

Manazir
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Nostalgia and Belonging in Art and Architecture from the MENA Region

Essay Collection

Research project conceptualized and edited by Laura Hindelang and Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region

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Manazir is a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in the study of visual arts, architecture and heritage in the MENA region (Middle East & North Africa) in Switzerland.

The term "Manazir" refers to landscape, perspective and point of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, Manazir is oriented toward a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary "landscapes" and "points of views" and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

It is a non-hierarchical platform that will connect scholars, PhD candidates and art professionals working in Swiss universities and institutions, in order to give higher national and international visibility to a rich but yet relatively unknown field.

The Platform disseminates information regarding conferences, workshops, publications and exhibitions taking place in Switzerland. Research results are also promoted through *Manazir Journal*, a peer-reviewed online journal that regularly publishes thematic issues in open access.

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The Exhibition Here and Elsewhere

On the Contentious Concept of Contemporary Arab Art



Figure 7: Fouad Elkoury, *Color Snapshot, Place des Canons (Beirut 1982)*. 2014, chromogenic print, 40 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist, the Third Line, Dubai, and Galerie Tanit, Munich/Beirut.

An experience of existence that significantly differs from and surpasses all past forms of human existence, thinking, and action—this is how modernity was thought and imagined in the West. But does the modern go beyond the cartography of the West, the alleged cradle of modernity? If the answer is affirmative, should we talk about multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2) and grasp the contemporary world as a story of continual (re)constitution of various cultural programs? Or can all the different histories be subsumed under or placed in opposition to the same term, that of (Western) modernity? "Staging the modern has always required the nonmodern, the space of colonial difference", argues political scientist Timothy Mitchell in the book *Questions of Modernity* (xxvi). Over the past 20 years, much attention has been paid to Arab contemporary art. This has

been done, among other reasons, to broaden the focus of the study of modern and contemporary art. What has been criticized is that the West often provides recognition to the artists from the region “whose oeuvre falls in step with Western expectations of ‘Arab’ or ‘Islamic’ art” (Scheid 14). The artists recognized and promoted by the West are often “hailed as having overcome an environment that previously ‘lacked art’ or appreciative audiences” (14). Also, non-Western phenomena of modernity are still frequently seen as imported “second-hand modernity” (Mitchell xxvi). How are non-Western modernities presented in the West? Furthermore, why are culturally specific exhibitions that focus on modern and contemporary non-Western art still causing debates?

To explore these issues in more depth, I decided to examine one exhibition of Arab art curated by Massimiliano Gioni, Natalie Bell, Gary Carrion-Murayari, Helga Christoffersen, and Margot Norton at the New Museum in New York in 2014 (Gioni et al.). The exhibition *Here and Elsewhere* was the first museum-wide exhibition in New York City to feature contemporary art from and about the Arab world. The exhibition brought together forty-five artists from twelve countries, many of whom live and work internationally. The participating artists work in disparate mediums (photography, video art, painting, sculpture, installations, collages) and are of different generations. Their work explores history, politics, and social life in the Middle East and beyond. The topics presented included personal portraits and searching for a place to be and a place to stay (Khaled Jarrar, Bouchra Khalili), reportages and testimonies (Abounaddara filmmakers’ collective), photography as a territory of conflicting narratives (Yto Barrada), memory and collective image (Shuruq Harb), and drawings of political protests and demonstrations (Rokni Haerizadeh). Practices of archiving, cataloging, and analyzing were also dealt with in the works of many other participating artists.

The title of the exhibition should remind us of a 1974 film essay of the same name by directors Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and Anne-Marie Miéville: *Ici et ailleurs* (Here and Elsewhere). The film was initially conceived as a pro-Palestinian documentary but afterward became a montage of footage shot in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria in 1970 intertwined with footage shot in Grenoble, France, in 1974. Thus, it evolved from a documentary into “a complex reflection on the ethics of representation and the status of images as instruments of political consciousness” (Bell and Gioni 18). According to the exhibition’s curatorial team, the film’s directors and the artists featured in the exhibition share a critical attitude towards simplified representations and propaganda, as well as an overall commitment to questioning the role of images in capturing the truth of a situation (24).

Although the title of the exhibition implies questioning on the way images are used for constructing narratives, the exhibition *Here and Elsewhere* has been a matter of debate since its inception precisely because of the politics of representation. Not surprisingly, a core of the criticism is related to Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism, that is, Western representations of the non-West. As stated in the directors’ foreword to the exhibition catalog, this is not the first exhibition to address “the contentious concept of Arab contemporary art” (Phillips 11). What is new is the transparent approach that the curators decided to take: they incorporated correspondence with artists who refused to exhibit their works, as well as their explanations for their refusals, into the exhibition. One of the reasons for non-participation published in the exhibition catalog is by Moroccan-French artist Latifa Echakhch, who stated that she had decided never to participate in exhibitions related to the Arab world: “I just want to be considered for my choices as an artist and not because of things I cannot choose like my gender or origins” (Bell and Gioni 20). In a similar vein, Palestinian photographer Ahlam Shibli also did not want his work to be framed by an exhibition under a common denominator: “I want my work to have a place of its own, where it can be appreciated or dismissed for the issues it really tries to address” (Bell and Gioni 21). Egyptian

artist Basim Magdy resented the reduction of the oeuvre of an artist to “just being about where the artist comes from” (Bell and Gioni 24). The arguments presented here give us an idea of why exhibitions of this type are still questionable and continue to be the subject of debate.

Furthermore, when discussing culturally and geographically defined exhibitions, it is inevitable to consider the notion of belonging—belonging as not being *in* but *of* the place (Bohrer 28). Belonging is that which becomes visible with distance by affirming one’s *be/ing* through *longing*, which is interestingly considered a touchstone of aesthetic expression throughout Arab culture (Boullata 14). But is it belonging that ensures authentic representation? Does Arab art express Arab experiences, as asked by art historian Nada M. Shabout in *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetic*? To which I would add: Should we as an audience expect artists to represent the general experience of belonging? Should we expect them to be representative of belonging irrespective of whether they feel an emotional attachment to a particular culture or share political and ethical values with it (Yuval 202–204)? Or should we accept their belonging as theirs—somewhat shared, somewhat individual, but definitely personal?

To be spiritually tied to a place, to use your belonging as an inspiration, and yet to wish to extend your work beyond the specificity this implies raises important questions of shared human experiences and universality. Early twenty-first-century Western modernity has tried to affirm narratives about communities of artists who belong to nothing but art itself. Contrasting this position, the curators of the exhibition *Here and Elsewhere* have built their argument on the standpoint that there is no such thing as an international grammar of contemporary art. To refuse the paradigm of universality (or, in other words, internationality without origins or belonging), the curatorial team reached for a cultural framing of the exhibition. As explained by the curators: “the cultural specificity of ‘Here and Elsewhere’ is not so much an essentialist framing of the work of artists who . . . are connected to the Arab world. It is rather a refusal of a pluralist, neoliberal paradigm that reduces difference “in the name of a universality that only recapitulates the homogenizing forces of the global economy.” (Bell and Gioni 22).

In brief, the aim of *Here and Elsewhere* was to present diversity within the specificity of an art exhibition in a New York museum that goes hand in hand with the inexplicit title of the exhibition, that does not highlight the cultural specificity of the exhibition. Ideologically charged notions of authenticity, belonging, and modernism were reflected upon, and the curators acknowledged issues related to the fact that the exhibition rested on national and cultural classifications. But they stopped there, not striving to resolve the issues of representation or to surpass national taxonomies. What they have managed to do is to open up space for further discussions and contributions.

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