

SPECIAL FOCUS

IS THERE A CANON? ARTISTIC MODERNISMS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES

Reading *Modern Art in the Arab World* from Morocco and Qatar

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Abstract

Modern Art in the Arab World is a collection of approximately 125 primary documents dealing with the debates around modernism in the Arab world dating between 1882 to 1987. This essay responds to the book from two perspectives: first, as an academic researching modernism in Morocco, and second, as a Qatar-based professor that teaches undergraduate courses about modern and contemporary Arab art. The book highlights a broadly defined and heterogeneous Arab world that extends from Morocco to the Gulf, and the selected texts create new conversations between these varied movements. It is evidence of the changing nature of this field of study. As a tool for teaching, the book offers signposts about what the editors consider to be the most significant debates and events in a given place while also creating the possibility for reading these movements transnationally.

Keywords: Modernism, Arab art, Transnational, Morocco, Qatar

Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, edited by Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, is a collection of some 125 primary documents dealing with the debates around modernism in the Arab world dating between 1882 and 1987.¹ Originating in more than twelve countries in the Arab world, they have been translated from at least four different source languages into English. It is the eighth volume in a series of anthologies of curated primary documents published by the

¹ Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2018)

Museum of Modern Art's International Program, which aims to provide trustworthy English translations of significant documents from international modernisms as well as essays to properly contextualize the primary sources. In this volume, rather than trying to offer a comprehensive overview of the developments of modernism in the Arab world, the documents are meant to foreground significant regional claims, debates, and developments. The book is organized into a roughly chronological sequence, further organized by what the editors term "constellations," whether that be around a particular city, initiative, or perspective, with brief notes by the editors at the beginning of each section.

I come to *Modern Art in the Arab World* in two separate but interwoven ways: first, as an academic researching modernism in Morocco, and second, as a Qatar-based professor that teaches undergraduate courses about modern and contemporary Arab art. As two of the three editors of the volume are founding members of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Turkey, and Iran (AMCA), with which I have been affiliated since 2010, this book is also hard for me to separate from the work done by AMCA.

My research focuses on modernism in the visual arts in Morocco, and particularly on the role that artists of the Casablanca school, such as Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Melehi, and Mohammed Chebaa, took in working toward post-colonial national culture during the period following independence in 1956, and especially during their tenure as faculty at the Casablanca Ecole des Beaux Arts. When I began my doctorate in 2008 on African art, at the many conferences I attended on that subject Morocco was treated as marginal if not outright irrelevant. There are of course exceptions to this perspective within the field. And yet early in my academic career, I felt the absence of shared knowledge about North Africa acutely. It was when I found the research group AMCA that I began to feel like I could understand how to fit my personal research interests into a larger field. Nonetheless, Morocco does not fit seamlessly into the field of modern Arab art for a variety of linguistic and historical reasons. Particularly earlier on in my research, the baseline understanding in academia seemed to orient the primary networks of Moroccan art toward France, and not the Arab world. Nonetheless, AMCA staked a claim for the study of modernism in the Arab world – as distinct from lumping it under the rubric of Islamic art. While people within the field have varying levels of knowledge about Islamic art, especially based on the relevance of Islamic art to the specific modernist movements they focus on, the very

notion of Arab art as a field unto itself demands a temporal and theoretical distinction between the two.

When considering *Modern Art in the Arab World* from the perspective of my research, the prevalence of texts from Morocco in this volume marks a shift that I can feel viscerally from those earlier and isolating days to today, when Morocco's role within the history of modern art in the Arab world has become more widely embraced. This is, perhaps, a sign of the ways in which the field is maturing. The first AMCA conference was held in 2010 at the opening of Mathaf: the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar. Within the history of this field, these two simultaneous events heralded significant change. Mathaf holds a wide-ranging collection of Arab modernist art works and is the only major museum of its kind to maintain this primary focus. Its 2010 opening allowed researchers and artists to view pieces they had only seen in reproductions or heard about in references. AMCA's conference at that opening then made a claim that there was, in fact, a community of researchers early in their careers working on modernism in the region that together were establishing this as a distinct field. Of course, there had been researchers who had done pioneering work in the field prior to this such as Silvia Naef and Salwa Mikdadi; to be clear, this was by no means the original start of the field. It was, however, a significant moment that claimed a discrete field with a younger generation taking part in the research.

