

## SPECIAL FOCUS

# IS THERE A CANON? ARTISTIC MODERNISMS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES

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## On Language and Modern Art: A Reflection

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### Abstract

*This essay, written collectively by the co-editors of the publication Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents (2018), provides an account of the book's conception, institutional backing, and multi-year process of research and editing. The authors reflect in particular on the translational politics that obtain in the global art world and the museum sector as well as the academic study of the modern Middle East.*

**Keywords:** modern art, Arab world, translation, archives, globalization

The word “artwork” appears only once in the 426 pages of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*.<sup>1</sup> As we learned from the copy editors at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, art publishers consider the phrase “work of art” to be preferable.<sup>2</sup> And so it is that the 126 texts in *Modern Art in the Arab World* (hereafter MAAW), spanning the

<sup>1</sup> *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018). As of April 2020, the volume is available online as a free, downloadable PDF: <https://mo.ma/2V3pfUy>.

<sup>2</sup> Email correspondence, March 30, 2017.

years 1882 to 1989, mobilize the phrase “work of art” dozens of times, using it (and not “artwork”) to render references to “l’oeuvre d’art,” “al-‘amal al-fannī,” “al-āthār al-fannī,” “opera artistica,” and other designations for aesthetic entities, into the English language. Crucially, in its repetition, the phrase also does work in shuttling between modernist possibilities. It and other conventions of speech help to put the texts of artists who worked in differing places and ideological conditions into the contemporary standards of English-language modern art writing, enacting transpositions that are necessary if readers are to be brought into a space of listening to testimony they would not otherwise be asked to consider.

With this short essay, we are pleased to have the opportunity to reflect on the process of compiling and editing *MAAW*, a process that required many kinds of movement along the lines of incommensurability that underpin the art worlds of the twentieth century (the arena from which *MAAW* draws its texts) and the twenty-first (the arena of our current professional lives). Certainly, matters of translation were hardly far from the minds of the writers whose texts we chose for the book. For instance, the term “opera artistica” is deployed by Egyptian artist and diplomat Salah Kamel in an Italian-language text he wrote to introduce the pavilion for the United Arab Republic at the 1960 Venice Biennale, an occasion requiring him to promote ideas of fortuitous union between Egyptian and Syrian artists. Many authors signaled, whether by means of vocabulary choice, intertextual references, or outright citation, that they were thinking alongside others in an international community. Nevertheless, we found that a survey project of translation such as *MAAW* put ongoing problems of likeness and difference into especially acute relief. As the book finds its way onto office shelves and course syllabi, it seems appropriate to return to consider the *modus operandi* we developed as we went and to address what it enabled and what it suppressed.

We begin by speaking to some of the institutional background for the book: the perceived hegemony of MoMA as a *de facto* author of “modernism” may not be as familiar to specialists in fields as it is to those of us in history of art. Published in the summer of 2018, *MAAW* is the eighth volume in the now nine-volume Primary Documents series of the International Program at MoMA, which is dedicated to making historical source materials available in English translation, often for the first time. The first, *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*, was published in 2002. Each volume is pitched as a scholarly resource geared toward students of global art history who wish to engage with art from countries or regions outside of North America

and Western Europe with the help of signal eye-witness accounts by the makers of this art. The volumes are also research projects in their own right, of course, requiring teams of skilled translators and subject advisors, not to mention funded meetings and archival visits. As such, we learned that the Primary Documents series occupies a novel position within the MoMA enterprise. Its home is not with the curatorial offices. Rather, it resides with the International Program, an office established in 1952 as an agent of Cold War diplomacy and overseas exhibitions. In its current configuration, the International Program has no exhibition remit and is relatively distanced from curatorial decisions at the museum, instead working on education and exchange programming. This separation proves relevant to the question of whether our publication can be said to augur any shifts in the museum's approach to collection, or portend buying blitzes in the region.<sup>3</sup> From discussions with directors and curators, we came to understand that the museum saw its own curatorial staff as a constituency that would benefit from the translations, yet it envisioned no direct correlation between the book and its decisions about acquisitions. What the book *did* contribute to MoMA's planning, however, was an occasion to cultivate new funders in the (flexible) framework of knowledge production.

