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PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Teaching Modern Art: Situating Aesthetic Debates Within Arab Intellectual History

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In April 2018, on the occasion of the imminent publication of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, edited by Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, the Middle Eastern Studies program at Bard College hosted a workshop entitled *Found in Translation: Archiving Modern Arab Art*. During the two sessions – Viewing the Exhibition and Accounting for the June 1967 War – Sarah Rogers and I led a group of a dozen students through a close reading of a range of primary sources including exhibition guestbook entries from the early 1930s, exhibition reviews from the 1950s and an artistic manifesto written in response to the war as well as artists' interviews and roundtables. Students' enthusiastic engagement with this material and their desire to continue these conversations inspired me to develop a course, *Art, Aesthetics, and Modernism in the Arab World*. While focusing on the visual arts, the course was primarily intended to introduce students to the intellectual and cultural history framing the debates and discourses that shaped the development of modern art in the region from the 1900s to the 1970s.

When teaching Arab or Middle Eastern cultural production, I consistently begin by drawing students' attention to the question of our collective positionality; for example what does it mean for us to read these artistic debates, in translation – and in this case specifically, while relying on a reader produced by the MoMA – from the space of an American college campus? Oftentimes students come to my classroom from a range of disciplinary interests and backgrounds, with little or no exposure to cultural and artistic production from the Middle East, or perhaps the

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non-West in general.[2] This question of positionality serves to foreground questions of power and politics from the outset, making them aware of the canons (with their presumptions) that shape their readings and understanding.

In this case, in order to introduce the course and frame some of the stakes, I stayed close to home: the MoMA's *Travel Ban Rehang*.[3] Our first discussion focused on the museum's response to President Trump's January 2017 so-called "Muslim ban," in which it replaced works by Western artists in its fifth floor galleries with works by artists hailing from (some of the) Muslim-majority countries affected by the travel restrictions, as a departure point for an interrogation of the place of non-Western art in the modern art canon and museum that displays it.[4] Kirsten Scheid's "The MoMA Visa: Modern Art after the Trump Ban" provided an astute critique that exposed students to the nuances and complexities of this much-celebrated curatorial gesture.[5] Through this very contemporary example, students could immediately engage in debates about the stakes of sudden "appearance" of pieces by Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, Sudanese painter Ibrahim el-Salahi, and Iranian (born) artists Tala Madani, Parviz Tanavoli, Charles Hussein Zenderoudi, Shirina Shahbazi, Marcos Grigorian, and Siah Armajani. They grappled with the restrictive framing of these artists as coming from "a nation whose citizens are being denied entry into the United States,"[6] with these problematic terms of inclusion in the face of previous and consistent exclusion, as well the significance of the curatorial decision to scatter these works amongst the western "masters" such as Picasso, Matisse, Francis Picabia, Umberto Boccioni, and Oskar Kokoschka in a way that was, according to Christophe Cherix, MoMA's chief curator of drawings and prints, "inclusive and not disruptive;" a curatorial approach revealed the place assigned to the non-west in the canon of modern art.[7] (We expanded on these themes when reading deconstructions of modernism and modernity such as Prita Meier,

[2] Like many small liberal arts colleges, the art history and film programs at Bard College have limited offerings on the modern (or contemporary) non-West. Many of the observations I make here are equally applicable to a course I have taught titled *Middle Eastern Cinemas*.

[3] https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/2010/travel-ban-re-hang/.

[4] Artists from Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen were noticeably absent, however this curatorial intervention was accompanied by a series of film screenings that sought to rectify this.

[5] https://networks.h-net.org/node/3444/reviews/192655/scheid-museum-modern-art-installation-following-executive-order.

[6] https://www.moma.org/interactives/moma_through_time/2010/travel-ban-re-hang/.

[7] https://hyperallergic.com/356224/moma-installs-works-by-artists-from-countries-targeted-by-trumps-travel-ban/.

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"Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter in African and Middle Eastern Art History," and Keith Moxey, "Is Modernity Multiple?")[8]

Critiques of this specific project naturally developed into an interrogation of the proximity of institutions such as the MoMA to power and the implications thereof. Many students were familiar with the controversy beginning to surround the Whitney Museum of American Art and its upcoming biennial, namely the board's vice chair Warren B. Kander's ties to Safariland, the manufacturer of tear gas used by United States Customs and Border Protection agents against migrants crossing the US-Mexico border.[9] Through this discussion, we were able to establish the significance of studying art and aesthetics as a means of understanding the relationship between culture and power, as tools of colonial oppression, nationalism and decolonial resistance.

