



**Workshop 4**

***From Local to Global: Visual Arts in the Eastern Mediterranean  
between International Markets and Local Expectations***

**directed by**

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***Workshop abstract***

Within the discourse of culture and identity, globalization has emerged as a seminal factor. This workshop will explore the concerns of globalization and the emergence over the last 15 years of a global art scene on visual representations in countries outside the West, and more specifically, in the Arab countries of the Middle East. The changing socio-political dynamics of the Arab East presents a number of unique and interesting case studies of this new situation, having of course its specificity, but also being a part of a much larger, global, movement.

For the most part, Arab art has not succeeded yet in asserting its identity in relation to “modernity” on the international art scene. Nevertheless, cultural exchanges and cross-influences, which have strengthened the debate of “global” art, on the one hand, and initiated the conservative call for a return to tradition on the other, necessarily transformed the *status quo*.

Ideally, this should be an interdisciplinary workshop approaching the topic both empirically and theoretically. Issues to be discussed during the workshop should address the following:

How Western attitudes towards art outside its boundaries have (or not) changed in the last fifteen years.

Changes in the Arab world in relation to new Western attitudes and mutual impacts of these changes on art production and the art scene.

The place of art in society in view of its reception (i.e. exhibitions, etc.) as opposed to production.

### *Workshop description*

In the 1990s visual arts have become a global phenomenon. The notion of fine arts as “a peculiarly Western activity” is no longer the only acceptable standard. In today’s postmodern art world, artistic centers are not limited to certain Western capitals but are instead dispersed in a multiplicity of centers around the world. Similarly, artistic currents and styles have multiplied beyond the few privileged Eurocentric ones which dominated the Western art world for centuries. In recent years, works coming from elsewhere have become fashionable in Europe and are to be found in major events like the *Documenta* in Kassel or the *Biennial of Venice*. This is an important change in the attitudes of the big institutions and museums, as well as of art criticism.

The notion of “universality” is a European invention. As asserted by Edward Said, Europe had only considered its own culture and its peculiar expressions as universal in contrast with the so-called indigenous cultures, considered as regional phenomena. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, art and culture were comprehended through a euro-centric point of view, while the claim for universality made this eurocentricity unconscious for most people.

This general cultural attitude explains why, until a little more than a decade ago, art critics in Europe were largely unaware that modern art could be produced outside the West. No serious art historian would have explored what was going on in the so called “Third World”. Artists from non-Western countries were shown only in ethnographic exhibitions: they were considered craftsmen and their production interesting folklore. Nevertheless, such major change has not taken effect in the USA yet. For the most part, non-Western art is still viewed in ethnic terms, except for specific cases, such as the Iranian-American Shirin Neshat whose work has been accepted in New York’s galleries, but the ideology of its reception remains vague. Furthermore, the terms “international” or “global,” are still perceived, particularly by non-Westerners to mean “Western.” Guy Brett argues that “‘Universal’ is

rarely construed to mean 'plural.' Our art-historical maps are still largely a one-way projection from a fixed Western point of reference."<sup>1</sup>

It is generally accepted that the Paris exhibition *Les Magiciens de la terre* (Magicians of the Earth), organized by the Centre Georges Pompidou and La Villette in 1989 was fundamental in producing new paradigms<sup>2</sup>. It was the first exhibition in a leading Western art institution featuring artists from countries outside the West and treating them as equal artists, at least to a certain extent.

In his introduction to the catalogue, Jean-Hubert Martin criticized the prevailing attitude, which excluded the possibility of contemporary creation outside the West as one of the "surviving characters of the arrogance of our [European] culture". Still, even the curators of the Beaubourg exhibition had a somehow paternalistic vision of art elsewhere. They chose to call the authors of the works "Magicians" rather than artists, a term strongly recalling rituals of what ethnology labeled until recently primitive people. With a few exceptions, only Western experts curated the exhibition. As Martin put it, the reason was that "we did not know any expert in the Third World who did share our knowledge and our taste in contemporary Western art". So, he continues "we decided to elaborate ourselves our criteria and methods"<sup>3</sup>. Although Martin was criticized in the same catalogue by Thomas McEvelley<sup>4</sup>, it still shows how much the outer world was, then, a terra incognita, an unknown territory.

Since then, many important institutions have exhibited art from non-Western countries. In 1997, the French Catherine David, the curator of the *Documenta X*, was not convinced that non-Western visual arts – in contrast to literature and cinema - could contribute to the understanding of the present world's complexity<sup>5</sup>. In the new millennium however, Catherine David's attitude has changed as she developed a special interest in visual arts from the Arab world. As the director of the de Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Netherlands, she launched a long-term project in the arts called *Contemporary Arab Representations*, which included thematic exhibitions and publications. *Tamáss* is the publication that accompanies the main exhibitions with theoretical texts written by artists and thinkers of the Arab world.

