

Beyond Prisms: In search of Alternatives in Critique

By Jyoti Dhar

To begin with, we may ask ourselves: If art is no longer about the pursuit of philosophical investigation, then what are the responsibilities of the contemporary critic? If postmodernism has given way to an era of 'altermodernity', then where does this place the already vague baseline from which to begin examining and critiquing art? At the fin de siècle the contemporary art world was sceptical of theory, ideology and linear history, so where does that leave us at the beginning of the 'tens'? As we can see, a debate on art criticism is more likely to bring up more questions than it is likely to produce satisfactory answers.

Time And Place

Firstly, to orientate ourselves (no pun intended) this article is written from the perspective of an arts commentator based in the Gulf, where the commercial sphere has developed faster than the traditional canons of foundational art criticism and curating. Much of

the critical literature on art that is available in the Gulf comes in the form of international publications, ranging from newspapers and journals to academic magazines. Local media tends to 'cover' events rather than critique them and a general lack of formal analysis or even basic contextualization exists in newsprint. As such, the above mentioned issues become even more difficult to come to terms with. Nevertheless, there are a number of regional critics who try to navigate their way through this uncertain terrain, attempting to document, analyse and translate art produced in this emerging region, effectively.

In 2009, a curious thing happened. We were being told that post-modernism was dead and that a new era of altermodernism, where "artists [are] now starting

from a globalised state of culture,”¹ was here. However, the continuation of region-specific exhibitions such as *Unveiled: Contemporary Art from the Middle-East*, *Emirati Expressions* and *Made in Iran* promoted the idea that categorising art according to nation or region was still a valid way of presenting contemporary art. In addition, the stream of (mainly international) writings that came as a result of this revealed misconceptions and misinterpretations, of the art being produced in this region.

These issues are especially a concern when indigenous art criticism in some parts of the region is less prominent than ‘foreign reviews,’ which in addition are published in English rather than Arabic.² As Gilane Tawadros tells us, “we have a tendency to assume that we all start from the same place and yet English is read from left to right and Arabic from right to left. Our starting points (and hence our bearings) can often be diametrically different, opening up the possibility of multiple misreading, mistranslations and misunderstandings.”³

Without intending to feed into the much explored ‘victimisation of East by West’ discourse, this essay intends to address genuine concerns about the literature being produced on art from the region. Foucault says, “If history is always genealogy and intervention, then frameworks of knowledge and modes of understanding are always changing.”⁴ Using this premise as a starting point, it is my intention to examine the way in which we approach the analysis of art produced and exhibited in the Gulf (and, where applicable, the wider Middle-East) from common terminology used to analytical constructs.

Prisms

If we want to look at new and alternative ways of approaching art criticism in the region, we have to begin by highlighting some of the more commonly occurring problems that currently exist. The first, as mentioned earlier would be regional media, which, as Antonia Carver, Editor of Bidoun magazine says, “tends to approach art through descriptive terms or through regurgitated material, rather than opinion.”⁵ This brings up the issue of lack of vision or stance by the critic, which will be discussed in depth later. The second is international critics who, when it comes to writing about the region, “display fantastic ignorance, intellectual laziness and shorthand everything into generalized responses based on categories of judgement that are problematic.”⁶

There are of course countless examples of this, but my favourite has to be Charles Darwent, in his review of *Unveiled*. He states that Sara Rahbar’s *Flag #19* is about Jasper Johns and therefore American cultural hegemony. He goes on to say, “If Rahbar found Johns circa 1954, Aloudani taps into a more generic modernism. A vast, untitled pastel-on-paper piece... has echoes of both Neue Sachlichkeit and Abstract Expressionism.”⁷ Although this can be understood within Edward Said’s theory of “seeing new things as versions of a previously known thing,”⁸ the glaring issues here range from basic terminology used, through to looking at developing art practices through prisms of European art history; both of which lead to gross misinterpretation of the work itself.

Bearing this in mind, an alternative and more relevant approach may be to contextualize these artists using other global contemporary artists. For example should we say the work of Sara Rahbar is like that of an Iranian modern-day Jasper Johns? Or is it more similar to work

1 See Nicolas Bourriaud’s Altermodernism Manifesto: <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm>

2 Sumner, Oliver: Artists and Society and Egypt: www.engage.org/publications/%5Cdownloads%5C207727BE_EJ_19_O.Sumner.pdf

3 Tawadros, Gilane: Reading (and Curating) from Right to Left: www.universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/gilane_tawadros

4 Lechte, John: Fifty key contemporary thinkers, From structuralism to post-humanism, Routledge, New York, 2nd ed. 2008, p.140

5 Interview with Editor of Bidoun Magazine, Antonia Carver (January 2010)

6 Interview with Artist and Writer, Hassan Khan (January 2010)

7 Darwent, Charles: Reviews, *Unveiled*, New Art from the Middle-East, Saatchi Gallery, London, 1st February 2009

8 Ed. Sloman, Paul: Contemporary Art in the Middle-East, Black Dog Publishing, UK, 2009, p.178

subverting the hegemony of American iconography, such as that of Khaled Hafez? Similarly, is Rokni Haerizadeh a 'quasi-surrealist', 'neo-expressionist' painter, or is he in fact using metaphors and symbols in a similar fashion to Israeli video artist Michal Rovner? If we must grasp on to something we understand to help gain perspective, it is imperative that we at least use wording and comparisons reflective of the artist we are detailing. Once this is achieved, we can begin to delve into using analytical tools relevant to contemporary art from the region.

