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edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

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Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts,
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Etel Adnan — in Close Encounters with Paul Klee

Review of the Etel Adnan Exhibition and Symposium

Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, September 27th – 28th 2018

Keywords: Etel Adnan, Paul Klee, Zentrum Paul Klee, Symposium, Exhibition

Etel Adnan is one of the many artists whose work has been affected by the modernist painter Paul Klee (1879-1940). In 2018 the Zentrum Paul Klee (ZPK), located in Bern, dedicated the third solo exhibition in Switzerland to her life and work as a painter and theoretician.² Adnan was born in Beirut in 1925, studied at Sorbonne and Berkeley Universities, taught in the United States, and currently lives and works in Paris. Since the late 1970s she has published novels, poetry and artist's books written in French and English, many of which have been translated into other languages. Adnan's importance has nonetheless been noted by many Arab writers and her poetry have been translated into Arabic by some of the most prominent poets of the Arab world before being published in important Arabic journals such as *Shi'r*, *Mawakif*, *Zawaya* and *Al Karmel*. Her artworks have been exhibited since the 1990s in small scale exhibitions in the United States, and Europe, and on a broader level in the Arab world. Since documenta 13 in 2012 her artistic work has gained fame on a global scale. Exhibiting Etel Adnan as a visual artist is an inevitable challenge to conveying to the public Adnan the poet, Adnan the thinker and Adnan the activist. It was precisely for this reason that professors Nadia Radwan (World Art History, University of Bern) and Silvia Naef (Arabic Studies, University of Geneva), organized the symposium accompanying the exhibition with an eye on Adnan's impact on Arab art scenes. The symposium "The Arab Apocalypse: Art, Abstraction & Activism" took place at the ZPK on September 27th and 28th 2018, and featured original research engaging with Adnan through her writings and her literary collaborations with artists. This review considers the symposium within the framework of the exhibition it accompanied as well as the materials published along with it, in order to explore avenues for future academic and curatorial research.

Klee's impact on generations of artists from outside centers of the European art world has never been studied thoroughly. Only recently, the curators at ZPK started to acknowledge this gap in research by initiating a dialog with artists and art historians beyond the beaten tracks of Euro-American art history and exhibition making. The exhibition *10 Americans. After Paul Klee* in 2017-18 marked a shift in the ZPK's curatorial approach from focusing on relatively unknown aspects of Klee's life and work towards tracing his influence on artists worldwide. Shortly after, the director of ZPK, Nina Zimmer, decided to widen the scope in order to include contemporary artists. The first step in this endeavor was this, the first solo exhibition in the ZPK dedicated to the oeuvre of the Lebanese-

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² This exhibition came after "La fulgurance du geste", Fondation Jan Michalski, Montricher, 16 February – 20 May 2018, and "La joie de vivre", Museum Haus Konstruktiv, Zürich, 29 October 2015 – 31 January 2016. Etel Adnan was, furthermore, part of the group show "The Printed Room – read the room/you've go to", SALTS, Birsfeld, 20 June – 21 July 2014 and her works are in the public collection of the Kunsthaus Zürich.

American painter, poet and activist Etel Adnan, curated by Fabienne Eggelhöfer, chief curator and head of collection, exhibitions and research at the ZPK and her co-curator Sébastien Delot, curator for cultural heritage and director of the Lille Métropole Museum of Modern, Contemporary and Outsider Art (LaM) in Villeneuve d'Ascq, who previously collaborated with the artist for her substantial retrospective at the Institut du monde arabe, Paris, in 2016.

Adnan, who cites Paul Klee as her first artistic love, has been a prolific artist throughout her life, making it impossible to attempt a comprehensive or purely chronological retrospective of her work. The curators dealt with the depth of her oeuvre by dividing the exhibition into eight sections, exploring the relationship between Adnan's texts and artworks in chronological order from the 1960s until today. The exhibition established a dialogue between Adnan and Klee by inviting Adnan to juxtapose her own artworks with those by Klee from the extensive ZPK collection and archives. Adnan opted to greet visitors with three puppets made by Klee at the entrance to the first chapter of the exhibition (fig. 1). Klee's puppets, displayed in glass vitrines, highlighted the multiple possibilities for concrete and symbolic interconnections between the texts and objects in this exhibition through their resonance with Adnan's writings as well as her artworks. A wall text detailed a recollection by Adnan: how she discovered Klee when she first started to paint and was teaching philosophy of art at the Dominican College in San Raphael, California, in 1959:

