

# Invisible Stories: The Other Criteria of Art Criticism in the Middle East

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This paper aims to bring to the fore the issues of translatability, transposition, and anachronism in the field of art criticism in the Middle East by focusing on the case of the permanent collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art of the Sharjah Art Museum in the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> By demonstrating how new narratives come into play in art spaces and institutions that are conceived and run locally in the Arab world, it questions the effects of the shifting place of enunciation of art criticism in the region. More importantly perhaps, it discusses the way the so-called global institutions conceal other stories – stories that are marked by antagonisms and differences. It suggests looking closely at these stories by taking into account art and exhibition practices that offer a third path by disrupting both Western and Middle Eastern narratives.

## From the Intimate Critic to the Institution

From the early 20th century until the 1980s, several factors marked a change in the field of art criticism in the Middle East. First, it is essential to underline that in this region, art criticism was dominated by scholars and critics, who positioned themselves as privileged witnesses of the art scene, being artists themselves, art professors, or relatives of artists. Therefore, in that specific context, the form of *testimony* was the form of *art criticism* that became *art history*.

In the case of Egypt, for instance, this literature was published both in French and Arabic. While the publications in French insisted on the cosmopolitanism of the art scene and the presence of European artists and professors, the writings in Arabic, in particular the texts published during the Nasser Era (1950s-1970), provide the reader with a nationalist narrative that essentializes the Egyptianness of artists and tends to minimize foreign influence. However, even though these local historiographies call for a double reading, they

constitute a fundamental body of knowledge that deserves to be taken into account in scholarship in the field of art practices in the region. The witnesses have also been possibly overlooked because of the style of the testimony, which may be perceived as non-scientific from a Western academic perspective.

A first shift breaking away from the intimate critic is marked by the disappearance of the witness in favor of the emergence of art criticism produced by the global art market. At the beginning of the 2000s, particularly after the tragic events of 9/11, the place of enunciation of art criticism was progressively transferred from the testimony to the institution. This literature was superseded by other narratives mainly published in English by Western museums and art galleries. Through exhibitions and art sales, the latter signaled the existence of contemporary art and art-makers from the Middle East, and consequently erased multiple other stories of modernism in the region. Indeed, the apparent newness associated with contemporary Middle Eastern art, emphasized over the past twenty years, notably through exhibitions organized in Europe and in the United States,<sup>2</sup> contributed to the strengthening of the already well-established idea of a void between the glorious past of Islamic art and contemporaneity. One may recall the infamous commentary of the British journalist Brian Appleyard regarding the exhibition *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* held at the Saatchi Gallery in 2009: “It would be hard to classify anything in the Saatchi as great art. But that is not really the point. What matters is the fact that it is art, and that it detonates our simple conceptions of the Middle East”.<sup>3</sup> This comment reflects the general tendency to canonize contemporary art from the Middle East in Western institutions and to consider the artist as a social and political critic.

While the events of the so-called Arab Spring and, more recently, the war in Syria have once



Fig. 1. A sampling of the body of knowledge of art criticism in Egypt (Author's Personal Archives).

again shed light on this phenomenon, artists from the region – although mainly belonging to the diasporas – positioned themselves as commentators. Hence, one may question the role of the Middle Eastern artist. Is it to bear witness to his/her time? A critic producing a commentary on global issues or Middle Eastern politics?

I argue that the disappearance of the intimate critic led to the formulation, by Western institutions and the art market, of criteria for Arab contemporary art that should be mainly oriented towards identity politics and reflect otherness, subsequently excluding from the canon artworks that did not meet these criteria and that rather pointed towards sameness.

A second shift is to be found in the documentary turn that the field has witnessed since more than a decade now, notably with initiatives such as the publication of the Primary Documents series<sup>4</sup> by the MoMA, or the valuation of archives by exhibitions, such as, for instance, the exhibition on the Egyptian surrealist group Art et Liberté held

at the Centre Georges Pompidou in 2017.<sup>5</sup> This Derridean ‘archive fever’ brings to the fore the question of the discursive power but also of the commodification of the archive, of what is included or excluded from it – that is to say, of what is made visible for the viewer or the critic and what is relevant to the (re-)writing of stories of art in the Middle East.

