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Defining a Space for New Art Genealogies – North-African and Middle-Eastern Modernities and Critical Legacies

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Bagdad mon amour : documents d'exposition, Paris : Zamân Books : Institut des Cultures d'Islam, 2018. Sous la dir. de Morad Montazami

Hamed Abdalla : Arabécédaire, Paris : Zamân Books, 2018. Sous la dir. de Morad Montazami

In the Fields of Empty Days: The intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art, Los Angeles : Los Angeles County Museum of Art ; Munich : DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2018. Sous la dir. de Linda Komaroff

Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, New York : Museum of Modern Art, 2018, (Primary Documents). Sous la dir. d'Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout Elias Chad, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-Civil War Lebanon*, Durham : Duke University Press, 2018

Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity and Museums in Exile, Varsovie : Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2018. Sous la dir. de Kristine Khouri, Rasha Salti

Mirroring an interview of Edward W. Saïd that is yet unpublished in French, the philosopher Seloua Luste Boulbina ironically asks: "Can the Arab speak?"¹ It is also a reference to the title of Gayatri Spivak's famous essay on the silenced voice of subalterns², but it takes on a new dimension in regards to the recent international publications devoted to critical and artistic works produced in the Middle East and

North Africa. Beyond the category of “contemporary Islamic art” which is inevitably associated to this kind of production, the connection between these different books, which all hail from the Middle East and North Africa, rests in their capacity to question forgotten intellectual legacies and buried heritage. It is now essential to apprehend this artistic sphere critically – especially following the works of Monia Abdallah.³ These books question the sources used to write the history of artistic modernisms, especially in relation to art and current heritage. Changing the original meridian, unbalancing the cartography of critical sources and revealing new axioms imposes a decentring of the categories and references that the historiography of art relies on, in order to make possible new affinities with types of art that are all too often assigned to peripheral spaces.

In the exhibition *In the Fields of Empty Days*, Linda Komaroff, the curator of Islamic art at the LACMA exhibited Iranian modern and contemporary art in Los Angeles (some of which joined the museum’s collections) on the theme of the interpenetration of iconographic sources of Iranian history in the present. This hybridisation, which combines preserving the Persian and Islamic heritage –particularly through the tutelary visual presence of the *Shāhnāmāh* [Book of Kings] manuscript – and globalised forms of Western modernism, is approached as a space from which an “authentic”, *in situ* art can be defined and connected to globalised space and current topics. The works reproduced in the catalogue display frictions, dualities, and symbioses between secular Middle-Eastern and varied, endogenous and transnational iconographies, from which an occasionally satirical criticism of moderns worlds emerges. The catalogue explores non-linearity through anachronistic visual references. However, the almost total absence of abstraction in this selection of Iranian art is regrettable – it could have included, for instance, the work of abstract painter Behdjat Sadr, whose paintings are infused with references to Persian and Islamic visual culture.⁴ The catalogue shows how iconographies resonate and enter a dialogue with each other. It outlines a certain visual and epistemic binary between past and present, authenticity and modernism, nationalism and globalism, modernism and contemporaneity, which is difficult to brush aside. A tension emerges, from the formulation of the Persian criticism of *Gharbzadegi* (translated into English as “Occidentosis”, or “being intoxicated by the West”) between “neo-traditionalism” and exogenous “modernism”. The canonical term of “modernism” is discussed yet again in the synthesis written by Hamid Keshmirshakan for the LACMA catalogue. The author seeks to circumvent un-contextualised reflections and overly binary analyses of Iranian art. Hamid Keshmirshakan looks to “altermodernism” and autonomous Iranian art, where the complexity of critical negotiations with Western modernism goes hand in hand with a deconstruction of secular references: “This position has enabled them to depict social reactions to an internal and external stimulus and its subsequent consequences for the political and social trajectory of contemporary Iranian culture”⁵

The concept of “modernism” as applied to Arab countries is formulated in critical terms from the very introduction of the eagerly expected *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, an anthology of essays on modern art in Arab countries, published in partnership with the MoMA by Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rodgers and Nada Shabout. The editors argue that one way “to engage this writing about modern art, ideas, things, and events is to consider the deterritorialized aspects of historic modernism, and not a separate tradition or an ‘alternative’ modernism.”⁶ This collection of articles, manifestos, interviews, conferences and other first-hand writings is in part a

compilation of new sources, but it is first and foremost a montage of essential historic fragments that underscores the ramifications and density of the intellectual debates of a century (1897-1987) of considerations on art in the Arab art world. From the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the First Palestinian Intifada just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the chronological integration of these sources indicates a history of the reconfiguration of geopolitical spaces and paradigms. The modalities for a modernism and artistic researches produced from within specific contexts and socio-political issues (colonisation, imperialism, *Nadha*, pan-Arabism, Third-Worldism, revolutions, wars, etc.) are negotiated through the profusion of ideas and voices, infused with solidary internationalism and emancipatory nationalist claims. The agents of art in the Arab world are speaking in their own name, thus attempting to outline a self-reflexive artistic practice. The transnational dimension is intensified by the plurality of languages in which these ideas are set out, which are all carefully and faithfully translated into English. French-speaking readers will be happy to encounter essays which were initially published in French (by Algerian, Egyptian and Lebanese artists and theoreticians), but which are not yet sufficiently referenced outside of the Art history specifically devoted to the area, although they relate to the legacy of international art criticism and demonstrate the connections and frictions in the perception of artistic expressions with numerous centres.

