

I N T E R N A T I O N A L C O N F E R E N C E
REGIONAL VIS-À-VIS GLOBAL DISCOURSES:
CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE MIDDLE EAST
F R I D A Y 5 A N D S A T U R D A Y 6 J U L Y 2 0 1 3

BIOS AND ABSTRACTS



James W. Allan

Professor Allan spent most of his working life in the Ashmolean Museum, as curator of the Islamic collections, and later also as Keeper of Eastern Art. From 2006 until his retirement last year he was lecturing in Islamic art in the Khalili Research Centre at Oxford University. He has published numerous books and articles, particularly in the field of Islamic metalwork and ceramics. His latest book, *The Art and Architecture of Twelver Shi'ism: Iraq, Iran and the Indian Sub-continent*, was published in 2012.



Laura Carderera

Laura Carderera has been working as a projects and partnerships manager at the Delfina Foundation since October 2012. Before joining Delfina Foundation she was based in Istanbul, where she co-founded SPOT, an independent curatorial and educational project aimed at helping local art collectors develop their critical framework in contemporary art while channeling funding to creative, non-commercial, projects by young Turkish artists. Between 2006 and 2010, Laura worked as a project manager and programme curator at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo. Among other projects, she curated 'Speak, Memory', a symposium on archival practices and other strategies of reactivation of cultural memory. During her time at the Townhouse Gallery, Laura conceptualised and co-ordinated several educational programmes, including the first curatorial programme for emerging art professionals in the region as well as an independent study programme on modern and contemporary art from the Middle East. Laura holds an MA in Arts Administration from Columbia University New York.



Anna Contadini

Professor Contadini graduated in Arabic and Islamic Art at the Oriental Institute of Venice University with a thesis on miniature painting of the Mamluk period. She also has a great interest in music and has received a Diploma in piano as a soloist from the Conservatorio 'Benedetto Marcello' in Venice. Subsequently she completed her doctorate in Islamic Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) of London University with a thesis on early Arab and Persian miniature painting. She was then appointed Baring Foundation Research Fellow in Islamic Studies at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, where she was based in the Research Department. She conducted research on a range of objects drawn from the splendid Islamic collection of the Museum, but concentrated on the Fatimid material, on which she then wrote a book, published in 1998. From 1994-7 she was in Ireland, as Lecturer in Islamic Art at Trinity College Dublin, and Curator of the Islamic Collections of the Chester Beatty Library. Anna Contadini is now Professor in the History of Islamic Art at SOAS, University of London.



Hamid Dabashi

Hamid Dabashi has had a long and distinguished academic career since he obtained a dual PhD in Sociology of Culture and Islamic Studies from the University of Pennsylvania in 1984. He is Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University but he has taught and delivered lectures in many North and Latin American, European, Arab and Iranian universities. He is a founding member of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society as well as a founding member of the Center for Palestine Studies, at Columbia University.

Professor Dabashi has written 25 books, edited 4, and contributed chapters to many more. He is also the author of over 100 essays, articles and book reviews in major scholarly and peer reviewed journals on subjects ranging from Iranian Studies, medieval and modern Islam, comparative literature, world cinema and the philosophy of art (trans-aesthetics). A selected sample of his writing, *The World is my Home: A Hamid Dabashi Reader* co-edited by Andrew Davison and Himadeep Muppidi, was published in 2010. In the context of his commitment to advancing trans-national art and independent world cinema, Dabashi is the founder of Dreams of a Nation, a Palestinian Film Project, dedicated to preserving and safeguarding Palestinian cinema. He is also chiefly responsible for opening up the study of Persian literature and Iranian culture at Columbia University to students of comparative literature and society, breaking away from the confinements of European Orientalism and American Area Studies.

Abstract

“Trauma, Memory, and History”

The creative intersections where an artist attends to historical events and visually remembers them anew inevitably provokes the traumas that have constituted a national subconscious. In visual and performing arts from West Asia and North Africa there are numerous occasions when artists attend to these traumatic moments. The affective history of these aesthetic experiences of national traumas works through the collective recollections of the uncanny – Nietzsche, Jentsch and Freud – when and where the familiar is made foreign by bringing it up close for a visual or performative encounter. These traumatic experiences in contemporary art have two complementary effects: they both posit the traumatic art as “contemporary” by historicising its own past and permanently impregnate the present with a past it can only forget at the cost of aborting its own potency. With specific examples from Iran, Palestine, Iraq, Tunisia, Armenians and others I will explore the phenomenon of the uncanny as trauma in the memorial encounters with history.