Socio-Political Context

Cairo-based artist and writer Hassan Khan tells us, "Contemporary artists are not necessarily all connected to the same genealogy. We're all operating in different ways; that's just the nature of the present somehow. It is really dangerous when we start looking at this local, specific angle because it easily leads to provincialism. At the same time sensitivity to the local context should be part of the critic's awareness, so it's not something that even has to be highlighted, it can just be part of the nuance."⁹

As artists living, working or connected to any nation that has suffered the effects of war or political struggle such as devastation, deprivation or dislocation, they will naturally be reflective of the zeitgeist that surrounds them. There are a few ways in which art works may be read as political. The simplest is if the work is deliberately placed within a political framework such as within the exhibitions *Lines of Control*, or even *Disorientation II*, where we are directed in our interpretation by a patent curatorial premise.

Another is if by its very time-specific context, the work has social and political implications, such as in the work of Simin Keramati in *Made in Iran*. The exhibition took place during the infamous and well-publicised political upheaval of Iran's 2009 election. As a result, her works took on an additional dimension to what was perhaps intended. Xerxes Cook says of the artist, "Simin



Sara Rahbar, *Flag # 19, "Memories Without Recollection,"* 2008
Mixed media textile, 203.2 x 116.8 cm
Courtesy of the Artist



Iftikhar Dadi and Nalini Malani, *Bloodlines*, 2008
 Sequins and thread on cloth, 165 x 188 cm (16 panels, 33 x 38 cm each)
 Details from Lines of Control image from The Third Line [Installation View]
 Courtesy of the Artists and The Third Line Gallery, Dubai



Rokni Haerizadeh in his Dubai studio. Image courtesy of Jyoti Dhar

Keramati's painting *Make Up...* would have always evoked self-censorship or domestic violence, but now also conjured up images of Neda Agha gunned down on Tehran's side streets."¹⁰

This demonstrates the responsibility of the critic as chronicler, where one has to be sensitive to the socio-political and time-specific context of the art work, without making it solely about that. Perhaps, in concurrence with the post-modernist idea of 'death of the author and birth of the subject' we could begin to look at art works per se, as opposed to the artists themselves. This would be a step towards eliminating the prism of always seeing 'Middle Eastern art' as primarily about war, violence and oppression. As such, these facts become part of the nuance of understanding the artist's work thematically and formally.

Subverting Authenticity

Traditionally, 'authenticity' has been a hegemonic concept, mainly brought up in Western art circles in talking about non-Western art forms. In the past, Western critics have asked whether this art was representative of its region and whether it fitted the criteria of what was expected of global contemporary art. As such, artists have construed authenticity in a variety of ways leading to a mélange of art works produced; some of which are seen as true to the artist's 'self' and some that are vying for a Western notion of 'authenticity' and acceptance. Recently a young student from the American University of Dubai showing his work in a debut exhibition, admitted to producing his work 'to look like Western art', and an international curator concurred that the exhibition did indeed look like 'something you would see in a gallery in Chelsea, NY.'

Anna Somers Cocks contrasts this temptation perfectly in an article where she states, "What no one needs is western-style "fine art" with some orientalist flourishes. That would be a sad colonialisation of the art of the

¹⁰ Bidoun, Issue no 19, Noise, Winter 2009/2010, Reviews, Made in Iran, Xerxes Cook, p. 159, New York

region."¹¹ A statement like this brings up a number of sensitive issues. One wonders whether in a globalised world, artists from the Middle East can really be authentic or original in a post-modern or altermodern time?

Hassan Khan says, "If there's a critic arguing for authenticity he needs to present that within a world view as a vision and how that relates to what art is, in which case we'd have a more productive situation." Bearing this in mind, I would argue that we should use this concept to look at art and ask pertinent questions about its nature and function.

I propose that authenticity could be a tool of validation within emerging art practice if used by commentators within the region. Rather than Western art critics questioning non-Western art, regional art critics who have a more personal experience of the artist and their subjects should look at such art practice and ask questions such as: "Why is this artist undertaking this particular concept or form?" "Is it true to their thinking or a body of work they have demonstrated previously?" By tracking an artist's development over time or spending time with these artists and their contemporaries, a regional critic is able to ascertain an important notion: whether the artwork is 'true' to the artist and as such their nature. To counter Western notions of authenticity, this would contrast or explain whether artists are designing 'recipes' for a wider global art market, or whether their art represents themselves.