Although I had no formal background in art history and its theories, I could discern a terrible anxiety in several paintings, even in bright ones. [Paul Klee] was a man of the inter-war period. This, I learned later but saw instinctively. When there were characters in his works, they were reminiscent of clowns and puppets; they were the dead of 1914-1918 or those of 1939-1940 [sic].³

While Adnan's colorful geometric and cosmogenic drawings from the 1990s visually dominated the walls in this room, the crude, faded puppets in their glass caskets and the writing on the wall were a powerful reminder not to simply take the artists' works at their bright face value. A key painting by Klee, the *Carpet of Memory* (1914), formed another strong argument. It was created in response to the painter's journey in Tunisia that led him to explore his emotions in increasingly abstracted ways. The formal resonance between the Klees and Adnan's drawings visually connected the artists in their common investment in research and color.⁴

Entering the second section, three untitled paintings by Etel Adnan representing a mountain were displayed on an ultramarine blue wall. Four white panels shaped this space, in which leprellos, ink drawings, watercolors, oil paintings and works on paper showed Mount Tamalpais, i.e., *Rihla ila Jabal Tamalpais* (2008), and other urban landscapes, such as *New York* (1990). This section was dedicated to Adnan's artistic passion for nature and architecture, especially Mount Tamalpais, which she still uses as a starting point for creating compositions.

Living in its environment [Mount Tamalpais] and studying it, the mountain became my house, a mystical experience. I believe that in that respect my work resembles that of Cézanne, for whom Mont Sainte-Victoire was not a mountain but an absolute [...] Experiencing the mountain in canvas after canvas, Cézanne climbed towards painting.⁵

Adnan admires the mountain, which she could view from her apartment's bay window when she was living in Sausalito and has depicted numerous times. In this section, quotes from her book on the mountain⁶ and excerpts from interviews she gave carried the visitor back to the time when she moved to this little town north of San Francisco, before she even started to paint. Exhibited alongside

³ Etel Adnan, "Paul Klee," in *Etel Adnan*, ed. Sébastien Delot, exhibition catalogue (Bern, Zentrum Paul Klee, 15.06-07.10.2018), Paris: Dilecta, 2018, 73. Also printed in the first section of the exhibition.

⁴ Michael Baumgartner et al., ed., *Paul Klee, August Macke, Louis Moilliet. The Journey to Tunisia 1914* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2014).

⁵ Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Etel Adnan* (Paris: Manuella Editions, "Une conversation" series, 2012), 44-45; printed in the 2nd section of the exhibition.

⁶ Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais* (Sausalito: Post Apollo Press, 1986).



Figure 1: Exhibition view, *Etel Adnan* Exhibition, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 2018. © Zentrum Paul Klee.

the series of paintings of the mountain view, was the leporello, *East River Pollution "From Laura's Window"*, which Adnan made when she was visiting a friend in New York in 1979, and *Motion*, several digitized Super 8 films produced while she was traveling in New York, Sausalito, Yosemite National Park and San Francisco in the 1980s.

In chapter three of the exhibition, another panel guided the visitor towards abstract compositions. There is something similar in Adnan's attitude towards the representation of Mount Tamalpais and the Mediterranean Sea, which she paints in one stroke with pure colors. Adnan's approach invariably comes down to the possibilities offered by colors and textures modulated by a palette knife to create geometric abstractions, a peak and a skyline. Even if abstraction takes a huge place in her oeuvre, her purpose doesn't lie in the deconstruction of the form. These abstract compositions can be compared to those made by artists belonging to the Figurative Movement and working in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1950s and 1960s.⁷ These artists progressively moved towards figurative representations, while remaining attached to Abstract Expressionism, which dominated post World War II Modernism in the United States. In their paintings, elements such as the sea and the mountain were considered as figures to compose and structure the landscape in order to express it rather than to comprehend it. Hence Etel Adnan's purpose lies in the elaboration of a philosophical perspective of form and landscape, in the way that Paul Cézanne's Mont Sainte-Victoire becomes an absolute and not a mountain anymore.

