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The Arab Apocalypse

Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East

edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan

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Nadia Radwan[1]

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

[1] **Nadia Radwan,** Assistant Professor in World Art History, Institute of Art History, University of Bern.
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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 Paolo 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.

Curator's note

Fabienne Eggelhöfer[1]

Etel Adnan Meets Paul Klee

Abstract

In comparing the works of Etel Adnan and Paul Klee, their shared interest in the relationship between writing and images became clear. Etel Adnan's great admiration for Klee's art was an additional reason for holding an exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern. The following note examines the extent to which the artists' engagement with (Arabic) calligraphy was an integral part of their practices.

Keywords: Etel Adnan, Paul Klee, Zentrum Paul Klee, Abstraction

> When I started painting in the early 1960s, the painter who struck me the most was Paul Klee. I was instantly captivated. I would look for his paintings, in books mostly, and in museums whenever possible. I would follow each line with my eyes, noticing how he would frame his paintings within the canvas so as to make them look larger, something that was distinctively his. This kind of addiction gave way to a fascination and a learning process. I would love everything I saw and constantly made new discoveries. Like with any first love, this passion created a sharpness of observation that I remember as a continuous revelation. It was as if each line was being drawn before my eyes. The world he depicted was both intimate and foreign. The diversity of that world brought surprises.

Etel Adnan not only holds Paul Klee in high regard, as shown by the above quotation, but she also considers him a soulmate. Reading his diaries, which were first published in English translation in California at the beginning of the 1960s, provided Adnan with new insights into the thoughts of an artist who never dictated a specific style, but rather addressed approaches and processes. For Adnan, the directness and variety of Klee's work was a revelation. Klee and Adnan share a profound interest in different forms of artistic expression, including poetry, music, and painting. For Adnan, abstract painting is a means to express her ideas, thoughts, and emotions. To use Klee's words, her art "does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."[2]

It therefore made sense for the Zentrum Paul Klee to plan an exhibition with Etel Adnan. She selected some works from our collection and we then collaborated with the curator Sébastien Delot to display them alongside her abstract paintings, leporellos, and tapestries. The parallel to Klee's artistic process is particularly evident in Adnan's leporellos, in which she synthesizes drawing and writing. Like Klee, she is fascinated by the close relationship between writing and drawing,

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[2] Paul Klee, "Creative Confession," in *Creative Confession and Other Writings,* edited by Matthew Gale, trans. by Thames & Hudson (London: Tate, 2013), 7-14. First published as "Schöpferische Konfession," in *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit XIII*, edited by Kasimir Edschmid (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920), 28-40.

which he described as "rooted together as one."[3] The tradition of calligraphy in Asia and the Middle East informs the artists' thoughts on this relationship. For Adnan in particular, the reference to Arabic calligraphy, which does not make a stark differentiation between writing and painting, is central.

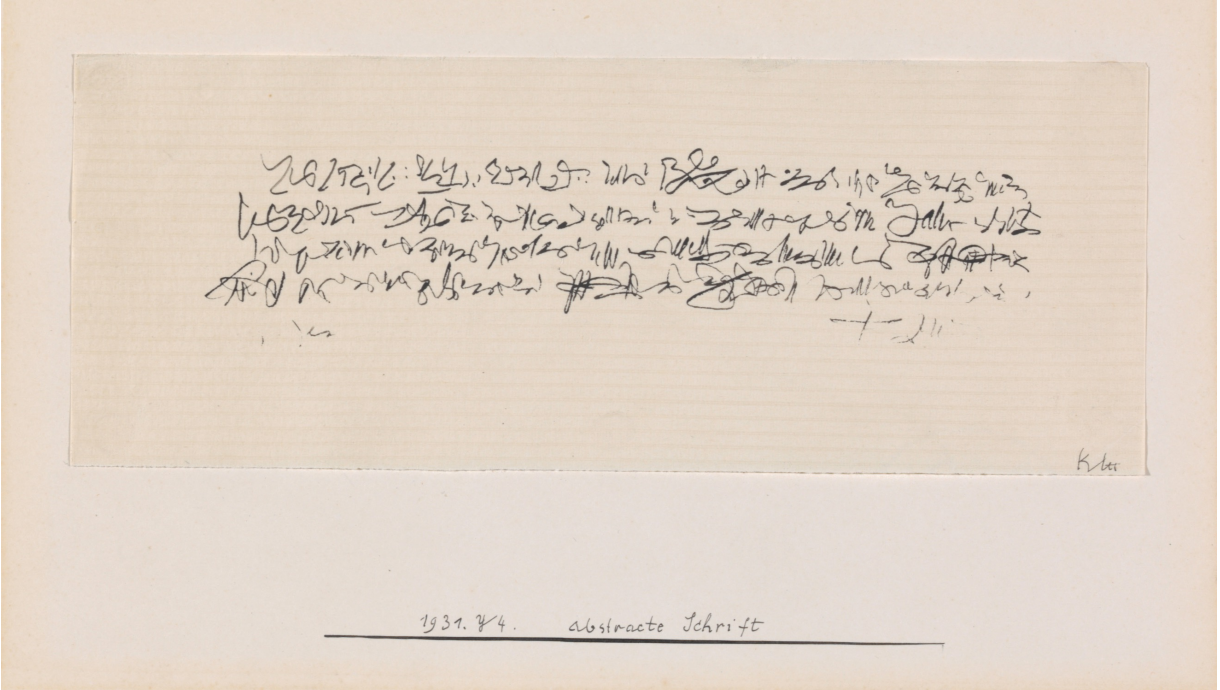

Figure 1: Paul Klee, *abstracte Schrift* (Abstract Writing) 1931, 284. pen on paper on cardboard, 8,4 x 21,9 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

A point setting itself in motion comprises the beginning of any composition. The resulting line can unfold in either a free or controlled manner across the picture plane. Paul Klee used both methods to develop his linear pictorial language. The best artistic approach, according to Klee, combined spontaneity and control, unconscious and conscious action. To the students at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, where he taught from 1931 until 1933, Klee recommended Chinese calligraphy as a prime example of an expressive script, as Petra Petitpierre's transcription recounts: "According to Chinese concepts, the essence of calligraphy does not lie in the orderliness and uniformity of the handwriting, which can easily lead to stasis, but in what is to be expressed, being represented in the most perfect manner possible, yet entailing the least expenditure of resources. The calligraphic characteristic of manifesting itself and developing, in graphic and painterly relations, is a means, that is, a component of artistic composition."[4] The subject seemed to preoccupy Klee in his artistic work of the period, as the drawing *Abstract Writing, 1931, 284*, demonstrates.[5]

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[3] Paul Klee, *Bildnerische Gestaltungslehre: I.1. Gestaltungslehre als Begriff* (Theory of Pictorial Configuration: I.1. Theory of Pictorial Configuration as Concept) (MS, Archiv ZPK, inv. no. BG I.1/5). Available on www.kleegestaltungslehre.zpk.org.

[4] Petra Petitpierre, *Aus der Malklasse von Paul Klee* (Bern: Benteli, 1957), 14.

[5] For more on the significance of writing as an allegory for artistic creation, see Fabienne Eggelhöfer, "The Art of Merging Control and Spontaneity," in *Taking a Line for a Walk,* ed. by Fabienne Eggelhöfer (Cologne: Snoeck for ZPK, Bern, 2014), 12-23.

Figure 2: Etel Adnan, *East River Pollution "From Laura's Window"*, New York, April 79, 1979, leporello, colored pencil, pencil, 30 pages, 20.5 x 8, max. 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut.

Klee considered the work of art primarily as a form of genesis and, like the process of writing, a fitting allegory for movement. The line unfolds across the pictorial surface for its own sake, without depicting anything specific. In Adnan's leporello *East River Pollution from Laura's Window, New York, April 79*, which she created during a stay in New York in 1979, lines also convey the movement and rhythm of the city.

However, in Adnan's work, movement is not as central as the relationship between art and language. On the one hand, this emphasis stems from her multi-cultural heritage. On the other, it reflects her life in varied cultural contexts: Lebanon, France, and the United States. In her literary work, Adnan frequently addresses the devastation of war in the Arab world and beyond. For instance, in protest of France's suppression of the Algerian Revolution, Adnan renounced the French language: "I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic." Through her engagement with Arabic poetry, which is of special significance to Adnan, the artist first addressed the symbolic nature of writing. She did so in part because of her personal history, which is rooted in the Arab world. However, she was also captivated by the specific approach to text and image, writing and drawing in pre-modern Arab culture, where they are not seen as separate practices. Although she barely understood and spoke Arabic and never mastered Arabic writing, Adnan transcribed poems by Arab authors in her leporellos in Arabic – as in *'Awdat Lilith* (2004), the transposition of a poem by Joumana Haddad. In Adnan's work, Arabic letters become symbols and ultimately pictorial elements that are charged with meaning.

Figure 3: Etel Adnan, *Lilith's Return*, 2004, leporello, watercolor and Indian ink on Japan paper, 24 pages. Poem by Joumana Haddad, 33 x 612 cm. Collection Claude & France Lemand, Paris. © Etel Adnan. Courtesy of Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris.

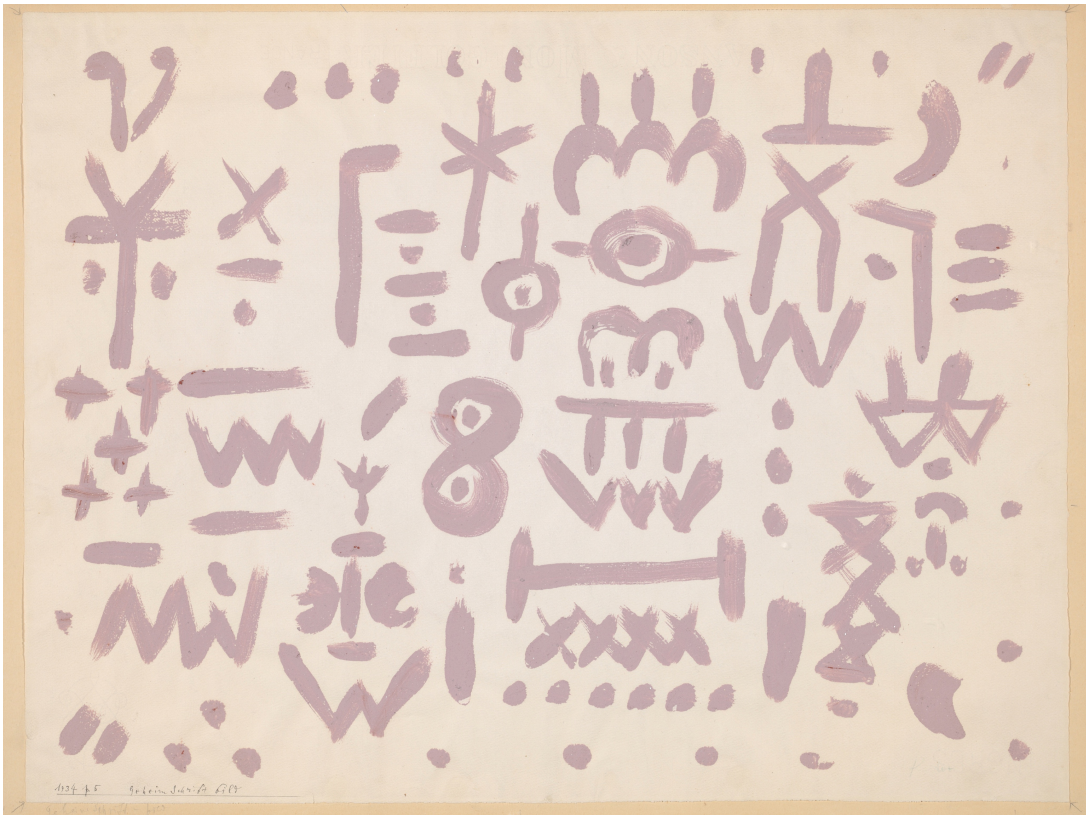

Figure 4: Paul Klee, *Geheim Schrift bild* (Secret Typeface), 1934, 105, colored paste on paper on cardboard, 48 x 63,5 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

Paul Klee also transposed whole poems into textual images, as in *Once Emerged from the Gray of Night…1918, 17*. Over the course of his career, he paid special attention to individual letters and characters, drawing upon their full symbolic and associative power. At the same time, since the 1910s, Klee devised his own cryptic forms, which serve as symbolic, mysterious hieroglyphics. Arabic and Asian calligraphy, as well as prehistoric drawings and Egyptian hieroglyphs, were inspirations to Klee, especially in the last decade of his career, in the development his own scriptive imagery, as in *Secret Type-Face, 1934, 105*.[6] Klee was not concerned with copying existing signs but rather with abstracting and transforming them. His indecipherable characters are simultaneously graphic figures. He employed them in an attempt to return to archetypal origins and achieve universal expression.[7]

In her poetry and prose, Etel Adnan addresses specific political and social conditions, especially with respect to the Middle East. However, like Klee, she seeks a universal form of expression in her paintings and drawings, striving for a fragile balance between largely abstract color-field paintings and rhythmically animated drawings. Although they are abstract, her works express the mind and soul, life's unsteady equilibrium. Klee, too, sought a lively balance in his art; stable constructions did not interest him. Rather, his endeavor was to achieve dynamic configuration.

As these brief examples demonstrate, the goal of the *Etel Adnan* exhibition, which was held at the Zentrum Paul Klee from June 15 through October 7, 2018, was not to identify a particular influence nor to establish visual parallels between Adnan and Klee. Instead, it juxtaposed two artists who were concerned with similar questions about composition and artistic expression. Both cultivated a fascination for Arabic calligraphy, albeit from different perspectives. Etel Adnan has ties to Arab culture through her family heritage, whereas Klee encountered the Arab world through his travels to Tunisia in 1914 and Egypt in the winter of 1929—30, as well as through publications. The exhibition revealed how artists from different periods and backgrounds responded to similar issues. Such dialogues with contemporary artists allow us to bring to the fore new questions about Klee's work and to approach it from a different perspective. In this respect, Etel Adnan is a truly serendipitous example: not only is she an enthusiastic fan of Klee, but she also understands Klee's artistic approach and has adapted it to her own pictorial language. And this was always Klee's goal: showing the way without prescribing the result. That is why, for many artists of subsequent generations, he stands as an "inciter to invention," as Clement Greenberg described him in 1950.[8] To what extent Klee opened doors for other artists in the Arab world remains a desideratum in Klee scholarship.

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[6] For Egyptian hieroglyphs inspiring Klee, see Otto Pöggeler, *Bild und Technik: Heidegger, Klee und die Moderne Kunst* (Munich: Fink, 2002), 204; and Kathryn Porter Aichele, *Paul Klee's Pictorial Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132-33, 178.

[7] Dörte Zbikowsky, "Zeichen der Erinnerung: Zur Bedeutung der altägyptischen Schriftkultur im Werk Paul Klees," in *Paul Klee: Reisen in den Süden: Reisefieber praecisiert* (Ostfildern: G. Hatje for Gustav-Lübcke Museum, Hamm, 1997), 170.

[8] On the reception of Klee in the United States, see Fabienne Eggelhöfer, "'Inciter to Invention': Paul Klee and a New Path for Abstract Art in America," in *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee* (Bern: Zentrum Paul Klee: Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2018; Munich, London, New York: Prestel), 17-34.

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Biography

In 2017 **Fabienne Eggelhöfer** has been appointed chief curator and director of collection, exhibitions and research at the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, where she had served as curator for modern and contemporary art since 2007. In 2012 she completed a research project on Paul Klee's teaching at the Bauhaus that culminated in an online database of Klee's teaching notes and an exhibition. In addition, she also analyzed the meaning of nature in Klee's teaching in a dissertation leading to a PhD degree. In several exhibitions she focused her interest on the continuities and discontinuities in the development of art since the beginning of the 20th century. The Zentrum Paul Klee granted her a curatorial leave in 2015 and 2016 in order to research the impact of Paul Klee on the American artists of the mid-20th century which culminated in the exhibition *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee*.

Articles

Silvia Naef[1]

"Painting in Arabic": Etel Adnan and the Invention of a New Language

Abstract

This article deals with Etel Adnan's complex and original relation with the Arabic language, and with her concern for the situation of wars and destruction in the Arab world. It tries to analyze how, by "painting in Arabic," Adnan not only finds a solution to her linguistic quest, but also gives word to her political commitment to the region. And finally, "painting in Arabic" makes her one of the main representatives of the Hurufiyya movement, a fundamental modernist pictorial trend in the Arab world.

Keywords: Arabic language, French language, Painting, Poetry, Hurufiyya, Etel Adnan

> The Arabic language has a certain aura for me, partly because we were forbidden to learn it in the French schools – and we were punished if we even spoke it. And because we spoke it neither at school nor at home, I was locked out of it. I speak it in the street, but can't write a poem in Arabic. This means I've made Arabic into a myth, into a kind of lost paradise. [2]

Etel Adnan (b. 1925), the daughter of an Ottoman officer from Syria, and an Ottoman Greek mother from Smyrna, today Izmir, grew up in Beirut, then under French mandate. The family's language was Turkish while her mother spoke Greek to her, and she grew up speaking the two languages until the age of five.[3] Adnan then went to a French school, where, as she states in the above quote, speaking Arabic was forbidden and considered a "sin."[4] Some of the pupils were in charge of spying on the others and reporting to the nuns: everyone who was caught speaking Arabic was punished, and a stone was placed in his or her pocket to symbolize this "sin." So far, nothing exceptional, the fate of many in the Arab world, especially under French domination: Adnan recalls that she realized much later that other colonial subjects in the French empire as a whole, be it in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, sub-Saharan Africa or Indochina had similar experiences.[5] With this went

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[2] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," in *Etel Adnan in All Her Dimensions*, Doha/Milan: Mathaf/Skira, 2014, 29–30.

[3] Etel Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère* (Paris: L'Echoppe, 2014), 11. Original English online version: Etel Adnan, "To Write in a Foreign Language," *Electronic Poetry Review* 1 (1996), accessed 12 July 2019, www.epoetry.org/issues/issue1/alltext/esadn.htm, pages not numbered. Quotations are made after the English online version, but references are given to the French printed text where the pages are numbered.

[4] Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 11.

