

Modern Art in The Arab World

PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

Editors

Lenssen Anneka, Rogers Sarah, Shabout Nada

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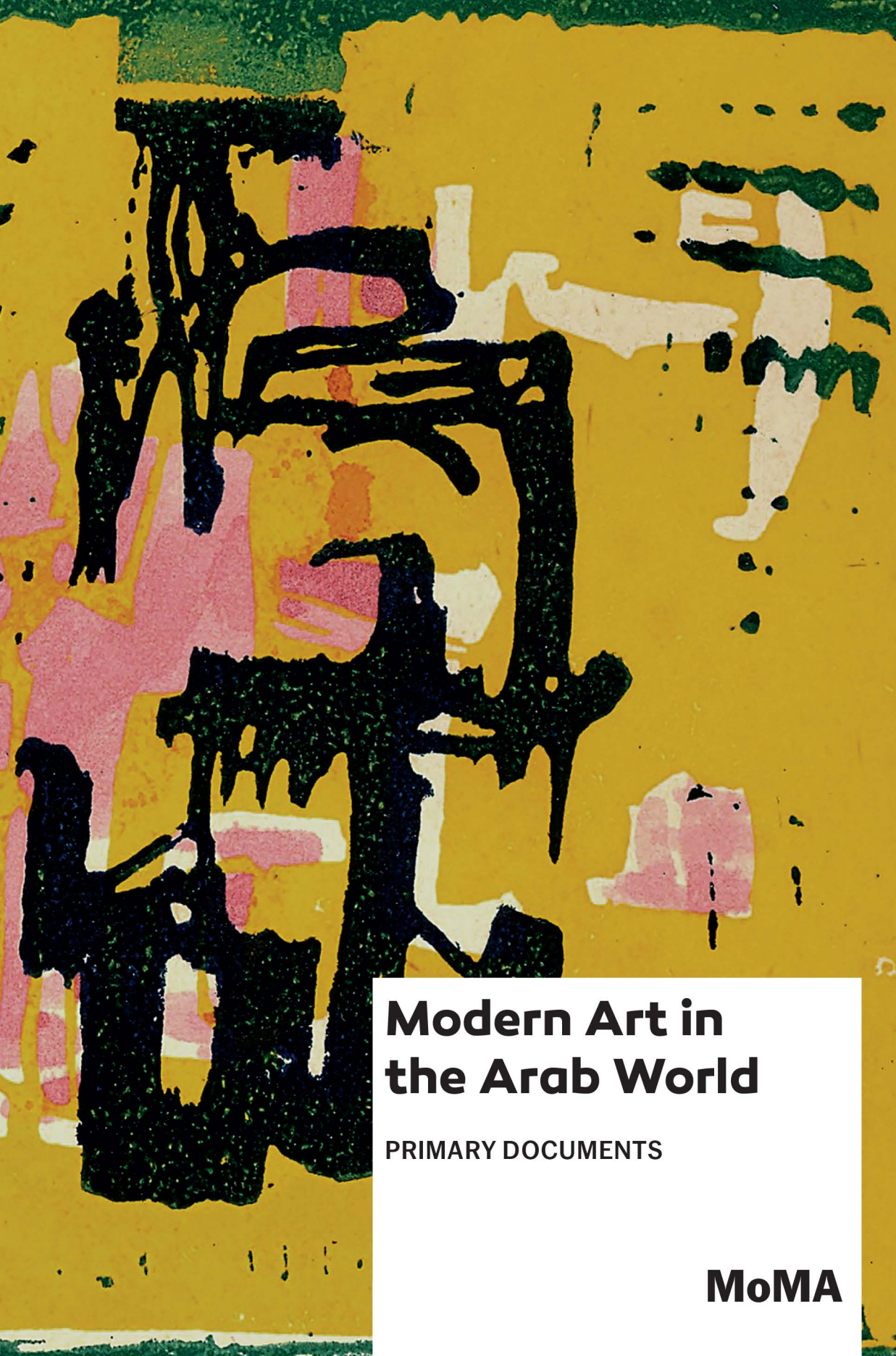
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Modern Art in the Arab World

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MoMA

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Primary Documents



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Edited by

Anneka Lenssen

Sarah Rogers

Nada Shabout

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Foreword

Glenn D. Lowry

Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents is the eighth volume in an ambitious series of documentary anthologies that began in 2002 with *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s*. Published by The Museum of Modern Art's International Program and generously supported by its International Council and other donors, the series is designed 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. As an evolving constellation of books, the Primary Documents series offers readers opportunities to trace the ways that related ideas of *the modern* have developed across the disparate geographic regions covered by its volumes, following trajectories that are often determined by widely diverging local exigencies. The affinities and differences that make up the global history of modernism are of vital importance to our work at The Museum of Modern Art, as they are to the many readers of these publications.

This volume originated as a proposal from Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout. Recognizing that the subject is both timely and important, we were delighted to add the project to our Primary Documents series and to engage the three scholars as our editors. It was clear from the start that finding and assembling the book's texts would be a formidable task. The contents of the volume are drawn from more than a dozen countries; furthermore, certain important texts are incomplete, or found only in out-of-print journals, while some unpublished writings are located in archives that are difficult to access. The documents collected here could never have been gathered without the vision, tireless energy, and exemplary organization of its three editors, as well as the knowledgeable advisors around the globe who so generously assisted them. Their groundbreaking work was bolstered by the solid support within MoMA of Jay Levenson, Director of the International Program, and Sarah Lookofsky, its Assistant Director. We are extremely grateful to all of them for their devotion to this project.

The documents included in this book offer singular insight on ideas and practices of modernism throughout the Arab world; they are enriched by newly commissioned scholarly essays that shed light on their broader cultural, social, and political contexts. Needless to say, the book includes a multiplicity of voices and opinions that belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of The Museum of Modern Art.

Documented in these pages are stories of vigorous 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.

As was the case with the other books in The Museum of Modern Art's Primary Documents series, much of the cost of this volume has been generously underwritten by numerous institutions and individuals to ensure that it will be accessible to the widest possible readership. It is our hope that the texts in this book will provide fertile ground for future scholarship and further advance this field of research. This publication would not have been possible without the support of our principal funders, led by The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art. We are grateful to our major supporters, Misk Art Institute and Zaza Jabre. Generous support has also been provided by an anonymous donor, The Fran and Ray Stark Foundation, Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Darat al Funun—The Khalid Shoman Foundation, Abdelmonem Bin Eisa Alserkal, The Kamel Lazaar Foundation, Geneva/Tunis, Barjeel Art Foundation, Marieluise Hessel Artzt, and other donors. Finally, a great deal of thanks are due to Jay Levenson, who conceived the Primary Documents series and who has so ably brought each volume, including this one, to fruition.

Acknowledgments

Jay A. Levenson and Sarah Lookofsky

Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents has been a genuinely collaborative undertaking from the start. We owe our deepest thanks first to the volume's editors, Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, who have worked with great dedication to ensure the successful and timely completion of this illuminating book. Without their tireless efforts, this volume could not have included the diversity, complexity, and depth of meaning it so thoroughly incorporates. The richness of the texts in this compilation is also the result of the extraordinary support we received from so many experts along the way.

Our first step in planning this project was to convene meetings of our advisors to help shape the book. An initial gathering in New York in February 2012 included a core group of specialists: Farid Haddad, Sam Bardaouil, Kirsten Scheid, and Stephen Sheehi. This was followed by a two-day meeting in February 2014, in Amman, Jordan, where we were joined by our in-house advisors, Eva Respini and Mitra Abbaspour from MoMA, along with a remarkable group of artists, critics, and scholars: Adonis, Tamam al-Akhal, A. Ghani Belmaachi (Ghany), Waddah Faris, Salwa Mikdadi, May Muzaffar, and Mostafa El Razzaz. Kamal Boullata and Mohammed Melehi, who were unable to attend, contributed notes from afar. Omar Berrada joined Bardaouil, Scheid, and Sheehi in refining the selection of the texts, along with the book's subject advisors, Cynthia Becker, Clare Davies, Jessica Gerschultz, and Katarzyna Pieprzak. We are grateful to art historian Eiman Elgibreen in Riyadh and to the distinguished art critic Salah Hassan Abdullah in Khartoum, whose expertise helped us identify pertinent critical texts from Saudi Arabia and Sudan, respectively. We extend our profound thanks to the authors of the "In Focus" essays—Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès, Anahi Alviso-Marino, Anneka Lenssen, May Muzaffar, Nasser Rabbat, Dina Ramadan, Sarah Rogers, Kirsten Scheid, Nada Shabout, Stephen Sheehi, and Mohanad Yaqubi—for their incisive contemporary commentary on particular histories, places, and agents. The "Personal Reflections" writers—Dia al-Azzawi, Waddah Faris, Amir Nour, Mona Saudi, and Vera Tamari—are themselves protagonists in these histories; their accounts and recollections shed intimate contemporary light on the book's archival documents. We are grateful also to historian Ussama Makdisi for his essay, an important contribution that serves to elucidate the complex arena in which Arab modernism took form.

Many MoMA staff members contributed to the making of this book. We are indebted to the excellent team in our Publications Department that has enabled us to produce the Primary Documents series: Christopher Hudson, Publisher; Chul R. Kim, Associate Publisher; Marc Sapis, Production Director; Don McMahon, Editorial Director; Rebecca Roberts, Editor; Matthew Pimm, Production Manager; Genevieve Allison, Rights Coordinator; and Cerise Fontaine, Department Coordinator. Very special thanks are due to David Frankel, who supervised the critical initial stages of the book's making in his former capacity as Editorial Director; his thoughtful guidance has greatly benefited this and all the previous volumes in the Primary Documents series. In the International Program, Gwen Farrelly, former Assistant Director, was essential in the project's initial formulation. Amy Benzyk, former Department Assistant, provided crucial logistical support as the book came underway. More recently, Marta Dansie, Department Coordinator, has been instrumental in navigating many aspects of the project, and Rotana Shaker, intern, assisted with proofreading. Todd Bishop, Sylvia Renner, Lauren Stakias, Bobby Kean, Genevieve Allen, and Kayla Rakowski Dryden were key in securing the funding necessary for the project's completion. We are also grateful to Peter Eleey for joining us as a MoMA advisor, and to Alexis Sandler and Nancy Adelson for providing expertise on legal questions. For their enthusiastic encouragement from the project's very beginnings, we owe a great debt of gratitude to MoMA's Director, Glenn D. Lowry, and the Museum's former Associate Director and Laurenz Foundation Curator, Kathy Halbreich.

The central task of bringing these many texts into English was accomplished by an expert team of translators, commissioned and coordinated with grace and humor by editorial associate Ismail Fayed, who also devoted untold hours to researching and collecting texts and images. Kareem James Abu-Zeid, the book's senior translation editor, upheld the rigor of the translation/review process across a vast range of Arabic and French texts and ensured consistency of style throughout. Along with Abu-Zeid himself, this remarkable team of translators includes: Vanessa Brutsche, Sarah Dorman, Yazan Doughan, Amira Elmasry, Matthew H. Evans, Aubrey Gabel, Yasmine Haj, Katharine Halls, Jeanine Herman, Dina El Hussein, Patrick Lyons, Mandy McClure, Pietro Morabito, Emma Ramadan, Anna Swank, Teresa Villa-Ignacio, and Nariman Youssef. In addition, Ashley Miller, Dina Ramadan, and Kirsten Scheid contributed translations of texts with which they work in their ongoing research. Also featured are translations that have been published elsewhere, by Mustafa Adam, Bill Brown, and the late Suheil Bushrui and Salma Kuzbari. Fouzia Dasser completed early transcriptions, and close editing of the Arabic transliterations was provided by Christine Cuk and Katharine Halls. We thank Tiffany Floyd for compiling a timeline of artistic, institutional, and political events—though it is not included in the present volume, it was particularly helpful as the editors formulated the scope of the project. The book's English-language editor, Diana Stoll, was extremely thorough in ensuring the comprehensiveness and clarity of the final texts in English. Her communications among the editors and the MoMA team have been supremely gracious, efficient, and precise. Gina Rossi, the designer of each book in the Primary Documents series, has provided us once again with stunning visual language for the book's contents.

Needless to say, a volume of this scope can take shape only through a tremendous collective effort. The book's editors and MoMA are grateful to the many individuals, archives, and institutions that generously shared knowledge and support. In Amman, we benefited from working with Lina Shannak, translator, and Shuruq Harb and the Makan art space, and from the generosity of our hosts, Suha Shoman, Tamam al-Akhal, and HRH Wijdan al-Hashimi. As the project progressed, the editors relied upon the expertise of many friends and colleagues for help with archival searches, translation queries, copyright questions, and moral support. In addition to those already mentioned above, our thanks go to Fiza Akram, Saleem Al-Bahloly, Abdulrahman Al-Soliman, Zeina Arida, Shibeen Banerji, Saleh Barakat, Ramon Tio Bellido, Annabelle Boissier, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Yoav di Capua, Yasmine Chemali, Emma Chubb, Charbel Dagher, Humphrey Davies, Whitney Davis, André Elbaz, Todd Fine, Ihsan Fethi, Finbarr Barry Flood, Allison Gordon, Judith Greer, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Ahmed Hafez and Gamal Hosni of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Samia Halaby, Moayad Hassan, Leila Heller, Valerie Hess, Rabee Jaber, Yanal Janbek, Lauren Johnson, Muriel Kahwagi, Fatenn Mostafa Kanafani, Ahmed Khalil, Mehri Khalil, Riad Kherdeen, Kristine Khouri, Patricia Kubala, Anna Kulinka, Abdel Latif Laabi, Malitta Lacy and Nicole Anne Westrick, Debra Lenssen, Ahmed Mater and Stephen Stapleton, the late Yasmin Milsom, Xenia Nikolskaya, Todd Olson, Mohamed-Salah Omri, Addi Ouadderrou, Naji B. Oueijan, Holiday Powers, Sheikha Hoor Al Qasimi and the Sharjah Art Foundation, Sultan Sooud al-Qassemi and the Barjeel Art Foundation, Marzouq Qubti, Sasha Rossman, Ann Saad and Joe Valder, Mona Said of Safar Khan Gallery, Lilia Ben Salah, Alex Dika Seggerman, Rawan Sharaf, Amer Shomali, Laila Soliman, Saniya Taher, Suheyda Takesh, Rachida Triki, Mercedes Volait, Jessica Winegar, Julie Wolf, and Ala Younis. We could not have brought the project to completion without the kindness of Dana Farouki and Mazen Makarem, who so generously hosted us in Dubai.

Finally, we are profoundly grateful to the many artists, authors, artists' families and estates, institutions, and collectors who gave us permission to include the texts and images that make up this book. In many cases they went above and beyond all reasonable expectations to provide their energy and resources. It is primarily due to their support and collaboration that *Modern Art in the Arab World* is a reality.

Imagination is a lost guest roving the earth; it is the strongest cultural force. Its movement never ceases throughout our lives.

—May Ziadeh (Cairo, 1912)

Modern art truly is the art of the age, and its complexity is a result of the complexity of this era. It expresses many things: anxiety, fear, great disparities in most things, human massacres, man's distancing himself from God, and then the new perspectives on everything, generated by modern theories in psychology and other disciplines.

—Jewad Selim (Baghdad, 1951)

People speak of the simplification of form and content—apparently, to paint a plow is to put your work within reach of the peasant. [. . .] Must we really return to naïve Épinal prints? And, in order for music to be understood, must we forbid symphonies and only compose little ditties? Underdeveloped painting is not on the revolution's agenda.

—Mohamed Khadda (Algiers, 1964)

The essential problem is man's anachronistic perception. The artist is not ahead of his time, as we are so fond of repeating; rather, society is behind its time.

—Farid Belkahia (Casablanca, 1967)

Art! It is always the capacity to transform the artist's internal vision into an external wakefulness that influences social change.

—Hassan Soliman (Cairo, 1968)

Our ambition does not end here. It is not enough to prove that everyone practices plastic art (God save us from the evils of diligence and ambition!). But since "ordinary people" practice it in such an embryonic fashion, our ambition is to implant those practices.

—Abdallah Bola (Khartoum, 1976)

Introduction: About This Book

Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout

This book 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. Its texts—some 125 in all—originate from more than twelve countries and their diasporas, and at least four source languages, altogether spanning a full century of writing about art from the experience of modernity's rapidly shifting commitments and contradictions. In assembling these documents, we have proceeded from an awareness that conversations and debates, as much as the fixed properties of finished art objects, gave meaning to the new art practices and theories of the twentieth century.

The period under consideration here, 1882 to 1987, was a century of intense activity in the Arab regions, including the establishment of formal art institutions and academic conventions, some of which were then dismantled through avant-garde movements and in turn reconstituted along other thresholds of orthodoxy and challenge. Manifestos were written, artists' unions formed, journals established, biennials held, and legislation passed—with stances taking form in many types of public media, from art exhibitions and festivals to press, symposia, and radio addresses. At certain moments, the documentation of these initiatives is dense with overlapping discussions. There was, for example, a proliferation of debates in the 1960s about the appropriateness of abstract painting to the populist socialist regimes in Algeria, Syria, Tunisia, and other postcolonial national milieus. There were expressions of collective trauma after the Arab defeat in the June 1967 War with Israel from artists in the region, in press interviews, roundtables, and other forums. At times, the positions are more widely dispersed, with testimonies addressing specific local challenges directly. Whereas authors often raise broad questions of originality and creation, of value, of affective sensibility, moral authority, formation of the psyche, public space, and more, they also protest against conservative or opportunistic critics, the diffidence of their audiences, or perceived factionalization within specific art scenes.

In modern geopolitical terms, the “Arab world” of our title—the region of history and experience from which these texts are drawn—may be loosely defined as a grouping of majority Arabic-speaking nation-states that range from the Atlantic Ocean to the Arabian Gulf. The 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. Important 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 (pressures under which Arab regions continue to transform even now).

In his essay written for this volume, historian and Arab-studies scholar Ussama Makdisi reflects upon the history of negotiations with the Arab imaginary, highlighting how a first consciousness of what might be described as an Arab polity emerged from the shifting power vectors of the late Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Arab intellectuals perceived a need for a collective identity to differentiate the Arabic-speaking provinces from other parts of that regime.

Beginning around 1860 and continuing through World War I, Arab intellectuals in Egypt and greater Syria undertook a project of ontological revival that has become known

as the Arab Renaissance (*al-Nahda al-'Arabiyya*). The first document in this volume—an excerpt from the entry on painting in an Arabic encyclopedia project launched by *Nahda* intellectual Butrus al-Bustani in Beirut in 1876—marks a watershed for art writing as a modern practice. Its trilingual title, “*Taswir, Peinture, Painting*,” declares its tabulating approach to knowledge; the essay takes the Arabic language as a means of narrating a world history of painterly representation. After offering access to a history of achievements along the pathways of European civilization, from Classical paradigms to modern regional powers, al-Bustani concludes the entry by inviting readers to imagine invigorated fine-arts efforts in “our countries.”¹

Other early appeals to an Arab interest in the arts held different stakes in a nascent sense of collectivity. In Egypt, where the khedival monarchy had led drives toward modernization since the 1830s, the *Nahda* project of cultural rescripting was understood and promoted as a specifically Egyptian need for reform. The early evolution of Egyptian nationalism in the 1870s highlighted the uniqueness of the geography and history of Egypt and, in contrast to the nationalist efforts in greater Syria, did not sever its Ottoman ties or relinquish the sense of Islamic authority in the face of imperialism. This genealogy is activated in the 1887 text by Ahmed Fahmi, offering a taxonomy of institutional uses and categories of visual art.² Writing from afar, as a student in Paris, while presumably seeking favor at home from Egypt’s Khedive Tewfik Pasha, Fahmi notes that “His Majesty our venerable Khedive” had, like the late Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, inaugurated “a state of civilization in our happy country.” Fahmi positions his venue of publication—the scientific-cultural journal *al-Muqtataf*—at the center of Egypt’s enlightened system of outreach to the people of the Arab East and North Africa. As Fahmi puts it, his hope was to “reach all children of the Arab nation and attain the same status as the other fields of knowledge.”

In Algeria, where French colonialism had been in place since the 1830s, the record of art writing reflects how a decades-long process of annexation from Ottoman rulers had incorporated art activities into a French imperialist milieu. As a result, art practices and ambitions often played out within a French hierarchy that kept Paris at the center, via the academic genre of Orientalist painting. (Famously, Eugène Delacroix visited Algeria in 1832, and countless French Orientalists and others followed in his footsteps—including Claude Monet and Auguste Renoir.) The earliest texts from North Africa included in this volume are short petitions written in French by artists from Algeria and Morocco during the 1920s. Directed to colonial administrators, these documents assert native cultural insight as a resource within the system, mobilizing it to further other agendas.³

By writing and acting as subjects of their immediate surroundings, Arab artists and intellectuals engaged with the broad creative practices of the era. Many of these figures recognized, in the experience of making and viewing painting and sculpture, a means to demonstrate their political and cultural parity with other modern protagonists, and particularly with their peers in Europe. As has been suggested by anthropologist Kirsten Scheid, to read the Arabic journals of this period can be a process of recognizing how the region’s artists and critics were formulating modernism as a “global” project.⁴ The capacity to produce works in forms that others found recognizable as *art* comprised a cultural project to establish equality, at the same time buttressing the purported authority of colonial discourses. Other chroniclers of Arab culture have put these inscriptions in positive terms, making openness a characteristic position. Literary scholar Salma Khadra Jayyusi, writing of Arab identity, has emphasized the capacity “for friendship, for gregarious co-existence,

for the reassuring presence of the other in one's life."⁵ As the artists, critics, and groups featured here went about formulating models for a responsible and flexible modernism, the Arab identity was often thought of as a frame in which to consolidate creative energies without subsuming all differences. A crucial contention in this anthology is that art writing in the Arab world may be recognized as *already inscribed* in a transregional imaginary that required many actors, and in a society created through ongoing interactions. To engage this writing about modern art, ideas, things, and events is to consider the deterritorialized aspects of historic modernism, and not a separate tradition or an "alternative" modernism. In other words, the notion of the "Arab world" contains a great deal. It also enables a great deal. To retrospectively extract and isolate is a vexed and even specious project, not to be encouraged. If we can relinquish our presumptions about the superiority of modernism in the North Atlantic states, then we can read alongside artists and critics who grappled with similar presumptions.

Consider, for instance, one of the most radical texts selected for this book—the declaration of the Algerian Group of the Lettrist International (1953).⁶ Issued in French from Algiers (but published in Paris), this brief text announces a refusal to participate in any society, for all societies are based upon policing as a supreme force. It calls for overcoming the violent occupation of Algeria by rejecting not only French imperialism, but also all other systematic requirements to produce and consume within the world system. A few months later, again in Algiers, the revolutionary *poet noir* Jean Sénac would organize an exhibition at the gallery Le Nombre d'Or—showing Baya (Fatma Haddad-Mahieddine), Maria Manton, Louis Nallard, and others—on the basis of what he dubbed "love (that virtue without proof)" in place of complacency or Orientalism.⁷ Indeed, many of the texts in this volume offer counterpossibilities for the social stakes of both art making and art viewing, including instances of uncertain identification and instability. A 1953 exhibition critique by Shakir Hassan Al Said offers a canny assessment of the unequal conditions for artistic exchange between Iraq and India, and Iraq and the United Kingdom.⁸ And, in Palestinian artist Mustafa al-Hallaj's 1975 reflection on the formation of his consciousness of his place in the Arab nation, the effects of music and sound—powerful yet ephemeral—are invoked as an alternative basis for collectivity.⁹

In making text selections from across this vast terrain, we have been guided by the hope that insight into the ongoing activities of calibration and struggle (rather than the formal and thematic results in works of art alone) will spark further research into modernism's constitution across differentials of resources and belief. In the following pages, one can read the famous fatwa, or legal ruling, of Egyptian imam Muhammad Abduh, published in 1904, which argues for the licitness of image making as a civilizational tool of learning and preservation, thus overturning conventional interpretations of the hadith warning that image makers would be punished on Judgment Day.¹⁰ There is the tragic individualism expressed by Tunisian artist Hatem el Mekki in 1944.¹¹ The desire for a vibrant and enlivening Arab art, outlined in Damascus in 1951 by the artist and Ba'th Party activist Adham Isma'il.¹² The 1963 press conference for Gallery One in Beirut, in which founding director Helen al-Khal promises to blaze a path toward a truly "good art" of substance and meaning.¹³ A 1966 editorial in Kuwait, endorsing the space-age aesthetic of kinetic art.¹⁴ And the Crystalist Manifesto issued in Khartoum in 1976 by Hassan Abdallah, Hashim Ibrahim, Muhammad Hamid Shaddad, Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq, and Naiyla Al Tayib, which insists on conceptual duality in all places where a singular, idealist clarity had been posited.¹⁵

It is our hope that the new availability of these texts will help to disrupt some of the familiar patterns in the specialized study of Arab modernism. As Nada Shabout has outlined elsewhere, the modern conception of Arab identity has been as a performative meta-category of political or cultural unity, sometimes revealed as an elective affinity on the part of an artist, and at other times as a top-down platform for solidarity upheld by a political movement, party, or bloc.¹⁶ Its mobilization as an identifier that is both active and shifting, then, has tended to privilege recognizably “Arab” art. In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, when the military regimes of the postcolonial states of Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria each embraced some notion of pan-Arab cultural collectivity, their cultural ministries highlighted characteristic Arab motifs—such as Arab-Islamic design idioms, epic figures from folk literature, and ancient artifacts—as repositories of native symbolologies. The art historical narratives from these national contexts often emphasize the dynamics of recovery; they characterize the nineteenth-century importation of the European oil-painting format into the region’s bourgeois homes and military academies as an original moment of cultural alienation that relegated “native arts” to second-class status, in turn portraying the subsequent decades of experimentation and postcolonial struggle as a process of self-discovery and reclamation of a shared cultural core. Not by chance, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed a heyday of artistic efforts to adopt the Arabic letterform as a plastic element within painting. As both a living sign system and an abstract technique of formation, letter-painting of this kind offered a promise of “authenticity” that artists and governments alike were pursuing, but that could never be attained. These strategies, too, received criticism in their time. As the Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi put it in 1980, political pressures had made the use of the Arabic letter in Arab art into something like an “Aladdin’s lamp”—a device for “fulfilling the wishes of the artist who is less concerned with the quality of the work than with being accepted.”¹⁷

Similarly, the visual works included in the canon of modern Arab art, as it has coalesced through national histories, largely reflect conventional narratives of authenticity. Often, the same selection of one or two individual works has been repeatedly reproduced, serving as stand-ins for entire careers and movements. The cursory visual history that results is due, in part, to a limited number of public museums and other repositories compared with private holdings. Large bodies of work remain with artists’ families or in state collections that lack a public mandate. For the present volume, every effort has been made to feature lesser-known visual materials. Our illustration selections have been guided by the texts themselves; we sought works of art with direct connections to the writings—whether by the artist-authors of the related passages or by artists referenced in them, or else works that demonstrate the theories and practices discussed, and that issued from the same historical moment as the related text’s publication. Thanks to the collaboration and generosity of collectors, artists, families, estates, galleries, and museums, we present here one hundred images as a visual record of a diverse and robust history of modernism in the region.

This volume does not provide a comprehensive view of the development of the practices and institutions of modern art in the Arab world. It cannot. We have endeavored, though, to foreground documents we recognized as signal primary sources: texts that offer direct access to a particular claim or attitude undergoing active development, as components in a rich and manifold history of questions, assertions, debates, and declared possibilities. With this in mind, we have drawn texts from the widest possible range of formats and forums, including position papers and manifestos, interviews, speeches, diary entries, exhibition guest registers, and hitherto unpublished manuscript drafts.

One consequence of our emphasis on the direct testimony of *primary* documents, however, is the absence in this volume of journalistic writing by major critics in the region, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Helen al-Khal, or Nazih Khater. Although formative to the Arab art world and its sense of its own trajectory, such critical writings functioned as a secondary literature devoted to crafting retrospective historical assessments and, as such, are outside the scope of the present volume. Equally, many artistic groups propelled practice in new programmatic directions but, because they produced few or no texts—or because the record of those documents has been lost—they receive no representation here. (There are no texts from Cairo's Chimera group of the 1920s, nor from the Experimentalists in Alexandria in the 1960s, for example.) Rather than make a vain attempt to compile a comprehensive overview, we have labored to highlight points of intense debate or conviction. Toward this end, for reasons of space and focus, we have sometimes abridged texts, removing the occasional excursus on peripheral matters. (In these cases, the fact of omission is marked with bracketed ellipses, thus: [. . .].) Those readers who wish to read the texts in full, and in their original languages, are invited to visit amcainternational.org/moma_primary_documents, where they may access pdfs of all texts no longer in copyright, and other texts available in digitized library collections.

Finally, by offering access to a history of art writing as a series of short entries, or “nodes,” in a system of diffuse but meaningful linkages, this volume purposefully avoids positing causal relations between its texts. The reader will notice that we have opted not to include a time line of political and cultural events as part of the contextual apparatus for this book. Although a chronology was commissioned for inclusion in the volume, and was very ably produced by our colleague Tiffany Floyd, it became clear in our editorial process that it would be impossible to reconcile the time-line format of orderly sequences of institutional initiatives, political foundations, and militarized disruptions with the decidedly fluid ways of being that are evident in the texts themselves.

By way of contextualization, then, we have organized the primary documents into a loosely chronological sequence, and gathered them into constellations: a collective conversation in a particular city, or discussions pertaining to a specific initiative, or a shared challenge of position and circumstance. In some cases, when direct affinities with other texts may not be apparent, a document has been allowed to stand on its own as a declaration of principle or problem. At the start of each section of related texts, we have provided brief contextualizing notes offering information about the participants in the discussions that follow, the original venue of each text, and its likely readership.

We recognized that there are certain thematic questions and historical initiatives that are key to the discursive context for modern art in the Arab world but that are not fully explicated in the primary documents themselves. To address these points, we invited experts in the pertinent fields to contribute short supplemental essays; these are distributed throughout the book at relevant chronological junctures. These contemporary contributions take two forms. The “In Focus” texts are brief historical studies authored by scholars in the disciplines of anthropology, art and architectural history, literary and Middle East studies, design studies, and film. The “Personal Reflections” are written by protagonists themselves, and engage particular moments in the regional history of modern art from a firsthand perspective, constituting yet another form of primary documentation for the varied genealogies of modern art of the Arab world.

To conclude: This 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. The Cold War was coming to a close, and the concomitant rise of a global art market was underway. Furthermore, this concluding date corresponds with a number of discrete turning points in the region. The violent Iraq-Iran War was in its final throes, with a new era of complexities in the Arabian Gulf region to come. A bloodless coup in Tunisia brought to power Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, ending the reign of Habib Ben Ali Bourguiba (and commencing a twenty-three-year presidency that ended only in January 2011 with the Tunisian Revolution). But 1987 also brought a specific new hope that reenergized artists’ imaginations. December 1987 marked the beginning of the first Palestinian Intifada, or uprising, against the Israeli occupation. Launched twenty years after the June 1967 War, this intifada was a nonviolent, grassroots resistance movement taking various forms, including refusal to pay taxes to Israel, boycott of all Israeli products imported into the occupied territories, and the adoption of new tactics to reclaim public spaces with graffiti and public messaging. Representing a historical moment of Palestinian solidarity, the intifada seemed to offer a new beginning amid upheavals that otherwise augured endings: the 1982 Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil War, the massacres of the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Beirut, and the subsequent expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon. The movement’s optimism regarding the capacity of collective action to bring about social and political justice—a movement in which artists played an integral part—seems particularly fitting as a bookend to the era designated as the modern. It is our hope that this collection of resources may provide multiple points of entry into the remarkable history of modern art in the Arab world.

Notes on Language and Translation

The work of rendering these texts into English was a team effort undertaken by some twenty translators led by our Senior Translation Editor, Kareem James Abu-Zeid, and our Editorial Associate, Ismail Fayed. And still at times the task seemed to exceed our collective capacities. It entailed not only working with different source languages, but also contending with myriad diglossic differences in syntax, verb tenses, and vocabulary. Moreover, Arabic writing on *art* in particular—a subject often based on nearly ineffable sensory experiences—presented substantial challenges to translation. This is because, to an Arabophone reader accustomed to the conventions of literary and journalistic prose, the language can seem to resist customary or authoritative syntactic sense. Further, some texts delivered a difficult, obscure, or even awkward and incomplete reading experience in their original language of composition. In other cases, authors improvised, incorporating expressions and terms from their own dialects and sayings, or coining neologisms.

The aim in all cases was 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. So as to achieve this kind of reading experience in English, we determined, it was necessary to take an interpretative approach to translation. A literal translation process that hews too closely to original sentence structure would not do for these purposes. We asked translators to be willing to alter syntax, reconfigure tone, and adjust for anachronistic terminology. We sometimes modified punctuation for readability, amending what seemed to be idiosyncratic uses (quotation marks employed

to emphasize terms, for example). On occasion we adjusted paragraph breaks, inserting them where they seemed most supportive to the logic of a given text. Finally, we often opted to clarify an antecedent of a reflexive pronoun by naming the thing or person again, rather than leave it as an ambiguous *it*, or *they*. Relatedly, the gender bias toward the use of male pronouns as the neutral has been retained, as this bias was in place at the time of these writings' formulation.

This is not to say that we aimed to force a digestibility upon the texts, or to posit false equivalencies between languages. Rather, we worked to honor the intellectual content of the texts by rendering them in eloquent English, thereby allowing them to make sense to readers who have no access to the original Arabic or original French.¹⁸ With a view to allowing space for multivalence in the authors' ideas and intentions, we have avoided overburdening the texts with cumbersome editors' notes, or by the use of parenthetical references to terms in the source language. In those instances where we have imposed an editorial footnote, we preface it with "*Eds.*," to distinguish it from any notes that are original to the document. In the end, the emphasis is on enabling readers to glean meaning from the text at hand, as completely as possible.

Several key points of resistance did arise from this extensive translation process, and must be recognized here. First, in a region most often defined linguistically as Arabic-speaking, the presence of multiple source languages indicates a complex history; the polyglotism of our selections has its own internal weight and bias. Absences are meaningful. This book includes no documents translated from the languages of many communities that have been subsumed by the nationalist history of the current Arab nation-states—fitfully and violently so—such as Armenian, Kurdish, or the Amazigh languages. Art writing in these languages is not available to us in the same way: the primary archives of newspapers, exhibition catalogues, and even oral histories tend, unsurprisingly, to be organized according to the languages of the governments in power. Some Armenian and Kurdish artists were active in the art communities of the Arab world, and are represented in these texts, but only via testimony in Arabic or French. Notably, a full third of the texts selected for this anthology were written and published in French—a language often experienced as a colonial imperative; most of these originate from North Africa, but others are from Lebanon and Egypt. (Throughout this volume, the source language of a given text is indicated in the informational lines that immediately follow it.) Readers will find that the politics of language sometimes factors directly into artists' conversations about their visual craft. This is the case in postcolonial Morocco, for example, where intellectuals discussed language choice as a fraught negotiation within perceived oppositions of colonizer and colonized. Members of the avant-garde Casablanca School write about the urgent task of forging understanding across the different registers of sensibility imposed by foreign education, for which they seek to produce a national culture open to more abstract—even prelinguistic—cognitive forms.¹⁹

In the case of Arabic texts, certain terms proved to be so fluid and contextually specific, and yet so central to the historical argument, that the translation decisions ultimately constitute a mode of history writing in themselves. For example, we agonized over the adjective *adabī*, which in contemporary usage would likely be translated as "literary," but which over time has also carried connotations of civilized exchange, comportment, moral-ethical manners, and a field of cultural activity (in the sense of the "liberal arts"). Ultimately, to make a determination, we had to rely on our own extralinguistic knowledge of context and even intent (sometimes based on our knowledge of an author's wider oeuvre). In

May Ziadeh's 1912 article "Something about Art," for example, the term *adabī* is rendered in the phrase "strongest *cultural* force," translated thus rather than as "strongest *literary* force" or "strongest *moral* force"—although all are plausible interpretations.²⁰ As another example, the noun *al-tajāwuz*, meaning "crossing" or "exceeding," factors in a number of Iraqi texts on art in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the manifesto "Towards a New Vision" of 1969, it appears in English as "surpassing," in accordance with the progressive, avant-garde spirit of the text.²¹ In texts by Shakir Hassan Al Said, by contrast, the term has been rendered as "transcendence," in keeping with his more mystical and antiprogressivist framework.²²

Finally, other challenges arose from varying conditions of availability for the original texts themselves. These include the following:

Citational practices

Some texts selected for this anthology contain abundant intertextual references, freely paraphrased quotations from other sources, often offered without precise or complete citation. At other times, sentiments presented in the form of direct citations are in fact something more like interpretational summaries. This seems to have been the case, for example, in Hamed Said's extensive discussion of Goethean models of natural creation.²³ Acknowledging the fluidity of such citational practices, and the ways in which new use of texts produces new meaning, we opted to translate "quoted" (or paraphrased) passages directly from the Arabic or French in which they were presented, rather than locating and citing the original texts.

Absent originals

Certain texts in the book are no longer available as original documents; some of these now exist only in an already translated state. This is the case for Egyptian artist Mohamed Naghi's now-famous 1928 speech in defense of the civilizational value of Egyptian popular arts.²⁴ Delivered at the first International Congress of Popular Arts in Prague, it was composed and presented in French. We have managed to trace only an Arabic translation of the speech transcript. As a result, its syntax and specialized vocabulary feels particularly estranging to the Arabophone reader, and in one case leaves us to guess at the referent for the phrase (as we have rendered it here) "necklaces 'of purity.'" Another missing original is Dia al-Azzawi's "Exploding Artistic and Cultural Handicaps," written in Arabic in response to the first Arab Biennial in Baghdad in 1974, and translated into French for publication in the Moroccan journal *Intégral*. Thus the English version here is, again, a translation of a translated text.²⁵ Further, insofar as the differences between spoken and written Arabic are considerable, it is inevitable that Arabic-language interviews and roundtable discussions, here presented as texts, have lost something of their original sense. A gathering such as the Forum from the first Arab Biennial included participants from a dozen or so countries and, in the live event, would have contained a full range of styles and registers of expression; the transcript that appears in print, however, translates all the voices into standardized Arabic for the purposes of circulation in the media.²⁶

Doubling—bilingualism

Certain texts in this volume took form through a conscious deployment of bilingualism. This is the case for the "Long Live Degenerate Art!" manifesto (1938), which comprises a strident commitment to internationalism and was published in Cairo in Arabic and French

simultaneously (the translation in the present volume is from the Arabic).²⁷ Another example is the 1969 Djema al Fna exhibition statement from Morocco, which details a commitment to the fully open and public status of art, artists, and exhibition space. It was published simultaneously in Arabic and French in the journal *Souffles*, where a bilingual reader would have noticed slight differences between the two versions.²⁸

In other instances, authors composed texts in languages that were not their own, specifically for communication to foreign audiences. This seems to have been the case for the text that Egyptian art administrator Salah Kamel composed for the 1960 Venice Biennale, introducing work by Egyptian and Syrian artists who exhibited in the United Arab Republic pavilion. Writing in Italian, but about Arab commonalities, Kamel negotiates certain communal divides by seeking to break down others.²⁹ Finally, a small number of the selected texts were composed in English originally—for a variety of reasons and purposes—and so did not require translation. For some authors, it was a native language. Kahlil Gibran is represented here with a draft of an unpublished essay written in English³⁰ (as well as with a letter translated from Arabic); Gibran spent the majority of his short life in the United States and his writings in English were extensive, among them his best-selling 1923 book *The Prophet*. For others, such as Mahmoud Sabri, who wrote an English-language version of his 1971 Quantum Realism manifesto while residing in Prague, the language offered a most effective means to address an international art audience.³¹

Flexible titling

As has been the case with artists everywhere and throughout history, modern artists in the Arab world often took a flexible approach to the titles of their works. A single work of art might appear in the literature under several varying titles. Some debuted without any title at all, only to accrue one (or several) in subsequent commentaries. The confusion is compounded by the linguistic diversity of the region; a work or an event could carry an Arabic, French, and English title simultaneously—each with a slightly different meaning. Given the variability of these titling practices, we have avoided attempting to isolate “original” names for works of art or exhibitions. Instead, we provide the titles of exhibitions and works of art in English translation only. Similarly, we have opted to provide the names of institutions, whether Arabic, French, or other, in English.

Personal names

The reader will note that most historical figures in the volume—regardless of cultural origin—are identified by their full names; this editorial decision was made with a view to maintaining a balance of scholarly information for all. Our criteria in implementing this style protocol have been necessarily flexible, giving allowance for transcultural conventions of designation (“Shakespeare,” “Machiavelli,” and “al-Ghazali,” for instance, are identified by surnames alone).

Regarding transliteration of Arabic names: variants are wide ranging, as are regional practices of transliteration (as one of many examples: “Mohamed” is a common rendering for this name in the case of Egyptians in particular; “Muhammad” a stricter transliteration from the Arabic). There can be no resolution to such variations, and thus we have not sought to regularize them in this volume. Instead, we have attempted to employ the most widely used transliteration of each artist’s name, so as to facilitate further research in Anglophone sources. To do so, we typically first consulted the *Mathaf Encyclopedia of*

Modern Art and the Arab World, and adopted its version of the name, even when it conflicts with the spelling used most frequently in Anglophone scholarship. (Thus “Mokhtar” instead of “Moukhtar.”)

When a name is not listed in the Mathaf encyclopedia but is familiar in the relevant literature, we have attempted to follow the general consensus. In some cases an artist or a member of an artist’s family has conveyed the preferred spelling of a name. For example, the Telmissany family has noted that the artist preferred to spell his name “Kamel Telmisany” (no *alif lam*, and with a single s). In almost all such cases, we have heeded the wishes of the artist or the artist’s family (with exceptions when a body of important secondary literature has converged upon a different spelling—for example, “Moustafa Farroukh,” rather than the artist’s preferred “Farouk”).

Finally, we have provided fully transliterated authors’ names, titles of texts, and places of publication in the postscript citation lines that follow each translated text, offering sufficient information for subject specialists to undertake further research in Arabic sources.

—The epigraphic passages that open this essay are drawn from the Primary Documents section in the present volume. See May Ziadeh, “Something about Art,” 45; Jewad Selim, “The Renewal of Art,” 154; Mohamed Khadda, “Elements for a New Art,” 233; Farid Belkahlia, “Responses to the *Souffles* Artists’ Questionnaire,” 269; Hassan Soliman, “(....),” 305; and Abdallah Bola, “Commentary,” 403.

Notes

1. Butrus al-Bustani, “*Taswir, Peinture, Painting*” (c. 1882), in the present volume, 36–37.
2. Ahmed Fahmi, “The Fine Arts” (1887), in the present volume, 37–42.
3. See Omar Racim, letter to the Director of *The Exhibition of Indigenous Art from the French Colonies* (1923); and Azouaou Mammeri, letter to Jean Alazard, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Algiers (1929), in the present volume, 57 and 73–74 respectively.
4. See Kirsten Scheid, “The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity,” *MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies (MIT-IJMES)*, no. 7 (Spring 2007): 6–23.
5. Salma Khadra Jayyusi, “Global Culture: An Arab View,” in Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 204.
6. Cheikh Ben Dhine, Mohamed Dahou, Ismail Ait Djafer, “Manifesto” (1953), in the present volume, 163.
7. Jean Sénac, “On the Presentation of a Collective Exhibition” (1953), in the present volume, 156.
8. Shakir Hassan Al Said, “About the Third Exhibition at the British Cultural Council” (1953), in the present volume, 158–61.
9. Mustafa al-Hallaj, “The Palestinian People’s Consciousness and Aesthetic Expression” (1975), in the present volume, 387–93.
10. Muhammad Abduh, “Images and Statues, Their Benefits and Legality” (1904), in the present volume, 42–45.
11. Hatem el Mekki, “Thoughts on Art” (1944), in the present volume, 110–11.
12. Adham Isma’il, speech delivered at Damascus’s Maydan High School (1951), in the present volume, 144.
13. “Opening of Gallery One: A First Art Institution of Its Kind” (1963), in the present volume, 206–8.
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15. “The Crystalist Manifesto” (1976), in the present volume, 393–401.
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17. Dia al-Azzawi, interview with Basim Farah, *al-Majalla*, no. 16 (1980): 57, cited in Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 94.
18. We are inspired in particular by a recent essay by Robyn Creswell that makes a case for asserting some measure of translatability, and therefore eloquence in translations from Arabic, as a way to make more intelligible the ways in which Anglophone readers might be implicated in these other literatures. “Is Arabic Untranslatable?” *Public Culture* 28, no. 30 (2016): 447–56.
19. Mohammed Chebaa, “On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language” (1966), in the present volume, 263–66.
20. Ziadeh, “Something about Art,” 45.
21. “Manifesto: Towards a New Vision” (1969), in the present volume, 306–9.
22. Shakir Hassan Al Said, “The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension” (1973), in the present volume, 357–59.
23. Hamed Said, “The Freedom of Art” (1958), in the present volume, 186–89.
24. Mohamed Naghi, “The Popular Arts in Egypt” (1928), in the present volume, 68–71.
25. Dia al-Azzawi, “Exploding Artistic and Cultural Handicaps” (1974), in the present volume, 386–87.
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27. “Long Live Degenerate Art!” (1938), in the present volume, 94–95.
28. Mohammed Ataallah, Farid Belkahlia, Mohammed Chebaa, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Hamidi, Mohammed Melehi, “Statement” (1969), in the present volume, 323–24.
29. Salah Kamel, “Text for the United Arab Republic Pavilion, Venice Biennale” (1960), in the present volume, 189–90.
30. Kahlil Gibran, draft essay (1920s), in the present volume, 51–53.
31. Mahmoud Sabri, “Quantum Realism—An Art of Processes” (1971), in the present volume, 347–50.

The Making and Unmaking of the Arab World

Ussama Makdisi

The modern Arab world has been made and unmade repeatedly over the course of two centuries—first as Ottoman provinces, then as European-dominated states, and finally as postcolonial states in an age of U.S. hegemony.¹ It is a place inhabited primarily by Arabic-speaking peoples, and a space constantly manipulated by foreign powers. The history of the modern Arab imaginary has thus inevitably shifted in locale and form: from the diverse and cosmopolitan cities of Cairo and Beirut at the turn of the twentieth century to revolutionary struggles in Algeria, Iraq, and Egypt in the mid-twentieth century to the Gulf region dominated by Doha, Dubai, and Riyadh in the post-Cold War era.

This history has also been shaped by a panoply of Western political, military, cultural, and economic encroachments on, and entanglements with, the Arab world. France, for example, colonized Algeria in 1830; Britain invaded Egypt in 1882; Italy occupied Libya in 1911. Nearly four decades after the partition of Africa at Berlin in 1884, the former Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the Levant were placed under direct British and French rule in 1920. In 1946, the historian Albert Hourani presciently described the fateful imprint of Western colonialism on the Arab world. Hourani insisted that the “attitude which the Arabs will take up towards the West is not entirely a matter for the Arabs themselves,” adding that “it depends very largely upon the attitude which the West takes up towards them.”² The tragedy of Arab history, Hourani suggested, is that it was caught between an indigenous desire for self-determination and an incorrigible Western will to dominate the Arab world itself.

Before the advent of direct European rule, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Arab world (with the exception of Morocco) had been subjects of the Ottoman Empire for four centuries, between 1516 and 1918. As an Islamic empire, the Ottoman state had legally and ideologically privileged Muslims over non-Muslims; at the same time, it granted a large degree of religious and cultural autonomy to its non-Muslim subjects. Yet for much of the Ottoman era there was little sense of a *political* Arab identity; instead, a variety of affiliations—social, religious, linguistic, ethnic, class, urban, and geographic—marked the diverse nature of the populations, both Arab and non-Arab, living under Ottoman rule.³

The Ottoman Empire was forced on the defensive by European military, political, and economic intrusions; the “Great Powers”-backed Greek war of independence of the 1820s; and a major rebellion by an erstwhile provincial governor of Egypt in the 1830s. In 1839, under enormous European military and diplomatic pressure, the Ottoman Empire began to abolish its most discriminatory codes against non-Muslims. Known as the *Tanzimat*, this era of reform culminated in 1876, amid a crisis in the Ottoman Empire’s Balkan provinces, imperial bankruptcy, and the brink of yet another war with Russia. In that year, the Ottomans promulgated the first constitution of the empire that set down the legal and political equality of all Ottoman citizens, irrespective of religious affiliation.

This major shift, from explicitly discriminatory Ottoman imperial rule to putative equal citizenship, was not a straightforward process. As was the case in virtually every major nineteenth-century polity (including the United States), the idea of equal citizenship for all met with resistance. In the Ottoman case, this resistance was colored by the autocratic nature of centralized government, the reality of Western interventionism, and the perception that European powers habitually favored the Christian subjects of the empire. In some instances, most notably in Damascus in July 1860, there occurred unprecedented massacres

of Christians. The riots in Damascus that year broke out against the backdrop of increased European diplomatic, economic, and missionary presence in the region and targeted European Christians as well as local Arab Christians. They were as much a backlash against new *Tanzimat* Ottoman authority as they were a callous reminder of the persistence of prejudice and bigotry. On a far greater scale, French settler-colonial oppression of the indigenous Muslim population in Algeria unfolded across the nineteenth century, as did French efforts to divide Arab Muslims and Berbers, by portraying them as antagonistic groups that allegedly required a French “civilizing mission.”⁴ The era of Ottoman reform also saw a dramatic increase in foreign Christian missionary societies working in the Ottoman domains; many of these groups made no secret of their hope for the imminent overthrow of the Muslim sultanate.

Yet, despite these seemingly relentless pressures, the attempt to modernize and reconstitute Ottoman sovereignty did, in fact, encourage the emergence of vibrant new cultural endeavors, including Arabic printing presses and journals in cities such as Beirut, Cairo, Jaffa, and Damascus. These created the basis for a modern ecumenical Arab identity that promised to transcend religious and sectarian differences. Especially in the Levant, the idea of Christian Arab or Jewish Arab compatriotship with Muslim Arabs became meaningful within the late-Ottoman imperial framework. The flourishing of Arabic literature, education, and printing is often referred to as the *Nahda*—that is, renaissance, or revival. The paradox of the *Nahda* is that it thrived at a time when the Balkan and Anatolian regions of the Ottoman Empire were convulsed in nationalist violence that pitted Balkan Christians against Ottoman Muslims and led ultimately to the 1915 Armenian genocide and massive population transfers. The *Nahda* flourished right up to the moment when the Ottomans entered World War I.

That war effectively destroyed the Ottoman Empire. It left Arab populations, particularly in the Levant, decimated by famine and wartime mobilizations. It also consolidated French colonial rule across much of North Africa. The former subjects of the Ottoman sultan were vulnerable to an aggressive, late Anglo-British imperialism that was determined to seize control of the Middle East. The British government encouraged the Arabs—under the leadership of Sharif Husayn of Mecca and his son Emir Faysal—to revolt against their Ottoman overlords, with the promise of independence in 1915. At the same time, the British were secretly negotiating a wartime colonial pact with France. Known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, this pact divided the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire into roughly equivalent British and French spheres of direct and indirect influence. In November 1917, the Balfour Declaration provided British imperial sanction for the creation of a “Jewish National Home” in Palestine, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the indigenous population was Arab and was opposed to the creation of a Jewish state at their expense.

The Arab East was the last part of the world to be formally colonized by European empires. At the San Remo conference in April 1920, therefore, the victorious Allied powers affirmed the Balfour Declaration and parceled out to each other various “mandates,” disregarding all promises and pledges of independence made to Arabs who fought alongside the allies during World War I. In theory, and as a sop to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s idealistic call to abjure secret treaties and old-style colonialism, these mandates constituted what the League of Nations charter described as “sacred trusts of civilization.” They were purportedly not intended for imperial aggrandizement, but rather to safeguard religious liberty and to assist in the development of peoples in the former Ottoman Empire whose “provisional independence” was to be recognized “subject to the rendering of administrative assistance” by an ostensibly advanced and disinterested European power.⁵

Out of what had been a single Ottoman sovereignty, separate Arab countries were created by imperial fiat as an assemblage of nominally independent, but weak, states. Britain established Hashemite monarchies in Iraq and in the emirate of Transjordan. Furthermore, it established the mandate of Palestine, which politically privileged European Jewish Zionists over the native Arab Muslim and Christian populations. France, in turn, swept aside the Hashemite Faysal's short-lived Arab Kingdom of Syria and established in its place the Christian-dominated Republic of Lebanon. France further divided the state of Syria into Druze, Alawite, and Arab regions, deliberately encouraging the idea that the inhabitants of the Levant could never be greater than the sum of their communal and religious parts.

Both Britain and France crushed resistance to their colonial partition of the Middle East—the British suppressed uprisings in Egypt in 1919, Iraq in 1920, and Palestine in 1936; the French subdued an uprising in Syria in 1925. Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia remained under different regimes of French colonial control until the late 1950s and early 1960s. Libya was in thrall to Italy until 1943. At the same time, Britain consolidated its control over dependent emirates in the Gulf region as an integral part of the British Empire.

In the process, British agents and diplomats established the basis of what would become a pro-Western petroleum order, the fundamental purpose of which was to supply the industrialized economies of the West with inexpensive petroleum from the oil-rich Middle East. This was achieved by guaranteeing the protection of subordinate local rulers in Bahrain, Kuwait, the Trucial States (today's United Arab Emirates), and Oman, across what was at the time a sparsely populated Arabian Peninsula. The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, allowed a consortium of U.S. oil companies (which became the Arabian American Oil Company, or ARAMCO) to prospect for oil. When oil was discovered in Dhahran in 1938, the stage was set for close relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States.⁶

Yet Western powers have not been able to build this dependent Arab world alone. Arabs themselves both resisted and collaborated with colonial rule throughout the long twentieth century. In the shadow of Western hegemony, the Arab idea of the Arab world oscillated between two basic poles. One of these was an Islamic vision that drew on the fact that the vast majority of the population of the Arab world is Muslim, and that privileged this majority culturally and symbolically (if not necessarily legally or politically). At the other pole was a more secular Arab vision that purposefully included Christian and Jewish Arabs. The demographic and historical makeup of the different regions of the Arab world inevitably influenced which of these two poles—or which elements of each—would define the imaginary of a possible post-colonial future. North Africa, for example, had almost no Christian presence, whereas Morocco had a significant indigenous Jewish presence. Although several Jewish intellectuals in Morocco either were Communists or supported independence from French rule, most of the country's Jewish inhabitants were apprehensive about the end of colonialism, in large part because of the legacies of French colonial and educational policies in the region. The Arab East, for its part, had a major and vibrant Arab Christian presence. Despite consistent European attempts to drive a sectarian wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims in Syria, Palestine, and especially Lebanon, many Arab Christians played vital and well-recognized roles in the elaboration of Arab nationalism with their Muslim Arab compatriots.

Indeed, within each of the states created by the British and French partition of the Ottoman Empire, there were extraordinarily rich debates about the nature and orientation of society, about the proper relationship between religion (particularly Islam) and

government, and about the necessity of resisting or accommodating oneself to Western military and political control. Conflicting ideologies of Communism, nationalism, and Islamism came to the fore. Throughout the region, there were palpable tensions between the vision of an overarching “pan-Arab” identity and local Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, Jordanian, and Lebanese identities. These tensions resonated in North Africa as well, where challenges to French colonialism spurred the development of distinctive modern Moroccan, Tunisian, and Algerian identities.

For Christians and other minorities, there was a basic choice to be made during the interwar period: either to cultivate a minority consciousness that depended on Western protection, or to become an integral part of an anticolonial and antisectarian nationalist project. The Muslim majority, for its part, also had to choose between adopting a secular Arab identity or a more overtly Islamic one that often marginalized non-Muslims. Because no community was politically, sociologically, or culturally monolithic, these were not uncomplicated choices or debates. They raged on in the interwar mandate era, which saw the founding of national independence movements, the Muslim Brotherhood, the establishment of Communist and secular pan-Arab nationalist parties, and a host of communalist organizations.

The formal colonial age of the mandate era came to an end after World War II. By 1946, four of the mandatory states—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan—had achieved independence. Palestine, however, was a crucial exception. There, the Jewish state of Israel was established in 1948. Israel not only defeated several Arab armies that were sent to assist their Arab brethren in Palestine, it also systematically expelled and dispossessed the vast majority of Palestinian Arab Muslims and Christians from their homes and lands during and after the war of 1948. From an Arab perspective, the destruction of Arab Palestinian society and the defeat of 1948 is referred to as the *Nakba*, or “catastrophe.”⁷ Palestinians were scattered into a stateless diaspora, which in turn put enormous pressure on the region’s Jewish communities, some of which were scapegoated, while others found themselves increasingly alienated from their Arab surroundings. The tragedy of Palestine was a grievous blow to the modern culture of coexistence that had taken root in the Levant during the late Ottoman age.

Although militarily and politically unsuccessful, the Arab struggle to defend Palestine nevertheless galvanized a powerful Arab solidarity that cut across religious, class, and regional lines. Sympathy for the Palestinian struggle was expressed in different Islamic, secular, liberal, and radical nationalist registers across the Arab world. The question of Palestine, and with it a recognition of the injustice of Zionist settler colonialism to the native Arab population, became a core aspect of modern Arab identity. At the same time, however, the *Nakba* exposed the military, social, and economic weaknesses of the Arab world, as well as major disagreements about how to proceed in the face of the new state of Israel.⁸

In the aftermath of the Palestine debacle, nationalist military officers presented themselves as the saviors of their nations. The Egyptian Army officer Gamal Abdel Nasser, who had served in Palestine in 1948, personified this anticolonial nationalist era. As one of the self-styled Free Officers, Nasser participated in a revolution that toppled Egypt’s pro-British monarchy in July 1952. His 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal, and his defiance of the subsequent tripartite British, French, and Israeli invasion of Egypt, catapulted him onto the global stage. His basic promise of dignity, substantial land reform, and meaningful self-determination free of Western tutelage captured the imagination of the entire Arab world—indeed, of much of the Third World generally. Nasser became the first

genuinely popular and populist Arab leader of the modern era. He represented a sea change from the pliant Egyptian and Hashemite monarchs of the mandate era.

The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 was followed by the Iraqi Revolution of 1958, which violently toppled the pro-British monarchy in Baghdad. The anticolonial Algerian Revolution, in turn, unfolded between 1954 and 1962, gaining enthusiastic support across the Arab regions and the Third World. Finally, pan-Arabist, republican, socialist and anticolonial currents of Nasserism directly inspired several antimonarchic movements in the Gulf region, particularly in Oman and Yemen. In this period, the Arab imaginary was seized, in short, by the imperatives of rapid anticolonialism, modernization, and liberation and the advent of nationalist culture. But massive obstacles soon impeded the optimism of this revolutionary moment. The overtly anticolonial regimes lost their way, faced with severe economic and social challenges of rapidly growing populations with rising expectations, the military threat of Israel (in the case of Egypt), the hostility of the Saudi-centric, conservative pro-Western petroleum order, and the insidious narcotic of power itself. In Iraq, a series of coups and purges occurred in the 1960s, culminating in the seizure of power by the Arab nationalist Ba'ath Party in 1968.⁹ In Egypt, Nasser continued to consolidate power domestically until his death in 1970. Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed opposing republican and monarchical sides in a protracted struggle to determine the face of the Arab world.¹⁰ All this while the old and new imperial powers in the region, Britain, and the United States sought to neutralize the anticolonial potential of secular Arab nationalism, in the name of fighting Communism.¹¹

The tragedy of this revolutionary moment is the degree to which the leading anticolonial regimes progressively abandoned the secular freedoms that had been enshrined in their own revolutionary proclamations and constitutions. Iraqi and Egyptian regimes, for example, suppressed Communist, Islamist, and independent dissenters in the name of national unity, security, and anti-Zionism. Democracy was sacrificed at the altar of an increasingly shrill anticolonial nationalism and economic development. Although much was made of liberating Palestine—a powerful moral and ideological cause for Arabs—the priority of every Arab regime was in fact to ensure its own survival. The promise of secular development was upheld, to a greater or lesser extent, in Syria, Iraq, Algeria, and Egypt: in these countries, more primary schools were built than had been in the colonial era; new infrastructure and electricity networks were brought to rural areas (especially in Egypt after the completion of the Aswan Dam in 1970); there was an increase in higher education, especially in the medical and engineering fields; and public health care was improved.¹² These material developments of the Cold War era, however, corresponded with a denial of democratic representation, the consolidation of authoritarian military-nationalist regimes, and limited investment in scientific research, all of which ultimately led to a “brain-drain,” as highly educated Arabs sought employment overseas.¹³

The June 1967 War with Israel dealt a shattering blow to the authority of secular Arab nationalism, whose principal icon, Nasser, was undermined by the scale of the Arab defeat. Hundreds of thousands more Palestinians now found themselves under Israeli occupation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Gaza. The Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights were both occupied as well. The war also effectively consecrated a new era of American hegemony over the Middle East. This U.S. dominance relied on key pillars that defined the post-1967 landscape of the Middle East: economic, military, and diplomatic support for the Jewish state of Israel, despite its active colonization of Arab lands and

oppression of Palestinians; and support for two vital regional players in the pro-Western petroleum order: Iran under the shah, and Saudi Arabia.

The United States' hostility to anticolonial Arab nationalism, and to the Palestinian quest for national liberation, was matched by its efforts in the mid-1970s to draw Egypt away from pan-Arabist Nasserism and toward neo-liberal ("open door") policies under Anwar Sadat. This shift entailed the recognition of Israeli and Egyptian acquiescence to U.S. regional hegemony in return for U.S. military aid to Egypt. This was one of the principal outcomes of the 1978 Camp David Accords, which paved the way for the first formal peace treaty between an Arab state and Israel. Likewise, the strong support for the Shah of Iran and Saudi Arabia was coupled with the dramatic rise of oil prices in the 1970s.

Although the Iranian Revolution of 1979 toppled the shah, the extraordinary increase in the purchasing power of the British- and U.S.-backed Arab gulf monarchies and emirates in the 1970s relocated the balance of Arab power firmly in favor of the pro-Western, socially conservative, legally and openly antidemocratic and antiseccular Gulf monarchies. The Carter Doctrine of 1980 made clear that the United States was prepared to use military force to repel any threat to its dominion over the oil-rich Persian Gulf.

Civil war erupted in Lebanon in 1975, and dragged on for a decade and a half. This internecine conflict inflicted another blow to the idea of secular, anticolonial Arabism, for when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and besieged an Arab capital city, the major Arab states, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia, looked on impotently. With active U.S. support, Israel forced the eviction of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Lebanon in August 1982. A month later, the Israeli Army stood by while Maronite militiamen it had equipped and transported to the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila committed the largest massacre of the Arab-Israeli conflict. More than a thousand civilians, most of them Palestinians, were slaughtered.¹⁴

Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, precipitating a protracted war that lasted until 1988. During this conflict, which took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Iranians alike, the Iraqi military committed terrible atrocities against its own Kurdish population. But, because he was fighting in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran (with the aid of U.S. and European weaponry and funds from the Arab Gulf states), Hussein was shielded at the time from forceful international censure. In Egypt, meanwhile, the pro-U.S. Anwar Sadat's assassination in 1981 paved the way for the ascension to power of Hosni Mubarak, who continued Sadat's legacy of authoritarian pro-Americanism.

The decline of secular Arabism in the 1980s opened the door for the rise of new and diverse kinds of politicized Islamist movements that have alternately stirred and haunted the Arab world. Inspired by the Iranian Revolution, the Lebanese Shi'i Hezbollah was established in the immediate aftermath of Israel's invasion of Lebanon. Hezbollah was blamed by the United States for the bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks at Beirut airport in October 1983. Nearly twenty years later, Hezbollah solidified its reputation in the region by forcing Israel out of Lebanon in 2000.

The far older Sunni Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt also developed its organizational strength, to the point of being able to contest successfully democratic elections when and if they were allowed to be held. In Afghanistan, meanwhile, the United States actively worked with Saudi and Pakistani intelligence services to mobilize Arab and other Muslim volunteers to wage an anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s. Out of these mobilizations emerged Al-Qaeda. The supreme irony is that, having done so much to smother the potential of secular Arab

nationalism, the United States has played a crucial role in creating the politically and ideologically ravaged landscape of the modern Arab world.

Notes

1. The term *unmaking* is borrowed from Jeremy Salt, *The Unmaking of the Middle East: A History of Western Disorder in Arab Lands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
2. "The Case against a Jewish State in Palestine: Albert Hourani's Statement to the Anglo-American Committee of Enquiry of 1946," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 137 (Autumn 2005): 80–90.
3. See Bruce Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
4. Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Imperial Identities: Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria* (1995; rev. ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).
5. The classic account of this process from an Arab perspective remains George Antonius's *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938). See also A. L. Tibawi, *Anglo-Arab Relations and the Question of Palestine, 1914–1921* (London: Luzac, 1978), and Sahar Huneidi, *A Broken Trust: Herbert Samuel, Zionism and the Palestinians, 1920–1925* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001).
6. See Toby Jones, *Desert Kingdom: How Oil and Water Made Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Robert Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007); Rosemarie Said Zahlan, *The Making of the Modern Gulf States: Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman* (London: Ithaca Press, 1988). For a vivid rendition of this transformation of Arabia, see Abdelrahman Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* (New York: Random House, 1987).
7. See Adil Manna, *Nakba wa-Baqa'* (Beirut: IPS, 2016).
8. See Constantine K. Zurayk, *The Meaning of the Disaster*, trans. by R. Bayly Winder (Beirut: Khayat's College Book Cooperative, 1956).
9. See Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 1,073–110.
10. For more on revolutionary politics in the Gulf, see Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman, 1965–1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
11. Nathan J. Citino, *From Arab Nationalism to OPEC: Eisenhower, King Saud, and the Making of U.S.–Saudi Relations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
12. On public health, see Samer Jabbour, Rita Giacaman, Marwan Khawaja, and Iman Nuwayhid, eds., *Public Health in the Arab World* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 14. For a critical assessment of the longer-term environmental impact of the Aswan Dam, see J. R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World* (New York: Norton, 2000).
13. See A. B. Zahlan, ed., *The Arab Brain Drain: Proceedings of a Seminar Organised by the Natural Resources, Science and Technology Division of the United Nations Economic Commission for Western Asia, Beirut, 4 to 8 February 1980* (London: Ithaca Press for the United Nations, 1981).
14. See Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila: September 1982* (London: Pluto, 2004).

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The background of the entire page is an abstract pattern of black and white curved stripes. The stripes are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and movement, with some stripes appearing to curve towards the viewer and others away. The pattern is consistent across the entire page, providing a high-contrast, rhythmic backdrop for the text.

Primary Documents

DEFINING PAINTING

This text, probably the first modern definition of fine art painting in Arabic, appeared in Butrus al-Bustani's monumental Arabic encyclopedia, *Kitab Da'irat al-Ma'arif*, or *The Circle of Knowledge*. Al-Bustani, a teacher, translator, and scholar in Beirut, was an influential figure in the late nineteenth-century flourishing of Arabic-language literature and learning in Ottoman-ruled Lebanon and Syria (often termed the *Nahda*, or renaissance). As the entry's trilingual heading, "*Taswir, Peinture, Painting*," implies, it provides its readers with a synthetic account of the historical development of painting and as such sets a threshold for its recognition in the Arab world as a distinctive practice with distinctive modern values.

Taswir, Peinture, Painting (c. 1882)

Butrus al-Bustani

Painting: the art of producing semblances through the medium of light and shade or color applied to a smooth surface. Such semblances may have great importance in scholarly study, yet for the purposes of a painter they have only five properties or principles: form or shape, size or quantity, light and shadow or shading, decorative color, and structure. In nature, no thing is devoid of these distinguishing properties, just as no thing can be depicted other than by means of them; successful painting therefore rests on the execution of these properties. The most plausible narrative we possess on the origins of this art form is the suggestion that it arose contemporaneously with writing. In his [1775] *Origin of Laws, Arts, and Sciences*, [Antoine-Yves] Goguet mentions that when the first civilizations began to use writing, they would draw what they wished to impress upon the mind of the viewer, and it has been proven through long research that in all the ancient civilizations, writing developed in this way. It is not possible to say exactly when this art form emerged. [Benjamin Robert] Haydon averred that it was as difficult for researchers to discover in which country painting had originated as it was to find a country where painting had never



Bosphorus Room mural paintings, Said al-Quwatli house, Damascus. c. 1870. This is an example of one kind of mural commonly commissioned for elite homes in greater Syria in the late nineteenth century, the period of al-Bustani's writing.

existed. Accordingly, we cannot object to what is said of the development of painting among the Chinese, the Indians, the Persians, the Assyrians, the Phoenicians, and other similar ancient nations, for the histories offer no reliable facts in this regard; it is presumed that they never progressed beyond the basic forms of painting. The Egyptians, however, had cultivated the art since ancient times, and the oldest extant Egyptian paintings, skillful and clear in their form, may be as much as four thousand years old. [. . . *Eds.: Entry continues, elaborating on developments in time and through Western civilizations.*]

As for our countries, there are no schools dedicated to this art, and in fact it is almost totally forgotten, like many other specialized crafts; there are very few painters whose works match Western paintings in skill and splendor, which is why most of the paintings one sees in churches and homes have been brought over from Europe. Nevertheless, the art form is presently attracting some attention, though the circle of adherents remains small and seems scarcely worth mentioning.

—Buṭrus al-Bustānī, “*Taṣwīr, Peinture, Painting*” (excerpt), in Buṭrus al-Bustānī, ed., *Kitāb Dāʾirat al-Maʾārif*, vol. 6 (Beirut: s.n., 1876–1900), 136–45. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

ON THE BENEFITS OF ART

At the turn of the century in khedival Egypt, a range of scholars raised questions about the potential usefulness of the fine arts for the development and progress objectives of the period. The first text in this section, “The Fine Arts,” is by Ahmed Fahmi, an engineering student studying at the School of Fine Arts in Paris. It appeared in the Arabic scientific-literary monthly *al-Muqtataf* in 1887. With its extensive scholarly apparatus of discursive footnotes, the article offered readers a taxonomic view of the arts as a field of knowledge. The second text is a fatwa, or legal ruling, by the Imam Muhammad Abduh, the leading Islamic reformer who served as Egypt’s grand mufti between 1899 and 1905. Abduh draws on his travel experiences in Italy and elsewhere to argue for the value of visual depictions in two and three dimensions as a tool for preservation and learning (and, implicitly, for the licitness of these representational arts within Muslim belief).

The Fine Arts (1887)

Ahmed Fahmi

[. . .]

A Definition and Division of the Arts

[. . .] Let us now define the arts in a broad sense, then distinguish between them according to the original divisions proposed by the philosophers and great artists.

There is no word over whose definition the philosophers have differed so much as *art*, from the time of Aristotle and Plato to the present day, their aim being to bring together all the arts, of every kind, under a single general definition. We shall therefore satisfy ourselves with the words of [Jean] d’Alembert, who defined the arts

as “knowledge that can be reduced to positive and invariable rules independent of caprice or opinion.” This is their general definition. Their general purpose is to work toward the preservation of life and comfort, or toward the categorization of a thing that is useful and pleasant in either an intellectual or moral sense, this being the reason art is divided into two elementary branches, physical and liberal.

The aim of the physical arts is to extract benefit from nature, as agriculture does, or to transform elements of it from one state to another. From this process of transformation arises a further distinction, between the industrial arts and the manual arts.

The industrial arts are mechanical, natural, or chemical processes that enable a given craft to produce what is called *manufactured art*, either in paint or in three-dimensional depiction.¹ Thus all the following are *industrial* arts: photography, electroplating, the art of printing colored works with the help of lithography, enlargement and reduction using the pantograph, the art of molded reproduction in paste or wax or ceramic, mechanized cutting, photogravure, and other techniques too numerous to list here.

The *manual* arts are the production of silk, wool, cotton, gold and silver; weaving, etc. These arts are divisible into innumerable further kinds due to the variety of processes they employ and their intended end products.

The second elementary branch of the arts, the liberal arts, is the result of thought and imagination, and is also divided into two kinds: that which requires only the intellect in order to engage in it and comprehend its complexities, such as morphology, syntax, and the like; and the kind that requires both the intellect and the senses at once, this being fine art, which itself has two branches: the acoustic arts, which are eloquent speech, poetry, and music; and the pictorial arts, which are architecture, sculpture, and painting. [...]

Beauty and the Benefits of the Fine Arts

That the fine arts are of great import in the onward progress of civilization is only denied by the ignorant, and we shall therefore not concern ourselves here with proving it, nor with specifying the loftiest degree that they can attain in the civilization of peoples, for that task has stymied the finest of minds and eluded the most eloquent of pens. Anyone wishing to know the consequence and importance of the fine arts, and the perfection and sophistication that they have attained, need only look to the Western nations that have achieved such preeminence, becoming the envy of all those who aspire to refinement and the exemplar for those who desire progress and creativity. And if you were to ask how it is that the fine arts have come to occupy such an exalted position, and what the reason is for this great attention that they pay to it, and for the deep desire they possess for it, I would reply that there are three reasons:

The first reason, which we have mentioned in our foregoing discussions, is this: When God gives his commandment to a glorious and preeminent nation and decrees that it must pass into oblivion, its fine arts are all that remains to pass on its memory, its civilization, and its high standing. It is the fine arts that give life to its memory, restore its history, and reveal its virtues, prestige, and importance throughout the ages, even if nothing is left of all that save a barren wasteland where jackals



Interior of Abdeen Palace, Cairo, 1944, hung with commissioned oil portraits of the royal family, whom Fahmi invokes at the conclusion of his article. In the foreground is a portrait of Princess Djananlar Hanem, wife of Khedive Ismail (who ruled Egypt from 1863 to 1879).

roam, owls hoot, and crows caw. The second reason is the fine arts' considerable influence on people's good qualities, morals, and natural dispositions, and on human society in general. The third reason is their influence on industry.

To demonstrate this, and to substantiate the latter two reasons, we remind our distinguished readers that the scope of the fine arts is to depict and reveal beauty in all its forms and guises, and with all its attributes. An understanding thereof must hence come after an understanding of beauty itself, such that the true nature of beauty is clear in the mind before one moves on to discuss the arts concerned with depicting and displaying beauty, in multiple ways, to the senses. The occasion does not permit us to treat the matter at length, so we shall confine ourselves to what the great philosophers have said regarding beauty.

There are three kinds of beauty: natural beauty, intellectual beauty, and moral beauty. Natural beauty consists of those things that are perceptible, such as colors, sounds, images, and movement. Intellectual beauty consists of all those things at the heart of which lies reason, or the scope of which is knowledge and truth, such as the general laws that govern bodies and the laws that guide the mind and enlighten the perceptive faculties, and the powers of intellect, creation, and innovation that have earned renown for the masters of art, the luminaries of poetry, and the great philosophers. Moral beauty consists of noble traits and righteous, honorable deeds, such as virtue, freedom, loyalty, friendship, self-sacrifice, marvelous acts of affection and devotion, patriotism, justice, and courage. Whoever beholds the justice of Aristides,² the bravery of Leonidas,³ and the generosity of many Arabs, from Hatim al-Ta'i and Harim ibn Sinan to the Barmakids,⁴ is seized by an ardent and pleasurable response to the moral beauty they display.

These are the three kinds of beauty, and each is incontrovertibly beautiful in its own right, yet people differ in opinion as to whether they must always remain distinct or may be unified or traced to a singular beauty that is their origin, they being its branches; or that is their essence, they being its characteristics; or that is their source, they being the rays that emanate from it.

This question is not new, and was treated by Plotinus, a philosopher of the Alexandrian school in the Ptolemaic era, who asked: "What is beauty in and of itself, when it is attributed to different things, such as images, forms, words, and deeds? How may these different things resemble each other in their beauty when they bear no resemblance to each other in any other way?" We say that integrating the different kinds of beauty must either be impossible, due to their essential difference, or possible, due to their unity in some form, the true nature of which is beyond our grasp. If we conclude that integrating them into one is impossible, and that there is no relation between them, then artists are condemned to utter confusion, for every artist is obliged, in his art, to devise a single creation in which all types of beauty are combined, this being the requirement of each of the arts, as is well known. If the artist's integration of the different kinds of beauty is a fantasy with no truth to it and no real existence in nature, and if each kind of beauty is independent of, and essentially unlike, all others, then the scope of the arts must be no more than truthless fiction, and love of art merely an infatuation with the deceitful and preposterous. The burden is therefore on those who claim this to prove first of all that deception is the basis of art, so as to subsequently posit, in their claim, the essential difference between the different kinds of beauty. But proving what is asked of them is impossible, given its obvious invalidity, and so it holds that the three kinds of beauty are unified in origin, and art has revealed this unity and made it the subject of categorization and creative endeavor.

Thus there are three branches of beauty, but with a single origin, and the beholder finds that all are traceable back to true moral beauty, which is linked to intellectual beauty, as is evident in the following examples. [. . .]

The intellectual activity witnessed in civilized countries is a consequence of the widespread presence of the fine arts, because these arts nourish and sustain discernment. Refined and sound discernment is the distinguishing feature of the civilized person, making him receptive to the edifying influences that surround him. That is why, if you move a city-dweller to a city that differs from those of his native country in its customs, manners, vernacular expressions, and language, you will find that he will, within a short time, go about his business just like the locals, finding it much easier to mix and coexist with them than would a peasant who had come to the city from a nearby village that resembled it in its customs and language. This is simply because the foreigner has cultivated a taste for the fine arts while the peasant has not, the arts usually being more present in cities than in villages. The foreigner therefore finds easy what the local, in the absence of the arts, finds difficult.

It is likewise evident that the fine arts can teach a person in a short time and with immense ease what would otherwise take a long time and considerable effort. The scholar who resides far away from the edifices of art spends his days hunched over his books, struggling to absorb their contents, in order to understand a thing that a common person might understand in a few moments simply by gazing at an image of it in a house of art. It often happens, too, that the scholar forgets the knowledge he has obtained through labor, toil, and long hours of devoted study, while the common person does not forget what he learned in a moment with no effort or labor at all. The reason for this is clear: images seen by the eye are preserved in the memory more effectively than mental images. In sum, we may say that not a single person who has partaken of the fine arts has not seen their faculties awaken from a state of torpor and

inertia to one of ingenuity and creativity, for creativity is a condition of the arts, and their every detail and object of investigation is a work of reason that stimulates and strengthens the mind.

This is a general outline of the fine arts. When I saw that His Majesty our venerable Khedive had inaugurated a state of civilization in our happy country, just as our late lamented sovereign Muhammad 'Ali Pasha had initiated a period of progress, I came knocking, with what scanty means I had to offer, at the doors of the two scholars and entrepreneurs, that is to say the founders of *al-Muqtataf*, who have attained, through immense efforts and noble deeds, such a status of veneration and reverence that the people of the Arab East now boast of their work, and people from the Maghrib wish they would open wide the door for the fine arts with their *Muqtataf*, that its benefits might reach all children of the Arab nation and become as widely known as the other fields of knowledge. I intend, with God's will, to add to this article other articles on the philosophy of art, people's opinion of the arts, art history, and biographies of great artists and art's other famous figures. What urges me to do so, despite my humble abilities, is my desire to serve my nation and disseminate the fine arts—please, therefore, consider this my excuse to the learned editors of *al-Muqtataf* and its distinguished readers.⁵

Notes

1. By "three-dimensional depiction," I mean those images made of clay, plaster of Paris, wax, or similar materials.
2. Aristides was a famous Athenian statesman who rose to prominence in the latter part of the fifth century BC. He was so well known for his sense of justice and fair treatment of others that he came to be held as an exemplar of those qualities. It is said that his fellow countrymen sentenced him to exile, and that when the news reached him, he said: "All I wish for is that Athens should become so glorious and happy that there is no need for me to return." It was customary for exile to be enacted only after the people of Athens had approved the sentence. One day during this period of pending approval, an illiterate peasant came to him and, being unable to read and write, asked him, without knowing who he was: "Please be so kind as to write my name on this potsherd to signal my approval of the exile of the man whose name is written here," which was that of Aristides. So Aristides asked: "What ill has this man done to you, that you should approve of his being banished from his country?" He replied: "He has done me no ill, but I am fed up with his justice and with hearing him called 'The Just' everywhere I go, and I wish him exiled so as to have done with it." So Aristides said: "Give me the sherd," wrote his name, and returned the sherd.

[*Al-Muqtataf* eds. note: A biography and picture of Aristides may be found in a book titled *Lives of the Great Heroes*, which we translated from English into Arabic, and which was published by the American Press in Beirut several years ago.]

3. Leonidas was a king of Sparta, in Greece, who was killed in 480 BC at the Battle of Thermopylae. The details of the story are too long to relate here, the gist being that Xerxes, the king of Persia, advanced on Greece with an enormous army, said to have numbered three million soldiers. Leonidas went out to battle with four thousand soldiers and blocked a pass that lay on their route. There, the Persian king sent word to him, demanding: "Surrender or the sky shall rain arrows upon you and we shall snatch your souls with our swords." And Leonidas replied: "Then let us fight you in the shade of the arrows." They fought till the very last of them was slain, and on their graves were inscribed the words "Here, four thousand Peloponnesians fought three million," the Peloponnesians being the people of the Peloponnese, also known as the Morea.
4. Hatim al-Ta'i was famed for his generosity, which is referenced in the following poem:

*When I asked you for something
You let error take the place of sound judgment.
From whom did you learn
Not to be generous with anything at all?
Have you never encountered a slave
owned by a slave of Hatim al-Ta'i?*

When night fell, he would signal to his slave to light a fire on a patch of ground so that anybody who had lost the way would see it and be able to take refuge at their camp. He said:

*Kindle a fire, for the night is cold
And the wind, o firelighter, is piercing,
A wanderer may see your light
And if you bring us a guest I shall set you free.*

At the beginning of each month he would slaughter ten camels and feed the people.

Harim ibn Sinan al-Murri was another eminently generous figure. Poetry in praise of him was written by Zuhayr ibn Abi Sulma, author of one of the "hanging odes," who lionized him with the finest verses. Harim swore

that every time Zuhayr praised him in poetry, he would make him a gift; every time he asked him for something, he would make him a gift; every time he greeted him, he would make him a gift—of a male slave, a female slave, or a horse. Zuhayr became embarrassed and refused to accept anything from him. If he came across him in the open country he would say, “Good morning to all save Harim, and the best among you is the one I have excepted!”

The generosity of the Barmakids, especially that of al-Faḍl ibn Yahya, is so well known that it need not even be mentioned. Among those who gave generously of their self and property was Ma’n ibn Za’ida—the tales told of his magnanimity are moving and touching.

[Al-Muqataṭaf eds. note: More detail about Ma’n ibn Za’ida may be found in the sixth volume of *al-Lata’if*.]

5. [Al-Muqataṭaf eds. note: You will find an article on aesthetics, including the views of the philosophers, on page 231, and another article on people’s tastes in beauty, on page 239, in the sixth volume of *al-Muqataṭaf*.]

—Aḥmad Fahmī, “al-Funūn al-Jamila” (excerpt), *al-Muqataṭaf* 11, nos. 6/7 (1887): 329–39. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

Images and Statues, Their Benefits and Legality (1904)

Muhammad Abduh

These nations have a strange avidity for the preservation of images drawn on paper or on cloth. In the museums of larger nations or communities, you find that which you cannot find in smaller communities. This is the case with the Sicilians, for example. They ascertain the date the picture was drawn, and the hand that drew it. They have a strange rivalry over acquiring them, to the extent that one of Raphael’s paintings, for example, might be worth two hundred thousand in some museums. It is not possible to know the exact value; what is important, however, is the nations’ rivalry over the acquisition of these pictures and assessing what has been collected from the best of what was left behind by ancestors for their successors. It is the same case with statues; the older the heritage, the greater its worth and the more people desire it. Do you know why?

If you know the reason for your ancestors’ preservation of poetry, rendering it precisely in *diwans* [collections of verse], and going to great lengths to record it—especially pre-Islamic poetry—and the trouble the forefathers (may they rest in peace) went through to collect and organize it, then you are able to understand the reason for a nation’s preservation of objects such as paintings and statues. Painting is a kind of poetry that is seen but not heard, and poetry is a kind of painting that is heard and not seen. These paintings and statues have preserved much about people’s conditions in different situations, and communities’ conditions in different places, what is worthy of being called “the *diwan* of mankind’s societies and conditions.” They depict the human or the animal in states of joy, contentment, serenity, and submission. The meanings contained in these terms are close together; it is not easy for you to differentiate between them. But when you look at the different images, you see the difference, which is dazzlingly clear. For example, they depict them in a state of anxiety, panic, fear, and apprehension. *Anxiety* and *panic* are different in meaning and I didn’t bring them together here out of a desire to bring together two words with the letter ‘ayn in the same line, but because they are indeed different. However, when you make the mental effort to find the difference between the two, and between *fear* and *apprehension*, it is not easy to recognize when it’s fear and when it’s panic, and what appearance a person has in this state or another. But if you look at a painting—which is that silent poetry—you will find the truth has become highlighted, and is there for you to enjoy, as your senses delight in looking at it. If your appetite longs to realize

the obvious metaphor in your remark “I saw a lion”—you have in mind here a brave man—look at the image of the Sphinx by the Great Pyramid and you will find the man a lion, or the lion a man. The preservation of these monuments is in fact a preservation of knowledge and an acknowledgment of the craftsman for excelling in his craft. I hope that you have understood something from this. But if you have not, I do not have the time to explain it to you in any greater length than this. Make use of one of the linguists, painters, poets, or other masters to clarify whatever was difficult for you to comprehend, if it is within his ability to do so.

Maybe you are confronted with a question while reading these words, namely: What is the legal judgment concerning these images in Islamic law if their purpose is, as mentioned, to depict human forms in their emotional reactions or physical postures? Is this forbidden or permitted? Is it reprehensible, deplorable, or obligatory? I would say to you that the painter has painted, and that the benefit is unquestionable, undisputed. The idea of worship or the exaltation of pictures or statues has been wiped from people’s minds. Either you understand the judgment yourself after the case has become clear, or you raise a question to the mufti and he will respond to you verbally. If you quote the hadith,¹ “The most severely tortured people on Judgment Day will be the image makers,” or similar passages from the *Sahih*, he will probably say to you that this hadith came during the days of paganism, and that people turned to images during that time for two reasons: the first was distraction [from God] and the second was to seek blessing from the image of whichever of the righteous ones is being depicted. Religion detests the first of these reasons, and Islam came to wipe out the second. The image maker in both cases is a distraction from God and a facilitator of polytheism. If these two obstacles are removed and things of benefit are pursued, then depicting people is the same as depicting plants and trees. This was done on the margins of copies of the Qur’an and at the beginning of the *suras* [Qur’anic chapters] and none of the theologians have prohibited it, despite the fact that the benefit of ornamenting copies of the Qur’an is a disputed subject, whereas the benefit of images in the aforementioned manner is undisputed. However, if you intend to commit a number of sins in a place that has images in it, hoping that the two angel scribes, or the recorder of sin at the very least, would not enter a place that has images, as is mentioned, be careful not to assume that this will save you from your actions being recorded, for God is watching you, observing you, even in the house that has images in it. I do not think the angel will hesitate to accompany you if you are intent on entering a house because it has images in it. And it is not possible for you to respond to the mufti that the image is at any rate the most likely place for the worship of idols. I think he would say to you that your tongue is also the most likely place for deceit, so should we knot it even though it is just as conceivable that it will tell the truth as tell a lie?

In general, it seems to me that Islamic law is far from prohibiting one of the best tools for learning after it has been established that it is not a threat to religion, with respect to either doctrine or practice. Nevertheless, Muslims question only those things whose benefit has become evident, so as to deprive themselves of them. Otherwise, why is it that they do not ask about visiting the graves of saints, or of those whom some people call saints, given that we know nothing about some of them, and no one has peered into their souls? They do not ask for a religious ruling for the variety

of requests and supplications they make at those graves, nor for what they offer to the saints in the form of money and objects. They fear them as they fear God, or even more. They ask them for what they fear God will not grant them. They think that they are faster to respond to them than God Almighty. There is no doubt that they are unable to reconcile these beliefs with belief in the unity of God. However, they are able to reconcile the unity of God with the drawing of images of people and animals for the sake of scientific purposes and the representation of mental images.

Have you heard that we have preserved anything at all, even aside from images and paintings, despite our dire need to preserve many of the things of our ancestors? If we had preserved the dirham or the dinar that was used to estimate the minimum amount of property subject to the *zakat* tax, and is still used to estimate it today, would it not be easier for us to estimate the tax in pounds and francs, given that we have the first example in our hands?² If we had preserved the *saʿ* and the *mudd* and other kinds of measures, would this not have made it easier for us to know how much *zakat al-fitr* and how much *zakat* must be paid from the crop yield after the changing of measures? All we would have to do is gauge our measures against the preserved measures to get to the truth of the matter without dispute. I think you would agree with me that if a dirham, dinar, *saʿ*, and *mudd* were preserved from each period, there would not be this ongoing dispute among experts in Islamic jurisprudence, which they inherit from generation to generation. Each of them estimated the measures and weights in his own way until, finally, Ahmad al-Husayn Bey came along to declare that some of them were mistaken and to agree with the estimations of others, without having so much as a single *saʿ* or *mudd* in his hands. How difficult it is to pass any kind of judgment if evidence is not what differentiates between one faction and the other.

If you looked at the things religion obligates us to preserve, you would find that they are innumerable, and that we do not preserve any of them. We neglect them like those before us neglected them. And what do you say about the books and depositories of knowledge? Have we preserved them as we ought to, or have we neglected them as they ought not to be neglected? The books of knowledge have been lost, and its objects of value have vanished from our homes. If you want to look for a rare book or outstanding author, or an important writer or a useful literary work, go to the libraries in European countries and you will find these. As for our countries, you will find barely anything in terms of the gems of history, literature, or science there, except what the Europeans left behind and did not pay attention to. You will find part of a copy of a book in the Egyptian National Library, for example, and the rest of it in the library in Cambridge, England. If you want me to detail for you what they have preserved and what we have lost in terms of scientific records, I could write a book on the subject for you—which we would lose just like all the others, and after some time you will find it in the hands of a European in France or in another European country.

We do not take an interest in preserving anything so that we can retain its benefits for those who succeed us. If it occurs to one of us to leave behind something for whoever will come later, that successor is the least grateful person and goes about losing what his predecessor struggled to preserve for him. The aptitude for preservation is not something we have inherited. Instead, what is inherited are aptitudes for

malice and resentment, which are passed on from fathers to sons until they corrupt men and ruin countries. Those who possess such aptitudes will encounter them on the edge of Hell in the hereafter.

Notes

1. *Eds.*: The *hadith* are the accounts of the deeds and words of the Prophet Muhammad, which were collected after the Prophet's death by companions and eventually tabulated as a literature used in jurisprudence. The term *Sahih*, literally meaning "correct" or "sound," here refers to the *hadith* collected by Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 870 CE), considered to be the most authoritative collection of soundly transmitted accounts.
2. *Eds.*: *Zakat* is the term designating the alms-giving requirement in the Muslim faith, one of the five pillars of Islam. *Zakat al-fitr* refers to the alms given at the conclusion of fasting during Ramadan, on the holiday known as Eid al-Fitr.

—Muḥammad ‘Abduh, “al-Ṣuwar wa-l-Tamāthil wa-Fawā’iduhā wa-Ḥukmuhā,” *al-Manār* (March 18, 1904): 36–39.
Translated from Arabic by Dina Ramadan.

ARAB ROMANTICS

In the first decades of the twentieth century, a network of thinkers coalesced across both the Arab East and the Arab diaspora (*mahjar*) whose writings often cast the arts as a cross-medium field—encompassing poetry, the visual arts, dance, and more—of spiritual feeling not beholden to modern rationalism. “Something about Art,” by writer and poet May Ziadeh, was published in 1912 in the monthly journal *al-Zuhur*. Ziadeh was a central voice in the network based in Cairo, where she had just begun to hold her important Tuesday literary salon. The section continues with letters sent to Ziadeh on the occasion of the publication of her 1920 book *Seeker in the Desert*, a biography of pioneering Egyptian feminist Malak Hifni Nasif: one from Amin Rihani and the other from Kahlil Gibran, both famous men of letters working between Lebanon and the United States. Gibran had been corresponding with Ziadeh regularly since 1914, and his letter contains personal responses to her questions about the emotional labor of creation. In the final two texts, more programmatic positions of artistic creation are developed. A hitherto unpublished draft essay by Gibran outlines a possible Eastern approach to painting as an expression of spiritual experience. And Rihani’s 1927 essay “Renewal” distinguishes between a living, ever-renewable art of writing and the fixed forms of conventional composition.

See Plate 1 for a work by Kahlil Gibran from 1917–20.

Something about Art (1912)

May Ziadeh

Man knew the arts before he knew the sciences, because his imagination ignited before his logical thinking. Imagination is a lost guest roving the earth; it is the strongest cultural force. Its movement never ceases throughout our lives. Rather, like the heart, it is constantly at work; its work is continuous, in sleep or in waking. It preserves all memories of the past and all impressions conveyed by the senses—sights, sounds, melodies, scents, and other stimuli—and the commingling of these

memories and impressions forms the roots of the arts. Then come conception and innovation, which work to expand those roots, multiply their branches, and fulfill their potential.

If you look back on the history of eras long gone, you will find art at the core of their majesty, and science relegated to a lowly corner beside the explorers' travelogues and the great thinkers' histories. As for the Western colleges established in the eleventh century, they trained their pupils only in ancient poetry, war epics, and histories of the most famous peoples of the world. Students would study Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and perhaps Arabic and Assyrian as well, or other languages of the ancient Near East, rather than earth sciences, chemistry, and engineering. And of the ancients' many writings they studied only their poetry, histories, and philosophy, disregarding what some had written on mathematics.

However, little by little the sciences began to spread, starting in the fifteenth century. Discoveries abounded, profits increased, and mechanical revenues multiplied, and thus human thought turned to commercial knowledge, making art a martyr to which temples were erected in the souls of contemplative men. Indeed, the twentieth century, which we call the era of civilization and enlightenment, is merely a mechanical, commercial era!

The well-known art critic [John] Ruskin has said: "Every nation whose art approaches perfection, its kingdom falls, and its greatness vanishes."

I do not know if you have ever seen a picture of Ruskin, dear reader. Well, I have! I often contemplate it and attempt to pluck a hair from his beard whenever I recall that quote of his.

I know nothing of the sentiment that drove him to write this cruel thought, and I do not know how he would explain it if he were alive. I wonder how we could have evaluated the greatness of the Egyptians if we did not have the remains of their buildings, statues, and carvings, or how we could have evaluated the genius of the Greeks if we did not have their literature and arts, or the greatness of the Romans if we did not have their philosophy and poetry.

And if future peoples encountered these ancient artifacts alongside relics of our current generation, such as the Eiffel Tower, don't you think they would surmise that we, children of the modern era, were descended from Noah's cursed son, born to be the slaves of our favored uncles' sons—the sons of antiquity?

Paul Bourget, a member of the Académie Française, said: "Only two types understand artistic beauty: the distinguished scholar and the simple peasant. Between those two planes is the plane of ordinary people, and they are numerous, narrow minded, of limited horizons, cold-spirited." Then comes Ruskin of the plucked beard, saying: "The two necessary virtues for an appreciation of art are compassion and honesty." And both are correct; indeed, the words of the one elucidate the thought of the other.

Ruskin means that every painter, poet, musician, or sculptor must be extremely sensitive, emotionally attuned, observant, true-hearted, and accustomed to laying bare his soul, being an interpreter of the soul, and conveying the fantasies of dreams from the world of illusions to the real and tangible world. Ruskin stipulates that the poet or painter is bound by compassion before honesty, because compassion is a precious natural emotion, whereas honesty is a graceful habit that a person can

gain only through good education, study, living alongside the righteous, and communing with nature. Thus, these two virtues are not to be found in their purest manifestations except in the hearts of the wise scholar and the simple peasant, and the two are brothers!

Yes, the soul of mankind has embraced the fine arts since the dawn of civilization, yet that pure fervor no longer holds sway over our hearts. Our great ancestors' ideas have vanished, and their power has transformed in their descendants' hands to the professional invention of various tools and strange devices. And in those inventions there are as many contradictions as there are interactions and inconsistencies in people's bodies. For the objective of all of these amazing inventions is twofold: first, to service man's bodily needs; and second, to kill him quickly and easily!

But the refined sciences, stripped of commercial profit and greed, such as the ones to which Galileo, Newton, and Pascal devoted themselves to perfecting, we classify as secondary knowledge. Because the love of speculation and profit consumes us as much as the chimera of discovery and invention.

Don't you think that the great Newton, who deduced from an apple's manner of falling the eternal basic law that governs the motion of the planets—don't you think of him as belonging to a greater order than those who invented electric doorbells and phonograph turntables? Don't you think that these precise inventions, while beautiful in and of themselves, reveal the triviality of present thought and the fall of man's psyche from the peak of aesthetic beauty to the pit of commerce, where the workings of the markets require cheating, trickery, theft, cunning, and deceit?

I do not know whether I am right or wrong. But I do not think these discoveries that concern the public nowadays are capable of affecting individuals' souls the way the images and artistic phenomena of ancient thought can. Indeed, those individuals prefer the dignity of spiritual work to the dullness of mechanical comforts. Thus throughout their lives they remain slaves to sweet dreams of beauty, and to those who have highly sensitive temperaments wherein sharpness mingles with gentleness, laughter with anger, silence with joy, and reflections with beautiful fantasies.

—Mayy Ziyāda, "Shay' 'an al-Fann," *al-Zuhūr* (February 1912): 518–22. Translated from Arabic by Anna Swank.

Letter to May Ziadeh (1920)

Amin Rihani

Dear May,

I have just finished reading your book *Seeker in the Desert*, which I received yesterday. I must thank you for this valuable gift. And I must likewise congratulate the Arab nation on your writing. Your book is a work of beauty that honors a distinguished sister of yours [Malak Hifni Nasif]. And more beautiful than that is your honorable act of charity in making this literary work something that can benefit the nation. You have introduced me to a lady, or rather to a genius, I had until now known only in my imagination. Yet I feel her presence in Istanbul, Egypt, Syria,

even Morocco. And I am carefully monitoring the current happenings in Islam. I see the truth—a beginning by means of demolition—exemplified by those Muslim reformers. They who have carried the pickax rarely realize that dislodging one stone shakes the entire edifice.

There is nothing wrong with a religiosity that does neither harm nor benefit.

There is no harm in “the Holy Book,” or in expressions like “Peace be upon him” and “May God be pleased with him,” or in any other conventional trivialities, written or spoken. If the people around you value the likes of *Seeker in the Desert*, then God has strengthened Islam with its call. There is no harm in her extreme views, and she has dislodged a stone from the edifice of ignorance, oppression, recklessness, and fanaticism. The whole building is falling, without a doubt. I say this joyfully, but without malice, for I am a friend of the Muslims, and a supporter of the deep-rooted, living beauty within Islam, indeed, in every religion. But as for the chains that inhibit minds and kill spirits, and that turn their shackled wearers into burdens on civilization and the objects of pity and charity—such chains will not be tolerated, and will not last in times like these. Whoever reads your inestimable book will see how the chains of Muslim women will break one by one. For today it’s the wives, tomorrow the veil, and after that will come divorce customs, and then dancing. How harmful can dancing be in a nation that has mastered it, indeed, has raised it to the level of the fine arts? Egypt’s history, from the pharaohs to the Egyptian Muslims, contains evidence, indeed much evidence, for what I say. The supple mind abides in the supple body.

Easterners have had enough of tents and cameleers. Of sitting without moving. And of scowling, arrogance, and haughtiness when others tell them: Partake in play. For in fact play brings success in work. And one type of play is dance. And dance was and still is an art. And the arts have their origins in worship and holy practice.

And you, May, know all this and do not hide it, as other female writers do. God bless you, a free scholar with such precise and far-seeing vision. God bless you, a scholar with such eloquent expression. Such nimble references. Discriminating, expert, wise—so many social truths are revealed in your book, which Dr. [Yacoub] Sarrouf has given the mention it deserves. And you too deserve special mention. Your book is truly unique in its domain. When you see Dr. Sarrouf, I beg you to give him my greetings, and to tell him that his enjoyment of your writing increases my regard for his own knowledge and work.

—Amin al-Rihānī, letter, August 25, 1920; repr. in Albirt Rihānī, ed., *Rasā'il Amin al-Rihānī, 1896–1940* (Beirut: Dār Rihānī li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1959), 182–84. Translated from Arabic by Anna Swank.

Letter to May Ziadeh (1920)

Kahlil Gibran

My friend May,

[...] You tell me: "You are an artist and a poet, and you should be happy being an artist and a poet." But I am neither an artist nor a poet, May. I have spent my days and my nights drawing and writing, but the "I" [that is my Self] lies neither in my days nor in my nights. I am mist, May, I am mist that cloaks things but never unites them. I am mist unchanged into rainwater. I am mist, and mist is my loneliness and my being alone, and in this is my hunger and my thirst. My misfortune, however, is that this mist is my reality, and that it longs to meet with another mist in the sky, longs to hear the words "You are not alone, there are two of us, I know who you are."

Tell me, tell me, my friend, is there anyone in this world who would be able or willing to say to me: "I am another mist, O mist, so let us cloak the mountains and the valleys, let us wander among and over the trees, let us cover the high rocks, let us together penetrate the heart and the pores of all creation, and let us roam through these faraway places, impregnable and undiscovered"? Tell me, May, is there anyone in your sphere who would be able or willing to say one single word of this to me?

After all this, you may be expecting to smile and "forgive." I have done a lot of smiling this morning. I am smiling now, deep inside myself. I am smiling with all my being—and I shall continue to smile for a long time. I am smiling as if I were created to do nothing but smile. But "forgiveness" is a formidable word that devastates and wounds, forcing me to bow my head in embarrassment and awe before that noble spirit that so humbles itself, and ask her pardon. I am the sole culprit. I have been remiss in remaining silent, and in despairing—so I beg you to pardon me and forgive the wrong I have done.

It would have been more befitting to preface this discussion with a mention of *Seeker in the Desert*, but personal affairs do hold sway over us, and private matters possess the power to distract us from the most important or exalted of issues. I have never read an Arabic book quite like *Seeker in the Desert*; I have never in my life seen two portraits drawn with such lines and with such colors. I have never in my life seen two portraits in one: the portrait of a woman writer and reformer, and the portrait of a woman who is greater than a writer and greater than a reformer. I have never in my life seen two faces so well reflected in one mirror—a woman's face half-hidden by the shadow of the world, and another woman's face illumined by the rays of the sun. I say "a woman's face half-hidden by the shadow of the world" because for a long time now I have felt—and still do feel—that the Seeker in the Desert was unable until death to break loose from her physical environment or to divest herself of all national and social influences. The other face, the Lebanese face illumined by the rays of the sun, is, I believe, that of the first Eastern woman to ascend to the ethereal temple where all spirits shake off their bodies, created as they are out of the dust of tradition and convention and the force of inertia. This is the face of the first Eastern woman to realize the Unity of Being and all that exists both seen and unseen, known and unknown. And eventually, when time has cast the writings of writers and the poetizing of poets into the abyss of oblivion, *Seeker in the Desert* will

remain a book to attract the interest of admiring researchers and thinkers, and of the “wakeful.” You, May, are a voice crying in the wilderness; you are a divine voice, and divine voices remain reverberating in the ethereal expanse until the end of time.

Now I must answer every one of the sweet questions you have asked me. I must leave out nothing. First, the question “How am I?” I have not given much thought of late to the “how-ness of I”; I suppose, however, that I am well, despite what besets my daily life in the form of sundry distracting spirals and wheels of different shapes and sizes.

“What am I writing?” I write a line or two between nightfall and day. I say “between nightfall and day” because I spend the daylight on my large oil paintings, which I must complete before the winter’s end. Had it not been for these paintings and the contract that binds me, I should have spent the winter in Paris and in the East.

“Do I work a lot?” I work the whole time, I even work when I am asleep. In my work I am as solid as a rock, but my real work is neither in painting nor in writing. Deep inside me, May, there is another dynamic intelligence which has nothing to do with words, lines, or colors. The work I have been born to do has nothing to do with brush or pen.

“What color is the suit I am wearing today?” I am in the habit of wearing two suits at the same time, one of cloth that is woven and tailored, the other made of flesh, bone, and blood. But just now I am wearing a single robe, loose-fitting, long and covered with ink and paint stains, making it not unlike the robes worn by dervishes except for their cleanliness. I have divested myself in the next room of that other robe of flesh, blood, and bone, something I prefer not to have about me when I speak with you.

“How many cigarettes have I smoked this morning?” How sweet this question is, and how difficult to answer. Today, May, has been a day of smoking from first to last, and I have lit more than twenty cigarettes since this morning. As far as I am concerned, smoking is a pleasure rather than an irresistible need, for the whole day could pass without my having one cigarette. Yes indeed, I have smoked over twenty cigarettes today. But you are to blame, for if I had been on my own in this “valley” I would never have smoked. But I do not want to be on my own.

As for my house, it is still without walls or roof—which of us, I ask, wants to be a prisoner? As for the seas of sand and the ethereal oceans, they are just as they were in days of yore—deep and coastless, and full of waves. The ship in which I travel those seas sails but slowly. Is there anyone who is able or willing to give my ship an extra sail? Who is able or willing, I wonder?

As for the book *Toward God*,¹ this is still somewhat hazy in form, and the best drawings in it are still sketches in midair and images drawn on the face of the moon. *Al-Mustawhid*, on the other hand, came out three weeks ago under the title *The Forerunner*, a copy of which I have sent you. Under the same cover I mailed you a copy of *The Tempests* and a third copy of those unripe grapes from my vineyard, *A Tear and a Smile*. I did not send you my publisher’s summer list because I was away in the country during the summer—there is another reason as well! And as for the drawings, the pottery, the glass, the old books, the musical instruments, and the Egyptian, Greek, and Gothic statues—all these are just as you know them

to be, manifestations of that eternal and undying spirit, words taken from God's book. I have often sat before all these and pondered on the longing created within me by them, often gazed at them until they disappeared before my very eyes to be replaced by the ancient ghosts that brought them from the invisible world into the visible. I have not obtained the Chaldean black-stone statue. Last spring an English friend with the British Expedition in Iraq wrote and told me: "If I find anything it is yours."

I have answered all your questions, and have not left out a single one. I have reached this stage in my letter without having said one word of what I wanted to say when I started the first page. The mist in me has not turned to rainwater, and the silence, that winged and trembling silence, has not turned into speech. Will you not fill your hands with this mist? Will you not close your eyes and listen to these utterances of silence? Will you not pass by this valley again, where loneliness hovers like a bird, moves like a sheep, flows like a stream and stands tall like an oak tree? Will you not pass this way once more, May? God protect you and guard you.

Note

1. Eds.: Gibran does not appear to have published a book of this title.

—Kahlil Gibran, letter (excerpt), November 3, 1920; repr. in Suheil Bushrui and Salma Kuzbari, eds., *Blue Flame: The Love Letters of Kahlil Gibran and May Ziadah* (Harlow, U.K.: Longman, 1983). Translated from Arabic by Bushrui and Kuzbari, with minor modifications for the present publication.

Draft essay¹ (1920s)

Kahlil Gibran

The highest and loftiest expressions of life represent the results of a concentration which ultimately qualifies profundity. Artists determined toward the creation of works of spiritual significance and realization should not adhere to Western formulae. For in these expressive values the apex of Western art is below that of the cultural peaks of the East.

The Western observer anticipates and possesses experiences in the creative fields without actually undergoing them through means of his art. This fact, which is the difference between the real and its portrayal, eliminates destiny for the spectator. Art then portrays man's destiny. Western art levels nature to man's scale and man reshapes nature to the likeness of his dreams. Man assumes control and destiny becomes servile, since the nature of Western art aspires to possess time and space and potentialities; taking them from nature, which dominates, and placing them in a world in which he is supreme. Buddhist Asia makes no difference between man and nature, whereas the West tends to give nature man's qualities but without human form through the "momentary," thereby associating nature with man in his mentally precarious destiny. To Asia all things had sensations and feelings, and it removed the difference between man and the rest of nature through the belief in metempsychosis and mutual destiny. Western Christianity, with its denial of metempsychosis and its portrayal of the eternal last judgment, made the Western mental concept of destiny the background for a human tragedy rather than a mystery play of life. It is also the

sense of the lapse of time that impresses on the West the tragic side of the autonomy of nature. For this reason, relation between time and space and the work of art is especially significant in the West. It is therefore natural for the East, so unconcerned with temporal relations, to be uninterested in spatial illusions. The vibrating colored or gold flat backgrounds intensely convey the infinite. Areas of color are so combined that the result is a scintillating haunting impression. In the East, this intensification to the highest pitch engenders a human emotion which sees this as an expression of cosmic reality.

Eastern stylization does not in effect imply a rational simplification. The typification of the Greek, which is the font of Western art, is rational. Intellectual systems are mutually destructive and the greatest possible concentration of reason does not lead to the center of the soul. In order to express the soul directly, the tangible expression would have to be directly from the soul and would have to be based on a different approach from that of reason. I have felt strongly that the tangible form is arrived at however slightly only by the realization of the Being within us and by the ABILITY to re-create this immediate inner experience as immediately in a tangible form through [a] culture of concentration.

Life in a world of time and space is a condition of incessant change. We are not entities but processes, never stopping so as to “be,” and there is no such thing as a personality to be found anywhere in this world. The Balinese trance dancers who become limp and soft as they dance under the continual chanted hypnosis from the audience, dramatize this whole picture of involuntary learning. The dancer is not in fact expressing “herself,” but altogether an artist inspired. The whole procedure is a carrying-over into art the vital principle of resignation. It is as regards the best in us that we are really God’s toys and that we should dance accordingly. What should pull the strings is that Being hidden within us. That is our truthful speech, life, and man. So the Balinese dancer who is not expressing “herself” but playing her part impersonally is merely a perfect actress; knowing the distinction of acting from merely behaving, which is that of spontaneity from license.

—Coomaraswamy

All human works of art should be imitations of divine prototypes. Our conduct is influenced least by intellectual ideas. When an idea is the expression of spiritual experience, it represents forces which are beyond logical explanation or justification, and is always stronger than man and his brain. Man believes that he molds these ideas but in reality they mold him and make him their unwitting mouthpiece. The aim of the creative man should be to bring out this Being as spontaneously, and as purely as possible, without the governing influence of will or mind. The aim [is] to make impotent our many conflicting and opposed egos, which keep us from possessing a portion of unity or self, and to permit this now controlling superconsciousness, or soul, to come to the fore and record itself. Only when the artist is able to free himself from active self-consciousness while at work can he put down this communication automatically and without the directing force of reason and responsibility.

What used to be the motto of preceding years—contents set the style—should now be reversed. The theme should be determined by the creative form processes. Today liberty of choice has become an obsession, and the superior liberty of spontaneity is no longer understood.

My approach to painting has been based on my awareness of the above to a degree which is relative to my age and experiences, which should become progressively richer as I mature. This approach consists of contemplative immersion into a surface of color applied spontaneously and with emotional intensity, but with my mind as pacific and as blank as possible. Later I reveal the painting through what I “see” and intuit. The first step is the creation of an intense mass of color chosen and related unmindfully. Meditation into this surface permits my subconscious to respond and determine what the completed painting is to be, not through will or preconception of mind, since I attempt to cancel all thought from my mind, clearing a path to the inner. I try to master my means of expression to the point of second nature. I am little concerned by outer forms, inner collectedness being more important. I feel that this approach or attitude leads more and more to self-realization and more subjectivity, the product of which is the tangible representation of the spiritual.

Note

1. Eds.: This text, an unfinished typescript, represents a work in progress into which Gibran inserted handwritten edits that are, in many instances, indecipherable. We have therefore chosen to preserve the typewritten text. For readability, spelling and punctuation have been modified here.

—Kahlil Gibran, archival document (excerpt), written in English, provided in scanned duplicate by Stephen Sheehi. Gibran’s original typescript has not been located.

Renewal (1927)

Amin Rihani

Renewal in literature is not a rejection of all that came before—that would be possible only if we wrote in Esperanto or cuneiform.

Renewal does not mean abandoning a few familiar expressions, or omitting a few commonly used letters, or rejecting select words or a lofty formal style.

Renewal does not mean fleeing unappealing or uninspired innovations so as to jump, in a single leap, straight back to *The Hanging Odes* and pre-Islamic poetry and prose.

Renewal does not mean returning to stilted letter-writing and stylistic extravagance.

Renewal does not mean that we return to the dictionary, digging through our ancient history to secure bizarre, moth-eaten, and rusted terms, with which we can then adorn our writing, so that we may be called innovators.

Renewal certainly does not imply writing “solely” instead of “only,” “festivity” instead of “party,” “simper” instead of “smile,” “assail” instead of “attack,” or “civilized” instead of “advanced.”

Renewal is neither stylistic extravagance nor feebleness.

The most important aspect of renewal is soundness of vision. Life is like a prism, with many corners and faces. Therefore we must look at it today from the same vantage points taken by the ancients, as well as from the points they ignored or were unaware of. We are the successors of that time, and we must examine life, for our reasons for doing so have increased, while our years have not. An examination of life requires a style rooted in clarity, brevity, and candor. Renewal, then, is looking at life from all its facets, understanding what we can, and enjoying what we can.

Renewal is when the author has a critic's eye, a scientist's intellect, a poet's heart, and a pious man's soul.

Renewal means not resorting to well-known clichés of style and rhetoric. This spares readers from expressions like “coming away empty-handed” and “just around the corner.”

Renewal also means retiring poetic locutions such as “teeth like a honeycomb,” “hair black as night,” and “a physique carved from the moringa tree.”

Renewal in poetry means making the poem a living body, with a beginning and an end, not something that reads the same way from either direction.

Renewal in prose means devising a modern method unburdened of stylistic extravagance, which usually ends up impeding its intended benefits.

And if we wish to make use of metaphors, renewal means taking them from the canvas of existence, not from books.

Renewal means making our rhetoric reflect our real lives, even if that strips it of its charms. It means creating a vital link between our rhetoric and our circumstances and customs, and making that rhetoric representative of our social and national spirit.

Renewal means abandoning fatuous introductions, tedious preambles, hollow embellishments—in other words, it means staying away from all rhetorical convolutions.

Renewal means not constraining our expression with fantastical images and metaphors, such as the following: “And so the hand of fate has plucked a ripe branch from the tree of virtue in the orchard of literature.” What a waste of time, ink, paper, and print! All we needed to say was: “The young writer so-and-so has died.”

If preserving the language is only a matter of such trifles and stylistic extravagance, then I pity the language, and its preservers.

True renewers are champions of the truth and good taste before all else. They are innovators both in manner of thought and production. They therefore reject that which is obsolete, outmoded, and barren, and instead pursue beauty and art.

—Amin al-Rihānī, “al-Tajaddud”; repr. in *Adab wa-Fann* (Beirut: Dār Riḥānī li-l-Ṭibā‘a wa-l-Nashr, 1957), 55–57. Translated from Arabic by Anna Swank.

IN FOCUS

Arab Romanticism

Stephen Sheehi

In 1909 the Lebanese poet, author, and activist Amin Rihani delivered a lecture titled “The Cultural Revolution” to the Association of the Education of Syrian Youth in Beirut. The title was intentionally evocative of the previous year’s Young Turk Revolution, the successful coup against Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid II by the Committee for Union and Progress. As the first Arabic manifesto adumbrating Romantic commitments, Rihani’s talk (published in a 1909 issue of *al-Muqtataf*) presented an alternative intellectual and aesthetic vision for Arab society and culture by inverting the priorities of cultural, political, and social reform, a project otherwise known as *al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya*, or the Arab Renaissance. In the hope of extricating Arab culture from the perennial conflicts between the Eastern and Western civilizations, Rihani suggested that freedom was not only political, but also spiritual and intellectual. Freedom liberated the Arab self from its submission to convention, its fascination with materialism, and modernity’s adherence to positivism.

Rihani was among a handful of writers, artists, and intellectuals in the Arab *mah-jar* (diaspora) in the Americas who formed the earliest school of Arab Romanticism. Rihani, Kahlil Gibran, and Mikhail Naimy were its most prominent members. Their work sought to fuse the spirituality, mysticism, and appreciation of natural beauty of the East with the rationalism of the West.



Kahlil Gibran. *Pool of Blood*. 1913. Illustration published in the New York-based journal *al-Funun* (October 1913)

In 1912 Gibran—who, along with being a writer, was a painter of ethereal images—published his Romantic bildungsroman *Broken Wings*, and in 1913 Muhammad Husayn Haykal in Egypt published his Romantic novel *Zaynab*. By the 1930s, Haykal would write his own poetic revolution, calling for total liberation of a poetic imagination that would regenerate Egyptian identity and society.

Demarcating a Romantic movement in the Arab world is not easy. Iraqi poetess Nazik al-Malaika expresses a prevalent understanding of Romanticism, asserting that the Romantic tropes of nature, lost love, and sensuality were in fact already predominant themes in classical Arabic literature. Rather than being limited to one school or locality, Arab Romanticism was a transhistorical, cross-cultural movement in the Arab world of the first half of the twentieth century. What came to be known as the Mahjar School was based in New York City; however, its members' writings were published in prominent journals across the Arab world, such as *al-Hilal* and *al-Funun*, impacting Cairo and Beirut's literary and intellectual establishments. By the 1920s, Abbas Mahmud Aqqad, Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, and Abd al-Rahman al-Shukri had founded the Romantic nationalist Diwan School in Cairo, in reaction to the stifling confines of neoclassical poetry. A decade later, Ahmad Zaki Abu Shadi started the Apollo Society, which reached Arab readers from Lebanon to Tunisia; its journal, *Apollo* (1932–34), provided space for the contributions of figures such as Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi and Salih Jawdat. So powerful was the Romantic movement's influence that almost every Arab artist and poet between 1920 and 1950 experimented at some point with Romanticism, including the likes of the avant-garde Iraqi poet Abdul Wahab al-Bayati.

While Romanticism was most forcefully manifested in literature, it consistently expressed an affinity for the visual. Gibran was formally trained and saw himself as a painter. Rihani was the leading art critic of the Arab world and was married to the American painter Bertha Case. Naimy, himself an amateur painter, viewed the poet as painter as much as prophet. In Egypt, Abu Shadi's Romantic poetry was not only visually evocative but, in works such as *Rays and Shadows* (1931), his words were published alongside a series of paintings (by both European and Egyptian artists) to establish a dialogue between the two. His fellow Apollo Society member Sayyid Ibrahim was a calligrapher-poet who consciously bridged the visual and poetic.

From Lebanese artist Omar Onsi to Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar, Romanticism appeared in the works of innumerable Arab artists, invoking images of ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians as readily as Orientalist images of Bedouin and Arab peasantry. The popularity—indeed, predominance—of Romanticist representation resulted in the subsequent rise throughout the Arab world of modernist trends of Social Realism, Surrealism, and abstract art.

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LETTER FROM ALGIERS TO PARIS

In this 1923 letter, Omar Racim, an Algerian artist, calligrapher, educator, and political activist, writes to the organizers of the popular exhibition of indigenous arts from the French colonies that had just opened in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, to register his outrage at their failure to include Algerian artists. The “Committee for Old Algiers” to which he makes reference was a private committee dedicated to conserving architectural monuments of old Algiers, and its French members had previously been patrons of Omar’s younger brother, Mohamed Racim, the well-known painter of miniatures.

Letter to the Director of the *Exhibition of Indigenous Art from the French Colonies* (1923)

Omar Racim

To the Director of the *Exhibition of Indigenous Art from the French Colonies*:

I have just learned through the press that you have recently organized an exhibition of indigenous art from the French colonies. I am surprised that, according to the review, Algeria was not represented.

Allow me to make a remark: Algeria has an art that the Committee for Old Algiers once wanted to protect, but alas, political passions rooted in egotism finished by discouraging the initiatives of those competent members of the society.

If certain individuals, due to their negligent or ignorant nature, are forgetting Algeria and letting an art, or rather several arts, disappear, I urge the organizers of the exhibitions to promote either individually or through posters those who have inherited some notions of art from their masters, who made *Alger la blanche* (“Algiers the White”) above all a paradise of marvels: architecture, sculpture, ceramics, carpentry, decoration, embroidery, images, etc. I finish, Mr. Director, by asking you to kindly give me the names of the organizers and to relate the conditions for participating in these exhibitions.

In the hope of doing better next time, Mr. Director,

Sincerely yours,
Omar Racim

—Omar Racim, letter, November 27, 1923; Archives de l’Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs, Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (cote D1/138). Translated from French by Ashley V. Miller.

SCULPTURE AND THE PUBLIC IN EGYPT

These texts issue from the installation of Mahmoud Mokhtar's granite statue *Egypt Awakening* in the public square by the Cairo train station. First designed during Mokhtar's studies in Paris, the work depicts a woman lifting her veil toward the East with a rising Sphinx at her feet. *Egypt Awakening* drew the admiration of Egyptian nationalists, who had launched a subscription campaign to fund the full-scale commission. The project was finally realized in 1928 after much delay, generating copious press response, including this exchange: a skeptical article by the poet and essayist Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini, and a response by Mokhtar himself. Both appeared in *al-Siyasa al-Usbu'iyya*, the weekly cultural supplement to the daily newspaper *al-Siyasa*.

The Sphinx and Mokhtar's Statue (1928)

Ibrahim Abd al-Qadir al-Mazini

I have seen Mokhtar's statue as no one else has. I don't mean to say that I have climbed inside it, or clambered onto it and ridden its Sphinx, or that I looked at it through four eyes; rather, that no sooner had I stopped before it and raised my eyes to take a look than out of nowhere appeared a busybody who took me by the arm as if we'd known each other all our lives and informed me that it was a certain "Mokhtar Mohammed Mokhtar's." So I turned my gaze from the statue to this fellow who had decided, all of a sudden, to be my friend, favoring me over everybody else with his companionship—for the situation rather tickled me—and I said to him as I looked him up and down (in vain) for any sign that he might be a pickpocket: "Goodness me. Is that so?"

"Would I lie to you?" he replied. "You may ask any of these people."

Even more delighted, I said: "Good gracious. I wouldn't know if you've ever lied before." It occurred to me that I ought to extract as much amusement as I could from the situation, so I continued: "But, begging your pardon, I believe it is 'Abd al-Ghaffar's, do you—"

"No no no!" he cried eagerly, as if to rescue me. "Mokhtar—Mokhtar. Mohammed Mokhtar."

"I beg your pardon once again. This Mokhtar, then—is it his?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And where did he purchase it?" I asked.

"Purchase it? Why, it was he who carved it."

"Was there a mountain here, then, that he carved it out of?"

He grinned from ear to ear, exclaiming: "Mountain? What mountain? Are you not from Cairo?"

"Why no," I answered. "I'm from the country, and this is my first day in the city."

At this his incredulity abated and I must confess I was rather cross to see him having fun at *my* expense when it was I who had hoped to have a laugh at his expense, but at any rate I couldn't backpedal now, having taken things so far, and so I steered the conversation back to Mokhtar by asking: "And was this Mokhtar an ancient Egyptian? I do beg your pardon once again if I've got his name wrong, but was he—I mean, the owner of the statue—an ancient Egyptian?"

At this he gave a smile of sympathy at the sheer idiocy embodied in the fellow who stood at his side, and gently withdrew his arm from mine (for which I was rather thankful), and instead stood there scrutinizing me, for he had begun to wonder, I suspect, if I was pulling his leg, and his scrutiny made me certain that at any moment I would burst into uncontrollable laughter, no doubt to be followed by a regrettable incident—at least, one that *I* would regret. I quickly pointed to the name of the statue, which was written in Kufic script on its base, and asked: “What’s that?”

“Can’t you read?” he asked in response.

“Read?” I replied. “Why, is that writing?”



Mahmoud Mokhtar and laborers at work on *Egypt Awakening*. c. 1926

“Yes. What did you think it was? It’s the name of the statue: *Egypt Awakening*.”

“Look here,” I said, scowling at him. “I won’t stand being made a fool of.”

He swore to God that it was exactly as he said, and read out the name again, pointing out each letter in turn. So I asked: “And is this Abd al-Ghaffar’s—no, no, I mean Mokhtar’s—own writing? That was his name, wasn’t it? His handwriting’s awfully ugly. Why, the most simpleminded schoolboy in our village writes a thousand times better.”

I sensed his confusion as I stunned him with this observation and, finding him at a loss for words, I was most gratified to have succeeded in utterly flummoxing him.

I vowed to unleash a further hail of perplexity on him and, leaving him no time to compose an answer, I assailed him with another question, this time about the Egyptian woman standing next to the Sphinx. “Do you know this lady?”

He quickly looked up and replied eagerly: “Of course, she’s part of the statue.”

“I say, how wonderful,” I said. “Is it the first time that the lady has stood here?”

He gawped at me, uncomprehending. The joke had gone to waste, so I needed another question. “Will the lady remain standing here?”

At this point the penny dropped. “Brother, that’s not a lady!” he exclaimed. “She’s made of stone. A statue. Can’t you see?”

“I see, I see. But will she remain there? Won’t she get tired?”

“What do you mean, get tired?” he said, clapping his hands in exasperation. “I told you, she’s made of stone.”

“I see, yes, you’re quite right,” I conceded. “And what’s that animal next to her?”

“Animal? That’s the Sphinx awakening.”

“Oh, was it asleep before, then?”

Now I was sure that the chap would run off and leave me, but I was wrong, for he stood his ground and proved himself braver and more steadfast than I had thought, replying quietly and deliberately: “Look here, didn’t I tell you the statue was called *Egypt Awakening*?”

I obediently affirmed that indeed he had.

"Well, this is the Sphinx awakening," he explained, "which means that Egypt is awakening. Do you see now?"

"I wish I did, so as not to impose on you with my questions," I answered. "But where's Egypt in all this?"

"It's the Sphinx."

"And what is the lady standing next to it?" I asked.

"Egypt."

"There are two Egypts, then?"

"Good gracious," he exclaimed. "No, sir."

"Begging your pardon," I said, "but you led me to believe that the Sphinx was Egypt and that the lady was also Egypt, and I've always thought that one plus one made two."

"No, no," he said, "this isn't arithmetic, it's Egypt awakening the Sphinx."

"That must mean that Egypt is waking up Egypt then—isn't that so?"

"You're getting there," he said. "That's the meaning."

"Begging your pardon, but I still don't quite understand."

"How do you mean, you don't understand?" he asked in irritation.

It seemed to me that our conversation was becoming rather more serious than the chap could manage, so I went back to pretending to be an idiot and asked him: "I say, I can't see the pyramids here. Did Mokhtar move them?"

"Move them?" he asked quizzically. "What have the pyramids got to do with it?"

"Well, I've read in the books that the Sphinx is next to the pyramids, so where have they gone?"

Apparently, moving the pyramids was truly more than he could bear. He gesticulated in my face, muttered something—which I didn't catch, being otherwise engaged with my spectacles, which had tumbled to the floor and cracked in one lens—then turned his back to me and walked off.

After this agreeable conversation, which had distracted me from the statue and from properly contemplating it, I continued to the pyramids of the Pharaohs, and when I reached the Sphinx, I wished that our good friend had been with me. I would have asked him: "And who made this? Was this Mokhtar's work, too?"

I pictured him shrugging as he stood before me and replying: "No, it was the Pharaohs'."

"Are they alive?" I would continue.

