

New Arab Art Order

By: Khaled Ramadan



Hany Rashed, *Forum Box*, exhibition space Helsinki 14.

Background

Within the context of extreme political changes and social instability, the Arab world has had to re-define the landscape of its art and visual culture in response to its changing identity.

The changes or rather the expansion of visual culture, including the media industry, in the contemporary Arab world led to the birth of a new generation of image-makers who are on the rise, offering alternative sources of information and entertainment, and enjoying increased social awareness from across the region. The new image-makers have managed to expand our understanding of visually coming out of the Middle East as they seem to apply their own rules of engagement which are shaping a new contemporary

visual order in the region. Running in parallel with the increasing number of independent Arab image-makers, one can observe the birth of alternative trends and the visibility of true critical languages against the dominant discourse. These frontiers have developed a new visual language through the unconventional use of images, sounds and texts. The results are exciting, and so is the freedom of expression and the audacity taken by the image-makers. In a way, due to their engagement and persistence, this generation of image-makers can be described as a resisting generation. It is not necessarily a politic resistance and far from an organized common movement. It is rather a colorful mosaic of individual statements, a diversification of point of views, a playful association of ideas. Resistance in the sense of Deleuze's:

“Creating is not communication, but resisting (...). Art is what resists: it resists against death, servitude, infamy, shame”. These image-makers do not in themselves form a resistance against a particular system but are rather manifestations of resistance through thinking images and sounds. Visual thinking is a new kind of contemplation taking place in the Middle East.

Historic context

No art initiative endeavoring to bring transformation and growth in society can ignore the theory of Art as an essential part of this historical process. Moreover, certain geo-political circumstances such as social struggles, human rights movements or revolutions that surround artistic production in art spaces or in art initiatives (including independent art or intellectual projects) also contribute vastly to the characteristics of the artistic production. These particular conditions predictably empower artistic thought, and give the Artist political significance in the context of the history of Art, but also within his own geographical surrounding. In an interview by Lorenzo Marsili (*Shifting Geographies of Art - published in European Alternatives, 2009*), theorist Rasheed Araeen was asked if art has an historical responsibility and a subversive function. Araeen gave this answer: “Art as a ‘subversive’ force was in fact fundamental to the radical avant-garde. But this subversion became pacified once it entered the art institution with a demand to be recognized and legitimized as art. It is a difficult and unavoidable paradox, un-resolvable if art must maintain its status as art. The problem here is the individualism of the artist, whose main aim is only to strive for an individual success. Such a success does make an idea visible and distributes it into society. But by the time it reaches society and is consumed by it, it is no longer a subversive idea”. In the view of Araeen, art formed within a European context has progressed under free artistic conditions materializing in a movement of ideas that produced a body of knowledge whose subsequent critical examination by historians and philosophers led to the present narratives of art history. Hence, his particular analogy on art as a ‘subversive’ changing force paves the way for us to look into the operative boundaries of the concept and context of mainstream art initiatives in the Arab world, their public role and impact, which so far has been quite minimal in broader Arab societies.

The role of art in Arab countries

In recent years we have seen a frenzied art boom and greatly flourishing interest in contemporary art production coming out of China, the Balkans and the Arab World. Just in the United Arab Emirates alone we have witnessed record-breaking auctions, astonishing Christie’s auction sales, spectacular museums at Sa’diyyat Island, the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the Art Dubai fair. However, despite this growth and expansion, much of it can be categorized as artwork or art activities that are largely theoretical and aesthetical, and at the same time also non-confrontational or unthreatening to society or to the establishment. The remarkable upsurge in the amount of art being produced in the Arab world, and the increasing attention being given to it, seems to be part of a geographical re-arrangement of contemporary global artistic production. But this change is also partially the result of a commercial logic and a system of self-rating claimed by the very initiators and protectors of the major mainstream art initiatives in the Arab world. The development of the contemporary art scene in the Arab world was not the result of normal sociological or teleological circumstances. The world first seriously started to notice the art coming out of the Arab world soon after the globally-altering 9-11, an incident after which journalists, activists, curators, artists, political scientists and anthropologists began to regularly jet in and jet out of the Arab world for various social, political and cultural reasons. Initially, an extensive quantity of art curators attempted to study the art of the Arab world and interact with it. However, it is notable that some curators also ended up playing a major supplementary role in helping Arab artists to enter the global circuit of both the art market and art discourse. At the same time, a few scholars in the Arab world, among them Mona Abaza, Hanan Toukan and Kirsten Scheid, offered a new critical discussion regarding the approach of some Western curators and academics towards Arab culture. They suggested the argument that some Western curators do not regard Arab art as being an integral part of Arab Self-Identity, but rather an extension of the postcolonial art knowledge / project, hence why Arab artists require their assistance in the navigation of art’s global mechanical apparatus. Consequently, this theory remains a valid hypothesis. During the past 20



Beirut6 summer 14

years, several significant art spaces and art initiatives have been born in the Arab world. Some came to be at the hands of private cultural frontrunners with visible achievements, such as the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo, while others were born with the blessing of different national governments. Numerous governments in the Arab world (ex. Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Qatar, and also Iran for that matter) introduced their own art initiatives and projects. Although most of these programs emit a semblance of independency, in practical terms they remain under the regulation of their respective governments, hence incapable of achieving any real critical or intellectual effect in their societies. Understandably, yet not acceptably, conventional semi-independent art initiatives in the Arab world have chosen to focus their energies on their own self-realization while

also cautiously avoiding confrontation with the local political regimes. However, through this narrow game of self-preservation, art initiatives regrettably overlook the fact that art can be both discursive and effective in social instruction and advancement, in addition to significantly contributing to awareness-building and to direct social engagement within society.

