

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents: A Review Essay

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The study of modern and contemporary art from Islamic lands, and particularly the Arab world, is a developing field. Over the past few decades, a variety of publications on modern and contemporary art from the Arab world and its diasporas has appeared in art magazines, journals, and exhibition and auction catalogues. There is, however, still a lack of scholarly literature and reliable resources on the subject. Many such existing sources have focused on productions that are largely in line with certain interests or agendas pursued by the particular magazine/journal, exhibition, or art market in question. Therefore, although recent scholarly output has played a crucial role in introducing modern art in the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, these publications have not sufficiently filled the gap of discussion regarding certain aspects of the subject. *Modern Art in the Arab World*, a collection of critical writings by Arab intellectuals and artists, offers an unparalleled source for the study of modernism in the Arab world. Mapping the primary documents with additional entries written by the editors and other scholars, this book addresses the major historical, conceptual, theoretical, and aesthetic issues that inform the modern art paradigm in the Arab world. Arranged largely in a chronological order, it explores the art of the Arab world by tracing the main discourses that have shaped artistic practices and transformations in the region from the mid-nineteenth century until the late 1980s.

The volume's editors are all experts in the field, each one specializing in a major country in the region. Anneka Lenssen is assistant professor of global modern art at the History of Art Department, University of California, Berkeley, and is a specialist in visual practices and cultural politics in the modern Middle East. She has published scholarly works on modern art in

the Arab world and, in particular, painting and politics in Syria. Sarah Rogers is an independent scholar who has extensively written on the modern and contemporary art of the Arab world, with a focus on Lebanon during and after the country's civil war. Nada Shabout is professor of art history at the University of North Texas and curator and founding president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey. Her wide-ranging writings cover topics including Arab Art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a specialization in modern Iraqi art.

Published in 2018 by the Museum of Modern Art's (MoMA) International Program, the book comprises 464 pages, including some 125 texts together with 49-color and 51-black-and-white images. The texts consist of manifestos, essays, transcripts of roundtable discussions, diary entries, letters, and guest-book comments. The book begins with a comprehensive introduction followed by an extremely insightful essay on "The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World" by Ussama Makdisi.

According to the foreword notes by Glenn D. Lowry, the Director of MoMA, the book is the eighth volume in a series of documentary anthologies, called Primary Documents, which began in 2002. The series aims to offer "meticulous English translations, accompanied by contextual background essays, of key art historical source materials that have previously been available only in their original languages."¹ It provides an opportunity for readers to trace the ways that ideas of the "modern" have developed across the various geographic regions covered by the related volumes. The series also demonstrates the routes that are generally determined by broadly local demands.² Lowry emphasizes that "affinities and differences that make up the global history of modernism are of vital importance" to the Primary Documents project.³

Drawn from more than a dozen countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates, the volume comprises primary texts, including some unpublished writings found in almost-inaccessible archives, incomplete texts, and out-of-print journals. The writings consist of manifestos, journal articles, notes from artists' unions, critical writings

¹ Glenn D. Lowry, "Foreword," 13 in *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>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

on biennials, and notes on newly passed legislation as well as attitudes reflected in various types of public media from art exhibitions and festivals to press and symposia.⁴ The book pairs these with sixteen newly commissioned essays, spread throughout the volume and which offer commentaries about the broader cultural, social, and political contexts surrounding the primary documents.⁵ The added commentary includes essays by relevant scholars on key terms and events along with personal reflections by modern artists who were themselves active in the historical development of modern art in the Arab world. The volume is chronologically framed and shows dynamic experimentation “across media, accounts of artists’ engagements with political mobilizations and upheavals, and diverse ideas about how modern art relates to the abundant visual and cultural traditions of the broad sections of the Middle East and North Africa that constitute the modern Arab world.”⁶

The documents uncover the development of a global modernism through discussions on key issues such as originality, Arab nationalism, postcolonial exhibition politics, public space, and art and spiritualism. Negotiating nation-states, diasporas, and notional cultural and political associations, the documents span a full century of writing about art from 1882 to 1987. This century reveals crucial developments in the Arab countries, such as the formation of academic art institutions resulting in the authorization of certain artistic convention – some of which were later challenged by avant-garde movements.

The book starts with a comprehensive introduction written by the editors in which they explore the contents, methodology, selection strategies, arrangement, language, and translation. The volume, they write, is devoted “to documenting the tremendous discursive energies of modern artists and critics who lived and worked in the Arabic-speaking regions of the Middle East and North Africa.”⁷ As the introduction confirms, while a majority of the texts raises broad questions about originality and the process of creating modern works and artistic values, moral authority, and public space, a number of them moreover argue against conformist or dishonest critics and the hesitancy of their audiences within particular art scenes.⁸

The editors furthermore deal with the key, but controversial, term of the “Arab world” – “the region of history and experience from which these texts

⁴ Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Neda Shabout, “Introduction: About this Book,” 18.