In relation to *Contemporary Arab Representations, Beirut-Lebanon*, Catherine David wrote in 2002: "At present, Lebanon and the Middle East are essential to an understanding of contemporary culture:

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Brett, "Art & National Identity, A Critics' Symposium," in *Art in America*, 9 (September 1991), 81.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Magiciens de la terre*, Exhibition catalogue, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Hubert Martin, "Préface", in *Les Magiciens de la terre*, Paris, 1989, 8.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas McEvelley, "Ouverture du piège: l'exposition postmoderne et 'Magiciens de la Terre'", in *Les Magiciens...*, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine David, "Introduction", in *Documenta X, Short Guide*, Ostfildern, Cantz Verlag, 11-12.

the post-war situation they are living is complex [...] and in these times of globalization, the country may seem an exceptionally important laboratory for a number of reasons. Although it is no longer acceptable to continue considering Lebanon as a “model” or “exception” within the Arab world, the concern of many Lebanese intellectuals – immediately after the war – with the development and promotion of an experimental, critical contemporary Arab culture is sufficient reason to single out a group of authors who feel the need to meet and discuss a medium-term cultural project in their own city and their own context<sup>6</sup>.”

In 2003, *Contemporary Arab Representations* was shown at the Venice Biennial, in a somewhat different form. The statement made by Catherine David was: “The consolidation and promotion of contemporary Arab critical culture has become even more urgent with the worsening situation after the violent and cynically premeditated dismantling of Iraq and the emergence of another colonial occupation in the region<sup>7</sup>.” From May to July 2003, *Contemporary Arab Representations, Cairo-Egypt*, was held at the Witte de With in Rotterdam (18 May-27 July 2003)<sup>8</sup>.

What are the ramifications of this radical change of attitudes on Arab visual arts?

Modern art, i.e. art in the Western conception, has been the dominant visual expression in the Arab World for more than a 100 years. For our purposes, we shall distinguish grossly between 3 phases in its evolution:

A phase of adoption of Western art, in its techniques and concepts, from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1950s. In this first phase the aim was to introduce this new artistic genre in the Arab world. This was achieved by the creation of art schools, mostly directed by Western foreigners and by sending students to Europe on scholarships to study art.

The second phase is one of adaptation, going from the 1950 to the late 1980s, or, let’s say, 1991. This phase coincides with the growth of Arab nationalism. The question of identity was in the foreground. The specificity of the Arab identity (*hawiyya*) should be marked through the introduction of elements from the heritage of the region, Islamic or pre-Islamic, in the Western language of art.

Since 1991 (Gulf War), we are in a globalization phase, which has seen the introduction of new means of visual expression like videos and installations, and the emergence of a new generation whose

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<sup>6</sup> Tamás 1, *Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut, Barcelona, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2002*, 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.wdw.nl/ENG/projects/arab\\_venice/index.ht](http://www.wdw.nl/ENG/projects/arab_venice/index.ht)

<sup>8</sup> Tamás 2, *Contemporary Arab Representations: Cairo, Barcelona/Rotterdam, Fundació Antoni Tàpies/Witte de With, 2004*.

concern is less with a the affirmation of communitarian identity than with their own biography within a society undergoing fast and radical changes.

This change is not a product of an influence from the outside, but has its roots in the Arab reality itself for various reasons:

1) One is certainly intellectual. With the end of the eighties, the search of identity through art, and the need to produce “authentic” works, have been pushed out of the art scene. Younger artists, who have adopted new techniques like videos and installations, explore more their own self than some kind of national identity. The end of Arab nationalism has also contributed to this.

2) Secondly, the nineties have been the decade of development of the art market for reasons that differ from one country to the other. In Egypt, for instance, the liberalization of the market has played a role, but there were also some individual initiatives. In Syria, the boom of the ending eighties made people eager to buy art to decorate the new houses they were building. In Lebanon, where the art market had decreased during the war, activities in this field started again after the beginning of normalization. In Jordan, instigated first by the civil war in Lebanon and reinforced later by the succession of wars in Iraq, Amman became a convenient art centre providing exhibition venues and art market for displaced Arab artists. The wealthy Gulf states started to play an increasing role as a market for artists from other Arab countries; their museum infrastructure has been developed and international events – like the Sharjah Biennial - created.

3) The third factor is that people’s interest in visual arts has grown. If it is not yet usual for the great majority of people, it has become common for the elites. To borrow Bourdieu’s expression, the love of art<sup>9</sup>, an attitude he characterized as being typical for the Western elites, has recently become a part of the cultural practices of the bourgeoisie in most Arab countries.