⁷ Grégoire Prangé, "Chronology," *Etel Adnan*, 97.



Figure 2: Exhibition view, *Etel Adnan Exhibition*, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 2018. © Zentrum Paul Klee.

The following sections were presented in a suite of smaller, distinct spaces organized around a large open space dominated by Adnan's carpets. Abstract compositions in various media, oil paintings, tapestries and leporellos from different eras were alternated with Klee's watercolors, oils and pastels executed in the 1920s and 1930s, reflecting his research on form, color, architecture, indecipherable scripts, scribbles and symbols. In the midst of it all, four of Adnan's recent oil paintings entitled *The Four Seasons* (2017) were presented on another ultramarine blue wall with contrasting white panels (fig. 2). Adnan's tapestries displayed towards the end of the show link back to the painting *Carpet of Memory* as well as to the puppets by Klee displayed at the entrance. Including objects that have traditionally been dubbed "crafts" in Western discourses was unusual at the time at which Klee made his puppets and it remains so until today even though the art world has become increasingly permeable. In one of the small rooms adjacent to the central display, a poster, a film and two tapestries from the Egyptian Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre are displayed (fig. 3). These materials frame Adnan's sustained interest in craft and design, which started with her first encounter with traditional tapestries when she traveled to North Africa in 1967 and discovered an entirely new path for her oeuvre (fig. 4).⁸ By including documentation of the sources of inspiration for the artist's works as well as by making explicit the place of manufacture of her contemporary tapestries (Aubusson, Paris) a discursive space is opened for discussions that resonate well with work by contemporary artist-activists and documentary filmmakers. The connection to contemporary forms of documentary and storytelling continued in the display adjacent to the carpets, where the visitor was able to watch the 2016 film entitled *Ismyrna* (fig. 5) directed by Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige (both b. 1969 Beirut, l. Paris). The film originates from the artists' first meeting with Adnan at the end of the 1990s. *Ismyrna* merges the

⁸ Etel Adnan, *Life is a Weaving* (Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2016).

names of the city Smyrna, which was formerly part of the Ottoman empire, and its current name, the city of Izmir in Turkey. Both Hadjithomas's and Adnan's families originally came from Smyrna but were forced into exile when the Young-Turks captured the city from the Greek Army during the War of Independence in 1922. Both Adnan's mother and Hadjithomas's grandmother had married Syrian officers from the Ottoman army. And after the fall of the Empire (1919), they both went to live in the Ottoman province of Beirut, which would become the capital of Lebanon in 1920. During this 50-minute film, Adnan and Hadjithomas discuss their imagined memories and the notion of "home", while they question the colonial topography of modern and contemporary Middle East.



Figure 3: Exhibition view, *Etel Adnan* Exhibition, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 2018. © Zentrum Paul Klee.

The curators' approaches work very well together in creating a visually convincing, aesthetically and intellectually satisfying exhibition. The respective approaches of Sébastien Delot's to Adnan's work, grounded in an intimate working relationship with the artist, and Fabienne Eggelhöfer's probing of the aesthetic relationship between Adnan and Klee are detailed in their programmatic catalog essays.⁹ The catalog tries to bring to the fore the complexity of Adnan's life and work in its relation to Paul Klee's oeuvre by including essays by Adnan herself as well as specialists in the field who focus on locating the artists' oeuvres within the context of this exhibition at ZPK. A presentation of Adnan is provided by art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, who recently published a monograph on the artist.¹⁰ The Serpentine

⁹ Delot ed., *Etel Adnan*, 73.

¹⁰ Kaelen Wilson Goldie, *Etel Adnan* (London: Lund Humphries, 2018).

