

Manazir
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Journal

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The Arab Apocalypse

Art, Abstraction & Activism
in the Middle East

edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

Manazir مناظر Journal

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

Issue 1
2019

Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East

edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

Impressum

Manazir Journal is a peer-reviewed academic Platinum Open Access journal dedicated to visual arts, architecture and cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Created in 2019, the journal is linked to *Manazir – Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region*, a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in these themes. The term “Manazir” refers to landscapes, perspectives and points of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, *Manazir Journal* is oriented towards a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary “landscapes” and “points of views” and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

BOP - Bern Open Publishing

ISSN 2673-4354

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36950/manazir.2019.1.1.Intro>

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

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FACULTÉ DES LETTRES
Unité d'arabe

Production, Design & Layout: Joan Grandjean

Title graphic designer: Manuel Charpy

English Proofreading/corrector: Lillian Davies

Cover image: Etel Adnan (1925), *Untitled* (detail), 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

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Introduction

The starting point of this special issue was the exhibition dedicated to the Lebanese-American artist, poet and writer Etel Adnan held at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern from June to September 2018. On this occasion, the University of Bern and the Zentrum Paul Klee, in collaboration with the University of Geneva, jointly organized a symposium entitled "The Arab Apocalypse: Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East".² The symposium was not about Etel Adnan *per se* but rather, we considered her work and career as a basis to engage in a discussion about the political and historical genealogies of modernism and the relationship between abstraction and activism in the Arab world. The event brought together scholars, artists and curators focusing on these themes and revealed the substantial research undertaken on modern and contemporary art in the so-called global margins.

This first issue of *Manazir Journal*, which is linked to the newly founded *Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region*, is based on this event and publishes a part of the papers delivered during the symposium. In accordance with the journal's endeavor to de-center scholarly knowledge production and to be more inclusive by encouraging plurilingualism in academic publications, this issue includes articles written in both English and French.

The title "The Arab Apocalypse" refers to Etel Adnan's famous series of 59 illustrated poems, which she started writing in January 1975 in Beirut, two months before the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and that were originally published in French under the title *L'Apocalypse arabe* in 1980. In these powerful texts, Adnan evokes the extreme tension and violence of the war by using an abrupt telegraphic style, as well as by punctuating her verses with abstract symbols that provide a rhythm for the entire poem. This intertextual play between writing and visual elements inspired the general reflection about the relationship between aesthetics and politics. The choice of this title was also an allusion to the current "apocalyptic" situation in the region Middle East and the increasing difficulties for scholars, in particular young researchers, to undertake fieldwork and archival investigation in the region. Thus, this feeling of urgency that underlies the study of visual arts in this area is an additional motivation for publishing this issue. In that perspective, it aims to underline the importance of working with archives and primary documents for the field, which is brought to the fore in several articles.

Etel Adnan joined us via Skype for a conversation at the opening of the symposium. Sitting at her kitchen table in her apartment in Paris, with Simone Fattal by her side, the 94-year-old artist, with her vibrant and energetic personality, vividly shared her thoughts about art and spirituality, abstraction, activism, language and translation. During this conversation, she affirmed that she considered herself an activist in the sense that everything she did, wrote or painted was political.³ This statement set the tone for a shared reflection, which addressed the following questions: What does it mean to be an abstract artist in the Middle East? How can abstraction inform us about political and social dissent? What does the relationship between art and activism tell us about the aestheticization of

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² "The Arab Apocalypse. Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East," Etel Adnan Symposium, Zentrum Paul Klee, 27-28 September 2018.

³ In conversation with Etel Adnan, Nadia Radwan, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 27 September 2018.

politics? Can the museum be considered as a space for disobedience or emancipation? What part did Arab women play as pioneers of modernism? What is their role today in global art platforms?

In addition, the discussion was fueled by the Etel Adnan exhibition that raised further questions regarding the global genealogies of modern abstraction and its new cartographies. It was conceived as a dialogue between Etel Adnan and Paul Klee, which is explained in this issue by Fabienne Eggelhöfer, Head Curator at the Zentrum Paul Klee. Adnan chose each of the artworks by Klee that were displayed alongside her own works in the show. In our conversation, she admitted that not only Klee's paintings but perhaps more importantly, his theoretical writings, had had a major impact on her practice. It was in the 1960s that she discovered the English translation of his *Notebooks*, that collect his lectures given at the Bauhaus in the 1920s and his other essays on modern art. And that anecdote points to the fact that research yet remains to be undertaken on the impact of the global circulation of theoretical writings on modern art and their translation, in terms of knowledge transfer.