Fereshteh Daftari

Fereshteh Daftari obtained a PhD from Columbia University in 1988) and her thesis, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse, and Kandinsky*, was published in 1991. From

1988 to 2009 she worked in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art where she curated numerous exhibitions with international artists. In 2006 she curated *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*. Revisiting art by Middle Eastern artists, in 2012 she curated an exhibition of performance art with Iranian artists in Paris and she guest curated *Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian and Turkish Artists* for MOA in Vancouver in 2013. She has also focused on modern Iranian art, having guest curated an exhibition for New York University's Grey Art Gallery (2002) about which she wrote *Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective*. Her second exhibition on this theme, *Iran/Modern*, will open at Asia Society in New York in September 2013. Her many recent publications include essays on contemporary artists such as Ali Banisadr and Raqib Shaw.

Abstract

"Dilemmas and Benefits of Introducing Artists from the "Middle East" to Institutions in the West"

The paper will present a first-hand report on two exhibitions of contemporary art: *Without Boundary* organised for The Museum of Modern Art in New York (2006) and *Safar/Voyage* at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (2013). With the benefit of hindsight, it will evaluate the relation of curator to institution, how context affects reading and, in general, the validity of exhibitions based on geography in an increasingly globalised world.



Abbas Daneshvari

Abbas Daneshvari is a Professor of Art History and the Chair of the Department of Art at California State University Los Angeles. He is the author and editor of seven volumes on Iranian and Islamic Art, as well as numerous articles on medieval Iranian, contemporary Iranian and European art. His latest book, *Amazingly Original: Contemporary Iranian*

Art at Crossroads is to be published shortly.

Abstract

"The Liberation of Signs: Deconstruction and the Contemporary Arts of Iran"

Whether by design or by the imperatives of global inter-subjectivism – or even by some as yet inexplicable force – the arts of contemporary Iran share a profound affinity with the philosophical and aesthetic outlooks of postmodernism. Facets of the writings of Derrida (*Speech and Phenomena*, *Grammatology*, *Dissemination*, *Writing and Difference*) seem to run parallel to many attributes present in contemporary Iranian expressions, for example, the works of Babak Golkar, Barbad Golshiri, Neda Razavipour, Vahid Danaeifar and Mehran Mohajer among many others.

At the heart of these expressions is a free play of signs that undermines metaphysical, transcendental and eidetic reductions. In a similar vein to Nietzsche's view on hermeneutics as Egyptianising and mummification, the Derridan rejection of hermeneutic, asserting flux, is woven throughout the fabric of contemporary Iranian works. Moreover, the treatment of

language as a self-reflexive structure and as a system of signifiers unable to access the unique and ontological essence of the world, coupled with the view of origin as non-originary, often fits Nietzsche's and Derrida's conclusions on the absence of truth and the impossibility of a structured delivery of meaning. Iranian artists adopt many tactics to deconstruct: reversal of hierarchy, grafting, acknowledging meaning as a function of parergon and privileging the conditions and assumptions of expression (or discourse) rather than signified content.



Helia Darabi

Helia Darabi is an art critic, freelance curator lecturer on modern and contemporary art at the University of Art, Tehran. Since 1999 she has contributed to various publications focusing on contemporary art. She has worked on the *Encyclopedia of Art* (as assistant to the author), been employed by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (as a researcher) and been an assistant editor on the contemporary art quarterly, *Art Tomorrow*. She has co-translated art history text books including *Art of Modernism* by Sandro Bocola and *Gardner's Art through the Ages*. Her recent publications include "Found in Translation, the Productive Role of the Exile Experience on Contemporary Iranian Artists", *Nukta Art* (2010); "Three Iranian Contemporary Artists", *Art Press*, (2010) and she is currently preparing a textbook for critical analysis as her doctoral thesis.

Abstract

"Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art as a Microcosm of State's Cultural Agenda"

Inaugurated in 1977, the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) once embodied the Pahlavi modernisation and westernisation agenda. Its exceptional collection, encompassing a whole episode of western avant-garde – from Impressionism to early Conceptual Art – has often been the centre of worldwide academic and media attention. However, the function and influence of this museum, especially after the 1979 Revolution, has ironically had little to do with this magnificent collection. TMOCA's various, paradoxical and signifying roles serve as a case study of the state's cultural policies and *also* a platform for the artists to react to those strategies.

This paper aims to analyse the accordance of TMOCA's activities with state's cultural agenda in five phases, with regard to the reaction of the artistic community. 1. Formative Years (1977-1979): during which TMOCA announced its mission and priorities. 2. Pro-government or neutral (1980-1990): following the Revolution and during the eight-year war, the Museum revealed its potential as an ideological propaganda podium to herald governmental cultural agenda. 3. General support and advancement (1990-1998). At the end of the war the political 'reconstruction' phase (*sazandegi*) began when TMOCA recognised different branches in visual arts, provided logistic support for artists and resumed biennials. 4. A curatorial revolution (1998-2005): along with the political 'reform' phase (*islahat*), this period displayed daring approach to exhibiting; launched new artistic media; involved young, critical artists and encouraged socio-political themes. Though spontaneous and

experimental, this period was substantial in drawing in a far wider range of the artists and public. 5. Reversion and Simulation (2005-present): following a new, conservative division in IRI coming to power, TMOCA's general policy has swung between a retrogression to highly ideological post-revolutionary cultural policies and a simulation of the schemes of the two previous periods. Significantly, subsequent to disputed presidential elections (2009), a majority of the artistic community, including the artists' associations, have signed declarations to boycott all governmental institutions. TMOCA has nevertheless continued with various exhibitions and programmes, principally the annual Fadjr Visual Art Festivals. This paper will also focus on the fluctuating policy of this phase and the participation of a newer generation of artists in the absence of the professional.