Gallery director Hans Ulrich Obrist¹¹ wrote a preface to Klee's Diaries (1898-1918), emphasizing the impact they had on Etel Adnan, who read them right after they were translated into English and published in 1964. Adnan herself contributed to the catalog, with texts focusing on her relationship with Klee and the significance of his angels for her own oeuvre. This again brings to the fore the emotional and intellectual resonance Adnan feels with the experiences of artists of the modernist movement whose lives were uprooted by war and persecution. Walter Benjamin's famous meditation on a Klee painting which he called the "angel of history" (*Angelus Novus*, 1920) forms part of his *Theses on History* (1942), written shortly before the writer and thinker took his own life on the French-Spanish border in 1940, when he realized that there would be no escape from death at the hands of the Fascists.

In hindsight, and for future research and exhibitions, it would be interesting to further explore the commonalities of Adnan and Klee beyond the narrative provided by the artist herself and by taking a closer look at the ZPK archives. A glimpse of the ZPK's archives wealth of information could be gleaned in the *Cosmos Klee* (June 1 – October 28, 2018) exhibition, that was on display in parallel with *Etel Adnan* (July 15 – October 7, 2018). A more focused dialogue between these two parallel exhibitions would have opened the possibility to explore Adnan's connection with Klee's writings beyond the visual level. Indeed, despite different political and social backgrounds both artists' oeuvres share many common aspects: prolific production, the exploration of diverse media, working as an intellectual and as a teacher, living the experience of exile, adopting several cultures and nationalities. Moreover, the importance of archives in art history and the widespread use of archival materials by contemporary Lebanese artists, brought to the fore by the research-based work of Hadjithomas & Joreige's documentary video *Ismyrna*, would have been a fascinating aspect to be further developed.

Adnan's numerous *lives* between Beirut, Paris and Sausalito and her constant movement between different languages and cultures, and the condition of exile, were thematized by the symposium. In a programmatic lecture, "Painting in Arabic", professor Silvia Naef linked Etel Adnan's "diasporic existence" to her reactions on the ways in which the Arab world has been affected throughout her lifetime by colonial and hegemonic politics by major Western powers. As such, it was the French colonial administration's war against the Algerian population that affected Adnan and pushed her to abandon French as her primary literary language. And yet the war inflicted by the United States on Vietnam later caused her to leave the country; and it was Adnan's inability to write in Arabic, which made her embrace painting as a medium to express her sentiments around the same time. From the close reading of Adnan's prolific oeuvre in prose and poetry, it becomes clear just how much further the exhibition could have elaborated on the interconnection between Adnan's visual and intellectual work. The display of out of print editions of Adnan's books on a little side table outside the exhibition area on the lower floor could not and did not do justice to the complex negotiations of politics and language in the artist's work and one has to say that both the exhibition and catalog fell short in conveying these issues. Through Adnan's mobility and her choices of languages that she adopted and abandoned, she has become a living expression of colonial, post-colonial and neo-colonial history. By letting her oeuvre be shaped by these circumstances, Adnan has become an important collaborator both for poets and artists and a major reference for contemporary artists who have debuted internationally since the mid 1990s. During the symposium, the curator Morad Montazami (Tate Modern, London) and the literary scholar Sonja Mejcher-Atassi (American University in Beirut) took up the issue of direct collaborations between Adnan and other poets and artists, such as Hamed Abdallah (1917-1985) and Rafa Nasiri (1940-2013). Furthermore, Adnan has become the role-model for a generation of artists, whose practices are defined and shaped by the national ruptures and international interferences of the Lebanese wars from the 1970s up to the 1990s through her

¹¹ Obrist had long conversations with Adnan. He published some of them in the catalogue edited on the occasion of the retrospective he organized for her at Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, 2014, and in French in a separate booklet, cf. Obrist, *Etel Adnan*.

uncompromising and rigorous expression of herself as an intellectual, an artist and a human being. It was against the backdrop of the Lebanese Civil War that Adnan wrote her first novel *Sitt Marie Rose* (1978), which led to the revocation of her accreditation as a journalist. The war also greatly affected her now famous picture poem *The Arab Apocalypse* (1980), which the symposium took as its point of departure.

The selected lectures seemed to effortlessly fill the gaps left by exhibition: through the presentation of original research, the speakers were able to show the wider connections between Etel Adnan, her artistic collaborations and the art historical and sociological context which shaped her and which in turn she helped to shape. The symposium opened with a conversation between Nadia Radwan and Etel Adnan via Skype, during which the artist reflected on her practice, her notion of abstraction, political art and the relation between art and activism. The same topics were picked up more rigorously in the keynote lecture by Palestinian-American artist Samia Halaby (b. 1936 Jerusalem, L. New York).