Of course, one may draw formal comparisons between Klee and Adnan: his color schemes based on the idea of polyphony, her mastering of geometrical forms and lines and subtle use of colors. And in looking at Adnan's multiple views of Mount Tamalpais, which is the artist's Californian "Mont Sainte-Victoire," one may recall Klee's famous *Ad Parnassum* dated 1932. This work combines multi-layered references, such as the artist's trip to Egypt between 1928 and 1929 and his visit to the pyramids, and to Mount Niesen on the shores of Lake Thun in Switzerland or, as the title suggests, Mount Parnassus as a metaphor of creation. And it is very likely that Klee himself, on whom the legendary journey to Tunisia he undertook with the artists August Macke and Louis Moilliet in April 1914 would have a lasting influence, never imagined he would later have an impact on modernist painters living and working on the global margins. Indeed, although Klee's stay in Tunisia lasted for only two weeks, it was extremely prolific and he would continue drawing from his memories of North Africa until much later in his career. Islamic motifs, patterns, ornaments, calligraphy, geometric motives of tapestries as well as the colors of the "oriental" landscapes all nourished his approach of abstraction, while nevertheless embodying a timeless and pre-modern vision of North Africa.

Beyond this dialogue with Paul Klee, the exhibition brought to the fore the other manifold references in Adnan's work, such as, for instance, the link between her practice of tapestry and her visit to the Egyptian Art Center founded by the architect and pedagogue Ramses Wissa Wassef in the political framework of a revival of traditional crafts. These other encounters, including with contemporary artists, such as Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, have been underlined by Joan Grandjean and Mirl Redmann in their review of the exhibition and symposium.

Adnan's oeuvre also engages notions of language and translation, whether in her own polyglot background, in her writings or in her leporellos. The latter evoke the fragility as well as the playfulness of re-enacting one's own identities through copying a familiar lettering, while not entirely mastering it. These works go beyond the inclusion of the written sign as an ornament by involving the practice of "painting words." In this issue, Silvia Naef questions the artist's relationship to the Arabic language and the act of "painting in Arabic" not only as a reflection of a personal and diasporic experience, but also as a statement of political commitment. Likewise, in connection with writing and the embodiment of calligraphy, curator Morad Montazami addresses the use of "Letterism" as a form of activism by exploring the work of Egyptian painter Hamed Abdalla. Both authors open new paths for a reflection on Hurufiyya, an artistic movement that involves the use of Arabic letters, and to which Adnan never claimed to belong but with which she is often associated.

Another question regarding abstraction in the Arab world is the persistence of painting as a self-referential medium, one that could be interpreted as the persistence to translate and relocate the medium outside the traditional canon. This translocation implies reinterpretations of the canonic discourses about abstraction and the ornament, which come to challenge the idea of the "purity" of abstract art that would not be in accordance with the "superficial" and "decorative" nature of the

ornament, in order to acquire new meanings, and political meanings. This aspect is echoed by the Palestinian New York-based artist and activist Samia Halaby, whose practice of abstraction is underpinned by profound ties with Russian avant-garde and traditional Islamic arts and crafts. In her "artist's statement," Halaby explains how she uses abstract painting as a tool for supporting the class struggle, which, she believes, characterizes humanity. Samia Halaby belongs to Adnan's generation, and just like her, she is an Arab woman artist who migrated to the United States and who considers her practice of abstract painting as highly political. Both acquired international recognition relatively late in their careers, and that was, according to Adnan, more because they were women abstract painters than because they were Arab.

Nevertheless, Arab women artists have played a significant role as pioneers of modernism in the region and are also a focus of this volume. Indeed, their notable presence and active participation in international exhibitions and biennials in comparison with women from Western countries as of the mid 20th century come to challenge certain prejudiced ideas, in terms of gender, regarding women artists from the Arab world. Indeed, like women patrons, they have historically been – and still are – well represented in the art scene and they have largely contributed to the development and promotion of modern art from the region on a global level. In her article, Nadine Atallah reveals the high number of Egyptian women artists in the São Paulo Biennale and the active diplomatic role played by Swiss Egypt-based painter Irmgard Micaela Burchard in Egypt's first participation in this event. Similarly, in the Lebanese context, Nadia von Maltzahn discusses the role of the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne as a platform for the emancipation of women and the active presence of leading Lebanese figures of modernism, such as Saloua Raouda Choucair, Juliana Seraphim or Sophie Yeramian.

Thus, beyond paying homage to the richness of Etel Adnan's oeuvre, the compilation of these contributions attests to the array of reflections that intend to nourish the discussion about the ongoing writing of a history of modernism in the Arab world. And hopefully, abstraction will progressively find a place in these stories of art, not only as a genre or an approach but also as a form of engagement that challenges well-established and one-dimensional discourses.

Biography

Nadia Radwan is assistant professor of World Art History at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Her research focuses on non-Western modernisms, contemporary art and activism, Middle Eastern art and architecture (19th-20th century), and curatorial approaches to the global museum. Radwan is one of the founders of Manazir: Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region and *Manazir Journal*. She authored articles about modern Arab art and architecture and has contributed to several exhibition catalogues. Her PhD entitled *Les modernes d'Egypte* (The Moderns of Egypt) was published in 2017 (Bern: Peter Lang) and has been recently translated into Arabic (Cairo: National Centre for Translation, 2019). She is currently working on her habilitation project about concealed visibilities and the politics of abstraction. In 2018, she was awarded the Prize for Excellence in Teaching from the Faculty of Humanities, University of Bern.