Anthony Downey

Anthony Downey is Director of the Master's Programme in Contemporary Art at Sotheby's Institute of Art and also Editor of *Ibraaz* (www.ibraaz.org), a research forum for visual culture in the Middle East and North Africa, a member of *Third Text's* Editorial Board and a Consulting Editor for *Open Space* (Vienna). He sits on the steering committee of the Kamel Lazaar Foundation, is a trustee of the Maryam and Edward Eisler Foundation and sits on the Advisory Board for Counterpoints Arts, a forum on migration and the arts. He was recently appointed to be chair of the judges on the Magic of Persia prize for contemporary art, which is to be held in Dubai in 2013. Dr Downey is currently researching a book on politics and aesthetics (Thames and Hudson, forthcoming, 2013) and editing a volume on social media and participative practices in the Middle East and North Africa (I.B. Tauris, 2013). He is also guest editor of *Becoming Communities: Participation, Collaboration and Curatorial Practices* for a *Third Text* special issue to be published in Spring 2013.

Abstract

"What Can Art Do? New Pieties and Critical Practices"

The question 'What Can Art Do?', if asked in earnest, suggests that art has a function of sorts. In a period broadly defined as one in which we are apparently experiencing a global crisis, this function seems to be increasingly focussed on art as a document or as a means for producing socio-political, if not historical, knowledge (be it of revolution, globalisation, internecine conflict, environmental degradation or injustice). This paper will examine the context of this demand and suggest that it is directly related to a misplaced (and insidious) 'ethical' demand that art not only performs a function — that most cherished of neo-liberal ideals — but responds "ethically" and politically to global events. What we are witnessing, I will argue, is a new piety emerging in discussions of contemporary art practice, a frame of reference that needs to be questioned if we are to understand fully the dangers in the instrumental relationship being forged between neo-liberalism — as a specific set of socio-political and cultural demands — and the demand that art practices appeal to an ethical and political foundation in order to garner cultural legitimacy.



Barbad Golshiri

Barbad Golshiri is a contemporary Iranian artist and art critic. His output is prolific and wide-ranging – extending from video, digital media, installation, photography, the internet and critical writings. Most of his works are language-based and represent a silent objection to socio-philosophical problems while embracing a sense of despair and irony. He usually uses his own voice in expressing the infinite cultural aspects that he personally grapples with. His work also suggests a great interest in critical thinking by referring to language, literature, art history and theory, philosophical thought, and socio-political issues. There is no boundary between these disciplines in Golshiri's art; it has rather been blurred. Being both an artist and critic, he intentionally includes various theoretical constructs in his artworks. His works have been exhibited in numerous venues worldwide including "Iran.com: Iranian Art Today" in Freiburg's Museum für Neue Kunst (Museum for New Art), the First Biennial of Thessaloniki, and the Fourth Moscow Biennial.



Hamid Keshmirshakan

Hamid Keshmirshakan is the Barakat Trust Academic Fellow in the History of Art Department, Oxford University, and Editor-in-Chief of the bilingual (English-Persian) quarterly, *Art Tomorrow*. From 2004 to 2012 he was the Associate Fellow at the Khalili Research Centre, Oxford University. He received his PhD in history of art from SOAS, University of London and was awarded post-doctoral fellowships by the Barakat Trust in 2004-5 and the British Academy, AHRC and ESRC in 2008, both at Oxford University. His current research is on twentieth and twentieth-first century art from the Islamic world, paying particular attention to recent developments in art practice and its relation to the context. Dr Keshmirshakan has organised several international conferences on aspects of modern and contemporary Iranian and Middle Eastern art and contributed extensively to various publications. Some of his latest publications include "Reclaiming Cultural Space: Artist's Performativity versus State's Expectations in Contemporary Iran" in *Performing the Iranian State: Cultural Representations of Identity and Nation*, "Contemporary or Specific: the Dichotomous Desires in Art of Early 21st Century Iran", *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (2011), "Seeing Twofold: Locality and Trans-locality in the Art of Contemporary Iran", and *Art Tomorrow* (2011), "The Paradigms for Contemporaneity in Iranian Art", *Art Tomorrow* (2010).