[5] *Ibid*.

the strong feeling, suggested at school, that speaking Arabic was backwards and shameful,[6] as Adnan stresses in her *To write in a foreign language*. This led — and still does lead — many to abandon Arabic and adopt French instead, as a means of demonstrating progress on the way to becoming "civilized" persons. Adnan, on the contrary, decided she wanted to be an Arab, in spite of the fact that Arabic was not the language spoken in her family. "If the Arab world," Adnan says, "weren't forever at war, and so much under attack, maybe I wouldn't have been Arab."[7] Being an Arab was for her a sign of resistance, the adoption of a refused and despised identity. This does not mean that Adnan is an Arab nationalist, understood in the sense that pan-Arab ideologies spread around the Arab world, on the contrary, although in her youth she sympathized with those ideas. In an online interview she gave in July 2018 to Judith Benhamou-Huet, Adnan stated that nationalism was a mythology, since each person is a synthesis of many things, and defined herself as a "pioneer of the globalized world" that we know today, having grown up and lived in so many different cultures.[8] As Sonja Mejcher-Atassi observed, "the notion of 'home' has acquired a transnational and transcultural meaning for Adnan."[9]

In 1949, Adnan went to Paris to study and as a Francophone by education and an admirer of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, she wrote poems in French. Her first poem, *Le livre de la mer*, was translated into Arabic much later, since it played on the grammatical gender of the words "sun," masculine in French (*le soleil*) and feminine in Arabic (*shams*), and "sea", feminine in French (*la mer*) and masculine in Arabic (*bahr*). Again, Adnan was trapped between the language she had been educated in and the language that had been surrounding her daily life in the streets of Beirut, trapped in the impossibility of translation or rather, as she says, her first poem would have been unthinkable in Arabic.[10] In 1955, she moved to California, where she lived with few interruptions until recently, when she moved to Paris. Arriving to Berkeley was, to her, like discovering another planet.[11] Her English was then still very basic, but she immersed herself in the language and fell in love with American English.[12] She also fell in love with the landscape, the country, and its way of life: "Riding in a car on the American highways was like writing poetry with one's whole body."[13] She started teaching philosophy, in English, at the Dominican College in San Rafael, near San Francisco. She then still saw herself as someone defined by French culture, but the war in Algeria made her realize that she had taken sides, "naturally and spontaneously," against France. Her emotional involvement with the Algerian side of the war made it impossible for her to continue writing in French.[14] Today she no longer feels this way, but at the time, as she writes, the destiny of the Arab world and its unity seemed to depend on the outcome of this conflict. Encouraged by the head of the art department at her school, Ann O'Hanlon, Adnan started painting in 1960, and this new adopted language allowed her to solve the conflict:[15] "At that moment my soul was at peace, as if I'd been given the answer to an important problem."[16]

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[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 30.

[8] Judith Benhamou-Huet, *Etel Adnan: 7 answers in less than a minute. Behind the scenes with the painter and poet who has exhibitions in Arles, Bern, Marrakesh and also Massachusetts* (4: "How important is the idea of nationality to you"), accessed 12 July 2019, https://judithbenhamouhuet.com/report/etel-adnan-7-answers-in-less-than-a-minute-behind-the-scenes-with-the-painter-and-poet-who-has-exhibitions-in-arles-bern-marrakesh-and-also-in-massachusetts/.

[9] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "The Forbidden Paradise, How Etel Adnan Learnt to Paint in Arabic," In *Arabic Literature, Postmodern Perspectives,* ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler (London: Saqi, 2010), 313.

[10] Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 17.

[11] *Ibid*, 18.

[12] *Ibid*, 19.

[13] *Ibid*, 20.

[14] *Ibid*, 21.

[15] *Ibid*, 21-22.

[16] Hilary Kilpatrick, "Interview with Etel Adnan," in *Unheard Words, Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*, ed. Mineke Schipper (London/New York: Allison & Busby, 1985), 119.

Figure 1: Etel Adnan, *The Mountain*, series of ten drawings, watercolor and china ink on paper, 2014 (display on wall). Etel Adnan, *Journey to Mount Tamalpais*, watercolor and ink on paper, 2008 (leporello in display case).
Exhibition at Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 15 June – 7 October 2018. © Rolf Siegenthaler, Bern.

Adnan's commitment against the war in Algeria led her to join the protest movement against the Vietnam War, as did many intellectuals in the United States at the time. Many were expressing their opposition against the war with their literary work, and so did Adnan, in her first poem in English, "The Ballad of the Lonely Knight in Present-Day America," which was published in the ephemeral *S. B. Gazette* in 1965. She now had two new languages, painting and English, in which she could express herself.

When Adnan started painting, her work was mostly abstract, although she was inspired by surrounding natural landscapes. Starting in the 1980s, and for another twenty-three years, she painted Mount Tamalpais, which she could see from her home in Sausalito.

In 1964, Adnan discovered the leporello in a Japanese shop in San Francisco, a fold-out book that would give a new direction to her creativity, and become a way of uniting poetry and painting, the oral and the visual. On this very thin paper, Adnan started transcribing poems in Arabic, written by well-known poets, and rediscovered the graphic pleasure she had had in her childhood when she copied Arabic sentences that she did not understand. This feeling came from the way she was familiarized with Arabic. One day, her father, a Syrian Arab, disapproving of the fact that his daughter was being educated only in French, ignoring Arabic while living in an Arab country, started teaching her Arabic. He made her write the alphabet hundreds of times,[17] and then had her

[17] Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 13.

copying from an Arabic-Turkish grammar book he had used in his youth. Adnan knew the alphabet, but didn't know most of the vocabulary, so for her, who had always been fascinated when she watched her father write sentences in Arabic, it was more a form of drawing than of writing, of reproducing signs. As Simone Fattal puts it, speaking of Adnan's later artistic development, it "was discovering what the Chinese tradition knew all along: that writing is drawing."[18]

The first poem she "drew" was *Madinat al-Sindbad* (Sindbad's City) by Iraqi poet Badr Shaker al-Sayyab, who had died just one year earlier. Sayyab was, for Adnan, the first modernist Arab poet.[19] At the time, it was the Nasser era, and Adnan was moved by pan-Arab ideas she had become familiar with after 1957, when she met students from other Arab countries at Berkeley. Since she could not compose poetry in Arabic herself, she decided to write poems by other authors.[20] As she says: "I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic."[21]

Adnan has a strong passion for Arabic poetry, including pre-Islamic poems. However, since her position is political, she "draws" only poems by contemporary authors, like the Palestinian Mahmoud Darwish, whom she knew personally and who translated some of her poetry and of whom she says he was "constantly close … to the existential."[22]

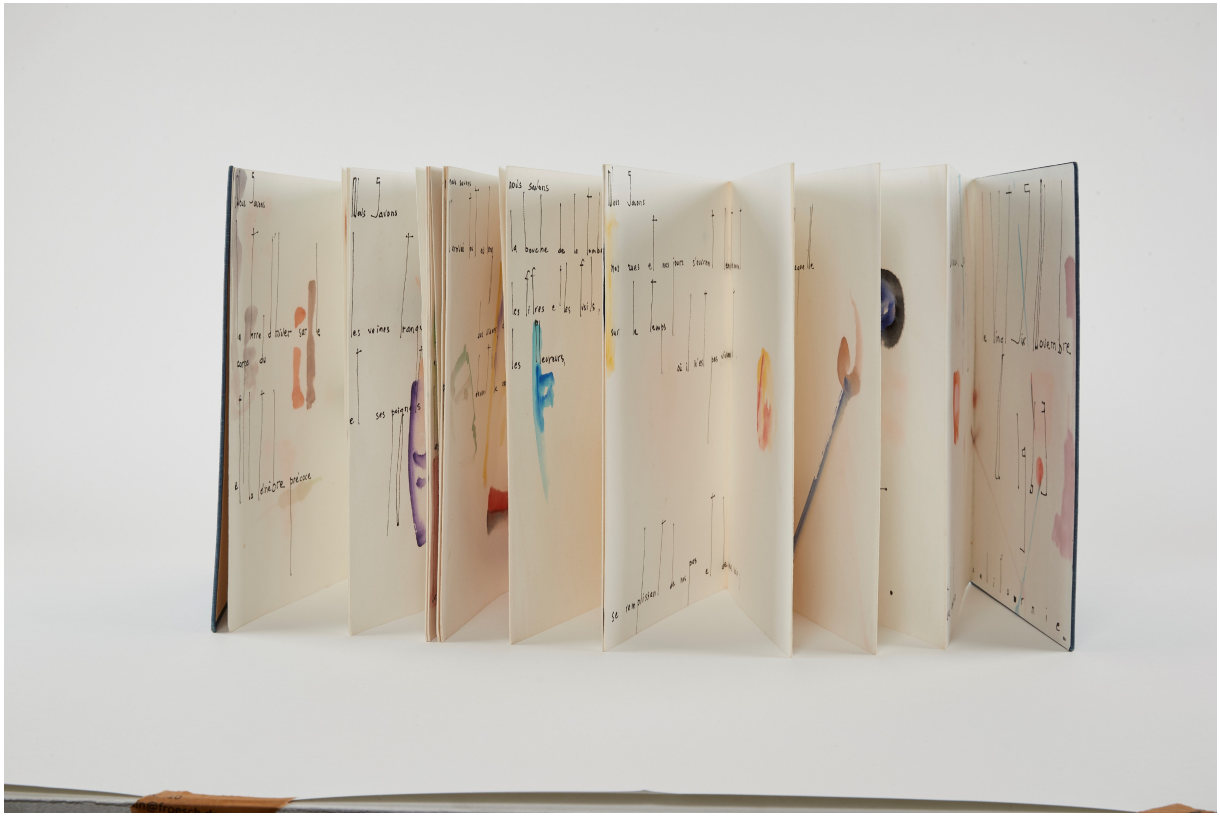

Figure 2: Etel Adnan, *Wendell Berry, 26 November 1964*, leporello, 1964. Exhibition at Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, 15 June – 7 October 2018. © Rolf Siegenthaler, Bern.

[18] Simone Fattal, "On Perception: Etel Adnan's Visual Art," in *Etel Adnan In All Her Dimensions* (Doha/Milan: Mathaf/Skira, 2014), 110.
[19] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 73.
[20] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 58.
[21] Adnan, *Ecrire dans une langue étrangère*, 22. Our emphasis.
[22] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 73.

She illustrated the lyrics of many other contemporary avant-garde authors, such as the Lebanese Yusuf al-Khal, American poets like Wendell Berry, and later on, her own poems. There was a cinematic dimension in the leporellos, a narrative, as Simone Fattal notes,[23] although some later leporellos are purely visual, as the ones she did of Paris rooftops and New York bridges.[24]

In spite of the fact that she did not write poems in Arabic, Adnan wanted to be recognized as an Arab poet. She travelled regularly to Beirut and met Yusuf al-Khal, the founder and editor of *Shi'r*, the ground-breaking intellectual periodical which had an immense impact on poetry writing in the Arab world. Al-Khal also opened Gallery One, a gallery which played a central role for modernist painters in Lebanon and in the Arab world as a whole and which was the first Beiruti professional art gallery. Al-Khal invited Adnan to contribute to *Shi'r*, by translating her poems into Arabic. This was essential to Adnan, since she suffered from the fact that some people thought that she was not an Arab poet because she did not write in Arabic. She comments: "My identity was in not wanting to be rejected by Arab poets."[25] The publication of her poems in *Shi'r*, the most prestigious journal for Arabic poetry and modern thought, allowed her this desired recognition.

Even though it initially resulted from her own biographical constraints, "painting in Arabic" found Adnan a place as an Arab artist within the movement called Hurufiyya. Hurufiyya – from the Arabic word "huruf," "letters" – is an artistic trend where the letters of the Arabic alphabet are used as an element of mostly abstract compositions. It is not to be confused with calligraphy, a genre which had a central place in Islamic art, as the first manifesto of the Hurufiyya movement, *The One Dimension* (Al-bu'd al-wahid) stated in 1971. Arab artists had started to use letters of the Arabic alphabet in their compositions in the late 1940s, namely two Iraqi artists, Madiha Omar (1908-2005), who then lived in Washington, and Jamil Hamoudi (1924-2004), who was in Paris. Omar, who had been interested in Islamic art and calligraphy, was the first to formulate, in a 1949 manifesto, the idea that modern artists should use the letter as a visual element in a modern art composition.[26] Hamoudi, who was in Paris at the time and working as an abstract painter, exhibiting at the Réalités Nouvelles salon, also made geometric compositions referring to alphabetic signs, although he did not, as Omar, formulate a precise thesis. Hurufiyya became a pan-Arab movement – the only such trend – in the 1970s and 1980s, after the Baghdadi group *The One Dimension*, under the lead of Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925 – 2004), issued its manifesto.[27] Painters all over the Arab world started to make compositions based on the letter. They had all been trained in Western-style painting or sculpture and clearly expressed their intention of being considered as painters, and not as calligraphers, as they are often inadequately named.
Etel Adnan never uses the term Hurufiyya in order to describe her work – she rather speaks of calligraphy, for instance, in her conversations with Hans Ulrich Obrist. We could however say that in the same way that *Shi'r* gave her legitimacy as an Arab poet, the Hurufiyya movement gave a place for her work within a larger trend which dominated artistic creativity in the Arab world for a long time, and which is still practiced today by some artists. The catalogue of the London and Dubai exhibition *Word into Art*, which presented artists from all over the Islamic world expressing themselves through alphabetic signs, says about Adnan: "Her *livres d'artistes* […] have placed her with Iraqi artist Shakir Hassan al-Said [sic] firmly at the centre of the genre known as hurufiyya".[28]

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[23] Fattal, "On Perception," 110.

[24] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 60-61.

[25] *Ibid*, 78.

[26] Charbel Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya, Art and Identity* (Translated by Samir Mahmoud, Milan: Skira, 2016), 137. Also published in *Modern Art in the Arab World. Primary Documents*, eds. Anneka Lensen, Sarah Rogers and Nada Shabout (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019), 139-142.

[27] For the English translation of the manifesto, see Shakir Hassan Al Said, "The One Dimension," in Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya*, 137-140.

[28] Venetia Porter ed., *Word into Art, Artists of the Modern Middle East* (Dubai: Dubai Holding/The Trustees of the British Museum, 2008), 53.

For Adnan, "painting in Arabic" is far more than merely an aesthetic choice, as it might be for some of the Hurufi artists, or a way to stress her belonging to the Arab world. Drawing poems on paper is part of her political commitment, which started when she arrived in California. Although she had written some poetry in French, her political work started with her poems against the Vietnam War, as in "Ballad of the Lonely Knight." She also wrote poetry, in French this time, evoking the Palestinian tragedy. *Jébu*, written after the 1967 war, published in 1973, narrated the story of the Jebusites, the Biblical people that inhabited the land of Canaan before the establishment of the Israelites, and of their fictional king Jebu.[29] The book, that some considered as anti-Semitic (even though the publisher himself was Jewish), caused some troubles in France, but was nevertheless translated into English and Arabic. Another text by Adnan was to be found in the same publication, *The Beirut-Hell Express*, written in 1970. In her 2011 interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, Adnan says of those texts that she "predicted that it was the destruction of the Arabs that was happening."[30]

Adnan went back to live in Beirut in 1972, where she worked for the newspapers *Al-Safa* and *L'Orient-Le Jour*. There she wrote, in 1975, after the outbreak of the Civil War, *Sitt Marie Rose*, her first novel.[31] In this novel, which she finished in just one month, she recounted a true story. In *Sitt Marie Rose*, Adnan wanted to denunciate the tribal mentality still dominant in the Arab world, where loyalty to the family and the clan comes before other allegiances. The book's main character, Sitt Marie Rose, is killed by her own people, who thought that she had betrayed them and their "cause" by showing solidarity with the Palestinians. Fighting this tribal mentality not only had a social, but also a political purpose, since it could easily be used by non-Arabs, for instance by the Israelis, to divide the Arabs, as Adnan as Adnan declared to the feminist journal *Off Our Backs* in 1983, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.[32] She had already left Lebanon in 1976, considering that the war was a "new gang fight between rival groups of men."[33]

Her major text – containing strong visual elements – about the situation in the Arab world, *The Arab Apocalypse*, which took her a year to write between 1979 and 1980, referred to the Lebanese Civil War, but is – alas – still topical and her text could have been written today on Iraq, Syria or Yemen as well.[34] *The Arab Apocalypse* is more than a poem, it is a combination of the textual and the visual, since it includes graphic elements that constitute a part of the text, "as if the verbal language alone had become an inadequate means of self-expression to Adnan."[35] The far-away wars in Iraq affected her again, as she tells it: "Being in California, I felt I was two people, because I was like all the Americans, the same as my friends. But I had a problem they didn't have: I was worried about Iraq, and they were not worried to the same degree."[36] As Simone Fattal writes, Adnan lives what happens elsewhere as if she had been "right there."[37]

This feeling is delicately and deeply expressed in the text Adnan wrote on the occasion of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, "To be in a time of war." With simple words, describing the banality of her everyday life in California, she involves the reader in the difficulty of being an average person living

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[29] Etel Adnan, *Jébu*, suivi de *L'Express Beyrouth – Enfer* (Paris: P.J. Oswald), 1973.

[30] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 80.

[31] Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie-Rose* (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1978). First English translation: Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie Rose* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1982).

[32] Etel Adnan and Inez Reider, "Tribal Mentality," *Off Our Backs. A Women's Newsjournal* 13/8 (1983): 32.

[33] Adnan and Reider, "Tribal Mentality," 32.

[34] Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse*, translated from the French by the author (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989). French original edition: Etel Adnan, *L'Apocalypse arabe* (Paris: Papyrus, 1980).

[35] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Breaking the Silence. Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose and The Arab Apocalypse," in *Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms, Forms of Interaction between Middle Eastern Writers and Their Societies, dedicated to Angelika Neuwirth*, eds. Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winckler (Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2006), 207.

[36] Obrist, "Conversations with Etel Adnan," 68.