Thus far, most art initiatives in the Arab world have been unable to establish the formation of a competitive, partly independent, home-grown art philosophy which can pave the way for an alternative “Art System”, such as has been seen in the case of the art scene in several former Eastern European countries during the last decades. One example is the Czech Republic where art collectives and art theorists have expanded our understanding of artistic practices and production, and



Beirut7 summer 14

contributed further to the development of the history of contemporary art. At the same time, there has also been a growing geographic competitiveness within the Arab art world itself. During the last ten years, leading Arab cultural cities like Cairo, Beirut and Damascus find themselves involuntarily sharing their positions as the elitist cultural cities of the Arab world. The shift in the Arab art geography is enforced by oil-rich Gulf countries like the Arab Emirates and Qatar, joined lately by Kuwait, Oman and even Saudi Arabia, all of which are competing on the means to obtain and maintain the title of the Arab world's Art Center.

In a certain sense, this rivalry can be seen to reflect a culmination of politically-motivated domination, hence not in any way advocating or representing a visionary subversive cultural perspective and unable to offer an

alternative scholarly art system for the Arab world to build its intellectual future on.

The struggle for alternative aesthetics

Since the uprisings which began spreading across the Arab world around four years ago, art initiatives – especially the ones subsidized by Western cultural funding bodies (ex. Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Morocco) and the royally-sponsored initiatives (ex. the Gulf region) have been, and continue to be challenged by the work of home-grown artists who seem to be changing the rules of the game by seeking 'control' of public spaces (including cyber space). They achieve this by introducing a different format of public aesthetics across the Arab world, such as mural, graffiti and stencil-making as seen in the work of Arab Spring image-makers like Aya Tarek, Chico, El Teneen, Mohamad

Fahmy (aka. Ganzeer), el Seed, Ammar Abo Bakr and Shady Youssef. The work of these artists has strongly manifested a new public aesthetic and proposed new visible formats, the impact and messages of which are felt across the Arab world and beyond. Ironically this new format of Arab Spring “aesthetics” quickly became popular in Europe and North America before even capturing the attention of local art spaces in the Arab world. This new format also resulted in renewed interest and deals of support, competitively too, from Western institutions and international NGOs like the Goethe Institute, the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Prince Claus Foundation, to name a few. Numerous Western art institutions and independent curators have been pursuing projects within this charismatic Arab Spring aesthetic, each eager to have on their CV that they engaged and invested in the production, presentation, and circulation of “revolutionary” art coming out of cities like Cairo, Tunisia, Algeria, and Damascus. However, the new form of public aesthetics is not only about charisma. Rather, it is much more importantly an innovative format of protest and resistance through which artists, designers, and ordinary citizens are expressing themselves. By combining political activism, aesthetics and information, they have developed a powerful new system of expression and influence: Artivism. The term Artivism/Artivists (this hybrid between art makers and political activists - a term introduced by Chela Sandoval, Guisela Latorre and Molefi Kete Asante in 2008) can in theory be applied to the new category of public image-makers in the Arab world. The Arab “representatives” of Artivism often produce and propose in their work critical content that is in most cases paramount to the aesthetical motivation. By applying means of communication, interactivities and different talents, they specifically aim to combat totalitarianism and oppression in a public forum; they propose fighting for freedom and justice using smart tablets, the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body; the artistic qualities of their work is used to largely appeal visually to people’s senses and ultimately to inspire the public. As public image-makers Arab Artivists are today the advocates of a collaborative aesthetical / intellectual project produced side-by-side with citizen journalists and