Abstract

"The Crisis of Belonging: On the Politics of Art Practice in Contemporary Iran"

The issue of "belonging", which is related to the artists' localised historical and cultural landscapes, is problematic and complex for Iranian artists. Moreover, the lack of critical discourse regarding this issue has resulted in the artist's individual quest for artistic strategies that are relevant to the demands of contemporaneity. This paper aims at exploring these strategies and the wider politics of art practice relating to these fundamental, yet unresolved questions. It will address the politics of resistance by artists to

the essentialised cultural views which would suggest explicit ethno-cultural identity markers, often reduced to geo-politically articulated concepts. It will also examine how some artists act against the erasure of contextual frames while being aware of the fact that contemporary art as a phenomenon has prided itself on transcending the politics of location. The paper argues that this is partly the outcome of a certain drive to comply with global value systems, in order to locate the work within the broader context of international contemporary art (museum exhibitions, the biennials and cultural events). For some artists, as will become clear, artistic practice is as an intellectual and activist engagement which serves as a fitting site for the possibility of a responsible socio-political art.

The paper will therefore examine these issues with reference to selected works, and will trace the current dilemma of how contemporary Iranian artists have responded to contemporary social and political complexities inherent in cultural zones such as Iran.



Hala Khayat

Hala Khayat was appointed as a specialist for Contemporary Middle Eastern and Iranian art, based in Christie's Dubai office, in 2007 and promoted to Head of Sale in 2013. Hala has a BA in Fine Arts and Visual Communications from the University of Damascus, Syria and an MS in Design Studies from Central St Martin's College of Art and Design, London.

She has held a variety of roles in the world of art and journalism, including working as an art consultant for galleries in Damascus. She also lectures on the history of Arab art and the Middle Eastern art market. She has been resident in Dubai for the past ten years. She is involved in consigning artworks, writing the catalogues for Christie's twice yearly art auctions in Dubai. Her job also includes evaluating, pricing and researching the art works; writing essays, overseeing the production of the catalogues and producing condition reports for the art works. She is also the Arabic spokesperson for Christie's in the Middle East.



Kristine Khouri

Kristine Khouri is a researcher, writer and photographer based in Beirut, Lebanon where she collaborates on projects with artists who have research-based practices including Walid Raad's current project, "*Scratching on Things You Could Disavow: A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art*" as well as with Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige on the Lebanese Rocket Society project. She has contributed to *Bidoun*, *Art Asia Pacific Almanac*, *The National* (Abu Dhabi) and written for Art Dubai's Global Art Forum 6: The Medium of Media's publication "TL; DR, Some Medium Stories" on gossip and research.

Her own research has been focused on modern art history in the Arab world. She is currently working with Rasha Salti on a research project on the history of "The International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine", held in Beirut in 1978. In addition she is working on a project exploring pan-Arab art sites and events in the 1970s, including the history of the Sultan Gallery, Kuwait.

Abstract

“A Case Study: Kuwait’s Sultan Gallery and Arab Art Galleries of the 1970s”

This paper looks back to a moment of the first contemporary Arab art galleries and their role in expanding a network of Arab art in the region in the 1960s and 1970s, through the case study of the Sultan Gallery in Kuwait.

Opened on March 25, 1969, Sultan Gallery was the first professional art gallery in the Arab Gulf and was founded by a young and dynamic brother and sister duo, Ghazi and Najat Sultan. For two decades the gallery introduced early to mid-career Arab artists to an audience in Kuwait, educating a growing public, and encouraging the development of some of the earliest personal and institutional Arab art collections.

How did such a space develop in a newly modernising country? How did the gallery imagine itself and from whom and where did it learn and connect? The paper will present the origins of the gallery, its influences and relationships spanning from India to London as well within the Arab world, developing a mapping of a network of artists, interlocutors and galleries ranging from Rabat to Beirut to Baghdad, placing Kuwait on the map as a central player in a regional network of Arab art. How can we think of the gallery’s history with respect to the region’s contemporary art scene in relation to the rest of the Gulf today?



Azar Mahmoudian

Azar Mahmoudian is a freelance curator and critic based in Tehran and London. She graduated with an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths in 2009 where she was the recipient of the Chevening scholarship. Her research interests are mainly focused on transcultural circulations and the politics of display. She has curated exhibitions for the CC Bruges and CAB Brussels, Belgium and since 2010 co-initiated the archive and documentary series section of the project “Iran and Co” which engaged with international representations of Iranian contemporary art in the previous decade. She collaborates with Tehran-based project spaces and works as a researcher, associate editor and lecturer.



Dr Dina Matar

Dina Matar is a lecturer in Arab Media and International Political Communication at the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies. She was formerly a foreign correspondent and editor covering the Middle East, Europe and Africa. She is also a co-editor of the Middle East Journal of Culture and Communications. Dr Matar is interested in the relationship between politics, culture and communication in the Arab world, especially in discourses of power and resistance. Also in processes of empowerment and democratization, particularly as experienced by emerging communities and forces in the Arab world, Islamist politics; Arab cultural studies; memory and oral history, diasporas and social movements.



