

SPECIAL FOCUS

IS THERE A CANON? ARTISTIC MODERNISMS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES

Contesting Labels: Revisiting old Questionnaires

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Abstract

As a response to several questionnaires, manifestos, interviews, and letters that were included in the book Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents, this article carries out a new questionnaire with seven artists from various backgrounds and geographies, in an attempt to update and re-question some of the issues that were highlighted in the collected essays. The questionnaire includes three questions, each focusing on a different issue. The first issue considers the validity of the term “Arab Art,” the second tries to

¹ We would like to thank Hanane Hajj Ali, a theatre-maker, “activist,” cultural manager, writer, and researcher, for her immense and valuable help in bringing the questionnaire in contact with valuable contributors. Şebnem Yücel would also like to thank Kerim Kürkçü, an architect and gallery owner, in his attempt to bring the questionnaire in contact with Syrian artists residing in Turkey. Şebnem Yücel’s research questions the representation of places, buildings and histories, and concentrates on the modernization in non-Western contexts. She received her B.Arch (1993) from Middle East Technical University, Turkey, MSc. Arch (1998) from University of Cincinnati, and Ph.D. (2003) from Arizona State University. Some of her publications include “Minority Heterotopias: The Cortijos of Izmir” (2016) in *ARQ: Architectural Research Quarterly*; “Regional/Modern and the Rest” (2015) in *Architecture, Culture, Interpretation*; and “Identity Calling: Turkish Architecture and the West” (2007) in *Architecture, Ethics and the Personhood of Place*. She is currently Chair of the Architecture Department at MEF University, Turkey. Associate Professor Dr. Serhan Ada is Chair of Art and Cultural Management Department, and Director of Cultural Policy and Management Research Center at Istanbul Bilgi University. He is also the Head of UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policy and Cultural Diplomacy at the same university. Ada has been a visiting professor in various universities in Paris, Barcelona, Lyon, Beirut, Turin, Hildesheim, Venice, and New Jersey. Ada is the editor of the book *Turkish Cultural Policy: A Civil Perspective* (2011), focusing on the civil society’s perspective on cultural policy of Turkey as an alternative to the National Report. He also writes poetry and essays.

identify the main dynamics of contemporary artistic production, and the last one questions the relation of contemporary production of arts to geography and history. The following interviews have been edited for consistency and clarity.

Keywords: Arab Art, Modern art, Identity, Art market, Mediterranean

In every challenge there lies opportunity. When we were asked to write a response paper to *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, by questioning the location of modernism and art as fields, as well as discussing the nature of artistic challenges today, we did not feel like our attempt to provide a framework from our distant location, both geographically and metaphysically, would do justice to the topic.

There rose the opportunity. Instead of looking at the “Arab World” from the outside – if we consider living in Turkey to being like a true “outsider” – we have decided to search for views and voices from the inside, while understanding that there is no “inside.” Those who were in were also positioned out, since the contemporary problematic was not place-bound.

Today’s discussion can not prioritize contemporary Arab Art, or modern Arab Art. In fact, it is not even about modern art or contemporary art per se. Instead it seems to make more sense to talk about “art in times of constant volatility” or “art as of today.” Therefore, instead of sticking to labels, we have chosen a different path. Reading the book, we noticed a number of questionnaires, starting with the 1956 “Artists’ Questionnaire, Art and Arab Life,” as well as various manifestos, interviews, and letters, etc. For our contribution, we have decided to carry out a new questionnaire, updating it with three questions that recurred throughout the book and posing them to contemporary Arab artists and art professionals living in diverse regions around the world. In doing so, our aim was to reduce our voice as much as possible in order to provide more space for theirs. Below you can find the new questions and answers given to them.

Three Questions and the Responses

1. In “How the Arab Understood Visual Art” (1951) Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair wrote that “the Arab never took much interest in visible, tangible reality, or the truth that every human sees. Rather, he took his search for beauty to the essence of the subject. . . . The Arab neither employed the illusion of depth nor distorted a truth in order to bring out an

idea. He neither made visual art subservient to literature nor affixed it with an alien spirit."²

In the years that passed following decolonization, wars, founding and dismantling of federations, as well as the resultant new dynamics set within the Arab countries themselves and between the other nations, can we still talk about an "Arab Art"? Could you please expand on the possibility and the challenges?

Ziad Adwan (researcher, director, actor, and drama teacher): Coming from the field of theatre, I will start my answer from this art form. The association of theatre with the topic of identity has resulted in repetitive discourses that restricted many potentials that might have helped develop ideological discourses and artistic techniques in order to search for the local identity within the art itself. What is peculiar is the tendency to associate art with geography in the "Third World," while art in central Europe varies according to time and aesthetics (as when we speak of Romanticism and Naturalism or nineteenth-century architecture or twentieth-century drama).

In Turkey, for instance, there is so much focus on how Turkey is Islamic, but not on how Turkey is European. This is because they don't want to speak about this relationship, but perhaps to avoid having Europe [as an issue] under the scope of identity. Identity in Europe is about encouraging minorities under the slogan of multiculturalism. Thus it seems that European institutions celebrate their multiculturalism on the account of stereotyping the minorities that live in this context.