In the decade since then, the field has taken on a new kind of visibility. Structural changes across the region have drawn increasing attention to modern art in the Arab world, including but not limited to the growing activities of the Sharjah Art Foundation and the openings of the Jameel Center in Dubai, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat, and the re-opening of the Surssock Museum in Beirut. In the United States and Europe, there are now curators dedicated to the Arab world at the Metropolitan Museum of New York and the Tate Modern in London, and MoMA – the publisher of this book – has recently rehung its collection to highlight an art history of modernism that is more inclusive of non-white, non-male, non-European art. There are more and more graduate students undertaking art historical research in the Arab world, faculty positions (albeit rare) that are focused on Arab art or faculty hires of Arab art specialists for more broadly defined roles, scholarly books that are being released on national case studies, and a new press series, initiated by two of the editors of this book, on scholarly biographies of artworks from the region.

Until now, a significant amount of scholarly work has focused on Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq, but this is changing. One of the achievements of *Modern Art in the Arab World* is the insistence on a broadly defined and heterogeneous Arab world that extends from Morocco to the Gulf (modernist movements in the Gulf have been notably understudied if not marginalized in the field). The prevalence of texts from Morocco and the larger Maghreb and their inclusion as signal primary sources establishes Maghrebi art history as an integral part of Arab art history.

The volume thus establishes a map, through its inclusion of texts ranging from Morocco to the Gulf, as well as a timeline for modernism. They chose to not include an actual timeline of political and cultural events for understandable reasons, namely that an ordered timeline is at odds with the reality of fluid initiatives and formations, although from a pedagogical perspective I wish it had been included. Nonetheless, the editors chose to include texts from 1882 – the date of what they pinpoint as the first modern definition of fine art painting in Arabic – to 1987 – which they treat as the rough and approximate chronological break between modernism and contemporary art. While they caveat that this history does not lend itself to a neatly bracketed timeline, there is a defined start and end point worthy of further debate.

As I continue to reference the volume in my research, it creates a new conversation with the colleagues that edited this volume, as I think about the art history that is suggested through the selection of texts. For example, I argue that there is a split within the Casablanca school catalyzed by solidarity with Palestine around the question of whether artists should focus on cultural engagement (with its potential for perhaps indirect political ramifications) or on straightforwardly political engagement. The group of artists had been linked with the literary and cultural journal *Souffles*. Following a special issue in 1969, the group of poets and writers at the journal's center began taking direct political action, while many of the visual artists turned toward less directly political cultural action. Within the context of the heavily repressive Moroccan regime during a period called the “Years of Lead,” in many ways this was a question of tactics. *Souffles* was shut down in 1972, and most of the remaining participants in the journal were put in jail. In looking through *Modern Art in the Arab World*, however, I was surprised to see the phrasing of a 1974 statement by many of the Casablanca artists under the aegis of the newly formed Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts. This manifesto was released as a statement at the First Arab Biennial, positing

that Arab art could serve as a catalyst or even a weapon for social and political change.

Given its political and cultural implications, the struggle for Arab existence cannot ignore the role of plastic artists, especially as the masses, whose political awareness increases day by day, recognize that from now on human existence will only be viable if the conditions for expressing that existence are met, and if the necessary means of expression are available. But we do not claim to express that reality in its entirety. Arab plastic artists have a long way to go before we can demonstrate that Arab man does not live by bread alone, and that a motivating canvas is not so different from a bullet – the difference between the plastic artist and the soldier being one of appearances (384–85).