[37] Fattal, "On Perception," 113.

in peaceful surroundings and her feelings of sorrow for what is happening in a country thousands of miles away, a country which she had visited many years before, meeting artists and intellectuals:

> To wake up, to stretch, to get out of bed, to dress, to stagger toward the window, to be ecstatic about the garden's beauty, to observe the quality of the light, to distinguish the roses from the hyacinths, to wonder if it rained in the night, to establish contact with the mountain, to notice its color, to see if the clouds are moving, to stop, to go to the kitchen, to grind some coffee, to light the gas, to heat water, hear it boiling, to make coffee, to shut off the gas, to pour the coffee, to decide to have some milk with it, to bring out the bottle, to pour the milk in the aluminium pan, to heat it, to be careful, to pour, to mix the coffee with the milk, to feel the heat, to bring the cup to one's mouth, to drink, to drink again, to face the day's chores, to stand and go to the kitchen, to come back and put the radio on, to bring the volume up, to hear that the war in Iraq has started.[38]

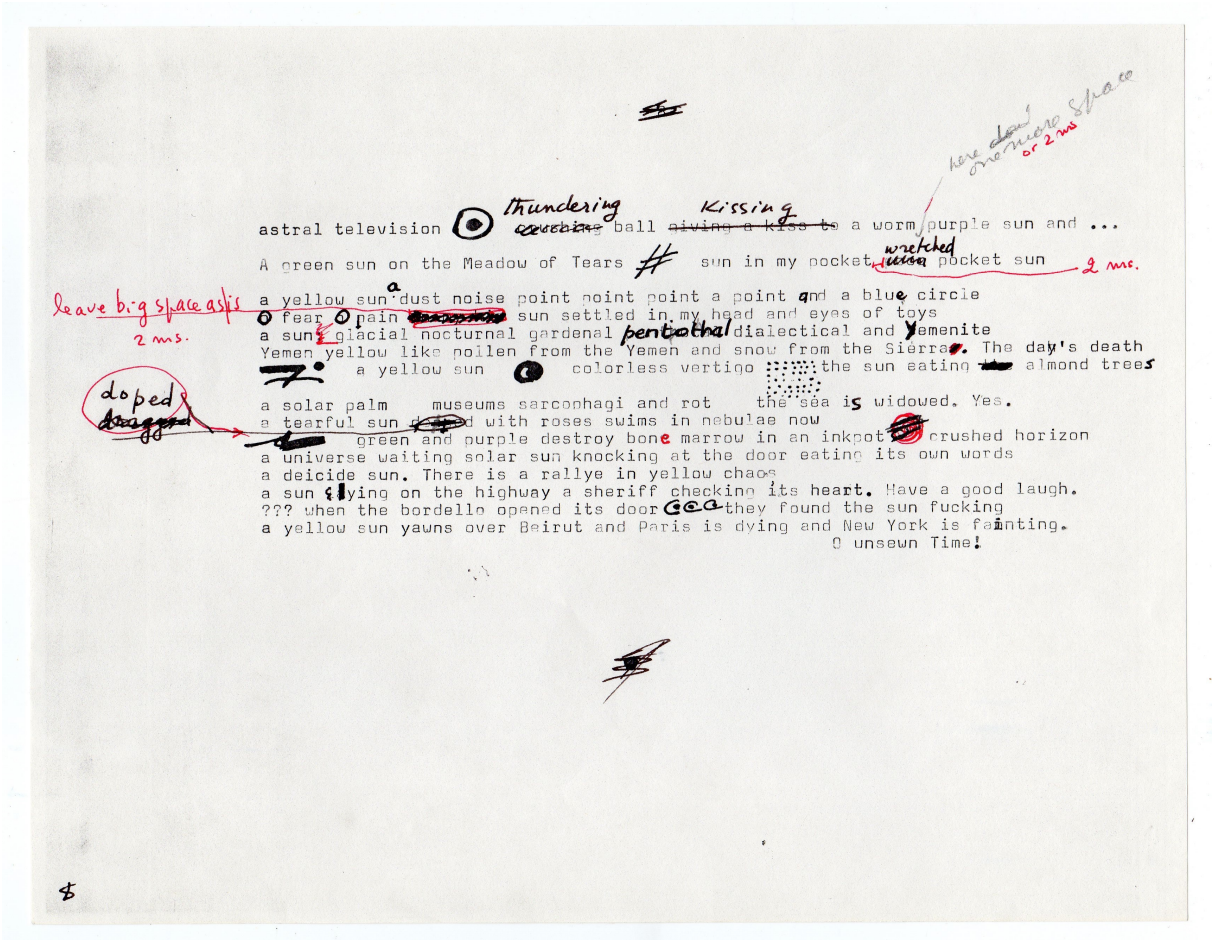

Figure 3: Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Manuscript), 1965. Photocopies with handwritten notes, 72 pages and cover sheet, 27,9 x 21,5 cm, each page. Courtesy of the artist & Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut / Hamburg.

Again, in this text, published in 2005, we find Adnan concerned with Iraq's disappearance, the conviction that the war operations aim to destroy its populations,[39] and "eliminate a country."[40] Is

[38] Etel Adnan,"To Be in A Time of War," *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2005), 100.
[39] Adnan,"To Be in A Time of War," 105.
[40] *Ibid*, 101.

there the fear that the Arabs might be "wiped out," as she says when speaking of the Native Americans in the United States? Adnan has developed this terrible lucidity over the decades, in a kind of tragic foresight, like that of Cassandra whom she mentions at the end of the text.[41] This acute sense and strong perception of the tragedy of the Arab world is nevertheless associated with a deep love for life and with the satisfaction of having reached the age of 90 years, with a considerable literary and artistic production behind her and with the feeling that she is part of the universe, a friend of the universe. The day she will die, she says, the universe will lose its best friend.[42]

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[41] *Ibid*, 116.
[42] Fattal, "On Perception", 102.

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Biography

Silvia Naef is a full professor, Arabic Studies Section, and director of the master program in Middle Eastern Studies (MAMO), Global Studies Institute, University of Geneva. She obtained her Ph.D. in 1993 with a thesis on modern art in the Arab world. She has taught in Tübingen, Basel and Toronto and has been a visiting professor in Sassari (Italy, 2012), the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris (2016), at Université St. Joseph, Beirut (2017) and a visiting researcher in Princeton (2003) and Göttingen (2013). Naef is a founding member of Manazir, Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region and *Manazir Journal*. Her research focusses on modern art, visual representations and images in the Arab and Islamic world; she is also interested in gender issues. She has been the principal investigator of the research project *Other Modernities: Patrimony and Practices of Visual Expression Outside the West* (2013-2017), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Publications include *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe* (1996; Arabic 2008); *Y a-t-il une question de l'image en Islam?* (2015, several translations); *Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Turkey and Iran: Reintroducing the 'Missing Modern'*, in *Asiatische Studien/Etudes Asiatiques* (2016, ed. with E. Helbig).

Morad Montazami[1]

Hamed Abdalla: Talismanic Modernism[2]

Abstract

Hamed Abdalla (1917–85) is a key figure in Egyptian modernism and postcolonial art history. His experimental inventions around the Arabic Letter reflected over thirty years of aesthetic debate in the region – often identified as related to the concept of Hurufiyya and its artistic network. Abdalla's much more political and militant use of the Arabic Letter places him as almost as a unique case. By giving shape to an exiled modernism (Cairo, Copenhagen, Paris, Beirut…) his practice is paradoxically affected by his complex exchange with the West. For instance, with Paul Klee, whom he sees with distance and a critical look but still studies him as a "visual translator" of Oriental(ist) and Egyptian sources.

Keywords: Hamed Abdalla, Egyptian modernism, Hurufiyya, Letterism

Hamed Abdalla is one of those artists who, having inscribed their name in the annals of history, reanimates in a single gesture the buried collective memory that made this inscription legible to humanity. Every work he signed was like the seal of a particular civilization, or rather, one of a series of stops in a quest for civilization(s). The young Abdalla's saga began in the 1930s. During his formative years, he learned traditional calligraphy while depicting the Egyptian man in the street, an anti-conformist act in the context of the neo-Impressionist academicism that had reigned in Cairo since the early 20th century. He was already engaged in a *pas de deux* between writing and figuration, between a solemn reverence for the Book and appreciation for the insolent brouhaha of the world, so to speak. His story, based on classical (even ancient) culture, is also one of a man of the first scientific and poetic revolutions and a man of the Second World War and modern geopolitics – the period during which the artist became Abdalla with a capital "A".

Abdalla in the Center of the Periphery

The name "Abd-alla" – beyond its etymological vocation and its union with the name of God (Allah), i.e., transcendence – was honored by Hamed, son of a *fellah* (farmer), who was to play one of the most decisive, steadfast pictorial scores within the concrete equation posed during the second half of the 20th century by the Western modernist challenge to all peoples and to the intelligentsia of non-Western countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Latin America. It was a challenge to their political imagination on one side, and to their art history and images on the other; it could be said that *epistemological rupture* was an experience associated with various decolonization movements of the time.

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At the confluence of the Arab-Muslim world, the Mediterranean region and the large Western cities where the concept of the avant-garde was forged, the name "Abdalla" is also – and perhaps above all – a story of philosophical intermingling. For someone like Abdalla, who lived in Egypt, Denmark and France, and was also familiar with many other world heritage sites and visual memories, Sicily is linked to Africa, and the ancient mosaic tradition is linked to the modernist tradition of collage. This interlacing – like an arabesque extended into a word before the same word comes undone into an arabesque – makes sense only in the dialectic of origins and uprooting, of near and far, in the back and forth between culturally and geographically distant ideals woven together and set in motion. An artist who adopts the philosophy of cultural interweaving agrees to become a symbol of mobility and exchange between a triumphant modernity (in the center) and a disenchanted modernity (on the margins), between a past in the making and a present in ruins. "Abdalla" is therefore a name that fits between the asperities of archaeological stones and those of modern mechanics. It is also a sound echoing fragmented knowledge, beyond the profane and the sacred, where individual fate *becomes* collective history and vice versa.

Born in Cairo in 1917, a year before the fall of the Ottoman Empire and on the eve of the great 1919 Egyptian revolt against British colonialism led by Saad Zaghloul, Abdalla developed his artistic language during the time of Nasser's revolution and later arrived in Paris, where decolonization and emancipation movements were beginning to be reflected in European social struggles. "Abdalla" is thus more than just a signature, more than the mark of a person vouching for his own subjectivity, tested by exile and utopia; "Abdalla" is also the name of our urgent contemporary need to decolonize modern European and American art history. The official story contains the seeds of other stories, chiseled by other masters and artisans, other aesthetic strategies (other "I"s and "we"s) and those who would have participated but whom we have preferred to keep in a geographical and cultural enclosure at the risk of no longer being able to read the names of our own ancestors, let alone decipher their secret dreams and map their detours. It is now up to us to transform the stories of the exiled, displaced and uprooted, to build a structure for art history in exile, on the move and free from ideological ties.

Abdalla had already travelled a great deal, well before his more or less definitive departure for Denmark in 1956, and also just before Gamal Abdel Nasser took power in Egypt in 1952, dethroning King Farouk and symbolizing the affirmation of Cairo as the cultural and political center of the Arab world. During this crucial period, the colorful cosmopolitanism of Belgian, Italian, French, Jewish, Greek, American and Syrian Cairo gradually buckled under the effects of pan-Arab nationalism and the Nasserite revolution, which worked for land reform for the peasants (*fellahs*) and against the feudal lords, but also led to the gradual impoverishment of the working classes, rural migration, full-on urbanization, the consolidation of the Arab League on the international scene and especially the emergence of the anti-colonialist movement of nonaligned countries, in which Nasser took a leading role (alongside Tito, Sukarno and Nehru) with the Bandung Conference in 1955, followed by the triumphant economic plans for the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the construction of the Aswan Dam. Other consequences were the cultural break with the West, censorship of journalists and writers, and the opening of political prisons.

Figure 1: Hamed Abdalla, *Fellaha* (Peasant), 1953, gouache on cardboard, 55 x 46 cm. Hamed Abdalla estate.

Cultural Counter-Currents and Emancipated Writing

Cairo, where Abdalla spent five more years developing his art in the 1950s, was at that time synonymous with rising nationalism and traces of authoritarianism in a city once described as *the* Arab capital because of the freedom of thought in intellectual circles (fig. 1). Abdalla sensed that the lives of artists and intellectuals would become increasingly difficult. The years of French Surrealism, symbolized by writers like George Henein, Edmond Jabès and Albert Cossery, were followed by a period of "socialist realism", state art and the ruling bureaucracy. Beginning in 1956, the Nasser government called on local artists to participate in major public campaigns, during which they were sent to Nubia, for example, to study the life of the peasants and produce works glorifying the little people, the "Arab nation" and other Third World utopias (Abdalla immediately refused to participate).[3] These artists ended up creating a new urban and industrial folklore germinated on the back of the *fellahs* who came to the city to profit from the economic boom but instead found devitalized land and a worn-out social fabric: "Fields of rubble, miserable neighborhoods crammed with hundreds of thousands of poor people who live – on what? – which are gutted by the Revolutionary soldier-urbanist to build wide roads, with little regard for the miserable inhabitants, who cram themselves into other overcrowded slums a little further away"[4] (while the same "poor of the nation" adorn frescoes by artists selling their art in exchange for the patronage of the "benefactor" state). Those were the compromises and pretenses in force in Nasser's society, which began as a symbol of renewal and a breath of freedom and then darkened into repression. And those were the paradoxes of the post-colonial Egyptian era that Abdalla fought unrelentingly, whether actively or through silence and withdrawal, beginning with his early exile in Denmark as of 1956. Far from the Cold War, geopolitics and the class struggle, Abdalla grieved perhaps most of all for the dynamic, cosmopolitan language of the 1940s, the same language commemorated by Edward Said, nostalgic for the "cultural crosscurrents" of 1940s Cairo, where he grew up: "The spoken Cairo dialect of Arabic, virtuosically darting in and out of solemnity, colonial discipline, and the combination of various religious and political authorities, retaining its quick, irreverent wit, its incomparable economy of line, its sharp cadences and abrupt rhythms."[5]

This same darting, virtuoso language of the 1940s can be found in the first novels of Naguib Mahfouz and the comedies of Naguib al-Rihani (whom Edward Said saw as the Balzac and Molière of Cairo) or in the evanescent yet inexhaustible images of Egyptian cinema. Said continues: "A cohabitation of Islamic, Mediterranean, and Latin and erotic forms, the latent promiscuity of this semi-underground Cairo...what I can easily imagine that the European colonists were attracted to, drew on, and – for their own safety – kept at bay...The traffic between Europe and *this* Cairo is what we are beginning to lose, as Nasser's Arabization, Sadat's Americanization, and Mubarak's reluctant Islamization efface its transactions altogether."[6]

Abdalla took inspiration from the letter and from writing – a symbol of civilization if ever there was one – a sensitive area with extraordinary visual power. This writing is the opposite of that which, under cover of a ban on images, tried to establish rules for the meaning of words. Abdalla's writing is the product, in painting, of several registers of writing, from the most tangible to the most metaphysical

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[3] Among the most remarkable artists who participated in the state art project for a certain period of time were Tahia Halim (1919-2003) and Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar (1925–1965). Abdalla had not waited for the project; he had already visited Upper Egypt and Nubia for several months in 1939 and 1940.

[4] Simone Lacouture, *Egypte* (Paris: Seuil, 1962), 74. The author, speaking of the children of the Nile Valley who had been trained to work with wool and needlepoint, was amazed by the beauty of their productions. She mentioned Abdalla as a leader of the "Cairo School" and as an innovative artist who knew how to experiment with tradition: "The most impressive, Hamed Abdallah, creator of large compositions with an angular design and daring expenses of solid color, drew his inspiration from the Egyptian lower classes so close to his childhood." *Ibid*., 182.

[5] Edward W. Said, "Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Cultural Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt," *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001 [1987]).

[6] Said, "Cairo Recalled: Growing Up in the Cultural Crosscurrents of 1940s Egypt."

(calligraphic writing, choreographic writing, talismanic writing, etc.), themselves conditioned by extremely (dizzyingly, we might say) varied visual media (from paint on papier mâché or on tissue paper to combustion as a principle of composition, and from relief print to watercolor).

We might say, therefore, that the *emancipation of writing* is the nodal point, or the most critical issue in the "Abdalla" chapter in the history of modern art. That means writing not only as a gesture, but also as a social and symbolic practice (writing is always circular, written for both oneself and for the recipient). By celebrating the visual, plastic power of writing as well as the freedom to *take on* writing, to re-appropriate and desacralize it to better glorify it, Hamed Abdalla joined a constellation of peers who were also concerned with this problem, this *malaise of civilization:* the search for a new language while reconnecting with a language's ancient roots, a problem that could be defined, to some extent, by the European avant-garde's interested in so-called "primitivism". In this context, we could mention the Europeans Paul Klee, Jean Dubuffet and Henri Michaux, but also the painters Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Shakir Hassan Al Said and Ahmed Cherkaoui, who, in countries as diverse as Iran, Iraq and Morocco, were dealing with writing that had a status very different from that of their metropolitan counterparts. It was more rooted in a widespread, living literary tradition (the Qur'an and more generally calligraphy as a *symbolic form*), one that was no doubt far more standardized and codified than Dubuffet's involvement with the art of the mentally unstable or Michaux's mescaline-fueled wanderings. The case of Hamed Abdalla in the story of "Letterist" or "bookish" art (a cosmopolitan story whose geographic dynamism transcended national and colonial divisions) is certainly more exemplary because of its pioneering nature as a contemporary equivalent of the Parisian Letterist movement, whose founder, Isidore Isou, was exiled there during the Second World War. But even though Abdalla cultivated an intimate knowledge of sacred and mythological texts, backed up by a mastery of calligraphy, which he had practiced since childhood, his investigation of the letter was no less liberating and experimental than that of the heirs of Dadaism and especially Surrealism, with which Egyptian artists had been familiar since the 1930s (the generation of George Henein, Ramses Yunan and Kamel el-Telmessany, among others, and the activities of the Art and Liberty group). The difference was that Abdalla's ties with Western modernism were closer to informal abstraction and the CoBrA[7] movement, probably the most intense (and transnational) seat of analytical deconstruction that refused to choose between figurative and abstract art (in this context, we might highlight the importance of the letter and the bookish paradigm in the painting of the artist Pierre Alechinsky, who was affiliated with CoBrA). In the specific context of the post-Second World War avant-garde and a Europe in ruins, this presented the risk of division between an increasingly open (progressive) definition of abstraction and an increasingly closed (conservative) definition of figuration. In the Egyptian and Afro-Arab context, it would take on a different connotation.