⁵ Lowry, “Foreword,” 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lenssen, “Introduction,” 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*

are drawn.”⁹ They argue that in modern geopolitical terms, the term may be “loosely” defined as a grouping of majority Arabic-speaking nation-states in the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁰ At the same time, however, they address the fact that “[t]he region itself is remarkably heterogeneous, including multiple ethnic groups, sects, languages, and other kinds of difference, allowing for a gamut of types of filiation and federation.” Along with this, they add that “[i]mportant for its bearing upon our study of modernism beyond its North Atlantic frameworks, the Arab world has served to designate potential affinities and common sets of practices that predate its divisions during the Cold War era into nation-states and ideologies, which so often pitted East against West and North against South as concrete blocs.”¹¹ In the subsequent pages the editors highlight the issue of Arab identity by referring to Nada Shabout’s notes on the modern conception of Arab identity as a “performative meta-category of political or cultural unity.” It is sometimes exposed as a chosen affinity on the part of an artist, and at other times as a top-down platform for unity supported by a political movement, party, or bloc.¹² The editors continue by saying that “[i]ts mobilization as an identifier that is both active and shifting, then has tended to privilege recognizably ‘Arab’ art.”¹³ They provide an example of this mobilization during the 1950s and 1960s when the military regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria were involved in building a notion of pan-Arab cultural collectivity and their cultural officials emphasized characteristic Arab motifs as sources of indigenous “symbolologies.”¹⁴

As for their definition of the time period constituting modern Arab art, the editors argue that “[t]his is by no means a neatly bracketed history. Accordingly, we take the 1987 end date of this collection to be both arbitrary and not. On one hand, 1987 marks a line of distinction between what might be understood as *the modern* – art as one part of an active and ongoing process of modernization (with all the notions of ‘progress’ that word implies) – and our contemporary moment, in which art is thought to work in a more coeval and nonlinear mode.”¹⁵ As for geopolitical changes

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art, Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

¹³ Lenssen, “Introduction,” 21.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 23

and their relation to the concluding date of the collection, the editors maintain that it marks the eve of the end of the Cold War, and the attendant growth of a global art market was in progress. Moreover, this date coincides with a number of distinct junctures in the region, including the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq war, the 1982 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, and the beginning of the first Palestinian Intifada in December 1987. They further argue that the Intifada, in particular, injected a hope for the potential of joint action to generate social and political justice. This was an influential movement in artistic activism in the region and it makes for an appropriate end to the era described as modern.¹⁶

According to the introduction, the main criteria for the selection of primary sources were that they should “offer direct access to a particular claim or attitude undergoing active development” or act as “compliments in a rich and manifold history of questions, assertions, debates, and declared possibilities.”¹⁷ Based on this idea, texts have been drawn from the most extensive possible variety of formats and settings, including “position papers and manifestos, interviews, speeches, diary entries, exhibition guest registers, and hitherto unpublished manuscript drafts.”¹⁸ As a result of applying this criteria and prioritizing the “direct testimony of *primary* documents,” several journalistic writings by key critics in the region were not included. The editors justify the absence of those seminal sources by maintaining that they functioned as “a secondary literature devoted to crafting retrospective historical assessments,” and thus fell outside the scope of the Primary Documents series.¹⁹

The texts offer access to a history of art writing as “a series of short entries in a system of diffuse but meaningful linkages.” The book, then, decisively evades postulating “causal relations” between its texts. No particular timeline of political and cultural events was included as part of the contextual system in this book. Rather, political backgrounds and militarized interruptions are interwoven within the text.²⁰ Based on a contextual arrangement applied throughout the book, the primary documents are organized in a generally chronological order. The texts are grouped into collections, including group conversations in particular cities and debates on specific initiatives or common encounters with a

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 22.