Sonja Mejcher-Atassi

Sonja Mejcher-Atassi is an Assistant Professor at the American University of Beirut where her research interests are in modern and contemporary literature and art in the Arab world, the interrelations between word and image, book art, collection and museum studies, gender studies, cultural memory and history. Her publications include *Reading across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2012); (edited with John Pedro Schwartz), *Museums, Archives and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); "Art and Political Dissent in Postwar Lebanon: Walid Sadek's *fi annani bigger than picasso [bigger than picasso]*," in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45/3 (2013), "Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq," in *Art History* 35/5 (2012); (ed.), *Writing a 'Tool for Change': 'Abd al-Rahman Munif Remembered*, *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (2007).

Abstract

"Questions about the 'Documentary Turn': Artistic Practices by Middle Eastern Artists Working Inside and Outside the Region"

In recent years, a significant amount of artistic production by Middle Eastern artists working inside and outside the region has been subsumed under headings such as "the archive" or "the documentary turn." This has especially been the case for the so-called post-war generation of artists from Lebanon, but a similar trend, or better, interest in collecting, can also be noticed in artistic practices from Iraq, Palestine and Syria. Focusing on recent examples, my paper sets out to distinguish similarities as well as differences in artistic production with respect to the idea of collecting and addresses the following questions: Why this interest in collecting? How do artistic practices question the very idea of what is collectable, what can and should be represented? How do they navigate between the local and the global and relate to politics, the art market and the museum boom in the Gulf?



Shaheen Merali

Shaheen Merali is a curator and writer currently based in London. Between 2003 and 2008, he was Head of Exhibitions, Film and New Media at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, where he curated several exhibitions accompanied by key publications, including *The Black Atlantic, Dreams and Trauma – Moving Images and the Promised Lands* and *Re-Imagining Asia, One Thousand Years of Separation*. In 2006, he was also co-curator of the 6th Gwangju Biennale in Korea. Since leaving Germany he has curated several exhibitions in India and Iran and subsequently embarked upon a period of extensive research and consultation on the conservation and production of a major exhibition of the International Collection of the Birla Academy of Art and Culture (January 2012). His recent exhibitions include *Refractions, Moving Images on Palestine* at the P21 Gallery, London and *When Violence becomes Decadent*, at the ACC Galerie, Weimar both of which took place in 2013. Meanwhile Merali continues to work as a writer.



Jessica Morgan

Jessica Morgan is The Daskalopoulos Curator, International Art, Tate Modern, where she is currently curating the exhibition Saloua Raouda Choucair (2013), *The World Goes Pop* (2015) and *Bhupen Kharkhar* (2016). She curated the retrospective of Gabriel Orozco in 2011 and has organised numerous group and solo exhibitions for Tate Modern such as *John Baldessari: Pure Beauty* (2009), *The World as a Stage* (2007), *Martin Kippenberger* (2006), *Time Zones* (2004) and *Common Wealth* (2003). In addition she curated the Turbine Hall Unilever Commissions by Tino Sehgal, *These Associations* (2012); Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, *TH.2058*, (2008/9) and Carsten Höller, *Test Site* (2006/7). In addition to her work on exhibitions, Morgan works on Tate's International Collection focusing on the development of its holdings of mid century and emerging art from Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.

Abstract

“Collecting Contexts”

Tracing the origin of comprehensive collections of art from around the globe, the nineteenth-century expansion of the public museum and a concomitant interest in the art of other cultures, this talk will ask why, in contrast, the modern or contemporary museum in the twentieth century was founded with such a comparatively small geographic remit, eliminating, through the establishment of maps and lineages, all but a few exceptions to Western art history. What then has changed in the last two decades such that museums around the world – and Tate in particular – have come to see as urgent the global expansion of their collection and exhibition making, research and publications? Are we finally, although very gradually, freeing ourselves from the convenient monikers (schools and isms) that have proved to be ready accomplices in a linear continuum of Western art history or are we simply revisiting in a late modernist, more obscured format the colonial process of exploration, excavation and collection?



Venetia Porter

Venetia Porter is a curator responsible for the collection of Islamic art, in particular of the Arab World and Turkey as well as developing the collection of the modern and contemporary art of the Middle East at the British Museum. She studied Arabic and Islamic art at Oxford University and obtained her PhD on the medieval history and architecture of the Yemen from the University of Durham. She curated the exhibitions *Word into Art : Artists of the Modern Middle East* in London (2006) and Dubai (2008) and *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam* (2012). Her recent publications include *Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum* (British Museum Research papers 2011), (Ed.) *Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam and The Art of Hajj* (2012) and a book based on the British Museum's collection of Middle Eastern art is in preparation.