Hieroglyphs, Talismans and Tattooed Memory

Abdalla invented – and never stopped using – many ways of extending the power of writing to the power of the image (and vice versa), instead of opposing or separating them, as was done by some orthodox modernists who were in love with purity and minimalism, and by those who fetishized either the image *or* the text. His unlimited repertoire of mobile signs, spirit words and other talismans were encompassed by the invention of what he called the "creative word", or the unity of original meaning in a system he developed in the manner of a scribe-alchemist, creating a half-scriptural, half-anthropomorphic alphabet. It was as if the *sacred* message of writing were concealed or nestled (in the most erotic sense of the term) in the speculative, hallucinatory contours of a body dancing,

[7] CoBrA, or "Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam", was an art movement founded in Paris on 8 November 1948 by the poets Christian Dotremont and Joseph Noiret and the painters Karel Appel, Constant, Corneille and Asger Jorn in response to the quarrel between abstraction and figuration. The movement, which published the journal *Cobra* (1948–1951), was dissolved in 1951.

praying, mourning or rejoicing in the effusions of colors and rhythms of the material. The *profane* body of a dancing child or drunken individual (or even of a bent-over peasant or a couple making love) joins its contortions to the Arabic letter like a fingerprint – engraving and suspending the meaning at the same time. Abdalla's alphabet is also related to a bestiary worthy of writers like Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, who wanted to break down limits on language (to the point of mysticism) while bringing together encyclopedic knowledge, combining a taste for nomenclature with a taste for collections (or series). In this sense, words are treated as moving bodies that retain and reveal meaning, which also moves, since the word-concept (the idea) is integrated into the mainly visual dynamic force field that Abdalla called "creative word". This shows with renewed eloquence how the *painting of symbols* or the art of the letter as practiced by Abdalla is close to the original collision of text and the body found in ancient memory games, which we could call, as Abdelkébir Khatibi did, the emanations of a "tattooed memory", a memory that goes beyond the spoken word by turning writing into a rite of passage between the here and now and the hereafter, between desire and mourning, a *bodily* memory (we are even tempted to say that Abdalla created a kind of Kamasutra of the Arabic language). The Egyptian painter seems to be reflected perfectly in the words of the Moroccan writer, as if the two had known each other well: "I wrote, an act without despair that was meant to conquer my sleep, my wandering. I wrote because it was the only way to disappear from the world, to cut myself off from chaos, to accustom myself to solitude. I believed in the destiny of the dead, so why not unite with the cycle of my eternity?"[8]

If Abdalla said, "I painted…" as Khatibi said "I wrote…", it would not be so much an analogy between the painted image and the literary text as an analogy between the act of painting and the act of writing: in both cases, there is the same desire to find a higher consciousness amidst the drifting of the mind and the passage of time, to make oneself the tattoo artist/witness of a collective memory that lies under our feet and would be like the symbol of the separation between a Me-body and a Me-word. Imagine Abdalla having exactly the same dream as Khatibi: "I dreamed the other night that my body was words."[9] There is no more dazzling equivalent in the work of the painter/tattoo artist than his monument to dreaming and wandering, *Al Sharida*, a word that can be translated as "lost" (in the sense of "lost in thought") or "escaped" (in the feminine).

[8] Abdelkébir Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée* (El Jadida, Okad, 2007 [1979]), 87. Abdalla and Khatibi did not know each other either personally or through their work, but a comparative analysis shows that they were driven by the same meditation on the relationship between marginality and universality, to the point of creating a path of initiation.

[9] Khatibi, *La Mémoire tatouée*, 79.

Figure 2: Hamed Abdalla, *Al Sharida* (Lost), 1966, mixed media, wooden relief on isorel, 116 x 89 cm. Tate Modern, London.

This imposing work with an outstanding conception consists of a system of wooden bas-reliefs with an architectural stature that allows the letters of the word "AL SHARIDA" to be arranged like a dismembered body or a couple whose bodies are entwined (or sitting on each other), as Abdalla often suggested in many of his works (fig.2). *Al Sharida* is a fine example of this research into the hybrid and the *third sense*, beyond the visual form and the form of language. It is even more evident here since the wandering or sleep of the spirit refers to what we do as readers/interpreters looking at the painting: we recognize the word written out "in full" while letting ourselves wander through untold, unpredictable ramifications, as if the moment when we read the word and the moment when it escapes us (the moment when the letters seem to let go of each other or break free of their own meaning) were basically the same. For Abdalla, the only meaning is nomadic, like human nomadism, beginning with his own discontinuous journey across Africa and Europe. *Al Sharida* dates from 1966, when the artist left Denmark for France, a turning point marked by the return to forms even more ingrained in Egyptian and Arabic identity. Edourad El Kharrat, in a remarkable text on Abdalla, was the first to speak about them as "Arabic hieroglyphics", observing with keen insight the "expressionist treatment of Lettrism…the dynamics of the letters, their inner movement and the incessant waves of their exuberance".[10]

Amongst the collection of symbols invented by Abdalla is an exact double of the prostrate figure: the figure of the *fellah*, the peasant whose freedom is attached to his land yet threatened by the expropriation of that land. Abdalla started using this figure in the Egyptian years (the 1940s). With his arms thrown up in the air, like a letter seeking its destination, or, more precisely, the crescent of the character *lam-alif* stretching up towards its silent accent, Abdalla's *fellah* is a symbol of resistance, revolt, insurrection – he is like the closed fist of the prostrate body, which suddenly opens. Again, language and image are never completely separated; they come together in the search for a third space, an area of recognition of symbols not identified by purely encyclopedic knowledge. Abdalla's language is inspired by the architecture, calligraphy and miniatures of the so-called Islamic tradition as well as by Persian, Chinese, African and European modernism, which he first confronted, almost without realizing it, in the 1940s. Above all, however, to completely free himself of distinctions between abstract and figurative, geometrics and symbolism, he takes even more liberties in layering the painting space and the writing space, i.e., the space of projection and of inscription.

Fragments of Knowledge, Fragments of Sensations

Abdalla's attraction to the concept of the *talisman* is related to this idea of *a posteriori knowledge* (as opposed to *preconceived knowledge)* and also to the analogy between the shape of the painting and the structure of a cartouche in which a name (divine or secular) is inscribed. He used this concept – at once numerological, ritual and chromatic – as a title for a group of works and suggested it in all his work as of the 1950s, especially when he finally stopped figuratively representing the *fellah* and other humans (as crude and childish as those figures from the Egyptian period seem, Abdalla was deconstructing the figure like a puppeteer frantically manipulating his marionettes). With the symbol of the talisman, he gradually moved away from this chapter to follow the Letterist "Arabic hieroglyphics", an adventure that was at once esoteric and erudite, speculative and narrative, like a sequence of numbers that we are asked to first *recognize* and *interpret* rather than read or just contemplate (fig. 3).

Navigating between memory games and mirror games, Abdalla's talismans make the substance and form shine one over the other, unfolding words (playing on the sound each contains, the utopia it covers, the institution that sets its value, etc.). Everything takes place in the folds, that is, in the infinite, which begins again with each new interpretation, each new interpreter who tries to decipher the

[10] Edouard El Kharrat, "Hamed Abdalla, The Artist of Monumentalism" (in Arabic), *Al-Hayat*, July 29, 1994, pages numbers unknown, (newspaper clip from Hamed Abdalla Archives).

talisman. But also in the identification with the physical folds, between the folds of the material (crumpled paper, cracked paint and other textures creating linings, interstitial spaces) and folds of vision: the deep meaning contained in Abdalla's talismans represents a hatching in both directions, up and down, open and closed. As if to remind us of the precept of the philosopher Gilles Deleuze, questioning the idea of the *fold*, developed at the end of his life by Gottfried Leibniz in his *Monadology*: "The task of perception entails pulverizing the world, but also one of spiritualizing its dust."[11] For Leibniz, one cannot access remarkable perceptions through the simple ratio of parts to the whole, but by synthesizing microscopic perception and macroscopic perception; a model that seems particularly suited to the talismanic language of Abdalla, for whom a letter was never a pure component of one word, and one word was never a pure component of a phrase or concept. The material the work is made of is also involved in this stratification of sensory experience. Deleuze continues: "That we are always perceiving in folds means that we grasp figures without objects, but through the dust without object that the figures raise up from the depths, which falls back again to let them be seen for a moment. I see the folds of things through the dust they stir up, whose folds I move aside. I do not see into God; I see into the folds."[12]

There is a stratification of perception but also a metaphysical splitting into two of the subject in a search for a synthesis between the two poles of existence, as the reader of the Qur'an is invited to do in two suras noted by Abdalla himself: "To God belong the East and the West; whithersoever you turn, there is the Face of God" (verse 2:115). Or: "Have they not regarded all things that God has created casting their shadows to the right and to the left, bowing themselves before God in all lowliness?" (verse 16:48).[13]

Abdalla's talismans, in spite of the swirls and jumbles that animate them, retain something of this transcendental experience; even when they are expressed in the world of profane symbols, they recall this immanent symmetry, this all-encompassing space (no top, bottom, left or right) and especially the deity's power of ubiquity.

While Abdalla's talismanic modernism ultimately offers a clear, unambiguous message ("sadness", "surrender" and "slavery", "prostration", "pain", "war", "defeat", "resistance" "revolution", "freedom", but also "love", "affection" and "desire"), above all it gives the (Arabic) alphabet a new plasticity, which belongs as much to the popular tradition as to the science of movement and the theory of decoration. In so doing, his experience of Arabic was influenced by his study of Chinese calligraphy, his knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics and Paul Klee's use of the broken line. Abdalla expressed this eclectic, interdisciplinary spirit in the modernist context, but its origins can also be found in many ancient works, such as the cosmographic books of the 16th century published during the second Mamluk dynasty, in which the miniatures reflect the Arabic, Persian and Turkish styles, with some even exhibiting Indian or European traits.[14] In other words, beyond international cosmopolitanism, Abdalla was particularly interested in the cosmopolitanism of the Arabic world itself, with its wealth of sources and influences (literary cosmopolitanism). This was well before the advent of Impressionism and European painting in the bourgeois Egyptian society (the cosmopolitanism of the salon) of the early 20th century.

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[11] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque,* trans. Tom Conley (London: The Athlone Press, 1993), 87.

[12] Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque,* 94.

[13] Hamed Abdalla Archives.

[14] Abdalla took particular note of one such book, *Qanun al-dunya wa-'aja'ibiha,* by Sheikh Ahmad [Misri], which he read about in Jean-Jacques Lévêque and Nicole Ménant, *La Peinture islamique et indienne* (Lausanne: Rencontre, 1967), 182. Hamed Abdalla Archives.

Figure 3: Hamed Abdalla, *Al Amal* (Hope), 1958, gouache on paper, 30 x 21 cm. Collection Philippe and Olivia Maari, Cairo.

One of his most significant trips in this context was undoubtedly the one he made to Sicily, where he exhibited in 1957 at the Mediterranean Cooperation Center in Palermo, during which he discovered the Palatine Chapel (dating from 1143 and built over an old mosque) on the first floor of the Norman Palace, with its magnificent Byzantine mosaics; its mix of Byzantine, Norman and Arab influences; and its coffered wooden ceiling, which was designed by the workers of the Caliphate of Cairo. Fascinated by it, Abdalla studied its history and decorative and iconographic system. He also looked into the presence of Islam in Palermo at that time (fig. 4). The encounter with these mosaics featuring characters that Abdalla "recognized" as his own played a totally paradoxical role: he re-discovered his Arab identity outside of the Arab world imagined by Nasser's conservative pan-Arabism; Abdalla's pan-Arabism is an intercontinental dream that extends throughout the Mediterranean and re-creates the link with Africa.

Figure 4 : Illustrations from Ugo Monneret de Villard's *La Pittura musulmana al soffitto della cappella Palatina in Palermo*, Rome, La Libreria dello Stato, 1950.

From the palm trees of Palermo to those of Cairo, sacred figures mingle with secular figures. The salt and ash of the Arab street rain down on conches filled with holy water and candles burning in the Christian chapel. The Muslim shrine recalls Italy, a country he had known under another name and under other meridians, the kingdom of Sicily, a land with a perfectly composite identity, born of the rapid succession of Byzantines, Arabs and Normans between the 10th and 12th centuries. From the palm trees of Palermo to those of Cairo, the painter discovered a multiple identity, the product of a nomadic, multilingual, mixed civilization. This experience, both imaginary and real, is reflected in his love for the fresco – Abdalla has all the qualities of a fresco painter, even though he painted on paper throughout his life. In the same year as the trip to Palermo, the Danish art critic Ib Paulsen

immediately detected signs of an agitator and a primitivist universalist in Abdalla: "The strength of Abdalla's works is to plunge consciousness through centuries of evolution, going back to cave paintings, beyond borders, around the world, as far as the Babylonian cults, all the while retaining a firm desire to transform images according to the temperament that alters them, whether it is Chinese, Egyptian, Aztec, Sumerian, or that of Abdalla, Klee, Picasso, Munch or Gauguin . . . [Abdalla] is a flame, a storm in the burning desert. We have much to learn from him."[15]

The big difference between European primitivists and Abdalla, like many artists of the Middle East and Africa, was that his reinvention of a vernacular or "authentic" language was not based on the invention of a faraway, foreign Other, but on an introspective movement, a self-analysis, which goes far beyond considerations of identity, whether related to pan-Arabism or the Egyptian identity.

The Body of the Letter in the Philosophy of Being

Abdalla was a perceptive observer of major avant-garde advances, such as the "free words" dear to Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, but he was more concerned with encircling words with a halo so they would regain their lost aura, another way of expressing the purpose of his talismanic modernism. The talisman is an invisible grid that gives the word its plastic relief and metaphysical depth. It is activated as a spiral inside the word, darting into the impure space of the material and the ideogram, an ideogram that is transformed under our eyes, abandoning calligraphy for a blind task and discontinuous, dismembered, even atomized writing. From that same radical movement, consisting of distorting the links between the letters of a word, stripping the language for the benefit of torn symbols, Abdalla foreshadowed many typographical innovations in relation to the Arabic "alphabet": typography is not just a given repertoire of symbols representing a language, it is also a reserve of meaning (and sounds) awaiting reincarnation. In this respect, the Arabic alphabet – which differs from the Latin alphabet in that it is foliated writing with letters that are joined together and no capitals (on the Western printing press) – goes against the very idea of "typography" or detached letters. This is why Abdalla's contribution to typographical and spatial uses of the Arabic letter goes far beyond the confines of the fine arts and the avant-garde, with which it is usually associated.[16]

If Abdalla's greatness lies in his proposal to merge *being* and the *letter,* like two sides of one and the same coin, it is to better reveal the function of the mirror, meaning that being can always find its salvation in the text, the source of all interpretations. And interpretations of the text themselves will win over minds when they also open to body language, the language of symbols, meaning in motion, which can operate both on an architectural surface, in the ornamental grammar of Islamic traditions, in tapestry and mosaics, but also in musical composition and mathematics – related areas Abdalla used with an economy of means and a variety of admirable procedures. Ultimately, this sacred union of being and the letter is perfectly situated beyond the formalistic games of the European Letterist movement, but it is close to the vitalist and political (or even anti-colonial) concerns of the CoBrA movement. It perfectly represents Abdalla's uniqueness in a trans-history of modern art beginning in the 1940s. If we were to summarize the terms of this union (being = letter), it would be hard to find a better definition than that of Gilles Deleuze when he explain the triad *percept, concept* and *affect*, or the very dynamic of creation, the same three dimensions in which we can perfectly break down each of the talismans engraved by Abdalla (*percept*: what is seen; *concept*: what is read; *affect*: what transforms our being).

Similarly, the way he signs his paintings distorts the difference between Latin and Arabic; we do not know if "Abdalla" is written in "French" or in Arabic; in other words, he is distorting the difference between two symbolic systems that are foreign to each other to better merge them into a set of

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[15] Hamed Abdalla Archives.

[16] An Iranian artist influential in this area was Reza Abedini, a leading player in the creation of a Perso-Arabic "typography". Cf. *Reza Abedini, Graphiste/Graphic Designer* (Paris: PYRAMID ntcv, 2004).

horizontal and vertical lines, or a kind of wild fictional cuneiform. The name "Abdalla" then becomes a pure effusion of space and movement that falls outside a specific idiom but, in an exquisite paradox, uses a language that seems both vernacular and futuristic.

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Biography

Morad Montazami is an art historian, a publisher and a curator. He is editor-in-chief for the journal *Zamân (Textes, images et documents)* and director for the platform Zamân Books & Curating, committed to develop studies and exhibitions of Arab, Asian and African modernities. He published several essays on artists such as Jeremy Deller, Francis Alÿs, Zineb Sedira, Éric Baudelaire, Walid Raad, Latif al-Ani, Bahman Mohassess, Mohammed Melehi, Faouzi Laatiris. He was co-curator for *Unedited History : Iran 1960-2014*, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris-MAXXI, Rome (2014-2015); as well as curator for *Volumes Fugitifs: Faouzi Laatiris et l'institut national des beaux-arts de Tétouan*, Musée Mohamed VI d'art moderne et contemporain in Rabat (2016), *Bagdad Mon Amour* at Institut des cultures d'Islam, Paris (2018) and NEW WAVES: Mohamed Melehi et les archives de l'École de Casablanca, MACAAL Museum, Marrakech (2019).

Nadine Atallah[1]

La participation de l'Égypte à la IIème Biennale de São Paulo (1953-1954)

Une initiative individuelle, des enjeux nationaux

Abstract

This article introduces in detail the genesis of Egypt's first participation in the São Paulo Biennial (1953-1954). The story begins with a spontaneous application from a Swiss painter settled in Egypt after having lived in Brazil: Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika (1908-1964). Her request soon leads to the project of composing an official delegation to represent the country, at a time when Egypt was going through a period of political change, as the republic was proclaimed in June 1953. Within an artistic landscape deprived of specialized administration, the exhibition's preparation was associated with several debates to establish who had the skills and legitimacy to select the artworks to be sent to São Paulo. The final list of artists reflects the reality of the Egyptian art worlds in the first half of the 1950s, in which academic personalities mix with a new generation keen to produce art which would stand as modern and authentically national, and with members of foreign elites well integrated into local society. This "group of modern Egyptian art painting, in the words of Burchard, includes a third of women and stands out as one of the most gender balanced pavilions in the Biennial. It thus reveals the important contribution of women to the development of modern art in Egypt and its promotion worldwide.

