Revising the Canon, Resurrecting Arab Worlds

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REFERENCES

Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary. Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation, Munich: Prestel; Londres: Whitechapel Gallery, 2015. Sous la dir. d'Omar Kholeif avec la collaboration de Candy Stobbs

Emily Jacir: Europa, Londres: Whitechapel Gallery; Munich: Prestel, 2015

Made in Algeria : généalogie d'un territoire, Paris : Hazan ; Marseille : Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, 2016. Sous la dir. de Zahia Rahmani, Jean-Yves Sarazin

- 1 Since when might we say that the history of art has been changing into the geography of art, and that the *discipline*, itself, has been changing into an odyssey? We have moved at the speed of light from the ruins of exoticism and colonial disenchantment to collective self-examination and the hybridization of modernism. But between the World Fairs of the past and the Global Art Forums of the present, eras may pass, but words survive, devitalized; it is up to us to re-name challenges, places and boundaries, and re-map the trajectories of so-called “global” art production (or visual history).
- 2 Between the dangers of a map drawn solely in ink taken from the sea—no sooner traced than evaporated—or in ink taken from the earth—no sooner traced than fossilized—, let us remember, thanks to Zahia Rahmani, who runs a research programme at the National Institute of Art history [INHA], that “the white space is not a blank space”. The joint curator of *Made in Algeria: généalogie d'un territoire* on view at the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilizations [MuCEM] in Marseille, alongside Jean-Louis Sarazin, director of the maps and plans department at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France [BnF], had promised a “scholarly and popular” exhibition, a wholesome ambition, too rarely

honoured. The promise has been kept, if we are to believe the show's success, as much in terms of numbers of visitors as reports in the media, with the press and the demanding scientific requirements of the project finding all their material in the catalogue which will undoubtedly mark a milestone (see the noteworthy essays by Hélène Blais, Todd Shepard, and Daho Djerbal). By bringing in, *inter alia*, military maps and charts so as to reveal their role in France's colonial conquest of Algeria, *Made in Algeria* draws up the narrative of a history which not only fashioned Algeria, but France as well (in particular its outlying zones), and it does this in a way that spans a period from the 19th century to the present day. In explaining the geographical, territorial and topological dynamics in colonial history, this endeavour seems self-explanatory, to such a degree does it inform the Mediterranean sea, for which the MuCEM is in the process of becoming the cultural and scientific beacon; so readers will recall that the first attempt was a masterly stroke. With its telescopic contents ("Vue de loin", p. 28-71; "Tracer le territoire", p. 72-137; "Capter l'Algérie", p. 138-205; "Au plus près", p. 206-224), and favouring the slow march of time by going back to Antiquity, the book is not limited just to an intellectual victory, namely exhuming the relation between maps and collective unconscious. By dovetailing cartography, the history of ideas, and contemporary art, it represents a genre model for "visual studies", and encompasses an impressive community of researchers from every discipline. It cannot really be summed up better than by the curators themselves, with their warning: "Including a material object such as the map within a system based on distinction, which is what the system of art is, is to create the conditions for reading the object, which is to say that within the map "there is thinking going on"; demonstrating this autonomy is to include the map within a modern praxis of visibility".¹

- 3 The exhibition *Imperfect Chronology* at the Whitechapel Gallery, which is based exclusively on the collection of the Barjeel Art Foundation and its owner-cum-promoter Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi, expresses the uncertain hope for "Arab art from the modern to the contemporary". The selection of works on view is to be praised, so novel is the gathering of these Palestinian, Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Moroccan, and Algerian artists, and the show is a noteworthy event. It is presented in four phases and four chapters ("Debating Modernism I", "Debating Modernism II", then "Mapping the Contemporary I", "Mapping the Contemporary II") and just one relatively small room at the Whitechapel is dedicated to this programme. Over and above the visual pleasure that it offers us, the Barjeel Art Foundation is a thoroughly interesting organization for its day and age. Needless to say, there is nothing new about this form of financial partnership, and even less so in major museums which quite naturally have recourse to patronage. Here, however, we are getting close to a form of "curatorial privatization", which merits further discussion. If there is nothing new about showing a private collection in a public museum, the Barjeel collection, for its part, asserts its brief which involves travelling from one museum to another. It thus lays claim to the function of 'soft power', otherwise put, setting itself up as a political and diplomatic tool. In this respect, the public-private distinction loses its meaning, because, despite the fact that the collection belongs to a physical person, it is also at the service of a national agenda, in this instance that of the United Arab Emirates: collecting, conserving and promoting "Arab art", an essentialist truism which is shattered, given the extremely varied backgrounds of the artists in this collection. Two conspicuous consequences nevertheless remain. Firstly, there is the practice of curating itself, grappling as it is with the system of the collection as 'soft power'-- whether we see the curator as a cultural activist or alternatively as the museum's armed wing of neoliberal ideology. Secondly, in a paradoxical and inverted