He would pray to the Lord that he might never be as utterly stupid as me and reply: "How could they be alive? They died thousands of years ago."

I would look amazed at the thought that they should have been dead for all those millennia, and ask him: "What did they die of?"

"I don't know," he'd say. "No one knows."

I'd persevere and ask: "Do you think they died of the plague?"

"I don't know. Perhaps. Who knows?"

"Or might they have died of cholera?" I'd insist.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he'd say, fed up with my questions. "I told you, I don't know."

But, merciless as I am, I wouldn't leave him alone.

"Perhaps they died of a broken heart?"

Thoroughly vexed, he would take a deep breath and repeat: "Perhaps. I've told you a thousand times, I don't know. They died, and good-bye to them."

I'd make it even worse for him by then asking: "Are the ancestors of the Pharaohs still alive?"

He'd rescue me from that one by saying: "Impossible!" while grinding each letter between his teeth, but that wouldn't stop me from asking him about the Sphinx: "Which part is the base, and which part is the Sphinx?"

He'd clap his hands angrily once more, but after he'd calmed himself somewhat, he would raise them in resignation. "How dignified it is," I'd comment, "and how silent. I say, is it . . . dead?"

He'd glower for a moment, then show me that the thing was made of stone, but unable to stretch his patience any further he would raise his hand in farewell and take his leave.

* * *

No, Mokhtar's statue—Mahmoud Mokhtar's, that is—despite its proficiency is nothing when one compares it in skill to the pharaonic Sphinx, for that face wears desolation, gravity, anticipation, patience, glory, and nobility, the likes of which are not to be found on any other human face—and although it is of stone, it appears quite clearly to be thinking, looking out at the world and beyond it, too, to the void that encircles the world. And when you gaze on it, you sense it is casting those eyes back into the past, skimming over the ocean of time and the waves of time's generations and centuries, or drawing them back and folding one over the other until they are heaped in a single expanse at the far horizon of antiquity. Yes, the Sphinx is thinking: of the wars that raged in days gone by; of the states whose dawning and demise it has witnessed; of the generations whose birth, advancement, and obliteration it has observed; of the joy and sorrow, life and death, ennoblement and abasement that four thousand long years have wrought.

Never mind what they meant to symbolize by the Sphinx, if anything at all; I see it as none other than the embodiment, in physical relief, of that human capacity that we call "memory," for there is nobody who knows the feeling evoked in the soul by the memory of days long past, and its imprint on the face, who cannot read the very same in those eyes with which the Sphinx gazes out at everything it knew and saw before history even began.

It does not measure time in years, for they are blinks of an eye, nor in generations, for they are mere moments, but rather in the empires that have risen and been crushed before its tireless, insatiable eyes: in a sense, it embodies eternity, for it saw Memphis and Thebes, witnessed their splendor but lived to see desolation lay waste to them and bequeath them to the owls and bats; it saw the Israelites arise then fall, the Greeks awaken then fade, the Romans build, casting their long shadow over the earth, then crumble; and it saw the Arabs surge across the world quicker than a storm, then go the way of all those before them.

And just as it has seen the dried bones of hundreds of empires past, so will it look on the graves of hundreds more before its vision dims and its eyelids close.

As one gazes on the sleepless Sphinx and ponders the thousands of years it has spent here, at the edge of the desert, one does not consider the matter strange,

nor sense any tension between these long ages and its posture and position, for its couchant pose evokes a feeling of utter stability. The ancients chose well, for it is a posture of comfort and contentment that connotes continuity to the mind, unlike the “awakening” portrayed in Mokhtar’s statue.¹ And naturally when one returns time and again to the Sphinx one senses that there it will remain. . . . Whether it leaps to the ground or continues its grave repose, remaining motionless day after day, month after month, year after year, the mind never quite accustoms itself to it nor feels at ease in the Sphinx’s presence; this may be one of the Sphinx’s greatest qualities, and the purpose behind it might have been to convey a sense of prophecy, or hope, or something similar. By this I am not finding fault or criticizing; I only mean to say that when I look at the monument I have the feeling that I have not yet seen all there is to see, and I might even imagine that the Sphinx will leap from its base to the ground.

But this new Sphinx is crouching, not rising, for when animals wish to stand, be they camels or cats, they do so first with their hind legs and only then with their forelegs, whereas here only the forelegs are extended as if to stand, resulting in a sort of crouch, which is a posture animals adopt sometimes—humans see it most frequently in dogs when they sit with their ears pricked and their eyes wide and alert. I suppose that Mokhtar selected this posture because the Sphinx would look strange and awkward if it extended its hind legs, as would be correct if it were truly meant to be shown in the act of standing up; on the other hand, perhaps Mokhtar’s reasoning is that the Sphinx is half-human and half-animal, and may therefore stand up in whatever manner it pleases, even on its head.

Meanwhile, I do not understand at all the significance of the young woman placed next to the Sphinx, and I cannot fathom why the sculptor has put her in such a tiring posture; if I were Mokhtar, I would have done without her altogether and contented myself with the Sphinx alone. Indeed, if the intention was to signify that Egypt is arising, then the Sphinx alone would have been sufficient to symbolize that, and nobody could possibly be in any doubt over who it was meant to be, confusing it, say, with Rome or Carthage, for the Sphinx’s act of standing up alone is symbol enough for the awakening of the country referred to in the statue’s name. What is more, the young woman standing beside the Sphinx muddles the meaning. This owes to the fact that, if I have understood correctly, she symbolizes modern Egypt, making the Sphinx stand for ancient Egypt; it is as if the meaning, hence, is that modern Egypt is awakening ancient Egypt, or that ancient Egypt is arising next to and under the wing of modern Egypt, both of which notions are implausible and unpalatable to the mind. It is clear that there is (or *here* is, to be more precise) one Egypt only, possessed of historical continuity and integrity, which has been sleeping or languishing or however else you wish to imagine it, and is now awakening or shaking off the dust of centuries and is soon to arise—a meaning that does not require the young woman, who spoils rather than enhances it.

I am likewise uncomfortable with the young woman’s posture, for she is as stiff as a rod and her right hand is positioned most awkwardly on the Sphinx’s head: the Sphinx is not, in fact, supporting her, for if you look at everything but her fingers you see that her arm appears to be hung in the air, albeit hidden from view by her cloak, or whatever the garment is; the right hand itself is passive save for the tips of the fingers braced curiously against the Sphinx’s head, while the palm of her

hand does not even make contact with it. I cannot fathom why he has sculpted her in this pose, not even letting her rest her arm. What, furthermore, is the import of this posture, and what is its intended symbolism? Is it really meant to convey that she is awakening the Sphinx? She makes no movement that would suggest that that is what she is doing, and neither does her face evince the least interest in what is beside her, which it surely would if she were indeed in the act of rousing the creature. Or do you think the intended meaning is that the new Egypt is unveiling her face and showing herself to the world, supporting herself all the while on ancient Egypt? If that is what was meant—and it would certainly be more appropriate—then the symbol of arising and awakening would be the young woman, not the Sphinx, and there would be no need for it to be standing on its forelegs, for it would not be the one arising but merely the woman's support and a device to indicate continuity with the past. Wouldn't that meaning be more fitting and more felicitous—the Sphinx remaining in its customary couchant posture as the young woman unveils herself at its side?

In short, the statue would have better achieved its purpose, in my view, had the Sphinx remained in its couchant posture, supporting the young woman next to it in reference to Egypt's reliance on its past, in which Egypt takes great pride and from which the country draws inspiration; or, alternatively, had the young woman not been included at all. I prefer the former option, though, for it would avoid the Sphinx's awkward semi-crouch and the mistake it represents. I cannot hide from readers the fact that the statue as it is gives me the feeling I am carrying it, base and all, on my back. My words should not, however, insult Mokhtar, for he knows that I am most ignorant of the arts, and that I have none of the faculties necessary for a sound appraisal of art save a brain and a pair of eyes, and nothing more.

Note

1. *Eds.*: This passage comparing the posture of the ancient Sphinx with that in Mokhtar's depiction proceeds by wordplay on the noun *al-nahda* (here translated as "awakening") and its verb form, which literally means the physical act of getting up or rising. Because we wished to preserve the English title by which Mokhtar's statue is known—*Egypt Awakening*, rather than "Egypt Rising"—some aspects of the wordplay have been lost in translation.

—Ibrāhīm 'Abd al-Qādir al-Māzinī, "Abū al-Hawl wa-Timthāl Mukhtār," originally published in *al-Siyāsa al-Uṣbū'īyya* (June 9, 1928); repr. in Badr al-Dīn Abū Ghāzī, *al-Maththāl Mukhtār* (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1964), 112–19. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

The Response of Sculptor Mokhtar to Mr. al-Mazini (1928)

Mahmoud Mokhtar

I read most vigilantly the article by Mr. al-Mazini published in the last issue of *al-Siyāsa al-Uṣbū'īyya* under the above title; it has obliged me to abandon the silence that I have carefully maintained for so long, and I emerge from it in a state of amazement for my friend al-Mazini and of pity for the interlocutor described in the article; but then, there is little among the works of this distinguished journalist that does not catch one's attention, for each of his articles is stamped firmly with the mark of his

genius, and indeed it is this that makes people read, discuss, and comment on them, as they did with his recent article concerning the statue, which I thank him for—and which may open the door to a campaign to which I feel I must contribute a few apposite remarks, thereby ensuring that the discussion is a productive one.

The tone of mockery and jest that characterized Mr. al-Mazini's conversation with his friend about the statue certainly draws us away from the theoretical debates of the immaterial found in discourses such as those of Plato, yet it does so with a veil of jest and mockery concealing what is at once a serious and dangerous idea. Voltaire, in his stories, would smile, joke, argue and wrangle, play and amuse, but the *divertissements* of that meticulous and revolutionary thinker carried threats of vengeance and destruction.

Thus I hope that I will be permitted to avert this new threat; after all, it is a question of sympathy and compassion in me. I feel much concern at the effect of Mr. al-Mazini's questions and answers on the spirit of his interlocutor—whether that interlocutor was a real person or a fictitious character—for they were leading questions, and disappointing answers. The interlocutor captured my heart and evoked my sympathies, so I wish to relieve him of the doubts that have seized his mind since that infamous conversation with Mr. al-Mazini. The remarkable thing is that I shall be able to enlighten him using his own self: he shall provide me with the means of his enlightenment, which is to say that his thoughts did not diverge from what one would expect, and moreover Mr. al-Mazini was only willing to have his interlocutor be an average person, a man well acquainted with the streets, although even so there were at times signs of a robust logic behind his *naïveté*.

Mr. al-Mazini assailed his interlocutor with a question about the Egyptian woman standing next to the Sphinx: “Do you know this lady?” To which he replied: “She’s part of the statue.” This answer would have invigorated me, my dear Mr. al-Mazini. If I had been in your place, I would have been perfectly content with it, and would have kept silent and thought: She *is* part of the statue! But our distinguished journalist, rather than working with his interlocutor’s logic, abandoned the topic entirely and went on to “converse with,” or talk to, himself.

Our friend al-Mazini would prefer to remove the woman entirely and keep only the Sphinx, but what idea would the statue then express if part of it were amputated in this manner? And what name would one give it? Is the Sphinx’s awakening “Egypt’s awakening?” And if it were? Let us accept Mr. al-Mazini’s suggestion momentarily; what Egypt would it be whose awakening was represented? The Egypt of which era? These questions, indubitably, can only produce very doubtful answers and a confused mind.

* * *

Mr. al-Mazini also demands something else, and this is what I shall discuss now, so listen carefully:

The Sphinx, symbol of pharaonic civilization and of the Pharaohs’ greatness, arises. The Egyptian nation stands at its side, proud of her noble past, and, shimmering with everlasting glory, tears away the veil that covers her and emerges before the people of the West, from whom she has been hidden for many centuries.

This is Egypt’s awakening. Everything in the statue, every reference, every stance, every posture, every movement of the arms, and every fold of the cloak—all

these reinforce and substantiate the overarching and all-encompassing idea, the idea of "Egypt's awakening."

All this constitutes a whole that is indivisible, and every element within it is a part of the whole that cannot be removed. Try to cut the statue in two, and it will be mutilated and you will be cutting off both halves, both woman and Sphinx. Both are necessary in order to represent a homogenous whole, whether sensorially or substantively. Statues must be whole in both their sensory and substantive aspects; each statue, in the world of sculptural art, must be a unit and a discrete entity. Was it not Michelangelo who said: "In order to be a masterpiece of sculpture worthy of the name, it must be cast from a great height, and its constituent parts must remain intact and never separate; when it falls, it will thus either remain whole and unadulterated, or it will become ash that scatters on the wind"?

It is intimated to us that Mr. al-Mazini accepts these considerations. Yet he also hints at another point, which is that he wishes that the woman would support herself on the Sphinx's head; but why that posture? If she did lean against it for support, she would look tired. And then, in accordance with the laws of anatomy, she would have to bend her legs. And if she were obliged to do that, she would lose her air of nobility and zeal and instead look limp and hesitant. Moreover, she would spoil the harmonious composition of the ensemble, for her arm, if supporting all her weight, would prevent the Sphinx from moving freely, and would in fact prevent it from standing up at all.

* * *

But Mr. al-Mazini remains unconvinced, claiming that the woman must be tired if she is standing up. With a single stroke of the pen, he thus condemns the standing pose in its entirety, yet is that pose not so awe-inspiring that it is said of man: "He has arisen, he is standing, he is awe-inspiring"?

Isn't the fact that humans can stand upright a quality that distinguishes them from animals? If you wish the statue that you are erecting to convey, in reality, the superiority and power of reason, then you must have the figure standing and unmoving. The statues of Apollo and Minerva at the Louvre, and those of Philomena in Naples, Kleio in Munich, and Euterpe in the Torlonia collection, all display themselves to viewers in a standing posture, as do the statues of Titus, Augustus, and Trajan; indeed, most of the statues of Rome and Florence that are found in towns around Italy are standing still, neither moving nor walking. Our friend Mr. al-Mazini, in calling for the unity of the image and the discreteness of the statue, denies the most noble posture in the art of sculpture: the posture of the group, which embodies the sculptor's full genius. Statues are art's tangible imprint and essence, and these sculptural groups are the most exquisite examples of that art, indeed the highest pinnacle that artistic ingenuity can reach, and no emotion the sculptor could feel could possibly carry him any further. If we observe the mental composition of a sculptor, then we can see that the object of his work must be the sculpture itself. But if we then follow him into his life and ask him about the momentous works toward which all the efforts of his intellect, his will, and his hands must be directed, the sculptural group is what we demand that he produce for us; for it is through this that the artist expresses in sensory language a noble idea that he embodies in different symbols or multiple figures, which together amplify that idea's scope, and give it gravity and clarity—within the principles of sculpture, of course.

Look at [François] Rude's statue immortalizing the national anthem, "La Marseillaise," in the Arc de Triomphe at the Place de l'Étoile [in Paris], and you will see that the woman who appears therein ought to be sufficient to signify the intended idea, if we adopt Mr. al-Mazini's theory. But Rude felt the need to use other figures to signify the character of the woman, and indeed the addition of these figures imbues the statue with strength. The statue embodies the exhilaration of victory experienced when the nation treading the path to freedom gave its impassioned and hopeful cry.

The same goes for the statue that narrates the story of Laocoön, for the sculptor added to the figure of Laocoön a depiction of the serpent attacking his sons, to render the image more painful. You could say the same of [Jean-Baptiste] Carpeaux's *Dance*, in which one dancer might have sufficed; the artist chose, however, to portray a group that in their strength of representation form one of the most powerful, original, and creative statues of its kind.

You may list as many examples as you wish; all will point to the fact that a masterpiece is a harmoniously composed and substantiated visual symbol, the aim of which is to awaken in our depths the continuous idea of art whose internal truth creates a link to the world of ideas alone. This explains the varying impressions the Sphinx of Giza leaves on individuals. Mr. al-Mazini sees the monument through the eyes of a litterateur, and places it in a context of litterateurs. I look at it through the eyes of a sculptor, and to my mind it has ceased to be the work of a human, for the passage of time has displaced the sculptor's craft and indeed time itself has completed the sculptor's work, and the monument has lost its original meaning, its sole value now residing in its mass, its color, its structure, and even in the decay that has affected it.

* * *

Now come, Mr. al-Mazini, perhaps you have not forgotten that the artists who built the Sphinx placed between its forelegs a statue of a standing deity or priest, and that the passage of time has destroyed that statue. The destruction of that statue was lucky for the Sphinx, if we imagine Mr. al-Mazini, champion of "unity," demanding that one of the two figures be destroyed. And just imagine if it had been the Sphinx that was sacrificed—the Sphinx that is now the object of our litterateur's awe.

But I shall also say another thing that is on my mind, namely, that the sight of the Sphinx with the sand removed is not to my taste—in fact it contravenes artistic principles, in my opinion—and I would prefer the sight of the sand cloaking it and veiling the troubling loss of harmony.

* * *

There remains Mr. al-Mazini's final objection. He wondered why "Mokhtar's Sphinx" did not stand up first on its hind legs, which is a worthwhile observation, especially given that it has been echoed in various other quarters, even in Parliament.

I consider my distinguished critic most generous for allowing that a sphinx—an imaginary creature that is half-human, half-animal—may stand up as it wishes, be that backward or forward or on its head. The truth is that art does not become real art unless it succeeds in escaping reality to reach imagination and fancy, and the truth is that I could have made the Sphinx—after asking Mr. al-Mazini's permission, of course—stand on its head or its tail, and the discussion between us would have been over. However, I wish to make my perspective clear so as to prevent people making the same mistake as Mr. al-Mazini. He claims that all animals, from camels to cats,

stand up by first straightening their hind legs, and then their forelegs. This description could hardly be more mistaken, and I urge you to visit the zoo, if you do not have a cat or dog. Let us walk past the cages and take a look. At first glance it might appear that riding animals do indeed fit the rule that al-Mazini has decreed, yet horses stand up by raising their forelegs, and I am supported in this statement by the famous painting that hangs in the Château de Fontainebleau, depicting Napoleon on his rearing steed, whose forelegs are tensed in nobility and pride.

And have you ever seen a horse fall to the ground? It always rights itself by first raising its forelegs, as do dogs.

But we now come to predatory animals such as lions and tigers; their case does not even merit discussion. They stand first on their forelegs, like all other non-riding animals. Camels conform to al-Mazini's rule—I concede this to you—but they might be the only riding animal to do so.

There remain other animals, from the cat family and the like, which do sometimes stand on their hind legs first, but we know that this posture indicates the intention to leap forward in defense or attack.

* * *

My Sphinx, on the contrary, wishes only to evince a wise, concealed strength and a quiet but mighty will.

May I add to what has been said thus far that what concerns art is that which evokes in the soul sensations that are limitless and that cannot be evaluated by any scientific theory?

* * *

I shall conclude here. I am glad to have been offered the opportunity to present my artistic perspective, and that the one to have offered me this opportunity should be an important figure, Mr. al-Mazini, who confides in us with charming humility his ignorance in matters of art, which nobody believes.

I ask myself: "In the pharaonic period, did the Sphinx not have its own al-Mazini, just as *Egypt Awakening* does now?" And who can say, perhaps in four thousand years, if the statue at the train station has remained standing, someone will regard it as Mr. al-Mazini now regards the Sphinx of Giza. And so, to that putative al-Mazini I send, across the future generations, the following missive: The Sphinx is a symbol of the glorious pharaonic past—and a symbol of the near future, rising up as Egypt lifts away the veil that has concealed her from the nations of the earth for four thousand years. The fingers she has placed lightly on the Sphinx's head refer to the successive passing of time, and the relationship of the present to the past, and the Egyptian nation with its glorious civilization resurrected.

—Maḥmūd Mukhtār, "Radd al-Maththāl Mukhtār 'alā al-Ustādh al-Māzini," originally published in *al-Siyāsa al-Uṣbū'iyya* (June 16, 1928); repr. in Badr al-Dīn Abū Ghāzi, *al-Maththāl Mukhtār* (Cairo: al-Dār al-Qawmiyya li-l-Ṭibā'a wa-l-Nashr, 1964), 120–25. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

IN DEFENSE OF EGYPTIAN POPULAR ART

Egyptian artist Mohamed Naghi delivered this speech defending the existence and vitality of folk arts in Egypt at the first International Congress of Popular Arts, which took place in Prague in 1928. The speech contravened the claim presented by Louis Hautecoeur (the French appointee then heading Egypt's General Administration of Fine Arts) that no such artistic capacities survived in Egypt.

The Popular Arts in Egypt (1928)

Mohamed Naghi

Anyone who witnesses the tremendous transformation in the various arts that took place in Egypt, whose land was the cradle of that transformation, might ask the following: Do any forms of expression still have the capacity to give voice to the hidden content of popular sentiment?

Popular art in Egypt takes its inspiration from disparate sources, according to the orientations of each of its factions, and to their origins and doctrines and traditions. At times popular art borrows from Egyptian art, and at other times it borrows from Coptic or Christian art. Finally, it also borrows from Arab or Islamic art.

The vernacular arts, which were never perfected, attained a degree of popular expressive power in ancient Egypt that allowed them to withstand the long centuries, for they still very elegantly expressed the powers of innovation and invention latent in the people. This is attested by the primitive drawings and sculptures made by boatmen, cooks, scribes, and servants, who were entrusted with protecting the dead bodies of their masters and noblemen. The souls of those noblemen were said to revive if their mummies encountered any danger, and so they would be forced to rise from their coffins to ward off disaster. It was therefore necessary for these forms, which were waiting for their souls to return to them, to be images identical to the life the dead person was living in the hereafter, a life that was in fact but a continuation of the person's life in this world. And there is no doubt that the stories and legends of ancient Egyptian religions, and even the elements within them that were obscure and difficult to understand, reflect the original local character clearly and plainly. Ever since the most ancient of days, Egypt has exerted a powerful influence on the valley that the waters of the Nile regularly flood, so that superstitions and myths in those ages continued to circulate via the various religions, and were transmitted unconsciously between them. And it so happened in the city of Luxor that the native population built a small and pristine white mosque in the rural style for one of the Sufi saints, in the middle of a forest of pillars that took the forms of lotus flowers. This aroused concern and worry among archaeologists, despite the prestige of that saint for whom the mosque was built and the respect and reverence he enjoyed among the native population, for ruins from the ancient pagan days still remained in that mosque. And shortly afterward, the local population built a holy boat for that Muslim saint, following the example of the traditions of their ancient ancestors who once worshipped the god Amun. And to this day we see the devotees of that saint in the city of Luxor, bearing aloft that boat on days of festivals and celebrations, and roaming all around the town with it beneath the scorching sun, thereby reviving that age-old tradition that they inherited from ancient times.

And it seems that the people of Upper Egypt are still influenced, to a great extent, by the ancient ruins. They even trade in them. When exhaustion overcomes one of the peasants of Upper Egypt as he is excavating the earth and secretly unearthing some tomb, seeking to realize his dreams of finding buried treasure, that peasant finds comfort in contemplating the alabaster scarabs and pottery he stumbles over, and the small statues he sometimes hits upon. And so he tries to replicate them, demonstrating superior skill and proficiency. As for in the urban centers, Egyptian art there is in its death throes, due to the lack of skilled workers in industry, and to a dearth of proficiency and know-how. That great art has degenerated in their hands and descended to an abominable level of distortion. The sellers of counterfeit artifacts swindle unwitting tourists, and the greed of those merchants has even led them to cheat some of their more naïve countrymen, and so this art has regrettably fallen into weakness and debility.

In general, it is hard for the popular multitude to grasp the soul of Egyptian art, and the scope of their imagination falls short of attaining its standards. For this reason, this art is unsuitable as a means of popular expression along the aesthetic lines that we know. This is in spite of that art's strong link to the national soul.

Let us turn to the distinctive features of Coptic art. That art is doubtlessly influenced by the art of ancient Greece, and it has steadily come closer to being ornamental. Greek art, however, is more oriented toward imitating nature, and it attends to things as they are in appearance. This is in contrast to Coptic art, which is greatly influenced by symbolism inspired by religion, and so you see it does not rely on direct observation, but rather adapts direct observation to make it comply with the requirements of geometric harmony. Coptic art is thereby limited with regard to visible nature, reducing it to lines on planes. To this day we see it on metal vessels and censers, just as we see it in those lamps with stems that curve like the branches of plants, and those dolls that have remained a pervasive tradition in the people's psyches since ancient times, when the doll was placed beside a dead man in his coffin. Traces of this art resulted in wrappings for mummies, as well as vessels and ceramic pots adorned with arabesque drawings and engravings resembling birds and fish, albeit taking on shapes devoid of elegance. They demonstrate just how far this art has degenerated, and the weakness and infirmity that has afflicted it.

Despite Coptic art's being influenced by Byzantine art, its sources are almost entirely local. Its primary inspiration is from Egyptian Christianity, which renders it more austere, and more akin to an intellectual production than to an emotional production. For it stops at the brink of life and hesitates between transience and permanence, as if it can feel the proximity of its own demise, and so it weaves embroidered carpets and brocaded fabrics for itself, so as to make the most splendid and beautiful shrouds out of them.

* * *

As for Islamic art, our connection to it begins when we cross the threshold of Arab life, where we can perceive its influence in weddings and in circumcision ceremonies, at festivals, and at funerals and in souks. This art finds expression in the people's clothing, and in their makeup, and in their jewelry, and in their custom of tattooing their skin. This art is everywhere: in the streets that are lined with shops and on the roads whose sidewalks are crammed with vendors, travelers, potters, and bronze-workers.

It can clearly be seen in the preparation of processions for different occasions. To defend against the incursions of modern life, this art has taken shelter in the old quarters, and crouched in narrow alleyways. It has found a way to survive, protecting itself against the dangers that surrounded it and threatened its very existence.

And indeed you see popular art around the mosques on days of celebrations and on the *mawlid* (saint's birthday). Here it appears in its original purity, in that it takes the form of dolls made of sugar.¹ And those figures representing shapes and animals set out on banks of wooden shelves look so wonderful—the children stare at them, their hearts yearn for them.

And you find, in the small café at the end of one of the alleyways, images of Persian and Syrian characters, images relating to chivalric tales and their legends among the Arabs, which satisfy the whims and fancies of the audience. There is no room for lengthy duels in these pictorial legends: the sword falls quickly and without hesitation, cutting off the enemy's head faster than the blink of an eye; and the spear never misses its mark when it is aimed at the eye of the adversary.

And elsewhere you notice that “the eye” has become a site of superstitious beliefs inherited down the generations, who added to it the spells and incantations of “the hand.” The jewelers then made jewelry with a distinctive aesthetic character based on the hand, and this character became an intrinsic part of personal ornamentation and display in the eyes of traditional women. And so there arose in Egypt an art of jewelry with features that accorded with the desires of simple, unsophisticated women from the countryside, or that satisfied the demands of the traditional women in the cities and urban areas. In the first case, the jewelry is heavy and coarse. In the latter case, the jewelry is elegant and embroidered with holes in the “filigree” style—it hangs on necklaces with threaded golden beads, or takes the curved shape of crescents.

However, the taste that reveals itself in the love for the material that is constitutive of this art, that primitive taste that our gaze has elevated to an elevated aesthetic standard in the modern age—it appears to be an abiding entity, perceptible in the curves of serpentine bracelets, necklaces “of purity,” and in those silver or gold anklets that women wear to adorn their legs.

And if you have the chance to see a wedding procession pass by, you'll see the bearers of the trousseau as they proudly walk one after the other, carrying on their heads—like the spoils of war—trays and baskets and receptacles and cushions embroidered with silver thread, with carts laden with heavy pieces of furniture trailing behind them. A witness of this scene would surely think he was in front of a painting depicting a



Roger Bréal. Illustration of street display of *mawlid* sugar dolls. The French artist Bréal kept a studio in Cairo during the 1920s and was one of the founders of the Chimera group, an art circle whose members included Mohamed Naghi and Mahmoud Mokhtar.

procession of sacrificial offerings in ancient times. The customs of the people have also resulted in large temporary pavilions being put up to receive the guests from the wedding parties. These pavilions are made of panels of colorful appliqué adorned with arabesque designs, lending the place an air of extravagance and luxury. Only a small faction of wealthy manufacturers knows how to make these panels, and they closely guard their secret. Beneath the shade of these wonderful arabesques, political organizations hold their meetings, and orators express the nationalist aspirations seething in their hearts. Funerals are also held beneath them, where the mourners piously sit and listen to the reciter of the Qur'an, who calmly and reverently reads to them verses from God's glorious book, stirring up devotion in their hearts, and lending them forbearance and solace.

And you see wedding parties animated by groups of musicians playing ouds, *qanun*, *rebab*, and reed flutes; and you recognize the *takht* ensemble, which is a popular and authentic form of Egyptian music. Some reformists have tried to set up an institute for this art: their goal may have been to wrest it away from the clutches of stagnation and breathe new life into it, so that it could be entrusted with the task of expressing the spirit of our effort, and the flames of our struggle. However, all the efforts made in this domain have been in vain, for this art shut its ears to the cries for reform, and it clung to the past, a prisoner of a delimited type of singing, without hope of ever freeing itself from it. This type of singing is composed solely of longing, and its distinguishing feature is sorrow. It is entirely at odds with what the people sing while working, when you can sense an original and authentic music arising, a music whose source lies in the soul of the people and their struggle.

And Egyptians know how to laugh; in this they are like the other people on the Mediterranean coasts, both east and west. They are also endowed with a precise faculty of observation, and do not fail to notice the shortcomings and flaws of society, for they bring these flaws to the fore in their own theaters.

By way of concluding these lines, I would like to express my hope and desire for our popular arts to recover their old vitality and vigor, especially after all they have suffered due to the disdain of some of our citizens, who turn their noses up at anything popular, preferring foreign art, even though popular art—as I have permitted myself to define it—is the form in which the sentiments of all the people and their particular powers of perception are manifested, and the form through which the individual expresses his innermost feelings and brings them out into the sphere of existence, whether in musical or plastic form.

I hope that a place will be made for this art within study of the fine arts, so that we may acquire, thanks to the vital response this art instills in our souls, an immunity that protects us from the dangers of academicism, and that renews within ourselves the spirit of creativity and innovation.

Note

1. Eds.: The *mawlid* dolls to which Naghi refers are molded candy figurines, traditionally made and sold for the annual celebration of the birthday of the Prophet, a practice thought to have origins in the celebrations of the Fatimid dynasty in the tenth century CE. See the illustration opposite.

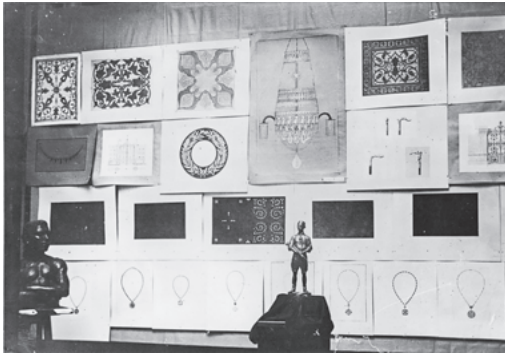
—Muḥammad Nāji, “al-Funūn al-Shaʿbiyya fī Miṣr,” from an Arabic translation of the original French, in Nabil Faraj, ed., *al-Dhikrā al-Miʿāwiyya li-l-Fannān Muḥammad Nāji* (Cairo: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Funūn al-Tashkiliyya, 1989), 167–72. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

IN FOCUS

Cairo's School of Fine Arts and the Pedagogical Imperative

Dina Ramadan

On May 12, 1908, the School of Fine Arts opened its doors at 100 Darb al-Gamamiz, in the Ismailiyya district of Cairo. Prince Youssef Kamal, its founder and patron, donated the palace that would house the school until 1923. A tuition-free institution, open to young people of all nationalities and religions, it was the first academy of its kind in the Arab world and was greeted with great enthusiasm; enrollment in its first year reached 150. Under the directorship of the French sculptor Guillaume Laplagne, the school offered students an artistic training modeled on the Beaux-Arts tradition, with tracks in painting, decoration, sculpture, and architecture. The pioneers of modern Egyptian art—Mahmoud Mokhtar, Youssef Kamel (no relation to the similarly named prince), Mohamed Hassan, Ragheb Ayad, Ali Hassan, and Anton Haggag—were all members of the school's first graduating class, and their work was part of the school's first exhibition in 1911 at the Automobile Club in Cairo.

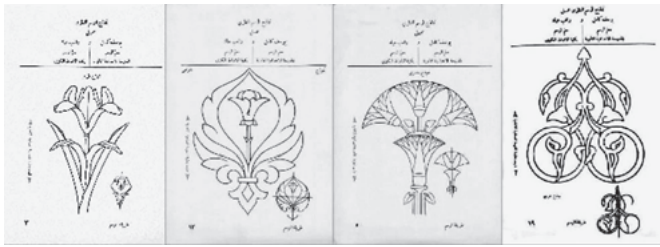


View of the first exhibition of the School of Fine Arts (later College of Fine Arts), Cairo, held at the Cairo Automobile Club. January 1911

Prior to the founding of the School of Fine Arts, aspiring Egyptian artists had been trained in the ateliers of European artists based in the region. This practice did not come to an end with the school's establishment, but continued into the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly for women. Another hub for early art education during the late nineteenth century had been the Ottoman military academy, where a number of Syrian, Lebanese, and Iraqi landscape painters received training in topographical drawing. Cairo's School of Fine Arts provided, for the first time, a formal educational structure that in turn contributed to the establishment of a social role for the artist as a professional.

Like many of its regional counterparts that followed, the Cairo school was initially staffed by foreign—namely French and Italian—instructors. Yet its patrons regarded the School of Fine Arts—as they did the Egyptian University that opened the same year—as an indigenous initiative, established by local royalty and elite and functioning independently of the British-controlled state machinery. Prince Youssef Kamal continued to sponsor the school until 1927, when it was shifted to the auspices of Egypt's Ministry of Education.

The School of Fine Arts would become an organizing site for numerous new attitudes and theories in Egypt regarding art practice and its ties to social outreach. In 1920, a new art education movement began to take form that would shift expectations for the school when a first group of educators, including Habib Jurji and Shafiq Zahir, were sent



Youssef Kamel and Ragheb Ayad. Four cards from a set of twenty-five educational drawing cards. 1910s–20s. Collection Raja Adal

to study in England. Novel approaches in art pedagogy were subsequently introduced and adopted, and by the 1930s a rift had developed between two main factions within the art academy system: the graduates of the School of the Fine Arts, who were still steeped in a Neoclassical academism, and art-education pioneers such as Jurji and Husayn Yusuf Amin, who championed a commitment to the innate creativity of each individual. An entire generation would be influenced by Jurji and his methods, including his son-in-law Ramsis Wissa Wassef, an architect and patron of the vernacular arts, and artists Hamed Said, Hussein Bikar, and Salah Taher. The generation of artists in Egypt who turned to more activist uses for art—figures like Ramsès Younan, Fouad Kamel, and Kamel Telmisany—rejected the monopoly of the Beaux-Arts training, and instead took inspiration from folk symbolism and popular traditions to produce an art that better reflected their political commitments to social reform and collective freedom.

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LETTER FROM MARRAKESH TO ALGIERS

In a letter to the director of the fine arts museum in Algiers, artist Azouaou Mammeri describes his recent paintings of Muslim life in North Africa as a proposal for a showcase exhibition. Mammeri was writing from Marrakesh, where he had recently been named Inspector of Moroccan Arts. By then, he had been working in posts in French-held Morocco for several years.

See Plate 2 for a 1931 painting by Azouaou Mammeri.

Letter to Jean Alazard, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Algiers (1929)

Azouaou Mammeri

Dear Mr. Alazard,

I have just sent two medium-size canvases to Mr. Valadier. They are set to be exhibited in Algiers on the occasion of the centenary.¹

Following up on the idea that you were so kind as to share with me concerning your interest in my work, I place them at your disposal, in case you intend to exhibit a collection of my paintings, under whatever conditions you deem fit.

What interests me personally is first of all showing how appreciative I am of the signs of encouragement you have given me, and also earning the respect of the skeptics. But above all I am interested in presenting, from a Muslim's point of view, an important portrait of Muslim society to counteract countless prejudices. You will see it at Mr. Valadier's: it is a portrait for which I made the studies three years ago and I haven't shown to anybody, since it represents a major religious figure from Kabylia who died a year ago and who had kept me from showing it during his lifetime. All he wanted was a portrait to leave to his family, and I will give it to them as soon as his children are able to appreciate it—they're still too young right now. If you find it to your liking (it has, I believe, a great deal of expression, and to my mind the likeness is strong), I would be very happy to see it featured in the Algiers museum, where I have no portraits. Otherwise you could always show it in an exhibition comprising a collection of my work. You might believe that I am abusing your kindness. In this case you will have to excuse me, for until now I've met with a great deal of indifference in Algiers, but with much encouragement in Morocco. The opposite ought to be true, but let's not speak of that logic—it would be tasteless to do so.

The other painting is of the famous storyteller of Djema al Fna. You'll recognize Marrakesh, but this painting has less character than the first.

Please convey my greetings to Madame Alazard; and with the best regards from myself and my family, please be assured of my sincerest gratitude.

Mammeri

Note

¹ Eds.: This is a reference to the 1930 centenary of French rule in Algiers.

—Azouaou Mammeri, letter, December 8, 1929; repr. in Ramón Tío Bellido, ed., *Le XXe Siècle dans l'art algérien* (Paris: AICA Press, 2003), 57. Translated from French by Matthew H. Evans.

ON THE FORMATION OF A MODERN SPIRIT

Lebanese columnist Irène Kéramé published “Modernism or Tradition?” in *La Revue du Liban*, a Francophone weekly that espoused a Mediterranean model of culture. A strong endorsement of progressive arts over traditional ones, it appeared in Beirut, the capital of French Mandate Lebanon from 1920 to 1943, at a time when the field of fine arts was beginning to gain recognition across multiple sectors of press and in civic organizations.

Modernism or Tradition? (1929)

Irène Kéramé

We are living in a time that is very rich in all the manifestations of the human spirit: a slightly confusing time, perhaps, precisely because of the diversity of its riches, but one that is proving extremely alluring.

And I am surprised to see so many who deliberately remain on the margins of this reality, denying the interest of its aspects because of bias, fear, or habit.

Their attitude, moreover, is entirely mental, since this renewed resistance appears almost exclusively in opposition to the purest, freest forms of human activity: forms of art.

Material advances, by contrast, have been readily accepted, if not solicited and sought after.

Rare are those who still refuse to use the telephone or the automobile, or those who prefer the crinoline dresses of our ancestors to our short skirts; yet everyone thinks it logical to turn away when faced with new artistic creations.

I am not denying the historical interest of archaeology: seeking in the past the development of a tradition. The blossoming of the faculties of a race of people has a certain appeal.

But should you live constantly turning toward the brilliant forms of the past, refusing the innumerable resources of the present?

The contributions of the current spirit disconcert you. Insensitive to the massive reinventions of aspects of the beautiful across civilizations, you cling to a small, preconceived idea that has settled in you, and you systematically prefer to ignore all other conceptions.

Whether in architecture, painting, or music, you seek only the confirmation of familiar rules.

And often, due to a refusal to believe that art in all its branches should bear the individual and original character of each creator, you wallow in a spectacle of pathetic pastiches.

Art is one of the liveliest, most human manifestations of the elite of a race. Unless one willfully ignores it, art must be given the freedom of these audacities, the meaning of which may escape you on first contact, but whose purpose the artist has brought forth from the deepest part of himself.

You often seek to understand first. Is the work of art always in the realm of the rational? Does its significance lie solely in the perceptible?

Can you understand the song of birds, or the fragrance of flowers? Can you penetrate the meaning of this nature that you find beautiful and admire?

Why do you ask the artist's creation to immediately reveal the principles that governed it, and to provide proof of its beauty?

Although its justification often escapes us, we should believe that it obeys the same necessities as productions in the more practical domain that yield tangible results. In addition to the obligation to reflect the customs of its era and to be transformed along with that era, as Hippolyte Taine recognized so well, authentic art must be strictly individual.

Thus, the value of great works relies on their essential differences.

It is thus not inopportune—in this journal that grapples with the most topical problems arising in our Eastern Mediterranean—to give this article, devoted to the artistic questions of our time, the interrogative title “Modernism or Tradition?”

For each branch of art, I hope to develop my point of view as a simple spectator and to say, not with audacity but with frankness, why I believe in the active virtue of the modern spirit more than in traditional routine.

—Irène Kéramé, “Modernisme ou tradition?” *La Revue du Liban* 1, no. 8 (April 1929): 23–24. Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

IN FOCUS

Cultivation Discourses in the Arab East

Kirsten Scheid

For many intellectuals in the Eastern Mediterranean in the early twentieth century, art offered an arena for reformulating the role of human agents in social change. Working at the intersection of anti-Ottomanism and anticolonialism, they thought, through art, to contribute to movements for nationalism, decolonization, pan-Arabism, women's equality, and piety revivalism.

Consider Lebanese author and journalist Labiba Hashim, who rejected May Ziadeh's 1912 claim, in "Something about Art," that mankind had undergone a devolution—dropped from the peaks of civilization, marked by love of art for its own sake, to the depths of pure materialism.¹ Charging Ziadeh with overlooking people's internal motivations, Hashim maintained that the difference between the selfish, unimaginative, unproductive dolt and the beneficent, creative contributor to community lay in acquiring learning, skills, and concerns. Thus Hashim introduced a *discourse of cultivation* to

counter the sense of failure and resignation produced by Ziadeh's civilizational teleology. Rather than describe current social practices to measure human advancement (or lack thereof), a cultivation discourse defines capacities for responsiveness. Hashim's recourse to art for retraining motives—and souls—was not entirely novel, but it represented a shift in subjectivity and social belonging that is important for understanding modernist Arab art production. Hashim and her peers turned to art not to represent a fully legible fact or extant reality, but to enlist it as a specially equipped participant in unclear, still-unfolding processes of rethinking self, society, identity, modernity, and even materiality.

The Arabic lexicon of cultivation discourses differs markedly from that of civilizational teleologies and ethnic representations.

Words like *tathqif* (cultivation), *tarbiyya* (edu-



Moustafa Farroukh, *Souvenir of the Farroukh Exhibition, 1933–1934*. Ink on paper. 5 1/2 × 3 1/16" (14 × 10 cm). Collection Hani Farroukh

cation), *tarqiyya* (elevation), *tarhif al-ahwas* (refining sensibility), and *dhawq* (more than "taste": the capacity to incorporate) focus on personal comportment in comparison to the natural or communal environment. Cultivation discourses first identify a social ill or deficiency. They may categorize "types" of people by practices or beliefs. Importantly, they produce a picture of society that demands that the audience scrutinize their own practices and consider what to change. Ultimately, cultivation discourses ask their audiences to manifest their changed habits or ideas in such a way as to provide a model to others. Cultivation discourses implicate audiences as both method and medium.

The late nineteenth-century elaboration of cultivation discourses accompanied political, social, economic, and demographic shifts. Across the Ottoman dominions, cities

expanded and transformed. Provincial capitals ousted Istanbul as the political center. New transportation modes moved people more frequently and more swiftly between neighborhoods, cities, and regions. An Ottoman sultanate no longer regulated urban-rural networks and interconfessional relations. Unprecedented economic possibilities flooded through the ports. The population transformed, too: women came to outnumber men (due to conscription and sickness), and immigrants (including European expatriates and colonial authorities) swamped urban centers. Negotiating the novel opportunities and obstacles required new skills and assets. While Arabic speakers had long called for social improvement and debated ethical responsibilities, the shift in vocabulary to discourses of cultivation refocused that discussion on human malleability, as both a threat and an opportunity, and treated society as the aggregate outcome of individual actions.

Many of Hashim's artist peers shared her concern for discerning the condition of society and intervening. For example, Moustafa Farroukh held that naturalistic paintings—with their concentrated visuality, technical finesse, and temporal compactness—heighten the viewer's sensory responsiveness, enhance her subjective attunement to others, and thereby increase her ability to communicate and interact productively.² He developed new styles of landscape in particular to relieve “the eye burdened by doltish materialism.”³ For their part, visitors to Farroukh's 1933 exhibition in Beirut used the guest registry to publicize their struggle to “comprehend” or “believe” in the new “language” that art made visible to them, and to take the works as an “imam” or “banner” to lead them forward. This suggests that some viewers and artists deemed art a cultivation discourse in itself, not merely a sign of civilization. In artworks, they found foundations for new conditions to spark social as well as personal prosperity.

Notes

1. See May Ziadeh, “Something about Art” (1912), in the present volume, 45–47.
2. Mustafa Farroukh, “Tali'at al-Fannanin al-Lubnaniyyin,” in *Muhadarat al-Nadwa al-Lubnaniyya* (Beirut: Cenacle Libanais, 1947), 252–70.
3. See Moustafa Farroukh, “Art and Religion” (1936), in the present volume, 80–81.

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VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

The citizens who visited the solo exhibitions of artists, a relatively new genre of presentation in the region, were invited to leave brief odes or other notes in the artist's guest registry—texts that demonstrate self-conscious negotiation with the stakes of the work, and the search for vocabularies of response. The texts in this section have been drawn from extant guest books from two such exhibitions. The first is the solo show of Zulfa al-Sa'di, a young Palestinian female artist, at the First National Arab Fair, organized in Jerusalem in 1933 under the auspices of the Supreme Muslim Council. It featured both paintings and samples of craftwork. The second is from Moustafa Farroukh's third solo exhibition, held at Beirut's School of Arts and Crafts in December 1933.

See Plate 3 for a representative painting by Moustafa Farroukh, and Plate 4 for Zulfa al-Sa'di's *King Faysal I of Iraq*, featured in her 1933 exhibition.

Guest book entries for Zulfa al-Sa'di (1933)

Have you heard the lovely melodies? Have you experienced how they make you quiver in delight and arouse sweet hopes and desires in you? This is how a person feels when he sees the refined lady Zulfa al-Sa'di. The wonderful handicrafts on display in the Arab exhibition stir up great hope in the spectator—the hope that our women are on their way to a renaissance through such beneficial work. This brings us pride and joy.

Tanious Naser, newspaper owner
1st day of the month of Rabi' II, 1352 [July 24, 1933]

We should have great admiration for the skillful hand that produced everything we saw in the first Arab exhibition—the hand of Miss Zulfa al-Sa'di, who truly counts as one of the treasures of the artistic renaissance in Arab Palestine. We plead to God for more women like Miss Zulfa, so that the men of this nation can come together to revive the glory and civilization that has been wiped out. God bless.

Abd al-Ghani al-Karmi
Muhammad Taha
1st day of the month of Rabi' II, 1352 [July 24, 1933]

I am very proud of the artisanal renaissance that is being carried out by young Arab women in Palestine. I was delighted by the work I saw during my visit to the Arab exhibition, which demonstrates Miss Zulfa al-Sa'di's excellent taste. Hopefully the young women of the future will follow in her footsteps. Bravo, Miss al-Sa'di, and cheers to her work and to all who follow her example—onward until we acquire independence.

Abu Khaldoun, Tulkarem
July 26, 1933

Zulfa is a wellspring of verse and oratory,
for poetry is nothing but tireless effort.
Take a look at your creations, Zulfa: they're marvels,
the best on display at the Arab exhibition.
The creation of Zulfa, is there wonder in magic?
For the magic it contained, bewitched those who beheld it

Yes, this is truly magic, and a wonder—or rather, many wonders: such extreme precision in the embroidery, such marvelous mastery in the craftsmanship, and such superb representation in the paintings, beyond even the skill of professional painters. When I saw her miraculous paintings, and in particular the one of the wild cactus fruit, I couldn't help but try to grab one of the fruits and eat it!

This genius, this lady's brilliance, is something every Arab can be proud of. It is fair to say that Miss Zulfa's works are innovations to which nothing can be added—one is left speechless, for such creativity is unprecedented.

Al-Afghani
July 29, 1933

—From the guest book of Zulfa al-Sa'di's 1933 exhibition, accessed from the research files of Rhonda Saad, our departed colleague who was preparing a study of Palestinian art and its publics until her unexpected death in 2010. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

Guest book entries for Moustafa Farroukh (1933)

Everybody, Farroukh, is infatuated with you,
and with you the East raises its head high.
Lebanon took delight in that, and rejoiced,
then straightened up and became your inspiration.
You, maker of beautiful art, be unto us
an example of whom mortals take note, and an imam.
Raise the banner of art above these foothills
and stay with us throughout the ages.

A student from the School of Arts and Crafts
December 17, 1933

A word I send, hoping that it might reach some part of the truth. Otherwise, let some see these words as those of a talkative person who has lost everything, even the ability to evaluate things.

* * *

In my eyes there are two tears: a tear of happiness and a tear of sadness. Each is deeply significant. The first fell when I saw the signs of beauty revealed in the book Farroukh has written with the ink of his organs, the pen of his art, and the inspiration of emotion. The second fell when Farroukh came to read his book to a people he found could not comprehend any part of its language.

Muhammad Shamil
December 22, 1933

A divine language descended on the eminent ones, engulfing secrets
made of poetry, music, and art: a revelation bringing liturgies
whose masters, with their creativity, were like messengers
through whom history advances, and through whose pens and lessons
the wisdom of the ages runs and leaves its marks.
The lion of this language is Ibn Farroukh's pen,

which has produced a miraculous sign for all ages.
I came to believe in the Revelation
manifested in his paintings—
he, its chosen prophet.
All art is at his fingertips,
all magic, all thoughts, all secrets of life.

Qabalan Riyashi
December 23, 1933

—From the guest book of Moustafa Farroukh's 1933 exhibition, in the collection of Hani Farrukh. Translated from Arabic by Kirsten Scheid.

QUERYING ART AND RELIGION

These texts, both by Lebanese authors, query the possible relationships among art making, aesthetic experience, and religion—and with these, the place of religion and religious knowledge in a secular modernity. Moustafa Farroukh prepared his text for a radio broadcast around 1936. Mikhail Naimy, who was an associate of the esteemed Mahjar School of Arab intellectuals in diaspora by dint of his earlier membership in the New York Pen League, outlined his position in a speech at the American University in Beirut. Naimy's text was published in the journal *al-Muqtataf* (by 1938 a venerable platform), printed in Cairo and circulated to the whole of the Arabic-speaking world.

Art and Religion (1936) Moustafa Farroukh

It is incontestable that religion has a clear impact on the arts in general, for the arts are its companion and faithful translator, the singer of its praises, and the vessel of its virtues and best aspects. For these reasons, the arts have received tremendous encouragement from religion, which has helped them to advance and flourish.

Consider music, for example: it persists in singing its most moving melodies and sweetest compositions from atop the temples and minarets and in the places of worship, enchanting hearts, affecting emotions, and making man forget matter and the material world and the injustices of life. Or consider literature: poetry, prose, and oratory resound from the highest pulpits and from the bellies of sacred books, captivating the hearts of the faithful with an exceeding power and thus strengthening the faith therein with its wondrous styles and evident charm.

Were we to contemplate the walls and ceilings of places of worship and the beauty of their architecture, we would be stopped by the exceptionally captivating beauty of the art, the strength of the chisel, and the charm of the brush. The colors before us would speak to us of the prophets' struggles and introduce us to the martyrs' blood, and would reveal their affect through their compositional lines, ornamentation, and the beauty of the calligraphy—including all the divine signs and marvelous

maxims therein contained. With the most elegant expression, they would tell us of the merits of religion and its service to mankind throughout the ages. They would manifest for us the colossal gulf between the ages of barbarism and the era of belief in God, an era of mercy to man and of brotherly kindness, an era of sympathy and compassion for the deprived and dispossessed.

The mission of art is to unveil for us all that is beautiful in nature, and the secrets, dazzling marvels, and signs of the divine that it enfolds—these bring us closer to the miracles and glories of the mind-blowing power that created this existence, praise be to God, the most splendid of creators.

Every sagacious gaze upon this existence makes one contemplate at length what great blessings God has created for us, and then grasp those blessings profoundly. Accordingly, we love life because we came to know points of beauty within it. And he who knows beauty loves God, for God created all creatures, gave them life, and bestowed beauty upon them.

Doubtlessly, God created nature's innumerable marvels only so we could immerse ourselves in their contemplation and thereby appreciate the work of the unique creator who created everything in the best way—he is truly omnipotent.

God created ears, eyes, and a mindful heart for us so that we may ponder his workmanship. Thus, he—may he be exalted and extolled—did this neither haphazardly nor fruitlessly. Rather, he created beauty for us that we may contemplate beautiful creations and glorify him for his masterful, beautiful workmanship.

Let whoever seeks happiness look at the book of God and the book of nature. The two will bring that person to God and allow him to approach God. For in the first he may hear the words of God, and in the second he may see the workmanship of God. Then his faith will become strong and steadfast in the depths of his heart.

The prophets, messengers, and philosophers who enlightened the world with their knowledge were almost all shepherds immersed in nature, inhabiting its quiet inspiration. Nature was for them a gracious pasture of inspiration and the means of their connection to the loftiest summits. There they would gaze at God's work and sing his praises. Similarly, many atheists returned to their maker after gazing upon nature through the dispassionate eye of the artist, instead of the eye burdened by doltish materialism. Indeed, most discoveries are the result of the contemplation and observation of nature.

In conclusion, we can say that art aids religion in its mission to unveil the magnificence of the creator and draw man closer to God by opening a wide window for us, out of which we may view nature and discover its treasures, which remain hidden from the sight of he who worships matter. Through nature and its treasures, which are replete with secrets, we are introduced to God's grandeur and are blessed with a glimpse of his powers, of the magnificence of his kingdom, and of the amazing marvels of his wisdom. Thus he breathes his light into our confused hearts and weary souls, filling them with piety, serenity, and peace.

—Muṣṭafā Farrūkh, “al-Fann wa-l-Dīn,” text for 1936 radio broadcast, published posthumously in *al-Fann wa-l-Ḥayāt: Maqālāt Tabḥaṭh fī al-Fann wa-l-Ḥayāt bi-l-Ḥayāt* (Beirut: Dār al-‘Ilm li-l-Malāyīn, 1967), 59–62. Translated from Arabic by Kirsten Scheid.

The Greatest Art (1938)

Mikhail Naimy

It is said in the Holy Book that God created man in his image and likeness.

I don't know whether you are believers or atheists. If you are believers, what is your faith? And if you are atheists, what is your atheism? There are people who flaunt their faith, and within that flaunting we find atheism in its entirety. And there are people who exaggerate their atheism, and within that exaggeration we find the full expanse of faith. And there are also people who have the capacity neither for faith nor for atheism.

As for myself—and may God deliver me and all of you from using the first person—I believe in God, and I believe that God is the source of all things visible and invisible. My belief in him is the cornerstone of my life. I believe in man as well, and I believe that he is the image and likeness of God. My faith in man is the ark that bears me on the ocean of this existence.

Were it not for my faith in God, I would not have any faith in man. And were it not for my faith in man, I would not have any faith in God. For the two faiths are of a single substance, or rather, are one and the same. It was God himself that led me to God, and not what I read about him in the holy books and elsewhere. And it was man himself who led me to man—not his monuments and histories, and not his sciences and arts. It is pointless to profess faith in God before he reveals himself to us in man, just as it is pointless to try to understand man before he is revealed to us in God. And it is pointless to demand this or that before the imagination within us is freed from all bonds and so comes to see the creator in the created, and the created in the creator.

In all his creation, God has not created anything other than himself. For there is nothing above or below him, nothing in front of him or behind him, and nothing before or after him—nothing in which he was not present since the beginning of time. And just as a spring floods only with the water that is already in it, and a tree brings forth only the fruit that it already contains, and wood ignites only with the flame that is already in its heart—thus only God can flood from God, and the only fruit that God can bear is God himself, and the only thing that God can manifest is God himself. Therefore man, who emanates from God, is an image of his source. He is eternal within God's eternity, everlasting within God's everlastingness, and he is a creator within the power that created him.

But this image is still unclear in man, who is wrapped up in the cloak of coarse sense perception and all the sickly goodness and haggard evil that clings to it. It is as if this image were on photographic film that has yet to be developed. The purpose of man's existence is one that does not accept association with God. That purpose, namely, is the rending of the cloak of sense perception to reveal the image in its entirety, so that man may be elevated to what is beyond good and evil. Thus, time with its bonds, and space with its limits, and death with its shadows, and birth with its emanations, and all the wailing and longing that permeate this, all the horror and tranquility, all the disquiet and calm—all these things are nothing more than magic potions and remedies that life prepares for us so that we might reveal the image of God within us. And when that revelation is complete, we will be able

to dispense with these potions and remedies forever, and we can help our brothers in humanity whose images are still unclear and hazy make use of those potions and medicines. [...]

This is the truth of my belief in man and in his life. Whoever shares in this faith will see his soul grow beyond all knowledge, including the knowledge that he is the image of God; and with this faith, that person will turn away from all volition, except the volition that emanates from that knowledge and that has no purpose other than revealing the image and delighting in it purely, splendidly, and completely. For all realizations, all actions, and even all intentions that do not draw their life from that knowledge become pain and ignorance in that person's vision. And all volition that does not draw its power from that volition becomes a chain around the neck and an arrow in the heart. Thus the knowledge of God within man and the accompanying volition to reach God become the center point of man's life. All human works that are centered on this point, and that spring from it, cross vast horizons to arrive at even vaster ones, whereas all things that stray from this center are failures that lead to other failures, and missteps that lead to further missteps.

* * *

Now, what can I possibly say about the art that you have asked me to speak about, and to which the people have given a halo of glory and prestige, of sanctity and exaltation? Is art more than merely one of man's many works? In fact, art is like the rest of man's works—some of it revolves around the center point of which I have spoken, and so there is knowledge in it, and it has volition. This kind of art represents a minority—a very small minority indeed. And some art strays from the center point, and so its knowledge is not knowledge, and its volition is not volition. This kind represents the majority—the vast majority—of art. The former reveals the image of God in man. The latter effaces that image with a plethora of lines and sounds, inflections and movements, shapes and colors. The former imposes itself on us as prayer imposes itself on the believer, as sleep imposes itself on the eyelids, as scent imposes itself on the nose, and as light imposes itself on the iris of the eye. The latter besieges us with lengthy propaganda about its "supreme" message in the service of truth and beauty. But its truth fails to go beyond flesh and blood, and so it is a deception. And its beauty fails to go beyond the scope of sight, and so it is merely intercession.

If you want an example of the art that takes man beyond man, then any of the pyramids of Egypt will suffice. Take the Great Pyramid of Giza, for example: four finite walls resting on a finite piece of earth. Those walls adhere to one another and to the Earth in such a way that they form a single mass that appears, at its base, to be eternal, exceedingly vast, and overwhelmingly heavy. It then gains in elevation, inch by inch, and as it rises it bends into itself, thereby remaining a single interconnected mass, its parts adhering together. Yet as it increases in elevation, its area contracts, and it becomes smaller, and lighter. And when it reaches its limit in terms of elevation, it vanishes into a point in space. This is the point of disintegration, the point of liberation, the point where all endings vanish into the endless. It is as if the five sides of the pyramid—its four walls and the ground on which it rests—expand in the beginning only so as to contract in the end, and take on weight only so as to become weightless, and bind themselves to one another only so as to rid themselves of all bonds. It is as if they become a thing only in order to become nothing.

This is precisely the condition of man with his five senses, for those senses are of no use except as gradients in which man advances to that which is beyond sense perception. There is nothing beneficial in their chains except the potential to break free of all chains. And there is no meaning to their limited existence except using it to attain limitless existence.

* * *

Before I set aside the example of the pyramid, I would like to take it a bit further. I ask you to imagine a pyramid on the shore of a pristine lake: that pyramid is reflected on the water in such a way that it appears as if there are two independent pyramids—the actual pyramid and its reflection—whose bases are joined, with the summit of the one being in the sky while the summit of the other is in the water. And from here I would like you to imagine the apparition of the pyramid in the water as the vision of the world in God's conscience, and to imagine the pyramid's summit as the point of origin. As for the shore of the lake, imagine it as the dividing line between the world of reflection and the world of sense perception, or the spiritual world and the material world.

The reflection begins at a point that we are unable to perceive either with the senses, for it cannot be sensed, or with the mind, for it is beyond the domain of the mind, or with thought, for it is vaster than the scope of thought. We might be able to imagine or reflect on its existence, since it is a reflection. The reflection then grows longer and expands into lines that give it a form. But it is a form that we perceive with the imagination, nothing more. The reflection then ends at the shore, above which it turns into a compact mass of cohesive stones, endowed with weight and form, with color and measure. And these stones continue to rise until they end at a point in space, just like the point from which the reflection originated in the water—a point that has neither weight nor shape, and neither color nor measure. This is how the soul condenses to become matter, and how matter dwindles to become soul once more.

Further, you should imagine every man as an independent pyramid in himself. And then imagine that pyramid as a stone in a larger pyramid, mankind, and mankind as a stone in the largest pyramid, the universe. Then the mankind of which we are a part is no longer a group of nationalities, sects, denominations, and faiths that are distinguished from one another with their power and wealth, or with their prestige and authority, or their kinship and knowledge, but it is rather a single structure whose base is in the Earth and whose pinnacle is in the infinite. It is a dynamic structure that knows no stagnation. Its base rises forever upward with its pinnacle, and its pinnacle draws the base into a realm beyond bonds and limits, beyond birth and death, beyond punishments and rewards—to God. There is no difference between one stone and another in this structure—i.e., between one man and another—except to the extent that one man moves toward the base while another moves toward the summit. The ones on the bottom carry the crushing burdens of the senses and have not yet become aware of their own reflective imagination, which would guide them to the eternal link between themselves and the summit, and to the faith that they will one day reach that summit. Those who have approached the summit are the ones whose reflective imagination has been activated, and whose faith is strong: their sensory burdens have thus become lighter. And those who have reached the summit are the ones who have become free of the noose of sense perception, and so no longer feel the pull of the Earth or the weight of heaven. There may be many at the pinnacle

of the pyramid who the people think belong at its base. And there may be many at its base who the people think belong at its pinnacle. Many stones at the pyramid's pinnacle are servants among the people. And many rulers among the people are nothing more than stones at the pyramid's base.

* * *

I have talked at such length about the pyramid only in order to give you an example of the art that, in my view, is worthy of consideration. When you perceive this art, you feel as if you have been liberated from sense perception. When you attempt to define this art, it takes you beyond definitions. You see yourselves as complete, just as God is complete. And you see yourselves as eternal, just as God is eternal. And you see yourselves as creators, just as God is a creator. In other words, this is the art that reveals the image and likeness of God within you. But I do not want to take you to the world's museums and landmarks, to its ballrooms and concert halls, to its theaters and its libraries, so as to show you this kind of art; I do not want to point you to the paintings of any painters, or the sculptures of any sculptors, or the buildings of any architects, or the compositions of any musicians, or the dances of any dancers, or the performances of any actors, or the poetry of any poets. For art is like nature—it lies in the eye of the beholder and in the ear of the listener, and whatever the two derive from imagination. For you cannot see through my eyes, just as I cannot hear through your ears.

As for the art that only strives to depict nature by conveying a negligible—a very negligible—aspect of its shapes and colors, its works will not give you an iota of what you are capable of taking in directly with your senses. I have never seen the sea on the canvas of a painting without it being a mockery of the one that I have seen with my own two eyes and heard with my own two ears. Nor have I seen the sun in a painting without it being a blasphemy of the sun I have known with every drop of my blood. This is also the case with the art that does not, in its depictions, take man beyond those emotions and thoughts of his, with which we are already familiar, beyond his normal intentions and desires, his joys and pains, his customs and circumstances. Such art is no more than a lock on the door of man's prison, another veil on top of the ones that already cloud his sight, another yoke on top of the one already around his neck. [. . .]

The most beautiful art is found neither in museums nor in artists' studios, but rather in a life that is unified in its purpose and its volition, and whose heart contains a faith that does not waver from the loftiest goal of man. In that faith, there is love that cannot be exhausted by even all the people and things that share in that goal. And in its works and words, its predilections and intentions, there is support for that faith, and fuel for that love.

If you are asking about the richest and most wonderful examples of art, then say: "A conscience free of derision. A brow with no dirt on it. A forbearing and grateful tongue. A chaste and forgiving heart. An eye that sees no impurities. A hand that does no harm. An intellect that sees blessings in misfortunes. And an imagination that binds eternity to everlastingness." You might come across these qualities in people with no knowledge of the secrets of colors or tunes or rhymes before you catch sight of a trace of them in the greatest of poets or painters or composers. You might find these qualities in modest huts before you find them in grand palaces. And in poor villages before renowned museums. Don't be deceived by the titles, and don't be tempted by their fame. Don't let the people's traditions blind you to the greatest

art—the art of extracting man from the scabbard of his own reputation, and of bringing him to the summit of divinity.

And if a single life does not suffice for you to reach the goal—and a single life will not suffice—then time will expand to many lives, with more lives beyond them, and still more beyond those. And if the Earth does not suffice—and it will not suffice—then there are abodes in space, and beyond them more abodes, and still more beyond those.

—Mikhā'il Na'ima, “al-Fann al-Akbar” (excerpt), *al-Muqata'af* 93, no. 1 (June 1938): 23–28. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

THE NEO-ORIENTALISTS / Cairo

The avant-garde Egyptian painter and filmmaker Kamel Telmisany organized a solo exhibition, *Resurrections, Storms, Brown Colors*, in January 1937 at the Cairo headquarters of the Essayistes (a cultural association of Francophone intellectuals with branches in Cairo and Alexandria). To accompany the exhibition, he issued this manifesto declaring his position against academic influences and in favor of the genuineness of Oriental artisanal practices.

Manifesto of the Neo-Orientalists (1937)

Kamel Telmisany

We believe that our personal, strictly Oriental ideas and perceptions are likely to give rise to a genuine art form only if we experience an authentic Oriental sentiment, freed from Occidental conceptions.

In the field of art, it is this sentiment that drives the artisan potter of Upper Egypt, the straw-mat maker of al-Sharqiah, the ivory carver of Assyut, and the copper chiseler of Khan el-Khalili.

It is the same sentiment felt by the simple man who plays the *ghab*¹ and tirelessly repeats an eternal melody: the groaning of the Egyptian *sakia*,² whose monotony has survived successive ages and civilizations.

It is also this oppressed and pent-up sentiment that the Oriental dancer tries to express through the sensual disorder of her movements, so as to free her being from the disgust that emanates from her dreary existence and from the secular traditions to which she remains enslaved.

This sentiment is none other than the inspiration contained within the Nile Valley, that inspiration that has persisted unchanged throughout the centuries, since the feet of the first Pharaonic artist tread upon this brown Earth.

The goal that I have pursued here and that I try to achieve in each of my works is to one day think like the young peasant girl who fashions “her doll and its camel” out of clay—that doll with the surprisingly long face—and also to think like the Egyptian child who makes the doll out of cloth, and to achieve the elevation of the soul of the elementary-school artist who finishes the *mawlid* sugar doll,³ complete with its own character and personality, and steeps it in local art, that local art that I consider to be the apex of our country’s contemporary art.

I hope one day to be like that anonymous man who, while a slave at Tura,

sculpted figures of animals he had probably never seen out of rock. That man communicated the purest message of his Oriental soul to us. My wish is to attain the spirit of the artist who gives the noble and elongated form of the head of a daughter of the Nile to the knob of the cane he's sculpting.

For me, the great artist is the unknown artisan who works in silence, far removed from academic influences. The one whose images illuminate the walls of popular cafés, reproducing the adventures of Abou Zeid al-Hilali and al-Zanati Khalifa, the one whose drawings decorate the façades of houses of pilgrims returning from Mecca, and which are the culmination of myths whose philosophy will remain perhaps forever incomprehensible to us.

If you perceive in my works a serious and mysterious, even peculiar, expression, outside all classical beauty, an expression that stems from this wretched side of me and that is merely the reflection of our repressed Oriental sentiments, therein lies my breakthrough.

I will consider myself an artist only if I manage to trace the first elements of this new local art.

Notes

1. Egyptian reed flute.
2. Eds.: Mechanical basket device used to raise water from the Nile.
3. Eds.: Dolls made of molded candy, traditionally made and sold for the annual celebration of the birthday of the Prophet. For an illustration of *mawlid* dolls, see p. 70.

—Kamel Telmisany, manifesto, included in Étienne Meriel, “Chez les essayistes: Expositions du ‘néo-Orientaliste’ Telmisany,” *La Bourse Égyptienne*, January 12, 1937. Translated from French by Emma Ramadan.

EGYPTIAN ART AND FREEDOM DEBATES

In the late 1930s, many of Egypt's intellectuals were distressed by the unfolding events of World War II, particularly the rising curtailment of freedoms under totalitarian regimes; they perceived that pressing questions for art and artists were being raised. The seven texts in this section address the question of art and freedom in a variety of ways. Ramsès Younan's “The Objective of the Contemporary Artist” (1938) is a pamphlet-length essay arguing for contemporary artists to use their tools to explore problems rather than merely reflect conventions. The subsequent five texts in the section issued from the collective effort of a group of avant-garde writers and artists in Egypt (Younan among them) to explore Surrealist ideas as a component of resistance to repression of all kinds. On December 22, 1938, members of this group signaled solidarity with the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art—the antifascist front that André Breton and Leon Trotsky had convened in Mexico at the home of Diego Rivera—issuing the manifesto “Long Live Degenerate Art!” and taking the name Art and Liberty (known as Art et Liberté and al-Fann wa-l-Hurriyya). This Art and Liberty project, and particularly its embrace of distorted imagery as a means to capture social truths (and ultimately precipitate social renewal), proved controversial within Egypt's intellectual circles. Over the course of 1939, the journal *al-Risala* provided a forum for responses to the group's provocations, ultimately hosting a debate about the meaning of *degenerate* and the purpose of Surrealism. Four texts from that interchange are included here: a statement by group member Anwar Kamel; a counterstatement on freedom by Aziz Ahmad Fahmi, a member of the *al-Risala*

board; a direct rebuttal of Kamel by Nasri Atallah Susa; and a defense and explication of the group and its form of Surrealism from group member Kamel Telmisany. The final text in this section, Mohamed Naghi's "Art and Dictatorship," offers a different position on tensions. Published in 1940 after the outbreak of hostilities, it calls on the Egyptian state to maintain a climate of free expression. Naghi, then director of the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, published his remarks in *La Revue du Caire*, an organ of the Egyptian section of the International Association of French-Language Writers and a supporter of Charles de Gaulle's Free French forces over Philippe Pétain's Vichy regime.

See Plate 5 for a 1933 painting by Mahmoud Bey Saïd, an artist cited in Kamel Telmisany's text.

The Objective of the Contemporary Artist (1938)

Ramsès Younan

Modern science has made many discoveries and devised inventions that have fundamentally altered the milieu in which we live, but science's successful discoveries and inventions have had another, more significant and far-reaching impact. Science has had an impact on our very psyches, for it has made us trust it and become more and more persuaded of its mode of research and thought.

The contemporary painter was among those affected by this indirect influence of science. He began to doubt much of what his ancestors considered axiomatic. He started arguing with himself, contriving logic, and seeking to establish his theories—and so many theories they are!—on scientific or quasi-scientific foundations.

I don't intend here a detailed exploration of these various theories; I am simply attempting a brief overview of the major issues facing the contemporary painter in order to gauge how he sought to address them and the extent of his success.

The issues are twofold: those related to style, and those related to subject matter.

Let us begin with the first. The success of photography in recording the appearances of things led a group of contemporary painters to spurn traditional painting and search for a new mode of expression not grounded in the imitation of nature. The Fauves ("wild beasts") started distorting the natural world in their paintings. To understand the aim of such distortion, we can compare Fauvist painting to singing. When we sing, we do not pronounce words in the conventional, recognized way, but extend a syllable here, emphasize or abridge a snippet there. That is, we "distort" the sound of the words.

In song, we intend for this distortion to endow the words with another, musical significance that complements their ordinary meaning and lends them a fluid melody that permeates the parts of the song, thus uniting its harmony and its expression.

It is in the service of this same end that the Fauve painter resorts to distortion, intentionally distorting the appearance of things, altering their size, proportions, and colors, thereby rearranging the components of his painting into a new harmony of lines and colors that underscore the emotional expression he intends.

After the Fauves came the Cubists, with their abstract paintings.

The Cubists have a semirational cause that they defend with their theory. They note the following: As long as the musician is absolutely free to compose his melodies inspired by his imagination, without taking recourse to the imitation of natural sounds, what denies the artist this same freedom in composing his paintings of forms and colors that have no connection to the natural world—paintings, in other words, that use lines and colors not to simulate something found in nature, but simply for their own subjective beauty. The Cubist painter believes that—just like melodies—lines and colors stripped of any relation to the natural world have the capacity to directly influence our emotions.

Accordingly, if Fauvism can be compared to singing, then we can liken Cubism to abstract music.

Whether or not we are persuaded by the central claim of these artists—that photography has relieved us of the need for mimetic painting—we cannot deny that they have at least added a new style to the modes of artistic expression available to the artist, and for this we owe them thanks. Still, it is noteworthy that the paintings of [Pablo] Picasso—the founder of Cubism and a pioneer among contemporary artists in the use of this new idiom (the language of abstract lines and colors)—often contain some representational element. We should also remember that this idiom is not, in fact, new. It was used to a limited degree as a supplementary language by [Andrea] Mantegna, El Greco, Michelangelo, and [William] Blake. And Egyptian and African sculptors created something similar in the art of sculpture.

This brief overview of style is sufficient, so let us turn to the more important issue for the contemporary artist, namely, his subjects.

Mr. [Amédée] Ozenfant, a distinguished Cubist painter, opens his [book on] contemporary painting¹ with a question: “Can our rational civilization, now in its machine age, possibly be in need of painting?” He then responds: “Yes, for the plastic arts, along with music and poetry, are the best means to divert us and carry us high above this mundane world, the world of reality.”

Elsewhere, he notes the following: “In the past, the artist fulfilled numerous functions. He served men of religion, princes, judges, commanders, teachers, journalists, and storytellers. But now that new tools—namely, photography and the printing press—have been invented to perform these functions on his behalf, the artist finds himself elevated to the ranks of the free poets.” [...]

Taking Ozenfant’s opinions to represent the general view of the Cubist painters, we can conclude the following:

1. Contemporary painting must go beyond reality.
2. The function of contemporary painting is limited to diverting us and occasionally delivering us from the exhausting world of reality.
3. Abstract geometry is the highest ideal of the human intellect and it is simultaneously disconnected from reality.
4. As such, the contemporary painter must move toward abstract geometry.

I believe the crux of all these assertions is the first claim that contemporary painting must leave aside reality.

We pause here to wonder: Are Ozenfant and the Cubists correct in this claim?

In fact, the primary purpose of this chapter is to respond to this essential question.

What further complicates our discussions and research on art is that we typically use many words that have no clear boundaries in our minds—words we use to denote different meanings in various contexts.

Art itself is one of these slippery and loosely defined words. We use it to refer to many things that are fundamentally different: Greek statuary, Persian carpets, El Greco's frescoes, Japanese ornament, African masks, the literal paintings of [Ernest] Meissonier.²

Failing to distinguish these various things from one another, we imagine that they have common characteristics—but this is simply an illusion.

We must now distinguish among at least four different meanings we denote with the word *art*, in particular in connection with painting:

1. Art that closely imitates nature. In fact, the claim that the essence of art is the imitation of the natural world was and remains the most widely accepted by the people.

I do not deny that—as Aristotle observed—we find a peculiar pleasure in recalling the images of familiar things and recollecting our knowledge of them. As Aldous Huxley says: “Most people are overjoyed when they see things they recognize on the silver screen or in drawings. They proclaim: ‘That car looks just like my neighbor’s car! . . . This bedroom set is exactly like the one in so-and-so’s house! . . . Look at this picture. Isn’t that a real policeman?!’”

But we should note that this pleasure revolves around the concentration and recollection of information. It has nothing to do with aesthetic feeling or artistic values. It was common for European painters from the Renaissance to the mid-nineteenth century to see the accurate replication of natural phenomena as an important component of their function.

Then photography was invented, leading them to question this convention.

2. Art that depicts the idealized human form—a robust body, well balanced, filled with vitality and energy. Ancient Greek art is the best example of this type of art.

It is abundantly clear that the ideal portrayed by this art is that toward which the athletic man strives. This is the reason for the Greeks’ attraction to it, renowned as they were for their passionate devotion to physical sport.

But it hardly needs to be said that the aim of the artist differs from that of the athlete; mixing up the two is like confusing psychology with biology.

3. Decorative art, from the simple geometric forms that adorn baskets and textiles to the finest, most delicate Japanese drawings.

Some European artists of the nineteenth century were influenced by Japanese art and tended toward the ornamental in their own work. Their works were suffused with delicacy and grace, but they simultaneously lost depth, penetration, and trenchancy. That is because decorative art—perhaps because of its delicacy and

grace—differs from what we call *true art* in that it can only touch the surface of our psyches. The unplumbed interior depths remain immune to its impact.

The pleasure that ornamental art gives us is a sensual pleasure in its essence; it persists as long as the stimulus does, and dissipates without it.

4. Affective art, expressive art, or subjective art, by which I mean art that issues from a deep-seated psychological need and leaves us with a piercing impression that reaches to the depths of our hearts.

Man has typically surrounded art with an aura of sacred veneration, similar only to the aura with which he surrounds his religions. This is difficult to explain unless we argue that man found in art—or rather, in some artistic works—the fulfillment of profound, hidden desires close to his heart. In fact, I may not be wrong in saying that the difficulty writers usually face when trying to define art can be attributed to the vagueness of these desires, interred deep in the hidden recesses of the unconscious mind.

It thus seems to me that every attempt to understand the nature of art that is not preceded by an examination of the human psyche, its needs, and its wants will inevitably fail. [...]

No matter how closely we analyze it, the external aspect of a painting cannot be a true measure of its artistic value. It cannot explain to us what effect it may have on our psyches. Rather, we can use this effect itself as a measure. It is the key to understanding the artistic language of the work and perceiving its message.

Let us move, then, from the outward appearance of the painting to the interior of our psyche, and attempt to discern what marks it has left on our hearts, and what emotions and sensations it inspired. We can then—if we have the capacity for artistic appreciation and psychoanalysis—uncover the meanings buried in the painting and the secrets concealed within its lines and colors, which are connected to the secrets of the psyche itself. We may discover, for example, that the tall tree “symbolizes” our drive for the sublime, as well as aspiration and striving, and that the distant, lofty mountain reminds us of the many great things and the broad hopes that we feel are still out of reach in our lives . . . and that the two small figures—by contrast—symbolize feelings of impotence, weakness, and smallness that are inseparable from the human psyche . . . and so on.

If we accept [Sigmund] Freud’s analysis of the human psyche, then we can state with confidence that the symbolic expressions contained by an affective painting must be related to the competing demands of the three faculties—the id, the superego, and the external world—or at least to the demands of two of these. Otherwise, there would be no expression of psychological struggle that this painting is working to resolve and reconcile. A painting that expresses the exterior world stripped of any connection to the interior world is a purely academic work. Yet if the painting reflects only the id or the superego, it satisfies just one aspect of our psyche, and this naturally happens at the expense of another aspect, and so we do not find it convincing.

This is in fact what we feel when we look at paintings that give expression to purely idealized fantasies or that expose solely instinctual desires.

The function of the ego remains. It undoubtedly plays an important role in the production of the painting. This role—I argue—is to reconcile the lines and colors

symbolizing the different psychological demands, bringing them together in a balanced, harmonious composition. (Corroborating this, Freud says that the ego is distinguished by a special tendency of association and unity.)

In performing this task, the ego appears to have successfully reconciled the demands of the different faculties, resolving the psychological conflict on which the painting is based. But this resolution is in fact an imaginary one, by which the ego has moved from the world of reality to the world of lines and colors.

As such, we can now define the function of the artist as reconciling lines and colors—which symbolize conflicting psychological desires and meanings—and creating a harmonious, coherent, formal unity out of them. [...]

Let us now return to our original question: Were Ozenfant and the Cubists correct in their claim that contemporary art must depart from the world of reality?

Of course, we don't expect the work of painters to be limited to objectively describing the external aspect of the work; that is the function of photography.

But the external world, as we've seen, is constantly interacting with our psyches. This interaction gives rise to those psychological battles on which the most exalted works of art are based. In this sense, at least, the painter cannot disregard the external world and its realities. We need not add that psychological struggles and turmoil are also realities—subjective realities. These are the necessary materials from which the artist fashions his works.

I believe that the Cubist painters, by disregarding objective reality, have ended up disregarding subjective reality as well. They argue that life—with its social, political, and moral problems—is a subject outside their domain. They thus sequester themselves in their studios, directing all their attention to pure aesthetics, forgetting or ignoring that these same problems determine our general disposition on life and our attitude toward the world. Our struggle with them generates those deep-seated psychological disturbances that we expect the great artist to address with his wondrous imagination.

In disregarding life and its realities, the Cubist artist has utterly disregarded the aim of these raw materials that are necessary for his work. As a result, Cubist painting has become a self-absorbed, superficial art, closer to decorative art than to anything else.

Earlier, we referred to the psychological crises ravaging the hearts of a great many intellectuals of this age. We said that two important causes are the disintegration of religious authority and the abundance of scientific discoveries inundating us, to which we have been unable to reconcile our impulses.

The decline of religious authority was followed by major upheavals in the standards of our spiritual values. Scientific discoveries have led—directly or indirectly—to the emergence of long series of phenomena: the spread of machines, class warfare, unemployed workers, industrial tycoons, dictatorships, colored shirts, poison gases, the League of Nations, multiyear master plans, emancipated women, the spread of dancing, nude clubs, stars with sex appeal, etc.

Faced with these manifold, confusing phenomena, the contemporary educated man, having lost his simple religious standards for the value of things, cannot take a definitive, unequivocal stance, for he feels as if he is struggling in a forest of intertwining paths and overlapping trails.

In the midst of this turbulent life, modern social and psychological sciences might help guide our minds and illuminate the way ahead. Nevertheless, we need spiritual powers to touch our hearts and refashion our psyches.

I have no doubt that art is one of the greatest of these powers. With its magical ways of inventing symbols and its wondrous capacity to find imaginary solutions (imaginary, yes, but convincing to the psyche), it can genuinely aid us in bringing order to our turbulent emotions and defining our desires and attitudes toward life's problems, paving the way for the evolution of new standards for the spiritual values of things. [...]

Until recently, Cubism was the foremost contemporary school of painting. But another school has now appeared which is gaining in force and attracting more adherents by the day: Surrealism.

The theoretical underpinnings of this school are found in Freud's analysis of the unconscious and his interpretation of dreams, myths, and jokes, children's tales, and native traditions. Freud has unearthed an overflowing reservoir in which the Surrealist painter can find abundant material for inspiration.

Surrealism, like every new school, attracts artists of various types—the brilliant and the derivative, the true believer and the hanger-on. Since it is still in the experimental phase, its capacities and limits are as yet unknown. Its styles vary greatly, at times diverging right, and at others left. It may advance only to retreat, like the archaeologist who doesn't quite know where the treasure is hidden or with what treasure the belly of the earth will surprise him.

There is a type of Surrealist whose efforts are directed solely at juxtaposing the strange and the paradoxical, then putting them in a wholly unrelated context: a girl sits in a flower that grows out of a candle flame . . . a cow dances in the middle of a room, the windows of which look out over a city, the Eiffel Tower looming on the horizon . . . a skeleton carries an umbrella and walks among the trees, fish singing on their branches.

The art of this group is liable to degenerate into an artificial, forced art that demonstrates the wit and skill of the conscious mind more than the specters and impulses of the unconscious.

Another type of Surrealist works with automatic painting: here, the painter attempts to strip himself of the censorship of his conscious mind to let the visions of his unconscious flow spontaneously and extemporaneously.

The art of this group differs from the other in that it is not limited to bringing together contrary yet familiar things. Instead, it seeks to invent new mythical creatures, thus opening up a broader range to express the hidden elements of our psyches.

There is no design or composition in the art of this group, for this contradicts their basic aim, which is to excite our imprisoned emotions and liberate our repressed, chaotic desires.

We may criticize this type of art for offering agitation and anxiety to the exclusion of any treatment or remedy. But we must remember that Surrealism is, at heart, a call for a moral, social revolution before it is an artistic school.

Finally, there is a third group that respects composition and finds in Surrealism something close to subjective realism or psychological realism. I believe that this group promises to be the most fertile and fruitful, and holds the most hope for the future. [...]

Notes

1. Eds.: The author is referring to Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret [Le Corbusier], *La Peinture moderne* (Paris: G. Crès, 1925).
2. A nineteenth-century French painter whose paintings differ little from photographs.

—Ramsis Yūnān, *Ghāyat al-Rassām al-ʿAṣrī* pamphlet (excerpt) (Cairo: Jamāʿat al-Dīʿāya al-Fanniyya, 1938); repr. in *Dirāsāt fī al-Fann* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1969), 16–35. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

Long Live Degenerate Art! (1938)

It is well known that present society looks with aversion upon any innovative creation in art and literature that threatens the cultural system on which that society is based, whether it be from the point of view of thought or of meaning.

Such feelings of repugnance are clearly visible in countries of a totalitarian nature, most particularly in Hitlerian Germany, where free art has met with extreme hostility and is now termed “degenerate art” by those ignoramuses. Artists from [Paul] Cézanne to [Pablo] Picasso have been vilified, and work that is the product of modern artistic genius—with its sense of freedom, energy, and humanity—has been abused and trampled under foot.

We believe that the fanatical racist, religious, and nationalistic path that certain individuals wish modern art to follow is simply contemptible and ridiculous.

We think that these reactionary myths will serve only to imprison thought. Art is, by its nature, a steady intellectual and emotional exchange, in which humankind as a whole participates and which therefore cannot accept such artificial limitations.

In Vienna, which has now been abandoned to the barbarians, a painting by [Auguste] Renoir has been torn into pieces, and books by [Sigmund] Freud have been burned in the public squares. Works by great German [*sic*] artists such as Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Karl Hofer, Oskar Kokoschka, George Grosz, and Vasily Kandinsky have been confiscated and replaced by worthless National Socialist art.

Similarly, in Rome, a committee has recently been formed “for the purification of literature”! It has taken up its duties and has decided to withdraw everything that is “anti-Italian, anti-racist, immoral, and depressing.”

Intellectuals, artists, and writers: Let us stand together and accept the challenge! We must align ourselves alongside this “degenerate art,” for in such art reposes the hopes of the future. Let us work to support it so that it will prevail against the new Middle Ages, which they are trying to resurrect in the heart of Europe.

—The statement has been signed by artists, writers, journalists, and lawyers. Their names are as follows: [Aristomenis] Angelopoulos, Armand Antebi, Abdel Khalek el-Azzouni, Zakaria el-Azzouni (member of the Alexandria Lawyer’s Association), Marcelle Biagini, Albert Cossery, Henri Dumani, Ahmed Fahmy, Annette Fedida, L. Galanti, Sami Hanouka, Hassia, Georges Henein, Albert Israel, Germaine Israel, Anwar Kamel, Fouad Kamel, Édouard Lévy, Malanos, Alexandra Metchcouevska,

Marcel Nada, Fatma Nimet-Rached, Mohammed Nour, A. Politis, Édouard Pollack, Angelo de Riz, A. Revaux, Sami Riad, Mohammed Seif el-Dine, Hassan Sobhy, Laurent [Marcel] Salinas, Émile Simon, [Giacomo?] Scalet, [Kamel] Telmisany, Nadave Silber, Kamal William, Ibrahim Wassily

—*Vive l'art dégénéré/Yahyā al-Fann al-Munḥatt*, pamphlet published in French and Arabic (Cairo: Art et Liberté, 1938). Translation (with minor amendments for the present volume) from Franklin Rosemont and Robin Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 148–49.

The Art and Liberty Group (1939)

Anwar Kamel

To the esteemed Mr. Ahmed Hassan al-Zayyat (Editor-in-Chief of *al-Risala* magazine):

We declare to the family of *al-Risala* that the words *chaos* and *degenerate art*, of which we stand accused, were not inspired by our thought. Rather, they come from a group of people who see in every movement for renewal a rebellion against traditions and morals, a recklessness that takes freedom to the edge of chaos, and a menace to contemporary social systems that reserve the greatest share of material wealth for individuals in this group.

The Art and Liberty group is as much a social movement as it is an artistic movement working for art for art's sake. The various manifestations of human thought and emotion, even the most exalted forms of philosophy, do not, in our view, lie beyond the bounds of expression, which emerges from dueling currents within the social body.

Egyptian society in its current state is a sick, disturbed society that has lost its balance, not only in its moral standards, but also in its social and economic conditions. In a society such as this, which is embarking on a renaissance, absolute freedom must be given to writers and thinkers to publish their emerging views, so that society may benefit from the solutions they propose to treat its manifold problems.

The Art and Liberty group is a group of young people who are alarmed by the disintegration of the elements of power in Egypt. The group has dedicated its efforts to studying the causes of this disintegration and finding solutions it believes might result in some good for all. It is not under the sway of any foreign movement. In fact, it is an Egyptian movement. What more is there to say other than this: it will be a cradle for nurturing new ideas to lay the groundwork for the development of this country.

Whether the art propagated by the Art and Liberty group is degenerate or not cannot be definitively resolved in a discussion in the pages of any magazine. Instead of this debate, it would be better for the *al-Risala* family to accept the group's invitation to visit its exhibition in order to see, firsthand, in which directions the group is actually moving.

—Anwar Kāmil, "Jamā'at al-Fann wa-l-Ḥurriyya," *al-Risāla*, no. 317 (July 31, 1939): 1520–21. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

Studies in Art: Art and Freedom (1939)

Aziz Ahmad Fahmi

There are three manifestations of life in the human being, from which all his doings and sayings, all his actions and omissions, arise. These three manifestations are emotion, intellect, and morality. The average person easily perceives in another a defect afflicting one or more of these dimensions, judging him to be emotionally cold, lacking intellect, or morally deformed. We are not concerned that it may be said that a judgment in these cases is merely discretionary. What concerns us is that emotion, intellect, and morality are present in every human being, though their clarity, and the clarity of their orientations in people, may vary, and their standards may differ. It is not a denial of the existence of wheat, after all, that people measure it by the *ardeb* or weigh it by the quintal.

Since human perfection requires the advancement of the human being in all his dimensions, such that these dimensions are harmonized, balanced, and interwoven within him, so that by them he may take a new step on the path of development and advancement in response to the summons of nature, every human action should issue from elevated emotion, elevated intellect, and elevated morality. If the balance between emotion, intellect, and morality is upset in any human action, it mars the action and diminishes its value.

If we examine these three dimensions, we see that each one strives on its own path of human advancement. The path of emotion is art; the path of the intellect is knowledge; and the path of morality is virtue.

The most perfect human being is undoubtedly he who scales the ladder of development with his emotion, intellect, and morality. The less perfect is he who scales this ladder with only two dimensions, and the least perfect is he who scales this ladder with just one dimension. Most people are unbalanced. Indeed, for most of them, only one of these dimensions is polished to a shine. It thus illuminates his surroundings, but only with the light of this single dimension, while next to it the light emanating from the other two dimensions dims. And so there have been artists with no connection to the intellect or sciences, except for what refutes the accusations of madness by people about them—or some of the accusations—and some people *do* accuse them of madness. And there have been artists with a connection to neither intellect nor morality, among them those accused of depravity as well as madness. In the same way, there have been scholars with no connection to emotion, who are therefore cold, and scholars with a connection to neither emotion nor morality, some of whom have been accused of being greedy as well as cold. And finally, there have been virtuous people, their virtue emanating from their souls to touch those who hate them along with those who love them—they have not suppressed their virtue, even if it caused them harm. They did not exercise caution as other rational beings would, nor did they sense evil. These are the virtuous, the God-fearing ascetics, those who have been sacrificed and oppressed.

Every one of these individuals, extraordinary in his own particular dimension and towering above the masses in it, is considered a genius in one dimension, although humanity held the lack in the other two dimensions against him. People still view genius as a type of deviance, or perhaps this is the case so long as its movement is confined to a single dimension.

If we blame human beings for their selfishness and ask them to consider the good of humanity in all their actions, especially those that relate to and affect others, then we have no choice but also to ask artists to combine all three dimensions in their work. We also ask this of scholars, and of the people of virtue. Art, or the most perfect art, is that which gratifies the intellect and morality as well as emotion. Similarly, knowledge, or the best knowledge, is that which gratifies emotion and morality as well as the intellect. And virtue, or the greatest virtue, is that which gratifies the intellect and emotion as well as morality.

We must keep in mind that the arts, sciences, and virtues are the goals of humanity, which strives toward their perfection as a unified, harmonized, and balanced whole—if we do not give our utmost attention to this, then we might allow the artist to attempt to proceed with emotion alone, the scholar to proceed with intellect alone, and the virtuous man to proceed with morality alone.

But humanity aspires to a higher ideal, although its image may vary in people's minds. If, therefore, we attempt to extract from among these images the one that we believe is the most faithful image of perfection, we will then be able to conceive an image of humanity that will be the nearest to human perfection, depending on the extent to which the image of the individual realizes the dimensions of perfection demanded by the image of perfect humanity. We will see how a person's emotion may be balanced by his intellect and morality in this higher image we discover. We will see if this balance is achieved when the human being has equal measures of emotion, intellect, and morality, and also if this balance can be achieved with different measures of these three elements—whether due simply to the abundance of some of them and the paucity of others, or due to a situation that requires some of them more than others, or due to the possibility of forgoing some of them at certain times.

We will differ.

People have differed in this since they first felt, reasoned, and had morals, and they will continue to differ in this until God wills that they be all one nation. For now, however, they are a multitude of nations, each with its own ideal, and each inclining to realize its ideal diligently at times, lazily at others, and passively most of the time.

If a person asked about my nation and the ideal to which I incline as a matter of belief, I am of Muhammad's nation. For me, art is what realizes the higher ideal outlined by Muhammad in his religion for life, and knowledge also realizes this ideal, and virtue is that which concords with the spirit of Islam.

I do not compel a human being to enter my nation, nor to embrace my ideal. But after what I think is adequate consideration for a rushed fellow like me, a child of this fast-moving age, I would say a few words that bear the timelessness of solemn old age and the immortality of vigorous youth: The ideal that Islam draws for man and the pure image that it draws for humanity represent the image of the most elevated living being within the most elevated image of life. It was not in vain that God said that Muhammad is the seal of the prophets and messengers, and that Islam is the seal of religions. We therefore looked closely at Islam and saw that it includes all the religions striving after God and acquits God of all the falsehood and spuriousness people have joined to him. If this is true, it is even truer that the most sublime human ideal is no more than part of the Islamic ideal. On this basis, we can make Islam an arbiter

of all of man's spiritual works, whether emotional, intellectual, or moral. If some people are not satisfied with Islam as an arbiter, then they will have their own ideals by which they may make judgments as they please. All that a weak, powerless person like myself can do in this case is to say to them: Before you discount Islam, consider it.

If they consider it, then they are Muslims with me; and if they submit, they are of the moderate nation; and as long as they are of the moderate nation, they must show regard for the intellect and morality in their art and grant them a share in it. Furthermore, they must show regard for emotion and morality in their knowledge and grant them a share in it, and they must also show regard for emotion and intellect in their virtue and grant them a share in it. This happens spontaneously, without prior consideration or volition if they are Muslims, for Islam is the religion of instinct; just as true, sound art is the art of instinct, and beneficial knowledge is the knowledge of instinct that God teaches people, whether they are illiterate or literate, and just as upright morality is the morality of instinct that issues spontaneously from a person without prior consideration or volition.

Having understood in instinct such splendor and gravitas, a question may well pose itself. A person may ask: Isn't man's instinct sometimes inclined toward that which morals disapprove of and the intellect is averse to? If I have such an inclination in art, it is instinctive art; nevertheless it does not agree with Islam, which, although it is the religion of instinct, draws restrictions and sets up morals as the guardians of these restrictions. Our response to this question is that an inclination in art toward that which is disavowed by morals and the intellect is not an instinctual inclination. It is, rather, an inclination with an imperfection that afflicts its master when he forgets others and, with art, is inclined to obey and express his senses. With this art he gratifies only himself, in a fleeting moment of his own life. He does not sense or think of his future, does not sense or think of his connection to others, does not sense or think of its impact on others.

We cannot deny that this type of art is art, but it is unruly art, strung from the beads of its creator to gratify himself alone. If we contemplate the types of art that are disavowed by the intellect, we find them to be nothing more than artistic hocus-pocus. They do not harm humanity unless a deceptive artist who is convinced of his artifice attempts to make people believe that it is reality. Any such artist who comes into the world leaves the domain of art through his subterfuge and enters the domain of fraud and trickery. If we contemplate the types of art that are disavowed by morality, we find them to be mere scraps that show aspects of life that nearly everyone knows, appreciates, and can express in a way that is no less faithful or magnificent than the way the artists express them. When the masses do not have the means to express these vulgar aspects of life, which Islamic art shies away from, then there are artists who are able to give it forceful expression. This is what spurs us to avidly adhere to Islam even in art; the art that we lose with this avidity is trivial and insignificant as long as it can be made by the masses. More is asked of the artist than of the general public. He is a living, mature being with refined senses and emotions—the people expect him to reveal the truths of life, its delights, and the beauty that they cannot reach with their own senses. Similarly, they want their scholars to guide them to the truths and benefits of life that they themselves are unable to reach, and they want their pious guides of virtue to spell out what they should and should not do.

And how exalted is he in whom all this is combined, to be a guide with his virtues, his knowledge, and his art!

If this does not come spontaneously to the mass of humanity, then volition is sufficient to achieve it. By *volition*, I do not mean that the artist intends to realize virtuous morals in his art while he himself remains far removed from such morals. His art would thus be forced and fatuous, inspiring in everyone who sees it the feeling that it has lost its core feature—namely, that it responds to the call of nature and instinct. What I mean is that the artist should begin by realizing virtue within himself. If he then creates art, the art will be in the same image, the art will be virtuous.

The nature of development and advancement demands this of artists, just as it demands it of scholars and the possessors of morals and virtues. Human spiritual life wants to reach the sublime and take steps forward, and the path to this elevation lies in the souls of people themselves. As long as the human being has volition, this volition must be of some use in realizing development and advancement, the evidence being that volition still exists in the human soul and man continues to exercise it in nearly all his actions. As such, we are right to want to elevate ourselves and, in turn, to work on that elevation. As for volition, it is in our grasp; and as for work, its path is practice. Just as the intellect has a practice to assist it in attaining knowledge, and morality has a practice to assist it in attaining virtue, so emotion has a practice to assist it in attaining art!

Every artist has subscribed to an ideal he wishes to attain. I have chosen Islam from among the possible ideals—some may find this choice agreeable for themselves as well.

As for those who do not wish to reach higher, they may revel in their art, knowledge, and morals with all the freedom of the errant, misguided soul.

—Aziz Ahmad Fahmī, “al-Fann wa-l-Ḥurriyya,” *al-Risāla*, no. 319 (August 14, 1939): 1610–12. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

On Degenerate Art: A Final Word (1939)

Nasri Atallah Susa

Mr. Anwar Kamel misunderstood the spirit that prompted my article published in issue 316 of *al-Risala*, titled “Degenerate Art, Nevertheless,” which provoked the gentleman and the group on whose behalf he speaks. I naturally believed that the gentleman would be willing to discuss the opinions by which he is guided after he said of his group: “Its aims are limited to defending freedom of art and culture, to publishing modern works, and to giving lectures” (*al-Risala*, issue 315, page 1,426).¹

With my article, I gave him a fine opportunity to publicize the efforts of his group in such a prestigious journal as *al-Risala*. But the gentleman fell short and published in issue 317 of *al-Risala* an article that differed substantially in spirit from the one he had published in issue 315. He let the opportunity slip from his hands for no reason other than his inability to defend the art he champions, neither by persuasive, reasoned thought nor by eloquence inspired by ardent belief that pours from the heart and speaks directly to other hearts, which are then persuaded. It is likely (as is

apparent to every reader) that *al-Risala* did not publish the gentleman's response in full. In fact, it omitted that which does not accord with its high-minded ethic and its elevated standard. I care not that the esteemed gentleman insults me, and I will not be moved by any personal affront. I declare to the gentleman and the *al-Risala* family that I wrote what I did in the belief that modern art is a labyrinth in which many go astray, and that the discussion and study of it is the best way to scrutinize it and know its truth from its falsehood. In this way, Mr. Kamel may direct me to that of which I am ignorant and I may direct him to that of which he is ignorant.

I repeat here that I have seen a bit of what some of the group's members have painted, and I reiterate with all my might that it is a degenerate art; for their paintings rely on Surrealism, which is a purely French movement whose prime impetus is the theory of the scientist Sigmund Freud. To demonstrate the nature of this movement, I will quote one of its leading figures, the writer André Breton:

The flights of fancy of insane people conform decidedly to some of my instinctual postulates. The phenomenon of automatic writing may produce astonishing results. We recognize absolutely nothing. We believe in our ability to minimize or overcome the intellect and sentimentality. We sympathize with all revolutionary parties. We do not believe in human progress. We want to support every oppositional movement with violence, gambling with our lives. Time does not exist. I would rather destroy than construct. We insist on a thorough revision of artistic values. We do not believe in literary genius, and literary quality is of only secondary value. We loathe the present reality.²

I believe that artistic currents cannot move so easily from one country to another, to say nothing of character and inspiration.

As for the social aspect of the group's efforts, I hope it flourishes and bears early fruit, and I offer my apology to the gentleman who bristled and bridled because I trusted him and innocently invited him to speak about art.

Notes

1. Eds.: Susa is referencing a sequence of articles in *al-Risala*, all published within a period of three weeks in July 1939: Aziz Ahmad Fahmi's article "Degenerate Art" was included in issue 314 (July 10, 1939). Anwar Kamel responded to Fahmi with "The Art and Liberty Group," in issue 315 (July 17, 1939). Susa in turn replied to Kamel with "Degenerate Art, Nevertheless," in issue 316 (July 24, 1939). Kamel's response and further explication, also titled "The Art and Liberty Group," was published in issue 317 (July 31, 1939); it is included in the present volume, p. 95.
2. From the book *Bohemian Literary and Social Life in Paris*. [Eds.: The full citation is: Sisley Huddleston, *Bohemian Literary and Social Life in Paris: Salons, Cafés, Studios* (London: Harrap, 1928).]

—Naṣrī Aṭā Allāh Sūsā, "Ḥawla al-Fann al-Munḥaṭṭ: Kalima Akhira," *al-Risāla*, no. 319 (August 14, 1939): 1620. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

On Degenerate Art (1939)

Kamel Telmisany

We read in issue 319 of the esteemed *al-Risala* an article titled “On Degenerate Art: A Final Word” a response to what a distinguished author had written about the Art and Liberty group, and a response to a dispute with Anwar Kamel, a member of the group, who, in his response to [Nasri Atallah Susa], purposefully avoided artistic details and any mention of names and dates. In this article of his, the distinguished gentleman [Susa] mentioned the name of author and poet André Breton, and translated an old passage of Breton’s on Surrealism, adding his own commentary to it. For this reason alone, I find myself compelled to correct his erroneous statements concerning Breton and his movement, so that the esteemed readers do not come away with a distorted and disfigured image of this international movement, which expresses the highest and noblest human feelings in the current century and, by its path of artistic civilization in poetry or modern painting, reached its highest level, thereby laying a foundation for the contemporary school of free verse and depiction based on intuitive thought and modern psychoanalysis. Perhaps the opponents among our colleagues will hereafter take pains to quote from more recent and credible sources on this rejuvenating movement, which even today is expanding and renewing itself, and before whose vigor no stagnant thought or indolent research and inquiry can stand.

It is apparent from his writing that the distinguished author acquired all his information about Surrealism—“art far removed from apparent reality”—from a few paragraphs in [Sisley Huddleston’s 1928] book *Bohemian Literary and Social Life in Paris*. We believe that simply reading a few paragraphs such as these, written several years ago, does not give him the right to speak of that about which he spoke, and that this is an offense against both the thought and the author whom he mentions. It is also an offense against *al-Risala*, given its influence and reach, which does not stop

at Egypt, but extends to the entire Arab East! We must therefore have a “final word” here in response to his article. We will not return to the matter henceforth, except perhaps in detailed analytical publications or in public exhibitions and lectures that may be accommodated in the coming winter season.

Over the past five years, Surrealism has undergone many essential and far-reaching developments. In this period, André Breton has published several successive statements about the movement, the innovations occurring in it, and the opinions and thought it has acquired. The most recent of these developments is Breton’s brilliant article in the latest issue of his journal *Minotaure*, which the gentleman in question must read, along with the articles preceding it. Breton’s article offers a lucid exploration



Kamel Telmisany. Illustration for Georges Henein’s 1938 book *Déraison d’être* (Paris: J. Corti)

of the most recent directions in Surrealist painting and writing by leading French and English critics, poets, and authors of the movement.

Surrealism is not “a purely French movement,” as the gentleman claims. Rather, it is a movement whose most distinctive feature is the internationalism of its thought and means. Its character is not local or nationalist in any way, whether major or minor. It is truly strange and astonishing that the gentleman [Susa] permits himself to fall into such obscene error in his writing. I advise him here to read what the great English critic Herbert Read wrote in his book on Surrealism regarding the internationalism of this free movement, and [to consider] the utter improbability of the gentleman’s accusation that it is purely French. In fact, I would like to inform him that there is not a single Frenchman among the leading Surrealist painters. The painter Giorgio de Chirico is Greek-Italian; Salvador Dalí is Spanish, as is [Pablo] Picasso himself; Paul Klee and Max Ernst are from Germany [*sic*: Klee was Swiss]; [Roland] Penrose is English, as is Henry Moore. As for Paul Delvaux, he is Belgian, and [Marc] Chagall is a Russian national, and so on. These, my good sir, are the leaders of the movement, and it is ironic that there is not a single Frenchman among them! Art has no country, my friend. You erred when you wrote: “I believe that artistic currents cannot move so easily from one country to another, to say nothing of character and inspiration.”

There are comparable movements in England, Mexico, Belgium, the United States, Holland, etc. Do you believe, sir, that it is a disgrace that some Egyptian paintings draw from or are influenced by this school? We want a civilization that moves with the world. We do not want to stand still while everyone else moves on. Concerning this same topic, I also advise you to read the editorial in the January 1939 issue of *Clé*, so that you can learn for yourself, in silence, how little understanding you have of this school.

Have you seen, sir, the four-armed sugar *mawlid* doll? Have you seen the *qaragoz* shadow puppets? Have you listened to the stories of Umm al-Shuur, Clever Hasan, and others from local folk literature?¹ All this, sir, is Surrealism.

Have you visited the Egyptian Museum? Much pharaonic art is Surrealism.

Have you visited the Coptic Museum? Much Coptic art is Surrealism. We are not imitating any foreign schools, but rather creating an art that arises from the brown soil of this country and has coursed in our blood from the first day we lived with our unrestricted thoughts up until this very hour, my friend.

Concerning this supposedly French movement, you say, sir, that “its prime impetus is the theory of the scientist Sigmund Freud.” This is a generalization that contains much hyperbole and seeks, without basis, to draw plaudits from the public—presuming as it does that the public is largely ignorant of such matters. Such words are a far cry from accurate analysis. Freud is valued by the public and by the entire free democratic world, which enjoys freedom of thought. Is it a crime, sir, for analysis based on Freudian theories to enter into painting, just as it has already entered into literature and poetry in this free and democratic country of ours? Egypt is not yet part of Germany, and Italy has yet to colonize our country—so Freud’s works need not yet be burned in our public squares amid cries of joy and savagery! No sir, Egypt is still democratic, and you must suppress the influence of fascist, Nazi thought on your view of our art, and discern the straight way for yourself. Do you know, sir, that the paintings of Mahmoud Bey Saïd, the greatest of painters, are all Freudian, as are most of the writings of Mr. Mahmud Taymur Bey, Tawfiq al-Hakim, and others?

That our art relies on Freud's theories—if this is partly true for some of us—is no reason to call such art “degenerate” at the top of your lungs. Here I advise you, sir, to become acquainted with the material before writing that this is the relationship of these paintings to the scientist Sigmund Freud. On this relationship, I point you to an enjoyable section in the book *Art and Society* by the critic Herbert Read, or to what that same English Surrealist has recently written in issues of the *London Bulletin*.

Among the things cited in your article, you mentioned “automatic writing.” Are you aware, sir, that the time of this automatic writing has come and gone already? A living thing is perpetually and spontaneously renewed. My friend, there is no need to mention, today, something that you've only learned a little bit about *after* those concerned have already abandoned it—the form of such writing has since changed. Have you read, my good sir, André Breton's *What Is Surrealism?* I am sure you have not. Otherwise you would not have quoted the words you did today—which Breton spoke several years ago—without mentioning what he said to introduce those words, and without noting what he said after them. Perhaps you will find an image that will please you, sir, in a lecture given in French by the Egyptian poet Georges Henein, a member of the group, reproduced in the October 1937 issue of the *Revue des Conférences Françaises en Orient*, which is published in Cairo.

Finally, do you know, sir, that the leading critic in Egypt, Ahmad Bey Rassim—a man who has expressed his opinions on art ever since art was destined to emerge in Egypt—spoke of three members of the group, painters, in several articles? In the last of these, in the September 17, 1938, issue of *al-Ahram* and the October 15, 1938, issue of *al-Balagh*, he mentioned the influence of folk art and Eastern art on the works of these artists, who include Kamal William, Fathi al-Bakri, and the author of these very lines. Some of the members of this group, such as Abu Khalil Lutfi and Husayn Yusuf Amin, have reached a high degree of refinement in local folk art. Their art reveals both imagination and an individual thought that is by no means Surrealist, although it does share in some of the associations and fundamentals of Surrealism, particularly the engravings of the sculptor Abu Khalil Lutfi. As for the paintings of Mr. Yusuf al-Afifi and Fouad Kamel, they are straight from the heart: their lines are composed of their very nerves and blood. The art of both of them is strictly individual, with no one but themselves having any direct link to it in any way. I would like to answer you here with what our master Yusuf al-Afifi once said to a critic who opposed his theory: “Surrealism is nothing but a modern academic term for what we call imagination, freedom of expression, freedom of style. From time immemorial, the East has been home to all of this.”

We shall not return to this again. Perhaps what I have briefly mentioned here will inspire the esteemed readers of *al-Risala* to read some of these authors and critics.

Kamel Telmisany

Member of the Art and Liberty Group

Note

1. Eds.: Here, Telmisany is identifying toys, activities, and folklore characters from popular arts in Egypt—that is, cultural practices that exhibit qualities of free imagination and stylistic exploration. For an image of *mawlid* dolls made of sugar, see p. 70 in the present volume.

—Kāmil al-Tilmisānī, “Ḥawla al-Fann al-Munḥaṭṭ,” *al-Risāla*, no. 321 (August 28, 1939): 1701–3. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

Art and Dictatorship (1940)

Mohamed Naghi

I would like to examine our ability to live ever since the roads have closed and material and spiritual exchanges have come to an almost complete halt because of the war.

I would like to mention the extent of our assets, the diversity of our resources: it is good to have a look at the owner, to note the order and harmony, to create an atmosphere of contemplation, of willingness to work.

If fortune is to spare this national monument of recovery on which we have worked together, it is right not to give up the pursuit of this ideal under the pretext that the world is lying under rubble. Intellectual stagnation is afflicting the people who are subject to the heavy sacrifices of the war, but we still have some reserves. Let us make use of them to save what remains of the debacle, since we have assumed responsibly—let us gauge what we have, take stock of our resources.

Science has been complicit in the evils afflicting humanity, but art has reserved the role of consoler. Art symbolizes the freedom of the individual, of which it is the last refuge: the dictator has also brought his inquisitorial sight into this domain.

Here, the individual can still avail himself of the lot of his natural abilities and transgress even the laws that a necessarily limited rationalism draws up for us, and this is where the tyrant wants to exercise his powers. Art is subject to his direct assessment; it is reduced to the level of zealous propagandist; it is a servant of whatever social philosophy an individual man fancies imposing on his fellow men, and generations must follow a specific lexicon when engaging in thought or enjoyment.

In the museums of Germany, so many values that were once the admiration of our youth have been dethroned—what will remain of the School of Paris, of its universality?

A kind of simpleton obsessed with racial hegemony, the dictator aims to reduce to this end all the laws of the beautiful.

In an unexpected turn, we are the sole custodians of so many diminished values; but this privilege is closely linked to our freedom, which the fortunes of war have so far spared. Does this mean that art and dictatorship necessarily imply an antinomy? Hasn't history justified such a rational grip on the literary or artistic production of an era? Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance—don't they offer flourishing examples of an individual will patronizing all the art of a century? Religious and apologetic, that art still had its freedom of expression and its individual consciousness; its means remained its own. The tyrant, the condottiere, the inquisitor, the mighty king—all of them gave artists great leeway to carry out the proposed themes, which were thus entirely assimilated by the artists' personalities.

But we are leaving that state of complete freedom, to which modern art has habituated us, for a form of expression wherein the best of the individual, of the human, is repressed in favor of an arbitrary collective leveling. In a Europe shaken and subject to the narrow regime of an autocracy to which the machine has granted unlimited power, everything is organized, all the way down to the domain of the spiritual, in order to ultimately contribute to the exaltation of that regime.

We are far from that lofty conception of art for art's sake, scornful of all speculations that are not forms, of all pleas for utility and even morality! It is only the exercise of art that attracts, for the sake of art itself: it gives us the feeling of being liberated by the all-too-material concerns of the struggle to live. A domain inaccessible to the lowly contingencies of life, art is its own reward, and has no other end but itself.

This same cult of beauty makes Leonardo indifferent to the misfortunes of Florence! For [Immanuel] Kant and for [Friedrich] Schiller, the plane of artistic activity is the supreme state of human relations.

A short time later, precursors of the Germanic apogee, [Georg Wilhelm Friedrich] Hegel and [Johann Gottlieb] Fichte, proposed a nationalist metaphysics, taking as their starting point the development of the German as an individual, which was said to be the prelude to the mankind's happiness! This was a first attack on the universality of art; it would lead to much severer ones!

Totalitarian states that mobilize all the activities necessary for consolidating their plans are now making use of art as a means of suggestion to enlist the masses. The modern era therefore represents a complete break with the old idea of an outdated romanticism that dreamed of a universal fraternity achieved within art.

For these antagonistic currents of human thought to be intelligible, one must pass through the same stages that art has passed through.

In an organized state, the first form of art reveals patronage and is characterized by choice and measure, which are the prerogatives of an enlightened aristocracy. Then royal privileges are diminished to the benefit of the bourgeoisie: the latter patronizes art and bestows its enduring ideals upon it. The observation and painting of social mores replaces apologies for the prince; a regulatory rationalism comes to moderate the excesses of abstract art—excesses in which our contemporaries have generously indulged themselves.

We are approaching this last stage where art, losing its autonomy, is nothing more than an instrument for disseminating an absorbing ideology. This is not the first appearance of this didactic form of art; official art is always propagandistic, whether under a democratic or a totalitarian regime. The experience of such art has often been disappointing. The mercenary artist, a prisoner to his own idea, and desiring to render it decipherable to the masses, allows that idea to become tendentious and declamatory.

Sensualism, which is characteristic of the work of art, will be replaced by a speculative intention of an entirely different nature. The didactic work will thus lead to an unpleasant hybrid form that is not art but rather its simulacrum.

On the literary plane, this form has deviated from its plastic destiny. However, democracies based on individual freedoms, recording only what was necessary to erect monuments to the glory of their mandate, also respected freedom of conscience, artistic integrity, and the autonomy of the worker of art.

Official art has not always repudiated individualism in democracies. The admirable flowering of the modern school, with Paris as its universal center, is a witness to this. But art under the totalitarian regime is only art if it finds its *raison d'être* in the nation! This is how the German antiliberal ideology would have it, placing all activities in the service of a collective ideal, an ideal free of any foreign contributions and particularly of any Jewish contributions. It is tendentious, didactic, and resolutely heroic.

It seeks to assert a local truth at the expense of the universal!

Fascism itself is not as absolute: the supporters of the art intuition, as Benedetto Croce likes to call it, make claims to individualism that are specific to the Latins.

No centralized government, however much it wants to benefit the masses, can question art's origin.

Three theses eloquently illustrate the Russian, German, and Italian conceptions of art, and these three clashed at the Volta Conference [on theater], held in 1934.

It's a matter of theater.

For the Russian delegate, Alexander Tairov, economic life, like a lever, controls the birth of art.

[Walter] Gropius, the German delegate, asserts that politics is the motive for all artistic activities. But the Italian delegate, when faced with the issue, boldly declares that art comes first.

In the light of these different conceptions, the three races are characterized by their varying degrees of propensity to the sources of art.

Slavs and Saxons consider the problem with respect to a utilitarian purpose. Despite these two major currents that now divide Europe between them, the Latins remain true to their motto of art for art's sake.

What is our attitude toward this problem? Has the Egyptian state assumed its share of responsibility in the choice? We believe we can discern a vague and timidly formulated desire to "Egyptianize," confusing the issue with the nature of the work. But the danger of a priori formulas is only daunting when it comes to dictatorship. Now public education has not thought it necessary to sacrifice the complex realities directly affecting art to a political façade. Its task is all the simpler: it consists of creating a climate conducive to the products of the mind.

Without being "totalitarian" or diving into metaphysical research, we can trust the art intuition. I have just indicated its immediate corollary: it is this "conducive climate" that the state, in the absence of an enlightened bourgeoisie, has the duty and the resources to promote widely.

—M[ohamed] Naghi, "Art et dictature," *La Revue du Caire* 3, no. 25 (December 1940): 163–67. Translated from French by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

SHAPING THE FATE OF THE NATION

Lebanese artist César Gemayel wrote this text for the Beirut cultural journal *al-Adib*, where it appeared as part of a series called "My Profession and Its Impact on Building the Nation." The series appeared in the midst of the country's active preparation for the end of the French Mandate; civilian elections would be held in August, and the Republic of Lebanon declared in November. Gemayel, too, was involved in national initiatives, helping to found the Lebanese Academy of Fine Arts in Beirut that same year.

The Painter (1943)

César Gémayel

My profession is thought, lines, and colors: thought that leads humanity to glories, lines that support the edifice of civilizations, and colors, which are a revolution and a tempest, a quietude and reassurance.

My profession is introducing the gods to humanity and elevating humanity to the level of the gods. My profession is a light that illuminates the darkness of ignorance and opens portholes in people's minds through which they may gaze at beauty. My profession is a white hope and a colored dream, a kiss from the lips of the gods on humanity's brow, a flower in the field of life, and a melody in the ear of fate. My profession is a link between earth and sky. My profession is light and shadow.

With color I wrote the history of humanity, introduced generations to generations, transmitted civilizations from country to country, and dispensed thought and taste, distributing them to the world.

Art was created the day the human being was created—the first masterpiece. It lived with him in the caves, among the beasts and predators. He adorned the rocks of his caves with paintings of the hunt and struggle. He covered his nakedness with the flowers of the field and the hides of beasts, and created for himself, in his refuge between the rocks and the jungles, the first art museum.

On this soft, green, radiant coast, he invented the alphabet, opening up broad horizons and blazing the path to thought, ambition, and law. He created gods and lived with them in cities, in forests, on the hunt, in the fields. He gathered daisies, violets, and broom, and plaited garlands from their sweet blooms. The springs of my country wept blood with Astarte as she cried over her lover Adonis, and the girls of Byblos wailed and danced the dance of death around his bier until their soft feet bled and the earth was quenched, turning the anemone red.

Art immortalized the works of man, cultivated his soul and refined his senses, and opened his eyes to the world, to the rays of dawn chasing away the darkness behind [Mount] Sannine. The incandescence of the blood-red sunset astonished him and he imagined it to be a fire blazing in the heavens. He opened his eyes and saw the tremors of the light on the hilltops and the fog creeping over the heights. He opened his ears and heard the whispers of the breeze carrying hearts' secrets to other hearts. The melody thrilled him, so he danced and played and made a paradise of earth, where he could carouse and be joyful.

Art immortalized the pharaohs, created their civilization, and taught them the life of splendor and glory. It extracted colors from grass, from stone, from insects, and from the soil, and colored their world. It dove into the sea and plucked a purple hue from its heart to adorn the pharaohs.

And art rested, so barbarism swept over civilizations, killing and destroying. The cyclone moved on, taking into its breast everything that stood in its path, and the artist's works were obliterated, and slept shattered and smashed under the rubble. When the storm abated and the universe calmed, and tranquility returned to people's souls, the artist again turned to completing his work, resurrecting the dead from their tombs, spreading civilizations erased by time and people submerged in the depths of oblivion. Ancient Egypt shook the dust off itself and returned to life; the pharaohs live

on through the hands of painters: their skin dark brown, the pharaohs hunt exotic birds on the banks of the Nile and among its lakes. The gods, too, have arisen from the sands, and Isis and the divine serpents have returned to their thrones. The “Sheikh El Balad”¹ strides through the Egyptian Museum of today just as he strode through his town thousands of years ago, and salaried working men now link arms with their women, as modern people do.

Art was elevated in Greece more than in any other country, and this flame still, to this very day, illuminates the world. Whenever the artist strays far in his travels, he returns to Phidias, Praxiteles, and Lysippos to inquire about the fundamentals of the profession and the secrets of beauty. [...]

As for contemporary art, its manifold tendencies, various types, and innumerable paths, it was born in Paris, the product of experiments by long generations. The first to shatter the Academy was Eugène Delacroix, the leader of the Romantics. The conflict between Delacroix and the academic school, represented in the person of [Jean-Auguste-Dominique] Ingres, was a tempestuous one, and it ended with the victory of Romanticism and the liberation of painting from the bonds of the school. The artist had grown bored with the studio walls and stepped out into the open country, into the light of the sun in the open air. The school of Impressionism shook the ancient schools and upended artists’ principles, dragging society’s taste along with it. Delacroix was the first to attempt to depart from the familiar. The critics stood up to him without being able to influence his views, and [Claude] Monet, [Alfred] Sisley, [Camille] Pissarro, [Edgar] Degas, and lastly [Paul] Cézanne all rallied around him. The Impressionist school tried to catch the tremors of light on things. As for Cézanne, he wanted to make Impressionism a strong art, so he took its pure colors and used them to construct a tightly composed, classical image—this was a new tendency, or a reaction against the Impressionists.

This is a brief glimpse of the procession of art through the ages. I did not intend it to be a history lesson, but rather to show you that the impact of art on the nation is present in all aspects of its intellectual and practical life, and that art is the measure of a nation’s advancement. If it is elevated, the nation is elevated, and if it is degraded, the nation is degraded along with it. China, for example, was the most advanced country on earth when the emperor was the dean of the academy of arts and its leading painter. As for us, it is time to wake up and for the state to open its eyes to this class of people who work in silence and thought in order to direct the youth of this country to beauty and the elevation of their spiritual level, and who work to fight ignorance and blindness in a country whose inhabitants flock to the merely material and swear their allegiance to it, thereby becoming dangers to the future of thought and the fate of the nation.

Note

1. *Eds.*: “Sheikh El Balad” is the nickname given to the ancient wood statue of Ka-aper (Egyptian fifth dynasty) that was found in Saqqara in 1860 by a team working for French archaeologist Auguste Mariette.

—Qayṣar al-Jumayyil, “al-Rassām” (excerpt), *al-Adīb*, no. 2 (February 1, 1943): 3–5. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

IRAQ'S WARTIME TRANSFORMATION

Iraqi artist Jewad Selim kept a diary from 1941 until 1945. During these years he was in Baghdad, in the period between his studies in Rome (1939–40) and prior to studying in England (1946–48). His diary entries detail the activities and aspirations of the paradoxical war years of Allied occupation in the Middle East. This entry, dated January 15, 1944, recalls some of the artistic discussions in Baghdad as well as Selim's own thinking on the public dimensions of ambitious art.

Diary entry (1944)

Jewad Selim

Last Friday night was a very rich night indeed. I went in (A)'s car to Mr. Stewart Perowne's cocktail party. Said was there, and later on Major Scaife and Captain Tolst arrived. I invited them to tea, and then Major Scaife and I started a long debate about art and its role these days. His opinion is that an artist today is carried away more by ideas and artistic research than by life and its images, which have been, since antiquity, the direct inspirations for an artist and the world he shows in his images, and which he would in turn render in the form of a painting, sculpture, poem, or piece of music. Then he spoke of [John] Ruskin, his views, and the attacks that were leveled at him. He said that the new generation continues to appreciate the opinions of that scholar and historian and to take them seriously, even though it was Ruskin who criticized anything modern in England, and who claimed that preserving a nationalist element in art was necessary. It was Ruskin who viciously attacked [James Abbott McNeill] Whistler and [Joseph Mallard William] Turner.

Art as a whole is another intellectual movement that is affected by the development of war and its outcomes. The last war resulted in the emergence of an intellectual movement in Europe. New schools appeared in poetry, music, painting, and sculpture. These schools and developments in thought are nowadays referred to as art from the interwar period. The opinions of European critics have diverged over the value of this art. However, Surrealism, which is the latest phase these modern schools have reached, gives a clear idea of the degree of complexity and exaggerations of these schools.

As for Iraq, given its nascent "modernity," art must also be affected by these sweeping developments, to a greater or lesser extent. However, I have high hopes that Iraq will have a promising future in painting: first of all, because the Iraqi artist is relatively sheltered from the war, and can thus dedicate himself more fully to his work; and secondly, because the circumstances of the war have allowed him to come into contact with various foreign artists, whether from England, Poland, or elsewhere.

* * *

I often compare the role of a sculptor to that of a composer. The amount of music the composer produces is related to the size of his audience. The larger the audience, the more music the composer produces, and the better and richer that music becomes. The smaller the audience, the less music he produces, and the less value that music has.

Just as a composer generally cannot write a symphony or an opera unless he receives a commission for such work from the government, or one of the large

associations, the sculptor usually cannot work without the support of the government or the associations. Furthermore, in terms of the magnitude of its message, a musical piece resembles a monument that is placed in a public square, which instills high and noble ideas in every passerby.

Sculpture has a promising future in Iraq, since our museums, public squares, and homes currently lack sculptural works. And just as a large movement for the construction of memorials arose in Europe following the Great War, wherein the sculptor and the architect came together to create a beautiful world, so the end of the current war will open the door for artists to take part in building a bright and virtuous new world.

—Jawād Salīm, diary entry, January 15, 1944; transcription in Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, *al-Rihla al-Thāmina: Dirāsāt Naqdiyya* (Beirut: al-Muʿassasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1979), 163–64. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseinī.

ON AGONY AND BEAUTY

The Tunisian monthly journal *al-Mabahith* served as a major platform for formulating an Arab Tunisian culture. With the intellectual and anticolonial activist Mahmoud Messadi as its editor from 1944 to 1947, *al-Mabahith* engaged with literature, history, the arts, and philosophy. The following four texts appeared in a recurring guest column titled “Thoughts on Art.” The short contributions of Hatem el Mekki and Aly Ben Salem elaborate their respective viewpoints as practicing artists. Omar Racim, the venerable Algerian artist and administrator, sent his text to *al-Mabahith* from Algiers; he had first delivered it as a speech over Radio Algeria on the occasion of an exhibition of young artists. Messadi’s own contribution, “Man and His Agony,” seems to have been the last in the series, and pivots to matters of the human condition.

