

Reflections on different aspects of Contemporary Jordanian Visual Arts.

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For ArtHub *The New Silk Roads symposium*

'You are Not and Artist' (4'04")
'This Does Not Mean Anything to Me' (11'13")
Video
2009

The socio-political and religious transformations in post-colonialist Arabia, and their consequent implications on daily life are multi-faceted. Within the obvious disarray, contemporary visual arts hold fragile grounds. Up until the late 1800's -for Jordan and other countries in the Levant region- Islamic art was predominantly the definition of and for visual expression. The transition from Islamic art ideologies (arguably seen as a sudden one) sometimes viewed as an imported product of colonialism and 'the west' may have left people somewhat disoriented between the cultural parameters in which artistic expression had been defined in the past, and the more recent introduction of western mediums and theories for artistic practice in the last decade.¹

There are of course some important matters that I am personally aware of in this questioning. On the one hand, there is some difficulty in attempting to address these questions in light of my personal American and British educations, which automatically distance me from the language, texts, learnings and conversations that have, and continue to take place around the arts in Jordan. While on the other hand, and within the region the torch-holders for art discourse and leaders of the systems through which art is practiced, presented and publicized are *guided* by western hands.

With this strong influence, where do you begin to find local threads through which specificities of the art context can be presented to form the local narrative for the developments of visual arts in the last half-century? Or is this attempt at re-reading and interpreting art history a futile one, in light of globalization, and the obvious authority presented by international systems, which through decades of discourse, production and exhibition of art will always be the reference for visual art practice.

Some initial research in mapping the grounds on which visual arts have formed bring starting points for the research. Initially it is worth highlighting that arts and culture are defined in nationalism and folklore, where culture is seen within the framework of an Arab-Islamic identity, and the Arabic language.²

Then in schools art education is found under the department of educational activities and doesn't account to final accumulative student grades. Faced with the curriculum and course book, one is not sure whether to laugh or cringe at the content. Surprisingly, one public university set up a department of visual arts over 20 years ago to offer different disciplines in visual arts, music, theater, TV and Radio. Then on a social level, arts are viewed either as a hobby or as something that will be damned by God and *haram*³ in the eyes of Islam.

Otherwise, there is a good infrastructure for the production and display of visual arts. The Jordan Na-

1 My personal opinion is that political changes bring with them many transformations. But in light of contemporary awareness of tradition and cultural changes seems to cause a behavior similar to separation anxiety towards these changes. Changes in visual arts are often times viewed by the older generation as another result of the bombardment of the 'evil west' on our lives.

2 Ministry of Culture www.moc.gov.jo

3 *Haram* in Islam means sinful and forbidden.

tional Gallery of Fine Arts founded in 1981 houses a substantial collection of predominantly Modern Arab and Islamic paintings and sculptures. Otherwise, the Darat Al Funun: Khalid Shoman Foundation and Makan - an independent art space – both through their separate and distinct agendas provide spaces for emerging and experimental works by artists living in Jordan and the Arab World. Recently, the Film House, a child of the Royal Film Commission has focused on capacity building in film-making which resulted in a drastic increase in film production. Sadly, and mostly for the larger institutions such as Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, local audiences are scarce in contrast to the scale of the establishment.

Without delving into further peculiarities or statistics for Jordan's visual arts, my research in the video works "*You are not an artist*" 2009 and "*This work does not mean anything to me*" 2009, look into the relationships formed through an obvious triangle; the audience, the museum, and the critic.

The idea of the museum was interpreted into an institution that presents itself as an authority through which an audience may -formally or informally- build an understanding towards visual arts and a language of aesthetics. For this broad interpretation of the museum, my research used two very different venues; the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, and the University of Jordan Students Affairs building. In a sense, each of these institutions present one idea of what visual art is and the subject matters it should depict. The National Gallery is an obvious choice in light of its status in presenting a selection of Jordanian and Islamic artists, the collection being curated according to themes or landscape, figurative, calligraphy and so on.

The Students Affairs Building presents a selection of works mainly by non-art students who use the university drawing and painting workshop, to make paintings, which are then hung on the walls throughout the building. The artworks reflect the ideas of the state for visual arts; iconography for the monarchy in portraits of the king / royal family, symbols of nationalism, folklore and tradition in desert scenes with camels depicting traditional Bedouin life. Technique and mediums used for these works are of poor quality. These works also represent the archetypal painting that is considered 'art' by the general public. Such works are frequently seen in government organizations, offices and can be an interpretation of artworks sold in 'art shops' and framing facilities.

