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SPECIAL FOCUS

IS THERE A CANON? ARTISTIC MODERNISMS ACROSS GEOGRAPHIES

Locating Primary Documents: Global Modernism and the Archival Turn

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Abstract

This essay considers the contribution of Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout's Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents *to global art history. In particular, the essay addresses the archival turn, the challenges of language and translations in the publication of primary sources, and the continued need to challenge Eurocentric views of and approaches to global modernism. This includes considering how* Modern Art and the Arab World's *contributions aim to upend Western preconceptions about modern art from the "Arab world," and demonstrating how such publications can serve as sources for critical evaluations and reconsiderations of the history of global modernism in general.*

Keywords: global art, archives, modernism, translation, Arab art, beyond Eurocentrism

Studies of global modernism today have proliferated within various cultural and artistic disciplines due to a paradigm shift, which seeks to lay the groundwork for non-hegemonic global histories through a growing commitment to unveiling, translating, exhibiting, and disseminating primary documents from global archives. Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkovitz's edited volume *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* presents modernism as a universal "global phenomena" and looks to archives of the global non-west for a comparative analysis of "what happens to the foundational concepts of modernism" when one looks beyond Europe and the west.[1] The

[1] Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkovitz, eds., *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1–2.

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turn to the archive, in recent years, has also seen a growing interest among art practitioners and curators dealing with modern and contemporary art. One popular inclination is to view the archival document not simply as a historical record, but also as an art object with a self-signifying capacity. The *Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums in Exile* exhibition, curated by Kristine G. Khouri and Rasha Salti at Beirut's Sursock Museum in 2018, is one such example. The exhibition displayed archival material as documentations of global artistic networks and practices that emerged from the 1960s–80s in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. The connection between the twenty-first-century "global turn" in art history and the rise of the archival document as artifact was also the subject of a recent workshop, "Global Art History and the Documentary Turn: Theory, Method, Archives," held in September 2019 at NYU Abu Dhabi in collaboration with the American University of Beirut and the MIT Press journal *ARTmargins*.[2] Situated within this interest in the intersection of global art, modernism, and the archive, Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout's *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* presents the first English translations of important documents, reports, and publications by artists and art critics from the Arab world at a time when modernism was gaining traction at the global level.

This sourcebook of translated texts, geared toward an English-speaking audience, emerges among a growing body of similar anthologies that make visible (to western audiences) important critical, literary, and artistic writing on modernity in the Arab world. One recent example that comes to mind is *The Arab Renaissance: A Bilingual Anthology of the* Nahda (MLA, 2018), edited by Tarek El-Ariss, which focuses on texts that can serve to relate the founding ideas of the Arab Nahda such as discourses on nationalism, religion, and language. Another comparable resource that is more squarely rooted in the artistic discipline is the journal *ARTMargins*, which occasionally includes a "Document" section in which contributors select important texts to translate into English for publication in the journal. For example, one such text, by anthropologist Kirsten Scheid (published in 2015), presents a translation of an Arabic letter "How the Arab Understood Visual Art" that was penned by the late Lebanese artist

[2] These are just a few examples. Another important work on archives and modern/contemporary art in the Middle East is Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and Pedro Schwartz, eds., *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (London: Ashgate, 2012). On the challenges of writing about modern or contemporary Arab art, see Silvia Naef, "Writing the History of Modern Art in the Arab World: Documents, Theories and Realities," in *"Global Art History": Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft*, eds J. Allerstorfer and M. Leisch-Kiesl (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 109–26.

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Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916–2017), and widely published (in Arabic) during the 1960s. Unsurprisingly, given Choucair's global significance and the originality of her letter, the translation by Scheid is included among the essay collection in *Modern Art in the Arab World*.[3] The aim of Scheid's translation is not simply to draw attention to a text by a female modernist, but, more importantly, to locate this document as an important example of cultural criticism that problematizes Eurocentric evaluations of "Arab" art and culture, while presenting localized views on materialism.[4] In underscoring the need to closely read primary documents on modern art from Arab, and global, contexts beyond widely-circulated "sound bites,"[5] or concerns about inclusivity and filling in gaps within the western canon, Scheid's translation allows for a truly critical engagement with global texts on modernism and its practices. Returning to Hayot and Walkovitz, I would suggest that translations like Scheid's have the potential to upend our conceptions of the foundations of Western modernism,[6] rather than simply adding to multiple histories of global modernism(s). *Modern Art in the Arab World* operates along similar lines by endeavoring not only to shift the terms of the debate on modern art from the Arab world, but also to demonstrate the centrality of art and views on modernism from this region to the history of modernism at the global scale.