independent opinion makers in the Arab world. In the public space of the Arab world these Artivists are among the few remaining independent visual content providers of public commentary on burning social and political issues. They are making good progress outside the realm of the established art circuit, introducing audiences to a whole new class of information aesthetics and providing more complex and diversified cultural experiences. Furthermore, while they are efficiently progressing on home fronts, succeeding in mobilizing communities, engaging and directly communicating with mass audiences, the mainstream elitist art initiatives in the Arab world remain largely ineffective and detached from the reality of political and social upheaval. By continuing to prioritize art as an “aesthetic experience” with little or no meaningful social or political content, the most established conventional governmental art initiatives of the Arab world, for example those in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar or Kuwait, have succeeded in protecting and keeping their own initiatives thriving with their own self-promotion, and also by pursuing the objective of playing an increasingly active and vital role in the globally recognized “art economy” system. However, the current reality is that these institutions are now genuinely facing a new, more fluid and challenging intellectual environment just by the fact that, in most societies, Art as knowledge and cultural value is no longer confined to the elites and art-production is no longer the privilege or right of artists alone. An assessment of the art system as we now perceive it reveals that it is in reality always in a rapidly changing condition. In order to ensure stronger future interaction, and a worthwhile and long-lasting effect within society, mainstream art and cultural initiatives in the Arab world must engage with these new currents if they ever wish to exist in the consciousness of their societies and not only in their own physical art spaces. In their current format, most mainstream art initiatives in the Arab world do not fit into the parameters of the Arab societies and in some cases they are not even relevant. Artistic and cultural conditions in Arab societies are changing and therefore a new type of cultural cultivation is needed. With this comes the birth of new Arab audiences. The new Arab audiences are unpredictable, more engaged, critically-minded and much better informed. They are fully

willing to interact with the new formats produced by Arab Artists and may eventually overlook many of the mainstream art initiatives which come and go, which do not realistically broaden the art system, nor bring change to social or political realities.

The dependency and independency of art in the Arab world

The augmented number of governmental and semi-independent art initiatives set up over the past years have indeed led to a certain amount of healthy competitiveness across the Arab world, but, at the same time, have generated a scene with a confusion of positioning, scope and purpose. As many of those initiatives chose to promote the art of the Arab world like any other precious commodity by highlighting so-called marketable art, the hope was to cater simultaneously to the demands of both the commercial art market, and to the conceptuality of art. This particular approach managed to blur the lines between art as a strictly aesthetic experience, and art that is produced with the aim of engaging in a broader critical discourse on social or geo-political issues. However, this encounter, in actual fact, primarily stimulated and helped further the development of the popular alternative aesthetic, an outcome confirmed by the prevailing sort of art practices seen taking place across the Arab world today. Contributing to this result is that the art initiatives in cities like Dubai, Damascus, Amman, Beirut, Abu Dhabi or Cairo did not grow to produce Art Systems that provide and produce substantial knowledge, nor did they gather momentum to become part of a movement of social struggle or form an intellectual resistance against dictatorship, corruption or suppression. Most initiatives remain within the scope of socio-cultural activities often catering to a narrow circle of the intellectual cultural elite. Many intellectual apparatuses exist in the Arab world, in fact the leading Arab intellectuals who put in motion artistic and intellectual initiatives in the past 100 years worked hard to change their reality. However, so far, the fruits of their struggles have been mainly disappointing due to foreign intervention and the ongoing political and economic struggle across the Arab world. Therefore the accumulated intellectual state in the Arab art world remains relatively static and a collective, Pan-Arab art

/ scholarly project does not yet exist. If art initiatives across the Arab world do not inspire a new collective thinking with innovative propositions, visual art cannot become part of the liberating cultural forces of Arab societies, something the Arab world is much in need of to accompany the ongoing geo-political struggle and changes taking place in the region. Thus a new art order is needed in the Arab world, starting with employing the lens of art to understand complex socio-political issues like the notion of the nation state, totalitarianism and tribalism, to name a few. Second, the region lacks serious formation of scholarly art collectives (apart from friendly recycling collaboration), which can introduce new intellectual norms, new understanding of the exhibition system, and expand networks and curatorial strategies into new topographies of the global art scene and liberate the way of thinking about art from its current, static, elitist position.

Now is a good moment to call for a re-thinking of art initiatives in the Arab world, and for a change in strategy, to come up with farsighted schemes that may become more than just an extensional art project. It is time to develop into an anti-hegemonic, home-grown, ideological art system that can cater to art history, rather than to the art market. This is essential if art in the Arab world wishes to guide the future of its own geo-political struggle, and not the other way around as we are witnessing today across the region where political establishments, specters of the ruling class and cultural elites are the ones regulating the outlines and therefore continuing to dictate the outcome.

Reading:

- *Shifting Geographies of Art* - Lorenzo Marsili published, *European Alternatives*, 2009
<http://www.euroalter.com/2009/interview-with-rasheed-araeen/>
- *Academic tourists sightseeing, The Arab Spring* - Mona Abaza, *Abram Online* Monday 26 Sep 2011. <http://english.abram.org.eg/News/22373.aspx>
- *The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity*. Kirsten Scheid. <http://www.mafhoum.com/press10/305C32.pdf>
- *Galleries Versus Supermarkets. Omar Donia, Contemporary Practices Art Journal* <http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/volumeX/GalleriesVersusSupermarkets%20.pdf>
- *Taking It to the Street*. Noah Feldman, *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 2012 <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970204425904578072630892858670>
- *Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art reaches 15 years*. Sara Elkamel, *Abram Online*. Dec 2013 <http://english.abram.org.eg/News/89915.aspx>
- *Islam, the State, and Democracy: Contrasting Conceptions of Society in Egypt*. Sami Zubaida, *Middle East Report* 179 (1992)