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Leiden
The Netherlands

Contemporary Arab Representations

ISIM,

Citation

ISIM,. (2002). Contemporary Arab Representations. *Isim Newsletter*, 11(1), 38-38.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16816>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Project

WITTE DE WITH CENTRE

The Middle East is a region that is often overlooked in present-day exhibitions, and when it is not, the focus is mainly on traditional culture. The image that is presented thus denies the fact that contemporary Arab culture is a pilot region, a political and cultural laboratory that is highly complex. It is because of this complexity that Catherine David does not focus exclusively on 'contemporary art' in her new project, but also envisages the whole of cultural production, whether literature, philosophy, or journalism, as well as the images and the patterns of thinking that currently exist in the Arab world. This is what lies behind the project's title: *Contemporary Arab Representations*.

Contemporary Arab Representations includes seminars, performances, publications, and presentations of works by different authors – visual artists, architects, writers, and poets – with the aim of encouraging production, interaction, and exchange between the different cultural centres of the Arab world and the rest of the world. The project aims to tackle heterogeneous situations and contexts that may sometimes be antagonistic or conflicting, and thus to acquire more specific knowledge about what is currently going on in certain parts of the Arab world, to look at the complexity of aesthetics in relation to social and political situations, and to encourage people to think more deeply about the role currently played by cultural practices in our own countries.

►
***I Do Not Think
People Leave
Hamra Street,
Hamra Street
Project, Ashkal
Alwan.***

Beirut/Lebanon

'Beirut/Lebanon' was the first in a series of presentations. At present, Lebanon and the Middle East are essential to an understanding of contemporary culture: the post-war situation they are living through is complex – the Ta'if Accords do not guarantee definitive peace, and in this age of globalization, the country can be seen as an exceptionally important laboratory for a variety of reasons. Although Lebanon can no longer serve as a 'model' or 'exception' within the Arab world, the concern of many Lebanese intellectuals – immediately after the war –

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PHOTO: WALID SADEK, 2000

with the development and promotion of an experimental and critical contemporary Arab culture was sufficient reason to single out a group of authors who feel the need to meet and discuss a medium-term cultural project in their own city and in their personal context.

All the participants in the project aim to propose representations that can broach the reality of the city and the present conditions in urban society. And they all realize that there are no theories or forms that can encapsulate the phenomenological complexity of contemporary Beirut and Lebanon. Thus, as Saree Makdisi writes in his article 'Laying Claim to Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere', Lebanon can be understood not simply as a post-modern state but also as the first example of a state on a lease. Indeed, the interest of the country or the region is also linked to the need to find new instruments

for analysing unprecedented dynamics, speeds, and configurations, the reverberations of which can be heard beyond the Middle East.

The unfolding of this project has been presented in different phases. It began with a seminar at the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía (UNIA) (22–26 October 2001) and continued with a colloquium at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart (7–9 February 2002). Several dossiers have been published in cultural journals, including the Arteleku magazine *Zehar* (issue 46/2002), *Springerin* (issue 2/2002), and *Camera Austria* (issue 78/2002). The project has been hosted by the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (2 May – 14 July 2002) and by Witte de With, centre for contemporary art in Rotterdam (14 September – 24 November 2002).

The project was accompanied by the publication *Tamáss 1*, which is the first in a series

of publications about current Arab cultural discourse. *Tamáss 1* includes essays and projects by Walid Sadek, Jalal Toufic, Saree Makdisi, Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, Elias Khoury, Rabih Mroué, The Atlas Group Project/Walid Raad, Marwan Rechmaoui, and Paola Yacoub & Michel Lasserre. *Tamáss*, which means contact, touch(ing), contiguity, adjacency, or tangency (when combined as *khat tamáss* and *khoutout tamáss* it can also mean demarcation line(s) or confrontation line(s)),* seeks to create an open forum for debate and the exchange of ideas, images, and projects between different parts of the Arab world and the rest of the world.

Cairo/Egypt

At present, a new phase is being developed under the title 'Cairo/Egypt'. In the Arab world, communication is neither fluid nor easy; freedom of expression is still difficult. Egypt is an example of a culture that is affected by a lack of liberty. The project will encourage the particular strategies that are undertaken by the participants to achieve a truly uncensored analysis and critique.

Contemporary Arab Representations will thus create a new voice among those who only focus on the glorious past of the Arab world while totally overlooking or even denying its present or future. In contrast with this, it will stimulate progressive projects in order to show that Islamic extremism and archaism are not apparent in all aspects of Arab society.

Note

* Rohi Baalbaki, *Al-Mawrid. A Modern Arabic-English Dictionary* (Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lilmalayin, 2001).

For further information, please contact Witte de With, centre for contemporary art, the Netherlands.
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Tamáss 1. Beirut/Lebanon

Price: 25 Euro

Illustrations in colour and black and white

23.5 x 17 cm, 168 pp.

English paperback

ISBN 84-88786-61-1

Tamáss 2. Cairo/Egypt is forthcoming (May 2003).