²⁰ Ibid.

particular circumstance. In the beginning of each section, brief records offer information about the contributors of the following texts, the original venue of each text, and its possible readership.²¹

A stimulating point revealed by *Modern Art in the Arab World*, also noted by the editors in the introduction, is the issue of language and coloniality in art texts. Apart from Arabic as the main language of the primary texts, almost a full third of the sources included in the volume were written and published in French, a language associated with coloniality, particularly in North Africa (as well as Lebanon). For example, it became a question in postcolonial Morocco, where intellectuals spoke openly about the choice of language “as a fraught negotiation within perceived oppositions of colonizer and colonized as an anxious intervention.”²² Interestingly, in the 1960s, members of the Casablanca Group and other Moroccan intellectuals raised similar questions, criticizing their own identities and cultural practices after colonialism. They wrote about different strategies for resisting foreign education and suggested the creation of a national culture open to more abstract rational forms.²³

In the volume’s first article, “The Marking and Unmarking of the Arab World,” Professor of Arab Studies Ussama Makdisi offers a rich historical examination of the region’s linked political and cultural developments during the twentieth century. He traces the history of debates on the Arab imaginary, emphasizing how an initial awareness of Arab polity developed from the shifting power trajectories of the late Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as Arab intellectuals realized a need for a collective identity to distinguish the Arabic-speaking zones from other parts of the Ottoman Empire.²⁴

Although the early writings on art date back to the beginning of the 1860s, when a number of intellectuals in Egypt and greater Syria commenced a mission of ontological revitalization that came to be identified as the Arab Renaissance (*al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya*),²⁵ the first text included in the book, “*Taswir, Peinture, Painting*” by *Nahda* intellectual Butrus al-Bustani, was written in Beirut in 1882. After introductory definitions of the three terms, the text ends with al-Bustani’s invitation to the readers to envisage the development of fine arts in the Arab countries.²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ Ussama Makdisi, “The Marking and Unmarking of the Arab World,” 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 18, 19.

²⁶ Butrus al-Bustani, “*Taswir, Peinture, Painting*,” 36.

The earlier texts visibly indicate the demands for collective initiatives in the Arab art world, particularly in Egypt, greater Syria, and Algeria. The earliest documents from North African countries in the book are petitions that were written in French by Algerian and Moroccan artists during the 1920s. They were directed to colonial authorities, affirming local cultural vision as a resource within a scheme that could further other programs. These texts were mostly authored by renowned figures of the time, mainly painters or sculptors, who wrote these petitions as a way to show their cultural and political adhesion with fellow leading intellectuals and their European counterparts. They reflect the zeitgeist as critics and artists were trying to articulate “modernism” as a global project. The writings also demonstrate how the authors grapple with the question of how to attach local modernism to historical modernism.

Several texts in this volume offer alternative prospects for the social supports of making and viewing art. These texts reveal how sociopolitical spirits affected art and artistic engagements. A good example is the manifesto of the Algerian Group of the Lettrist International in 1953. The brief radical text declares a rejection of taking part in any society because “the police are the supreme force in all societies.”²⁷ By rejecting not only French imperialism, but also all other organized desires within the world system to construct this system, it in fact demands the defeat of the French occupation of Algeria.²⁸ Another remarkable example is the entry on “Art after the Algerian Revolution”²⁹ which stimulatingly contextualizes the art movements and trends in the period after the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62).

One of the more noticeable editorial choices is the inclusion of materials that address ongoing evaluations and criteria of art – rather than solely those that speak to formal and thematic concerns – that help better our understanding of the construction of modernisms across differentials of resources and beliefs. A good example is the famous 1904 fatwa of the Egyptian Imam Muhammad Abduh, which presents the authority of image-making as a civilizational tool of education and preservation. This fatwa challenges the typical understandings of the hadith that those who are involved in making images will be punished on Judgment Day.³⁰

Indeed, a sensible strategy applied in the volume is the addition of contemporary writings to the primary documents. By this means, the

²⁷ Cheikh Ben Dhine, Mohamed Dahou, Ismail Ali Djafer, “Manifesto,” 163.

²⁸ Lenssen, “Introduction,” 20.

²⁹ See pages 229–40.

³⁰ Muhammad Abduh, “Images and Status, Their Benefits and Legality,” 42.

editors aimed to address certain key thematic questions and historical enterprises in the modern art of the Arab world that were not fully elucidated in those early documents. These entries, dispersed throughout the volume at related chronological stages, include essays by experts in the relevant fields providing additional information about particular contexts or discourses. They appear in two forms: the “In Focus” texts containing short historical studies written by anthropologies, art and architectural historians, literary and Middle Eastern studies experts, and film and design studies scholars; and the “Personal Reflections,” which include texts written by key figures in the modern art movement of the Arab world and provide personal viewpoints that act as another primary historical record. In addition, the other extremely helpful editorial strategy is the inclusion of introductory texts prior to the primary sources in each section. They provide insightful information and contextualize the framework in which the writing was produced.

Another strong point of the *Modern Art in the Arab World* is the inclusion of rich visual materials. The editors have meticulously selected artworks – mostly unpublished – documentary photos, and other illustrations, which complement and contextualize the related text. The works of art featured in the book are carefully selected to address the direct connection to the texts.