Challenges of Politicized Contexts and Histories

Modern Art in the Arab World's contributions include 125 essays from across twelve Arabic-speaking countries that were written and/or published between 1882 to 1987, thus concluding just before the end of the Cold War and the dawn of the so-called New World Order. The book's editors explain that the essays "[span] a full century of writing about art from the experience of modernity's rapidly shifting commitments and contradictions."[7] This was a period during which modern art institutions were first forming in the region. Concomitant with the emergence of the nation-state, this regional art scene was formed from a growing body of temporary exhibitions, conferences, artist cooperatives, unions, and movements that coalesced with socio-political debates on populism, nationalism, Pan-Arabism, and the Arab–Israeli conflicts, among other

[3] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 145–49.

[4] Kirsten Scheid, "Toward a Material Modernism: Introduction to S.R. Choucair's 'How the Arab Understood Visual Art,'" *ARTMargins* 4.1 (2015): 102–18.

[5] Scheid, "Towards a Material Modernism," 103.

[6] Hayot and Walkovitz, *A New Vocabulary*, 2.

[7] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 18.

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regional and global concerns. Of concern for the editors of this volume are the documents produced as a result of these regional developments, such as news clippings, journal articles, public announcements, manifestos, and press interviews. The 125 texts translated for this volume thus come from sources, mostly Arabic or French,[8] that were largely ephemeral in nature. This ephemerality is not limited to the original sources' mediums. Rather, there is also an underlying sense of urgency, given the Middle East's current social, political, and economic volatility, which researchers continue to confront regarding access to and the presence of archival documents.

Considering the present-day uprisings, conflicts, and socio-political changes in the Middle Eastern regions covered in this volume, it is difficult not to hear the echo of its essays, specifically those dealing with the subject of revolutions. Indeed, one can argue that while twentieth century discourses on modernity might not be at the heart of the Arab World's recent events, today's struggles are largely responses to the previous century's after-effects of colonialism, American imperialism, and the dominance of neoliberal capitalism brought about by the practices of global modernization. From the "Arab Spring" and the (ongoing) wars in Syria and Yemen, to the more recent protest movements unfolding on the streets of Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt, and Iran, it is difficult to disassociate the region's contemporary politics from one's reading of the essays in this book. One such example is "Manifesto: Towards a New Vision" written in 1969 by a group of artists[9] in the wake of the Naksa, the "set-back" resulting from the defeat of Arab armies to Israel in the Six Day War of 1967. The manifesto positions art as the practice of facing the world and "reject[ing] all of that is wrong in the structure of society" in which this "rejection and resistance" transform into "two indispensable presences for the continuous practice of innovation." The artist, in this practice, "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."[10] Describing the modern artist as a revolutionary figure who, via his practice, fights for social justice on behalf of humanity is a theme that resonates in the most basic, universal sense with the calls by artists and cultural institutions for people to take to the streets in today's revolutionary protests from Chile

[8] Ibid., 18. Although the editors point out in their introduction that material came from at least four language sources, the majority of the selected texts were translated from French and/or Arabic sources.

[9] Dia al-Azzawi, Ismail Fattah, Saleh al-Jumaie, Muhammad Muhraddin, Rafa al-Nasiri, and Hashem Samarji.

[10] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 306.

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to Lebanon, where art institutions closed, or suspended their activities, in solidarity with protestors.[11] Other essays in the book similarly address the art that has accompanied regional revolutions, such as Iraqi critic Jaleel Kamal al-Din's 1958 review of *The Exhibition of the Revolution* that commemorated the revolutionary coup, which led to the establishment of the Republic of Iraq (1958–68).[12] Meanwhile, the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62) is used to frame essays dealing with discourses on post-revolutionary art as part of the National Liberation Front's socialist nation-building project, such as the unsigned text "Painting and the People" (1963)[13] and Algerian artist Mohamed Khadda's "Elements for a New Art" (1964).[14] What these essays have in common is their articulations of how artists responded to political upheaval or change through the formation of artist collectives and the proposal of new methods as a way to carve out a much-needed role for art in the construction of new states and regimes.

