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What We Do Not Know

Questions for a Study of Contemporary Arab Art

KIRSTEN SCHEID

All signs suggest an imminent flourishing in the study of contemporary Arab art.¹ In her 1989 review of “zones” of scholarly interest in the Arab world, Lila Abu-Lughod pointed to two quandaries relevant for our topic: the lack of interest in “creative” and “expressive” components of Arab society and the squandering of opportunities for contributing to social theory.² Today scholarships are granted by the SSRC and Fulbright for studies of art in Jordan, Tunis, and Iraq. Rich monographs about contemporary Egyptian and Amazigh art worlds and colonial art education, among others, have appeared from prominent American and European presses.³ This publishing boom accompanies an increased interest in seeing Arabs through the lens of art. Against the horrors of September 11, of the wars on Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, and of an apparent “civilizational clash,” new institutional supports allow Arab and Muslim artists to be exhibited and fêted in diverse venues as never before. Beyond journalistic and curatorial applause for Arabs as art-makers, however, lies an unprecedented opportunity to consider theoretical issues raised by this swell of concern.

Scholars in this field have the potential to revolutionize our understandings of subjectivity, cultural expression, modernism, secularism, among others. When artists wilfully converge on artistic practices with lineages distinct from their own cultural and national ones, what does this indicate about national and transnational subjectivities? What structures inform imagination and subjectivity without binding them

to spatial and temporal borders? How does “art” as an allegedly universal category of human production get taken up to prove membership in humanity? Such questions are important to counteract any repetitions of narratives from the repertoire of colonial travellers who revelled in the discovery of “aesthetic impulses” among “heathen Arabs.” Treating art as a bridge to humanity’s common ground, in contradistinction to other activities by Arabs, threatens to strip the historical and cultural context from a notion of art that developed as part of the formation of Europe after the Renaissance, and especially with industrialism and capitalism.⁴

Lest a culturally specific model be imposed uncritically, and a scholarly opportunity lost, it is important at this stage to remember what we do not know about contemporary Arab art. Naming

the unknowns will help us ask why that which gets promoted as “Arab art” is being made, circulated, and lauded, and not simply how. Studies engaging Arab art-making should bring insights from this field back to the field of critical art studies, rather than simply importing notions of art-making and applauding people for applying them in “unexpected” places. Stemming from an attempt to grapple with the limitations of my own work, this essay seeks to contribute to future scholarship by delineating a set of areas whose content is yet unknown.⁵ The focus is on visual art but the questions are pertinent to other activities that tend to fall under the rubric of “expressive arts.” The gaps in current scholar-

Contemporary Arab art increasingly attracts attention from both art institutions and scholars. By drawing on a variety of approaches, scholars in this field can put questions to major theoretical paradigms. Lest a scholarly opportunity be lost, we must remind ourselves at this stage what we do not know about contemporary Arab art, particularly in relation to historiography, concepts of artistry, audience cultivation, and the role of institutional support and funding.

ship can be summarized as having to do with 1) historiography; 2) concepts and forms; 3) audience cultivation; and 4) institutional support and funding.

Strategic histories

Much of the material authenticating past art-making as “Arab” comes from writings by predecessor artists who sought to situate themselves as nationalists or social pioneers. Too frequently, contemporary histories take

these as factual starting points. An inclination to promote oneself as distinctive (“the first artist”) or to relate to validating models (the tortured, the misunderstood, or the visionary artist), is thus easily and often taken to represent actual conditions of production in the past rather than previous strategies for laying claim to institutional support and social influence. Artists’ struggle to create something that could motivate nationalist Arab patrons in the past century involved declaring Arab society as currently art-less, but it also involved declaring “art” as a special activity that could rectify that society’s problems. Ignoring the strategic impact of such histories has led to overlooking how meanings of both “Arab” and “artistic” were formulated in tandem by artists who thought of themselves as social pioneers. This oversight has had the ironic effect of forwarding the same claims today – for example, the set of younger artists who are today promoted abroad are often hailed as having overcome an environment that previously “lacked art” or appreciative audiences. The little history that circulates asserts that this description of Arab society is simply true.

A return to history through period publications, sales records, diaries, exhibition registries would foreground the contingencies that produced art-making in certain forms at specific moments and relate artists’ concerns to those of their publics. It would help us understand how contemporary artists have found themselves in particular dilemmas with a defined set of tools available to them. One tool was recognizable connections to Ottoman, Hapsburgian, and Persian art realms. When was this tool forgotten at the bottom of the toolkit? Another tool is the vocabulary of art-making. In the early twentieth-century Lebanon, it was the *musawwar* (picturer) who made images in oil or light-rays, until he was gradually replaced by the *fannan* (artist) and *rassam* (usually, painter). Then there is the tool of polylingualism: which elements of art-making have found Arabic terminologies and why? In Beirut today, one does a *barmeh* (turn) at the *vernissage* (opening night) and compliments the artist by exclaiming, “*shu helu hal-strokes* (what beautiful strokes), *yislamu dayyatak* (may He bless your hands).” This was not always the case. The changing usefulness of the artist’s various tools tell us about the public debates that have impacted the structural conditions of Arab artists today. Addressing such issues would provide a sound basis for examining critically the genealogies that are and are not activated in today’s art world.