Hybridity As Translation

One could argue that, in order to fully understand art being produced in this moment and place, we must first have an understanding of our contemporary culture. Using present day concepts such as 'heterochronicity', we can look at the way contemporary artists restage their past to introduce other temporalities into the invention of their traditions. This challenging of the definitions of tradition and modernity is part of the "interstitial

passage between fixed identifications which opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity"¹² as outlined by Homi Bhabha in his seminal text, *The Location of Culture*.

Once again, I stress the importance of moving beyond the way in which this concept has been traditionally used, such as, for example, in the work of Raqib Shaw, who draws on a classical Eastern illustrative technique to construct ancient tapestries in a contemporary way. As a clear product of two cultures, he is often "subjected to reductive and essentialist readings"¹³ whereby his work is seen as a concept commensurate with his heritage as a Kashmir-born London resident. Dina Ramadan states this best when she says, "I think we are in a different moment now, and many fields, particularly in Middle East studies need to work out what happens post-orientalism...Much of art readings from the region, including a lot that is produced regionally is framed through a narrative of tradition versus modernity. What I am more concerned about...is where can we go from here."¹⁴

Working in this interstitial space becomes the starting point for both the artist to engage with cultural differences and for the critic to be able to articulate and translate them anew. For example, the work of painter and video artist Khaled Hafez is often described as "the art of dichotomies, wherein he pulls together (tired) binaries of East/West, Man/Woman, Traditional/Contemporary, Ancient/Pop into large canvases." However as Nat Muller tells us, "Hafez's work, which is typified by its seriality, is far more interesting to read as a comment on globalist consumer society than as an effort to hybridize cultural binaries."¹⁵

11 Somers Cocks, Ann: www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Are-we-colonialising-Middle-Eastern-art?/18604

12 Bhabha, Homi: *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1994, p.7

13 Malhotra, Priya: *A Panorama of Transience*, Asian Art News, Hong Kong, Vol 19, No 3, May/June 2009

14 Attalah, Lina: *Remembering the Literary Theorist and Cultural Critic: A Traveler's Critical Account on Edward Said*, AlMasry AlYoum, Egypt, September 26, 2009

15 Muller, Nat: *Curating Cairo: Tales of Countering the Epic*: http://www.springerlin.at/dyn/heft_text.php?textid=2195&lang=en

This comes back to Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, which in effect allows us to "elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the Other of ourselves."¹⁶ In these interstitial, disjunctive spaces and signs, new historical subjects of the transnational will emerge. In it we will find another territory of translation, another testimony of analytical argument, allowing us to move beyond traditional prisms.

Conclusion

Having looked at a number of examples of art from the Middle East that have been misinterpreted or misrepresented because of prisms of European art history, lack of contextual knowledge, or traditional uses of concepts such as authenticity and hybridity, it can be argued that post-colonial discourse has perhaps not fully corrected the imbalances it was meant to. This is perhaps why these theories and analytical constructs seem most relevant when one is trying to interpret contemporary art from the Gulf. Bearing this in mind, a working knowledge of evolving frameworks such as the following may aid us: socio-political context, subverting authenticity and hybridity as translator. However, it is essential to understand the difference between these key subjects so we may differentiate between the reading of the artist and the prism through which we see them.

What we can hope for in the future is more solo shows by artists and more works that do not directly reference nationalities or regional politics. For example, Walid Raad and Mona Hatoum are perhaps the best known examples of artists from the region, whose works address the civil war in Lebanon, and the effects of war-induced exile due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, respectively. Both artists work and live in the USA, where they have had the opportunity to showcase their work in prominent solo exhibitions. As such, both their personal experiences and their wider intended meanings are better documented and understood.

We also need more critics dealing with in-depth discussions of individual artistic practice that analyse

the artist's exploration of contemporary concerns. For example, as Antonia Carver states, "Murthazar Vali, looks at artists in a situation of exile, trying to write about their work in a different way. Rather than just look at the victimhood of being in a hybrid situation he's looking at their work through a much more complex prism and the power that exists in that relationship as well."¹⁷ Kaelen Wilson-Goldie and Jack Persekian are also important examples of observers who have written about particular Lebanese artists in depth and challenged existing frameworks within curating in the Middle-East, respectively.

I would propose that a contemporary critic be a reflection of one's surroundings in much the same way as the contemporary artist primarily becomes an observer of theirs. This is an essential part of being fully informed of an artist's formal and thematic undertakings. It is often at this stage of understanding that international critics fail, as they are usually only able to capture glances of foreign cultures rather than understand their total complexities. In a simultaneously contrasting effect, critics based in the region must finally realise that simply transposing generalized rubrics does not always translate, i.e. approaches to the classical methodologies and indeed pedagogies set up in the Western art world may need to be modified to work well in non-Western settings. Although it is still early days, I would urge critique to be a reflection rather than a transposition of a view through a prism.

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¹⁶ Ibid 12, p.56

¹⁷ Ibid 5