-political context that is understood by the Wallersteinian World Systems theory, which views the world in terms of epicenter and periphery. Within local artists' quest to access the center, it was convenient to embark on documenting pre-existing work or to offer orientalist representations that can be understood by the culture of the center. "Between those two, there should be a language that can be understood by the center; a specific unique language that is capable of representing the special and different culture on the periphery," he says.

Among the selected works, paintings were the most represented medium, despite a common expectation that jurists of the caliber and profile of Shawky, Khan and el-Baroni would opt for more facets of contemporariness by choosing media like video-art and installation. While the salon is an open national call with no pre-requisites with regard to the medium or the subject matter, the jurists were striving for artistic value in whatever they saw. This value was mostly found in paintings, which were mostly innovative depictions and representations of everyday situations with a range of approaches; sometimes paradoxical, sometimes ironic. The painting of a man sleeping while seated, by Mohamed Helmi, conveys an articulate sense of engagement in the act of slumbering. In another painting by Medhat Said, we see in a wide shot the back of two people, with microphones hung from the sky before them, in a hollow environment in an aesthetic composition that signals a certain

oddity. Ayatallah Alaa' Edin presents a playful painting of the classic classroom collective photo that elucidates the question of memory. Lamia Moghazy's painting of talk show hosts next to each other in a television screen, which marks the entrance of the salon, addresses the rather overindulged media discourse, especially through television consumption.

Drawings made less of a presence in the salon, with the few works exhibited featuring interesting experimentations with the form. For example, the detail level with which Shaimaa Sobhy Gomaa portrays a facial expression of a girl is attention-grabbing.

Sculpture is usually a convenient site of contentions in the debate on the critical embracement of modernity through contemporary art in Egypt. With a heritage of monumental sculpture from the Pharaonic era, the three-dimensional artwork is viewed today as a facet of national identity in the face of contemporariness. But this translates as a pre-conception in the curatorial language of the jurists, who were, yet again, looking for values of real engagement in the works. For one, contemporary sculpture draws on innovative uses of raw material, a conceptual decision in and of itself. Moreover, sculpture's tactical occupancy of space raises its potentials as a medium in the context of other media. The jurists' strategic reaction to the lack of works of sculpture that could make a presence on their own in the exhibition setting, is to put all 11 selected works on a platform side by side. By doing this, they try to create a dialectic relationship with viewers, about the artist and his or her agency. Khan expounds on how such decisions with regard to positioning and contextualizing create conceptual value on their own, "We placed [sculpture] in relation to other artworks in that room. Those other artworks are related to the sub-consciousness of the artist. Positioning these works in comparison to sculpture was a nice way to open discussion in a subtle way. They open certain questions and it's still all aesthetically pleasing." A rewarding aspect of this discussion for Khan is when one of the exhibiting sculptors looked at the presentation of the works next to each other and asked, "So why sculpture in the first place?"

The photography selected was presented with no captions, which can either be a conceptual choice or can simply be misleading. In Susan Sontag's view, "all photographs wait to be explained or falsified by their captions."[4] The lack of captions in the works of photography displayed in the salon

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4 Sontag, Susan. Regarding the Pain of Others. New York: Picador, 2003. p.10

can hence translate into a measure of ambiguity, particularly perceived in Zeinab Mohamed Adel's blurred piece and Amr al-Ashraf's street rock. A noteworthy theme in the photography selection, meanwhile, is traits of the domestic space in the works of Maha Hanafi and Ahmed Kamel, who has also produced series of pictures on the same theme on other occasions. Mohamed Ahmad Mansour presents a witty take on the display of the relationship between the artist and his work by incorporating himself into his photograph of an old building and covering his face with a panel stating "for me, abandoned buildings are very interesting."

In the very few video-art works selected by the jury, Mohamed Hassan Eldin Mahmoud and Eslam Zeinelabedin's joint project is one of the salon's centers of attention. In faint lighting, we see both of them facing each other and drumming consonantly in a state of uninterrupted involvement that unfolds with the different directions where the beat takes us. The sound of their work resonates all around the exhibition spaces, and somehow directs visitors to discover its source, hence somewhat demarcating the salon's viewing experience. Similarly few and omnipresent by their very nature, the installation works selected could hardly be bypassed. While their three-dimensional nature and different relationship to space challenge the limits of imagination, they can also be traps of contentious reproductions. Yet some of them showcase ambitious ventures. The joint work between Ahmad Nagy and Mahmoud Halwy represents a multi-layered take on the questions of consumerism, mass culture and identity protection. The screen showing a man eating un-curated food items, the sound narration about construction mechanisms and the overall gray-colored cement box incubating the whole installation are the artists' choices to manifest two sides of a certain binary: the heterogeneity in the practice of the everyday, which is largely the product of consumerism, and identity preservation through the construction of "a solid mold, which is difficult to penetrate through the process of broadcasting." Another innovative take on installation as a medium is Magdi Moustafa's Magnetic Fields Orchestra, where he examines the nature of sound cells and renders this examination process visible through a room-wide sound installation. Through the display of sound devices, he shows his investigation of the sound analogy prior to digital solutions, which is based on electro-magnetic generators. He uses visuality to represent the resulting sound waves which are square-shaped, less curvy and hence more powerful carriers of sound energy. His work represents the interesting intersection that can bring arts and science together in understanding technology.

The selected works of this year's salon manifest different levels

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of value, sometimes embedded in the quality use of media and sometimes in the conceptual engagement they produce alongside the aesthetic experience. The professionalization of the process of selecting and exhibiting the artwork in a nation-wide competition is a step forward, but one would hope to see further steps, such as inviting artists to provide statements and using wall texts. The function of such texts is to interrogate a conceptual context for the artists' works as articulated by them (with the help of curators).

The works shown and the context of the salon provided the art scene in Egypt with a case in point with regard to the politics of curating art and the multi-layered contentions surrounding it.[5] While moved by the sole aspiration of producing a quality exhibition, the jurists posed an alternative model of working with a prevalent structure, rather than adopting the extremes of refuting it altogether or embracing it. Khan and el-Baroni plan to take this endeavor one step further by working on a publication where they examine "local" contemporary art through the lens of all the artworks presented to them as jurists. By venturing into this documented thinking process, they turn the experience of the Youth Salon into a process of intellectual investigation.

1 Video installation by Ahmed Nagy and Mahmoud Halawy

2 Exhibition view of sculpture platform with Mohamed Mansour's photographic series it could be a family album, it could be not

3 Sound installation - Sound Cells by Magdy Mostafa

4 From left to right Painting by Mena Khalil, etching by Dalia Abdelhameed, Drawing by Osama Abd El Meneim Painting by Samar El Barawy, Ceramic piece by Mohamed Osama Abd El Karim

5 Ahmed Badry Aly's Made in China / Son' El Seen (stacked cardboard boxes and silver paint) and Lamia Moghazy's collage of painted portraits on vinyl

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* Mikdadi, Salwa. "Egyptian Modern Art". In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–.Online: *http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egma/hd_egma.htm*. Viewed on 25 July 2009

* Ibid

* El-Shakry, Omnia. "Artistic Sovereignty in the Shadow of Post-Socialism: Egypt's 20th Annual Youth Salon". In E-Flux. Online: *http://e-flux.com/journal/view/70*. Viewed on 25 July 2009.

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* Omniya el-Shakry refers to a series of binaries: the local and the global, the government-sponsored and the independent, the authentic and the contemporary.

5 Omniya el-Shakry refers to a series of binaries: the local and the global, the government-sponsored and the independent, the authentic and the contemporary.

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