

Catalogue and Exhibition review: *Here and Elsewhere*

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Edited by Massimiliano Gioni, Gary Carrion-Murayari, and Natalie Bell

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(Softcover)

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“Here and Elsewhere” is the catalogue for an exhibition of the same name that ran from July to September of 2014 at the New Museum in New York. The exhibition featured the works of 45 artists from across the Arabic-speaking world and boasted that it was “not an attempt to circumscribe the participating artists solely by geography” [p. 11]. However, the actual organization of the exhibition was entirely based on geographical regions and territories. The ground floor was inhabited by artists from the Gulf (Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the GCC Collective), the first and the second floor by the Levant and Egypt, and the third floor by North Africa. This fundamental contradiction in the purported curatorial vision permeates the exhibition and its catalogue.

The opening curatorial essay by Massimiliano Gioni and Natalie Bell takes Godard's film *Ici et Ailleurs (Here and Elsewhere)* (1976) as a departure point and namesake of the exhibition. Yet, the curators themselves, while elaborating Godard's involvement in creating a propaganda film for the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), do not question the problematic history of Fatah within the larger structure of the PLO, or how that relationship changed in the wake of the Jordanian Civil War in 1970. Godard's association with Fatah and inability to finish the film for three years should have given the curators a hint at the difficulty of any facile generalizations or superficial understanding of the complex historical and political trajectory of the region. Their choice of the film as a reference point reflects the continued misapprehension of Arab history and its complexity. It is also symptomatic of the curators' insistence upon finding references to Western engagement with Arab culture and history as an entry point, a way to either sanction such history or make it visible and intelligible to Western audiences. However, it comes across as a self-congratulatory gesture regarding the avant-gardism of the Left in the West, as well as its historical support of national and colonial struggles in Third World countries.

The catalogue, structured around color plates of the works included in the exhibition, is divided into four main components: curatorial essays (Gioni and Bell's opening text, followed by essays by Media Farzin and Yasmine El Rashidi); the transcribed texts of three roundtables moderated by the editors of the New York-based magazine *Bidoun*; and an anthology of previously published texts, also by *Bidoun*. While the latter do not necessarily contextualize the works presented or the positions of the artists and their processes, the

curatorial essays go to great length in highlighting the history of exhibiting Arab art since the year 2000. Farzin's essay "On the History of Contemporary Arab Shows," with its tongue-in-cheek approach, gives an excellent overview of major international exhibitions of Arab art over the last decade. This bibliographical essay, along with the curatorial introduction, declares that "'Here and Elsewhere' share a critical attitude toward images, a healthy skepticism toward simplified representations" [p. 13]. This orientation may be seen as attempt to deconstruct, unpack and even denounce the pervasiveness of the politics of representation that characterize the other exhibitions. Nevertheless, the essays' failure to recognize the problematics of memory *and* delve into who owns history creates a sense of repetition and the mislabeling of certain terms. This failure also suggests that it is the politics of memory that needs to be unpacked and deconstructed, not the fixation on what constitutes an authentic Arab artist or Arab art. For example, although the three roundtables are organized around the themes of "The Past," "The Present," and "The Future," each of them boils down to the question of who owns history in this region and how we have come to understand it, as observed in the following statement, "If you read Tolstoy, he stands somehow for Russia. This is why archeologists speak of traces. Everything that everyone does speaks to his or her time," [Etel Adnan, Roundtable Two, "The Present," p. 100].

The dissonance between the artists' statements, their positions and the significance of their work is especially evident if we consider Roundtable Three, "The Future," the GCC collective and Simone Fattal's answers in comparison to the answers of Marwa Arsanios and Maha Amoun. Both Maamoun and Arsanios reflect on how the notion of envisioning the future relates to their work, while Fattal's hyperbolic answers about his own inspiration from the mythological past stand in complete contrast. So does the GCC's insistence on the "transcendent nature" of their artistic practice: The statement "our work can definitely transcend its geographic context," [p. 150] was equally mirrored in the exhibition. Not only was the space overcrowded, but also the rationale behind placing certain artworks next to each other was difficult to decipher. For example, are Suzan Hefuna's drawings placed next to Anna Boghiguan's surreal drawings and Maha Mamoun's video because they are all women or, more specifically, all Egyptian women? The dissonance between the interlocutors in the roundtables extended into the exhibition space itself, creating a visual dissonance that was reinforced by the grouping of artists by country or region rather than by process, artistic strategy, or even interest.

The driving premise behind the exhibition and the catalogue seems to be the notion that contemporary Arab artists produce work that is meaningful and universal beyond geographical specificity. But, in fact, the works were exhibited together by that very geographical specificity, notwithstanding that many works would make more sense if exhibited alongside other "Western" artworks. A stark example is Marwan's late Expressionist paintings, conspicuous amidst a sea of artworks that all hinge on documentary practices and what might be termed "political" work. The deeply psychological portraits of Marwan raise the question of whether he was placed there only because he is a Syrian artist or whether there is any particular resonance between him and the installations of Shuruq

Harb or the multimedia installation of Wafa Hourani.

The curatorial anxiety about representation and its many pitfalls, which has marred former exhibitions, is perhaps offset by the assurance given by the director's forward, that the exhibition “presents a collection of under-recognized figures” [p. 11]. Again, this poses the problematic proposition that somehow the choices of the curators are “radical,” or at least distinct from, the usual choices of other exhibitions. Yet, in fact, many of the artists selected are quite well-recognized, and have been featured in the majority of international Arab art shows since 2002. In addition, there is seemingly serious oversight of key artists (for example, Rana El Nemr and Sherif El Azma from Egypt).

Even in Yasmine El Rashidi's deeply impressionistic essay, the attempt to capture the experience of growing up in Egypt during the early 1990s falls into the trap of exalting one single institution, the Townhouse Gallery, as the locus of artistic, political and cultural activism, thus failing to shed a more critical light on how that same institution single-handedly monopolized the production, dissemination and definition of contemporary art in Egypt. El Rashidi's poetic meditation does not capture the profound struggle of a diverse, independent art scene seeking to escape the overbearing control of the state. Perhaps a simplification that might resonate with the simplistic choice of Godard's film, or the singular focus on critiquing the politics of representation vis-à-vis the politics of memory, illuminates what was actually missing from the discussion.

The catalogue provides a much needed genealogy of the recent mania on exhibiting Arab art. On the one hand, the meticulous and thorough research is presented clearly and informatively. On the other hand, the exhibition's obsession with deriding all previous attempts to present Arab art constitutes an ironic case of self-denial. A true breakthrough in exhibiting Arab art would have entailed a deeper engagement with specific artistic strategies rather than with artworks' geographic or historical origins.

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