Thoughts on Art (1944)

Hatem el Mekki

If I am a painter, it is not because painting is my craft and the thing I know best. In any case, I would not have agreed to be a painter just because I needed to make a living. Rather, I paint out of compulsion, because I am exhausted and weak: I am exhausted by myself and weakened by my own way of being, because I am an impotent person who has no ambition other than to destroy himself. I wish I could be rid of myself, escape myself forever. Still, I would not commit suicide, because I worry that I might not succeed at dying and leaving this life. Life has taught me to be wary and cautious of death and its treachery, just as I am wary and cautious of the “checks” of bankrupt merchants.

In fact, painting is like pregnancy. It is about expressing the image in my mind and bringing it out with all its details, regardless of how bifurcated, complicated, and strange they may be. So as long as the image remains inside me and I am still contemplating it with my mind’s eye, it will be vague and out of focus—although its pres-



Hatem el Mekki. *The Beggars*. c. 1943. Chinese ink on paper. 19 1/16 × 25 3/8" (50 × 65 cm). El Marsa Gallery

ence inside me is certain and firm—because it is unfathomable and I cannot summon it up at will. When I grow tired of being able only to half-see it, I equip myself with a brush, dive in for it, and extract it. . . . I truly bring it forth, and there in my hands is an image, which is not merely identical to that which I was seeking, but rather is the thing itself, colored in my colors, and a part of “me.” But then I grow disappointed again. . . .

Other people’s experience in painting and their creativity is of no use to you. This is what you must accept as the truth, for anything else is mere fantasy. This is because any other person—regardless of his genius—cannot uncover the nature of your character or the type of your creativity. Look deep inside yourself! For then you will certainly know that you do not resemble any other person, and that your creativity does not mimic that of another . . . and that the paintings you produce are actually your own echo, a repetition of your own self.

If you like certain paintings, do not try to figure out the secret of their production or how they were visualized. You will never be able to understand Rembrandt’s genius, for example, by inspecting his paintings under a microscope; nor will you be able to explain why an image is beautiful by describing the proportions of its lines and the kinds of colors it has. This is because the most important aspects of what the hands of an artist produce are the stirring emotions, as well as the artist’s own soul, which animates and speaks through his work. If anything makes a work of art timeless, it is the artist’s soul that dwells in it.

—Ḥatim al-Makki, “Khawāṭir fī al-Fann,” *al-Mabāḥith*, no. 8 (1944): 7. Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

Thoughts on Art (1945)

Aly Ben Salem

Art has an ethical, educational, and intellectual purpose that a student cannot attain through what he learns in art school or museums. This is because art is not as the general public sees it: something that, when seen, stirs a momentary and temporary sense of admiration. Rather, it is that which unifies your admiration for a piece of pottery made in Nabeul, a marvelous painting made by the Persians, and a sculpture made by the Greeks, because these moments of admiration are actually for one thing that is found in each of these: artistic beauty. Beauty is one of the essences of human life. One judges proportions and shapes by sight, and judges the harmony of sounds by hearing, and the whole nervous system is affected by various kinds of rhythms. For this reason, one finds an instinctual need in oneself to ponder beauty and to be affected by it. If someone were to become mindful of this complex instinct in his nature and let his desire for beauty burn and his soul become attuned to it, his senses would be invigorated, he would recover truth in his feelings and awaken his heart and mind—things that ordinary life often destroys due to neglect and lack of attention. Indeed, if one were to attain this awareness and sought to understand beauty, its purposes and its reasons, if one were no longer content with temporary sensory stimulation, but allowed art to move one's soul, intellect, heart, and mind, one would then have found the higher purpose of art: to prioritize form over matter and the spiritual over the sensual.

—ʿAlī ibn Sālim, “Khawāṭir fī al-Fann,” *al-Mabāḥith*, no. 10 (1945): 6. Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

Thoughts on Art (1945)

Omar Racim

The fine arts are the emblem of civilization; they indicate what degree of spiritual eminence a nation has reached. This is because what compels us toward the love of art, toward an inclination and passion for it, is the love of beauty. This love is invigorated by refined taste, delicate sensibility, and the power of living emotions.

People of taste do not consider art to be an acquired skill. A true artist who is committed to his art would not consider what profit or fame his skill might bring him. Rather, his satisfaction, happiness, and true gain lie in satisfying his taste, passions, and desires, because he works for himself and for art only. He who seeks profit through his art loses his spiritual inspiration and talent, loses sight of his creativity, loses his freedom, and confines his passion. In this case, he would be providing a service or commercial product for a fee rather than engaging in artistic creation.

—ʿUmar Rāsim, “Khawāṭir fī al-Fann,” *al-Mabāḥith*, no. 11 (1945): 6. Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

Thoughts on Art: Man and His Agony (1945)

Mahmoud Messadi

Art, in all its many forms and means of expression, springs from a single source in humanity's soul: human agony. So it was with Aeschylus the Greek, Beethoven, [Charles] Baudelaire, Omar Khayyam, and [Pablo] Picasso.

No matter whether one takes the view of [Blaise] Pascal and other such philosophers who have plumbed the depths of human misery, or deems art a pleasant and diverting pastime after the manner of Ibn al-Rumi, who held that

All pleasures people seek are a distraction
From recalling their misfortunes,

or whether one considers it not a source of distraction but rather the very expression of pain and malady—one never strays far from the significance of misery and the need for release from it.

The means of release and well-being are many (including wisdom, inaction, evasion, faith, money, indulgence, dissolution, and the many other shades of worldly pleasure), yet the most enduring and cherished of these is art.

Art: it is art that clothes tragedy in beauty, steering it away from its natural ignominy, its essential horror, its dark hues and crushing gloom, and toward grace, splendor, sublimity, and radiance; it transforms what was once primitive, earth-bound, rough, physical—the squeal of the beast at the slaughter, the agonies of a creature stung or bitten, the shuddering limbs of the stricken man or animal—into a thing made by man, into his creation.

Art is thus the child of a joint endeavor between gods and men, for it is the gods who have created pain and sown agony in the soul, and it is humans who distill it into beauty and splendor.

—Maḥmūd al-Masʿādī, “Khawāṭir fī al-Fann: al-Insān wa-Ghuṣṣatuḥu,” *al-Mabāḥith*, no. 14 (1945): 6. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

CONTEMPORARY ART GROUP / Cairo

These two exhibition statements were issued in Cairo by members of the Contemporary Art Group, a student arts circle. The group had coalesced circa 1944 around Husayn Yusuf Amin, a worldly artist with leftist sympathies who advocated for making painting a practice of self-expression in connection with contemporary Egyptian life. The group prepared an initial statement of purpose in 1946, for its inaugural exhibition at the French Lycée in Bab El-Louk. They issued the second text in this section for their 1948 exhibition, held at the Youth Service center in downtown Cairo.

See Plate 6 for a c. 1950 work by Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, a founding member of the Contemporary Art Group.

Contemporary Art Group, First Declaration (1946)

Husayn Yusuf Amin, Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar, Mahmoud Khalil, Ibrahim Massouda, Mogli (Salem el-Habshi), Hamed Nada, Maher Raef, Samir Rafi, Kamal Youssef

The value of a work of art is proportional to the extent to which it brings thinking and feeling together. An artist will never approach any of the summits that he hopes to reach unless he uncovers the philosopher within himself. Similarly, his art will remain stagnant and far removed from the spirit of the era so long as he confines himself to formalist values or abstract aesthetic conditions closed unto themselves, for these fold the artist along with them into permanent rigidity or enclosed ivory towers. It has been conclusively established that thought moves forward in a continual path to development, which nurtures artistic feeling and impresses upon it the character of its times. Mere feeling is constant across all ages, whereas there is continuous change at the level of the intellect. This is why we note changes between the art of successive eras, from the enchanting mystery of Egyptian or primitive art, to the spirituality of Egyptian or Chinese art, to the materialist conception of Greek art. Later classical artists then blended Christian philosophy with the materialist trend. Finally, we note the infiltration of nature and the predominance of science in art as well as an awareness of social conditions and of the extent to which art is linked to life. These factors have all had a major connection to art that cannot be denied, whether we consider this situation to be the result of purely artistic circumstances or to have been caused by sources from which artistic production draws its nourishment. In either case, contemporary art (with Surrealism its introduction) insists to the fullest extent on standing side by side with modern thought. The purpose of contemporary art runs contrary to the aims of those superficial arts that disregard the secret of life and the secret of our relationships within life. Indeed, contemporary art refutes those who would hide behind the cloak of superficial arts and use them as a way to cover up the real values of this existence.

We of the Contemporary Art Group have based our idealism on the strong link between art and intellectual thought, as well as on the consideration that painting, sculpture, and music, just like literature, are means to convey a given philosophy. This is what engenders our artistic works, to create new values to take the place of the intellectual fabric behind people's unsound understanding of nature and their relationships within it.

—Jamā'at al-Fann al-Mu'āṣir declaration, from transcript published by Ḥusayn Yūsuf Amin in "‘Abd al-Hādī al-Jazzār: Fannān al-Thawra," *al-Majalla*, no. 124 (April 1967): 79–80. Translated from Arabic by Sarah Dorman.

Contemporary Art Group, Second Declaration (1948)

A progressive intellectual movement is prevalent in the world today that did not originally arise only out of direct economic circumstances, although people tend to understand it within the limits of this common definition and fail to comprehend the real reasons behind it. The fundamental impetus for this movement—as for these



Husayn Yusuf Amin
(center, in white shirt and
tie) with members of the
Contemporary Art Group,
Cairo. 1947

economic conditions as well—is that human beings’ perception is in constant development; as a result, humans have begun to become aware of new values, which they then aspire to attain and master.

The way for humans to master these new values surrounding them is to open up their stagnant feelings and awaken their unconscious perception. The artist is the discoverer, or the leader, who opens up people’s perception before them, sharpening their senses and deepening their vision as a step toward this mastery. The discrepancy between human reality on the one hand, and the human desire for total control on the other, is what is causing the upheaval that interests us now. Indeed, one of the manifestations of this upheaval is the proliferation of schools and different trends.

As such, we are able to note the essential difference between contemporary art and the other, older arts, each of which corresponded only to the spirit of the era in which it was produced. These arts were born of particular social circumstances, and they are not consistent with the current desire of humanity for modern development, which all now seek.

The rationale of contemporary art is no longer consistent with the rationale of these older arts, some of which stooped to the level of merely recording what is visible, a task that has now been replaced by modern photography. Some others were concerned with inherent innocence and purity. These concepts are intellectually limited, however, and fail to go beyond the limits of the child in his sweet naïveté, nor are they able to confront the modern age with all of its complexities and multifaceted scientific trends. Some of these art forms were even used by affluent students as a mere form of enjoyment. Worse still, art was used as a way to cover up people’s pain in some circumstances, concealing it under false appearances.

However, contemporary art refuses to do anything less than stand shoulder to shoulder with modern thought in its highest forms. It has the opposite aim of those superficial fine arts that overlook or disregard the secret of life and the secret of our relationships within life. Contemporary art is a tool of attack and knowledge. Art has become its own master, and a leader of people’s consciousness, after it had long served hidden ambitions or been used as a tool for diversion and entertainment.

Throughout its long existence, art has never enjoyed a fixed set of circumstances. It has therefore never had a fixed ideal. These have ranged from the secret enchantments of primitive art to religious spirituality in Egyptian or Chinese art to

the materialist conception of Greek art. Later classical artists then blended Christian philosophy with the materialist trend. Finally, we note in contemporary art the infiltration of nature and the predominance of science, as well as an awareness of social conditions and of the extent to which art is linked to life.

The major mistake that precipitates people's misunderstanding of contemporary artistic production lies—unbeknownst to them—in their attempt to accept this art through the lens of one of the old artistic ideals, or of some ideal that they construct by blending the old ideals together.

The most difficult art to comprehend is classical art, which is considered the only art by general consensus. Classical art tended toward the beautification of nature, due to the particular circumstances from which it emerged, whereas contemporary art heads in a more literary, philosophical, scientific direction. For this reason, it has been easy for people with limited culture or simplistic intellectual understanding to accept classical art, for that art reflected their own simple emotions and basic instincts. In order to understand contemporary art, however, people must have a certain level of awareness about the different types of cultures from which the numerous ideals of the contemporary schools have emerged.

These schools express different views, some of which are philosophical, while others are psychological or directly social. Still others are purely artistic, based on emotions or science, and so on and so forth. It would therefore be a mistake at an exhibition such as the one we are presently discussing for a visitor to stand before each such piece and ask the artist to explain it to him in literal terms. The visitor should first refer to the general philosophy of the school to which the particular work belongs, whether Surrealism, Expressionism, or Symbolism. This general understanding is what would lead the visitor to accept and comprehend the production of each artist in its entirety, rather than feeling misled or confused by the works on display. The works on display in this exhibition are by a group of artists, and each of those artists has cut his own path and pursued the artistic school or trend that suited his own inner being, having realized it without any contrivance and without the intended adoption of anything alien to him. Indeed, the personality or individual abilities of each artist are what determined his leanings. As such, the work of these artists was not subjected to lifeless academia, which concerns itself only with the appearance of the characteristics of the artistic schools.

Some of these exhibitors have reached higher degrees of completion in their work than others, and others have maintained a stronger direction within themselves.

—Unsigned text, from transcription in Ḥusayn Yūsuf Amīn, “‘Abd al-Hādī al-Jazzār: Fannān al-Thawra,” *al-Majalla*, no. 124 (April 1967): 82–84. Translated from Arabic by Sarah Dorman.



Plates I



1.
Kahlil Gibran
Untitled. 1917-20.
Graphite with red wash
on paper. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ \times 8"
(24.7 \times 20.3 cm). Telfair
Museums, Savannah,
Georgia. Gift of Mary
Haskell Minis

2.
Azouaou Mammeri
*Moroccan Festival
at Marrakesh*. 1931.
Gouache on paper.
18 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 24 $\frac{13}{16}$ "
(48 \times 63 cm). Centre
Pompidou, Paris.
MNAM-CCI, Dist.
RMN-Grand Palais





3.
Moustafa Farroukh
*Toward Damascus
 at the Foot of Mount
 Qassioun, Muhajireen
 Quarter.* c. 1933. Oil on
 canvas. 20 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 25 $\frac{3}{16}$ "
 (53 \times 64 cm). Collection
 Hani Farroukh

4.
Zulfa al-Sa'di
King Faysal I of Iraq.
 Early 1930s. Oil on
 canvas, mounted on
 board. 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ \times 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ "
 (67 \times 46 cm). The
 text at the bottom
 reads: "His Hashemite
 Majesty King
 Faysal I." Collection
 Ismail Shammout





5.
Mahmoud Bey Saïd
*The Woman with
 Golden Locks*. 1933. Oil
 on canvas. 40 × 31 7/8"
 (101.5 × 81 cm). Mathaf:
 Arab Museum of
 Modern Art, Doha



6.
Abdel Hadi el-Gazzar
Untitled, c. 1950. Pastel
on paper. 21 $\frac{11}{16}$ × 27"
(55 × 68.5 cm)

7.
Jamil Hamoudi
Portrait of a Girl, 1944.
 Wood, 7 1/2 × 4 1/2"
 (19 × 11.5 cm).
 Collection Awni Qubti



8.
Abdelaziz Gorgi,
 with the **Poterie**
Abderrazak
 Nabeul, Tunisia. 1951.
 One of ten ceramic tile
 panels still in situ in the
 residence hall, Sadiqi
 College, Khaznadar
 (now the Khaznadar
 School in Bardo), Tunis.
 Dimensions unknown



9.
Pierre Boucherle
 Maquette for mural
 in the Carthage
 School, Tunis. c. 1950.
 Watercolor on paper.
 13 × 18 7/8" (33 × 48 cm).
 Collection Patrice
 Boucherle



10.

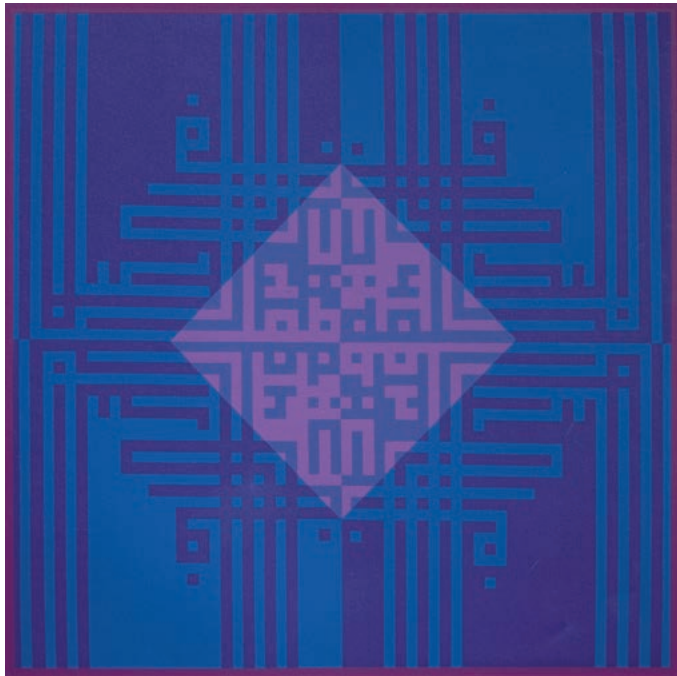
Madiha Umar

Music in Line (Roses from the South by Johann Strauss). 1949. Mixed media on paper. 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ \times 24 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (46 \times 60.5 cm). Alia and Hussain Ali Abbass Harba Family Collection

11.

Kamal Boullata

Fi-l Bid' Kan-al-Kalima ("In the Beginning Was the Word," St. John). 1983. Screenprint. 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (58 \times 58 cm). Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah





12.

Omar El-Nagdi

One. 1960. Oil on
 canvas. $60 \frac{5}{8} \times 59 \frac{13}{16}$ "
 (154 × 152 cm). Mathaf:
 Arab Museum of
 Modern Art, Doha



13.
Saloua Raouda Choucair
Rhythmical
Composition with Red.
 1951. Oil on canvas.
 9 7/16 × 12 3/16"
 (24 × 31 cm). Saloua Raouda Choucair Foundation, Beirut

14.
Shakir Hassan Al Said
Return to the Village.
 1951. Oil on canvas.
 Dimensions unknown.
 Formerly in the collection of the Iraqi National Museum of Modern Art (previously the Saddam Center for the Arts), Baghdad. Current location unknown





15.

Baya (Fatma Haddad-Mahieddine)

Woman in a Cross-Hatched Yellow Dress.

1947. Gouache on cardboard. 19 × 25"

(43.8 × 63.5 cm).

Collection Jules Maeght, San Francisco

16.

Sliman Mansour

Camel of Hardship.

1973. Oil on canvas.

43 5/16 × 31 1/2"

(110 × 80 cm). Private collection





17.
Hamed Abdalla
Lovers. 1956. Gouache
 on crumpled silk and
 cardboard. 13 ¾ ×
 10 ¼" (35 × 26 cm).
 Abdalla Family
 Collection

18.
Jewad Selim
Baghdadiat. 1956.
 Mixed media on board.
 38 ¾ × 66 ½"
 (98.5 × 169 cm). Mathaf:
 Arab Museum of
 Modern Art, Doha





19.

Mahmoud Sabri

Massacre in Algiers.

1958. Oil on canvas.

68 7/8" × 9' 6 3/4"

(175 × 291.5 cm).

Formerly in the collection of the Iraqi National Museum of Modern Art (previously the Saddam Center for the Arts), Baghdad. Current location unknown

20.

Salah Abdel Kerim

Cry of the Beast.

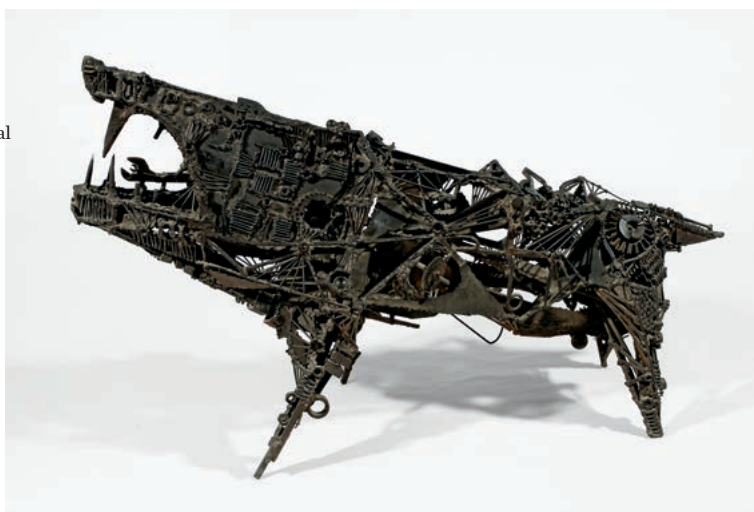
1970 replica of 1960

original. Scrap metal.

Dimensions of original

work unknown. Safar

Khan Gallery, Cairo



21.

Inji Efflatoun

Trees Behind Walls.

c. 1960. Oil on canvas,
mounted on wood.

9 $\frac{1}{16}$ \times 14 $\frac{3}{6}$ "
(23 \times 36 cm). Safar
Khan Gallery, Cairo



22.

M'hamed Issiakhem

Kabylie Landscape.

1960. Oil on board.

22 $\frac{1}{8}$ \times 19 $\frac{3}{16}$ "
(56.2 \times 48.8 cm).
National Museum of
Fine Arts, Algiers





23.

Shafic Abboud

Child's Play. 1964. Oil
on canvas. 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ ×
39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (100 × 100 cm).
Sursock Museum,
Beirut

24.

Stélio Scamanga

Composition. 1966.
Oil on canvas. 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ ×
31 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (80 × 80 cm).
Collection Joseph
Tarrab





25.

Fouad Kamel

Abstract Composition.

1963. Oil on canvas.

35 ⁷/₁₆ × 51 ³/₁₆"

(90 × 130 cm).

Al-Masar Gallery for
Contemporary Art,
Cairo

SURREALIST SENSITIVITIES

The Arab literary scene of the late 1940s included a number of experiments with Surrealist techniques of automatic writing and condensation, often conducted within an interdisciplinary milieu of writers, artists, and others. Baghdad's cultural and literary revue *al-Fikr al-Hadith*, edited by the artist Jamil Hamoudi, was a particular proponent of Surrealist work as a modern approach to art. It published this experimental essay by Khaldun Sati al-Husry—a series of fragmentary observations on art and politics purportedly culled from one of his old notebooks—in 1947. In Aleppo in the same years, the intellectual Urkhan Muyassar hosted a cultural salon of sorts at his home, where poets, artists, and other intellectuals incorporated Surrealist modes into their work. Muyassar published this 1947 essay explaining the aesthetic parameters of Surrealism in *Surreal*, a collection of free verse poems by himself and his colleague Ali al-Nasir.

See Plate 7 for a sculpture from Jamil Hamoudi's Surrealist period.

From an Old Diary (1947)

Khaldun Sati al-Husry

Dawn. The day rising. From Abu Afif restaurant. Al-Burj Square. The Martyrs' Statue. The Grand Serail. The Serail Clocktower. Watering carts. The tramway glistening like silver snakes. The early traffic. The early tram. Early people. Movement begins. The waiter stretches. . . . Voices. . . . Movement. . . . Daytime. . . . (1943)

* * *

In the beginning was the word: the Gospel, and the first and last rule of writing. Might we say of painting: "In the beginning was the line"? Yes, in certain periods of its history. But in others, one should say: "In the beginning was color."

For the Impressionists, in the beginning was color. Next came [Henri] Matisse, and for him, in the beginning was the line. We must write a history of painting based on its adherence to these two precepts over the course of its history.

* * *

In the English original is written: "I kissed her cheek. It was soft and smelled of violets, violets damp after a rainfall. I kissed her hand; it was soft and warm. It too smelled of violets, warm violets that had slept for a long time in a vase next to a red fire." (February 28, 1940)

* * *

I testify that there is no Shakespeare but Shakespeare and that Tolstoy is Shakespeare's prophet.

* * *

The woman next to us is slaughtering a sheep. She raises her voice: "Fetch the sheep. Come on, let's slaughter the sheep. Where are the sheep's hooves?" so as to let the whole neighborhood know she is slaughtering a sheep. A cat appears and licks the sheep's blood from the ground, then goes and lies down in the sun, and cleans its bloodstained whiskers and paws with its long tongue.

* * *

Ruwaysat Sawfar. The hillside covered in pines. In the evening, the train to Damascus passes by at its foot: a whistle and black smoke.

There are tall, slim-legged, bronze-skinned Egyptian women in the G.H.¹ They talk in French. They knit. (Summer 1942)

* * *

Al-Tabari knew how to write. Ibn Tufayl knew how to write. Ibn al-Haytham knew how to write. Ibn Khaldun knew how to write.

The biggest mistake we make in the study of classical Arabic is to study only the works of “literary writers,” to the exclusion of the works of historians, philosophers, and theologians. Their aims compelled them to carefully select every word they used. And that is what we need to learn today.

* * *

Is one who works in politics a politician of action? What about one who writes about politics, about political philosophy?

No one person succeeds in doing both. The greatest politician history has known was [Otto von] Bismarck. But Bismarck added nothing to our knowledge of politics.

The greatest political writer in history was Machiavelli. It was Machiavelli who first put the rules of politics in writing, and, as [Jean] Genet put it, “translated politics into the vernacular,” but he was not a political actor.

There is one exception: Lenin. He was a first-class politician, and he had a political philosophy that developed the work of Marx and Engels.

In our history there is another exception: the Prophet Muhammad. He was a first-class politician, and he had a political philosophy.

One day I’ll write my M.A. about this.

* * *

I can’t believe F has died. I went with Jabir in A’s car to the cafe on the high road above the valley. There, he drank a toast to her. How enormous the gulf between mind and emotion. The easiest, simplest, and clearest form of logic is the syllogism:

Plato is a man.

All men are mortal.

Therefore, Plato is mortal.

One may understand this intellectually, but how hard it is to grasp when one removes the name “Plato” and replaces it with the name of a person one loves.

* * *

“L’enfer, c’est les autres” [Hell is other people].—[Jean-Paul] Sartre

“Cogito ergo sum” [I think therefore I am].—[René] Descartes

No, Sartre was wrong. Hell is one’s own self, which is discovered through contact with others. (12/10/1946)

Note

1. Eds.: “G.H.” appears in Roman characters in the text. Husry may be referring to the Grand Hotel.

—Khaldūn Sāṭi’ al-Ḥuṣrī, “Min Dafātir Muswadda ‘Atīqa,” *al-Fikr al-Ḥadīth* 2, no. 10 (1947): 14–16. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

Notes from *Surreal* (1947)

Urkhan Muyassar

[...]

These pieces of poetry, with their strange lines and their dark and hazy colors, might seem frivolous to the reader whose mind is accustomed to traditional clarity only, with its quick and regulated connections. It is not uncommon for the conventional material he has learned by rote to be called up in his memory. This material impels him to believe that utterances and expressions like these poems—which the Surrealist uses to record his “visions” and which seem to have nothing that bind them together—are almost ordinary within their own narrow limits. It is also not uncommon for a belief such as this to lead that reader to the delusion that it is within the capabilities of any individual to *create a Surrealist work*. It suffices for him to write, for example, “a desk . . . a hand moves . . . a sullen fog . . .” to convince himself or others of the soundness of the results of the regulated connections under which his conventional, memorized material falls.

In the logic of an illiterate person, writing is nothing more than a set of nearly identical lines, some of which extend upward, and others of which arch downward. Such a person might not be able to distinguish between Arab writing and European, Hebrew, or Armenian writing, for they are all, in his view, a group of geometric lines that are similar in their upward extension and downward arching. The subconscious desire for traditional excellence might impel him to imitate the work of those who know how to write. So he tries to draw some of the words that he has randomly chosen, and he draws them in such a way that seems, to his own logic, to be truly identical with the original that he uses as his model. And it may be that no other illiterate person can distinguish between the original and this drawing. Yet the matter is entirely different for an individual whose senses have full knowledge of reading and writing, and whose memory contains the meanings of the links between the upward extensions and the downward archings—it is easy for such an individual to distinguish between the real and mere play.

This simplistic example suffices for much scientific explanation in answer to a question that might arise within the reader whose mind *is only accustomed to traditional clarity with its quick and regulated connections of ideas*. The content of that question might be the following: “If Surrealism in writing seems to be limited to joining utterances and expressions that are unrelated to one another in any way, thereby disregarding the specific emotional atmospheres (or lack thereof) that these utterances and expressions evoke, then how can we distinguish between a piece of Surrealist writing and another piece of writing whose author, motivated by ignorance or impudence, intended as an imitation of Surrealism?”

In its writing, Surrealism is in many respects similar to that which scientists are trying to achieve today, with regard to the nourishment of man. They are trying—and they have succeeded in this, to a large extent—to make a pill the size of a chickpea that would give the average individual the vitamin C (for example) that his body needs, without that individual being forced to exhaust his digestive system by eating three or four oranges. And they are trying to make the pill itself palatable by giving it the familiar taste of an orange.

Hence the difference between the mind’s enjoyment of Surrealism and the sense of taste’s enjoyment of the concentrated pills—and the concomitant relaxation

of the gastric nerves and stomach muscles—is akin to the difference between the brain and the stomach!

Rhymed and metered speech in all languages, which is called poetry, is nothing more, in objective reality, than aesthetic speech that contains rhythmic vibrations and alluring depictions from which the individual derives a joy in the same mechanical manner he enjoys his usual habits, and the association of fantasies of sexual longings in their hidden and chaste forms.

Nevertheless, there are other aspects that we can glimpse through everything in our being that is a means of communication with life in its diverse forms and its different stages; aspects in which we see these fantasies stripped of their chasteness; in which we see convention adorned in a coursing current that cannot be resisted by the nervous system; in which we see our higher ideals, our sublime desires, our sweet hopes, and our ambitions with all their excitement and ejaculation; and in which we see our struggle, and our individual and collective dignity, and also our offspring, whose ejection into existence we are so proud of. We see all this as a single essence that imparts a clear and distinct feeling of our similarity and connection—in terms of form, emanation, and primordial matter—to every living creature that grows and procreates or is destroyed and transformed on this earth. And we also see that we, in spite of all this, cannot erase in the depths of our cells the jumbled lines of the mirage of these groups that have become a single essence.

Here, the creative god and the created embryo merge to compose a single entity, a single view, a single feeling, and a single life that stretches across millions of years.

Between the lines of this mirage, and in the shade of knowledge that stretches across millions of spatial years as well, this unified entity roams, here and there, scattering dark and hazy lines that the years have not embalmed and that the limited scope of individual sight has not shackled.

These dark, hazy lines are what compose the true material of artistic production in poetry and painting and music.

* * *

Until very recently, Dr. Ali al-Nasir was one of those people who ate oranges in large quantities, motivated by habit and mechanical enjoyment.

Nevertheless, he was quick to respond to the development of human thought, and his intellect was swiftly transformed from the Cubist form to the flowing form, for he tasted the concentrated pills, and abstained from the amounts of fiber that had once exhausted the different systems of his body. And so he was able to say in just a few words what once took him many lines to say.

Dr. al-Nasir wrote the following piece, composed of seventy-six words, back in 1937:

The heart said to me, mockingly, in the evening:
Get up and place a flower on the grave of your sorrow,
for this is the truth of loyalty. Now then, why
did you veil the horizons of your eyes with fog?
I did not answer it. So it led me forward in amazement
and we walked over remains for a long time

Had we tricked it? I do not know, but
I had buried it beneath these boards,
and here's the cypress tree I planted
My fingertips in the earth where I buried it,
we bent over its grave to set down
a flower from the newborn lights.
A hissing sound resounded from its flanks,
cold as a shudder of mockery:
Which sorrow spread, in an instant, into the evening.

This poem of his recorded a passing emotion. Nevertheless, it is not necessary, in such an abbreviated essay as this one, to determine with any scientific precision the atmosphere created by the recording of this state and by the association of mental and affective states that followed this recording in stages. All this collapsed into the subconscious that he merged with, adopted, and emitted in 1947, as can be seen from the following Surrealist piece by him, composed of only sixteen words:

A lip,
mortal remains from a lacerated flower
disfigured, with nothing left of its harmony
but a drop of blood
staring at an eye.

And in 1939 he wrote the following poem, which is composed of 113 words:

Tranquility, where is there tranquility for my heart
while ceaseless storms pass through it
A peace with which I soothe my grief,
like the stranger's grave in pleasant wastelands.
The mother did not scatter flowers,
neither do the steeds move around in it,
and there is no precise and sullen angel of death
to record that life, forgetting its miseries—
a life moved since its beginnings
by a great whip, blind and deaf,
a life whose good is not sought
although, of course, it holds no evil.
Bliss, if you embrace bliss,
is short, and contains long sorrows—
a bliss to which I train myself
I clench my fist, my fist of steel,
and grab it desirously.
But I open my fist and I see a monster
that laughs at my foolishness mockingly
So I walk back, defeated
and for my fantasy and its followers I erect

statues, at whose feet I kneel in reverence,
and I pound my chest time and again,
and set fire to my soul, and bow down before it.
When I pull back the clouds of tears
it seems, to my kindled eye,
the beginning of an evil omen—its shape
embraces what was hurled into the afterlife.

And in 1947 the subconscious brought out the following Surrealist piece, which was fused with all the timeless atmospheres that lived in Dr. al-Nasir's knowledge and experience, and in the events of his life, and in his dreams—it is composed of only twelve words:

I . . . I . . .
am a shooting star
an atom of coal
a created and creative god
decay
despair
an outpouring of shame.

* * *

An eye brimming with tears is much less splendid than an eye whose tears are burning away.

—Ūrkḥān Muyassar, notes to *Siryāl* (excerpt), originally published in Ūrkḥān Muyassar and 'Alī al-Nāsir, *Siryāl* (Aleppo: Maṭba'at al-Salām, 1947), reissued as Ūrkḥān Muyassar, *Siryāl wa-Qaṣā'id Ukhṛā* (Damascus: Manshūrāt Ittīḥād al-Kuttāb al-'Arab, 1979), 38–45. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

PETITION FOR THE 1 PERCENT LAW / Tunis

Artists Pierre Boucherle and Yahia Turki, both members of the Group of Ten artists' circle (a precursor to the School of Tunis, or École de Tunis artists' group, formed in 1949), submitted this letter to the Resident-General of the French Protectorate of Tunisia. Their request resulted in a "1 percent law," implemented in 1950, which allocated 1 percent of the construction budget for civic buildings to their decoration with art.

See Plates 8 and 9 for commissioned works by Abdelaziz Gorgi and Pierre Boucherle resulting from the 1 Percent Law.

Letter to the Resident General in Tunis (1948)

Pierre Boucherle and Yahia Turki

To the Resident General of the French Republic,
The professional painters of Tunisia permit themselves to bring their extremely precarious situation to the attention of the Resident General.

They ask that he provide them with work, as is being done in France, Algeria, and Morocco: the decoration of public buildings, ministries, schools, hospitals, post offices, municipalities, etc.

Furthermore, the funds allocated each year for the purchase of works of art at the salon are clearly insufficient, and a large portion of them goes to amateur painters free from want and of questionable talent. Therefore, the professional painters of Tunisia respectfully request that the Resident General augment these funds and appoint one of their representatives to the Acquisitions Committee.

Yours faithfully, on behalf of the professional painters of Tunisia,

P. Boucherle
Yahia

—Pierre Boucherle and Yahia Turki, unpublished letter, National Archives of Tunisia. Translated from French by Matthew H. Evans.

AN EARLY DECLARATION OF HUROUFIYAH

The Iraqi-Syrian artist Madiha Umar authored one of the earliest artist's statements outlining an approach to using Arabic letter-forms as generative elements in a modern art (often dubbed *huroufiyah* or, alternately, *hurufiyya*). Umar had begun experimenting with the use of letters in her painting while living in Washington, D.C., and studying art at the Corcoran Academy of Fine Arts. "Arabic Calligraphy: Inspiring Element in Abstract Art," which is dated 1949–50, correlates to a solo exhibition of twenty-two paintings she had held at the Peabody Library at Georgetown University in 1949.

See Plate 10 for a 1949 work by Madiha Umar.

Arabic Calligraphy: An Inspiring Element in Abstract Art (1949–50) Madiha Umar

Design

Arabic writing was twined into the ornaments of architecture and illuminated manuscripts, all the way from Spain and Morocco in North Africa to India and Turkestan. One cannot fail to notice that Arabic calligraphy used as ornament within the geometric form on the enriched walls and screens of the Alhambra at Granada, on the lavishly engraved vessels of all kinds in antique shops, and in most distinguished museums of various countries. Even to this day, on the minarets of Baghdad, these decorative inscriptions exist and stand out against the bright rays of the sun and the clear blue sky.

In the past, there was a taboo on representational images, which led art to swing toward abstraction in ornament, thus making the Arab artist become a great geometrician of natural forms. He discarded the natural and familiar identity of a leaf, a flower, or a twinning branch by reducing it into its simplest form. Then the repetition of these changed forms were freely put into patterns, in such a way that made

the enchanting pattern hard to ignore. It is to this final manifestation of controlled pattern that the name “Arabesque” was given. It is this design that won the mastery over Eastern art in the past and still continues to hold its influence.

To some Western critics this kind of art is “beguiling,” and “frosting” [decorative] surface manipulation. But how can anyone overlook the sensuous pleasure it gives? No one can deny the melodious values, the wonderful ingenuity. The subtle balance of the mathematical and the free abstract element is mystical. There is grace and rhythm in the geometric repetitive-plan control. It is fascinating to see how this decorative, space-filling art blends the calligraphy artfully into the design ensemble.

If the best design is that of restlessness and never-ending movement, then the Arabesque has those qualities, in addition to delicacy and colorfulness.

Design and Calligraphy in Arabic

A basic quality of the art of the great masters, both old and new, is design. An idea that lived for so long and continues to live must have reasons rooted in some immense, powerful, and continuous reality, which is nature. Everything in nature, be it animate or inanimate, has a harmonious design, e.g. a human body or an animal, a tree or a plant, a flower, a leaf, or a stone. Design seems to be the beginning and in all creation. Likewise it seems that man, the artist, has fallen back consciously or unconsciously to that essential routine of life in life. The artist found peace in the production, which represented his inner being. His language, his calligraphy—which became his artistic expression—was full of design and continued to influence his life and production through the ages. One of the best, the richest, and the oldest [examples] is Arabic writing. Arabic writing had its roots in an alphabet that was being formed back in the nineteenth century BC, if not earlier. That alphabet, which was fashioned in the northern part of Arabia, went through various stages of development and branched into several types of characters under different linguistic and local influences. The two main types were the Phoenician and the Aramaic.

Not until the fourth or even the sixth century AD was it that the Arabic writing began to resemble what it is today.

The early, simple and severe Kufic—which was one of the four outstanding scripts passed through different stages of growth and grandeur—became floriated and interlaced during the period of general splendor and magnificence; and thus Kufic became monumental and ornamental, used for decorating walls of castles, palaces, and mosques during the Middle Ages.

Other outstanding script styles are:

Meccan, which derives its name from the town where it flourished—as the word *Kufic* does from the town Kufa.

Ma’il is a third type, which means *slanting*, as the letters, especially the long letters, are not straight but bent to one side.

Mashq is another style, which is characterized by horizontal strokes, closer spacing of lines; it is meant for speedy writing.

Twenty-four sizes and shapes of pens were used. Scribes in olden times spent time and thought in improving the tools they used for writing the Qur'an and the religious books. Literary books also received great attention from the scribes.

Classification of letters according to the shapes are as follows and are twenty-eight in number:

<u>Long letters (Arabic)</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Short letters</u>	<u>English</u>
ا	A	د	D
ب	B	ث	TH
ج	E or TH	ز	Z
ح	H	ر	R
خ	L		
د	H		
ذ	LA		
<u>Round letters</u>	<u>English letters</u>	<u>Wide letters</u>	<u>English</u>
ع	H	و	B
ف	EH	ط	T
ق	G	ظ	TH
ك	'A	ص	S
ل	OH	ض	OH
م	H	س	S
ن	Y	ش	SH
		ح	F
		ج	K
		خ	H

Madiha Umar's type-script classification of letter shapes in the Arabic alphabet and their cognate sounds in English

What I Found

I have studied and observed modern art, always comparing it with the Arab art of the Middle East. The letter still stands out, so magnificently colorful, fascinating, intricate, and ornamental; but I felt that a more meaningful and powerful life—which might have brought that monumental art from this stage of stillness, from the limitation of the surface manipulation into the freer expression and closer to the dynamic movement and restlessness of our modern art—is needed. As a child I marveled at the beautiful and intricate forms of the Arabic calligraphy that borders the gates of mosques, encircles their domes and minarets, and they enchanted me. I have seen old homes with decorated ceilings and walls in Damascus, and elsewhere the monumental relics in various Arabic-speaking countries. I never ceased to enjoy looking at them. Then, here in America, where I happened to learn more about the history of Arabic calligraphy, I realized its intrinsic ancient value, and the long pilgrimage it made down through the ages, and how each letter gained such rich and unique variety before it became as we know it today. It was then that the idea dawned on me that Arabic calligraphy, which is abstract and yet so symbolic in its essence, need not be limited any more to the space-filling of geometrical design. For I believe such handling of Arabic calligraphy in the field of artistic design does injustice to the personality of each letter. It curtails its freedom of expression and individuality in forming a design. Each letter is able, and has a personality dynamic enough, to form an abstract design; and what is more, each has an outstanding individual quality as a contributing factor in shaping the final whole of a picture, which might convey an idea, a thought, or an event—be it contemporary or historical.

To me, each Arabic letter says something in abstract design, and through their variety of expressions they have become inspiring elements. The *ya*—which stands for Y, for instance [...] has a domineering personality capable of great expressions. And so is the letter *ayn*, which has no equivalent in the English alphabet, an active and strong member, bearing a double meaning in Arabic language. It stands for *eye* in certain phrases, and at other times may mean *spring of water*. [...] The letter *lam*, which stands for L in English, expresses delicate and rhythmic movements, as seen in *Swing* and *Rhythm of Lam*.

With that conviction in mind I started using the Arabic alphabet as a basis for my abstract painting, gradually developing it from plain surface manipulation into the more expressive dynamic movement of a thought in a picture, using the letters appropriate to the meaning of that abstraction, considering their force, individuality, rhythmic effect, power of expression, and adaptability.

Although I am still in the experimental stage of my idea, I know I have discovered the possibilities of Arabic calligraphy in producing an effect that is stimulating and lasting for the artist to work with, and for the layman—not only to enjoy looking at a colorful picture, but also to stimulate a thought that he will carry with him thereafter. [...]

—Madiha Umar, “Arabic Calligraphy: Inspiring Element in Abstract Art” (abridged). The text, originally in English, has been amended slightly to conform to the style of the present volume. Text first identified in Sharbal Dāghir, *al-Ḥurūfiyya al-‘Arabiyya: Fann wa-Huwiyya* (Beirut: Sharikat al-Maṭbū‘āt li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘, 1990), recently published in translation as *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art and Identity*, trans. by Samir Mahmoud (Milan: Skira, 2016), 136–42.

IN FOCUS

***Huroufiyah*: The Arabic Letter as Visual Form**

Nada Shabout

The use of the Arabic letter as a visual element in modern Arab art dates to the mid-twentieth century. *Huroufiyah* (from the Arabic *harf/huruf*, meaning “letter”) is based on two principles: negotiating the letter as a plastic element grounded in the modernist understanding of form, and constructing a modern work of art engaged in its cultural specificity. On an epistemological level, the letter functioned as both a unifier and a signifier of Arab identity, negotiating a new, secular consciousness and a means of reevaluating the relationship between self and other. As such, the Arabic letter was liberated from both its sacred connotations (as perceived through Islamic calligraphy and the Arabic language as the sacred language of the Qur’an) and its connectedness as a written script. *Huroufiyah*, in other words, specifically detached itself from Islamic calligraphy, and as a term carried different significance. It was invoked specifically to ideologically perceive the reformulation of the Arabic text in modern art as a decolonized form, which rejected in equal measure the sacred past of the text and the Western obsession with it. It had thus come specifically to signify a national pan-Arab art product, or a national Arab art phenomenon that does not aim at a continuation of Islamic calligraphy, despite engaging it in many instances.

Early examples of the Arabic letter’s engagement in modern art are found in a few isolated efforts. Important precedents are seen in the work of two artists, the Iraqi-Syrian artist Madiha Umar and the Iraqi artist Jamil Hamoudi. Umar became interested

in the graphic possibilities of the Arabic letter and its abstractness as a form while investigating Islamic calligraphy as an art student in the United States. A 1949 exhibition of her paintings in Washington, DC, was accompanied by her text on the potentially inspirational role of Arabic calligraphy in abstract art.¹ Later, in 1981, she exhibited examples of her early works in Baghdad. Hamoudi, who started as a Surrealist artist, turned to the Arabic letter as a form of self-expression while he was living in Paris in 1947. In turn, his Surrealist approach was transformed into Cubist formulations of Arabic letters.

The 1950s witnessed increasing experiments with the Arabic letter, including many examples involving traditional calligraphy, such as the work of Lebanese artist Wajih Nahle, and Sudanese artists Osman A. Waqialla and Ahmed Mohammed Shibrain. In the 1960s, the Arabic letter became well rooted as a cultural signifier, demarcating a shift in its negotiations by further abandoning its classical connections. Egyptian artist Omar El-Nagdi found the Arabic letter to be a point of coalescence for his various interests, including music. He composed abstract rhythmic repetitions that expressed letters' spiritual and plastic qualities, as well as their musicality. During the 1970s and '80s, *huroufiyah* gained in popularity and prompted most artists in the Arab world to make use of the letter in a variety of ways; important experiments include works by Syrian artist Mahmoud Hammad; Iraqi Shaker Hassan Al Said, Dia al-Azzawi, and Rafa al-Nasiri; Palestinian Kamal Boullata; and Algerian Rachid Koraïchi.

Although the term *huroufiyah* has been popularly used to signify the gamut of experiments with the Arabic letter in modern art, its diverse uses have led to a series of debates over terminology and art historical genealogies. (The name "Calligraphic School of Art" has been proposed as an alternative by artist and art historian Wijdan Ali [al-Hashimi] to express a perceived continuity with Islamic calligraphy.)

A somewhat generic term, *huroufiyah* has been misleadingly used to cover a range of works, from the rich, unique, and seriously experimental to the simple, repetitive, and decorative. In the former cases, artists deployed the letter as but an entryway to the work; these practitioners viewed *huroufiyah* as a necessary but transitional mode, and many of them later abandoned it. In the latter cases, the letter itself constitutes the work. These works are largely predicated on the market, and this specific formulation of *huroufiyah* has been widely popularized, particularly among Western critics. This is because such works are perceived as having a relationship with traditional religious calligraphy, thereby perpetuating the dominant neo-Orientalist trope—in which the Arabic letter serves as the conventional signal of all Islamic cultures. Unfortunately, it is this understanding of *huroufiyah* that seems to persist, and continues to be enthusiastically received in local Middle Eastern markets.

The early twenty-first century is revealing a tendency among artists to find spiritual connections with the Islamic age by experimenting with the Arabic letter. While these new formulations are disconnected from the modernist notion of *huroufiyah*, they are instigating a reevaluation of the twentieth-century trend.

Note

1. See Madiha Umar, "Arabic Calligraphy: Inspiring Element in Abstract Art," in the present volume, 139–42.

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See Plates 11 and 12 for representative works by Kamal Boullata and Omar El-Nagdi.

IMAGINING AN IMMORTAL ARAB ART

After the withdrawal of the French military from Syria in 1946, a generation of young artists turned their attentions to an aesthetics of renewal and restoration. This rousing speech, given by artist Adham Isma'il at the opening of a high school art exhibition he had organized, emphasizes the values of collectivity and Arab spirit in particular. Isma'il was closely affiliated to the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, then an opposition party committed to a revivalist Arab nationalism as a basis for more collective self-governance. The text of the speech appeared the party's newspaper *al-Ba'ath*.

Speech delivered at Damascus's Maydan High School (1951)

Adham Isma'il

Gentlemen,

It is the pleasure of Maydan High School to welcome you here and to present its artistic production for this year.

The school's first season was an abundant one; and today its new season bears the sweetest of fruits. This indicates the soil's fertility, this soil wherein bountiful treasures remain buried, waiting for the day its springs overflow, quenching the people's thirst and inspiring energy and vitality in every part of this beloved homeland. The creative forces will then spread their wings in faraway skies, taking the helm of fate to steer it once again in the direction of immortality.

I will not speak of the paintings you will see today, but of the destiny of thousands of talents suffocating without a chance to create, and fading before they have shone, disappearing one after the other into the darkness of the past. We must illuminate that darkness with the light of our modern renaissance. From this day onward, we must leave no more darkness in our wake.

Arab citizens are capable of great deeds that deserve every possible respect and appreciation, but the artistic field of which we speak remains untrodden by them, despite all the efforts being made in this regard.

In Egypt, Iraq, and Lebanon, there are academies of fine arts and even dedicated government ministries to which talented artists may turn in order to unite themselves and become an artistic force of considerable regard. Meanwhile, we are still just considering the establishment of a fine arts school; but if this is done on outdated foundations, it will unravel in the face of the trends of the modern age.

We must raise a new generation of young artists who are capable of adopting the finest of what the Western arts can offer and the most profound aspects of Eastern spirituality. We must create a new Arab art that can compete with the greatest artistic movements of our time—this is by no means a distant goal. We must cover hundreds of years in a few leaps, yet this is no outlandish ambition, for we have the advantage of the Western art movements lying before us and the flames of individual talents burning within us, ready to burst into fire and light, destroying every obstacle and illuminating every path.

—Adham Ismā'īl, speech transcribed in "Jawla fi al-Ma'raḡ al-Fanni li-Thānawīyyat al-Maydān," *al-Ba'ath*, May 26, 1951. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

TOWARD A MATERIAL MODERNISM

Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair published her text “How the Arab Understood Visual Art” in the Beirut journal *al-Abhath* in 1951. She wrote it from Paris, where she had lived since 1948 as a student of painting, developing a particularly close engagement with the theories and methods of geometric abstraction. The essay is a rejoinder to a 1950 volume on the subject of Arab narrative fiction, by her colleague Musa Sulaiman, which expressed a negative view of the “materialism” of Arabic literature. Much of the language is a direct response to Sulaiman’s own, producing a kind of tongue-in-cheek effect.

See Plate 13 for a 1951 work by Saloua Raouda Choucair.

How the Arab Understood Visual Art (1951)

Saloua Raouda Choucair

Having read your book and taken note of your personal opinions, analysis, and interpretation, I am prompted to make a few observations that may have some benefit, or even much. First, I want to draw your attention to the issue of Orientalists and how they appear in an Arab perspective, or rather in the perspective of you who studied with them and were influenced by their standards. In your various studies of Arabs, their history, and their literature, you compare them to the civilizations that preceded them, whether Indian, Persian, or Greek. I do not believe that such a comparison is fair or tenable, unless we allow comparing [twelfth-century poet] Ibn al-Farid with Napoleon, for example. In your study of the Arabic story, you venture to note some very strange aesthetics, but the general standards on which you base your study prevented you from dealing with them directly, so you could only give a glimpse of them. Consequently, your questions proliferated.

I acknowledge that Arabs borrowed much from the peoples they encountered, among them Indians, Persians, and Greeks. Yet, on the other hand, everything they took, they stamped with their own personality. You yourself mention this on page 20 of your book, in the course of your study of *A Thousand and One Nights*, saying: “The Arabic coloring in it stands out the strongest.” I will extrapolate from this that Arabs imposed their special character on all they borrowed from other peoples, and that was the source of the strength of their personality, a personality that differed from all others around them. It is this personality that needs to be studied, in its own light and not in the light of other civilizations. It is from this theoretical angle that I will analyze Arab visual art, because it facilitates understanding other forms of Arab art, and because visual art is my specialty.

How did the Arab understand visual art?

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, extracting it from all the blemishes that had accumulated in art since the time of the [ancient] Greeks until the end of the nineteenth century. 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.

Arabs are the most sophisticated of peoples in understanding art in terms of sensory perception, and that is why they broached the subject at its essence, abstractly. Visual art has its own impact and value in itself, so there is no need, from the Arab's perspective, to associate it with other art forms for it to be complete. In literature there is the word, and in visual art there is color. The Arab never mixed the two together, and this is what has escaped critics to this day. Rather, they judged Arabs according to the standards I mentioned above, those that affirm the achievements of the Greeks and Romans as the pinnacle of intellect and innovation. As I said, in seeking the essence in visual art, the Arab purifies it of admixtures, *because that is in his spirit*. Not because the Qur'an forbids it. This attitude is equally apparent in the sciences, literature, and religious dogma, where the Arab seeks abstraction and the elimination of irregularities.

Do you not see that Jews and some Christians who believe in the Old Testament did not abide by the passage of the commandment that says: "Do not make for yourselves graven sculptures or images"?

You ask: "What is the relationship of Arabic stories to the sciences and arts of the period?" The answer to this question lies in the Arabs' quest for the essence and the abstract. Indeed, the Arab shone in mathematics and its related fields, such as astronomy. In the place of a given truth, these sciences substitute a deeper truth, that of the number. With chemistry, they distilled alcohol.¹ This process of distillation is in fact simply the conversion of substances back to their original nature, free of impurities. This is what Arabs are legendary for. The idea of an "elixir of life" long engrossed the Arab.²

Is there something in the Arab's religion that leads him to this outlook? Have you ever considered the Qur'anic description of heaven? Heaven is not somewhere beyond our imagination, where ages and genders have all faded, where food, drink, and the pleasures of life have disappeared. It is not an illusion or an unrealistic vision. Rather, it is the very essence of reality, life itself, as we know it on earth. A life distilled to its quintessence. Prophets and all who have been motivated by benevolence have tried to improve life and elevate it to the state of perfection. Heaven in the Qur'an is exactly that promise of perfection in life.

Do we love life? There is eternal life.

We love women? There are the virgins of paradise.

We love water, in these parched lands? Heaven has gardens with rivers flowing through them.

Everything that we love on earth exists abundantly in heaven, with the troubles of hunger, poverty, death, and all other imperfections blotted out. By God, I prefer such a heaven to the illusory paradise of no existence, where pleasure is eternally deprived.

Why wasn't the Arab influenced by Greek philosophy? Why didn't he embrace it as he embraced Greek science? Because Greek philosophy is an illusory one: it takes you from one point to another by means of [speculative] argument, leading you to an imaginary point that actually is inaccessible since it is inexistent. Dialectical argumentation is the main foundation for this illusion, and it is a foundation built on logic, not experience.³ The Arab and the Greek differ in spirituality, and for that reason, the Arab ignored this realm [of Greek thought]. The Arab philosophers were Sufis; their knowledge stemmed from experience, not dialectical argumentation. Until recently, they were often accused of not having a philosophy at all,

but then various Western philosophers approached Sufism in their own thinking, such as [Søren] Kierkegaard, [Karl] Jaspers, [Martin] Heidegger, and [Jean-Paul] Sartre.

What we see from the foregoing is that Arabs' devotion to the idea of the essence was the result of neither a coincidence nor a Qur'anic interdiction against representing people and things. Rather, it was one of the distinguishing features of Arab arts, religion, philosophy, sciences, and literatures. It appears in their storytelling, too, and the story of Antara is a prime example.⁴

The focal point for the Arab, in every artistic and scientific endeavor, is the essence, and it is thus in the story, too. In the Arabic story, we observe the special trait of "distillation" that I mentioned before, or the process of cleansing the essence and ridding it of excesses and "imperfections." A story needs a hero, so he must be the greatest hero that ever lived and ever will. This is just as you described Antara in your book:

Antara the myth was lifted to the loftiest heights of heroism and adorned with the best virtues of chivalry, combining courage and the compassion of the powerful. He is the paragon of the perfect paladin, a knight-hero whose heroism knows no end. He fears no army, no matter how large; he fears no perils, no matter how grave. Were thousands to rise against him, one shout from him would disperse them. Were demons to obstruct his path, he would set his sword to work on them and be rid of them one by one.

These traits demonstrate the essence of heroism, distilled, unblended, far from the admixture of reality, approaching the pure principle. To one who does not understand the Arab spirit, they seem like hyperbole, exceeding the scope of conception, as you said. They look like lies to whoever cannot release his imagination from the flaws of reality, [to apprehend] that unadulterated truth which scorns time and space.

What use is this chronological sequence upon which you all insist? Does essence change when advanced or delayed? Why do you want the Arab to lend more importance to time lines? Have you [not] read modern literature, by [André] Gide, [Marcel] Proust, [John] Dos Passos, or [Virginia] Woolf? Have you [not] noticed how completely they disregard historical time? Or rather, how perfect their intention to disregard it! See how they mingle timelines—the chronologies by which you would impose an artificial separation. Arabs' indifference to those chronologies was deliberate, for the purpose of emphasizing that the hero's main personality trait does not change with time. Whether writers take up Antara's feats today or a thousand days from today, what counts is that the truth of these feats can only intensify.

As for the *imaginaire* of [our] materialist storyteller, in which you find no "upward thrust" [i.e. dynamism], you say:

The narration is built on a peculiar imagination. It is inhibited, limited. It raises you toward transcendence only to shock you with the concrete and the tangible. It is an imagination that will always and forever lead you to embodied matter.

This imagination is the same one you go on to praise on page 115 in your description of modern civilization:

Do you not see that this truth, incarnated in the modern West in the submarine exploding through the belly of the oceans, and in the jet plane cutting through the skies, is nothing other than the offspring of an ancient imagination, that of *A Thousand and One Nights*, Solomon's demons, and the storytellers' genies? The modern mind could not have reached these achievements had it not been nourished by the flying carpet, magic lamp, and genie-servant!

What do you think of what you say? I agree with your assertion because, like you, I am inclined to think that modern thought is the fulfillment of that venerable Arab mentality with its quest for the essence and its interest in matter's fundamental characteristics. Modern thought has realized the promises of the Arab *imaginaire*, and it has expanded upon them simply by utilizing contemporary sciences as embodied in inventions and discoveries unknown to the ancients.

The Arab did not disregard matter; he approached it through its essence. He will always choose the essence or noblest material to describe a thing. Musk and amber, for example, are the noblest of materials, so anything that should be aromatic will be described with them. Genies and demons are the cleverest of creatures. Who but they can build luxurious palaces? Ivory, ebony, and elephant's tooth are the noblest materials for furniture; hence you will find the prophets and heroes all seated on chairs of these materials. From here we see that the Arab effected the realization of the essence in visions more real than common reality. These visions were and would indeed have remained imaginary were they not realized in this age: the flying carpet reappears today as the airplane that rips across the skies; those industrious workers, the demons and genies, have come into existence today as robots; and the magic lamp is today's electric switch, a servant at your fingertips. The actualization of these visions in this manner is vindication of that purified thought.

He who disdains matter is either benighted or prejudiced by the Greek standards that froze the world for centuries. He who fears matter is far from grasping the foundations of our era and the civilizations preceding it. Matter, for him, is an airplane that could explode and dispatch the souls of innocents or a car that could mow down humans. Or it is the search for an atomic bomb that will extinguish the world. Such is the thinking of he who does not understand the spirit of our era. Foremost are the Surrealists who arose between the two world wars, amid poison gas and the atomic bomb.

Despised in ancient Greece, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, matter can today become either a road to heaven on earth, as promised by the Qur'an, or a living Hell, depending on how it is used. I do not think that mankind [today] will abuse it, at least not more than did his forefather in the days of religion and spirituality, when he waged the Crusades in the name of religion. In our era, the matter that was despised by the Greeks and their successors has become an invisible spirit bringing to us the most beautiful theater and the most poignant classical musical compositions. It carries us to the highest spiritual transcendence and the greatest reaches of the imagination. Have not radar beams reached the Moon, and the other planets?

Into how many different spirits has this matter metamorphosed? To how many prophets has it been transmitted? In how many philanthropists has it

transpired? Into how many medical cures has it developed? How many miracles did it produce? It has resurrected the dead and rehabilitated the crippled. It has opened eyes and transplanted human organs. Is it a means for knowing God? Maybe in this aspect, is there not a way to respect matter rather than despise it?

Lastly, you say on page 175 of your book, where you discuss the anonymous Arab narrator, that

he would float hither and thither, seeing a flower here and a rose there, and stumbling as he bumps into a pearl. He would scoop it all up into his arms, happily carrying it about like a child carrying his pretty toys, but he was unable to sort and order them or make of them a unity that can satisfy the heart and spirit, and not just the eye.

Did it not once occur to you that perhaps the Arab narrator did that purposefully? Could that have come about as the result of deep, purified thought and clear comprehension? Is that narrator not like his brother the artist, placing an emerald circle next to a ruby-red square alongside a triangle of ivory in an effort to reveal the eternal essence that is defined by neither time nor space? He who seeks for essences is no child. And he who pays no mind to time is eternalist in his thought. This “child” was fully aware. His goal was pure beauty, not the integrity of historical time. He who does not see unity in all the flowers, roses, and pearls remains captive to antiquated, transient standards. He who does not thrill in his heart and soul at the essence, will he find happiness anywhere?

I am inclined to believe—knowing that this lacks extensive, scientific research—that Antara’s biography was composed by a single author and that the addition of self-standing stories into the biography was intentional, as I suggested previously, operating according to the same principle as the artist who sets an independent circle next to a self-sufficient triangle to generate a strange beauty that only Arab creativity can understand. Likewise, that anonymous artist who did not sign his name to his works is like the anonymous author who, out of humility, did not record his name.

As I said in the opening of my letter, I appreciated your book, and what I write here is primarily directed to the older Orientalists and their students who took up their opinions, and to all those who have studied Arabs by comparing them to [ancient] India, Persia, and Greece. How I would have preferred that you approach your research in your book from the angle I indicated, and which I think is closer to an understanding of the ancient civilizations.

Notes

Translator’s notes (drawn from the scholarly annotations accompanying this text’s publication in the journal *ArtMargins*):

1. The word *alcohol* derives from the Arabic *al-kuhl*, meaning antimony sulfide. The word retains its Arabic form in all European languages, a reminder of its association with Arabic science.
2. The word *elixir* derives from the Arabic *al-iksir*, denoting a substance held to be incorruptible (a notion based on gold, which does not tarnish) and thereby able to provide immortality.
3. The Arabic word used here is *tajriba*, which also means “experiment.”
4. Antara(a) Ibn Shaddad was a poet in the Arabian Peninsula of the sixth century AD, credited with authoring the epic hero’s tale *Story of Antara* (*Sirat Antara*).

—Salwā Rawḍa Shuqayr, “Kayfa Fahima al-‘Arabī Fann al-Taṣwīr,” *al-Abḥāth* 4, no. 2 (June 1951): 190–201. Translated from Arabic by Kirsten Scheid. A version of this translation, including complete annotations, was published as “How the Arab Understood Visual Art,” *ArtMargins* 4, no. 1 (February 2015): 102–18.

BAGHDAD GROUP FOR MODERN ART

In 1951, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Jewad Selim founded the Baghdad Group for Modern Art and brought together members Lorna Selim, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Mohammed al-Husni, Mahmoud Sabri, and Qahtan Abdallah Oni, alongside other Iraqi artists, for an inaugural exhibition. At the opening, Al Said read the following manifesto aloud and Selim delivered his extemporaneous speech, “The Renewal of Art,” describing the challenges of engaging an audience for whom modern art was wholly unfamiliar.

See Plate 14 for a 1951 painting by Shakir Hassan Al Said.

Manifesto (1951)

Baghdad Group for Modern Art

At a time when Western civilization is expressing itself in the realm of art, an expression that marks the present age with a yearning to achieve freedom through the modern trends, our audience remains oblivious to the importance of the art of painting as an indicator of the extent of the country’s wakefulness and its tackling of the problem of genuine freedom.

However, a new direction in the art of painting will resolve this problem as a contemporary awakening that picks up a path begun long ago: the first steps along this path were taken by the artists of the thirteenth century AD, and the new generation will find that their ancestors’ early efforts are still pointing a way forward, despite the darkness and the danger. The modern Iraqi artist is burdened with the weight of the culture of the age and the character of local civilization.

As a result of this, the following question will linger in the artist’s mind: By what means will this new art be realized? Various answers will tempt his thought, and he will carry out all manner of experiments, as his head, eyes, and hands dictate. As for the public, shocked at first by the novelty of the effect, they would do better to continuously seek the key to the secrets behind the efforts that are exerted. And then the gulf that separates the public from the artist will disappear.

Logic has been our guide since the beginning. There are two things: a means and a goal. In art, the goal becomes the means. On the one hand, the emergent modern art style becomes the crux of the concept that we will realize. As for the conventional view that constantly tears the concept from the style, it is a narrow view from the remnants of the romanticism of the beginning of the past century. There is no reason to keep clinging to that concept if it calls for dismantling the work of art. On the other hand, our efforts are in vain if they do not contain a spirit of renewal and innovation. This initiative, which appears today in the form of this first exhibition of modern art, and which brings together various modern studies such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Surrealism, Cubism, and abstractionism, is the first following World War II, and it takes confident strides toward creating a unique personality for our civilization. If we do not realize ourselves through art, as well as in all other spheres of thought, we will be unable to take the feverish plunge into the fierceness of life. However, a work of style alone does not solve the problem we seek to resolve, that is, the need for creation that requires the introduction of new elements into our styles.



Shakir Hassan Al Said (seated) and Jewad Selim reading aloud the manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art at the group's inaugural exhibition, Baghdad. 1951

[Pablo] Picasso, the artist of this age, who has today become one of the foundations of the most modern art, did not attain that status without passing through stages, which showed him the validity of searching for new elements at their sources. It was not in vain that he was led to primitive Iberian art, then to black African art, then to the works of one of the authors of the post-Impressionist movement. These were first steps that would lead him to what is known as Cubism. This shows us, from among the different paths diverging beneath our feet, a course we must explore. It requires on the one hand that we be aware of the current styles, and on the other hand that we grasp the elements with which we will enrich our work. Here, the first presents the level of our understanding of those foreign styles; and the second our awareness of local character. This character—of which most of us are ignorant today—is what will allow us to compete with other styles in the universal field of thought.

We thus announce today the beginning of a new school of painting, which derives its sources from the civilization of the contemporary age, with all the styles and schools of plastic art that have emerged from it, and from the unique character of Eastern civilization. In this way, we will honor the stronghold of the Iraqi art of painting that collapsed after the school of Yahya al-Wasiti, the Mesopotamian school of the thirteenth century AD. And in this way we will reconnect the continuity that has been broken since the fall of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols. The rebirth of art in our countries depends on the efforts we make, and we call upon our painter brothers to undertake this task for the sake of our civilization and for the sake of universal civilization, which is developed by the cooperation of different peoples. May the heritage of the present times and our awareness of local character be our guides. May we receive support from the attention, good taste, and encouragement that we anticipate from the public.

We, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, hereby declare the birth of a new school of art for the sake of our civilization, and for the sake of universal civilization.

—“Bayān Jamāʿat Baghdād li-l-Fann al-Ḥadīth al-Awwal,” published in *al-Adīb* 10, no. 7 (July 1951): 52. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

The Renewal of Art (1951)

Jewad Selim

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am not a writer. The man who writes uses the pen as his tool, but my tools are color, line, and form. However, both the writer and I are humans who observe. The writer observes and perceives—if he is a true writer—and marvelous symbols are aroused in his inner mind, these being words. Then he inscribes those strange symbols on paper and says: Read! If you can read, you follow what he says word for word, and you feel what he wants to say. Then you take another look to see what you missed the first time. However, if you are unlucky—that is, if you are among 97 percent of Iraqis—then you are in a completely different world from that of the writer.¹

As for myself, as a sculptor or as a painter, I do not differ much from the writer. I too observe, but what I see does not arouse in me those marvelous symbols the writer excels in using. Rather, different symbols arise in my head: lines, colors, and form. This is my language. I place it in a painting or a statue, and say: “Look!” or “Read!” So if you don’t want to slow down for a moment to take a look, or if you are one of the abovementioned 97 percent, then you are in a world that is completely different from my own.

The writer and I hope to share what we want to say with all of humanity. Every human being wants to sense man’s intellectual privileges. For individuals in the human community, this advantage—the advantage of mind and thought—can be accomplished only through exchange and experience. I could tell a friend what I’m thinking, but I might not feel that that is sufficient, so I address the whole of humanity. An animal does not want to say anything, it wants to live, and it does not know why it lives. The writer and I want to live, but we know why we live. We bear a thing that thinks in our heads.

Now before I forget, I would like to remind you of something you hear often: “Hey, come on. We want to eat bread.”

I stand here borrowing a tool that I have no mastery of. What I excel at lies there, in the exhibition hall. I hope the writer will excuse me. We are both struggling, while pretending to forget about bread.



Jewad Selim. *Mother and Child*. 1954. Fruitwood and mixed media. 16 1/16 × 11 3/16 × 5 1/2" (43 × 30 × 14 cm). Private collection

Today, I do not wish to defend my group. We shall continue, and we have opened up our hearts in a spirit of honesty. However, I would like to highlight a few simple points: the artist as a member of society; people, and their relationship with art, especially in this nation; the essence of the personalities of Bach or [Abul ‘Ala] al-Ma‘arri, as they relate to Napoleon or a sheikh from the tribal chiefs. In other words, what are the things that make us proud to be human?

These are truly complex and intricate points that are related to man’s economic and political history. I have no desire to go into all of that. But consider the artist: Who is an artist? What is he? Recall a number of artists: Beethoven, Goya, Bach, Shakespeare, Raphael, and Faiq Hassan.² Did they live for material things? No doubt. But what is the difference between

them and Rothschild, Hitler, Al Capone, Metro Goldwyn Mayer, Betty Grable, or the pastry seller? They are all human. But Bach elevated humanity. He introduced it to nobility, love, goodness, and beauty. He benefited humanity, did he not? And Michelangelo demonstrated man's genius to man himself—he aided humanity, just as [Thomas] Edison did, or the discoverer of penicillin. Is that not true? Indeed it is.

Art does not lie in painting Louis XIV, or in writing poems in praise of Sayf al-Dawla, or in drawing an apple, or in singing a verse from the popular song “Balak tadawwus ‘ala al-ward” (Careful not to step on the flowers). Art rises above all that. It is a piece by Mozart, a page from Molière, a poem by al-Ma‘arri or [Muhammad Muḥdī] al-Jawahiri, or [Pablo] Picasso's *Guernica*. These are things that have benefited humanity.

Art is not *Musamarat al-Jayb* or *al-Ithnayn* magazines.³ Good art performs a noble service, and a good artist serves humanity. A woman's arm or a handsome man: every muscle in the body is beneficial. This brings Plato's saying to mind. As for Picasso, he says the artist's goal is to save humanity from sinking into the pit of evil.

Now, where are we in relation to that artist? Here in Baghdad, for instance: Is he on Al-Rasheed Street, or in the public parks, or in people's homes? Take the homes: the first thing that grabs your attention when you step inside is all the expensive furniture. The taste is not important. The connection of the distorted cubistic model to the costly Persian rug—that, too, is unimportant. The furniture is very comfortable, the latest style from Beirut. *Oh, so nice!* You take a look around and see that *al-Ithnayn* magazine and *Musamarat al-Jayb* have taken the place of books. Then you notice a shelf with records on it. As you approach it, you see Argentine tango, and the latest record by Dinah Shore. If the taste is more local, then you see records by Farid al-Atrash. You lift your gaze to the walls, and what do you see? If the wall is not bare, it is decorated by a large photograph of the family's grandfather, and an even larger one of the head of the family in his youth, as well as photos of the children in elegant frames, and photos of the grandchildren. There are a lot of pictures—that's all that need be said. But why are they in the drawing room, where guests are received? God only knows.

Now if the taste is slightly more elevated, and the head of the house feels the need for some art, then the walls will have a calendar by the Cadillac company, adorned with a photograph of a girl who does not seem to have any connection to planet Earth other than the fact that she arouses your more animalistic instincts. Or there might be an elegantly framed picture of a landscape in Switzerland. You might reproach your friend for not having any paintings: “Please one oil painting—*something?*” To which he responds: “*You're the artist. What do I care for art?*”

As for spiritual matters, most of us find it in alcoholic drinks. For the people—most of them, anyway—their only relationship to art is confined to national radio and the hits of Egyptian music, as well as “Egyptianized” Iraqi music. This is in addition to Egyptian movies, movies about Mars, and Hollywood movies.

That is the general taste. And here in this exhibition, we, as Iraqis, are trying—if only to a modest extent—to align ourselves with what humanity is producing in the universal language of painting, taking our inspiration from what excites us within our nature and immediate surroundings.

A kindhearted poet has called us the enemies of the people. He claims every dedicated Iraqi who is loyal to this country should struggle against us. We are said to be the enemies of the people, even as the people are feeding on *Musamarat al-Jayb*,

al-Ithnayn, Egyptian movies, and filthy nightclubs—that is the food of the people.

That friend is a kindhearted poet who does not know these things.

There is a clique of people in our audience who taste art and painting and then force their will on you in a remarkable way: “That really is no good, you must make something that the people understand.” They want us to paint an apple and give it the title *An Apple*. “Now *that’s* an apple,” they’ll say, “a perfect apple.” They want us to paint the sun setting over the Tigris and write *Sunset* beneath it. Or they want a painting of palm trees with the title *Palms*. Or a painting of a beautiful girl—she must be beautiful, because art is beautiful—beneath which we write *Waiting* in elegant handwriting.

Art is a language, and we must become familiarized to this language, if only briefly: What, for instance, is the painter trying to convey here with his words, where the words are colors, lines, and volumes?

This language uses the same words, but in a new mold that accords with the influences of the modern era. For instance, it is no longer natural for a poet today to recite poetry that is similar to pre-Islamic poetry. Painting, throughout its history, converges upon foundational points: the beauty of color, the beauty of line, and the beauty of shapes. All these come together to authentically express aspects of the feelings of the artists of each era. A true artist must know what he is painting and why he paints. What does a painting of palm trees that looks just like a photograph mean? Where is the expression in a literal rendering of an apple?

In painting, harmony—in terms of color—is as complex and significant as it is in music. Colors do not emerge by chance in a good painting, whether it is old or modern. In every painting there is a particular correspondence that changes the picture’s spirituality, by lines, dimension, and light and shade.

Modern art truly is the art of the age, and its complexity is a result of the complexity of this era. It expresses many things: anxiety, fear, great disparities in most things, human massacres, man’s distancing himself from God, and then the new perspectives on everything, generated by modern theories in psychology and other disciplines.

Take the example of the painting *A Dog Barks on a Cold Night*, for instance, which is one of the works on display in this exhibition. Imagine the loneliness of the night—the darkness, the cold—and then the sound of a dog barking: this is a modern and vivid subject that lives with us. But how can you express these things and place them in an effective artistic form? No doubt you will use color and lines. It would be ridiculous to paint that scene in a photographic manner.

I wonder, has anyone asked himself why the domes of mosques are blue? They are blue because the mosque is a lofty spiritual creation, and nothing expresses that better than blue.

An artist follows what goes on around him and expresses it sincerely. However, he must know how to accomplish such expression.

Notes

1. Eds.: Selim seems to be referring to the rate of illiteracy. Iraq reported an 89.1 percent illiteracy rate in 1947.
2. Eds.: Faiq Hassan was a contemporary of Selim’s, and another leading Iraqi artist; he formed his group, the Pioneers (also known as Société Primitif, or S.P.), around a commitment to painting outdoors and in environs beyond the city.
3. Eds.: *Musamarat al-Jayb* and *al-Ithnayn* were popular journals published in Egypt. The former was an illustrated magazine; the latter was a humor publication.

—Jawād Salīm, “Tajdid al-Fann,” speech transcribed in Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā, *Jawād Salīm wa-Nuṣb al-Hurriyya* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-ʿIlām, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqāfa al-ʿĀmma, 1974), 189–94. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF EXHIBITIONS

The texts in this section offer a variety of takes on the cultural politics of exhibitions—in particular the issues of sponsorship and patronage as legacies of colonial occupation. The first is a short note of subtle protest by Algerian artist Yahia Bahmed, who had written to Algeria's Department of Interior and Fine Arts to request a residency at the famed Villa Abd-el-Tif, only to be told that it was reserved for artists from the metropole—that is, from the parent state of France. Another text from Algeria, written in 1953 by *pied noir* poet Jean Sénac, announces the independent gallery program he organized under the auspices of his literary magazine *Terrasses*, featuring both French Algerian and native Algerian artists. In the same year, in Gaza, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency field office hosted a solo art exhibition for the first time—by refugee Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout. In “Exhibition of a Palestinian Artist,” written for Beirut's *al-Adib* magazine, teacher Harun Hashim Rashid reviews Shammout's work and comments on its implications in the region. The final text in this section is from Iraq: artist Shakir Hassan Al Said's critical assessment of the problems of exhibition reviews and patronage in Baghdad's art scene; it was written for the new pan-Arab journal *al-Adab*, founded in Beirut in 1953 as an organ of politically engaged thought and cultural analysis.

See Plate 15 for a 1947 painting by Baya (Fatma Haddad-Mahieddine), one of the artists featured by Jean Sénac in his 1953 program.

Letter to the Department of Interior and Fine Arts (1952)

Yahia Bahmed

The undersigned, Hadj Yahia Bahmed ben Hammou, painter residing in Métlili, Ghardaïa

To the Minister plenipotentiary, General Governor of Algeria
Department of Interior and Fine Arts in Algiers

Mr. Minister,

Following my request dated 5/15/1952 and your response dated 5/29/1952, no. 2,143 IBA/4, observing that the Villa Abd-el-Tif is reserved for the exclusive use of metropolitan artists, I am honored to request your esteemed generosity in kindly sending me the address of the institution allocated to the Algerians. In advance of a favorable response, please accept the compliments of my highest esteem.

Your devoted servant,
Hadj Yahia Bahmed

—Yahia Bahmed, letter, July 7, 1952, in the Archives du Musée National des Beaux-Arts, Algiers; repr. in *Revue du Musée National des Beaux-Arts*, no. 5 (December 1995): 29. Translated from French by Matthew H. Evans.

On the Presentation of a Collective Exhibition (1953)

Jean Sénac

Complacency and Orientalism have ravaged Algeria more than the infestations of locusts. It is time, for the sake of the health and prestige of this country, to wrest it from the confusion of values it is suffering from and to clear the way, once and for all, for the truest face of its art. We hope that our audacity will be forgiven and our ambition understood. We stand by [Luc de Clapier, Marquis de] Vauvenargues's assertion that "to speak equally well of everyone is a petty and poor practice."

We have neither the naïveté nor the pretentiousness—at least for the moment—to believe in a "School of Algiers," but we are in the fire of new trends, and it seems beneficial to identify the most prominent among them. We are of course *biased*, and we admit to it all the more freely because our selection was determined solely by the plastic quality of an expression and its dynamic resonance in contemporary pictorial art.

Through different techniques and visions, the artists gathered here construct an identical and sincere carnal lyricism, one that is stripped of allusion and that encompasses, even amid the profusion of techniques and visions, the pure balance of the Midi. Thus they continue a tradition of natural constants and, expressing a true part of the spirit of our times, are witnesses for the future.

In the rigorous dialogue in which they engage the viewer, they are able to demand as much sensitivity, intelligence, and humility as they themselves use to represent with dignity our shared reality on the canvas. This is to say that love (that virtue without proof) must establish a commutative space and preside over the exchange and celebration in which this exhibition is inviting us to partake.

—Jean Sénac, text for exhibition organized by Terrasses at Le Nombre d'Or gallery, Algiers, October 21–31, 1953; repr. in Hamid Nacer-Khodja, ed., *Visages d'Algérie: Regards sur l'art* (Paris: Paris-Méditerranée; Algiers: EDIF, 2002), 120–21. Translated from French by Emma Ramadan.



From left: Jean Sénac, Jean de Maisonseul, Paul Gillon, Maria Manton, and Louis Nallard in front of Le Nombre d'Or gallery, Algiers. 1953



Ismail Shammout at his 1953 exhibition at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Khan Younis Refugee Camp, Gaza. *Where To?* is the large painting visible to the right of the artist.

Exhibition of a Palestinian Artist (1953)

Harun Hashim Rashid

Ismail Shammout is one of the many artists born of the Palestinian disaster; he emigrated with those displaced from their most sacred and beloved country. He emigrated from Lydda, bearing a store of images, impressions, and feelings in the very depths of his soul. These lurked in his mind, awaiting opportunities to burst forth. He arrived in Gaza and settled in Khan Younis as a refugee in one of its camps. He confronted wind and rain, endured heat and cold. Yet there his talent awoke, and with it the artist's brush. He began to paint depictions of the camp's unrelenting misery and affliction. But his great soul, having learned patience and aspiration, urged him on to Cairo to study at the free section of its art institute.¹ There his talent was refined, and his sensitivities were established on the foundation of that talent. Shammout's star began to shine; lively rumors began to circulate; Shammout, and his paintings, had gone public.

I met him for the first time here at his exhibition. I read in his face a splendid reflection of the struggle and the resistance, and of true faith in our right as a people to life, and in our right as a nation to dignity and freedom. I wandered with him through the massive exhibition. I browsed the vivid, eloquent paintings. His exhibition begins with a superb image of Major-General Muhammad Naguib [later Egypt's first president], who is resolving disputes: first the problem of Sudan, then Suez, then Palestine. I strolled on with him until I found myself stopped, alongside a great number of onlookers, in front of the painting *Where To?*, the question that was repeated on the lips of the thousands displaced from their homeland. The painting is of an old man carrying one child on his shoulder and grasping another by the hand, with a third following behind. The expressions etched on those deadened faces are the truest demonstration of the sincerity of rendering in Shammout's paintings. A man involved in the Armistice² stopped in front of this painting and said to the artist: "I'll pay you the asking price, I'll pay you any amount you want." But the artist declined to sell it. The painting truthfully portrays the catastrophe, the tragedy, the crime against humanity that has stained the brow of the modern era with shame and injustice. It is an ardent scream from the depths, the depths of the heart. A scream

in the ear of injustice and falsehood: “One must . . . we must . . . triumph over this entrenched misery.”

I walked with the artist and examined the excellent paintings—the most notable ones were *A Sip of Water*, *Sick*, and *The Beginning of the Tragedy* or *We Started from Here*, as well as many other magnificent works.

Everything in Shammout’s exhibition indicates that the Palestinian cause is alive in her sons’ hearts, and that it is the spring from which they draw the inspiration to make their accusations.

Indeed, we work for Palestine. We write for her. We paint for her. We compose for her. Palestine is in our hearts and our eyes and our chests—despite the cruel violence of time.

I hope that Shammout’s exhibition garners the same support in Beirut that it has received in Gaza, for I have heard that efforts are underway to stage our talented artist’s next exhibition in Beirut.

Notes

1. *Eds.*: The free section offered the open, non-degree-granting courses at the College of Fine Arts.
2. *Eds.*: This refers to the Armistice Agreements, signed between Israel and individual Arab countries in 1949, to officially end the 1948 Arab-Israeli War.

—Hārūn Hāshim Rashīd, “Ma‘raḡ Fannān Filasṭīnī,” *al-Adīb* 12, no. 9 (September 1953), 72–73. Translated from Arabic by Anna Swank.

About the Third Exhibition at the British Cultural Council (1953)

Shakir Hassan Al Said

When I first read the title of Mr. Atta Sabri’s review of the Third Art Exhibition at the British Cultural Council in Baghdad in the October issue [of *al-Adab*],¹ I expected an article of visual criticism wherein a quick survey of the content of the exhibition and the names of the artists would be a prelude to the critic’s evaluation of the paintings: their triteness or brilliance, as seen from a particular artistic angle. But I was to be disappointed.

The fact that the critic is expected to shoulder such responsibility is a positive aspect of present-day criticism. When a contemporary painter writes about an art exhibition in a literary magazine, the article must go beyond journalistic survey to provide a meticulous analysis that allows readers to perceive the extent of the work’s development and significance, as well as the value of the responsibility borne by the artist in undertaking his work. For a series of exhibitions is a chart of the work’s development, and also serves to establish a standard for general artistic taste. When an artist accepts the responsibility of exhibiting a painting, he is just like a poet or writer who chooses to publish a poem or story; in doing so, he is, once and for all, establishing a final boundary for himself that protects his work from his own pen. A painting is subject to development in the artist’s studio up until the time it leaves it for exhibition. The artist’s introduction of his paintings into the gallery thus becomes his final brushstroke, the artist’s participation in the exhibition his ultimate stance.

Thus the decision to participate in an exhibition is not an easy one for a painter to make, placing him as it does in a delicate position of accountability for

all potential outcomes, as well as registering the significance of his choice to exhibit and to take part in the game with others. It is perhaps this problem that causes some artists to hesitate before venturing to exhibit their work. The contemporary sculptor [Alberto] Giacometti used to make sculptures that he destroyed upon completion for fear of presenting civilization with a work of art which did not satisfy him, which he found imperfect. The same is true for [Franz] Kafka, the renowned Austro[-Hungarian] author who never published any of his novels or stories during his lifetime because not one of them convinced him of its brilliance.

It is worth noting that the artist today is no longer an isolated individual. The age of isolation and pessimism and the hankering after merely performative values ended with World War I and the interwar period. The legacy that was developed by the Cubists, Expressionists, Surrealists, and Fauvists has today become a new point of departure for the new problems of expressing the age's spirit of humanism and the characteristics of the generation's struggle and commitment—all necessitated by the current awakening of spiritual values. What is to be expected, then, from a contemporary artist but to mirror the improving age? So the art exhibition is not a passing event for visitors to enjoy, but rather the first edition of a poetry collection that expects attentive reading from readers and proper criticism from critics. It represents not just the artist's personal stance but also a measure of his maturity, even a measure of the maturity of art itself and the extent of its accord with the spirit of the age.

Hence, it was by these two measures, namely the exhibition's responsibility and the extent of its expression of the age, that the critic should have reviewed the exhibition in question. The observations made by Mr. Atta Sabri are nothing but brief allusions to the painters' talents, the titles of some of their paintings, and the extent of the influence of the European schools that shaped their artistic education. He also mentions, with numbers, the audience turnout at the exhibition, as well as the participation of some foreign painters, in order to draw conclusions about the exhibition's success. But what is actually expected of him in this case is to take the *paintings* as a starting point toward a verdict about the exhibition and the artists. That is to say, the critic here has turned proper criticism on its head and created a descriptive context instead of an interpretive one.

As for the actual outcome of the exhibition, the responsibility of its artists, and the extent of its expression of the level of arts in Iraq and of the spirit of the age, let us ask ourselves: What sense of responsibility can be vested in the artist?

The year 1953 has been full of visual arts exhibitions, the most important being those by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, the Pioneers, and Friends of Art,² in addition to some exhibitions held at schools and universities. From the type of paintings and the unity of style for each exhibiting group, we can surmise the level of responsibility assumed by each exhibition. The Baghdad Group for Modern Art and the Pioneers have generally exhibited the summation of modern creative experiences. The Friends of Art society has demonstrated the unity of artists in Iraq. And the school exhibitions have showcased the potential of young generations.

What, then, was the British Council's responsibility? This is the question that Mr. Atta should have addressed. In my opinion, the participating artists were motivated by nothing more than an opportunity to show their work, or rather by an opportunity to do so in a context that reminded them of the country in which they

completed their education. This was in the best of cases. No one shouldered any responsibility worth carrying; the art exhibition is but a new tool for sharing works of art, and the artist's objective should not be merely to make use of that tool, but rather to use it toward a satisfactory end.

Furthermore, the participation of Iraqi artists today in an exhibition organized by a foreign institution implies an acceptance of that institution's logic in preparing the exhibition. Participating in a foreign exhibition should not be rejected in and of itself; what should be rejected is any objective of an exhibition hosted by such an institution that is not positive, that aims at anything other than encouraging the artists and showcasing their talents. Most Iraqi artists also participated, for example, in an international exhibition held in India last year, and the Indian government has plans to organize an exhibition of exclusively Iraqi painters. But what does it mean when a *colonial* institution like the British Cultural Council hosts an exhibition for Iraqi artists?

In fact, before becoming involved in any exhibition an artist should ask himself whether the commitment he is about to embark on is in line with his true desires and freedom of action, and whether he is confident of the soundness of the responsibility he is assuming. For it is unacceptable for a painter to take any opportunity to indiscriminately send off his paintings. I know a painter who was desperate for any chance to exhibit his paintings, but his bad luck never let him have one [showing] that did not in some way disadvantage him.

It seems that none of the painters who participated in the British exhibition appreciated the weight of the responsibility as much as the organizing institution appreciated its own. For while the painters viewed the exhibition merely as a means to exhibit—and perhaps sell—some of their paintings, the institution strove to demonstrate its care for Iraqi artists while simultaneously promoting British ones. The exhibition hall included paintings by both British and Iraqi painters. It cannot be said, in the end, that the Iraqi artists' participation in this exhibition carried any serious responsibility or meaning.

As for the extent to which the exhibition reflected the spirit of the age, the mood of the generation, and the level of artistic development in Iraq, these questions can only be answered by examining the paintings themselves. The first thing that struck the visitor was the elegance of the display, and the complete lack of unity of style among the works exhibited. Indeed, the exhibition contained a gamut of styles, including the poor and the priceless, the good and the bad, the old and the new. Some paintings were academic, some impressionistic, some abstract, and others impossible to identify as belonging to any artistic school or movement. Some paintings (by Qasim Naji) were presented as Surrealist, when they were in fact utterly unrelated to any modern style, let alone Surrealism. Atta Sabri himself characterized them as "Roman" images.

Such a variety of methods and styles could have presented us with a comprehensive image of the visual arts in Iraq, had the exhibition not omitted many notable artists and distorted the true art scene—a selection that features only mediocre or academic paintings represents only the bleak side of art.

Thus, this exhibition did not represent art's progress and essence so much as it represented its status quo. If the objective was for the paintings to represent the

cream of current artistic endeavors, it was hindered by a status quo that foregrounds the academic over the modern.

These passing remarks are meant to alert my colleague Mr. Atta Sabri to some objections, and to urge my fellow painters to apply more careful consideration before rushing into exhibitions. Finally, they are also intended to correct the mistaken impressions cast on readers' minds with regard to painting in Iraq and the disposition of Iraqi artists.

Notes

1. Eds.: The reference is to Atta Sabri, "Al-Ma'rad al-Fanni al-Thalith fi al-Ma'had al-Thaqafi al-Britani fi Baghdad," *al-Adab* 1, no. 10 (October 1953): 77–79.
2. Eds.: On the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, see pp. 150–54 in this volume. The Pioneers artists' group was formally established by Iraqi artist Faiq Hassan in 1947, and the Friends of Art was founded in Baghdad in 1941 by a number of Iraq's leading artists, with the goal of promoting and exhibiting modern visual arts.

—Shākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, "Ḥawla al-Ma'rad al-Fanni al-Thālith fi al-Ma'had al-Thaqāfi," *al-Ādāb* 1, no. 12 (December 1953): 62–63. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

IN FOCUS

The *Nakba* and Arab Culture

Nasser Rabbat

The loss of Palestine—a decisive event whose full magnitude ultimately coalesced around the notion of the *Nakba*, or “catastrophe”—marked Arab culture in the second half of the twentieth century. Stunned by the swift victory in 1948 of the nascent State of Israel, which seized most of Palestine, and overwhelmed by the streams of Palestinian refugees flooding the neighboring countries, the Arab world responded first with bafflement and later with denial coupled with lamentation. Denial resulted in further fissures in the already embattled Arab politics and identity, and led to a series of military coups in Syria (1949), Egypt (1952), and Iraq (1957) that claimed pan-Arabism as the ideology of salvation. Grief pervaded poetry, song, stories, and painting, much of which focused on the dreadful life of the refugees and their hopes of return to their lost homes.

The recovery of Palestine became the central Arab cause during the age of progressive pan-Arabism, which peaked in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Concurrently, Arabic cultural expressions moved toward an upbeat, even over-confident optimism, while romantic representations of Palestine in words and images kept its memory alive. Nostalgic depictions of landscapes, daily life, and historic landmarks (in particular the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem) were punctuated by dramatic illustrations of the refugees' misery as well as puffed-up displays of the Arab armies' readiness for the awaited liberation, all of which made their way, over the course of the following decades, into diverse forms of representation: art, posters, stamps, television skits, songs, and *tableaux vivants*.

The startling defeat in the war of June 1967 with Israel and the loss of the rest of historical Palestine spelled the end of the grand dream of imminent return. A mood of defeated melancholy and wounded ego permeated the culture throughout the Arab world. But the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a coalition of grassroots resistance movements and its heroic stands against the Israeli Army in the late 1960s restored some optimism to the Palestinian cause. The existence of the PLO also fostered a renewal of a defiant Palestinian culture, complete with its own revolutionary art,



Burhan Karkutli. *Jerusalem Is Ours—The Victory Is Ours*. 1975. Ink on cardboard. 9 1/16 × 15 3/4" (50 × 40 cm). Collection Dr. Ramzi Dalloul

which borrowed from Socialist Realism and graffiti art and combined them with a revitalized folkloric imagery. This process signaled the advent of a national Palestinian art that shared many themes and historical references with the art of other progressive countries, including Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and especially Lebanon, where relative freedom and exposure to the West imbued a dynamic cultural and artistic scene.

But the hopes for Palestinian liberation and progress were again dashed with the Black September war in Jordan in 1970–71, which pitted the PLO against the king of Jordan and his army. This was followed in 1975 by the excruciating civil war in Lebanon, which gravely damaged the PLO, and the Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel in 1978, which shattered any remaining semblance of cohesive Arab support.

Art responded in various ways that reflected the complex conditions of the Palestinian people, who were divided into two basic populations. Those of the “interior” included the 1948 Palestinians, who carried Israeli nationality, as well as the Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Then there were the various communities of the Palestinian diaspora spread around the world, whose second and third generations eased into their host cultures, without forgetting Palestine and the dream of returning to it one day.

Against a backdrop of adverse regional and global events at the end of the twentieth century, the successive intifadas against Israeli occupation (1987–91 and 2000–2005), the 1993 Oslo accords, and the labyrinthine “peace process” threw the Palestinian cause into a state of limbo. The situation was exacerbated by the rise of political Islam and the later revolts of the Arab Spring in the 2010s, which toppled the dominant yet fragile Arab political order. For the first time in more than seventy-five years, Palestine ceased to be the undisputed primary Arab cause. More regional concerns replaced it in other Arab countries, while a different kind of Arabism arose in the diaspora. Today, a new generation of artists and intellectuals is experimenting with novel and less directly political forms of expression, which has had the salutary effect of humanizing and globalizing the just cause of Palestine.

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See Plate 16 for a representative painting by Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour, *Camel of Hardship* (1973).

ALGERIAN GROUP OF THE LETTRIST INTERNATIONAL / Algiers

This manifesto, which appeared in the third issue of the short-lived *Internationale Lettriste* (December 1952–June 1954), the journal of a splinter Lettrist group established in Paris by Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman, was issued by a group of Algerian activist-intellectuals. The manifesto's lead author, Mohamed “Midhou” Dahou, contributed numerous other texts to the Lettrist project and would go on to join Debord in creating the anti-authoritarian Marxist group Situationist International.

Manifesto (1953)

Cheikh Ben Dhine, Mohamed Dahou, Ismail Ait Djafer

No one dies of hunger, thirst, or life. One can only die from renunciation.

Modern society is a society of cops. We are revolutionaries, because the police are the supreme force of this society. We are not for another society, because the police are the supreme force of all societies. We are not nihilists, because we do not grant power to anyone or anything.

We are Lettrists who wait, for want of something better. We have become aware of the extremely regressive nature of all salaried work. The nonresolution of complex problems determines a period of waiting in which all practical activity constitutes cowardice, because life must be asymptotic and benevolent.

Moreover, we are geniuses: know it once and for all.

Algiers, April 1953

—(Original byline:) Hajj Mohamed Dahou, Cheikh Ben Dhine, Ait Djafer, “Manifeste du Groupe Algérien de l'Internationale Lettriste,” *Internationale Lettriste*, no. 3 (August 1953). Translated from French by Bill Brown, for notbored.org.



Internationale Lettriste newsletter, no. 3 (1953), featuring the manifesto signed by the Algerian group of the Lettrist International movement

A CALL TO HUMAN HERITAGE

The young Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber) published this essay on painting as a human-centered practice in the newspaper *al-Bina'*, a Damascus-based platform for the Syrian Socialist Nationalist Party. At the time, Adonis served as the paper's literary editor, and he had organized a special issue on the arts, featuring contributions by artists and archaeologists, to coincide with the opening of Syria's third National Exhibition (an annual juried exhibition sponsored by the Syrian state). The newspaper notes that the text has been excerpted from a longer study he was preparing on contemporary art (that longer text was never published).

The Meaning of Painting (1953)

Adonis

When a Cubist approach is adopted, the focus is on depicting reality rather than nature, and this is done by painting a cluster of the object's external faces, which are seen from several angles: from the side and from the front, and from above and below, all at the same time. We therefore have good reason to inquire about the essence of this reality.

After a bit of study and deeper inquiry, it becomes apparent that this reality contracts and atrophies before being transformed into another reality, one that has no relation to the object in question. It becomes a psychological "reality," the reality of the artist's feelings as he is depicting the object. Or it becomes a private "composition" that only the painter grasps, and even *he* might not grasp it. For it is as if the artist were not depicting the object's reality here, but rather his own psychological state, or his own mental play. It is as if reality were a riddle, or a puzzle. And whenever reality turns out this way, it loses all measure, and loses its human and social meaning, which is the very foundation and essence of reality.

The art we want is the art that originates from man, and that ends with him. It is the art that man adopts as a source for himself, and as a goal. In my opinion, if art has meaning, it is this meaning.

In the poem, the piece of music, the painting, the sculpture—in all of these, we want to see life, to see it grow and move, and we want to see man, with all his various problems, struggle and forbear, suffer and hope. We want him to translate his flesh and blood into behavior and action.

Art, and especially painting, in its orientation toward poor and simple subjects such as people, natural landscapes, and inanimate objects, does not offer humanity—with all its long struggles and all the monuments it has left behind—anything that can put it face to face with itself, in front of life, in its living meaning, and in front of the great human problems, which are innumerable, unending.

What artistic richness is there, from the human perspective, in depicting a tree or a river or a mountain?

And what richness is there, once again from the same human perspective, in depicting people in portraits, or in depicting inanimate objects?

It is said that the value of the painting here lies in its forms and its artistic standards, as well as in its structure and composition, but I believe that the value of

the work of art in general does not lie in its form or its appearance or its externally imposed standards. Rather, I believe that the work of art's entire value arises when it is able to represent human emotions and thoughts, and when it conveys an impression of them. In my opinion, the value of the painting lies neither in its general composition nor in what it is composed of, nor in the harmony between colors, nor in the balance between the different forms within it, but rather in the life that moves within it, in the human values that it represents and from which it originates.

Neither aesthetic theories nor formal values constitute the basic subject of art. Instead, man, in his life, constitutes that subject. Thus it is not the form that we need to emphasize in the work of art, but rather the idea; we should not be emphasizing artistic styles, but rather human life.

The representation of a person or an animal or a plant or an inanimate object is virtually devoid of all human richness and depth. Truth, action, man. And when he works for progress, when he struggles, when he fails and when he emerges victorious, when he falls behind and when he moves forward, when he dies and when he survives—this man, in his life, in his entire being, is the true subject of art.

The ancient Syrian artist perceived the importance of the idea, or the truth, in art. His sculptures aimed at accentuating human meaning, in the example of the Syrian man, in that man's connection to the absolute and his evaluation of life, in his behavior, and in his life as well. Syrian poetry and literature have not turned away from this foundation either. The epic of Gilgamesh and the epics of Ugarit are vivid models of this, for they take up the greatest human topics and grapple with them, and shed new light on them.

In contrast to this, anyone who studies the artistic heritage in ancient Greece will notice its tendency to turn away from the idea and be pinned down at the limits of beautiful forms, to such an extent that beauty becomes a matter of specific standards, and lengths measured out in meters. For this reason, ancient Greek art as a whole strayed from the deep human meaning that once formed the essence and foundation of Syrian art.

Whoever studies the history of art, and especially painting, will notice this curious development that has afflicted it, and that continues to afflict it every day. There is no doubt that each new form that this development takes has the same underlying goal: namely, to attempt to express the subjects of life; and there is no doubt that the proponents of each new form believe that that form somehow has a greater potential to express those subjects than the previous ones.

But this development, in some of its forms, appears to have pulled art backward, or at the very least appears to be hindering art.

If the development of art is necessary and natural, then it is not natural for that development to turn into mere forms and mere styles.

Some of the contemporary trends in the development of art have definitively freed themselves from the subject; and within them, painting has become colors and surfaces devoid of any meaning except for internal organization and harmony.

Some of these trends have led to a kind of centralization around the self. From the individual self—the self of the artist—they have tapped a wellspring for their artistic experiments, and as a source for everything they produce. How simple and naïve the subject of art seems when it is restricted to merely emerging from the

individual, from that small conduit, if what I've claimed is true. That subject, in order to keep its distance from life, is a condensation of life within a single self and a single individual experience. And the distance from life is, at the same time, a distance from art.

Art that was termed *academic* was an expression of manual skill in conveying things and in representing them. And within that art, painting does not constitute a representation of the artist's relationship with society. In other words, the artist removed himself from the painting and conveyed things objectively.

The contemporary trends are, in most cases, violent reactions against the academy. It seems that the artists, in developing art, are solely interested in artistic style, and not in the idea or the subject.

Artistic styles and values have therefore undergone a great deal of transformation and change, whereas the subject has remained the same, for the most part. This means that the development of art has been a formal one rather than an essential one, for in all the various artistic trends the subject has remained virtually the same, and yet that subject is expressed or drawn with different forms.

In my opinion, the artistic development we need is the development of the idea, the development of a perspective on life, so that the formal expressive values can be as they may, on the condition that they do not become ends in themselves.

For the differences in style and formal values throughout paintings, or any works of art, are not important as long as those works, in their entirety, aim to express the genuine subject of art, namely, man in his deep humanity, in his thought and behavior, in his entire being.

Studying the problem of time in art might reveal just how poor the majority of productions are within most of the artistic currents that have emerged to this day. This is merely a result of the poverty of the subjects of art.

And if the value of the artistic work—whether it be a poem or a piece of music or a painting or a sculpture—lies in the extent to which time is compressed within it, that is, in the extent to which it appears to be filled with duration and life, then the works of art that take up natural landscapes or inanimate objects or portraits of people seem poor and simple indeed.

And if painting is, by its very nature, spatial—that is, if it is devoid of time and movement, free of life—then it will be capable of realizing the unity of time and space, liberating itself from its servitude to these poor subjects and devoting itself to man, and to the life of man and the problems of human life.

The painting that conveys only the sensory moment lasts, as its lifespan, no more than a single moment.

A great work of art reveals simultaneously the past, present, and future.

—Adūnis, "Ma'nā al-Lawḥa al-Fanniyya," *al-Binā'*, December 9, 1953. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

CONSIDERING ARAB ART AND ARTISTS

In January 1956, the Beirut-based journal *al-Adab* dedicated a special issue to the arts in the Arab world. Editor Suhayl Idriss explained that the journal would consider the health of the arts in the Arab countries, posing the question: “Where do our arts stand with regard to the consciousness that is blossoming in the Arab nation in this period?” The texts that follow are drawn from that special issue. The first consists of excerpts from the responses to a questionnaire on “Art and Arab Life” that *al-Adab* circulated to artists in Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria (original respondents not translated here include César Gemayel, Maher Raef, Ismail Al-Sheikhly, Hamdy Ghayath, and Khalil al-Masry). The second, an essay by Egyptian intellectual and folklorist Zakariya al-Hijjawi, outlines the psychological parameters for a meaningful national art.

See Plates 17 and 18 for 1956 works by Hamed Abdalla and Jewad Selim, both respondents to the questionnaire.

Artists’ Questionnaire: “Art and Arab Life” (1956)

Modern Arab societies have gone through important periods of development and growth, to which numerous factors have contributed—and art has been one of these driving, influential factors. What role has art played in the field of your specialty (painting, music, theater, cinema, etc.) in terms of its impact on Arab society, and in terms of the impact of Arab society on it?

Al-Adab posed this question to a group of people working in art in different Arab countries and received the following responses:

Response of Mr. Moustafa Farroukh (Lebanon)

If we examine the truth of our artistic production, and its relationship with our reality and our lives, we find that everything connected with culture in the Arab world is unconnected to anything of our reality. 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.

Art, as one of the elements of culture and guidance, is rarely linked to our current reality. It fumbles about in the chaos of different foreign artistic currents. It is not inspired, whether in small or large part, by personal or national feelings, with the exception of certain phenomena. Most of this art was transferred or copied from foreign arts.

And we can see that art in Lebanon—which we might claim to be more developed than the other Arab countries due to its antiquity as well as for other reasons—is for the most part a copy, an imitation, and a repetition of foreign arts. Rarely does it express its reality, or derive it from its surroundings and history or from personal feelings.

I do not wish to narrate events or to disclose certain artistic scandals; this is not my goal. Instead, I will leave this to time and the people’s cultural development, which will guarantee that all of it comes to light.

In sum, the dominant spirit of art in our region is a spirit of commercialism and the endless pursuit of money. Any careful observer will note that the jealousy, animosity, disaffection, and loss of communication between artists all comprise irrefutable evidence of the soundness of this statement. Thus, one does not hope that present-day art will undergo improvement or revival, for art anywhere in the world—and including in Lebanon—must be based on a spirit of love, and an artistic work must be for the sake of art and nothing but that.

As for the state of art in the rest of the Arab countries, it is no better off. Most of this art is based on copying and imitating art movements established in Europe, without making any attempt to deny this or to draw inspiration from the present realities and exigencies of Arab countries. At the same time, the mission of art, as we know, is the truthful expression of the feelings and reality of the nation.

For all these reasons, I am of the opinion that true artists must move away from the idea of commercialism and work solely for the sake of the art. They must seek inspiration from within themselves and from the nature of their countries, clearly after studying the principles and rules in proper art schools. Then they must leave behind the idea of commercialism and the acquisition of wealth, for art has never, throughout its long history, been a means for acquiring money and wealth. Finally, the adherents of art in our countries must not let envy permeate their being. Instead, they should possess a beautiful spirit and a good character, for this is the fertile soil in which true art can be established, and from which it can carry out its noble mission.

Response of Mr. Rachid Wehbe (Lebanon)

It is well known that art is considered the truthful mirror of every people. Indeed, it seeks inspiration from images of its past and its heritage, and it expresses its present and portrays its desires and hopes for the future. As such, art is a symbol of the spirit of that people. It echoes their responses to their environment and times, and in doing so presents a vibrant picture of life over time. If we search in the light of this truth for the relationship between our artistic production and our current reality, we will not find it to be a closely linked relationship. This is because, if we mention certain artistic works that endeavor to approach this reality, and its stamping by national traits, we cannot forget that our present artistic production is represented by the theory of “art for art’s sake,” where art exists in its ivory tower, far from the environment and the people; and literary ideas remain secondary to formal considerations, which center artistic value around the creation of a harmonious composition of volumes, lines, and colors.

Even though this theory enjoys a great deal of support from international artistic circles, we should nevertheless take into account our specific circumstances, as a people who are building for history, and ensure that we improve the alignment of the pillars onto which our solid edifice will be raised, so that our works present a true picture of what we feel and experience. Art is one of the most prominent of the intellectual elements that accompany the renaissances of nations. The true artist is the person who lives in his environment, searching and inquiring in order to convey the feelings and impressions that influence him. Art in our region suffers from foreign influences that nearly divert it from its ideal direction and separate it from our current realities. In many cases, our production comes as if it were another image from those schools whose artistic principles we have borrowed or taken. Drawing

from others is necessary to develop our artistic culture, yet there is a major difference between consciously drawing from another's work and adopting his ideas to the point of becoming lost in his personality, estranged from our context and our environment. Here, in order to successfully navigate this critical stage of our artistic life, we should work to liberate ourselves from all that obstructs our proper nationalist direction, in order to be rid of all foreign influence on our artistic thinking and to establish sound foundations for the independence of our artistic personality. We must search for this personality in our Eastern, Lebanese surroundings, which are full of vibrant, exciting light, as well as in our glorious national heritage and in the subjects that have value for us. We should remember that these surroundings have already enchanted Western artists and served as a source of innovation and inspiration for them. What would be more appropriate for us, as we revive these surroundings, than to draw from them the impetus for an elevated artistic production, consistent with our environmental circumstances—which we sense more fully than anyone else. Let us adopt them as a basis on which we plant the pillars of our artistic renaissance, that very renaissance we are working to bring about. And let us move forward by its light with strength, determination, and faith.

Response of Mr. Fouad Kamel (Egypt)

[. . .] Since 1953, Egyptian artists have felt the need to find more vibrant arenas in which to display their developing art. Discussions in some of the newspapers have begun to ask in earnest about the role of art in relation to society, and debates have been initiated regarding methods of realism in art—thereby following the current of freethinking that began with the establishment of the Art and Liberty group. Today we see that the Egyptian artist is nearly suffocating in his own art. If he does not set out for new horizons, armed with a progressive awareness of art and science, this artistic generation will be doomed to annihilation, and Egypt will continue to wait for another new generation to hold its dreams in their minds and hearts. These new horizons are the mural arts. And fortunately, the modern Egyptian artist has a long artistic heritage at his disposal, beginning with cave paintings from the prehistoric era and including pharaonic art and the art of churches and mosques. These different images and various materials can well serve as a fertile source for study, revival, and development. The Egyptian artist may be assured that the mural is also found in modern artistic heritage, as in the creations of Mexico's artists such as [José Clemente] Orozco, [Diego] Rivera, and [Rufino] Tamayo, which occupy government buildings, halls of science, theaters, restaurants, and all the popular institutions. These are tall, broad pages, on which developed, modern artistic principles may be manifested in murals, without slipping into prevailing academic taste.

Today's insightful critic senses the seeds of this art in the works of Hamed Nada in his most recent phase.

The collective dreams of today should push beyond the limits of the frame and the salons, to be rejuvenated and to live under the sun, before the eyes of millions.

Response of Mr. Hamed Abdalla (Egypt)

Art and society simultaneously influence and are influenced by each other. The true artist takes reality as his raw material. He does not convey this reality literally, but

rather revives it through his whole living being, “viewing it from within” as he creates it anew as a more vibrant reality. Society is also impacted by art and responds to its inspiration. For this reason, the content of art is the content of life.

As for the artist who supposes that an affected display of empty forms is art, he heeds only formalist relations. As for the artist who mimics external reality or represents it in an anecdotal way, he considers art a tool of comprehension, not a way of knowing—or, for the purpose of propagandizing by another means. Because he touches only the surface of life, he represents superficiality and stasis in art.

We note that every phase of society’s development is also a phase of the development of art and all sorts of ways of thinking. We find in the phase of struggle in Egyptian society—in the middle of this century, for example, for the cause of independence—that modern Egyptian art has been liberated from the influence of Western art and has been guided to its correct path: connected with its ancient, inherited past, and with the well of the art of the people and their traditions, adopting the principles of the ancient East without imitating them, in contrast to the principles of the West, which observe the rules of perspective painting, and modeling in shade and color. These rules, which aim to depict objects as seen by the eye without regard for their truth, are subjected to the falsity of naturalism—the principle that the contemporary West rejected when it abandoned easel painting for wall painting.

Response of Mr. Jewad Selim (Iraq)

In any time or place, all important and good artistic production is a mirror that reflects the reality in which it exists. How we perceive this product—whether it is truly human, and how it can be a genuine and powerful expression—all this is related to the freedom of the artist to express his surroundings. This is simultaneously an intellectual freedom and an economic one. There are hundreds of “shoulds” and “musts” that are repeatedly mentioned in our newspapers and magazines, and in most cases the writer is attempting to express his own superiority or the nobleness of his ideas, trying to extricate the artist from his stupefaction or backwardness. This generally indicates the presence of old commonplaces in new molds. Most authors who are agitated with lofty human ideas are quick to offer guidance to writers or artists, even when they themselves do not know or intentionally forget the contents of museums and books, and all the art that humanity has produced that restores our trust in humanity’s goodness.

Response of Mr. Hafidh al-Droubi (Iraq)

Our reality suffers in its appearance, but not in its essence, from the dominance of European character. Our way of life has taken on affectation in order to fit with European life. Local dress is on the verge of being swept aside by European styles as we leave the countryside and move to the cities. Moreover, there is a great contradiction between our core equilibrium as Eastern people and these almost completely false and affected appearances. This is in terms of our reality. In terms of art, the problem is different, for art in our region suffers from Western domination in both its essence and its external forms. In other words, the contradiction mentioned above is nearly nonexistent, for art in our region is in fact Western in its entirety. The reason for this goes back to the fact that painters, and Iraqi painters in particular, had their artistic

beginnings and studies in Europe and in the style of European schools, and as such their views of things became that of a Western person. In addition, there was a dark period that cut us off from our heritage—whether ancient or Islamic civilizations—following which Iraqi artists opened their eyes and saw nothing but mature European art before them. As for our civilizational heritage, it remained concealed until only recently, when museums were established. As for local art, it is extremely simple in impression, so much so that it is difficult to use it as any kind of basis. Another thing is that the local art market is invaded by an artistic culture with a European art affect, whether in inquiry or in outline. We have barely any access to authentic Eastern art—such as Indian, Chinese, and Japanese art—despite the fact that the West has also been influenced by it, and despite its maturity and importance.

Today we feel intense pain at this move away from local reality and national character. Most of us attempt and endeavor to establish an art that represents this reality, that influences it and is influenced by it, and each of us seeks to achieve it according to his specific point of view. Some deal with line and composition, attempting through them to claim something of the Assyrian and Sumerian spirit, yet they remain European nevertheless. Yet these artists try—always, they try.

Others continuously call for a specifically Iraqi art, yet they themselves have not found such a character. One of the Europeans who said that “dusty colors are of an Iraqi character” may have been mistaken, for Iraq is never dusty. And these are our colors. And this is our sun.

There are artists who consider their attempts to be Iraqi art, even as they follow the direction of the modern European school, and the French school in particular. This is because France had a major educational influence on these artists.

As for me personally, despite the fact that I continually endeavor to paint Iraqi subjects, on the basis of my upbringing in a purely Iraqi environment, I continue to think of the work of European painters when picking up the brush and painting. As such, I consider myself still to be playing the role of attempting to establish a modern Iraqi school. Even though I have at times proceeded along the lines of the ancient Iraqi model, these were an imitation and nothing more.

As for how this relationship should be: we believe it should be a close relationship. Artistic tendencies are not subject to logical controls, but rather to the circumstances surrounding the art, the abovementioned factors, and other factors. These current schools will endeavor to create a sound, strong connection with reality, which continues to develop, and to strive to find its particular character.

Response of Mr. Atta Sabri (Iraq)

[. . .] If we move forward to today’s era, we find that the chaos, decadence, confusion, moral collapse, and apathy that followed the two [world] wars have had a major impact on artists. We find them defeated by reality and moving in different, confused directions. Their artistic production was in ebb and flow, until artists in some domains arrived at Social Realism and began to assert their social and political opinions in murals that gave expression to the working class, peasants, and others. This is what happened in Mexico at the hands of the artist [Diego] Rivera and others.

Here we see that the state entered the field and supported and directed artists, or imposed its will on them, so that these artists give voice to their society or political

regime, either directly or indirectly. Whereas [Franklin D.] Roosevelt, with his regime known as the “New Deal,” moved to encourage artists materially and morally and left the field open to them with complete freedom of artistic production, the dictatorships prior to World War II imposed restrictions and conditions on the kinds of art permitted.

As for today in Iraq, following a long period of stagnation, we have embarked on a new and blessed artistic movement, initiated about a quarter of a century ago with our deceased artist Abdul Qadir al-Rassam, the “artist of the Tigris and Baghdad,” who captured peaceful views of the landscape in his oil painting. Then, after 1930, artistic missions began to go to Europe at the behest of the Iraqi Ministry of Education, and returned to their homeland after lengthy study in a new mold and with a European character. These new Iraqi artists, and their students after them, began to look to Europe as a source of revelation and inspiration for their artistic paintings and even their subjects, which became Leda and the Swan, flowers, landscapes, etc. They forgot all but a very little of their surroundings and the environment in which they lived.

Others then emerged who conducted their artistic experiments in the manner of the European artists who were prominent between the two wars, with distinguishing circumstances and causes. They began, in painting their pictures and images, to adopt the schools and methods of Cubism, Surrealism, or abstraction, regardless of the reasons that led European artists to use such modes of expression in their own paintings. As such, they imitated [Pablo] Picasso and others in order to be “modernized” painters. The truth is that we today are facing social, economic, and political problems and circumstances and going through new developments that differ completely from those of European artists.

We noticed that the exhibition of Indian art held in Baghdad three years ago bore a distinctly Indian character, and was tending toward the formation of a modern Indian school. Undoubtedly, that had a pronounced effect on the psyches of Iraqi artists and on a majority of those who visited this exhibition, thus prompting Iraqi artists to think about new and prospective ways to arrive at an Iraqi artistic school, or create a local character, or to form a style that represents Baghdad. Yet this cannot be attained in a single day, or even in a year. Rather, writers, literary figures, and artists must unite to establish the solutions and capacities for attaining a local character, with connection to the international artistic movement.

The new generation in Iraq today has begun to appreciate art in a very encouraging manner for this goal. For we must present more art exhibitions, with facilitation from the Ministry of Education via the Institute of Fine Arts, so as to connect with foreign countries and bring art exhibitions to Iraq, whether of the old works by their masters and schools or of the contemporary. And I think it is incumbent for artists to work to create an artistic and literary magazine to consolidate a public of readers who are thirsty for arts and literature.

Iraq today is going through the birth of a comprehensive architectural and industrial movement. As such, our architects must open the field to painters and sculptors to create murals and bas-relief sculptures on the walls of these buildings, and particularly government buildings, so as to be completely integrated. On the other hand, attention must be paid to commercial art, so that it can meet the needs of the country’s industrial production for images, advertisements, and other commercial

art forms. Art must also be used for social purposes, such as social services and other uses. The new and expansive squares and open areas to be created upon completion of Baghdad's city planning will be among the best arenas for sculptors in our country to erect monumental statues, which will become a Ka'ba for visitors and excursionists who seek to escape from the people or fill their spare time, just as in the squares of Rome, Paris, and London.

Our artistic production should be a true expression of our current reality. It must reflect the pains of the people as well as their joys, in social and popular subjects. The artist faces an open field, for these subjects have not been addressed previously. Art today is moving toward a kind of new realism, by which it is possible to record daily life in our country in tremendous, expressive paintings.

Response of Mr. Fateh al-Moudarres (Syria)

The Arab arts have suffered through a long period of decline, from painting to styles of buildings, from metal engraving to textiles, and even popular traditions of dress and song. In addition, a permanent religious opposition, combined with the shallowness of the scientific culture, and the lack of genuine, constructive attempts by Arab governments to revive popular Arab heritage—all this has led to the obliteration of whatever remained of a distinctive artistic heritage.

Along with all these urgent ailments, European imperialism arrived to spread distortion and poverty and poisoned relations between the remaining religious sects so as to politicize them. All this destroyed the last remaining bastion of Arab art in the East, and it remains in ruins.

If we wish to define a character for any Arab artistic production, or if we wish to find a link between any such production and our reality, we will fail. If a European critic today were to view any painting by an Arab painter, he would not find anything but a Turkish fez, the face of a dome, an ancient minaret, a strangely designed water pipe in a carnival of cafés, or a piece of embroidery from a worn-out Shiraz carpet!

The modern concept of contemporary realist Arab art is difficult to define, as the nonexistence of inherited artistic features has, to a great extent, rendered our Arab artistic production weak in terms of its identity. Indeed, the contemporary art of each state in the world is based on substantial inheritances. In India, we see in the paintings of modern artists clear references to the ancient Indian artistic heritage. The same is true of modern China, as well as Japan. We see in the exhibitions of all the nations an originality and differentiation that indicate that this painting is Indian or that painting is Chinese or Finnish. However, the painting created in the Arab East has no identity, for its character is lost, its originality erased, and it consists of a distorted, mixed-up imitation of the European schools. We can thus assert, for all the preceding reasons, that Arab artistic production has no relationship at all with our reality or our renaissance.

In order to bless contemporary Arab taste with a truly Arab art that interprets its reality and its social struggle on all fronts, we must begin a new "renaissance" era—meaning an era based on the rebirth of ancient Arab art, grafted to current modern concepts, in a light rich in distinctive color and inherited, authentic designs.

The reasons for the chaos to be found in the exhibitions held in Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Damascus, Aleppo, and Baghdad have become clear: There is no

close coordination between governments and painters, sculptors, musicians, architects, and authors. Nor is there even a sense that this collaboration is lacking.

Come with me: Stand next to me before an Arab painting, and let us assume that its creator has called it an Arabic name meaning “Awakening” or “Revolution” or “Protest.” What would you find in this painting? You would not find anything except a carnival of influences, firstly because the artist has no personal style. You would not find any colors from the East, nor would you find that authentic effort to highlight originality in the orientation of the design and the subject as a whole. Perhaps the reason for this goes back to the fact that Arab history is not studied, on one hand, and on the other to the dearth of understanding of common artistic schools. Thus, painters, sculptors, musicians, and architects are unable to establish a distinctive character by which they might define their place in the ranks of universal art.

The development of the artistic understanding of a contemporary people is not incompatible with the inherited ancient values that have a unique character. If you were to take even the most contemporary of schools, such as Surrealism, and if you as an artist fervently cling to your Arab nationalism, you would be able to render an original expression from your lines. And even if you were an advocate of the abstract or the non-objective schools, you would be able to maintain a distinctive Arab character. This matter is inevitable for modern architects who insist on taking from the style of Le Corbusier! Indeed, if Le Corbusier had been Eastern or Arab, he would have given his school a distinctive character, while still observing the latest requirements of the age, because comprehending character requires it, and national pride as well!

I visited Europe this year, and found a unique character in every country I visited. When the steamer docked us back on Syrian shores, the absurd hodgepodge became apparent in the buildings, the music, and all signs of life—even in people’s faces! The East appeared before me as if it had been hit by a hydrogen bomb! How, then, can we respond to the original question: Does contemporary Arab artistic production have a connection to our reality—apart from what we have said in the preceding lines?

Our situation is disgraceful, our values cheap, and our confidence nonexistent. As such, our distinctive Arab identity is also absent. If we have been allowed to stand among the many nations, it is only because we have not yet died out completely.

Look: This man is Chinese, that one is Siamese; this man is Filipino, that one is French—and who do we have here? Tell me, by God, who is this strange creation who wears a fez on his head and on top of that a hat, and below them a tie, and on his shoulders an overcoat, and over that an *abaya*, and on his feet crepe-soled shoes. He speaks in a language that is neither Arabic nor Chinese nor Siamese, nor anything recognizable—his language does not even resemble the language of the birds! Now look at his face, and you will not even find distinctive Eastern features in it! After all this, how does your stomach accept and digest the painting the Arab holds in his hands, as if he were a beggar holding out an empty bowl, begging for the people’s sympathy before they judge him with sweeping verdicts, but not daring to reveal it! How do we accept to call this a painting? Such an Arab, when standing among the ranks of nations, should bow his head in shame.

We can lie to ourselves, but the matter is different in the eyes of others, who must see us as we truly are—who must see that our pride in our distinctive values has ceased to exist.

If we wish to have a modern Arab art, we must initiate an era of rebirth for all that has become extinct. We must build it up and graft to it what we will, according to what the old outlines will accept in terms of new turns and appearances. As I say this, regret fills my heart, because the matter applies to my own work as well!

Response of Mr. Munir Sulayman (Syria)

The question about art and its link to our Arab reality is frequently repeated, and the people respond to it with a host of different answers. The most important of these answers is that the greatest purpose of art is to express the features of life in its various aspects. In all Arab countries, art remains far from this. If you were to see a painting that represents a landscape or face or still life, you would feel that there is a dense veil blocking you from seeing the truth of these objects or separating you and the life that pulses within each of them.

The important thing in painting is that people see in every canvas something of themselves, something of their hopes and dreams for life. Even more, the artist seeks to depict through his painting the life that is lived by the people, as well as the hopes that stir in his heart and in theirs. The artist succeeds to the extent that he expresses these dreams and makes them speak in his painting with a power to affect the people, even influencing the simple souls among them who have not had the good fortune to enjoy a culture of art.

The function of art, whatever its color and whatever its form, is to serve life. A beautiful painting—whether of a river, or the breast or legs of a beautiful woman, or the shoulders of a man of great stature, or his arm—is beautiful because it suits its organic function, and its concept is nothing but the elevated rendering of our many needs. Indeed, it is the perpetual extension of these needs, meaning that the concept distills the future of these powerful, unrestrained needs and makes it evident, just as the flower and the fruit condense the tree, promulgate it, and extend its life into immortality.

Yet this eternal truth remains unfamiliar to artists in all the Arab countries. For this reason, we cannot claim that there is art in the Arab countries, and we will remain far from it so long as artists are distantly removed from the essence and secret of art, and even from its fundamental components.

—“Al-Fann . . . wa-l-Ḥayāt al-‘Arabiyya,” *al-Ādāb* 4, no. 1 (January 1956): 3–10. Translated from Arabic by Sarah Dorman.

The Question of Form: Between National Realism and the Psychological Moment (1956)

Zakariya al-Hijawi

One person, among thousands and millions of others, is different from other people and creatures. That person is the artist.

Most people are divided into groups, each of which has its own spiritual or material realm and tenets. The artist alone stands outside these groups, not because he has apostatized from their creed, but because he believes with silent conviction in the fundamental virtue of humanity.

Most people go about their lives in search of pleasure, profoundly attached to the idea that it is their chance for existence, while this person alone, the artist, strives to penetrate the superficialities of the senses in search of deeper joys that he gropes for with his soul, his psyche, his very being. Whereas they inhabit the cells of everyday existence, the artist alone seeks out a life that is not divided into days, seasons, passing flickers of pleasure: a life of constant, radiant springtime.

Most people plant the white flag on the hills of habit and convention and the plains of good counsel, while the artist alone raises his flags in permanent war on habit, convention, and admonition. Whereas they see the fall of a woman as a blemish of shame that can only be washed clean by blood, he believes that shame is found nowhere but in submission to vengefulness, and that honor consists not in putting an adulteress to death, but in putting to death the causes of societal decay.

Most people are filled with joy at the sight of the shining moon or the fragrance of blossoms carried on the breeze. But this person alone sees, in some of the people around him, wider skies; in their noble deeds, brighter and more glorious moons; and in their sacrifices, winds carrying the scent of human glory.

Most people profess that life is impermanent, and all things transitory, while privately sharpening their claws as if they wished to possess everything, convinced that they will never die. The artist alone proclaims that life is eternal and permanent and will not fade, while privately and publicly he does nothing but give of his wealth, himself, and his soul, as if certain he might die at any moment.

Most people are ruled by their emotions, while he alone seeks out cause and reason. Whereas this leads others to say: "There is nothing in the realm of possibility more wondrous than what is,"¹ he alone cries out through his art: "But everything is possible!"

Why is this so?

The artist, in short, is a person in and around whom circumstances have coalesced so as to push him to the critical point at which creatures and things are transformed from their original state to another, the crucial moment at which a human being and all his or her visible attributes undergo a total qualitative transformation.