When artists emerged as the people who produce original works and who breach social norms,³ critics tend to enclose Arab artists under social and cultural collective labels. I believe that several artists (including theatre-makers) avoid being categorized as Arab artists. The problem intensifies when we ask: Who has the authority to coin the term "Arab Art"? The Arab artists themselves? Arab producers and institutions? Arab critics?

This variety widens to include the Western perception of the art that comes from the Arabic-speaking countries as well as the Arab diaspora. I recall in this respect, the views of Edward Said, Timothy Mitchell, and Graham Huggan, who explored the mechanisms of constructing an Orient that the Occidental can identify itself against. The western market has

² Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (Museum of Modern Art Primary Documents Series, Brazil: Duke University Press, 2018), 145.

³ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

certainly affirmed what is successful as an “Arab Art,” who, consequently, could gain western and international recognition, and could be granted distribution and fame. This “Western interference” in shaping an Arab identity has played a major role not only in shaping the Arab identity, but also in shaping the Arab national iconic symbols.

Personally, I have always viewed arts, and theatre too, as an international and transnational experience. It is the sum of the cultural exchange of techniques, aesthetics, values, and knowledge.

Having said so, I do not wish to escape the challenges of answering the question. The question validates what we discuss as the ideology of Arabism and this was demonstrated in written literature. I am not quite familiar with Arab arts, but there are certainly some more critical angles to discuss, such as the relationship between Arab heritage and the art of painting and sculpturing, as well as the controversial relationship between Islam and its portrayals.

Note: I think that there was a continuous controversy about the interference of the Islamic and conservative regulations in the Fine Arts Faculty in Damascus, something that the Higher Institute of Theatre Arts, the music conservatoire, and the other Literature faculties in Damascus did not suffer from.

Houssam Alloum (artist/painter): The Arabic art exists and continues although it is in emergence. The capabilities of Arab Art are based on generational [works] that created different ideas and styles. The art in the Arabic world is developing as a result of rich and different new experiences, especially after the Arab Spring that opened a wider horizon of art with the rise in the level of freedoms. At the same time, there are lots of challenges, such as the lack of support for the artist by governments and institutions that allow the artist to do art full time or part time, a deteriorating economic and political situation in many Arab countries, and the absence of art criticism.

Gregory Buchakhjian (photographer, filmmaker, and art historian): The notion of “Arab Art,” like all similar notions (“French Art,” “European Art,” or even the art movements like “Expressionism,” etc.) is very problematic. It is vague and heterogeneous and can be biased. When speaking of “Arab Art,” this englobes a region going from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, with multiple geographies, identities, and histories, without speaking of the diasporas around the world. In the context of the history of decolonization, there certainly was a production of art

related to these struggles in the 1950s–1970s, by politically engaged artists. Thinking of Baghdad, or even Beirut with Aref Rayess, Rafic Charaf, etc. On more recent grounds, there have also been, from Mona Hatoum onwards, artists from the Arab world questioning political and historical issues of the region. On another hand, numerous artists from or living in the Arab world can produce art that doesn't specifically deal with Arab identities.

Lamia Joreige (visual artist and filmmaker): I don't think that it is possible to easily define Arab identity and therefore Arab Art today or even in the past decades. While the most important connector remains language, the complexities of the social, political, and geographical contexts make the experience of being an Arab so different from one country to another. I see it today as it probably was then: a political claim. Even within one country, there are issues of identity. For instance, in Lebanon a minor part of the population rejects the fact of being Arab and does not want to be seen as Arabs, while the country is officially a member of the Arab League, and its constitution, which used to say it has an "Arab Face," confirmed "Lebanon as an Arab State" in the *Taif Agreement* in 1989. One can decide to embody this political identity or not.

In the last decade, there was a "wave" of interest toward "Arab Art," "Islamic Art," and "Middle Eastern Art," for better or worse. For the worse, because all these labels are contestable as they often fit the necessity to realize cultural and financial agendas, tending to simplify the realities of the places where these art practices are grounded. For the better, because within a more globalized world, these practices were rendered more visible locally and internationally, and the many exchanges of ideas and practices were able to feed each other across the world.

Walid Sadek (artist and writer): To say the obvious, so much has happened since the time of Choucair's statement that any attempt at thinking through her words requires a historical contextualization. Accordingly, her statement, even if intriguing in its generalities, is not compelling as the figure of the Arab – an obviously colonial figure – must first be dismantled and critiqued. Perhaps, my response to your question can be best articulated in a short introduction titled "Not, not Arab" that I wrote for a special issue of *Third Text*, published in 2012.⁴

⁴ Walid Sadek, "Not, Not Arab," *Third Text* 26:4 (2012): 377.

Sana Tamzini (artist and curator): The first part of your question refers to the identity dimension in relation to the act of creation and I believe that this question never ceases to impose itself like a normal and legitimate reaction to the massive globalization experienced since the second half of the twentieth century. Globalization very quickly standardized the notion of universal “beauty,” manifested mainly through the art market and the different trends imposed on artists, who were trying to survive and be recognized. This need for recognition prompted them to abandon their “identity” to subscribe to currents, trends, and so-called universal fashions. Fortunately, this capitalist system is starting to run out of steam and lose its justification, notably thanks to this globalization: the reason for its dawn has ended up causing the current coma of art!