Mots clés : Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika, Art et diplomatie, Cosmopolitisme, Artistes femmes, Circulations transnationales

L'Égypte participe pour la première fois à la Biennale de São Paulo lors de sa deuxième édition, qui se tient de décembre 1953 à février 1954. Fondée en 1951 sur le modèle de la Biennale de Venise, la Biennale de São Paulo est l'une des pionnières d'un genre qui contribue à façonner le paysage artistique moderne mondialisé. C'est dans l'objectif affirmé de faire de la capitale du Sudeste un pôle artistique international que l'industriel et amateur d'art Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho impulse le projet de la Biennale après avoir mis en place en 1948 le Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo (MAM-SP)[2]. Succédant à une première édition centrée sur les Amériques et l'Europe – hormis la présence notable du Japon –, la Biennale de 1953 s'ouvre vers d'autres régions du monde en intégrant l'Égypte, l'Indonésie et Israël. L'Égypte s'y distingue alors en tant que seul pays arabe et seul pays d'Afrique représenté ; une exceptionnalité qui la caractérise déjà lorsqu'elle prend part pour la première fois à la Biennale de Venise en 1938, au sein du pavillon italien. L'engouement national pour ces grandes manifestations artistiques se confirme quand l'Égypte du roi Farouk acquiert, en 1952, son propre pavillon officiel dans les Giardini vénitiens. Quelques années et une révolution plus tard,

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[2] Isobel Whitelegg, « The Bienal Internacional de São Paulo: a concise history, 1951-2014, » *Perspective* 2 (2013), consulté le 15 mai 2019, http://journals.openedition.org/perspective/3902.

la troisième biennale au monde est inaugurée en 1955 par le président Gamal Abdel Nasser à Alexandrie, mettant à l'honneur les pays méditerranéens. La géographie des biennales originelles, articulant Venise à São Paulo et Alexandrie, témoigne du rôle fédérateur et prescripteur joué par les pays du sud, et particulièrement par l'Égypte, dans l'organisation des mondes de l'art au lendemain de la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Le développement de la création artistique constitue en effet une facette importante du projet social et politique de la modernité égyptienne, et le pays multiplie les initiatives pour favoriser la reconnaissance internationale de ses artistes.

Depuis 1924, le Brésil et l'Égypte entretiennent des relations diplomatiques qui renforcent les échanges commerciaux actifs depuis l'époque du protectorat britannique. Mais c'est surtout la reconnaissance par le Brésil de toutes les nations nouvellement indépendantes au cours des années 1950 qui rapproche les deux puissances[3]. Or 1953 est une année décisive : la République égyptienne est proclamée le 18 juin, près d'un an après le coup d'État des Officiers libres qui aboutit à la destitution du roi. En ces temps révolutionnaires, la priorité est d'organiser un nouveau gouvernement dans la perspective d'affranchir le pays de la domination coloniale : bien que l'indépendance de l'Égypte soit officiellement reconnue en 1922 par la Grande-Bretagne, elle ne devient véritablement effective qu'après le retrait des dernières troupes britanniques du territoire, à l'issue de la Crise de Suez de 1956. Il serait alors tentant de penser qu'en participant à la IIème Biennale de São Paulo, le nouvel État en train de se constituer consolide une stratégie politique visant à rallier le concert des nations modernes. Mais la documentation conservée par la Biennale révèle que l'initiative de cette exposition fut avant tout individuelle, et non pas gouvernementale[4]. Ce sont en effet les efforts d'une artiste, Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika (1908-1964), Suissesse installée en Égypte après avoir vécu au Brésil, qui ont permis à la nation égyptienne d'avoir sa salle à São Paulo. Ayant d'abord contacté Matarazzo Sobrinho à titre personnel pour soumettre une candidature spontanée, Burchard[5] se charge rapidement, en dialogue avec les organisateurs brésiliens, de fédérer une vingtaine d'artistes et différents acteurs institutionnels. Engageant aussi bien son réseau que son temps et son argent personnels, elle coordonne et rend possible l'envoi des œuvres par-delà la Méditerranée et l'Atlantique. Cet article revient en détail sur la genèse complexe de la première participation de l'Égypte à cette grande manifestation ; une histoire singulière qui invite à reconsidérer le sens et les enjeux des participations nationales au sein des Biennales, en replaçant l'agentivité des artistes au cœur du processus. Il convient tout d'abord de présenter Burchard, dont le parcours international et les expériences en termes d'organisation d'exposition lui permettent de jouer le premier rôle. Néanmoins, dans le catalogue de la Biennale son nom s'efface au profit de la participation nationale égyptienne. Il s'agit alors de comprendre les raisons politiques, mais aussi très pragmatiques, qui mènent de son initiative personnelle à la constitution d'une délégation officielle. L'intervention gouvernementale implique la responsabilité, pour les participant·e·s, de représenter la nation. Des débats entourent alors les choix artistiques, tandis que la diplomatie apporte son soutien. La liste d'artistes finalement rassemblée est cosmopolite et mixte, indiquant la place centrale des étranger·ère·s dans la scène artistique égyptienne, et l'importance de la contribution des femmes à son développement et à sa valorisation à travers le monde.

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[3] Élodie Brun. « Le Brésil en Méditerranée : une éclosion stratégique sur fond d'héritages socio-historiques. » *Confluences Méditerranée* 74/3 (2010) : 53-72, consulté le 15 mai 2019, https://doi.org/10.3917/come.074.0053.

[4] Les archives sont conservées dans l'Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo situé dans les locaux de la Biennale au cœur du parc Ibirapuera à São Paulo. Un séjour en août 2017 rendu possible par la bourse Jean Walter-Zellidja de l'Académie française m'a permis de consulter le fonds relatif aux participations de l'Égypte. Celui-ci contient entre autres des extraits de correspondances, les fiches d'inscription des artistes, des documents relatifs au transport des œuvres, la documentation textuelle et visuelle envoyée par les artistes, ainsi que des coupures de presse.

[5] Dans cet article, nous nous référons à Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika par son nom d'artiste, Burchard, qui est celui qu'elle utilise pour signer ses œuvres et annoncer ses expositions.

De Zurich au Caire en passant par Rio : itinéraire de Burchard jusqu'à São Paulo[6]

« Irmgard-Micaela Burchard-Simaika ; nom compliqué, nom charade, et pourtant si simple : mon premier (Burchard) c'est l'origine suisse ; mon second (Simaika) c'est la passion égyptienne : mon tout c'est le mariage avec la peinture, l'union vraie, consubstantielle, trépidante – bien rare à ce degré – de l'artiste avec sa vocation[7] ». Figure méconnue de l'histoire de l'art, Burchard offre par son parcours personnel et professionnel un plaidoyer efficace en faveur d'une lecture transnationale de la modernité artistique. Exilée pendant la guerre mais aussi voyageuse infatigable, elle sillonne, observe et peint les rues de Paris, la nature brésilienne, la vallée du Nil et les côtes de la mer de Chine. Née à Zurich en 1908, Burchard grandit entre la Suisse et l'Allemagne. Enchaînant d'abord les emplois et les formations dans des secteurs aussi divers que l'industrie du tabac, le commerce, l'édition ou encore la thérapie par diathermie, elle écrit aussi et publie des poèmes dont certains furent traduits par Rabindranath Tagore. En 1936, elle épouse le peintre et graphiste suisse Richard Paul Lohse, dont elle divorce trois ans et demi plus tard. Ce mariage a pu jouer un rôle dans sa carrière, puisque c'est en 1937 qu'elle commence à travailler dans le milieu de l'art[8]. Cette année-là, elle organise trois expositions intitulées « Art Réaliste et Abstrait » à Zurich avec notamment en tête d'affiche Willi Baumeister, Paul Klee et Pablo Picasso. Cette expérience précède son implication dans la conception de « Twentieth Century German Art » en 1938 aux New Burlington Galleries à Londres. Cette exposition fit date comme l'une des réponses majeures à la condamnation des avant-gardes par le régime nazi[9]. Avec l'appui de figures telles que l'historien de l'art Herbert Read, Burchard lève les fonds nécessaires et mobilise un important réseau européen d'artistes et de collectionneur·euse·s, dont un certain nombre était alors en exil. Sont ainsi rassemblées plusieurs centaines d'œuvres signées par des modernistes de renom dont Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Paul Klee, Oskar Kokoschka, Franz Marc et Emil Nolde. Après la fin de l'exposition, Burchard s'installe à Rome où elle aurait suivi des cours d'art et d'archéologie, mais elle est expulsée vers la Suisse en 1940. Probablement inquiète de la situation politique, elle part pour le Brésil où elle séjourne de 1941 à 1947. Elle y trouve un emploi dans une usine de poupées, et s'implique dans l'organisation d'une nouvelle exposition antinazie à la galerie Askanasy à Rio de Janeiro. C'est aussi là qu'elle commence à peindre. En 1945, elle montre ses tableaux lors d'une première exposition personnelle à l'Institut des Architectes Brésil-États-Unis, toujours à Rio. Invitée par Wilhelm Uhde à exposer à Paris en 1947, elle regagne le Vieux Continent. C'est là qu'elle fait la connaissance du mathématicien égyptien Jacques Boulos Simaika, qu'elle épouse en secondes noces en 1952. Cette rencontre la conduit au Caire dès 1951, et c'est sur cette terre d'adoption qu'elle finit brutalement ses jours en 1964, emportée par une hémorragie cérébrale à la veille de sa dernière exposition personnelle.

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[6] Nous tenons à signaler ici les travaux en cours de l'historien de l'art Andreas Alfred Meier concernant la vie et l'œuvre de Burchard, et à le remercier pour les informations qu'il a généreusement partagées avec nous. Burchard a également fait l'objet d'un mémoire de Master qui se concentre sur ses activités en Europe : Lucy Watling. « Irmgard Burchard (1908-1964): Zurich, London and the recognition of cultural activism. » Mémoire de MA, Londres, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 2010. Merci à Marie-Amélie Senot, attachée de conservation en charge de l'art moderne et de l'art contemporain au LaM, Villeneuve d'Ascq, pour les références et informations concernant Burchard qu'elle m'a aimablement communiquées.

[7] Michel Conil-Lacoste. « Cham El-Nessim à Saint Germain des Prés. » *Le Monde*, 1er avril 1955, d'après des notes dactylographiées reproduisant des textes critiques sur l'œuvre de Burchard conservées à la Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Paris, fonds Fernand Leprette, cote Ms. 6054(3), 5 feuillets.

[8] Certaines biographies font cependant état d'activités plus anciennes liées à l'art, comme une collaboration avec *Der Sturm*, qui est à la fois le nom d'une revue fondée à Berlin par Herwarth Walden qui paraît de 1910 à 1932, et d'une galerie associée à cette revue, active de 1912 à 1924. Voir : Aimé Azar. *Femmes peintres d'Égypte*. Le Caire : Éditions Nouvelles, 1953, 66. Or, selon une communication personnelle d'Andreas Alfred Meier (juin 2019), les archives démontrent bien que Burchard n'aurait commencé à travailler dans l'art qu'à partir de 1937. Elle pourrait s'être inventée une expérience antérieure afin de conforter sa légitimité dans le milieu artistique.

[9] Rappelons que l'exposition *Entartete Kunst* se tient à Munich l'année précédente, en 1937. Pour plus de détails concernant « Twentieth Century German Art » et l'implication de Burchard dans son organisation, voir : Lucy Wasensteiner. « A British Statement against Nazi Policy? The Organization of Twentieth Century German Art ». In *London 1938. Defending 'Degenerate art'*, édité par Lucy Wasensteiner et Martin Faas, Berlin: Villa Liebermann, 2018, 59-66.

Burchard trouve rapidement sa place dans le milieu de l'art égyptien, cosmopolite et polyglotte. Les Égyptien·ne·s y côtoient en effet des artistes d'origine étrangère – notamment italienne, arménienne, française et britannique – de passage ou bien installé·e·s depuis plusieurs générations. Les actualités de Burchard sont largement relayées par la presse francophone, et plus particulièrement par *Le Journal Suisse d'Égypte* qui lui consacre régulièrement ses colonnes artistiques, la mettant parfois en concurrence avec l'une de ses compatriotes native du Caire, Margo Veillon (1907-2003). Tout comme Veillon, et seulement deux ans après son arrivée dans le pays, Burchard figure parmi les *Femmes Peintres d'Égypte* mises à l'honneur dans le petit livre d'Aimé Azar publié en 1953[10]. « Burchard a compris l'Égypte ; elle a pénétré jusqu'au fond de ce peuple qui cultive avec amour les traditions et qui ne craint pas d'affronter la vie moderne », écrit le critique levantin. – Lui-même étranger sur le sol égyptien, Azar est un autre exemple de la propension du paysage artistique et intellectuel de l'Égypte de l'époque à intégrer des identités culturelles multiples. La reconnaissance locale de Burchard est en partie liée à sa capacité à faire siennes les thématiques privilégiées de la peinture moderne égyptienne. À l'instar de ses collègues autochtones, elle arpente les campagnes, peignant les paysages ruraux et les paysan·ne·s au travail. Elle emporte à plusieurs reprises son chevalet en Haute-Égypte, notamment en 1953 lorsqu'elle part à la découverte des sites antiques de Louxor (fig. 1) et des ateliers de tapisserie de Nagada en compagnie de la peintresse Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989) qui y réalise le tableau *Tisserands de Nagada* (1953), exposé à la Biennale de São Paulo à la fin de l'année[11].

Entre 1956 et 1957, ses pérégrinations emmènent Burchard en Inde, au Cambodge, au Viêtnam, en Thaïlande et à Singapour, où elle produit des œuvres présentées à l'Atelier du Caire en décembre 1957. Extrêmement prolifique, elle multiplie les expositions personnelles et collectives en Égypte, mais aussi à travers le monde. Elle fait également partie des artistes qui représentent l'Égypte à la Biennale de Venise (1952, 1958), et à celle d'Alexandrie (1957, 1959). Son dynamisme témoigne certes d'une reconnaissance par les institutions et le marché, mais il doit aussi s'expliquer par la situation financière instable qui est la sienne. Burchard a besoin de vendre ses œuvres pour continuer à peindre ; le matériel coûte cher, or ses revenus et le soutien financier apporté par son époux ne suffisent pas à couvrir ses besoins et elle accumule les dettes[12]. La problématique économique atteste de la persévérance de Burchard à faire de la peinture son métier, après avoir envisagé d'autres carrières. Elle apporte en Égypte sa connaissance et son réseau d'acteur·trice·s culturel·le·s, d'institutions et d'artistes tissés à l'internationale, et contribue ainsi à créer de nouvelles connexions avec l'étranger. C'est ainsi que Burchard s'appuie conjointement sur son expérience au Brésil, pays qui l'a vue faire ses débuts en tant qu'artiste, et sur son ancrage dans la scène égyptienne pour contacter, depuis Le Caire, les organisateurs de la Biennale de São Paulo.

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[10] Aimé Azar. *Femmes peintres d'Égypte.* 36-45. Voir aussi le chapitre consacré à Burchard dans Aimé Azar. *La Peinture moderne en Égypte.* Le Caire : Éditions nouvelles, 1961, 331-339.

[11] Le titre est en français sur la fiche d'inscription (Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier « Inji Efflatoun »). Le tableau est conservé au musée Inji Efflatoun, Le Caire. Un article de Raymond Millet paru dans la presse sous le titre « Visite aux hommes vivants de Haute-Égypte » décrit les deux femmes au travail pendant qu'elles peignent les tisserands du village de Nagada, près de Louxor. La référence de cet article est inconnue, mais une copie est conservée dans un album du fonds Inji Efflatoun dans les archives de l'IFAO (Institut français d'archéologie orientale), Le Caire.

[12] Voir notamment la correspondance conservée dans le fonds Fernand Leprette à la Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève à Paris (cote Ms. 60-54), en particulier la lettre de Burchard à Liese Bihalji-Merin, Paris, 19 octobre 1961, et la lettre de Burchard à Edith Leprette, Le Caire, 11 octobre, 1961.

Figure 1 : Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika (à droite) et Inji Efflatoun (à gauche) lors d'un voyage à Louxor en 1953. Archives de l'IFAO, fonds Efflatoun. © IFAO.

De l'initiative personnelle à la délégation officielle

Le 3 février 1953, Burchard adresse une lettre (fig. 2) à Matarazzo Sobrinho et à Ruy Bloem, Président du MAM-SP, dans laquelle elle explique :

> J'aimerais beaucoup participer à la IIème Biennale de São Paulo et je vous serais bien reconnaissante de m'envoyer les conditions de participation à cette manifestation artistique.
> Ayant travaillé plus de 6 ans au Brésil, fait ma première exposition à l'Institut des Architectes Brésil-États-Unis en 1945 (préface du catalogue par Oswaldo Goeldi) et ayant fait en 1947 une exposition à Paris sous le patronage de S.E. L.M. de Souza Dantas, Ambassadeur du Brésil en France, je crois que mes tableaux d'Égypte pourraient avoir un intérêt tant du point de vue plastique que de celui du milieu qu'ils reflètent. […]
> Pensant à la grande perte de temps que nécessite l'envoi éventuel d'ici à São Paulo, je vous serais reconnaissante d'une réponse aussi rapide que possible[13].

Burchard joint à cette sollicitation une copie de son *curriculum vitae*, accompagnée d'une documentation textuelle et photographique. L'artiste exprime ici clairement sa volonté de participer à la Biennale à titre individuel, bien qu'une lettre plus tardive nous apprenne qu'elle envoie, en même temps, des informations concernant d'autres artistes d'Égypte par l'intermédiaire de l'ambassade du Brésil au Caire[14]. Arturo Profili, secrétaire général de la Biennale, lui répond en précisant le souhait initial des organisateurs de collaborer avec le gouvernement égyptien, et fait état de démarches entamées sans succès. Il entrevoit alors dans la lettre de Burchard l'occasion de se rapprocher du pays. Plutôt que d'encourager sa candidature personnelle, il privilégie l'idée de former avec elle un groupe d'artistes d'Égypte. Il semble en effet que les difficultés rencontrées par les organisateurs de la Biennale dans leur communication avec l'Égypte résultent avant tout de leur incapacité à identifier les interlocuteur·trice·s adéquat·e·s. Le début des années 1950 ne marque en effet pas seulement un chambardement politique capital pour l'Égypte, mais aussi une transition dans l'organisation de ses mondes de l'art qui sont en voie de professionnalisation et d'institutionnalisation. Le Ministère de la Culture ne voit le jour qu'en 1958, et au cours des premières années postrévolutionnaires ses fonctions sont assurées par divers organismes gouvernementaux. Les structures privées jouent alors un rôle fondamental. Ainsi, l'invitation de la part de la Biennale de São Paulo a été adressée à la Société des Amis de l'Art [*Gam'iyyat muhibbi al-funun al-gamila*], une association d'amateur·trice·s d'art qui, depuis 1919, organise chaque année le très conventionnel Salon du Caire. Ne se jugeant pas apte à y répondre, la Société transmet la demande au Ministère de l'Instruction publique [*Wizarat al-ma'arif al-'umumiyya*] qui décide de ne pas donner suite, arguant du manque de fonds nécessaires pour mettre en place une telle exposition[15].