Following each translated text, in the postscript citation lines, places of publication, authors’ names, and titles of texts have been fully transliterated. It is indeed a useful addition and provides excellent information for specialists who wish to further research the original sources.

As with all primary source volumes, not all entries stand equally. Some are more collective and important, such as manifestos and notes on social- or political-related artistic trends or movements. Some are very personal accounts, such as texts written by artists or interviews in which at times the language is too abstract or locally specific to follow the contents. Although in the section on “Notes on Language and Translation” in the Introduction, the editors claim the translations are intended “to offer Anglophone readers a lively and fluid reading experience, and to provide prose that is sufficiently eloquent to allow them to engage fully with the ideas and arguments presented,”³¹ on occasions the translations fail to fully establish the engagement. For example, the reasoning behind the decision on several occasions to use the term “new art” instead of modern art remains unclear. However, it is not the case in most of the texts. A few

³¹ Lensen, “Introduction,” 23, 24

entries, such as “In Defence of Egyptian Popular Art,” do not discuss issues pertaining to fine art or visual art, but rather discuss visual and material culture more generally. The same problem concerning the definition of art occurs in the text on “Modern or Tradition?” by Irène Kèromé. As is the case in many non-Western cultures, the word art denotes other branches of the arts such as literature, architecture, theatre, and material culture. It would have been useful to address these alternative terminological connotations in the introduction.

A few entries do not seem to be located justifiably within the book. The reason might be the multiplicity of subjects and their vast variety. For example, it is not easy to understand why the entry on “Imagining and Immoral Arab Art” was included, as it carries no dialogue or even affinity with the previous and subsequent entries. Or why the In Focus on “The *Nakba* and Arab Culture”³² is located on page 161 and how it communicates with previous and subsequent texts. In the section on “Accounting for the June 1967 War,” the relationship between the first text, “(. . .)” by Hassan Soliman, and the second text, “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision,” by Dia al-Azzawi and Ismail Fattah, is not perfectly clear. There is no indication of the June 1967 War or “expressions of collective trauma,”³³ the aftermath of the defeat, and the traumatic events afterwards, or any reference to the political context, and so the reason why they have been enclosed in this section remains opaque to this reader. These two texts seem to appear unexpectedly. It is not very clear, either, why equal attention was not paid to the art educational system and art schools in the Arab world. The In Focus section “Cairo’s School of Fine Arts and the Pedagogical Imperative”³⁴ was the only text on art schools that was included in the volume, while other major art schools were left out.

The editors’ definition of the end of the modern period, the main subject that the book covers, does not seem perfectly convincing in terms of art historical inquiries. It rather addresses historical and geopolitical changes as the main criteria for their choice of the framework, which might not necessarily be applied to artistic developments. The editors could have generated art historical accounts for such a category, in particular when they rightly define the modern as a part of a constant process of modernization and the contemporary as a more coeval and nonlinear concept.³⁵ The major issue here is to formulate how art of the Arab world

³² Nasser Rabbat, “The *Nakba* and Arab Culture,” 161.

³³ Lenssen, “Introduction,” 18.

³⁴ Dina Ramadan, “Cairo’s School of Fine Arts and the Pedagogical Imperative,” 72–73.

³⁵ Lenssen, “Introduction,” 23.

in its history adapted this condition. Is it something related to the question of artistic experimentation and innovative styles and techniques as sites for desired artistic development that may distinguish modern art from contemporary practices? Is it referring to the end of grand narratives? As the art historian Tom McDonough states, the contemporary is a crucial charge to think in terms of those transversal connections between aesthetic practice and the contested terrain of social relations and to ask where we stand in relation to them.³⁶

Without a doubt, *Modern Art in the Arab World* provides a unique collection of resources for experts, scholars, and students in the fields of art history of non-Western lands and the material culture of the Arab and Islamic world. It offers readers a series of rich first-hand materials written by the most distinguished and key figures, both artists and critics, in the art scene across the Arab world spanning more than a century. The book provides insightful perspectives on intellectual and artistic engagements beyond the acknowledged narrative of the Western practice of modernism and advances global understanding and cross-cultural awareness within the discipline of art history. Debates about the values of art and artistic practice, political announcements, questions of authenticity, the constant fluctuation between past and present, and their attribution to the nature of Arab cultures reflect a vibrant modernism practiced in the art of the Arabic-speaking region. ✎

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³⁶ Tom McDonough, "Contemporary Art History. Field of Inquiry," *October* 130 (Fall 2009): 124.