I deeply believe that my experience, with all the historical, social, and cultural stratification it has engendered, has made me who I am today: a Berber, African, Carthaginian, and Arab woman artist open to the world. An identity mosaic that many try to deny and erase, but not me!

The current global perception of Arab culture is far from fascinating; not for the lack of its rich content but for a negative image conveyed and accepted without a real effort of understanding. So I consider that my belonging to Arab culture is a strong point that I try to highlight in all my creations like many other artists have also done. The Tunisian writer Albert Memmi speaks on this subject saying: “When I learned a little about her history, I got dizzy. Phoenicians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Berbers, Arabs, Spaniards, Turks, Italians, French, I certainly forgot some or others mixed up; five hundred strolls and we have gone from one civilization to another.”⁵ There is a diversity of many ways of life, of traditions that intertwine to form a unity without borders between the culture of the Amazighs and the cultural heritage of other peoples. This diversity is made visible by several Tunisian artists, by showing that it is particular to Tunisia and it is the foundation of being Tunisian. Rachida Triki, a philosopher and Tunisian art critic, developed the notion of Tunisian “identity” in these words:

For the moderns, the reference for Tunisian culture remains today, fundamentally, that of historical events, more recent one being Islamic conquests. On an intellectual level, the reference is rather the Renaissance that Tunisia experienced in the nineteenth

⁵ Patricia Triki and Christine Bruckbauer, *Un Avenir en Rose: Art Actuel en Tunisie*, ifa- Galerie Berlin, (Berlin: Kerber, 2012), 37.

century, which conveyed the ideas of freedom and diversity. All this highlights the ability of the Tunisian to assimilate and fertilize the crops he has been in contact with. Identity is constituted by its *historiality*.⁶

It is an attachment of the human being to its past and present while relating to the future and the constant mutability. “Identity is no longer perceived as a retreat into one’s self, a constant and a rejection of the other, but as the substrate of a multiplicity.”⁷

It is in the context of an increasingly globalized visual arts that the Arab world has emerged in what is called a contemporary art movement. It is summed up by acts of freedom, by the richness of its diversity not only ideological but also technical and technological. The novelty of the mediums of the works reflects a desire for emancipation. The artistic approach and the choice of materials of Arab artists come close to the level of the formal conception of contemporary practices of the visual arts in the West, but they are distinguished by the object treated, which is often in relation to their real-life situations and social or individual fictions.

The current concern of Arab artists is to adopt a creative process that would allow them to better position themselves in a space crossed by constraints as well as social, societal, and political contradictions. The artists have a deep awareness of their commitment to a present where the identity of the individual is constantly changing, faced with the new demands of globalization. Indeed, the art market constituted in the West brings out new aesthetic values that privilege and highlight certain subjects such as the situation of Arab women, intimate sexuality, and religion and its socio-political impact. Budget lines of funding agencies have been created according to the needs of Arab artists who fled their country because of war. The clandestine migration of artists is not only a search for a country. It is not only a search for a changed perception of the world on the works produced, but also on the creative act of these artists. Many artists adopt a responsible and autonomous attitude by giving an aesthetic form to a socio-cultural experience. It is above all a choice of creation, with respect and dignity, which determines their commitment. From then on, we talk about an engaged art or the art of resistance.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Liwaa Yazji (filmmaker, playwright, television screenwriter, dramaturgist, and poet): The direct generalized answer concerning Arab Art is negative. I even find it rather hard to define the term “Arab Art” when talking about Fine Arts (not when talking about Applied Arts, Calligraphy, and miniatures of course). Islam and colonization didn’t work in favor of emphasizing and protecting elements of Arab identity in the fine arts, each in its own way. So, what is left to talk about here is the Western tradition even when talking about Arab Art.

Before Islam, local artistic expressions took place in the region, but the Islamic rules prevented certain genres from flourishing and gave space to other ones (especially function-oriented forms, which were prevailing). So, when talking about challenges and possibilities I have the urge to ask artists what, if they could go back in time and bring back to life the uprooted authentic identity of art that was to develop, should Islam have given it the space, and then try to see how this art could have developed. The same could be asked concerning the effects of colonization. This is of course a hypothesis.

Nevertheless, we can still trace individual experiences using primitive, brutal, virgin, and authentic styles that belong to the Arabic tradition, but I cannot see them coining the modern art scene; they can only live as individual experiences. Although it cannot be denied that after independence Arab artists largely tried to work hard on finding their own voices as a means of civil protest/celebration against the Western traditions to emphasize Arabic identity.

When art was reintroduced in the cultural life after these limitations, the result was a continuation of the Western tradition and an admiration of its values. Thus, Western techniques and schools were/are the prevailing ones, while in terms of themes we can talk about several important trials that tried to rejuvenate the Arabic spirit. No doubt these themes were not exclusive to Arabic artists; lots of prominent European artists visited the Arab world and rendered paintings – mostly – and sculptures that talked in Arabic.