With that said, given the fact that a number of this volume's essays deal with the question of art and writing about art produced in situations of socio-political conflict or instability, it is almost too easy to read the book in light of recent events. Although there is a good amount of "revolutionary" literature to be had in this book that may resonate with Arab (and global) uprisings today, these texts should be read in connection to their own historical moment, as part of the tricontinental movement and rise of post-colonial discourse in the wake of the cultural turn of the 1970s. Indeed, for the artists and commentators whose work is translated in this book, their writing emerged in response to and as an articulation of their respective socio-political and artistic environments, but these essays cannot be reduced to universal or essentialist discourses about war and conflict. Rather, as the editors of the book explain, "[m]any of these figures [Arab artists and intellectuals] 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."[15]

[11] In Lebanon, for instance, several cultural institutions released statements announcing the cancellation of events or temporary closure of venues, see Taylor Dafoe, "Arts Organizations in Beirut Are Closing in Solidarity with the Millions of Lebanese Protesting the Government," *artnetnews*, October 22, 2019, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/beirut-arts-organizations-closing-protests-1685554.

[12] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 181–86.

[13] Ibid., 229–31.

[14] Ibid., 232–34.

[15] Ibid., 19.

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As a result, it is vital to consider how these nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and critics from the Middle East were locating themselves, and their views on modernism, as part of a "global project."[16] They not only sought inspiration from this phenomenon, but also actively participated in it. The key point to be made here, one which the editors underscore in their introduction, is that the modernist commitments and projects of the "Arab world" cannot be "retrospectively extract[ed] and isolate[ed]" from global projects of the time. The texts by these protagonists were "*already inscribed* in a transregional imaginary" and cannot be perceived as part of a "separate tradition or an 'alternative' modernism."[17] This volume is thus not simply filling gaps in (western) scholarship on modern Arab art. Rather, it is an attempt at shifting the terms of the debate on modernism as a uniquely western project that can only manifest in "non-western" regions as delayed, derivative, alternative, or one of "multiple modernities."[18] In so doing, the book's editors urge readers to cast off their "presumptions about the superiority of modernism in the North Atlantic states"[19] in order to understand how artists and writers on the global stage were contending with similar views on modernization, the politics of a world system/economy, and social change.

Upending Preconceptions

Through its contributions, *Modern Art in the Arab World* seeks to overturn preconceived notions of art produced in the "Arab world," in general, and views on Arab modernism, in particular. The volume's texts do this at different levels. One is contending with the slipperiness of the term "Arab" as a word and identifier that has historically shifting meanings and functions, specifically in the context of the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of nationalism in the Middle East and the emergence of pan-Arabism. For instance, motivated by regional political impulses to define and delineate modern Arab art from western works, or to recover a purportedly unifying Arab "cultural core," some artists turned to Arabic calligraphy and

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 20.

[18] For a take on non-Western modernity as "alternative," see Alev Çinar, *Modernity, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey: Bodies, Places, and Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). Other scholars explain global modernism as attempts that were delayed or "failed to bear out" the promises of westernization and can thus be best understood as multiple modernities with their own contexts and timelines. See S. N. Eisenstadt, "Multiple Modernities," *Daedalus* 129:1 (Winter, 2000): 1–2.

[19] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 20.

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lettering as a universal "Arab-Islamic idiom" along with "epic figures from folk literature, and ancient artifacts – as repositories of native symbologies."[20] Contemporary commentators and scholars have often perceived this turn to local visual histories, traditions, and constructed national heritage by artists and national governments as a rejection of the colonialist discourses of modernism and a quest for the ever-elusive "authenticity" of Arab art. Yet, *Modern Art in the Arab World*'s essays show that views on these strategies were disparate, and such approaches also found criticism among contemporary practitioners.[21]

Further problematizing dominant nationalist narratives of Arab modernism is the book's inclusion of artwork that is frequently underrepresented or excluded from the canon. Although the book is not heavily illustrated, the editors make a point of reproducing artworks that have not previously been widely published or circulated. The editors explain that "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."[22] For instance, while the book includes two works by the world renowned Khalil Gibran, they are two lesser-known works which would be unfamiliar to most readers: an engraving "Pool of Blood" (1913) published in the New York-based *al-Funun*[23] and an untitled granite wash drawing (1917–20).[24] More importantly, the images used help to further underscore the integral connection between artists' work and their writing. For example, in connection with the Baghdad Group for Modern Art's "Manifesto" (1951), a 1951 painting entitled "Return to the Village" by one of the group's members, the Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan Al Said, is referenced to help readers visually link the artwork with the text's description of a "new art" that brings together a comprehension of "foreign styles" (in reference to Cubism and abstraction) and an "awareness of local character."[25] While artworks maintain a certain degree of autonomy, and should, rightly, not

[20] Ibid., 21.

[21] Ibid., 21. The editors cite Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, who explained the use of calligraphy in Arab art as method aimed at "fulfilling the wishes of the artist who is less concerned with the quality of the work than with being accepted."

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., 55.