If human limbs and organs were constituted of pure chemical, vegetable, or mineral matter, we would be able to witness this transformation with the naked eye, just as we witness other changes in these forms of matter, such as when a chemical substance changes color or transitions from frozen to gaseous or volatile, or when the green of a plant fades to yellow, or when a mineral changes in composition, becoming

a different mineral. If the human form were made of such things, it would be easy to perceive the contours of the human being's transformation each time he reacted to a passing notion, event, idea, or desire: withering or flowering, extinguished or alight, dormant or erupting.

What prevents us from witnessing this being in a state of change is not some blindness that has seized our hearts, but the fact that we see him rather than hearing the destruction and fulmination within him, or breathing the sharp scent of transformation, or seeing his soul, even if its steams and vapors leak out to us from within.

But what is the secret behind this human being's propensity to undergo these qualitative changes when others do not, such that he seems, physiologically, almost to be a creature made of chemical matter, and the conditions and events and experiences that act upon him to be made of chemical matter as well?

For this we must return to the earliest stage of development, to observe people as children and accompany them through their maturation. It is here we may recognize the factors that begin to create the crucial detachment within the "nature" of this person.

The first thing we will notice is that some unknown factor begins to draw this child, but not his companions, toward art. This factor could be physical: he might be skinny and frail, demanding extraordinary tenderness from his parents, and from his mother most particularly and indispensably. This tenderness will take on a much greater role in his life than it does for other children, manifesting itself in emotional expressions, in his mother's voice and gestures, her frowns and smiles; and this tenderness will be reflected in various forms in other beings, until the child believes that everything inclines sympathetically toward him.

The child might be unusual looking and attract stares more frequently than other children, as if he were wildly handsome, or so ugly he disgusts the eye and repels the mind: perhaps his nose is a protest against his broad face, or his eyes bulge out of their sockets; perhaps, through some miserliness of creation, he is short, or through some generosity tall or fat, or endowed with hair reminiscent of a jungle inhabited by predatory beasts.

Just as staring eyes gather around the child, so he too begins, unconsciously, to scrutinize these gazes, and in his watchful, observant unconscious, there grows a germ of thought, contemplation, contention, scrutiny, analysis, and immanence.

Any child like this, whether nature has been magnanimous or miserly toward him, is affected by these gazes, be they noble or ignoble, and he sees them as unspoken words, as expressive, meaningful messages. Our child begins to carry in his mind images, visions, observations, and words that are not present in the minds of other children.

Alternatively, the factor that creates deficiency or superabundance in the child might be nonphysical, a purely psychological feature arising as a consequence of some social condition: he might be shabbily dressed when other children are not; or sad and unpopular in the playground due to his appearance, the status of his family, or the class of his relatives; or damaged by conflicts between his parents; or gloomy or hot-tempered due to insidious comments about his father's humble profession or the fact that his mother is divorced. Or he might be deprived and rejected, an orphan even though his parents are alive, themselves deprived and rejected. As a

result of these conflicts and sorrows, the child is filled not merely with emotion, but with fully formed and colored emotion, images, visions, observations, and impressions. In his psyche is born excitement and longing, scrutiny and analysis, and thought.

A question arises here: Do all children under the influence of these experiences become, without exception, extraordinary children: that is to say, artists?

Let us accompany two children of this kind, who feel this sense of physical or psychological deficiency or abundance, or whose lives are full of psychological or social conflict.

Since that germ of thought was born within him, his mind filling up with images, observations, and visions, each child has felt like a red mark on the blackboard of childhood, and has spent the earliest stage of his life feeling afflicted by some unfamiliar thing. What is this alien thing? He does not know. Another stage of life passes, each of the two children probing and exploring this unfamiliar thing; they begin to feel inadequate, and to become frightened and withdrawn, like crystals stubbornly refusing to dissolve in the liquid of collective childhood. By the time the third stage is over, each child is in communion with the terrible feelings inflicted on him by the eyes around him: if they mock him, life itself seems to mock him, and if they show him pity, life itself seems to pity him. The hostility in the eyes and on the tongues of his childhood companions now makes itself felt in the depths of his own self, even when he is alone, far from the eyes of others.

At the stage each of the children has reached, withdrawn and obsessed with his inadequacy, each feels that he is not as good as his fellows. In what will be a decisive moment, one of them is shaken by a dreadful event in which the indistinct hostility that inspires his sense of inadequacy becomes a harsh and unmistakable utterance that convinces him the whole world is laughing at him, sharing in the speaker's desire to remind him of his ignominious inadequacy. This utterance might be a timid, hostile snub by the girl of his dreams; it might be a rivalry with his companions. It might be a crushing rejection by someone he considers a role model: his father, his mother, his teacher, or his dearest friend. From this decisive moment on, our child searches for friendship, a role model, companionship, and affection, in a sphere much wider than his group of peers: the imagination.

Our child is now utterly different from his friends and others his age, for where they see the shade as shade, he sees it as shade, tenderness, friendship, and mercy. Where they see the moon as the moon, he sees it as the moon and as universal, silver poetry. Where they see the sea as the sea, he sees it as the sea, the song of sailors, the longings of travelers, the chance for emigrants to return home. Everything he sees is augmented by figures of his imagination—in other words, he sees the essence of things.

Speech, for all people, is a means of conversing with others, but for him it is not the only means. He gleans the point at hand from the words of the speaker, but also from the lineaments of the face, from their tone of the voice, from gestures, and from the flicker of the eyes. That germ of thought born in him long ago is alone able to test the ingot and determine whether the speaker is truthful or a liar, whether he means what he says or implies some hidden intent.

Voices, images, and impressions seep into our child's imagination, consciousness, and emotions, provoking sometimes vexation and sometimes

satisfaction; nothing can take away his sense of alienation and loneliness or transform his desolation into joy except a psychological moment that calls him to another like it in lineaments of tenderness, or of shade, or of the moon, such as a song he hears, a phrase he reads, an image he sees, or a statue he beholds. When he is in the embrace of art, the eternal psychological moment is concentrated there, and he no longer feels alienated or abnormal or inadequate: the psychological moment that he once lived is the same moment that brings him back to life as he stands before a work of art.

The work of art that our child sees is not merely a song—it is a song, and shade, and tenderness, and motherhood, and friends and companions in the street, and a cool pitcher of water, and kindly vendors hawking their wares in the market at the end of the street.

He becomes captivated by one image above all others, not because it is a picture of a field on harvest day, but because deep inside he is sure that that yellow color is the exact color of the straw mat he used to sit on at home as he listened to his mother's [expressions of] tenderness and radiant affection. And that blue in the picture confirms this feeling: it looks as if it has been taken straight from his mother or father's robe; and that green, too, reminds him of something sweet and beautiful that he cannot remember, perhaps his mother's smile, or the kerchief on her head.

And that statue at which he is so awestruck—what is the secret of its effect on him? Is it its gleaming white hue, which reminds him of their lofty street? And the folds and creases in the robes of the immortal man embodied in the statue—do they remind him of the wrinkled faces of kindly men who have shown him sympathy and affection, unlike those who have mocked and jeered him?

In the child's mind, everything can undergo a qualitative transformation: a melody may be perceived as an image, an image may be perceived as words, a statue may even be perceived as a street bustling with men and women and vendors.

Everything in life has its likeness in art, and everything in art has its likeness in life.

When he experiences emotions, they are always accompanied by colors, the beat of music, chanting, statues, and exquisite images.

As the child proceeds to youth and maturity, his mind and instincts reach a state of perfection and completion. His yearnings turn toward the search for a role model, for friendship, for a psychological homeland, so that he might forget the reasons for his inadequacy. These yearnings begin to lead him unconsciously into a glorious alternate world that is free of mocking faces and prying eyes, a world that, with its colors, its melodies, its images, its statues, its poetic phrases, is far superior to the arid world where others live: the alternate world called art.

I wonder, what art will our artist produce?

It is not the artist's training alone that determines his direction, but also the role played by his instinctual, social, and emotional needs. He will collide—in his search for instinctual, social, and emotional self-realization—with the wall of antagonism that stands between the melodious, colorful world he perceives with his vision, passion, and imagination, and the immediate reality of society.

Many artists weep at this wall, thus swelling the ranks of romanticism with another soldier. But many artists stop to seek the reason for this wall's existence,

then unsheathe their instruments of expression and enter the ranks on the side of realism.

When an artist in our time sides with realism, he sides with ridding his society of the causes of inadequacy, and bringing down the wall of antagonism.

But . . .

Is every artist who has joined the ranks of realism a realist artist?

This article is the response, or part of the response, to that question. Unless the content springs from the psychological moment we are living, and unless the form corresponds to it, then the artist is a realist by contrivance and not by virtue of birth and the irresistible decree of existence.

Indeed, the question of form is of greater consequence in realism than the question of content, because many people choose to write in standard Arabic, while many others choose to write in the vernacular, when the psychological moments we live are equally unconcerned with both standard and vernacular Arabic; instead they are concerned with the language people speak, the standard Arabic that has ascended to the status of a pan-national language, that is to say, the Arabic forged by vernacular utterances.

Those who write dialogue in standard Arabic, therefore, are no more realists than those who write dialogue in vernacular Arabic. The realist is the writer whose vision can pinpoint the mode of expression called for by the psychological moment of our age, the age of the story.

Those who present their content in an abstract form do not allow us to find out where the heroes of their stories hail from—not in geographic terms, but in terms of the habits, nature, emotional conventions, and ideas prominent in the internal life of their nation: that is to say, in terms of the psychological moment. Those who do not give us their ideas in this form are not realist authors, and they are not nationalist authors.

Note

1. *Eds.*: This dictum is attributed to al-Ghazali (c. 1056–1111 CE), the influential Muslim theologian, philosopher, and mystic.

—Zakariyyā al-Hijjāwī, “Qaḍiyyat al-Shakl: Bayna al-Wāqīʿiyya al-Qawmiyya wa-l-Lahẓa al-Sikūlūjiyya” (excerpt), *al-Ādāb* 4, no. 1 (January 1956): 73–75. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

REVIEWING THE IRAQI REVOLUTION

This report from Baghdad, which Iraqi writer Jaleel Kamal al-Din filed in September 1958 to the Beirut journal *al-Adab*, discusses *The Exhibition of the Revolution*, held to commemorate the revolution of July 14, 1958. A military coup d'état led by Abd al-Karim Qasim, the revolution had overturned the Hashemite monarchy in the name of reversing the corruptions of imperialism, and established the Republic of Iraq (1958–68).

See Plate 19 for Mahmoud Sabri's 1958 painting *Massacre in Algiers*, which was included in this exhibition.

At The Exhibition of the Revolution (1958)

Jaleel Kamal al-Din

If the Iraqi Revolution of July 14, 1958—which was a logical extension and inevitable development of the revolutionary struggle of the Iraqi people since World War I, and over the forty years that followed—if this revolution is an exceptional event in the Arab East in the twentieth century, then the exhibition that is the subject of this review, *The Exhibition of the Revolution*, may also be an exceptional event in the history of modern Iraqi art, and a necessary turn toward a wider future of resistance for committed Iraqi artists.

The roots of this exhibition probably reach back to the 1940s, when the foundations of a revolutionary imagination were laid in the endeavors of some of our laudable artists. These foundations became increasingly clear during the 1950s, with the establishment of art groups such as the Pioneers, Baghdad Group for Modern Art, the Impressionists Group, and the Circle of Contemporary Art. Notwithstanding the fact that a significant percentage of artists were isolated from real events, and that the premises of their art were shallow and at the service of the old regime in the intellectual and artistic fields, there was also a respectable number of other artists, young and old, who were, to the extent possible, committed and progressive in depicting our defunct reality in the now-defunct past. Those include [Mahmoud] Sabri, Nouri al-Rawi, Kadhim Haidar, and others.

While the now-defunct regime restricted every revolutionary movement, whether political, literary, artistic, or intellectual, we have always had realist artists, moved by subjective and objective factors, who were never far from a degree of identification, relative or partial, with the people's national movement, the wider Arab liberation movement, and the triumphant universal procession of humanity. Sometimes they painted in symbols, in riddles, or by using signals or hints; and at other times, when circumstances permitted, they explicated and declared the revolutionary content of their paintings and sculptures and creations. It would be inaccurate to claim that all Iraqi art back then was isolationist, distracting, cautionary, and aristocratic, expressing only the sensibilities, imagination, and context of the ruling classes and those connected to them. Because there was, on the other side, a significant segment of artists who offered, by whatever means available—which did not preclude some objective, thematic, and technical failings—what was at least a partial representation of reality, life, and the human struggle.

A careful and detailed study of the foundations and future of Iraqi revolutionary art is outside the scope of this article. This article can, however, give a nod to the intention to undertake such research, and a promise to do so in more detailed studies in the near future, now that the nightmare has irreversibly ended. For now, having acknowledged the historical dimension, let us return to the subject of the exhibition, to address it directly and succinctly.

What could be more appropriate than to let that group of free artists—sixty-one in all—speak about their own exhibition, its conception and its birth, its concept and slogan, before we move on to an objective critical examination of their works, through the triad of theme, content, and form. Here is what those free artists have to say to their audience:

The idea for this exhibition was born in the few days that followed the events of the glorious revolution. If it was linked to those events, it was through the emotionally rich experience lived by the artists as they saw their great dream realized in the form of a contemporary government that has granted them full freedom to select a means of self-expression on behalf of themselves and others.

It is a primary duty of Iraqi artists—as they cross this sensitive and decisive threshold in their modern history—to understand that they are facing renewed and growing needs, as wide as the new horizon and as deep as its reach. And to realize that everything they undertake to express their position at this historical moment will amount to nothing less than pure worship at the altar of their beloved land and her free, noble people.

And so they have begun, with the first breath of freedom that fills their lungs, each rising up to carry the flame of their art and place its light at the service of the people, instead of using it to light the palace corridors. The past plunged its horrible sword into the heart of the art movement—just as it did to all other aspects of life—and forced art to exist nowhere but within the realm of its service . . . to adorn life, to bestow its light and beauty while withholding the same from the people to which it belongs. . . . This was how artists moved along with the parade of the recent past, unable to work in complete honesty or to express their thoughts freely and openly.

The Exhibition of the Revolution represents a point of departure toward a new Iraqi art, which will enjoy richness, depth, and universality . . . a future-looking art that places its ideal values at the service of the people and the people's glory. In addition, such art expresses the intellectual harmony between the revolution's goals and the implementation of those goals in life's arenas. So even if the art does not display any features that might move the inhabitants of ivory towers to call it a "complete work of art," it will not lack other elements that bring it closer to the understanding and emotions of the people. . . .

This is no more than a sincere and heartfelt salute to the leaders of the revolution and its brilliant men. It is no more than a heartfelt salute to that great man who has led the people of Iraq to the shores of safety . . . the leader Abd al-Karim Qasim. It is a salute to the dawn of peace and freedom, which revealed a wide horizon on July 14.

When we examine this conscious and committed statement of the exhibiting artists, just two months after our glorious revolution, it becomes clear that the exhibition is intended as a “point of departure” for a new Iraqi art—fertile, deep, and universal, and close to the people’s heart—and as “a heartfelt salute” to the revolution’s dawn and heroes. We can then ask: Has our exhibition really offered that point of departure? Does it carry the features of modern Iraqi art? Have the exhibiting artists lived the experience of revolution, the *reality* of revolution? Has blood pumped through their veins with the true content of the revolution, the new revolutionary existence, the constructive, conscious, exacting revolutionary blood? Have our exhibiting artists understood the spirit of revolution and its further reaches—all its dimensions? Were they pioneering in form, content, and theme? Does their salute befit the occasion?

Let us say, first of all, that a span of two months is by no means enough for a detailed and responsible understanding of the Iraqi revolution, so generous and humanistic in its coverage. Let us also say that the exhibition did not include the entire free, progressive, realist sector of Iraq’s artists. There are distinguished artists who made revolutionary artistic efforts during the time of the now-defunct regime, for example: Mahmoud Sabri, Jewad [Selim], Abbud Faiq, [Khalid] al-Qassab, and Qutaiba [al-Sheikh Nouri]. Regardless of differences—whether in the sources of their inspiration, extent, human depth, in disposition or vocation, and in the mode of realistic treatment—the fact remains that those artists make up a segment that is necessary to support the group of exhibiting free artists. For art belongs to the people. Artists and their art belong to the audience, to humanity. I do not mean to excuse the shortcomings of those artists and their tardiness in catching up with the exhibitors’ parade, but I want to point out that haste, time pressure, and eagerness—along with tardiness, laziness, and a failure to fully and faithfully absorb the content, symbols, and parameters of the Iraqi people’s revolution—deprived the first exhibition of revolutionary art of many generous talents and sources of excellence in both content and technique.

Any popular revolution at this point in history would and should produce similar and comparable symbols: the dove of peace, the flowing blood of victims, martyrs, the wheel of history, the flame of revolution, prison windows, battle flags, guns and tanks, the revolutionary momentum of soldiers and masses of workers, students, professionals, and intellectuals, blood-stained fields, signs of moral and mental degeneracy of the rulers, the owl of war, the monster of colonialism. These are all popular revolutionary symbols that no revolution, whether victorious or not, could avoid or ignore. The question here is how this revolutionary content can be properly presented in an equally revolutionary form. For one cannot draw the revolutionaries in battle with swaying, dancing bodies, or frame the victorious peace within an inferno of blood and skulls. Neither can one portray the revolution as civil strife, or as a massacre, barbarically filled with blood and limbs and corpses.

When the revolution is painted—whether as a present, developing, or future reality—with such chaotic, naïve techniques, it loses its healthy dimension, artistically speaking, and thus submits its exhibitions to illness. It is worth noting and celebrating that our exhibition has not portrayed the revolution in such a simplistic or chaotic way. We have instead a variety of colors and artistic schools, myriad forms from different artists with diverse gifts but similar ideas, who are well-intentioned and united in revolutionary belief. Because the exhibition was exceptionally democratic, it included



Mahmoud Sabri in his Baghdad studio. c. 1958. Behind him is his 1958 painting *Massacre in Algiers*.

efforts by artists ranging from the very young, such as Laith al-Mumayyaz, who is only thirteen years old, to prominent artists such as the distinguished Akram Shukri.

[...] The exhibition was particularly abundant with works for murals. These are, relatively speaking, wonderful images that can be linked, with some reservation, to Mexican murals made after World War I and the victorious Mexican Revolution. There are some points of comparison also between Mexican works and murals painted by the likes of Nouri al-Rawi, Kadhim Haidar, Tariq Madhloum, Ismail Fattah, and Khalid al-Jader. More importantly, it should be mentioned that Mahmoud Sabri, with his two mural paintings *Dante's Inferno* and *Massacre in Algiers*, offered a well-laid foundation for this turn toward mural art, which has at its core a humanistic disposition and an honest and popular understanding of the viewer as an individual and as part of a collective.

It should also be mentioned, for the sake of objective historical truth, that *The Exhibition of the Rejected*, a show of works rejected by a certain committee under the now-defunct colonial rule, was presented to the arbiter-public by a group that included both skilled artists as well as the pretentious and artless.¹ That was in addition to the *Algeria Exhibition*, which was banned by officials and opportunists after it had been planned as our artists' contribution to Algeria's heroic battle. These exhibitions, I would venture to say, along with individual revolutionary impulses—clandestine at times, open at others—helped to firm the roots of this revolutionary exhibition, and contributed to its progressive content, its comparative dimension, its core of diligent struggle.

If this means anything, it means that the exhibition at hand has history, roots, and solid underpinnings. Let us see, then, if the exhibiting free artists have benefited from their postrevolution freedom, if they have managed to absorb the revolution's substance, dimensions, development, struggle, and future. [...]

Among the authentic endeavors, we should note that the three paintings by Nouri al-Rawi—*Invitation to Joy*, *Between Two Worlds*, and *Affinity*—are good paintings in which culture and awareness are clearly foregrounded, despite the lack of detailed attention to color techniques and composition. *Invitation to Joy*, a painting that displays sensitive lyricism, is a revolutionary work despite showing neither blood nor victims—which are naïve expressions, and overused. It also displays a humanistic disposition, as well as being cloaked in poetry.

The same can be said for Kadhim Haidar, an artist who, like al-Rawi, belongs to the Circle of Contemporary Art.² His three paintings—*The Iraqi Revolution, 14th of July*, and *I See in Your Hands the Power to Destroy Colonialism*—also reflect cultural

understanding and a developed, progressive awareness. When considering that his paintings are, moreover, almost large enough to be murals, and that the symbols in *The Iraqi Revolution* are truly symbols of revolution, we can observe how successful Kadhimi has been in portraying the revolution, and in expressing his views via a semi-expressionist and realist route, and via the modern techniques he followed. This painting depicts the imprisoned nation, the sun, heavy chains, and at the same time the people's uprising, the breaking of the chains. But that uprising remains captive, limited, as long as the soldier is not part of it. Once the soldier does take part, in a third section of the same painting, which corresponds to the July 14 Revolution, the nightmare recedes; the monster of colonialism and the traitors it employed are killed and the corpse is buried: a cadaver of dissolution and decay presented in the middle of the painting. That is how the Iraqi Revolution was: a glorious people's revolution in its beginnings, development, and victory. *14th of July*, however, is not as successful a painting as the one just considered. It seems, generally, to lack the consecrating popular hatred against traitors. More importantly, however, we notice that the color composition is generally pleasing, and that the modern technique the artist utilizes is a good means to express what he wanted.

The artist Tariq Madhloum, who fuses ancient arts, especially Persian and Assyrian, with modern art in order to bring forth a unique character in Iraqi art, contributed paintings that are copious in number and rich in quality. His five works—*The Flame of Freedom*, *War and Peace*, *The Immortal Incident of the Bridge*, *The Sheikh and His Subjects*, and *Impressions of the Dawn of 14 July*—are all genuinely good paintings, excellent in theme and content, in addition to their technical distinction. On analyzing his *Sheikh and His Subjects*, we note that Madhloum gathers together, in a satisfactory manner, several dimensions of the theme and content he wants: the feudal lord staying up all night next to a prostitute at a nightclub; the farmer who toils in the land, tilling, sowing, and harvesting; women farmers at the receiving end of the compounded oppression of the feudal society; cattle, palms, trees; the castle of the feudal sheikh—all existing within the big prison that the feudal system has imposed in collaboration with colonialism. If we contemplate another painting by the same artist from the time of the revolution, after his earlier paintings had shown us the dark colonial era, we find a brilliant design, first in its mural-like aspect, and also in its fusion of lyricism and realism, in its rich color composition, in its intelligent, supple assembling of the chapters of the revolutionary struggle. Al-Rihab Palace, the palace of treason,³ is depicted in flames and destroyed by military bullets while the soldiers climb to its top; at the base is the front of a big prison. One prisoner burns in agony, another is being tortured; a policeman plays the role of a guard dog—and in spite of all this the people go forth, carrying the flame of freedom. In the middle of the painting are figures carrying the body of a martyred prisoner; behind them a girl lights the revolutionary flame. The painting is guarded on the sides by two political prisoners, a man and a woman, who have broken their chains and are surging with the doves of peace toward the light.

Artist Ismail Fattah—whose relief sculpture *Jamila* we discussed in a previous issue of *al-Adab*—presents here a mural-like oil painting, again titled *The 14th of July*. This one depicts people attacking the traitors, while military soldiers light the flame of freedom. Prison is symbolized by a window at the base of the painting, where a dove of peace circles before surging forth on the winds of freedom. In the background,

a Baghdad mosque watches over the scene. The color composition serves the painting's theme and content brilliantly. However, haste—and the influence of *Massacre in Algiers* (discussed in a previous issue of *al-Adab*) by Mahmoud Sabri, who in turn was influenced by [Pablo] Picasso's *Guernica*—has deprived the painting of the detailed understanding that might have granted it new dimensions. Nonetheless, it is important to say that painting's content, generally speaking, has merit, and heralds a revolutionary beginning for the artist.

[. . .] It also remains to be said that *The Exhibition of the Revolution* was but a route and a point of departure toward the new Iraqi art in the new era.

Notes

1. Eds.: This counter-exhibition was organized in Baghdad by Kadhim Haidar in 1958 after he and other young artists were rejected from an exhibition at Nadi al-Mansur ([Baghdad's] al-Mansur Club).
2. Eds.: Kamal al-Din seems to be referring to a short-lived artists' group comprised of Kadhim Haidar, Nouri al-Rawi, and Ibrahim Abbo.
3. Eds.: Al-Rihab Palace in Baghdad served as the residence of the royal family until the 1958 revolution, when military officers surrounded it, forced the family to surrender, and executed them.

—Jalil Kamāl al-Dīn, "Fī Ma'raḍ al-Thawra" (excerpt), *al-Ādāb* 6, no. 9–10 (September–October 1958): 87–90. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

PROCLAIMING ARAB UNITY

On February 1, 1958, Syria joined Egypt as a single republic under the presidency of Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, forming the United Arab Republic (UAR)—it lasted until a September 1961 coup d'état in Damascus. These texts are from Egypt during that period of heightened national sentiment. Artist Hamed Said published "The Freedom of Art" in *al-Majalla* in August 1958, dedicating it to the newly created Ministry of Culture and outlining a Goethean view of artistic development. The second text in this section was written in 1960 as the catalogue introduction to the UAR Pavilion at that year's Venice Biennale, which featured both Egyptian and Syrian artists. Author Salah Kamel was an Egyptian artist then serving in Rome as director of the Egyptian Academy and cultural councilor for the Egyptian embassy.

See Plate 20 for a replica of Salah Abdel Kerim's *Cry of the Beast*, featured in the 1960 UAR Pavilion.

The Freedom of Art (1958)

Hamed Said

A look at the life of Egyptian, Greek, European, or Chinese art from beginning to end is sufficient to demonstrate how the artistic thought of any of these arts takes shape over time in successive forms, the latter of which cannot come to being before those that precede it, and the former of which cannot come to being after those that succeed it. The same happens with respect to the artistic thought of an individual artist if his growth takes a sound and natural course.

We call this logical coherence *the logic of time* in the work of art. In our opinion, it is a vital concern that deserves respect. We also believe that it must not be interfered with, obstructed, or interrupted, in order to allow the artistic thought to grow and live



Hamed Said. Untitled. n.d. Pencil on paper. 36 × 25 3/8" (91.5 × 64.5 cm). Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Art Collections, Alexandria

its true, robust life. When this logical coherence is not achieved, we find the artist jumping from one form of production to another without the living, organic link that unifies these forms. His work is therefore contrived and artificial; it does not enjoy an innate, generative life; it does not rest on an authentic foundation in the artist's self; or it is hollow, and moves in a vicious circle from which there is no escape.

Time provides the potential for growth, progress, and regeneration in art. There is no point in saying that this is the age of speed, for what is produced in haste perishes quickly, whereas profound art serves many generations.

[Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe says: "When nature undertakes something, it can only accomplish it gradually and in sequence. For

example, it could not produce a horse prior to producing all the other animals on which it ascends to the horse, step-by-step, as if on the rungs of a ladder."¹

Thus we find the individual dependent for his existence on the whole, much as the whole exists for the individual who, in turn, represents the group. Nature is singular, despite its many manifestations. The new is founded on the totality of what already exists, and must be harmonious with it in the general context of things.

Growth in natural creation is equivalent to growth in calm artistic creation. Genuine artistic thought can only emerge if it is based on an artist's previous work. Every piece of work owes its existence to the whole, while the entire body of the artist's work connects to and enriches that one piece. This is the case if the artist in question is sincere and produces authentic work that is true to his own self. However, if he is a feeble artist and an imitator, then his work will not follow the sequence of natural creation to which Goethe has alluded. Such an artist is like a destroyer of existence, because he lacks a context. Goethe also says:

Every living thing is a complex, not a simple, being; even insofar as it seems to us an individual, it remains nevertheless an aggregation of independent living beings, united in their source. Whenever a living thing is in a primitive stage, its individual parts would be similar to each other and to the whole they constitute, and whenever the living thing reaches a higher and more complete stage, its individual parts become dissimilar. Whereas in the first case we find the parts similar to the whole, in the second case we find them dissimilar. We also find that when the parts are similar they can become autonomous, for cooperation between parts is the feature of a being that has reached an advanced stage of growth and evolution.

We come to know these facts—or their equivalents—when we notice how the drawings of children evolve. We also come to know them when we follow the evolution of styles and artistic schools as well as that of the work of individual artists.

The logic of creation and composition in art is the same as it is in nature, because the two spring from the same well.

Goethe says as well: "The study of reproduction and the comparison of male and female organisms clearly demonstrate the key thesis that nature is capable of producing parts that are seemingly contradictory in form and function by transforming ones that share the same source. This phenomenon has many counterparts in artistic life."

And if we are to better understand the issue of growth in nature as studied by Goethe, we must remember these words of his:

The study of the anatomy of certain sea creatures clearly demonstrates that, in designing the structure of these animals, nature was feeling her way toward a higher idea, which is that of terrestrial animals. Actual facts make clear how this happens in artistic creation as well, whereby an artist's future work interprets his present work in a better and clearer way than any interpretation offered by a critic or an analytical researcher. For the artist whose work springs from true inspiration is in fact working in tandem with nature, as if it were nature itself creating for the second time, through the mechanism of the artist, the new creatures that are these works.

* * *

Freedom is one of the confused terms of this age. For the Communists, *freedom* means being a Communist; for Westerners, it means joining their own ranks; and for those who call for innovation in art, it means following their lead.

In ancient times, art was an integral part of life. Some artists today criticize ancient Egyptian art for failing to be "free" and for not being art for art's sake.

Some people are moved by zeal for art and freedom whenever art addresses science, religion, poetry, nature, or social life. They claim that art must remain "free" of everything: art for art's sake, liberated from all bonds.

Another group enthusiastically criticizes art for existing in an ivory tower, for being isolated from what they consider to be life, while humanity is shackled by humiliation and slavery. Freedom once again stirs people's souls here, impelling art to be in the service of wretched society.

Some intellectuals respond to both groups by rejecting any tutelage or imposition from art. They debate and argue, matching every argument with a counterargument, and every piece of evidence with counterevidence.

In our opinion, this is all a waste of time, because what is required is work, not debate. The correct life is one in which all the various facets of human activity are in harmony, where we cannot dispense with one authentic activity for another, or one dimension for another. But our partial outlook on life distorts reality, complicating what is simple, and bending what is straight. This leads to difficulties and an accumulation of problems.

Had those who work in art, literature, and the other human activities evolved in a sound and natural manner, and had our outlook on life been broad, comprehensive, and rational, these problems would not have arisen, all this effort would not have been wasted, and we would have welcomed the plurality of approaches in art, provided they were authentic and each followed its path of growth.

But the reasonable man loses his reason when he argues with the foolish; dispute kills culture, and culture is psychological growth. Freedom in art means authenticity and growth according to the laws of life. But whence can such people find a chance for proper growth? And where can they find mental integrity and psychological well-being when fate has thrown them, since childhood, into the hands of instructors who themselves did not have the chance to mature—instructors who need instruction themselves—and into the hands of a faithless age where power, money, fanfare, and fame are objects of worship? God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves. How can they have a chance for sound growth unless God wills it?

The true foundation for the respect of freedom is respect for life.

Note

1. Eds.: Said's discussion freely invokes the writings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, but never with a precise citation. Following the editorial guidelines for other cited passages in this volume, here we have opted to capture Said's interpretation of these ideas by translating directly from his Arabic rendering of Goethean ideas.

—Ḥamid Saʿīd, "Ḥurriyya li-l-Fann," *al-Majalla* 2, no. 20 (August 1958): 76–68. Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

Text for the United Arab Republic Pavilion, Venice Biennale (1960) Salah Kamel

This year the UAR responds to the call of the most important international art exhibition with a selection of the most recent works by Syrian and Egyptian artists. The paintings and sculptures displayed bear a particular value of life experience, whatever the opinion of the critics and the public may be. The newly born republic presents the paintings of artists from two different countries jointly. This is a challenge that goes beyond the scope of technical or aesthetic appraisal and draws more profound, vital meanings: those of the congeniality of lineages that have now become a single political organism. The value of this congeniality is determined by the quality of the language employed by artists to express their inner spiritual world. There is no doubt that this language displays an intimate unity of culture and human need, from which the specific characters of the two countries emerge with well-defined traits. One's vision seizes upon aspects of particular traditions, while technique reveals tendencies resulting from tastes that developed over the course of each country's distinct artistic evolution. It is this very *concordia discors*, which lays the foundation for political unity, that represents the key element needed to grasp the meaning of the works displayed. Egypt and Syria are asked to illustrate, within the life of the Republic, the energies derived from the affinity of their lineages, and to pursue the imperatives dictated by an often shared historic evolution. The two countries are also invited to enrich one another, drawing from the resources of their respective indestructible characters, and so to translate the impulses originating from these energies and imperatives into forms of life and—and from there into art.

The juxtaposition of artistic production from the two countries in the same pavilion will, through the paintings displayed, provide the public with a compelling perspective: a wide vista onto the Eastern Mediterranean. This will grant the observer

opportunities to ponder and compare; it will suggest theories and perhaps even enable him to draw new conclusions. Will the art of the Eastern Mediterranean—the trends presented by the UAR through the works of our most significant artists—be an entity of absolute originality, complete in its own characteristic forms? Will it ever represent a particular element of the overall panorama of world art? To what extent will the motifs that the art of the Eastern Mediterranean is developing, in terms of both technique and content, preserve their original character, and to what extent will they be reinvented in this particular environment, which these works already clearly display? Will it be possible—or, rather, *is* it possible to have a “contemporary art of the Eastern Mediterranean”? Can the widening of vision, achieved through combining works by painters from these two countries, enable us to judge whether a contemporary Eastern Mediterranean art already exists or if it is yet to be developed?

The most attentive and vigilant spirits are entrusted with the responsibility of harnessing all the latent energies of the two countries for the common progress of the new state. These individuals do not neglect the highly expressive as an index of the artistic level of the people, which serves to gauge the level of civic maturity a people has reached. This is based on the absolute certainty that a man who is conscious of his own vocation, and who feels that such a vocation suits his environment, is the instrument of spiritual elevation. Certainly the path in the artistic field is somewhat slower and more difficult, as it is for all kinds of free spiritual creation. However, the Syrian and Egyptian artist knows he works in a country that values his efforts, and that appreciates his absolute, necessary individuality. At the same time, the artist recognizes that it is only through this individuality that the most secret soul of a collectivity is expressed in tangible images. Therefore, the work of art becomes the voice of its country in the world, entering, in this way, a dimension not bound by time. The UAR nurtures with meticulous care the energies and the artistic production of its people, and constantly monitors them, with a special regard to younger generations. In this way art can fully express the strength of the individual and the soul of its people, bearing its noble past and its future hopes. The passion for the artistic process is still alive and fervent, [as it has been] through the thousand-year evolution of Eastern Mediterranean history; it maintains the strength that has produced some of the most precious examples of the power of the human spirit. In this context, the UAR artists will continue to invest their efforts fruitfully for the miracle to take place again: the ineffable assuming a face and figure in nonephemeral forms of art.

—Salah Kamel, “R.A.U.” *XXX Biennale Internazionale d’Art* (Venice: Biennale di Venezia, 1960), 282–84. Translated from Italian by Pietro Morabito.

IN FOCUS

Biennials and Arab Representation

Anneka Lenssen

The first appearance of an Arab country in the international art biennial circuit occurred before World War II: in 1938, the Kingdom of Egypt participated in the 20th Venice Biennale, exhibiting work by sixteen artists. The next four iterations of the Biennale—a venerable institution inaugurated in 1895 during the late imperial age of great expositions—would be disrupted by war, including outright suspension of operations in 1944 and 1946. When Venice reopened its Biennale in 1948 amid a changing world order, the well-established event offered participating countries a platform from which to assert international prestige, and even to solidify foreign policy. As part of the preparations for the 1948 reopening, the Italian Biennale commission contacted Egyptian officials, inviting their participation and making exhibition space available in the hopes of reestablishing a binational alliance. Egypt accepted, and in early 1952 moved to make its national representation in Venice permanent by purchasing a pavilion in the Giardini that Switzerland had vacated. Egypt's leaders recognized the cultural importance of national representation in such events. Even after the July 1952 military coup (often termed the Free Officers Revolution), which overturned the Egyptian monarchy and founded a republic, the country's new governing officers went forward with establishing a permanent presence at the Venice Biennale. In 1953, Egypt joined Brazil's Bienal de São Paulo as well (the second iteration of that exhibition).

Throughout the 1950s, the biennial format—often organized as an assembly of national pavilions, but increasingly adopting other showcase models as well—proved useful to a myriad of postwar diplomatic schemes, including efforts at forging political alliances in the Mediterranean Basin. As early as 1948, for example, Italy moved to create fellowship programs to bring students from Middle Eastern states into its renowned arts academies. This was followed with plans for a pan-Mediterranean biennial, coordinated through the Mediterranean Academy, intended to be based in Palermo (the plan eventually took the form of gatherings of artists, architects, intellectuals, and trade promoters in various Italian cities, 1954–57). In Egypt, themes of Mediterranean cooperation gave impetus to city officials in Alexandria, who launched the Alexandria Biennale for Mediterranean Countries in 1955, the third anniversary of the Free Officers Revolution. Presenting work from Spain, Greece, France, Italy, Lebanon, Yugoslavia, and Syria, Alexandria's biennial was the first to be launched in an Arab country, and—up until 1959, when artists from Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia were featured in the first Biennale de Paris—the only one to which other Arab states contributed. Although conceived as a traveling event with changing host cities, the Biennale for Mediterranean Countries effectively matched Alexandria's cosmopolitan credentials with the objectives of the Egyptian state, and it has never moved from the city.

The 1960s witnessed occasional efforts in Arab countries to organize biennial platforms to showcase either the new coalitions demanded by decolonization struggles or the cosmopolitan tastes desired by world markets. One of the most notable was Morocco's *Rencontre Internationale*, held in Rabat in 1963—a joint venture of the Moroccan government, foreign consulates, and French guest critics—which was billed by some as the first African biennial. But it was not until the 1970s that regional initiatives coalesced around an explicit theme of Arab unity, in part spurred by the defeat of Arab military forces in the June 1967

War with Israel, and in part enabled by the nationalization of oil in the Arabian Gulf. In 1969 Kuwait's cultural ministry inaugurated an exhibition of work by Arab artists in Kuwait City that was envisioned as a biennial. In 1971 artists from Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine banded together to announce the formation of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, intended to coordinate artists' associations across the region. Subsequent events brought the notion of an Arab biennial into wide discussion, in particular the Yahya al-Wasiti Festival in Baghdad, sponsored by the Iraqi Ministry of Information in 1972. A year later in Baghdad, at the first conference of the General Union, members ratified an Arabic name for the event—so as to forgo the use of the foreign loan word (*Ma'rad al-Sanatayn al-'Arabi*, literally, the Arab Biennial Exhibition)—and eliminated prizes in the name of collective equality. This biennial opened in Baghdad in 1974, with a second iteration in Rabat in 1976. By this point, however, participating artists had already begun to critique the event's failure to consolidate energies, and the biennial program fizzled out after a little-documented third iteration in Libya.

In subsequent decades, new Arab biennials came together only sporadically, and under different organizing umbrellas. The Cairo Biennale (inaugurated 1984) and the United Arab Emirates' Sharjah Biennial (inaugurated 1993) both cast their initial event in a pan-Arab mold. Some artists and critics questioned these Arab designations; against changing regional dynamics and a globalizing art world, such aims of solidarity seemed less viable. In Cairo in 1984, for example, a group of leftist nationalist artists issued a statement decrying what they saw as the event's failure to rise above the level of a public-relations stunt or to reflect authentic Egyptian and Arab concerns.¹ The region's biennials eventually opted to revamp their focus toward international contemporary art—a dramatic example being the 2003 Sharjah Biennial, with its acclaimed turn to a curator-driven model focused on new art practices and discursive programs.

Note

1. See "Statement against Artistic Racism" (1984), and rebuttal from Mostafa El Razzaz, "Spotlight on a Spotlight" (1984), both in the present volume, 437–43.

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CAIRO: LIMITS ON FREEDOM

Egyptian artist and political activist Inji Efflatoun was arrested in March 1959 as part of a countrywide roundup of Communist intellectuals. She spent four years in jail as a political prisoner, from 1959 to 1963. This text, which details her efforts to secure permission and materials to paint inside the prison, has been excerpted from her posthumously published memoir.

See Plate 21 for a painting by Inji Efflatoun, thought to have been completed while the artist was in prison.

Recollections of Imprisonment (1959–63)

Inji Efflatoun

I arrived in the women's prison on June 19 [1959], and on July 23 the prison experienced a unique state of anticipation and expectancy, as inmates anxiously awaited any decision ordering the reduction of sentences or the release of the regular prisoners.¹ Unconsciously, the rest of us also succumbed to this infectious anticipation, despite our rational analysis of the prevailing political circumstances, which contradicted this sense of hope.

I would say to the other inmates: "This is madness—we won't be let out now. We've got a long time ahead of us." They accused me of being pessimistic, but the truth is that it wasn't pessimism. I simply realized that the political situation at that time would never allow for our release. Despite this, a glimmer of hope toyed with me on July 23. It quickly faded, leaving a deep sense of disappointment in its place. As it turned out, we were released on July 26—but several years later, in 1963.

Some two or three months after I arrived in prison, I felt a desire to paint, and with it came a refusal to surrender to the status quo.

I tried to come up with a solution. The director of the women's prison was Hassan al-Kurdi, a kind man who was quite humane. He loved to paint, and he often did so by copying traditional paintings from books and reproductions. He was keen to show them to me to hear what I thought of them. I showered him with flattery, of course, as the most important thing was for him to help me find a way to paint.

Thank God, my efforts were successful. When I told him I wanted to paint, he said: "You know that's forbidden, by order of Criminal Investigations." "I'm prepared to paint in service of the prison," I replied. "Bring me the supplies and paper, and you can sell the paintings to benefit the jail." I had recently won an award of a hundred Egyptian pounds for my painting, and this may have gained me some respect and led some within the prison to believe that I was a great artist. Hassan al-Kurdi agreed to my request, and he brought me a very poor set of paints and some extremely cheap canvas. He asked me not to paint the prison, which threw me into confusion: What should I paint?!

I would go up to the roof of the building to paint anything I could find. The paintings were quite bad in the beginning, but I gradually grew bolder and started painting the inmates. The director of the prison took the paintings and returned sometime later to inform me that no one wanted to buy them because they were depressing. I was afraid I'd lose my right to paint, so I quickly suggested that my fellow inmates and I buy the paintings out of our deposited money, and I asked him for a special discount for myself—considering that I was the one who painted them. The price per painting was set at two or three pounds, and I could buy them, after the discount, for a pound and a half. However, this process was an exhausting and expensive one for me, and I was soon fed up with painting and then having to buy my own works.

The right to paint in prison

At the same time, my sister Bouli took action on behalf of her husband, Ismail, and myself, and she persisted until she was able to obtain authorization for me to paint. She provided me with the necessary supplies, and she was supposed to receive the paintings

via the Criminal Investigations Department and the Department of Prisons. The truth is that Bouli was amazing; it is thanks to her that I obtained the right to paint in prison!

After some time, I discovered that eleven paintings had been confiscated. Beside myself, I decided to start smuggling them out. Two problems confronted me. First: How to work, and where to paint? I was painting inside a cramped ward that housed twenty inmates, where my paintings were knocked over every five minutes. After a while, I was able to make some headway with Abbas Qutb, the General Manager of my area [within the prison]; he was a smart man with a strong personality. He took some of the paintings for his own home, and in return he provided us with some allowances, such as leaving the door of the holding cell open and being lenient with us. He would let me stay in the yard to paint after the recess hour or let me go to the washhouse to paint there. He was a lover of art, but he was taking advantage of my status as a prisoner. Still, I soon found myself desperately in need of the benefits he provided in order to be able to pick up my brush. Abbas Qutb now has an impressive collection of my works.

The second problem: How to smuggle the paintings out of the prison? I'd wait until a painting had dried, then I'd remove the canvas from the wooden stretcher and give it to one of the wardens who would wrap it around her body under her clothes. I was worried they'd discover how we were smuggling them out, as this could result in my being completely banned from painting—a right that I had won only by a miracle. There was one warden who was particularly good at smuggling; we called her “the express train.” She would deliver the paintings to my sister in return for a sum of money. Some of the doctors also helped me because they were not subject to inspection.

But what concerned me most was figuring out the artistic value of my work. My fellow inmates did not have much aesthetic or artistic experience; they thought all the paintings were good and commendable. This was why I asked my sister, in secret letters, to show my work to artists and experts. And indeed, she allayed my fears by showing some of the paintings to artists such as Tahia Halim, Angelo de Riz, and others, and they were very pleased with them and commended them.

I would have painted the prison if not for the warning of the director. But it so happened that a high-ranking officer—I don't remember his name—came to inspect the prison one day. He asked to meet me and asked me about what I painted and whether or not I ever painted the prison. I told him that the director had forbidden me from painting it. He then told the director: “You have Inji Efflatoun here—this is the chance of a lifetime. Let her paint everything with total freedom—that's an order.” From that day on, I set out without restrictions or hesitation to paint and record anything I wished to within the prison. One of the most important subjects I painted from inside the prison was Inshirah, who had been sentenced to death, but her execution had been postponed for one year until her child was weaned. Of course, those sentenced to be executed were placed in a cell under special guard so they wouldn't commit suicide, and they wore red uniforms. While awaiting Inshirah's execution, I felt the massive tragedy of her story, as she had killed and stolen under the pressure of extremely harsh conditions and overwhelming misery. When I asked to paint her, the director Hassan al-Kurdi told me that it would be very depressing. I did indeed paint her and her son—this was one of the paintings that were confiscated by the Criminal Investigations Department. The three paintings that avoided confiscation were: 1. *The Line*, 2. *The Mess Hall*, and 3. *Dawn Sail*.

[...] The period of my detention took on major significance, as it appeared to be a period during which to pursue painting. I would often say to my fellow inmates: "Leave me alone, I don't have time," before eagerly returning to painting. After some time, I lost the desire to paint the prison and its inmates—the whole place disgusted me. I began to paint what nature there was behind bars, as we did have some gardens, trees, and flowers. I was fascinated by a tree that was near the barbed wire—I'd paint it in every season, and such meticulous attention to a single object taught me a lot. If I'd been outside the prison I never would have painted just one tree, as an endless number of choices would have been available to me. My fellow inmates even named the tree after me; they called it "Inji's tree."

There was something else I wanted to paint: behind the prison, there was a small tributary of the Nile where sailboats would pass by. We would watch from inside the prison as the sails caught the wind and men climbed up the masts to tie them down. Seeing the wind in the sails stirred many sorrows in me, and sparked an uncontrollable desire for freedom. I was at a loss: as the sailboats passed by and went on their way, we remained stuck in this awful place. I obtained permission from the General Manager Abbas Qutb to go up to the roof of the washhouse, where the view was better. This got the attention of the other inmates, and when the boats appeared, they would cry out: "The boats are here!" I painted many pictures of those sailboats, depicting our immobility against the movement of the sails.

In the beginning, my paintings were expressions of the prison and its great tragedies. People were piled on top of one another in filthy holding cells, where they would suffer horrific treatment. Every inmate represented her own social tragedy. For example, there was a drug dealer who married and then made his wives transport and distribute the drugs, but it was the women who were arrested and given life sentences. So those women paid the price for their husband's crimes, spending decades of their lives in prison—and all in order to protect their husband, the drug dealer, who continued to enjoy his freedom. In another example, a young girl was arrested for prostitution, and was then taught by thieves to steal.

Those sentenced to life in prison, whether for drug-related crimes or for murder, lived like the queens of the prison and scorned those imprisoned for prostitution or theft, treating them like the scum of the earth.

The madams would attempt to attract and recruit the younger prisoners. One time, the prison warden decided to isolate them in a separate holding cell next to our own. This created a problem, as every time we went out to the bathroom they would blatantly harass us. We complained to the prison director, who laughed and apologized, then transferred them somewhere else. Most of the madams were Italians and Greeks.

There was a group called the "rulers of the prison," made up of inmates serving long sentences. Their experience enabled them to exert control over the other prisoners, with the help of the head warden, whose name was Alia. Alia was witty and had a kind heart. She often helped us, and was affectionate toward us. However, there was another senior warden whose name was Umm Prince. She was cold and hard-hearted, and would lock all the doors on us and only open them at the officially designated times. She never listened to any of our requests or accepted any excuses from us. She kept herself apart: she'd refuse any food we offered her so as not to become weak and soft with us, so as not to start treating us humanely.

Life in prison taught us many strange things. For example, the word *sister* had a dangerous connotation, as it referred to sexual relations between two inmates—something that was acknowledged as occurring among the prisoners. One of the inmates once asked me: “Where’s your sister?” When I responded that my sister was outside the prison, the inmate was shocked. After a while, the inmates realized that I wasn’t referring to such a relationship, but to my real sister. Similarly, the other inmates were often confused by the idea of communal life, as there was no private property among us. If any one of us owned something in the prison, it belonged to all of us. All this increased the other inmates’ respect for us, in addition to the fact that we were kind to them.

Note

1. Eds.: July 23 is the anniversary of the 1952 Egyptian Free Officers revolution, a potential occasion for pardons.

—From the memoirs of Injī Aflātūn (excerpt); repr. in Saʿīd Khayyāl, ed., *Mudhakkirāt Injī Aflātūn* (Kuwait: Dār Suʿād al-Ṣabāh, 1993), 236–44. Translated from Arabic by Sarah Dorman.

MATERIALS FOR A NEW ALGERIAN ART

This statement on the components of Algerian art was published by artist M’hamed Issiakhem in *La Nouvelle Critique*, a Communist Party journal published in France. It appeared as part of a special issue dedicated to Algerian culture. Issiakhem was then a mobile activist living and working outside Algeria for the cause of Algerian independence, including frequent contributions to propaganda of the National Liberation Front.

See Plate 22 for a 1960 painting by M’hamed Issiakhem.

Painting (1960)

M’hamed Issiakhem

North Africa bears witness to an artistic heritage of considerable diversity.

From works of Berber craftsmanship steeped in the myriad currents of the ancient African world to the most recent figurative or abstract paintings, we are living the history of multiple influences: Carthaginian, Roman, Byzantine, Arab, and French.

The Carthaginians, like the Romans, whose architectural vestiges are still being uncovered (Carthage, Cherchell, Timgad, etc.), did not penetrate deeply into indigenous art, unlike the Arabs, who were assimilated into North Africa and even Spain.

The Berber created goldsmithery, pottery, and tapestries only in view of their immediate use. His hard, dry, crosshatched art, whose preferred motifs include triangles, rhombuses, and quadrilles, expresses the peasant’s harsh and difficult life in the Aurès, Kabylia, or the Rif. Arab art, monumental and “disinterested,” admirably uses epigraphy, and floral and geometrical [motifs]. Mosques are the focal point of all the elements of this art, which itself underwent transformations through contact with Africa.

Easel painting, a technique specific to Europe, arrived with the French.

Enriched by these many contributions, what might have been the circum-

stances and the personality of the indigenous artist? Originality was the hallmark of his creations, and he took inspiration from the tastes and sentiments of the popular masses among whom he lived and for whom he worked.

The Racim brothers [Omar and Mohamed], along with [Abdel Kader] Guermaz and, closer to us, [Mohamed] Temmam, [Mohamed] Ranem, and [Bachir] Yellès, endeavored to enrich Algerian art, despite the opposition of an administration that disregarded popular interest and instead favored, in accordance with a superficial Orientalism, the expansion of certain artisanal centers (in Beni Yenni, Constantine, Algiers, Tlemcen, etc.) under the direction of French specialists.

Around 1930, the Indigenous Affairs Department, a branch of Algeria's general government, created the first school of calligraphy and illumination in Algiers, directed by Omar Racim. Lacking the basic material necessities, this experiment failed. Re-created in Constantine around 1936, it ran up against even greater difficulties and had to interrupt its research and works-in-progress. Furthermore, the School of Fine Arts in Algiers was attended almost exclusively by European students, since the indigenous middle classes had limited access to the universities and therefore preferred to guide their children toward practical careers.

The administration managed to exploit the influence of North African experiments by [Eugène] Delacroix, [Théodore] Chasseriau, [Auguste] Renoir, [Henri] Matisse, and above all [Nasreddine] Diné. These artists, whose works were diluted by the masses of copyists and imitators, imposed an art whose sources were not their own.

Finally, after World War II, some young artists emerged—[Mohamed] Louail, [Mohammed] Bouzid, [Abdallah] Benanteur, [Mohamed] Khadda, [?] Kessous—split between the lives they lived in European milieus and the masses of popular inspiration from which they originated. Strongly influenced by contemporary artistic movements, they attempted to meld their own ideas with the tendencies of the European avant-garde.

Today's free artist, distancing himself from the professors of an obscurantist colonization whose only concern remains the accumulation of property, is engaging in a struggle that he will resolve only through a double movement: achieving his full creative liberty and rejoining his people in the will to transform its circumstances.

In Algeria, the destiny of art is playing out in this context.

—M'hamed Issiakhem, "La Peinture," *La Nouvelle Critique*, no. 112, special issue on "La Culture algérienne" (January 1960): 138–39; repr. in *M'hamed Issiakhem* (Algiers: Éditions Bouchène, 1988). Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

PLASTIC ARTS MOVEMENT / Damascus

With the 1960 establishment of Damascus's Gallery of International Modern Art, Syria's first private art gallery, modernist painters began to claim visibility in the press. In April 1962, artists Fateh al-Moudarres and Mahmoud Daadouch joined critic Abdul Aziz Alloun at the gallery to compose an eleven-point manifesto for a "Plastic Arts Movement in Syria." After distributing the manifesto in person and via the newspaper *Sawt al-Arab*, Alloun published an open letter to colleague Salman Qataya that explained their aims against a backdrop of political uncertainty following the sudden termination of Syria's participation in the United Arab Republic (in September 1961). This was soon followed by critic Adnan Ibn Dhurayl's explication and defense of the manifesto text.

Manifesto of the Plastic Arts Movement in Syria (1962)

Abdul Aziz Alloun, Mahmoud Daadouch, Fateh al-Moudarres

1. Art is a *zero point ten*, based on a mystical denominator, for it is a transparent humanity that is bound to the fourth dimension of existence.¹
2. The mission of art is to enrich human heritage with creative insights, which, however small, are of great significance in building the future, because art is the addition of new perceptions to human heritage.
3. Authentic art is engagement and participation in the creation of existence.
 - The artist at the moment of creation is a self-contained unit detached from subservience to material or everyday influences.
 - The work of art does not cease radiating; it grows in perpetuity.
4. There is a contemporary mysticism in art.²
 - We would smash all the desiccated accretions that attached themselves to the material of the work of art as a result of industrial production, and restore to the material a sanctity whose potency is unlimited prior to creation, and which becomes bound to the work and yields to it after its completion.
 - All inanimate material acquires the sanctity of living flesh once it is incorporated into the work of art.
 - We do not believe in the death and stasis of things; rather, we believe in their movement and development.
 - We are dependent upon life within the walls of the city, and [yet] the architect continues to erect ugly walls that block the expanse of the universe, and to align himself with the industry of torturing others. We entrust architects with the responsibility of creating a world that breathes with an aesthetic sense and that adheres to the positions laid out in this manifesto.
5. We believe that the art of tomorrow will have the utmost power and spontaneity to engender new, primary commitments that link the depths of man to the cosmic void.

- We believe in the artist as a civilizational pioneer.
- We reject symbols.
- We follow Cézanne in rejecting literary thought.
- We are coming to reject poetry as a foundational element, because art is perception of that material with which the artist creates.
- We reject the compilation of dictionaries for the movement of colors.
- Artists in the world comprise the drill with which humanity pierces the wall of time.
- Humanity embraces works of art after their creation and experiences the development of their value and their eternal, perpetual movement.



Mahmoud Daadouch. *Highway of the Sun*. 1961.
Medium and dimensions unknown

6. Art and the artist are one; there is no conflict between the two arcs of a single circle.

7. The artist does not think of the collective at the moment of creation because the collective is latent within him.

- We mourn the contemporary man who is neither an agent of the arts nor acted upon by them, and we observe that obscured cosmic dimensions lie within his depths.

8. The artist has a civilizational responsibility for both the physical and social aspects³ reflected by the sun on the particular patch of earth on which he lives, for that spot is one of the rich wellsprings of human heritage.

- We do not forgive the sin of the Arab artist in the use of yellow, gold, or crimson.
- The Arab artist is responsible for giving expression to the Arab spirit striving to provide humanity with values and ideals.

9. The coupling of things in nature and their tendency to unite in the human mind—followed by the turn of the natural cycle, which fragments and dissolves this existence—causes the artist to maintain a protean amorphousness in his works, in which the viewpoint swings between form and the formless.

- The formless is an established condition, like form, and is acceptable in the work of art. The formless consists of a succession of movements, each of which destroys the value of the prior movement. In this way, form disappears when the locus of the succession is lost (the desert is a formless painting because it is the unbroken movement of one grain of sand).

- Man is born and becomes aware of form as a gestalt (that is, as a total image). Herein lies the intuitive inclination for form. When the human being develops, the third dimension develops with him, and a set of forms or shapes develops in his mind. So he begins to analyze objects, and then abandons analysis within form, which collapses as a consequence. In this way, man draws near to the silent formless world of stirring voices, as if he had revealed the cosmic void.

10. From the standpoint of art history to those of aesthetics and art criticism, artistic culture is considered one of the links that secures the artist's relationship with the public. When an individual is endowed with artistic culture, he is ready to test his humanity.

- We reject any art criticism whose foundation is rhetorical effect.
- In our opinion, the mission of art criticism is the direct observation of the emanations of the work of art.
- The art critic's task is to reveal both the indirect and the objective aesthetic elements in the work of art.
- We are wary of the critic who does not believe in temporal sequence, and we ask him to see in every work of art a window open onto the future.

11. We hold sacred the freedom of man, and of the artist in particular, because freedom is the natural environment in which art grows.

- Freedom is one of the prerequisites for the artist's life.
- The revolutionary nature of art is inevitable and natural, because we see in every work of art a new human take on existence.
- We believe that the revolutionary exists in every work of art, manifesting only through a boundless freedom from which the artist proceeds.
- Traditions are boundaries that may be freely taken and freely abandoned.

Notes

1. *Eds.: Sifr fasila 'ashara*: literally, "zero comma ten." The authors may be making reference to the Suprematist movement and the exhibition titled *0.10*, organized in Petrograd in 1915.
2. *Eds.: The sentence is "Fi fann sufiyya mu'asira"*: literally, "There is a contemporary Sufism in art." In this case, the term "Sufism" seems to connote the mystical inquiry of László Moholy-Nagy, as is noted by Abdul Aziz Alloun in a letter to his friend Salman Qataya (see following text in the present volume).
3. *Eds.: Al-lawnayn*: literally, "the two colors" of the physical and the social.

—"Mānifist (Bayān Fanni li-l-Ḥaraka al-Tashkiliyya fi Sūriyā)," in 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Allūn, *Mun'aṭaf al-Sittināt fi Tārīkh al-Funūn al-Jamila al-Mu'asira fi Sūriyā* (Damascus: al-Dār al-Thaqāfi li-Majmū'at Da'dūsh al-'Ālamiyya, 2003), 78-80. Translated from Arabic by the editors of the present volume.

Letter to Salman Qataya (1962)

Abdul Aziz Alloun

I told you before about our meetings at the Gallery of International Modern Art to research the points of a manifesto, or statement of foundational philosophy, for the productions of the Arab artist here. And now I'm back to tell you that a draft manifesto or statement was published yesterday in some Damascus newspapers, and it

will be published in most Arabic newspapers and magazines. Only three artists signed the new manifesto: Fateh al-Moudarres, Mahmoud Daadouch, and myself.

You may be puzzled, my dear friend, as to why we three would publish something like this. Why would we agree so swiftly to lay down an artistic philosophy, given the current state of affairs? We identified the need to establish the philosophical underpinnings for such a statement, and studied and examined various Western views posited in the second half of the last century. Then we set aside one or two meetings to listen to lectures by specialists in the artistic history and traditions of Arab Syria, and to some of the perspectives on popular art that continue to influence the lives of people here. And finally, we collected the products of these studies and formed groups, each one devoted to drafting an aspect of this artistic philosophy, so as to arrive ultimately at the final draft. Why would we do all this?

We had hoped that the manifesto would be like a civilizational guide that would bring together everyone who works in the arts here, and would mark out a path for the arts movement to pursue in the future.

But our meetings failed, as noted previously. Some people had fears and attempted to narrow the scope of the discussions—which involved only a few painters and were not joined by poets, fiction writers, or those engaged in the fields of thought, music, or architecture. The discussions thus remained fruitless, such that we nearly withdrew from the second meeting when the usual bickering erupted between some colleagues during a discussion of the difference between authentic and spurious art.

The important thing is that we three found there is no way to achieve the dream that we wish would be realized in our land. We are truly fed up with seeing, hanging from nails, canvases that in no way approach the land in which they were painted and that are not held together by any particular intellectual concept.

I am fed up, my friend, with writing about people in my articles whom I force myself to call artists. I am pained as I tell myself—again—that their only greatness is that they digest Western artists through copying or imitation, or unholy apprenticeships, or utterly unbalanced approaches to expressing the unified personality.

Despite all this, I believe that there are some artists, or projects by certain artists, that are sincere in expressing themselves and are faithful to their art. But what good are these against those peddlers who continue to spark artistic uproar without deserving the honor of working in the artistic field? One of these recently staged a solo exhibition in which he showcased four [of his own] paintings that were derived from four well-known artists. We had a long laugh at the opening when we saw the paintings, which our friend had signed in large letters.

In any case, after the meeting that would be our last, we sought refuge in Fateh's house in al-Najma Square in Damascus, despair stealing into our hearts, and we discussed the matter among ourselves. We found that we agreed on some points, and so we followed along the course that the general meetings should have followed [had they continued].

We paused for a long while to consider artistic views that had appeared in the West in the second half of the last century, and we began recording some of our opinions, particularly when examining the views of the artist [László] Moholy-Nagy in his artistic theory known as "the New Vision." We paused for quite a long time at

his view that art is mystical, and we adopted it.¹ We thus began by underscoring the spirituality of the Arab man.

We spent several nights at Fateh's discussing this until we had produced a draft of the manifesto. We three signed it on the morning of April 9, 1962.

In the points of the manifesto, we were keen to stress the freedom and spontaneity of the work of art. We paused for a long time at some of the points to underscore the forward course of the art movement. We also sketched out some parameters and civilizational commitments for the local specificity of the work of art. When we decided to publish the manifesto, we did so not in order to spark an uproar in the press, but to hear our fellow artists' and thinkers' opinions of our efforts, and to focus the course of the arts movement. It is not enough for people to frequent art exhibitions. The public must also engage with those exhibitions and discover their own humanity in the works exhibited. They must open their eyes to a world created for them by an artist who lives with them and who honestly and faithfully expresses the splendid aesthetics that stirs in his spirit and molds his ideals and values.

We await artists and thinkers to write their opinions in the press. Perhaps through their comments we may reach some intellectual ground or archway where the Arab artist who is isolated from our country's society can find shelter. We give great importance to the opinions of those involved in the intellectual fields, because we believe that a lively discussion can liberate the artist in our country from his servitude to the trends coming at him so forcefully from all directions, fully formed, which he is compelled—like a negligent pupil—to adopt. We also believe that this is the best way to support artistic traditions and convey the gains of one generation to the next, and to recognize the historical mission of the artist and make his art eternal.

Note

1. Eds.: Alloun attributes the sentiment "*al-fann sufiyya*"—a phrase meaning literally "art is Sufism"—to László Moholy-Nagy. However, given that Moholy-Nagy's *The New Vision* (originally *Von Material zu Architektur*, 1928, translated to English as *The New Vision* in 1930, and reissued in expanded form in 1947) contains no direct reference to Sufism, Alloun seems to use the term "Sufism" to connote a unifying mysticism.

—'Abd al-'Aziz 'Allūn, open letter to Salmān Qatāya, originally published in *Ṣawt al-'Arab*, May 20, 1962; repr. in 'Abd al-'Aziz 'Allūn, *Mun'aṭaf al-Sittināt fī Tārīkh al-Funūn al-Jamīla al-Mu'āṣira fī Sūriyā* (Damascus: al-Dār al-Thaqāfi li-Majmū'at Da'dūsh al-'Ālamiyya, 2003), 82–84. Translated from Arabic by the editors of the present volume.

You're Entitled to Your Opinion (1962)

Adnan Ibn Dhurayl

A quiet *life-immediacy*¹ is not a rejection of value, but rather an attempt to experience life, and the life of the societies around, with profundity and discernment, seeking new aesthetics. It is a predilection for abstraction both formal and absolute, and a yielding to suggestion and inspiration. These are at base the intellectual and stylistic principles reflected in the manifesto released by Mahmoud Daadouch, Fateh al-Moudarres, and Abdul Aziz Alloun.

The manifesto, all of it, is a life-oriented, abstract declaration—we must admit this.

When we say *life-immediacy*, we are speaking of time and struggle, of spirit and transcendence, and we are speaking, in the end, of shackles and freedom as well.

There is a subjective existentialism and deep introspection in it, and it takes its faith from mysticism.² It trusts in things, and its passion informs its accomplishments. In truth, the manifesto is not a rejection of values and standards, but rather [it proposes] a new valuation and a modern mode of experience. It is neither nihilistic nor social, but rather open to the self and liberated from the manufactured.

The authors of the statement say:

- *Authentic art is engagement and participation in the creation of existence.*
- *There is a contemporary mysticism in art. We would smash all the desiccated accretions that attached themselves to the material of the work of art as a result of industrial production.*
- *All inanimate material acquires the sanctity of living flesh once it is incorporated into the work of art.*
- *We do not believe in the death and stasis of things; rather, we believe in their movement and development.* (There is also universal and vital compassion in these candid points, their immediacy ultimately reaching a humanity that believes in action, in the future, and in art.)
- *Art is the addition of new perceptions to human heritage.*
- *The mission of art is to enrich human heritage with creative insights, which, however small, are of great significance in building the future.*
- *The revolutionary nature of art is inevitable and natural, because we see in every work of art a new human take on existence.*

These principles are truly acceptable, in theory and practice alike. Just as we have hailed their pioneers, in their formal and formless artistic productions, both of which are purposeful, here we hail the emergence of these principles in our artistic milieu, as well as every product that demonstrates its artistry and value.

Critic and artist friends have asked me: “How can you accept these radical, nebulous principles? Given our artistic and intellectual reality, how can you be silent about life-immediacy and existentialism?” I answered them, and I repeat what I said to them here: “These principles are not radical, nor are they nebulous. Moreover, life-immediacy is acceptable, particularly if it is optimistic and constructive, because it brings the artist closer to reality, and the audience closer to suffering—just as existentialism is acceptable today, particularly the virtuous version of it, and the purposeful one, because it is fertile, and rich.”

Others ask: Where is the commitment in the words of those who issued the statement? Does the artist not think of the collective at the moment of creation because the collective is latent within him? Is individual artistic activity sufficient?

I say, truly: While the manifesto may lack a call for commitment, it does not lack commitment itself, for this is a prerogative of the life-immediacy that is in the manifesto! Moreover, there are numerous references in the manifesto to the collective and its vitality, and anyone who wishes may expand on them.

The evidence of this is the civilization awareness that is abundant in the manifesto: “The artist has a civilizational responsibility for both the physical and social aspects reflected by the sun on the particular patch of earth on which he lives, for that spot is one of the rich wellsprings of human heritage.” “The Arab artist is responsible for

giving expression to the Arab spirit striving to provide humanity with values and ideals.” In addition to all this, there are valuable definitions of artistic culture and art criticism, and also of the artistic public, which indicates purposefulness and optimism.

There remains the problem of form and the formless in the manifesto. As stated above, the manifesto demonstrates a preference for the formless, and this after interesting analyses of artistic creation between the conscious and unconscious, of course. In fact, the manifesto is acceptable in this regard as well, and is not radical. It allows form to be treated by modification or abbreviation, even for social and purposeful subjects.

The formless is an established existence, like form, and is acceptable in the work of art in order to avoid monotony and stasis. “The coupling of things in nature and their tendency to unite in the human mind—followed by the turn of the natural cycle, which fragments and dissolves this existence—causes the artist to maintain a protean amorphousness in his works, in which the viewpoint swings between form and the formless.”

The output of the authors of the manifesto, Daadouch, Moudarres [and Alloun], is true to these artistic claims, as we have seen, and as we still see, in the coupling of form and the formless with harmony, virtuosity, and authenticity.

Notes

1. Eds.: *Hayatiyya*: this term appears to be a neologism, suggesting something like a close, existential commitment to life in all its dimensions.
2. Eds.: Again, the term *sufiyya*—literally, Sufism—is here used to denote mysticism.

—ʿAdnān ibn Dhurayl, “Anta Ḥurr fī Raʾyika,” *Ṣawt al-ʿArab*, June 7, 1962. Translated from Arabic by the editors of the present volume.

IN FOCUS

Art and Political Patronage during the Cold War

Sarah Rogers

During the Cold War decades of the 1950s and 1960s, artists, galleries, and critical discourse in the Arab regions became imbricated in plays for political and economic influence, both local and international. The cultural infrastructures of the Arab world received an influx of energy and attention from the United States, European countries, and the Soviet Bloc. Lebanon in particular emerged as a strategic hub in the assertion of American influence, with art as a potential medium in this process. As recorded in a 1962 Memorandum of Conversation with President John F. Kennedy, the Lebanese ambassador to the United States, Nadim Dimechkie, suggested a more aggressive cultural and commercial policy in the region, with particular focus on Lebanon. A year later, the United States Information Agency (USIA, under the auspices of the State Department) sent American Abstract Expressionist painter John Ferren to Beirut as the first artist chosen for the agency’s annual artist-in-residence-abroad program.

Ferren’s official presence in Beirut, along with his subsequent tour through Iran, Jordan, Pakistan, and India to deliver lectures on American abstraction, and his previous work with the Office of War Information in Algiers (1943–45), together indicate the U.S. government’s willingness to commit resources to cultural propaganda throughout the Cold

War. The USIA (known abroad as the United States Information Services, USIS)—from its establishment in 1953 until 1999, when it was absorbed into the Department of State under the new Bureau of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs—served, at least ostensibly, to promote public diplomacy through cultural and education exchange programs between the United States and its institutions abroad. Such programming took the form of residencies, scholarships, film series, cultural magazines and literary journals, trade shows, and traveling exhibitions. There are also examples of direct investment, such as the establishment of cultural centers and galleries, including the John F. Kennedy American Center in Beirut, an exhibition space and library that opened in 1953 and was run by the U.S. Embassy, one of five cultural-center branches located throughout Lebanon. But such instances of U.S. patronage became fraught with tension in the Arab world. Ferren was aware that audiences in Lebanon were unlikely to perceive his presence as neutral; to avoid any suspicion of being a spy, he made a point of insisting in Lebanese press interviews and artist roundtable talks that he was in Lebanon on an arts scholarship.

Such U.S.-protected exchange programs as student fellowships and “technical consultancies” had been initiated in a Cold War mode; many had been conceived as factors of Unesco’s programs of the postwar 1940s. States espousing other worldviews—Communism, Arab socialism, humanism of the Non-Aligned movement—offered further training opportunities for cultural and artistic exchange. When the directors of the new national art school in Syria needed teaching staff in 1961, for example, they forged agreements with France, Italy, Poland, and Bulgaria to create a fully international faculty. The Syrian state had long taken exhibition-exchange programs seriously as a medium for positive propaganda, organizing a first major touring exhibition of Syrian paintings and popular crafts in 1957 and sending it to Moscow. Cold War flows of ideological resources could also keep more experimental initiatives afloat; the first art gallery in Damascus, the Gallery of International Modern Art, which opened in 1960 with an exhibition of abstract work, covered its operating costs by printing Arabic translations of “red,” pro-Soviet writings as a subcontract with the Syrian government. Once the Ba’th Party took control of Syria in 1963, the newspapers shifted focus decisively to national arts, mural commissions, and, eventually, international youth rallies and their distinctive visual culture. Similar tracks were followed by countries of the region such as Iraq and Egypt.

These overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, political affiliations in the region sparked fraught deliberations on political commitment and aesthetic integrity. Throughout the 1960s these debates filled the pages of leading Arabic cultural journals, such as *al-Adab*, *Shi’r*, and *Hiwar* (all based in Beirut, with pan-Arab circulation). In 1966, however, when the *New York Times* published a series of front-page articles detailing the ways in which the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had funded the Congress for Cultural Freedom, including the publication of journals such as *Hiwar*, the terrain shifted radically and the influence of many of these journals faded.

Sarah Rogers is an independent scholar.

MAKING SPACES IN BEIRUT

The early 1960s in Beirut saw a boom in gallery openings and new art initiatives, which also sparked public debates. This section includes three documents about Lebanon's burgeoning art scene. The first is a notice, published in the newspaper *al-Nahar*, about the 1963 launch of Gallery One; it includes a brief interview with American Lebanese artist and gallery director Helen al-Khal in which she describes the venue as a new model of gallery devoted to the professional promotion of ambitious art. It is followed by an opinion piece on the 1964 Autumn Salon at Beirut's Sursock Museum by art journalist and emerging theater director Jalal Khoury. Finally, painter Stélio Scamanga offers a manifestolike statement written for his December 1964 exhibition at Galerie L'Amateur.

See Plate 23 for Shafic Abboud's 1964 *Child's Play*, which won the painting prize at the 1964 Autumn Salon at the Sursock Museum, and Plate 24 for a representative painting by Stélio Scamanga.

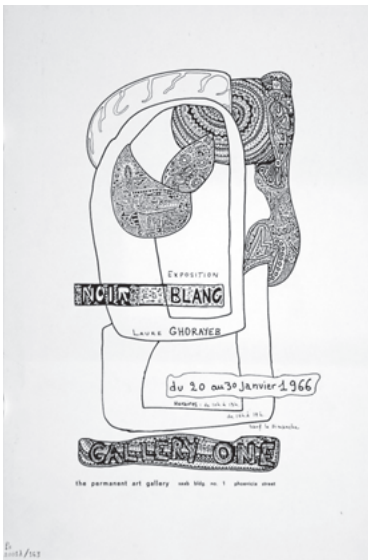
Opening of Gallery One: A First Art Institution of Its Kind (1963)

Mrs. Helen al-Khal convened a press conference at the offices of the publishing house of the journal *Shi'r*, where she spoke of the establishment of the first art gallery of its kind in the East. The new gallery, which opened yesterday, is called Gallery One, a reference to its being the first of its kind. It is a permanent gallery that houses a new collection of selected paintings, sculptures, and artist prints by Lebanese and Arab artists; they will remain on display in the gallery until they are sold, at which point they will be replaced by new works. The gallery is located in the Saab Building, no. 1 Phoenicia Street, near the publishing headquarters of the journal *Shi'r*.

Before the questions began, the following statement was distributed to journalists:

An art movement is rising in Lebanon today. There is thus an urgent need to establish a permanent exhibition space for the works of this movement, similar to the galleries of the world's art capitals, which present for sale a selected group of works. Such a space will achieve the following major goals:

1. To bring order to the existing chaos in art exhibition and pricing.
2. To properly highlight the faces of artistic activity in Lebanon and the Arab countries, and assist the public in evaluating it, assessing its various new styles, and purchasing the successful examples from them.



Poster for the exhibition *Noir et Blanc* (*Black and White*): Laure Ghorayeb, at Gallery One, Beirut. 1966. Commercially printed on cardboard. 18 7/8 × 11 1/16" (48 × 30 cm). The Jafet Library Collection, American University of Beirut. Gift of César Nammour

3. To market our artistic production in the art capitals of the world.

4. To support existing artistic talents and discover and foster emerging talents.

Gallery One, despite its modest beginnings, aspires to meet this need and realize these goals. It is the first of its kind not only in Lebanon, but in the entire Arab East. There is no better indication of its worth than the full cooperation it has received from artists in Lebanon and circles interested in the renaissance and flourishing of art.

* * *

Mrs. Helen al-Khal, the director and artistic supervisor of Gallery One, was asked what exactly was meant by the phrase “bring order to the existing chaos in art exhibition and pricing.” She said that there is a robust art movement in Lebanon that has been very active in recent years. The confusion lies in how things are exhibited. Anyone who wants to exhibit something does so without any control or direction, and so the public has confused good art with poor art. The two factors that can help limit the confusion in world art markets—government sponsorship and responsible critics—are weak in Beirut. The factor of criticism is nearly nonexistent. Gallery One will try to blaze a path in coordination, regulation, and organization, hoping that many sister galleries will follow.

Responding to another question, the director of the gallery said that, with regard to the pricing of art paintings in the Beirut markets, a kind of speculation is taking place that lacks any benchmarks or standards. Since artistic quality is not tied to standards, prices are adrift as well. They are subject to no system and do not comport with the fundamental rules observed in the most refined art capitals. And so we have recently seen the prices of paintings raised far beyond what they should be. Mrs. al-Khal added: “Initially, we will be bound by the current prices in Lebanon, but we will seek, as soon as the gallery finds its feet, to subject the price of paintings to a special metric that considers the quality of the work of art on the one hand and the public’s purchasing capacities on the other.”

A question-and-answer session followed:

On what commercial basis will the cooperation between Gallery One and artists be predicated?

On the generally accepted basis: The gallery will take a percentage of sales and will assume responsibility for all expenses, organizational and promotional.

In addition to the permanent exhibition, will you put on special exhibitions?

Yes, from time to time.

Does Gallery One have a particular artistic orientation?

No, all artistic orientations are acceptable, as long as a certain level of quality is maintained.

Will Gallery One provide grants and prizes to artists?

All kinds of support and recompense are possible, and we'll work to make those things a reality. I'd like to mention that Gallery One is not merely an exhibition space. It will also strive to be a link between Lebanese and Arab artists, and a forum where they can gather freely, discuss their affairs, and establish relationships with one another.

What is the relationship between Gallery One and the Shi'r publishing house?

Administratively, Gallery One is subordinate to the *Shi'r* publishing house, but it is utterly independent in all other respects. [...]

—“‘Ifṭitāḥ ‘Ghālirī Wāḥid’: Awwāl Mu’assasa Fanniyya min Naw’ihā” (abridged), *al-Nahār*, April 18, 1963. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

Remarks on the Autumn Exhibition: I Am Uncultured! (1964)

Jalal Khoury

If one were to randomly select a citizen of the world and lead him blindfolded into the middle of the Sursock Museum, would he know where he was? Would the few paintings that constitute the Autumn Exhibition suffice to provide him with the key to the artistic mystery, causing him to say: I am in Beirut, Lebanon, for these works express a way of life, a sensibility, and a heritage proper only to Lebanon?

A journalist posed this question at the pre-opening of the current salon, and it seems that no such citizen of the world—unless he were a seer, a medium, or a clairvoyant—would know quite how to respond.

A panoramic look at the few paintings on display reveals the degree to which local artists have been uprooted, their works sounding only a distant, clumsy echo of various European styles.

If a man with good sense and an average level of culture, one who does not necessarily believe everything he sees in print, were to venture into the Sursock Museum, what would his reaction be before this muddle of colors and pasty surfaces, collectively baptized “abstract art,” which is the common denominator of all the works on display? No doubt our man would leave the place empty-handed. Yet if he dares to voice his discontent, he'll quickly be labeled uncultured and vulgar, sent off to rejoin the pack of other vulgar types from all countries, united in their common lack of culture.

This is because what we call art today situates itself against the common sentiment that it is supposed to express, at the height of an absurd hermeticism reserved exclusively (for the sake of high-society pomp, of course) for the “masters” of canned spirit, whether they be critics, jury members, or simply dilettantes of the latest style. These individuals alone are capable of “understanding” abstract art, and they alone are entitled to damn to hell everything that disagrees with their criteria of appreciation and judgment. It's a closed caste that has assumed the right to impose its views and its verbiage on others, having equipped themselves with absolute guarantees about the future of art and culture.

Personally, I belong among the vulgar lot—incapable of grasping, of appreciating “the spatial dynamic of time objectified by the structuring normality of becoming tangential,” and other “users’ manuals” for abstract art, which the arts page is constantly serving up to us.

I am vulgar, but I insist on staying that way, preferring to dream beneath a tree rather than to taste the pompous, empty “universalism” of linguistic clowns and their kind. I refuse at once the enlightenment of the critics, the statistics of the experts, the faith of the philosopher. The stranger who looks at me must either see me as I am or go home. I won’t act like a monkey to make a good impression on him, and I do not live as a tourist.

The art that moves me is called neither “slop” nor Pop art. I find consolation in thinking that Cervantes would have ignored [Françoise] Sagan and the Nouveau Roman, as Shakespeare would have ignored the theater of Mr. [Eugène] Ionesco. Which prevents no one from “understanding” *Don Quixote* and *The Merchant of Venice*.

When a work strikes me as incongruous, I grant myself the luxury not to attack myself, but to accuse its author.

The “guides” who offer me mosaics of words destined to impress the gallery or pay for last night’s dinner simply evoke pity in me. Even when they warn me of the dangers of a lack of culture, of academicism, and of populism.

For I consider no other danger but that which eyes my frontiers, and no other enemies but those who seek—from the inside as well as the outside—to mime the capacity for resistance and the vital forces that represent the cultural heritage of my fellow citizens, my brothers in ignorance. And they do this by making me take:

the smoke of the critics for the fire of abstract art;

the filming of spy films for a plainsong of local tourism;

Absurdist theater for an urgent need;

Lettrism for an Esperanto of culture;

the films of [Alain] Resnais for an expression of the complete man;

the visit of any French-speaking underling for a blessing from the sky above.

And words, words, words. . . .

—Jalal Khoury, “Propos sur le Salon d’Automne: Je suis inculte! . . .” *Magazine*, no. 417 (December 17, 1964): 21. Translated from French by Patrick Lyons.

Toward a New Space: The Perspective of the Abstract (1964)

Stélio Scamanga

Five hundred years have passed, and Western painting is still a prisoner of the concept of the middle ground, of Albertian perspective.

This stable and symmetrical space, defined by a system of mathematical calculations, composed of discontinuous elements, clearly analyzed, where the surprise of metamorphoses is banished, illustrates a Cartesian way of thinking based on development and the concrete world.

The work is conceived as an object in the universe, illuminated like other objects by the light of day.

The concept of the middle ground favors the dispersion of volume, the play of empty spaces, holes, multiple planes colliding that break up the light, reliefs and protrusions, based on modeling and shading.

This space, which adopts the notion of a ground, derives from a rationalization of the thought that man would rebel against a separate domain. A domain viewed by man.

Then the image of the painting is treated only as a retinal image, combining an illusion of three dimensions on one plane.

This is true for painting that is termed *figurative* as well as for painting termed *abstract*. A false definition, this abstract painting.

Western painting has never been [truly] abstract; it is, rather, an abstraction of the image seen by the eye—always subject to the laws of the middle ground.

The perspective of the abstract is based on the concept of the limit-space.

A space that rejects the system of the mathematical series in order to adopt the system of the labyrinth, which proceeds by mobile syntheses, and in which the eye travels without finding its way, intentionally led astray by a linear caprice that slips away to reach a secret goal.

A sort of grid is formed, creating an infinite variety of blocks of space that constitute a fragmented universe.

The shapes tend to be wedded to their respective curves: to meet, become entangled; they go from the evenness of the curves and contacts to this undulating continuity, where the relationship of the parts ceases to be discernible, where the beginning and the end are concealed. It is a space where the light is in the painting.

The work is conceived as a universe that has its own light, its inner light.

A new dimension is formed, which is neither movement nor depth.

This space rejects the mathematical series in favor of interlacing. It is a mobile space:

The metamorphoses occur there not in separate stages but in the complex continuity of curves, interlaced spires, in the flexion of a curve, creating rhythm and combination, and implying a whole future of alternations, duplications, and folds. The space of interlacing is not flat:

The strips that make up these unstable figures pass under one another, and their obvious shape on the plane of the image is explained only by a secret activity on a plane underneath.

This is the perspective of the abstract.

It does not reside entirely in the play of the interlacing.

Combinations of irregular polyhedrons, alternating light and dark, without the slightest use of shadow, give us the illusion—at once insistent and elusive—of a shimmering relief.

The compartments never juxtapose two equal values, but interpose a different value: this is the rule of the structure of this space.

No notion of a ground; it is a space seen beyond man, a periphery that extends and surrounds at the same time. The creation of a world that is not our own.

The power of abstraction and the infinite resources of the imaginary.

An illustration of a way of thinking that rejects development to adopt involution, that rejects the concrete world in favor of the vagaries of the dream. A space that translates the human reverie on form.

—Stélio Scamanga, “Vers un espace nouveau: La Perspective de l’abstract,” 1964; text supplied by the artist. Translated from French by Jeanine Herman.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Three Years of Teaching Art in Khartoum, 1962–65

Amir Nour

In the period from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s, a group of around ten Sudanese artists were given government grants to study art in London. I was among them, attending London’s Slade School of Fine Art from 1959 to 1962. Upon our return to Sudan, in return for the scholarships we had received, we were obliged to teach in Khartoum’s School of Fine and Applied Arts. We were hopeful, enthusiastic, energetic, and filled with ideas and dreams. However, we were faced with an utter lack of recognition: considered mere government employees, we were tasked with teaching skills and techniques at an art school that was run like a vocational high school, training teachers to be art instructors in secondary schools.

In those days, the pursuit of theoretical knowledge in Sudan was virtually nonexistent: there were no lectures on any type of art history; there were no art galleries; there

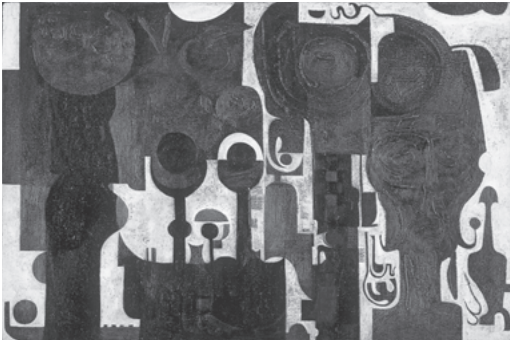


Amir Nour. *Confession*. 1961. Lithograph. Sheet: 17 × 22" (43.2 × 55.9 cm). Collection the artist

was no art criticism. Sadly, the School of Fine and Applied Arts did not serve as an “oasis” in this cultural desert (as has been supposed by some critics). And yet those artists associated with the school were able to find inspiration in the diverse cultures and traditions of the country’s various regions. Indeed, the most beneficial parts of each school year were the organized biannual trips to places such as the city of Wadi Halfa and the surrounding area of northern Sudan, the port city of Suakin and the Red Sea Hills, and the Nuba Mountains. These trips,

during which the travelers drew and painted, helped to compensate for the lack of theoretical studies. Furthermore, a short distance from the school was the National Museum in Khartoum, which housed the antiquities of the ancient Kush Kingdom and the ancient remains of pottery from Darfur.

In spite of the hardships and the disheartening school environment, a few individuals succeeded in establishing a name for themselves. Among them were Ibrahim el-Salahi, who received a six-month Unesco grant to travel to South America in 1962,



Ibrahim el-Salahi. *The Mosque*. 1964. Oil on canvas. 12 1/16 × 18 1/8" (30.7 × 46 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Fund

and a one-year scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation to go to New York in 1964. During the time that el-Salahi was working at the school in Khartoum, his paintings were representational: skeletonlike figures with elongated faces, depicted in earthy colors. Meticulously executed, but more illustrative than painterly, they reflected an influence of traditional African carvings rather than Arabic art or calligraphy.

Two artists who worked in the realm of Arabic calligraphy were Osman A. Waqialla and his student Ahmed M. Shibrain. Waqialla was the first Sudanese to formally pioneer the study of both English and Arabic calligraphy, first in London and then in Cairo. He resigned from his teaching post at the School of Fine and Applied Arts in the early 1950s to become the first artist in Khartoum to establish a commercial calligraphy studio. Waqialla inspired many artists through his carefully controlled work in classical calligraphy.

In Sudan, the position of the calligrapher is one of honor: he exalts the language of the Holy Qur'an and beautifies the words of Allah by the work of his hand. Other artists in Sudan in the 1960s were not accorded such honor. Waqialla's student Shibrain, a devout Muslim, was inspired to explore the artistic possibilities in Arabic calligraphy. He departed from the formalities of traditional Islamic calligraphy (which were apparent in the work of his teacher), and experimented freely. He indulged in abstracting, in a complex fashion, Qur'anic verses into powerful visual images.

During my time studying in London, I executed many lithographic prints with Arabic calligraphy as a theme. Some of these lithographs were exhibited in London, and later in the Sudan Pavilion at the New York World's Fair (1964–65). This was the time when I began to see things in Sudan from a different perspective. I was fascinated by gatherings of people and animals, and by observing objects in Sudan's vast, desert horizon. Everything seemed blurred and small and deprived of details, abstracted by distance and mist. I vividly recall the experience of seeing hundreds and hundreds of gourds scattered in the dry season in that vast landscape: dots and pure forms in a boundless space. A few years later, the cumulative experience of those years inspired many pieces of my sculpture, such as *Grazing at Shendi* (1969).

Unfortunately, I stored all the work I made during those three years—as well as most of the work I'd made in London—at the school in Khartoum before I left the country in 1965. When I returned to Sudan seven years later, there was nothing left of it. The school authorities declared that the storage area had been flooded and everything in it destroyed. That was a turning point in my life, when I decided to leave Sudan.

Born in Shendi, Sudan, **Amir Nour** is an artist and professor of fine arts. He taught at Khartoum's School of Fine and Applied Arts between 1962 and 1965.



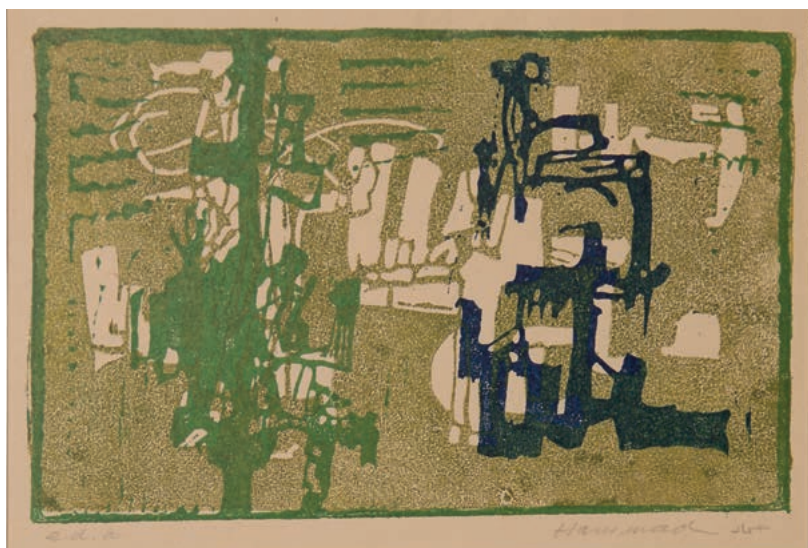
Plates II



26.
Fateh al-Moudarres
Ranch Girls. 1965. Oil
 on canvas. 19 $\frac{11}{16}$ ×
 27 $\frac{9}{16}$ " (50 × 70 cm).
 Jalanbo Collection

27.
Shakir Hassan
Al Said
One Dimension in Color.
 1966. Pastel on paper.
 24 × 18 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (61 × 46 cm)





28.

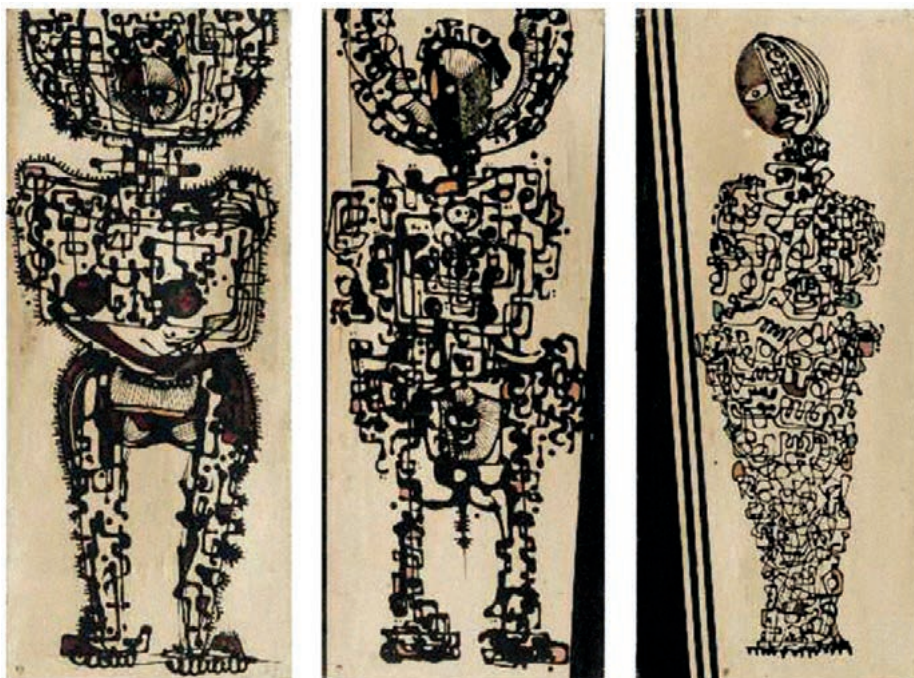
Mahmoud Hammad

Composition (e.d.a.).

1966. Linoleum cuts
on paper, mounted
on cardboard, with
watercolor additions.

Sheet (each): $5 \frac{1}{8} \times$
 $7 \frac{3}{8}$ " (13 × 18.8 cm);

plate (each): $4 \frac{7}{16} \times 7$ "
(11.3 × 17.8 cm)



29.

Nja Mahdaoui

Aura Popularis.

1966. Triptych, oil on plywood. 51 $\frac{3}{16}$ \times 21 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (130 \times 55 cm) each. Collection the artist

30.

Najib Belkhodja

Abstraction No. 45.

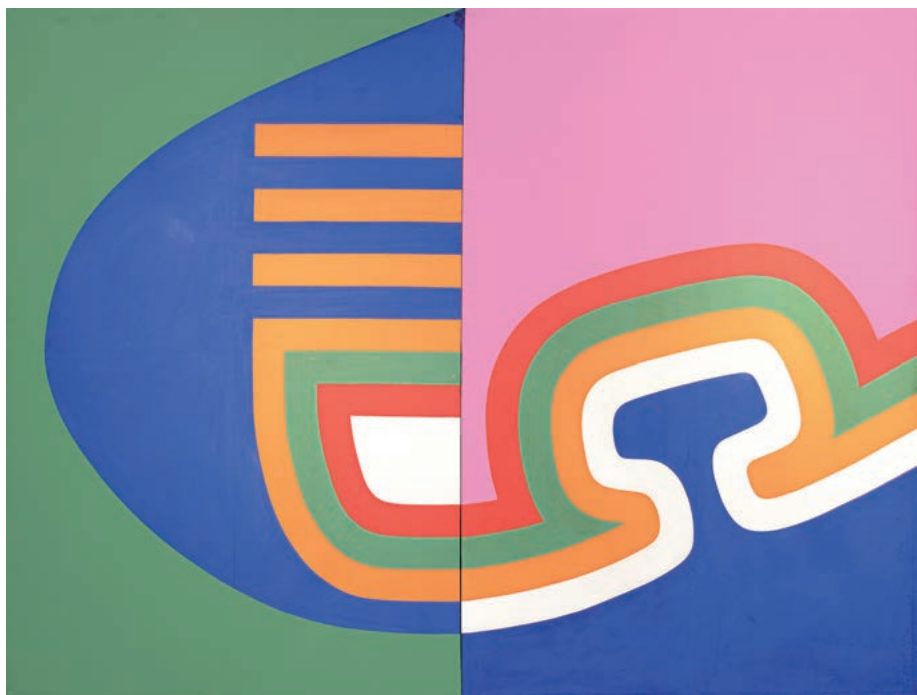
1964. Oil on canvas. 38 $\frac{15}{16}$ \times 25 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (99 \times 64 cm). Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah

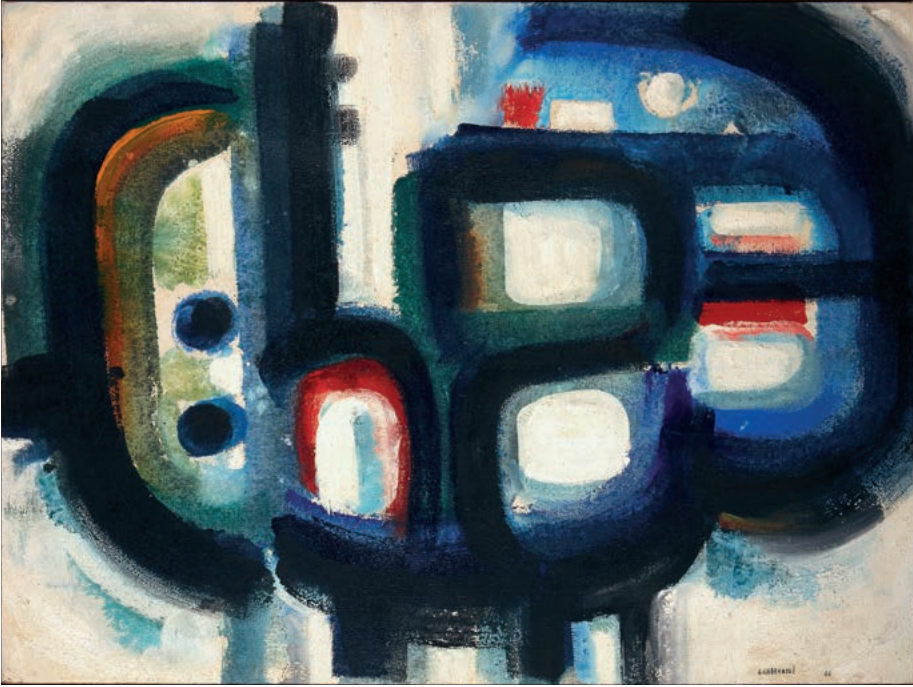




31.
Mohammed Melehi
Poster for the
exhibition *Belkahia,
Chebaa, Melehi*,
in Rabat. 1966.
Letterpress. 39 1/4 ×
25 1/4" (99.8 × 64.2
cm). The Museum of
Modern Art, New York.
Gift of the artist

32.
Mohammed Chebaa
Composition. 1967.
Diptych, acrylic
on canvas. 59 1/16 ×
78 3/4" (150 × 200 cm).
Fondation Nationale
des Musées du Maroc





33.
Ahmed Cherkaoui
Talisman No. 3. 1966.
 Oil on canvas. 51 $\frac{3}{16}$ ×
 38 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (130 × 97 cm).
 Institut du Monde
 Arabe, Paris

34.
André Elbaz
The Earthquake of
Agadir. 1960. Oil on
 canvas. 30 $\frac{13}{16}$ × 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ "
 (73.8 × 60 cm)



35.

Khalifa Qattan

Resistance. 1967.

Oil on fiberboard.

19 11/16 × 23 5/8" (50 ×

60 cm). The Khalifa

and Lidia Qattan Art

Museum, Kuwait City

36.

Dia al-Azzawi

Poster for an exhibition

at the National

Gallery of Modern Art

(Gulbenkian), Baghdad.

1971. Screenprint

on paper. 39 3/8 ×

27 9/16" (100 × 70 cm).

Collection the artist





37.

Hassan Soliman

Boy, Bicycle, Kite.

1967. Oil on canvas.

41 1/4 × 61" (120 ×

155 cm). Collection

Leila Soliman



38.

Saleh al-Jumaie

Bullet Trace, 1967. Oil
and gesso on canvas.

51 × 35 1/2" (129.5 ×
90.2 cm)

39.

Mona Saudi

Mother/Earth, 1965.

Limestone, 19 11/16 ×
15 3/4 × 11 13/16" (50 ×
40 × 30 cm). Collection
the artist



40.
Yahya al-Sheikh
Untitled. 1970. Oil on
canvas. 34 $\frac{1}{4}$ \times 27 $\frac{9}{16}$ "
(87 \times 70 cm). Current
location unknown

41.
**Qutaiba al-Sheikh
Nouri**
Untitled. 1968. Oil on
paper. 19 $\frac{7}{8}$ \times 19 $\frac{11}{16}$ "
(50.5 \times 50 cm). Alia
and Hussain Ali
Abbass Harba Family
Collection



42.

Huguette Caland

Self-Portrait. 1973. Oil
on linen. 47 $\frac{5}{8}$ \times 47 $\frac{5}{8}$ "
(121 \times 121 cm). Saradar
Collection, Beirut



43.

**Marwan Kassab
Bachi**

Face Landscape II.

1972. Oil on canvas.

51 $\frac{3}{16}$ × 63 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

(130 × 162 cm).

Nationalgalerie,
Staatliche Museen,
Berlin



44.

**Mohammed Omer
Khalil**

Collage with Thread.

1969. Etching, aquatint,
transfer. Sheet: 29 1/2 ×
22 7/16" (75 × 57 cm).
Albareh Art Gallery,
Manama



45.

**Mohammed
Al-Saleem**

Construction. 1977.

Oil on canvas. 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ ×
39 $\frac{3}{8}$ " (100 × 100 cm).

Saudi Arabian Society
for Culture and the
Arts, Jeddah



46.
Mural paintings
by **Farid Belkahia**
(center) and
Mohammed Hamidi
(right), Asilah,
Morocco. Both 1978

47.
Hussein Miloudi
Mural painting, Asilah,
Morocco. 1978



48.
Mounir Canaan
Title unknown. 1984.
Collage and paint on
board. Dimensions
unknown

49.
Sliman Mansour
Untitled. 1987. Mud,
whitewash, henna, and
natural colors on wood.
35 7/16 × 31 1/2" (90 ×
80 cm). Collection
Robert Krieg



ART AFTER THE ALGERIAN REVOLUTION

During the first years of the rule of the National Liberation Front (FLN), following the conclusion of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), official cultural discourse emphasized the role of art as a component in building a socialist state. This section gathers observations and commentary from discussions of art's use and value to a people that had just won independence. Four of the following texts are drawn from features published between 1963 and 1964 in the FLN's cultural organ, *Révolution Africaine*, a weekly newspaper that was circulated among readers of international resistance networks in Africa and beyond: "Painting and the People" reports didactically on interchanges among new museum- and gallery-goers in Algiers; and three statements, by the artists Mohamed Khadda, Choukri Mesli, and Abdallah Benanteur, engage the topic of "elements for a new art" befitting the new Algeria. Also included are a text by Jean Sénac to launch his new Gallery 54 (named for the 1954 date of the FLN's declaration that launched the Algerian War of Independence), and an essay by writer Henri Kréa for the catalogue to the exhibition *Art and the Algerian Revolution*, a show of international artists that was presented at the Palace of Fine Arts of the City of Paris from September 4 to November 3, 1964.

Painting and the People (1963)

The exhibition of paintings at the Ibn Khaldoun Gallery is causing quite a stir among Algerian artists. Without going into detail about the quarrels, in which doctrinal oppositions often serve only to conceal longstanding and deeply personal differences, we can only deplore the subjectivism that seems to reign as an almost absolute master in our intellectual milieus.

Every time a quarrel of this kind erupts in a socialist country, each adversary calls upon the people to assist him, mobilizing them (verbally or in writing) to defend his point of view. This is why we find it preferable to ask the visitors of the Ibn Khaldoun Gallery directly, without any intermediary, what they think of the exhibition and of Algerian painting in general.

The exhibition hall of the Ibn Khaldoun Gallery has peak hours, especially in the evening after six, and in the afternoon as well, when the schoolchildren come. Each visitor takes his catalogue leaflet and devotes himself to exploring an as-yet unknown world.

The paintings that attract the most viewers are the engaged works—the ones with eloquent titles in the catalogue. *The Widow* by M'hamed Issiakhem; *Algerian War* by Bachir Yellès; *November 1, 1954* by Rezki Zerarti; *Algeria in Flames* by Choukri Mesli; *Napalm and Torture* by Denis Martinez; *The Day of the Tree* by Angel Diaz Ortéga [sic]. Catalogue in hand, they look for the paintings all over the hall, since they are not organized by number.

"I like *The Widow* by Issiakhem, and I also really like *The Day of the Tree* and *Algerian War*." We are in front of *Napalm* by Martinez.

"And this one?"

"Well, you know . . . I don't really get it."

"Don't you find that it really expresses the horror of the repression?"

"I don't know . . . it doesn't look like what you see in everyday life. It's all distorted."

"Did you see the miniatures by Mohamed Racim?"

"Yes—I really liked them." We go stand in front of the glass cases where four precious illuminations are lined up.

"But this is distorted, too—look at these women in the bath. You've never seen women's bodies built like that in reality, and this position isn't realistic." He looks closely for a few seconds.

"That's true."

Silence.

"But it's beautiful, it's pleasant to look at."

"And Baya, do you like what she does?"

"Yes, I find it pleasant, too."

"Is that what you ask of a painting—to be pleasant, to be decorative?"

"Well . . . all I can say is that these are the kind of paintings I like. When I look at a painting, I judge it by asking myself whether I would like to hang it up at home. But you know, you never see any paintings like the ones here. There should be more like this."

Another visitor is contemplating *Algeria in Flames*, by Choukri Mesli. He is wearing the uniform of an RSTA [Algerian Transportation System] worker.

"Do you like this painting?"

"I really like the colors."

"Do you think it merits its title?"

"I really don't know. There, it looks like the Admiralty . . . don't you think?"

He looks at the painting.

"I find it beautiful because of the colors, but I feel like it also has tons of things in it that I don't understand."

"Do you think that painting shouldn't be decorative, that it should say something?"

"Yes. You know, I really like paintings. Before the events, I had been to the museum in Algiers several times, and also the museum in Oran. And at home, I cut out articles about painting in *Paris Match*. You know, they publish them pretty often. And yet I can't manage to understand. You know, I think that with paintings, you have to learn how to look at them, like you learn how to read. Some people say that a painting has to please the people just like that, right away—but I don't think that's true. You have to learn to love it. In Algeria, we never had the opportunity to see paintings. I remember when I went to the museum in Algiers, people looked at me suspiciously because I was an Arab, and because I wasn't dressed like a bourgeois. They always had a guide keeping an eye on me from a distance, so you can imagine. . . ."

Two other men and a schoolboy stopped near us to listen to the discussion.

"We're completely illiterate. Some people tell us that as soon as we know how to read, we can teach ourselves everything, but I think that's a joke."

Around us, the three listeners murmur their opinions discreetly.

"I'll tell you what I'd do if someone asked me to organize an exhibition. For each painting, there'd be a whole explanation of the style, the history . . ."

"of the technique . . ."

“Yes, of the technique as well. They should tell us everything—how the painting was made. You know, I went to the museum at the Parc de Galland, where arts and crafts are on display.”

“The Gsell Museum?”

“Maybe, I don’t know the name. Well, everything is displayed haphazardly, all piled together. How can they expect anyone to learn anything? There are rugs, pottery, all that, but it doesn’t say where they come from, why they’re the way they are, etc. . . . After ten minutes, you’ve had enough, and all you want is to get out of there as quickly as possible.”

“All in all, you think works of art need to be explained, not just displayed.”

“Naturally—people come here because they want to learn.”

In fact, all the visitors to the Ibn Khaldoun Gallery, even the many children, move diligently from painting to painting, looking at the number in the catalogue, lingering patiently over the works they find disconcerting; and when there are two or three of them together, they passionately discuss the paintings.

“You know, I’m not one of those people who laugh when they see a [Pablo] Picasso. We want to learn everything. Giving us the possibility to learn—that’s socialism.”

—Unsigned, “Le Peuple et la peinture,” *Révolution Africaine*, November 16, 1963. Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

Presentation at Gallery 54 (1964)

Jean Sénac

Just two years after the war of liberation, a new generation of Algerian painters is achieving notoriety. Artistic activity is now a part of the nation’s life and the country’s march toward progress. An increasingly large public, especially young people who are passionate about knowledge, are giving our culture a climate and a dynamic that will condition, decisively and originally, our every move.

At Gallery 54—which is intended as an experimental gallery in permanent contact with the people—we have brought together artists who are Algerian citizens, or who have physical ties to our country. Each one expresses, through the appearance or the essence of what is seen, a part of the Algerian reality today. Both rooted and open to the modern world, their only real point of convergence is a certain technical quality and a will to see freely that which marks their minds and their hearts in this moment of edification, which is also one of sun and poetry. “That is why,” we can affirm, with Mourad Bourboune, “not only are our artists exhuming the ravaged face of the mother, but, in the clear light of the Renaissance (the *Nahda*), they are fashioning a new image of man, whose new expression they examine tirelessly.”¹

Note

1. Eds.: This reference is to an introductory text that Bourboune—then the president of the National Liberation Front’s Cultural Commission and the National Commissioner for Culture—contributed to the exhibition catalogue for *Peintres algériens* (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, April 15–30, 1964).

—Jean Sénac, “Présentation de la Galerie 54”; repr. in Hamid Nacer-Khodja, ed., *Visages d’Algérie* (Paris: Paris Méditerranée, 2000), 164. Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

Elements for a New Art (1964)

Mohamed Khadda

With the collapse of colonialism, the values that Old Europe left to us are breaking down as well. Our country is taking the socialist path, and the artist—like the worker and the peasant—has a duty to participate in the edification of this new world, in which man will no longer exploit man.

Many questions arise, either directly or indirectly, for the artist-painter (as for other creators). What does painting bring to the people, to the revolution, to socialism?

We will attempt to respond to these questions here; our goal is to spark interest and concern.

In the fever of building the first socialist state, an entire generation of artists was sacrificed. Brilliant artists ([Vasily] Kandinsky, [Mikhail] Larionov, [Marc] Chagall) took the path of exile, and art declined into the most ridiculous academicism. Such is the result of forty years of realism in a socialist country.

It was claimed that the work of art had to serve the revolution, and based on that premise, a climate of constraint was created: artists painted smiling barricade-builders and transfigured heroes. Art's utility became the number-one criterion. Once again, the need for the work to be legible caused it to get bogged down in the conventional. They talked about the people and, with the help of demagoguery, they painted in a populist style, thus pandering to the petty sentiments of a great people. As a result, socialism crumbled beneath giant frescoes that were nothing but posters in poor taste. Our Soviet friends recognized their mistakes and, for the past several years, have been working courageously to rectify the situation.

We have a duty to learn from this experience. The main problem was the desire for art to be immediately profitable. We must distinguish art from agitation; the latter serves, directly and immediately, the position of the popular government. The art

of agitation is the poster, the illustration, the mobilizing slogan. Such a work must signify instantly; it must be legible and attract, hold attention and convince. The only muse and inspiration for agitation is the political slogan. It is the art of social utility—great in scope, but limited in time, as it is limited by the slogan that generates it.

Nevertheless, we must point out some of the exceptional successes, when agitation has exceeded itself and becomes great art. For example, we may think of the Mexican artist David Alfaro Siqueiros—his titanic frescoes, his vehemence.

The case of [Pablo] Picasso, a militant Communist, illustrates quite well the difficult synthesis of the agitator and the artist. He painted the extraordinary *Guernica*, denouncing fascist atrocities, but also *Les Femmes d'Alger*. The master of Cubism is also the man of *The Dove of Peace*.



Mohamed Khadda painting in his Algiers studio. c. 1965

The painter lives in a world that influences him and that he, in turn, influences; and if he is a witness of his time, he is also a creator of new forms that he imposes on his contemporaries. High art, in opposition to the art of agitation, is what, in the long term, transforms social customs as it transforms itself. New ideas of beauty emerge, and the old ones fade away. The *Mona Lisa* is nothing more than an obsolete legend. The socialist civilization that is inevitably replacing capitalist civilization will produce its own moral and aesthetic values.

The influence of art on practical objects no longer needs to be proven. From [Henry] Moore's sculptures and [Jean] Arp's shapes, we have cigarette lighters shaped like pebbles; lamps and chandeliers imitate [Alexander] Calder's mobiles. From the kitchen to the highway, art is present in everyday life . . . and one day it will be necessary for the architecture of the mosque to be brought up to date with that of the aerodrome.

There are so many of our culture's treasures that must be brought to light, from the enigmatic Tassili frescoes to the humble murals of the Ouadhias tribe. We must inventory the symbolism of rugs and pottery in secular colors and signs, and that of calligraphy, miniatures, illuminations—an entire stunning repertoire.

But it would be a mistake to ignore the fabulous heritage of humanity as a whole. We cannot forget Negro art, which transformed the West around 1900, or Aztec art, or [David Alfaro] Siqueiros in his prison, or the calligraphy of the Far East, or the diversity of Western art, or the dead-end revolt of American Pop art against the absurd American way of life. We have to learn why [Henri] Matisse was nourished by arabesques; why after [Eugène] Delacroix, the [Swiss-]German artist [Paul] Klee was dazzled by the Orient; and why [Piet] Mondrian, in his impasse of "art for art's sake," turned to Kufic.

Revolutions in art do not destroy; they accumulate, and we are indebted to all these marvels.

A real chasm exists between the people and the artist, and the goal of our revolution is precisely to dis-alienate both the people and the artist. Upon reflection, this problem is less dramatic for us than it is in a capitalist country, where the condition of the people is nowhere close to improving.

Bertolt Brecht said: "The work of art is not immediately popular, it becomes popular." Our country is at the stage of literacy. People speak of the simplification of form and content—apparently, to paint a plow is to put your work within reach of the peasant. This is a very simplistic pedagogy. Must we really return to naïve Épinal prints? And, in order for music to be understood, must we forbid symphonies and only compose little ditties? Underdeveloped painting is not on the revolution's agenda. The artist is responsible for his work, and the more finished it is, the better its contribution to cultural education. A good painting is what shapes the best audience.

It is also said that the people are the only judge. According to this assumption, the work of art is judged by its level of accessibility to the public. This is a seductive idea, and it seems revolutionary, but in reality it is demagogic and will only slow down the evolution of the people. We must repeat that we are still alienated, even as we emerge from the colonial darkness. Furthermore, the people are not a single entity, but have multiple tastes and needs.

Since independence, cultural events have attracted large audiences. We believe that exhibitions, news articles, conferences, and later on cultural circles

are the best ways to shift the public out of its current receptive state and into a selective state.

Art is also entertainment: this aspect is often neglected. We think of that day of the rose, which arrives after the day of the tree.

In the West, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the painted work was large scale, and decorated palaces, churches, cathedrals, and public spaces. Thus it was available to a relatively broad audience.

In the modern era, which is ruled by the laws of capital, the artist-painter enjoys a relative freedom, as, like the proletarian, he depends on the ruling class. Furthermore, obeying the law of supply and demand, his work has shrunk to fit the dimensions of an apartment, for the egotistical pleasure of the merchant or industrialist: the work of art is on the same scale as furniture.

Yet without condemning this so-called easel painting, we think that art must take place in the street, in public squares, it must adorn the façades of buildings, light up windowless walls: pictorial art will thus rediscover its breadth and meaning.

Across centuries, and in parallel with social and economic upheavals and technical advances, the history of painting is linked to that of humanity. Universally, there are two major tendencies in painting: the figurative and the nonfigurative.

Figurative painting remains faithful to the subject that it reproduces or transposes: like an alphabet, convention allows it to signify immediately and become legible.

From the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt to the distortions of Picasso, both the manner of painting and the notion of beauty have been transformed in several stages. It can be said that the adventure of painting is one of continuous liberation: from the Impressionists, who sought to capture the instant, to the Fauvists, who rejected grayness in order to paint with dynamite; from the Expressionists, who tortured form in order to reach paroxysm, to the Cubists, who radically altered the surface of the canvas.

These various revolutions led painting to that day in 1910 when the Russian artist Kandinsky created the first nonrepresentational work. Nonfigurative (or abstract) painting was born. After this long process, painting—like music, architecture, or dance—became an art unto itself, and the painter, who had long been dependent on the subject, became a creator, in the proper sense of the word. He would no longer paint almond trees in flower. Instead, by using lines, colors, or shapes, he would re-create springtime, love, or the revolution. In this domain as well, which was from now on open to man, there was no longer a horizon, but infinity.

We must emphasize the original contribution of Islam to the graphic arts. Essentially nonfigurative, it is once again in the avant-garde of universal aesthetic developments.

In Algeria, trends and currents are already emerging. These are signs of wealth more than of discord, for the competitions, controversies, and emulations carry within them a whole future of promises.

At a time when the synthesis of the arts is being spoken of elsewhere, it would be desirable for a federation of arts and letters to be formed, which would include writers, painters, dramaturges, musicians, and architects. It would be a means of fruitful exchange, influence, and reciprocal enrichment.

The honor of our Revolution is the confidence that it shows in man, the “freedom to express freely, for our culture must enrich itself with the audacity of the Revolution.”

—Mohamed Khadda, “Éléments pour un art nouveau,” *Révolution Africaine*, June 27, 1964. Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

Elements for a New Art (1964)

Choukri Mesli

There are a lot of paintings to see in Algiers right now—at the National Union of Plastic Arts galleries, at solo exhibitions—including, notably, many abstract paintings, which are the most recent productions of Algerian artists. Many people are wondering: Why this abstract art? Isn't it unusual or excessive to introduce it in a country that has been developing in an archaic style of art for centuries? What do these painters, trained in Europe, have in common with their brothers, as they try to force their paintings upon a people who are necessarily opposed to such novelties?

To this, the painter responds that he is not following a Western trend with his abstract techniques. On the contrary, he feels very close to Muslim tradition. And he wishes to find a new art, while remaining linked to a tradition. It is normal for the people not to understand it. Every living art is made by trials, by attempts, and even by errors, which can only be appreciated by art lovers, until habit leads the general public to accept the new art. Moreover, Algerians' taste was ruined by the bazaar-style Orientalism that was implanted by European realist painters in the 1900s, that awful era, as well as by those photographs in harsh and vulgar colors. This corruption made it so that the public understands serious, traditional Muslim art just as poorly as they understand the current methods of painters.

But an artist's mission is not to pander to the poor taste of the masses.

Muslim art developed outside of any realism. It has always been the triumph of plastic beauty in its purest form. Arab art is an enchantment made of lines, proportions, colors; this beauty is self-sufficient. It is from the West that we get this need to reduce it to being the translation of a realistic image. This is not a condemnation of realism, but we must admit that realism is not a criterion of beauty: it is only one form of art, like any other.

Our ancestors knew how to delight in an arabesque, in the scintillating colors of a piece of ceramic art. Consider the rugs: those paintings in wool or silk from which radiate such a beautiful and intense harmony that you would never dream of asking for more than this exquisite visual pleasure. This decor was originally drawn from nature; there you find gardens with flowerbeds, ponds, and streams of water. All this is transposed, extremely stylized, to the point of being but a feast for the eyes. But now, if a painter tries to put on canvas a study of colors or of shapes destined first to delight the eye, he is treated as a hermetic. This is, I repeat, the consequence of the naturalism brought from Europe. Yet painting is not about the subject, but about colors, shapes, and sensibility.

Of course, the painter has a much greater ambition than the weavers or ceramicists of the past, whose goal was achieved when the public was charmed. The only goal of adornment is to please, while the abstract painter seeks to express

himself, in his spirit and personality. This parallel between traditional Muslim art and abstract art thus ends fairly quickly. In our current work, ideas and sentiments always intervene. Nature always remains a pretext—the painter draws his ideas from it, but he submits it to a whole internal dream. It is this dream that becomes the material of painting, not in front of the subject, but in the studio.

But it must not be said that the Algerian people are incapable of understanding abstraction. Their entire past proves that, face-to-face with Greece and Europe, they deliberately eliminated every element of nature, and the idea of representing nature never occurred to them. The public's eye must be reaccustomed to reading an art that presents itself primarily by its plastic aspect, and they should be advised to look elsewhere for illustration and propaganda.

Abstract art is a trend, certainly, but it is above all an inevitable change—more precisely, it has been an extraordinary revolution in Europe. Here in Algeria, it can be considered a simple evolution. The increasing importance accorded to the senses over the intellect has been impacting all the arts, even literature, for many years.

Algeria can give a particular and original brilliance to this vast current. These words are not in vain. The current artistic trends throughout the world are very closely related to all the qualities that make up our own genius: imagination, fantasy, the love of delicious combinations of color and material, the development of an art that can be tasted by the senses and no longer by the mind in search of intentions.

I have often been asked why I paint in such a way, and what my motivations are. Well, here they are: I choose a theme, which could be a sunset just as easily as an idea, such as the drama of the Algerian War. Then I must determine the harmony of colors that will be most appropriate for expressing my idea—warm colors for a sunset, for example. The choice is more delicate when it comes to translating a drama: above all, the sense of tragedy must be evoked solely by the resonance of one color with another, or by the violence of contrasts.

Then I become utterly absorbed in my painting: organizing it, conversing with it; dividing it into eloquent rhythms, making it vibrate, bending it to my idea, a slow and laborious battle. I don't like art to be easy. I especially like bright, warm colors—reds, ochers. I love richness, brilliance, a stained-glass effect. In this way, I feel myself to be well within Muslim tradition, in which the idea of richness is always melded with the idea of beauty.

Bright colors are as difficult to handle as dynamite; they explode against each other, and I love playing with their strength. I cannot bring myself to paint with grays.

My paintings are rarely pure abstractions. Often, a very precise landscape gives me the starting point: the Casbah bathed in light, the Bay of Algiers in the fog, or the view from the heights. These have often provided me with the basis for semi-figurative paintings, in which I set out to express different substances: the limpidity of the air contrasted with the concrete of the walls, for example. For me, Algiers is a poetry of whiteness, of sun, of space. This is what I attempt to demonstrate through my graphic line and colors. The drawing must be suggestive and make the viewer understand, but must not be enslaved to the model.

—Choukri Mesli, "Éléments pour un art nouveau," *Révolution Africaine*, July 1, 1964. Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

Elements for a New Art (1964)

Abdallah Benanteur

The misguided movement of young Algerian painting, by which I mean the one that is vehemently represented by a certain Union of the Plastic Arts, is afflicting us with its push toward conformism.

Why must the enthusiasm of our liberation have been spent by a backward organization whose incompetence and lack of foresight have managed to impose foreign ideas on painting?

If our patriotic fervor conforms to a directive, the feeling of creation is only established by the clear expression of the artist. A work of art is nothing but a selfish feeling conquered by means of contradictory aspirations in order to justify the existence of the world that belongs only to the work itself.

The artist does not rely on any line of conduct to perfect the work, but liberates himself from all scruples in order to affirm the authority of his world, which his conception substitutes for the world of life's realities.

A great work moves us by its lack of attachments, not by its content. The great work of art is not a reflection of the feelings that animate the artist toward his kind, as he believes. Instead, it is its own truth, which emerges at its birth.

Art is born of the refusal to copy one's feelings, of the will not to tolerate internal forms and to extract them in order to produce a vision, and then to bring that vision into a world governed by art. Faced with these truths, the artist easily admits that a revolution and the liberation of a country are often the prelude to a golden age. He is thus inclined to indulge comfortably in idyllic, formulaic expressions.

An optimism results from this that is immediately ruined by practice. We find that the facts are not so simple. Facts can neither justify nor perfect the inalienability of art.

Because of this, the young Algerian painter finds himself in a dilemma between his patriotic feelings and the unattached selfishness of his work.

Despite his attachments, his firmest political convictions, and his goodwill as a militant, the creator sees that art is not a goal and that it cannot serve any cause, not even the cause that affects him the most: the one that would justify him, the one that would give his attachments back to him. Being overtaken, he admits that the only thing his country can lay claim to is the value of his work.

It is important to know that, when it is time to take stock, this seemingly gratuitous art will subsequently find its place alongside all the real values of a nation, thanks to the notion and the indirect testimony that each work bears.

The artist inevitably has this vocation of truth, as do all other creators. The painter is elected to incarnate human emotions. His current contribution is immense. It is his duty to establish a fraternal foundation for the vast field of production that technology has placed in the service of man.

In this context, the term "art and revolution" takes on a new dimension. Yet we have been witnessing the evasion of the artist for half a century, due to his inadequacy when faced with his most basic duties.

In Algeria, as elsewhere, a simplistic deception is inciting some of our painters to justify mediocre productions, in which only the titles are evocative.

However, if one is to believe the accounts in our press, Algerian art is quite great. And yet only a small number of our painters have chosen a path on the margins of the revolutionary spirit.

I do not deny that the artist, by making his easel painting, is surely creating a work of the utmost value, since the influence exerted by newly created forms is then passed on to all domains of everyday life, from the highest to the most modest.

If such an influence finds itself compromised, it is the artist's duty to intervene.

For us in Algeria and in the contemporary world, the artist scorns these means of creation. The disappearance of our artisan-artists—which will occur before long—will bring about a vulgarity that will be displayed in all objects. At that time, the revolutionary Algerian artist will have to be there to renovate everyday forms, by drawing the lines of a scarf or the coloring of a cloth.

Our predecessors felt no false shame in making a suit, a piece of furniture, a letter. . . .

Once again, our true painters should participate in collective life. There are no closed politics in Algeria. Thanks to our revolution, all fields are accessible to the artist.

One of the largest fields is publishing, a domain in great need, open to vast numbers of people, in which taste should find its chosen ground. An outlet within our reach where the artist will work toward the understanding of beauty, this will be one of our most effective resources.

But the painter is passively witnessing the ways of life in his time. This contempt avoids an effective solution.

The logic of a great artist is to be complete; he must be able to take on everything. It is not a proven fact that isolation is his sole domain. To the true artist, all these means are within his abilities.

Today, when all the schools are outmoded, we are witnessing the nonsense of values, due to the incompetence of the works produced, in which the simple, everyday object is cut off from beauty.

For the painter, it is an imperious duty to turn toward life, to reestablish everywhere the perceptible current of beauty, and to impose forms with the new materials made available by technology.

The moment of renewal is within our reach; the majority of men cannot help but be sensitive to contact with objects of high quality. The movement must be maintained in a climate of beauty, or at least strive toward this goal.

The artist's task must not be limited to this. We find ourselves at the close of a concept. A certain heritage is being swept away by non-figuration.

At the heart of this new renaissance, it is up to us to put forward our contribution.

—Abdallah Benanteur “Éléments pour un art nouveau,” *Révolution Africaine*, August 1, 1964. Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

Art and the Algerian Revolution (1964)

Henri Kréa

The artists of today have painfully felt the wounds inflicted on the Algerian people and the abuses carried out against them during the colonial nightmare and the War of Independence.

Even when they were unable, for obvious reasons, to exhibit works in which they expressed, according to their original temperament, their feelings, their cries of horror, or the profound songs they addressed to the martyrs, contemporary painters were no less united with the admirable men and heroic women of a crushed country.

Furthermore, this international exhibition is more than a typical installation bringing together artists based on their aesthetic affinities. In no way did the organizers, critics, writers, and poets seek out the haphazardness that too often presides over that kind of event.

Exceptionally, this is a retrospective in which the majority of the creators of our time have been committed to participating. These painters and sculptors, who are also in the vanguard of current developments in the plastic arts, considered it an honor to have the opportunity to show their occasional works to the people who inspired them and with whom they maintain the deepest friendship. Such a friendship is a meeting of minds for which, as Paul Éluard affirmed, “dawn dissolves the monsters.”

No one could deny to these artists the immense importance of their actions, this will to testify in their own way against abomination, wherever it occurs. The Algerian Revolution did not fail to incite them to sound the alarm among the citizens of this world, which had fallen prey to the most moving moral and humanitarian crisis that has ever occurred in human history. It was a matter of warning them: for the second time in a century and a half, a terrible genocide was threatening to annihilate a dismantled nation.