The results thus far of globalization in the Arab East have been the creation of two distinct levels of production and market in the visual arts. Some artists have achieved limited international recognition and produce for the world market. The consequence is often, but not always, that they start to live in the West. The majority of the artists, however, produce for the local market and do not follow, or follow only partially, the international criteria. It is difficult to say if it is a choice or coincidence. The duality of the art scene is a relatively new thing which has definitely to do with the emergence of a

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art, European Art Museums and Their Public*, Stanford University Press, 1990 (French original: *L’amour de l’art, Les musées et leurs publics*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Paris, 1966).

world-wide concern for art on the one (Western) side and the adoption of new languages and media of expression by some artists in the Arab world. The more traditional works of art, shown in galleries all over the Middle East, seem to be closer to what the West would call a “local taste”, and in accordance to its established “international standard” judge as “backward”. However, according to Vasif Kortun, a contemporary Turkish art critic:

“When we show a painting of an Egyptian artist of the twenties at the same time with a contemporary European artist, the European public will say: How much traditional it is, how old-fashioned does it look. But maybe the painting is not traditional. The reason is that the Western observer is conditioned by an entirely European vision. Therefore, he is not capable to really look at the work, to read it. He cannot read its real context, its local context, he does not read the energies that have been put in it, he does not read the peculiar strategies that have inspired the work.”<sup>10</sup>”

Kortun was speaking about the first half of the twentieth century, but his remarks are valid as well for the present situation. If globalization has made visual arts extraterritorial, as the Canadian art historian Stephen Wright has expressed in a recent Istanbul symposium<sup>11</sup>, there still is a demand for an art production which is local and responds to local requirements in matter of esthetics and taste.

The emergence of a global art scene since the 1990s, which for the first time included non-Western artists among its top ones, has produced a world elite of artists, having a common visual language although coming from different cultural backgrounds, having common habits, reading the same books and magazines etc. Nevertheless, its pronounced difference is in its new negotiations of the politics of identity between local and global. Generally the result is transmigration, and very often leads to elite artists leaving their country for a Western city. This question has become a very vital one for artists from the periphery: can they be integrated into the international art scene although living in their country of origin or do they have to expatriate themselves in order to keep this international level? It is thus imperative to extend the invitation to Arab artists to participate in this workshop as well.

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<sup>10</sup> Vasif Kortun, “Die anderen Modernen” in Samuel Herzog, (ed.). *Total Global - Umgang mit nicht-westlicher Kunst. Zweite Runde: Türkei*, Basel, Christoph-Merian-Verlag, 2000, 12-13 (translation from German by authors).

<sup>11</sup> AICA Turkey, “Art-criticism and Curatorial Report Practices, East of the EU”, International Workshop and Round-table in conjunction with the 8<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 18-21 September 2003.

## *Directors' Individual Abstracts*

### *Producing and Exhibiting Art in the Arab World: Between Local Priorities and Global Criteria*

**Silvia Naef**

In the last ten or 15 years, the local art scene in many countries of the Arab East has become quite active. This development resulted mainly from local factors: the raising of an urban bourgeoisie interested in art, the construction boom, oil money, etc. There is a market, in the region, for art by Arab artists, and there are specialized collectors for it: The Kinda collection exhibited in 2002 at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris is such an example. Publications and magazines, like the recent Emirati Canvas Magazine, are other signs of this growing local interest for visual arts.

The concomitant new Western interest in non-Western art made curators and art critics travel to the region or open exhibition spaces there. This produced a small category of “world class” artists who are fully integrated into the international scene. This new group – non-existent one decade ago – uses other languages and techniques (videos, installations) and works on other themes than the artists known on the local level. Most “world class” artists live outside the region or are long-time residents of Western capitals.

This paper, largely based on field work done in the Middle East and Europe, will try to analyze the interaction between these two categories of artists, the impact it may have on the art scene and the public in the Arab world, as well as on institutions. More generally, it will try to ask if there can be contemporary creation in the “periphery” and if works produced there in languages differing from the dominating ones used in the main art capitals may be considered as “contemporary” – not only locally, but also globally.

### *Globalization or Isolation: The Effects of Sanctions on Contemporary Iraqi Art*

**Nada M. Shabout**

Within the ongoing rhetoric of globalization and identity, and the debates concerning the identity of the Iraqi nation, Iraqi visual representations of the last fifteen years become a unique case. During the 1990s, when the West was extending the discourse of globalization to the visual arts, Iraqi artists witnessed the unfolding events of Gulf War I, which then initiated their isolation from the world scene as a consequence of the imposed economic sanctions. With all travel and study abroad suspended, as well as the absence of most forms of contact, a generation of Iraqi artists were largely trained and nurtured in seclusion from the developments taking place in the rest of the world. If visual

globalisation is at least partially predicated on the notion of linkage, as facilitated through the information revolution, fast speed internet and satellite TV, then how should we evaluate contemporary Iraqi art within this context and in relation to a global art scene?

This paper will examine the development of Iraqi visual representations during the 1990s in relation to 1: earlier movements of modern Iraqi art and their emphasis on establishing a national Iraqi visual identity; and 2: a contemporary global identity allowing it a place in the global art scene. It will examine the role of the new art market that developed in Baghdad during the 1990s, when private art galleries were established as a solution to the lack of state patronage, in the transformation of aesthetics and the role of art in society.