Abstract

“Histories of the Present: the Changing Worlds of Middle Eastern Artists”

Artists of the Middle East today are presented with formidable challenges and are in the spotlight as never before. They can be affected by the politics of where they live in terms of what they can and cannot exhibit and yet, we ask of them that they make work which helps us understand the complexities of the Middle East today. They are at the mercy of the vagaries of the market – the sudden rise and fall in prices. There are the demands of the art fairs, biennales and galleries, there is a definite notion of who is “in” and who is out. They are also faced with museums and the complexities of the acquisitions process. This paper will look at some of these issues through the work of a number of artists who have navigated this complex landscape producing art that retains a powerful identity, evoking heritage, making social commentary. These will include Sadegh Tirafkan (d.2013) whose layered photographs powerfully evoke the rituals surrounding the annual commemorations of the martyrdom of Imam Hussayn at Kerbela in 680, and Nicene Kossentini whose work is inspired by the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi.



Dina A Ramadan

Dina Ramadan is Assistant Professor of Arabic and Director of Middle Eastern Studies at Bard College. Her current book project focuses on the development of the category of modern art and the relationship between education and artistic production in early 20th century Egypt. She is a senior editor of the *Arab Studies Journal* and the guest editor of the issue studying the visual arts in the Spring of 2010. She is a founding member of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA). She lectures regularly on modern and contemporary artistic production in Egypt and her writings have been published in the *Arab Studies Journal*, *Art Journal*, *Journal of Visual Culture*, *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* and others. In the autumn she will be take up an EUME fellowship at the Berlin-based Forum Transregionale Studien.

Abstract

“And Again to Authenticity...”

In a recent review of PhotoCairo 5 in *Jadaliyya*, the author voices his frustrations that only one of the pieces included addressed the revolution and that overall the exhibition “required knowledge of the English language and international art practices and theories to be comprehensible.” The expectations of a “local” exhibition are immediately identified as being different; PhotoCairo 5 “would have been a fine exhibition in an European or American city where the fragmentation of society has led to art made for specialists shown in institutions that attract small audiences.”

This paper will take these different expectations as a departure point for a historical mapping of the stubborn persistence of the notion of authenticity as the primary criteria by which art practices in Egypt continue to be assessed. I will focus specifically on how this discourse has developed locally, its manifestations over time and its most recent incarnation in the wake of the uprisings. Most striking is the constant effort to instrumentalise art, and the resistance on the part of artists to take part in such a process.



Sarah Rogers

Sarah Rogers is an independent scholar. She received her PhD from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of Architecture in 2008, where she wrote the thesis on, "Postwar Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism." Her writings on modern and contemporary art of the Arab world have been published by *Parachute*, *Art Journal* and *Arab Studies Journal*. She is a founding board member of AMCA, the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey. She is currently editing a collection of essays on the Khalid Shoman Private Collection in Amman, Jordan.

Abstract

"The Global Work of Art: The Case of Beirut"

Around the year 2002, the city of Beirut began to experience a series of international projects momentarily invested in an art scene that purportedly operated in a liminal status, the product of an unfortunate war-torn history that none the less promises an alternative to institutional norms. The focus of nearly all such activities was a loosely associated group of colleagues and friends whose work shared a historical and theoretical interest in the legacies of the Civil War (1975-1990), most often tackled through a suspect, ironic and, at times, humorous approach to the purportedly documentary desires of the archive and its visual records. In the aftermath of a disastrous civil war, foreign curators lauded this set of critical practices that showcased the possibilities of an activist art that operated in what has been characterised as a sort of post-war *tabula rasa* in terms of audience, institutional support and art history. In the contemporary art world of the moment – defined as it is by biennale culture and a deep investment in artistic practice as an intellectual, historical, and activist engagement – the context of Beirut serves as a fitting site for the possibility of a responsible socio-political art. Yet since the late nineties, artists living and working in Beirut have also operated within the global circuits that produce contemporary art today – the publications, biennials, festivals and mega-exhibitions that bring together artists from geographically dispersed yet increasingly co-ordinated locations. This is not a story of a local art going global: as artists produce and circulate work within more locally intimate infrastructures, they also negotiate the business of art. In an attempt to historicise the contemporary through the case of Beirut, this paper suggests that it is precisely the multiple scales of infrastructure operating together in the region that constitute contemporary art today.



Irit Rogoff

Irit Rogoff is a writer, curator and organiser working at the intersection of contemporary art, critical theory and emergent political manifestations. She is Professor of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, London University where she heads the PhD in Curatorial/Knowledge programme, the MA in Global Arts programme and the new Geo-Cultures Research Centre.

Professor Rogoff has written extensively on geography, globalisation and contemporary participatory practices in the expanded field of art. A collection of recent essays, *Unbounded—Limits' Possibilities*, was published in 2012 with e-flux journal/Sternberg and her new book, *Looking Away—Participating Singularities, Ontological Communities*, will be published in 2013. She lives and works in London.