This collection of works proves that the artists and poets were right, once again. They showed their contemporaries where the keys to justice and equity could be found. For them, it was important that harmony be reestablished and that, for a country that withstood the somber loss of one-seventh of its population over the course of seven and a half years, the reparation of honor become a reality, an irrefutable necessity.

The creators, proving with eloquence that the words *Art* and *Revolution* are meant to express the same idea, magnificently demonstrate that modern painting and sculpture are not, above all, destined for bourgeois pleasure. The plastic enunciation of their thinking has an incontestable popular resonance here—enough with the masking of sensibility.

The artists show that the most unusual concepts correspond to the expression of truth and, in the domain that concerns us, to the permanence of revolutionary combat. For too long, and following an obscene interpretation of popular taste, exoticists have inappropriately claimed a realism that they were incapable of defining, and have believed that they could force us to accept their point of view. It goes without saying that this annexation of art didn't last long.

The proponents of this exoticism, which has been so rampant on the African continent, had already laid claim to some social functions. Not content to impose their invasive work, they thought themselves in a position to discredit the true creators, accusing them of belonging to the school of a moribund civilization, even as they themselves were germinating from the corpse of the colonial aesthetic. To compare their paintings with the paintings of the artists who participated in this exhibition, for example, is beyond cruel.

Modern painters and sculptors perform the work of poets. They are the ones who seek to reinvent the world, to overthrow outdated ways of apprehending reality. They find the same beauty in the new era that one can detect in the writings of our authors who are turned toward the future, toward a world in which everything will be called into question, in which freedom must be man's sole mistress. For beauty is revolutionary.

As one of the greatest minds of our time, André Breton, affirmed in a text published in Mexico City in 1938: "The artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art."¹

The timeliness of such an analysis must not escape us, and the rallying cry circulated on this occasion is more alive than ever:

The independence of art for the revolution.

The revolution for the complete liberation of art.

Note

1. Eds.: Kréa is quoting from the manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art," the founding text of the Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art, issued in 1938 by André Breton and Leon Trotsky. See also "Egyptian Art and Freedom debates," in the present volume, esp. pp. 87–88.

—Henri Kréa, introduction, *L'Art et la révolution algérienne* (Algiers: Direction des affaires culturelles du Ministère de l'Orientation nationale de la République Algérienne, 1964). Translated from French by Vanessa Brutsche.

EXPLORATORY ABSTRACTION

In April 1964, the Beirut-based pan-Arab cultural journal *Hiwar* featured a portfolio of recent abstract paintings by Egyptian artist Fouad Kamel, from the years 1959–64. The journal, which was established in November 1962 by poet Tawfiq Sayigh, often featured formally experimental art that diverged from the more politically committed art that predominated in other Arab cultural journals. To preface the feature, *Hiwar* published Kamel's concept text on abstract painting, titled "Meaninglessness Within and Without."

See Plate 25 for one of Fouad Kamel's abstract paintings from this period.

Meaninglessness Within and Without (1964)

Fouad Kamel

Alone I must move in the dark, praying to the shapes that are awakening to a new cosmic spiritual unity, unbounded by measures of reason and logic, merging movement and energy with the tremors of solid matter, shedding descriptive observation and visual knowledge.

Yes, my images are of the features of that unending azure dome, of that black earth on which beings turn ceaselessly, of imagination and free dreams and rebellion and chronic anxiety and obsessions and blazing mysterious longings. I retain the absolute right to use what I want out of all those as raw material for my art, to form a part of an ancient reservoir, made up of things inherited from predecessors, from boundless space, from the entire cosmic sensibility.

The source of my motivation and my truth moves me, so I leave the reins of my spirit to my art and set forth, to explore a unique point that trembles in the heart of a storm or sleeps in darkness's embrace, that disappears into the cloud of an ancient star explosion or into the wrinkles of birth and love and death.

Yes, I have learned—through the long and hard experience of being the child of blind coincidence so that I may renounce coincidence—to abide by the lightning flash, the heart, and by its light to explore a road that leads me to exposing that extended mask that hides my inner nakedness and external contradictions. I am not afraid to topple the image of any being, for I never know exactly where I will end up, as I follow no predetermined plan and do not shape my material according to a premeditated project.

I mold atoms of clouds into trails of magic that offer me myriad outlets where I can face myself and approach my inner skies, listening to the pulse of all existing things, to the digging and lathing, the meshing and inlaying, so as to extract the lines of a dimensionless dream. Whether a world that is slight and calm, or a world giant and destructive, it is futile to seek its meaning within my art, for form is no alternative to life or literature or philosophy or even poetry.

Yes, its special function for me is something I cannot define in intellectual terms; I receive a strange kind of consolation from its ability to provide that personal rhythm, which might compose something out of those specific living characteristics able to bring my emotions into that intimate relationship with cosmic visions. By creating the form, I create the desire for an internal conversation between the form and the ripples of that cosmic vision—ripples that do not point to a specific meaning but rather to the human condition in general, with its seasons of great tragedy. That unknown is lurking behind the forms, and beyond it are those infinite depths to which an unseeing fate and an unresponsive destiny are tethered.

When considering my art, I work as I think and think as I work; that is, I involve all my senses—my mind and intellect, my mood and emotions, even my guts. I do not separate action from thought, as I do not separate myself from the cosmos; for the work of art that absorbs all emanations of the self and all impressions of the cosmos is that final stone surface that displays an abundance of cracking and erosion, tension and pressure, and contraction and sedimentation. It is but the outcome of the struggle between a number of bodily movements that await a process of formation,

allowing what lies in the subconscious to be liberated and to pass into a medium in which thought is not separate from action, is not separate from the perpetual motion of the shoulder, elbow, wrist, hand, and fingers, which seize the brush or any other tool that leaves a mark; for my canvas, colors, tools, and raw materials, everything I turn to and attempt to use, are things that have their own specific will, and what applies to the individual elements of the work of art also applies to their collective movement.

Yes, my paintings, however big or small, are passion and wonder and adventure, by which I step beyond the visible world and separate art's material from its image in order to construct absolute form, and through it explore the world of the unknown, which is as much a surprise to me as to anyone else when it appears. When I remove the veil of trimmings and ornaments, and break mathematical certainty and geometric construction, I find myself speechless before a silent cosmos and a fate that lies in wait; but I approach hidden passages buried in faraway depths, repulsive forces that cause scattering and division, attractive forces that assemble and consolidate. That struggle between the free self and the external world generates the fabric of my paintings, the fabric of the self and its desires, the fabric of galaxies and starry space, the fabric of the ripples and curves in life's first particle that emits warmth and light and energy, sending them into the fragments of crystallized stones, into the grains of sand and mud, the drizzle of rain, the veins of marble, and the boles of sycamores and acacias—as if crossing a magic passage in which the lines of land and horizon disappear forever, where light might also disappear, and with it form and its shadow.

I reach what resembles a deadlock, where I cannot but derive from power and violence, from calmness and repose, from within metamorphosing forms, from their convulsions, something that explodes their dormant energy and reveals contrasting fabrics from behind that thick insulating membrane; and for every veil I remove I add another still intact, and for every road lost I illuminate another for feet to tread. The ongoing struggle of that image is between what is and what is about to be, between illusion and reality, appearance and essence, the mortal and the everlasting. That image transgresses systemic borders, and might allow a partial exposure of deeper recurring forces, which may form a relative quasi-foundation, which immediately becomes a set of broken and scattered states or circumstances, and the links and connections that might appear between them are only a result of those links and connections I wish to impart. If I want to link and organize those states, I might layer the excitement of present moments upon the image, invoking the magic of their haphazardness; as for transposing it into the sphere of directed intellect for the sake of practical purposes or planting a myth, I leave that to my friends who would be convinced by nothing less than my death. Herein lies my ordeal and my confusion, when I awaken to find that the abyss has widened and that I am sliding like a downpour into it, or when a nightingale gleams suddenly in a quiver of longing, and some convulsion of terror or sorrowful encounter—an encounter with destiny—makes me aware of my horrific and endless waiting.

—Fu'ād Kāmil, "Lā Ma'nā Khārijanā Kamā Huwa Dākhilānā," *Ḥiwār*, no. 9 (year 2, issue 3, April 1964): 102–4. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

THE CHALLENGE OF ART

During the first years of Ba'th Party rule in Syria after a March 1963 coup d'état, the government's commitment to socialist, Arab nationalist tenets sparked debate among artists who questioned the political implications of different creative practices, and abstraction in particular. In 1965, Syrian poet Muhammad al-Maghout published "A Trailing Zero: Damascus Letter" in *Hiwar*; this sardonic essay addresses the challenges to creativity to be found in the capital. The following year, the Syrian Ministry of Culture sponsored a high-profile exhibition of contemporary Syrian painting at Beirut's Sursock Museum; it featured abstract paintings by leading artists Mahmoud Hammad, Nasir Shoura, and Elias Zayyat among its other selections, sparking controversy. This text is a personal response defending abstract painting, written by Hammad to Farouq al-Buqayli, a Lebanese journalist who had convened a symposium around the exhibition.

See Plate 26 for a 1965 painting by Fateh al-Moudarres, whom al-Maghout discusses, and Plate 28 for an example of Mahmoud Hammad's experiments with the Arabic letter.

A Trailing Zero: Damascus Letter (1965)

Muhammad al-Maghout

It is historically certain that developing countries will remain undeveloped as long as literature is treated as a "public relief agency." The cultural aspect of these countries will therefore, despite the crowded bookstores, thundering printers, and depth of the studies, continue to seem untrue: cold and distorted, as if it had suddenly been doused with acid.

But who did this, I wonder? The baker? The pastry maker? Or that red literary incubator, any one of whose members would, the moment he grows as tall as his pen, become critical of [Friedrich] Nietzsche, challenging [Albert] Camus, and exposing Shakespeare: alone in the arena, supported by a left that is misunderstood, riding that giant wave that moves from one continent to the next spreading proper enunciation and knighthood of the word, having left thousands of silenced lips and the bullet-ridden poets' skulls in its wake—on the beach, and at its distant source.

Or have the bellies become so barren and the wombs so corrupted that they no longer bear geniuses and the great? We are at the Gardenia Café, the Pentagon of literature, art, and philosophy. Why can we find nothing but cups, glasses, and yawning? We see rows of heads resting on fingertips, swaying to the right or left depending on the wind's direction. If you close your eyes a little and peer into the crowns of any of those heads, you'll find them packed with nothing less than this: genius! But genius in what? Literature, of course! And art!

Wonderful. But if you dare ask in a gentle whisper: "But what genre of literature or art, son?" The lips, tightly closed around a pipe or a drinking straw, would reply: "Umm. . . Literature. Art. Does that not suffice?"

Of course it suffices, son. Can this continuous questioning be met with anything but such reticence? Can this fluid language and malleable experience be met with anything other than such recalcitrance? Of course it more than suffices, son.

Leave the man, then, to face that intellectual arsenal that stretches from the North Pole to the South Pole with a poem about plains and lances. Let him chronicle five hundred years of invasions and executions and the ruler's whip with a drinking straw and an enthusiastic study of the magnificent handicrafts in Tashkent. Yes, leave the man, and let us turn, for example, to the person who sits alone in the corner, rallying the public with his yawn, or to the one who neither stands nor sits but carries his papers from table to table, from corner to corner, not knowing how exactly he may lay that egg. If you just watch him, you'll see wonders in how he crafts his popular literature. He is, as is evident from his distant eyes and wrinkled brow, in a great state of "creation." He must be searching his memory for a novel or a play that has not been plundered yet, to get it alone and feed on it at leisure; for cultural intermarriage with others is a necessity—even if it's adultery.

As for the reasons that make all this a must, they are so valid and self-evident that the words *what are they?* seem like a form of madness and a waste of time in this age that overflows with activity, energy, and achievement. The evidence of this is the following: if straightening a verse in a short poem is more difficult than straightening bent iron, then imagine what would be needed to change the entire foundation of the notions of literature, thought, and art, putting them on the right path after long centuries of lawless deviation. A feat like that cannot be accomplished in one or two weeks, but may need a month or a year! How are we then to escape this cultural bind? What shortcut would let us keep up with the speed, progress, and creativity of the times? One course of action becomes necessary at this definitive historical juncture: theft. For example, stealing the play *The Crows* and presenting it as "*The Flood*." Instead of the father dying of heart failure, he dies of agricultural failure; instead of the protagonist fainting when she hears her lover's voice outside the window, she faints when she hears the noise of a tractor outside the window. As for things like love, emotions, dreams, yearning, and sighs, those are narrow, provincial aspects that must be banished from the pages of literature and the warp of art, just as bad students are banished from the classroom. Either that or they must return to their senses and become magically transformed for the benefit of the people, so that despair turns into hope, waiting into reunion, longing into forgetting, fear into courage, jazz into ballet, and ballet into *dabkeh*¹—all serving the greater good of all citizens, encouraging tourism, building hospitals, lighting villages.

As for how to achieve this, it is by accusing any emotional poem, novel, or play of being right wing and bourgeois. Or through "abridged" studies that excerpt nothing from a newspaper apart from six pages about obscure thought in Burma, and through indifferent translations that take nothing from a magazine but sixty pages about a poet that no one has heard of in El Salvador. But when it comes to [classical literary figures such as Abul 'Ala] al-Ma'arri, Abu Firas [al-Hamdani], al-Farabi, al-Mutanabbi, or al-Sharif al-Radi, we prefer to leave them to the Orientalists to study and evaluate, adding and deleting according to whim, because these writers [apparently] belong to the Eskimo rather than being at the heart of our civilization, our pride and joy, and the promise of our past and our future.

Whoever claims that there is progressive literature and the others are reactionary, that there is revolutionary art and the others opportunistic, is wrong, deep in a forest of wrongs without any historical guidance. For there has never been a real

author or real artist, at any point of history, east or west, north or south, who championed hunger, promoted injustice, or called for slavery or the whipping of free men. True literature, and true art, is a separate, autonomous thing; like fate, and like God, it is beyond everything and in everything. It cannot be tamed and confined to the closed domain of wheat and vegetables and the signing of treaties. Our temporarily beardless literary reality does not need a foreign beard and mustache to assert its manhood.

Moreover, true literature is not the literature that is immediately appealing and comprehensible to the masses, like poster ads on telephone poles and buses. For if that were the case, the jury members of the Nobel Prize for literature would have entrusted their cooks and drivers with the decision.

After [the poet] Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, this year has seen the dropping of another bead from the rosary of Arab thought, quietly and without a fuss, like a pearl dropping to the seabed.

Urkhan Muyassar was not a renowned author like Naguib Mahfouz, or a brilliant critic like Mohamed Mandour, but there is no doubt that if he'd had the circumstances and climate of either of them, he wouldn't have poured the culture of three nations into his drink: the doctors say it was cancer that killed him, his friends say it was alcohol, but those who were closely familiar with his circumstances don't doubt for a moment that he was killed by silence (despite the fact that he often talked in his sleep).

Yes, that silence which often becomes threads of a spiderweb that binds the tip of the tongue to the tip of the pen, in an age characterized by screaming from the pulpits. He refused to haggle over civilization, as if it were in a bazaar. He abstained even from discussing the crisis of Arab thought if the point of departure exceeded the beginning of history by even one step, regardless of the direction, intensity, or brilliance of the current trend.

Since those who shared his position were too rotten to withstand the shock of the current and not intelligent enough to trick it, Urkhan has lived alone among his books, dreams, and thoughts. He would read one word and knock back a glass, not to forget the catastrophe, but to live it. As he crawled on his bony knees in that vast library, which extended from the bedroom to the kitchen, and looked for death or for heritage, he was shaded by woeful paintings and surrounded by the dregs of alcohol in the glasses of friends and guests who'd had their drink and left. Perhaps the most fitting tribute on the dark and mournful day of his funeral (when two of his friends stood mourning him with the usual words: *Urkhan isn't dead, Urkhan lives in our hearts, is present in our souls*) was the agonized scream of Said al-Jazairi, urging them by everything that is sacred to stop that nonsense, because words, all words, would at that moment have been blown away by less than a passing breeze, to say nothing of the wind that kept kicking up, blowing from the cemetery to the street and from the street to the cemetery as if it were itself about to be buried in the ground.

There are two painters who compete for preeminence in Damascus: Fateh al-Moudarres and Louay Kayyali. On opposite walls in cafés filled with noise and smoke, each one has a painting hanging, his latest piece, while they sit on opposite tables awaiting the opinions of the public—the ignorant and the cultured, the yawners and the philosophizers. But the public is strange, and abstract or expressionist art is

even stranger. For if a citizen, ordinary or cultured, is negotiating the kind of circumstances that make it difficult to understand the written word, legible and surrounded by parentheses and commas as it is, then how would he understand that a line going this way and another line going that way would mean this or that?

Still, sometimes a miracle occurs and a faint light of understanding flickers reluctantly, causing such lines to indeed mean this or that. In the painting *Palmyrene Women* by Fateh al-Moudarres, you are met by the features of a human massacre, the canvas transforming, by the bright, furious colors set down upon it, into the mental retreat of four women who have lost all hope in past, present, and future, fusing at their hair and ears and cheeks and fingers, so that their four faces appear as a single mass that can barely carry the weight of eight all-seeing and all-ignoring eyes. An astonishing demonstration of human extremities and neglected senses lies within the painting, only: for submission; only: for condemnation. As for the desolate horizon line that ripples above red clouds and tattered black peaks, it is a failed historical pretext, lending the painting a temporal dimension that is ill suited to it, unless it had covered one third of the painting at least. In its current form, the line is pathetic, high and straight enough to be taken as part of the frame or its shadow. We don't know the reason for this flaw, but in any case it implies that the subject that Fateh al-Moudarres ventured into was too big to pass easily through his paint tubes.

As for Louay Kayyali's painting *The Three Faces*, even though it comprises only one face fewer than Fateh al-Moudarres's, it shows a myriad of differences. The heads here are three: the face of a woman who is suffering and waiting; the face of a woman who is suffering and complaining; and the face of a third woman who is suffering and complaining and waiting, and is pregnant to boot (perhaps Louay Kayyali should have put her in a hospital instead of a painting) because the fetus imposes upon her an academic atmosphere of pity, and demotes her, despite the charm and noble viscosity of the colors, from the world of respect, derivation, and prolonged looking. The presence of the pregnant woman has forced her neighbor (the most beautiful woman in the painting, as well as the saddest and most seductive) to lower her hands to her knees—or what look like knees—in an uncomfortable manner in order not to harm the fetus, so that her yellow-tinged blue fingers are fused together in a cold agglomeration that has no meaning, when they should have been elevated toward her chest, ready to catch the opening of her dress, as a sign of the intimidation and impatience against this resignation that overwhelms the painting with a fascination that borders on creativity—if it weren't for the tears. Yes, those tears, which Louay Kayyali improvised in a hybrid classicism, are inexplicable when compared with the genuineness that his paints endeavored to illuminate despite the humble plainness of the third woman, whom we haven't yet mentioned. The blending of tears with kohl, or with the suggestion of it in the black shadows of eyelids, makes them unaccomplished, unconvincing tears.

The distance between the *Palmyrene Women* of Fateh al-Moudarres and the *Faces* of Louay Kayyali, in terms of ideas and style of treatment, is much greater than the distance between the walls of the café.

It is unclear why sculptor Said Makhoulouf's exhibition was titled *Space* when its space is smaller than that of a chicken coop. If the space had been meant for displaying Syrian antiques or dried fruit, the Ministry of Culture and National

Orientation's design decision would have been excusable. But when it comes to Said Makhoul's statues (known for their savagery and fierceness), guaranteeing a certain distance between sculpture and viewer is more important than the sculpture itself.

Something that really deserves to be mentioned: It is common physiological knowledge that long limbs and broad hands and heads are signs of sluggishness and idleness in the human species, but Said Makhoul's chisel and file have shown that this truism is far off the mark. For him, everything implies internal violence and radical dissent, and indeed implies a great number of heroic deeds that are proud and abject at the same time, as in *Fight* or *The Chair*. This is the essence of his work, and it turns his limited training in this art form into a secondary consideration, since he doesn't rely on any previous standards in his work. Instead, often it is the shape of the tree branch or the protrusions of the stump he is using that dictate the form and subject of the sculpture. Therefore all those who constantly praise his skill in carving wood only serve to remind him that the real test of his talent is stone, where there are no protrusions or branches, where there is nothing but the challenge itself. Although Said Makhoul has made several attempts in that field, they were insufficient to put the challenge—or the insinuation—to rest.

Now let us leave the cafés and exhibitions and cemeteries behind and go out into the open air, where innocent whispering voices quicken like heartbeats, in an age when the heart itself has grown old. There are pens that carry in their tips the outpouring of clouds and the dust of villages. They seek fundamental truth by any path in order to forge their destinies, yet they do so during a difficult time in the history of humanity, a time that does not allow active participation in producing one's own destiny with anything more than by a hairstyle or the buttoning of a jacket. While the enthusiasm of this group of young litterateurs will create their most beautiful memories in the future, in the present moment it remains the only breeze in a literary environment that is otherwise suffocating.

There are paintings, stories, articles, and poems, but what they reflect does not shed light on the latent features: the wrinkles layered one on top of the other by cowardice, indifference, and dim prospects. But there is a pale mirror on the literary horizon, already wondering what it may reflect amid ghosts that block the sun, and what shadows will be drawn on a glass framed by doubt and angry screams in ears that lack the calm needed for attentiveness and the objectivity needed for listening. This is what will be answered in *The Pale Mirror*, the first novel by Saniyya Saleh, once she has completed the last chapter—the chapter of invoking dreams never realized and atoning for mistakes never made.

Note

1. Eds.: *Dabkeh* is a dance performed collectively at celebrations such as weddings in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere in the Mediterranean. By the time of al-Maghout's writing, it had become the subject of Arab nationalist programming as well, including the formation of state-sponsored dance troupes who performed *dabkeh* for official events.

—Muhammad al-Māghūṭ, “Ṣifr ‘alā al-Yamīn (Risālat Dimashq),” *Ḥiwār*, no. 18 (year 3, issue 6, September/October 1965): 119–22. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

Letter to Farouq al-Buqayli (1966)

Mahmoud Hammad

Dear Mr. Farouq al-Buqayli,

I wish first to congratulate you on the excellent report you did for *al-Ushbu' al-'Arabi* on the exhibition of Syrian art at the Sursock Museum.¹ I apologize for my absence at the panel discussion, due to a prior engagement, and I hope I will have an opportunity to meet with you before long and to speak about matters of concern to us both, matters of art in our country.

I also thank you for your kind thoughts about my present work, which I believe is but a link in the search for something better. I wish to clear up a matter that has reached you in distorted form about teaching methods at the College of Fine Arts in Damascus.

An irrational campaign of libel has been launched against this college, and this campaign has taken as its mantra a litany with the title "La Regina," for no other reason but that [Guido] La Regina is a person of broad culture who speaks frankly and resolutely.²

La Regina is not the entire College of Fine Arts. He is one of several professors, Arab and foreign, at the college, among them a Pole, a German, a Bulgarian, and a Japanese. He was asked, as others were, to devise a curriculum in the branch in which he works in this nascent college, for it is unthinkable for any university college to operate without defined, well-considered curricula.

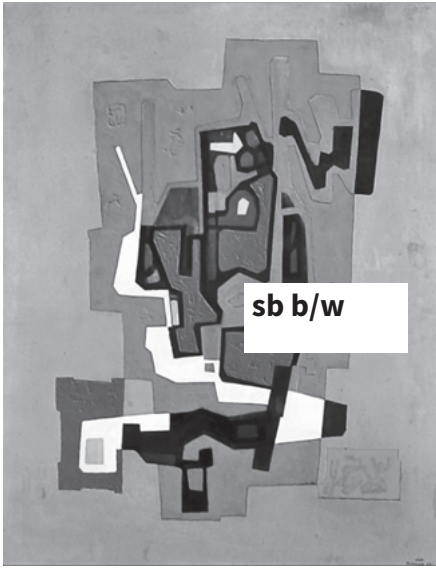
His curriculum was discussed at length at a session of the faculty assembly, which approved it by an overwhelming majority, since it comports in its spirit and principles with the latest methods of art instruction in the world. Its primary aim is not to impose a particular intellectual line on young people, but rather to discover their particular sensibility and push them onto the path that suits it, in contrast to antiquated academic traditions that are keen to turn their students into identical molds in spirit and style.

At this point, an explanation is required. The litany that we've heard repeated for so long in the Damascus papers, and which has now moved to Beirut, is that the college teaches abstract art (this is not the place to explain or evaluate abstraction) and that the college is pursuing an errant course. Someone even crowed that it teaches imported principles in art "which are supported by imperialism."

No one objected to this claim or inquired whether the college teaches ancient or modern architecture, and no one inquired whether it instructs its students in the principles of the decorative arts, ancient or modern. Rather, the questioning was always aimed at the art of painting.

The painting curriculum at the college is based first and foremost on teaching students the elementary principles of art and conveying the language or the ABCs, while habituating them, from the very first moment, to thinking and inquiry.

The lessons begin with the geometric concepts in art: the value of the plane or space, and its relationship to a simple shape within it. It gradually turns to more complex shapes, ultimately to give the student, over several exercises, basic information about the rules of composition that will help him resolve problems



Mahmoud Hammad.
*Arabic Writing: A Word
 from a Merciful Lord,
 Work No. 11, 1965. Oil on
 canvas. 51 3/16 × 39 3/8"*
 (130 × 100 cm). Collection
 the estate of Mahmoud
 Hammad

he encounters in subsequent lessons. At that point, exercises in drawing from nature begin, starting with geometric volumes. By systematic, organized studies, the student moves to the study of realistic forms, taking the task of arranging and composing them within the realm of painting, each individual student, under supervision and instruction, within the bounds of his personal thinking. The objective of this is to refrain from imposing a uniform way of thinking on all students, with the purpose of spurring each of them from the outset to develop their special talents and discover their artistic personality.

This is in contrast to the course followed in academic instruction, in which all students are stamped in the mold of traditional art and its images, particularly the stamp of the professor.

These exercises constitute part of the lessons in the first year, after which the student moves on to the study of the human body for the sake of comprehension, and not for the sake of superficial copying, meaning that the student starts by drawing the parts of the body separately (from nature and from classroom models) and gains a deep understanding of anatomical and kinetic relationships by means of a clear line that brooks no hesitation or equivocation, until he reaches the study of the human body as a whole.

As for color, the instructional curriculum has adopted principles that eschew worn-out academic rules that do not suit the radiance of the contemporary mind, for, on the one hand, modern art has done away with these once and for all, and on the other, they have no link to our local artistic traditions.

Color must be illuminating, clean, flat, and above all personal. At the same time, the student studies sculpture, printmaking, ornament, the rules of perspective, orthogonal projections and cross-sections, anatomy, art history, aesthetics, Arab society, calligraphy, and language.

As for the following two years, lessons in the painting department enter a broader, more profound realm of research at the heart of artistic issues. Most

lessons rely on the study of the human body, always studying for the sake of comprehension, as we noted above. From these, the student sets off to realize his personality. These regular lessons are punctuated by regular talks given by professors from time to time to clarify artistic issues and all matters related to contemporary aesthetics. This, of course, leads to discussions of artistic precedents, Western and Eastern. The lessons are also punctuated by exercises in technique that revolve around both old and modern media, materials, and various methods employed in art, so that each young person can choose a path of expression that suits his sensibility and style.

This demonstrates that the curriculum aims to encourage creative personalities, rather than to produce hackneyed carbon copies among its young graduates.

After all is said and done, the college does not teach abstract art, representational art, Impressionism, or Symbolism. Rather, the student enrolls in the college to learn about styles of expression generally, and to choose and adopt what suits him. Art education cannot be reduced to mathematical equations, but is rather the opening of horizons before young people so they may choose their path with utter freedom. Our college is located in a country that proclaims freedom, and education in it can only be a mirror of this freedom.

As examples of the graduates of this college, you have two before you in the *Contemporary Syrian Painting* exhibition, two young people aspiring to find their feet among Syrian artists: Nashat Al Zuaby and Asaad Arabi. Up until the past two years, the first worked within the logic of traditional representational art, but after graduating he found in himself, without meeting with or seeing La Regina, the courage or the need to adopt a type of abstraction, which we see in his three works at the Sursock Museum. This courage of his deserves appreciation and respect, as does his work.

The second settled, in his final year of study, on a new reality, arriving at it by interpreting a personal vision in the Damascene milieu where he has lived since his childhood. You find it in five pieces in the same exhibition, which honor their maker, and show him to be one of the hopes of Syrian painting.

If conditions later allow and you are able to visit the college, you will find out for yourself that the curriculum at our college is not only sound, but also under continuous development for the better. Matters at this college are not conducted haphazardly, but rather employ the diverse expertise of the staff that works there, both nationals and foreigners, drawn from extensive experience in colleges around the world.

As for the first part of the final question raised at *al-Ushbu' al-'Arabi's* panel on the *Contemporary Syrian Painting* exhibition in Beirut, it is correct: the college did indeed change its pedagogical concepts, in all departments and not only in painting, and this is a source of pride.

In the next part of the question, you say: "From the first classes, they began viewing projects through abstraction." This talk that was relayed to you indicates that the person who relayed it misunderstands the reality of the situation—I do not wish to say that it contains insinuations whose goal is destruction. I explained to you above how teaching proceeds step by step.

And in a later part of the question: “The farce (according to some who heard) is that students encounter Pop art while still in their first year, and their works employ odd materials such as pieces of tin and burlap.” I explained the curriculum of the first year to you above, so there’s no need to repeat myself.

There is no farce, unless it is a farce (in the opinion of the person who relayed this information) for us to familiarize our students with what is going on in the world. We are in a college at a university, and our duty in later years is to make our students aware of what is happening in our time as well as what happened in previous periods. In their classes on artistic technique, the professors here are committed to explaining all the media and materials used by artists in ancient and modern times. These are historical matters that are not our invention. The professors are similarly committed to explaining to their students the geometric foundations in the art of Michelangelo and the foundations of scientific inquiry in the art of Leonardo, as well as the values and concepts on which Assyrian art is based and the philosophical and historical principles underlying Arab ornament on a manuscript page or on the wall of an ancient palace, and to finding an intellectual relationship between it and an Op art painting by [Victor] Vasarely.

I wonder where the person who said this wants the college to stop in its education of its students. At Impressionism or Cubism? Or before or after these?

Is it reasonable for a student to graduate from the College of Fine Arts and not understand the meaning of terms such as *Pop art*, *Op art*, or *Dadaism* if mentioned in front of him? Or for him to be perplexed at exhibitions and stand slack-jawed if he sees a painting in which the artist uses new and unfamiliar materials?

I repeat that the college does not teach a particular school of art, but rather strives to broaden its students’ faculties and introduce them to all artistic currents, ancient and modern.

Moving to the final section, in which you spoke of La Regina’s influence on his colleagues, we addressed this matter in a panel discussion held at *al-Ba‘th* newspaper.³

Artistic influence should be judged by the values it bears. As for saying that so-and-so was influenced by someone, I personally have been influenced throughout my artistic life by many colleagues who are my contemporaries and others who are not. This is natural and true of any of us in the world. How can an author or artist not be influenced by another?

The important thing is whether this person, in the end, sought the most profound expression of the constituent parts of his self or not?

Here we must allude to the note hammered by most critics, as if they are trying to say that were it not for so-and-so, there would be no Hammad, there would be no [Nasir] Shoura, there would be no [Elias] Zayyat.

Hammad began exhibiting his abstract works at the Spring Exhibition in Aleppo in 1963—that is, two years before La Regina arrived. And these were preceded by studies that were preparatory efforts anticipating this experiment, as his friends well know.

The case of Shoura is no different, except that his attempts at abstraction, though they began nearly ten years ago, only recently found their way to the light, in three successive exhibitions.

As for Zayyat, his development has been so clear and orderly that it leaves no room for anything other than the expression we saw in the *Contemporary Syrian Painting* exhibition at the Sursock Museum, and in several exhibitions before that.

I assure you that thus far we have only rarely had the good fortune of a critic who looks at the work of art as a living, intellectual product deserving of an aesthetic analysis that would help it reach people—that beacon of a critic who facilitates the artist's work, and facilitates the artist's connection with the people. The work of critics here is, with few exceptions, generally limited to journalistic commentary that ranges from superficial praise to superficial insults. Would that such insults arose from knowledge of the foundations of error and correctness in the work, for then criticism and art would be in very good shape indeed.

I hope you forgive my long-windedness, and I hope to read [more] from you soon. With my best wishes,

Sincerely,
Mahmoud Hammad

Notes

1. Eds.: The reference is to Faruq al-Buqayli, "Khamsat Fannanin wa-Qadiyya Wahida: Al-Fann al-Suri," *al-Usbu' al-'Arabi*, no. 355 (July 14, 1966): 41–47.
2. Eds.: Guido La Regina was an Italian abstract painter based in Rome, whom the College of Fine Arts hired as a lead instructor; he taught there in 1965–67.
3. Eds.: Hammad is most likely referring to "Nadwa Thulathiyya ma' Fatih al-Mudarris wa-Mahmud Hammad wa-Ilyas Zayyat," *al-Ba'th*, March 28, 1966.

—Mahmoud Hammad, letter, 1960, printed with permission from Lubna Hammad. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

CONTEMPLATIVE ART / Baghdad

Shakir Hassan Al Said, one of the Iraqi artists who helped to launch the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in 1951, in the 1960s began to draw on a mix of Islamic Sufism and Western existentialist philosophy to develop a theory of the work of art emphasizing its use as a means of arriving at a truth. He published this text, now known as the "Contemplative Manifesto," in *al-Jumhuriyya* newspaper in 1966.

See Plate 27 for a 1966 work by Shakir Hassan Al Said.

Manifesto (1966)

Shakir Hassan Al Said

Say: "He is God, One. God, the Everlasting Refuge, who has not begotten, and has not been begotten, and equal to Him is not any one."

—The Holy Qur'an¹

1. At a time when the current universal civilization is discovering its scientific and humanistic destiny through its *actual* existence, its other existence—the one that

transcends human nature and art—has been striving for the truth, a truth that keeps escaping the frameworks of *material* or subjectified reality, in all ages and countries.

Ever since the artist in our part of the world became aware of his relatively flourishing role at the center of contemporary civilization, he has sought his way with confident steps, and begun to reveal his presence with honesty and sincerity. Since the beginning of the sixth decade of this century, our artist has sought to link his present to his past via tradition and artistic means practiced in light of modern artistic trends.² Having embraced populism in order to deepen his personal conception of taste through an understanding of the public conception of taste,³ he now finds himself ready to embark on his journey—contemplatively—toward his destination.

2. Earlier conceptions and assumptions drove the artist to cling to a personal and relative view in practices that made the work of art into a realm for creation and composition, “creating a unique personality for our civilization”⁴ and “uniting the efforts of the intellectual with those of the man on the street.”⁵ All this was a natural response to a psychological condition that was either lagging behind or surging ahead. That is because the artist’s belief in the personal, or relative, value of his expression—a belief that depends on the assumption of the artist’s exclusive individual responsibility for the creative process—disregarding other factors, such as the material of the work, the mode of expression, and the biological, psychological, social, economic, and other circumstances in which the artist finds himself—inevitably leads him to construct the reality of his artistic existence on either a realist-humanist basis or a materialist basis, as either a defensive or a controlling phenomenon that takes man, or the material, as the basis for artistic accomplishment and evaluation. This in turn presents the work of art, like any scientifically constituted approach, as a creation that gives the human being the role of an active element. As a methodology, this also logically entails the artist paying attention to *technique* or to *subject*, i.e., taking an interest in the modes of human expression instead of focusing on, and exposing, the reality of human existence.

3. Now the artist wants to adopt a new, truly human point of view, one that renders his existence as a *vitalistic-cosmic* phenomenon rather than as a *humanistic-humanistic* phenomenon, one that in fact uses him to reveal truth, instead of him—the human—using the work of art to reveal himself, his personality, and his humanity.

4. A true artist—being the one most capable of taking on that role without losing his connection to his objective existence—would propose revising the work of art into material for contemplation and for *the exploration of truth in all its dimensions*. In that sense, contemplative art is a *discourse* whose only basis within the external world is as a created world “that has already been composed, where the role of the human being—the artist being implicitly human—is merely to reveal a view; in other words, to bear witness with all his artistic faculties. Contemplative art is a testament to the beauty and majesty of the universe. *Majesty plus beauty equals perfection*. This is also an acknowledgment of an existing truth, the truth of *a thing being told to be, and so it was*, a truth that fully *is*, in the material and spiritual sense, for

within it alone the will of the almighty Creator is revealed. The contemplator's role, and his revelation, by contrast, requires his own witnessing, but does not require my existence or yours. *A thing was told not to be, and it was, while a non-thing was told to be, and it was not.*⁶

The significance of this perspective is the attempt to apprehend the objective world, external or internal, as the realm of reality as it is, without it being overburdened by any specific concept, or biased toward the humanistic. In this way, a work of art is a pure description of existence, delivered through the freedom of the unbiased human, or even through the freedom of the nonhumanist human. If artistic contemplation is fundamentally also a description of pure consciousness that entails a desire to dissolve into the truth, a form of immediate arrival at the destination, then it can be part of any work of art, regardless of its character and style, simply on the basis of its starting point.

Contemplation, on the part of the observer, means witnessing the truth through the prism of the cosmos, which includes the work of art. It is a passive stance that becomes active. On the part of the artist, however, it means *recognizing* cosmic truth through the work of art: *the work first, then the cosmos*. It is active witnessing, i.e., an active stance, that becomes passive in the end. In the act of recognizing, the artist is no longer merely a witness, but becomes an *accountable witness*, intervening in the outside world suddenly, like an element of nature, and at the right moment to also be present in it himself. He experiences it with all his being, thus becoming part of it, in the same way that a worshipper intervenes in the rituals of his worship. Art in this sense is a form of worship: An artist who is *honest* in his art is no different from a worshipper who is *honest* in his devotion.⁷

At its core, contemplation is *absolute passivity*, the opposite of absolute activity, and *sacrifice, as opposed to tyranny*, since the *intervener* is not a primary factor prior to the intervention, and since absolute passivity involves seeing the worked for and not the work⁸: the artist observes the beauty and majesty of the cosmos up close, not fully conscious of the experience as he is isolated from his incomplete act. A touch of an index finger “transforms”⁹ his absolute passivity into relative activity, not through continual awareness of the subject at hand—the complete, closed external world—but through a world that is more than the external world. The transformation is complete when he interacts with and dissolves into that world, attempting to become one with it by vanishing through it.

In this way, artistic practice and any artistic work become a kind of impossibility—an *attempt to achieve contradiction in a noncontradictory fashion*—since one, as a contemplator, can only live the experience of his subject matter anew, in the same way that an actor lives his role without fully assuming it. The impossibility lies in the basic contradiction between the dimensions of the artist's specific world and the broader values that are being expressed.

Nevertheless, the aesthetics of contemplation rely on two principles.

The first principle is that the contemplative work of art is a *description* of the world, “an illumination of the relationship between the self (i.e., the artist) and the subject (i.e., the work).”¹⁰ Such a description entails an *ascension*, i.e., movement upward “from the personal to the local, from the local to the global, then to the cosmic.”¹¹ But it also entails a reverse movement, a *fall*—from the human toward the

animal, then toward the vegetal and the microbial. Between the ascension and the fall, between the upward movement and the descending one, description takes place, an unbiased description of the external world via the internal world. The artist is able to “reveal it, through his *current positioning* or his *self-cosmic* spiritual ascension [*internal-cellular*], following his *material-human* journey.”¹²

The second principle is that the contemplative work of art is an act of personal *creativity* and “a denial that rules out filling the pictorial plane with signs.”¹³ It presupposes the completeness of each painting prior to any completion. In spite of this, intervention, in its specificity as action, will perpetually occur, as evidenced in the *procedure of comparison*: the return of the artist and his *recognition* of the insignificance of the created when compared to the Creator, of the artist’s own nonpersonhood through his specific achievement. This recognition of nonpersonhood takes place on a horizontal path that extends from the artist’s self toward others, from his being a specific person to his being a member of society, indeed from being a citizen to being a human in the world, then from being a human to being a world that is more human than man himself, capable of expressing that which can constitute *value* and not just a *means* of expression or explanation [...].¹⁴

Finally, contemplative art is not rational art. It is neither *idealistic* nor materialistic, but rather the *perceptive*, heartfelt art, its exterior expressing its interior and vice versa. As art without rationality, it cannot ignore felt experience, and is too aware and nonsubjective to ignore emotions and intuition. At its core, it is sheer human exposition that nevertheless reaches for the nonhumanist. Is this because it is a denunciation of imitation, a cost-free creative act that tends toward formless form and nonabstract abstraction? Is this because it is the art of intentionality? Over and above all this, it is *an affirmation of the belief in the One Creator through artistic form, an actualization that is measured by the degree of the sincerity of the act.*

Now, artists and art audiences are invited to perceive the meaning of art as *contemplation*, not as *creation*. By this alone, we can realize our true humanity, humanity as a vital cosmic phenomenon, and can come together to reveal the truth through our selves, instead of revealing our humanity through art at the expense of the truth.

Notes

1. Eds.: This text’s epigraph is the Qur’an 112: 1–4. Translation by A. J. Arberry (1955).
2. From the first Manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art, delivered at the opening of its First Exhibition, 1952. [Eds.: The Baghdad Group’s first exhibition was actually held in 1951. See the manifesto in the present volume, 150–51.]
3. “Invitation: For the Sake of Establishing the Baghdad Modern Art School,” 14 *Tammuz*, no. 1 (1958): 20.
4. Manifesto of the Baghdad Group for Modern Art.
5. “For the Sake of Establishing the Baghdad Modern Art School.” Op. cit.
6. Derived from the author Shakir Hassan Al Said, unpublished clarification of contemplation.
7. See the article “Art Between Existentialism and Sufism,” *al-Balad* (December 16, 1963).
8. In Louis Massignon’s *The Passion of al-Hallaj*, the following passage from al-Hallaj is quoted: “He who notices the work misses the worked for, and he who notices the worked for does not see the work.”
9. “Pure intention is what lies between Heaven and Hell.” See Shakir Hassan Al Said, “Transformation,” *al-Ajyal* magazine, no. 8 (1965): 41.
10. Derived from the author.
11. Catalogue of Shakir Hassan Al Said’s solo exhibition *A Study of Artistic Dimensions*, 1966.
12. Derived from the author. See also *al-Aqlam*, no. 5 (1966).
13. Catalogue of Shakir Hassan Al Said’s solo exhibition *A Study of Artistic Dimensions*, 1966.
14. Eds.: This sentence is incomplete in the original Arabic text.

—Shākīr Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, “al-Bayān al-Taʾammulī,” *al-Jumhūriyya*, June 23, 1966. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

PRESENTING NEW TUNISIAN PAINTING

In the 1960s an emerging group of artists—Nja Mahdaoui, Naceur Ben Cheikh, and Najib Belkhodja among them—aimed to chart new directions for Tunisian art, including breaking with the folkloric concerns that otherwise dominated the national field. These texts are the artists' profiles that *L'Action*, the country's French-language daily, published on the occasion of their group exhibition (along with Juliette Garmadi and Fabio Roccheggiani) at the Municipal Gallery of the Arts in Tunis.

See Plates 29 and 30 for representative works by Nja Mahdaoui and Najib Belkhodja.

A True Language of Forms: Interview with Nja Mahdaoui (1966)

Moncef S. Badday

The paths of research are arduous. Sometimes strange as well. They're long. They lead to the finished work. The artist's progress is always stirring, obscure, often complex, and sometimes paradoxical. Especially if he situates himself on the margins of a debilitating ease from the very beginning, as Nja Mahdaoui does, going against the grain of a certain tendency, called natural by some, that seeks to impose figuration as the only worthwhile form of expression in this country.

Mahdaoui thus refuses—let's go ahead and say it—the watchwords of a certain folklore and proves himself exceptionally demanding. His exacting nature arises from a hyper-acute awareness of his country, his century, and his condition. He wants to shoulder all this and, in so doing, express it. One critic's commentary on Mahdaoui's work comes to mind: "He's perhaps one of the rare artists from here." Why? One must obviously grasp this statement in its totality. Art is a continual birthing on the level of a man's life. If Mahdaoui understands his world today through Pop art, it is because he was in some manner led to do it. "I had my figurative period," he says. "It lasted even longer than it should have. It was only a stage to verify some of the basics, nothing more."

In his own estimation, Mahdaoui opted for a language of forms that was transfigured according to his anxieties, his intuitions, and his premonitions. He had to speak his world at all costs. Welded according to his whims or a momentary epiphany, his small pieces of iron—screws, nuts, clock faces, worthless scraps from this century of steel—are made useful once more by participating in a work of art.

The snide and embittered comments he provoked when he appeared on television only reinforced his convictions. Moreover, artists have little interest in certain out-of-date figurations that are cluttering up the gallery walls.

When Mahdaoui mentions his travels through England, France, and, more recently, Italy, the USSR, and Bulgaria, he doesn't say "I learned something," but quite simply "I meandered through museums." This says it all, because this exalted globetrotter of painting, this recidivist bohemian, isn't enlightened and doesn't want to don the halo of the pariah: "That would reaffirm that I'm Tunisian," he says; and then, later "A truth isn't spoken, it's shouted."

Pop art or decorative fantasy—Mahdaoui couldn't care less. He continues his research: a daily questioning of himself and his work. It's man that interests him, man in a labyrinth of machinery and noise.

In our column, Mahdaoui speaks without any restrictions. Since his television appearance, he already expressed his outright and irreversible refusal of decadent conformism, of the versatile and ridiculous folklore and the exotic nonsense that invokes it. The restrained vehemence of his remarks and his lack of romantic-folkloric sentimentality are a credit to him.

Mahdaoui provides frank responses to the four questions that follow.

Nja Mahdaoui, how long have you been painting, and why?

To express myself, to say certain things that must be revealed. I spontaneously opted for a language of forms that is transfigured according to my instinctive feelings. My almost obsessive theme is man grappling with this century of machines. What does he become? We are in the era of the cosmos, on the verge of interplanetary travel. I have a feeling that a fantastic and prodigious transformation will affect man, even on the morphological level. What interests me most is man led hopelessly astray on a daily basis in this frightening labyrinth: myself, in other words. I paint to express this. Nothing else interests me. The finished painting no longer concerns me, and the satisfaction I derive from it is only temporary. No end or respite. The summit remains hopelessly hypothetical. How long have I been painting? Forever, I think. I try to capture, to pin down terrible instants, infernal moments, minutes that are so many diamonds in a man's life. Painting thus becomes a physical function like eating or drinking. I've been through some terrible moments. Who hasn't experienced [Franz] Kafka and his labyrinth? My father lay dying while I read Kafka. The result: these moments are ultimately the most beautiful. My work is essentially the sum of these situations.

Along with other painters, you set yourself apart from what is generally done here. Why? What do you have to say about the painting-folklore confusion and its effects?

In the end, it was natural for there to be a reaction against a certain complacency. I feel an intellectual affinity with [Najib] Belkhodja, for example. We start from the same facts: those that I listed above. Folklore—I have nothing against our cultural heritage, which we must cultivate, enrich, and respect. But what does this have to do with painting? The popular Tunisian arts contain prodigious wealth in music and dance and in architecture as well. An aberrant habit born of the deliberate desire to please imposes a pale caricature of our beautiful folklore on our artistic mores. A degraded sidewalk folklore, one that's been trampled on. All this under the false pretext of artistic creation. A beautiful image on a slide always does better than the best of imitators. I think that in national painting-folklore, which can be understood in an extremely rigorous manner, everything was said by the painter [Maurice] Bismouth. Since then, nobody has done better. To return to my painting, I would say that it is not a result of visual observation, but a strictly interior investigation that then bursts forth in colors onto the surrounding world. Selling my work is not what most interests me, but rather seeking out original channels, always with a will to take a step further on both the physical and the purely intellectual levels.

According to you, your painting expresses man grappling with the convulsions of this century. But doesn't your narrative technique take the most unexpected paths?

I disturb the sanctity of good taste, of course. Good taste is Chinese porcelain, ivory sculptures, chiseled copper, “well-made” paintings—all those sophisticated things, that salon bric-a-brac that causes Sunday initiates to swoon. Me, I glue pieces of iron spattered with bright colors. In essence, isn’t art what’s familiar to us? Those things from our immediate world, those nuts and bolts that besiege us. People recognize them and aren’t surprised to find them on gallery walls. That’s what Pop art is—a synthesis, a shortcut that regenerates the common thing and the sublime. I’m sure people will laugh about this, but I would simply say that I wore myself out painting in Sidi Bou Said until I realized I was wasting my time.

Have you already exhibited your work? Where?

First in Palermo, at the El Harka gallery, under the aegis of Mr. Francesco Crispi, the director of the Mediterranean Cultural Center. Then in Milan, thanks to Signor Sari, the Honorary Consul of Tunisia, at the avant-garde Mondo gallery. I left a few paintings in Florence at the Galleria Numero. Furthermore, I’m waiting for the authorization of the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs to exhibit in Sofia, Bulgaria, where I’ve been invited by a gallery. As a side note, I’d like to underscore the constant support that the Secretary of State for Cultural Affairs provides to young artists. On November 29, I’ll be in a group exhibition at the Municipal Gallery of the Arts, with Belkhodja, [Naceur] Ben Cheikh, Juliette Garmadi, and Fabio Roccheggiani.

—M[oncef] S. Badday with Nja Mahdaoui, “Je peins l’homme fourvoyé dans l’effrayant labyrinthe de ce siècle/Un Vrai Langage de formes,” *L’Action*, November 18 1966. Translated from French by Aubrey Gabel.

A Language in His Land’s Dimensions: Interview with Naceur Ben Cheikh (1966)

Moncef S. Badday

Ben Cheikh destroys with serenity the myth of a certain kind of “national” painting. Every Tunisian work, he says, is necessarily Tunisian. He is young, especially in that particular faith he has in real and methodical research. He is calm, too, because his rebellion against the current pictorial tendencies breaks free only in order to show that the sole truth is the truth of the moment.

His speech calm and measured, he does not spare even the “bricoleurs” from commitment to painting. What could be more natural? If the artist is committed, it is above all to his art. An art that he conceives in the image of the world in which he lives: his country. His definition of commitment lacks neither relevance nor coherence: “I paint the Sahel,” says Ben Cheikh, “a world I’m immersed in and with which I identify. What more can I do?”

Concerning Ben Cheikh, it is important to point out that the mere fact of his being representative of his century does not exclude him from producing paintings that are authentically Tunisian. Not very talkative, and given to a reserve that borders on silence when he must talk about the work of other painters, Ben Cheikh speaks only to explain the irreversible obligation of a choice: imitation has died and given way to creation.

He comes from the Sahel, where the gnarled old olive trees have fascinated him since his early youth: a kind of identification, an atavistic and visceral attachment to places, shadows, and images.

Very early on, the desire to paint came over him: three years of figuration in order to establish certain skills, to become steeped in them. Then, a natural progression toward a form of expressionism. Despite its abstraction, his work remains violently concrete. Through his colors and his studies, Ben Cheikh seems to be making his way toward an original form of “new figuration.” With his virile, refined painting style, the young artist is not lacking in vigor; he is steeped in his land and transfigures it, illuminating it without betraying it.

Ben Cheikh, you say you're steeped in the land of the Sahel; some might be surprised that you didn't choose figurative expression. Tell us about your painting.

I think of myself as an expressionist painter. I went through a fairly long figurative phase. I love the land of the Sahel, of which I possess a particular and personal vision. I have to say that it's an arid land, harsh and often beautiful. I could no longer continue to paint as I used to, so I had to invent forms, to find a language in my land's dimensions. We often talk of folklore when it comes to our painting. I'm in favor of a Tunisia that is felt from the inside, but I'm absolutely against the cheap scribbles that people want to pass for pictorial work, and that really only serve to lure in tourists.

A true national painting?

Yes, it's always through national expression that we attain universal expression. I want to insist on the fact that a modern vision of things in no way excludes a truly Tunisian painting. I think that with the elements, the signs taken from our very own lives, from our traditions, we can make our painting prevail on the international level. Aren't [Pablo] Picasso, [Joan] Miró, and many other giants of the art of painting striking examples of what I'm saying?

Your painting is indisputably committed by the very fact that it plunges its roots into the heart of the country. What do you think of commitment in art?

The only truth is the truth of the moment, and the artist's only commitment is his conviction and his moral honesty. The artist must question himself, otherwise he'll come to a standstill. Painting is living. There's also that terrible anxiety of artistic creation; me, when I don't paint, I'm not there, I'm absent, without any hold on things or beings. Perhaps it's through the intermediary of painting that I become conscious of my surrounding environment.

And abstraction?

I think that the only true painters are abstract painters—figuration is a phase, nothing more. I've opted for creation, and this form of expression doesn't prevent, and even facilitates, what we call the new figuration. We are living in the century of scientific discoveries, and making choices has become a condition of survival.

And other painters?

There are the young painters, and everyone else. We can easily guess to whom the future belongs. The young are in favor of true studies, far removed from ossifying conventions. Our only goal is to create. I am against sentimentality and complacency and in favor of paintings that express through the newness of their forms, the harmony of their lines and colors.

—M[oncef] S. Badday with Naceur Ben Cheikh, “En exprimant mon pays, je choisis aussi d’assumer mon siècle/Un langage à la dimension de sa terre,” *L’Action*, December 21, 1966. Translated from French by Aubrey Gabel.

Against Neocolonialism in Painting: Interview with Najib Belkhdja (1966)

Férid Boughedir

A small revolution is unfolding at the Municipal Gallery of the Arts on Carthage Avenue. Five young painters are exhibiting there, painters who dared to “want to do work like the work being done abroad,” and who opted for research and for sincere, personal creation. Five painters who, tired of waiting for a mythical “Tunisian specificity,” attuned themselves to universal painting, at the latter’s current point of evolution. As is any artist’s right, they are claiming the discoveries and theories of this universal heritage, and they are using them only in order to surpass that heritage with their own work.

Tunisia finally has “international” painters whose creations surpass traditional painting, which is destined for “internal consumption” (or even worse, for touristic consumption), and which still lives off the recipes of drawing and color as taught in any respectable course at the Fine Arts. This path, this level that the other arts here are still far from reaching, particularly the arts of theater and film (doubtlessly because their techniques are more imposing)—Tunisia will at least have traveled this path with respect to painting.

Today, Tunisia can present paintings in international exhibitions without being shy about it, paintings other than color prints that are drawn too well, whose only value is in being the most artificially picturesque or “Orientalist” works. Let’s be clear: We are not for the disappearance of this kind of work; its existence is necessary, if only as a foil for the real “research” to which we are paying tribute here. We only ask that we stop calling them “paintings”: after all, caricature has its own credentials, and more than one draftsman would be filled with joy if we compared him to [Honoré] Daumier! It seems to us that the word *painting*, if it implies “creation” and “Art,” as we believe it does, cannot do without the concept of “research,” and must even be confused with it. But it would seem that this “new painting” does not benefit from the same official favor, a situation that can primarily be explained by something very understandable: our country is a country that has just emerged from colonialism. The recovery of national dignity is a vital issue for us, and this dignity can be found only through the creation or reconstitution of a unique culture. This is doubtlessly why we honor, sometimes a little hastily, everything that seems to participate visibly in this national culture.

And this is where we perceive the mistake to be: first of all because appearances are even more misleading than usual here, and a work that displays its “Arab style” as ostensibly as a medal or a trompe l’œil is more often than not one of the more artificial ones, since it is fake from the beginning. True “Tunisianness” is less superficial; one only has to look for it more deeply, in works that are steeped in it. And foreign critics can perceive this better than anyone, if only because they benefit from more distance than our own critics, who can see these young paintings only as abstract jumbles, intellectual and pretentious, devoid of all Tunisian character, and which they accuse of being “copied from abroad.” Thus, by an absurd turn of events, whoever actually wants to do research is treated as “pretentious” and described with the phrase “There’s nothing Tunisian about it,” all the while paraphrasing the famous expression “the more Tunisian of the two. . . .”

Another mistake seems to be the way in which recovering cultural dignity means looking resolutely toward the past. In our century of jet planes, a painter who has a car and a TV, and who lives in the restless and tumultuous city of Tunis—which is covered with advertising posters—gives us canvases of a Tunisia from a century ago, a Tunisia whose customs are disappearing. Once again, we don’t want to be misunderstood: we are not against this. A national culture cannot be built without knowing the foundation, the roots, of this culture. But again, this is the work of the columnist, of the caricaturist. This should not be called art, or painting; or at least it should not be considered the only possible form of art; it should be only one branch of this rebuilding process. In this essentially modern period, which is the transitional period in which we are living, the Tunisian cannot be content solely with his past; he must also be told about his present. The Tunisian who sees his country being built in the present cannot be satisfied with hackneyed views of Sidi Bou Said or overly “typical” scenes that have no reality for him; he cannot be satisfied with this self-contemplation that has already become outdated.

All this is to encourage you to admit that nonfigurative art also exists, that it too is Tunisian, because it is the fruit of research carried out by Tunisians; to encourage you, with your eye that was formed by “realist” painting and that is put off by the apparent chaos of these abstract paintings (I’m not talking to specialists!), not to default to your natural, logical reflexes to “understand” these paintings, but to try to “feel” the problems of the artist, who is always searching for his own language so as to infuse his painting with it or with his own notion of beauty.

Please don’t tell us that it is too soon for us to try, that these painters are still “ahead of their time.” The fact that their paintings exist and are being exhibited proves that this part of Tunisia exists as well, and that one would be wrong to stifle it in the name of a tyrannical “specificity” that remains vague or arbitrary. I remind you of their names: [Juliette] Garmadi, [Najib] Belkhdja, [Naceur] Ben Cheikh, [Nja] Mahdaoui, and [Fabio] Roccheggiani. They are all exhibiting their work at the Municipal Gallery of the Arts in Tunis until January 4.

After Nja Mahdaoui and Naceur Ben Cheikh, with whom *L’Action* has already conducted interviews, this is the most senior—we naturally hesitate to say the most established—of the five painters who make up the “nonfigurative” group, given that he has been exhibiting since 1956. He is also the most openly “Tunisian” painter of the group, and his work contains the most visibly unified tone, because a single

language runs through all of it, a language that is made up of what seem to be profiles of domes or extremely stylized minarets.

We asked him a few questions to mark the inauguration of the exhibition:

Do you consider this exhibition, the first of its kind, to be a sort of manifesto?

For there to truly be a manifesto, there has to be a “school.” We’re not there yet: our common denominator is that we are all nonfiguratives, and also that we are rising up against a number of taboos and prejudices on the level of representation as well as the levels of technique, color, and the well-known concern for “anatomy” and “perspective” that conventional figurative painting imposes. This exhibition was also a collective effort; there was an even distribution of work.

This raises a question: What do you think of contemporary Tunisian painting?

For me, the most serious issue is that this kind of painting, which should, in principle, help build an authentic national culture, is in fact participating in the least visible form of neocolonialism. The Tunisian and his country cannot be painted as they are; they are shown exactly as the colonizer sees them; thus they are reduced to the most specious of appearances for the sake of tourists, cheap folklore, and bazaar Orientalism. There is no stranger alienation than that of the man who continues to paint himself as his colonizer taught him to see himself, and who deceives himself in deceiving others.

Today the problem of the international level of art arises: Why doesn’t painting in Tunisia rise up to the level of Europe, at least technically, while still maintaining a Tunisian specificity, a specificity that would lead us to say of our fellow countrymen not “He is a great painter from Tunisia,” but simply “a great Tunisian painter”? [Joan] Miró and [Pablo] Picasso are specifically Spanish (I would even say that this is where the real folklore lies), and yet they are great universal painters.

Where do you think we’ll find the solution in Tunisia?

There would need to be a lot more painting, created in copious quantities by young people who aren’t being manipulated. But a young person encounters far too many obstacles: buying materials is very expensive; he has to pay to rent the gallery if he wants to put on an exhibition; what’s more, there isn’t much hope of selling his work. Many turn to simple and easy folklore: this is why Tunisian painting remains at this almost “commercial” level. We should try to create cooperatives for painting materials and get rid of the intermediaries. This would allow for research and would doubtlessly help bring about a true blossoming of painting in Tunisia. There is no need to try to make “Tunisian painting”; the painters simply need to create. This is how the U.S. and Japan—who, like us, were without their own pictorial tradition—succeeded in creating a veritable personal heritage; right now, great paintings are being made there.

Whoever speaks of heritage speaks of tendencies within that heritage. Tell me about yours. Here, very briefly, is what I think: First of all, Ben Cheikh, who takes up the vegetal and mineral worlds to create his universe, is very inspired by the countryside, the Sahel. Then there’s Mahdaoui, who is a true expressionist, and who lays claim to a cosmic realism; he uses collages, makes montage paintings that modify even the traditional

frame around the canvas; his rebellion is the most striking, the most visible. We can speak of “spatialism” with reference to Madame Garmadi, whose search for forms is carried out within a search for space. This is equally true of Fabio Roccheggiani, whose formal language takes on the mechanical aspects of modern life.

As for me, I think we can also talk about a language of forms, but if Beethoven is considered an expressionist and Bach a constructivist, I would tend to position myself on the side of the latter, because of a certain demand for objectivity, a certain rationalism.

To wrap up, what is your main source of satisfaction?

It is to say to myself, without being shy about it, that this exhibition could be held in Paris and would at least be judged to be “honest.” For me, internationalism is a criterion.

—Férid Boughedir with Najib Belkhodja, “La Nouvelle Peinture est née: La Droit à la recherche/Contre un néo-colonialisme en peinture,” *L’Action*, December 25, 1966. Translated from French by Aubrey Gabel.

MOROCCO’S CASABLANCA SCHOOL DIALOGUES

In Morocco in the mid-1960s, the national School of Fine Arts in Casablanca offered a new cohort of avant-garde thinkers—including artists Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebaa, and Mohammed Melehi, and critic Toni Maraini—a platform for developing new models of decolonized, integrated artistic practice. The first text in this section is a position statement by Chebaa, published in January 1966 in the Arabic daily *al-‘Alam* for the occasion of the three-person Belkahia, Chebaa, and Melehi exhibition at the Mohammed V Theatre gallery in Rabat. The other texts are selections from a 1967 special issue of *Souffles*—the leftist cultural journal that Abdellatif Laabi had launched in 1966—on the subject of the plastic arts. Toni Maraini’s “The Situation of the Moroccan Painter” analyzes the stakes of the Casablanca School project. Finally, a selection of artists’ responses to a *Souffles* questionnaire sheds light on possible relationships between the plastic arts and the broader field of national culture.

See Plates 31 and 32 for Mohammed Melehi’s poster for the 1966 exhibition in Rabat and a 1967 painting by Mohammed Chebaa.

On the Concept of Painting and the Plastic Language (1966)

Mohammed Chebaa

The exhibition is a fitting occasion to take a look at the situation of our plastic arts in recent years.¹

[. . .] I believe that this foreign support—first by the French Protectorate’s fine arts administration prior to independence, and by the French cultural mission after independence—was a way of highlighting an artistic phenomenon based (given our backward characteristics) upon exoticism, and not by any means upon support of popular art, as some people might believe.

Immediately after this, certain young painters emerged who demonstrated a particular openness to modern art, and especially to abstraction. They were sponsored by those same circles, and were sent to Paris to benefit from its school. All those painters did in fact return to Morocco, and most of them were greatly influenced by the city of Paris, and they are the ones who now represent the abstractionist trend in general, and Art Informel in particular, with [Jilali] Gharbaoui being their most prominent figure.

As a result, most of those painters also fail to demonstrate a trace of Moroccan authenticity, still less any African authenticity. The patrons and supporters I mentioned sense this, and so they seek a new outlet. When they opt to abandon these artists by renouncing their most prominent representative, Gharbaoui, then they soon find him wandering the streets without food or shelter, with illness gnawing away at his body!² And in their search they find “new talents,” but this time we see those talents returning to the ranks of the primitives. For the best those foreign supporters can find among the artists who come after Ben Allal—who has become too old for them—is [Ahmed] Ouardighi. And so they bring Ouardighi out into the open, and set up exhibitions for him at home and abroad, and create a market that no Moroccan painter has ever even dreamed of (some of his paintings have sold for record sums).

Although this presentation was brief due to space constraints, we can see that our manifestation of painting is closely linked to our associations with foreigners, and consequently to our lived historical and political circumstances during the Protectorate, and during the independence after it. Indeed, some of the aforementioned foreign circles imposed their patrimony on the artistic and cultural renaissance. Painting’s turn away from African and Arab traditions goes back, firstly, to the guidance of those circles, and secondly to a lack of awareness on the part of our painters with our cultural and intellectual identity, in light of the weakness of their own education—most of our painters are illiterate.

The disadvantages of that artistic orientation do not stop here, however. Its repercussions also include the fact that some of our intellectuals now associate representational painting with Moroccan reality, unaware of the fact that the essence of our art was not and will never be representational, for there is nothing representational in either our Islamic art or our Berber art. Rather, it is abstraction and symbol—the abstraction of nature in geometric painting, engraving, mosaic ornament, and Berber carpets. It is impossible for us to be authentic in our work by orienting ourselves toward representation in painting, so how would such an orientation be appropriate for us at a time when research in the plastic arts in the West is turning toward the symbolic and abstract, after abandoning the classical traditions; attempting to draw benefit in that new research from our [collective] mentalities so as to reach a rejuvenation, a symbolism and art that is in keeping with what might be a foundation for art of the future?! This leads to a certain confusion between the understanding of plastic arts and that of literary language, and consequently to a lack of understanding of the true function of painting: they demand from the painting that it tell stories, that it depict events for them, as if it were a report or a narrative record. And they also demand that the painting perform the same task that the newspaper—or writing in general—performs, or that photography performs, and here there is a serious confusion between the characteristics of languages and their identity. For if I demanded of a painting that it merely record an event for me, then it would be more appropriate



Mohammed Melehi (left)
and Mohammed Chebaa
at the Casablanca School
of Fine Arts. 1967

for me to read an article in the newspaper, which might very well be a clearer and more faithful rendering of that event!

The language of the plastic arts is not subject to the requirements of verbal or literary language, for these are two separate entities, each with its own rules and characteristics, and neither of them needs the other in order to accomplish its task fully, although both of them do have certain points in common with other languages—mathematics, music, theater, etc.—in embodying the human intellect and its civilization.

The treatment of this topic leads us to discuss an important problem: that of commitment in art. There are many conflicting opinions concerning this principle, but those who have hitherto posed this problem have, in my opinion, made the same mistake that we mentioned earlier: for in their understanding, commitment comprises “representational” painting, and the personification of the feelings and problems that the people are subject to in their bitter struggles. They also believe—and rightly so, this time—that painting must express the people and be understood by the people.

From this erroneous perspective, it appears as if the woman who weaves carpets in the remotest tribe of the Atlas Mountains does not understand the carpets she has woven, the designs of which she herself has created.

A few conclusions can be drawn from this:

Representational realism is not at the core of our artistic mentality. Rather, it was imposed by a different, European mentality—a reactionary one—which is alien to us.

Primitive art is not the *only* fitting direction our plastic art movement can take.

True commitment does not necessarily mean returning to regressive artistic models that are alien to us.

So what is the solution, then?

Just as I do not claim here to comprehensively treat all the elements that were at the origin of our current situation in the plastic arts, neither do I claim to be able to put forward solutions to the problems that this situation poses. All I can do is suggest elements of solutions, which I hope we can discuss.

My presentation should not lead anyone to think that I am defending what is called abstraction simply for abstraction's sake. Instead, I want to have been of benefit to the reader by demonstrating that the problem is not that of "abstraction vs. realism?" Rather, it is the following: research within the plastic arts befitting our rich traditions, our mentality, and our true perspective on the future.

And I believe that the best research in our plastic arts will be none other than investigation that takes the facts that we mentioned earlier into account. In my opinion, we must stop equating representation and figuration in painting with realism, since our artistic heritage—that of geometric ornament—is more realist and expressive of our historical mentality than any image that depicts a scene from everyday life!

I believe that this is the path of our true commitment.

Notes

1. *Belkahia, Chebaa, Melehi* at the Mohammed V Theatre in Rabat, January 9–February 17, 1966.
2. Eds.: This is a reference to the mental illness and hospitalization of Jilali Gharbaoui, who had earlier gained fame in Paris as an Informel painter.

—Muhammad Shab'a, "An Mafhūm al-Lawḥa, wa-'an al-Lughā al-Tashkiliyya" (excerpt), *al-'Alam*, January 11, 1966; repr. in Muhammad Shab'a, "al-Wa'y al-Baṣarī bi-l-Maghrib: Kitābāt, Ḥiwārāt, Shahādāt (Morocco: Ittihad Kuttāb al-Maghrib, 2001), n.p. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

The Situation of the Moroccan Painter (1967)

Toni Maraini

The parallel artistic research carried out by a certain number of artists, the thorough investigations undertaken by some of them, combined with the perspectives they've adopted, have begun to liberate Moroccan painting from the "absurd" cultural factors that once characterized it. These factors certainly continue to influence official painting practices as well as the work of marginal painters, but, as far as the focal point of this dossier is concerned, they have been effectively eliminated.

For the past few years, there has been a new movement, which is positioning itself in the history of Moroccan painting as avant-garde.

It is not my intention, and even less within my capabilities, to outline in these pages a history of painting in Morocco. In fact, this history, which is too often summarized both in Morocco and abroad in vague and rhetorical studies, instead requires a reasoned and in-depth analysis.

My main objective here is to highlight some of the characteristics of this avant-garde movement. However, with the help of the material gathered together in this dossier (chronologies, biographies, etc.), the reader will be able to form a general idea, as clear and well documented as possible, of the progression of Moroccan painting as a whole.

We know that avant-garde cultural action is possible only if we succeed in destroying the provincial superstructure, which is based on selfishness, opportunism, intellectual laziness, and artistic conventionality. Only then will it be possible for an artist to carry out an artistic venture that is free, open, proud, and completely uninhibited. The painters whom we are presenting have, with more or less depth, and more or less recently, become aware of that superstructure and left it behind.

Painters who have striven to bring this about through their work and through their ideas have encountered two fundamental problems as this situation has unfolded: the problem of “the avant-garde” (of the present in relation to the future and of the demands of contemporary life), and that of tradition (of the present in relation to the past and of traditional plastic values). In posing these problems, or in being brought brutally face to face with them, these painters have had to make choices. Each artist made these choices according to his experience and his degree of engagement; for some, the choices were forced and brutal.

The most important work is located in the lucid balance between these two realizations.

On the plastic level, these painters have chosen different approaches and forms of expression. However, even though figuration, with its frank and graphic nature, interests some of them, it is through the nonfigurative and the abstract that most of them carry out their work.

It is a language that is not finalized in terms of material utility (it does not serve to commemorate a battle or to glorify a landscape), but—as was the case with popular aesthetics—it opens up to the interior sensitivity of the spectator. The presence of an intentional “signage” that proposes a circuit determined by the artist does not condition the receiver’s freedom to participate. This freedom always disconcerts the academic public—whose imagination, accustomed to scholastic explanations, has atrophied too much—because we shake them up and ask them to actively participate in the painter’s creation.

However, nonrepresentational language traditionally prevails in Morocco, mainly due to its immanent and collective qualities rather than its contingent and descriptive ones. It is through this organic heritage that certain painters in this dossier have been able to directly and intensely feel the urgent artistic problems of today and insert themselves into the vast field of modern investigations, without having to pass through a series of cultural struggles—the struggles that digesting many centuries of academic dogmatism entails—as has been the case in Europe.

Each of these painters possesses a distinctive technique and style. [. . .]

Some of these painters, in parallel to this research, have carried out investigations to establish the role of tradition (to discover its constants, analyze it, inventory it, discern its different aspects and values) in relation to the present.

These investigations have found particularly fertile terrain through Melehi, Chebaa, and Belkahia, and through the pedagogic and cultural initiatives undertaken by the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca.

In analyzing the world of forms that surrounds them, they have discovered an entire tradition that was forgotten and neglected: popular rural and urban art, its plastic laws, its stylistic “patterns,” and its psychological meanings.

It is often through such a discovery—synchronized with cultural demands and with the search for an authentic source—that the artistic experience of a country is enhanced (see, for example, the case of Russia in the 1920s, and that of Mexico and Japan).

In Morocco, an entire production has been discovered, one that accompanied, and still accompanies, the daily visual life of the population. Some of its features have already been examined by foreign studies of the past, but the ambiguous, rigid

character of those studies has damaged, rather than contributed to, the understanding of the subject. Misunderstood, little known, superficially perceived and appreciated, this creation was thus catalogued among folkloric curiosities, confined to the repositories of scholars. It was also oriented toward a commercial and speculative productivity, which ultimately led it into the impasse of the tourist craft industries (in this regard, consider the particular role of the Native Arts Service, with its “stamping stations,” its “artisanal reeducation,” etc.—activities continued today by the Service of the Craft Industries).¹

This popular art production is at once mobile (diverse objects) and monumental (architecture and architectural “decoration”). It is a type of functional production: the aesthetic elements are organically coordinated according to utility, purpose, and material. These elements are based on canons, “rationally” determined over time, through experience, and through the continued collectivization of individual inventions, but they remain ever open to modification, to interpretation, to irrational and original interferences. They are generally composed in a nonfigurative or abstract language, which is often also “iconic” or stylized. It is a rich and warm language, visually quite varied. Linked to ancient Mediterranean, Saharan, and African traditions, it developed according to the fundamental laws of “gestalt” and “iconography.”²

Superficially treated as “decorative”—by an academic terminology and tradition that effectively assigns decoration the secondary role of “embellishment” (per the Larousse dictionary)—this art, on the contrary, is as meaningful and communicative as any other. However, the visual forms (geometric, abstract, or figurative), and the succession of ideographic “signals” employed to draw up its pictographic composition through their universal, primary, and symbolic nature, radically distance themselves from the visual forms to which the important official and urban art generally had recourse—too radically for any open and unconditioned appreciation to be possible. The sensitive observer, however, should know how to discern the creative element on any level of human artistic production.

Indeed, it is not by accident that in Morocco this “discovery” first took place among painters. But, for them, it is not about reproducing this traditional popular art, nor is it about formally and mechanically taking inspiration from it. Their reciprocal relations are deeply established. In this tradition, they localize a spirit and collective constants and draw an internalized plastic force from them.

The different aspects of popular art ultimately offer immensely important material for analysis. Thus, its traditional, pre-industrial, and harmonious nature, as well as, in an equally urgent and imperative way, its progressive degeneration into touristic artisanal creation and urban pseudo-modernization, attract the attention of artists. This movement—aggravated by the accelerated introduction of poor-quality speculative Western products, as well as by the lack of any truly modern aesthetic training on the part of the manufacturer, who mechanically “makes” ugly, half-utilitarian, half-decorative objects, no longer able to express himself traditionally nor even to express himself personally—risks becoming a long and hybrid one, giving rise only to sterile and grotesque production.

The intervention of painters is necessary in order to propose a suitable and sound aesthetic, either at the level of the everyday technological object (industrial

design) or at the level of the collective means of communication (graphic art, advertising, calligraphy, photography, etc.).

Thus their work is not located solely on the level of individual creation, but also falls within the framework of collective visual education.

For quite some time now, the artists of the Casablanca School have been constructively engaged in this approach.³

Notes

1. For more on this subject, see J. Mathias, "L'Artisanat marocain," *B.E.S.M.*, vol. 27 (1963), Rabat.
2. See for example *Icon and Idea [The Function of Art in the Development of Human Consciousness]* by Herbert Read (London [Faber and Faber], 1956), chapter II, which discusses the development of popular art by analyzing its psychological (gestalt) laws and its visual (iconographic) laws.
3. Through the inclusion of graphic art and modern advertising in their teaching, and beyond. They have, in this sense, done everything possible to provide artistic posters and catalogues to accompany didactic or personal exhibitions, whereas in the past the graphic side generally did not seem to interest painters at all—and painters ought to have been the most sensitive to it.

It would perhaps be interesting here—to give an idea of the important nature of these new investigations—to cite the example of the poster drawn by M. Melehi for a group exhibition in Rabat, which was chosen by The Museum of Modern Art in New York as one of the best international posters of 1966. [Eds.: see Plate 31 in this volume.]

—Toni Maraini, "Situation de la peinture marocaine" (excerpt), *Souffles*, nos. 7/8 (1967). Translated from French by Emma Ramadan.

Responses to the *Souffles* Artists' Questionnaire (1967)

Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebaa, Mohammed Hamidi,
Jilali Gharbaoui, Mohammed Melehi

Farid Belkahia

Q: In your opinion, how does painting contribute to the development of a national culture?

Painting is one of the most discriminated-against forms of expression.¹ If communication is difficult in this domain, it is because man was distorted from the start. He was accustomed to an order of things, to an organization of his surrounding universe, in which he accepts no disruptions whatsoever. Thus, he confines himself to a visual comfort that makes any deepening of reality, whether physical or organic, difficult for him.

Man considers the artist's intervention in what he views as his internal world to be a desecration.

The eye is an essential organ. But it has atrophied: it has become old. Man's other senses can be reeducated down the line. But too early on, the eye has registered realities that it is not always able to rejuvenate. From this, perhaps, comes inertia vis-à-vis painting, a fundamentally visual activity.

Man must readapt to today's world, to his surrounding environment, which has undergone enormous changes.

The essential problem is man's anachronistic perception. The artist is not ahead of his time, as we are so fond of repeating; rather, society is behind its time.

Thus we must embark on an education of the visual sense. For this to be achieved, all action must be collective. The notion of the artist-individual must disappear. It is absurd to continue to think of the artist as a genius isolated within society.

No artistic expression will remain trapped within individualism. Increasingly, we are moving toward a grouping-together of experiences.

What I am saying here is not innovative: architects, painters, and sculptors have been working together for fifteen or twenty years in many foreign countries. It is a practice that has already been established. But now it is we who will face, and who are facing, this challenge.

The possibilities of outward expression are very limited for us, despite the fact that we are in a country under reconstruction and on the path to industrialization. Our activity is conditioned by our socioeconomic realities. *We cannot allow ourselves to live what we think.*

But that does not impede us from anticipating this hypothetical action and from analyzing the domains in which it could be carried out.

In our country, the industrial production of objects (to take just one example) was, originally, artisanal. But with the evolution of modern industrial production, no effort was made to improve the form and quality of the object. This is where the artist can intervene. In highly industrialized countries, the artist is not always obliged to intervene in these technical domains. But in countries such as ours, there is a shortage of specialists. The artist can fill this void.

The gap that exists between developed and underdeveloped countries is growing ever wider. Our country lacks a courageous industrial mentality that can tackle the concerns of our age. There is a dearth of information or knowledge that might stimulate a fighting spirit or a sense of competition.

In developed countries, groups of researchers and aesthetes, collaborating across all industries, underlie aesthetic and functional renewals of industrial objects. Their work is always creating new ways of living, of seeing, of reacting. Op art is a striking example. Starting out as a visual arts movement, it has come to influence multiple branches of modern industry (furniture, advertising, textile printing). Op art was crucial for the vitality of certain industries.

Research is thus fundamental, but it requires means that are not yet within our reach because of our backward and unadventurous mentality. In a domain as vibrant and active as manufacturing, there must be a taste for risk and a continual drive for invention.

Q: What conditions can promote the development of the plastic arts in Morocco?

We face problems of audience, of education, and of consumption. Our audience offers the advantage of a great openness, ready to acquire all kinds of painting. For painting aimed at educating the public, using one method exclusively was never fruitful, never contributed to any enrichment. Quite the contrary. Personally, I must admit that the masses have always impressed me. I remain very cautious when it comes to recommending solutions for problems of communication.

There is, on the other hand (but there is almost no point in repeating this, since it is so obvious), the question of the means that should be put at artists' disposal to allow them to engage in dialogue with the public: exhibition spaces, at least in the main cities; debates and conferences; etc. For this, the work of the Fine Arts Services must not be limited to historical monuments, but rather must be infused with a spirit of invention and openness.

But the basis of all development in the field of plastic arts is education. Through experience, we have realized the academic shortcomings of students who have no contact with the plastic arts. There should be a real place for teaching drawing and painting in academic establishments; it should not be a marginalized, recreational activity. The teaching of this discipline must not be done out of a certain automatism solely because of the tradition of teaching this material in Europe.

Our students are also ignorant of all our plastic art traditions, even though they are an integral part of our culture. It is true that the institutions theoretically responsible for developing this heritage are not fulfilling their true function: the organization of museums of traditional Moroccan art is too static, dusty.

We have a bastard education. It follows a European pedagogic system that is already backward itself. It is considered a luxury for underdeveloped countries to want to teach culture in a broader sense. In secondary school, students must quickly arrive at a specialization, must be directed toward certain fields. We are obliged to adapt our teaching to our circumstances, our possibilities, and our way of life.

In my opinion, teaching in art schools should be, above all, a realm of experimentation with research focused on specific domains. For example, there had never been a course on Arabic calligraphy in a fine arts school in Morocco (prior to 1964). Beyond the teaching of its purely technical aspects, calligraphy could be a vehicle for work not only in the domain of the plastic arts, but also with regard to its potential practical applications in advertising and other fields.

I envisage a fine arts school in Morocco where the students are exposed to different techniques of modern painting (even the School of Fine Arts in Paris does not offer that). For it seems to me that the essential task of a fine arts school is *information*. Information then allows for individual investigation.

The way in which art history is taught is off the mark in a lot of schools. We go too far into the past when we should start with the state of art today.

But all the measures and suggestions I have just listed can be valid only in this moment. We must not reach a point of stasis. Experimentation must remain our fundamental concern.

Mohammed Chebaa

Q: In your opinion, how does painting contribute to the development of a national culture?

Generally speaking, a large part of man's thought can be expressed only in a purely plastic language. Consequently, the plastic oeuvre clearly contributes to the development of a national culture. Our national culture will be formed according to our history, our profound psychology, the virtues of our very race, our vision of the world.

Thus we cannot devise preset plans for a national culture to be realized in the future. What we can do is take a stance vis-à-vis the information we have just cited.

The concept of national culture can be interpreted as a fanatical slogan, but for us it signifies an attempt to recover our own personality. Once we have reached this stage of consciousness, of responsibility, we will be able to develop principles in the general cultural domain, and in the domain of plastic art, of course. This recovery of self may one day allow us to engage in dialogue with other cultures. . . . We cannot engage in dialogue with others if we do not first know ourselves. But the

most important phase, in my opinion, is the application of the principles prescribed above, according to which we can develop an art form that will be offered to society and debated within it. When certain artistic forms realized in these conditions are consumed and made functional, they will become a true necessity, for they will enter the habits of people's daily lives. We will be able to speak of a Moroccan style or a Moroccan art only when they become social realities.

There are various domains in which we can observe the contribution of the plastic arts to a country's culture:

The domain of graphic art: This is a domain that can play a large role in visual education, because it is very accessible. It will become very important as we move toward industrialization. The poster, for example, is a painting accessible to everyone. It addresses a psychology of the masses. While communicating a message (an advertisement for a product, etc.), we can begin to habituate the spectator to receiving the message in a certain way. This forms a sense of visual taste in him, and gives him the capacity for aesthetic choice.

In the industrial domain, we will supply the prototypes for future national products. For utilitarian and industrial objects, the Moroccan artist can conceive of forms and dimensions that correspond to a local functionalism and psychology. The artist is expected to give shape to an entire future civilization. A cultural movement can thus determine all the forms of life in a society (housing, clothing, furniture).

In the domain of architecture and urban planning, the integration of art can effectively contribute to a society's visual education because it allows for permanent daily contact.

For now, we must develop the principles for these future achievements. But between pure creation (the painting) and large-scale consumption (the glass, the armchair, or the plate), there is a distance that is subject to a historical process. If one day we manage to apply these principles in a systematic manner, we will be forced to call into question these new circumstances in order to find new openings and to escape all conventionalism. And it is our future realities that will dictate new choices and new actions.

Our society's taste has been corrupted. Consequently, we are obliged to start from scratch. Without this corruption, we could have started from a given (tradition). This work of depersonalization and corruption brought about by colonialism continues today because the masses are denied the right to education and culture. The relevant institutions have not begun to review this situation and work on it.

Thus we see that we must begin to wage a battle on the level of visual education, to eliminate the prejudices that condition sensibility and taste. For this, there are two paths of action: we must outline a national program of education; and on the individual level, the artist must intervene in all the domains where this education is carried out. He must undertake a work of clearing out, which will prepare the public for a new receptivity and taste that correspond to its own personality.

Mohammed Hamidi

Q: *In your opinion, how does painting contribute to the development of a national culture?*
Painting must revive our traditions and take its nourishment from our truly national values in all domains. A painter's actions must not be limited to creation.

Instead of adhering solely to the "creative universe," painting, in my opinion, must denounce the conditions that impede communication among men. Therefore, painting must not be limited to a circle of privileged people, but must be an integral part of community life.

Painting plays a role that is cultural and social at the same time. It can intervene in multiple sectors of economic and social life.

To participate in the construction of a national culture, Moroccan painting must be a completely novel endeavor. We must lay revolutionary foundations for plastic creation. Indeed, we must fight against a prejudice that weighs on the whole of the Third World, a prejudice that insists on seeing in Third World art only an expression of primitive man.

Q: *What conditions can promote the development of the plastic arts in Morocco?*

In Morocco, we lack the means for artists to make their work known and to popularize their methods: exhibition spaces, and the understanding of those in charge and of those within the intellectual milieu who still have a very narrow conception of art and the artist.

But we have countless possibilities. What we need is to make the most of them. I believe we are at a point of departure, and that it is important to be aware of this.

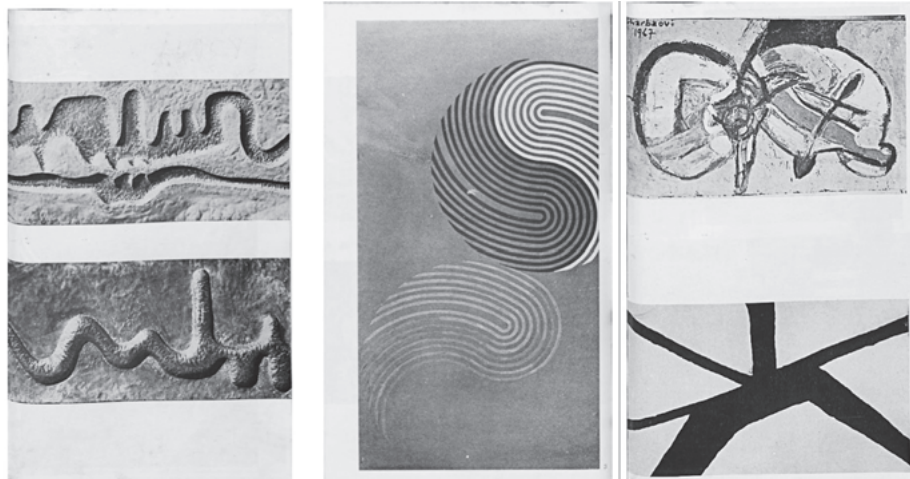
We must engage in dialogue with all strata of the population. Many factors can foster this dialogue.

First, *collaboration between architects and painters*. Our country is an ideal location for monumental art (Mexico provides a striking example of such architect-painter collaboration). This experiment is now starting to happen in Europe. I had the opportunity to participate in this work (in the creation of frescoes abroad).

Audiovisual means can play a leading role. It is necessary—and this seems crucial to me—for the public to realize that, alongside cultural forms of expression such as theater, poetry, and music, there exists another form of expression that is just as valuable, namely painting. Talk shows, interviews, and screenings could popularize the challenges associated with art (both traditional and contemporary), and foster, little by little, a visual education of the general public, making them aware of the role that painting can play in the socioeconomic and cultural domains.

But this education can be done everywhere. In national *museums*, or in regional museums where local artistic objects are exhibited. And even in the *street*. To illustrate this, I will choose a very small-scale example: the *shop window*.

The shop window can play as large a role in visual education as a museum. It is a means of immediate communication, accessible to anyone, which allows us to fight, on a daily basis, against the psychological and visual deformation of our public. The windows can be arranged, for example, as a function of purely popular cultural events (children's toys for the Day of Ashura; costumes for the Eid al-Kabir holiday; etc.). While helping to create an atmosphere of authentic, collective expression, the windows also serve as living vessels of visual education.



Works by Farid Belkahlia (left), Mohammed Ataallah (center), Jilali Gharbaoui (top right), and Mohammed Bennani (bottom right), as featured in the 1967 special issue of *Souffles* (nos. 7/8) devoted to “the plastic arts situation in Morocco”

The means of action are therefore numerous. Furthermore, this work will be the best opportunity for the artist himself to flourish, for he will feel that he is in fact participating, through his own instrument of expression, in the transformation of the culture and the fundamental existence of an entire people.

Jilali Gharbaoui

Q: In your opinion, how does painting contribute to the development of a national culture? What conditions can promote the development of the plastic arts in Morocco?

During the 1959 Paris Biennial, in which forty-two countries participated, Moroccan painting, still new at the time, was a revelation for European painters. And I noticed that our painting remains much closer to the land than that of other countries.

No effort was made to raise awareness about this painting.

The Directorate of Fine Arts in Morocco is in incompetent hands. And, in order to make ourselves known abroad, we are often reduced to going through foreign projects.

On the other hand, during my trip to the Netherlands (1965–66), I saw that their painters are well protected, as they are in many countries.

Abroad, I can produce and progress much more than I can here. There is an entire context that enables this: a well-prepared audience, museums, critics, as well as groups and movements against which one can situate oneself.

In Morocco, we must still wage a battle to impose our painting, to create a movement of interest around it. But this battle will be slow, for the general context is not dynamic. Moroccan painting underwent massive development ten years ago. But for the past few years there has been a slowdown in its momentum due to various obstacles.

Education in Morocco is incomplete. Nothing prepares Moroccans for the plastic art we are creating.

In our schools, we do not teach our youth to see.

In addition, the kind of painting that foreign organizations exhibit in Morocco is one that is already classified, that belongs to the past—a fragmented past, moreover.

This fails to introduce the Moroccan public to modern painting or to the work currently being created around the world.

Consequently, the public cannot communicate with our painting, which is situated within today's plastic arts movements.

We are also handicapped in Morocco by the presence of exotic painting often made by foreigners (sometimes by Moroccans): a kind of painting that was born in Morocco under the Protectorate to feed the tastes of the officials, among others.

This painting, which is rejected even in France, maintains a hold on the scene here and impedes the development of Moroccan painting.

A country's art can only evolve when the social and economic structures allow for it. In the current state of affairs, we find ourselves at an impasse.

We are living more or less in exile—this is what our country has in store for us.

Mohammed Melehi

Q: In your opinion, how does painting contribute to the development of a national culture?

A national culture does not invent itself. It is an edifice made up of successive strata. Wherever man exists, a culture exists. Moroccan culture is present; it has developed over the course of centuries. In Morocco, man knew to benefit from all the continental and foreign contributions by integrating them into his own creative genius.

In addition, we cannot develop a culture without seeking to identify with a pre-established heritage. A culture that is still looking for itself is always dependent on the dynamic forces of its heritage and previous acquisitions. Its formation and its evolution will depend enormously on this act of recovery.

This requires an entire process of investigation, observation, and research.

The painter, equipped with his graphic and plastic knowledge, takes a trip into history. And his expertise in painting as a profession and as a plastic language constitutes his own instrument of investigation.

This notion of *national culture* needs to be clarified, in my opinion. It is not an absolute goal or a final stage of evolution. It is a moment full of dynamism in the sense that it allows identification with and recovery of oneself. It is the moment when we must situate ourselves in relation to other cultures, lose our complexes, and truly become aware of our being and our own condition. It is a first venture, to be surpassed in the long term.

I will also try to respond to this question through the example of my current projects and the work I did in partnership with other painters at the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca.

When I took up my post at the school in 1964, I found that the instruction there followed foreign academic traditions to the letter. Furthermore, it remained at the documentary stage, oriented toward a culture and realities that did not correspond to our needs in any way.

This shock helped me realize that we needed to start with a rescue operation. We needed to have our students advance in time, wrest them from academicism, and move them into the healthy state of what we could call modern art. This brought us back to the present moment and the universal plastic art concerns of today.

I discovered afterward that one cannot import modernism. The rehabilitation of our own values was more vital and more urgent. And for me, modernism is situated precisely in this rehabilitation.

In a culture that was perhaps less sure, less assertive than the academic culture, but less dogmatic, we began this undertaking. Our teaching takes shape as we go, with the help of our research and the deeper exploration of our artistic heritage.

A clarification is needed here. There are painters of all different temperaments: there is the painter who improvises forms and colors, following only his instinct. In my opinion, instinct is a faculty we must not leave in a state of pre-education. We must be able to control it, so that even when we act instinctively, our actions are permeated by a certain *programming*.

On the other hand, there is the painter who bottles up this instinctive side while carrying out a program. And this programming is the result of being aware of numerous social problems. Which is to say that at the moment of creating, the artist must think about an equitable distribution of factors entering into the mix: the work, the creator, and the audience. The artist then acquires a neutrality with regard to his work, a distance that allows him to judge it. In our age of collectivism, the artist does not have the right to be a hermit.

To come back to the more general problems, I will say that in Morocco we no longer discuss the material or the gesture, the why of things. We are interested in the content, in the message. Art is a social language. It is significant.

In Europe, people are currently making much more History than actual culture. The sickness of our schools stems from this. Painting, like literature, is not currently resolving anything. Both seem to be serving only the polemic. The content is slowly receding.

The arts in the West are means of liberation (from academicism, from the tradition of the Renaissance), while for us they are means of rediscovery and action, of communication.

Right now, we must make a choice in our past. Identification grants assurance; we feel protected when we know who we are.

Painting as a means of communication can greatly contribute to this process of rediscovery.

Visual language has a power that is seldom made explicit. The eye has a much greater potential than the other senses. It is at once the eye and the ear.² For example, the fetishistic cult is visual. In this case, religious communication is also optical. Drawing is the language of that perception. Man is, furthermore, inevitably fetishistic through his attachment to the object (the force of the object resides in its physical structure).

Visual perception can take place without the eye. Thus, there are no blind men. The body sees. It has been scientifically proven that skin reacts to light. There are animals that see with their skin.

On another note, modern man is mistaken if he believes he is cultivated simply because he knows how to read and write. In reality, man has been reading and writing since he saw the light. *Reading is the pure visual identification of a message, and writing is the pure transmission of a visually conceived message.*

Man has always satisfied himself with his eyes. He has learned to live through observing the world. That is the most profound and most fundamental kind of reading. He imitated what he perceived. Thus, we could say that the foundation of human morality and creation is, above all, a visual culture. Before man thought rationally, he thought visually. Reason is simply the result of this extreme development of the visual organ.

Today, biologically, man tends to abstain from the use of the visual organ. Physical science would offset this organic loss. This is where discrimination against the plastic arts comes from. We no longer think they are quite so necessary.

Painting as an expression of visual perception could revive an understanding of the values of plastic art. It could be a means of seeking out a national aesthetic. *Painting and the plastic activities associated with it can be crucial for decolonization and denunciation.*

In closing, I will cite an example that may perhaps be thought of as marginal, but that shows, in my opinion, the nature of the battle that remains to be fought, and that will fall on the shoulders of the plastic arts: *calligraphy*.

Arabic calligraphy is one of our traditional plastic activities that has garnered universal renown. Today, even Western painters find inspiration in it. The calligraphy that makes up a part of our plastic traditions is in the process of becoming bastardized in Morocco, of becoming sterile and falling into the most grotesque anonymity. Yet calligraphy was and can still be one of the most beneficial optical stimulants for an entire people. Calligraphy is a pure type of painting. If it is revalued, it could contribute to the development of a visual culture in our country.

We all know that graphic arts play an important role in modern civilization (advertising, signs, optical communication). But what do we see around us? The signs written in or translated into Arabic have retained nothing of our traditional values. They are graphically impersonal and often incorrect or incomplete on the level of syntax or grammar. When juxtaposed with signs written in Latin characters, they do not measure up. This forces the spectator to research the Latin characters, which leads to a depreciation of the Arabic script.

In Casablanca, we can see that the Latin script is absurdly dominant, even in the most working-class neighborhoods. There are no Europeans in these neighborhoods. Signs in Latin characters are not a necessity for consumption. They are simply ornamental.

The absence of calligraphers leads to discrimination against Arabic characters and to a preponderance of Latin characters.

This is one of the illnesses of a visual culture, and this example shows the scope of the battle to be fought in the domain of painting.

Furthermore, this issue of calligraphy demonstrates in a very concrete way the larger issue of linguistic recovery: the question of a national language.³

Q: What conditions can promote the development of the plastic arts in Morocco?

Before any material possibilities or benefits, the fundamental condition of this development is *the awareness of artists*, for they are the artisans creating a national culture.

I am neither for the creation of museums nor for the awarding of medals. Material opportunities have always allowed mediocre artists to impose themselves. Work takes precedence over everything else.

The situation of plastic art in Morocco is very positive, despite all the disadvantages, in that we belong to a movement that possesses an immense creative wealth: that of the Third World.

The economic boom of the twentieth century has not yet affected our art. The artist of the Third World is still a militant.

The absence of a market gives us the opportunity to go deeper with our work. We have absolutely no need for markets or for “collecting.” The market is dangerous for a young painter in a state of gestation. This gives us some respite, which is necessary for fermentation, for creation.

These circumstances are also positive because our painting is not formalized. It is not a means of glorifying determined categories. We do not paint portraits or pictures of women lying in green fields.

Our painting is also not intellectualized.

Unlike painters in the West, we are not subjected to the crushing weight of history, which gives rise to various complexes in the artist. We are in a phase of experimentation rather than revision. Which means that it will take us less time than the West to do our clearing out. Our traditions and artistic values are still active and integrated into the lives of our communities, although they are threatened. But this threat does not suffocate the conscious artist. He can limit the damage. And that, in all its severity, is the problem with safeguarding our heritage. The danger can be eliminated if those who manage this heritage decide, at last, to assume their responsibilities.

Notes

1. Music, for example, has the advantage of being abstract in its essence. By virtue of its abstraction, it offers many more ways to imagine and create. It does not limit us. But communication in this domain is also becoming difficult, for current music tends to be concrete and electronic (which disrupts people's habits).
2. This can be demonstrated through the birth of cinema. The silent films that we tend to think of as an underdeveloped means of expression were capable of more faithfully communicating a message than films with sound. The eye was the sole means of perception. Sound was a technical revolution, but not truly an artistic revolution.
3. It should be noted that there is a department of calligraphy directed by Mr. Chebaa at the School of Fine Arts in Casablanca.

—Selections from responses to the Artists' Questionnaire, *Souffles*, nos. 7/8 (1967): Belkahlia, 29–31; Chebaa, 40–43; Hamidi, 51–52; Gharbaoui, 54–55; Melehi, 64–68. Translated from French by Emma Ramadan.

DEBATING NORTH AFRICAN ART AT HOME AND AWAY

In April 1967, the Tunisian office of cultural affairs in Tunis presented an exhibition of six Paris-based artists from North Africa—Ahmed Cherkaoui and André Elbaz from Morocco; Abdel Kader Guermaz and Abdallah Benanteur from Algeria; and Mahmoud Sehili and Edgard Naccache from Tunisia—sparking frank discussion of the differing conditions and practices between art worlds. Included here is a roundtable feature, published in *L'Action*, that uses the exhibition as an occasion to mount criticism of Tunisia's leading artists. The second text, "Internationalism Passes through Nationalism," is an indignant rebuttal from Tunisian artist Zubeir Turki, published in the journal *Faïza*. The third is an interview with Elbaz about his migratory life as an artist, conducted by the Moroccan journal *Lamalif* soon after his return from the Tunis exhibition.

See Plates 33 and 34 for representative paintings by Ahmed Cherkaoui and André Elbaz.

Six North African Painters Speak Out: Painting in North Africa, an Alarming Situation (1967)

Abdallah Benanteur, Ahmed Cherkaoui, André Elbaz,
Abdel Kader Guermaz, Edgard Naccache, Mahmoud Sehili

Six North African painters came to exhibit their work in Tunis, by invitation of the Secretariat of State for Cultural Affairs. All of them came from Paris, where they began their work, having left their home countries to confront "comparison" on an international level. At the forefront of the group is Benanteur (Algeria), who is known as "one of the painters to look out for," and who already enjoys a certain reputation. Also present are Cherkaoui and Elbaz (Morocco), Guermaz (Algeria), and Sehili and Naccache (Tunisia).

They don't pretend to be masters of thought: they came to establish contact with Tunisian painters, to see the state of Tunisian painting, and they left profoundly disappointed. In their opinion, painting in Tunisia (which enjoys a great deal of financial support from the state), indeed in North Africa as a whole, has taken a wrong turn.

A few reasons come to mind: ease, self-satisfaction, and, above all, the false notion of "national painting," which is too quickly confused with traditional imagery, brightly colored paintings, or charming folklore.

The following interview was held in the presence of several journalists, during a roundtable organized by the National Women's Club in Pasteur Square.



Edgard Naccache. *Bustier*. 1967. Acrylic on canvas. 18 1/8 × 21 5/8" (46 × 55 cm). Collection the artist's family

L'Action: *The six of you could be considered “exiles in Europe.” Why Europe? Why Paris?*

Benanteur: First of all, I would like to challenge the term: we are not “exiles,” we are “difficult to please.” It’s because of all the false values in our home countries that we left for Paris, looking for true values.

Cherkaoui: I could ask for nothing more than to stay in Morocco, and yet today it’s hardly possible. In Tunisia, there are infinitely more possibilities for painters. You just have to know who benefits from them.

Elbaz: Paris is confrontation, the refusal of ease; the public is very aware, there are plenty of galleries, lots of good painters. We are demanding because we don’t want to stop seeking and evolving. We don’t want to be like “the one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind.” Those artists are the one-eyed ones, those mediocre artists who are doing a lot of harm to North African painting.

Sehili: First off, I think that the label “North African painting” is an error. We never presumed to represent North Africa with six painters. It would be better to say “North African painters”—even though [Pablo] Picasso was above all a great painter, before being a Spanish painter.

L'Action: *What was your opinion, during the course of your stay, of Tunisian painting?*

Cherkaoui: We think that the authorities in Tunisia are very well intentioned. Sadly, “consecrated” painters are abusing this fact. I think that there is real cheating taking place on the part of our Tunisian comrades. Not only does what they’re doing represent the highest form of ease, it isn’t even painting. It’s painting that is responding to a given need—decorative, “typical” painting. I don’t think that you should paint “on demand,” especially not when you’re benefiting from the situation.

L'Action: *In effect, these painters have been “consecrated” and helped because they were the first. Sadly, it seems that they’re not satisfied with merely failing to ever reinvent themselves—they also have the need to practice a real intellectual “interventionism.” The fact that they are “official” painters is less troublesome than the fact that they have practically colonized the market and are dictating the prices, and that they aren’t sharing their luck with younger artists and are blocking all “abstract” painting.*

Cherkaoui: What does *abstract* mean? For us, the word *abstract* isn’t a criterion. It’s not about an opposition of concrete abstract painting, but about necessity and quality.

Elbaz: What seems especially dangerous to me is that these painters are trying to make a national language out of gobbledygook. This bastardized, caricatural, “exotic” painting, which corresponds well to the idea that colonizers had of an “Oriental” art, is promoted as “national” painting and is sent to represent the country abroad.

L'Action: *Is the situation the same in Morocco and in Algeria?*

Everyone: It's even more depressing.

Sehili: To come back to what Cherkaoui said, I don't think that there are any criteria in painting. I think that only those paintings, by an artist worthy of the name, that respond to something current are "testimony."

Tunis-Africa Press: *Could you define your painting with respect to what a North African audience demands?*

Sehili: The problem is not one of "responding to the public's taste"! Painting is above all a personal expression.

Elbaz: I think that the issue here is that we paint for a public, and that this public keeps the painter in a state of dependence. He becomes a merchant who delivers the expected monthly production. You aren't a good painter because you're abstract or not: a certain "soul" has to come through. A price can be had, here. Of course I'm happy when I sell work! But when I'm not selling any, I have to be a waiter or a porter at Les Halles. Painting is total commitment, not a commercial affair. You shouldn't have to descend to the public's level; you should make the public come to you.

Tunis-Africa Press: *Do you envisage, then, that you'll be working in a climate of incomprehension?*

Elbaz: I'm not looking to make people "understand" my aesthetic problem. I have an "order" to organize on a canvas. As a result, it's possible that a part of me emerges onto the canvas, to a greater or lesser extent. But that isn't what's important. My problem is to "create" with all possible sincerity, more than to "present" something to the public. They say that the great geniuses of painting are always a century ahead of their contemporaries. I could have answered: "Alas, people understand me." This is because I doubtlessly still have a lot of work to do.

Benanteur: The criteria for painting are personal; there is only a personal conception of the beauty that you must try to reach, rather than being content with "flattering the eye." But "incomprehension" doesn't mean "genius" either. . . .

Cherkaoui: Yesterday, I met a few young people from the School of Fine Arts, and I was touched by their kindness. One of them said to me: "I don't understand anything about your paintings." I told him that before independence, 80 percent of the people were illiterate and signed with thumbprints. What was the government going to do after independence? Be with the 20 percent and educate the rest, or make everyone sign with thumbprints? In art, you cannot move backward.

L'Action: *Talk to us about your exhibition. What are your conclusions?*

Elbaz: We didn't come here to give a course in painting, or to sell our paintings; we all have our Parisian followings. We came to seek out contact with the public, with other painters. Instead, we were welcomed like elephants in a china shop. The painters at the Tunis School refused dialogue with us, as if they had a guilty conscience, or as if they considered themselves above all "problems of painting." We tried to hold a meeting, which they promised they'd attend, but no one came. We were also told about young people carrying out their own personal projects, but we didn't get to meet them. We did meet, later on, with Amara Debbèche and Hatem el Mekki.

Benanteur: I have great admiration for Debbèche as a draftsman. For me, he's a revelation. I think Tunisia has a real artistic genius in him. In contrast, the case of el Mekki seems quite serious to me. According to what I've heard, young people look up to him as a leader of the "modern" tendency . . . while el Mekki's art lies mostly in his discourse. He's what we might call a showy provocateur. His painting is as far as possible from true modernity, from real work. He's a "show-off" in modern art, and this makes it even more urgent to demystify his painting for young people, for whom he passes himself off as someone who "refuses to be a follower," as someone who "carries out real work," and as an eternal outsider.

Jean-Jacques Lévêque (Parisian art critic): Demystify, that's the word. It's necessary that the true definition of quality take the upper hand. The problem in Tunisia is that most artists are killed by their own complacency. They're used to that working, and they immerse themselves in the most indecent of intellectual comforts. One ought to awaken a sense of anxiety in them, because painting today lives on an international timetable. And if Tunisia has a pavilion in Montreal or at the São Paulo biennial, it won't be by exhibiting the paintings of Turki or el Mekki that it will defend the prestige of its painting. You do have serious people, very valuable people. Debbèche is proof of that. There is only a confusion of values, and the officials in charge are not to blame. In fact, it's the painters who have educated those officials. A government official has other responsibilities; he's not an art critic. That's not his job. He must encourage all painters. The best proof of the officials' willingness to be open is that they have invited six "abstract" North African painters who are not "visibly" representative of national painting. It's for this reason that young painters, young journalists, and art critics should not accept the status quo that we have been talking about. They have to demystify, to redefine quality in art; in short, they have to "inform." In this sense, perhaps something important is developing. Mr. Chedli Klibi spoke to me of a possible seminar in which art critics, students, and sociologists could come together around a topic: "Does a North African painting exist?"—a seminar in which there would be an exhibition of "information," of works that are typical of all the "current" forms of art in all the countries of the world, as well as an "objective census" of Tunisian painting. It would be necessary in this case for painters to accept democracy, to accept confrontation. Their eventual absence could only be interpreted as a confession.

—"Six Peintres maghrébins parlent: La Peinture au Maghreb—Situation alarmante," *L'Action*, April 16, 1967. Translated from French by Aubrey Gabel.

Internationalism Passes through Nationalism (1967)

Zubeir Turki

I must respond here to the accusations made against the Tunis School by the painters who exhibited under the promotional label “North African Painters”—a label that is at least partially debatable, because one of them, Naccache, has had French nationality for some time.

Let’s take a look at what they accuse us of and, in turn, what they’re claiming. It’s simpler than you think: we are being accused of veritable “cheating.” We are “abusing the goodwill of the authorities”; we make painting that is “easy, typical, decorative, and made on demand.” We also have “a bad conscience” to the point of “refusing dialogue” with those who only came to “establish contact with Tunisian painting.” Finally, we are painters who are “consecrated, official, and mediocre, who are doing a lot of harm to North African painting.”

Now let’s take a look at the qualities they attribute to themselves and the virtues with which they adorn themselves. They are said to be “demanding,” seekers of “true values” in Paris. They do research; they evolve. They’ve left North Africa for Paris because they don’t “want to be the one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind.” They didn’t come here to sell work; they all have “their Parisian followings,” and when they don’t sell, they “work as waiters in cafés or porters at Les Halles.” They have given themselves the task of “demystifying the painting of the Tunis School.”

Is it necessary to add here that they succeeded in securing an invitation for themselves and their on-duty critic, a certain Mr. Lévêque, thanks to the help of their Tunisian-Parisian-North African “comrade”? For his part, Mr. Lévêque doesn’t speak to us about his own virtues but wants “the true definition of quality to regain the upper hand” and deplores that most painters in Tunisia “are killed by their complacency.” He wants “to awaken a sense of anxiety in them.” He doesn’t want “the paintings of Hatem el Mekki or Zubeir Turki to be sent to Montreal or São Paulo.” He wants “to send Debbeche’s paintings,” or another serious work to better defend the prestige of Tunisia. He denounces “the confusion of values.” He nevertheless exonerates the cultural authorities by explaining that, “after all, they have been educated by the painters.” He thinks he’s excusing them by adding that “they aren’t art critics,” and that they “have other responsibilities.” He thus invites Tunisian painters to accept “democracy and confrontation,” and cautions against an eventual “absence at the next seminar on the state of painting in Tunisia.” But let’s get to the Gentlemen of North Africa first, and then to Mr. Lévêque!

Dear Gentlemen of North Africa, what do you think of your diagnosis? Is it haughty enough, self-assured enough? Hateful enough? Allow me first of all to inform the public of what you already know. For my part, I wasn’t in Tunisia when you came and left. Before I left for Canada, I met the “comrade” who “managed” to secure you an invitation. When I asked him if it was true that he was thinking of exhibiting in Tunis with a group, he replied very evasively that he had “a project with friends from Paris,” without specifying any further and without making any reference to the project’s eventual North African character. I didn’t understand the reason for this discretion until later: When I returned, I learned about the article in *L’Action* that put Tunisian painting on trial.

Whatever your verdict, Gentlemen, of the “Parisian” censors (whose role as both judges and accomplices doesn’t seem to bother anyone at all), you aren’t bringing anything new to the sentence that Edgard Naccache believed he had to decree a few years ago, in a declaration made in the review *Africa*, after he moved permanently to France. He too had accused his “comrades” of “complacency, a tendency toward folklore, superficiality, a decorative character,” etc., etc. In fact, they’re the very same accusations that you’re making, distinguished visitors. I repeat: You’re not saying anything new.

It should also be said that for Naccache, the real explanation for this “misery in Tunisian painting” stems from the fact that the Tunisian painters that he denounced stubbornly cling to tradition and to Arab culture; then Naccache, in the same article, denied Arab art the power to inspire painters in any way.

In exchange, he advised these poor painters—in the event that they wanted to produce good painting—to forage in Numidian or Roman sources instead, and not to forget African violence. At this point in time, his statements were received with surprise. Some of Naccache’s “comrades” attributed them to the difficulties of transplantation and adaptation this painter must have experienced in France. All the same, people were surprised that the abstract painter Naccache denied all power of inspiration to an art and a culture that had in fact elevated abstraction to the greatest heights of creative imagination, and had inspired artists with totally different values than those of your dear theoretician: I would cite Paul Klee and Henri Matisse, among others. Faced with such an obviously biased and narrow-minded way of thinking, I thought it would be pointless to respond to this provocation and to engage in the polemics for which Naccache was certainly hoping. I advised my friends, some of whom were outraged by so much partiality and bad faith, to “let it go.”

If I feel obliged to speak about it, it’s because you wanted, Gentlemen of “North Africa,” to make people believe that you came here without any prejudices, without ulterior motives, without any preconceptions: with fresh eyes and open hearts, in total good faith, in all innocence. In fact, your declarations clearly demonstrate that none of this is true. The truth is altogether different. It seems certain that you came not only with dear Edgard’s paintings, but, sadly and above all, with his judgments and chauvinist antipathy.

In the eyes of the painters of the Tunis School, Naccache has brainwashed you. You came here with a ready-made indictment and a judgment that in truth wasn’t your own. Your conscious or unconscious complicity with him leaves not even a shadow of a doubt. You came here to continue the longwinded work of that man who didn’t even dare to take advantage of the invitation. You came here, in the end, as nice little commandos, intent on undermining us and doing us harm. The Tunisian painters spurned all dialogue with you, knowing full well what you are. This led you to participate in a veritable shoot-out, like Western outlaws, in an empty public plaza, in a cloud of dust and ululations. By being so vulgar in the saddle, you’ve reached a level of ridicule that is unprecedented in the history of painting. You have, in fact, let out a lot of hot air without impressing anyone. Gentlemen, do you really believe that taking trips to Paris is, for a painter, something original, or a heroic exploit that confers upon that person the right to pose as a professor or master thinker? We’ve all had our trips to Paris, but most of us didn’t let them go to our heads. We didn’t become demystifiers

or upholders of justice. We've all always had our own little ideas on painting. We never proclaimed them out in public squares. We know that painting speaks for itself with enough eloquence and truth. Do we have to add, Gentlemen, that it is always very disagreeable to hear someone systematically giving themselves the highest praise while constantly denigrating others? It's enough to give one goose bumps, Gentlemen.

What are you actually getting at when, on the one hand, you declare that you'd prefer being a porter at Les Halles to making decorative or facile art, and on the other hand that you're extremely concerned about knowing who profits from the "possibilities" in North Africa. So you do not want to renounce great painting, or decoration, or Les Halles. You want the ideal; you want to have your cake and eat it too. The problem you pose to yourselves isn't one of values, to which you have brought only commonplace ideas, but rather that of "possibilities and profit." It is clear that it is the material aspect of the question (on which you particularly insist) that is your principal concern and primary interest.

Moreover, you yourselves bluntly ask the question: "Who is profiting from this?"

You wouldn't deign to decorate the wall of a hotel on commission, when the owner demands grace and ornament. You wouldn't decorate the rooms with "light and gracious" drawings. You wouldn't do illustrations for newspapers. You look down on the poster, you scorn the postage stamp, you seem to hate illustration. Very well, Gentlemen. But aside from your gratuitous pretentiousness and your ever-contradictory statements, do you have the qualities required to engage in these activities? Do you have imagination? Do you know how to draw? Your painting certainly doesn't show it. . . . Could you make the model for a chair, create the form of a mirror? If this were the case, you could think of profiting from the "possibilities" that North Africa is offering its artists, for the moment.

Your genius, Gentlemen, your "true values," are actually too big for a North Africa that is still too small. No collectors, no galleries with contracts! The state's limited acquisitions and those of the rare, private individuals are far from sufficient for a man to live off of here in Tunisia, and I suppose where you are, too.

I invite you therefore to be consistent and honest, you who speak of cheating; I invite you to figure out what it is that you want. You don't want to condescend to the tastes of the country, but you still want to profit from them. You treat the whole world as if they were blind, and you treat us like the one-eyed man. You're obviously not faint of heart. But I ask myself: How can someone have so much scorn for his own people, have such a low opinion of them, and yet hope to express their soul and essence? But this is a different question, one to which we'll return. For my part, I am convinced that the fiercest among you are incapable of making a beautiful poster. You certainly have nothing in common with a [Henri de Toulouse-]Lautrec. What you want to make look easy is certainly impossible for most of you. This only adds to your envy, and thus to your fury.

You also tell us that we are "consecrated," "official," and "mediocre" painters. In Tunisia, Gentlemen, there are no consecrated painters, nor any official ones. There are painters who are more successful than others, but who are envied for their success and treated as mediocre. This is normal! It's natural! To speak of facility and cheating is too . . . easy. The success of these painters is due precisely to their

originality, to their sincerity, their refusal to cheat. For us, cheating consists of jumping on the bandwagon of a Paul Klee, a [Hans] Hartung, a [Pierre] Soulages, or any other renowned and fashionable painter, all the while believing or wanting people to believe that you're doing something new, original, and brilliant.

It is our respective attitudes concerning ease that separates us, Gentlemen. For us, even the most complex and intelligent art, if it is imitated and imported—even with certain adaptations such as tattoos or other folkloric motifs—in reality only represents a servile and easy copy of foreign works, a plagiarism devoid of soul and authenticity, and one that can be skillful to a greater or lesser extent: a recipe. We think that internationalism necessarily passes through nationalism. What comes of this is not the ease but rather the difficulty of our efforts, our attempts, and our experiments. We aren't making any claims yet: we don't believe we're too big for this country. We even fear the opposite is the case. The country knows this, and we hope to portray it well. We're also intent on furthering work that is sincere and arduous, because it seeks depth and authenticity.

We don't want to express our personality. Thanks to God, we are equipped to tackle this noble exploit. In fact, the common thread for most of us is how deeply rooted we are in our tradition and our culture. We spent many long hours huddled over all the riches of Arab art and literature, which we have studied deeply. We aren't content with Europe or Paris, which we know and appreciate better than you do. As for you, I very much fear that, as far as you are concerned, only the “gobbledygook” that you speak is really on your level.

This leads me, Gentlemen “judges,” to submit a crucial point to you. I will speak from personal experience, but my friends from the Tunis School are in the same situation. The painting I was talking about does not contain any “false notion of national painting.” It *is* national painting. Don't be fooled, it has nothing to do with hotel walls or the drawings that we hang there. For me and a lot of my friends, these allow us to live and to continue to paint. Moreover, we don't have any complexes with respect to our decorative production. For my part, I prefer a beautiful personal poster to a painting of poor quality.

When I talk about national painting, I'm not spouting out an unwarranted assertion. This painting isn't the work of “blind men” for whom you are supposed to act as guides. It is the opinion of eminent foreign critics who have different qualifications than your critic-supporter. In London, Prague, Stockholm, Istanbul, Rome, and Milan, the major newspapers and the best critics have spoken in favor of the authenticity and originality of this painting that you think you're demystifying because it is in isolation. You want to bury these painters whose works are already in several international museums.

Must I remind you that nothing other than my simple collection of drawings titled *Tunis, Then and Now* sparked the enthusiasm of a much more competent critic than you—namely, Claude Roy himself. He was so enthusiastic about these drawings, my dear “North African Gentlemen,” that he eagerly proposed to revise the commentaries for them, and refused all compensation. All this in the presence of Mr. [Mustapha] Masmoudi, the Minister of Information at the time, who also believes in the authenticity of my art (I owe a lot to him, and am extremely grateful to him).

My drawings and paintings have already been in museums and have been confirmed by the most eminent foreign art critics, so, since my fame comes from abroad (I've had more than three hundred paintings exhibited in Sweden, Italy, France, Czechoslovakia, Turkey, etc.), I think that you've been very poorly informed about me. You've come too late to do any demystifying. As I didn't have the pleasure of meeting with you, you could at least have carried out a more thorough investigation. Had you done so, you would have known that I have been exhibiting the fruit of my long-standing research and studies in the galleries of the Tunis School, and that I refused to sell them to the State Commission, in spite of the insistence of representatives of the Ministry of Culture. Because I preferred, and I still prefer, to live off of my drawings (don't be displeased), rather than to sell paintings that I consider trial runs, steps toward a goal that I hope to reach. Yet this didn't prevent you from applying the incredibly stupid label of "merchants" to us. I really hate to disappoint you, Gentlemen "Artists." I find it equally unpleasant to list off my own merits. But as the Arab proverb says: "Speak to people in a language that they can understand."

Now I'll turn to an even more disagreeable task, that of publicly judging other painters—something I have never allowed myself to do. As far as you're concerned, you certainly rushed to judgment (and probably with the goal of doing me harm) when you condemned me based on a leaflet or a postcard for tourists. You completely ignored the painter and his painting, because I wasn't here. As for me, when deciding to respond to your interview, I was nevertheless scrupulous enough to go see what the state bought from you—you who didn't "come here to sell." The "mediocre" painter of the Tunis School examined your innumerable objects up close and from afar. I searched and searched, turning and returning to your canvases, but it was all in vain—I couldn't find a trace of personality in them. It's sad. So much material to so little effect! Far be it from me, I assure you, to punish you for your nasty intrusion and your unspeakable pretention to dictate to other artists the way in which they must paint (what naïve optimism, in truth!). No matter what you say, the group of the Tunis School is open to all figurative and abstract tendencies, with mutual respect for each painter's vocation and ideas.

But since you too are so interested in true values, let me tell you that the sight of your works produced the same effect in me as a cortege of lords whose lackeys are dressed in costumes and wigs that resemble those of their masters; the lackeys carry the litters and hold their heads even higher and with more pride than their own lords. And yet they are only lackeys. You think the ones you're carrying in your litters are well-respected abstract painters of the West. In truth, you're only taking them out for a spin. I hope you understand this sentiment one day, before it's too late! If you don't, then you'll be heading straight into a catastrophe. Forgive this lesson I'm giving you, because I owe it to you. But I sincerely think that it's very dangerous for you, North African painters, to transform yourselves into the "Harkis" of Western painting.¹ I mean no offense!

And to be done with you, let me cite a little Chinese proverb that Claude Roy relates in *China in a Mirror*: One dog barks at the moon and a hundred dogs bark at the dog. I will not belittle you by explaining it. As far as the painters of the Tunis School are concerned, we didn't come to painting for profit. Before independence, it

was out of the question. We make paintings for the love of painting, and posters to survive. We will continue on this path.

Oh, yes! There's still Mr. Lévêque!

Mr. Lévêque, you speak like a . . . pope. You're not without knowledge of the history of art and, consequently, of the banal fact that great painters from all eras have often been reviled by critics that are more famous than you and a lot less simplistic.

On the other hand, I don't have the honor of knowing you. You don't have this honor either, no? Nor do you really know my paintings. You nevertheless judged them—I guess with the help of some go-between. You went as far as dictating your wishes: you don't want "my paintings sent to Montreal or São Paulo." They "hooked you up," too, with your first invitation in Tunisia, and you're already making yourself out to be a "specialist in Indigenous Affairs." The complacency that you so blithely attribute to us seems to be somewhat distorted—you're spreading untruths about us. You also exhibit a paternalism that Tunisians no longer want, as well as a total lack of courtesy, and, dare I say it, unprecedented "nerve" toward the officials that treated you so well—to the point that it went to your head and you thought you could do whatever you wanted.

You also assert that Tunisian officials are not art critics. In sum, you deny them any competency in this matter, while deigning to excuse them just the same, since they have, as you say, "other preoccupations." Would you have had the audacity to say as much about Mr. [André] Malraux and his collaborators? Do you already think yourself such an indispensable consultant to the Tunisian Ministry of Culture to the point of wanting to send its representatives abroad, or to dismiss them? There's some real confusion here. Do you take us for savages? This is clearly a time of cooperation, but don't abuse it, for God's sake. With regard to Tunisia, you've grasped neither the spirit nor the letter, and still less its paintings. You came here on your high horse. That's why you've doubtlessly taken the hospitality of our officials as some kind of capitulation to your genius.

As for me, allow me to assure you—and I'm saying this in the name of all my friends in the Tunis School—that you will never decide to whom or where Tunisia sends her canvases. And as far as your empty assertions and your naïve judgments are concerned, I will content myself with citing one last proverb (an Arab one this time): "Dogs bark, the caravan passes by."

To conclude, I will no longer address myself to you, but to the public opinion of my country—the only one that interests me. I want to say here that I'm resolved not to take up the pen a second time. Frankly, I can't take your group seriously, nor do I have any desire to indefinitely extend such a polemic. I have my commissions to attend to on the one hand (please don't be offended), and my painting on the other. That's what's important to me. The best way to convince people of one's good faith is to paint.

Note

1. *Eds.*: *Harki* is a slang term for the Algerians who assisted the French Army during the War of Independence, many of whom fled to Paris in 1962. The term is sometimes used to describe an Algerian thought to be sympathetic to French rule or influence.

—"Zubeir Turki défend la peinture tunisienne: 'L'International passe par le national,'" *Faïza*, no. 57 (May 1967): 12–15. Translated from French by Aubrey Gabel.

Art Must Reach the Universal and Must Not Become a National Crafts Industry: Interview with André Elbaz (1967)

Zakya Daoud

It's a fact that painters are scruffy and disheveled. André Elbaz's appearance is therefore reassuring. But are we reassured by his clothing or by the fact that he's a painter?

Who is he?

"I'm lucky to be me," he answers.

Say that again?

"It appears that I was born on the same day as Eugène Delacroix and that I'm as old as Christ" (thirty-three years old).

This pithy expression confirms that André Elbaz is by no means dissatisfied with himself. But that's not all there is to say about him. He is a complex being, difficult to grasp, totally paradoxical. Thus, he paints sorrowful canvases, has just made a film about the Warsaw Ghetto,¹ and is thinking of making another about Hiroshima. He's also working to deliver himself from racism: one has the impression that it's an issue that's close to his heart, that has affected him, more indirectly than directly, in the deepest part of himself. Nonetheless, he uses delicate colors to express himself, with blue being the dominant note. The faces that he intends to appear tortured never really do. The eyes in particular are luminous, soft, hardly bitter at all; they may sometimes express a wound, a disappointment, but never violence. Some of his paintings of Christ are particularly compelling. And in his cities, which are completely walled in, as though he wanted to conceal their interior, there is always a color that dances, just as there are always depths of azure in his gray skies.

His art is very diverse. It's impossible to draw parallels among his collages—which focus on and critique mechanism and mechanization—his abstract canvases, his portraits, and his Chinese ink drawings. It's as if there were many painters within him, or, at the very least, many men who express themselves differently through painting. His is a perfectly acquired art of painting, which he has truly made his own, and which he has indisputably made his vocation.

He acknowledges this diversity by admitting that when people enter one of his exhibitions, they hardly believe that all the works are by a single painter. How does he explain himself?

The color blue: "I was born in El Jadida. I am therefore a Doukkali.² A painter from the coast. And I love the sea."

Gentleness: "I am, above all, a painter of hope."

Diversity: "I deal with aesthetic issues, but also human issues. There are four or five themes that preoccupy me and that I express. My works reflecting these different themes have nothing to do with one another."

Racism: "I'm against everything that inhibits human beings, and racism concerns me because I'm Jewish. I sensed racism in Morocco, but I never really suffered from

it. It was in Greece, in fact, that I discovered it. I was there on vacation. Greek beauty was a shock for me. Then, at Corfu, I was with a young woman who wanted to visit a synagogue.

“The guide told us the story of the Greek Jews and their sufferings during the war. Jewish artisans showed us the numbers tattooed on their arms. They asked me how it was in Morocco during the war. Now, me, I hadn’t suffered. Maybe I missed having chocolate, but that was all. I truly learned about the Jewish question at Corfu. When I came back to London, where I lived at the time, and where I felt truly free and liberated, I couldn’t paint Greece. I was obsessed with the Jewish question. I came to Morocco, I rediscovered the light, but my obsession remained. That’s how I came to paint the canvases that I exhibited in Casablanca two years ago. I wanted them to be understood as an homage to Morocco, where we didn’t suffer from those problems. But no, they accused me of being a Zionist painter.