Equally significantly, our thinking about the *MAAW* volume predated its association with the Museum of Modern Art. We first began discussing ideas for a sourcebook in 2008, at which time we imagined it as a collective project undertaken by the membership of our professional organization, Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA, founded in 2007). At that juncture in the development of the field, we enjoyed a sufficient foundation of studies – including Silvia Naef's *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (which features translations of some selected Arabic-language manifestos into French) and Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art* – to design university courses on modern art in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Yet we worried that our teaching, and particularly

<sup>3</sup>On the MoMA's collection, including assessment of gaps and responsibility to fill them, see discussions of the museum's temporary rehang of some galleries in response to the 2017 "Muslim ban" enacted by President Donald Trump, and reviews of its 2019 comprehensive rehang. Shiva Balaghi, "MoMA's Travel Ban Protest Exposes a Legacy of Closeted Modernism," *hyperallergic.com*, March 15, 2017; Kirsten Scheid, "Installation Following the Executive Order of January 27, 2017," *H-AMCA*, August 2017; Helen Molesworth, "The New Moma," *Artforum*, January 2020.

<sup>4</sup>In 2007, the year of AMCA's founding, the list of teachable art historical volumes included Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art: The Emergence of a National Style* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1988); Salwa Mikdadi, ed., *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, exh. Cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994); Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe*:

our ability to make artist debates come alive, was hampered by our students' inability to access the materials on which the studies were based (the majority of which circulated only in excerpted and untranslated form). In the absence of opportunity to assign students such challenging texts as Muhammad Abduh's "fatwa" or the Baghdad Group for Modern Art's manifesto, it remained difficult to push them beyond such flattening analytical frames as the clash of "East" and "West." What's more, we thought that a sourcebook might help alleviate the difficulties faced by young scholars entering the field. Because many AMCA members were involved in mapping the locations of relevant archives in the region, we were aware of vast logistical barriers to accessing original material. The upfront expense involved in cultivating the necessary connections to locate research collections is such that any researcher who succeeds in befriending a family or a key bureaucrat can easily slip into an entrepreneurial mode, guarding sources in proprietary fashion. We wanted to find a way for scholars to share the evidence on which their arguments rested without risking being scooped.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, we considered a form of crowdsourcing. Each AMCA member would identify the primary document most important to their published or soon-to-be-published work, and we would prepare translations and publish the primary and secondary sources together. We submitted an application to the Arab Fund

*l'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1996); Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert, *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912-1965* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005); Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007). Key articles included Kamal Boullata, "Artists Re-Member Palestine in Beirut," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32.4 (Summer 2003): 22-38; and Stephen Sheehi, "Modernism, Anxiety and the Ideology of Arab Vision," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 28.1 (2006): 72-97. Important histories of modern art in North Africa by scholars such as Anissa Bouayed were also available, albeit in French. Finally, the quarterly online journal for the New York cultural platform ArteEast had begun to publish translations; in Winter 2008, Kirsten Scheid and Jessica Winegar put together a feature on Syrian modern artist Louay Kayyali that debuted two translations of his writing (trans. Hiba Morcos). We made grateful use of important Arabic-language studies by Ismail Shammout, Afif Bahnassi, and others in our own work, but could not assign these works because of the language gap.

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the College Art Association, our professional body, has written the sentiment that there should be "full, free, equal, and nondiscriminatory access to materials for all qualified art historians" into its Standards for the Practice of Art History document (rev. 2014). In a section titled "Rights of access to information and responsibilities of art historians," the association vests art historians with the "moral obligation to share the discovery of primary source material with his or her colleagues and serious students." The scholar retains only material of an *interpretive* nature – generated by the examination of source material – as intellectual property. The formulation is neither universally shared nor universally applicable, but it does articulate a professional standard for the practice of art history in the United States.

for Arts and Culture in 2009, and discussed possibilities with Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, albeit without success in either endeavor.

Eventually, the project found a home with the International Program at MoMA and its Primary Documents series – a connection initially brokered through relatively informal conversations at symposia and conferences on the subject of archives and art, then developed over time (it was formalized with a signed contract only in 2014). By the time the program invited us to submit a proposal, we had realized that the core audience for a sourcebook was going to be educators and researchers working in English. We were also acutely aware of the expenses involved in good translation work, a specialized intellectual undertaking that must be compensated accordingly. The Primary Documents series offered the project a structure and meaningful resources, and we were thrilled by the prospect of collaboration. At the same time, we knew the change of venue reopened questions about the kind of representation the book could be expected to give to modern art in the Arab world. For one, because the preceding volumes in the Primary Documents series had roughly followed a country- and region-specific rubric, our criteria for selecting texts started to shift. Whereas our earliest brainstorming about the table of contents had involved scouring the footnotes of already published literature in English to identify the sources on which arguments rested, we now felt challenged to cover more of the historical terrain we designated as the Arab world, a loose assembly of Arabic-speaking countries and diasporic communities. We worried, for instance, that excluding a country risked giving the readers the incorrect impression that no artistic activity had occurred there. This extended our research phase by several years, at times lending it its own crazed acquisitive quality. We requested microfilm journals, undertook library expeditions in Cairo and Beirut, pored over scrapbook collections, wrote to friends (and strangers), and convened consultative meetings with artists and critics to whom we posed questions meant to prompt them to recall the intellectual coordinates of their twenty-year-old selves: “What was the first major exhibition you attended?” “Do you remember denouncing or disputing any texts?” We recruited Ismail Fayed to work with us as associate editor, and later Kareem James Abu-Zeid as senior translation editor, and they in turn assembled a team of more than a dozen skilled translators. Numerous colleagues graciously helped in a consultative capacity. As an outcome of these canvassing efforts, we learned that most of us were better equipped to identify key *artists* than to identify key *texts*.