Although I was already familiar with this text via my own research, its inclusion within the book as a signal document made me reconsider how I describe this history, given the militant nature of the language that is employed here five years after the split with *Souffles* and two years after *Souffles* was shut down. 1969 was the year of both the *Souffles* special issue on Palestine and an outdoor exhibition held by these artists in the public plaza Djemaa al Fna in Marrakech in order to connect with a non-elite public. This exhibition is often seen as the most pioneering if not most radical moment in the art history of the Casablanca school, and the artists' statement about the exhibition is included within the book. While the 1974 text by the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts comes only five years later, there were major changes by that point in the art scene in Morocco, including the closure of *Souffles*, the arrest of Mohammed Chebaa, changes in the faculty at the school, and the increasing prominence of a younger generation with different priorities. The Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts manifesto must be read in the context of this history. In the absence of texts that clarify what happened between the 1969 exhibition in Djemaa al Fna and the First Arab Biennial in 1974 in Baghdad, a reliance on this book might then tell an imprecise history. This is the potential danger of cherry-picking texts in these sorts of collections: the selected text stands in for the rest even if it tells a different story. This is particularly challenging because this militant attitude can be alluring to academics, because it reifies the idea of the artist as heroically standing up to power, as opposed to the perhaps less palatable reality that history is full of concessions and compromises. The

inclusion of this text has been helpful in pushing me to think more precisely about these discursive shifts, much as it cannot be used in lieu of on-the-ground research. This book makes an incredible amount of texts available in translation and places them both up against each other and, importantly, outside of the often-inaccessible archives within the region. It is helpful in making these texts available, and it makes no claims for being a stand in for that archival research, nor should it be treated as such.

The volume has also instigated conversations for me between different art movements, as I contextualize my own research in realizing similarities between statements or debates. In the section “Art After the Algerian Revolution,” which includes four texts from 1963 to 1964 published in *Révolution Africaine*, the cultural organ of the National Liberation Front (FLN), I was struck by similarities with documents that I work with in Morocco. The 1963 text “Painting and the People” presents responses to an exhibition of paintings by Algerian artists at the Ibn Khaldoun Gallery. The article notes that the “paintings that attract the most viewers are the engaged works,” and gives responses from people that are clearly not part of an artistic elite, noting, for instance, the uniform one man is wearing for the RSTA [Algerian Transportation System]. The unsigned author notes the diligence and passion with which all visitors are looking at and discussing the works, ending with a quotation from one saying, “You know, I’m not one of those people who laugh when they see a [Pablo] Picasso. We want to learn everything. Giving us the possibility to learn – that’s socialism” (229–31). Certainly, this should be understood in service to the FLN and the role that art might play in building an independent socialist state. Yet I also find it helpful to see evidence of the ways in which engaging a broader public for modernist art becomes fundamental for many of these modernist artistic and cultural movements, closely tied to broader Third Worldist ideas about the role of the artist or intellectual. This can be seen from a theoretical perspective in Frantz Fanon’s writing, and, in my own research, forms a significant backbone to Moroccan art practice by the late 1960s, as in the exhibition in Djemaa al Fna. Algeria is not a focus in my own research, but this text opens up interesting questions for me as I consider the larger questions surrounding public artistic engagement in the Arab world in the 1960s. It is not an endpoint, but a possible path to follow in considering this version of officially sanctioned public engagement as a counterpoint to what was happening in Morocco. It is a potential dialogue between these movements that needs further research, but part of the utility of this book for me is in these sparks.

The second way in which I approach this book is as a professor who teaches Arab art history. Undergraduate students in my Spring 2019 seminar at VCUarts Qatar on modern and contemporary Arab art had copies of this book, and I selected texts each week to supplement our other readings, ultimately assigning the vast majority of the book. I teach at VCUarts Qatar, and hold most of my classes at Mathaf. That semester we transformed the back of the library into a classroom and would discuss the texts, then spend half of each session in the galleries. This is a unique way to teach Arab art. The upper floor of the museum is devoted to the permanent collection, which, depending on the current rotation, features major works by more or less all of the artists we study. Rather than relying on images of works by, say, Gazbia Sirry or Ibrahim el-Salahi, we sit with the artworks themselves and our study is shaped by what is accessible to us and what the curators have chosen to rotate in.