Finally, one should mention the leading role played by art institutions in the Gulf region – global platforms such as Art Dubai, the Sharjah Biennial, Christie’s Dubai, as well as the establishment of iconic museums designed by contemporary ‘starchitects’, such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi – in defining the value and criteria of artworks but also in providing a narrative about art from the Middle East.

**Behind the Lure: the Case of the Sharjah Art Museum**

The abovementioned ambitious cultural projects implemented by Gulf states also conceal invisible

stories. Already in 1990, Rosalind Krauss, in her seminal essay entitled *The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum* foresaw the global turn of the museum, announcing its shift towards a corporate identity linked to the world of leisure in which the encounter with the work of art would be superseded by the subjective “simulacral experience” of the museum space.<sup>6</sup> This idea was pursued in a postcolonial perspective by Saloni Mathur, who coined the term “McGuggenheim effect” to describe the export of the museum brand as a homogenized commodity.<sup>7</sup> While the hegemonic power of museum branding as a cultural legitimization in the Gulf and the problematic notion of universality deserve to be further debated, here I would like to focus on less obvious and more discreet yet significant initiatives that coexist alongside these branded institutions.

They concern different actors and audiences and are formed in the pursuit of distinctive curatorial goals that are not necessarily related to the global art market or the promotion of the ideal of a universal cultural heritage. Rather, these institutions seek to position the United Arab Emirates – a region which has historically constituted a platform for transnational exchange and the connectedness of the global and the local – on the map of Middle Eastern art history.

They therefore form hybrid spaces in which other stories are told, namely, counter-narratives that involve a production that has not only been excluded from Western modernism, but also from the recent canonization of Middle Eastern art by international biennales and art fairs. They seem to escape the paradigms of a global art history which, despite its claim of mapping new art regions and their geographic and cultural differences, seems to remain indebted to the system of inclusion and exclusion by major Western contemporary art platforms, such as the documenta in Kassel or the Venice Biennale.

This is the case, for instance, of the Sharjah Art Museum and in particular of its permanent exhibition entitled Collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art inaugurated in 2015. The Sharjah Art Museum was established by the Ruler of Sharjah, Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammad Al-Qasimi in 1997 and can therefore be defined as relatively old in the context of the UAE’s history of museal institutions. Initially, the museum centered around the Sheikh’s personal collection of 19th century European orientalist paintings.<sup>8</sup>

The Collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art is mainly comprised of gifts received by the Ruler of Sharjah and acquisitions made during various events, such as the Emirates Society of Fine Arts annual exhibition. In this sense, it differs from the Sheikh’s collection of orientalist paintings and does not follow the logic and coherence of a collector’s collection. Rather, it is the peculiar result of an accumulation of eclectic works, including both notable and unknown artists.

The works consist primarily of paintings, featuring portraits and landscapes, in addition to several abstract works. The collection is certainly not significant for its international reception when compared with other neighboring collections, such as, for instance, the Barjeel Art Foundation’s collection, established by the critic, patron, and collector Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi. This impressive collection of modern and contemporary art from the Arab World was exhibited at the very high-end Whitechapel Gallery in London at the same time as the new wing in Sharjah was inaugurated. It includes figures that have already earned their place in the white cube, either as pioneers of Arab modernism, or as contemporary artists. The exhibition catalogue of the Barjeel Art Foundation’s collection was signed by prominent international curators and scholars, and the goal of the collection itself, as explained by Sooud Al-Qassemi, was to provide a coherent narrative of modern and contemporary art in the Arab World:

Certainly, art is borderless and there are intertwining narratives and ethnic groups at play. However, in addition to the obvious matter of a shared language, there are also common causes, at the forefront of which is the Palestinian cause that permeates across all cultural and artistic expressions in the Arab world.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, in comparison, the Sharjah Art Museum’s collection belongs to another story of art, outside, or perhaps even beyond the canon. But the question remains: why then is its collection so meaningful both on a local and global level?