“My film? The topic came to me, just like that. I heard a piece of music by [Arnold] Schoenberg and I started to draw, thinking about those people who died senselessly, because some of them had longer noses than others. I lived eight months with that music and with those 750,000 deaths,³ because I had to. Now I’m thinking of making another film about the victims of Hiroshima. That too came from listening to music, a piece by [Krzysztof] Penderecki. Finally, I painted the March on Washington. It wasn’t out of a sense of romanticism. I have to free myself from these things completely.”

Influences: “Yes, I’ve been influenced, and I still am, though to a lesser degree, by a Russian painter, Nicolas de Staël. I started painting for the theater: posters, sets, collages. I took courses in the graphic arts, and then, when I was twenty-one years old, I was in Paris. But I never had the patience to study. It blew up in my face. And then I started over all alone, my sketchbook in hand, tracing the silhouettes in the street with my finger. It’s a technique I recommend: it taught me movement. And then I discovered Nicolas de Staël. He died in 1955, the year I started to paint. He killed himself. Incidentally, when you trace the path he took, his painting, you can understand why. He came to Morocco; he lived there, you can sense it when you look at his colors, especially his gray. His preoccupation? The distribution of mass: that is, of the subject, in space; that is, on the canvas, and the abstraction of everything unnecessary. In 1958, I was also preoccupied with problems of perspective, which is how I discovered de Staël. But I came to abstract art through the Agadir [earthquake] catastrophe. For me, Agadir was like Warsaw; I felt guilty, but I hadn’t seen Agadir, nor did I know anyone who had died there. I started to paint earthquakes, masses in movement on canvas. Afterward, I tried to rebuild, I made a series of walls, of cities.”

André Elbaz, you are a de Staëlian painter, and you are a painter committed to fighting racism, but are you a Moroccan painter?

I am not a Moroccan painter. I am a Moroccan and a painter.

But how does Morocco contribute to your paintings?

The color, the sun. If I were English, or German, I certainly would have painted differently. It might not be obvious in my work, but I’m the one who’s Moroccan. . . . There’s

also the taste of [Marcel] Proust's *madeleine*, which, where I'm from, is the taste of spices, cumin, and couscous that one rediscovers in my work.

But Moroccan painting was born with independence; it's the expression of a birth, of a revolt!

I disagree. Painting already existed, but no one had the opportunity to produce it or learn about it. And our young people didn't dare frequent exhibition halls. Since independence, many artistic revolutions have been born, along with the sense of freedom.

But didn't independence bring about an explosion?

For the politicians, yes, but I myself was born a painter, and I have the sense of being fully myself, a Moroccan and a painter.

Don't you have the sense of painting what others feel as well?

You know, the artist is selfish. I'm painting my personal issues, and you penetrate into my private world by looking at my paintings; I acquaint you with my aesthetic and human preoccupations. Every sincere painter has a message and a political commitment, but on an individual level. Now, you know, it's like in literature and in poetry. It's always enjoyable for any creator to know that a dialogue exists. Like all painters, I'm selfish, certainly, but if my work had been met only by silence, I would have shut up a long time ago.

But isn't art a general need to which the artist responds?

I don't know. . . . Oscar Wilde said: "All art is quite useless"; while [Antoine de] Saint-Exupéry said: "It's useful because it's beautiful." I'm very much at ease in Morocco, that's where I have my family, my friends, my public, although it's idiotic to say that I have a public. I need to go there, but I can't create in Morocco, I feel too secure. In Paris, there are tens of thousands of painters, there are interesting debates among them that stimulate development. In Morocco, I wouldn't have been able to paint my paintings of the Jews, or make my collages against mechanization, because those issues don't come up in Morocco, or at least not very much.

But Moroccan painting does indeed exist. . . .

It doesn't necessarily have to exist. Art is universal. Art should reach the universal and not just one nation. Art needs freedom. I hope it's never reduced to a national crafts industry. We should speak, rather, about our hopes for Moroccan painting.

And what are they?

They're new, they're young, they're beautiful. We could create a Moroccan School—we're a long way off from establishing one. There are so many fakes among the painters, it's upsetting, but it would be better, above all, to create museums and train critics so that we exhibit only visually truthful works.

In this sense, what did you get out of your recent exhibition in Tunis?

I got to know the art and the youth of Tunisia. The youth are extraordinary and seek to better themselves. And it's a dynamic environment; they're creating museums,

there are debates. This allows us to see where we are in relation to ourselves and to others. Some painters have a sense of painting, but instead of expressing what they feel, they draw, they copy. One painter among them, [Mahmoud] Sehili, has decided to bring Tunisian painters back to painting, back to the universal. This will be long and hard, but it's a marvelous task. In Morocco, we are more advanced, which is all the better. We must not forget that art is the reflection of each country and of each civilization. Therefore, we don't have the right to leave behind poor works of art. But we lack this approach to art, these means, these debates. Art is elevated by dialogue; every painter is vain, thinking he's brilliant. Painters need criticism, and the public needs to become familiar with painting. Art should not be made accessible to the masses; the masses should be elevated to the level of art.

Notes

1. Eds.: The reference is to Elbaz's 1966 short film *La Nuit n'est jamais complète*.
2. Eds.: *Doukkali* refers to inhabitants of the coastal region of Doukkala in Morocco.
3. Eds.: The figure cited here would seem to reflect the allusion, in Schoenberg's *A Survivor in Warsaw*, to the destruction of Jewish life in the Warsaw Ghetto and at Treblinka.

—Zakya Daoud with André Elbaz, "L'Art doit toucher l'universel et ne doit pas devenir un artisanat national," *Lamalif*, no. 12 (May 1967): 34–37. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

AOUCHEM GROUP / Algiers and Blida

In Algeria in 1967, artists Denis Martinez and Choukri Mesli founded the Aouchem group, which issued this manifesto text. The word *aouchem* means "tattoo" in Arabic, and as a title signaled the member artists' interest in deploying native Amazigh motifs as magical signs in their work—a tactic to recapture authenticity and disrupt lingering French colonial cultural influence.

Manifesto (1967)

Hamid Abdoun, Mustafa Adane, Baya (Fatma Haddad-Mahieddine), Mohamed Ben Baghdad, Mahfoud Dahmani, Denis Martinez, Choukri Mesli, Said Saidani, Arezki Zerarti

Aouchem was born thousands of years ago, on the walls of a cave in the Tassili Mountains. Its existence continues into our own time, sometimes in secret, sometimes in the open, according to the fluctuations of history. It has defended us and survived in many forms, despite the many conquests that have taken place since the Roman period. The continued use of the magical sign reveals the retention of a popular culture, which has for a long time embodied the hope of a nation, even if, because of history, a certain decadence in its form has been produced under foreign influence. Thus, for all time, across the works of artists-artisans, an intellectual rigor characteristic of our civilization, from north to south, has been maintained, and this has been expressed in geometric compositions in particular.

It is this authentic tradition that Aouchem 1967 insists on rediscovering, not only in the forms of works of art, but also in the intensity of color. Far from a



In the studio of Denis Martinez at Blida, Algeria, at the time of Aouchem. 1967. From left: a friend, poet Abdelhamid Laghouati, two friends, painter Denis Martinez, painter Mustapha Aknoun, sister of Denis Martinez

certain gratuitousness of contemporary Western abstraction, which has forgotten the Eastern and African lessons that suffused Roman art, we want to define the true totems and the true arabesques capable of expressing the world we live in. That is to say, starting from the major formal themes inherited from Algerian history, [we must] reassemble all the plastic elements invented here or there, by the civilizations of the Third World that were crushed yesterday and that are coming back to life today. Our goal is for the new Algerian reality to be situated within the growing universal humanism of the second half of the twentieth century.

That is why the Aouchem group is also engaged in reusing major mythological themes—still alive today—in symbolizing individual lyrical explosion, as well as in violently taking hold of the provocations that the current tragedies in Africa and Asia are throwing in the face of the artist.

We intend to show that the sign, always magic, is more powerful than the bomb. We believe that we have discerned similar preoccupations with language in the works of certain Algerian poets.

Realist visionaries, the Aouchem painters and poets declare that they will use effective creative forces against the rearguard of aesthetic mediocrity.

—“Manifeste du groupe ‘Aouchem,’” typescript. Reproduced, with slight amendments to conform to the style of the present volume, from Susan Greenspan’s translation from French in *Critical Interventions* 3, no. 1 (February 2009): 189.

CIRCULISM AND KINETICS IN KUWAIT

Starting in 1966, the Kuwaiti Writers Association published *al-Bayan*, a cultural revue with a purview that included the visual arts. These two articles from the journal's early years address questions raised by the rapidity of development initiatives in Kuwait, and its impact on the nature of art itself. The first is an editorial introduction to kinetic art as an international phenomenon of response to technological developments. The second is an interview with painter Khalifa Qattan, one of Kuwait's first professional artists, about the theory of Circulism, which he had been developing since the early 1960s. (Some years later, in 1971, an unrelated "Circulism" would be proposed by Iraqi artist Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri; see pages 345–46 in the present volume.)

See Plate 35 for Khalifa Qattan's 1967 painting *Resistance*, which was featured on the cover of *al-Bayan*.

Kinetic Art: A Movement that Represents the New Man (1966)

The man of this age of hydrogen bombs, deadly radiation, and space travel can no longer find, among the traditional means of artistic expression, a way to express the stage he has reached—not in poetry, or in music, or in painting. The solidity of the moon, its rocklike nature, has stripped it of its emotional halo. The heart manufactured from plastic has come to impose, on the poets and the writers of emotion, an innovative new mode of writing, an exploration of other summits that are different from the ones that those writers reached and have rested upon. The old visions have been abandoned, the sun no longer rises in the East, and the moon has settled somewhere other than the forest and the rooftops of village houses.

And now what? The old language has become a constraint. The language of speech, the language of painting and music, and the language of poetry—the man [who has made it to] outer space has relegated all of these to the morgue, and has gone in search of new tools with which to express himself, to express his visions and dreams. The stars have yet to lose their shine and their impact, and it does not seem as though they *will* lose them, since they remain a source of inspiration. Yet that source is different from what man has known until recently. It is no longer the inspiration of the lover, but rather the nucleus of the unknown, the catalyst of knowledge, the spirit of adventure.

The *Kinetic* art exhibition that recently opened in the city of San Francisco was the first to grapple with the new means of expression in an attempt to establish their existence and spell out their concepts, since these means go past the modern—and indeed go far beyond it, for they are an expression of what will be, not of what presently is.¹

The exhibition opened amid great commotion and an even greater mental preparation, making the sphere of the laboratory seem calm and serious, as if it followed the protocol of a church confessional. [...]

Another exhibition of this art was held at the University of California, Berkeley,² and was, like the one in San Francisco, a vehement sign of the swiftest art development America has witnessed, and which reverberates around the world. [...]

Across the two exhibitions, the advances in sculpture were embodied by seventy-two pieces presented, by eight Americans and fourteen Europeans. The Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely notes that “the artists have placed themselves, by means of kinetic art, into a movement compatible with their time, and particularly connected with endless perpetual motion.”

Tinguely speaks of beyond-modern art, noting the following: “People respond quickly to kineticism in art because it is an example of the sterility of our daily mechanical lives.” But not all of Tinguely’s colleagues express the same melancholic views about the direction of society or its derisiveness.

On the contrary, the modern, clamorous art of destructive progressivism plunges the followers of kinetic art into the middle of the technological current, where they swim like joyful dolphins. Their work is an enticing mix of natural and mechanical elements; and their tools are also a mix of primitive elements such as wind, water, air, light, fire, smoke, alongside modern elements such as motors, magnets, radios, radar devices, and computers.

They are artists whom Peter Selz describes as a new generation that seems to be more influenced by man’s ability to leave the earth and move to outer space than by man’s failure on this earth specifically.

What are the features of this new art? Who is the true kinetic artist?

Selz states that the kinetic artist must be a combination of the complete manual worker and the engineer who is an expert in four-dimensional design, and that the sculptural work of such an artist is more important and more valuable than a work of traditional painting.

A tour through the exhibition is enough to convince one of how kinetic art has left a loud and famous art in its wake, just as women’s fashion changes from year to year. [...]

All the pieces in the exhibition offered sure proof that they are located at the midpoint between science and art. Indeed, in their connection to a single concept and in their relation to kinetic art, these works are embodiments of the psychology of the imagination and sense perception, as well as of the theory of transmitting sense perceptions, which is called *information theory*. And in spite of the productive assembly of exceptional mental operations, the kinetic artist still allows circumstance and the unexpected to play a large role in his work. [...]

The artist is an inventor, a scientist, and an engineer. He conducts his experiments with the tools of his time; thus it is ironic that the kinetic artist’s indulgence in modern technology has led him beyond his materiality and his tools ... and toward the metaphysical means of that which is behind material perfection.

Takis [Panagiotis Vassilakis] says the following about this topic: The main issue is that we are able to transform matter into energy. And in fact we do not think of matter and energy as two different things, for when I use an existing object I move away from traditional art and gradually move closer to invisible forces. In one of my works I used pieces of an old radar apparatus, for radar is a tool with which we listen to the music of eternity. [...]

Otto Piene, one of the most famous pioneers of kinetic art, says: The contemporary art of sculpture reflects reality, but we are now attempting to transform that reality, not to reflect and represent it. Modern art is related to consumer society, and

we are trying to harmonize nature and technology. Where other artists see the evils of the machine, we ourselves do not perceive those evils—we do not view the machine as a nightmare, or as an enemy of art.

Kinetic artists see that man is capable of linking technology with nature. The scientist conducts his studies and research, and no sooner has he put down a law or a theory than he turns to another subject, as George Rickey says. The scientist abandons the discovery immediately after it has been made, but the kinetic artist takes a different approach: he tries to find out how to make life greater and richer, and how he can instill more life into the idea that has been discovered.

With the power and capacity of science, kinetic art rediscovers the social congruence or societal harmony that modern art has lost, or has come to neglect.

As Enrique Castro-Cid says: We live in an atomized society, in a tribal society where games are binding; and if this art is successful, it too will create new bonds. A unique one-on-one relationship exists between the viewer and the painter. But when the kinetic sculptor creates something unusual or unexpected, the viewer turns to anyone standing nearby to ask: “Do you see that?” In the case of kinetic art, the situation is akin to an accident on the road: it impels people to talk to strangers.

It should be added that kinetic sculpture or painting, with its expressive capacity, fosters closer relationships.

We are not talking about kinetics with a terminology of computation and engineering, but rather with what is often the language of the bedchamber, as Pol Bury says. [Henri] Matisse asserts that both traditional painting and modern painting can be sofas on which man can rest. As for kinetic art, it is in no way a sofa to rest on, for it includes society in its entirety, and gives man something to occupy himself in his times of rest and laziness—downtime that the machine has provided for him. And since the man of the future will not tire, he does not need the sofa: he will have the energy needed to enjoy kinetic art.

Notes

1. Eds.: *Kinetic Currents*, San Francisco Museum of Art, March 20–April 10, 1966.
2. Eds.: *Directions in Kinetic Sculpture*, University Art Gallery, Berkeley, California, March 18–May 1, 1966.

—Hay'at al-Tahrir, “Fann al-Ḥaraka: Ḥaraka Tumaththil al-Insān al-Jadīd” (abridged), *al-Bayān*, no. 4 (July 1, 1966): 22–24. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

Interview with the Artist Khalifa Qattan (1967)

Sulayman al-Shatti

Everything in this country of ours and in our developing community—everything, without exception, is taking its very first steps, from industry to the economy, and all the way to art. All these things are sowing their first seeds in the soil of knowledge. And it is natural—given the origins of things, and the starting point, and this state of affairs—to start at the beginning. In the plastic arts, we begin with the classical school and move on to the Romantic school, until we’ve reached the end of the road. And although we may be condensing time here, we still have to pass through these stages so that the growth is natural and integrated. This is not an introduction I am present-

ing before the interview, but rather a fundamental point that anyone who opposes the artist Khalifa Qattan relies on—I say “opposes” and not “attacks.” And there is no doubt that Qattan has gone to great lengths and toiled and sweated in order to lay the foundations of “Circulism.” There is one thing that we will never be able to accept, and that is attacking Qattan. And there is one thing that we insist on and call for: debate. It is Qattan’s responsibility to speak—to clarify and explain his art. He has tried to do this, and he is still trying. And for our part, we will spare no effort to understand him. When we presented him with the words of his opponents, he replied with the following:

It is classical art that underpins and bestows its favor on all artistic schools, and so it is the starting point. There are real schools of art, including Surrealism and Cubism, and then there are the styles of Fauvism and Dada, but their value does not reach the level of classical art.

Q: And yet you turned to Circulism even though we are still taking our first steps?

The Kuwaiti public is unsophisticated and doesn’t appreciate much other than obvious things, such as a view of the sea. There are people who want the artist to be a transmitter and not a creator and an innovator, but the works of such artists are indistinguishable from commercial works and far-removed from actual art, for art is not an imitation of nature but rather a sense of and interaction with its surroundings. With Circulism, I am trying to convey my interaction with my surroundings. Let’s take the painting *The Kuwaiti Diver* (1964) as an example. In it we see the diver with his dark skin and white hair. Part of his body is in the sea, and the rest of it is above water. He is diving for oysters—those are the goal. And in the painting we also see the form of a shell. There are circles within the shell that resemble the diver’s downward spirals through the water, but these are almost vicious circles, for the diver may or may not find the oyster, although he spends four months, in sunlight and in the darkness of night. We also witness the dangers, for we see a shark. Furthermore, the painting highlights the diver’s resources by revealing a *sambuk* and its sail.

Q: So can we say that Circulism is not far removed from the classical orientation . . . ?

As is evident from the painting of the seaman, Circulism is an expression of an integrated story. If we wanted to express the life of the sailor, for example, in the old way, we would need a great deal of time and space. Circulism reduces the time and space needed.

Q: A question keeps running through my mind. . . . How did you hit upon the idea of Circulism?

It was in 1963. Circulism was the result of reading books of philosophy and nature and the sciences in general. I have read about Cubist theory, which states that the cube is at the origin of things, and that everything is composed of it. But I see things differently, and I don’t accept the Cubist theory, because everything—as is well known—is composed of atoms, and the atom is an expression of the circular orbits of electrons around a nucleus, and this is the smallest thing in existence. If something smaller than it were to exist, it might still not be able to escape this system. And if we look at

the biggest of things, we find the earth orbiting the sun, and the whole solar system orbiting other stars, etc. The circular line, and rotation along with it, delimits time. Energy, too, is generated from this orbit. Look at the stone you throw into the water—don't you see circles rippling outward from it?

Q: Nature is prominent in this art, so where is man?

Man's connection to nature is clear. Furthermore, Circulism manifests man's instincts and his continually renewed objectives, which have neither a beginning nor an end. So this communication with the desires of man and this atom are the origin of everything.

There is another point I would like to bring up for a moment, since it contains a clarification of the value on which this art is based. Circulism is an expression of an officer standing before a call to retreat.

Q: Can you elaborate on that point a bit?

You know that when man wanted to express himself in ancient times, he started to carve on stones and in caves, and to draw what was consuming him, and we are able to observe this from archaeological excavations that have uncovered quite a lot. Ancient man expressed himself with absolute freedom, without the intervention of intellectual complication. From this point, the leaders of the modern schools revolted within art: they attempted to express the self directly, whereas classicism proceeded within carefully calculated and defined lines. These modern schools included Surrealism and abstractionism, among others. If we were to take a piece from archaeological excavations, from the shapes that the first man drew, and place it beside what modern artists are drawing, we wouldn't see any difference between the two.

Q: But that's not what's at fault with modern artists, for ancient man and the modern artist are both trying to express the human self.

It's true that both ancient man and the modern artist are trying to express the human self, but where is man's progress? Where are the developments that have occurred? Haven't those developments had an influence on man, and doesn't that influence have an impact on the artist? It is here, at this point, that Circulism comes in, for it creates a link between everything consuming the human self and the intellect. Circulism brings the intellect and instinct together, and in doing so protects art from returning to the point of beginning without blocking it from honestly expressing itself.

Q: Every artist or innovator paints a future for his creation, so what is the future that you want and hope for with regard to this method? And what is this method based on?

When man perceives something clearly, this means that he wishes all possible success for it. But the important thing is that man, when he believes in something, must work for the sake of that thing, and in this regard there are three paths that I rely on, namely:

First: Publicity, by which I mean the means of disseminating the method or school. This path is well known.

Second: The artist himself, to the extent of the creative talent he has, and the innovation he brings, and his subtle and refined feeling—when he attempts to convey

all of them sincerely via line and color and detachment. Let's take [André] Breton as an example: that artist worked on behalf of Surrealism and struggled and made sacrifices until the school gained international renown.

Third: The public—and this is the most difficult aspect, for an artistic method might be well known only as a name. Everyone knows the name of Surrealism, or that of Cubism, but they know them merely as names. As for the truth of these schools, that needs time to actually become known. Circulism was well received in Italy, where it was accepted as a new school. I am trying to make simplicity the general characteristic of Circulism, for the artist's message must not stray too far from the public. While the public savored the Surrealist method on the formal level, it could only guess at Surrealism's meaning. And I did not try to distance myself from the current age. Rather, I tried to depict the general characteristic of this age, and what I found was hatred, spite, and distaste.

Q: But don't you think that goodness has a place in reality? Where is its place in Circulism?

I was asked that same question in Italy—they asked why *that* characteristic in particular. I would say that love and purity exist, but that hatred and spite have triumphed over goodness. I try to foreground hatred and spite and present it to the people. Whoever finds himself reflected in these attributes will realize the aim of the painting here. I view goodness as an origin and selfishness as an offshoot, for once we exterminate the parasites of selfishness and hatred, it's goodness that remains. But this doesn't mean that I depict only the negative aspects, for I have presented and portrayed motherhood and compassion and sadness, as well as nature—for example, the sea. But I orient myself toward moral aspects, and here one point comes to the fore: namely, beauty. For me, beauty is a sense within the human self and not the influence of others, so I do not depict values or beauty.

Q: Let's pause before modern art. Artists in the modern era say that life today is complex and is not subject to norms.

I don't believe that, for life is as it is. Selfishness and greed are what complicate life—they are what led America to kill innocent people in Vietnam. The complexities go back to the way people treat one another. One of the Americans killed seven girls; if we examined that man, we would see that he set out to kill not because he loved but because he hated. And hatred came to him from the painful reality he lived. For what are psychological illnesses if not a reflection of the painful reality that greed has painted?

Q: The artist is a reflection of his reality, so did you adopt this attitude toward depicting hatred and spite from the reality of our Kuwaiti society?

The only thing I can say is that Kuwait is what supplied me with those images. We can examine my painting *Life of an Artist*, for it contains some answer to that question. The painting says that a sincere and candid artist will be tossed away, like an old date pit, by the people around him, because he does not go along with them in wearing the masks of falsehood and deception and instead tries to reveal the truth of those masks with his brush. The honest artist suffers from the misdeeds around him—

misdeeds that could drive his society into the abyss. But with his faith and resolve, he will continue working to combat those misdeeds until his hair turns gray and his eyes go white [with sorrow]. He hears the people around him openly expressing their pleasure and championing their hatred, and he questions them, but they cannot hear him. He develops skill in his craft to light the way for them, but they cannot see that their task is to appreciate and safeguard him like a jewel, not to cast him away like a pit. Yet they don't realize all this. As you can see, the interpretation of this painting provides a clear picture of the influence of Kuwait on this method of mine, and you can see that all these circumstances exhibited in the painting are present in Kuwait.

Q: Has the most recent battle¹ revealed certain things and raised a question about the role of art in this critical phase?

Art is like any other message, such as literature and theater and music. And part of its message is highlighting the nationalist sentiments that occur in its environment. This is done by working on paintings that embody what's happening, and by holding exhibitions both within the country and abroad. For if the artist exhibits his work in the Arab homeland, it reflects the emotion of the nationalist public; and when he exhibits it abroad, it reflects the truth and demonstrates to others what is happening in our Arab homeland by means of the expressive image.

Q: But is killing one of the sentiments of our people?

Absolutely not. In the paintings I've made, I've tried to show the truth, namely that our people defend themselves and that defending oneself is a duty that is affirmed by all people and all nations. During the battle, the efforts of the Syrian artists were outstanding, and they painted and exhibited their paintings in the streets.

Q: Our second-to-last question: What is your opinion of art in Kuwait?

Every people has art that wells up from its depths, and one people might be late in this . . . but they must still have art. Native seeds of art existed in Kuwait, for the Kuwaiti "booms" [boats] included a lot of ornamentation and sections. They refrained from depicting people, believing that the Islamic religion forbade this. But that's not true, for Islam urged people not to make statues specifically in its first centuries, out of fear of a return to the age of ignorance.² But once the religion settled into people's souls, there was no need to fear a return to unbelief. But this did not prevent—as I mentioned—the appearance of ornamentation and the prominent aesthetic aspects. The modern renaissance emerged after this period, and schools were formed; the artistic renaissance developed, and attention to art became prominent; the Free Atelier opened under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Guidance rendered great services to artists. In this regard, we should not forget the deceased painters Mujib al-Dusri and Mohammad al-Damkhi—all the deceased had augured a bright future for art.

Q: Our last question: What is the secret of your interest in acquiring books?

I believe that the artist takes a flower from every garden, and gathers a lot of information, which helps the growth of his art, for he knows something about everything and everything about some things. So science and philosophy serve his art—the two

inform his art, as do ancient monuments and archaeological excavations. As does literature. Art is humanistic in general. . . .

* * *

This, in conclusion, is Khalifa Qattan: an artist from our homeland sowing his seeds in our fertile soil. Let's open our hearts and minds to his hopes so that they can be realized, and so that we may rise to the level of art.

Notes

1. *Eds.*: The battle to which al-Shatti refers is the June 1967 War between Israel and the Arab states.
2. *Eds.*: The Arabic term here is *jahiliyya*, used to refer to the period of "ignorance" of monotheism in Arabia that preceded the advent of Islam (and which had included practices of idol worship).

—Sulaymān al-Shaṭṭī, "Ma'a al-Fannān Khalifa al-Qaṭṭān," *al-Bayān*, no. 20 (October 1, 1967): 29–32. Translated from Arabic by Kareem James Abu-Zeid.

IN FOCUS

Experiments in Modern Arabic Typography

Huda Smitshuijzen AbiFarès

The evolution of Arabic typography over the past century and a half has contributed to the development of modern Arab societies through the decrease in illiteracy and the promotion of cultural progress. Arabic printing types began to undergo a process of simplification in the late nineteenth century, partly with the pragmatic aim of speeding up the production of printed educational and scientific Arabic publications. The Arabic script's cursive structure—which is to say that the letters are necessarily connected—dictates that the letters, in many cases, change shape depending on whether they fall at the beginning, middle, or end of a word. This has posed a challenge for Arabic typography since the sixteenth century. In 1936 the Arabic Language Academy in Cairo launched a language and script-reform campaign, and later initiated an international competition (the first was held in 1945, a second in 1959) to tackle the problems of typesetting Arabic texts. In 1947 Lebanese designer Nasri Khattar proposed a new way to combat illiteracy: the Unified Arabic Alphabet, consisting of disconnected letters that, unlike the conventional Arabic alphabet, do not change shape depending on their position in a word. A decade later, in 1958, Moroccan Arabist Ahmed Lakhdar-Ghazal devised a system for mechanical typesetting, ASV-CODAR (Arabe Standard Voyellé—Codage Arabe [Standard Vocalized Arabic—Arabic Encoding]), which reduced the number of letterforms and incorporated vocalization marks (denoting soft vowels) as separate characters placed after each consonant, in an attempt to make the reading of Arabic texts simpler and error-free. Lakhdar-Ghazal's efforts were followed in the 1970s by those of Iraqi poet and calligrapher Mohammed Said al-Saggar, who pursued the simplification of Arabic script by analyzing the structure of its letterforms and categorizing them according to their shared visual characteristics. In 1972 he devised what he termed a "condensed alphabet," consisting of a minimal number of 21 letter components—in contrast to the 134 characters for mechanical typesetting, and the 354 characters for hand setting—which he used as the basis for creating a variety of modern Arabic typefaces.

Beginning in the 1960s, mainstream typesetting equipment in the Arab world utilized Arabic printing types designed according to traditional, but simplified, calligraphic styles. Meanwhile, artists and designers were experimenting with and drawing their own expressive lettering. Many Arab artists were exploring the notion of re-creating the pure, formal essence of the written Arabic language, which often entailed returning to older models of the script and adopting their geometric simplicity and graphic strength. Lettering became integral to the repertoire of visual artists interested in poetry and abstraction. The popular Arabic written texts of the pre-Islamic *Hanging Odes* were transformed into posters, bringing art outside the walls of museums and galleries and to a wider viewership. The typographic experiments of the 1970s freed type from the constraints of conventional printing types and rigid composition. And with the expanding possibilities of photographic reproduction, the power of text-as-image soared. Arabic characters were integrated into drawings; they were handwritten, constructed, and manipulated. Khattar's Unified Arabic fonts were sometimes used not for their original purpose but as a break with tradition—an expression of rebellion—and in pursuit of ongoing creative renewal.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Iraqi posters brought a fresh approach to Arabic type design and lettering. In Baghdad, printmaker and photographer Nadhim Ramzi established a fully equipped state-of-the-art printing press. In collaboration with fellow artists (among them Dia al-Azzawi), he designed and produced posters, cards, exhibition catalogues, and other publications, for which he created a number of modern typefaces that married older Kufic scripts with the look of the machine age. Ramzi's typographic designs not only reflected the aesthetic experiments of the time, but also offered a truly modern Arab image, and influenced future generations of Arab type designers.

Contemporary designer Mamoun Sakkal, one of the first Arab type designers to achieve international renown, cites the work of Ramzi—in particular his typefaces from the 1970s for the magazine *Afaq Arabiyya*—as a major inspiration for Sakkal's Kufic-based font family, Shilia. Sakkal's work for multinational brands and branding agencies, and his experiments creating Arabic adaptations of Latin-script typographic logotypes, have set a standard for Arabic graphic design since the early 1990s. His inventiveness as a type designer has continued to grow, informed by thorough research and a profound level of craft. His work has shaped both the Arabic type-design profession and contemporary Arab visual culture.

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See Plate 36 for a 1971 exhibition poster by Dia al-Azzawi, printed with Nadhim Ramzi.

ACCOUNTING FOR THE JUNE 1967 WAR

June 5, 1967, marks one of the most traumatic events for many artists in the Arabic-speaking world: the start of the Six-Day War that culminated in a staggering defeat of the Arab military forces by the Israeli Army, including losses of territory (Egypt lost the Sinai, Jordan lost the West Bank, and Syria lost the Golan Heights), and a new refugee crisis. The texts in this section all engage the defeat—which is often called the *Naksa*, or setback—and its impact on artistic practice in the Arab world. The essay enigmatically titled “(. . .),” by Egyptian artist Hassan Soliman, appeared in the very first issue of *Galerie 68*, an experimental literary journal launched in Cairo in the aftermath of the defeat. From Iraq, the New Vision manifesto, signed by six artists in Baghdad in 1969, outlines a shared commitment to art as a particular struggle. In this section’s final two texts, from Lebanon and Syria, conversations turn to the June 5 defeat as an element of artistic experience. One is an excerpt from an interview with three Lebanese painters, conducted by writer Samir Sayegh for the avant-garde literary journal *Mawaqif*. The last is an excerpt from a roundtable discussion of the 11th Autumn Exhibition in Damascus, convened in late 1969 at the invitation of *al-Tali’a*, a state cultural journal.

See Plates 37 and 38 for representative works by Hassan Soliman and Saleh al-Jumaie; the latter was a signatory to the New Vision manifesto.

(. . .) (1968)
Hassan Soliman

Once a stagnant topic of discussion, the issue of the artist’s commitment or obligation has now become a subject worth writing about. Discussing the freedom the artist has lost—between the influence of twentieth-century mechanization and subjection to deep-seated traditions—will not get us anywhere. I will be simple and honest with myself. I am starting from the point of the alienation of the artist within freedom and deadly individualism. For he has become so invisible to everyone that he is on the verge of believing that everything he makes is utterly worthless. Whenever people pin old and tired slogans on him, such as “a responsive artist,” “a conscious artist,” or “a progressive artist,” he falls silent or smiles bitterly. When a kind of obligation or pressure is imposed on the artist, we end up with something like slavery. And in the shadow of slavery, is it possible for art—or productive technique, even—to develop?

The artist suffers from an indulgence in freedom. A freedom without financial means or social status, devoid of any link to humanistic thought. Does such freedom have any value?

A prison it is, in that case.

(. . .)

The modern artist has lost all faith in art and in society. He mocks the idea of the love of art for art’s sake or of making art without expecting a reward.

Calling for conferences that present problems and seek out solutions only leads to an increase in restrictive slogans.

Any movement that aims to place art behind specific bars is doomed to failure. It is easy to criticize but difficult to construct. How can we make this generation more aware of itself and others?

What binds a generation together into a school of art or under an intellectual rubric is not ideology or a specific philosophy so much as it is an emotional initiative toward a certain present reality. The generation is united by hope or despair, by love or hatred.

Persistently trying to produce art with a purpose and insisting on connecting to a specific idealism will not lead to the creation of art for the people. Any art that directly serves a political cause is generally contrived. To insist on producing such art would lead to the suffocation of all forms of art, humanistic or not, committed or not.

It would inevitably lead to confusion.

Art is an end in itself, although we tend to discuss it as a means and as a tool that can intervene in anything.

Responsibility always comes down on the means rather than on the ends.

As long as the type of art found in Egypt is still connected to the middle class, with its abilities and affluence, it will collapse with the collapse of that class. Even if we overlooked the romantic element in bourgeois art, we would not be able to ignore the elements of fantasy and mysticism. Can fantasy and mysticism be of service to politics?

Art is the product of the rebellion of a distinctive individuality.

There cannot be a more meaningless myth than contemporary economic life: the inflation of its production and its problems of unemployment. There is no longer any security in human life, whether one thinks in materialist or metaphysical terms, for the strong still eat the weak. There is no such thing as equal opportunity.

These problems are not specific to this century—they have always been and still remain the same.

For the problems of humanity are fixed in their nature. The difference lies, now, in man becoming aware of the problems and understanding their causes. In Egypt, the problem is clearer, for with the revolution and the activity in public information, intellectual and political awareness has increased, as has awareness of one's problems and status. Such awareness has led to constant tension and anxiety. Man feels as if his depths are a desert bordered by life and death. For the abyss between the artist and society is but the gap between the artist and himself. He lives as a stranger to himself, a stranger to his society and times. Need must come first, the people's need for art itself. This need will impel art to develop not just in terms of content and form, but also in terms of materials and style. This need will dispel the myth that there is one art for the elite and another for the masses. That myth is no longer relevant.

A good work of art influences our aesthetic sensibility in general without delimiting how or in what direction, for good art has the ability to affect each person differently.

(...)

An artist's value lies in the extent of his connection to people's lives. An artist needs to be fully connected to people's lives, directly or indirectly. The depth in *The Divine Comedy* comes from Dante's being closely connected to the political issues of his

homeland, without those issues being imposed on him. Because he trusted himself and had faith in his country's causes, he didn't have to contrive a political subject and turn *The Divine Comedy* into a call for the unification of Italy.

How do we reach a point where art is a means for mental and intellectual convergence among people?

How can we make art popular?

There is certainly a gap that separates the public and the artist, making each expect the unachievable from the other.

On its part, the public tries to get a taste of good art and discard vulgar art. The artist, on the other hand, should rein in his desire to express every single modern artistic technique he has mastered.

It is no shame for the artist to be simple and to express his own emotions and those of the people with simplicity. We all quiver when reading the few lines in which Dante describes Paolo kissing Francesca's lips. But we never attempt to reread any of the Russian literature written at the time of Stalin, for instance.

While an artist's work may be marked by subjectivity, he still bears a responsibility that is no less than any other. Art! It is always the capacity to transform the artist's internal vision into an external wakefulness that influences social change.

In my view, art should be a new representation of reality and a discovery of its forms and forces. It is a kind of sensitivity that has the power to connect past and present. This can be clearly seen in the works of the modern artists who are our teachers. Art expresses the tension between past and present and cannot be regarded as a boundary between them. Nor is it an entity with fixed boundaries. It is the past when it awakens and the future that is yet to be born.

Do we have an art that expresses our present reality and our future while being connected to our past?

What is it that we can call revolutionary art?

What kind of art can be a herald of a flourishing society?

The image for me is nothing but a human experience that the artist turns into an experience in facture. A generation is by and large bound together by a unified human experience, which in most cases begets unified thought, and a unified artistic school.

* * *

When the artist tackles a human or artistic experience, it is something he does alone and cannot impose on society. But if all artists, writers, and musicians were gathered together in a unified intellectual trend and a single pressing need, and if they insisted—collectively—on consolidating that trend, then that would be the natural harmony of willing contribution.

The result would be that this artistic school would find its way to the light faster than anyone could imagine, and would even become a pillar of the political struggle.

—Ḥasan Sulaymān, "(...)," *Gālirī* 68, no. 1 (May 1968): 29–33. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

Manifesto: Towards a New Vision (1969)

Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, Rafa al-Nasiri, Hashem Samarji

There is an internal unity to the world that places the human in a nonvisible position in relation to it. There is no doubt that contemporary consciousness is nothing other than a process of discovering the essential identity of the human on the one hand, and of civilization on the other.

If our current stage of civilization is the inevitable outcome of humankind's previous discoveries and surpassing of his external world, then actual existence will only be realized through a living movement that rejects any ultimate purpose for existence. The presence of an object lies in its continuing evolution and constant change. Since the continuity of exploration has become an intrinsic characteristic of the conscious man, the contemporary artist has refrained from presenting the world as something stagnant and incapable of change. As such, its mystery has driven him to take interest in discovering the true essence of things, and he has placed himself in confrontation with the great challenges of the external world, demonstrating his capacity to transgress the limits of appearances that nature and social relations force upon him in the domain of experience.

If the primitive peoples endowed art with magic, and the Greeks ascribed to it the study of beauty, and the medieval ages expected art to reinforce the realm of faith, our civilization makes of it a human practice undertaken by one who lives in constant contact with the world, using it to present a human existence laid bare before the truth, and thus bringing about a different form of relationship between the contemporary human and the world.

Art is the practice of taking a position in relation to the world, a continual practice of transgressing and discovering human interiority from within change. It is a mental rejection of all that is wrong in the structure of society, and thus becomes a practice of constant creation, by which it offers to human existence its own independent world, composed of line, color, and mass. In this way, rejection and resistance—not in their absolute form—become two indispensable presences for the continuous practice of innovation.

The artist is a fighter who refuses to put his weapon down as he speaks in the name of the world, and in the name of the human. He lives in a state of constant sacrifice towards his world, expressing a burning desire to denounce the masks of falsehood, and so he always owns what he wishes to say. The unity of artistic production throughout history places the artist at the center of the world and at the focal point of the revolution. Change and transgression are two faces of a conscious challenge to all the regressive social and intellectual values that surround his world. A true artist is one who affirms his refusal to fall captive to a mummified body of worn-out social values. Instead, he must rise against the world so that he finds himself on the opposite side, from where he is able to judge it. At the center of the revolution, he rises above any ready-made givens, transforming himself into another [Mansur] al-Hallaj standing against injustice and intellectual servitude.¹ The artist is a critic and revolutionary, negating the world around him.

The presence of the revolution confronts him with the spirituality of

self-annihilation and sacrifice as he explodes the fallacies of the past and present, and seeks to restructure the world within a new artistic vision. The closure of the self, and the commodification of art, is the result of a superficial view of the world. The rejection thereof will not be realized except by continuous change so that man is rescued from the crushing effect to which his material and social relations subject him. As such the artist's task is to place these relations in human terms, so that they develop and grow with new discoveries and successive modulation; his task is to bring a lasting end to previous forms of thought and relation, so he may grow anew. For the new always has its own vision, and its own voice. Unity with the new will not be achieved except by engaging it in terms of that vision and voice.

An artist grounds his justifications for human existence in nature. Alongside the historical dimension of existence, he grants it a human one, such that, by the legitimacy of his existence, he acquires the possibility of creating history or inventing it once again. For when he brings his own unique world into existence, on a one-dimensional surface, he is presenting to the world a truth that appears at first not to exist. Through his creative capabilities he gives that truth a presence in the world of light so that it may help us uncover some of the hidden aspects of our lived experience—those that cannot otherwise be revealed in mental perceptions.

Artistic vision is only one of our modes of utilizing our internal and external world, but an artist draws on that vision in order to secure the foundation of that world, which he wishes to build anew. Thus, the work of art is a manifestation of the emergence of the artist's world into public existence. A good artist is one who realizes the greatness of uniting with others through his artistic production. For an artist who relates to art as production only, and who produces work as a commodity, cannot be a historical witness to the human capacity to create. He cannot become an authentic artist so long as he is a Trojan horse carrying inside him the body of a dead society.

The artist lives the unity of all periods of history, even while he lives in his time, and as a part of his own society. As much as he feels that he must change the past through contemporary vision, he also feels that the past orients the present, that between the past and the present there is unity and coexistence. For if artistic vision is presence realized in the painting, and this presence is a self that is anxious to search for a civilizational identity, then legend and historical sensibility are the means by which the artist will arrive at his new world. It is a return to the singular self, in which he may either live or die. For we die in the unity of our human and civilizational selves, and it is through the unity of that self that we begin the journey of change and creation. We find no artistic generation among the generations of our nation that lived its whole life demanding this, as we now do. No generation has been as immersed in the spirit of homeland and humanity, with such urgency, as ours is. We are continuously called to challenge and confront all the threats to the homeland. We live in the midst of a vortex of the military advances of a new Nazism. Our existence is always under threat. We work for the sake of focus and the call for an avant-garde art that integrates its humanist goals with a new artistic vision. And we shall continue to be a generation that brings its spirit to these challenges with urgency, making art not a means of seclusion in individual existence or immersion in one's private world, but rather a vision directed to the world by a tacit language articulated by the artist in his own way. This rejects any mechanical understanding of art and its role in society,

limiting the artist to what is readily available within the restrictions of existing relations. The processes of obliteration that social relations have enacted upon the artist, and which at times have made him a bearer of masks of falseness and subservience, and at other times a victim, cannot retain their legitimacy; nor can they prevent us from extending our perceptions beyond things.

Let us be the vanguard of the challenge. We want to be nothing but the artists who carry the spirit of homeland and humanity. Be with us so that we unite the new vision of the world. Grant it the aggressiveness and rebellion of youth, transforming academic halls into strongholds of change, so that we may have an independent painting of transgression—painting that shakes our depths, tears through falseness, opens the river of life in our society.

There shall be no presence of such painting, nor building of a new vision, except by a plunge, by a work of creation, by a civilizational, humanist, creative self—the repository of human creation.

Let us remember our art in the lands of Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Nile, and let us reject the world of rigidity and imitation. Let us construct a permanent and honest relationship with our generation.

We must tear apart heritage so that we re-create it.

We must challenge it in order to surpass it.

We must recognize it, within the confines of its museum existence, and recognize the aggressiveness and fierceness of the encounter. Let us unite in our souls a desire to surpass. We will not be ripped from our roots, but rather extend them deep into the land—a depth of reach, of honesty, filled with vivid life. So long as we hold a free stance towards it, heritage is not dictatorial art that drags us in and locks us inside itself. It is that malleable dough worked by the hands of the creating artist. We will not traverse our heritage with fear of slavery; rather, we shall place it on our foreheads so that we may wade through the world, speaking in the new language of life, using its symbols, its new human. We carry the spirit of incursion, a spirit of rebellion that tears all ossified things apart, so that we may return from our journey bearing a new vision.

We are the generation that demands change, transgression, and innovation. We reject the embalmed past.

We reject the artist of divisions and boundaries. We advance. We fall. But we will not retreat. We present to the world our new vision:

- Modern art is the language of contemporary society. The artist is the human being in this society who is capable of transgressing the boundaries of the contemporary self, adhering to a purity that is free of all the prejudices of modern civilization, in an effort to affirm the innovative existence of this national community through art. Those who reject this language are the living dead.
- Freedom of expression is the freedom of the revolutionary against everything that turns thinking into a muddy quagmire. It is freedom of vision, of rebellion against all of society's false constructions.
- Art is every new innovation. It is incompatible with stagnation; is continuous creation. As such it is not merely a mirror of the artist's lived reality, but also the spirit of the future.

- Good art criticism is that which delivers the artistic endeavor to the public and strengthens the features of the actual art movement, moving away from a spirit of appeasement and adulation. Between criticism and art there is a process of correlation and complementarity. As such, criticism's failure to keep pace with developments is a severe blow to the evaluation of the plastic arts movement and its growth.
- The past is not a dead object that we study; rather, it is a stance that goes beyond time to produce comprehensive human evidence of both plastic and psychological aspects together. Thus, the significance of the past is seen and renewed in light of the present. To consider the past as a fixed vision is but a ruse aimed at freezing contemporary experience in molds that history has already worn out. As such, the whole of national and human heritage becomes our tributary throughout our journey of change and innovation.
- The issue of the relationship with the public is a social one. Our artistic production is what interacts with the public, not us. As such, it is the street—and not the museum galleries—that is the true site of adhesion.
- We reject social relationships that lead to deceitful masquerades, and we reject things that are given to us as charity. We justify our existence through our journey of change.
- We laud the generation of pioneers for their historic role in our artistic renaissance, and we reject academic guardianship and instructional thinking.
- We defy the world. And we reject the military and intellectual defeat of our nation. We glorify the popular war of liberation in the chests of the martyrs, the glory of our nation.
- Revolution is the transgression of negative values and the crystallization of the spirit of the future. As such, it is the maker of the new human—the liberated human who surpasses his own existence on the path to realizing his individual human essence. Art is the bright face of that human, for revolution and art are two inseparable features of humanity's development.
- The practice of art is contingent upon man's practice of his human essence, and the best thing the revolution can do for the human artist is to provide him with the means to implement this essence, rejecting a lagging existence and dead relationships. For the revolution that transgresses and makes the revolutionary paradigm is also an astounding future-oriented art, through which the new vision is realized.

Note

1. Eds.: Mansur al-Hallaj was a poet and Sufi mystic who was executed for heresy in Baghdad in 922 CE on the basis of his declaration of his oneness with God: "I am the Truth."

—Ḍiyā' al-ʿAzzāwī, Ismāʿīl Fattāḥ, Šālīḥ al-Jumayʿī, Muḥammad Muhr al-Dīn, Rāfiʿ al-Nāširi, Ḥāshim Samarjī, *Naḥwa al-Ruʾyā al-Jadīda* (October 1969); repr. in Šākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, *al-Bayānāt al-Fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-Iʿlām, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqāfa al-ʿĀmma, 1973), 31–35. Translated from Arabic by the editors of the present volume.

You, the Arab Artist Who Rejects the West, What Is Your East?: Interview with Adel Saghir, Stélio Scamanga, and Mounir Najm

(1969)

Samir Sayegh

I am fully aware that accessing an artistic truth, touching it like a stone, is impossible. And I know that reaching an artist's truth is even more difficult than reaching this artistic truth. But I am convinced that silence is not the only way to enter the realm of art.

The logical, analytical, mental perspective through which we view life's concerns does not work for art, because art's existence constitutes the antithesis of that perspective. The mind explains, interprets, analyzes, places the world within frames, laws, and spheres. And logic finds causes and effects, arranges every action in clearly drawn lines. But art is above and beyond, a thing we do not know; it is always new. It is your foil, and does not submit to your control, does not allow you to become the master and it the slave. It is not the thing whose motion you can halt, imprisoning it inside a concept or theory. Art is not merely one of mankind's works, nor one of the gifts bestowed upon his psyche or upon the world; rather, it is a presence equal to the human presence itself, which separates itself from the human, claims its independence, and has its own particular movement and continuity.

Thus it would be incorrect to enter into a new art through the door of the past, or to view new art with the same eyes with which we viewed past art. For we cannot use the language that we have learned from art history to converse with new art. This art has its own unique language and voice, and to speak with it one must address it directly, and understand it through its own language and voice. [. . .]

Samir Sayegh: *Which school of artistic thought links the three of you? Do you have a single artistic perspective?*

Adel Saghir: What unites the three of us is that we work on a single problem, and set off from a single point of departure. This problem is the mastery of an expressive language that has its own particular nature, sprouting from roots planted in this land.

Stélio Scamanga: I was not seeking, as I progressed on the path of art, any specific form to lead me to a school or method that would embody my concerns. I was on this path in search of myself, and to speak with it. And suddenly, I met Adel Saghir and Mounir Najm. The moment we met, a feeling welled up in me, but not from the mind. It was a visceral feeling. After that the path became clearer, and I understood that we, in our artistic concerns, were searching for springs—our springs. For roots—our roots.

The feeling is an Eastern one, leaping from and plunging back into the arms of the East. And the problem that we three raise, the basic point of departure, is the separation and distinction between East and West.

Previously, the problem was raised in the avoidance of artistic influence from the West, but because we are in fact influenced by Western art, we have fallen into a contradiction. This contradiction comes from the fundamental antagonism between intellect and feeling, between Westerners and Easterners.

Western art has been, since the age of cave painting in France, and on through the Middle Ages, to the Renaissance and the modern era, the hostage of the external world—fascinated by it, surrendering to it, never escaping from it.

The Easterner goes beyond the surface, leaves the external world, leaves matter, and enters into the soul. This is us, and this is our truth. And this is what distinguishes us from the West. This is our perspective, which we express through the medium of art. [...]

Saghir: We are not trying to compare Western art and Eastern art and determine which is truer. That is not our intention. Likewise, we do not deny the West its own spirituality. Rather we differ in terms of our perspective.

The West, through its research and study of art, has finally arrived at the Eastern perspective, and is now working within that concept.

Scamanga: But the West still focuses on reason, so there is abstraction—abstraction of matter and not of spirit, as Mounir noted. And whoever abstracts objects must abstract their depths first, or they will end up in a meaningless void.

Sayegh: *How do these ideas take their place in painting? How would you see your own painting as a critic, not as an artist?*

Saghir: Three worlds intermingle in my painting: the world of color, the world of expression, and the world of composition. Shape and line live in the world of color, and are subject to the laws of matter. The spirit, which moves in an atmosphere of freedom, lives in the world of expression. Reason and philosophy, which are subject to time and the motion of man on the surface of time, live in the world of composition.

I have inhabited these three worlds throughout my voyage in the world of art, and simultaneously they inhabit me. Sometimes movement advances more in one of these three worlds, and light illuminates it, making it seem clearer than the others. But the three worlds are actually one, because the presence of every world is the result of the other worlds' presence. Color is the language of the spirit, and reason is the mouth by which speech is enunciated.

Mounir Najm: I dedicate my paintings to the river of movement. My painting is this river that constantly renews itself. For me, the painting is not the prisoner of a delimited frame, but a free space.

This space is color (not any particular color). I try to invoke through the movement of the painting a life that is hidden inside me, I try to send it forth from inside myself by granting it the wings of color, and color here externalizes the image of this life: its violence, its mercilessness, its tenderness, and its silence.

When color stands in the sky of the painting, light comes. Color and light wrestle, and color becomes the light's hostage sometimes, and its captor at other times. And in this struggle between light and color, line and shape appear, and surrender to the movement of the painting. They turn, separate, merge, and die. In them we hear voices coming from the depths of the painting, voices that enter into dialogue in the

space between them, a space that contracts and expands, and that moves in all directions. Those voices are the space of that vortex within me.

Color constitutes the two arms that embrace the poetic word, music, and movement with great force until you can no longer distinguish between them. In this case, color becomes a word that comprises all words, a word that swims in endless dimensions.

Within me, life transforms into colors that are voices, which fade at times and rejoice at others. They lament. They are the movement of that inner angst, the movement of the search for truth.

Scamanga: I speak about painting, about my paintings, after they become independent of me and acquire their own existence. Before the painting gains its independence, I don't know anything about it. And I will speak of a painting only after studying it as a critic, not as its creator.

The painting comes alive for me in space, a space that is anchored on the surfaces of different colors, which have different color values. I give this space a name: a space of borders—but not the frame in which the West imprisons the painting. These colors take up a position in the center of the painting, and revolve in that center in a continual motion with no known beginning or end. This center is a mystery. The colors revolve around this secret, approach it, touch it, but suddenly, in a quick motion, spin away from it.

The center of the painting is the truth I seek. But when I think I have drawn close, I feel like I have lost the ability to penetrate it, and have somehow slipped far away. Yet I stay, trying to access it.

I concur with Adel Saghir and Mounir Najm in the belief that color is poetic, and that there is no specific color, but we differ in our method of mixing colors: how to combine green and red? How to achieve a personal language through it? Here each of us is distinct from the other, each with a particular voice.

In terms of color and space, I use two dimensions in my paintings. I avoid the third dimension, which the West calls *depth*. But this does not mean the painting remains flat. Perhaps it gives that impression at first glance, but if you contemplate the painting, you will find that there *is* a third dimension—not physical depth, but rather metaphysical depth. It is present in the symbol of the painting, and is simultaneously the mystery of the entire painting.

What I try to create in this painting is a world that includes all the spiritual capacities of man. It is a world built on dreams, not on matter. It is a world springing from a capacity to abstract, surpassing the ability to play with matter and going beyond it. [...]

Sayegh: *How does your art touch upon the revolution? Is art revolutionary work? How are you, as artists, agents of revolution?*

Saghir: We were the first revolutionaries. We preceded the revolutions that are spoken about today. Because revolution comes first from an intellectual position, and is then embodied in action. . . . So the revolution that happened between us and our painting came before the people experienced a revolution between themselves and life.

Our revolution was against the teachings of the past. It was against heritage itself. It was against tradition. We made a revolution, it began as a revolution, and I think it will end with a fiercer and more vital revolution.

Najm: Revolution is not only armed struggle, or political or ideological upheaval. It is also artistic struggle. It is man rising up and striving to shake off the weight bearing down on his shoulders, paralyzing his movements.

Revolution for the artist is his insight, because he is an honest and authentic person.

Scamanga: I would add, to what Adel Saghier mentioned, our revolution against Western influence, and against complete submission to the old. I take the revolutionary position because I am trying to understand myself first, and second because I strive to be truthful, just, and frank in every work I undertake. My revolution can be effective in this life when it sets out from this sacrifice and this intention. [...]

Sayegh: *How do you view June 5, 1967, artistically? How do you evaluate the art that was exhibited after it?*

Najm: After June 5, that art was superficial and folkloric. It therefore did not go beyond the surface, and was not on the level of the event itself. I think that June 5 was a deep experience for the artist, but not a dividing line as far as art was concerned. Perhaps it increased the artist's scope of pain and tragedy. This, at least, is what we were looking for after June 5 in the exhibitions that went up; but we did not find it.

Painting a rifle or a chest bleeding red paint does not enhance or add anything. Any other color can pierce your depths like a scream or a spear, increasing your pain and your hope, provided it comes from an authentic artist.

Scamanga: June 5 might be an important event and a dividing line for those who were asleep, whom sleep had robbed of the benefit of sight—but not for the authentic artist, who had sensed June 5 ever since '48 or '56.¹

I cannot, for my part, place June 5 in a narrow frame, for to this day I feel this pressure, this pain, this suffering, I am still gazing at this person.

Najm: I was aware of June 5 before it happened, I sensed that it was coming, but I could not tolerate it when it came, despite my intuition. Because the defeat was terrible, it was gratuitous, yet at the same time I felt that another line emerged next to the line of June 5. It was a line running counter to it. It was an ascending line. Perhaps it is the coming generations. Perhaps it is our revolution. Perhaps it is our refusal to surrender. I don't know where it leads, but I see it nonetheless.

My sole concern as an artist is the truth. And the greatest truth in this century is Palestine. Any art, thought, or philosophy that ignores this truth is not art, thought, or philosophy. We are not outside politics, because we are not outside the concerns of mankind.

Saghir: Personally, I exhibited a painting called *Redemption*. It did not depart from my trajectory and path in painting. I feel that I was honest in it, and that it answers this question.

Najm: June 5 increased my faith in what I was searching for, and spurred me toward it more than before. It was proof to me that the progress man has achieved in the field of science and inventions will turn against him if it does not open up new horizons for the spirit.

Sayegh: *How does the future of art appear to you in terms of what you have started? How do you see your art in particular?*

Saghir: We first met a long time ago. We did not plan that meeting, and we did not plan to create a school from it. We shared a spiritual affinity and an awareness of a single problem. Of course, there are others who agree with us much of the time. I personally hope that we will stand together with other artists. But at the same time I cannot judge the future.

Najm: The work defines itself by its accumulation. What we are doing right now will remain conversation and thinking about art, and could increase the artist's depth and capacity to work. But the most important thing is the work in and of itself.

Saghir: Each of us has many aspirations. I wonder, can they be achieved?

Najm: I want my art to take on the nature of life, that is, to reinvigorate itself constantly and have the power to change and renew. But I do not interpret that renewal, nor do I lay down any plans for it. Rather, this desire for renewal issues from a faith that is greater than that, from love, and thus I give my future over to that faith and surrender to the laws of life.

Scamanga: I cannot see what my art will look like in the future; I simply believe that I will continue investigating and searching endlessly.

Saghir: This question forces me to stand face-to-face with death. Death is what compels me to work. I feel that the distance between birth and death is insufficient. But perhaps, through art, I can lengthen that distance.

Note

1. Eds.: The dates here refer to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, fought between the State of Israel and a military coalition of Arab states (forces mainly from Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq with contingents from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and elsewhere); and the "Tripartite Aggression" of 1956, when a coalition of Great Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt to claim control of the Suez Canal.

—Samir al-Ṣāyigh, "Ṣīliyyū Skāmankā, 'Ādil al-Ṣaghīr, Munir Najm: Ayyuhā al-Fannān al-ʿArabī alladhi Yarfud al-Gharb, Mā Huwa Sharquka?" (excerpt), *Mawāqif* 1, no. 4 (June 1969): 122–40. Translated from Arabic by Anna Swank.

***Al-Tali'a* Symposium Roundtable (1969)**

To mark the opening of the 11th Autumn Exhibition, *al-Tali'a* invited several artists and critics to take part in a roundtable on the art movement in the Syrian Arab region. *Al-Tali'a's* invitation was answered by Na'im Isma'il, Ghayas Akhras, Rida Hus-Hus, Elias Zayyat, Ahmad Darak al-Siba'i, Ghassan Siba'i, Tarek al-Sharif, Asaad Arabi, Fateh al-Moudarres, and Nazir Nabaa, all of whom took part in the discussion moderated by *al-Tali'a's* art editor. We invite all readers who have seen the Autumn Exhibition to discuss the opinions found in this roundtable. [. . .]

Akhras: There's no doubt that the current Autumn Exhibition represents a step forward in artistic terms. There is another important point for me, which is that local events since June 5, 1967, with all its blood and gunpowder, have been transformed via the works of artists: from merely direct and superficial reactions into profound emotional and aesthetic sensibilities. The paintings directly influenced by these events typically depict a person screaming. This actually disfigures the subject and distorts it. But this Autumn Exhibition is free of such paintings. At the same time, artists have begun to engage with the events in a more profound, spiritual way, producing tremendous works free of immediate reaction. This makes the current Autumn Exhibition different from previous ones.

Al-Sharif: What Ghayas [Akhras] says is correct, but there is an important point here, which is that the Autumn Exhibition contains vanguard elements exemplifying the movement of which Ghayas speaks, but there are also elements that lag behind these vanguard elements. In fact, there are paintings that indicate that their creators do not know how to paint at all.

G. Siba'i: But this is natural. It could happen in any advanced country.

Art editor: Since we're still at the beginning, I'd like to talk about the extent of artistic development achieved by this exhibition in relation to previous exhibitions in terms of form and in terms of content. Were there previous Autumn Exhibitions that raised particular issues that differed from those raised in the current one? I'd like to go from here.

Al-Moudarres: This is the starting point.

Arabi: The Autumn Exhibition is a snapshot of the art movement in the country. As such, we see the production of artists every year. The Autumn Exhibition reflects their personal experiences, which are evolving. If we say that the exhibition is evolving, it is evolving only on the shoulders of artists, but it has not evolved in its functional and administrative framework.

Art editor: At its core, the Autumn Exhibition is about the artists and their paintings, and there's no need now to talk about administrative aspects.

Arabi: Fine. If we look at the movement of art through the exhibition, we observe a process of maturation on the part of some names and the disappearance of others. Leaving aside some artists who choose not to participate in the exhibitions, there are others who have ceased to be artists!

Akhras: I'd like to add something. It has become clear that a sense of both artistic and topical responsibility has begun to crystallize. There was some disregard of art, from an aesthetic perspective, and an emphasis exclusively on the side of content after the June defeat. This year, however, the artists are showing interest in the aesthetic angle as a means of proposing solutions to the problem of content. This is entirely clear in this year's exhibition.

Arabi: I have an observation. If we track the movement as a whole, we notice that some names are converging upon a shared concept, although they differ in technique—there is a common thread in terms of the subject that motivates them to work, although not in the framework in which they work. We find that there is a beginning of something called art. This will, in the future, foster the rise of local features in our country.

Art editor: Do you mean that a shared conceptual direction is sowing the seeds of local artistic features?

Arabi: I mean that the interaction of artists' experiments makes local artistic features possible, but the forms need not come only from the local environment.

Akhras: There is a connection to the land that is more spiritual than formal.

Art editor: But what is it that connects the artist in the first place?

Akhras: The land, surely the land. There is a long, fine thread that links artists to one another and to their land. There is also the spirit of this country, the spirit of the land, the smell of the earth, its fragrance.

Art editor: In this sense, does the current exhibition differ from past exhibitions?

Akhras: This in particular is what distinguishes this exhibition from others. It is becoming much clearer here.

Al-Moudarres: The current exhibition has a character of greater strength, greater technique. The works of Ghassan Siba'i, for example, are some of the good works in the exhibition: they have a technique, and they have a clear and pristine vision. There is a painting by Na'im Isma'il—*Ravens in the Mosque*—that has an overall clarity. There is a painting by Mr. Nabaa that is very sophisticated. And there is a young man who recently arrived from France—Fu'ad Abu Kalam. In his painting you can tell that he's removed from the land, from the essence of the land. You also notice that he's bearing a European melancholy in his heart, and not an Eastern melancholy. That is utterly clear from his painting.

Nabaa: Na'im [Isma'il], I'd like to ask you, what do you see as the prominent tendencies in the Autumn Exhibition that reflect what you're saying?

Isma'il: The current Autumn Exhibition, I believe, gives expression to a problem we are currently facing, and has therefore taken on a certain character that we may not see in coming years. For example, you have a tendency to incorporate volume in the frame. Brother Nazir [Nabaa] has always had ground and form in his paintings, but now the form in his paintings is commingling with the walls and the frame, so that form is strong and mass is more substantial. The form now challenges the frame and tries to get outside it. Many of the artists are experiencing an eruption, and this is reflected in their works. Their shapes used to be small and modest, and located in the middle of the painting, but now they reach the four edges of the painting. For Elias Zayyat, for example, form or mass moves outward toward all the painting's edges. I feel this kind of eruption in the current Autumn Exhibition. There is a strong use of black and white, and an outward movement toward all the edges, in a forceful, conspicuous way.

Al-Moudarres: That's a really good observation.

Isma'il: In previous exhibitions, we noticed a romantic attachment to heritage. This is over now. There are forceful, immediate events that are stronger and more capable of imposing themselves on the artists' work. Their works encompass the problems we experience today. The artist no longer wants to pore through the archives or search for the golden age. There is something specific he seeks to express this very day. If he delays, it might be too late.

Al-Moudarres: The decline of Romanticism.

Isma'il: The decline of Romanticism, and the emergence of the new reality in all its momentousness, and the forceful expression of that new reality.

Al-Moudarres: I'd like to add here that I accompanied the French ambassador during his tour of the Autumn Exhibition. He expressed his astonishment and admiration for the productions of Syrian artists compared to the works he knew by artists in other Arab countries. He spoke of the difference between our artists and their peers, and of how much more rapidly our artists have evolved. [...]

Let's now return to the original topic. In contrast to our progress and potential, the art movement in Europe suffers from the problems of silence and confusion. They realized the error of erecting walls between artistic schools, especially between abstraction and objectivism, and these walls are now crumbling. The European now rejects borders between form and content. In the East, there is more youth, there are flowers and colors and heat, and there is something more important: a reservoir. That's the right word. Eastern art draws on a reservoir. The Eastern artist feels that he has a reservoir, an abundant artistic life, at his disposal.

Nabaa: Going back to the Autumn Exhibition—Tarek [al-Sharif], do you have a comment on what has been said about it?

Al-Sharif: The main thing you notice is that there were artists in the previous exhibitions who were striving to reach distant horizons. Even if what they reached was weak in one exhibition and strong in another, sound thought and a clear vision could certainly be observed. There was a clear direction. It is those artists who most fully represent the art movement. They are the ones who make up the current exhibition, in fact. The main thing I would add to the comments of my brothers is that, while it's true that these artists are connected to the land and its heritage, what is noticeable is that there are two types of vision in their works. There are those whose vision moves toward a poetic horizon, and those who present their vision in an analytical, rational way—there are people who borrow from their land, and others who make use of the technique and heritage of the West.

Hus-Hus: Do you mean those same vanguard artists?

Al-Sharif: With Nashat Al Zuaby, for example, you feel that his paintings convey things that belong to this country, to this land. Everything that he puts in details reflects a richness of color. This goes back to his instinctual nature. But in Asaad [Arabi]'s paintings, you feel the presence of rationality to a certain degree. That is, both artists have a vision, but the expression of the vision takes two paths. This is clear.

Zayyat: Don't you think the cause of this is our inability to disengage from the scientific civilization that dominates in our age?

Al-Sharif: That is how I would respond to Fateh [al-Moudarres]. We have our heritage, but the West has its heritage *and* our heritage, so it is richer than we are. [Pablo] Picasso, for example, takes his materials from all over the world. As for us, we take only from the West to develop ourselves.

Arabi: I'd like to go back to the original point. In truth, one can link art and its evolution with material affluence at a certain stage in any society. Because of prosperity, numerous art movements are generated in society. Then the next generation comes along and may not enjoy the same favorable conditions, which leads it to rely on the conditions of the generation before it. This is what Fateh [al-Moudarres] called a *reservoir*. We can look at some real-life examples. The person in a materially affluent environment can use the piano, but the person in a poor environment can use only his voice. As a result, the latter possesses the potential for expression, but with weaker means.

Art editor: Are the means everything in artistic production?

Arabi: No, we're talking about art as art.

Isma'il: The caveman is still, to this day, the greatest example of an artist, despite the primitiveness of his means!

Al-Moudarres: The caveman was not valued until after the appearance of the major painters. Otherwise he would have remained just a caveman whose drawings

expressed pagan spells. Those drawings were valued in light of great art.

Art editor: The question, then, is did the caveman become an artist after he was valued, or was he originally an artist? What I'm asking is: Did his current valuation create his artistic value or merely reveal it?

Isma'il: No doubt his valuation revealed his artistic genius. He was valued because he was an artist.

Al-Moudarres: To create without knowing what you're doing is art, but to create and know what you're doing, that is art and also human.

Art editor: To create without knowing what you're doing is art without a message, a kind of game, as [Immanuel] Kant says. But when you know what you're doing when you create, then you're creating for a purpose, you're aiming for a message. Creativity stops being a game here, and acquires a new legitimacy.

Nabaa: But the human being cannot work without a purpose to his work.

Art editor: That's exactly what I want to stress. The caveman's drawings were religious spells that helped him with the metaphysical aspects of his daily life. His drawings were necessary, and they were art. [...]

Akhras: I'd like to comment on the issue of science and art again. We have our reservoir and our heritage, but the arts in our age come together and interact with one another. The important thing is for the painter in our country to live his age and speak the language of his age. When he goes back to examine certain formal and aesthetic issues, that doesn't mean taking some benefaction from the West. Rather, it means he is trying to develop and nourish the means to produce a clearer and stronger expression. When the painter is outside his age—that is, far removed from artistic discoveries—and raises a human topic, the topic remains crude, in my opinion, because it does not take on the dimensions of our age. It's a human topic raised by trivial means. There is, then, a type of meeting between science and art in our age that cannot be denied.

Nabaa: I think the issue is that the new human, the contemporary human, cannot speak in the old vernacular. One can no longer speak in Shakespeare's language, for example. For this reason, the contemporary human is in need of new resources.

Isma'il: When you say that we're connected to contemporary civilization, we must bear in mind the following question: To what degree can we keep pace with an advanced state, artistically speaking? We are a backward people. This is a fact. We can't talk with the car, the plane, and missiles because we only see them on television. We can't put ourselves on the same level of industrial advancement as the Western world. We're aspiring toward progress, that's true, but we're living in conditions of civilizational backwardness.

Nabaa: I would ask the following: Can I use the same means of expression that the ancient artist used? The Persian artist, for example?

Isma'il: Of course not, it's inconceivable.

Zayyat: It's true we don't enjoy all the advantages of Western civilization, but that civilization isn't alien to us.

Isma'il: This is reflected in our art.

Nabaa: A comment on what Elias [Zayyat] said. While it's true that the conflict in Vietnam is far away, I'm still happy when [the Vietnamese] are victorious, just as I'm happy when the Arab *fedayeen* are victorious, for example. But I feel it, too. Barriers no longer exist in our contemporary world.

Al-Sharif: When we talk about contemporary art, we need to specify where contemporary art is, what it is, what we mean by it. If we wish to approach contemporary art, we must be willing to be within contemporary art. We're here. If an artist wants to enter contemporary art with all its new artistic techniques connected to technique and colors and even the electronic mind, he must lose himself.

G. Siba'i: Lose himself?!

Al-Moudarres: The state has a duty here to renew contemporary forms in our country via artists. This isn't happening at all, even though the artist here is willing to participate in renewing existing forms.

G. Siba'i: In terms of proximity or distance to contemporary art, in my opinion this is compulsory, something that must happen. Because when there was an Egyptian or Assyrian art, civilizations were isolated. In turn, there was an artistic character that was isolated and independent. But now there's no longer any isolation, even if we wanted it. That's one thing. At the same time, the contemporary artist and the ancient artist have a single purpose. The human being uses art as a means of challenging fear and death. Religion and magic have waned, and nothing remains now but science and art. Good art in this sense is progressive, even in ancient Egypt.

Al-Sharif: The crux of the problem as I see it is that all art, in any age, is bound to the events experienced by the country. Art is an expression of those events in a way that satisfies the artist himself. For example, prior to the June 1967 War, 50 percent of the paintings in the 1966 Autumn Exhibition were abstract. But in this year's Autumn Exhibition, there are no abstract paintings, nor were there any in last year's. Why is this?

Al-Moudarres: Ease!

Al-Sharif: The reason is that we have events here that prevent us from meandering and getting lost in the tumult of forms.

Nabaa: My opinion is that when new styles of modern expression appeared, artists took them up and tried to experiment to enrich themselves and their artistic mediums. After the events that shook them up, they could no longer continue to enjoy the sweetness and pleasure of the craft. All artists usually love their work, and sometimes they become so absorbed in it that they work for the sake of work. This is what's called *artistic play*, or *work as play*. But the events of history imposed themselves on those artists, and it's no longer possible for them to go back to play and pleasure. The artist cannot play right now.

Art editor: So you agree with Tarek [al-Sharif].

Nabaa: But that's not the only reason. I think that even if the *Naksa* hadn't happened, the artist would still have had to return to a connection with the events of history, whatever they were.

Art editor: A question: If the June setback had not occurred, would we have seen nonabstract paintings in the Autumn Exhibition?

Nabaa: Yes, although perhaps not in this exhibition, but rather in coming ones.

Akhras: Under normal conditions, the artist, even the committed artist, feels the need to turn inward: to experiment, to scribble, to discover techniques and materials that he later bends to a particular subject. Every artist in the world feels that he has such a need. Major historical events certainly attract the feelings and sentiments of the artist. That's obvious. If we find that the entire Autumn Exhibition is objective and topical, that's because of the gravity of such events. So the artist who used to feel a need to play with forms had to move beyond that stage and master a style that's better suited to approach the human being, to speak to him directly.

Al-Sharif: True, the 1967 defeat hastened the artist's return to addressing the human being. The artist would have reached that stage anyway, but it would have taken him longer. [...]

— "Nadwat al-Ṭalī'a: Ma'raḍ al-Kharīf al-Ḥadī 'Ashar" (excerpt), *al-Ṭalī'a*, no. 180 (November 22, 1969): 36–43. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

From Dreams to Achievements: A Jordanian Artist in the Era of 1968

Mona Saudi

Going to Paris to become an artist had been my dream ever since I was a child growing up in Jordan. But I knew that my conservative traditional family would never give me permission, so I broke the rules and ran away at the age of seventeen. I spent a year in Beirut, which was important in that it gave me the opportunity to meet poets and artists such as Paul Guiragossian, Adonis, and Michel Basbous. I felt that I belonged to a society of creative people who encouraged me to follow my passion.

With my first exhibition in Beirut, in 1963, I made enough money to travel to Paris. I still remember the seagulls that followed my ship: signs of the freedom of my new creative life. When I arrived, I enrolled at the School of Fine Arts. My choice from the beginning was to study sculpture. In 1965, I realized my first sculpture in direct carving in limestone, and titled it *Mother/Earth*.

In Paris I started to spend time with leftist groups who defended the Palestinian revolution and other international liberation movements. I lived in a small room in St. Germain des Prés, and studied sculpture in a direct carving class with René Collamarini.

I was supposed to graduate and receive my diploma from the School of Fine Arts in the summer of 1968. But May '68 was a turning point in my life. I took part in the student uprisings, demonstrating in the Latin Quarter, and working at night in the school's studios, making posters to be distributed throughout Paris. It was a remarkable experience that raised my cultural and political awareness. Our slogans were calls for freedom of expression and the defense of human rights. I came to see that the West is not superior to the East and the so-called Third World, neither in its human values nor in its creative ones.

In a few weeks, our uprisings were suppressed; the universities were closed down. I felt a profound desire to return to my country, to live and participate in the forces of change where I belonged. My idea was to work with Palestinian refugee children in Jordan. My friend Roberto Matta, the Chilean avant-garde artist, encouraged me; he told me that he felt that in Paris he had become a slave to the art galleries.

In the autumn of 1968, I returned to Jordan and began my work with children at the Beqaa refugee camp, where thousands of Palestinians had fled after the 1967 war. I was fascinated by their drawings and stories, as I helped the children to express themselves freely using just paper and wax crayons. That experience inspired me to publish *In Time of War: Children Testify* (1970), a collection of children's drawings and words that depicted bombs and warplanes, but also the flowers and doves of their hopes and dreams.

My next plan was to start a collective art movement to create art in public spaces throughout Jordan, so that art would be available for everyone. However, September of 1970 was marked by battles between the Jordanian Army and Palestinian fighters in Jordan. I left the country and moved to Beirut.

The early 1970s brought the rise of modern Arab art, from Iraq to Morocco, and at the time Beirut was the center of it all. Even if Arab political regimes were not unified, the *cultural* unity of the Arab world was a vivid, continuous reality.

But in April 1975 civil war broke out in Lebanon, and Beirut was transformed into a battlefield. I realized then that war is an epidemic, and civil wars are the worst. Despite the turmoil, I went on with my work in sculpture. The act of creating was my response to the destruction and violence around me—fulfilling a vital need to create light in the midst of darkness.

Born in Amman, **Mona Saudi** is a sculptor who studied in Paris and has been living in Beirut since 1970.

See Plate 39 for Mona Saudi's 1965 sculpture *Mother/Earth*.

EXHIBITION AT DJEMA AL FNA / Marrakesh

In Marrakesh on May 9, 1969, a group of artists, many of whom taught at the Casablanca School of Fine Arts, opened an exhibition of their works in the central market square, Djema al Fna. This form of direct public engagement with audiences marked a turning point for their collective practice. The group issued this statement about the event in the journal *Souffles*, where it was published in both French and Arabic.

Statement (1969)

Mohammed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chebaa, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Hamidi, Mohammed Melehi

Throughout the day in the Djema al Fna square in Marrakesh, various popular performances take place. In this collective atmosphere, people (from the city, from rural areas, from all social classes) walk around in a particular state of mind. We hung up our works in this square for ten days. We wanted to engage the people where they are, when they are receptive and relaxed, and so we presented this living exhibition: paintings displayed in the open air, in a public square. Works outside the closed circuit of the galleries, of the salons—places this audience has never entered,



From left: Mohammed Ataallah, Farid Belkahia, Mustapha Hafid, Mohammed Hamidi, Mohammed Chebaa, and Mohammed Melehi in Djema al Fna, Marrakesh. 1969

for these people have never cared about the type of show that exists in a vacuum. We presented works that were subjected to the same atmospheric variations as the people, the walls, the entire square.

We alone were responsible for bringing about this idea, and no one served as the intermediary between us and the people, who came by the hundreds to see our works up close, or who looked at them from afar, from buses, from stores, going to or coming from work.

With this encounter, we wanted not only to present ourselves directly and without formalities to a diverse audience, but also to call into question the academic prejudices that, in one way or another, have managed to influence the way the average person has come to look at things. We also wanted to arouse interest in this person, to awaken his curiosity, his critical spirit, to stimulate him so that he integrates new plastic expressions into the rhythm of his life, into his daily space. The long discussions born of this sincere and direct approach encourage us to think that these goals can be achieved because, from the start, we were met with a great receptiveness, despite the prejudices formed against this audience. And we can say, without a doubt, that these discussions and the experiment as a whole were very important for us: we were able, in a concrete way, to experiment with art integrated into the urban framework, in the street, seen from a distance, in the natural light, etc. And a crucial point: we realized the problems inherent within artistic communication and the barriers that must still be broken down—within ourselves, among ourselves, and in relation to this audience.

—“Action Plastique: Exposition Jamaa Ilna, Marrakech,” *Souffles*, nos. 13/14 (1969): 45–46. Translated from French by Emma Ramadan.

TRANSFORMING THE ARTS OF THE REVOLUTION

In the early 1970s, a number of left-aligned artists issued statements linking artistic work to themes of armed struggle—a move they often framed within a project of Third World solidarity. The Moroccan journal *Souffles* took a turn toward committedly revolutionary content, and in 1970 published the manifesto text “On Art and Combat” by Tahar Ben Jelloun—a declaration of transformed artistic purpose. In Beirut, *Mawaqif* published Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata’s “Art in the Time of the Palestinian Revolution”—an equally direct assessment of pressing challenges—in January 1971. A second text in *Mawaqif*, published in July of that year, engaged the Palestinian liberation struggle through strategies of imagination and invention: Vladimir Tamari’s “Drawing in Three Dimensions,” which the Palestinian artist submitted from Japan not long after moving there from Lebanon.

On Art and Combat (1970)

Tahar Ben Jelloun

In this section [of the journal *Souffles*], the reader will find written studies, analyses, testimonies, and accounts focusing on art in its many plastic and visual forms.

But what kind of art?

Let's get right to it: the art of combat.

Obviously, another form of art (which perhaps is not art) is excluded here: the art of the salon and of mystification: alienating art.

For us, the art of combat is becoming an urgent necessity. In certain countries that are fighting for their liberation, guerilla art (guerilla film, guerilla theater) has jettisoned many class prejudices that once governed artistic communication.

Finished: the myth of the artist, a misunderstood, exiled, isolated man and bearer of truths.

Finished: the myth of the hero-artist who doesn't know where to demonstrate his prowess because he's a stranger to the masses' aspirations.

Finished: the myth of art meant only for initiated intellectuals.

Finished: the contempt for popular culture and the uproar over folklore produced and consumed as merchandise.

Enough. The people don't need the artist. It's the artist who needs the people: he needs to learn the language of the masses.

May the painters leave the salons and the museums. (If people don't go see them in the halls of the great hotels, it's because they know that those paintings do not concern them.)

May the theater serve all, by arming itself with a true ideology of combat; and may the filmmakers shatter the capitalist structures of production and distribution.

Only an art of combat can put an end to the enterprise of de-culturation, intoxication, and alienation.

—Tahar Ben Jelloun, "Souffles: Arts," *Souffles*, nos. 16/17 (1969/70): 46. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

Art in the Time of the Palestinian Revolution (1971)

Kamal Boullata

I

There are two figures in society whose words are less important than their deeds: the politician and the artist. An Arab painter who sits holding forth about art instead of actually painting is much like the Arab politician who stands at a podium lecturing us about our future history as we lie in our beds. Both cases are equally concerning.

One of the factors that has held back the energies of the Arab avant-garde is the chasm between the words and the deeds of Arab politicians. As a painter, I see my duty as being to paint rather than to talk about art, thereby avoiding the mistakes of Arab politicians; but the nature of this period of struggle requires today's painter to be a critic, an artist, a politician, a human, a lover, and a warrior all at once. The artist's first calling has always been a single occupation: not painting, composition, or

creation, but always sincerity, absolute sincerity. His raw material? Life. Here, then, I will permit myself to speak of art in our times in accordance with my responsibility as an artist: aware of the bloody nature of reality, forcing myself to boldly face its truths, and trusting that you will forgive me for offering you words rather than colors.

II

When I speak of Palestinian art in the revolutionary period, I refer to an art that nobody has seen, for it has not yet been born. It is the all-encompassing revolution that creates revolutionary art, not the inverse: there can be no political revolution without social revolution, no social revolution without moral revolution, and, indeed, no moral revolution without revolution in art. There have been martyrs and merchants of revolution in many other times and places. The Palestinian revolution is still a bud that is only just forming. Much of the Palestinian art you see is simply traditional art leeching off the revolution; it belongs ultimately to the old world, because it has only traditional visions to offer. It is a superficial art rather than a transformative, revolutionary, artistic activity that encompasses both art and society. Most of the Palestinian works we have seen so far profess an art of “return” to Palestine. For us to call this revolutionary art is contradictory, because return is a retrograde motion, whereas revolution propels us forward.

The dangers faced by Palestinian art today have a dialectical relationship to the dangers faced by the Palestinian revolution. For a painting to be sold for hundreds of dinars, due to its alleged revolutionary Palestinian credentials, is a betrayal of the people and the revolutionary cause, a case of profiteering from the sacrifices of those who die to further that revolution. That kind of artistic production is an accessory for bourgeois salons, a luxury to be enjoyed by one class of Arab society while remaining beyond the reach of others. The first duty of a revolutionary Palestinian artist is to blast away these standards of painting and art.

III

Life is the pulse of existence and the axis around which creation revolves. We are all here because we have chosen life, and we live, work, and struggle for a life that is better. The life of three-quarters of the world is threatened with annihilation by the governments of the remaining quarter, and the peoples of some oppressed countries are today rising up to reject death. Revolution is the only way to achieve a better life for the Third World and bring an end to the tyranny of man over fellow man. The harsh, savage, armed struggle that has been imposed upon us is not in itself the revolution we aspire to, but it is life’s path toward the revolution. The revolution begins after the victory of that struggle. No revolution aims to change the “form” of society; instead the aim is the transformation of the “content” of the individual within society. This transformation of the “content” of the individual entails a radical transformation of all the inherited concepts and preexisting values that have shackled humans and contributed to the debasement of their humanity.

The life that surrounds the artist in the Third World calls upon him as a person whose craft is distinct from that of others in a single way—in the fact that the raw material of his craft is life. The deeper the artist plunges into the sea of life, the higher his art rises in the firmament of creativity and eternity.

(One day I was in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, standing enraptured by the extraordinary artistry of the tender, soft flesh of a marble statue by Canova. I don't know how long I stood there, mouth agape and eyes transfixed by the splendor of that carved-out specimen of beauty. Suddenly I became aware of the presence of a young woman behind me who was trying to look at the statue from my angle. I heard the rustling of her legs as she moved in her tight clothing, and I could smell the feminine scent of her perfume, but I didn't immediately turn around to look at her. The choice before me at that moment was this: to sup the elixir of an immortal masterpiece of artistic creation, or turn to see a perfectly ordinary young woman standing next to me. At that moment, the statue went back to being a lump of rock. Ever since that day during my studies, I have understood what one of the great artists of our age meant when he said: If I saw moths eating the *Mona Lisa* to survive, I wouldn't stop them.)

The life that surrounds the artist in the Third World calls upon him, as a human being, to join the revolution. His works help transform the content of the individual. Revolutionary art is not a product of revolutionary doctrines but of a revolutionary life and revolutionary actions. Revolutionary actions do not transform content without form or form without content in works of art, but rather transform the two together in an innovative approach that arises naturally out of a transformed society; moreover, they transform the inherited place of art in society.

The art world in the West developed in parallel with the bourgeoisie and capitalism (the writings of John Berger, Ernst Fischer, and Herbert Marcuse are among the most important on this subject). In the Socialist bloc, meanwhile, Stalinism has mounted an all-out assault on the free nature of art. Major works of art are now no more than investments for dealers and the rich, and art consists of acrobatic forms that take up ever-greater expanses of canvas while their actual artistic content diminishes ever further. Art is stripped of its humanity when the artist becomes a cog in the capitalist regime, or is crushed under the boots of Stalinism in Russia.

IV

Art and society in the Third World, particularly the Arab world, have not yet been polluted by the inhumanity that characterizes contemporary Western art, because the history of studio art here is not yet even a hundred years old. The question of form and content in art, which has been a major point of contention in the West for centuries, still manifests in the works of Arab artists as a mere reverberation and echo of Western trends. We possess neither the concept of the "gallery" nor the figure of the art dealer, the collector, or the philosophizing critic who holds forth on the subject of content and form in painting as if he were speaking about music. This is where the greater responsibility of the Third World artist lies. His new contribution, far from the bourgeois conception of art, is not confined to consoling and encouraging his nation, but resides in his ability to create new art for the world. With regard to his nation, his presence is necessary, even if it is not thought essential. A revolutionary artist in an inhumane world is a hero, as much as his colleague who wields a machine gun on the hilltops to defend against the brutal enemies of the people.

For historical, political, technological, and economic reasons, the modes of oppression and tyranny and the mechanisms of repression and exploitation have

changed, just as the weapon used against the victim has changed. In the face of this change, our conception of the resistance hero has also changed with the times. He is no longer a figure of the chivalric Antar type¹ who joins his nation's army ready to face death alongside ranks of his fellow soldiers; guerrilla fighters must avoid death. The hero today is someone who resists without falling into the chasm of death: a warrior who clings to life, like Job, through distress and hardship. Revolutionary leaders from Vietnam to Guatemala, Angola to Palestine, repeat to the public in a single voice: "Our first aim is to remain steadfast." Today, then, we live at the beginning of a long path that stretches the length of an entire age before us: this experience was only a chapter in the life of Jonah. This is a harsh reality, and we must acknowledge it if we are determined to live and create history. The era of Fatah [the Palestinian national liberation movement] is the era of Job and Jonah, not Antar.

V

The Palestinian works of art we have seen so far are mirror images of Palestinian reality, whereas [true] art transcends reality so as to re-create it. In this view, the drawings created by the children of Palestine in the camps are the only truly revolutionary Palestinian art to have appeared during this short period of revolution (see Mona Saudi's *In Time of War: Children Testify*, Beirut: Mawaqif, 1970) because these works are not the art of society, but a vital urge expressing the reality truly lived by each child, and realized in new artistic forms. That Palestinian child whose hands are still too small to carry a weapon has picked up a brush instead, but in the future he alone will be the warrior-artist, and then we will be able not merely to speak of but to see and experience revolutionary Palestinian art within Palestinian Arab revolutionary life.

Ernst Fischer says: "All art is conditioned by time, and represents humanity in so far as it corresponds to the ideas and aspirations, the needs and hopes of a particular historical situation. . . . Art also creates a moment of humanity, promising constant development."²

I hope that my works will one day be considered "a moment of humanity" in the history of our nation and "promising [of] constant development," and that the direction of my life as a human being will be an example of the steadfastness we so desperately need in order to make the revolution a reality.

Notes

1. Eds.: Antar (alternatively, Antara) is the hero of the epic *Story of Antara*, who overcomes lowly origins with bravery and genius, as such becoming a popular model of heroism in the Arabic-speaking world.
2. Eds.: The quotation is from Ernst Fischer's *The Necessity of Art*, Eng. trans. by Anna Bostock (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1963); first published in German as *Von der Notwendigkeit der Kunst* (Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1959).

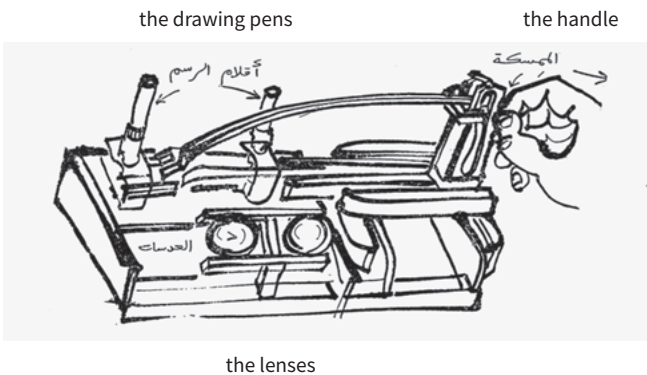
—Kamāl Bullāṭa, "al-Fann fī Zaman al-Thawra al-Filasṭīniyya," *Mawāqif* 3, no. 13/14 (January/February 1971): 176–79. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

Drawing in Three Dimensions¹ (1971)

Vladimir Tamari

I demand that the Arabic Language Academy create a new word, as this instrument does not have a name. It should preferably be a word of the *mif'ala* pattern,² and it would be best that this new word evoke the scent of the mountains between Jericho and Jerusalem at sunrise, or at least the scent of the dry stone in the tomato fields of al-Bireh, Ramallah, north of Jerusalem. It was there that the instrument was invented, in the middle of the night, sometime between 1963 and 1964.

The device looks like this:



The instrument is about the size of a rotten watermelon, or perhaps about the size of a folding machine gun. It is made of cheap wood, pieces of glass, mirrors, lenses, and smooth steel balls like those used in the gambling machines³ that any visitor to Tokyo can find—if he so wishes—between the street and the train platforms.

What does this instrument do? Every tool has its use—the broom, for example, cleans the floor, if its owner so wishes. The coffee grinder also has its purpose: imagine that the ground coffee, when boiled in water with sugar and cardamom, turns into a cup of coffee that jolts the mind of the person who drinks it with vibrations capable of giving rise to revolutions or creating the most magnificent poetry! Of course, this all depends on who's drinking the coffee. This demonstrates the importance of tools in general, and of the coffee grinder in particular, especially in our day and age.

What does the instrument I've drawn above do? (It is known by its abbreviation, the "3DD," or Three-Dimensional Drawing instrument. However, this is very close to DDT—may God save me. . . .) And why is it described in a *literary* journal, when it is likely that only a small minority of readers will be able to understand it in technical terms? (If the electricity were to go out right now, would Adonis be able to repair the fuse?)⁴ Returning to the point: What, then, does the instrument do? Without further ado, let us announce it unabashedly: The instrument draws in space! In space, you say? It draws in space? And what's the relationship between this instrument and the Palestinian question? The relationship is an organic one, just like that between falafel and bread.

Here, it is necessary to describe the drawing process in detail. The artist looks through the lenses and sees a sheet of paper placed in a wooden frame. The paper is pure white, yet it is ready to commit suicide for the sake of art and. . . . The artist takes hold of the handle and presses slightly, and a single black dot appears on the paper. The dot is the beginning. Our friend moves the handle forward, drawing a line as he sees fit. As he turns the handle to the left or right, the line moves to the left or right. So the process is a matter of drawing lines. Precisely. The artist draws a few lines, then sets aside his work for a moment to read his cup of coffee and drink the paper (Georgina Rizk, Miss Lebanon, has been voted Miss Universe—our congratulations).

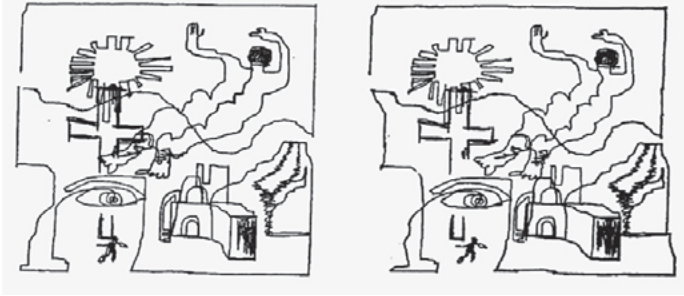
Then our friend goes back to drawing. This time, he does not move the handle forward or to the left or right, but upward, as one would do when lifting the pen off the page.

This is where the miracle occurs, one that—if we so wished—could return each of us to his country. The line does not disappear, but rather stubbornly follows the movement of the handle as it rises, growing upward and mocking the space that hovers all around the paper. This time, the artist leaves everything else and focuses on drawing with his new powers. He moves the handle through the air like a madman, up and down, left and right. Lines appear on the page that play in space like the flight path of a dying housefly, or like a jumble of wires placed on a white sheet of paper. These lines have a curious feature: they stand in space! One line heads toward us while another soars near the artist and yet another beyond it seems to be moving off into the distance, like the road that leads to the airport. The artist lifts his gaze from the lenses and rubs his eyes for a moment. The instrument on the table has two pens, and these two pens have drawn two similar patterns of lines. The drawing on the left differs by only millimeters—or fractions of millimeters—from the drawing on the right. Herein lies the “secret” of drawing in space, as the lenses combine the two drawings so that the right eye sees only the drawing on the right, and the left eye sees only the drawing on the left. Yet the artist isn’t thinking about all this right now. Instead, he’s looking at the room around him.

There’s a flower on the windowsill that appears to be close and “solid” as it sits irreverently in space. There’s a pine tree in the distance, behind the flower, and behind the tree there’s a road with people on it—people who seem very far away. Between the flower, the tree, and the road, the hot summer air swims in the sunlight. The objects in the room itself are solid and vivid, and every object has its place in the room, some closer to the artist, some farther away. This gives the artist something of a headache, so he lights a cigarette and gazes at the smoke as it swirls through the space between him and the flower on the windowsill.

After some time, the artist understands the tool, and the tool understands him. His fear of space disappears, and the lines in space are transformed, one drawing after another, into forms that swim steadily and freely in the cubical space. The artist notices over and over again that it is only through the lenses that the flat, duplicate drawings produced by the instrument merge to reveal their spatial characteristics. Yet looking through the lenses forces the artist to sit in seclusion and focus on drawing, away from the cafés and his friends.

He then draws the following:



Unfortunately, however, the two drawings will only merge to form a single three-dimensional drawing through the lenses of the stereoscope. The idea behind the lenses and the dual images is not new in scientific terms, of course, but the application to drawing of this idea is new, and this is what concerns us here. In terms of art, this instrument represents the realization of a dream that had long seduced artists of the past, who despaired of ever making it a reality:

It is impossible for forms to appear on the canvas in relief in the same way that they appear in the mirror.

—Leonardo da Vinci, from Chapter 24 of his *Treatise on Painting*, 1584

In our last lecture, we noted with regret that we do not have a three-dimensional script.

—Paul Klee, from a lecture he gave at the Bauhaus in Weimar, 1921

Suddenly, an idea came to me—I now order the world of architectural engineering to design buildings in four dimensions and drawings in three dimensions. Who will do this?

—Noboru Kawazoe, in the journal *Architectural Design*, October 1964

And, finally, an excerpt from a [1906] Japanese novel titled *The Three-Cornered World*, written by [Natsume] Soseki:

I thrust the sketchbook under her nose, saying: “Here you go, come inside this image.” She looked at it for a moment, then said: “What a cramped, uncomfortable world! It’s all breadth and no depth. Do you like this sort of place, where you can only move to the left or to the right? You must be a crab.”

Thus, with this new instrument, the line has been liberated from the page and soars through space. The drawing has become a new world that we have not even begun to discover yet. There are many technical applications of this tool, yet here I only explore the most important of these: its use by an artist to express what is inside of him.

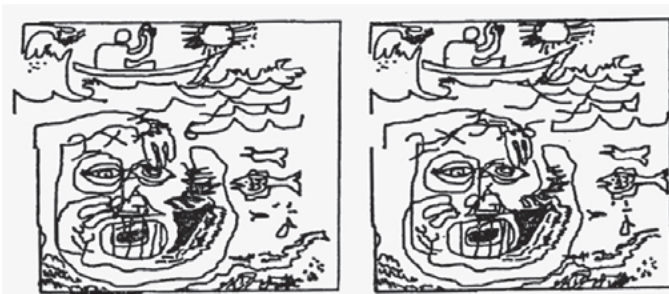
The feeling of emptiness, of the distance between one thing and another, is terrifying and must be confronted and “understood.” Our journey in the world begins

when the umbilical cord that connects us as infants to our mothers is cut. We always exist in a particular place, and many things approach or move away from us in every moment. When [the poet Badr Shakir] al-Sayyab says: “Rain, rain . . . and in Iraq there is hunger,” we truly feel the rain filling the void between us and those who are hungry. When the space that separates us from them is filled by the rain, we suddenly stop fearing that space and are able to transcend it.

For me, the problem of distance and of the relationships between different things has become a kind of unconscious study that is nourished by a basic thirst to define relationships, whether close or distant. For instance, what do you make of the tremendous distance, described by Kamal Boullata, between a young woman who has been burned by napalm and the viewer sitting in front of the television screen, drinking a bottle of Coca-Cola?

What about the distance between a hungry child and the bowl of *mulukhiya* in the window of a restaurant? An immense and cruel space separates the two in this case as well. I do not wish to speak of the distance between the city of Amman and the Jordan River, or of the distance between each of us and the place of his or her birth or the place of his or her death, or of the distance between us and those we love (indeed, Christ and all the other *fedayeen* gave their lives to bridge these distances).

I must stop here. The instrument is for drawing and not for speech. Be patient, my brothers, until it has been produced—then let us build anew the world we left behind and have forgotten; let us rebuild it in the lenses of this box of wonders (the magic-lantern box) in the cities and villages of our childhood that were burned down.



Notes

1. Eds.: See Kamal Boullata, “Modern Arab Art: The Quest and the Ordeal,” *Mundus Artium* 10, no. 1 (1977)—our source for identifying this text by Tamari—for a key analysis of the intellectual and political shifts in the arts of these years.
2. Eds.: Any new word coined by the Arabic Language Academy would follow a pattern based on a trilateral root. The pattern Tamari suggests is used for nouns of instrumental agency, known as “tool nouns.”
3. Eds.: The reference is to the Pachinko gambling machines, popular in Tokyo.
4. Eds.: Adonis is the pen name of Syrian poet Ali Ahmad Said, the editor of *Mawaqif*.

—Vlādimīr Tamārī, “Daftar Afkār: al-Rasm bi-l-Ab‘ād al-Thalātha,” *Mawāqif* 3, no. 16 (July 1971): 152–56. Translated from Arabic by Sarah Dorman.

IN FOCUS

Revolutionary Film: The Palestine Film Unit

Mohanad Yaqubi

In the aftermath of the June 1967 War, three film-school graduates, Mustafa Abu Ali, Sulafa Jadallah, and Hani Jowharieh, met in Amman. They decided to use their recently acquired knowledge of film to establish a film unit to contribute toward their people's efforts in the newly born Palestinian revolution. They called it the Palestine Film Unit (PFU).

The PFU's beginnings were humble. They worked with two cameras, developed negatives in a kitchen of a safe house they shared with other militants, and dried their photographic prints over the stovetop. When they learned that major events—such as massive demonstrations—were about to happen, they would secretly borrow a film camera from the cinema department of their employer, the state-run Jordan Television Corporation, with which to document it. They considered their primary tasks to be documenting the revolution and creating an archive of images of historical moments, to be used in films once the revolution had brought about Palestinian liberation.

The PFU gained attention after the 1968 Karameh battle, near the Jordan-Israel border, in which Palestinian freedom fighters defeated the Israel Defense Forces. The battle resonated, following as it did soon after the great Arab defeat in June 1967. The sudden increase in interest, both regionally and internationally, about the Palestinian movement meant new demands for PFU's images and footage. Other non-Palestinian filmmakers sought to bring their cameras to the area and see what it was about the Palestinian revolution that was producing hope.

The PFU work was also recognized by the Palestinian political leadership, al-Fatah, which valued the importance of their work to the revolution, and the team was given the responsibility of presenting the face of the revolution. The group was joined by other members, and soon they found themselves enmeshed in the process of producing images of the revolution, filming more events, and developing ways to archive their footage systematically. In the midst of this archive building, the unit managed to produce its first film in 1969, *No to the Peaceful Solution*—today unfortunately lost without a trace.

Finding new aesthetics for revolutionary cinema was a central concern for the PFU, and they engaged such issues with French film directors Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin—both founders of the politically active filmmakers' collective known as the Dziga Vertov Group—who were in the region at the time. Godard, who



From left: Armand Marco, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Jean-Luc Godard shooting *Until Victory* at a Palestinian refugee camp in Baqaa, Jordan. 1969

was experimenting with new ways to make films, had been invited by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to visit refugee- and training-camps in Jordan in order to make a film that told the story of the revolution for Western audiences. He and Gorin were accompanied by Jowharieh and Ali on their several filming trips between 1969 and 1970. Together, the filmmakers discussed the relations between content and context, final outcome and process. The 16-millimeter camera had recently been introduced to the film community, and laymen had new capabilities to make their own films. The process of making films was undergoing its own kind of revolution, and these new possibilities were quickly explored by the PFU.



At the Sukhneh
training camp,
Jordan. 1969.
Photograph by
Hani Jowharieh

But the journey for the PFU was not an easy one. Sulafa Jadallah was injured in a gunshot accident while giving a workshop to the unit's new recruits of militants. As a result, she was paralyzed and unable to continue working. Internal disorder was overtaking the organization of the revolution, which led to a violent confrontation between the PLO and the Jordanian regime; the event, known as Black September, resulted in the expulsion of the PLO leadership from Jordan to Lebanon. Ali and Jowharieh filmed the events of Black September, searching for an iconic image of a Palestinian hero. This led to their 1971 film *With Soul, With Blood*, but with only Ali at the editing table in Beirut, as Jowharieh was in Amman, under home detention enforced by Jordanian security.

Once the revolution moved to Lebanon after Black September, the PFU followed closely the reformations that were taking place within the revolutionary body. It was renamed Palestine Cinema Institute and became one of seven departments of the PLO's Unified Media. An olive branch now adorned the unit's logo, joining a film reel and a Kalashnikov. Mustafa Abu Ali headed the department from 1973 to 1975, during which the Palestine Cinema Institute produced twelve films.

The institute managed to build bridges and ties with many progressive Arab and international filmmakers and collectives, including Jean Chammoun, Nadia Lutfi, Monica Maurer, Nahla Shahhal, Nils Vest, and the Groupe Cinema Vincennes, among others; and it was involved in producing hundreds of films. Tragically, the films of that period made by the PFU and other filmmakers and institutions are nearly impossible to locate; most of the negatives have been lost or were destroyed during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which led to the expulsion of the PLO from the country, ending an era of film production that included more than two hundred films.

Mohanad Yaqubi is a filmmaker, producer, and cofounder of Idiom Films and creator of the film *Off Frame, AKA Revolution Until Victory* (2015).

ARAB ART IN FEDERATION

The 1970s witnessed the launch of several intersecting initiatives meant to create a framework for coordinating artistic production across Arab countries and their national unions—a major step in the consolidation of Arab art as a transnational project. These endeavors coincided with a number of political initiatives meant to establish regional unity, including an April 1971 plan announced by Egypt, Libya, and Syria to unite as a Federation of Arab Republics (that coalition would remain in place from 1972 to 1977). In the summer of 1971, a small group of artists from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon collectively developed a founding statement of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists, which was signed by colleagues in other Arab countries as well. This was followed, in December of the same year, by a First Arab Conference of Fine Arts, which the Syrian Association of Plastic Artists organized in Damascus—featuring papers by Mahmoud Hammad and Fateh al-Moudarres (among many others) analyzing the promise of the initiative. The conference, which was attended by delegates from seven countries, culminated in the proclamation of a General Union of Arab Plastic Artists as an umbrella organization comprised of chartered national associations.

Statement of the Founding Committee of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists (1971)

To fellow Arab plastic artists everywhere,
The aspirations to which most plastic artists in different Arab states have always felt attached are aimed—above all else—at the creation of a state of responsiveness, accord, and mutual enrichment among themselves in order to fuse their creative talents in the crucible of the striving contemporary Arab civilization. But the individual efforts scattered here and there remained restricted to their own limited boundaries; they were—for many reasons—unable to bring plastic artists together and establish an Arab union for them along the lines of the unions of Arab engineers, doctors, and writers.

We all know that plastic art is a special world of its own. It is marked by a close connection to life, yet different in its own values and directions from everything else. Therefore, it was not easy for the Arab League, which had thankfully taken the initiative by trying to organize a conference for Arab plastic artists, to accomplish something definitive and comprehensive in this field. Perhaps the biggest reason for this was the official nature of the efforts exerted in this regard, which caused the artists to adopt a cautious and cynical attitude toward them. To this day, the conference remains an unrealized dream. However, a group of Arab artists who, like most of their brothers and colleagues, feel a sense of critical responsibility before the history and civilizational reality of our Arab nation, find that the time has come to undertake this constructive effort toward unifying creative artistic energies in a civilizational front with coherent elements. They have come together driven by a strong and honest desire, aiming to create a union that brings together Arab artists on a brotherly level, and within the nationalist framework to which they belong. This would facilitate the Arab artist's task of fortifying the pillars of our Arab nation's cultural renaissance, which is currently experiencing its darkest days.

Since this idea cannot be realized without individual attempts, this cadre of fellow Arab artists has sought to place the first stone in the structure of the union.

Iraqi artist Jamil Hamoudi traveled to Beirut in early June 1971 to invite his fellow Arab artists there to begin work. Their meeting was useful and fruitful: it confirmed that the idea was now ripe and that everyone wanted to make it a reality, and it also helped crystallize suggestions and streamline opinions in that regard. Following that meeting, both Mr. Jamil Hamoudi and Mr. Wajih Nahle left for Damascus, and they met a number of artists in Syria who were no less enthusiastic than their brothers in Beirut about the necessity of quick action toward establishing the union. As such, the meeting that took place in Damascus in June 1971 at Nazir Nabaa's atelier constituted the birth of the Founding Committee of the Union of Arab Plastic Artists.

Meetings in Beirut with various Arab artists followed, during which ideas and suggestions were discussed: the Founding Committee must choose the best of these, informing itself and seeking to enrich the project (the Union of Arab Plastic Artists) and guide it to the implementation stage.

Hence the first preliminary step was approved as a necessary practical initiative: the Founding Committee was established comprising an artist from each Arab country. The aim of this committee is to pave the way for holding the first general conference for Arab Plastic Artists, out of which the Union will emerge.

The membership of the Founding Committee is as follows:

1. Jamil Hamoudi (Iraqi Republic)—President
2. Gamal El-Sagini (United Arab Republic)—Vice President
3. Na'im Isma'il (Arab Republic of Syria)—General Secretary
4. Ismail Shammout (Palestine)—General Advisor
5. Wajih Nahle (Lebanese Republic)—Public Relations Secretary
6. Khazaal Awad Al Qaffas (State of Kuwait)—Treasurer (by recommendation of the Committee)
7. Ahmed Shibrain (Democratic Republic of Sudan)—Advisor (by recommendation of the Committee)

It is hoped that an agreement will be reached to include other members, as follows:

8. Rafiq Laham (Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan)
9. Tahir Amin Al Maghribi (Libyan Arab Republic)
10. Zubeir Turki (Republic of Tunisia)
11. Al Fatmi Al Fatmi (Kingdom of Morocco)
12. ... (People's Democratic Republic of Algeria)

The goals that the founding committee aspires to achieve through this Union can be summarized as follows:

1. Facilitating suitable circumstances for conducting regular meetings between Arab artists, the purpose of which is to deliberate on issues that concern their lives and production.
2. Making all means available for the artist to perform his or her artistic work in all freedom; working continuously and sincerely to resolve his or her artistic and financial difficulties; and safeguarding his or her rights.

3. Working on enriching cultural and artistic exchange and facilitating the movement of artists, their activities, and production to and from all Arab countries.
4. Organizing various regular and traveling exhibitions on both the Arab and international fronts.
5. Piloting cultural and educational projects directed at artists on the one hand and at the audience on the other, with the purpose of streamlining and spreading artistic concepts through different mediums, such as magazines, dedicated art periodicals, radio, television, books, posters, cards, cinematic films, documentary tapes, lectures, and others.
6. Effecting cultural exchange with various artistic and cultural institutions around the world.
7. Emphasizing the Arab artistic presence in various international organizations, conferences, and artistic and cultural events.

The Founding Committee is determined to spare no effort in order to prepare the largest possible collection of documentation that concerns Arab artists on both the individual and collective levels, for the purpose of creating an archival library dedicated to Arab plastic arts—the Union will be in charge of this library once it is established. The Union will also seek to organize an exhibition for contemporary Arab plastic arts on the occasion of the First Conference of Arab Plastic Artists. As such, the committee is making constructive efforts to serve the idea that we all hope will become an actual reality: it has committed itself to working tirelessly and sincerely, free of all peripheral, irrelevant influences, while doing everything in its power to establish a suitable atmosphere for organizing the first conference, in cooperation—as much as possible—with all fellow artists, those working in the field of plastic arts and those interested in arts in the Arab countries. The committee sincerely hopes that it lives up to the expectations of fellow Arab artists everywhere. It also greatly hopes that those artists provide it with everything needed to help identify them, so as to achieve its desired goal with their assistance. They can do this by submitting all important documents and information about individual and other Arab artistic endeavors so that those documents can be used during the preparation stage of the general conference. The artists are therefore invited to send their opinions and constructive suggestions as soon as possible.

We ask God to aid us all in serving our Arab nation.

This declaration was written in Beirut on this first day of July 1971, and has been ratified through the agreement of the signatories:

Jamil Hamoudi (Iraq)
Na'im Isma'il (Syria)
Gamal El-Sagini (United Arab Republic)
Ismail Shammout (Palestine)
Wajih Nahle (Lebanon)

—“Bayān al-Hay’a al-Ta’sisiyya li-Ittiḥād al-Fannānīn al-Tashkīliyyīn al-‘Arab” (abridged), first published in booklet form in Beirut in 1971; repr. in *Fann* (Summer 1986): 7–10. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

Arab Art . . . and Its Position in Relation to the World's Art (1971)

Mahmoud Hammad

Where does Arab art generally stand with respect to the two great contemporary currents in the world: the art of Socialist countries, and the art of capitalist countries?

We all know the characteristics and advantages of Socialist Realism, as understood in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and Romania, for instance, as well as the motives that caused the multitude of the artists and intellectuals to adopt the features of that school and its goals, which aim at making art accessible to the masses, in the service of social and political causes, and for the glorification of human labor. This has required a certain style, which has in many cases neglected issues of form in favor of content. We also know that with the advent of the October Revolution there were artists who were considered at the time the avant-garde of Russian art, of whom we could mention [Vladimir] Tatlin, who envisioned the first abstract monument in commemoration of the Third International in 1919.

However, the revolution and the Soviet intellectuals behind it have laid out a clear path for art in keeping with the stages through which the Soviet people are living. Their artists have chosen academic styles, and employed them to glorify the man of the revolution: the worker, the farmer, the soldier, the man in struggle generally. They have stressed human expression above all else, even if this path has meant sacrificing artistic innovation and formalist research.

On the other side of the world, in the capitalist countries, art has undergone several developments due to social reasons, in addition to other reasons linked to scientific advancements. The first step was taken, as we know, by the Impressionist movement. This was followed by all the schools and trends that naturally resulted from the artist's search for new forms and molds, as well as the influence of scientific discoveries on the one hand, and by political and social developments on the other. The major signs of these developments emerged in France, the Netherlands, and Germany.

The experiments of artists led to the nonfigurative movements, which spread through most countries of the world, where the artist turned to his own internal universe instead of conveying his emotions as inspired by the visible world. Research and experimentation did not stop there, however, but were followed by the artist attempting to develop the form he desired, in order to express and harmonize with his contemporaneity. The changes in these schools were akin to the swift changes in fashion, as the avant-gardes in capitalist countries ended up calling, on the one hand, for art that reflects consumerist societies, and on the other hand for art that is accessible to a broad public, art that is not intended for museums but rather for people's homes. Many young artists called for the work of art not to be a singular work, but rather to be reproducible for an unlimited number of times, no matter whether the work in question was painted or sculpted, so that it could be presented in a grand storehouse as a necessary commodity for every person, just like clothes or food. In such cases, the artists had no objection to using any material they liked, or any style they considered beneficial to achieving their goals, such as photomechanical [reproduction] methods and plastic materials, pushing the work through to a factory after they had shaped it into a form that suited people's lives. Those artists therefore considered themselves to have achieved socialism in art by popularizing it for the broader public.

From this quick review of what has been going on in the world, we ask the following about the Arab artist: Where does he stand, what are his goals, what are his methods, and what has he put forward?

Contemporary plastic art is a nascent form of art in Arab countries, and is no more than about half a century old. It is an art that our artists received from the Western arts. If we believe that Arab countries are undergoing a renaissance in this field, then this renaissance started with the return of the first group of Arab artists who were studying in Europe. They took from the West the conventions of the arts of painting, sculpture, and engraving. The generations that followed helped convey the different schools and trends to our countries, and are also to thank for spreading the concept of the plastic arts among the people, after centuries of its being forgotten. Today the artist plays a crucial role in the building of modern civilization. Despite attempts by intellectual artists to pay attention to heritage and environment, and despite their constant search for methods that accord with our lives, societies, and aspirations—which is an exhausting and burdensome task—the limited history of the modern art movement has not allowed Arab art to find a clear identity for itself. Furthermore, the shortcomings of politics—which over the course of decades have caused various types of rifts among these peoples, and thus among their artists—have also led to a scarcity of meetings together, and contributed to the lack of unity in thinking and goals.

These words are not a call for despair. What we see today, in terms of the talents of the younger generations of artists and their ongoing determination to affirm the serious quest of knowing ourselves and knowing other points of view, inspires great hope for the emergence of an art that speaks for us without being isolated from international thought.

We may here mention one of the most important factors that has obstructed the development of our plastic arts, namely, the fact that the artist is always forced to spend most of his time making a living or dealing with practical matters, leaving only a small portion of his time for artistic production. He is therefore an amateur artist. If we do not one day reach the level of professional art, then our efforts will have fallen short of the goal. As such, it is the state's responsibility to make sure that competent artists have enough time for creation, so that they can truly contribute to clarifying the identity of this art.

We must here refer to the fact that the lack of an atmosphere conducive to artistic work has led to the migration of artistic minds, just as many scientific minds have migrated. Arab governments have now started to realize the increasing danger of this situation, as well as its deleterious consequences, and they have begun to take measures to counteract it.

Is it appropriate here to cite the characteristics of our contemporary Arab plastic arts?

I don't think our contemporary art has one unifying characteristic, for our artists generally work with varying styles and divergent trends, which can all be connected to artistic currents taken up around the world.

Nevertheless, this has not prevented research, in several of the Arab countries, that proceeds from the representation of heritage, or its simulation, and presents it in new molds. There is other research as well that has kept up with modern art discoveries in the West.

We live in the civilization of the second half of the twentieth century. As countries, we benefit from the most recent scientific and technological discoveries. Naturally, we import these discoveries. If it is the duty of scientists, in their research, to seek the equivalent of these discoveries, then the artist, in my opinion, must not limit his efforts and research to traditional, inherited, or imported templates. Indeed, he should exert more effort to develop modes of art that are in service to Arab thought and society. This is how he arrives at a distinct identity for himself.

It is important here to stress the division the Arab nation has suffered, dispersing talents, as a result of prolonged domination by imperialist countries. For, until recently, the Arab world was comprised of small, scattered statelets, whose capabilities had not been united so that they could give what they are capable of giving.

What has happened in Syria since the beginning of this century more or less resembles what has happened in the other Arab countries. In the beginning the artists followed academic frameworks, responding to the demands of the elite, who were their patrons. The first group of young artists who studied in Italy and France returned shortly before World War II. They paved the way for the next generation of artists, who also studied abroad, and who returned with the new concepts of Western art.

Thus, the student delegations continued and, with the advent of the first unity between the sister nations Egypt and Syria, the first College of Fine Arts was established in Damascus. The college has played a major role in teaching the fundamentals of art to large numbers of youth; and in the most recent phase of the country's history, studies and trends have multiplied, as have attempts to develop Arab attributes in art, even if these attributes have been varied in terms of content and form. We consider these efforts to be crucial for fortifying the pillars of this nascent movement. Furthermore, the different displays of art—the official exhibitions that the state oversees, the solo exhibitions, and the discussions through various media outlets, as well as the exhibitions the country has hosted for artists of other nationalities—have greatly expanded the horizons of artists on the one hand, and those of the audience on the other.

Our gathering today is an important initiative, one we hope will be repeated in more Arab capitals, so that the dialogue is sustained, and so that we can continue learning about our different artistic experiments, so as to help us find our path to artistic unity.

Furthermore, artistic organizations in all the countries and their assembly into a general Arab union will be linked to international organizations—such as the International Association of Plastic Arts at Unesco and other organizations—in friendly nations, and will reap the benefits that come from Arab art playing a positive role in the international field. The Arab nation is passing through a critical phase today, and desperately needs to gather its forces on all levels.

—Maḥmūd Ḥammād, “al-Fann al-‘Arabī . . . wa-Mawqī‘uhu min al-Funūn fi al-‘Ālam,” in *al-Mu‘tamar al-‘Arabī al-Awwal li-l-Funūn al-Jamila* (Damascus: Niqābat al-Funūn al-Jamila, 1971), 73–78. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

The Arab Artist's Rights and His Obligations (1971)

Fateh al-Moudarres

Brothers,

I will not suggest to you what is already running through your minds. I will be brief, so as to leave to you the laying-out of plans capable of enhancing the level of the fine arts in Arab countries, thereby placing artistic effort at the disposal of the sacred Arab cause in its dreadful hour of danger. I say “dreadful” because the danger that threatens the Arab nation is beyond its imagination. In brief, the very existence of the Arab nation is under threat, and so is its art!

Therefore, the Arab artist must fully understand his rights and obligations. In short, over the course of his artistic battle against the enemies of the Arabs and the Arab civilization (for art is a weapon like any other), the act of bringing together the forces of plastic artists under the umbrella of a union with a detailed program becomes an important aspect of cultural communication for our fateful battle.

A. The Arab artist and his rights and obligations

Before the Arab artist has the right to be an Arab artist, he must learn the composition of his social ground, to commit himself to be subject to foundations that are the basis of his artistic work. Adequate knowledge requires effort within a program. The tasks of the General Union include conducting a study on this objective basis for the contemporary Arab artist.

Concerning his obligations:

First, the Arab artist must be the child of his environment so that he can then reflect this environment aesthetically to the Arab world, and then to the contemporary Western world. That duty constitutes the honor of participating in the fateful battle.

Concerning his rights:

As an intermediary between the artist and the legislator, the Union will guarantee that the artist in the unified Arab region can live in sole devotion to his cultural struggle. This important task of the Union will bear fruit in the very near future, after which the West will know that the Arab nation is still a blessed lighthouse to a civilization that was the mother of all civilizations, and this sentiment in the psyche of Western man will help us in our war against our known enemy. From here we understand that the rise of civilizations in the modern world is based on foundations of adequate scientific knowledge—for ignorance has no place under the sun.

A dedicated committee from the Union must make recommendations for regulations that specify the obligations of the artist and preserve his rights within the framework of the natural artistic identity of the Arab artist and his relationship to the larger Arab homeland, and subsequently his contribution to contemporary, world civilization.

B. [Goals for] arts organizations in the Arab world

1. Establishment of plastic arts organizations in every Arab country

2. Consolidation of the organizations into a union
3. Establishment of a General Union for the artists of the Arab homeland

In order to accomplish [these goals], a committee must be formed to conduct a preliminary study and create a work program.

The task of the General Union for Arab artists in the field of fine arts is a very difficult one to achieve due to the differences among various regimes and legislations. However, I see great hope in the Arab League, in that it is reaching out, just as a comrade reaches out to his brother in arms when the battle is at its peak. I don't want my words to be construed to mean that the artist wishes to go to war. The artist's war has been ongoing ever since he understood that every people has its own artistic civilization. The artist works in his studio night and day. He is truly the sharp drill bit of a large machine boring against the wall of time, for art is what remains of civilizations. This means it is the longest and the broadest self, and the distinguishing color of peoples. It is the beauty of a people, which is why if an enemy strikes, it first strikes the beauty of a people's civilization, and *then* finishes it off on the physical level.

We have observed how the artistic political clusters in Europe stand as a strong barricade against Arab artists. Zionism fights Arabs in Europe and does not allow them to hold exhibitions. This shows that art is the beautiful face of a people and that it is dangerous to allow others to get to know that face.

The duty of the Union today is to make the civilized face of the Arab nation known. That is why a union must be established in every Arab country, and these unions merge together in a General Union.

Such a union will be able to secure meetings between Arab artists, bringing their efforts together and emphasizing their artistic identity, which has been distorted by the West throughout the first part of this century. We want an art that contributes to the building of contemporary civilization in the world, and we cannot participate in building a contemporary civilization with concepts that have been borrowed from outside our land. The world expects much of us—this is what I have gathered from my conversations with free persons in Europe.

For this reason, I suggest that this conference not be convened until we have established a program of meetings that are confirmed down to the year, month, day, and hour. A program such as that is the only guarantee for revealing the essence of the true artistic work that is expected.

To conclude: It is the duty of the Ministry of Culture and Information, the Arab League, and the proposals legislated by the people's assemblies to consider artistic work as an important component of the Arab nation's battle. I hereby affirm that the program of the governments of Western Europe and North America includes the total eradication of the Arab nation, because we represent the only wall of resistance before Africa. The demise of the Arab nation would make it easier for the West to inaugurate a long era of modern economic colonialism in Africa.

—Fātiḥ al-Mudarris, "al-Fannān al-ʿArabī fī Ḥuqūqihī wa-Itizāmātihi," in *al-Muṭamar al-ʿArabī al-Awwal li-l-Funūn al-Jamila* (Damascus: Niqābat al-Funūn al-Jamila, 1971), 115–18. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseiny.

EXHIBITION ARTICULATIONS IN IRAQ

A profusion of art writing accompanied Iraq's increased funding of the cultural sector, and in 1973, Shakir Hassan Al Said gathered key texts together in an edited anthology. The following artists' statements, each issued in 1971 on the occasion of ambitious solo exhibitions, appear in that volume. Yahya al-Sheikh's statement gave conceptual context to his solo exhibition in Baghdad. The text by Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri, an artist and surgeon, outlines a theory of circular composition, or "Circulism," in painting. (Note that this "Circulism" is unrelated to the movement of the same name that was initiated in Kuwait in the 1960s; see pages 294–301 in the present volume.) "Quantum Realism," by Mahmoud Sabri, is a manifestolike text that the artist distributed in Prague (where he had resided in exile since 1963) as accompaniment to an exhibition held in October–November 1971.

See Plates 40 and 41 for representative works by Yahya al-Sheikh and Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri.

Presence in the Object and the Object's Presence in Transformation, the Becoming of Consciousness (1971)

Yahya al-Sheikh

I was the foundling of his absence
I was the victim in his presence
And I was his funeral and shroud.

The major tasks of consciousness, on its way to deepening its capacities for perception, are the following: To choose the world as its designated equal. And to surpass it constantly. Toward this end, a process of representation takes place, its annihilation of the self. To conduct, in one behavioral form or another, a process of violating its own features, boundaries, and laws. To represent, which means revealing its secrets. To become itself, which means transforming itself at every moment.

And for the artist to surpass his own self. He represents it in the world. It is interpreted by taking up its furthest orbit, full of the dimensions provided by the world, its singularity violated with the constant presence of the world so that it again comes to be present outside it. And so on. It is not necessary that the transformation process happen through the process of spectatorship that the Surrealists adopted, as in what they call *pure psychology*, which stipulates that consciousness takes a single pathway aiming to reach the maximum intensity of its domination over all dimensions, wherein a fig leaf submits to becoming the earth's crust, and wherein it ceases transforming into a runway for an airport, or a fig leaf. Consequently, the complete consciousness of totality is the final detour toward the cities of transformation and destiny; it is the sap from which life advances.

Objects transform into a necessary purity of consciousness, choosing to share all the givens of their existence, and all the hostile distances between them. It is the selection of objects that is the main justification for the artist's presence in each thing, where the world is divided infinitely, surpassing the boundaries of the body. That is the wall: after all its sensory capacities for receiving the world are exhausted,

after recognition becomes one of the functions of consciousness alone, when it delves deeply into the lake of the intermingled whole. Following this state—the surpassing of the body’s boundaries—the artist provides the distance between himself and it, with a new orbit containing all the dialectical distances between him and things. At his will, the distances acquire their plastic truth, a finite or bounded polarization.

The final turning point, the complete consciousness of totality, leads to the utter and ultimate acquisition of the condition of totality. As a result, each object does nothing other than coalesce into an infinite polarization at the cosmic center that consciousness represents in its ever-comprehensive presence. The painting (occurrence number 1) and its axioms are the liquid, diluted polarization of the diluted fluid of the dense fluid under the pretext of the domination of consciousness and the acquisition and retention of the condition of totality.

Total dependence on form being the ultimate occurrence of consciousness requires sacrifice and adventure in the real world as it is represented at the moments of occurrence, so that it is transformed into a true sense to which the plastic becoming imparts the eternity of formation and giving, and so that there is a grasping of the sense of the real world where the work of art transforms into a process of constant interaction in a situation—not an image, but rather in a *situation* of becoming, where consciousness ends up after the ultimate settlement of the world through the transmutation of the form in order to blast its abstract boundaries with the abstract occurrence of settlements. This act is present in its intentional function represented by the constant process of interaction, without which it becomes impossible for the painting to surpass its plastic orbit and be represented at its first occurrence (occurrence number 1). There, the painting becomes a decorative work and nothing more; and without it—intentionality—it also becomes impossible to grasp the true justification for the occurrence, and, thirdly, the coexistence of the situation of interaction with the situation of becoming becomes impossible, while the duality between the occurrence of intentionality and the occurrence of the work leads to the synchronicity of both occurrences. And elevating each other to merge into one occurrence that would be the elevated third entity in terms of consciousness—infinite in height and inclusivity, depending on one occurrence raising the other. This elevated third entity, after fulfilling its own conditions, stipulates the place and time of both occurrences, meaning that it chooses itself depending on their ability (the ability of occurrences 1 and 2) to be displaced from their true world, where the viewer then is both the consciousness and the one made conscious, the bearable and borne upon. For the painting is the theater then and the viewer is the reincarnated actor, and the scrutinizer of every step toward the world of the painting, with the world of the painting as a whole.

The process of clothing the forms, the process of their representation and deduction, is the real result set by the revelation of the elevated third entity (the artistic occurrence), for the painting is one entity in the process of uncovering the real sensation of the world. And it is its constant occurrence. It is a theater where the second occurrence (the occurrence of consciousness) is always raising the curtain for the third occurrence (the artistic occurrence).

The painting = yes or no.

The viewer = yes or no.

