

# Geo-coding Contemporary Art?

by *Timo Kaabi-Linke*



**Ziad Abillama** *Untitled, Painted Aluminium, 2011* - Courtesy of Agial Art Gallery, Beirut

## 1. Labels

The use of cultural labels is a common method to organize the field of contemporary art. In the international art scene, people talk about Indian Art, African Art, Chinese Art, Arab Art, Indonesian Art and so on. Making use of these labels is hardly questioned, although it is obviously driven by ideologies. Here is my argument. First of all, cultural, regional and national labels are intellectual artifacts. There is not, for example, a specific African Art nor a unique Arab Art, nor is there an intersection of both which could enable us to tell North-African Art apart from the rest of African Art without referring to differences within the forms and content of artistic expressions in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, South-Sudan, Chad, Niger, Mali, Mauritania and Western Sahara. Such labels are used as if they are universal categories, even if we do not know whether they refer to given entities or what these entities are. Whenever someone

distinguishes works of art by using culture-specific criteria, we must assume that he or she comprehends specific qualities such as 'Africanness' or 'Arabness' – but who can say where these terms refer to? In most cases, cultural terms seem to be used with unwritten question marks. Exhibits are organized in order to find common traits which can be considered as empirical data for the selection. On the other hand, a culture-specific grouping of objects already necessitates knowledge about cultural and/or regional modes of expression and representations. Hence, the anticipated result of a culturally designed exhibition is the self-fulfilling prerequisite of its very creation. Only a grammatology of visual and conceptual languages can be the intellectual framework for telling Arab Art apart from African Art, etc., but such knowledge requires empirical data which has yet to be found. Since cultural and regional labels do not refer to empirical facts, they cannot be based on an acknowledgement of cultural specificities.

## 2. Geo-codes

Nevertheless, labels are used to ascribe certain expectations, stereotypes and clichés of collectors, curators and visitors to cultural productions. In many cases, these ascriptions are motivated by political and economic interests and could spur suspicion that a whiff of the old-man halitosis of Orientalism wafts from between the rotten teeth of Colonialism. Although appropriate groupings are hard to find in reality, they nonetheless seem to be very easy to create. One only needs to avoid the wiry, tangled matters of ethnology, sociology and anthropology. Anyone can launch his own classes within more or less uprooted abstractions of cartography and clichés – and hence geo-coding is brought into play.

Geographical codes are comprised of cartographic knowledge rather than real places and of culturally specific stereotypes rather than cross-cultural experiences. It is a quite modern understanding of borders, nationalities and regions that relates to outlined territories rather than the cultural diversities within these areas. Furthermore, it seems to function as a wrapping format for outmoded clichés and expectations. The collectors' eyes are blinded by presuppositions about the regions where the artworks come from. Iran is made a promising country for its subversive and politically engaged contemporary art, Indian works must reflect the complications of old customs and new urbanism, Chinese masters are supposed to fulfill Westerners' expectation of traditional perfectionism – even including the obligatory, perfect imperfections. Arab artists should either exploit their calligraphic heritage or deal with conflict, war, equal rights and modernism in a highly conceptual way, while from Africa, collectors await either vernacular trash-works – as if African trash would not come from Europe or elsewhere – or hybrid figures, preferably chimaeras that express an uprooted and alienated state of being. Only Western artists seem to be free to do what they want – but who cares for emerging Western artists? All these ascriptions endow quite different fictions about “the other” without questioning the author who creates them. Geographical categories are abstract enough to embrace all kinds of leanings that might influence the personal selection of artworks. However, in the long run these codes could do a disservice to anybody who is interested in art for the sake of novelty. Since today's artists are manufacturers within a demand-driven capitalist market where sale is a promise of success, there is always the risk that their production replies directly to demands. This does not have to be a concern for private collectors who are free to make their personal choices, but I think it should be a critical question for public collections. Geo-codes do not correspond with cross-cultural exchange among contemporary artists. They belong to the field where art is exploited and consumed; they are secondary