Modern Art in the Arab World is very clear that it “does not provide a comprehensive view of the development of the practices and institutions of modern art in the Arab world. It cannot” (21). The pedagogical challenge, though, is that for the Anglophone academy this comprehensive view does not currently exist. Nada Shabout’s book *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (2007) is the closest, although its second half focuses primarily on case studies of Iraqi artists. Only a few other books have attempted to create an overview, such as *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* by Wijdan Ali (1997), in addition to scattered articles and special issues. Admittedly there is a growing number of case studies exploring specific national scenes, many of which reference other histories as well. However, I teach undergraduates in an exclusively Anglophone curriculum as it is the only fully shared language across the student body. For many of them, English is a second language. Even outside the specific linguistic challenges faced by my students, undergraduates are not necessarily able to wade through the complexity of articles, or the length of book-length studies. I assign the materials that are available, to varying degrees of success.

In the absence of a more accessible textbook or readings that provide an authoritative overview of modern Arab art, much of the burden falls on individual faculty members, both to make connections between movements so that they are not isolated to national boundaries and to explicate the importance of different groupings. While the book references the “canon of modern Arab art, as it has coalesced through national histories” (21), I am wary of this claim. Because faculty positions focusing on Arab art are mostly new and remain rare, and because departments

that are interested in courses focusing solely on Arab modernism are rare, teaching Arab modernism seems to require reinventing the wheel. I am not convinced that there is a canon that we all know, teach, or reference, much less agree on. Further, beyond a select few artists, we would not assume a student coming out of a class on Arab modernism could comprehensively grasp the import of specific works, artists, or movements. It is true of all teaching that faculty choose their focus, but in teaching Arab modernism, faculty are also creating and re-creating that canon by what they choose to focus on.

I found that *Modern Art in the Arab World* offered a resolution to this quandary, as it sets out one possible way of selecting the history that I would teach. The texts are mostly chronological and organized into sections based on specific cities or specific conversations. In practice, this means that they are often grouped into national sections but they are nonetheless contextualized within the larger book. I have structured my class primarily through national case studies, both for clarity for undergraduate students that do not know much about modern Arab political history and given the importance of nationalism in modernist movements. Yet modernisms cannot be studied only through the lens of the nation-state: transnationalism is, I would argue, constitutive of modernity, and within this specific region, the centrality of pan-Arabism, especially during the 1970s, precludes any neat separation. This book, therefore, offers on the one hand signposts about what the editors consider to be the most significant debates and events in a given place with a brief introductory text that helps to explicate the sometimes dense primary sources, while also creating nodes of overlap, giving me as a professor a way to help highlight the overlapping movements and ideas. It does not take the place of much-needed pedagogical texts, but should be treated as a landmark publication for teaching Arab art nonetheless.

We need to slowly find ways of making these same connections and conversations across specialties. So often, global modernisms are primarily put into dialogue with Western European and American modernisms. In part, it is true that many artists from formerly colonized countries studied in Europe and were themselves deeply aware of or in dialogue with European modernism. This was a two-way street: the post-colonial presence of these artists in Western metropolises played a significant role in European modernism as well. The logic of modernism is inseparable from the logic of colonialism, and beyond the specific histories of influence and discourse, any history of European modernism should take this into account – although, of course, many of these histories gloss over

these global dimensions. Beyond the historical ways and reasons for which many non-Western modernist movements were in dialogue in some sense with Western modernisms, I wonder if we as scholars also foreground these connections because there is a known canon that we can draw upon. Most trained art historians learn the history of Western modernism, and come to the more recent research into non-Western modernisms after that. Without expecting any one academic to know absolutely everything, the goal is to find a way to make these art histories more accessible to allow the many and significant South-South connections and points of resonance within the history of modernism to become more visible. Many art history programs are working to change this pedagogical model that starts with Western modernism, attempting to teach a more global history of art more broadly, and a more global history of modernism more specifically. *Modern Art in the Arab World* allows us as specialists and teachers to create dialogues across Arab modernist movements. The next question is how to create these same spaces for dialogues across regions. The accessibility this book creates for non-specialists is a significant step in creating visibility for this specialty.