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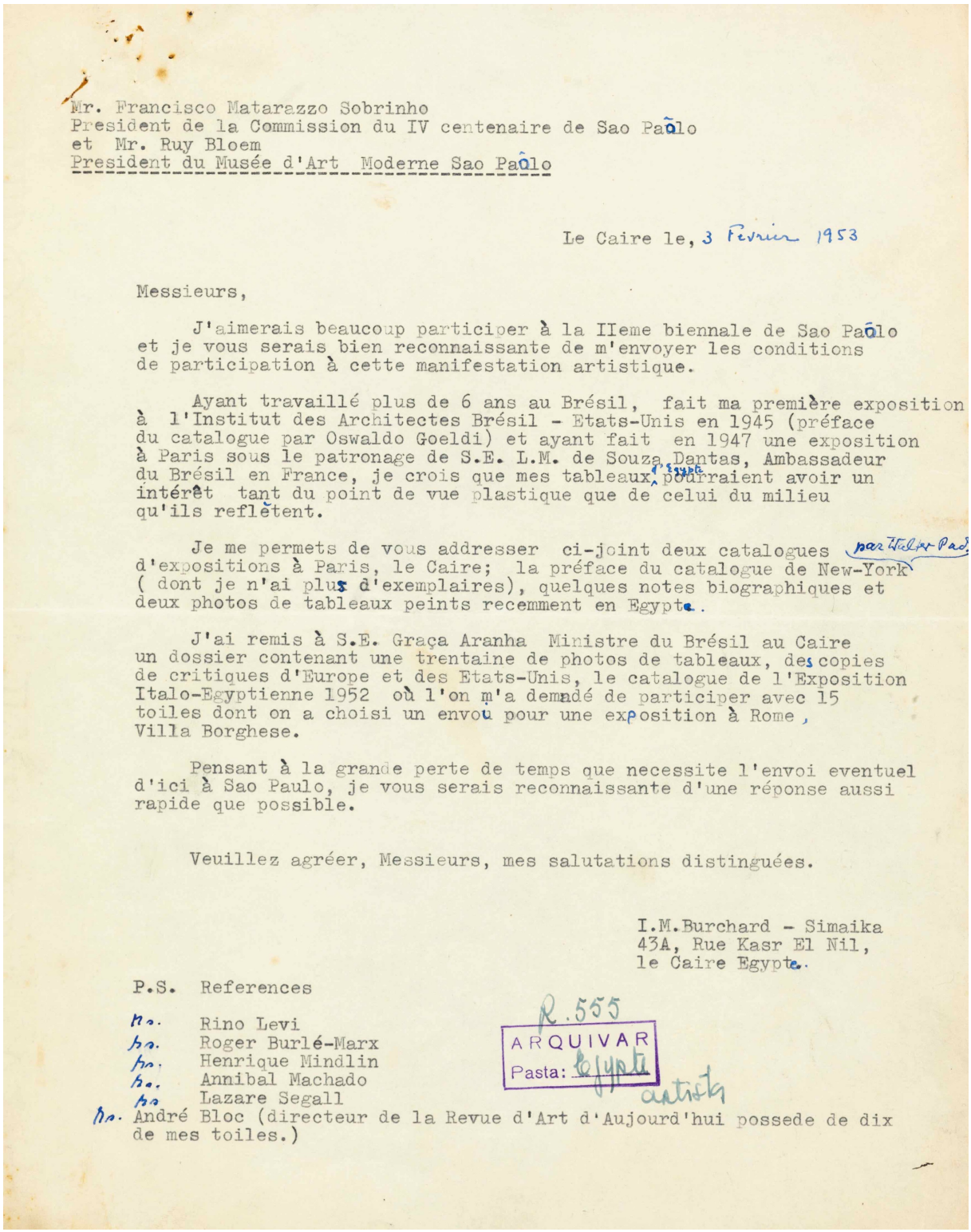
[13] Lettre de Burchard à Matarazzo Sobrinho et Bloem, Le Caire, 3 février 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3. L'ensemble de la correspondance entre Burchard et les organisateurs brésiliens est en français.

[14] Lettre de Burchard à Matarazzo Sobrinho et Bloem, Le Caire, 15 mars 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

[15] Gabriel Boctor. « Une nouvelle querelle des Anciens et des Modernes ». *La Bourse Égyptienne*, 30 mai 1953 : n.p.



Mr. Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho
President de la Commission du IV centenaire de Sao Paõlo
et Mr. Ruy Bloem
President du Musée d'Art Moderne Sao Paõlo

Le Caire le, 3 Février 1953

Messieurs,

J'aimerais beaucoup participer à la IIeme biennale de Sao Paõlo et je vous serais bien reconnaissante de m'envoyer les conditions de participation à cette manifestation artistique.

Ayant travaillé plus de 6 ans au Brésil, fait ma première exposition à l'Institut des Architectes Brésil - Etats-Unis en 1945 (préface du catalogue par Oswaldo Goeldi) et ayant fait en 1947 une exposition à Paris sous le patronage de S.E. L.M. de Souza Dantas, Ambassadeur du Brésil en France, je crois que mes tableaux pourraient avoir un intérêt tant du point de vue plastique que de celui du milieu qu'ils reflètent.

Je me permets de vous addresser ci-joint deux catalogues d'expositions à Paris, le Caire; la préface du catalogue de New-York (dont je n'ai plus d'exemplaires), quelques notes biographiques et deux photos de tableaux peints recemment en Egypte.

J'ai remis à S.E. Graça Aranha Ministre du Brésil au Caire un dossier contenant une trentaine de photos de tableaux, des copies de critiques d'Europe et des Etats-Unis, le catalogue de l'Exposition Italo-Egyptienne 1952 où l'on m'a demadé de participer avec 15 toiles dont on a choisi un envoi pour une exposition à Rome, Villa Borghese.

Pensant à la grande perte de temps que necessite l'envoi eventuel d'ici à Sao Paulo, je vous serais reconnaissante d'une réponse aussi rapide que possible.

Veuillez agréer, Messieurs, mes salutations distinguées.

I.M.Burchard - Simaika
43A, Rue Kasr El Nil,
le Caire Egypte.

P.S. References

Rino Levi
Roger Burlé-Marx
Henrique Mindlin
Annibal Machado
Lazare Segall
André Bloc (directeur de la Revue d'Art d'Aujourd'hui possede de dix de mes toiles.)

R.555
ARQUIVAR
Pasta: Egypte

Figure 2 : Lettre de Burchard à Matarazzo Sobrinho et Bloem, Le Caire, 3 février 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, document no R.555, dossier nº 62-3. © Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

L'intervention de Burchard se révèle alors providentielle. Bénéficiant d'une solide expérience d'organisation d'expositions, elle réunit rapidement un groupe d'artistes désireux·ses de participer à la Biennale. Comme elle l'explique dans une lettre du 16 avril 1953, « La liste des inscriptions comprend actuellement 22 artistes appartenant au groupement de 'l'Atelier', 54 rue Fouad Ier, Alexandrie, et aux groupements des 'Amis de l'Art', de 'l'Art Contemporain Égyptien', etc… »[16]. Le rôle exact des organismes cités n'est pas connu, sinon qu'ils semblent avoir contribué à la coordination. Parmi eux, figure donc la Société des Amis de l'Art initialement contactée par la Biennale, et avec laquelle Burchard est en relation directe puisqu'elle expose au mois de mai 1953 ses tableaux chez Madeleine Francine Biberia, une amatrice d'art mondaine alors secrétaire de la Société (fig.3). Quant à l'Atelier d'Alexandrie, association culturelle fondée en 1934 par le peintre Mohamed Naghi (1888-1956) et l'écrivain Gaston Zananiri (1904-1996) pour promouvoir la production artistique et littéraire, son secrétaire général Giuseppe Sebasti (1900-1961) se charge de transmettre à Profili les fiches d'inscription de plusieurs de ses membres : Clea Badaro (1913-1968), Effat Naghi (1905-1994), Oscar Terni (1900-?), et Gaby Cremisi (1912-1987)[17]. Son envoi est daté du mois d'avril, alors que Burchard se trouve précisément à Alexandrie où elle participe à l'exposition « 4 Peintres du Caire » aux Amitiés Françaises, aux côtés d'Inji Efflatoun, Kamal Youssef (né en 1923) et Hamed Nada (1924-1990) (fig.4).

Ce quatuor cairote figure justement parmi les exposant·e·s à São Paulo ; et Youssef et Nada font même partie du Groupe de l'Art Contemporain [*Gam'iyyat al-fann al-mu'asir*], que Burchard mentionne dans sa lettre. Fondé dans les années 1940, ce Groupe développe une recherche picturale nourrie par la culture et les traditions populaires égyptiennes[18], contribuant à façonner un imaginaire de l'identité et de la société égyptiennes. Deux autres de ses membres prééminents, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar (1925-1966) et Samir Rafi (1926-2004), envoient aussi des œuvres à la Biennale. Articulée autour du réseau de Burchard et constituée sur la base d'aspirations personnelles, la liste d'artistes présentée à Profili semble tout à fait informelle. Elle se voit pourtant gratifiée, au mois d'août 1953, d'une reconnaissance en tant que délégation officielle par le Ministère des Affaires étrangères égyptien[19]. Le gouvernement ayant d'emblée affirmé son manque de moyens financiers pour s'investir dans le projet, on comprend aisément qu'il saisisse l'opportunité d'une exposition clé en main et tous frais payés. Burchard, en effet, a convaincu ses collègues d'assumer les coûts relatifs au transport de leurs œuvres. Pour aider celles et ceux qui disposent de moyens limités, des fonds sont levés auprès de donateurs, parmi lesquels le peintre Mahmoud Saïd (1897-1964) et un certain Monsieur Aziz Amad. Burchard elle-même affirme avoir dépensé des « sommes assez grandes » pour permettre cet envoi[20]. Or c'est justement parce que les artistes investissent leur argent personnel dans l'exposition que le soutien des autorités s'avère nécessaire. « Nous attendons d'être officiellement agréés pour bénéficier de l'inscription en tant que Délégation égyptienne. Comme nous devons payer nos propres frais de transport, nous ne voudrions pas courir le risque de voir refuser nos tableaux », écrit Burchard en référence au règlement de la Biennale[21]. En effet, si les postulant·e·s ne sont pas reconnu·e·s en tant que délégation officielle, les œuvres qu'ils·elles envoient doivent être examinées à titre individuel par un jury brésilien, qui se réserve le droit de les

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[16] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Alexandrie, 16 avril 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

[17] Lettre de Giuseppe Sebasti à la Biennale de São Paulo, Alexandrie, 23 avril 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 67-4.

[18] Voir notamment : Aimé Azar. *L'Éveil de la Conscience Picturale, Le Groupe de l'Art Contemporain.* Le Caire : Imprimerie française, 1954) ; Alain Roussillon. « Identité et révolution : lecture de l'évolution de l'œuvre picturale de Abd Al-Hadi Al-Gazzar, artiste égyptien ». *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord*, XXXII (1993) : 151-162 ; Sam Bardaouil. *Surrealism in Egypt. Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group.* Londres: I.B. Tauris, 2016. Ch. « The Contemporary Art Group : From Protégés to Pretenders » : 226-235.

[19] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Le Caire, 14 août 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

[20] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Le Caire, 10 février 1955, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 93-2.

[21] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Alexandrie, 16 avril 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

écarter. En cas d'acceptation, celles-ci seront accrochées dans le hall général[22]. Au contraire, les participations nationales bénéficient d'une salle réservée, et les œuvres incluses ne nécessitent pas l'approbation du comité de la Biennale. Ainsi, si les efforts de Burchard pour officialiser l'exposition sont sans doute motivés par une volonté de promouvoir la création égyptienne, ils répondent surtout à des contraintes matérielles. En poussant la constitution d'une délégation nationale, elle assure la visibilité de ses tableaux et de ceux de ses collègues au sein de cette importante manifestation artistique, tandis qu'une candidature spontanée était vouée à l'incertitude. Mais le caractère officiel de l'exposition implique aussi une responsabilité vis-à-vis de la nation : celle de la représenter. Les biennales sont souvent conçues comme des échantillons ou des bilans de la production locale, et elles servent aussi de vitrine aux pouvoirs. Représenter la nation, c'est donc assumer une fonction diplomatique à travers l'art.

Représenter la nation : choix artistiques et soutien diplomatique

Le catalogue de la deuxième Biennale de São Paulo précise, pour la section égyptienne, qu'il s'agit d'une « délégation organisée par le musée d'art moderne du Caire »[23]. L'officialisation de la participation nationale se fait donc sous les auspices de l'une des seules institutions étatiques alors dédiées à l'art moderne dans la capitale égyptienne. En amont de la validation ministérielle, une commission constituée par Youssef Hammam, Contrôleur des Beaux-Arts [*muraqib 'amm li-l-funun al-gamila*] au sein du Ministère de l'Instruction publique, est ainsi chargée de définir les œuvres qui seront exposées. Mais les archives nous montrent qu'il n'y a que peu de différences entre les candidatures rassemblées par Burchard et la liste définitive imprimée dans le catalogue, suggérant que le musée intervient surtout pour formaliser la sélection. Pourtant, ce processus s'est heurté à quelques difficultés. On apprend ainsi par le critique d'art Gabriel Boctor, au mois de mai 1953, que « quelques professeurs jugeant que n'étant pas présents à cette manifestation celle-ci n'était pas représentative de l'art égyptien contemporain, firent des démarches pour retirer l'appui gouvernemental »[24]. Parmi les détracteurs, Inji Efflatoun cite le peintre Rouchdi Iskandar (1918-1989) auquel elle s'adresse publiquement dans la presse, lui reprochant de bafouer à la fois la décision de la commission de sélection et la liberté des artistes[25]. Iskandar est l'un des instigateurs de l'Union des Diplômés de la Faculté des Beaux-Arts [*Ittihad kharrigi kulliyyat al-funun al-gamila*] qui inaugure précisément en mai 1953 la première édition de l'Exposition du Printemps [*ma'rad al-rabi'*] au Caire.

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[22] Lettre de Profili à Burchard, São Paulo, 6 mars 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 67-4 ; lettre de Matarazzo Sobrinho à Carlos Eiras, chargé des affaires de l'ambassade du Brésil au Caire, São Paulo, 22 juin 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 75-5.

[23] « Delegação organizada pelo museu de arte moderna do Cairo », Collectif, *Bienal de São Paulo* 2, cat. exp. São Paulo : Museu de arte moderna, São Paulo, 1953 :126.

[24] Gabriel Boctor. « Une nouvelle querelle des Anciens et des Modernes ». *La Bourse Égyptienne,* 30 mai 1953 : n.p.

[25] Inji Efflatoun. « Radd 'ala naqd » titre du journal illisible (29 mai 1953). Coupure de presse conservée dans le fonds Inji Efflatoun, IFAO, Le Caire.

photo Maurice Boutros
cliché maison Ohanness

CHEZ MADELEINE FRANCINE BIBERIA, SECRETAIRE DE LA SOCIETE DES AMIS DE L'ART
CE DIMANCHE 11 JANVIER 1953 DANS L'APRES-MIDI

de gauche à droite : Madame Francine Madeleine BIBERIA, — Madame Elena LORENZO FERNANDEZ, pianiste-virtuose, femme du compositeur brésilien LORENZO FERNANDEZ, — Son Excellence Monsieur T. Graça ARANHA, Ambassadeur du Brésil au Caire, — Monsieur Robert BLUM, critique d'art et publiciste, — Madame Behidja HAFEZ, « as » du cinéma égyptien, — Monsieur Mohammad EL NAHAS, Directeur du Centre Culturel au Ministère de l'Education Nationale, — Monsieur Azmi FARAG, rentier.

Figure 3 : Chez Madeleine Francine Biberia, Secrétaire de la Société des Amis de l'Art, 1953. Madame Biberia est assise tout à fait à gauche. Notons la présence de Temistocles de Graça Aranha, Ambassadeur du Brésil au Caire (troisième en partant de la gauche). *L'Égypte nouvelle*, couverture du nº 446, 16 janvier 1953. Archives CEAlex (http://www.cealex.org/pfe/index.php).

Figure 4 : De gauche à droite : Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika, Kamal Youssef, Inji Efflatoun et Hamed Nada préparant l'exposition « 4 Peintres du Caire », Amitiés Françaises, Alexandrie, 1953. Archives de l'IFAO, fonds Efflatoun. © IFAO.

Cette nouvelle manifestation d'envergure promeut un art qui se veut « à l'avant-garde du mouvement national » et souhaite concurrencer le Salon du Caire[26]. Or ce qui se joue dans la polémique de la Biennale de São Paulo, selon les mots de Boctor, est « une nouvelle querelle des Anciens et des Modernes »[27] – les artistes sélectionné·e·s étant désigné·e·s comme modernes. L'enjeu en effet est de déterminer quel type d'art est le plus susceptible de représenter la création contemporaine locale, selon les critères induits par le cadre de la Biennale ; c'est-à-dire un art qui puisse à la fois être reconnu comme moderne et égyptien. Le débat est donc attisé par le ressentiment de certains artistes de ne pas voir leur travail qualifié selon ces termes, en plus d'être privés d'une occasion rare de se faire connaître hors d'Égypte[28]. Notons que l'origine étrangère de plusieurs des artistes en lice, et notamment de Burchard leur cheffe de file, ne semble pas au cœur de cette dispute. Il s'agit davantage de qualifier ce qu'est l'art moderne et plus encore de définir qui a la compétence et la légitimité, dans un paysage artistique dépourvu d'administration spécialisée, d'arrêter une telle décision.