Equally significant for the eventual shape of the book, the format of Primary Documents prompted us to seek a certain quality of writing, giving preference to exhortative modes of expression, such as the manifesto, over biographical, exegetical, and other kinds of prose. As we worked to develop selection criteria that would be responsible to the material itself, we found ourselves returning to a shared aspiration as a guide. We wanted the anthology to prompt readers to bear witness to the creative, critical convictions of artists in the Arab world and to recognize the robustness of their participation in world debates. This meant that the volume needed to stand on texts with sufficient rhetorical élan to convey the excitement of their moment, including the thrill of the challenge of giving expression to perceptual experience. These parameters were not without controversy. Several of our colleagues raised questions about representativeness of the manifesto format as but one kind of art writing in a wider regional corpus. Might pedagogical writing have served as the real arena for announcing new convictions about art in its modern formations? We wrestled with such questions, and we took care to bring different kinds of writing into the book (guestbook entries, some literary criticism, more artist interviews), but we did not entirely abandon our preference for declarative writing. After all, some artists – particularly those with roles in national cultural administrations – had undertaken their own anthology projects and had themselves privileged the manifesto. Perhaps the best-known such collection is Shakir Hassan Al Said's *al-Bayānāt al-Fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (*Art Manifestos in Iraq*), a volume devoted to texts by Iraqi modern artists that he edited in the 1970s, and which appeared precisely as Iraq's cultural ministry was massively funding promotional efforts at home and abroad.<sup>6</sup> In the end, we made similar decisions, selecting texts that conveyed a sense of speaking to a zeitgeist. We excluded review articles that merely reported on exhibitions and put aside the large volume of biographical writing about individual artists' careers. This is not to claim that such modes of writing fell outside the realm of art history; to the contrary, we recognize that they formed the very habits of thought that gave meaning to artistic techniques and works in specific moments. But, we continued to favor declarations because we had experience teaching with historical documents collected in such volumes as *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* and *Islamic Art and Visual Culture: An Anthology of Sources*, and knew that other kinds of writing are less well served by the Primary Documents format.

<sup>6</sup> Shakir Hassan Al Said, *al-Bayānāt al-Fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-ʿIlām, 1973).

Similarly, when it came time to write contextual notes for the final list of selected texts, we made choices meant to usher readers into the urgency of that moment's debates without rehearsing subsequent arguments about their historical stakes, with the hope that this would make space to perceive the contingency of the positions. Take the example of Iraqi artist Jewad Selim's diary entries, 1941–45, which the artist's colleagues published after his death. When we first drafted notes to introduce the text in the book, we made reference to the fact that Selim went on to find recognition as a pioneering figure in developing ways to take inspiration from national heritage in his art. During later revisions, however, we decided to remove the sentences previewing subsequent developments. Our final version instead mentions the undecided nature of national trajectories amid clashes between world powers and the paradoxical cultural conditions of the Allied forces' occupation of Iraq. With these choices, we sought to uphold the spirit of "primary source" in its most radical sense of meanings that are not-yet-settled by historical consensus. By tactically bracketing the existing historiography, would it be possible to forge other narratives?

All of which returns us to the anecdote about "good style" with which we opened this essay, and the questions it introduces for historians of modern art who wish to pursue research in a global frame. To what degree can the stylistic conventions by which we and other art historians in North Atlantic academia expect to consume modernist texts – deeply disciplinary and ideological, and focused on a singular "work of art" as distinct from broad categories like artwork – be imposed on the concerns expressed by authors who wrote under different circumstances? In the two years since the publication of the book, we have fielded important critical questions about the stakes of preparing these texts for smoother transnational circulation. Some reviewers have asked whether, regardless of the scholarly merit (or lack thereof) of the contents of *MAAW*, the project serves to prop up a vexed and specifically *contemporary* museum project of global hyper-visibility. They expressed interest in the ways that MoMA seems determined to move its operations beyond the old modernist internationalism for which it stood, and some took the Primary Documents series as a bellwether in a "literal drive toward the accumulation of source data," signaling a new cultural politics based upon emptied-out gestures of inclusion and diversity.<sup>7</sup> There is a level at which these concerns seem slightly misplaced to us. Can any one entity really be said to acquire a