The possibility to ignite what can be called an Arabic Art is a bit hard from my point of view, as I do not see a tangible equivalent to the term itself to lean back on. Identity in this regard means – for me, and I guess maybe for others too – addressing local themes and figures, using local palette, and celebrating local lines and aesthetics. But when it comes to technique and schools, I guess I cannot personally talk of an Arab Art, unless we are talking about ornamentation (and other forms as such) for example.

Some debate exists that the era of nation-states in the Arab world was marked by questions about identity and authenticity to cut roots with the colonizers. Introducing thus two terms, Modern Art as the one still related to the West and New Art as the one referring to attempts of exploring identity, these attempts – from my point of view – did not come up with Arabic schools despite the truthful search for authenticity and identity. Rather, these attempts worked on local palettes, figures, and themes, and in some cases choosing materials belonging to the local environments, which can be rather more regional and geographically labeled than national/Arabic.

Historically, the relation to the West marked the Arab fine art scene in different ways: production, academy, market lines, and criticism theories. Therefore, when talking about challenges, at the top of the list can be history, academy, and market standards, in addition to globalization and the nature of art/time: art as a cross-border spirit is not supposed to be defined geographically. The only criteria needed to define good art is being artistically good and authentic in terms of its individuality (not being a copy of something else).

2. For the 1956 questionnaire “Art and Arab Life” (1956) when Lebanese artist, Moustafa Faroukh, was posed with the question “*what role has art played in your field of your speciality in terms of its impact on Arab society and in terms of the impact of Arab society on it?*” he replied with a pessimist tone, stating “*we find that chaos, unbelief, and turmoil dominate our reality and that the Arab thinker ‘lives in one valley’ while the rest of the Arab nation lives in another completely.*” Adding to this, he continued “*the dominant spirit of art in our region is a spirit of commercialism and the endless pursuit of money.*”⁸

Considering the wider presence of artists from the Arab world in international biennials, art fairs, and renown galleries, and also the proliferation of global museums in the Gulf area, how do you identify the main dynamics of the contemporary artistic production in the Arab world?

Ziad Adwan: Maybe, the question starts from the relationship between arts and dictatorship as it formalized arts in terms of expression and subsidy. This relationship has standardized art production for decades, and artists and intellectuals had to adjust their means of expression according to the

⁸ Lenssen, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 167.

measurements that were imposed by the regimes. The means of production in several Arab countries were limited to the systems of totalitarian regimes. In these countries we can conclude the accurate picture when we look at what was censored as well as what was produced and displayed to the public.

By the 1990s, and in parallel with the collapse of the Soviet Union, many private sectors were encouraged to venture into the fields of art. This step has turned TV actors to become one of the wealthiest ranks in Syria. In the 2000s, artists, and painters specifically, became one of the new wealthy and prestigious groups. This could be also seen in the Gulf, when TV industries were given subsidized incentives in the 1990s and then the fine art scene in the 2000s.

The openness of the 1990s to Western subsidies changed the institutional roles in the nation-states. Artists in general took oppositional standpoints against their conservative societies and this was apparent in many Arab discourses and rhetoric (ivory tower, enemies of the people, etc.) The government or the regime tried to play a judicial role between artists and society. It protected artists from social oppression, while accusing these artists of being agents of Western agendas.

Furthermore, festivals played a major part in shaking society. They disturbed the bureaucratic hierarchy that manipulated cultural productions and encouraged the use of public spaces and public heritage to fuse modern arts in conservative communities. When Damascus was named the Arab Capital of Culture in 2008, the organizers enjoyed an exceptional treatment from the Syrian regime and they could skip the interference of the cultural institutions (such as the Ministry of Culture) to gain direct contact with the presidential palace. Foreign cultural centers also played a significant part in producing and distributing arts, and they could compromise their projects with local authorities.

Houssam Alloum: The contemporary artistic production in the Arab world is linked to several factors, for example, the art market, which generally doesn't do justice to the artists and is dominated by major galleries spread throughout the Arab world. These galleries often make a significant impact on art in accordance with their profitability goals. Add to this the fact that contemporary art is also new for the Arabic culture, so it needs to have more productions from artists to create a new state of artistic awareness in the Arab audience.

Gregory Buchakhjian: There has been a global shift since the early 2000s. It was triggered by events that were not directly related, such as the

“Contemporary Arab Representations” project by Catherine David, September 11, and the expansion and emancipation of the Gulf states, mainly UAE and Qatar. This period has witnessed a considerable rise of exposure and prices on the market. Recently the movement has been reversed due to various economic and political reasons. Where we are going now is hard to know. The region faces a multiplicity of challenges and transformations. Many countries like Iraq and Lebanon are in deep political and economic crisis with an ongoing movement of protest. The Gulf states are under the threat of increased U.S.–Iran tensions.

Lamia Joreige: I think the last two decades saw an amazing production of art and thoughts in our region. It could be that the experiences of the many conflicts – wars, occupations, etc. – had to be reflected upon and expressed. Our region witnessed the emergence of many art spaces and initiatives. I myself co-founded an art space, Beirut Art Center (BAC), based on the fact that Beirut needed a place dedicated to contemporary art besides the existing commercial galleries. But even though BAC was meant to be a platform of experimentation off the market, in our world where most things are interconnected, it proved impossible to be disconnected from the market and its rapid transformation in the region; so, one has to remain aware and cautious of the various interests and dynamics at stake when programming and defining the artistic direction of such places. Ten years later, I still think our initiative had and still has a meaning and a role to play today, yet in the light of the recent evolution of art places in Lebanon, and most importantly considering the realities of our country, BAC is reassessing its role with the aim to create new dynamics in the city.