Abstract

“Oblique Points of Entry”

Given the interest, activity and engagement with Middle Eastern Arts at present, it seems important to understand the perspectives, interests and subjectivities converging on the explication of this newly emergent set of practices in the region. This presentation raises the question of how one evolves a viewing position of historically and materially specific places and locations and of how one negotiates these with external positions. There are several crucial problems with the frontal approach to facing a place and a location, primarily having to do with the degree to which we position artistic practices as 'representational' of places and their conditions.

Building on the assumption that one cannot simply and seamlessly assume to 'know' another place, the question remains as to what points of entry one might have available for another level of active engagement. Using several theoretical and artistic sources, I will try and map out what I think these possibilities are and how we might think about 'emergent subjectivities' that do not function as representative.



Hamid Severi

Hamid Severi studied the history of art at Santa Barbara University and has taught theoretical courses on art at various universities and private institutions. He was Deputy of Education in the Faculty of Art and Architecture at Azad University in Tehran and the Head of the Research Centre of the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art. He has contributed articles to art journals such as the bilingual quarterly *Art Tomorrow*, and has curated many photography and video art exhibitions and has convened many conferences. He was chosen as University of Ottawa's Distinguished Visiting Professor for 2011 and is currently on the editorial boards of *Art Tomorrow* and *Art and Media Magazines*.

Abstract

“Mapping Iranian Contemporary Art Publications and Knowledge Production”

Theory, aesthetics, art criticism and art history do not have a strong tradition in Iran. Further, public institutions such as universities, the Academy of Art of Iran, Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art and Culture and the Islamic Guidance Ministry are concerned mostly with religious and ideological aspects of art of the past centuries. Usually complying with the state’s definitions, these public institutions even see the art of today as ideological propaganda in its wider scope. There is therefore no public fund for any research in this area; a major shortcoming in publications and knowledge production on contemporary art is thus evident. Even art universities, lacking art history as discipline, have nothing to do with publishing in contemporary art. However, because a huge number of young students and artists are thirsty for knowledge, and there is a booming market for Iranian art abroad, the demand for such publications is very high. There are therefore many translated books, and a number of magazines, booklets, brochures and exhibition catalogues (mostly with one or two paragraphs of texts) and also some books on single artists, but there are no proper monographs, let alone *catalogues raisonnés*. In general, academic writing dealing with and reviewing the situation of contemporary Iranian art, art history and its theoretical discourses is scarce.

This paper will map out the state of books and magazines written on contemporary art in Iran. Books on world contemporary art, a couple of books with Islamic ideological points of views on contemporary art, and also a number of books on Iranian contemporary art produced in Iran or abroad will be examined, together with some magazines. A quick review of these books and magazines does not reveal a particular school of thought or theoretical approach but there is rather a common lack of theoretical frameworks and methodological knowledge. It will be proposed here that the main problems lie not with the necessity, demand, will and responsibility of the authors, but with a lack of resources, research material and expertise.



Nada Shabout

Nada Shabout is an Associate Professor of Art History and the Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Studies Institute (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas, USA. She is a former member of the Board of Governors of the Cultural Development Center of the Qatar Foundation, Consulting Director of Research Center on Arab Modernity and a long-term advisor at Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha. She led Mathaf’s curatorial team for its inaugural exhibition *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*, as well as curating one of the two accompanying opening exhibitions, *Interventions: A Dialogue between the Modern and the Contemporary*. Her teaching and writing interests are in the area of Arab and Islamic visual culture, theory and history, imperialism, Orientalism and globalisation. She is the author of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, University of Florida Press, 2007; co-editor of *New Vision: Arab Art in the 21st Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2009; and the founding president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab

World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA). She has co-curated *Modernism and Iraq* at the Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2009, and curated the travelling exhibition, *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, 2005-2009. She has published numerous articles on modern and contemporary Iraqi art and the relationship of identity and visual representations in Iraq. She is the founder and project director of the Modern ArtIraq Archive (MAIA), which documents and digitizes modern Iraqi heritage, particularly the collection previously held at the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art. Her awards include: TAARII fellow 2006, 2007; MIT visiting Assistant Professor, spring 2008, and Fulbright Senior Scholar Program, 2008 Lecture/Research fellowship to Jordan. She is a member of the editorial committee of MERIP and member of the International Editorial Advisory Board for the Routledge Encyclopaedia of Modernism (REM).

Abstract

“Framing a Discipline: Contemporary Art of the Arab World”

Since 9/11, there has been a plethora of uncritical writing about contemporary art in the Middle East in general, and Arab art in particular. Initially it was in the form of short texts accompanying exhibitions and while that continues, a couple of substantial books based on field research about visual production of specific countries in the Arab world were published in 2006, including Jessica Winegar’s *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. However, three expensive coffee-table books then appeared in the market within two years: *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, 2009; *Art of the Middle East*, 2009 and *Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, published in 2010. The publisher of *New Vision* went on to publish a series of books on the Middle East, including Iran and Turkey. Prior to these books, a three-volume edition, *Arab Art Now*, was published in 2007. While it never became available on the market, in many ways it set the standards for the production of big books with hi-resolution coloured photos. Profiles of the artists became a must in all the books.