One could argue that the significance of the collection resides in the variety of represented countries, as it includes works from Sudan, Yemen, and Bahrain, which are relatively rare on the art scene. However, although this diversity would seem a relevant aspect of the exhibition, the display neglects to reference the artists’ origins. The



gallery labels include only the artists' names, and the titles and dates of the artworks, which may indicate that, in the eyes of the curators, the common denominator of Arabness surpassed regionalisms.

### Sameness and Arab Art Histories

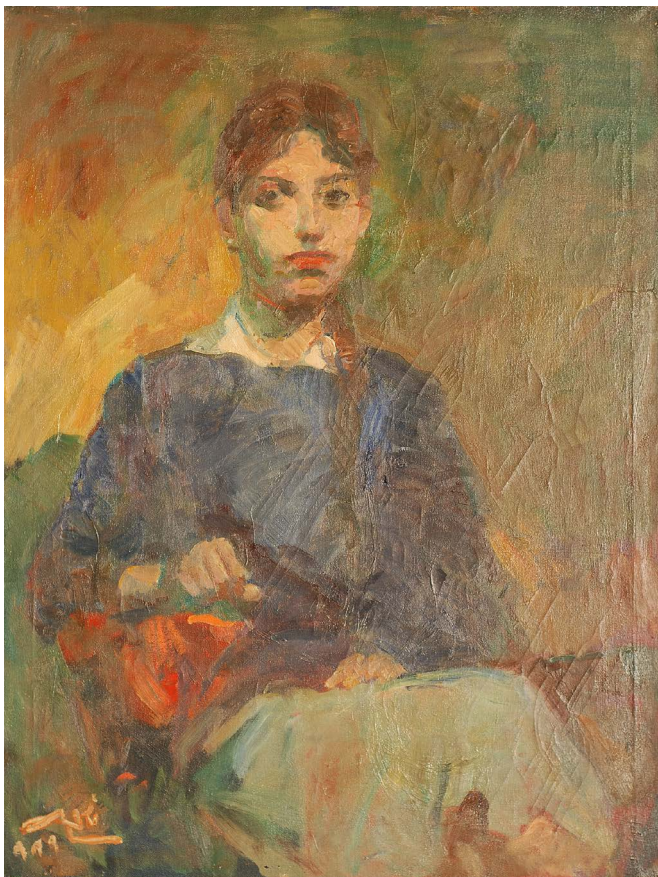
Amongst the central pieces of this Pan-Arab collection are two portraits by the Syrian artist Louay Kayali (1934-1978) and the Iraqi Faiq Hassan (1914-1992), painted in 1971 and 1989, respectively. This generation of artists is characterized by mobility between the Middle East and Europe. Most were trained in Europe and, upon returning to their homelands, they took part in the institutionalization of art education and the establishment of museums. For instance, Faiq Hassan created and directed the Department of Painting at the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad after studying at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, and Louay Kayali studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Therefore, the genres and styles in which these paintings were executed in the late 20th century do not reflect otherness and are perceived as anachronistic

on the one hand, and as westernized on the other. Indeed, Kayali's 1989 'impressionistic' portrait may be labelled as 'outdated' if considered in the light of Western criteria.

However, in the case of Arab art histories, it seems more relevant to ask *how* and *why* these works were created, rather than *when*. It was indeed a clear choice by many Arab artists to abstain from adhering to European avant-gardes. A commitment to realism and a conservative aesthetic actually resulted in a translation of European academic training, creating new meanings. Thus, for the viewer and critic, the challenge is to discern the newness of something which, aesthetically, seems completely familiar and even maybe outdated. The curatorial approach to such works can therefore play a major role by emphasizing stories of mobility, circulation, and cultural transfer – in other words, by translating “the appropriation of and simultaneously the emancipation from a cultural object, a transposition that would impart as much legitimacy as the ‘original’”.<sup>10</sup>

Another question tackled by this collection is the notion of translation and translatability of certain terms and genres. This is the case, for instance, with abstraction (*fann al-tajrid*), which encompasses multiple genealogies of Western and Islamic art, but conveys specific politics and aesthetics when practiced in the context of the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> Etel Adnan, for instance, became internationally famous after exhibiting at the documenta 13 in 2012 and, since then, has been absorbed by the global art market. While her work maintains such a subtle and particular relationship with abstraction, Arabic poetry, and calligraphy, it tends to be over-simplified by institutional narratives.