Elias Chad's essay, *Posthumous Images*, analyses the violence in the erasure of history by insightfully approaching recent Lebanese contemporary creations. Working with the ruins of spaces scarred by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the artists circumvent the manipulation of memory and engage new narratives. These works transcend categories of identity and shift archetypal patterns through which Lebanese society is still all too often perceived by the media and by institutional and academic historic constructions. The author takes a stance against the reiteration of the analysis of social and community tensions in favour of the experience of artists whose different identities constitute a "community of witnesses". The creative memory of post-Civil War artists goes beyond truncated histories: they put forth collective questions rooted in a political and artistic anamnesis. They inform, but above all they use the wounds of the past to build possible projections in the future. These artists (Walid Raad, Ayam Trawi, Akram Zaatari among others) thus construct archival works, that are at once real and fictional,

constantly shifting from macro to micro-history. They devise a double criticism by collecting obliterated pasts and activating utopias, other possible futures within "a nation haunted by the spectre of failed leftist political projects and the defeat of multicultural and secular forms of nationalism in the Arab world."⁷ Unpacking history and post-war memory asks the question of going beyond this rupture, as in the artistic projects that evacuate the trauma of the Civil War by exploring the history of Lebanon before the conflict. For example, *The Lebanese Rocket Society* (2012) subtly demonstrates how traumatic events have excluded all other narratives from the national imaginary. In that documentary, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, the artists investigate the fragmentary traces of an aborted and forgotten Pan-Arabic space programme.

In this sense, how is it possible to reactivate utopias and re-engage imaginaries that transcend the shocks of history? Successful attempts to create alternative narratives are at the heart of the commitments formulated in publications centred on documenting militant, cosmopolitan and solidary Art history, which still needs to be

written and taught. *Arabacédaire* delicately opens the “drawers”⁸ of Hamed Abdalla’s (1917-1985) archives, exposing the artistic and political connections, as well as the aesthetic affinities of the Egyptian artist with African-American, Pan-Arabic and Third-Worldist creation. By taking into account Hamed Abdalla’s “eclecticism”, be it “Western” or “Oriental”, from Tehran to Paris, from Italy to Palestine, the book outlines a panoramic vision of the production of this artist-as-archivist/activist. Its publication is an attempt to compensate for the absence of “an Art history that is transmitted neither by books or by universities, even less so by museums.”⁹ Although these histories and museums do not exist materially, solidarity, exhibitions and investigation become loci of resistance and of integration into reality. Examining the richly documented travelling exhibition *International Art Exhibition for Palestine*, which was shown in Beirut in 1978, and whose traces were destroyed by the war with Lebanon, the book *Past Disquiet* reactivates the archives and history of a political act for the liberation of Palestine. Using innovative methodologies for Art history by capturing the contacts and ramifications of a history of transnational political and artistic solidarities, the book initiates a new chapter in the investigation that was launched in 2008 by the re-discovery of the 1978 exhibition catalogue. Constructed around the idea of exiled museum, it underscores “the current need for a different political imagination, one that is not so helpless in the face of contemporary problems.”¹⁰ From conflicts in Latin America to the political and artistic contestation of the Apartheid, this prospective research recounts the history of museums in exile, from the donation of works in support of the creation of art museum and the recognition of oppressed peoples by international artists. The commitment to these causes by artistic communities, works and exhibitions are conceptualized as tools of resistance that create spaces of hospitality, fragments of exiled museums through travelling shows that “restore rejected narratives, a necessary effort for building a holistic picture of history, [...] [that] revive at least fragments or strains of alternative narratives about the shape of international exchange and interpersonal solidarity.”¹¹ Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti, by blending together personal narratives and accounts, translated historical texts, essays and archives, not only bring “visibility to marginalized art history and forgotten exhibitions; [they] also [revive] a recent past, a time when militant artists brought art to the heart of political action [...]”¹² The catalogue of the exhibition *Bagdad mon amour* functions in the same way, by displaying the Baghdadi “wall-less museum”, by retracing the history of museums and modern art collections in Iraq, all subjected to the disasters of war. Starting with the pillaging of Iraqi museums after the American invasion in 2003, the collected *exhibition documents* follow the traces of artist and international cultural agents working towards the preservation of an endangered world heritage.

The global dimension of the narratives is no longer a simple gesture, it is a necessity in order to understand the interconnections and the activism of cultural agents, who can initiate internationalist postures and seize, in the present as well as in the future perfect, the real utopia of the end of epistemic hegemonies. Dario Gamboni had already postulated in 2001 that a global critical heritage is only possible as long as we remain conscious that “on the world level, the real success of the idea of world heritage will depend upon the degree to which the universalism born of European Enlightenment comes to be perceived as truly universal, rather than appearing as a new form of colonialism or the cultural face of economic globalization. [...] what we will need is a forum in which several worlds, with differing visions of heritage or legacy, can come

into contact, communicate, and negotiate those differences.”¹³ These recent publications (re)activate other Art histories from solidarity networks and distanced geopolitical spaces, echoing the Algerian painter Mohamed Khadda, when he encouraged “creators who are conscious of their art and their future” not to “elude the question of the contribution of art to the disalienation of humankind.”¹⁴

NOTES

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Emilie Goudal is an art historian. She has written a thesis that will be published by the Presses du réel at the end of 2018 under the title *Des Damné(e)s de l'histoire : les arts visuels face à la guerre d'Algérie*. She holds a grant from the Gerda Henkel Stiftung/LabexMed at the Centre Norbert Elias (EHESS-CNRS), in Marseille. Her research focuses on the interpenetrations between art, history, politics and memorial issues in the context of decolonization. She has published several articles on the subject, including “Frantz Fanon iconique ? Pensées à voir, l’Algérie de Fanon dans les arts visuels”, in *Perspective*, 2017/2 and “Warding off Disappearance, Getting Beyond Icons: The (Counter)Visuality of Algeria”, which is online on the website of *AWARE magazine*.