[24] Ibid., 118. The artwork is held at the Telfair Museum in Savannah, GA.

[25] Ibid., 151.

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be reduced to mere expressions or representations of intellectual debates, writing on art cannot be disconnected from the art itself. Perhaps in an effort to avoid reductive readings of artworks, they are not deployed as illuminating devices in the essays themselves, but are grouped together, like a small gallery of images, within two "Plates" sections located near the middle of the book.

Another way in which this volume problematizes dominant discourses on the history of Arab art is through the book's organizational structure. While the contents follow a loose chronology, the essays are grouped according to myriad themes, or "constellations" in the editors' words.[26] Some of these themes deal with specific responses to or articulations of art movements, like Romanticism, Surrealism, Pop Art, or Neo-Orientalism, while others are more concerned with specific national issues, such as "Iraq's Wartime Transformation" or "Making Spaces in Beirut." Notably absent in this structure are the rote categories and timelines that one would expect from an art history textbook. Indeed, as the editors explain, the categories were determined by the translated texts, and not the other way around. Opting to view these essays as "nodes" in what they call "a system of diffuse but meaningful links" the editors avoid the pitfalls of causality in the readers' experience of the texts.[27] One of the very useful aspects of the book's structure is the use of "In Focus" essays, each written by a different contributing author, to help frame these different "constellations" (or the translated works for a non-specialist audience). Nevertheless, although this organizational approach allows for a nuanced approach to the texts, it sometimes makes for a confusing read. Someone perusing the volume to locate writing by a specific artist/critic or from a particular country would need to turn to the book's index for better guidance. However, through its non-linear organization, the books forces readers to think, and read, thereby obstructing any reliance on, or desire for, master narratives.

The Limits of Material Access

According to their introduction, one of the challenges that the editors of *Modern Art in the Arab World* faced was working with translations of original texts that are no longer available. Thus, the editors explain, some essays only exist today as transcripts translated (into French or English) from Arabic. Other texts based on dialogues between artists, such as roundtable discussions and interviews, which were originally presented in

[26] Ibid., 22.
[27] Ibid.

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colloquial (or spoken) Arabic, may have lost some of their spontaneity or conversational characteristics when they were recorded and transcribed in written Arabic (*fusha*).[28] Indeed, the paucity of primary source documents remains a source of concern for scholars in the field. Add to that the continued loss of libraries and archival materials as a result of regional conflicts. This points to the urgency felt among researchers to rescue books, papers, and artifacts from obscurity. In her work on the library of the Syrian playwright, Saʿdallah Wannus (1941–1997), and its eventful relocation from Damascus to Beirut in 2015, Sonja Mejcher-Atassi explains the challenges scholars face today with the loss or inaccessibility of archives or libraries created by Arab writers and/or artists. This usually means that "research is driven by chance encounters."[29]

Reading *Modern Art in the Arab World*, one gets the sense that some of the selections made indeed resulted from similar accidental happenstances between the editors and available public and/or private archives and repositories based on their own respective research. The book's project is ambitious: it not only attempts to anthologize a single selection of texts, but has done so in a field where there are very few such anthologies in Arabic, let alone English. With any such audacious endeavor, one could very easily find gaps in the selections. For instance, although the editors claim that the anthology covers texts related to concepts of modernity in Arab art since the nineteenth century, there are only four examples from the pre-WWI period, one of which is an excerpted selection: an encyclopedia entry, from the 1880s, on painting by the Syrian scholar Butrus al-Bustani (1819–1883).[30] Readers interested in the question of modernist painting during the long nineteenth century might wish that the anthology considered the question of *musawwirun* (painters/image-makers) and their artistic practices across mediums at a time when notions of Art, in the beaux-arts sense, were still being consolidated.[31] To their credit, the editors clearly define the parameters of their project as one that commences, around the late nineteenth century, with the emergence of nationalist projects vis-à-vis articulations of an Arab

[28] Ibid., 25.

[29] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Unpacking Saʿdallāh Wannūs' Private Library: On the (After)Lives of Books," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 50 (2019): 4.

[30] Butrus al-Bustani, "*Taswir*, *Peinture*, Painting (c. 1882)," in Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), 36–37.

[31] An exhibition curated by Octavian Esanu at the American University of Beirut in 2015, "*Musawirrun*: Artists before Art" is an example of a recent event that addressed this group of artists.

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identity differentiated from an Ottoman one.[32] Nevertheless, these delineations, even among Arab scholars like al-Bustani, were complex and negotiated via these individuals' positions as Ottoman subjects.