The artistic event = the elevated third entity.
And in compliance with this consciousness of mine,
“my heart is a tent that I do not know how to inhabit alone.”

At the time when I find myself and the world, I find myself as a whole mass drawn to the world by what repels me from it. And repelled from it by what draws me to it.

—Yahyā al-Shaykh, “al-Ḥudūr fī Shayʿ wa-Ḥudūr al-Shayʿ fī al-Taḥawwul, Ṣayrūrāt al-Waʿy”; repr. in Shākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, *al-Bayānāt al-Fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-Iʿlām, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqāfa al-ʿAmma, 1973), 59–61.
Translated from Arabic by Amira Elmasry.

Circulism: Why Circulism? What Is Circulism? (1971)

Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri

The circle: Why the circle?

What is the circle?

Life is a grand circle with an invisible circumference, the center of which is the human being. It is endlessly teeming with circular shapes to the point of derangement (delirium).

The moon, sun, planets, visual beauty, pupils of the eye, ear canals, blood corpuscles, pods’ kernels, dewdrops, the glistening of water, gears and axles, victory arches, prescription pills, the cycle of time, the succession of night and day, and so on and so forth—all these are circles spinning and pulsing with the music of life.

We live in the midst of a symphony of circles and arcs, meeting, jostling, successive, cascading, interacting.

The circle suggests movement: it chases its own tail, or is a straight line that pivots around itself, or is any geometric shape that rotates around a point on its surface or one of its angles.

The circle is an imprisoned movement. It gives birth to endless possibilities, and creation lies within these possibilities—and creation is a type of freedom.

Circles spin, meet, mingle, blossom, break against themselves, intertwine, harmonize, diverge, converge, and so on and so forth, in worlds of inexhaustible aesthetic formations and compositions.

The circle is an interaction between release and silent hope. Just like a prisoner, it is violently entangled in its psyche—trembling nebulae of ancient images and future dreams.

The circle is a human symbol of a closed, introspective world. It contains utter seriousness and utter impetuousness.

Galaxies of emotions, contemplation, dreams, and other worlds that do not admit time and space.

The circle is like the human soul, a life confined in skulls that exists through rhythms of feeling, growing with the input of the senses and immediate experiences, and opening up to songs and images, in order to go beyond the dimensions of the human subject itself.

It is a rejection and nonrecognition of the past or the present. Is there a present? No, the present has no existence, and if it exists, it is a moment of suffering and a

pang so brief as to be devoid of time and existence. Or it is a leap and step from nothingness to creation, from black (noncolor) to white (all colors), from the museum of “was” to the creative “will be.” The present is a fine, transparent, microtomic nylon curtain that veils the mythical old woman of the past, with all her memories, stories, legends, religions, totems, and icons, from the newborn child (the future), teeming with growth, motion, hopes, projects, aspirations, and many questions about creation and renewal.

I return to the circle: the elegant form expressing a confined, oppressed movement, a vortex of will and abstract aspiration unfettered by time and space.

It is abstraction and nonabstraction. And what is the shame in abstraction? What is the fear of abstraction? Why does the human being take solace in abstraction and the absolute?

Undoubtedly it is a renunciation, a rejection, a challenge, and at times a revolution against the familiar slavery, the stagnancy of the milieu, and traditionalism. It is the smashing of locks and the lifting of the siege on confined creativity and imagination. It is the artist stepping beyond the rusty frames of reality.

The artist seeks refuge in abstraction when his rhythm and the rhythm of the environment refuse to reconcile, or he takes refuge in abstraction if he feels a hunger for freedom, so he delves inward and lives his authentic inner depths and breathes and sings. Then the false confusion, the bubblelike view of the exterior world, and the everyday starting point grow faint.

The artist seeks succor in abstraction when the grand human being becomes a silly rusty nail driven into the axles of daily routine. It is a rejection of the mechanization of the human and a return to pulsation, contemplation, thought, dream, and freedom.

The artist seeks refuge in abstraction if he (the artist) and she (the environment) grow apart for some reason, be it political, ethical, intellectual, or spiritual. It is a condition of distance, disorientation, and loss, and then a return to freedom.

Abstraction is subjective freedom, and subjective freedom, like any form of freedom, is a creative characteristic inherent in the evolution of life and a contribution to the construction of human civilization.

Freedom is relative existence born of the interaction of two poles (spatial-temporal) (subjective-objective) and (realistic-aspirational) (stable-propulsive).

The ego-history: it is a movement and an interaction, a traversal of the bounds of what exists, which derives its continuity from opposition and contradiction.

Every human being has a language and a symbol.

If he knows them, he can solve all riddles and translate all daily and subjective contemplations and sensations. Then he finds himself able to lift the heavy lid off unknown worlds in his depths.

The vision of circles is an elegant, emancipated language. It draws lovely lines and fills dimensions of light, color, and surface. It gives movement a visual meaning and creates pleasure in a tired, abandoned, distant corner of the human world.

—Qutayba al-Shaykh Nūrī, “al-Dā’ira: Limādhā al-Dā’ira? Mā Hiya al-Dā’ira?”; repr. in Shākir Hasan Āl Sa’id, *al-Bayānat al-Fanniyya fī al-‘Irāq* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-I’lām, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqāfa al-‘Āmma, 1973), 63–65. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

Quantum Realism—An Art of Processes (1971)

Mahmoud Sabri

Quantum Realism is the application of the scientific method in the field of art. It is the art of man, the remaker of nature. It is the earliest stage of the new art of techno-nuclear humanity. It gives man a model of nature as a “complex of processes.” It provides the basis for the new would-be created environment of man.

The particulars and structure of the new art are:

I. The Quantum

II. The Atom

III. The Structural Process

I. The QUANTUM: the basic ingredient of Quantum Realism (QR)

It is the elementary energy/color unit and as such is regarded by QR as the basic constituent factor of the visible universe. The wavelengths of visible light—expressed in Angstrom Units—provide about 4,000 color-lines. QR employs about 600 color lines representing the selected line-spectra of the 92 atoms. The size of the quantum is always inversely proportional to its wavelength, or proportional to frequency. This is expressed by the well-known equation:

$$E = hv$$

where E is the energy of the quantum; v the frequency and h is Planck's constant.

Hence we have an upward trend in the magnitude of the color unit as we move from the RED to the VIOLET ends of the spectrum, with red as a minimum and violet as a maximum value. In QR, a quantum has no independent existence, but acquires a relative identity only when it combines with other quanta to form an atom/unit.

II. The ATOM: the fundamental unit of structure in QR

It is viewed as a unit of energy—a “wave-phenomenon.” It is a structure composed of a group of quanta. Graphically each atom/unit is a unique rectilinear figure. Its graphic uniqueness is derived from its structure, i.e. spectral composition. Each structural unit therefore is defined by the color-lines of which it is composed. The atoms of the ninety-two elements are the “building blocks” of QR. Also they are the ALPHABETICAL LETTERS of the new language of art. Each atom is represented by a selection of its characteristic line-spectrum, i.e. the strongest and most sensitive lines. For example, hydrogen, which has a visible spectrum of eight lines, is represented by a selected group of five colors corresponding to its most sensitive lines. Oxygen, which has a visible spectrum of well over ninety lines, is represented by a selected group of seven colors.

Hence the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen are defined, in terms of color units, as follows:¹

Hydrogen		Oxygen	
<u>W-L</u>	<u>Color</u>	<u>W-L</u>	<u>Color</u>
6562	red	7775	m. red
6562	red	7774	m. red
4861	blue-green	7771	m. red
4340	blue	6456	red
4101	violet	6158	orange
--	--	5330	green
--	--	4368	blue

The necessity of limiting the number of lines in the spectral structure of each atom unit is explained as follows:

1. The intensities of the line spectrum of any given element vary according to the “conditions of excitation” and also the state of the atom—whether neutral or ionized.
2. The number of lines in the spectra of certain elements presents an insurmountable difficulty of execution. Iron, for example, has a spectrum of more than 3,000 lines. Hence the necessity of some form of limitation at this initial stage to ensure proper differentiation and depiction.
3. An art of processes is graphically inconceivable at present without a given set of well-defined units, i.e. an ALPHABET. Nature has provided these units in the form of the 92 types of chemical atoms. But these must first be transformed into recognizable graphic units, articulate enough to depict the processes of nature. The purpose is not the depiction of individual atoms with their varied line spectra, but rather the processes resulting from their interactions in nature. That is to say, the purpose is to create a model of atomic reality apprehensible to man.
4. I have therefore fixed the range of selection to a maximum of seven lines for any given atom, so as to formulate a working alphabet that is both practicable and recognizable. But this is only the first alphabet of the new art—an elementary tentative one. Like the alphabet of ordinary language, the graphic alphabet must be conventionalized by both artists and society—not as a set of symbols with arbitrary meanings attached to them but as the recognized yet limited graphic characteristic of the atomic units that make by their interactions the processes of nature. Such a voluntary limitation of artistic means is an inevitable condition for the transformation of the subjective art of agrarian man into the new objective art of techno-nuclear man. There is no doubt that with the development of working technique and color manufacture more elaborate alphabets would be created in the future by amplifying the color structure of various units so as to be more representative of the full line-spectra.

We therefore have 92 types of “building blocks,” each composed of a number of colors. These colored blocks are the structural units of the new art of QR. Although each unit is a structure, it behaves in its interactions with other units as an ultimate indivisible unit. A unit of hydrogen always has the same structure-color ingredients—

irrespective of the combinations it forms with other atom units. A hydrogen atom-unit ceases to be a hydrogen unit if its structure is altered.

The component colors of each unit are two-dimensional. Here we are dealing with energy units and not with objects of everyday experience. Hence there is no place for three-dimensional representation. The necessity for two-dimensional depiction is made clear by Einstein's equation:

(Where L is the original length of an object at rest. L', the length obtained for this object while moving at a given velocity, V its velocity, and C the velocity of light.)

$$L' = L \sqrt{1 - \frac{V^2}{C^2}}$$

An object is contracted in the direction of its movement (Lorentz–FitzGerald Contraction theory), and its length becomes ZERO if its velocity reaches the velocity of light. QR essentially deals with matter as units of light energy, hence only two-dimensional depiction is correct.

III. The STRUCTURAL PROCESSES of QR

They are the graphic equivalent of the *Chemical Processes of nature*. That is to say, the processes through which substances are formed by the interactions/combinations of different atoms/units. In nature there are 92 types of such atoms/units, but millions of chemical compounds with which we are familiar in our macroscopic world as objects/substances. To QR, a substance is the color equivalent of its chemical composition. A chemical formula is a definition of the essential physical factors/elements constituting a given process. Hence WATER is not depicted as the ever-changing water of Heraclitus but as the chemical process defining its formation: H_2O .² At this level we are not dealing with the visible palpable liquid of our daily experience but with a combination of two molecules of hydrogen and one of oxygen to form this “object” of our daily experience. Chemists tell us that an atom of oxygen with six electrons in its outer shell requires two hydrogen atoms with an electron each, to achieve more stability, thus giving us a molecule of water. This is the process of water-formation as described by chemical symbols and everyday language. It is processes such as this that need to be graphically depicted now by art. Hence art has to devise its own symbols and its own language—a new language and new symbols.

Art dispenses with the chemical symbols and with everyday language. It also dispenses with the particle-model of the atom: a central nucleus with electrons rotating round it in a manner simulating the solar system. Such a working model with its orbits and rotating particles serves the chemists. It defies an effective graphic representation.

But the atom as energy equivalent is different. It lends itself to graphic depiction. In this sense it is essentially a field of colors, and constitutes as such the basic unit of the new art. *It is the depiction of such colored units in their interactions, that is to say, the depiction of the chemical processes through which substances are formed, that constitutes the*



Mahmoud Sabri at the opening of his *Quantum Realism* exhibition, Prague, 1971

NEW ART of QUANTUM REALISM. To this extent, QR is an art that depicts natural phenomena in a way different from all previous art. It does not start with the “object” as a material particle swimming in space, but with the natural process as a pattern of relations and structures. QR gives man an image of inner nature, a working model for the reconstruction of nature. Hence the old picture of the world as: *objects–spatial relations–space* is replaced by: *units of structure–structural relations–structure*. Viewed as such, space appears as a STRUCTURE/FIELD composed of matter units (line-spectra), i.e. colors. This is the picture we get if white light in our macroscopic world is transformed by some special mechanism into its color components. *The whole macroscopic world would be a patterned structure of colors.*

Mankind as an extension of the animal world sees space and things only insofar as they are defined by white light. But mankind, as a techno-nuclear development transcending through its sophisticated instruments the limitations of its natural/animal existence, can see space and things differently by reducing white light to its component frequencies.

But QR is also a NEW LANGUAGE with an ALPHABET: the 92 atoms/units as its letters. In this sense it is a negation of the pictographic language of macroscopic art. The alphabetical letter/unit is substituted for the pictogram. But unlike the alphabetical units of ordinary language, the new units of the QUANTUM alphabet are not arbitrary creations. They are based on measured factors existing independently of man. They represent precise values that are universally valid: a quantum of light can have only one value in terms of color. Hence each letter/unit of the new alphabet, as a rectilinear figure of selected colors, embodies objective knowledge. It is not an arbitrary symbol like a letter of the alphabet of ordinary language, nor an abstraction like a mathematical number-sign. The units of the new alphabet of QR are real units, visible “counterparts” of objectively existing physical units.

Hence an atom/unit in its new role as an ultimate graphic unit of QR becomes—as a multicolor unit in the hand of the artist—a unit of equivalence for the representation of the processes of nature; but processes whose existence and constituent factors are independent of man’s consciousness, and too remote from his direct sense experience.

Hence art is transformed into an objective activity carried out with the precision of natural science. In this sense QR will eliminate the subjective intricacies of all hitherto existing art. By giving art an OBJECTIVE CRITERION it would bridge the frustrating gap between art and society. Man can follow through the QUANTUM alphabet the inner working of nature. The new art is an aid to objective understanding in addition to enjoyment. It graphically explains the abstruse facts of science. It puts the discoveries of science within the grasp of man. But in time it will also make its own discoveries. Science and art are interpenetrating each other. They will be ONE. There will be a scientific art or artistic science of man.

Notes

1. Eds.: It would seem that “W-L” in the table stands for “wavelength.”
2. In the case of chemical mixtures, the chemical symbol is equated with the process. The elements contained in a mixture are represented according to the number of atoms specified in its chemical symbol. To QR, AIR is the color equivalent of: $O_2, 4 N_2$

—Mahmoud Sabri, manifesto text in the catalogue for the first exhibition of Quantum Realism, presented in Prague, October 26–November 14, 1971. The text, originally in English, has been amended slightly to conform to the style of the present volume.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Notes on Contact Art Gallery, 1972–75

Waddah Faris

When Contact Art Gallery was inaugurated in February 1972, the Beirut art and cultural scene was in full swing, filled with cutting-edge activities in publishing, theater, music, art, and political activism.

The decision to start a gallery was quite accidental: it arose through a chance encounter in the fall of 1971 with a real-estate agent. I was strolling from my office at *al-Nahar* newspaper to the Horse Shoe Café (our favorite equivalent of Paris's Deux Magots). The agent, whom I knew, greeted me and asked casually if I were looking for property to rent. Spontaneously, I answered that I might be, if he knew of a ground-floor apartment in the area of Hamra Street. He took me across the street to a residential apartment of about a hundred square meters. I promptly called my oldest friend, César Nammour. With a background in business, and with his usual boundless enthusiasm, Nammour joined me to launch Contact Art Gallery. But the mix of my impulsive and improvised decision-making and his administrative and managerial skills did not survive the year. He graciously withdrew to attend to other business concerns, and I continued programming while working as a graphic designer. However, a year later we joined forces again, and now the gallery took the Beirut art scene by storm.

From its launch, Contact strove to explore frontiers of social, artistic, and political expression through its programming. For the inaugural exhibition, we showed the pioneering works of Saloua Raouda Choucair, Aref El Rayess, Halim Jurdak, Amine El Bacha, and the conceptual sculpture projects of Mounir Eido. We also included Eido's small cardboard maquettes of his unrealized sculptures—in an effort to shed light on the creative conceptual process. The 1972 exhibition *Hearts & Monuments* by Farid Haddad confronted the public with minimalist works that challenged inherited conventional expectations.

In a socio-cultural environment that often avoided sensitive issues, we mounted two major exhibitions that directly addressed sexuality. First, a solo show of

the work of Huguette Caland included paintings and ink and crayon drawings that dealt intimately and frankly with her sexuality and personal biography. Second, the 1973 exhibition *Mutanabbi Street Flowers* by Aref El Rayess was selected for its daring engagement with taboo social subjects such as prostitution, which the artist treated with mastery, tenderness, and humor, taking aim at prevalent social mores.

We took on a politically controversial show in 1973. In April of that year, I became acquainted with a young Chinese artist living in Beirut, Wen-ti Tsen, who was preparing for an exhibition at Beirut's Kennedy Center, run by the American Embassy. Visiting his studio, I was surprised: Wen-ti Tsen had produced very large works that were clearly critical of the Vietnam War. Realizing it was improbable that the Kennedy Center would exhibit these masterful critical works, I asked Wen-ti if the center had seen them yet—they had not. I asked him to tell me the outcome of their visit to his studio. Not long after, as expected,



One of the artists' campaign posters for politician Ghassan Tuani, exhibited at Contact Art Gallery, Beirut (as published in the Lebanese newspaper *al-Nahar*, April 2, 1971)

the artist came to Contact, utterly dejected, to inform me that the Kennedy Center presentation was indefinitely postponed for “scheduling reasons”! I invited him to show his works at Contact in June. The exhibition was a great success, and due to public demand it stayed up through September. To meet the gallery’s expenses, the artist contributed seven drawings about the Israeli occupation of Gaza.

A second politically engaged exhibition came about during Lebanon’s parliamentary elections of 1973. With the proliferation of election posters throughout the streets of Beirut, we decided to engage a group of artists in an experiment. We selected a set of black-and-white posters of the candidate Ghassan Tueni and distributed them to artists willing to transform them. Some twenty artists took part in deconstructing the posters and creating new works from them, which were exhibited for one night only; the proceeds of sales went toward the artists’ fees and to Tueni’s electoral campaign.

These landmark events illustrate the spirit of Contact Art Gallery’s search for new frontiers in art practice in Beirut. We strongly believed that there were untapped regions in the imagination, and the gallery was a showcase for them.

Born in Aleppo, Syria, **Waddah Faris** is an Iraqi-Lebanese artist and gallerist who has lived and worked in Beirut. In 1972, he cofounded, with César Nammour, Contact Art Gallery in Beirut.

See Plate 42 for Huguette Caland’s 1973 painting *Self-Portrait*.

A TRANSREGIONAL CRITICAL TERRAIN

Moroccan artist Mohammed Melehi launched the journal *Intégral* in 1971, conceptualizing it as a transregional forum for critical engagement with the arts. Over its intermittent seven-year run, the publication featured the work of avant-garde artists—often in loose coordination with the Rabat gallery L’Atelier (established in 1971 by Pauline de Mazières)—and offered a forum for experimental, critical writing that was distinct from the sphere of official arts represented in the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists. The two essays featured in this section appeared in the January 1973 issue of *Intégral*. The Moroccan literary critic Abdelkebir Khatibi published “A Note on the Calligraphic Sign,” a short study of the interplay of referent and form in calligraphic art that previewed his then-forthcoming *The Wound of the Proper Name* (1974). And Etel Adnan, an artist, poet, and critic, submitted the future-oriented piece “Light: The Ultimate Material for Art” from Beirut, where she was working as the cultural editor for the newspaper *al-Safa*.

A Note on the Calligraphic Sign (1973)

Abdelkebir Khatibi

Any interest in calligraphic signs would be meaningless if the act of writing were not concerned with the uniqueness of cultures and, more deeply, with the relationship of text to being. Without these, it would resemble that nostalgic pleasure that certain disillusioned diplomats take in arranging floral bouquets or Japanese Zen gardens and in learning to control the breath when using a bow and arrow.

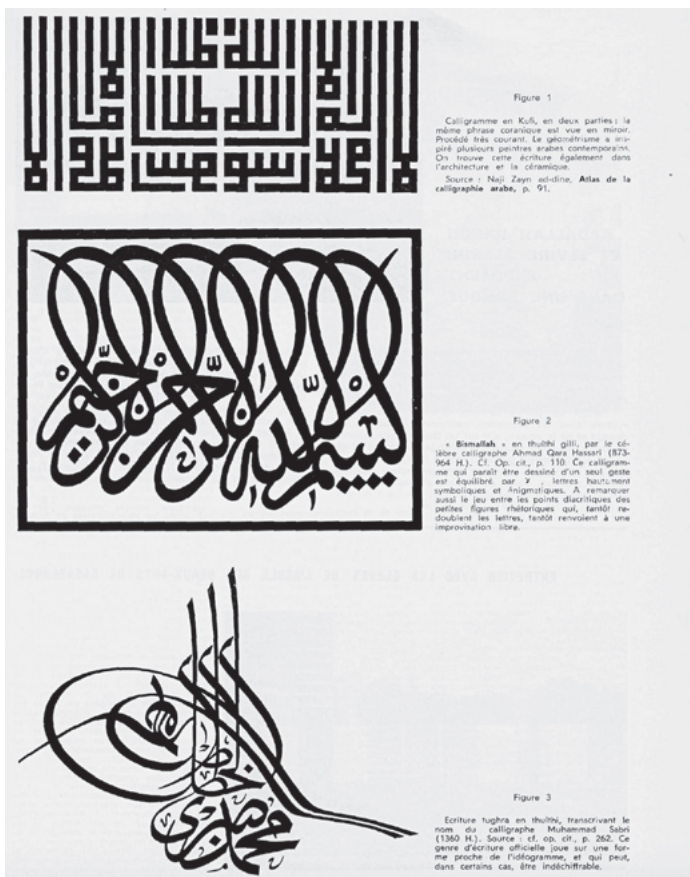


Illustration 1. Calligram in Kufic, in two parts: the same Qur'anic phrase is mirrored. Widely practiced today. Geometric rigor has inspired many contemporary Arab painters. This style of writing also appears in architecture and ceramics. Source: Naji Zayn ad-Din, *Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy*, 91.

Illustration 2. “Bismillah” in the Thuluth jali script, by the famous calligrapher Ahmed Karahisari (873–964 H.). Source: [*Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy*], 110. This calligram, which seems to have been created in a single gesture, is balanced by 9, highly symbolic and enigmatic letters. Also remarkable is the play between the diacritical marks of the small rhetorical figures, which sometimes double the letters and sometimes return to free improvisation.

Illustration 3. A *tughra* [calligraphic monogram] in the Thuluth script, transcribing the name of the calligrapher Muhammad Sabri (1360 H.). Source: [*Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy*], 262. This genre of official writing plays on a form close to the ideogram, and, in certain cases, may be indecipherable.

Here and now, calligraphy puts us to the test. Working on language, calligraphy carves and chisels into it an ensemble of motifs and rhetorical figures such that deciphering a calligram requires repeated readings that are attentive to ambiguities in meaning.

Take a simple example (illustration 1). How should we read this calligram? On the right, the reader quickly perceives the Arabic word لا (“There is no”), which begins an essential Qur’anic phrase: لا اله الا الله محمد رسول الله (“There is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet”).

Having recognized this phrase, the reader tries next to identify the combination of letters. This reading of recognition, in order to be fruitful, requires the

deciphering of rhetorical figures such as the reversal of letters, their movement, intersection, placement. . . .

The process by which the phrase becomes meaningful is the following: pre-existing the calligraphy, the meaning comes from another source (here the Qur'an), and at the same time, this pre-existing meaning needs to be *spelled out*, rearticulated as a function of another code, that of calligraphy. There is, therefore, a split in the linguistic sign: it offers us a text and its usual meaning, then takes it away little by little, disfigures it, recovers it, mirrors it. And so on.

This work of eroding signification is close to the work of poetry; that which the poet puts into question is the very principle of textual clarity. Whoever speaks of clarity speaks of repressing the multiple possibilities of meaning. Calligraphy undoubtedly originates in language and returns to it, but in the meantime it transports language into another code, another realm of the imaginary. Its pleasure is that of a paradoxical reading: one only reads in the calligram that which one *already* knows, but perhaps that is the principle of all reading. However, calligraphy allows the production of meaning to proceed at a much slower pace.

We need to rethink the calligraphic sign, especially in Arab and Chinese cultures. Although they are quite different, these two cultures have developed an extremely refined science of the sign, whose importance we have barely begun to assess. We must read and contemplate the beautiful book by the Iraqi Naji Zayn ad-Din: *Atlas of Arabic Calligraphy* (in Arabic), Baghdad, 1967. This admirable work has been grossly plagiarized by Mohammed Aziza (cf. his *Arab Calligraphy* [in French], Tunis, 1971). I have denounced this contemptible theft elsewhere.¹

The renewed interest in the field of calligraphy may serve quite diverse ends. Firstly, pedagogical ones (which are no small matter): we know that the writing of our teachers, and therefore that of our schoolchildren, is often ill formed, incoherent. Calligraphy manuals would give children working knowledge of symbols, as well as the pleasure of drawing. Beautiful handwriting reinforces meaning. When speaking of a refined person, the Japanese say: *She has beautiful handwriting*. In this way, we name an essential quality of mind and body. "Writing and word," writes Ahmad al-Qalqashandi, "share and belong to the same virtue of *bayan* (rhetoric)." Through this working knowledge, the child will gain a greater mastery of his language.

Another area of exploration—undertaken elsewhere by Moroccan painters—awaits further development. Although they cannot be reduced to language, drawing and painting entail a *translation* into linguistic code. Language is present everywhere, as much in the process of production as in that of reading. As each language has its own code, it is very important for the painter to have as little naïveté as possible when confronting the play of texts that traverse his compositions. The historical depth of the Arabic language makes it possible to investigate the many specific practices of language from which the painter's linguistic references have emerged. Sooner or later, Moroccan painters will have to address this issue.

Note

1. Eds.: In the same issue of *Intégral* that includes this essay and the next is a reprint of a letter Khatibi sent to the Paris journal *La Quinzaine Littéraire* (which had reviewed Aziza's *La Calligraphie arabe*), alerting the publication's readers to Aziza's several transgressions.

—Abdelkebir Khatibi, "Note sur le signe calligraphique," *Intégral: Revue de création plastique et littéraire* 2 nos. 3/4 (January 1973): 46–47. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

Light: The Ultimate Material for Art (1973)

Etel Adnan

Artists are drawn to light like moths to a lamp. The material of light is the material of the Space Age. It is matter-energy, it is heat, it is life, it is death. Physics has traditionally been the battlefield of matter and energy, but now this battle is waged in contemporary artists' studios. When abstract art congealed into strange archetypes, when, after [Piet] Mondrian and [Victor] Vasarely, painting had reached the breaking point, as if the circle itself wanted to become square and immobile, the only possible breakaway was through movement and light. A whole world of tools and industrial machines was ready to make this new dimension possible: kinetic art was born, and with it, "light" art.

Since our cave-dwelling days, our human instincts have led us to fire and to light. Light may seem like a cold element, but we're accustomed to the cold whispers of art. Moreover, its extraterrestrial quality befits our Space Age: luminescent objects seem to come to us from interstellar regions. Today, light is an element as much as it is the very content of the work of art.

From the moment of its invention, electricity has been used by visionaries in dreamlike constructions. The most fantastic of these visionaries was Paul Scheerbart (1863–1915), a German writer whose stories proposed, among other things, the construction of artificial stars destined to be remotely guided in the sky. He even spoke, around 1904, of aerial cities that would be carried into the air by steerable hot-air balloons, "to rise and descend continuously in interesting combinations, thus designing a mobile architecture." Cities on land were to be illuminated by beams lighting up like gigantic diamonds. Scheerbart was a prophet: our neon-lit cities of today could lend themselves to lighting that would be at once commercial and artistic. There is no reason for light art not to take "to the streets," and no reason for illuminated signs not to become everyone's festival every evening. At night, cities like New York are already immense illuminated sculptures, as if certain Paul Klee drawings were nothing but timid sketches of them.

The new neon sculptures, like those by Chryssa and Billy Apple, those that you see in all the New York galleries and in museums, only accelerate a typical contemporary process: the erasure of the line between that which indicates an object and that which constitutes its environment, between the sculpture itself and the enlivened space in which it bathes, between the person who identifies with the surface of her own skin and the projection of that very same human being in the wider spaces that she occupies. . . . It is therefore not the objects that have changed with this new use of light, but also the good old specter itself, the body-and-soul alliance with which we have grown familiar.

In all major cities, from New York to San Francisco, "light shows" are multiplying: a creative wave of abstract images constantly renews itself on the large walls of dark rooms; and one seems to dwell with the secrets of nature, to become a cell in a world of cells, a flower in a universe of flowers, a handful of water in a river. The desire of mystics, childhood dreams, all are satisfied, all is accomplished when we are sitting surrounded by these screens, when we have become an antenna, the little "gadget" upon which the whole universe converges. It is a new form of being.

And since, in spite of everything, our minds are becoming more and more passive, we let ourselves be mesmerized by the most aggressive art forms: we expect to be threatened, attacked, swallowed up. We no longer approach a painting as we approach a book; we expect that every painting, in its enormity and vitality, will devour us. Light art achieves this effect in an absolute manner. The spectator is literally attacked by millions of active particles, he no longer even “looks” but is like an object that his own nerve cells are looking at. He no longer stands but floats in the electromagnetic fields that deform his body, as we have seen electric currents deform metals. Of course, the public’s very passivity highlights the almost diabolical power of the “engineer” of light art: here, the artist guides his work, his intelligence infuses the magnetic field with his actions, this intelligence itself shines in the electric bulbs and communicates his emotions and personal rhythms through the pulsation of electrodes. Through the “direct” aspect of their power on the public’s psyche, the manipulators of the new electric and luminous art are very close neighbors to the great sorcerers of Africa.

* * *

In view of our easy association of lights with festivals, we can recognize that the traditional museum-going public is evolving: it goes to “Happenings,” as it used to go to the circus, to bullfights, or even to public executions and to war. Light art is becoming a ritual, a ceremony, a celebration, a sacred service. In New York there’s a group of painters, weavers, poets, and sound engineers who have formed the USCO collective and constructed a tabernacle. Erected on the site of what used to be a Protestant church in Garnerville, this tabernacle is a hexagonal construction crowned by a dome that is in fact an orange-and-white parachute. Every Sunday the public is invited to a slideshow of reproductions of paintings as well as of filmed photographs of a moving motorcycle or car. These images are projected from the roof and accompanied by sounds delivered by ubiquitous loudspeakers. In the center of the space, a column of light projects light onto the walls. The bottom of the column is surrounded by water jets, and incense burns in a corner. The purpose of the “show” is to induce hallucinations in the spectators without the aid of drugs. Following the example of other religious organizations, the tabernacle has registered itself in the State of New York as a religious institution and is beginning to recruit affiliates.

Light art takes us back to Chinese shadows and magic lanterns, to the spectacle of *qaragoz* [shadow plays] and the marionettes of the Egyptian Fatimid period. It takes us back to the symbolism of light so dear to the Muslim mystics, the Sufis, and to the opalescent message of the old Syrian glasswork. Our alchemist forebears expect our young artists from North Africa and the Arab East to return once again to these arts of fire and of light that are so familiar to us. Where are they? In the first lines of Genesis as in the last chapters of the Qur’an, the universe begins and ends with light.

Every eye is an atom of light, every atom is an atom of light, and the artist is once again face-to-face with naked light, all intermediaries having disappeared. Yes, light is also terror, the ten thousand suns of Hiroshima. If, in the end, it must be our catastrophe, for the moment may it also be our happiness: in illuminated fountains, in architectures colored and inhabited by liquid fire, artists may communicate to us their courage, their intelligence, and their compassion.

—Etel Adnan, “La Lumière: Ultime matériau de l’art,” *Intégral: Revue de création plastique et littéraire* 2, nos. 3/4 (January 1973): 56–57. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

ART AND THE LETTER

In the early 1970s, a number of Iraqi artists signaled an interest in using the Arabic letter as a carrier of inspiration in art. The group's chief theorist was Shakir Hassan Al Said, who in 1973 published a framing discussion of its underlying philosophy—which he dubbed “One Dimension”—on the occasion of the group's second exhibition. The publication also contained commentary by artists Madiha Umar, Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri, and Jamil Hamoudi, the latter two of which are included here. Umar's theories of the letter in art are outlined in her 1949 text “Arabic Calligraphy: A Source of Inspiration in Abstract Art” in this volume.

The Philosophical, Technical, and Expressive Aspects of the One Dimension (1973)

Shakir Hassan Al Said

The principle of incorporating the alphabetic letter into art and developing it to express its meaning requires studying the One Dimension from a number of angles.

1. From a philosophical perspective, we may consider the type of thought that is devoted to incorporating the letter into art to be transcendent thought. It does not try to delve into investigation as an experimental scientific approach, but attempts to bifurcate into a comparative experience between two worlds: namely, the linguistic world of the letter and the plastic-arts world of two dimensions. In this respect, the One Dimension is a human-nonhumanist vision, for it transcends its subjective world and moves toward a cosmic horizon. Because the artist who is devoted to using letters is not content with plastic art alone, he adds alphabetical signs to it. This means that the painting becomes more than just a formal endeavor, for if artistic composition is at its core a spatial composition, then inserting a linguistic element moves beyond the essence of that practice toward its temporal horizon. This means that what the artist wants to discuss at that moment is not human or spatial existence, but rather the problem of spatial *and* temporal existence taken as a whole. Hence, the main subject of the One Dimension is cosmic existence itself.

This theory of the One Dimension assumes that the true meaning of the cosmos is realized by returning form to its linear eternity and mass to its formal eternity. The One Dimension is the practice of transcendence (and, by implication, of falling back) through the relationship formed between the self and the external world in such a manner that the relationship does not become shackles in which the subjective human existence becomes petrified; it is rather an evolving relationship in which the self experiences its being within cosmic existence.

We can observe the human-nonhumanist features of the One Dimension when we compare Surrealist and contemplative visions. The Surrealist vision is at its core a humanist vision, because it sees that the authentic form of a human entity does not lie in consciousness, but rather in the conjoining of conscious expression with the underlying subconscious levels or with the unconscious mind. It follows that Surrealist alienation is alienation that does not transcend its human framework. The Surrealist is someone who fully believes in his positive absolute humanity but feels

that the academic vision has obstructed his human truth since it continually hides its radiant and authentic side, the side that is called the subconscious or the world of dreams and delirium. Hence, with his new vision, the Surrealist restores truth to human existence.

Contemplative vision, on the other hand, sees how human consciousness, in its current state as an active consciousness in relation to the universe, continually impairs its true existence because it does not sufficiently express the truth of spatial and temporal existence taken as a whole. It can, however, be a fruitful consciousness if it is absorbed into the universe by becoming a passive existence. So if the “fantastical” is the model for the Surrealist, then the “thinker” is the model for the contemplator, which is to say the man of the One Dimension. This contemplator is someone who perceives his cosmic being through his humanity when he turns his passivity into a new element to become one with the whole of creation. He does not inhabit his “self” as a positivity set against the negativity of the external world, but instead inhabits that “self” as a passivity against the activeness of the same world.

Thus, the pictorial surface and its capacities for expressing the self soon accept the activeness of the linguistic letter by inserting the letter’s world into the world of the painting. Incorporating the letter in art is then no longer anything but the cosmic stance of the contemplator, for it seeks to expose the unity of two worlds that are simultaneously inhabited, namely, the “linguistic” world of thought and the “plastic” world of sight.

2. As for the technical aspect, the One Dimension is attention to the transformation of linguistic symbols into a plastic dimension. That is, if the “vitality” of natural features is the philosophical form of the complete theory of polytheism expressing the metaphysical thought of ancient times—which is to say the selection of “ideal conditions” to express knowledge rather than using sensory observation to express visual sensation—then in the modern era the “principle of mimesis” has become the philosophical form for the humanist and scientific disposition; meanwhile, in current times, “syncretic technique,” i.e., the form expressive of the unity of cosmic existence, is the new framework for a collative vision. This is how the principle of collage was found to be a new means of expanding such a vision. In the One Dimension, the artistic technique becomes a collagelike endeavor, as it unites letter-signs on the one hand with the plastic realm of painting on the other. Thus the letter also assumes its technical role as a manifestation within the linguistic world by its presence at the center of the pictorial surface. It remains, in fact, surrounded by an aura from the world of linguistic conception, in addition to the features it brings in from the art of Arabic calligraphy. The incorporated letter and the painted space together form a rhetorical attestation; that is, they form all the readable phonic and symbolic heritage of the intellectual world. It is true that the transformative technique here will transform the letter in its turn into a plastic sign, whether through nonlinguistic variation or through division, yet in the viewer’s conception it remains in the world of language. In short, the syncretic technique of One Dimension art appears to be an endeavor to combine different materials, although in essence it combines two worlds. It is thus a clear case of intellectual collage.

3. As for the expressive aspect of the One Dimension, the realm of the letter is a rich realm that combines the internal and external dimensions of the innovative capacities of art. Arabic calligraphy has many styles of expression. There is the condensed Kufic style, and there are other forms with a curved impetus, such as Naskh, Thuluth, or Farsi scripts. In each instance, the different incorporated forms of calligraphy retain their plastic and ornamental values, whereas the incorporation of the standard letter becomes something ordinary, as in the styles of handwriting, children's handwriting, and wall graffiti. All these remain expressive of the essence of the human spirit, which presents itself spontaneously, teeming with expression and with the conscious and unconscious together. In other words, in painting that is laden with the letter in this way, expression is almost akin to the signs produced by a seismograph. For there is the writing style of the educational stage, i.e. the writing of students in primary school in particular. And there is the writing style of the city walls, which is as replete with anxiety, fear, and spontaneity as it is full of obscure, repressed, and deceptive signals.

The One Dimension, then, in including these forms of writing, seeks to express the human self in a state of encounter with nature as wall, or nature as ground. Therein lies its expressive role in art.

—Shākir Ḥasan Āl Saʿīd, “al-Jawānib al-Falsafīyya wa-l-Taḥqīqīyya wa-l-Taʿbīrīyya li-l-Buʿd al-Wāḥid,” in *al-Buʿd al-Wāḥid: al-Fann Yastalhim al-Ḥarf 2* (Baghdad: Maṭbaʿat al-Shaʿb, 1973), 5–9. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

The Civilizational Quality of the One Dimension (1973)

Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri

The psychological connection that humans have with letters has its spiritual roots in history and has a direct, material relationship to the present day.

The One Dimension is but a new art practice, a human perception of the letter as an art form and a civilizational symbol, one fused with the character of contemporary Eastern man, who employs Arabic letters visually, intellectually, and spiritually.

As a move from geometric definition to plastic inspiration, it is like any work of art that transcends the existent toward deeper and more comprehensive dimensions, discovering the profounder and more human meanings in life, in the human body within space and the cosmos. As for materialist explanations, they are the specialty of the sciences (such as anatomy, physiology, astronomy, physics, etc.). The One Dimension constitutes a transcendence of linguistic meaning (in which linguists and literary scholars specialize) toward a purely plastic meaning. This certainly constitutes a discovery of a new dimension of the letter.

The Arabic letter, which is distinguished by a clear aesthetics and expressiveness, attracts the viewer regardless of its linguistic meaning. Many contemporary Western artists were fascinated by it ([Paul] Klee, [Joan] Miró, [Willi] Baumeister, [Jean] Arp, [Antoni] Tàpies, [Yves] Klein, [Gastone] Novelli, [Robert] Rauschenberg, [Hans] Hartung, and others). Thus, the Arabic letter has entered world art history with a new contemplative and expressive character, acquiring another dimension in

the process. This is an important discovery, for the plastic reality of Arabic letters has remained hidden since their inception—lost, until recently, in the crowd of linguistic meanings and vocal enunciations.

Let us now look into the birth of letters with man, who desired to write. In the beginning, a letter had two separate manifestations, which ancient man then merged into one entity, namely, the traditional letter.

Those [original two] manifestations were the visual (or formal) and the vocal (or phonetic).

The first manifestation, the visual, is the one that is of interest to artists, while the second is the specialty of linguists, dramatists, and singers.

A difficult question crops up here. Why did the first writer's hand draw letters with such smoothness and flow, with these particular ascending lines and intersections, and not some other way? Why was the letter *wāw* drawn with a centrifugal curve rather than a centripetal one? Why was the letter *sīn* formed out of three short closed beats and a longer open one? Could there be a connection between the letter as sound and the letter as form?

But such a connection seems naïve and unconvincing to me, too direct. I think the connection is deeper and more important than that, and that it is tied to the psychology of the people to whom the letters belong.

Let us contemplate the shapes of Arabic letters. Each letter begins at a condensed and precise point and continues until it vanishes into a flowing trail—a beginning of defined dimensions followed by an ending that melts into a space of unknown dimensions. This is exactly like the life of a Bedouin, who begins his day in the confinement of his tent, then goes out and disappears into a vast dimensionless desert. He begins each morning with a mind focused on the day's plan, which then vanishes into the indifference of wind, sand, light, and time.

The study of the psychological and social origins of the shapes of Arabic letters is extremely important, and I hope that it will soon arouse the interest of specialists.

The Bedouin character gave Arabic letters a large degree of emotionality, aesthetics, and spaciousness, in contrast to Latin letters, which were born in the city (as straight ascending lines that are governed by an arid geometry).

Artists of the One Dimension are researchers investigating the aesthetics and civilizational quality of Arabic letters, and they read the Bedouin mentality—and also the emotional expressiveness and civilizational density—within those letters.

The Arabic letter is like any living organism. It was born in a primitive state, then went on to develop its features; after that, it began to adorn itself with dots and diacritical marks, then continued to evolve, influenced by Islamic civilization and architecture, as seen in the Kufic script and other forms. It will continue to change and evolve according to the social phase it finds itself in. Time has once again revived the Arabic script, in the midst of this era with its modern problems and concerns: machines, mobility, outer space, and also the spiritual dimensions of contemporary man, who is living through the conflict between the existing state of things and the astonishing data and surprises of science.

The One Dimension is a civilizational phase in the life of letters in which they are treated not as museum pieces or imposed geometric forms, but as civilizational

creations. It is a historical phase that is associated both with the essence of the letter and with the future.

Practitioners of One Dimension art take various approaches. One practitioner could be interested in its Sufism, another in its scientific and mechanical nature, and yet another in its plastic emotionality—these are the lines of a rainbow in a contemporary bundle of light.

Here's an example: I am a man of science (a medical doctor), and have developed over the past five years a certain artistic sensitivity toward the figure of the circle. It interests me, on the plastic and philosophical levels. I have observed it taking part in the lines and planes of the entire visible world, and in the background meanings of life. I have also noticed in Arabic letters an abundance of circular visuals, arching flow, and musical repetition. I have no doubt that a deep connection with life and heritage emerges whenever I use letters in my paintings.

When we visit an exhibition and stand before a painting, we don't see a fixed, static image or form, but a developing work of art. The energy of its birth and creation emerges out of life, out of the earth, and then it is reflected onto the artist's consciousness and emotions, interacting profoundly with him to produce the painting. The birth is often difficult, preceded by attempts that fall between what the artist wants and what he is actually able to accomplish. Then the image emerges, breathing in life, seeing the light as well as seeing and being seen by people. But it continues to long for life, for eternity, and for the constituents of survival.

In other words, the painting longs to be distinct and to contribute to the rich momentum of human civilization. This is the civilizational dimension of the image, the dimension that matters most in a work of art, or in any other work.

It is a cosmic dimension that comes into being once man has transcended his earthly existence and entered into cosmic knowledge. It is on this foundation that those interested in the One Dimension carry out their work.

An eternal question stubbornly remains: What is the extent of this contribution?

It is, whatever the circumstances, an attempt, and every authentic attempt has civilizational merit. Inevitably, it will blossom someday, contribute to the world, and affirm its existence with the word *yes*.

—Qutayba al-Shaykh Nūri, "Ḥadāriyyat al-Bu'd al-Wahid," in *al-Bu'd al-Wāḥid: al-Fann Yastalhim al-Ḥarf 2* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Sha'b, 1973), 25–29. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

About the Letter . . . A Response (1973)

Jamil Hamoudi

I was once asked about the aim or objective of an artist who introduces Arabic letters into plastic art.

The following lines might offer an answer of sorts: I think that the aim is as clear as it is manifold, hosting multiple dualities. For at the time when the artist discovers the bountiful wellspring of pure possibilities that Arabic letters hold for plastic art, his thought will have become linked, in a deep and tangible way, to several

civilizational dimensions that arise from using those letters as sources of inspiration. This will come after a phase akin to a subjective struggle, one that the artist must endure for a while so as to cultivate his perception of the heritage value that is manifest in the presence of the letter, which is a foundation and a constituent element before it becomes words, meanings, a people's language, and a specific culture.

The artist's objective can be summed up as the return to authenticity in expression and the subjection of artistic form to cultural bases with specific ethnic standards. When a non-Arab artist seeks inspiration from Arabic letters, the exercise does not transcend the visual composition of artistic form, adhering to external artistic principles that have no depth and are thus prone to ambiguity and confusion. For the Arab artist, by contrast, the same exercise amounts to a close connection to the original principles of a comprehensive culture with its particular limitations and standards. Since letters have spiritual values that, even in their simplest forms, seep into the human psyche, the artist becomes someone who has found himself, someone who strives to express something with sufficient sacredness and sublimity to elevate his work to a level distinguished by purity and abstraction, without losing its genuine relationship to society or weakening its vitality and humanity.

We can thus see that the introduction of Arabic letters into contemporary plastic art has many aims, not just one single aim. The most important of these is to steer the process of artistic innovation toward a civilizational quality that connects the artist to authentic foundations that distinguish his nationalism and pull him toward his land and his natural surroundings. The process also allows the artist to make use of the suppleness of the Arabic letter—known for its beautiful form and its malleability, like a melody that can be played on different musical instruments—in order to realize a plastic perspective that brings the subject closer to purity and abstraction without sacrificing the signified content or disturbing its meaning. One of the features of the Arabic letter acting as a source of inspiration in art is its ability to draw us toward an image with dualistic value, since it proposes, with its rich spontaneity, an intellectual approach at the same time it becomes a formal existence that, in its appearance, can hardly be considered part of nature, and yet does not renounce nature. For it is extracted from the depths of human existence, and human existence is at its core both form and content.

—Jamil Hammūdi, "An al-Ḥarf . . . Jawāb," in *al-Bu'd al-Wāhid: al-Fann Yastalhim al-Ḥarf 2* (Baghdad: Maṭba'at al-Sha'b, 1973), 30–31. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

THE DIASPORIC DIVIDE

Syrian artist Na'im Isma'il addressed this 1973 epistolary essay to his friend Marwan Kassab Bachi, who had left Syria in 1957 to study in Germany, only to remain there permanently. Published in a special plastic-arts issue of the Syrian state cultural journal *al-Ma'rifa*, Isma'il's bittersweet meditation on the affective bonds of the homeland appeared amid other, more official national accounts of trends and developments in the Arab art world.

See Plate 43 for a 1972 painting by Marwan Kassab Bachi, used by *al-Ma'rifa* to illustrate this text.

An Arab Artist between Damascus and Berlin (1973)

Na'im Isma'il

Dear Marwan,

We parted fourteen years ago. I wouldn't use the term *parted* except that the period preceding each of our departures to distant places was, to a great extent, a heated time. I don't think you've forgotten. We had together just come out of—or entered into—an intense experience. We had held an exhibition, you and I, together with our older brother Adham [Isma'il], in 1957 at the halls of the Unesco Palace in Beirut.¹

At the time, the exhibition left a good impression on most Lebanese critics, artists, and intellectuals. I have held on to some of what they wrote, and I vividly recall the great enthusiasm with which we were received.

That day at our exhibition, we raised an issue, the great importance of which we had scarcely imagined until after the furor it stirred. The exhibition had, as a matter of fact, carried a character of commitment to the Arab cause in its broad political aspect: works that 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. Adham with his arabesque, unending lines, bright color, and absolute joy. Me with my little units of decorative motifs of village life from Palmyra to Antakya, to the alleyways of Damascus. And you and your hint of passionate expressionism and gypsy love for the walls of the ancient quarters of Damascus.

Many of our brothers met us with great enthusiasm there. The pinnacle of that enthusiasm was expressed by the Lebanese critic Victor Hakim, in *La Revue du Liban*: "I hope Lebanese artists follow the same path and search within heritage . . .," etc.²

You had inclined toward expressionism since your earliest days, and you had a special talent for utilizing color contrast that relied on differences in hue between light and dark tones. We used to refer to this by using the term "*tache*."³ *Tache* is a word we still use, as we haven't found a replacement for it yet.

[Pierre] Bonnard, the French painter, was once commissioned to paint a mural. When asked what he would like to paint, he said: "All I want is to be able to put good and balanced '*taches*' on that wall."

A *tache* can almost be looked at as the picture's mark of distinction, the disposition of the artistic work in depiction: the ability to create harmony between grades of color from light to dark, and the other way around. For a painter, everything rests on that ability.

The lines, the form, even mass—few are those who understand this and few are those who treat their subject with the *tache*, i.e., with black and white, before they move to treating it with color. I can see them now, scornfully looking at me, whispering: "How old fashioned and academic," they say. "He says things that are behind the times." Ah, those youths. . . . If only they knew one thing: Learning and then going beyond what one has learned is better than being ignorant and then going beyond that of which one is ignorant. It is great for a young man to be proud, but it is greater when his pride is based on a credit of both talent and knowledge.

This requires a strong will, coolness, and total control of oneself and the work at hand. Rare are those who can endure that. That is why, in most of the art we see, we admire something—an angle, or an aspect of the way it has been treated, color, a certain harmony, an agreement of contrasting elements—but without feeling comfortable with everything in it. Feeling comfortable with a work of art is a rare and complex thing. We have to admit this. Naturally, we stop at art that fills us with the greatest deal of comfort. I do not mean psychological relaxation and peace of mind here, but rather feeling comfortable with the artistic value and humanistic content, even if the work is waging war with us and throwing stones at our heads.

Two years after you left, I received a box from you containing color slides of your paintings, all of which were entirely abstract. Nevertheless, the works ranged among different tendencies. Some of them tended toward colored planes resembling the work of [Serge] Poliakoff: harmony in color removed from the theories of physics, reliant on factors of psychological satisfaction and free connections between planes, and therefore far from the rigidity of Cubism and all the geometric trends that came out of Cubism. That was on the one hand. On the other hand, you had some abstract works that could be labeled experiments in *tachisme*: particles of color and scattered lines, some of which were in harmony with one another while others were not. Nevertheless, a deep sensitivity dominated the work in all its aspects. All this, including the rapid changes in experiment, was justified by your entry into a new world, a process that I can simply call a world of technique or new techniques.

There, far away, you were familiarizing yourself with materials and with new relationships between lines, figures, and colors, while completely freeing yourself from the subject. You were also getting to know the experiments of others. You wanted to understand what others, there in the West, were saying—not just theoretically, but through the actual application of those techniques.

So you entered the world of abstraction. . . .

In this context, I prefer to use the word *distortion*, in order to link between obscurantist abstraction, which does not represent anything to us in terms of the visible, with other abstraction, which might contain some features from the external world. Let all of it be *distortion* of the visible world that we see in the perspectival plane before us.

Contemporary art is built on distortion in its broader sense. This is because the eye of the camera apparatus has become much clearer—so clear that it cannot be compared to the eye of the plastic artist. If you want to be contemporary, you must be a distorter of some sort. Like fate, distortion is forced on the artist for whom the doors to classical, realist representational treatments have all been shut.

However, at the same time, distortion is a form of freedom to the artist of this era. All artists believe in that: through our personal interpretations, we are able to say our own word. This is a battle that was forced on us, but we are convinced that it determines our humanistic position in the broad sense. In this battle we will be able to say something new, as we are given a great degree of freedom in choosing the means, or the weapon.

As we have said, distortion—any distortion—need not deny art its realist aspect. [Piet] Mondrian, who analyzed his visions through horizontal and vertical

lines, additions and subtractions, squares, rectangles, and lozenges, might have been a realist like [Francisco] Goya or [Jean-François] Millet.

It was with much relief that I read in your letter, which you sent me at this time, a phrase that I must mention now, for it is a great expression of this period. It is [Jean-Baptiste-Camille] Corot's famous words of supplication, which he recited before embarking on any new work of art: "Oh Lord, please make me forget everything I have learned about art."

At the end of that letter, you wrote:

I have abandoned all that I created in the past; and I view many of my newer works as trivial garbage after just a short while. Thus far, I haven't felt enthusiastic about any of the things I've created. . . . Don't you agree that two or three years of experimenting is not such a long time, or that in fact it isn't even enough time to be guided to what one wants? There are no windows here like the ones that were in our alley, no weeds that grow through cracks in the street's stones. Is it then right for me to continue to paint visions of windows, dwellings, and Damascus flowers? I started off like someone gambling, like someone hurling himself into the sea.

Yes, Marwan. And what a raging, terrifying sea, with dark horizons and distant shores. What a thorny forest that is discovered over and over again, and yet remains mysterious and unknown, a virgin for all eternity. This is art.

However, even though any true artist naturally possesses the characteristics of an adventurer and a fighter, he must still be able to define the bold lines of that which propels the adventure forward—the cause and the caused. He should know how to swim before jumping into the sea.

An Arab artist must not be lost. The temptations of this world must not distract him from the goal for which he has gone to Europe. The complexities of the experiences of European experiments in modern art must not make him forget what he wants to do. Being in Europe contributes to enriching the self, the Arab character. Any other interpretation of the situation simply is not true.

As the years have gone by, we've gradually drifted further and further apart from one another. I used to hear some of your news—ambiguous tidbits. I did not know where your art was heading or along which trend it was developing, until a colleague came to me with a painting of yours (an engraving) and a brochure for one of your exhibitions in Berlin, which had photographs of some of your work. It might have been your first exhibition there.

I must say, I was surprised at first. For days I was confused and disconcerted, unable to make a judgment. I delayed expressing my opinion until I had lived with your work for a longer period. Don't you agree that art first has to infiltrate the soul, the depths of the soul? Thus, a period of time had to go by.

The first thing that unsettled me in your drawing was that heavy pessimism that overshadowed every stroke you placed on that terrifying surface called a canvas. You were depicting yourself in particular, but in a peculiar mirror. A mirror that was neither dark nor desperate but merely pessimistic, and that instilled in oneself a great fear of destiny . . . of a certain destiny!

Given that you have continued in the same style, developing and deepening it, I feel that I can continue the discussion along the same way.

Your evolution over the past three to four years has been nothing other than an astonishing delving into a style you were employing—speaking from a technical perspective. However, in reality you’ve been living through a critical phase of questioning, which will very likely lead you to a point of “to be or not to be.” Have you confronted yourself with courage and honesty!? No, that’s not sufficient. You are confronting yourself with a sensual, bodily, and sexual encounter. Fumbling for your skin, your head, your eyes, first trying to confirm your material existence. Sometimes, many times, the eyes almost melt, involuntarily drifting apart from one another. Your limbs disintegrate in slow boredom. You attempt to stay together, to remain on your feet, but you can’t. Yet at the same time, you don’t collapse. In order to remain, you find nothing to lean on except your very self, your body, your organs in particular. That is truly terrifying and painful. I try to embrace you, but where can I get hold of you? If I touched you, I am afraid you would fall apart, become dust in the wind. And I am afraid that if I touched you I, too, would fall apart and crumble.

Marwan, is one’s body all a person is left with? In all its materiality, its flesh, its skin, its blood and other fluids? How cruel is it that one’s horizons are narrowed down to this frightening form? You are sometimes overcome by longing when you crane your neck and try, with bleary eyes, to see distant horizons. Maybe your homeland lies behind those horizons: Damascus, Syria, the Arab world. . . . You don’t see much. You don’t dream, you don’t feel optimistic, but neither do you despair.

The gist of the sensibilities of a European person? Two questions come to mind as I see the art of Europe within your work:

- Has the paradigm, the ideal, ultimately collapsed in Europe?
- Did Europe become fed up with health and undertake a sanctification of disease instead?

Fourteen years ago you craned your neck to make the sculpture *Hunger* (currently in the National Museum in Damascus). Here you are again, trying to rise up like El Greco . . . trying.

Marwan, I don’t think I’m exaggerating when I say that you stand on equal footing with renowned artists around the world. But I have something else that I must say to you: Can’t you be a little less pessimistic? I want you to be happy, to be even a little bit happy.

You wrote to me ten years ago, saying: “I would throw my paintings in the garbage if they didn’t deserve to exist, if they didn’t bring about real joy and make people want to leap in the air. . . .”

You also wrote: “You reminded me of freshness and tranquility. . . . I’ll look for them.” I am reminding you once more. Don’t you want to look for them again? I hope you do.

There is a solution, and I’m certain it’s the only one: Come back home after such a long absence. You now live in Europe heart and soul, as they say, and we are not better than Europe. We still import paint, brushes, keys, and shoelaces from over there. But I still believe we 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.

A long time ago, you told me: "I'm certain we'll meet along the path somehow. I'm sure of it. I'll never be a stranger to you."

I still consider your words a promise. A promise that you will come back to the homeland so we can carry its burdens together. That is all I hope for.

Notes

1. Eds.: The exhibition *Syrian Painters* opened in June 1957 and featured work by Na'im Isma'il, his brother Adham Isma'il, and Marwan Kassab Bachi.
2. Eds.: The reference is to Victor Hakim, "Trois Jeunes Peintres de Syrie à l'Unesco," *La Revue du Liban* (June 8, 1957): 17.
3. Eds.: The printed article here uses the Arabic word *al-buq'a*, which literally means "spot," "stain," or "patch," but places it in quotes, as if it were a loan word from another language. Because later in the text Isma'il explicitly links the concept of "spot painting" to the French term *tachisme*, we here translated *al-buq'a* as *tache*, meaning painterly touches of unblended color.

—Na'im Ismā'il, "Fannān 'Arabī Bayna Dimashq wa-Birlīn," *al-Ma'rifa*, no. 134 (April 1973): 102–8. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

NEW REALISM / Baghdad

This manifesto ratifying a commitment to a modern version of realist art was signed in Baghdad in 1973 by four artists whose work often included public commissions such as murals. It was published in the newspaper *al-Thawra*.

Manifesto of New Realism (1973)

Abdal-Razzaq Ali Jawdat, Muhammad Arif, Shams al-Din Faris, Ibrahim al-Kamali

Since antiquity, plastic art has played, in diverse domains, a decisive, leading role in human societies. Not only was it a mirror that reflected its society, it was also, and continues to be, an important educational element for edifying the public and enhancing their cultural and intellectual level.

As realist artists, we must clarify the fundamental characteristic of content, namely, by taking account of objective reality. Toward this end, the artist, through his creations, finds all the traditions surrounding him; and although the social meaning of artistic production becomes evident through the social development of art, the responsibility always falls on the shoulders of the mature artist, who is armed with progressive opinions and his perceptions of his society. Thus intellectual interpretation and understanding are products of the objective circumstances established by nature and the environment.

We are realist artists who do not stop before the superficial details that surround us. Instead, we go beyond them to the whole spirit of society. In our view, this philosophical work is one of the most important components of all our artistic productions.

Transforming art so that it enters into the service of the public is, in our eyes, a great tornado that overruns all the foreign trends that are alien to our national culture. This act gives us the continuity to stress that art has a social role and should have a strong impact on the broadest of audiences, teaching and inspiring them, and calling on them to join the struggle. This can only ever be accomplished by perceiving what the public feels expresses their contemporary reality.



Shams al-Din Faris. Mural commissioned for Lumumba University, Moscow. 1969

Through our artistic and theoretical creations, we shall cultivate the roots of a modern realism that will be, in and of itself, enriched by all that the past and the present have brought forth, even that which came up through contemporary individualistic art.

The most significant thing this modern realism embodies is humanistic meaning, with its progressive ideology aimed at human happiness. Our modern realism will be the general benchmark meaning for the realization of humanistic values through the lyrical emotionalism of human social life. Furthermore, we believe that the emotional forces that affect the viewer are difficult to attain by means of imitating reality in its familiar form (naturalism). Here, a vast space opens for the creative imagination of the painter. This imagination is not sustainable without its foundation, which is life itself. For creativity only arises when it senses

those things that are not visible. But, at the same time, in order to see those things correctly, and in order for it to be a genuine creativity sensitive to everything surrounding the artist:

Free creative imagination, in our opinion, will transform realism from those archaic frameworks that arrest development. For realism cannot be “nothing.” As creative material, it is in a state of perpetual motion.

But can this movement bring a modern realism to that which opposes it? At that time, will it put an end to the spread of strange and foreign trends? Here, we realists have a deeply rooted belief in popular meaning and its intellectual convictions. The artists who follow European trends innovate within form for the sake of form—as if playing with pure harmonies. However, the true realists always build and are building, with determination, a form that is more refined and more in line with substance. To us, reality is unified within a fulcrum based upon the national traditions of the contemporary people. It explores the experiences of our great artists and our ancient civilization while taking into account the objective reality in which we live during this era, emphasizing a contemporary progressive realism that effectively contributes to the civilizational construction of our homeland and to that of world civilization.

Through our realism, *the strong relationship and deep ties between man and the world around him* become apparent.

We also believe that human kindness gives it strength and turns it into an art of tenacious struggle.

—“Al-Bayān al-Awwal li-Jamā‘at al-Wāqifiyya al-Ḥaditha,” *al-Thawra*, February 14, 1973; repr. in Shākir Ḥasan Āl Sa‘īd, *al-Bayānāt al-Fanniyya fi al-‘Irāq* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-‘Ilām, Mudiriyyat al-Thaqāfa al-‘amma), 41–42. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Hussein.

RESPONSE TO THE OCTOBER 1973 WAR

A new war between Arab forces and Israel's military, fought in October 1973, ended in a ceasefire negotiated by the United Nations, and was celebrated as a victory in much Arabic national press. Responses from artists varied, and included flashpoints of dissent around the need for critical versus constructive work. In Beirut, the Anglophone cultural-affairs magazine *Monday Morning* commissioned work responding to the war from Waddah Faris and Aref El Rayess, only to characterize the latter artist's efforts as an impulsive and unconsidered kind of political commitment. This prompted El Rayess to compose the following angry letter to the editor.

Letter to the Editor of *Monday Morning* (1973)

Aref El Rayess

Dear Sirs,

Your magazine contacted me recently and asked me if I had any painting expressing my impressions about the war. I answered by the affirmative saying I had paintings with my impressions about both the war and the May incidents. Subsequently, your photographer came to my studio and took pictures of what was published in your issue no. 70 without interviewing me or taking from me, directly or indirectly, a statement or commentary.

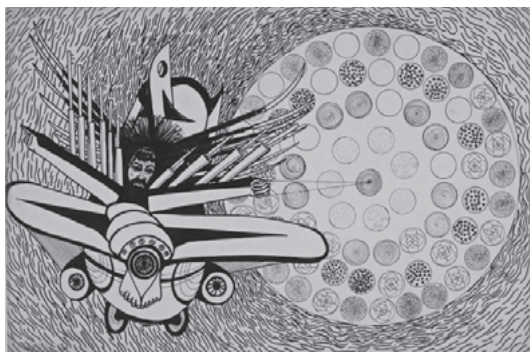
On looking over the said issue, published on October 15, 1973, I was surprised to note that you have attributed to me statements I have not made—statements which I consider to be antagonistic to expressive and committed art. Your reference to “relatively vulgar paintings since June 1967” contradicts your publication of said paintings.

You also state that you have commissioned me and other Lebanese artists to render our impressions about the war. In this respect, I wish to point out the difference between the commercial artist and the genuine one. The former, like any other vendor, asks to be paid for whatever he produces. The latter's only concern is to contribute to the cultural, political, and “military” effort of this country.

I hope you will publish this letter in your next edition particularly that I do not wish to be paid for contributing for a cause which I consider to be mine.

—Aref El Rayess, letter, originally published in English, *Monday Morning* 2 no. 73 (November 5–11, 1973).

Aref El Rayess. Untitled.
1973. Ink on cardboard.
19 7/8 × 30" (50.5 ×
76.3 cm). Aref El Rayess
Foundation, Aley, Mount
Lebanon, Lebanon



PERSONAL REFLECTION

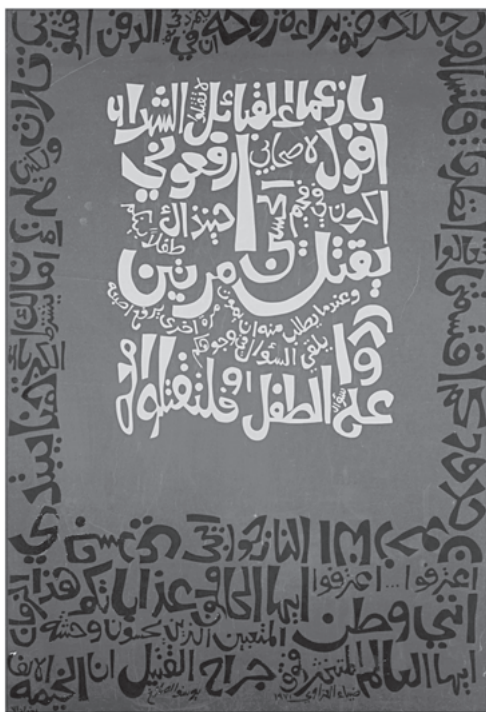
Graphic Design and the Visual Arts in Iraq

Dia al-Azzawi

I designed my first poster in 1962, for the Iraqi film *Abu Heyla*, directed by Yusuf Girgis Hamad and Mohammed Shukri Jameel, and featuring Iraqi actors Yusuf al-Ani and Zainab (Fakhriya Abdel Karim) in the leading roles. I progressed in this art by participating in the annual Poster Expo in Warsaw and by following the Polish art and design magazine *Projekt*. In 1964 I won a design competition with my poster for the annual exhibition of the Iraqi Artists Society, and the following year I won a prize in the Baghdad International Expo poster-design competition. Since then, poster design has consistently enriched my practice.

The first exhibition of poster art in Iraq took place at the National Gallery of Modern Art, from April 1 to 8, 1971. It was proposed by the artist Nadhim Ramzi and supported by his design office, which had a modern printing press. To encourage official and private institutions to improve communication, the *Exhibition of Iraqi Posters* covered a range of topics: politics, tourism, commerce, and culture. Along with Ramzi and myself, participants in the show included Rafa al-Nasiri, Hashem Samarji, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, and Qutaiba al-Sheikh Nouri.

The victory for my colleagues and myself in the elections of the Iraqi Artists Society in 1971 provided a golden opportunity for us to pursue what those artists (including myself) who had signed the 1969 manifesto “Towards a New Vision” had hoped to achieve.¹ From the outset, I worked with the society’s administrative committee and via personal contacts to organize art events that were integrated into the Arab, and specifically Iraqi, cultural environment. We organized readings by Iraqi and other Arab poets,



Dia al-Azzawi. Poster for the first al-Marbid poetry festival, Basra, Iraq. 1971. Screenprint. 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 27 $\frac{3}{16}$ " (100 × 70 cm). Collection the artist

along with panel discussions on Iraqi art and theater. In cooperation with the Kuwaiti Arts Association, we managed to organize the first Iraqi art exhibition in Kuwait.

In April 1971, the first Arab poetry festival, al-Marbid, was held in Basra. Yahya al-Sheikh designed one poster for the overall event, another for the Iraqi art exhibition, and a third for the book and publications section of the fair. I worked with Hashem Samarji to organize the art exhibition. Al-Nasiri, Samarji, and I created a poetry poster that was the first of its kind in the history of Arab poster design: a collaborative effort between Iraqi visual artists and Iraqi poets Youssef al-Sayigh, Buland al-Haydari, and Fadhil al-Azzawi. These activities led to our meeting Iraq's Minister of Information, Shafiq al-Kamali, who suggested that we consider organizing an arts festival along the lines of al-Marbid. This was a great opportunity to realize our dream of presenting events that would introduce us to Arab artists, at a time when arts publications and journals did not yet exist. So, after much planning, in April 1972 we presented the al-Wasiti festival, named for the thirteenth-century Iraqi artist Yahya al-Wasiti.

In 1972 the Iraqi government nationalized the oil industry. To celebrate, we presented a poster exhibition under the Jewad Selim memorial in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, with support from the Iraqi journal *Wa'y al-'Ummal*. Yahya al-Sheikh, Sadiq Smaysem, Musa al-Khamisi, Rafa al-Nasiri, Salim al-Dabbagh, Amer al-Obaidi, Talib al-Allaq, and I all participated in this exhibition, which included poetry readings by Youssef al-Sayigh, Fadhil al-Azzawi, Zaki al-Jaber, Muhammad Jamil Shalash, Salih Bahr al-Ulum, and Khalid Ali Mustafa.

In the Arab biennial initiatives of the 1970s, posters played a significant role as a mode of innovative communication with the public. The creative explosion in this period was related to many factors: political and cultural conditions, collaborations between official institutions and artists, the use of posters as means of developing society and citizens' sense of belonging, and the degree of freedom we artists had in dealing with the topics at hand. We were able to push our practice beyond local boundaries and toward international engagement.

Like many artists, I was convinced of my own ability to play a part in developing social relations and creating a cultural and artistic base that could energize and guide younger generations. But in Iraq the conditions changed, and by the time I left the country, in 1976, the dominant political current had already severed its connections with others, and from that point on, the art of poster design in Iraq took a narrow political direction.

Note

1. See "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision" (1969), in the present volume, 306–9.

Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

Born in Iraq, **Dia al-Azzawi** is an artist, graphic designer, and founder of the New Vision artists group in Iraq. Since 1976, he has lived and worked in London.

See Plate 36 for Dia al-Azzawi's poster for a November 1971 exhibition at Baghdad's National Gallery of Modern Art.

IN FOCUS

Graphic Art in the Arab World

May Muzaffar

The 1960s represent a foundational period for Arab graphic art, a form of artistic expression in which the statement is made, usually on paper, through an emphasis on lines, marks, or printed letters. During this decade, many art students from across the Arab world returned home after being educated abroad—in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Poland, the United States, China, and elsewhere—and began teaching printmaking, engraving, etching, lithography, screenprinting, and other graphic mediums in schools and universities. Egypt, Lebanon, and Iraq were among the leading countries in the region to establish graphic departments in art institutions. Many of these pioneering artists also participated in international graphic exhibitions, receiving awards and serving on juries. Beginning in 1978, international graphic workshops became part of the annual cultural season in the Moroccan seaside town of Asilah. In 1980, the Iraqi Cultural Centre in London organized the Third World Biennial of Graphic Art, with Chilean artist Roberto Matta presiding on the jury; a later iteration of the event was held in Baghdad. Some years later, in 1993, the Egyptian International Print Triennial was launched in Cairo.

Generally speaking, the best-known artists have worked in both painting and printmaking; a number of them have had a profound influence on subsequent generations. In Lebanon, for example, painters Shafic Abboud and Halim Jurdak were both active in graphic art during the second half of the twentieth century. Later generations have become still more enthusiastic, using more developed graphic techniques. Mohammad al Rawas, to name one, has been working and teaching printmaking combined with mixed media.

In Iraq, graphic art was initially promoted by the first Iraqi artist to specialize in printmaking, Rafa al-Nasiri. Trained in China and later in Lisbon, al-Nasiri created figurative woodcuts, and later abstract etchings, which incorporated Arabic lettering as an expressionist element, always maintaining a link between his prints and paintings. Dia al-Azzawi, a prolific colorist painter, is also renowned as a printer who embellishes his screenprints with Arabic texts. Suad al-Attar, known for her thematic symbols that draw on Mesopotamian and Arabic scripts alike, is another Iraqi artist who works in both mediums. Among other contemporary figures, Modhir Ahmed, a graduate of the Baghdad Institute of Fine Arts (and now based in Sweden), is recognized for introducing an innovative technique that uses nontoxic materials in the printmaking process.

In time, the practice of graphic art in the Arab world has become as diversified as it is innovative. In Egypt, Mariam Abdel Aleem, who taught printmaking at the College of Fine Arts at Alexandria University from the time of its establishment in 1958, rendered folkloric themes in precise and highly stylized etchings using aquatint and drypoint. Graphic art has maintained its popularity as a medium in Egypt today; one of the leading printmakers, Ahmed Nawar, explores linear details of geometric forms using multiple plates to produce a single print, working in both aquatint and drypoint. In Kuwait, graphic-art pioneer Munira al Kazi emerged in the mid 1960s as a brilliant printmaker who created colorful and meticulous lyrical compositions. From Syria, Marwan Kassab Bachi (who was based in Germany), Ghayas Akhras, Ziad Dalloul, and Youssef Abdelke are among



Rafa al-Nasiri in the graphic studio at the Institute of Fine Arts, Baghdad. 1983

those celebrated for their work. Mohammed Omer Khalil, a Sudanese artist based in New York since the 1970s, works as a painter and printmaker, creating large color, black-and-white, and photo-based etchings on a variety of surfaces. Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata has become internationally known for his bold, abstract color screenprints that combine Islamic and Western motifs.

In North Africa, Algerian Rachid Koraïchi draws on Islamic and traditional motifs, with an emphasis on Arabic script, which he inscribes throughout a range of mediums—ceramics, textiles, metalwork, and printmaking. Triki Gouider, a Tunisian printmaker, mixes techniques, including etching, drypoint, and aquatint, to produce a single innovative print. Mohamed Ben Meftah is an equally

influential Tunisian printmaker. In Morocco, graphic art has been popular since the 1960s through the work of leading artists such as Mohammed Melehi and Farid Belkahia. Since the late 1960s, Moroccan-Belgian artist Hachmi Azza has devoted his art to printmaking, mastering the interplay of light and shade in surrealist mezzotint compositions.

This list represents only a small selection of pioneers and contemporary graphic artists across generations. It is worth noting that the number of practicing printmakers in the Arab world is limited in comparison with that of painters. This may be attributed to several factors, including the need for a strong academic background, drawing skills, and the patience and strong will required to carry out the technical processing. Furthermore, throughout the 1960s and '70s, printmaking centers were rather limited in much of the Arab world. Nevertheless, many artists have discovered a great joy in this medium, in which spontaneity, intuition, and chance play key roles. Moreover, the graphic arts have offered Arab artists several privileges that painting and sculpture do not: the ability to produce multiple prints; the ease of transferring and exchanging paper works between different parts of the world; and the collective spirit of working together in a shared studio. These factors have helped to create artistic ties and offered Arab artists opportunities to venture into new international arenas.

May Muzaffar is an Iraqi poet, writer, critic, and translator based in Amman, and the editor of *Rafa Nasiri: 50 Years of Printmaking* (Milan: Skira, 2013), a monograph dedicated to the work of her late husband.

See Plate 44 for a 1969 graphic work by Mohammed Omer Khalil.

ARAB BIENNIAL INITIATIVES AND CRITIQUES

The hub of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists activities shifted from Syria to Iraq over the years 1972–73, in part because the nationalization of the country's oil industry had yielded greater capacities for funding. In April 1973, Baghdad hosted the first conference of the General Union, and distributed by newsletter the ideological framing statement "Art Inspired by the People, the Struggle, and Liberation in the Trilogy of Heritage, the Present Moment, and Contemporaneity." In March 1974, the General Union launched the first Arab Biennial in Baghdad, featuring work from fourteen countries: Algeria, the Democratic Republic of Yemen, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Tunisia. Three responses to that event are included here: a transcript from the 1974 biennial's concluding forum discussion; a manifesto issued by the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts on the occasion of the biennial; and finally, a critique of its conceptualization authored by Iraqi artist Dial al-Azzawi, who had not participated in the event.

Art Inspired by the People, the Struggle, and Liberation in the Trilogy of Heritage, the Present Moment, and Contemporaneity (1973)

Art in general, and Arab plastic art in particular, was never isolated from the movements of society, history, and the epoch. If Arab plastic art—in terms of heritage, the present moment, and contemporaneity—is a product of Arab society, with its rich and diverse civilization, that has over long historical eras enriched human civilizations and bestowed abundance upon them, it is also the product of the new Arab society that faces chronic imperialist pressures, such as deepening divisions through a belligerent, reactionary rightist expansion that conspires and helps to implement it. Arab plastic art is also a product of this Arab society facing, at its core, attempts to erase its Arab identity and civilization, as well as its very existence, especially where the pivotal issue in the struggle for Arab liberation is concerned: namely, the issue of Palestine.

Since contemporary Arab plastic art as a reality, along with its problems and aspirations, is the central subject of research and discussion of the First Conference of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists to be held in revolutionary Baghdad this coming April 20 to 24, under the auspices of President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr, the topics "Heritage and the Contemporary" and "The Role of Art in Crucial Arab Issues" are dialectically linked to that main subject.

Hence the trilogy of heritage, the present, and contemporaneity is formed within the framework of current, fateful issues, as a goal, as an object of research, an ambition, and a means of gathering together, so as to enrich the discussion and share experiences, as well as to attain a mode of unified Arab work, contributing to the deepening of the organizational work of Arab plastic art. This is in order to eliminate one aspect of the fragmentation created by eras of imperialism, occupation, and oppression, and in order to intensify the reality of Arab resistance on one of the cultural and media fronts—namely, the front of the plastic art movement in the Arab homeland—and also in order to employ art as a foundation for serving the people

and the struggle, and for the causes of humanity, liberation, progress, and beauty around the world.

For art—like any aspect of culture, literature, and knowledge—is neither an intellectual luxury nor a purely aesthetic, ornamental composition constituting a decorative scheme for man. Rather, it is a function of interaction with man's needs, his existence, aspirations, hopes, desires, and suffering.

Thus, if the fact that “culture, art, and the media are among the finest fruits of human civilization and the strongest and most impactful means invented by man for expressing his social conditions and his emotions, ambitions, and aspirations” is a fundamental topic emphasized by the National Action Charter, then “respecting the freedom to choose forms of expression, their styles, and the preservation of the practical elements of creation and innovation” is another important issue, one that also necessarily relates to the fruits of human civilization and to their effectiveness and impact in expressing the issues of society, nation, and age.

Today, the unity of the Arab struggle for liberation is taking on exceptional importance on all levels. The industrious Arab peoples—as the real stakeholders in the revolution and its forward-thinking accomplishments—are the main audience to whom the artist must turn in order to address and learn from them, and in order to enrich himself with their experiences and to enhance their revolutionary interactions. And further, to enrich the people's fervor and deepen their ambitions and their march toward defending the elements of their human and cultural existence against all imperialist, Zionist, and expansionist colonialist forces, which constitute the fascism of the twentieth century, as well as their reactionary ally that continues to represent the fifth column in planning and executing heinous crimes against the most honorable of our fighters in the Arab field.

The [following] tasks accord an exceptional importance to our First Conference.

First: The conference is being held at a time when the belligerence and aggressiveness of fascist Israel is in parallel and in coordination with all the projects and attempts aimed at liquidating the resistance factions, the people of Palestine, and the occupied Arab territories in a single action that is also conspiring to liquidate the Arab character of the Arabian Gulf.¹

Second: The conference is taking place in the land of revolutionary Baghdad, which continues to stand in fierce confrontational resistance against all forms of monopolization and all imperialist schemes, and at the forefront of resistance in support of the causes of national liberation, progress, and struggle; and in support of the peoples of the world who are striving for independence and liberation; and also in true and fruitful solidarity with the forces of the socialist camp and the progressive forces in the world, the vanguard of which is our friend the Soviet Union.

Third: The unity of Arab plastic artists is but an important addition, a fundamental tributary flowing into the course of action for the sake of the unity of *all* factions of art, until complete unity is achieved. This is the great historical ambition of the peoples of our Arab nation.

Thus fundamental tasks face Arab plastic artists, not just for the sake of the success of their First Conference as a true cultural, artistic, and political demonstration, but first and foremost for the sake of an art that is inspired by the people,

liberation, struggle, and fateful issues, through the trilogy of heritage, the present, and contemporaneity.

We hope the conference and its attendants realize these legitimate aspirations.

Note

1. The *Arabian Gulf* is the name the Arab countries give to the shallow arm of the Arabian Sea between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula (it is also known as the Persian Gulf). This passage in the text would seem to refer to ongoing regional tensions over control of the Gulf region, including the March 1973 border clashes between Iraq and Kuwait.

—“Fann Yastalhim al-Jamāhīr wa-l-Maʿraka wa-l-Taharrur fī Thuluthiyyat al-Turāth wa-l-Hādir wa-l-Muʾāṣara,” news-letter distributed in 1973; repr. in Khālīṣ ʿAzmi and Nizār Salīm, eds., *al-Muʿtamar al-Awwal li-l-Ittiḥād al-ʿĀmm li-l-Fannānīn al-Tashkiliyyīn al-ʿArab* (Baghdad: Wizārat al-ʿIlām, 1973), 12–13. Translated from Arabic by Dina El Husseiny.

Discussion Forum from the First Arab Biennial (1974)

Ismail Shammout (Palestine)

Dear brothers, I welcome you in the name of the General Secretariat of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists. As Arab plastic artists, we have the right to feel proud and honored that this Union of ours is only two years and a few months of age, yet was able to accomplish so many things we previously only dreamed of. We give appreciation to Iraq, which has given us unlimited aid enabling us to turn that dream into a reality that is able to speak for itself. This was through your will, the Arab plastic artists who were receptive to the idea of a General Union in a manner that few predicted.

The first Arab Biennial is an experience in which the positivity of the Arab plastic artist is manifest. All the eleven associations comprising the Union are present in the biennial, in addition to the attendance of our colleagues from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Qatar, and a representative of our colleagues in Sudan, not to mention a large number of works—more than six hundred. We have marked an important accomplishment in the history of the contemporary Arab plastic art movement. For the first time, the representation of the plastic art movement in Arab countries is the responsibility of the artists themselves. We have taken a shortcut, avoiding a long and circuitous road. We were able to bring about direct communication among the artists and to give the artists themselves, as well as every union that has joined the General Union, responsibility for representing the art movement as they see it, and not as employees of the government see it.

We in the General Secretariat are not claiming that no mistakes were made. We say that the only person who makes no mistakes is he who does not work. There were justifiable mistakes and shortcomings, most of which are now remnants of the past. Each of us had difficult experiences participating in exhibitions. Some works of art arrived late, after the established deadline, for various reasons. This created difficulties for the organizers, and resulted in deficiencies preparing a proper exhibition catalogue in the manner we would have wished.

In the name of the General Secretariat of the General Union I am happy to welcome our brothers who will speak in this forum. [...] We hope that they have an exchange about our mistakes, show us our shortcomings, and then offer suggestions about what we must do to bring about an Arab art movement to make us proud, or rather to make the Arab nation proud.

Badr el-Din Abou Ghazi (Egypt)

I would like to point out that what I am going to say now merely represents a few personal impressions, and particularly those of an initial, pioneering endeavor that has, thankfully, been undertaken by the Union, which exerted a great effort for its sake. I will try to be candid about my impressions of the overall direction of the first Arab Biennial. [...]

First of all, why the first Arab Biennial? It seems to me that the inclination in calling for the organization and production of this exhibition was to break down the barriers that kept contemporary Arab artists in different countries of the Arab homeland isolated from one another, to endeavor to identify the best work of art in every Arab country, and to bring artists and work together in a spirit of cooperation. It may be that the exhibition has taken the name *biennale* and Arabized it. But even if we Arabize the name, we still need to Arabize the goal within our consciousness. For the notion of a biennial is an imported one that emerged from completely different concerns, and in societies very different from our Arab societies. Therefore, I would like to leave this point aside until after I make the following observations:

This gathering was no doubt a particularly strenuous experience, for it was the inaugural one, and it relied on artists' associations in every country. It happened, to a certain extent, in a very short period of time relative to the great effort it required. Furthermore, it has refrained from defining a specific goal for itself.

Did this exhibition, the first that the Union has organized, aim to present a historical picture of the art movement of every Arab country? Or did it aim to present work that appeared during a specific epoch that represents, to a great extent, the anguish of Arab reality in every country, reflected in one way or the other in the artists' paintings, statues, and other works? Or was it a representation of some of the modern tendencies—by which I mean the latest modern trends—in every Arab country, as is the case for biennials internationally? And to what extent was the exhibition able to adopt an orientation from among those trends and to assess accordingly the collection of more than six hundred works? These still require a fuller and more thorough assessment. [...]



View of the Kuwaiti artists' section at the Arab Biennial, Baghdad. 1974

There is also great confusion among the works that were collected in the different sections of this exhibition. In some of the exhibition sections there is a clear orientation that indicates a conscious representation of the national heritage of that country. Then there are also secure, close ties to contemporary trends, and an absorption of those trends and an attempt to read heritage from the viewpoint of this age and to re-create it honestly. This is clear in some works of art, and is explicitly recognizable in some of the sections of the exhibition. However, it is conspicuously lacking in other sections. There are pieces that are clearly influenced by external trends and currents, but that lack honesty and sufficient depth. Not everything that those currents bring is worthy; not all that glitters is gold. There is also a lot of fake shine, by which some artists are impressed. They rush to pick it up and try to reformulate it, and end up with nothing novel, but rather a great echo of trends that originated in other countries. Moreover, these styles are the products of societies that live in conditions very different from our own. Thus, if these works represent some honesty and sincerity in their own countries, to us they are imported and untrue. The value of a work of art is in the stroke of sincerity and originality it carries.

This is also apparent in some of the art pieces represented in this exhibition and in some unexceptional works that should not, by any measure, have been presented by the artists' associations to the first comprehensive Arab exhibition—so as to be fair to themselves on the one hand, and so as to be true to the reality of Arab plastic art in the different regions of the Arab world on the other.

There are clear directions in some of the Arab countries that are completely unrepresented in the exhibition. There are missing works that, for the first Arab exhibition, we should have attempted to collect and present to Arab citizens, especially given that the exhibition has not adopted a particular direction. It should at least have sought a better standard and committed to a nonbiased gathering without endeavoring to sink at moments to the level of courtesies—to the detriment of the exhibition's caliber in some of the sections.

This is a general impression. We are here in a gathering of family. We are all one, and we want to face ourselves with candor, and to evaluate our first attempt so that we can avoid its mistakes, shortcomings, and oversights in our second attempt. [...]

One of the most significant positive aspects is the very idea of gathering these works together and then presenting them, thereby emerging as a tangible reality, in addition to the great organizational effort that has gone into this exhibition, and that has brought about the representative picture that we can witness in it.

Another positive aspect is the showcasing of many artists from the Arab countries whose work was largely unknown to us, especially the artists from Arab Morocco, the Palestinian artists, and others—this exhibition was able to shed light on them and also on some constructive and brilliant styles.

A question arises about the future of the Arab Biennial. Will it remain as it is, tied to a specific date and location, and seeking to avoid some of the shortcomings that plagued the first attempt, so that the experience can gradually develop? Or should we try to take a step back to determine why we are holding this exhibition? Should we create a specific goal for it that sets it within the current of international biennial concepts and their different exhibitions? Or should it be a representational picture of certain national trends of the countries of the Arab regions, and of differ-

ent experiences related to authentic art and to attempts to reconcile heritage and the contemporary, and authenticity and innovation?

[. . .] The idea of the biennial that came from abroad has resulted in the appearance of many extreme trends in our contemporary Arab art, which seeks to speak the language of this age and keep up with all that is novel. I am not inclined to rigidity, nor would I say that authenticity can come by resolve, negotiation, or referendum. It is not a laboratory compound. Rather, it is a result of the artist's honesty, his connection to his reality, and his deep understanding of his own heritage, as well as his connection to the different trends of the age and his attempts to follow these trends with a critical spirit; it does *not* come from his merely being swept away by these trends. However, being impressed with these international exhibitions has often led to the emergence, among young artists, of trends that are derivative of what goes on at the Paris biennial for young artists, for example, or at the Venice Biennale. If we do not arrive at a framework and purpose to govern this exhibition, I fear that we will simply be transposing these trends that come to us from abroad into our own approach to mounting exhibitions such as this one every two years. That is why I present this matter as an issue that we must all face and try to seek an axis or axes around which the Arab Biennial should turn. Thank you.



Meeting of members of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, Baghdad. 1974. From left: Amine El Bacha, Aref El Rayess, George al-Bahgoury, Inji Efflatoun, and Tamam al-Akhal

Bastawi Baghdadi (Sudan)

[. . .] When I was asked to join this forum, I went back over my own position, asking myself the following questions: To what extent were we liberated from foreign rule, and at what time? I have found it appropriate to consider the exhibition through these temporal influences, which govern the works I witnessed in it. This temporal element (what is history, or when did we rid ourselves of colonization and foreign rule?)—how many of us have reviewed the educational curricula and endeavored to remove the outdated and corrupted material from it? How many of us have introduced art education in schools? Those are the people who will see and enjoy our production. How many of us have introduced art education in curricula, in order to prepare the citizen who views these exhibitions? When did we prepare the citizen to take an interest in, to appreciate, and to follow what Arab artists produce? Have we set up galleries and museums? That is the temporal aspect.

As for the human aspect: There are roles that have affected this exhibition—the role of Arab civilization, in an intellectual, religious, artistic, and moral sense. And in my opinion, there was the role of African civilization, the role of popular art, of industrial and technological development in the world and our connection to it—all these things must be included in the picture before passing judgment on pictures in general, and before we can judge a work of art. [...]

Mohamed al-Senussi (Tunisia)

Brothers Mr. Badr el-Din Abou Ghazi, and Mr. Bastawi Baghdadi have preceded me and spoken about the exhibition. Therefore I do not want to add anything about the exhibition, or to speak of it. Rather, I would like to speak about the Arab plastic-art movement in general, and about the General Union, and the relation of plastic artists to art criticism, or to cultural communication, as I like to call it. I think that this great gathering, and the event that we have called historic, which it is, prompts us to ask about the extent of its echo in Arab countries and elsewhere, in the press, and even in the Iraqi press. Where is this echo? And have we established a suitable relationship between the creation of art and the communication of it? Because the creation of a work of art without its promotion will remain a voice without an echo. I think that one of the things that has been forgotten is the organization of sub-gatherings on the margins of this exhibition, since the purpose is not only to display works and present them to an audience, but also to communicate them.

Mr. Ben Baghdadi (Algeria)

I don't have much to say, either as a journalist or as a painter. The most important positive aspect of this exhibition is that it has gathered together all the artists from the Arab world, and this is a very important point. We cannot—neither at this exhibition, nor at the second or the third—demand the delimitation of an artistic approach or policy.

Another point I would like to mention is that meetings and gatherings such as this one should have been held from day one, so that all of us could have benefited from meeting one another and exchanging views. [...]

Bashir Zuhdi (Syria)

[...] In this exhibition, the visitor feels the presence of several artistic techniques with great aesthetic value. Moreover, there are various themes that seem to occupy the minds of artists. Some wanted to rely on civilizational heritage as a fundamental basis in their creation. Some relied on ancient myths, and some wanted to confirm the importance of Arabic calligraphy as a key element. Some took Arab ornament as their basis, while others went for symbolism. Some chose to express the phase of struggle that our Arab nation is currently waging against its enemies. Some works were distinguished by the depiction of moments and important aspects from everyday life, which were also moments of beauty. There were some that sang of the beauty of nature in their country, and some emphasized the beauty of local urbanism, itself a local characteristic and aesthetic value. Some stood out as social critics, albeit in the guise of artists. Some paintings directed attention to future horizons, while others emphasized the value of human labor as a virtue, and summoned man to work.

Moreover, there were pieces of sculpture of a high artistic level that stood out due to their conceptual content.

This exhibition is nothing less than an important cultural demonstration that represents the contemporary Arab art movement and shows that the Arab artist, through his art, confirms his humanity and commitment to all causes of human justice in an era characterized by its humanistic aspirations.

And if art is a powerful capacity, then the union of artists contains even more powerful capacities.

Ismail Shammout

Thanks to the brothers who have spoken. We now open the floor to discussion by other colleagues present.

Mohammed Chebaa (Morocco)

We must first present our thanks to Iraq for hosting this arts event: the first Arab Biennial, organized by the General Union.

I would first like to delve into an issue mentioned by one of the brothers who spoke, which is the Arabizing of the exhibition content. The Manifesto of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts, which we have distributed with this exhibition, referred to this matter. Our position is that every [national] association should put forward necessary recommendations for the Arabization of content. In our opinion, we usually import foreign molds, and this is a form of Western appropriation. We try to resemble the West in activities so as to draw closer to them and prove to foreigners that we are able to do what they do—and most particularly what they do in the West.

The first step is to liberate ourselves from this complex—an inferiority complex from which we must escape.

We belong to Arab countries that have gained their independence, whether in different historical periods, or one country immediately after the other. However, we never resolved the issue of being subject to intellectual colonialism. If we want to get rid of foreign domination, then we must rid ourselves of it in all fields, and especially in the field of culture, considering that art is an inextricable part of culture. Culture determines ideology, and ideology is what determines the personality of a people or a certain society in any given country.

The fact that we copied the name and organizational form is, in our view, a trap that we must be aware of, so that our work is not that of mere copying or blind imitation. For if we liberate ourselves from this aspect and seek to bring the content of our work into alignment with our aspirations, then we can organize iterations of this exhibition on that basis, subject to themes that are derived from our Arab society, and that all the artists' associations have agreed upon. [...]

Ismail Shammout

So far, from what our brothers and colleagues have shared, the importance of organizing study and working groups has been clear, so that these vital intellectual and artistic issues can be discussed—and this in meetings and conferences to be held by the Union in the future. [...]

Mahmoud al-Nabawi al-Shal (Egypt)

[...] I have some comments on the words spoken by some of the respected speakers:

[...] Mr. Badr el-Din Abou Ghazi mentioned that he noticed a lot of work by new artists, in addition to pieces by well-established artists, or the great pioneers. I think we must greet this phenomenon with open arms. In the past, the work of young artists was often not exhibited beside the work of the pioneers, which caused the young artists to lose confidence in themselves and their work. Exhibiting the work of young artists side by side with those of the pioneer artists is an acknowledgment and encouragement of their work, and is a recognition of those who will become leaders in the future.

Mr. Badr el-Din also referred to the increase in foreign trends and currents, in a manner that grabbed his attention. We reiterate that we should get rid of many of those trends. We are not saying we should deprive ourselves of those currents, but that they should not be an influential factor in the vitality of spontaneous, subjective work within our own circumstances and reality. [...]

Badr el-Din Abou Ghazi

Mr. al-Shal has suggested that I criticized the exhibition for including work by the youth. I did not differentiate between the work of the old and the young. Rather, I said that the exhibition, although full of excellent work, also contained some pieces that would have been better avoided. Those pieces could have been by older artists, while, in contrast, many of the works by young artists in some of the sections were strong, original, outstanding, and worthy of attention. That is what I pointed out, thank you.

[Omar] Ali Ermes (Libya)

For the most part, contemporary Arab art, to which the people are attempting to give a philosophy, does not serve the production of a contemporary or future Arab civilization. I do not want to speak of the past, or say that we imitate Europeans. The issue is one of making the right choice, whether it is from the past, present, or future. Artistic work is not a matter of imagination in the world of the obscure. Nor should we accept what the artist presents under the presumption that he is an odd creature. An artist, like any other human being, is someone who—if he is a true artist and has knowledge of art materials and methods—is capable of presenting a work of art of a beautiful quality that astonishes many people. If he is able to modify and develop form, then he is someone capable of presenting new things to civilization and can be of use to many people. [...]

Abdulaziz Hamadi (Saudi Arabia)

[...] I have a few questions:

First, if the general aim of the exhibition is to seek information on the level of each country, and if we are interrelating art with human civilization, i.e. its level of civilization, then does each country have a civilization ranking?

Second, if the purpose is to bring out an Arab artistic personality in general, what is the next step that the General Union can take in order to alert the world to this overall level of Arab art?

Ismail Shammout

To respond to the query from our colleague Hamadi: Concerning his first question, this exhibition is not meant to give grades to countries, to determine which comes first and which comes second. Instead, this event aims at initiating interaction within the Arab art movement, to give dozens of colleagues and Arab and foreign guests an opportunity to get to know the art movements in most Arab states for the first time, and also to allow colleagues to meet one another and have gatherings such as this. As for the second question, the purpose is to find an Arab artistic personality. However, a goal such as that cannot be accomplished through a single meeting, conference, or by decision, and not within one year or two. Rather, it needs many long years of serious work. We think that events such as this one do lead to—and contribute greatly to—a crystallization of that personality and its realization over the long term. In this way, the publicizing of the art movement on the international level takes place spontaneously.

Fares Boukhatem (Algeria)

We look at this exhibition with a positive eye, prompting us to direct our thanks to those who supervised and organized it. It is true some mistakes were made and there are some shortcomings, but we consider this to be natural, given that this is the first exhibition and the first experiment. We must not forget, as we assess this exhibition, the role of this cultural activity, which we consider to be a struggle that complements our nation's struggle on the path of liberation. The oil battle and the October War shook the world. Exhibitions such as this one are necessary both on the Arab level and on the international one as acts of struggle by means of art.

Latifa Toudjani (Morocco)

This exhibition represents an Arab position in the battle to determine the Arab fate. It represents a unification of our efforts and our collective participation in one civilizational effort. We have great hope that this gathering can be a launching pad for Arab movements, movements that serve the Arab peoples.

We, as Arab youth living an Arab reality, reject the negative role of protectorates and custodianship, and we also reject the negative role of obscurantism. [...]

Ismail Shammout

In the name of the General Secretariat of the General Union, I hereby thank the brothers who participated in this forum, and I thank all of you who attended. I also thank Iraq, which made this meeting possible and allowed our artistic Union to take its first steps.

—“Nadwat al-‘Adad: Ārāʾ fī Maʿraḍ al-Sanatayn al-‘Arabī al-Awwal” (excerpt), *al-Tashkīl al-‘Arabī*, no. 2 (March 1975): 5–15. Translated from Arabic by the editors of the present volume. The other participants in the forum were: Mohammed Khair Dibajah, Laure Ghorayeb, Zakariya Ibrahim, Hassan Kamal, Ibrahim Marzouq, and Wajih Nahle.

Manifesto of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts (1974)

This major artistic gathering allows us to reaffirm our awareness of the weighty responsibilities that we bear with regard to the future. This does not mean that, in our forecasts, we ignore gains made in the past or considerations of the present.

While attempts to establish the itinerary of Morocco's plastic arts movement are currently multiplying, some time will have to pass before we can arrive at true clarity and certainty about it. Understanding this movement's history cannot mean losing sight of the polemic that reigns at the level of the actual content of different concepts of culture, folklore, acculturation, etc.

Let us also consider that writing history in the spirit of both rediscovery and contemporaneity is more than a simple muscular effort. Rather, it is a crucial surgical operation with the goal of reviving many forms of human expression that are, on a daily basis, causing the number of museums and academic books to swell. And if this need to resuscitate the past without losing sight of present imperatives does not facilitate our immediate daily tasks, the primary matter of our cultural heritage suffices to stimulate a considerable number of energies and talents.

On this level, Morocco is not so different from other countries that have inherited, from their ancient civilizations, the same enduring need to paint the universe and give it form through individual and collective representations. However, in Morocco this cultural legacy has not escaped the violence of the cultural and political rivalries that took place throughout the period of the Protectorate and in the wake of independence. This is the source of the variety and diversity of the contemporary Moroccan plastic arts movement. Yet this does not impose any restrictions on this gathering, which aims to posit founding principles that correspond as much to the past as to the innovations emerging every day in all parts of the country.

Our faith in the role of the plastic arts movement and its commitment to the nation and to humanity is no longer compatible with new debates and questioning. Nonetheless, this faith is not limited to current production, but also covers everything that may be produced and concretized in the future.

Human experience has bequeathed to us a capital that enriches our own experience. We must still confirm in practice that a plastic artist is condemned to be an innovator and a man of the avant-garde. Painting is no longer a simple link between the artist and the universe; it is henceforth a personal manifesto, certainly, but one that translates collective feelings and reactions. We are of the conviction that our actions translate hopes and aspirations and prefigure future perspectives that are gestating within our daily lived realities.

From this sketch of the plastic arts movement's efficacy and its aptitude for crystallizing new ideas, we can see the perspectives that are opening up before the Arab artist, who shoulders a heavy responsibility in this historic phase of our nation's life.

Given its political and cultural implications, the struggle for Arab existence cannot ignore the role of plastic artists, especially as the masses, whose political awareness increases day by day, recognize that from now on human existence will only be viable if the conditions for expressing that existence are met, and if the necessary means of expression are available.

But we do not claim to express that reality in its entirety. Arab plastic artists have a long way to go before we can demonstrate that Arab man does not live by bread alone, and that a motivating canvas is not so different from a bullet—the difference between the plastic artist and the soldier being one of appearances. We are convinced that we share the concerns and aspirations of our brothers within the Union of Arab Plastic Artists, even if our means are different. We also hope that this avant-garde gathering will be a platform for comparing our efforts and initiating collective action.

And if this encounter merits the respect of Moroccan plastic artists who, aware of the importance of this event and its national and cultural implications, reaffirm on this occasion that they do indeed exist, it must not be an excuse for us to turn a blind eye to the organization's contradictions or to the essence of this colloquium, which must not, under any circumstances, set a bad example for those that will follow.

We hope that this first Arab Biennial will not follow the example of Western biennials that consist primarily of grouping professional artists together in a dull exhibition, similar to any commercial exhibition where the laws of supply and demand entirely determine which characteristics a production should adopt at a later stage. As witnesses of Arab reality, and wishing to discover its future concerns, we are convinced that this gathering of Arab plastic artists is too important to be merely an opportunity to take stock of abilities or talents. The next encounters should aim to focus our energies in order to mobilize the Arab peoples and put them on permanent alert.

And as we reiterate that we reject the negative atmosphere of Western art gatherings, we find it necessary to challenge both the nature and the number of invitations sent to journalists, critics, and honorary guests, so as to be able to concentrate on the youth who live the reality of the Arab plastic arts movement, thereby demonstrating its current position, which accords with our concerns, hopes, and aspirations. We insist on this necessity. Having done so, we rely on our knowledge (which leaves no room for doubt) of the alienating, paternalistic, and assimilationist role of certain preachers both inside the Arab world and outside it.

Moreover, we exclude from our concerns the principle of awarding prizes in the framework of a biennial that, in our view, should be considered in terms of Arab plastic artists' national participation in the common Arab cause.

Generally speaking, the objectives of this art event will not be achieved in proportion to the number of participating countries, invitations, receptions, and newspaper articles about it. These objectives consist essentially in establishing a constructive dialogue among plastic artists on the one hand, and between plastic artists and the public on the other, and in determining the status of the Arab plastic arts movement and its wide range of perspectives.

—“Première Biennale des arts plastiques à Bagdad: Manifeste de l'Association marocaine des arts plastiques,” *Intégral*, no. 8 (March–April 1974): 16–19. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

Exploding Artistic and Cultural Handicaps (1974)

Dia al-Azzawi

There is no doubt the idea of a first Arab Biennial constitutes a favorable initiative in terms of promoting the plastic arts movement in all Arab states, despite certain negative features that its practical application has brought forth. We think that the biennial, in terms of its primary objective, should be envisioned as an ensemble of complementary responsibilities as much with regard to the style of the work of art as to its theoretical level, so as to provide the Arab experience with a practical platform.

It is in light of this mission that we may discuss the biennial.

This biennial has little chance of constituting an important cultural event or a positive promotional act in favor of the Arab plastic arts movement. We are not contesting the idea of professional gatherings or their utility. However, the measure of an artist is not his participation; rather, it is his artistic production.

If we simply reduce the artist's creativity to his role as a participant, and if we evaluate the validity of his participation in the biennial according to how well he fulfills his commitments, we will be faced with a biennial and an art history that depends on gatherings without informing us about whether they faithfully reflect the artistic situation of such and such a country, and without taking into consideration the fact that the consciousness and necessity of artistic organizations differ from one country to another. The structure of the Iraqi Artists Society is tied to the Iraqi context, and we must be cautious when dealing with any mixture of official and professional art. We think that any approach whose goal is to carry out a new artistic experiment must not address that which exists, but rather that which *should* exist, in terms of a qualitative process. Experiment must therefore be everyone's goal—and not only the goal of certain factions—in order for there to be a chance of success. Its extent will depend on the degree to which the experiment at hand can take the place of traditions that are anachronistic relative to the organization, thinking, and practice of art. If an experiment already exists in the world, its existence does not require us to adopt an attitude of imitation toward it, which would destroy our ability to make sure that the biennial lives up to the social, cultural, and artistic conditions particular to Arab countries.

We need the biennial to the extent that it can become an event that explodes artistic and cultural frivolities and handicaps, all the while requiring better participation among artists; this should itself be subject to a critical approach within a clear ideological framework. In rejecting the notion of the biennial participants' professional status, we have the right to wonder about the absence of certain artists: Saliba Douaihy, Paul Guiragossian, and Rafic Charaf (Lebanon); Ibrahim el-Salahi and [Ahmed] Mohammed Shibrain (Sudan); Kamal Boullata (Palestine); Adam Henein and Hassan Soliman (Egypt); Nazir Nabaa and Abdulkader Arnaout (Syria); Mona Saudi (Jordan); and Jafar Islah (Kuwait).

One cannot compare the biennial, as an event of great importance, to other exhibitions put on by the professional associations and groups in our countries, their tasks being different. The biennial begins with a collection of limited scope belonging to one country, and proceeds to a much more expansive Arab vision, with the goal of fostering contact in order to arrive at a unified Arab experience. It is therefore not important that participation be quantitative, but rather that it be qualitative.

Bringing together the avant-garde experiments in every Arab country does not necessarily invalidate other artistic endeavors. Indeed, we insist on the necessity of fully including these avant-garde experiments so that they may be studied objectively, discussed, and therefore made capable of surpassing their individual character so as to lead to a vast creative movement. We think that an experiment can only seriously deliver its solutions and its knowledge through true participation.

We believe that the form of participation in this biennial will be that which emerges from an Arab country's best experiments, even if they are the work of only a small group of artists.

In our view, the decision not to organize exhibitions parallel to the biennial is a symptom of a traditional streak that fears artistic and cultural dialogue. This attitude cannot encourage effective participation in the construction of a culture and a civilization that tolerates research and innovation.

The graphic arts are undoubtedly a new experience for Arab states, and as a point of departure it was necessary—and was in the interest of the plastic arts movement as a whole—that they be encouraged by allowing them to participate in a clear and conspicuous manner.

The gathering together of successful graphic experiments will constitute an important discovery within the Arab movement. On this subject, we wonder about the absence of Munira al Kazi (Kuwait), Ghayas Akhras (Syria), and Assadour Bezdikian (Lebanon).

—Dia al-Azzawi, "Faire éclater les handicaps artistiques et culturels," *Intégral*, no. 9 (December 1974): 37. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

LIFE AS A PALESTINIAN ARTIST

This commentary on the history and future of Palestinian arts around 1975 is from Mustafa al-Hallaj, a painter and printmaker of surreal allegories whose work was received as controversial at the 1974 Arab Biennial. He was living in Damascus when this article was published in the Syrian journal *al-Ma'rifa*.

The Palestinian People's Consciousness and Aesthetic Expression (1975)

Mustafa al-Hallaj

(They say living at the top of a high mountain makes people seem small, but they forget about the cold, the loneliness, and the emptiness. The ego is inflated there, and a Sufi sensibility grows, along with nothingness. But in the midst of the crowd you see people as they are, and coming into contact with them generates human warmth, and those interactions enrich individuals and society alike.)

When we speak of the Palestinian people's consciousness and aesthetic expression, the topic is not far removed from our own consciousness or awareness, for consciousness and aesthetic awareness are basically one and the same across

the whole Arab nation. They share greater or lesser similarities with the neighboring regions of this nation. I will not be making mere abstract deductions here, but will narrate all that has happened and all that I have lived and witnessed, in order to emphasize the idea that I want to present.

In 1964 I was in Luxor in the South of Egypt, dedicating myself to theoretical and practical studies of art—that was after I had graduated from the College of Fine Arts [in Cairo]. Pharaonic studies appealed to me in all their facets: artistic, literary, historical, and economic. So I immersed myself in that environment, where every aspect of the climate, the nature, the ancient ruins, and the books enchanted me and drew me in, until I was like the sap that descends from the flower to the roots of the tree, looking for the perceptive and ecstatic depths of that civilization.

One afternoon, as I was sitting by the Colossi of Memnon and reading a book on pharaonic studies, a friend came by with a radio playing Palestinian songs from the enemy's broadcast. Hearing that caused something to be severed within me, in the sense that it transported me away from that environment that I had willfully allowed to draw me in. That amputation was like losing my memory of the present even while the past was fiercely resurrected within me, and it transported me to a tree under whose branches we used to play when we were kids in Salama, our village. I felt that the tune, the lyrics, and the singer's voice were creating elastic ropes that bound my heart to the roots of that tree under which we used to play, generating a yearning and a desire in me to be there.

A question arises: What was it that created that feeling and that desire, and made them grow? Naturally, the traditional atmosphere and the aesthetic consciousness that I was born into in Salama, in addition to other constitutive factors. After I returned to the pharaonic atmosphere and compared my ability to intentionally delve into it with how a simple tune could pull me away involuntarily, I had an urge to speak to a friend of mine in Cairo, the folk poet Abdel Rahman al-Abnoudi. So I wrote to him, and in my letter I said the following, among other things: "When you write a song, write it from your own depths. Make the ink of your pen the sap of your roots. In other words, when you sing, a love relationship is born among the people, and between the people and the earth, the rocks, the rivers, the mountains, and the trees; and when that love is born, their ability to defend what they love grows. You need only express yourself in order to speak for others." For when an artist is among his people and his own social class, his feelings are their feelings and his thoughts are their thoughts, for he is the hive of their dreams. Indeed, aesthetic consciousness is something that everyone has. This aesthetic consciousness is produced outside or within the context of work, in a song or a tune, in professional or domestic tools; it is produced in all things, especially in the major arts, such as the plastic arts, theater, film, music, and literature. All those branches express one thing: the aesthetic relationship of this people, relations that develop and change as the means, dynamics, and modes of production change, or under the influence of exceptional circumstances such as natural disasters, epidemics, and invasions—the people's artistic and literary heritage is clear evidence of this. I remember how the atmosphere of war affected all social activities, across all strata of society, from the highest to the lowest, during the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956. I perceived this particularly in the means of expression, such as national songs and circulated prints of paintings.



Mustafa al-Hallaj. Untitled. 1975. Engraving, printed from Masonite. Image: $7 \frac{3}{4} \times 31 \frac{1}{8}$ " (19.7 × 79.1 cm); sheet: $16 \frac{1}{2} \times 39 \frac{1}{8}$ " (41.9 × 99.4 cm). Collection Samia A. Halaby

Imagine, then, the case of a people who used to live on a land in security like all other peoples, and indeed contributed to human civilization and gave much to the world. Then those people suddenly found themselves strangers in their own country, or living in refugee camps or gated encampments, or roaming the Arab world in search of work, since the need to make a living forced them to cross deserts on foot (as portrayed by Ghassan Kanafani in his [1962] novella *Men in the Sun*).

In their own nation, that people used to create everything with an aesthetic consciousness and power of expression that showed through in all the different arts. That consciousness was deeply rooted in history and was latent, for instance, in architecture, ceramics, glassware, the embroidery of clothing, and in other practical objects. Those products made life richer. After 1948, that consciousness burst forth as a force of expression that took its inspiration from contemporary artistic approaches in the Arab world and the West. For the challenges had changed, and those changes affected what counts as Arabic poetry, as can be seen in songs and music, etc. That is to say, those arts were already present, and it was only their function that changed, for a process of diversifying the means of expression took place both within the occupied territories and outside them.

True, the issue of Palestine has affected all activities across the Arab nation, because it is fundamentally an Arab issue. But Palestinians are caught between the hammer and the anvil, and their position creates a specificity with sharp features. This specificity takes on the particular features that exist between towns within any one Arab country in terms of variations of dialect, such as the difference between someone from Aleppo and someone from Damascus, or Mosul and Basra, or Upper Egypt and Cairo, etc.

When we return to post-1948 production, we find that songs and anthems in the occupied territories explode with hidden longing, with both sadness and exhortation at one and the same time. We find that literature is connected to a growing everyday suffering, which reaches its peak with the poets within the territories, such as Mahmoud Darwish, Samih al-Qasim, and Tawfiq Ziad. Abroad, the expressive scream and the act of rousing the Arab nation are manifested not only in the Palestinian literary movement but also in its political movement. Anyone following the literary and artistic movements of the Palestinian people both within the occupied territories and outside them will find a Palestinian visionary tone that carries a historical Arab depth and the particular tragic nature of this people in constant movement, inhabiting a space between tragic production, the description and analysis of reality, and agitation—and all this in accordance with the Palestinian and Arab political movements. Then we find

that it turns into thousands of hammers, gathered by the first bullet to be shot by the armed Palestinian revolution. And after that we come to know the poetry of resistance, the Palestinian short story, the Palestinian novel, Palestinian theater, Palestinian cinema, and of course Palestinian painting. That first bullet did not create all these fields, but rather brought them together, for an artist is not created in a moment.

When world Zionism, supported by imperialism and colonialism, stole Palestine in 1948, it began by erasing the legitimate rights and specific features of Palestinian Arabness. It stole the flag and changed it, stole the name and changed it, stole our place in the United Nations, falsified maps, encyclopedias, and dictionaries, and stole Palestinian popular culture and displayed it as Israeli. Yet it could not steal the living Palestinian consciousness, whose production has lived on in poetry, literature, and the arts as a historical archive growing out of this land. I remember an article by a French writer attending a conference to discuss the plastic arts in Israel, which says: "In order to create an Israeli artistic movement, Arab idealism must be destroyed." That is because the makeup of the Israeli society is a *mélange* of different and diverse cultures that take their features from the sources from which they hail. This contributed to consolidating Palestinian identity and specificity at a time when Palestinian politics and the Palestinian armed struggle had not yet surfaced and was thus not yet affecting the Arab and international domains. But if we examine Palestinian activities in the Arab and international arenas, we find that they were seeking, in the midst of that struggle, an autonomous movement within the context of the overall Arab movement; and that the armed struggle that broke out against the Zionist enemy in 1965 was but the start of gathering together all Palestinian forces and organizing them into institutions such as the Research Center in the fields of political, historical, and social thought; the Planning Center; and the House of Arab Art, which is—in my view—one of the best institutions for the development of children and youth in the Arab world, since it takes advantage of all available expertise in that field.¹

At its inception, the armed revolution made great efforts to gather and represent popular crafts and costumes, and established institutions to preserve this heritage and produce it, in addition to offering economic support to families and individuals. Feminist unions and the Samed Institution² have also contributed to that endeavor. In other words, consciousness and aesthetic expression have been an explosive force in the battle of legitimacy vs. illegitimacy, negation vs. survival.

Then came "Palestinian theater," and a Palestinian cinema that was brought to life by Mustafa Abu Ali with his purely revolutionary approach. He started with posters, drawings, images, and simple dramatic pieces, adhering to the principle that if you want to fight, you start by sharpening your nails. He did not come to entertain us, but to inform us and at the same time to exhort us.

Next, the unions of Palestinian writers and artists were formed.

All this shows that the gun, which has brought forth all sorts of activities, does not work on its own, for the different activities operate in their respective fields, all converging on the focal point of the battle. [...]

Since 1948, all kinds of images—photographic, journalistic, and cinematic—have portrayed Palestinians as hungry refugees standing in line in order to gain the sympathy of donors to the relief agency. Even Arab artists, who have represented

Palestinians in tents behind barbed wire, have not been exempt from such ignorance. At the same time, children—alongside their homework—were painting on the pavement of the streets of Gaza and the camps, depicting both the camps and their dreams. Those artistic productions underwent further development in schools later on, but they were not recorded. The main outcome of this entire plastic arts movement, however, was Ismail Shammout, who stood out from the group, continued to produce, received encouragement, and evolved to the point where every refugee and all Palestinians could recognize their tragedy in his paintings, since tragedy and the everyday were his subjects, even if his methods did not take on a Palestinian flavor or a local tone. He was the first plastic arts phenomenon to be noticed in a context wider than Gaza. After him, in the 1950s, large numbers of young people studied the arts in Cairo, Baghdad, and outside the Arab world. I remember—at the College of Fine Arts—that those hailing from the Gaza Strip differed from the others in terms of style and tone. I realized then that the particular Palestinian features were latent in the subject matter prior to anything else. But the artistic vision, even when displaying special characteristics—like the particularities of language and dialect in specific cities in one region—has not overlooked the Arab and international experiences at hand. For if we examine the role of the plastic arts in the history of the Palestinian people, we find it to be similar to that of the people of the Arab region as a whole, even if it carries special characteristics in terms of form. Ornament was the hero enriching life in architecture, in applied art, and in the embroidery of clothing. But after 1948 it began to play an expressive role, given the specific variables of the geographic and historical makeup of this people. Those variables are the processes of invasion and expulsion (as explained above), and they have fostered in us—Palestinian artists—a desire to illuminate and emphasize Palestinian specificities, in order to use them to confront anyone who attempts to erase the legitimate rights and particular character of Palestinian Arabism.

Due to the space constraints of this article, I cannot speak of my personal experience in that field. I will, however, speak of our Palestinian experience as a whole: When my Palestinian colleagues and I graduated from the College of Fine Arts, I proposed that we set up a collective art studio to launch the Palestinian art movement in all its historical depth, because we were not simply artists producing paintings, but were also living a cause that we were necessarily part of. Some excused themselves because of their difficult life circumstances, as it was necessary for them to find a job to provide for their families, for their mothers and siblings. Their circumstances were indeed dire—like those of Shafiq Radwan, for instance, who worked and still works as a teacher in Kuwait, where the environment is harsh and the work draining. In spite of this, he has continued producing art, although he is not known by many. And so the plastic arts movement remained dispersed and was absorbed into the various schools and institutions around the Arab world, until the armed Palestinian political revolution spontaneously gathered the artistic efforts and coordinated them through various institutions, as mentioned.

Why has Zionism assassinated Ghassan Kanafani, Kamal Nasser, and Kamal Adwan, attempted the assassination of Dr. Anis Sayigh and Shafiq al-Hut,³ assassinated some of the Palestinian revolutionary youth in Europe such as Wael Zuaiter, blown up the Research Center, obstructed the continuation of the Palestinian children's exhibition that the artist Mona Saudi organized in Norway, committed many

acts of harassment pertaining to lectures and art exhibitions, and attempted the Israelization of Palestinian painters—such as Abdallah al-Qarra—in the occupied territories? All this has taken place because Israel perfectly understands the importance of the architects of Palestinian consciousness in all its fields, the extent of its effect in the media in establishing the legitimacy of this people, for intellectual and artistic work, or ideological production in the broader sense, are like the cement that holds people together, enhancing their power like a military tune that causes soldiers to march in unison, or like a theater play or cinematic work that puts the spectators and listeners in the same environment, enabling a collective consciousness to grow. So what would the effect be if that work were of the mobilizing kind? [...]

As for our experience in setting up exhibitions, ever since 1969 we have pursued an approach of integrated media with regard to the images displayed, beginning with maps, photographs, illustrative drawings, children's drawings, and various artistic works, and ending with works of art that are more sophisticated in terms of subject matter and treatment. In addition, we have not forgotten to broadcast music and Palestinian revolutionary anthems in the spaces of exhibitions, and we have also distributed material that complements and serves Palestinian publicity of the period at hand, such as records, booklets, postcards, postage stamps, tape recordings, flags, and medals. I recall a debate that took place about the inclusion of some advanced works of art in an exhibition that was hosted at the Wihdat refugee camp in Amman, and concerns about them being inaccessible to the public. But they were included, despite some opposition. How great was our surprise when we discovered that the people's awareness was more evolved than we had imagined! And why? By studying the daily notes I took pertaining to the public's reactions to the works on display, I found that the explanations that people offered each other about the paintings came from their popular cultural background, from the revolution, and from everyday life. I have observed this among Palestinians in particular in all the exhibitions that have taken place around the Arab world.

Anyone connected to the everyday suffering that constitutes a living cell in the body of a nation must express it through his individual consciousness. Concerning this, I remember the words of [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe: "What I create is society's creation, it just happens to be signed by the name Goethe." For in order for an individual to be part of a nation, the individual consciousness must grow to become a collective consciousness. That comes by means of absorbing everything, be it heritage or living, everyday relationships, so that in his moment of self-expression the artist will also be expressing the nation.

The artist is free at the moment of expression, but accountable at the moment of communication.

I remember that when I was in Cairo and Luxor, I used to paint suffering, displacement, expulsion, and the dream of the future. When I came to Syria in 1966, the first true Palestinian rhythm was born in my artistic work. In 1969, when I was in Amman and the Jordan Valley, I discovered the Palestinian form in the dialect. This means that when an artist is painting at a remove from the arena of a movement, he can still be sympathetic to it. But we are part of that movement, not mere sympathizers.

Notes

1. *Eds.*: Both the Research and Planning centers referenced by al-Hallaj were instituted by the Palestine Liberation Organization in Beirut in 1965. The “House of Arab Art” to which he refers has not yet been identified.
2. *Eds.*: At the time of al-Hallaj’s writing, the Samed Institution was a Fatah organization devoted to social welfare and development.
3. *Eds.*: The six men al-Hallaj names here are Palestinian intellectuals, activists, and political leaders whom the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, targeted for assassination in retaliation for alleged participation in the planning of the 1972 Lod airport massacre (organized by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) and the killing of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich (undertaken by the Palestinian Black September organization). Al-Hallaj here seems to draw attention to how Mossad’s assassination campaign targeted not the organizers of these operations, but rather persons working in the arts, diplomacy, and other such fields.

—Muṣṭafā al-Hallāj, “al-Wa’y wa-l-Ta’bīr al-Jamālī ladā al-Sha’b al-Filasṭīnī” (excerpt), *al-Ma’rifa*, no. 159 (May 1975): 7–15. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

KHARTOUM DIALOGUES

The passages in this section come from Khartoum’s art scene in the late 1970s, a period of shifting political ideology under Sudan’s President Gaafar Nimeiry, during which a number of artists and critics raised questions about the source and nature of artistic knowledge and proposed varied anti-academic models of practice. On January 21, 1976, a group of five artists and critics issued “The Crystalist Manifesto”—a full-page statement of artistic vision—in *al-Ayyam* newspaper. In the same newspaper, leading critical figures, such as Abdallah Bola, published sustained exegetical commentaries on artistic challenges; the excerpted texts here by Bola and by Mohamed Abusabib, which engage the problem of bourgeois specialization in the arts, represent one such discussion. The final text of this section, dated December 1980, is an artist’s statement by Muhammad Hamid Shaddad, one of the signatories to the Crystalist Manifesto, for his solo exhibition in the fourth annual cultural festival at Friendship Hall in Khartoum.¹

The Crystalist Manifesto (1976)

Hassan Abdallah, Hashim Ibrahim, Kamala Ibrahim Ishaq,
Muhammad Hamid Shaddad, Naiyla Al Tayib

Introduction

Man himself is the endeavor and the subject of a crystal that extends endlessly within. This happens simultaneously in isolation from and in connection to other things. We believe that the contradictions inherent in the claim that the universe is finite are no less than the contradictions inherent in the claim that the universe is infinite.

In the face of this crisis, the Crystalist idea emerges: the universe is at once finite and infinite; things have dual natures. When we say dual, we do not mean contradictory, for we go further and say that truth itself has a dual nature. When we refer to the duality of truth, we do not mean its multiplicity. This is not an issue that can be contained within a simple quantity; but perhaps it can be contained within a teleological quantity, namely, pleasure.

Theorization

Truth is relative, and absolute nature is dependent on man as a limited proposition. The struggle between man and nature always tries to find forms and claims for the opposite, that is, the absolute man, face to face with the limited forms and

institutions in nature, which are themselves man-made. If the dialectic in classical modern thought is expressed with the phrases *there are no isolated phenomena* and *man's knowledge of matter lies in his knowledge of the forms of that matter's movement*, then we, in accordance with the idea of the crystal, may venture that the dialectic is a substitute for nature itself.

The basic premise for Crystalist thought, or modern liberalism, is to reject the essential quality of things, for it is now clear that any essence is nothing but a semblance for another essence. In the past, it was said that the atom was the irreducible essence, but then a whole world was discovered within it—nuclei, electrons, protons. This applies to subatomic particles, sub-subatomic particles, and to the limitless forms of existence of the entire cosmos. Man's struggle with nature is but a transition from semblance to essence, which is in turn a semblance for another essence, and so the undoing of contradictions continues endlessly. This is what we mean when we speak of the transition from the opaque to the transparent, i.e., the removal of layers of concealment. The discovery of atoms does not negate the surface existence of things. Hence the naming of our school *Crystalism*, which implies the existence of both the semblance, or form, of the crystal and the dimensions and spectrums perceived within it. In the past, the transition from semblance to essence, and then to semblance, and so on, was regarded as idealistic thought, the standing objection being: Is there no difference between semblance and essence? And does that not also entail a beginning and an end? To that we say: The difference is primarily one of research methodology, and that the differentiation between semblance and essence is also subject to the same infinite sequence: semblance, essence, semblance, essence. . . .

But in order not to drag others into precarious territory, we opt for simplification and describe the process as follows: the transition is from relative semblance to relative essence, which creates another relative semblance that contains a new essence, and so the undoing of contradictions continues. Furthermore, the idea itself, as well as objections to it, are ultimately nothing but a potential embodiment of the crystal in its infinite spectra and its semblances, themselves also subject to endlessness. It is self-evident that a book lying before its owner is nothing but a semblance of a deeper essence, but we would here add that the same book is an essence for the semblance that surrounds it. That is to say, the crystal not only moves forward but also extends backward. To be more precise, it moves in all directions, or in all of space; or, if you will, the Crystalist school is nothing other than a negation of the objectification of objects.

The Unit of Measurement

The possibilities that nature lays before our eyes are not the ultimate possibilities. When an electron is two thousand times smaller than a proton, and one gram measures six hundred million trillion protons, it is understandable that a human being today—with disparate senses and a simple, empirical mind—would feel extremely alienated when attempting to grasp such massive numbers. We believe that the crisis lies originally in the old unit of measurement, for philosophy and the empirical sciences make man the unit of measurement, which leads to a dead end. The solution to this contradiction is to resurrect the essence, not the semblance, as the unit of measurement. Man's essence is pleasure, and that should be the sole unit of measurement

everywhere, including in the sciences, philosophy, and art—there is no other criterion. Pleasure in fact represents a full circle, in the sense that it is both a means and an end. Our goal is to seek out the teleological quantity.

The Chaos of Quantity

The dramatic struggle between materialism and idealism has resulted in familiar theories regarding the reality of things. Since antiquity, idealist thinking has claimed that the difference in things lies in expansions and contractions in quantity, and that, per Pythagoras and Democritus, numerical proportions are the basis of differences between things. Materialism, on the other hand, declared differences between things to be qualitative and occurring as a result of quantitative accumulation. From the crystal's perspective, we believe that neither of these approaches sufficiently grasps the reality of things, for both deal with quantity and accumulation as fixed realities rather than a reality full of myriad contradictions. Quantity itself is simultaneously rational and irrational. Taking, for example, the number one as a unit of quantity, we find that it is made up of an accumulation of three thirds. But if, for the sake of precision, we divide it decimally by three, we unexpectedly find the result to be cyclic fractions that extend into infinity, which means that the accumulation in the number one is irrational, for it is both finite and infinite. Furthermore, when one is divided by an even number—for example, two—we find that the result is infinitely divisible by two.