Two critics were invited to give their professional opinion on two painted portraits of the king that were located in the Students Affairs building at the University of Jordan. While for the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, people from different backgrounds were asked to comment on works by Jordanian artists. These people included the person who owns a fruits and vegetable shop in the vicinity of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, some friends who do or do not frequent the gallery, and a local artist, among others.

The video work presents the audience with a painting (as a still photograph) and the voice of the person telling us what they think of the work before us. The participant is simply asked to say what they see in the artwork, and if it reminds them of anything, or evokes a feeling or sensation. The participant is then left to speak until they feel they have no more to say. The work attempts to dissect the relationship of art, language and how far the audience reads the references artists use in their work. In one sense the work is pushing people out of their comfort zone with art, and forcing them to articulate their notions about an object they shy away from, or feel uncomfortable around. Simultaneously, the work questions the function of art in society, as well as the museum as an authority for aesthetic heritage of a nation.

These two video works are part of an ongoing research in various media in which the formulations and transformation of the visual arts in Jordan in the last 50 years are scrutinized and dissected. In order to try and develop an understanding of the basic structures and ground works that affected the visual language of the arts, as well as the references artists used, and how these relate to an audience with

no formal art education. Also, an important element is the 'critic'⁴ and how their use of language fits into the whole picture.

The video works were presented via a projector to the participants of the symposium.⁵ They stirred questions about aesthetics and culture, about the systems in which certain artworks are presented and other ignored. They also raised questions about audiences and their relationship with arts. And finally, the conversations questioned agendas of funding bodies being geared towards certain productions vs. others in the creative industries.

Where are the Arabs? 2009

Public intervention / Performance

Where are the Arabs? Originally presented in Amman Jordan, is a project that investigates the Arab identity and the publics' relation to the notion of Arab Unity. The work is a performance of a speech in public spaces through different mediums; performance in public spaces in the city of Amman, a participation from the audience to read the same speech, and a video performance imitating a live Television broadcast on TVs in cafes and restaurants.

The speech is made up from 12 different speeches that were presented to audiences throughout the Arab World between 1958⁶ and 1961 by the ex-president of Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser⁷. Nasser was the instigator and advocate for United Arab Republic through unity of the Arab countries. Even today he remains the key figure in relation to this phenomenon.

The use of Jamal Abdul Nasser in this work is a metaphoric reference to a part of our recent history. The work utilizes an iconic figure who resonates strongly in the contemporary Arab consciousness in the framework of a utopian and glorious past.

The work is also a commentary on the use of the Arabic language in the past and the present. The work meditates on the ideas around repetition (seen in the reiteration of ideas throughout the length of the speech. Repetition is used in the Arabic language to emphasize and project conviction; where in this work it is used to generate boredom thus reversing its functionality.

The presentation of the work in public spaces and has a participatory nature by inviting people from the audience to appropriate the podium and microphone and present the speech themselves⁸. This platform invites viewers to playfully contemplate a distinctive part of our history and reflect on their relationship to it, and how it formulates in present-day Arab identity.

This work has been presented in Jordan, Palestine, United Arab Emirates and now Thailand. As an intervention, the work reacts to the spaces of the locale. While it was totally unplanned for *The Making of the New Silk Roads*, one of the works produced for the symposium by participant Stefan Rusu entitled *The Flat Space* presented "a design that replicates the apartment space created by socialist society standards within urban landscapes of several East European cities, with an idealist functionality and aesthetics"⁹ The space offered a doorway to a small veranda overlooking the participants of the

4 I am aware of the role and expertise of the critic in countries who's art-historical backgrounds, education in art history and use of art language are very different than those in Jordan. The one person with a PhD in art criticism does not write critically in art, and other practicing critics write for newspapers, and cannot hold the to the true meaning of profession.

5 In an exhibition, the videos would be placed side by side.

6 1958 was also the year of the inauguration of the United Arab Republic. In reality, the unity was short-lived and was realized through similar laws between Egypt and Syria, and briefly with Iraq.

7 "Gamal Abdel Nasser was the second President of Egypt from 1954 until his death in 1970. He led the bloodless coup which toppled the monarchy of King Farouk and heralded a new period of modernization and socialist reform in Egypt together with a profound advancement of pan-Arab nationalism" <http://en.wikipedia.org>

8 This is only possible in Arabic Speaking countries and has so far only taken place in the intervention in Amman, Jordan.

9 Projects outline, *The Making of the New Silk Roads*, Bangkok University Gallery 2009.

symposium. *The Flat Space's* references to socialism, as well as the physical structure overlooking the crowds was an opportunity for appropriation and an intervention with the words of the glorious past of the United Arab Republic.