way, this moveable collection foreshadows future “exiled” collections. Notably from the salons of wealthy Syrian and Iraqi families and in the theatres of the worldwide war which is currently being played out. These latter will before long be confronting Western museums with their responsibilities, and the urgent need to review their *modus operandi* (at the same time as they review their canons), the better to accommodate them, preserve them, and display them—albeit on a temporary basis. At the hub of these challenges, let us bear in mind the report submitted to France’s public authorities by Jean-Luc Martinez in order to lay down the law about the right of asylum applied to objects and heritage. The problem raised by a chronology (or, in reality a collection) which is presented as “imperfect” is more the re-assertion of the chronological order than its imperfection—with a watertight division between “modern” and “contemporary” works. There is no dearth of reasons why this order is doomed to deconstruction, in particular those to do with the invariably problematic but not yet truly clarified status of the orientalist and post-Impressionist works in this chronology. What emerges is probably a too clearly defined separation in the break between the first and second halves of the 20th century. The fact is that a quick examination of the archives associated with the art of the Arab worlds will simply respond by saying that, from the 1930s onward, there was evidence of an anti-colonial and anti-academic art, especially in Egypt, with the Art and Liberty Group, in which we find Ramses Younan (1913-1966) and Kamel el Telmissany (let us hope that the exhibition announced at the Centre Pompidou for September 2016, devoted to Surrealism in Egypt, will help to demonstrate as much). More generally, we might mention Georges Sabbagh, Saloua Raouda Choucair, Hamed Abdalla, and Ferhelnissa Zeif (sadly, none of these artists feature in the selection offered us, despite the presence of the dissident artist Enji Efflatoun). Might an artist such as Abdul Hay Mosallam Zarara, who explicitly borrows the illustrative material of the Arab nationalism of the 1960s not, incidentally, be placed alongside artists like Hamed Ewais and Khadim Hayder? Why separate him by the modern/contemporary boundary on the pretext that his work dates from 1990? Conversely, why are artists such as Marwan, Farid Belkahia and Ibrahim el Salahi, whose vigorous activities continued into the 2000s, not presented as “contemporary”?

- 4 In such a way that, unlike an “imperfect chronology” it would have been better to talk about multi-chronologies, a preposterous history and dyschronies. Over and above terminological tergiversations, what is involved is measuring the gap between a chronological approach, advocated here with its undeclared but definitely teleological conception of history, and a *genealogical* approach open to staccato time frames and temporal re-assemblies. In this respect, whether they work with documents (Louisa Babari, Katia Kameli ...) or with living matter (Raphaëlle Pauper-Borne, Hellal Zoubir...), the contingent of contemporary artists on view in *Made in Algeria* has the merit of taking us beyond territorial divisions, in order to show us the future ramifications of Algeria with France, Africa, Europe, and the Mediterranean.
- 5 We are well aware that the debate between art and politics in the Arab worlds is broached in a manner that is quite unlike any history dictated by the First and Second World Wars. It focuses on the Third World history of the non-aligned countries and of the nationalist-revolutionary and reformist movements which inform artists’ careers. It includes the micro-history of a whole host of institutions, wherein lies the lung of this history: local schools of fine art (see the edifying interview with Nadira Laggoune in *Made in Algeria*), foreign cultural institutes in Arab countries and vice versa, and biennials and other

transnational exhibitions organized from Tehran to Rabat and from Alexandria to Damascus.

- 6 The history of exhibitions has not been written in a manner that is *synchronous* with events. This is why it is certainly necessary to gauge these choices associated with an irretrievable past, if not in the form of scattered documents and methodologies which are still waiting to be invented. Present-day historiography tends quite naturally towards a conjugation of *re-writing* and *re-living*, archiving and recollecting (Rasha Salti's² two essays in *Imperfect Chronology* are a model of speculative and anti-positivist reflection, an approach which often gives rise to usurpation and imposture, but which, here, turns out to be brilliant).
- 7 The fragment as a tool for exhuming history, cartography as a field of subjectivation, and the document as a performative system designed to relive events are all landmarks for defining the complex and polymorphous praxis of the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir. The exhibition titled *Europa* was held, once again, at the Whitechapel, proof of its vitality in the domain of what we might call "cartographic curating", brainchild of Omar Kholeif who, after that project, left the Whitechapel for the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. As another direct echo of the books being discussed here, *Europa* and its catalogue here again bring together the disparate pieces of an ode to the Mediterranean. In this context, we are struck by the obvious relation between the artist's praxis and American Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, whose impersonal character she nevertheless redirected towards introspection, not to say existential puzzle, heading towards a kind of *lyrical conceptualism*. The artist's relationship with Italy, and in particular with Rome, a place of passage which became her base, can be seen like an endless duplication (*mise en abyme*) of other itineraries made by Arab intellectuals in the land of Dante, like that of the writer and translator Wael Zauiter, who was assassinated on 16 October 1972 by Mossad (a fact which has been legally proven). In her treatment of the clues linked to this story, Emily Jacir is less concerned with creating a fiction based on reality than with reconstructing the traces of political censorship, and even *repatriating* the sources of a knowledge that has been confiscated. Furthermore, it is the elective affinities between the artist's public story and her personal movements which have the task of guiding the inquiry, and not relations between truth and falsehood—in this sense, she is less close to Walid Raad than to Eric Baudelaire. When Emily Jacir went to the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem, she collected—by reproducing them—pages of books confiscated by the Israeli army in homes and institutions in Palestine, simply stamped A. P. (*Abandoned Property*). The exhibition of this display of images at Documenta 13 (in 2012) focused attention on her, as a result of its obviousness and its power. Emily Jacir puts us in real contact with urgent reflections about the above-mentioned right of asylum of heritage, which, in Iraq and in Syria in particular, has become an absolute emergency, at a time when collecting, preserving and showing are becoming gestures which are increasingly interdependent and linked with an activist practice.

NOTES

1. Rahmani, Zahia, Sarazin, Jean-Yves. « Le Propos des commissaires », *Made in Algeria : généalogie d'un territoire*, Paris : Hazan ; Marseille : Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée, 2016, p. 7
2. Salti, Rasha. "Be Still My Beating Heart Part I: A fugue in fictional art history" and "A Speculative Reading of *Al-Waleh wal Miskeen* by Fateh Moundarres", *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary. Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, Munich: Prestel; London : Whitechapel Gallery, 2015, p. 77-88