On a personal level, I tend to agree with Moustapha Farroukh: we, as artists and thinkers, are a minority in our lands, where cultural practices are not a priority, and little attention and means are given to them. For decades, we have witnessed the collapse of our hope for democracy and the rise of corruption and fanaticism in our region. As an artist, my art attempts to witness these realities and serves as a critical tool to apprehend them, but most importantly I make art because it is an urgency to me, it is what makes me thrive and survive in this world, regardless of the exterior dynamics of biennials, markets, and cultural policies.

Walid Sadek: Reading this second question leads me back uncannily to issues I have previously thought and wrote about. I apologize if you are looking for short answers but again I must share with you an essay I wrote

about Farroukh, his despondency and resulting moralism. The essay, titled “In Health but Mostly in Sickness,” was published in the volume *Out of Beirut*.⁹

Briefly said, there is a widening gap between art institutions and the desires of artists today, at least those who began their practices after the year 2000. The proliferation of art institutions and the dominance of the global spectacle of art are generally un-conducive to the development of rigorous art that is cognizant of geopolitics and (un-essentialized) localities.

Sana Tamzini: The artist witnesses his/her time and cannot be separated from his/her environment. For him/her to be seen beyond its locality, there needs to be an art market, that is, investment, museums, and galleries. Fairs, biennials (Marrakech, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Beirut, Istanbul, Venice), and galleries helped these artists to emerge. In other words, art critics, conservation specialists, curators, and businessmen are accelerators.

The astonishing appearance of these accelerators on the Arab arts scene is the fruit only of western interests that follow the geopolitical changes. Market law dictates that a privileged minority exercises a global oppression over the rest of the population. Ismael, one of the artists who emerged during the Tunisian revolution, says:

Economically, the law of the art market makes the law of the arts. It does it just as well aesthetically, ethically and politically. Speculation and money laundering make and unmake plastic artists. The aesthetics in the virtual, digital and nanotechnological world are smooth, ethereal and volatile. The ethics are those of private property, personal fulfillment and global conformism.¹⁰

Politics is about banalization, the ludic playfulness and the sacredness of entertainment. Ideas and forms are most of the time recuperated and then taken up. A work has no existence unless it has the capacity to entertain.

In November 2011, the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale hosted the largest number of Arab artists in its history. Moreover, during the exhibition “The Future of a Promise” produced by Edge of Arabia, twenty-two artists were invited from the Arab world, such as Algerian artist Kader Attia, Mounir Fatimi from Morocco, Nithal Chamekh from Tunisia, and Mona Hatoum from Lebanon. The choice of artists was forged on the visual shaping of politics, ignoring the geographic location. All

⁹ Walid Sadek, “In Health but Mostly in Sickness: The Autobiography of Moustafa Farroukh,” in *Out of Beirut*, ed. Suzanne Cotter (Oxford: Modern Art Oxford Series, 2006), 66-71.

¹⁰ In the National Center of Live Art, *Politiques*, catalogue, (Tunisian Ministry of Culture, 2013), 11.

techniques were combined at the *rendezvous*: installation, performance, video, painting. Arab artists mastered the different mediums of contemporary art. Communication tools such as social media and cell phones have made these visual expressions more accessible. Brahim Alaoui specifies that it is reductive to define these artists by only as being Arabs: “artists, singular in themselves, are never standard bearers.”¹¹ The globalization of artistic practices has fueled the imagination. He considers artists from the Arab world to be involved in a common history with the West – as no Chinese artist will ever be.

In this politically tormented era of “Arab revolts,” “world conflicts,” “clash of civilizations,” and “clandestine immigration” in the making, I believe that the arts are precious because they are the antitheses to ideologies. Certainly they will not change the course of history, but by their existence, they will give a reason for the struggle.

Liwaaz Yazji: The notion of artists being separated from reality can still be applicable in a certain way, but to be more specific we can say that the mentioned gap actually exists between the art productions and the mass receptors and their standards; it is a matter of miscommunication that I am talking about here, even if the gap has narrowed down after 2011 where all norms were shaken and art became more of an accessible tool. The Arab Spring marked a new era for Arab art where it became more invited and welcomed. It has now more presence and has forced more curiosity and currency.

What is said about commercialism and pursuit of money is still prevailing, and the role an artist can play in changing society is still limited (though magnified after 2011), yet the influence society can have on artists I think is remarkable and tangible.

I guess the market is the main factor when it comes to the dynamics of contemporary artistic production. Market here refers to local galleries, curators, collectors, and the link to the international market, which became the real player in the last few years. Talking about these dynamics, we cannot exclude the numerous individual attempts that tried to safeguard their own voices and succeeded in finding a place in the international market as well.

¹¹ Patricia Boyer de Latou, “Monde Arabe, les Artistes Font le Printemps” *Le Figaro*, January 29, 2012, <https://madame.lefigaro.fr/art-de-vivre/monde-arabe-artistes-font-printemps-290112-212715>. Accessed February 11, 2020.