constructions that do not relate to the production of an artwork. Let us face the reality of today's artists. A lucky minority among them are successful enough to participate in international events. These emerging artists usually travel a lot, participate in residencies, and have likely lived in several places that differ from their countries of origin. Actually, it is not rare for them to hold dual citizenships, but let us get to the point. An artist's practice is often – if not always – related to the places where he or she lives and creates. Furthermore, there are many regions like post-colonial Northern Africa which have become culturally hybrid areas. The intellectual biographies of these artists interrelate to different countries, regions, languages and cultures. Personally, I know an artist who has lived in Tunisia, the Soviet Union, the United Arab Emirates, France and Germany during the last 25 years. All these are great places that are capable of fueling creative impulses. How is it then possible to assign the work of such an artist to only one place, which is primarily the place of birth? Or, to tie the argument to tangible things; even the production of one piece can proceed in a variety of places. In one country you obtain the best materials, in another the best price, and in the third you can access the highest quality and precision. The final artwork will embody all these different working conditions and practices and will be tied to all these places, but not necessarily to the specific place where the artist is from. I can imagine that cultural geo-tagging is a pretty nice tool for reducing complicated truths into simple conditional clauses like, “If the artist X is practicing Y (let us say, Islamic calligraphy), then he or she is probably from (a country either from the MENA region or Indonesia).” This proposition is true even if the condition is wrong, which means that an artist from the MENA region is also allowed to do things other than calligraphy, yet the result will be false if an artist starts working with Arab calligraphy even if he has no ties to the region or Islamic culture. How does this make sense? Notably, curators make use of this kind of geo-code determination – even if not explicitly. However, oversimplifying their field of work will not make their jobs any easier. Many of them fly around the globe to pay visits to artists. When they use geo-tagging as a basis – as if this could better help keep their itinerary straight – they disrespect the indeterminate nature of the abstractions they use. Using geo-codes like memory hooks that remind a curator where he is while he is talking to someone might be effective at times, but in many cases geo-coding serves as an unreliable navigation tool. It is always possible to find German artists in Pakistan and Pakistani artists in Germany or elsewhere; cities like London, Berlin, New York and Istanbul have become crossroads for artists from all over the world who are now shaping the cultural atmospheres of these places. It is obvious

to say people move, and therefore, the use of ambiguous geo-tags is rather complicated. Nevertheless, the geo-coding of contemporary art is a global phenomenon worth questioning.

### 3. Time-lag

Classification is probably the most common way to organize art knowledge. Basically, this knowledge is historical. Historians file older artworks in certain eras and style periods. Historical classification depends on selective schemes to reduce complexity while organizing variety, but this method fails when it comes to contemporary art for many reasons. One reason is that nowadays we can view more art than ever. An alternative management of content must be found since up-to-date products are still too close in time for temporal divisions. There is no historical distance from the day of production to now, and there is no temporal interval that could extend the future history of reception. The time-lag of observation is missing.

Saying contemporary artworks lack aftermath does not mean that they do not possess a historical feed-line. Theoretically, the full knowledge of history is available now to living and working artists, but once the work is complete, this history ends. Post-histoire is the mode of current real-time productions and neither are there time-lags for observations nor periods for temporal determinations. That makes the collection of contemporary art an adventurous activity that rather depends on irrational issues like intuition and taste than on facts, expertise, and established values. On the other hand, it grants an eminent role to the collectors who are – whether publicly or privately – the builders of the history of things that one day will be described by historians. Most things are lost. If the annual production during the past two thousand years had been a thousandth of what it is today, even then very little would have remained. Decay and oblivion are the propellers of history. In this sense, collecting art is a heroic task that seems to be driven by the awareness that a ground for future history has yet to be laid.

In order to better understand why contemporary art is described with artificial geo-codes – even though there are many other suitable categories such as media, practice, materials, concepts – I would like to ask how art historians manage to find appropriate classes for their objects and if their methods of classifying could also be applied to contemporary art. Obviously, historians are dealing with some methodological difficulties. “When duration and setting are retained in view”, wrote George Kubler, “we have shifting relations, passing moments, and changing places in historic life. Any imaginary dimension or continuities like style fade from view as we look for them.” A closer look at conditions, such as duration and historical setting, is a critical

act since the predominant historical knowledge has been organized through the idea of continuity and consecutively developing forms of style. If style evaporates, the construct of art history falters as well. Nevertheless, historians overcome the deficiencies of style as long as they find empirical data for historical change. Now we can pinpoint the problem. In contemporary art, we are not yet able to observe historical change; there are no breaks, no traditions or ruptures, no signs of obsolescence or fatigue, and no revivals or renewals that could mark significant discontinuities or continuities. The circumstances of contemporaneity do not deliver shapes of time which can provide useful models for classifications. This could be considered a major handicap compared to the working field of art historians. Historiographical tools and perspectives are not available for the study of contemporary art. Coeval artworks are spread over the globe more or less simultaneously. This could explain why the dominant grouping of contemporary artworks is based on topological criteria, even if this leads to counterfactual, geographically constructed schemes.