Questioning concepts and confronting forms

Good genealogies make for good maps of present relationships. Tracing a term back to its plethora of parentages, through time and space, can reveal in a positive light the deviations of Arab art world paradigms from their putative European ancestors. This means we do not need to

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and why? How is “taste” conceived? How is liking connected to buying? When do purchasers call it “art” and not “décor,” “wedding gifts,” or “self-expression”? Is there overlap between art reception and family formation, hospitality, grief, piety, or prosperity? We need to understand the efforts that audiences take upon themselves to interact with “art,” in galleries, books, television studios, doctors’ offices, and streets filled with three-metre high acrylic Ayatollahs. One way to address these questions is through art education programmes. For example, the appreciation courses offered by many elite Beirut schools for students’ parents are not secondary to the “look” of art and do differ significantly according to the gender or political outlook of the enrollees. Thinking more about the audience will help us understand how it comes to be seen, in some art discourse, as polluting of creative expression. Viewers’ demands for artwork that is affordable, intelligible, non-objectionable, or matches the living-room are said by some self-described “art-lovers” to overwhelm creative production, and yet they could be seen as essential to it. By scrutinizing in tandem audience efforts and those made by artists to reach various publics we may grapple with how these artists conceive and fashion their own and communal identity.

Funding for “Arab” art

The study of Arab art poses most elegantly questions about the relationship between audience formation, identity, and visual forms. Asking them, we can examine a newly visible set of relationships between art as productive of audiences, funding as productive of art, and thus funding as productive of audiences. First, however, we must first know what constraints and opportunities associated with different types of funding have been available to Arab artists. We know there are differences between banks, ministries, embassies and private patronage, between “local” and “foreign” funders, but how does their impact differ? Is an artist “Arab” or “female” or “resistant” in the same way to different funders? How is a funder “outside” or “inside” an art community? We must look at the relationship between a funder’s social agenda – e.g., overcoming social trauma or promoting tolerance – and the notion of art forwarded by their patronage. We should explore how artists realize, if not accept, that some sorts of politics are more likely to be funded. How indeed, does the sparsity of funds create people’s experiences of art and understandings of institutional support? After all, funding affects the elements with which art-makers must engage and the circuits through which art objects must travel to produce a valid, impacting presence. It is only logical that changes will result in the art produced when the class, national, and geographical distribution of funding shifts.

In sum, there is an exciting opportunity present in the encounter between Euro-American scholarship and contemporary Arab art. The above are questions that will help us understand not only the politics of art-making but the forms of art themselves. The political interest and institutional support newly available have made it possible to explore in-depth issues that were never considered relevant before. The complex intercultural encounters and political urgencies involved in this art could stimulate the advancement of art theory. But these issues will not be recognized, let alone the opportunities they pose grasped, if we do not consider the conditions of our own disciplinary and historical production as scholars of this field.

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push at Arab productions to see them as “art” but can rather push at paradigms to see their historical formation.⁶ Does “creativity” mean the same thing in different social settings? Is creativity itself always an important criterion for comprehending contemporary Arab artistry? Communal or individual authenticity? Figure versus abstract? Secular versus religious? If yes, what histories have resulted in their relevance? I say “histories” to avoid positing a single local narrative by which specific art practices must be counted authentic or inauthentic. When posited a priori intellectual paradigms make certain art works uninteresting (“parochial” or “locally irrelevant”) or even deformed (“romantic” or “influenced”). Questioning those paradigms enables us to consider how competitions between artists for audiences and funds have resulted in interventions that differ in visually measurable ways, rather than in better or worse ways. How is value ascribed and why does art need to be evaluated at all? Indeed, why is art used to evaluate Arabs’ lives, politics, and projects? Rather than seeing debates about art as reflecting realities of communities involved in nation-building and decolonization, we could look for how art became a means to press into “the future” or connect with “the past.” Studying art in a way that does not assume intellectual or communal boundaries can have the advantage of highlighting the contests that revolved around notions of art as well as the ambitions and actions that sought to mobilize certain associations embodied by it.

This set of questions points to another that is more focused on the object: why do art forms literally have to look a certain way to gain presence, validity, or impact in different historical and contemporary moments? The fact that much Arab art-making has strong, identifiable relations with non-Arab art worlds, especially former colonial metropolises, provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between understandings of art, their material instantiation, and the establishment of intimacies that cross boundaries at the geographic, class, or historical level. These visual borrowings embarrass a model of art that prizes creativity and authenticity. Yet, that model assumes the existence of fully formed communal identities upon which authenticity can be based. Rather, in what ways can Arab art works be understood as “first-hand” documents of socio-cultural processes?

Audience appreciation or pollution?

One phenomenon art may document first-hand is the matter of audience cultivation. In my own fieldwork, I once found myself arguing with a gallerist to get my name on her mailing list. This alerted me to the role audiences have in coming into existence. Although a few authors have looked at audiences, more research needs to be done. Who likes what,

Notes

1. “Arab art” here refers to production and discourse conceived as outside Euro-America and coming into visibility through the political encounters that have produced contrastive “Arab” and “western” labels within a specific Euro-American cultural, political, and disciplinary setting.
2. Lila Abu-Lughod, “Zones of Theory in the Anthropology of the Arab World,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 267–306.
3. For example, Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Cynthia Becker, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006); Hamid Irbouh, *Art in the Service of Colonialism* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2005); Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (Geneva: Editions Slatkine, 1996); Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007).
4. See Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropology Quarterly*, in print.
5. Kirsten Scheid, *Painters, Picture-makers, and Lebanon* (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2005).
6. See Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, chapter 1.
7. Katarzyna Pieprzak, “Citizens and Subjects in the Bank,” *Journal of North African Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 131–154.