Another problem with only including two essays from the nineteenth century, a period which has been extensively researched and covered in the context of painting in Europe and North America, is that readers might mistakenly assume that there was no sustained interest in modern art within the Ottoman provinces until the end of the Ottoman period in the twentieth century. Again, framing this anthology as one primarily concerned with "Arab" artists necessitates the exclusion of Ottoman artists and art institutions. Yet this raises important questions about the field itself, which continues to struggle with framing or understanding art produced in the nineteenth century under Ottoman rule.[33] For scholars of modern Arab art, nineteenth-century art produced in the Ottoman provinces is oftentimes perceived as not being "modern" or "nationalist" enough in its ties to Islamic traditions. Or, for Islamic art historians, this period's modernization practices resulted in art that was too "westernized" and not Islamic enough. Gaps in *Modern Art in the Arab World*'s contents can thus be used as an important opportunity to problematize dominant discourses on artistic production in the Arab world and to find ways to reconcile these issues.

Tackling Global Art History

One of *Modern Art in the Arab World*'s most important contributions to the field is the ability to use this volume as a teaching tool in classes on Arab art or global modernism. The "global turn" in art history since the early twenty-first century has placed necessary pressure on art history programs and scholars to move beyond the Eurocentric frameworks of a western canon by shaking the foundations of the discipline, which was born out of the writing by German Enlightenment thinkers in the late eighteenth century.[34] Writing and teaching a "Global Art History" is imperative at this critical juncture with the troubling resurrection of extremism in the form of nationalist white supremacist groups and fascist

[32] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art*, 18–19.

[33] This view of Ottoman rule is not new, nor is it limited to art history. An important commentary on the problems with the Arab historiography is Rifaʿat Abou-El-Haj, "The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14 (1982): 185–201.

[34] Some of the earliest sources to tackle this issue include: James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007); James Elkins, Zhivka Valiavicharska, and Alice Kim, eds., *Art and Globalization* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010); Aruna D'Souza, "In the Wake of the Global Turn," *ARTMargins* 1:2–3 (2012): 176–85; and Caroline A. Jones and Steven Nelson, "Global Turns in US Art History," *Perspective* 2 (2015): 1–17.

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governments, particularly in western contexts. However, in practice, there are significant conceptual and methodological problems with teaching global art history today. One major issue, underpinning any consideration of a global history, is how to speak of global trends or practices without making "dangerous claims"[35] to what some see as a hegemonic universalism. On the other hand, how global can an art history be if it only considered questions of regional relativism or particularities? To avoid either of these confines, some scholars have advocated a turn to "trans-local," "trans-national," or "trans-cultural" studies of artist networks without turning to nationalist or western/universalist master-narratives.[36] Similarly, the editors of *Modern Art in the Arab World* eschew the minefield of claims to a singular or multiple global art by viewing modernism as transregional, though not separate or marginal, and allowing the texts to explain the heterogenous views on modernity, modernism, and artistic practices from the perspective of artist/critic protagonists themselves.

With its focus on an English-speaking audience, *Modern Art in the Arab World* serves as an important, and meaningful, contribution to a growing body of literature dealing with the question of global modernism. Although detractors might take issue with the absence of texts in their original Arabic or French languages,[37] the editors make it clear that the book is framed for and geared toward a primarily English-speaking readership, with an interest in attracting undergraduate and graduate students. Thus, this book, although of great use for scholars in the field, also plays an important, yet often marginalized or disparaged, pedagogical role. The question of language, and the problems of translation, are some of the key methodological challenges in teaching global art history. Making material not only accessible, but also readable and easy to understand is imperative for any art history that strives to upend deeply seated preconceptions and hegemonic narratives.

[35] Avinom Shalem, "Dangerous Claims: On 'Othering' Islamic Art History and How it Operates within Global Art History," *Kritische Berichte: Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* 40:2 (2012): 69–86.

[36] For example: Zanna Gilbert, "'Something Unnameable in Common': Translocal Collaboration at the Beau Geste Press," *ARTMargins* 1:2–3 (2012): 45–72; Monica Juneja, "Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation,'" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, eds H. Belting, J. Birken, and A. Buddensieg (Stuttgart: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 274–97.

[37] However, although it is not mentioned in the book itself, the editors explained at the book's launch in Beirut's Sursock Museum in 2018 (and likely at other public discussions about the book) that those interested in reading some of the texts in their original language can find them in the book's "Repository of original source documents" hosted on the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran and Turkey's (AMCA) website. "Repository of original source documents for Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents," AMCA, accessed Dec 3, 2019, http://amcainternational.org/moma_primary_documents/.

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