However, these constructions are not any more erroneous than historical continuities such as recurrent stylistic periods and cyclical movements. Any artifact that does not fit within these descriptive models becomes an unresolvable problem that is usually determined a “stroke of genius”. In the same way, difficulties arise with geographical tools. If geo-data provide the only common ground for a group of artists, the differences among them – which make things interesting for viewers, collectors, and historians – must be blanked. An artwork is rarely reducible to one artist, since there are always predecessors and contemporary competitors who are not limited to certain regions or cultures. Even if one speaks about different cultures in art, a general term based only on anthropological and sociological knowledge, instead of geographical entities, is necessary. Humans all around the globe produce things that are different in number and use from other products of modern and non-modern societies, and in turn other humans sell and collect these things. These cultural products belong to visual arts, and art is a language that is spoken everywhere without need of translation. In this sense, it seems unlikely to me that specific cultural backgrounds mark meaningful differences for the contemporary understanding of art.

### 4. Grass-roots and Fiber-optics

The characterization of artists, techniques, and conceptions via geo-data and the artists’ origins could also be seen as compensation for the lost sense of tangible originals. Like phantom limb pain, the discourse of originality has emerged and faded with modern facilities of mechanical and electronic

reproductions. Today, most eye-contact with visual art is transmitted through physical or electronic images. Even professionals, like art critics and curators, spend more time browsing the web, photographs, catalogs and art books than in gallery halls, exhibition venues and museums. The uniqueness of the artwork notwithstanding, it is no longer bound to a specific place. Moreover, it is reproduced and distributed through media and time, it has become accessible to everybody and, nowadays, accessibility relates rather to visibility than “touchability”. Incidentally, it was Paul Valéry who seemed to have anticipated the iPad when he claimed that we would be supplied with audio-visual materials that appear and disappear with the slightest swipe of a hand. Today, after more than a hundred years of developing and using new media devices that have released artworks out of spatial custody, one should beware that these tech-devices do not only transform solitary and highly exclusive originals into multiplied and widely represented works of art, but might also become emancipatory agents in the hands of artists. Just as the visibility of an artwork is unbound from the original in time and space, the potential of an artist should not be restricted by his or her origins.

These days, the entire art world has been updated with fiber-optic wires, cloud computing, and social networks. A great many artists share their lives with connected friends all over the planet. The degree of integration might vary by generation and individual, but among the artists performing on the international stage it has become quite common to enhance the private and professional social life with virtual peers. Like anyone, they benefit from new, opportune techniques and cultivate a new range of acquaintanceships. This constitutes new forms of worldwide communities that unite through the preoccupation with art instead of being divided by geopolitically drawn demarcation lines and identities.

In view of these “hyper-realities”, the discursive strategy of geo-coding will not make it easier to understand the products that have emerged within these socially and technically inter-related contexts of life. New information technologies unbind and reorganize the public and private spheres, everything seems to be getting closer and one would definitely be in trouble if appraising the recent globally linked, pro-democracy protests without considering the circumstance of an electronically triggered global citizenship. In October 2011, people gathered on Westminster’s Bridge in London to protest against the power accorded to the financial sector. The same happened in other places in Europe. These events followed the call from New York, where people started to occupy Liberty Plaza near Wall Street in September. The campaign is described as a horizontally organized resistance movement employing the Arab Spring tactic of nonviolent

assemblies to restore democracy in America. Unlike labor movements or student activities, the Occupy Wall Street campaigners do not represent a certain sector of society (worker or students), but people of many colors, genders and political persuasions. They have no one agenda or manifesto but a common conviction that they are “the 99% that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1%”.

One could say that these pro-democracy protests are motivated by the financial crisis, but this is not entirely correct. It is not the first financial or economic crisis, but for the first time in history people in Western countries are following the civil uprisings that began in the Arab World to promote and protect democracy. “Ash-sha’b yurid isqat an-nizam (the people want to bring down the regime)”, was the chant first sounded on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis; due to social media it spread like wind over the national borders and echoed in Egypt and Libya, as well as in Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. There have been revolts in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and even in China and Israel people protested for more rights and social justice. The civil fights against autocratic regimes in the Arab world and the resistance movements for social justice stand at the two poles of a worldwide damaged system characterized by imbalanced market mechanisms and a lack of distributive justice.

When I look at this phenomenon, I cannot help but wonder about the strategy of discursive geo-coding. Since communications and activities have become transnational and cross-cultural, these odd and outmoded habits should be rigorously reviewed. The planetary civil movements outline a political consciousness that has been a prior ideal for a great many artists – the feeling of being part of one world. It was once an idea relegated to the minds of thinkers and poets from the Age of Enlightenment, but for writers like Frantz Fanon and twentieth century scholars like Homi K. Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and Kwame A. Appiah, it became a powerful tool for criticism. And now for the 99% – the majority of people on this planet – the pressure of existence has pushed it into being. On the one hand, the international art scene is the perfect laboratory for cultivated cosmopolitan thinking; on the other hand it seems to be the odd mill where geo-codes are being even further refined.

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