We are confronted with the truth of the statement *It is irrational for the finite to contain the infinite*. We conclude that the number 1 is an irregular accumulation that, despite its finiteness, contains infiniteness. But we are still faced with the quantitative unit of “one.” In response to this quantum chaos, Crystalist thought emerges and proposes the teleological quantity, which is pleasure, and which also has a dual nature, being simultaneously a means and an end.

The Unit of Time

From the perspective of the crystal, we assert that things produce their own time, that there is more than one time depending on the diversity and difference of nature's possibilities, and that what we live in is not that mythical collective time supposedly agreed upon by all people and shared by all things. Understanding the interconnect-edness of multiple times is not particularly difficult, but it does require a high level of Crystalism. Man's current alienation does not lie in the discrepancy of public times produced separately by separate things, but rather in the discrepancy of personal times, considering that each person is a construct of multiple and diverse things. The time unit of the individual is a matter of utmost importance.

Knowledge

Neoclassicism asserts that knowledge moves from the specific to the general, then back to the specific. We believe that generalization is a domain of repression. What really happens is that the specific and the free are pulled into the general domain and then returned in chains. We aim to liberate things from the repression of knowledge itself. To say that we seek knowledge that liberates things from knowledge itself does not make us self-contradictory; it makes us Crystalists. If knowledge was once based

on the paradigm that a thing cannot be known in isolation from other things or from itself, then what we are currently proposing, in accordance with Crystalism, is that a thing cannot be known in isolation from infinity, or, in other words, that a thing can only be known in isolation from finiteness. We attach great importance to the claim that nothing is something, and that the dissolution of objective boundaries is itself a new objective boundary.

The Unit of Space

Matter exists in space. Things can exist above or below, to the North or the South, to the East or the West, etc. In other words, space is direction. But a thing is itself a space in the sense of an area, and area is determined by specificity, meaning that it would be difficult to claim that space is area, since area is extracted from the absence of area. We therefore say that when direction is specified it should be called an *area*, or, in other words, when it is perceived it should be called an area. Hence, North or East are also spaces in the sense of areas, except that they extend infinitely and are relative; indeed, infinite extension is possible from any relative point. Quantity is corrupt! We do not mean to claim that space does not exist in reality, but rather that it is an intellectual methodology. Based on the idea that space is direction, it is possible to say that the thing itself exists everywhere and, to complicate matters further, that the thing exists here and there in the same direction. In the face of this chaos of space, we propose teleological space, which is pleasure.

Language

Language, in its current state, being extremely close to objects, demonstrates its own corruption. The only way out of this is to dissolve language and turn it into a transparent crystal that moves in all directions: between the name, the subject, the thought, and their components; between the word and its components; and between the letter and its components. We expect this to happen in such a way that the fundamental opposition in language becomes an opposition between the crystal of meaning and the crystal of vocalization, which is a first and necessary step. We should mention here that the science of semiotics, [Claude] Shannon's information theory, the methods for measuring quantitative possibilities of all information contained in a vocalization, the methods of measuring the information contained within one letter of the alphabet, and all associated mathematical laws—are nothing but dry academic methodologies as far as the problem of language is concerned. They are all based on the corrupt notion of quantity, and so do not rise to the level of the crisis.

Community

There are three types of repression suffered by the human form. Seen from a modern perspective, the first type is the repression that started with the separation of organic and inorganic matter, leading to the creation of man. The second type is the emergence of the objective mind, which is the mind of man's entry into community. We also concede that at first, man collided with reality and outwitted it by creating certain institutions to fight it. It was inevitable, then, to form a community, and accordingly, man gave up a portion of his freedom in order to achieve harmony between his individual interests and the community's interests. At the time, this price he paid was almost

a freedom in itself. Ever since entering into community, man has been confronted with certain historical epochs characterized by different production relationships that were adopted by the intellectual institutions of each epoch, all confirming that instrument of repression. But the truth we are now facing is that the repression that occurred with the emergence of the objective mind continued to be inherited from one generation to the next. The idea of behavioral inheritance has much to support it, despite its being intentionally neglected for a long time. The obvious battle was between the schools of [Jean-Baptiste] Lamarck and [Charles] Darwin on the one hand, and those of [Hugo] de Vries and [August] Weismann—with their germ-cell research and evening primrose discoveries—on the other. In recent times, McDonough² came up with the decisive response to the question of behavioral inheritance. In all cases, we currently adhere to the idea that the function creates the organ and not the other way around. The third type of repression is the ongoing repression that is linked to the individual from birth to the present moment. As mentioned earlier, repression at first was both a necessity and a form of freedom, but through the acquisition of characteristics and its normalization, things become one's nature, so that repression is no longer a price that man paid that ends with the end of its causes, but has become a human characteristic. Furthermore, man now finds pleasure in repression itself, having replaced sensual pleasure with nonphysical pleasure. There would be nothing wrong with that had the insufficiency of abstract pleasure not been scientifically proven. This has led to the creation of a new man for this age, the indifferent man, the refusing man, the man who does not experience pleasure. Modern literature, from Albert Camus's "stranger" and Colin Wilson's "outsider" to Tayeb Salih's character Mustafa Sa'eed, speaks of the indifferent man, the man who does not experience pleasure. We believe that anyone who reads such literature and appreciates it also carries a similar current within him. The risk is magnified by the fact that the undoing of that repression and the liberation of man, and thus all forms of his creative activities and energies—arts and literature—would be achieved by negating the objective mind.

Transparency

Crystalism seeks transparency, and so does Sufism, but the difference between the two can be summarized as follows: while Sufism (a mode of behavior) calls for dissolving into the self by negating personal volition, we believe that negating personal volition itself requires volition, or, in other words, that negating volition is itself a volitional act. When continued infinitely—volition, negation, volition, negation, and so on—an extending, infinite crystal is created, which again means the endlessly extending presence of semblances and essence.

But similarities do exist: the idea of the crystal is mentioned, both explicitly and implicitly, in a number of religions, for example Manichaeism, Orphism, Christianity, and Islam.

Beauty

In response to the question of what beauty is, we say that the crystal represents utmost beauty, and that the most prominent quality of the crystal is its liberality, in the sense of its being liberated. Furthermore, we maintain that a thing becomes beautiful when it has acquired a certain measure of dissolving objective limitations.

Plastic Art

Line: The basic value of the line lies in its direction. As mentioned earlier, matter exists in a direction, which is space, and matter is itself space in the sense of area. But in the final analysis, a line is a dynamic spatial dimension that contains temporal differences and transforms into them. The most exciting things about the line are its tangible bias toward the concept of space as direction rather than as area, and its containment of simple and dynamic temporal differences.

Color: Color is a composite. Taking for instance the color red, we find it to be unlimited both positively and negatively. This has prompted academics to break it down into principal bundles—scarlet, vermilion, crimson, and rose—in a desperate attempt to contain its limitlessness. To make things easier, we call for a change in the names of colors, so that instead of *red* we would say *redness*. Furthermore, there are numerous principal factors that negate the limitedness of color, such as:

1. The inclination of unlimited color toward other colors, [as] blue exists in reddish or greenish tones, in utterly limitless variations.
2. The amount of light falling on a color and reflecting off it.
3. The proportion of whiteness or blackness in a color.
4. The eye's capacity to see, taking into consideration: a) the eye's physiological makeup; b) the eye's training in seeing and perception.
5. Spatial distance, which is also limited. Color is completely different, depending on whether it is one centimeter away or ten thousand meters away. This can be clearly discerned in natural landscapes, where the color red is the first to fade, turning gradually to brown until it disappears.
6. Also, the psychological state of the viewer, which can simultaneously be both certain and doubtful.
7. The possibilities of the nature of color presented before us at any given moment are not final, for the colors of nature are limitless.
8. Colors exist in nature in the form of surface. It follows that no surface in nature is without a specific color. Areas themselves appear geometrically or organically. Once again, geometric forms are limitless, as are organic forms.
9. Another relative factor for the surface of a color, if its form is defined, is its size. Blue, for instance, can exist in an area as wide as the sea, or it can cover just one millimeter. Again, there are no limits to how big or small an area can be. This leads us to unequivocally assert that colors exist in nature in limitless forms and possibilities: each color has limitless tonalities, the number of colors in nature is limitless, and the relationships among colors are limitless.

It can be said that simply being aware of a thing causes it to lose its essential characteristic, provided it had one to begin with. In this regard, Mao Zedong says that to know the taste of an apple you must taste it, meaning that you must change its taste in order to know it. Saying that green cannot be known in isolation from other colors would be an incomplete claim. The truth is that green can be known in isolation from finiteness.

Form: Objects acquire plastic value from their external movement: the value of a triangle lies in its triangularity. The academic perspective then studies the affiliations or relationships of a triangle with regard to other related forms, i.e., its external movement within the set of external movements of forms that it influences, or by which it is influenced. Aspects of similarity, balance, sequence, rhythm, and the rejection of disharmonies are studied. We assert that the triangle itself is of unlimited triangularity, assuming the validity of its reality as a triangle. The possibilities of its relationships with other forms are also unlimited. But let us forget all this and return to the academic perspective, where forms have always been divided into *geometric* and *organic*. Then, as knowledge progressed, academics had to budge a little, for it was proven that organic forms are only the product of geometric accumulations. As for geometric forms, those were eventually relegated to the museum of history with a massive sign that read “Euclid.” The old dreams have all collapsed—that two parallel lines never meet, that a straight line is the shortest route between two points, and the most impregnable stronghold of all, that light moves in a straight line. The old academics clung to these for a while, believing that an equivalent of the straight line existed in nature. But modern physics showed no mercy for any of these beliefs, and now the straight line no longer has any existence whatsoever. The differentiation between geometric and organic forms was a result of a quantitative understanding of things, but in reality everything is simultaneously geometric and organic.

An Appeal

We call on all plastic artists to use the color blue, for it has great potential in showing internal dimensions and depths—in other words, it has the ability to create a Crystalist vision. It is currently the clearest embodiment of Crystalism within the color spectrum. We must stress that the human ability to see internal dimensions in the color blue is not merely the result of a conditional reflex specific to the blueness of the sea and the sky.

Drama

The idea of the three dimensions of theater is irrational, for each theatrical performance is as multiple as the people who watch it. Someone sitting in the first row sees movements, expressions, and emotions, and hears vocal tones that are all completely different from what someone sitting at the very back of the theater, or to the right or left of the stage, sees and hears. So with the arrival of each new audience member, who would naturally occupy a different seat from all the others, a play remains open to further plurality and division. This plurality goes on infinitely, which is valuable in and of itself. But academics, with their habit of twisting the truth, deal with each play

from a singular view, and it is on this basis that they issue their judgments, criticisms, and interpretations. Last year, when we covered the front of the theater with a transparent crystal, we were referencing this affliction. In the near future, in an attempt to ease critics' consciences and give ourselves some rest, we will be interrupting the performance for short intervals in which we will ask audience members to change seats so that they can enjoy a greater variety of plays and have a more pleasant experience. This should result in less criticism.

The idea of acting, or characterization, is itself an irrational idea: for two hours an actor can wreak havoc in the world through his assumed character, before hurrying off the stage for a previously arranged appointment, a cinema date for instance. This irrationality is not something that we discovered; the very history of theater is built on it. The struggle between theater giants like [Bertolt] Brecht and [Konstantin] Stanislavsky reflects it, and a dialogue with them is quite possible. Let us start with Stanislavsky's question "How can affective memory be turned into deliberate action?" And can this be achieved in isolation from the thesis of transparency? Is there not a need—even a minor one—for a theater of telepathy, history, clairvoyance, psychiatry, or automatism?

Concerning the appeal to morphology (the science of form) to provide a futuristic solution to the problem of drama, we say that human morphology is a set of developmental cycles and multiple adaptations to ensure survival. We still maintain that it is the function that creates the organ and not the other way around. Furthermore, present morphology reflects that struggle that relates to the different capacities of an earlier age. Now that man has entered the technological age, present morphology has become almost a burden on him.

Poets

Transparency is a genuine current in poetry. What artist and poet William Blake said about man's four-dimensional vision—the ability to see an entire world in a grain of sand—represents a cornerstone of Crystalist thought. Sufi poetry is also full of references to the reality of the crystal. Indeed, it takes the crystal to its furthest and most impenetrable extremes. This can be seen in the following translation of a poem by Asif Jatt Halabi:

The colors went to the sun
I need neither colors
Nor the absence of colors
The suns died, devoid of space
I need neither light
Nor darkness

Children

The interest and intense joy that young children exhibit toward the crystal in its simple forms—like a soap bubble or a kaleidoscope, which consists of a lens and broken bits of glass—add to the crystal's authenticity. Children's interest in the crystal is a deeply complex matter, for children are the most complex of riddles.

Conclusion

We conclude by repeating that the crystal is nothing but the denial of the objectification of objects. It is infinite transparency. We painted the crystal, we thought about the crystal, and so the Crystalist vision came to be.

Notes

1. Eds.: The Crystalist texts were first introduced to English-speaking readers in 1995, with art historian Salah Hassan's discussion and translation in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa*. Since that time, the Khartoum-based art critic Salah Hassan Abdullah has published additional materials in Arabic, allowing us to identify the Crystalist Manifesto printed January 21, 1976, as the inaugural one, and to recharacterize the text that Hassan had published under the title of manifesto as the 1980 statement of Shaddad.
2. Eds.: It is uncertain to whom the authors are referring with "McDonough" (or in Arabic "Makdunat").

—"Bayān al-Madrasa al-Kristāliyya," *al-Ayyām*, January 21, 1976; repr. in Ṣalāḥ Ḥasan 'Abd Allāh, *Musāhamāt fī al-Adab al-Tashkīlī, 1974–86*, 2nd ed. (Khartoum: Madārik, 2010), 311–22. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

Commentary (1976)

Abdallah Bola

[...]

It would be beyond the scope of the present article to chronicle the counter-development—that of the revolutionary cultural institution—and how it impeded the cultural fraud committed by the institution of intellectual exploitation. It would also distract us from the main subject, which is the genesis of the elite man, his splendor followed by the beginning of his downfall, and the relationship between all that and the bourgeois art establishment as part of the elite establishment.

The qualitative condition that distinguishes the art establishment is the fact that it is the last stronghold of the elite establishment, and the most immune. This is because the bourgeoisie was initially suspicious of art, throwing all its weight into the fields of philosophy, law, and politics, although it is beyond the scope of this article to go into how this was done—see [Ernst] Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* [1963], for further, if not entirely precise, analysis of this. But the bourgeoisie was enamored of profit, willing to create a product of the Devil himself, and did not hesitate to storm the realm of art when the opportunity presented itself. In my view, this is the genealogy of traditional criticism, which, in the manner of all bourgeois intellectual institutions, has created the artist in the image of the bourgeoisie. Of course, this does not apply to all artists, but to those who give in to it, or those who are prone to being recruited and tamed, in a final bid by the bourgeoisie to maintain some control, given that the bourgeoisie, in the final analysis, is an institution of propaganda, advertising, and marketing, and has nothing to do with criticism.

The main premise of the traditional institutions of criticism is to treat art as an irrational activity that does not emanate from knowledge or history and cannot be studied or acquired; it is merely based on sensibility, intuition, clairvoyance, and so forth. The crucial point here is that it has nothing to do with the objective world, the world of measurements, surveys, and comparisons. We are not far from a series of articles in which one of our young plastic artists defends the absolute animosity

between art and intellectual activity. But the cunning that can be found among the guardians of the intellectual elite, those who specialize in criticism, far exceeds that of young artists who are victims of the national educational establishment, which is in turn merely a shadow of the global establishment.

[Paul] Claudel, after some hesitation, states the following: "In art lies an element that can only be revealed to the most delicate of tastes, a sweet fragrance that can be found in all refined cultures but is inaccessible to the world of weights and measurements. It exists only for the sensibility that can delicately detect it, and resists those who try to grasp it intellectually, through categorization and analysis that would take it apart. Thus, the only way to understand it is through intuition."

The revelations of someone who practices his art in that manner would have to be accepted as a matter of faith. By imprisoning his practice within a subjective reality, he sets himself up as master over everyone. Who would be able to prove otherwise, when he is expressing a truth for which his personal value is the only evidence? What truth can be used in opposition, when the claim is precisely that the higher truth is the one that reveals itself to him? What means do we have to judge an activity that elevates itself over classification, measurement, and history?

Needless to say, those types of artists or art connoisseurs, with the professional art critic at their summit, are part of the elite. What is unfortunate is that the revolutionary cultural institution continues, to a great extent, to adopt the very same ideas as the elite. Otherwise, how can we explain the agreement between Herbert Read, Fischer, and [Roger] Garaudy when it comes to [Pablo] Picasso, for instance? Let us not make the false assumption of referring this matter to a shared human inclination. For Read, a human being is a bourgeois human being, and aesthetic values—like other values, in his point of view—are, by definition, bourgeois values.

To share aesthetic measures with the critics of the bourgeois establishment constitutes, no doubt, a fault in professional criticism and in the criticism of the revolutionary cultural institution. The revolution should not merely aim to provide material and aesthetic needs, but should call those very needs into question. [. . .]

This concept requires lengthy dialogue and collective contributions in order to take shape. Collective contributions are at its root, especially those that replace the professional critic not by the specialist artist but by everyone, without an intermediary, and with no one possessing an advantage based on the claim of clairvoyance or strength of intuition. The question is not, as asked by brother [Mohamed] Abusabib, "Where are the intellectuals?" It is, rather, "Where is the public?" That is, where are the ordinary people, the man on the street, and so on? And what makes that man ordinary? Is being kept away from creative activity what makes a person ordinary?

Brother Hassan [Musa] addresses that question in a text titled "The Ordinary Man on the Street Is Not Ordinary." In it he argues that those referred to by that label also practice plastic art. They practice it as viewers, and in the different activities that official criticism does not include under the rubric of plastic art—the ornamental design on straw mats, rugs, pottery, etc.—things that are usually referred to as popular arts and crafts. This is also true of those who chose the colors and design of their clothes. But such an idea does not occur to our professional critics, who are afraid to have their viewpoints contaminated by the art of the common people.

Our ambition does not end here. It is not enough to prove that everyone practices plastic art (God save us from the evils of diligence and ambition!). But since “ordinary people” practice it in such an embryonic fashion, our ambition is to implant those practices. That would require an examination of the educational factor, and the distortion of such curricula in which the creative act appears as a miracle, a heroic feature, and which stirs up children’s emotions with melodramatic riddles about the weak, the poor, and the oppressed, who do nothing but wait for the heroic savior—the courageous prince or the just ruler. They never attain victory by themselves, nor do they ever rule themselves. See all history textbooks since the beginning of formal education to this day.

In cinema, the Sudanese mythic hero is not enough, so we get American and Italian heroes. Radio and television, those proud achievements of science and education, shamelessly disseminate social and linguistic diseases—the laments of the petit bourgeoisie over “the good old days,” in which the letter *qaf* has miraculously turned into the letter *ghayn*, all declensions (*dammās*, *fathas*, and *kasras*) have been replaced by *sukuns* (marks indicating the absence of a vowel), all *sukuns* have become identical, brains have been replaced by wigs, and ignorance has occupied the rest of the space between the door and the microphone. Isn’t it sheer audacity to then complain that interest in the plastic arts is absent in media and education—as if the media and education were showing great interest in all other meaningful pursuits, and only art were missing? Is it even true that such interest is absent? The interests mentioned above in fact represent their authentic interests, in our opinion.

The problem does not lie, as brother Abusabib sees it, in the complexity of knowledge and the multiplicity of its fields, but in the complexity of the routes of dissemination that the elite establishment has unapologetically closed off. There is no avoiding a battle against the professional recipients of secrets and revelations, and no one is claiming that it will be easy.

As mentioned above, the ordinary people, whose embryonic knowledge our endeavors aim to implant, cannot be lumped together. Addressing them requires an effort of differentiation and classification. There are the young ones whose share of artistic training the educational establishment has, as a matter of course, turned into a substitute lesson for other subjects. The responsibility for them lies with plastic artists who work in education, the plastic artists’ union, and those interested in such activities, whether parents, citizens, or intellectuals who have a different view than that of the traditional establishment.

Then there are the students of high schools and secondary education, who should for a start be enlightened about plastic art as an acquirable skill that is necessary for the building of a contemporary, socially progressive character. Those among them who work hard in this field have every right to be rewarded. Plastic art education should become a primary subject in high school curricula and final and graduating examinations. Those interested in the field should work on refuting ridiculous arguments and weak claims, which are essentially based on a lack of interest in progressive education: the claim, for instance, that plastic art—referred to as *the arts*—is a natural gift, and so cannot be made into a compulsory subject. How can real effort be nothing more than a natural gift, when the history of human evolution stands witness to the opposite?

There are also the intellectuals, who can be divided into two groups. One group understands the meaning of culture as evolving and integrated knowledge that strives for perpetual change in the building of character and social structures. Those possess enough academic integrity to comfortably admit ignorance in a particular field and ask to learn about it. We teach them and learn from them, each party eager for what the other has to offer.

The second group, on the other hand, uses culture as a medal of honor, or a certificate of privilege, a means to higher ranks. Among those is the type of professional critic mentioned above. They only engage in people's affairs if they are given full control over them. When they refrain from writing, it is not because of the cruelty of our concept of criticism, but because they are willing to write only if they are guaranteed the credit "by Dr. So-and-So," in bold letters. We welcome their contributions, but we offer them no guarantees.

Worst of all is the reclusive specialist, who fancies himself the greatest to walk this earth. A friend who did his postgraduate studies in a developed country—in the social sense of the term—told me about the Sudanese students who resented the fact that, in addition to studying their field of choice, they had to take courses in philosophy, plastic art, music, economics, etc. Most of them preferred to drop out. Those types of educated specialists, inasmuch as they flaunt their knowledge of their field of specialization, flaunt their ignorance of other fields, particularly when it comes to art. This is real knowledge, they say. No comment.

As for the rest of humanity, those whom the establishment calls *the common people*, or *the man on the street*, they must have the final say when it comes to changing their situation. "Revolutions happen not only for the people but by the people." Our role is limited to emphasizing that we have not acquired the knowledge we have because we are superior to them, but rather at their expense. There are plastic artists—in the full sense of the term—among those people, and it is up to the criticism that aims at implanting their activities to confirm this truth.

I have addressed this point before in the "Death of the Privileged Man" series, and called for opening the gate of plastic art to all workers in the fields of creating visual forms—carpenters, ironmongers, shoemakers, all the way to the very end of the list of definable plastic artists. Of course, I do not imagine that one article or book will be able to change the entire culture, but it might at least contribute to formulating a possibility, a theoretical awareness. Those who do not practice the molding of forms still practice art in the embryonic mode proposed by Hassan Musa. Everyone is included in this, from the revolutionary intellectual to the beloved woman sitting in the courtyard of her home. All possess critical capacities that differ in degree but not in type.

Without a doubt, complete rootedness will happen only under the umbrella of a radical cultural and social revolution. But such a revolution cannot take place without the continued effort to implant awareness, of which plastic awareness—in practice and criticism—is an integral element. This is unacceptable to the professional critic. Or as one fashionable French lady once wrote: "If all women were fashionable, I would lose my distinction." The professional critic knows that people will not suddenly all become critics, but even the initial hint of such a project troubles him, in the same way that the idea of equality troubles the psychologically privileged.

Finally, it appears to me that brother Abusabib's observations have inverted the issue. His protest against our notion of criticism—the necessity of making knowledge of the external and internal laws of a phenomenon widely available—and his claim about the difficulty thereof for the plastic artist, present the issue in a way that suggests that one seeks knowledge in order to acquire a label: critic, artist, historian, etc. Knowledge is needed in order to change reality—personal reality and social reality. If plastic art keeps us imprisoned within a field of specialization, and erects a barrier between us and knowledge, then to Hell—or to the museum—with it.

The question remains: Does practice fall outside the realm of knowledge? Is it acceptable to criticize, chronicle, or think without understanding all the fields that the brother mentioned? On the other hand, could we produce innovative plastic art without that? Can the composite structure of knowledge be complete without the practice of art?

Thanks are due to brother Abusabib, for it is from him that we have acquired the habit of bringing these deep and lively questions to the fore. We hope that the scope of the debate continues to expand, so that we may avoid slipping from brevity into platitudes.

—‘Abd Allāh Aḥmad [Būlā], “Muwāṣalat al-Ta‘qīb” (excerpt), *al-Ayyām*, December 14, 1976; repr. in Ṣalāḥ Ḥasan ‘Abd Allāh, *Musāhamāt fī al-Adab al-Tashkīlī*, 1974–86, 2nd ed. (Khartoum: Madārik, 2010), 289–97. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

Commentary (1976)

Mohamed Abusabib

[...]

I think I can now clarify the issue of specialization, and my understanding of it, by referring it back to more or less the same previous concepts.

I understand this issue in the sense that necessitated the separation of medicine and astronomy from philosophy, the same sense that makes Abdallah Bola so intent on distinguishing between the phenomena of plastic art and literature, and finally in the sense that allows the same colleague to benefit from and apply his readings in psychology to questions of creativity in plastic art without being himself a psychologist, or that allows a psychologist in turn to benefit from that application without being a practicing painter.

Our brother Bola writes the following: “The problem thus lies not in the complexity of knowledge, but in the means of dissemination that are based on a lack of desire to communicate it, and on the fear of it being a force for change. Let him present in segments, then, that hateful being—segments that our brother here calls ‘specializations,’ and whose true name is knowledge. They become isolated specializations only under the conditions of the institution of social privilege.” And I had written, in the passage from which Bola quotes in his article, that “it is no longer just a matter of accumulating information; it has become an arduous and complex process that requires creative extrapolations and connections of the different theories of these sciences.”

From those two passages, the following can be deduced:

First, I have never called for the isolation of specializations. I have in fact stated the opposite: the necessity of creative connections and links based on the logical dialectics mentioned earlier.

Second, Bola does not see the problem as lying in complexities or specializations, as might be understood from the context, but as lying in the means of dissemination that are unwanted by the bourgeoisie.

Third, if I have established that specializations should not be isolated, then it inevitably follows that Bola does not disagree with me about the means of dissemination. It is worth mentioning that bourgeois thought, in more developed countries, has overcome this issue of isolating specializations or presenting them in separate segments. This was dictated by the necessity for reform on the one hand and the realities of scientific demands on the other. But in our country—where bourgeois thought is of course underdeveloped—it still has not really produced even such isolated segments.

As for the matter of my granting the professional critic permission to roam about the spaces of knowledge but withholding the same permission from the painter, as our brother Bola seems to imagine—this actually took me by surprise. How did he miss the fact that in all my writings I have emphasized the importance of theoretical study, followed by the study of aesthetics, and, finally—something I have myself practically applied—the importance of following a dialectical method in addressing questions of plastic art, whether theoretical or critical? Most probably that was a “conditional” reaction on his part, as he was preoccupied with questions of criticism and knowledge.

To further emphasize my point on the question of criticism: even if we assume that such a professional critic exists, one who understands the internal “law” of phenomena and offers criticism that is in complete agreement with my previously presented viewpoint (and such an assumption lies within the realm of possibility), my call for the necessity of theoretical understanding on the part of plastic artists still stands.

Once again, the premise of my claim is that specialization is not a bourgeois invention but a natural condition in the same way that complexity is, and is in fact a result of that complexity. Therefore, specialization is not the cause of alienation. Rather, the means of dissemination and the unwillingness to communicate knowledge are the causes of the worker’s alienation. Furthermore, the worker’s isolation from the experience of his own work, along with its outcomes and proceeds, are also to blame.

In developed countries, specialized research academies are established in the different fields of knowledge with the goal of undertaking collective research. In these academies, individual researchers specialize in different branches within the same field, the primary purpose being to accelerate research and discoveries, and save time by collating findings and connecting results.

Finally, I hope that I have managed to clarify to Bola and all others concerned with this subject that the specialization I mean is not the kind “plagued by a myopic vision.” I also want to confirm that this by no means constitutes a denial of how bourgeois thought exploits the complexity of truth by using that complexity as a justification to claim that knowledge is only possible for the elite man. Neither does it mean denying the role of this thought in exploiting the reality of specialized

disciplines and presenting them as isolated slices, which is what I referred to in the introduction to this article by suggesting that this thought manifests a certain intelligence insofar as it lends the appearance of not being inimical to truth.

—Muhammad ‘Abd al-Rahmān Abū Sabīb, “Ta‘qīb Abū Sabīb” (excerpt), *al-Ayyām*, December 28, 1976; repr. in Ṣalāḥ Ḥasan ‘Abd Allāh, *Musāhamāt fī al-Adab al-Tashkīlī*, 1974–86, 2nd ed. (Khartoum: Madārik, 2010), 297–301. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

Exhibition Statement (1980)

Muhammad Hamid Shaddad

The Crystalists testify, with their good minds, that the universe is a project of a transparent crystal—one with no obscuring divisions, but rather eternal depths. The truth is that the Crystalists don’t perceive space and time the way others do.

Their concern is to love the language of the crystal, and to cause your language to become transparent, so that no word obscures another—the language is not selective—and so that when the people respond with a single transparent utterance, it is as if they were responding with the entire language. This can be extended further, so that no transparent letter obscures another. Similarly, no transparent sound would obscure another. Otherwise, people should keep silent, and that too is a crystal.

We are living a new life, and we need a new language and poetry for it. Our new life means that we have acquired new content, which necessitates new forms and molds capable of embracing this modern content. In other words, we have not retained the old framework. Rhyme and meter do not appeal to us.

Crystalists attest that there is no empirical knowledge and that everything ever said about empirical knowledge is a myth. The human mind has never evolved and will never evolve through experience. The basis for Crystalist thought is that receptivity to knowledge is also knowledge. Receptivity to knowledge is older than the experiential acquisition of knowledge. In truth, the mind is more intelligent than experience is, and more complete! When asked about the existence of this nonempirical knowledge within the mind, we Crystalists settle the debate by saying that it is not knowledge, but pleasure that originally exists in the mind.

Yes, pleasure is prior to knowledge. Our observations in life are but observations of pleasure, and we know that nonexistent mirrors of light and water separate the intervals of pleasure. The universe is reduced in size and enlarged, is actualized and unactualized, and a dialectic of nonexistent mirrors separates the one from the other. And the largest thing in the universe is also the smallest, with nonexistent mirrors of light and water separating the one from the other. We know as well that the universe that appears to us is the one calculated against the fixed value of the speed of light. But we direct our vision toward the inverse of the speed of light so as to arrive at the edges of the nonexistent mirrors.

We have no confidence in the law of evolution, for the dinosaur evolved to the point of extinction. Man: you carry in your chest two breasts that are remnants of the woman in you, so look for her. What is known about her, and known to you, is that the primary function of breasts is feeding, and every part of the human body either

has a specific function now or had one in the past. So did you too breastfeed? And what was your name then?

We prefer vision to craftsmanship and oppose the trend that declares craftsmanship to be the measure of a good work.

I conclude without asking you to commit yourselves to anything.

—Muhammad Hāmid Shaddād, exhibition statement for *Ma'raq al-Fannān wa-l-Afkār*, December 1980; repr. in Ṣalāḥ Ḥasan 'Abd Allāh, *Musāhamāt fī al-Adab al-Tashkīlī*, 1974–86, 2nd ed. (Khartoum: Madārik, 2010), 265–66. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

SECOND ARAB BIENNIAL IN RABAT

The second Arab Biennial took place in Rabat in December 1976, but its planning and implementation sparked much criticism among Moroccan artists. One source of tension lay in local organizational structures. In 1975, a group of artists in Casablanca (A. Ghani Belmaachi, Abdessalam Guessous, Abdelhay Mellakh, and Omar Bouragba) instituted a second artists' association, the Association of Moroccan Plastic Artists, with the intent of counteracting the perceived elitism of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts (AMAP), affiliated with the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists and its biennial planning. Their manifesto appeared in April 1976, and included a proclamation of plans to organize the exhibition *Twenty Years of Plastic Art in Morocco* as a parallel event to the biennial envisioned by the AMAP. A 1978 interview with artist Fouad Bellamine, conducted by *Intégral*, provides further detail on the difficulties and frustrations surrounding questions of authenticity and authority.

Manifesto of the Association of Moroccan Plastic Artists (1976)

The plastic arts in Morocco are undergoing an acute crisis.

The diverse and complex reasons for this state of affairs are surfacing and becoming clearer: hidden behind misleading and false appearances, they have encouraged the proliferation of poor works lacking sincere expression, even to the point of undermining plastic arts research.

Moroccan art has thus broken away from its natural setting to take confused paths that oblige it to follow various foreign trends, without taking into account differences in circumstances, environmental adaptability, means, and ends.

The reality of Morocco's plastic arts is unlike any other.

As a consequence, these imported trends have had no impact, for they're neither lived nor felt in any profound way that would give them a new form and a purely Moroccan character.

The result of this detour is therefore a lack of action and of any healthy popularization of plastic works, as well as of the creation of agreement and contribution to other intellectual currents with the goal of building solid foundations.



Visitors at an exhibition featuring works by members of the Association of Moroccan Plastic Artists, presented in the underground passageway beneath Mohamed V Square, Casablanca. 1976

Our coming to consciousness of this situation has given birth to the Association of Moroccan Plastic Artists, whose goals are to denounce the fear and disorder reigning in the domain of the arts, to contribute to the revalorization of creation and its flourishing, and, finally, to give birth to an authentic, unadulterated, and new art.

We cannot deny that the Moroccan public understands the situation; it is searching with a critical eye for proof that will confirm and reinforce Morocco's plastic arts personality, so that it may insert itself among the developed currents rather than continuing to lose itself within them.

The Association of Moroccan Plastic Artists was thus born from the profound desire for action that is freer, more open, more adaptable, and more oriented toward the future. This implies that the artist must take his destiny in his own hands in order to be able to overcome all the difficulties that hinder the development and flourishing of his work, and that confine the plastic arts to restricted areas. In order to build a healthy culture that is free of all complexes, he must multiply the connections among his works, his ideas, and his public, destroy the odious myth of the nonpublic, and give himself over to a rich and flourishing artistic life.

For us, it's important to move beyond the ritual of the exhibition. We're most interested in creating unprecedented situations in sectors where the plastic arts don't yet have access and thus in providing everyone—artists and the public—with new perspectives. That's why a hanging of works must be mixed with screenings and with active, face-to-face debates, in which the artist and the public can both have their say.

We oppose the conventions that, for a very long time, have labeled the "creator" a being apart, incapable of thinking and expressing himself except through his art, and cut off from the realities of his time.

Our efforts aim to create art spaces and national museums in order to engage broader audiences in dialogue, to encourage confrontations, collaborations, and international exchanges in terms of a necessarily dynamic reality that our plastic artists must perpetually transform.

Altogether, these actions will contribute to the blossoming of a new, authentic, unadulterated, and indestructible art.

Naturally, we will discuss naïve art, which we will neither ignore nor reject, for it comes from an original source and is based on the pure and sincere gift of oneself, whose subjects are spontaneously drawn from our ancestral heritage.

Every nation takes pride in its naïve art; we should neither omit it nor ignore it.

Neither should we forget that our mission is to build, in our day and age, solid foundations for future times.

We must draw on and transform this existing energy, this mystified energy, this sublimated energy: that's where the future lies.

We must restore the feeling that man has a mission to accomplish on earth, that he must rid himself of all complexes, all lies, that he must transform all his poisons into an elixir in order to become a creator of quality and of merit.

Folded in on itself, the world of the arts has only belatedly come to consciousness. And in this month of April, our association forces open its doors to announce its creation, not only on the level of words, but also at the level of action, with our first plastic arts event, which we consider to be preparation for the exhibition *Twenty Years of Plastic Art in Morocco*, which we have announced to all Moroccan plastic artists.¹

May we prepare ourselves for this large-scale event that will endure, we hope, in the annals of the history of Moroccan art, and that will allow us to synthesize this art, with the goal of better understanding in what context it may evolve toward universality.

Note

1. Eds.: This exhibition was presented at Galerie Bab Rouah, Rabat, April 15–30, 1976.

—Statement signed “Association des Plasticiens Marocains,” *Création*, no. 1 (April 1976): n.p. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

Interview with Fouad Bellamine (1978)

What do you think of the Rabat Biennial?

First of all, I would like to note that the word *biennial* seems too pretentious to describe the event that took place in Rabat. It is not possible, in my view, to compare it with the well-known biennials (São Paulo, Venice, etc.). A biennial worthy of the name requires perfect organization, very careful preparation, and a rigorous selection of works. But everyone knows that the date of the Rabat Biennial was set at the last moment, that there was no contact or exchange between the painters and the public, no lectures, not even an exchange of ideas among the participating artists. Because of all this, I see this biennial as having more negative aspects than positive ones.

How would you envision the next Arab Biennial?

If the next Arab Biennial intends to live up to the comparison with other biennials and provide all of us, artists and the public, with experiences worthy of reflection, it has to allow time for thorough organization and, above all, a rigorous selection of works in accordance with the value of the artists' methods and aims. It should be a selection based on legitimate work, not a diversion for “Sunday painters.”

What was your impression of the biennial from an aesthetic point of view?

On the whole, the quality of the works presented was very mediocre, with two exceptions: the Iraqi and Moroccan pavilions. As for the rest, one had the impression that their techniques were often poorly “digested”; anecdotal and demagogic aspects dominated the figurative works (in the Palestinian and Yemeni pavilions, for example).

There were, as I said, two exceptions. What some of the Iraqi and Moroccan painters had in common was the foresight to present works that could speak to the future without in any way disowning their cultural heritage.

As far as the Moroccan pavilion is concerned, I found that the collection hardly allowed the visitor to judge the ensemble of artistic experiments and to form an idea of them, since the painters presented only one work each. Notwithstanding, we certainly demonstrated a technical mastery as well as an avant-garde dynamism that were remarkable in comparison with the level of the other participants.

Some members of the press and the public have repeatedly accused Moroccan artists of being “Westernized.” What do you say to that?

In Morocco, this issue is raised by a certain intellectual elite, some of whose members write in French (and who therefore have to confront similar problems relative to the issue of authenticity), as well as by certain groups of Arabic-speaking writers. They ought to understand us, yet they expect plastic artists to shoulder the entire burden of interpretation. In particular, I remember a debate that took place in Fez between artists and an audience of students and intellectuals (mostly of French expression), a debate where the problem of acculturation was raised by hurling accusations at the plastic artists. Here’s what I can say about that occasion: first of all, there was, from the outset, a veritable incomprehension of the particularities of the plastic language; for example, when the works of the Moroccan artists were figurative, the problem of authenticity never came up for them, even though figurative art is Western! As if figurative art were the only solution. . . . Secondly, the concept of commitment was often vague and poorly understood; a certain student elite, armed with certain Marxist ideas, used the theme of authenticity for political ends without really paying attention to artistic issues.

As for me, I think that an artist’s commitment takes place in society, in relation to his own behavior and his ideal of life. Finally, regarding the issue of authenticity: I’ve observed for a few years now that it has been part of a genuine, growing awareness among numerous artists in the Arab world, in Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia, as well as here at home. With these artists, who have devoted themselves to research, we find ideas that come from a common source of inspiration. In their work I rediscover elements that link them to a common heritage. I’m thinking of Saadi al-Kaabi, Saleh al-Jumaie, Dia al-Azzawi, Samir Salameh (a Palestinian artist who participated in the Baghdad Biennial), A. Bezzaj, and Nja Mahdaoui, for example, to cite just a few names.

When we look back at the history of contemporary art to situate its different periods, we arrive at a decisive decade, the 1950s—a real site of bifurcation out of which several tendencies and avenues of research were born. In my view, this was a very important turning point: I’m thinking of the school of abstract painting in Paris and the American gestural school, with their points of convergence (Pop art, Op art, etc.). So, when Europe speaks of a crisis, I wonder if we shouldn’t take a step back and return to a free and independent standpoint, one that precedes the issue of style (just as Francis Bacon did, for example), in order to focus on the problem of Man (as in the paintings of Dia al-Azzawi or Mohamed Kacimi), or on something else that may be linked to semiotics—the graphic gesture, for example (I confess that I’m extremely

interested in graffiti)—as an alternative to this crisis and as a valorization of our cultural heritage.

But to return to the initial question, I will say that the art of painting on canvas necessarily implies a form of Westernization, like other material aspects of our life (clothing, housing, etc.), without our wanting to deny our heritage and our way of being! The search for identity takes place in the context of this desire.

The problem therefore lies in the non-assimilation of this issue on the part of certain intellectuals, in view also of the complexity of the language (aesthetic and psychological), which is beyond their reach. Without listening to them, I will go so far as to say that we have, on the contrary, a very important role to play as artists and pedagogues, on the level of teaching and education, as well as in introducing the general public to the language of the plastic arts. It must be said, unfortunately, that no one is helping us make ourselves understood. Throughout the history of art, artists have always received support from intellectuals, men of letters, and poets. In Morocco, however, those who raise these issues (the issue of Westernization and authenticity) aren't trying to make a contribution, aren't offering any examples. Those who should be the closest to us are the ones who do not understand us. It's true that some have tried, have made an effort to understand the artists, to see and discuss. But most of them . . . Finally, how can anyone make a firm decision about something they know nothing about? How can anyone pass judgment on an exhibition without going to see it, or without examining it thoroughly? For their part, the painters should also make an effort to contribute better explanations of their works.

Certain exhibitions take place in milieus that are too isolated, without the possibility of exchange or dialogue. For its part, the state is not helping us either. We have no special newspaper columns on the plastic arts, nor any radio or TV programs, not to mention the lack of museums. However, from childhood we have been surrounded by an architectural milieu (a balance between straight and oblique lines) and an ensemble of extraordinary objects on which we never reflect. And the paradoxical thing is that, despite this heritage, we continue to underestimate art and the role of artists.

As for me, I believe in the necessity of drawing on our heritage, while remaining open to the West.

—"Entretien avec Fouad Bellamine," *Intégral*, no. 12/13 (1978): 12–13. Translated from French by Teresa Villa-Ignacio.

ON THE DESERT STYLE IN SAUDI ARABIA

Mohammed Al-Saleem was among the first generation of Saudi Arabian artists sent abroad to study in the 1970s; he completed his degree in Florence. Not long after his return to the Kingdom, he composed these position texts as an introduction to a 1976 solo exhibition in Riyadh. His work with desert horizons offered a path of mediation between the opposing heritage and abstraction currents of the period.

See Plate 45 for a 1977 painting by Mohammed Al-Saleem.

A Word for the Sake of Art (1976)

Mohammed Al-Saleem

The plastic arts in all corners of the world provide a true and honest picture of the level of culture of their nations. It is known that culture is built on foundations of faith and thought, which usually manifest in the customs and traditions of nations, and in the inherited experiences that serve the realization of ideal values for a better life.

Here we are surrounded by traditions derived from our Islamic beliefs and Arab customs. The plastic arts in this part of the world, as in every other part, must derive their flavor and distinct characteristics from that culture.

Just as, all over the world, nature and the environment contribute to shaping a person's taste, a Saudi person is distinguished by a nature and environment rich with distinct aesthetic elements of form, color, volume, and line.

Here I would like to point out to our youth and emerging artists that not everything that has been said or written about the plastic arts applies to our culture and our environment. Anyone who has ever spoken or written about the plastic arts has done so based on a perception of his own society and environment, not out of a perception of our culture and environment.

I would not deny—indeed, I appreciate—the authenticity of each artist in the context of his culture and environment. Art is a universal methodology that anyone anywhere can use for expression, but no one would be able to express your culture and your understanding of your ideal life values with complete faith. Therefore, we must understand that we are obliged to create authentic art that draws on our own local authenticity.

Many may be misled on the subject of culture, describing it as backward or falling behind the parade of civilizational progress. That is wrong, for culture by its very nature is continuously evolving as long as there is a natural continuation of life. Culture is nothing but the understanding—as I have already mentioned—of the meaning and requirements of life, as guided by experience and scientific progress in various fields.

Many may also be misled on the subject of artistic commitment—such as those who describe it or label it as a restriction of style or as thematic limitation. That too is wrong, for commitment is the authenticity of production, which lends a distinct character to the work, like a proof of identity. Otherwise, what would be the difference between an original and an imitation, or between creating and copying?

Let's consider, for instance, the subject of bullfighting, which is naturally not a Saudi subject. If it is addressed by a Saudi artist, it would no doubt result in the proprietors of this subject feeling pride in the fact that their culture has unwittingly affected a Saudi artist's sensibility. This applies to both form and content.

Then there are those boxes lining our streets; the houses and buildings that assume a style devoid of all artistic references to our aesthetic reality. We force ourselves to accept them, reluctantly, following an attitude of "if others do it, then I may as well."

I repeat: the plastic arts are what provide the true and honest image of any nation, the level of its awareness of its own aesthetic values, in content and in form, be it in paintings, buildings, furniture, clothing, or kitchenware.

I do hope that our youth will commit to their culture. For how proud it makes one to see the world praise authentic Saudi art, in the same way that we praise the art of others! And I aspire to seeing art as authentic as the Saudi people themselves, always looking ahead.

Exhibition Statement (1976)

Mohammed Al-Saleem

In this twelfth solo exhibition, I have focused on studying the color and composition of the desert environment, in content and form, through the effect of the force of the sun on a desert landscape, so that color values have vanished—an effect common to Impressionist paintings.

I compensated by using bronze colors, and basic colors with a focus on their warmer tones, in order to convey a realistic impression of the force of the sun and the extent of its effects on our nature.

It is known that Impressionist styles depend on light and shadow, on foregrounding prismatic colors as brought out by sunlight during the different times of day.

I have observed how the sun affects a landscape by spreading its rays on every element that exists on earth, and that we can find aesthetic compositions in form and color in the subjective colors and forms of the existing elements that are revealed to us through that spreading movement of sunlight, even where there is no shadow.

For shadow and prismatic colors are natural phenomena that exist naturally. It would better befit an artist, instead of re-creating something that already exists, to search for undiscovered values, which is what I have attempted in my quest for the natural distinct features of our Saudi environment. If I have ignored prismatic colors and overlooked shadow and light, that is because the force of the sun in our land exhibits chromatic and formal variations in warm colors and bronzes that blend with the colors of the spectrum, producing distinct tones and rhythms. If we had to give this a label, we might call it “desert art.”

I would like to note that the first experiments in this art took place in Italy and proved successful, winning a number of awards. When I asked an Arab critic, Hussein Bikar, for his opinion about my works at the Fourth Exhibition of Arab Plastic Artists in Kuwait, he told me: “This style belongs to you alone, the desert style. Through it, I recognize this art as a Saudi art.”

I write this and hope to God, the High and Almighty, that I may attain more success in pleasing Him and pleasing the Saudi art audience. With God’s will, I shall advance on a straight line, illuminated by the Saudi desert sun, toward an authentic Saudi art.

—Muhammad al-Salim, “Kalima min Ajl al-Fann” and “Kalimat al-Ma’raq,” in *Muhammad al-Salim*, exh. cat. (Riyadh: Saudi Arabian Society for the Arts, 1976), 12–16. Translated from Arabic by Nariman Youssef.

THINKING THROUGH CULTURE DURING THE LEBANESE CIVIL WARS

Beirut activist Janine Rubeiz ran the Dar el-Fan art space and cultural platform in Beirut for nine years, from 1967 until events leading up to the Lebanese civil wars forced her to close in September of 1975. Members of the Beirut community, however, continued to meet at Rubeiz's home. This public statement, composed by Rubeiz and some of her associates in 1977 and published in local Arabic and French newspapers, signaled Dar el-Fan's commitment to ongoing cultural work, calling on Lebanon's then-president Elias Sarkis to create an independent national ministry of culture to serve all of Lebanon's citizens.

Proposal for a Cultural Policy (1977)

Janine Rubeiz

At the outset, we wish to affirm the fundamental role of culture.

So we begin by defining it: What is culture? The reality is that this concept remains ambiguous, having changed substantially over the ages. At times it has meant human phenomena as opposed to nature: everything the human being creates in opposition to what he is given in nature; culture as everything manifested in the life of the people ([Edward B.] Tylor). At times it assumed a special, elite meaning: this limits culture to a select group capable of understanding symbols and signs, as if it were a secret society. This is the origin of the idea that culture is a luxury, which is so widespread in our country.

We do not agree with this latter interpretation. On the contrary, we are inclined to choose the definition that radically contradicts it. Human activity in the particular sense of the word manifests on two levels: creation and inquiry. Everything that is created by the human being is culture, and everything that is a subject of inquiry is science. By the object of creation, we mean symbolic objects produced by society: language (literature, thought, poetry), form (painting, sculpture, etc.), image, and sound.

Cultural work is characterized by its embrace of the collective unconscious and the aesthetic or political moral values of a long past and a shared heritage. Here we see the importance of culture: a conscious and unconscious foundation for society. Through it, and through its channels that speak to human thought and sensibility, we can realize, in society and the system of values, the profound transformations that in turn change the human being and society.

We propose adopting the following definition of culture: *Culture is that which alters life*. It is therefore progress and innovation.

It is important and urgent to establish an independent Ministry of Culture, because state agencies concerned with culture must be divorced from agencies concerned with education. These are the following reasons:

1. The Ministry of National Education is an important ministry that is allocated a sizable budget constituting about a quarter of the public budget. Nevertheless, this budget is insufficient, because the needs of education are many, and are growing. No

matter how cultured the minister, he will view culture as a secondary matter and reduce allocations for it.

2. Education molds the mind and consciousness of citizens, and culture shapes the sensibility for this. It must consider all preconceptions, temperaments, and tastes borne by citizens in their unconscious. The way problems are approached is very different. The standard for measuring the outcomes on teaching the sciences, for example, is not compatible with the standard for measuring the outcomes on arts, where there is no room for competitions and degrees, and where excellence cannot be measured. Art education must therefore be subordinate to the Ministry of Culture, not the Ministry of Education.

3. This ministry must address many problems that are now dispersed across various ministries. As such, we believe it should undertake three missions:

Art education:

Starting with classes in elementary school and secondary school, and with instructors from the cadre of the Ministry of Culture, of course

Establishment of special schools for artistically talented students: special curricula should be prepared for them that will enable them to devote all the necessary hours to their art while maintaining a good level of general knowledge

Higher education in arts and literature: an institute for the fine arts, an institute for music (a single institute in which all students become familiar with both Eastern and Western music), an institute for dramatic training, an institute for dance (Eastern and Western), an institute for literature and philosophy

The preservation of heritage:

Archives, a national library, antiquities, folklore, crafts, old buildings and natural sites, museums

The promotion of art and culture:

Establishment of cultural centers in all regions

Establishment of national theater, dance, and song troupes

Production of noncommercial films of international caliber: short films, television films, documentaries, and feature films

Establishment of an orchestra and several music troupes

Organization of plastic art exhibitions of an international caliber, and work to bring artistic production to the international market

As for the principal points for this ministry, we propose the following:

First Point: Fostering Creativity

Lebanon, like other Third World countries, was subject to an imperialist cultural assault. Western civilization came to stifle our ancient civilization, shatter our values, and impose Western values on us. In this way the character of our citizens was subverted, for the shock was a strong one. Nevertheless, and in contrast to the reactions

of deeply rooted cultures (Islamic culture, for example), which turned in on themselves, preferring self-absorption to rupture, the reaction of the Lebanese was total submission with full willingness.

Here lies the cause of the dearth of creativity among the Lebanese, their strong predilection for imitation over innovation, their high regard for the foreign template, their pride in imported things, and their contempt for national production. Here, too, is the source of their inferiority complex toward templates, their arrogant individualism, and their tendency to self-assertiveness abroad that betrays a need for validation by the other.

Even in politics, which, along with commerce, is their most widespread—and might even be described as inflated—activity, we can only note the dearth of analyses and the absence of creative thought. Marxism, for example, which is fundamentally a dialectical practice opposed to chauvinism, is, for Arab Marxists, fully compatible with the enslavement of women and religious interdictions, and becomes dogma in their hands.

Creativity is the human activity par excellence. In fact, it may be the defining trait that distinguishes man from machine in the face of the mechanization of life. For to be creating is to be living a better life.

But how do we confront this situation? Must we shut out Western civilization and return to the past? Certainly not. Our choice is to continue to open up to foreign cultures without any complex and without this openness standing between us and our adherence to our cultural roots and the preservation of our national heritage.

We must therefore reject every fanatical prejudice, every preconception, and all tribalism. In particular, we must reject this idolizing, laudatory mindset that dominates Arab thought and that is the cause, or perhaps consequence, of its degeneration.

How, then, have we studied our cultural heritage? Our attitude was to idolize this sacred thing we received as an indivisible whole, refusing to subject it to any criticism or observation. Any reconsideration of it was a potential transgression, so we could not engage in any analysis. The fact is that Orientalists are the ones who studied and appraised our cultural past for us, and we owe much to them. No one would think of denying their role, but their view can only be an outside one subject to their cultural formation and their Western standards.

We must appraise our cultural heritage. It is we who must study it and critique it, and look at it objectively, relying on our values and concepts, not Western cultural values and concepts. Let us embark on this as swiftly as possible, with an open and modern way of thinking liberated from all dogma and fanaticism.

Creativity is unpredictable. We do not know from where the spark of genius will spring, and we must give it every opportunity. The diversity of cultures is an enriching factor if we confront it with an open mind and genuine syncretism.

Therefore: deep-rootedness and openness are what we must adhere to for the sake of a surpassing creativity.

Second Point: Creative Freedom

There is but one standard that guides us: the thoughtfulness and quality of the work. We should not choose one artistic or literary direction at the expense of another for

any political consideration. Art is a reflection of society. If, for example, bourgeois art flourishes in a socialist society, it is not the artist's fault, but rather indicative of dysfunction in society itself. There is no art for art's sake.

Third Point: Against Chauvinism

Chauvinism might be human nature. But, first, what is chauvinism? It is a will for difference, a will for differentiation from others and the transformation of this difference to superiority. Chauvinism is manifested individually and collectively in everything, particularly with regard to color, race, descent, class, and gender. It is natural that difference exists, but it is unacceptable for us to turn it into an element of superiority. All people are equal in rights and duties, and society must provide them equal opportunities for their characters to unfold, so as to make good citizens of them. But they are not equal in the philosophical, normative sense of the word, for they are different. The goal of culture is: work to accept equality in difference.

This issue is particularly critical in Lebanon. Extremely violent crises have shaken our society throughout our history, and we still bear the burden of the most recent convulsion, which is attributable primarily to the chauvinism of a segment of the people. This chauvinism is aggravated when one segment feels it is a minority dominated and engulfed by another segment.

But if the other is a brother, why fear him? This different other—who is an other because he is of a different religion or a different culture—is not an enemy, but an equal. He is a human being.

In fact, these distinctions they speak of are not absolute. Eastern Christians are not Western Christians and have no connection to Western civilization, especially since they have lived together with Muslims for several centuries on the same land and the two groups speak one language and have one cultural heritage.

We cannot deny the difference between basic Islamic and Christian theological tenets, but have we not achieved, or begun to achieve, a magnificent syncretism in our way of living here on our land, a synthesis between peace-loving, tolerant thought, the joy of creation and work, and the joy of living? Have we not begun to establish a fusion between technology and wisdom? If we have not done so, or if we have not perfected that marriage, then this is a task we must undertake. If we have not done so, it means we are not yet a nation.

We have thus far juxtaposed Christian and Muslim because the political choice from the beginning was balance, coexistence, and the institutionalization of the autonomy of sects, not syncretism. We have done nothing to create a Lebanese citizen, and we will be unable to do anything after all these centuries of mistrust, hatred, and mutual ignorance if we content ourselves with simply amending some legislation. We need a revolution in legislative thought. This is crucial, although it is only through culture that Lebanese citizenship will be realized on a profound level.

Fourth Point: The Democracy of Culture

The crux is that we affirm culture as a democratic phenomenon.

We, Arab Lebanese—after these long centuries of degeneration, and after our culture has become a luxury and our art a distraction reserved for princes—must provide all citizens with the right of culture.

Since the human being is the goal, the revolution for us is a cultural revolution.

Legislation may change, and economic and social relations may be altered, but the human mindset changes only through culture. We must build a new society and create a new human being.

Aesthetics have retreated in our day from the pretense of the search for beauty. Today, the works of all innovators in all fields must be in harmony with their conduct, commitment, and authenticity.

—Jānīn Rubayz et al., “Iqtirāḥāt min Ajl Siyāsa Thaqāfiyya,” originally published September 16, 1977; repr. in *Jānīn Rubayz wa-Ḍār al-Fann wa-l-Adab: Naẓra ilā Turāth Thaqāfi* (Beirut: Ḍār al-Nahār, 2003), 260–63. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

ENVIRONMENTAL ART AT ASILAH

In the summer of 1978, Moroccan artist Mohammed Melehi joined forces with colleague Mohammed Benaïssa, who had become mayor of the small coastal city of Asilah, to inaugurate an annual *moussem*, or festival, of art and culture. The initiative entailed a public-works program of cleaning and restoring the streets while also bringing artists to Asilah to live and to create murals and other installations. This text, which was prepared by participant artist Mohammed Chebaa, collects statements about the project from the artists as well as local residents. Initially circulated locally via the Moroccan Writers Union and the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts (AMAP), the document was republished in 1981 in *al-Fann al-Arabi*, a magazine of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists.

See Plates 46 and 47 for murals painted at Asilah by Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Hamidi, and Hussein Miloudi.

Statements from Participants of the First International Cultural *Moussem* (1978)

Hussein Miloudi

I consider this event to have been an uncommon experience. We met people of all ages and of both sexes, and we received their simple, direct, and sound ideas. The residents participated in various ways. The audience differed from the audiences of exhibition halls and aficionados of art. Another important thing for me was that these works weren't made to last a long time, which turned our event into an open creation. The important thing was the several days of contact and living together.

For us as artists, this event gave us the opportunity to live together for the first time, so that we were in close contact with one another, whether on the technical level or the human level. I think this event was successful because we sensed great enthusiasm among the residents.

Mohammed Hamidi

I've done murals before, but they were indoors. This is the first time I've done a mural in the open air. I brought a plan for a mural with me, but I suddenly found that my plan was not suitable for the particular wall I had chosen, and I faced a struggle in which I was compelled to change my plan. That's why in the past I've insisted that the artist step out of the limits of the indoor painting. I would normally have used assistants who know the profession, but here we faced the wall with assistants and high school students who were not versed in large-scale work. In the middle of the noise and bustle of the street and the crowds of children and people, I felt as if we were at a construction site or a factory.

As for the students, there's no doubt that their participation gave them an image of the Moroccan artist that diverged from their previous view, in which they saw him as aloof and living in an ivory tower.

I earnestly hope that this event is repeated in other cities because I benefited a great deal from the Asilah experience.

Mohamed Kacimi

My feeling is informed by the enthusiasm for the idea as a means, as a project of stepping out of the narrow milieu into a broader arena. In my view, the most important aspect is the collective participation, in which the dialogue is not only among artists themselves, but is also extended to include the residents of the city. The idea of direct action has been brewing for some time among some of my fellow artists: finding new paths and outlets to get closer to the people.

I had personally done a project with children at Place Pietri in Rabat, but the experience here in Asilah is different, because it includes people of all ages and walks of life. The surprising thing about Asilah is the enthusiasm of the people, their openness to dialogue and discussion, and their willingness to ask questions. They talk and want to listen, they ask questions and want answers. The street, the road, is no longer just a point leading from one place to another, but has become a space for encounter, an area of connection. This is the importance of the event as a movement.

As for us, the event has motivated us to ask questions about the work we're doing: its dimensions, the impact it will have on viewers, the dialectical relationship between creativity and the audience. The more we engage in collective work that steps out from the closed space of exhibition halls, the more urgent these questions become. This close contact with the general public and the people on the streets exposes the real, fundamental issues related to the role of the artist in a specific historical movement.

Abderrahman Rahoul

The event is very important for the artist, because it wasn't possible before for us to create a work of this size and within such a framework. Since we all lived together for several days, we were able to discuss, critique, and compare our works.

Concerning the public, there is a class that is interested in this because they have always decorated the city: painting the walls or washing them in indigo, coloring the entrances to their homes, etc.

Some say: “Instead of painting murals, you should build factories!” As for the youth, who are of special concern to us, they’re enthusiastic, encourage our work, and ask us about our take on things. This is active participation, even if it’s indirect. As for the schoolchildren, the event has affected them and has encouraged those among them who are interested in the plastic arts to set their minds to specializing in it. This is an indication of the interaction between our public demonstration and the youth.

I hope this experiment extends to other cities and doesn’t stop here. . . . As for other artists who did not take part, they should think about doing so in the future and should go out to the streets to connect with a broader spectrum of people, especially residents of working-class districts who are denied culture and art.

Miloud Labied

I feel like I’ve been born again, because I’m working in front of people for the first time. . . . For the residents, it has been an extraordinary event. They’re asking questions, following our work, and participating with their observations and their feelings. The whole city has been set in motion. It reminds me of the paintings of Jerome [Hieronymus] Bosch, with the air teeming with human situations and questions.

In terms of the work as a work of art, I see it as being of an ethical value more than of a material value. The phenomenon itself is the important thing for me, not the value of the work as a work.

For the first time, we’re making a work that will live for a year at most, even though it requires great effort, a work that unites us with the people in an ethical contract, one that is not bound by economic conditions, by the law of supply and demand. For the first time, I take out my own particular tools and my own particular habits, those that exist between four walls, which makes this event a collaborative one between the public and myself.

I believe this event grew out of several discussions between members of the Association [AMAP], which brought us to this stage and this level of work.

For the local residents, our work is just a period of visual respite, because they don’t need us to decorate the walls, as this is already a deeply rooted and age-old custom for them. This is why the temporary nature of our work is important, as is its natural exposure to the elements and the changing moods of the residents. . . . Finally, this event is also important because it goes beyond decorating the city and targets the residents in particular.

Mohammed Melehi

I have no particular stance, for two reasons. First, the idea has been there for years, because my approach and the approaches of the artists I’ve worked with are treading this same path. Ten years ago, we carried out the experiment at Djema al Fna in Marrakesh.

This event in Asilah follows that current in the plastic arts, which aims to bring art to the broadest spectrum of people (as it is not limited to private exhibition halls and private collections). This experiment provides us a practical resolution to that theory.

Second, the event—in terms of its connection to an environmental setting—returns to the ancient practice of linking creativity with applied function, as in the

ornamentation of architecture. And then there is the professional, artistic aspect, wherein each of us had to wrestle with the wall in its environment and to solve the technical problems this posed.

These two factors are tantamount to destroying the walls around any school, so that the atmosphere surrounding the people becomes the school itself, and so that the barriers that surround culture, making it an elite culture, will fall.

Said al-Hasani

The contact with the wall was the first experience for me. For the first time, I confronted a wall and a work of art of this size. Little by little, I started to sense the fundamental things that I had to express while at the same time being aware of the mood it gave on the wall and of it requiring this particular work on my part. And so there was a back and forth between me and it.

There's something else that influenced me—the street, which opened its eyes to find me, followed the work, and made observations moment by moment. I didn't feel like I was alone, as is usually the case with my work. I was involved in a collective project.

Usually the artist remains a prisoner of his habitual style. For me, I was utterly liberated, and I stepped outside my style, with an awareness of this transformation.

For me, the experience in general was extremely important. I can't now identify the dimensions it comprised, but time will undoubtedly clarify all the particulars of this phenomenon.

As a group of artists, we had the opportunity to get to know each of our individual characters, as people and as artists, through daily discussions and close contact. Because of all this, I consider the experience to have been a positive one.

Farid Belkahia

I think this is the first event of its kind in North Africa and the Arab world. That made it an adventure: for the first time, we worked outside in the open air.

We shouldn't forget the social nature of the event. We didn't come here to decorate the city or conceal its miseries, but rather to help combat pollution and the degeneration of the city. Our work is expected to have a psychological effect, so that color on the walls makes people respect those walls as architectural elements, and, in turn, renews their esteem for them—with the knowledge that this city has old traditions of cleaning up neighborhoods and painting streets in various colors.

I was quite confused when I stood before the wall, for I was used to working in my studio with my own familiar tools, which had become inseparable from everything I created. We had to work in the street amid the noise of passersby, their questions, and their observant eyes. . . . So that's how we did our work, stripped of all veils and masks.

In terms of the art, I feel that we all stuck to the form of paintings on walls, and I wonder, was that enough for us here? Was it necessary to give that certain well-known flavor to our work, or would it have been better to abandon the ego in these works? This isn't a criticism on my part, only a question to which there is no clear answer at the moment.

As for our earlier reservations and fears, we found the people here enthusiastic and accepting. Some women asked why we didn't paint the walls of their homes!

The degeneration of the city goes back to social shifts, among them the death of the older generations, the original residents. We lived in the ambience of the alley and the city, and became aware of the problems of the neighborhood in a tangible way, whereas our analysis before was abstract and not based on practice.

Musa al-Zakani

A new experience for me. For the first time I had an opportunity to work with a wall, following only my own desires and my own particular vision. In terms of the technical aspects of the work, many of us undoubtedly encountered numerous problems since we were dealing with our work in nature with conditions that were utterly different from those of the studio. For my part, I encountered no difficulties. I chose a suitable wall and decided to make a relief work of sand and cement that I would color after completion.

As for the residents, they showed a lot of enthusiasm and support. The inhabitants of the quarter I worked in helped me spontaneously, offering jugs of water and ladders. The hospitality was very moving and exceeded my expectations.

As for working together as artists in this event, the psychological climate was wonderful and there was a great deal of enthusiasm. We would pass by our respective workshops and cooperate with one another, discuss ideas, and exchange criticism. Given our intimate dialogue in this experience, I hope it can be repeated at least once a year in different Moroccan cities, especially since each municipality would have to cover only very modest expenses for the event because the artists volunteer and participate for free.

Lutfi Mohammed (twenty-five, unemployed worker in Asilah)

I welcome the idea because this event allowed the Asilah public to get to know many Moroccan artists who came from various cities, and we were able to talk with them about art and all the issues it raises.

The participating artists made great efforts that were not without benefit. They encouraged many beginners, interested people, and student participants. This is very important, especially for a city like Asilah that does not have the opportunity to hold art exhibitions. I hope that other initiatives follow this one. I express my warm thanks to all the participating artists without exception.

Mohammed Benaïssa (film journalist [and mayor of Asilah])

There are several aspects to consider. There is the purely artistic aspect: I consider the event an outburst, a declaration of a kind of break between the bourgeois mode of exhibiting works of art and the popular, grassroots style of work, a direct connection with the street. In a way, the event establishes authentic links between the contemporary in artistic practice and the artistic legacy of earlier artists—working-class creators, embellishers, and architects—those artists who were never recognized because of academic concepts and practice.

On the other hand, there is the social dimension. That was our goal—mine and al-Melehi's—when we put the idea to the municipal council a year ago. We aimed to generate, among the citizens, a sense of the need to improve the quality of life by beautifying the environment and reevaluating the environs, for we believe that no matter how far material and technological means go, they are not enough to maintain

cleanliness, and thus they are also not enough to maintain the dignity of and respect for citizens' living conditions. The deterioration of the environment and environs is not, in my view, attributable to declining income or unemployment, for example, or to a lack of mechanical resources. It is first and foremost due to not raising the awareness of citizens through education and through the civic practice of following standards of beauty and habits of cleanliness.

I consider the process of painting the walls to be a peaceful protest aimed at education policy in Morocco. It is beyond belief that a country like Morocco, which has an abundant, indigenous practice of building the environment and beautifying and adorning it, and which established an exemplary school of architecture, shows no concern for the visual arts in its educational programs.

Given the lack of institutions for the visual arts and the lack of art classes in schools, I think that the plastic artists in this event decided to organize workshops in which students and the general public participated exactly as they would have participated in a traditional class or workshop.

—“Jidāriyāt Ašīla, wa-l-Bī'a al-Ḥadāriyya,” distributed in Morocco c. 1978; repr. in *al-Fann al-ʿArabī*, no. 4, (1981): 10–14. Translated from Arabic by Mandy McClure.

IN FOCUS

Yemen's Free Atelier: History and Context in the Arabian Peninsula

Anahi Alviso-Marino

In Yemen, modern painting practices developed in the northern cities of Taz and Sana'a in the late 1960s and more significantly in the 1970s, while in the southern port city of Aden painting had been practiced since the 1930s and 1940s during the British occupation (1839–1967). By the late 1970s, Aden—a highly cosmopolitan center—had an art scene that was frequented by painters who were then traveling to Europe, the Soviet Union, as well as to other Arab countries in order to pursue an artistic education and to participate in exhibitions and other art-related events. This art scene, which had grown up around the Adeni Association (1956–58), the Adeni Association for Plastic Arts (1960–65), and the Federation of Yemeni Plastic Artists (1972–90), provided a particular niche for young artists: the Free Atelier (*al-Marsam al-Hurr*), established in Aden in 1976 by the government of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (the Marxist-Leninist republic in South Yemen prior to the country's 1990 unification). Led by the Egyptian painter Abdul Aziz Darwish, the atelier held classes for approximately forty Yemeni students, both male and female, who gathered there in the evenings to learn, improve skills and techniques, and socialize with fellow artists.

Although the Free Atelier operated for only three years, its significance cannot be overstated. The initiative represented the first public post-high-school education in the visual arts in South Yemen. At the time, the only other option for training in the fine arts was in neighboring North Yemen where, in 1970, painter Hashem Ali—considered the father of modern Yemeni painting—opened his studio to students. Even after the Free Atelier's closure, connections that had been established there continued to develop. During the late 1970s and into the 1980s, a number of the atelier's former students obtained state-sponsored scholarships to study art abroad, primarily in the Soviet Union. The visual artists that had



Participants in the Free Atelier, Aden, Yemen. 1978

once gathered at the Free Atelier—as well as dancers, musicians, and theater students—found each other once again at these schools; together they were learning Russian, living in university housing, and meeting artists from North Yemen (some of them former students of Hashem Ali), who had also been granted scholarships.

The collective experiences that had been initiated at the Free Atelier and continued in the following

decades had a concrete impact on the history of art in Yemen. Upon their return home, from the mid-1980s until 1990, many of these artists—Ali Ghaddaf, Ahmed Ba Madhaf, Abdallah al-Ameen, and Elham al-Arashi among them—participated in the nationalization of the local art movement. They moved into teaching posts that had been held by foreign instructors at schools, and worked for the government by taking on state-sponsored commissions, holding positions in the fine art departments of the military and national museums, and being employed by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. They were also active in collective initiatives such as the establishment of art groups, associations, and unions, including the Association of Young Plastic Artists in Aden (1982–90), the Association of Plastic Artists in Sana’a (1986–90), the Group of Modern Art (1993), the Yemeni International Cultural Circle, known as al-Halaqa (1996–2002), and the Union of Yemeni Plastic Artists (1997–present day). With the establishment of the Jamil Ghanem Institute of Fine Arts, where former students of the Free Atelier played a central role as teachers, Aden remained until the late 1990s the only Yemeni city to offer public education in applied and fine arts.

Notably, the institutional format of the *marsam*—translated as “free workshop,” “free atelier,” or “open studio”—was adopted in other countries of the Arabian Peninsula as well. As in Yemen, these *marsams* were state-sponsored initiatives. In Kuwait in 1960, under government supervision, the Free Atelier for Fine Arts in Kuwait City was open to national and foreign residents for sculpture, printmaking, and painting, yet it did not offer an official certificate of study that would allow its graduates to be eligible for jobs in the civil service. In 1972, when Kuwait’s Free Atelier came under the auspices of the country’s Ministry of Information, these conditions changed. The atelier became a publicly supported initiative offered to Kuwaiti artists only, and granting diplomas after three-year or five-year periods of training. Similar to the Yemeni case, artists trained at the Atelier would travel abroad (for instance to Egypt) with state-sponsored scholarships. Upon their return, this would also allow them to become qualified teaching staff at the Atelier.

In other countries, the *marsam* also served an important role in developing an infrastructure for the arts. In Oman, the Youth Studio in Muscat was inaugurated in 1980 and is still in existence, gathering artists for weekly sessions with the support of the government. As in Kuwait and Yemen, these spaces galvanized art amateurs and students, some of whom became pioneer figures in their countries and in the region.

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THE CLOSURE OF GALLERY 79 / Ramallah

In July 1979, artists Nabil Anani and Issam Badr established Gallery 79 in Ramallah, which asserted the presence of Palestinian artists in the occupied West Bank. The gallery's events were attended by both Palestinians and Israelis. In 1980, however, Gallery 79's operations were interrupted by Israeli Defense Force raids, prompting the following media statement, which was issued by the gallery and its supporters.

Statement (1980)

Following the seizure of paintings from Gallery 79, artists from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have released a statement in English appealing to the Israeli and local public to stand with them in their efforts to see Gallery 79 in Ramallah reopened. The statement follows.

On September 1, Israeli occupation forces raided Gallery 79 in Ramallah and seized five paintings by Muhammad Hammouda, who was exhibiting at the gallery as part of the Festival of Palestinian Plastic Arts. Furthermore, the artist Issam Badr was warned not to exhibit any works dealing with political subjects without prior permission from the authorities.

On the 21st of the same month, the artist Sliman Mansour held an exhibition at the gallery in which he deliberately avoided political themes. Despite this, occupation forces raided the gallery once again, interrogated Issam Badr and Sliman Mansour, and confiscated their works. The gallery was then closed by order of the military authorities, although it holds an official permit from the municipality and the chamber of commerce.

It may therefore be concluded that the harsh treatment that Palestinian artists are receiving at the hands of the authorities is part of an all-out attack on national culture. In line with this policy, local newspapers, publishing houses, and fine-art printers have been subjected to strict censorship; authorities have also violated the academic freedoms of universities and interfered with school curricula. All these measures directed against forms of expression contravene the most basic of human rights.

We appeal to local and international bodies, to all those who hold human rights dear, and to lovers of the fine arts, to support us in our efforts to reestablish our right to freely exhibit our art to audiences and to reopen Gallery 79 in Ramallah. Your support and solidarity will be vital in guarding against the occupation's attempts to destroy and erase the culture and heritage of our people.

—Statement, originally issued in English, translated into Arabic and published in Nabil 'Anānī and 'Iṣām Badr, *al-Fann al-Tashkīlī al-Filasṭīnī fī al-Arḍ al-Muḥtalla* (Ramallah: Gallery 79, 1984), accessed from the research files of our departed colleague Rhonda Saad, who was preparing a study of Palestinian art and its publics until her unexpected death in 2010. Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

DEBATING COMMITMENT IN A NEW EGYPT

Possibilities for pan-Arab solidarity changed after the Camp David accords, signed in 1978 by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In Egypt, artists experienced a sense of crisis, as the ideological parameters of their work seemed to shift. This section contains four texts relating to the varied processes of recalibration in the period: excerpts from Hassan Soliman's 1980 book *The Artist's Freedom*, which reexamined the place of artists in society; a text from the second exhibition of the four-person Axis Group, which formed in 1981 in part as a way to model a collective approach to resistance to the individualism of the market; and two texts that arose from the tensions and disagreements that surrounded the creation of a Cairo Biennial of Arab Art in 1984. The first of these is a statement signed by a coalition of artists and critics on the nationalist left, who objected to the apolitical, "formalist" character of the biennial. The second is the response of Egyptian artist Mostafa El Razzaz, who gave a speech defending the biennial jury's decisions, and protesting the critical article "Spotlight on the First Cairo Biennial," by Mukhtar el-Attar (a signatory to the statement), which had appeared in Cairo's *al-Musawwar* magazine.

See Plate 48 for a 1984 work by Mounir Canaan, who received first prize at that year's Cairo Biennial of Arab Art.

From *The Artist's Freedom* (1980)

Hassan Soliman

Introduction

The period following World War II witnessed a revolution against all constraints placed on art, and ever since, artists have striven more and more for self-liberation and honesty. The urge for freedom grew out of a profound feeling of loss and waste, and it wasn't long before this sense of loss became the symbol of the new generation of artists and writers. Modern art, to put it simply, became the expression of a bitter conflict, not against death or fate, but—unfortunately—against society.

Artists are confronted with intolerable circumstances by the societies in which they live, and this confrontation limits, in one way or another, their artistic freedom—even if they are not fully or consciously aware of these circumstances, and take no stance toward them. It is here that we may appreciate the full scope of the conflict with the self and with others brought on by the artist's search for the truth, and its connection to freedom in the broadest sense.

More recently, in the early 1970s, a new generation of philosophers—who came from a Marxist background and whose work was rooted in dialectical materialism—announced that Marx was dead. They went on to build their thinking on the rubble of Marxism, as did the early Marxists, who based their dialectical philosophy on the vestiges of Hegelianism. The character of the artist and the conditions in which artists lived and worked in the twentieth century had a significant influence on the intellectual direction of these philosophers, who felt that the application of Marxist theory, in the rigid manner they were witnessing, could not be the solution.

Artists, whether aware of the conflict around them or not, feel torn, and struggle to hold themselves together, choked by fear for themselves in the face of society, and fear for their art in the face of themselves. However they may fight for a better life for their society, they cannot suppress their profound longing for isolation, which would allow them to liberate themselves and achieve self-realization, unconcerned by anything else and free to express every conflict and hope that quivers inside them. Thus are artists fated to live in an ocean of psychological agitation: the rigid application of Communism cannot resolve the conflict and anxiety that plague them, yet neither can capitalist society provide relief.

In these pages we find the perspective of a human who practices art of some kind in our society in the twentieth century. He tries, as best he can in unfavorable circumstances, to convey his feelings and emotions to others. It cuts into him to hear the questions "What are you doing? What does it mean?" and he must inevitably avoid replying and ignore the speaker, or feel that he has become obsolete.

One is right to ask what value there is to artistic freedom under such circumstances, and what its limits are. One question in particular stands out: Where is that freedom? Artists suffer from a deep and crushing feeling of alienation, and are pained by the incomprehension of others: it is as if the artist were standing alone in one valley while everybody else stands in another, shouting among themselves and paying no attention to the artist's cries. In the context of this alienation, freedom is an intractable problem, for we live in an age when many people are convinced that what they do, and what others do, has no value whatsoever.

It is bitterly painful to think that thousands of outstanding artists, despite their candor and sincerity, die in total obscurity—artists whose only concern in life is the practice of their art, no matter what the pressure of the circumstances they live in. The reality is that without immense strength and absolute self-control, it is impossible for man to realize his ideas in a way he finds satisfying and convincing. And then he has nothing: to abstain from realizing his innermost desires, to abstain from the truth, is tantamount to fraud. Without absolute honesty in the practice of art, the artist's efforts will meet nothing but frustration with regard to his life, his emotions, and his freedom. [...]

The question is: Can we envision an appropriate system that would be an alternative to the patronage of this group of people? And in the twentieth century, moreover—an era that calls for equality among all people, until we no longer have an elite possessed of aristocratic thought? The entire world, East and West, moves inexorably toward the concentration of capital, be it in the hands of the government or in those of large institutions.

At the same time, we must recognize and accept the individuality of the artist—no easy task. We must also recognize the unusual relationship between artists and those around them, and society must accept the inevitable gulf between the refined tastes of artists and the ordinary tastes of others. Last, society must understand and provide for the special needs of the artistic community, for most artists cannot live on the proceeds of their art alone; instead they watch their talents shrink and wither, distorted by external pressures resulting from their isolation and their conflicts. It is not only artists themselves who lose out when this happens, but the whole of society.

For art to fulfill its proper function, then, it requires support. Yet it is hard to provide proper and sufficient support—particularly given artists' complex psychological makeup.

Artists, as I see it, are responsible for the integrity of their art, even if that means audiences or the authorities have to support them. Artists must do whatever they can to protect their art and their audiences from artistic charlatanry and fraud, lest the opportunities available go to the undeserving or the unsuited. They must also protect their art from decadence and triviality. But how? It seems to me that many artists take the uncompromising position that they have only one duty, the duty to be faithful to their artistic conscience, regardless of whether others can understand their work or not.

Yet it should not be this way—for their own sake. Artists suffer terrible isolation if they cannot communicate through their work with a large number of people, if they cannot create understanding and cultivate in others an appetite for their creativity. The latent power of an artist's distinctive individuality can only be realized through interaction with external circumstances and the environment.

Moreover, if we agree that art is a means of communication the aim of which is to convey the artist's profoundest emotions and thoughts to others, then it follows that it must not be limited to the narrow circle of the artist's colleagues. It is not for these people that artists create, nor is it from them that artists derive their emotions, their humanity, and their power to interact with the collective. I find myself wondering, fearfully, how can art ever grow and develop if artists are not committed to reaching beyond the closed circle of their colleagues who have devoted themselves to art?

And how, too, might this be achieved at a time when artists have lost the qualities that once pushed them to sacrifice themselves in the service of total experience and humanity? Even if we are powerless to confront our fears, and cannot hide our despair and idiocy or forget our defeats, as artists we must work to reaffirm the value of the human soul in the agonizing historical period of which we are part. This is no easy adjustment to make, for artists' first loyalty must be to the integrity of their art; and yet they are kept awake at night by the reality in which they live, tortured by their unfulfilled duties toward their art and toward society. [...]

One often hears the following: "Didn't I speak of the October War in pictures I published in the newspapers? Didn't I respond to the events by donating ten pictures to sell to benefit the soldiers? What more can be asked of me than this?" One is choked by bitterness and feels obliged to reply that nothing is asked of them, and that they would be better off had they done nothing at all, for their words have the ring of hypocrisy, deceit, and flattery, and the degeneracy with which artists sully themselves.

Many people wrongly assume that with the victory of the political regime the artist believes in, he will achieve contentment and peace. Yet the real law that defines the artist, as we have said, is a product of his faith in and advocacy of certain values; his style of expression is determined by the realization of goals that he has long believed in and stood by. The artist knows that the mere fact of belonging to a given society may not guarantee him legitimacy in his struggle for the values he espouses; his stance may differ from that of his family and society. Indeed, artists

have often supported the causes of other countries, sometimes to the point of opposing their own government or society; other artists are reluctant to fight for their own country and society, too preoccupied with worthless flattery and servitude, while foreign artists rush to its defense. Such was the case during the ordeals of the years 1956 and 1967, when righteous artists the world over stood by our side; foreign magazines acquainted us, too, with the verses of young poets in Tel Aviv who denounced the aggression of their state and its policies.

In the foregoing, then, we have ruled out both intellectual pretension and anarchism, with all the chaos it entails, and have called for an end to rigid concepts. We vehemently reject any obligation to descend to the level of the half-talented, to the level of narrow-minded pretenders, and the intellectual bullying and imposition of constraints on art that they favor. We have also disapproved of rigid and ossified approaches.

It is difficult for the artist today—given his psyche and his allegiance to middle-class values, in both socialist and capitalist contexts—to calibrate how to protect themselves, their interests, and their individuality. [...]

It is the fate of most of this generation of artists in the region to flounder amid artistic and intellectual currents the experiences of which they themselves have not lived through, and to witness social and political changes that will thrust them into a conflict that will drain them drop by drop. They have lived through all this without taking a clear or defined stance, and without developing an intellectual framework that might shape their artistic production and set it on the right track. [...]

It is worth restating that when the artist clings to his illusions, reveres the metaphysical, and saturates his pictures with dreams, obscurity, and visions laden with symbolism, it is simply an admission of defeat by the fighter deep inside him, and the works this produces can never be more than futile illusions. The art might be impeccable, but it is necessarily bitter; the artist's feelings of defeat within himself remain unchanged, and his works remain a witness to this attachment to collapsed dreams, as if he fears being left alone with life, bereft of illusions and dreams. The moment when the artist stands still, haughty, stripped of his illusions, is part of his struggle in life. For the artist to cling to them, even when they are no longer convincing, is to build walls of deceit and negativity around himself, to imprison and paralyze himself, to extinguish the flicker of truth that seems to blaze around him on every side, demanding recklessness and courage.

We must search deep inside ourselves for the honesty of words before we utter them, and we must search for powerful words that can bring to light every truth we believe in. For we have come to understand that a naked word is far better than one wrapped in artifice and pretension. Thus we must search first of all for the word that was born with us, in our time, and uttered by events since the late 1940s, the word that vibrantly pulses in our footprints, and glimmers on our rooftops. We must cast aside the vocabulary that has calcified, frozen our sky, and made us cold as glass. I mean that we must search for a language of the land to replace the vocabulary marred by incomprehension and misuse to the point of ruin and corruption. We must forget for a while that we are artists and remember that we always need to grasp each other's

hands in times of trial. Let us wonder whom we paint for rather than wondering why we paint: it takes only a little empathy to think of them, but in the end it will do much for art and for the society we love. [...]

The Result

An artist can be either an artist, or nothing at all. If he becomes an artist, he must tolerate everything—loneliness, alienation—for his experience is distinct and independent, and no other person or force can interfere with it. Likewise, created works can be either art, or nothing at all. When we grant the label of quality to a work, there is nothing more to be added, and the matter becomes a given. One must either accept the work as it is, or reject it completely, but to accept it with reservation is a mistake.

The work of art flows and penetrates our innermost thoughts, yet any attempt to discuss it rationally, or any effort to convince ourselves of it, is out of the question. This brings us to another point: the futility of comparing works of art and of attempting to rank one above another. A work of art is either exactly as the artist intended it to be, or it is unworthy of interest.

There are numerous perspectives on the value of art. Some consider it to be one of the branches of knowledge; others categorize it as human emotion or expression. The truth probably lies somewhere between the two, for art gives us knowledge of the emotions we hold but are not conscious of. The challenges of earning a living often strip us of our ability to experience and grasp the truth of our emotions in their pure form, to the point that we can scarcely distinguish them amid the mayhem of our lives. A young man living in poverty whose father dies, bequeathing him responsibility over his younger siblings, may not realize the true extent, as an abstract value, of his sadness and love for his father, when faced with the enormity of the shock and the new duties that accompany it. Art is our only means of uncovering our feelings, joyful or sad, for they are all faint tremors that the artist's sensitivity can amplify. The artist can accentuate them, reveal them in their absolute form. Add to this the fact that, with the pressures of life, we rarely see the end of things: everything passes or is renewed with the interminable struggle of daily existence.

Often, circumstances or coincidences can cause us to feel scattered, and our emotions disperse with the impact of events. Add to this the fact that life, with all its chaos and contradiction, offers us no help in finding the balance and harmony that are a crucial law of existence. In time, everything passes, unmoored, and endlessly moving into the infinite. For some, this might be reason to denigrate art for limiting the free-flowing nature of life, imprisoning it in molds and enclosing it in fixed laws—and artists as well, for distracting us from reality. But this couldn't be further from the truth, for no one takes into consideration the fact that life is synonymous with art, or that art must conform to life; art simply provides a clearer and more complete view of the things and events we are so accustomed to that we cannot distinguish them in the *mêlée* of life. Art encourages us to stand before them for a while, and in doing so it reinvigorates us and reshapes our mental and sensory anatomy. To the objection that knowledge, in the literal sense of the word, cannot be achieved in this way, the response is that art's job is not to correct mistakes or reveal hidden truths, but to present the essence of truth through the conduit of the artist, who is endowed with a vision others do not possess. In this, artistic truth

seems to possess a rhythm and equilibrium of its own; truth, with its equilibrium, becomes melody.

Simple things go into building the truth of a work of art, such as an emphasis on a particular part, or an assimilation of parts, followed by an absence of emphasis on another part. We perceive this clearly in a simple musical rhythm: a beat then a pause, and another beat or two short beats then a shorter pause, forming a unit that is repeated continuously. It is a game of movement and silence played across time and space, between coming and going.

In painting and sculpture, the melody is produced through emphasis on certain elements of the form more than others; all these elements revolve around a single thing upon which the work is based, which might be a splash of color or a certain space; next come the other elements, from light and shade to the three-dimensional surface, all serving the one dominant thing that draws the eye in to experience it. We perceive this harmony in art in general: it is through it that the equilibrium between mass and space is achieved.

In theater, for example, we find that it is generated by the treatment of characters and events: on one hand there is the hero and a handful of secondary characters; in parallel is another central character with his or her own set of secondary characters. The two blocs move in equipoise across a lengthy trajectory of dramatic conflict comprising peaks and troughs. As is the case in painting, music, or any of the other arts, the elements of theater center on a specific point.

Words such as *intensity*, *fidelity*, and *authenticity* come up frequently in art criticism and the evaluation of works of art, disguising complicated, intertwined issues that are more easily sensed than concretely perceived. These confuse even the scholar or connoisseur, who becomes so mixed up as to think that talent lies in technical skill. Indeed, constant repetition of the artistic process can lead to these important elements being forgotten. And yet we find that when abstract values take center stage, terms like these are crucial to discussions in which we seek to identify clear outlines for art.

In fact, if we free ourselves of the constraints imposed by our minds, our culture, or our commitment to values that dictate certain criteria to our tastes, we will find ourselves guided instead by an honesty that leads us naturally to the same things that attract the ordinary man. Pretentious self-appointed experts do a great deal of harm when they attempt to impose other styles.

To a certain extent, as we have said, the strength of a work of art depends on harmony and rhythm, on a musical sensibility that leads the way to a sensory appreciation of the unity and integrity of creation.

An artist's mastery of the strokes of a paintbrush or pen on a blank surface, or the movements of a bow on strings, its strokes across the instrument, with alternating softness and force, is the clearest evidence of the ability to control his internal rhythm, a unique rhythm born out of his experiences in life, which defines his very character.

The rhythm of an image or sculpture, then, can be discerned in the artist's emphasis of certain elements and their relationship to the other elements in the work. Sometimes we are able to identify immediately the center around which the spaces, colors, and lines revolve, and the dynamics of movement that lead the eye to that center.

So much for the rhythm and melody of the artist's work; there remains the relationship between the artist himself and the reality in which he lives. Knowing and understanding the events that unfold around us has indisputably become one of the greatest challenges facing us this century. Reading a newspaper, or listening to different media broadcasts, is not enough to understand fully what is happening. News is biased, or driven by hidden agendas. Countries ruled by dictatorial regimes witness all fields of activity, intellectual and material, monopolized by the authorities, who subordinate every interest to the dictates of the ruling party; in these countries it is difficult if not impossible ever to get at the truth. In capitalist countries, meanwhile, we find that matters are scarcely different, for the pressures of living leave little opportunity for the pursuit of knowledge; here, exhaustion and apathy stand in the way of truth, leaving only the safe alternatives of indifference, mediocrity of culture, and complacent satisfaction with convention. A red-penned censor bars our way to the truth, crossing out here and adding there, or a powerful bureaucrat who controls and directs in the name of the public good. Yet even these pale in comparison with the hierarchical and class-stratified structure of capitalist society, for artists are controlled by those above them on the ladder: obliged to conduct their work within the remit of the state, they are governed by an array of forces with little understanding of the arts.

Given these circumstances, and given art's ability to express the truth, we must understand that art's greatest enemy is cowardice and hesitance in recognizing, expressing, and upholding the truth. Certainly, to do so requires bravery and even recklessness, especially in the twentieth century; there is also the challenge of finding a new lexicon that suits the artist's time and circumstances, and in particular a lexicon that can express human meanings and passions at a time when the arts are dominated by styles so overused as to have become meaningless, and devoid of any link with personal experience or truth, and without the continuity that guarantees evolution.

Innovations such as the cinema and television are stifling art, for the artist now creates for audiences familiar with all shades of thought, while individuals shy away from the grim view of life that sophisticated art often presents. To this must be added the multitude of temptations now so readily available via the media of easy and shallow entertainment that most people now care only for keeping up with radio and television programs and the like. Undemanding of their audiences, these compound people's negative attitudes toward works of art, or rather toward the truths that art conveys. Real art demands engagement from its audiences, requires effort to understand and absorb, and demands thought and reflection.

Amid all these factors, the artist is in such a difficult position that some people now regard his social role as secondary, and argue that he no longer has any part to play in constructing society. The experience the contemporary artist undergoes in this troubled, strained world—particularly in societies of the Third World—makes him doubt the truth of matters, including established wisdoms, and he has washed his hands of everything around him. [...]

It has thus become essential for the artist to learn to understand the situation of a human in a state of weakness or rebellion against a fate in which surrender, with an inescapable social contradiction, is unavoidable—that is to say, to understand the

situation of the one whom society has fettered to the point that he becomes a prisoner held captive within himself, trying desperately to remain steadfast as best as his limited opportunities will permit him. This understanding demands much greater effort from the artist now than in days gone by.

Some people confuse facts with the truth that is the artist's material. A man's takeover of power is a fact; mankind's arrival on the moon is a fact. These facts have an effect on the artist, to be sure, but the truth we speak of here is the artist's embrace of the conflicts in society around him, and the artist's understanding of the contradiction and discord inherent in life.

The essence of truth is a distant, unreachable point. In its metaphysical aspect, it might be the experience of a fleeting vision; in its material aspect, it is the continuous struggle between life's contradictions. One might think that one has obtained truth at a given moment, then realize the very next moment that one has lost it again. For the artist, truth is precisely the effort to move beyond the experience of tangible reality.

Indeed, by virtue of his psychological makeup, the artist feels constantly as if his vocabulary and knowledge hampers him in his efforts to fully and completely reveal truth. It may be this feeling that intensifies his vitality and his struggle to create links with the essence of truth. One moment he feels he has succeeded, the next he discovers the exact opposite. Likewise, he lives in constant doubt concerning the powers of expression available to him through his limited artistic vocabulary, no matter how skilled he may be. An artist's intelligence, hard work, and research are useless on their own; the crucial thing is for the artist to surprise us with what he possesses of us, and to push us to take firmer stances in life. When a person has been touched by a work of art, he should emerge more passionate, more confident, and reassured. The broader meaning of art is thus related to the artist's honesty, passion, and freedom of expression, for nothing can be achieved without them.

Art must not, then, be a loudspeaker to impose given ideas or a means to propagate particular ideologies, because this approach causes it to lose the essence of the human and the self—the most important animators of art, and the aim of every artist. If we agree that humans cannot be subsumed into programs or theories, we approach the conclusion that the aim of art, which conveys a living, continuous human conflict, is to liberate people from confinement within the narrow bounds of time and place, to empower them in the struggle forced upon them, and to fill them with a sense of satisfaction so they can approach the problem of truth seriously, and confront the challenges of life, which differ depending on environment, social and religious factors, and time period, yet always result in the same outcome for artists: alienation and suffering, and oscillation between self-obsession and an awareness of their inadequate response to the sufferings of those around them. In this regard we must caution against the misconception that art is a space in which the imagination can be liberated from the constraints of reality, or that it creates an alternative world that offers compensation for an existence we cannot bear.

Given all this, one could be excused for thinking that art is now confined to only the slimmest sphere of action. We wonder: What role remains for the artist now? Can he change anything? Was he ever able to? Such questions do not have answers. Art as an essence will last forever. Even if it is discussed and quantified, it will always remain an attempt to pierce the veil of the unknown, which is difficult

to fully perceive or categorically define. The visible elements of human life may not represent the whole truth, but art can express what lies beneath them.

The essence and unity of existence urges the artist onward, while also binding him to people's humanity. We can conclude from this that faith in art, like people's faith in life, is a burden placed upon the artist's shoulders, presenting him with a choice: either express the essence of truth and uphold what is right for its own sake, or flee dishonestly from violent confrontation; commitment and integrity or collaboration and sycophancy. There is no middle way. [...]

Amid these labyrinths, the artist soon discovers that there is only one truth: the power to fight back against the conditions that have placed humans in this position. If he wishes to free himself, he has no choice but to approach this reality with integrity. He must shake off his weakness and the shackles of opportunism, because the truth of art is measured less by quick success or fleeting acclaim than by the vehemence of the artist's standpoint, his spontaneous reaction to fraudulent values, and his fortitude in recognizing the bitterness of reality. Art, then, is a spontaneous response to the tyrannical world that surrounds mankind, combined with a sincere desire and genuine attempt to find a union between three things—idea, artistic creation, and reality—and between the absolute, the abstract, and the relative. At the same time, it can be said that it is an attempt to unite faith and action. The artist lives in a society that makes him miserable and anxious. The oppression and deceit he sees in that society pains him; he is ashamed to see people living in triviality, and feels he must take a stand.

From the outside, the artist may appear to possess freedom of expression. Yet this freedom is that of a tightrope walker in a big top. In his relationship to society he feels like prey held between the claws of a predator: when its patience runs out, he will be eaten alive.

It is here we can perceive the bitterness [Friedrich] Nietzsche felt when he began writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. We find, too, [Vladimir] Mayakovsky's justifications for committing suicide during Stalin's repression of artists' freedom and individuality. In the past, I had little sympathy for his having resorted to suicide so as to avoid this conflict, yet I forgave him when I read the words he had spoken in the Louvre. Turning away from the canvases on the walls, he looked out of a window at the street below, and cried: "This is the greatest work of all!"

When the finest masterpieces pale in comparison to a narrow sliver of life, it becomes impossible for the artist to tolerate the pressure and coercion inflicted by a political or social regime, or by other people, on pretexts that bear no relation to the profound and absolute truths hidden within the artist.

—Ḥasan Sulaymān, excerpts from *Ḥurriyat al-Fannān* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kitāb, 1980). Translated from Arabic by Katharine Halls.

The Axis Continues (1982)

The Axis Group: Farghali Abdel Hafiz, Abd al-Rahman al-Nashar, Ahmed Nawar, Mostafa El Razzaz

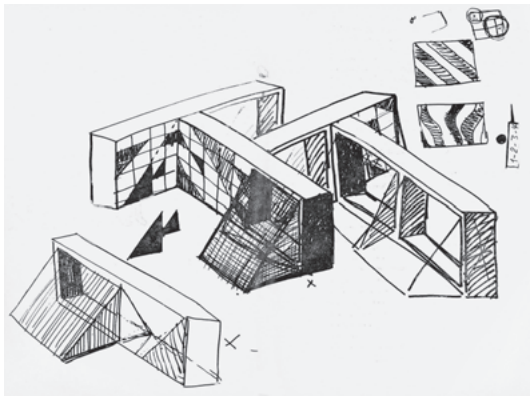
The Axis Group hereby reaffirms its commitment and dedication to the honorable struggle of promoting innovation and igniting a new flame—one that counters inaction and stagnation, and seeks to revive a milieu of interaction and dialogue.

In its first Axis presentation, in April 1981, the group introduced its core ideas in a nascent experiment, which was successful (in the realization of the core idea) in some aspects and misjudged in others. It was hindered mainly due to the limited range of visibility and some defects related to lighting. Nonetheless, the first Axis maintains its place in the minds and souls of many as an exciting and awakening work, inspiring faith in the vigor of the contemporary Egyptian art movement and the fecundity of its resources.

On April 17, 1982, the group launched its second Axis, to which careful attention was given, aiming for further positive accomplishments.

Perhaps it would be beneficial to reiterate here the group's ideas, to which we commit and which we seek to achieve, as follows:

We aim to create work of a collective and integrative spirit, but one that also comprises a spectrum of entirely different artistic styles. This is an artistic entity made up of a group of distinct yet interwoven approaches. It is a call for coalition in a disintegrating world, and a call for unity that avoids complete fusion and the loss of individuality.



Mostafa El Razzaz.
Sketch for an exhibition
concept for the second
Axis exhibition, Cairo.
1982. As published in the
exhibition booklet *The
Axis Continues* (Cairo:
al-Markaz al-Qawmi
li-l- Funun al-Tashkiliya,
1982).

A mathematical sequence was generated to govern the entire construction; it enables each unit to be multiplied or divided by four. Accordingly, the aesthetic and social perspective of this Axis may be formulated in two equations as follows:

The aesthetic axis = $4 \times 4 + 4 / 4 / 4 + 4 + 4 / 4$

The social axis = ([volition] $4 \times$ glow + confidence) against fragmentation and deflation.

And while the first Axis presentation attempted to realize these ideas by using a collection of semitransparent silk voiles that limited direct contact between each of the artists' works, today's Axis provides new conditions for the group's realization of its ideas, whereby the spectator may simultaneously see the four artists'

works from each angle of vision. That is, the spectator is able to see the utter uniqueness of each of the artists together, in a single aesthetic entity. This was made possible by stipulating a large number of integrative conditions for the general aesthetic construction of this work.

—“Al-Miḥwar Mustamirr,” in *Jamāʿat al-Miḥwar*, exh. cat. (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmī li-l-Funūn al-Tashkiliyya, 1982). Translated from Arabic by Yasmine Haj. In consultation with Mostafa El Razzaz, the editors of the present volume have slightly adjusted the order of this text to accord with the originally intended sequence.

Statement against “Artistic Racism” (1984)

Mukhtar el-Attar, Mahmoud Baqshish, Inji Efflatoun, Kamal al-Juweili, Salah Abdel Kerim, Saad El-Mansouri, Ezzedine Naguib, Subhi al-Sharuni, Abbas Shohdi

The Egyptian art movement is currently on a dangerous trajectory, and a critical turning point was reached at the “Arab Art Salon” exhibition, titled the First International Cairo Biennial for Arab Arts. The exhibition lived up neither to its grand name nor to the prestige of Cairo.

The dominance and intolerance of those following formalist and frivolous trends, the failure to consult with Egyptian critics, and the subjugation of the exhibition to nonartistic considerations have led to a weak exhibition, one unable to meet the expectations of the first biennial in Cairo—a capital that should take the lead, in accordance with its ancient noble standing among African and Arab countries.

We therefore see it as our duty to make public this objection to the course being charted by the fine arts officials at the Ministry of Culture—which is doggedly impelling the artistic movement in Egypt toward frivolity and formalism, utilizing all available means to that end, while excluding artists whose work is dedicated to the service of society and to progressive thinking.

They distort the image of the Egyptian critic, discredit what he writes, and insist on disregarding his opinions, all while hosting international critics with whom they have a prearranged agreement as regards the evaluation criteria for the Arab Art Salon.

Had this biased and tendentious stance not had a negative effect on hard-working artists, as well as on young artists—who have been lured to formalism by prizes and jury memberships, and have stopped engaging with national and patriotic questions—had this not been the case, we wouldn’t have been forced to publish this statement.

What happened at last year’s exhibition is one stark example of these prejudices, for most of the artists exhibited their works outside the competition, as they had lost faith in the jury’s impartiality. Add to that the fact that the judging process was dominated by an outright aggressive attitude toward all national and subject-driven approaches.

This was further proven in the choice of the spokesperson or “official lecturer” on “behalf of Egypt” at the Arab Biennial. He was chosen despite having

previously declared in a public symposium that treating the subject of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in a painting is not an engagement with reality but rather “cheap propaganda”!

As for the people chosen by the official system to represent Egypt in Venice’s current biennial—to cite another example—they follow the same approach.

The siege that this system has imposed on the national artistic trends in competitions and public exhibitions, both local and international, has widened the gap between the fine arts and the public in Egypt.

We have always prided ourselves on the diversity of styles and artistic schools in our art movement, and considered it a sign of productiveness and prosperity; but the bias of this system toward one approach is unprecedented in our artistic history.

We hereby issue this statement out of our sense of historical responsibility to fight prejudice, fanaticism, and artistic racism, demanding the respect of all artistic schools and the inclusion of all approaches and opinions in the different juries as well as in Egypt’s exhibitions abroad.

As for the juries, they are composed of a majority of local critics in competitions all over the world. No one can deny the role of Egyptian critics that bore and still bear the responsibility of advancing the current art movement in Egypt and the Arab world. Those critics do not limit themselves to a single approach toward which they are biased.

We call attention to the danger of this trajectory, out of concern for the soundness of our contemporary art movement, and in order to preserve the national and aesthetic values established by the generation of pioneers and by subsequent generations that took up the torch of art.

— Injī Aflāṭūn, Mukhtār al-‘Aṭṭār, Maḥmūd Baqshīsh, Kamāl al-Juwaylī, Ṣalāh Abd al-Karīm, Sa’d al-Manṣūrī, ‘Izz al-Dīn Najīb, Ṣubḥī al-Shārūnī, ‘Abbās Shuhdī, “Bayān Didd ‘al-‘Unsuriyya al-Fanniyya,” from a typescript in the Ṣalāh Ṭāhīr archives, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, American University in Cairo. Translated from Arabic by Yasmine Haj.

Spotlight on a Spotlight (1984)

Mostafa El Razzaz

In the last issue of *al-Musawwar*, in an article by professor Mukhtar el-Attar titled “A Spotlight on the First Cairo Biennial”—published on July 6, 1984, and accompanied by Faris Hammad’s photographs—el-Attar continues his campaign against positive and progressive approaches in contemporary Egyptian art, individuals and groups, institutions and participants.¹

The short article was apparently long enough for the writer to repeatedly level accusations against those who follow these directions, describing them as frivolous, impetuous, as executing poor judgment, and of committing grave mistakes that cannot be ignored, notably by importing a foreign critic who was responsible for the so-called catastrophe because he encouraged, in the author’s words, clichés and inartistic, pointless abstractions. El-Attar then continues his article by accusing those people of “practicing artistic racism; of lacking a standard by which to evaluate works of art; of bias toward frivolous approaches; of being unable to distinguish between frivolous abstract art and serious academic art, expressionist art . . .” etc.

The writer then ranks the biennial below average, placing it beneath the level of our local exhibitions, and subsequently ranking the 14th General Exhibition of Modern Egyptian Art at an even lower level. The writer also accuses those so-called racist frivolers of conspiring to exclude the majority of figurative works, and of conspiring to disqualify the most prominent artists from participating in the aforementioned General Exhibition—a claim that is divorced from reality. He also considers the granting of the biennial's first prize to the gifted artist Mounir Canaan to have been “a mistake”—he views this artist's paintings and other work as the most abstract and frivolous of all, and describes them as a pile of old collaged papers, with nonsensical black and colored surfaces. He then falsely claims that they contain variations of the Nazi swastika.

Likewise, the writer is quick to remind the reader that another mistake had been made upon granting the artist Dr. Farouk Wahba—professor of painting at the College of Fine Arts in Alexandria—the first prize in painting at the last General Exhibition. His works, the writer claims, were “the most frivolous and abstract of all.” He accuses the jury, whose integrity he calls into question, of having a clearly hostile attitude toward nationalist approaches, disregarding the fact that the committee comprises fifteen artists and thinkers of varying approaches and ages.

The writer of that article also throws a special accusation at me personally, repeating a fabricated phrase, which he falsely attributes to me. He claims that I said the following: “Expressing the Sabra and Shatila massacre in a painting is merely cheap propaganda.” He had already circulated this claim in a previous statement, lending it an air of credibility by making reference to the most prominent art critics, being one of them himself. He is also bewildered at the Iraqi artist Suad al-Attar having been awarded a prize for a semiabstract black-and-white painting the size of a sketchbook. He criticizes the biennial's lack of originality and authenticity, as well as its declining expertise.

The writer states that the Egyptian Pavilion in the biennial had, generally speaking, excluded realists and figurative artists. He concludes his series of accusations by saying that the biennial's administration used ambiguous, flowery, and empty phrases in formulating its mission statement.

However—the fact that the 14th General Exhibition and the Cairo International Biennial stirred up so much zeal and enthusiasm in the writer that he feels compelled to condemn and depict them with a series of convulsive and violent accusations—I consider this a proud moment for the organizers of these two events, for they have revealed his rancor and led him to publicly confess his hostility toward those approaches that he claims have a dangerous hold over the artistic movement, subsequently provoking him to defend what he calls *true art*. This situation has also placed him into a spotlight he cannot evade, that of informed artistic public opinion.

In his article, the writer relies on unsubstantiated rumors to claim that a five-hour verbal altercation had broken out among the nineteen jury members, three of whom were foreigners and the rest of whom are chairs of official delegations and administrators.

He also claims knowledge of their incapacity to distinguish between the abstract sculptural “monumental” panel by the Egyptian sculptor Sabri Nashed and

the sophisticated, expressionist symbolist bronze sculpture by the Kuwaiti sculptor Sami Mohammad.

He follows this up with another one of his distortions, claiming that the Kuwaiti artist won thanks to diplomatic etiquette and courtesy, after which he states that he “actually agrees with the decision.”

In describing the 14th General Exhibition, the writer relies on groundless speculations that undermine the sources of his information. He claims that the prize for the aforementioned exhibition had been given to a frivolous artist, while asserting that another inspired young artist, Reda Abd el-Salam, had been nominated for the same prize. He then goes on, praising the nominated painting, fawning on its drama, structure, the power of its colors, its expression, components, line, vitality, and its ability to reflect imagination and dreams upon the receiver, guiding him to the world of ideas.

However, as I used to be a member of the 14th General Exhibition’s appointed jury, I can attest to the mendacity of this whole narrative. The painting by the select artist Reda Abd el-Salam was never nominated for first prize; that prize was given to the artist Farouk Wahba, who was unanimously selected by the fifteen members of jury—a jury that included some of the Egyptian art movement’s most distinguished leaders and luminaries.

Moreover, in his article, the writer pairs the word *frivolous* with the word *abstract*, considering them to be similar in meaning and effect. He also focuses on the pioneering artist Mounir Canaan (b. 1919), winner of the first prize in painting, saying the following about him:

Despite the general approach toward frivolous abstraction and semi-abstraction, the first prize in “painting” was given to the most abstract or frivolous of the paintings. It is merely a composition of Arabic and foreign newspapers collaged together, above which are additional squares, black or colored, and without meaning regardless. And when some do have a geometric shape, they resemble variations on the swastika.

And lo and behold, the very same writer plays up abstraction in another article, published in issue 3079, October 14, 1983, titled “Nameless Sculptures.”

At times, he sees in those sculptures the “potential to be implemented at a larger scale in gardens and squares, rectifying the warped public taste, which has reached rock bottom in our countries.”

At other times, he describes them as mathematical, geometrical, and precise, then as emotional and capable of expressing the essence of popular life through wood, sackcloth, and plastic raw materials—plaster, oil. He says that “the artist Saleh Reda has created an innovative series of ‘passionate, abstract, expressive’ pictures, using funnels, buckets, punctured jugs . . .” etc.

He makes it sound as if Mounir Canaan’s compositions of different raw materials constitute a mere frivolous practice, while the same compositions become thrilling innovations that capture the observer’s thoughts and imagination in the work of Saleh Reda. The writer thus tried to flatter Saleh Reda, since he was the head of the [Egyptian] Artists’ Syndicate at the time, praising the way the latter diverts

the observer's attention away from the endless cares of daily life, whereas he falsely accuses other artists of being frivolous:

Thus Saleh Reda has perfected expressing the idea of “bearing fruit,” reproduction, and extracting life from death. The sculpture of copper balls embodies this idea—it attracts the observer's thought and imagination, and removes him from the endless concerns of daily life. Its originality lies in invoking the spirit of discovery and satisfying one's tendency to regard the unknown. Its main idea is that the external form does not constitute the whole truth: the sparkling golden ball hidden between the two halves of the sculpture symbolize the truth, a shape inspired by the peapod. But that is not the point here; for everything has an external form and an interiority. This is an invitation to contemplate and revise given truths. The “content” that he seeks is a reconsideration of inherited truths that do not agree with contemporary global thinking. If my view of the core of Saleh Reda's works is correct, then there is no doubt that those works are of high cultural value. He is not one to repeat and mimic configurations and traditional motifs; rather, he creates innovative parallel forms and alters tradition. He borrows from traditional forms and adds to them, using whatever “technology” our current situation allows. Since the beginning of his artistic journey, his paintings as well as his ceramic, plaster, wood, copper, and dramatic sculptures have been full of ideas, inspiration, and genuine excitement. They are essentially different from the decorative arts used to complement interior design, which tourists buy for souvenirs from some of the commercial artists. The latter are quickly forgotten and neglected in a corner, rather than put in museums and international forums.

Artistic innovation means discovering new connections—ones that add a new perspective to existing connections. Artistic innovation exists within general logic and global culture. It adds a new “rationality” that transforms the impossible into the possible. This is how we identify the similarities between science and art. The artist landed on the moon with his imagination long before the scientist would with his spaceship.

And so the writer stumbles along, caught between his respect for the serious abstract work of the creative artist Dr. Saleh Reda—he cannot help his excitement for the creative values and intellectual stimulants that Reda's abstract works stir and contain—and the abstract work of the serious artists Farouk Wahba and Mounir Canaan. Apparently, to the writer, abstraction was a valid trend in 1983, but a devil in 1984, and he recruited himself and his comrades to stone it to death.

To end this commentary, I will quote a text from writer Safinaz Kazim in her article “A Study of the Formal Character of Mounir Canaan,” which was published in issue 3084 of *al-Musawwar*, November 18, 1983. Her text is a direct quote of Mounir Canaan's words, saying:

Abstraction (*tajrid*) does not derive from locusts (*jarad*), as some people joke or honestly believe. Abstraction does not mean dispossession, but

rather the depiction of truth in its core by dissolving the deceptive material appearances that block seeing, and sensing, the core of truth. This is the essence of Islamic thought and the logic behind its perception of the universe, and its visible and invisible objects. Islamic thought rejects figuration or anthropomorphism as means to knowledge; the prohibition of sculpture in Islam is thus a stance against not only idolatry, but also external appearances—for the external form of a thing is not its truth. The Islamic mind is raised to believe in a singular God and a truth that cannot be represented figuratively, not even through the imagination. The Qur’anic verse “there is nothing like Him” teaches Muslims how to believe in God as an abstract truth. Due to the prohibition on depictions of the Prophet (peace be upon him), his family members, the Companions of the Prophet, and the heroes of the early Islamic era, Islamic art knew abstract expression from the beginning, far removed from figurative art and the formal representation of human beings and all other creatures. The solutions advanced by Islamic artistic expression are based on units of ornament and on the formation of letters and words. This point of departure found its utmost level of development in my own work, from the beginning of my artistic journey in the early 1950s all the way to the present day. It reached its peak during the 1960s, when visitors at the *Akhbar al-Youm* exhibition were shocked by my composition in wood and nails. No one grasped what I was trying to say then. I wanted to tell the Egyptian observer: Return to your mind’s configuration of abstraction, which Islam has trained you for, and do not look at materials in their superficial form, but rather at their contextual meaning in this new formation. Liberate your eyes from the constricted cycle of figurative representation.

Safinaz Kazim then comments on Canaan’s life and the vicious attacks from reactionary forces that he faced after his seven solo exhibitions over nineteen years, and says the following about those exhibitions:

They have stirred up heated debate around him, leaving him rejected by two tribes who have united against him, as he belongs to neither.

The first is the tribe of academics, who have turned their noses up at him and are unwilling to part with their first and last line of defense, namely: figurative representation. For they, with their academic training characterized by rigidity and cowardice, are unwilling to sail toward any unknown continents before those continents have been mapped, measured, and evaluated.

The academics would never accept Canaan, as he had not studied art at university or in an academic setting; he had instead dug up knowledge with his own bare hands. The academics thus excluded Canaan from their networks and their critical evaluations, just as Shakespeare’s academic contemporaries did to him, disowning him because he was self-made and self-taught. He was never their colleague in school or university, which led them to consider him a parasite on art and culture.

The second tribe that would forever disown Canaan was the tribe of secular ideologues, who have also turned their noses up at him, and who hide their lack of talent behind empty nationalist propaganda, which they spew out on God knows whose authority.

Their works were limited to regurgitated symbols that quickly became exhausted and clichéd, leaving them empty-handed. Still, these people were not content merely with their hatred of Canaan; they went so far as to declare war against him, accusing him of frivolity, nihilism, and lack of content.

And so Canaan remained, and still remains, a unique and solitary figure, comforted only by a heart full of visions, a heart with a passion to explore “the unknown.” The Islamic approach to thinking beyond the frame of matter, and beyond the delimitations of form, takes him by the hand and encourages him, opening up new horizons for him to enjoy in his journey of exploration of hidden aesthetic values, which are unveiled through successive processes of destruction and construction.

Note

1. Eds.: The reference is to Mukhtar al-‘Attar, “Adwa’ ‘ala Biyanali al-Qahira al-Awwal,” *al-Musawwar* (July 6, 1984): 34–39.

—Muṣṭafā al-Razzāz, “Aḍwā’ ‘alā Aḍwā’: Ta’liq ‘alā Maqāl Aḍwā’ ‘alā Biyanālī al-Qāhira al-Awwal,” 1984 typescript provided by the author. Translated from Arabic by Yasmine Hajj.

CONTEMPORARY MODES IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

In the 1980s, Emirati visual art entered new creative territory as a generation of young artists banded together, forming the Emirates Fine Arts Society in Sharjah in 1980 and launching the journal *al-Tashkeel* in September 1984. “To Contemplate Is to Lay a Foundation” is a position statement by the journal’s cultural committee, written for its third issue in 1985. Of the members of that group, Hassan Sharif’s conceptual and site-specific work proved particularly challenging for viewers. The second text in the section, “On *Wooden Columns*,” by Ahmed Rashid, discusses one such work for the cultural section of the newspaper *al-Khalij*.

To Contemplate Is to Lay a Foundation (1985)

Al-Tashkeel Cultural Committee: Abdul Jalil Jawad, Abdulraheem Salim, Hassan Sharif, Abdul Latif Al Smoudi

The existence of a specialized print publication is a cause and an effect at one and the same time. It is an inevitable result of certain pressuring forces that are building up in the social structure, whose aim is to point to the stars. And it is a cause for laying a foundation for an awareness more capable of bringing about a better understanding of perceptible things around us, one that may contribute to a better grasp of those



Cover of the arts journal
al-Tashkeel (published
by the Emirates Fine Arts
Society), no. 3, 1985

equations that have become incomprehensible in a world changing more quickly than we are able to follow. Thus our strategic vision is to focus primarily on shocking the recipient by pulling him a step closer to the vast horizons, without forgetting the importance of attending to the authentic and the contemporary—the light and the shadow—and presenting them in an aesthetic form that brings together, as much as possible, studies that dissect the creative artistic moment, and attempt to look at it rationally, sometimes through a comprehensive outlook and sometimes with specificity, focus, education, and elucidation through impressions and memories, and also by attempting to dissect the present reality or the envisioned future in light of available facts. We do not believe that the current plastic reality is paralyzed and incapable of producing creative individuals. While the present circumstances indicate atrophy, they are also, for another reason, connected to the creative person's ability to digest this reality, to delve into it and reshape it. These are temporary appearances that vanish once the mind is polished and enlightened, and once it moves closer to the moment of revelation and the transparent visionary quality that can reshape this reality by adding touches that attempt to trace the contours of the mural of the future and to write a new history of this reality. A true artist is one whose true concern is with writing his name on the mural of the future. This publication is a window that leads the reader toward a more panoramic vision. Its main goal is to lay the foundations for an artistic taste that adheres to a positive future, discards the negativity of the present, and maintains the authenticity of the past by way of the shock of modernity. It is a voice—will it be echoed!?

—Al-Lajna al-Thaqāfiyya, “An Nata’ammal Ya’nī an Nu’assis,” *al-Tashkīl*, no. 3 (1985): 3. Translated from Arabic by Yazan Doughan.

On *Wooden Columns* (1986)

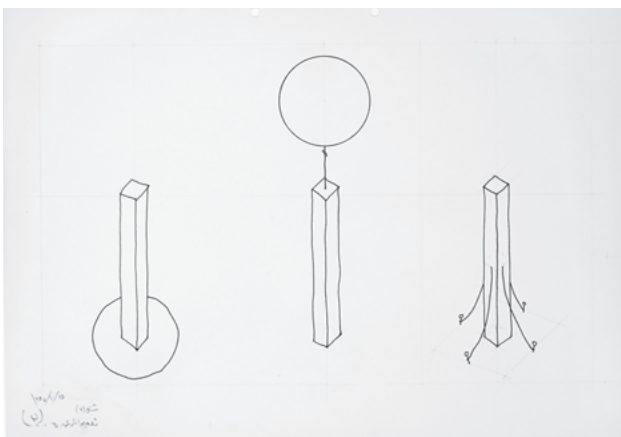
Ahmed Rashid

Hassan Sharif's *Wooden Columns* were on view as part of the Emirates Fine Arts Society's annual exhibition. A wall label next to the work read: "September 1985. This type of wooden column has many uses, such as bearing the 'No Parking' sign that marks private parking spaces. This column, however, has been laid inside a 40-by-16-by-16-inch box made of wood and glass." From this we learn that all Hassan Sharif has done is put a wooden street column—an ordinary, everyday item—inside a box. In doing so, Hassan renders it useless. Such acts are typical of Hassan Sharif's artistic concerns. The wooden column can no longer serve a practical everyday purpose: its only possible use, once trapped inside the box, is as a work of art by the artist Hassan Sharif.

Sharif's work repudiates the notion of representation, because the everyday item is not the subject of a visual illusion. He is following the footsteps of the modern novel and the "new novel," as seen in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet. "He perceives things with an impartial eye . . . avoids anxious psychological analysis, which alienates and conceals man. . . . He focuses our attention on the material world." He is cunningly playful in his own shrewd way. His game is not to create an absolute, only to demolish and re-create it in a different image. He does not act on the thing itself, adding to or subtracting from it. He defines it within its particular space and determines its use and potential. The object is placed in a situation where it can only be a thing in itself. The object has its own life.

The event that is *Wooden Columns* also demonstrates that the column does not have a life outside the box in which it is placed. It has been removed from the natural world to become an artistic phenomenon, or text. It lives as part of this text, which is perpetually impartial, and divulges nothing beyond its new world.

In Sharif's work, the wooden column is no longer a symbol. It assumes a new nature given to it by the artist. The object was not chosen or put in this box because of any particular virtue. It is an object like any other that we might use in our daily life. Sharif does not intend to disclose anything other than what was revealed by the object itself prior to being displayed before us as a work of art. He simply places the object before us, and confronts us with an utterance. He forces our eyes to stop pursuing



Hassan Sharif. Study for *Wooden Columns*, a work in nine parts (a wood-and-glass object and eight panels). 1985. Ink on paper. 33 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 23 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (84 × 59.5 cm). Sharjah Art Foundation

the mirage of representation and illusion. He leaves us to gaze at what we normally classify as ordinary and expendable.

We are confronted with an object that we avoid in our daily life, that we shun, as if it holds not only human misery, but also the space occupied by the object itself, the object we mistakenly believe we can usurp and exploit. It is this space that stuns and fascinates, emerging from nothingness like a hail of bread crumbs.

Sharif gives the object contextual freedom by not interfering with its domain. The artist does not project himself upon the object. He does not propose that the object speak on his behalf, as a metaphor for his own psyche. He cuts off any psychologizing before it meets the wood and cancels out the object's identity. Sharif's real game is to let the object express itself as an object and nothing else. He eliminates the object's muteness. The artist does not display his work, and does not bring the viewer to make associations in relation to the object. There is complete silence.

Sharif's importance as an artist, and the significance of his artistic vision, lies in his great silence, in the fact that he never says a word. "This thing, which you do not really understand, is right here in front of you. It reveals no more than its being itself. I did not embellish or change it. I have no specific intention in choosing to display it, and I do not expect it to disclose anything to you on my behalf. It expresses itself as an object and nothing more."

—Ahmad Rashid, "al-A'mida al-Khashabiyya," *al-Khalij*, May 5, 1986; repr. in Hoor al Qasimi and Karen Marta, eds., *1980–Today: Exhibitions in the United Arab Emirates* (Abu Dhabi, UAE: National Pavilion, United Arab Emirates, Biennale di Venezia, 2015), 164–66. Translated from Arabic by Mustafa Adam for the Sharjah Art Foundation; the text has been amended slightly for the present publication.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Along New Paths: The New Visions Art Collective in Occupied Palestine

Vera Tamari

The First Intifada (1987–91) was a historic moment of Arab unity and collective struggle against Israel's occupation of Palestine. The intifada (literally, "act of shaking off," or uprising) was a popular nonviolent resistance movement, and it constituted a moment of great challenge and hope. Every individual participated in the movement in his or her own way: planting vegetables in communal gardens; holding classes for schoolchildren at home; reporting to the media; and caring for the injured and the families of the fallen. It was during this period that artists Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Tayseer Barakat, and myself were faced with the futility of trying to produce, in our respective modes, a faithful visual narrative of the poignant scenes of confrontation, heroism, death, and destruction that prevailed everywhere in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and Jerusalem—all the areas occupied by Israel in 1967.

There was, of course, no way we could compete with the distressing daily media images appearing on TV and in newspapers. Any attempt to reproduce those dramatic scenes of real-life situations seemed banal and unnecessary. We sought as a group to address how art could serve our national struggle without compromising our personal



From left: Nabil Anani, Tayseer Barakat, Vera Tamari, and Sliman Mansour at the first exhibition of New Visions, Jerusalem. 1989

expressive style, and with this in view in 1989 we formed the New Visions collective. The four of us had been among the founders of the League of Palestinian Artists, established in 1975 in occupied Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. That consortium had led the way in proposing how art could be used as a tool for propagating political activism, resistance, and civic and public awareness in occupied Palestine.

Metaphorical images expressing Palestinian identity, resilience, and defiance against the occupation—rooted olive trees, broken shackles, and women in traditional Palestinian dress as symbols of the land—became common iconography in our art. Historic and mythological references were important themes, too. That art, which stressed the collectivity of the struggle, was timely and necessary. It quenched the interest of the masses as they looked for visual symbols to ascertain their national aspirations and struggle against the occupation.

With the spirit of that intifada, the grounds for change became fertile. The Arabic name of the New Visions group, *Nahw al-Tajrib wa-l-Ibda'*—which translates literally to “toward experimentation and creativity”—encapsulates our stance. Indeed, we were questioning our very role as artists, feeling the need for more open and personalized horizons in the production of our art. The art of the 1970s and early 1980s had become too confining for us. We rebelled against overused and much-repeated themes and symbols and against classical mediums, against the framed oil-on-canvas that dominated the walls of most exhibitions. It was necessary to indulge our individual growth and development as artists.

Our first exhibition as a group took place in 1989 at the Hakawati theater in Jerusalem. Still largely inspired by the concept of a free and independent state of Palestine, we also explored newer themes. In the spirit of self-reliance—as dictated by the intifada—we worked in materials and mediums drawn from local tradition, such as mud, straw, henna and other natural dyes and colors. The art forms were malleable, the surfaces varied; many of the works leaned toward abstraction. Collages, three-dimensional structures, and reliefs took the place of the rigidly framed paintings that for so long had been the status quo.

The New Visions exhibitions traveled within Palestine and beyond, to Jordan, Germany, Italy, and the United States. While the works inspired many, there were some traditionalists who questioned the shift away from a commitment to mainstream art modalities. But ours was unquestionably a committed art: it carried within it signals of

change, self-direction, and responsibility. In that same spirit, in 1994 the New Visions group renovated a traditional Arab-style house in Jerusalem, establishing Al Wasiti Art Center. The inaugural exhibition, *From Exile to Jerusalem*, featured the works and “virtual” return of prominent Palestinian artists who had been displaced by the diaspora, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Leila Shawa, Vladimir Tamari, and Kamal Boullata, among others.

Today, New Visions is no longer formally an active collective. There are newer and more dramatic changes affecting the art-production scene in Palestine, where conceptual and new media contemporary art practices are gaining momentum among a generation of emerging young artists. However, those same young artists often look back to the spirit of New Visions collective as an inspirational model of change and creativity.

Born in Jerusalem, Palestinian visual artist **Vera Tamari** is also a curator, art historian, and educator. In 1989, she was a founding member of the New Visions Art Collective.

See Plate 49 for a 1987 work by Sliman Mansour.

An abstract black and white artwork featuring a complex composition of organic, swirling patterns and geometric shapes. The background is dark, with lighter, textured areas that resemble brushstrokes or marbled paper. Large, dark, circular forms with concentric rings are prominent, along with various angular and curved shapes in white and light gray. The overall effect is one of dynamic movement and intricate detail.

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