Before the publication of this volume, teaching a course that drew heavily on primary sources would have been almost impossible; linguistics constraints aside, the inaccessibility of such material was a significant challenge. The fact that *Modern Art in the Arab World* was ten years in the making speaks both to the scale of the task and the magnitude of the accomplishment. (The editors' introduction lays on the at-times unwieldy nature of the project.) The range of sources and geographical scope of the volume are not only impressive, but also invaluable; while press material, especially from more studied contexts such as Egypt is easier to come by, the inclusion of letters, exhibition guest books, personal letters, diary entries, and long lost exhibition texts and manifestos, as well as affording space to understudied artistic movements, for example in the Persian Gulf, decenters the narrative from the usual cultural capitals of Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad and expands the cultural and artistic geography through this polyvalence. Grouping thematic sections together, rather than approaching the volume entirely chronologically, further enhances this intraregional dialogue.

However, in planning such a course one still faces significant limitations related to the dearth and quality of secondary scholarship necessary to help students contextualize and historicize the debates they encounter in primary sources. It is difficult to match the scope of the sources with

[8] Prita Meier, "Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter in African and Middle Eastern Art History," *The Arab Studies Journal* 18:1 1 (Spring 2010): 12-44; and Keith Moxey, Is Modernity Multiple? http://www.columbia.edu/cu/arthistory/courses/Multiple-Modernities/moxey-essay.html.

[9] https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/whitney-staff-members-assail-vice-chairman-s-connection-to-tear-gas-attacks-at-us-border.

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similar academic case studies. Some moments and movements are heavily, if not rigorously, studied – Mahmud Mukhtar's neo-Pharaonism, and more recently the Egyptian Surrealists group *al-Fann wa-l-Hurriyya* have received much attention in English-language scholarship, however, this is often reductive and unreliable – while others are neglected, at times due to geopolitical circumstances. The same is true of access to images of artworks.) Moreover, the field is largely dominated by surveys of national art movements within the region, which while informative, fail to present a theoretical engagement. It is unfortunate that scholarship on Arab art and aesthetics, with few exceptions, has not developed innovative approaches to reading artists, art movements, and artworks. One must therefore look to adjacent fields, such as literary and intellectual history or other art histories of the global South for theoretical frameworks.

While the introductions and *In Focus* essays framing each thematic cluster are useful, they are quite brief. Ultimately, it is difficult to find texts that provide students with the historical overview of the development of modern art in the region that do not reproduce Orientalist narratives of a cultural world shaped by the binary of Ottoman degeneracy and stagnation and European-inspired enlightenment. These regional surveys have been primarily concerned with finding a place for modern (and contemporary) artistic production from the region within the established narrative of (western) art history.[10] Such studies have therefore focused on discussions of the appropriate categorization and nomenclature (Arab versus Islamic) for art produced in the last century. However, such debates often reproduce the colonial disciplinary structures they seek to contest. Introducing students to this history must therefore simultaneously be coupled with a debunking of this narrative. This can be difficult during the early weeks of the semester, when trying to give students a roadmap. However, by flagging these tropes, we were able to return to them in subsequent weeks in a more complicated manner. For example, Sarah Rogers disrupts the binary between cosmopolitanism and nationalism in her study of the Lebanese painter Daoud Corm and his self-fashioning as a modern artist.[11] Similarly, Scheid demonstrates how Arab painters' presumed aversion to the nude is in fact a modern-day misconception.

[10] I am thinking specifically here of the introductions to Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997) and Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

[11] Sarah Rogers, "Daoud Corm, Cosmopolitan Nationalism, and the Origins of Lebanese Modern Art," *Arab Studies Journal* 18: 1 (Spring 2010): 46-77.

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The nude was in fact considered "an index and instrument of modernizing" indicating a process of culturing rather than liberating.[12]

Articles such as these highlighted for students the complex stakes at the heart of the debates that took place in the reviews and manifestos. The artists, poets, philosophers, as well as religious and political figures that participated in heated exchanges regarding the nature of art education, the revival of aesthetic traditions, the significance of figurative and abstract art, the role of art in political resistance, and the possibilities of regional or international artistic alliances did so against the backdrop of rapidly changing geopolitical realities – the dissolution of empires, the redrawing of boundaries, the promises of nationalist movements, the birth of refugee and diasporic communities. *Modern Art in the Arab World* exposes students of art history, but also those interested in a broader cultural and intellectual history of the region, to these diverse voices. It is an invaluable resource for scholars of the modern Middle East, that can be used across a range of disciplines and courses in the humanities and social sciences.

[12] Kirsten Scheid, "Necessary Nudes: *Hadatha* and *Mu'asara* in the Lives of Modern Lebanese," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 203-30.

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