"We are gathered here to celebrate the anniversary of unity and the birth of United Arab Republic. What we celebrate today is not merely the birth of Unity, nor the birth of a great nation solely; but the birth of willpower. Unity was simply the expression with which this willpower chose to express itself.

The reality, my brothers, is that Unity was simply a popular demand that gained its freedom and rid itself from all traces of foreign control. It continued to pave its path, and declared this to its rulers; the proof of this is that freedom was only achieved after a long struggle that set out from the very beginning to the very end to acquiring freedom. This was willpower. The willpower, your willpower my brothers, was the result of freedom, as there is no willpower without freedom.

This Republic, my brothers, that has risen amidst the Arab Nation to lift the flag of independence, as independence is the first step we take towards solidarity, so there is a unity and a union.

Unity, my brothers, is the means that Arabs everywhere saw towards independence and freedom. Solidarity was the path that Arabs, in every Arab country, found to safeguard independence, to protect it from those looking greedily towards us, and protect it from the oppressors.

We are the soldiers of Arab Nationalism and we have a duty, a great duty, an important duty to protect our nationalism, which has been targeted by our enemies for years, as our parents and grandparents have protected it in the past.

Our ancestors have protected our nationalism against attack and assault; against exploit and foreign control, against plots and segregation. They were able to safeguard our nationalism and pass it onto us. We were born in this generation to see our Arab nationalism enduring, which we owe to those of our parents who fought, and our grandparents who martyred.

Today, my brothers, we have the same duty; we must safeguard our nationalism against its enemies. And there are many against Arab Nationalism, plotting and conspiring against us, there are those who wish to destroy our nationalism.

My brothers

Praise be to God, praise be to God, praise be to God who united us in truth, as the calling that has united us is one of truth. The call for Arab Nationalism unites us here today after many years of struggling and fighting, the call for Arab Nationalism that brings together faithful hearts and pure souls is a call for Truth.

The call that brought us here today is a call from God, and you are this call's soldiers, we are all soldiers for this call, all the Arab Nations are soldiers for this call. With these hearts, with these souls, with this faith and with the help of God, your call will triumph, the call of Arab Nationalism. These souls this faith, and this spirit cannot but triumph, because this call –as I said - is a call from God, otherwise these hearts, and these thousands upon thousands of people would not have agreed to it, and united towards it in every Arab country."¹⁰

10 The work at *The Making of the New Silk Roads* was performed in Arabic and subtitled in English.

My reflection on the Symposium

Generally, I find myself questioning this platform of 'the meeting', in its different manifestations as a place in which learning and engaging are intended. 'The Meeting' makes sense as a great place for – literally- people to meet one another; namely networking. Usually people find the time to convene and get acquainted outside the actual meeting agenda; taking place in the coffee breaks and later at night over dinner and drinks. So all the energy, planning and resources used to create a dynamic agenda filled with speakers and presentations does not get the main attention from the participants, rendering the program in itself somewhat futile?

Already in 2009 I have attended three 'meetings', and I seem to approach these with two contrasting emotions. On one hand, the sense of excitement at an invaluable opportunity to meet different people and learn of their experience in the art world, hoping to make true connections for the future. On the other, a pessimism to the amount of real knowledge to be acquired from the program itself. These feelings need to be placed in context of an anticipation of the inevitable foreseen hours to be spent posed, and presumably alert, throughout several days on hard chairs (thank you Supersudaca!). Also, I am wondering about the reason for this setup of an exclusivity club for managers and operators of the cultural field, who - in absence of the independent artist - are invited to meet and discuss issues around their work with art and artists.

It is none-the-less refreshing when your expectations are challenged. In the least it keeps you awake, and at best it confronts your understanding, shifting your views, and forcing you to unlearn what you had previously defined.

Catherine Grenier in her description of the artistic process today describes that “we are seeing the flowering of a new spirit, whose spontaneous dynamic favors immediacy...inventiveness and proliferation.... spirit of play... These new forms of art trumpet their refusal to set an example...”¹¹. Upon arrival, and after formalities were out of the way, the curators encouraged us to react and intervene to the works and presentations throughout the 3-day symposium. The curators opened the learning experience by engaging the participants and mimicking their natural way of learning by using different media presented by various representatives from the field. *The Making of the New Silk Roads* was a charged, inquisitive, and playful grounds that brought the artist, the architect, the writer, the curator, the manager, the film-maker and the student all in one place to reflect and challenge notions set across this broad expanse of *the silk road* to reconstruct and contest their understanding of artistic practice and production.

11 Grenier, Catherine; “Turn of the Page” *Abracadabra : international contemporary art*. London : Tate Gallery Pub., 1999.