La liste finale est composite puisqu'elle rassemble vingt-sept peintre·sse·s et sculpteur·trice·s qui ont alors entre 27 et 61 ans, et opèrent dans des milieux distincts avec des styles différents. Le catalogue les cite dans cet ordre : Zeinab Abdel Hamid (1919-2002), Hamed Abdalla (1917-1985), Clea Badaro, Enrico Brandani (1914-1979), Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika, Michel Canaan (1919-?), Angelo de Riz (1908-?), Adham Wanly (1909), Effat Naghi, Inji Efflatoun, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar, Eetamad El Taraboulsy (1916-?), Tahia Halim (1919-2003), Ezzedine Hammouda (1919-1990), Hamed Nada, Puzant Godjamanian (1909-1993), Ragheb Ayad (1892-1982), Samir Rafi (1926-2004), Seif Wanly (1907-1979), Gazbia Sirry (née en 1925), Youssef Sida (1922-1994), Carlos Suares (1892-1976)[29], Eugène Oscar Terni, Kamal Youssef, Gaby Cremisi, Mahmoud Moussa (1913-2003), Suzy Green Viterbo (1904-1999)[30]. On remarque la présence d'artistes appartenant à deux mouvements artistiques : le Groupe de l'Art Contemporain, précédemment évoqué, et celui de l'Art Moderne [*Gam ʿiyyat al-fann al-hadith*], dont font partie Zeinab Abdel Hamid, Ezzedine Hammouda, Youssef Sida et Gazbia Sirry[31]. Ces jeunes peintre·sse·s égyptien·ne·s, mu·e·s par un sentiment nationaliste et le souci d'inventer un art authentiquement local, veulent incarner le renouveau de la peinture en défiant les canons des beaux-arts et en s'appropriant l'héritage européen. Les deux groupes se forment en opposition au surréalisme qu'ils jugent élitiste et dont trois autres exposant·e·s de São Paulo, Angelo de Riz, Michel Canaan et Inji Efflatoun, étaient proches. Actifs de 1938 à 1948 sous le nom d'Art et Liberté, les surréalistes d'Égypte défendaient un art à portée politique susceptible de s'opposer à l'expansion du fascisme et des nationalismes au temps de la Seconde Guerre mondiale – leur manifeste fondateur s'intitule bien à propos « Vive l'art dégénéré », rejoignant les préoccupations antinazies de Burchard à la même époque[32]. En contrepoint également, il convient de souligner la présence d'artistes bien établi·e·s dans les cercles académiques, comme Ragheb Ayad, considéré comme l'un des pionniers de la modernité artistique égyptienne, ou encore les frères alexandrins Seif et Adham Wanly, mais aussi d'artistes moins connu·e·s, comme Carlos Suares, Eetamad El Taraboulsy et la sculptrice Gaby Cremisi. Possiblement parce qu'elle est nouvelle dans les mondes de l'art égyptiens et n'est en cela pas partie prenante dans la querelle des professeurs, Burchard parvient à constituer un groupe qui

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[26] Anonyme. « Ma'rad al-rabi'. » *Al-Musawwar* 22 mai 1953 : 44.

[27] Gabriel Boctor. « Une nouvelle querelle des Anciens et des Modernes ». *La Bourse Égyptienne*, 30 mai 1953 : n.p.

[28] Anonyme. « L'Égypte a aussi sa querelle des Anciens et Modernes. ». *Le Journal d'Égypte*, 17 juin 1955 : n.p.

[29] Connu également sous le nom de Charles-Joseph Suares.

[30] Les noms sont reproduits ici selon une translittération simplifiée ou l'orthographe la plus communément utilisée, qui ne correspondent pas toujours à celles du catalogue de la Biennale de São Paulo.

[31] Sur le Groupe de l'Art Moderne, voir notamment Aimé Azar. *Peintres du Groupe de l'Art Moderne.* Le Caire, 1954 ; Liliane Karnouk. *Contemporary Egyptian Art.* Le Caire : The American University in Cairo Press, 1995 : 18-28.

[32] Manifeste « Vive l'art dégénéré », papier imprimé, 1938, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art Archive, Édimbourg, reproduit dans : Sam Bardaouil et Till Fellrath. *Art et Liberté. Rupture, guerre et surréalisme en Égypte (1938-1948).* Paris : Skira, 2016 : 68-69.

dépasse les désaccords entre les différents cercles et « n'en fait pas une question de personnes »[33]. Elle désigne même l'ensemble des exposant·e·s par l'expression unificatrice « le groupe de la Peinture de l'Art moderne égyptien »[34], signifiant que la querelle fut bien tranchée en faveur des « Modernes ». Une fois le choix des œuvres arrêté, celles-ci doivent être expédiées.

Le 1er juin 1953, l'ambassadeur du Brésil au Caire Temistocles de Graça Aranha part pour un long périple maritime qui s'achève le 2 juillet, lorsqu'il débarque au port de Rio de Janeiro. Il emporte dans ses bagages personnels les quarante-huit peintures et deux sculptures destinées à la salle égyptienne au sein de la Biennale. Les œuvres sont réceptionnées à Santos par les agents de l'ambassade d'Égypte à Rio, et acheminées vers les locaux de la Biennale[35]. Depuis sa première lettre du 3 février 1953 dont elle lui confie une copie, Burchard implique l'ambassadeur Graça Aranha dans ses démarches. Celui-ci est ensuite régulièrement sollicité pour transmettre messages et documentation aux organisateurs de la Biennale. Lors du retour des œuvres vers l'Égypte au printemps 1954, il semble même que l'ambassade brésilienne ait couvert les frais superfétatoires engendrés par le stockage des caisses à Marseille, consécutif à une erreur d'acheminement[36]. Le désengagement du gouvernement égyptien à la fois sur le plan financier et organisationnel est donc compensé par le rôle essentiel du corps diplomatique, sans lequel l'exposition n'aurait certainement pas été possible. Ce soutien manifeste la volonté brésilienne de renforcer les liens avec l'Égypte au lendemain de la proclamation de la République, et rappelle le caractère hautement politique des biennales d'art internationales. Mais au-delà du cas précis de cette exposition, il existe une porosité entre les mondes artistique et diplomatique en Égypte, en particulier au cours de la première moitié du 20ème siècle. Dans la presse, les comptes rendus de vernissages du Caire et d'Alexandrie soulignent systématiquement la présence d'ambassadeur·drice·s et autres agents diplomatiques. Les centres culturels étrangers sont particulièrement actifs et les initiatives bilatérales se multiplient, à l'instar de l'exposition italo-égyptienne, réservée aux artistes égyptien·ne·s ayant séjourné en Italie dans le cadre de leur formation et aux Italien·ne·s résidant en Égypte[37]. Celle-ci a lieu en décembre 1952 sous le double patronage du ministre égyptien de l'Instruction publique et de l'ambassadeur d'Italie au Caire, et on peut y voir les travaux de près de la moitié des artistes impliqué·e·s à São Paulo – Burchard, notamment, y présente une quinzaine de tableaux. Cette forte activité étrangère diminue sensiblement à partir de la seconde moitié des années 1950. En 1956, l'alliance de la France et du Royaume-Uni avec Israël pour contrer la nationalisation du Canal de Suez crée une scission irréconciliable entre l'État nassérien et les ressortissant·e·s européen·ne·s, que les tensions politiques et la vague de nationalisation poussent à l'exode. La Biennale de São Paulo de 1953 offre donc un instantané d'une ère cosmopolite sur le déclin, où enfants du pays et immigré·e·s d'autres horizons exposent ensemble sous le drapeau égyptien. C'est de plus un critique d'art français en poste à l'Université du Caire de 1926 à 1956, Étienne Mériel, qui est chargé de rédiger le texte d'introduction pour le catalogue. Demeurée « au Caire dans les mains d'un petit comité d'artistes exposants »[38], cette préface n'a pas pu être publiée et son contenu demeure inconnu, privant la section égyptienne d'une présentation argumentée.

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33 Gabriel Boctor. « Une nouvelle querelle des Anciens et des Modernes ». *La Bourse Égyptienne*, 30 mai 1953 : n.p.

34 Lettre de Burchard à Profili et Matarazzo Sobrinho, Le Caire, 31 mars 1954, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

35 Télégramme de Graça Aranha à la Biennale, Le Caire, 1er juin 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 75-5.

36 Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Le Caire, 10 février 1955, et lettre de Profili à Burchard, São Paulo, 25 février 1955, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 93-2.

37 Voir le catalogue de l'exposition : *Mostra d'arte italo-egiziana*. Le Caire: Imprimerie française, 1952.

38 Lettre de Burchard à Profili et Matarazzo Sobrinho, Le Caire, 31 mars 1954, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

Cosmopolite et mixte : une sélection qui reflète le milieu artistique égyptien

Les archives et le catalogue, qui n'inclut ni introduction ni images, ne permettent pas d'identifier facilement les œuvres exposées malgré leur titre. Le Musée d'art moderne de São Paulo (MAM-SP) conserve cependant un témoignage matériel de la présence égyptienne en 1953, puisque Carlos Suares a fait don de l'un de ses tableaux qui porte le titre opportun de *São Paulo* (non daté)[39]. Celui-ci fait partie d'un accrochage des collections permanentes du musée en 1954-1955, qui compte aussi un tableau de Burchard, classé parmi les donations suite à un malentendu avant d'être restitué à son autrice[40]. Intitulé *Sous le ciel de Paris*, on sait que ce tableau figure dans la sélection égyptienne. Le catalogue mentionne trois autres œuvres de Burchard : *La Crèche de Saint-Roch, La Fiancée de Sidi Mobarek* et *Fellaha de Sawagui* (fig. 5).

Figure 5 : Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika, *Fellaha de Sawagui,* 1953 (?), technique, dimensions et lieu de conservation inconnus. Image reproduite sous le titre *Mère Fallaha de Sawagui* dans le catalogue de l'exposition « 4 Peintres du Caire », Amitiés Françaises, Alexandrie, 9-18 avril 1953. Archives de l'IFAO, fonds Efflatoun. © IFAO.

[39] Le tableau est aujourd'hui conservé au Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Universidade de São Paulo (MAC USP).
[40] Lettre de Profili à Burchard, São Paulo, 25 février 1955, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº93-2.

Cependant, Andreas Alfred Meier précise que le tableau *Le Caire et la Citadelle* (1952-1953), (fig. 6) qui appartient à la collection de la Ville de Zurich, porte au dos un autocollant de la Biennale de São Paulo[41].

Si ce tableau figure bien dans les formulaires d'inscription, il est rayé de la liste finale et n'apparaît à ce titre pas dans le catalogue. On ignore s'il a fait partie des œuvres effectivement exposées. Quand Burchard écrit, dès sa première lettre aux organisateurs de la Biennale que ses « tableaux d'Égypte pourraient avoir un intérêt tant du point de vue plastique que de celui du milieu qu'ils reflètent », peut-être fait-elle référence au peuple et aux paysages qu'elle peint dans la vallée du Nil et à la tendance, dans l'art moderne égyptien, à représenter la vie rurale locale. Les précisions concernant les œuvres exposées manquent, mais l'identité des artistes participant·e·s offre un reflet plus global de la réalité du milieu artistique égyptien.

Figure 6 : Irmgard Micaela Burchard Simaika, *Le Caire et la Citadelle*, 1952-1953, huile sur carton fixé sur contreplaqué, 52 x 76 cm. Kunstsammlung Stadt Zürich. Photo : Andreas Alfred Meier. Courtesy of Kunstsammlung Stadt Zürich.

[41] Communication personnelle d'Andreas Alfred Meier, juin 2019.

À l'instar de Burchard, le groupe final fait en effet la part belle aux allochtones et met sur le même plan des artistes hommes et femmes. « Comme nous avons dans notre groupe des peintres de différentes nationalités, comme Arméniens, Libanais, Italiens, Français, à part des artistes égyptiens, est-ce que vous voyez peut-être une possibilité d'avertir, le moment de l'ouverture de l'exposition, les différentes légations ou ambassades », demande la Suissesse à Profili[42]. Les Italien·ne·s, comme nous l'avons vu, sont particulièrement nombreux·euses et leur présence reflète la relation privilégiée que les deux pays entretiennent, volontiers célébrée par l'historiographie[43]. Angelo de Riz, originaire de Venise, réside au Caire depuis 1931, où il fuit le régime fasciste en raison de ses convictions anarchistes. Ses compatriotes Enrico Brandani et Eugène Oscar Terni, natifs d'Alexandrie, évoluent entre les deux pays tout comme Suzy Green Viterbo, née au Caire. S'identifiant comme Italienne ou encore « Anglo-Indienne », Gaby Cremisi, née Helou, possède un passeport britannique : dans cette Égypte pluriethnique, les identités ne sont pas figées et la nationalité ne reflète pas toujours l'histoire personnelle[44]. Ainsi, ressortissant français, le peintre, écrivain et spécialiste de la kabbale Carlos Suares est issu d'une famille juive d'origine espagnole, propriétaire de la banque du même nom à Alexandrie. Puzant Godjamanian est Arménien né en Turquie, exilé à Athènes dès 1922 avant de prendre la route de l'Égypte en 1927. Clea Badaro, Alexandrine de mère grecque, formée aux Beaux-Arts de Lausanne (1930-1934) inspire le dernier volume de la tétralogie de Lawrence Durrell publié en 1960 – une plongée sentimentale dans la société intellectuelle et diplomatique de la cité portuaire avant et pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale[45]. À première vue, la liste des artistes d'Égypte à la Biennale de São Paulo frappe par son cosmopolitisme. Au-delà des fantasmes nostalgiques que réveille ce terme – l'Égypte carrefour des cultures de la Méditerranée, société coloniale façonnée par une mosaïque communautaire, terre d'accueil des exilés… –, il renvoie à une réalité : la surreprésentation des élites étrangères dans les cercles artistiques égyptiens pré-nassériens. La correspondance entre les artistes et la Biennale, presque exclusivement en français, illustre la persistance de cet esprit occidentalophile. Si les chambardements politiques contraignent la grande majorité des personnes citées ci-dessus à quitter l'Égypte aux alentours de 1956[46], ce n'est pas le cas de Burchard dont l'immigration, motivée par le mariage, est plus tardive et non corrélée aux dynamiques coloniales. Son interrogation concernant les représentations diplomatiques est essuyée par la réponse parfaitement règlementaire de Profili, qui écarte toute possibilité de différenciation : « Les artistes qui composent la délégation égyptienne figurent pratiquement comme égyptiens »[47]. La discussion est ainsi définitivement close, puisque dans ses futures participations à la Biennale de São Paulo, l'Égypte ne présente aucun artiste d'origine étrangère.

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[42] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Le Caire, 14 août 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 62-3.

[43] Pour un regard critique sur la place, l'histoire et l'historiographie de la communauté italienne d'Égypte et notamment d'Alexandrie, voir entre autres : Mercedes Volait. « La communauté italienne et ses édiles ». *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 46 (1987). *Alexandrie, entre deux mondes*, sous la direction de Robert Ilbert, 137-156, consulté le 15 mai 2019, https://www.persee.fr/doc/remmm_0035-1474_1987_num_46_1_2196 ; et également Anthony Santilli. « Penser et analyser le cosmopolitisme. Le cas des Italiens d'Alexandrie au XIXe siècle. » *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines* 125/2 (2013), consulté le 15 mai 2019, https://journals.openedition.org/mefrim/1516.

[44] L'histoire familiale de Gaby Cremisi est abordée dans le roman de la fille de l'artiste : Teresa Cremisi. *La Triomphante.* Paris : Éditions des Équateurs, 2015 : 17-18, 59.

[45] Lawrence Durrell. *Clea.* Paris : Le Livre de Poche, 2016, traduit de l'anglais par Roger Giroud, première publication en 1960. Quatrième volume du *Quatuor d'Alexandrie*, publié entre 1957 et 1960.

[46] Brandani est le premier à s'installer en Italie en 1955, suivi par Terni, Cremisi et Suzy Green en 1956. L'expropriation de ses biens familiaux pousse Suares à l'exil à la même époque. Enfin, de Riz quitte Le Caire en 1961, et Godjamanian en 1969.

[47] Lettre de Profili à Burchard, São Paulo, 26 août 1953, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 76-2.

La délégation égyptienne n'est pas seulement emmenée par une femme, elle comprend aussi un tiers de femmes parmi les artistes exposé.e.s, soit 9 femmes sur les 27 artistes. Ce chiffre, encore aujourd'hui rarement atteint dans les expositions collectives d'envergure internationale, place l'Égypte parmi les pays qui valorisent alors le mieux les femmes dans leur délégation. En effet, la plupart des nations participantes expose moins de trois femmes. Plusieurs d'entre elles n'en incluent même aucune comme la Suisse, l'Allemagne, l'Espagne et Israël. Leonor Fini est la seule de son genre parmi les 31 artistes de la section italienne. Les pays d'Amérique latine semblent plus favorables à la mixité, en particulier le Chili mais aussi le Brésil qui présente près d'un tiers d'artistes femmes. Celles-ci sont mentionnées dans une brève du journal brésilien *A Gazeta* qui titre « La présence féminine à la IIème Biennale de São Paulo » (fig. 7) et s'illustre de quelques images de tableaux peints par des femmes[48]. Parmi elles, Suzy Green Viterbo est mise en lumière, rare écho de la participation égyptienne dans la presse locale. Seulement, l'image publiée sous son nom n'est pas d'elle mais de son confrère Samir Rafi, puisqu'il s'agit de *L'Homme à la chandelle* (1951).


A presença feminina na II Bienal de São Paulo

Alguns quadros de autoria de pintoras de diversos países expostos na Bienal. São eles de Tarsila do Amaral, do Brasil; Susana Turiansky, do Uruguai; Elisa Martins Silveira, do Brasil; Leonor Fini, da Italia; e Suzy Green Viterbo, do Egito

Figure 7 : Anonyme, « A presença feminina na II bienal do São Paulo ». *A Gazeta* (26 décembre 1953) : n.p. En bas au milieu : Samir Rafi, *L'Homme à la chandelle*, 1951. © Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo.

