

# Art Fair 101: A Lesson in Market Dynamics

*By Yasmine El Rashidi*

Paris Photo won its accolades many months before its doors actually opened to the mass anticipated public. Despite its photographic focus, this was touted as one of the most important showcases of contemporary Arab and Iranian art of the year, and perhaps as well of the decade about to close. What unfolded instead when those doors metaphorically opened at the Carrousel du Louvre on November 17th, was a reminder that the art world is somewhat divided; between those personally invested in both the art, and the region in this instance, and by those for whom art is merely – or primarily - a commodity to buy and trade in a market that is in its mechanics a microcosm and mirror to the much larger global financial arena.

In its execution the Fair could not be faulted. Drawing on the expertise not just of a seasoned organizing team, but as well of a city known for a history of perfection in the creative industries, the globally lauded photography

Fair lived up to usual reputations, and expectations, of gallery mapping and spatial design and organization. But while it won for itself once again the annual nod of approval as a Fair well executed, its content left a herd of visitors and critics feeling somewhat deflated and let down. For an event meant to showcase “Arab and Iranian” contemporary photography, Paris Photo 2009, did, as was echoed widely, a strange and disproportionate job, by veering much farther East than the region it is meant to represent, and attempting to swoop - in one shot it appeared - the growing and parallel trend for work from further afield – South East Asia.

And that was perhaps just the first of its flaws.

In many ways Paris Photo offered a broad “Introduction” to international visitors vis-à-vis art from the “region”. Like any fair forced to dwindle a growing list of names to

some form of containment, at this one, most of the key names were there. From Yto Barrada, Reza Aramesh, and Akram Zaatari, to Walid Raad, Shadi Ghadirian, Youssef Nabil, Abbas Kiarostami, and Khosrow Hassanzadeh, the Fair did a commendable job securing a fair share of the names that command attention both currently and in the larger context of the global art world, steering away perhaps from hype and bringing attention to the so-called “reputed” names with production histories and the credibility of sustained practice. But in that same breath one wonders why there was no real representation and presence of Shirin Neshat, for example, and instead only Lalla Essaydi? Why there was no real space given to younger artists like Barbad Golshiri or Shirin Aliabadi? And although Farhad Moshiri has little photographic work, would it not have been appropriate that his voice of commentary, or at the very least that of his gallery, be there in presence considering how much they are collectively doing for art in the region on the platform of the world?

One can plausibly account the absences to the equal absence of space, but then there were choices that were, shall we say, “odd” in ways, and perhaps indicative of the forceful frenzy of galleries to position themselves, for collectors as possible entrees into the “Arab” art scene and world and circles of money. In the instance of Caprice Horn Gallery, for example, who have actively, and successfully, positioned themselves on the Arab map, their choices of Khaled Hafez and Amal Kenawy were perhaps a little off, for both Hafez and Kenawy can’t quite be said to be photographic aficionados by any stretch of the creative imagination. While solid, talented, and reputed artists in their respective multi-media choices, the presence of Egypt on the photographic platform would have been better represented by this gallery, par exemple, by securing work of Sabah Naim Maha Maamoun, Amr Fekry, or even, using creative license, Huda Lutfi, whose appropriation of images and snapshots into full-scale image-based installations of her own is both interesting and important on a level of how artists from the region have taken the photographic image and adapted it to suit their creative needs in a culture where the freedom to take pictures, and access to them, is not always fluid.



*Paris Photo Entrance*  
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*BMW Prize, The Arab Image Foundation*  
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*The Arab Image Foundation*  
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On the one hand though, who can place blame on an annual event vying to attract visitors who are torn amongst now dozens of other similar happenings across the globe. Who can point the finger at the organisers for banking on perhaps the reference (“Arab”) with perhaps the greatest purchasing power in an economy otherwise still scrambling to find its solid ground? Who can blame galleries for scrambling with what they have to secure places at an Art Fair almost guaranteed to generate sales?

Perhaps it is indeed “our” fault – us from the region; us with an interest in art as an expression, as testimony, as collective memory and archive and document. Perhaps it is our fault for looking at a Fair under the lens of “festival”; for expecting holistic representation and celebration rather than merely vitrines of images selected for their market history, for their selling power, for their reflection of regional clichés and associations and visual references that feed global demand of what the “Arab” and “Iranian” is perceived as today. Perhaps it is indeed our fault for expecting the integrity of a responsibility to providing the world with a comprehensive survey of art from the region, rather than facing the reality of what a Fair is – a three-day market of goods. And it is, perhaps, our own politics in a world post 9/11 that make us reactive to any platform that offers to give “us” breathing space for collective voices, and it is in that, that perhaps the disappointment is sourced, stems and grows.

But it is in those same aisles and spaces where Arab and Iranian art was given space to breathe that something much more significant was unfolding, and for which attention must be raised. While we can overlook the work from further East as a Fair scrambling to make its own living, and the often brow-raising curatorial choices as gallerists struggling to stay economically afloat, what Paris Photo was also witness to, was a perpetuation of a colonialist history in the region and the Orientalist view. From the choice of Catherine David to curate the archives of the Arab Image Foundation (FAI), to the selection of Karijn Kakebeke for the BMW Award, to the disproportionately high number of Western artists’ work “on” the region, the Fair perhaps lost loyal goers in the form of curators, artists, patrons, for whom a

responsibility, as they saw it, was not fully honored.

In Paris Photo’s choice of Ms. David, one can perhaps be a little divided. This is, after all, the woman who pioneered contemporary representations of the Arab world on the artistic map, and who single-handedly did more for the visual representation of the Arab world in the space of a few years than many of us have done, collectively, in many more. But still, it would have been time to move beyond her reputation as the “it” thing, and instead sculpt a platform of images with the vision of someone from within the culture. This should have been our chance – as Arabs, as Iranians, as Muslims, and as Arab Christians even – but yet again, it was offered up to the Western expert, and to the voice we have allowed to become an authority on what we should know best.

The tragedy, if it can be called that, was not ultimately in the curatorial vision of Ms. David, whose eye cannot be faulted and whose selection and interpretation ultimately is just her own, but rather, in the reality that for the FAI - a project of great vision, labor and passion - it was an opportunity missed to delve into what this Foundation really represents, which is a history and memory - a collective one – that offers platforms as pertinent to the looking back as to the looking forward.

“I would say that it’s important first to take into consideration that this is Catherine David’s presentation of samples from our archives, and not an exhibition,” said Zeina Arida, Director of the FAI. “It is not one of our projects, but Paris Photo and Catherine David’s project. It remains a presentation of sample of images from our collection as opposed to something else that could have taken into consideration the evolution, the history, the discussions that have been taking place in the Foundation around photographic documents and about their use in contemporary practices. The general feeling in the Foundation is that a chance has been missed to address this as a whole.”

But, as Ms. Arida added, “maybe this was not the right context, because it is a Fair.”

And it is in that statement that perhaps the questions



B21 Gallery Booth  
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and the answers both lie. However, while the financials of a Fair's success cannot be disregarded, the dialogue of representation, of illumination, and of conceiving an event that is as much for the region as it is for the world, seem to be not only of importance, but also of opportunity. Paris Photo had the chance to set itself apart on a platform of expertise, but instead, offered not a comprehensive survey, nor a collective and representative voice, but rather, a lesson in Arab and Iranian Art that would be classified perhaps as merely ArabArt101. And perhaps for those from the region that encompasses the Arab world and Iran, it was a lesson of another kind – one of market dynamics, and the fundamental premise of the platform called the Art Fair.