The speed of publication signifies the market demand for knowledge on the topic but it should equally sound an alarm concerning the research involved and its criticality. Moreover, given the lack of traditional research-based and peer-reviewed academic publications in the field, this literature has also been used in academia too and is, in effect, constructing and framing the academic field.

This paper explores how knowledge about contemporary Arab art is generated and constructed and how it contributes to building an academic field that negotiates its unique discourse while simultaneously forming relationships with other art histories, particularly through methodological concerns. How does the focus on transnational histories and diasporic contributions, which seems to be at the core of writing this history, inform the discourse in the absence of conventional structures of art history? And how does it connect to the larger key issues of the 20th century, particularly within the current increasing interest in documentations and archives?



Sarah-Neel Smith

Sarah-Neel is a PhD candidate in the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research focuses on the intersection of art and politics in Turkey in the post-war period — specifically, the ways that local art spaces and art criticism have dovetailed with international discourses about democracy after the Second World War. She writes regularly for both *frieze* and *Bidoun*.

Abstract

“From Galeri to Gallery: Transitioning from Public Forums to Commercial Spaces”

This paper looks at the phenomenon of contemporary nostalgia in the Turkish art world for the pioneering local galleries of the 1950s. In what way do recent nostalgic gestures reflect current concerns about the rapid expansion of the Turkish art world?

Over the last two decades, the local contemporary art world, and market, have expanded immensely to encompass exhibitions, fairs and museums such as the Istanbul Biennial, Contemporary Istanbul and Istanbul Modern. At the same time, several Turkish art spaces have explicitly aligned themselves with the country’s first galleries through exhibitions, publications and other gestures, such as repurposing the names of legendary galleries of the past. They do so in a context wildly different from that of the 1950s, when an art market had yet to develop and the term *galeri* did not carry the implication of commercial interests subsuming all others. At this time, so-called galleries were founded with the aim of serving as public forums where a Turkish citizenry could simultaneously become “cultured” and could refine a set of skills crucial to the practice of democracy, such as the ability to make critical judgments or to express shared opinions and demands regarding collective experiences.

What impulse underlies these recent homages to Turkey’s galleries of the 1950s? How have ideas regarding the relationship between the art and the market, or the gallery as a public space, changed between these two moments, one modern and one contemporary? If, in the 1950s, public access to art was widely considered as an index of Turkey’s democratic cultural credentials, does this idea still pertain today?



Hanan Toukan

Hanan Toukan received her PhD from SOAS in 2011. Her award-winning PhD thesis “Art, Aid, Affect: Locating the Political in Post-Civil War Lebanon’s Contemporary Cultural Practices” looked at the role of international cultural funding institutions, “global” and “local” discourses on culture and the arts and travelling theoretical conceptions and enactments of what “the political” holds in cultural production. From 2009 to 2012 she was a Teaching Fellow at SOAS, where she taught and lectured on the Politics and Society of the Middle East in the Politics Department as well as later in the Mediated Cultures of the

Middle East at the Centre for Media and Film Studies. Dr Toukan was a CBRL Postdoctoral Visiting Research Fellow at the Kenyon Institute in East Jerusalem between May and September 2012 and since then has been a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Forum for Transregional Studies in Berlin. Her writings on cultural and visual politics, travelling theory, contemporary art practices, transnationalism and international cultural aid have appeared in various journals and edited volumes.

Abstract

“Uneasy Lie the Arts that Wear the Crown: Disaggregating the ‘Critical’ in Post-War Contemporary Lebanese Art”

This paper examines some of the most commonly used terms such as “radical”, “alternative”, “subversive” and “countercultural” appropriated by international curators and critics to describe what has come to be known as Post-Civil War contemporary art from Lebanon, to argue the case that making claims to counter-hegemony cannot be evaluated without a comprehensive reference to the politics of locality, temporality or spatiality.

Accordingly, the questions the paper asks are concerned with which interpretations of the contemporary cultural production scene in Lebanon became dominant in the global arts circuit in the first half of the Millenium and why? In other words what bodies of knowledge, what institutions and which actors set out the parameters of the meaning, content and form of “criticality” in the production of art works?

Through a diachronic analysis engaging with the various forms of representations and theory appropriation undertaken by international onlookers of the scene, the paper argues that even seemingly ‘progressive’ discourses of knowledge about art, resistance and social change in the region are sometimes embodiments of relations of power in society and, more broadly, international relations.



Hamed Yousefi

Hamed Yousefi is a cultural critic, journalist and broadcaster based in London. He has contributed to several publications and has produced numerous television documentaries. He is interested in the cultural and historical mapping of political ideologies in contemporary Iran. Among his projects is a series of documentary films based on archival material to suggest an aesthetic history of the Islamic Republic of Iran.