The opening up to the global market and curatorial presence marked and affected the artistic production in the region, but this might have another aspect apart from the common “commercialism/globalization,” as the more you get to know the universal production the more you are open to variant aesthetics and schools, knowledge and horizons. So, it is not a negative effect by default, if one is not overwhelmed and turned into a copier who is less adventurous in navigating his/her own voice.

Of course, artists have the right to live off of their art; this sounds old fashioned and pathetic; it is sad that we are still defending this right in this century/decade. So if these international spaces opened up toward more commercialism on the one hand, they, on the other hand, have helped to widen up the horizons for some Arab artists who no longer feel excluded from the international scene; they are part of it, using the same dictionary used by artists all over the world. They have hopes in being part of the international movement rather than just watching it, studying/teaching it. They can even hope of affecting it! Thus, Arab artists can develop (or stand still marching in place!) by virtue of this interaction; they can have international ranking, which can motivate/demotivate them. So, it is no longer all related to the local mafias, now they can talk about the international ones! No longer they are obliged to deal only with governmental institutions of the postcolonial Arab world nations, they have other choices, which in turn do not come without a high price to pay. This exchange created new challenges and possibilities, new mafias, new standards, and introduced thus new schools and techniques and new audiences.

Market, following up the new trends, and politics, and, in special individual cases, the pursuit of the artists’ project itself are in my opinion the main dynamics in the new contemporary productions.

3. In Syrian artist Na’im İsmail’s 1973 letter to his friend Marwan Kassab-Bachi, who was living in Germany at the time, we read İsmail reminisce fondly about their 1957 exhibition together, and how their works “were an attempt at art with an Arab flavor, the elements of which drew on Arab life and heritage, underpinned by international, contemporary concepts – a contemporary art conveying an authentic, national call.”¹² As we read further we learn that the two friends drifted apart as the years passed, Kassab-Bachi abandoning all that he created in the past for new explorations in modern art in Germany. The letter continues

¹² *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 363.

with Isma'il's plead to his friend to remember the goal for which he has gone to Europe and to come back home. At the end of the letter he concludes his case by stating that in their country they have something essential for humanity that Europe does not possess: "*We have a sun that smiles from time to time. . . Behind the clouds of setbacks, tragedies, and defeats, our sun sometimes shines through, smiling.*"¹³

Today, in the aftermath of increased circulation of goods and people and due to events like the Arab Spring as well as the wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, Arab artists create and present their works in exile as well as within the Arab territories. Therefore, when defining the "Arab Art" today, how do you establish its relations with geography and history?

Ziad Adwan: The catastrophic events in many Arab countries have led to controversies. I think that we are facing additional difficulties in the mission of relating art to identity. Syrian identity for instance has been fragmented, and there are several unofficial debates on whether Syrians who reside in France are different from those who are residing in Germany, Turkey, Lebanon, and inside Syria. Perhaps the Syrians in their diaspora lack a collective narrative about the experience of their country (is it a revolution, an Islamic rebellion, or a conspiracy?).

I still find it difficult to define an Arab Art, as it was stated in the answer of the first question, and also as it is proving difficult nowadays when the question of identity, nation-states, and culture is causing more bloodshed than reconciliation. People tend to believe that the model they want to live in is the closest intimate collective memory they share, but I still believe that we are opening up to models of society, identity, and art production that we have not experienced in the previous century.

Houssam Alloum: The presence of the Arab artist in the countries of asylum is a major shift in the character of artistic work. The intellectual and critical reflection that the new life makes it within the radical changes of life priorities, such as returning to school and learning a new language, has changed from the artist's compass. The artist is experiencing a state of confusion between his past adherence and his acceptance of the idea of starting new again in his/her new country. The creation of balance between the present and the past will result in works of art that belong to various cultures. So we can say that Arab art is on its way to universality.

¹³ Ibid., 366-67.

Gregory Buchakhjian: This goes back to our first question. “Arab Art” often applies to the art of the diaspora. Mona Hatoum is at the same time a British artist (a British citizen living in the UK) and an Arab artist. Kader Attia, who is of Algerian origin, was born in France, and never lived in an Arab country, is also a French artist and an Arab artist. The question can also apply to myself, being Lebanese, born and living in Beirut, but of Armenian origin. Am I an Arab artist? An Armenian diaspora artist? I strongly believe that these definitions are mainly practical commodities because people need to put things in boxes.

Lamia Joreige: In response to Na’im İsmail’s words, I am very suspicious of concepts of authenticity when it comes to art, and of nationalism in general. In any case, in today’s globalized world, it is practically impossible to think of art as something separate and not influenced by various worldwide flux and movements. Yet, I do believe in the specificities of experiences, local ones in the geographical sense, and non-local ones in the broader sense – economic systems, war, exile. Exile is particular as it carries at once the local experience of the place left behind, the weight of displacement itself, and the experience of a new place.

I believe that the context in which one lives and works affects greatly one’s practice. On a personal level, my artworks have been rooted in Lebanon’s specific experience – its social and political context – in an attempt to question historical processes.