This equally pertains to *hurufiyya*, a genre that appeared towards the end of the 1950s, when Arab artists began to engage with the art of calligraphy. Deriving from the word *harf* ('the written sign') and playing on the dialogue between the aesthetics, form, and meaning of the Arab letter, it was developed at a time when cultural identities were crystalizing around the question of Arabness. *Hurufiyya*, when simply translated as 'lettrism' or 'calligraphy', obscures multilayered aspects linked to the dimension of form, politics, and the hidden meanings of the Arabic written sign.<sup>12</sup> Over-simplified translation is a recurring issue in the writing of art histories in the Arab World, and arguably, in non-Western contexts in general. In conclu-



**Fig. 2.** Faiq Hassan, *Student model*, 1989. Oil on canvas (Courtesy of the Sharjah Art Museum, Sharjah, UAE).

sion, the permanent collection of the Sharjah Art Museum brings to the fore issues of anachronism, translatability, and the complexity of defining other criteria for Middle Eastern art history. It demonstrates how new narratives, which are concealed by apparent formal similitudes, come into play in institutions that are conceived and run locally.

Moreover, it draws attention to the sameness trap, in regard to Arab modernism. For the viewer of this permanent exhibition, novelty may not be readily apparent. Indeed, his/her experience of the Collection of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art

will differ from the spectator's subjective experience of newness once described by Leo Steinberg as the 'plight' of the audience when discovering new forms of art and being "confronted with an unfamiliar style".<sup>13</sup> Likely owing to familiar styles and easily identifiable genres, the counter-narratives conveyed by this collection of works are rendered nearly imperceptible, or murmuring, and demonstrate how engagement with art history in the Middle East calls for a decentering of the discipline – one which implies a very close look at sameness rather than otherness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this paper has been published in K. Imesh-Oechslin, *Authenticity and Cultural Translation in the Global City and Community: The Case of the Greater Middle East* (Oberhausen: Athena, forthcoming 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Emblematic of the post-9/11 exhibitions underlining the newness of Middle Eastern contemporary art was the Saatchi Gallery's *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, exh. cat. (London: Saatchi Gallery, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> B. Appleyard, "Islam Stripped Bare", *Sunday Times* (25 January 2009).

<sup>4</sup> A. Lenssen, S. Rogers, N. Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> S. Bardaouil, T. Fellrath, *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)* (Paris: Skira, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> R. Krauss, "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum", *October* 54 (1990): p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> S. Mathur, "Museums and Globalization", *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (2005): pp. 698-700.

<sup>8</sup> On Orientalist collections in the Middle East, see: M. Volait, "Middle Eastern Collections of Orientalist Painting at the Turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Paradoxical Reversal or Persistent Misunderstanding?", in F. Pouillon, ed., *After Orientalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 251-271.

<sup>9</sup> S. Sooud Al-Qassemi, "The Arab World: A Sum of Its Parts", in *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary – Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, exh. cat. (London: Whitechapel Gallery), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> M. Espagne, "La notion de transfert culturel", *Revue Sciences/Lettres* 1 (2013). <http://rsl.revues.org/219>.

<sup>11</sup> This issue has been addressed elsewhere, see: N. Radwan, S. Naef, eds., *Art, Abstraction and Activism in the Middle East*, Special issue of *Manazir Journal* 1 (2019). <https://bop.unibe.ch/manazir/issue/view/1009>.

See also the Catalogue presenting the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection of Abstract Art: L. Gumpert, S. Takesh, eds., *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World 1950s-1980s*, exh. cat. (New York and Munich: Grey Art Gallery in association with Hirmer Publishers, 2020).

<sup>12</sup> See Nada Shabout's discussion about the term *Hurufiyya* in N. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), pp. 75-96. See also: C. Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya, Art and Identity*, tr. S. Mahmoud (Milano: Skira, 2016) and I. Dadi, "Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism", in K. Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press-Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006), pp. 94-114.

<sup>13</sup> L. Steinberg, *Other Criteria. Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 5.