Figure 4: Exhibition view, *Etel Adnan* Exhibition, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 2018. © Zentrum Paul Klee.

The symposium was dedicated to a number of case studies focusing on modern art from and in the Arab world in a global perspective. Female perspectives were emphasized, as well as the experience of living through historic crises in zones of conflict. Involvement in terms of an “art engagé” as well as social and artistic activism and the consequence of living in exile were recurrent topics. The lectures given by Kirsten Scheid (American University in Beirut), Charlotte Bank (Art-Lab Berlin), Nadia von Maltzahn (Orient-Institut, Beirut) and Nadine Atallah (Panthéon-Sorbonne Paris 1 University) gave an idea of current art historical research on specific contexts being done on and in the Arab world and their relevance for understanding much of the contemporary art production

today. The concluding roundtable with doctoral students was moderated by Noémie Étienne (University of Bern). Student presentations of their ongoing research projects allowed for further insights into new approaches in the study of modern and contemporary art in the Middle East. The scope and breadth of their work was demonstrated as well as the ways in which they build on the work done by prior generations of researchers who were also present at the symposium. The discussion between Zouina Ait Slimani, Joan Grandjean, Riccardo Legena, Mirl Redmann and Firouzeh Saghafi showed that in the field of art history relating to the Middle East much work has been done over the past thirty years and yet, more time and money must be devoted to young researchers in order to continue producing relevant research, beyond the production of exhibitions and catalogs.



Figure 5: Exhibition view, *Etel Adnan* Exhibition, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 2018. © Zentrum Paul Klee.

In conclusion, while ample available knowledge on specific historical context is being taken more or less for granted by art historians operating in and on Western contexts, through processes of canonization it is presupposed in global audiences as well. And yet, as the curators and organizers of this exhibition and symposium have realized, a precise location of artistic movements and possibilities in time and space lies at the basis of each and every attempt to write a "global" art history. And these precise locations are not only anchored in the spaces of exile but they are very much linked to mother tongues, they are linked to existing and imagined landscapes, to the topographies and logistics of childhood memories and family histories, which only passing references have been made to in the Etel Adnan exhibition. Increasingly, artists, curators and historians can rely on research into the histories of the everyday, the ordinary, the sociological and historical bases of societies and art scenes which have been upturned by a long and violent 20th century. It is the connection between Adnan's life and work which consciously reflects upon and

gives expression to trauma, that led her to be understood as one of the most powerful artistic voices of the past century. How wonderful that at the end of these two intense days so many approaches and detailed studies are available to form the foundation of more comprehensive studies of the impact of Adnan's life and work on contemporary art scenes and of further explorations of Klee's global impact.

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Biographies

Joan Grandjean is a PhD candidate at the University of Geneva. His research focusses on science fiction in the Arab geocultural space contemporary art. Since the early 2000s, "Futurist" aesthetics have created new imaginaries as tools for questioning, criticizing and telling new narratives about the history, cultural Arabness, political interests and conflicts of the Arab countries. After studying performing arts, visual arts and art history in Lyon, Utrecht and Rennes, he worked at the Arab Image Foundation in Beirut as a research officer. Grandjean has been Silvia Naef's assistant for the last two years and is a founding member of Manazir, Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region and *Manazir Journal*.

Mirl Redmann is a writer, art educator and PhD candidate at the University of Geneva. Her doctoral dissertation focuses on sociological aspects of globalisation in the context of international large-scale exhibitions. Which networks and discourses have brought artists labeled as coming from "Arab" countries to the documenta? How do these artists perceive of and deal with this label in the international art world/in the context of their participation in documenta? After studying Arabic languages and cultures, as well as the history of Islamic art in Leipzig, Leiden, Cairo, Berlin and Bonn she became a project researcher for the SNF-Sinergia project "Other Modernities" (2013- 2017). She worked as an art educator for documenta 14 and is currently based in Kassel from where she explores and mediates archives engaging in cultural and political debates.