Walid Sadek: Pursuing the previous thought, the issue is one of chronotope. On the one hand, power and its apparatuses in many countries work in severing time from place. Either by sacralizing the values of an ancient time over the lived values of the present and leading to a reviling of place, or by insisting on defending the sacrality of places at the cost of becoming conservatively anachronistic. Yet, one should not fall into a paralyzing pining for the recombination of place and time, for a chronotope. Rather, one should maintain the critique and make of the chronotope the heading for a critique of power. Perhaps this is one thing artists can keep in mind as they work if exile is avoidable and certainly as a way to avoid a comparative evaluation of their places against a reductive reading of the West as a place that lacks humanity.

Sana Tamzini: Catherine David, Middle East specialist and exhibition curator, recalled that “artists are not born like carrots! They existed before

the Arab Spring, but the revolution made them visible and yet not everywhere. . . What do we know about Libyan artists?"¹⁴ Take the example of Tunisia; during the 2011 revolution called the "Arab Spring" by the Westerners, I witnessed the accelerated emergence of Tunisian visual artists on the international scene. Tunisia was seen as an exception in the Arab world. It was a popular revolution that has caught the attention of the entire world. The country, which has provoked a wave of upheavals, is at a historic turning point, the impact of which is not limited to the Arab countries – it is now spreading to other regions.

Contemporary artistic production in the country has benefited from this international attention. There has never been as much interest in contemporary art in Tunisia as there has been after the revolution. I often had the impression that the contemporary Tunisian artist was discovered by the rest of the world as being a kind of an ambassador. The artist suddenly has to express himself/herself freely and openly about his/her discomforts and fears and especially his/her political opinions. In March of 2012, I discovered a young Tunisian artist, unknown to the national art scene, taking his first steps. Our meeting generated the birth of a collective called *Politiques* (Politics), where 8 artists came together to organize an exhibition in a space belonging to the state, the National Center for Living Art¹⁵ (*Centre National d'Art Vivant*, or CNAV) in a delicate time when Tunisian artists boycotted public institutions. I took charge of this collective during the time I managed CNAV in order to highlight the works of young rebel creators who aimed to share worlds and works and concerns and research that interest them first – not the art market, the media, or curators. At the end of two years, five of them were taken care of by national and international cultural organizations. Nidhal Chamekh was selected at the 54th edition of the Venice Biennale; Ismael had the grand prize at the 2012 FID Marseille International Cinema Festival; and Fakhri El Ghezal has since exhibited at the Dubai Biennale. This instant emergence of barely known artists in their own country suddenly helped them emerge in the local and international art market. Despite the rhetoric they had at the start of their career about refusing to integrate into an art market standardized by aesthetic, economic, and political standards, they found themselves in full joint artistic action.

¹⁴ Patricia Boyer de Latou, "Monde Arabe, les Artistes Font le Printemps."

¹⁵ The National Center for Living Art is a cultural space that belongs to the Tunisian Ministry of Culture. It is a cultural space that provides the public with an exhibition gallery, a media library, as well as a space for the experimentation of contemporary artists.

This new context of the Arab revolutions made it possible to give a new function and a new status to the Arab artist. The artist is forced to carry with him/her these new requirements imposed by an art market. How can he/she put these changes into artistic practice? How can the artist best exploit this possibility of free expression?

It seems important to me to go back to talk about the situation of the visual arts before the Arab revolutions. There were artists, gallery owners, some art critics, some collectors, and curators, as well as cultural representatives of the state such as the Ministry of Culture as well as public institutions and a restricted audience, which consists of what we call the intellectual elites. Artists were marginalized by political power for fear of having an important aura to influence a large audience.

The political system was holding on to the fact that no artist would have a large audience and recognition at the local as well as international level. Because of this marginalization of the artist in his own country, there was a gap between the artist and the general public. Authoritarian regimes in Arab countries are responsible for this. After years of confinement of the artist and censorship of works of art, art must go out into public space and interact with a wider audience. Art movements have been formed, collectives have been brought together, and new mediums of art have been experimented. Interactivity with the public was emphasized in order to create a new social dynamic. The public was thirsty for new artistic expressions. Ahl al-Kahf¹⁶ took over public space from the earliest days of the Tunisian revolution and participated in protest movements through artistic actions. The members of this movement declare in their founding manifesto: “If you pass by a street and find, on a wall, one of the works of Ahl al-Kahf, put your signature on it. It is said that the work of art derives its value and price from the signature.”¹⁷ They say their movement is not Tunisian, Egyptian, or of any other nationality. It’s an epidemic that spreads through contagion. Ahl al-Kahf adopts any action of laceration of advertising posters or destruction of mercantile signs as well as the demolition of everything that comes under the consumerist “good taste.” This open call by artists, which invites the public to interact with urban works and to appropriate them, is a first in Tunisia. Street art, photography, graffiti, and comics really exploded after the revolution, thanks to political openness and new spaces for free expression. Politics

¹⁶ Ahl al-Kahf (Friends of the Cave) is an arts collective, active on public space, which emerged during the revolution in Tunisia.