<sup>7</sup> Mostafa Heddaya, "Critical Eye: Doxing the Modern," *Art in America* (February 2019).

text? Few of the texts translated in the book ever existed as private, singular communications, and nor were they written in the absence of an expectation of circulation. Most were published in journals with a wide and distributed readership, or posted (or recited) at exhibitions visited by many people, local and foreign. Indeed, they had always been available to multiple readers, albeit as potentially recalcitrant texts that revealed meaning only to those determined scholars who immersed themselves in the world of difficult, portmanteau-riddled Arabophone and Francophone writing about plastic arts. Still, the larger point about the violence of translation is well taken. To transpose these texts into the standards of American museum prose is to project a kind of provisional commensurability.

In our own thinking about the power imbalance of making things visible in our time, we confess to having taken comfort in the book's focus on language over collectible, aestheticized things. Whereas a museum's efforts to scout out "global" works of art for acquisition or display might ordinarily pass through art experts and dealers, or follow such context-less considerations as works' formal affinities with styles in New York or Paris, the Primary Documents initiative seems to provide an opportunity (or, at least, the approximation of an opportunity) to listen into conversations and hear the value judgments passed by now-deceased practitioners and critics in *their* own times, and their own regimes of value. Indeed, in the nearly twenty years since MoMA inaugurated the Primary Documents series, the number of documentary exhibitions staged at museums has been on the rise. At present, a new generation of curators, art publishers, and even auction houses now opt to reproduce documentary material *as* material, presenting the tattered edges of blue mimeograph typescripts as aesthetic objects that prompt a nostalgia for the thingliness of the intellectual enterprise prior to the digital age.<sup>8</sup> The Primary Documents series, by contrast, retains its translator-guided focus on concepts over things. The texts in *MAAW* appear on the page in an unremarkable serif font, thereby signaling little interest in commodifying purportedly original appearances.

<sup>8</sup>The curatorial duo Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath have produced a number of well-received exhibitions making use of both art and documents include (see, for instance, *Tea with Nefertiti: The making of an artwork by the artist, the museum and the public* and *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)*), as has Morad Montazami (*Arabecedaire: Hamed Abdalla and New Waves: Mohamed Melehi and the Casablanca Art School Archives*). See also the integration of archival material into *Ten Stories*, an exhibition of the permanent collection of the Sursock Museum, Beirut. Finally, we noted with interest the inclusion of typescripts and newspaper clippings in the catalogue to the June 2018 sale held by CMOOA (Compagnie Marocaine des Œuvres et Objet d'art) in Casablanca. We draw these examples from the regions of the Middle East and North Africa, but this kind of archival turn may be observed elsewhere as well.



In the end, the view of translation we held most dear, and the one we hoped could do the most strategic work, was the view that insisted that we ourselves must be changed by the translational act, as must “our” texts. It is our contention that the task of compiling *MAAW* should involve not only the transformation of the objects to be translated, but also the transformation of we who might receive them, accommodate them, and recognize themselves against (or within) them. Here, our recognition that the book is directed toward scholars working in English-speaking environments is again worthy of comment, even as we know and expect that other readers will use the book in other ways. As we wrote in our editorial essay, we wanted readers to relinquish their lingering presumptions about the superiority of modernism in the North Atlantic states so that they could instead place themselves among artists and critics in the Arab world who had grappled with similar presumptions.<sup>9</sup> This is a quality of interpenetrated historicity – incomplete, yet still perceptible – that we know impacted the artist-interlocutors in the book and their practice of self-translation. Should it not have an impact on us as well? These authors told located stories and waged their debates in precise political contexts, all while recognizing their inscription in international developments and change. We felt that the responsible and self-reflexive art historians of our own moment must be called to do the same.

As we proceeded in this project, we saw the texts in *MAAW* as emerging not from a wholly separate tradition or alternative modernism, but instead from a folded, polyglot modernism in which different historical formations communicate with one another. We certainly hope that the primary outcome of the preparation of these texts for a global readership of curators and students will not be the endless, frictionless, surface circulation of terms and names. Instead, we hope that these histories enter readers’ own lives, finding incorporation in critical retellings of the modernism of many.

<sup>9</sup> See also the parameters for a new research agenda proposed by Kirsten Scheid in “The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity,” *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* 7 (Spring 2007): 6–23.