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/أهل-الكهف-ahl-alkahf/>
ahl-al-kahf-manifeste-fondateur-transition-fr/387506547996340. Accessed January 13, 2020.

and art have this in common that they both permeate city life. But if politics regulates this life, art, on the contrary, liberates it.

Liwaa Yazji: This takes us back to the first question when talking about the term itself and if something like pure Arab Art exists in the first place, or even should exist!

The idea of establishing a relation with geography and history is a matter of question here. Why should an artist be defined as a Syrian artist or an Egyptian artist? Or how can it be defined in this age that an artist is a Tunisian one depending only on what and how he/she practices his/her art? Does that mean as a Lebanese artist you are not supposed to address Iraqi themes? Or should only use so-called Lebanese art techniques – if they ever even existed?

Being outside the geography he/she belongs to, does it turn an artist into a representative? Where do limits of geography end and where does the individual experience start? I feel it is rather a lifetime of questions rather than already-existing answers. Each artist should take his/her own journey to navigate and come up with his/her own special mix. It is rather very critical these days to use geography in identifying artists since politics has a cynical role to play in shaping the quality of productions according to political notions; adding here and diminishing there in an era where an art production can be part of a bigger game, creating thus more false heroes and deforming the artistic scenes, or vice versa.

It is perfectly understood when a Syrian artist wants to indulge in Syrian themes, but the bitter fact is when the market limits its appetite to such elements, imprisoning certain nationalities in expected themes (and nothing more) or when it praises art for just being Syrian or Yemeni addressing a just cause no matter how mediocre it might be.

It is important for an artist to know where he/she comes from, but for that matter, it is good for a lawyer to know that as well. Of course, humanities have more relations to notions like history and geography, but I still don't believe they should be the first to ring a bell when seeing an art piece.

[Artist Imad Habbab preferred to give one answer to all three questions]

Imad Habbab (artist/painter): It is important to be aware of the meaning and effect when labeling “Arabic Art.” For me, art as a human product must be received via its individuality, free from the assumptions that it contains, e.g. orientalism and its reactions.

Optically, a human being receives information way faster than through the other senses. So the visual language will be hard to limit – or even

localize – by calling it the art of a specific region, when visual communication today has no borders and wider possibilities than ever. Naming art regionally is about feeding cases and considerations, which are in the opposite direction of the purpose of art. We find this awareness with the art associations that have started in the “Middle East” and “Arabic region,” when they were including artworks internationally, reflecting a humanization of art. Cultural awareness – which comes from the individual – is important to avoid falling into the trap of the inverted orientalism, which turns the art scene into identical crisis, emptied of its human essence.

The past decade carried many artworks and masterpieces, shaped by the events of its time, especially post revolutions. Covering and documenting the scattered experiences in exile is a big responsibility on the side of art associations. In addition to that is the importance of building a conscious and prepared society to receive and preserve these intellectual products, when cultural and social awareness are priceless.

Urgencies and Emergences

*Finally the electricity is back on (it has been cut out for long durations for quite some time now) and finally . . . the internet is back on. . . . As soon as I finish this mail I will join a group to protest in front of a police station. . . . where one of our friends is arrested. Her only accusation was the fact that she protested loudly in the bank when she was declined from withdrawing a small sum of her own money, she desperately needed . . . she was locked into a small room at the bank until the police arrived.*¹⁸

In times of war, political unrest, and economic crisis, one faces several urgencies. Urgencies that are impossible to put off. Urgencies that make a sound analysis questionable. Urgencies that are exemplified in the likes of the quote above, where financial capital and the state are walking in arms, one fusing into the other. The world as we know it is getting blurred in our region. And yet, these are the urgencies from which a sound discourse and artistic production continue to emerge. In a way, even if the contexts were different, this has been the case before and it continues to be. The collection of essays in the *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* was one testament to this fact and the answers we have collected in response to our questionnaire are another.

¹⁸ From a personal correspondence of one of the potential participants with the authors, describing the situation they were in at their home country in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The common threads that emerged from the questionnaire were several. First of all, it is problematic and even impossible to talk about an “Arab Art” today, especially since, as Walid Sadek put it, this requires the dismantling and critiquing of the figure of the Arab as a colonial figure first. Secondly, the relation of arts to society and market has exploded into many fine particles today, so much so that the questioning of an artist’s relation to his/her society as well as the relationship between an artist’s individuality and the market are almost irrelevant, making it hard to separate one from the other. An unknown artist can be famous in an instant through market conjuncture; or a well-recognized artist can choose to pull himself/herself out of the market on purpose. Thirdly, we do not any longer know who is *in* or belongs to one place, and who is not.¹⁹ Among the Arabic-speaking artists there are many who are living outside of their countries, whether by choice or necessity. While orientalism still lingers, self-orientalizing is not an issue, nor is occidentalism. East and West are not such clear binary oppositions anymore. The labels are not sticking to where they were once placed.

And finally, we ponder whether it makes more sense to talk about a Mediterranean inter-culturality of a *mundus cultura* rather than a mere region or a simple basin containing intertwined layers of beliefs and expressions from various civilizations that fought with and lived together. However, especially during these times of urgencies the bigger questions still remain: Who is an artist? What are his/her responsibilities?

¹⁹This is why we decided not to mention any countries right next to the names of our participants.