Cette confusion évoque celles, récurrentes, de Profili qui persiste à adresser des courriers à « Monsieur Inji Efflatoun » et « Monsieur Effat Naghi », en dépit de l'obstination de la deuxième à faire précéder sa signature d'un ostensible « Mademoiselle ». La maladresse du secrétaire général

[48] Anonyme. « A presença feminina na II bienal do São Paulo ». *A Gazeta*, 26 décembre 1953 : n.p.

témoigne de la tenace association de la fonction d'artiste au genre masculin, soulignant de manière tout à fait indirecte la bonne représentation des femmes comme une singularité égyptienne. En effet, malgré un ordre social profondément inégalitaire, l'Égypte des années 1950 accorde une place et une visibilité satisfaisantes aux femmes qui choisissent d'embrasser les arts comme carrière. Les opportunités d'exposition sont réelles puisqu'il existe, depuis la fondation des mouvements de l'art moderne, un salon des femmes, et qu'elles intègrent, avec constance depuis le début du 20ème siècle, les expositions collectives telles que le célèbre Salon du Caire. Les raisons motivant cette mixité des arts sont variées, et peuvent être mises en relation avec la rhétorique de la *Nahda* selon laquelle l'émancipation de tous les individus, et particulièrement des femmes, est un prérequis nécessaire à l'affranchissement de la nation de la domination coloniale[49]. Dans une Égypte qui cherche à s'affirmer comme une nation moderne, la visibilité des femmes peut donc constituer un enjeu stratégique. Par ailleurs, l'extraction sociale des premières générations d'artistes femmes d'Égypte, issues des élites locales ou étrangères, est également un facteur important de leur réussite dans le milieu de l'art, dans la mesure où elle leur garantit l'accès à une formation de qualité, ainsi qu'une situation financière confortable. Des femmes des élites ont même joué un rôle de premier plan dans l'organisation des mondes de l'art égyptiens, au tournant du 19ème et du 20ème siècles. C'est notamment le cas de militantes féministes qui créent et financent des prix et des associations artistiques, et plaident pour l'accès à la formation et à la professionnalisation des femmes dans l'art[50]. Les biennales offrent un bon observatoire des problématiques de genre dans les arts, en permettant des comparaisons à l'échelle du monde. Mais si l'exposition égyptienne a été impulsée par une femme et montre nombre de travaux de femmes, il ne faut pas pousser l'interprétation jusqu'à lire dans cette histoire le signe d'un féminisme institutionnel. Si Burchard a pu mettre en place cette exposition, c'est d'abord parce qu'elle en avait la volonté et les capacités, mais aussi parce que personne d'autre ne s'en est chargé.

Épilogue

Plus que l'image des œuvres présentées par l'Égypte à la IIème Biennale de São Paulo, ce que les archives mettent en lumière, c'est l'histoire inhabituelle de l'organisation de cette exposition. Sous l'impulsion d'une peintresse étrangère mue par une vision des mondes de l'art qui dépasse les frontières nationales et continentales, un réseau d'individus et d'organisations joint ses forces pour concrétiser cette exposition. Une liste d'artistes est ainsi constituée, destinée à démontrer la vitalité de la création égyptienne et à représenter la nation aux yeux du monde. Le processus d'élaboration de l'exposition, tout autant que l'identité des participant·e·s, révèle un milieu artistique et un contexte politique en pleine mutation. On voit poindre en effet une jeune génération égyptienne, incarnée par les membres du Groupe de l'Art Moderne et du Groupe de l'Art Contemporain, qui succède peu à peu aux artistes multiculturels de la haute société. Mais l'évolution en marche dans les mondes de l'art est tout aussi structurelle. La constitution de la République et, plus tard, de l'État nassérien, fera naître les administrations culturelles qui manquent encore en 1953. Mais c'est justement cette absence de structuration officielle, cumulée à ses ambitions de carrière et à ses impératifs économiques, qui permet à Burchard de prendre l'initiative de cette exposition et de la mener à bien. En toute logique, les organisateurs de la Biennale se tournent donc vers elle pour inviter la jeune république à renouveler l'expérience deux ans plus tard. Profili lui adresse ainsi ces mots en décembre 1954 :

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[49] Voir par exemple Qasim Amin. *The Liberation of Women and The New Woman: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*. Trad. S. Sidhom Peterson. Le Caire : The American University in Cairo Press, 2000 [1865 et 1908]).

[50] Sur le rôle des femmes de la haute société dans les arts, voir notamment Nadia Radwan. *Les modernes d'Égypte. Une renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts appliqués.* Berne : Peter Lang, 2017. Ch. « Le rôle précurseur des 'Dames égyptiennes' », 146-163.

> « En outre, nous avons distribué au monde entier les fiches et le matériel d'inscription. Dans le cas de l'Égypte, nous avons dû cependant nous abstenir de le faire, ne sachant pas quel est l'organisme qui s'occupe de cette question auprès des autorités égyptiennes.
> Vous avez été notre collaboratrice directe, lors de notre seconde biennale, et nous avez offert si gentiment votre appui par vos démarches et relations dans les cercles artistiques de votre pays. C'est la raison pour laquelle nous nous permettons de nous adresser encore une fois à vous, pour faire appel à votre amabilité, certains comme nous le sommes que les éléments que vous pourrez nous fournir nous seront de la plus grande utilité en faveur de la présence de l'Égypte à notre prochaine manifestation »[51].

Malgré l'obtention d'un premier accord de principe de la part du gouvernement, l'Égypte passe son tour en 1955 pour des raisons qui demeurent floues. Burchard se dit encore dépassée par l'édition précédente, à cause du temps et de l'argent qu'elle a dû dépenser[52]. De plus, elle est désormais privée de l'aide de l'ambassadeur Graça Aranha, qui quitte ses fonctions au Caire en avril 1954. Il faudra donc attendre 1959 puis 1963 pour que le public pauliste puisse à nouveau découvrir le travail des artistes d'Égypte, alors que la création est à cette époque fermement contrôlée par le régime nassérien. La présence de l'Égypte est cependant si sporadique qu'en 1979 personne ne semble relever l'erreur largement relayée par les médias brésiliens, qui annoncent étonnamment cette année-là la toute première participation du pays à la Biennale de São Paulo. Une amnésie qui occulte regrettablement l'épisode de 1953, et avec lui l'efficience des agentivités individuelles face au poids politique et institutionnel considérable que représentent les biennales.

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[51] Lettre de Profili à Burchard, São Paulo, 24 décembre 1954, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 93-2.
[52] Lettre de Burchard à Profili, Le Caire, 10 février 1955, Arquivo Histórico Wanda Svevo, São Paulo, dossier nº 93-2.

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Biographie

Nadine Atallah est doctorante contractuelle en histoire de l'art à l'Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, rattachée au laboratoire de recherche InVisu (CNRS/INHA). Ses recherches portent sur l'importante contribution des femmes aux arts visuels modernes en Égypte dans les années 1950-1960, en relation avec les politiques et les idéologies nationalistes et nassériennes. Depuis 2015, Nadine Atallah collabore avec le collectif Madrassa, une plateforme curatoriale transnationale dont elle est l'une des membres fondatrices. Elle a travaillé dans diverses institutions culturelles et galeries à Paris et à Beyrouth, ainsi qu'au bureau des expositions de l'Académie de France à Rome – Villa Médicis, où elle a également mis en place le programme dédié aux jeunes publics. En 2019, elle a organisé l'exposition de peinture contemporaine égyptienne « In Conversation. A Painting Show » qui interrogeait de manière contextuelle les évolutions du médium en relation avec la photographie et les technologies numériques, tout en proposant un point de vue critique sur l'histoire des expositions des femmes peintres d'Égypte (Sharjah Art Gallery, The American University in Cairo, Le Caire).

Nadia von Maltzahn[1]

The Museum as an Egalitarian Space?

Women artists in Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1960s and 1970s

Abstract

This article discusses the role of the Sursock Museum as a platform for the emancipation of women, and to what extent the Museum's Salon d'Automne constituted an egalitarian space. Etel Adnan took part in two Salons, in 1964 and 1974. This paper will provide some context for the Beirut art scene in which she worked. The general institutional framework for women artists is highlighted before discussing the situation of women artists in Beirut's Sursock Museum exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s, the years Etel Adnan participated in the Salon. Brief portraits of four women artists show us that women artists were neither considered alike nor singled out for their gender. They treated very diverse subjects and styles, came from different social backgrounds and generations, and were often pioneers in their fields.

Keywords: Beirut, Sursock Museum, women artists, Arab apocalypse, Art Salon

A yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun
a [drawing] sun A sun [drawing] a [drawing] blue a [drawing] red a [drawing] blue
a blue yellow sun a yellow red sun a blue green sun a
a yellow boat a yellow sun a [drawing] red a [drawing] red blue and yellow
a yellow morning on a green sun a flower flower on a blue blue but
a yellow sun A green sun a yellow sun A red sun a blue sun[2]

These are the opening lines of Etel Adnan's *The Arab Apocalypse* (1989), the writer-cum-artist's series of illustrated poems evoking the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). According to Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, the 59 poems emulate the 59 days of the siege of Tall al-Za'tar in 1976, in which Palestinian civilians were killed by Christian militias.[3] The sun is ever-changing, and in the course of Adnan's poems becomes a symbol of colonialism and imperialism, as it has been argued by Caroline Seymour-Jorn.[4] The catalogue covers of the Sursock Museum's Salon d'Automne in 1982 and 1984, not long after *The Arab Apocalypse* was first published in French under the title *L'apocalypse arabe* (1980), show a large sun rising behind the Sursock Museum.

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[2] Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse* (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1989), 7 (opening paragraph).

[3] Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, "Breaking the Silence: Etel Adnan's Sitt Marie Rose and The Arab Apocalypse," in *Poetry's Voice – Society's Norms: Forms of Interaction Between Middle Eastern Writers and Their Societies*, ed. Andreas Pflitsch and Barbara Winkler (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2006), 207-8.

[4] Caroline Seymour-Jorn, "*The Arab Apocalypse* as a Critique of Colonialism and Imperialism," In *Etel Adnan: Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), 37-49.

Figure 1: Catalogue cover (Arabic side) of the 10th Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, 1982.

A green sun in 1982, a yellow sun in 1984. They are based on the poster the artist Saad Kiwan designed for the 10th Salon d'Automne in 1982, the first group exhibition that took place in the Sursock Museum during the Lebanese Civil War after an interruption of eight years. It was held in a spirit of hope, during a temporary halt in hostilities when some believed the war to be coming to an end. "We are at the beginning of a new period of Lebanon's history. After dark years and long nights, we rediscover hope and light," proclaimed Victor Cassir, President of the Sursock Museum Committee. "In the great tradition of the Museum Nicolas Sursock, here, with the return to peace, this 10th Salon d'Automne" is how Loutfalla Melki, curator of the Museum, presented the exhibition[5]. The Salon took place in the autumn after the expulsion of the Palestinian leadership from Lebanon following the Israeli invasion in June 1982. The hopeful tone and the statement that now peace had returned clearly inscribes the Museum into the – right-wing, largely Christian – camp that blamed

[5] 10th Salon d'Automne catalogue (Beirut: Sursock Museum 1982).

the Palestinians for the war. Unlike Adnan's negatively connoted sun in *The Arab Apocalypse*, the sun on the catalogue cover was considered a symbol of this hope and light.

Politically, Adnan and the Museum thus did not see eye to eye at the time. However, the politics of the Museum were never openly debated, and are not the focus here. This article discusses the role of the Sursock Museum as a platform for the professional emancipation of women artists, and to what extent the Museum's Salon d'Automne constituted an egalitarian space. Whereas Etel Adnan took part in only two Salons, this paper will provide some context of the Beirut art scene in which she worked. Etel Adnan participated with three works (*Le Tigre à Bagdad au printemps, Composition en long I, Composition en long II*) in the last Salon before the outbreak of the war, the 9th Salon in 1974. She had previously been part of the 4th Salon in 1964, with two works (*Manuscrit arabe* and *Chasseur d'images*). Before we delve into a discussion of women artists at Beirut's Sursock Museum in the 1960s and 1970s, the years that Etel Adnan participated in the Salon, and whether the Museum can be considered as a platform for emancipation, some general institutional framework for women artists should be highlighted.

Women Artists in Lebanon's Art World

It is well known that women artists are underrepresented by art institutions worldwide. A study published in the United Kingdom in 2017 shows that of the top-selling one hundred artists at auction in 2015, only one was a woman. The highest value item sold at auction that year was Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* for 160 million USD, the highest value work of a woman artist sold was Louise Bourgeois' *Spider* for 25 million USD. The study also shows that between 2007 and 2014, London's Tate Modern granted female artists solo exhibitions only 25 per cent of the time, and New York's Museum of Modern Art only 20 per cent of the time[6]. An article in the Guardian in February 2017 picks up on the topic. Entitled "How the art world airbrushed female artists from history," it starts with the following:

> Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Caravaggio, Botticelli, Titian, Nelli. All were once greats of the Renaissance, though if the last name on the list doesn't ring a bell with you, you could be forgiven. Like those of her male contemporaries, Plautilla Nelli's Biblical paintings were masterful works of beauty, but, in a tale as old as patriarchy itself, she was written out of every Renaissance history book, dismissed as just another nun with a paintbrush.[7]

The article illustrates how women artists have been overlooked by art history, and argues that this inequality is systemic.

Art historian Tamar Garb, in her article on the French union of women painters and sculptors in the late nineteenth century, analyses the role of institutional framework for women artists in Paris. The union, founded in 1881, lobbied for women artists' participation in art academies and exhibitions. It was a product of its time and could not have been created without the economic and social developments in the Paris art world that were based on a changing notion of women's roles in society. However, while women artists did become more visible, their roles and the spaces they exhibited in were still gendered. This is perhaps best illustrated by two paintings shown in the 1885 Paris Salon of male and female juries: the painting depicting a male jury (*Une séance du jury de peinture* by Henri Gervex) shows men judging paintings in a public space, while the one portraying a

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[6] Artfinder. *The Artfinder Gender Equality Report 2017*, accessed 21 February 2019: http://bit.ly/artworldsexism.

[7] Hannah Ellis-Petersen, "How the art world airbrushed female artists from history," *The Guardian*, 6 February, 2017, accessed 21 February 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/feb/06/how-the-art-world-airbrushed-female-artists-from-history.

female jury (*Un jury* by Alberto Vianelli) takes place in an intimate private setting. Women were also generally less frequently recognized by the Salon jury.[8]

In a study on women artists in Lebanon undertaken in the mid-1970s and published in 1987, the Lebanese-American artist and writer Helen Khal underlines that a third of the leading artists in Lebanon were women. In Lebanon, women artists and sculptors were present from the beginning of the development of modern art. According to Khal, the main challenge women artists faced in Lebanon during the 1960s and 1970s was the conflict between their careers and their role as women, wives and mothers; in their role as women they were confronted by society's expectations, in their role as artists they had their own identities free from preconceived limitations.[9] While the image of women in mid-twentieth century Lebanon continued to be formed by traditional gender roles, women artists experienced success from the beginning. How can this be explained? Could the lack of strong institutional framework and gatekeepers account for this?[10] Lebanon seems to provide a useful case-study for the claim that strong institutions can prevent women (and other groups who do not hold power) from creating great art.[11] There was no equivalent of the dominating Parisian Académie des Beaux-Arts with its annual Salon exhibition, and institutions like the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts or the Sursock Museum were only just establishing itself. A 1974 Unesco report on contemporary art in Lebanon underlines that art at the time was still considered as a hobby rather than a serious subject of study or education, and that this lack of seeing art as a profession favored women becoming artists.[12] Khal quotes a review of the first group exhibition of contemporary art at the Ecole des Arts et Métiers in 1931, in which the author states the following:

> Another observation is that the only local painters who succeeded in being very good, who have done interesting things and remain original, are the women. The best painters of the exhibition are: Mesdames Bart, [Marie] Haddad and [Gladys] Shoukair. We say this without hesitation. These ladies are superior to all the scholarship-grantee (*boursiers*) specialists and professionals in this art.[13]

This implies that while in the first half of the twentieth century women were not counted as professionals in the field, their art was appreciated. Khal names a number of reasons why women artists in post-independent Lebanon received more recognition than elsewhere, including that it was not difficult to find exhibition spaces, Beirut having become the cultural hub of the region and mounting around 150 exhibitions per year; that cultural activities were widely reviewed; and that critics generally did not differentiate between men and women in their coverage, which we will elaborate on below.[14]

In their interviews with Khal, critics emphasized that women were more daring, experimented with diverse techniques and materials, and researched new ideas; she gives the examples of Saloua Raouda Choucair who is often considered the first abstract artist, Nadia Saikali as the first kinetic artist, and Juliana Seraphim and Hughette Caland as the first artists exhibiting explicitly erotic art in Lebanon. All four of these artists exhibited at the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum from

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[8] Tamar Garb, "Revising the Revisionists: The Formation of the Union des Femmes Peintres et Sculpteurs," *Art Journal* 48/1 (Spring 1989): 63-70.

[9] Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut: Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1987), 21.

[10] This essay constitutes only an initial reflection on this question, which will be further investigated in the forthcoming research project LAWHA – Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943.

[11] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? (1971)," in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Linda Nochlin (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 145-169.

[12] Organisation des Nations Unies pour l'Education, la Science et la Culture. *Consultation collective sur les problèmes contemporains des arts arabes dans leurs relations socio-culturelles avec le monde arabe*. "Les styles de l'art contemporain au Liban." Hammamet, Mars 1974, 5.

[13] R.C. in *Tout* (Beirut, January 1931), as quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 26.

[14] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 32.

the beginning, and we will look at three of them in more detail – Saloua Raouda Choucair, Nadia Saikali and Juliana Seraphim – as well as a fourth artist, Sophie Yeramian. First, however, it may be useful to share a few words about the Sursock Museum and its Salon d'Automne.

Beirut's Sursock Museum and its Salon d'Automne

Beirut's Sursock Museum, a museum for modern and contemporary art in Lebanon's capital, re-opened its doors to the public in October 2015 after an extensive renovation and expansion of its building. The Sursock Museum was originally set up as an endowment under the supervision of Beirut's municipality. Born into a wealthy Greek-Orthodox family, Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock (ca.1875-1952) bequeathed his mansion and art collection to the city of Beirut, to be held in a *waqf* (trust-fund) under the guardianship of Beirut's municipality upon his death. The house was to be turned into a "public museum for ancient and modern art from Lebanon, other Arab countries or elsewhere," as well as an exhibition hall where works by Lebanese artists were to be exhibited.[15]Although after his death in December 1952 the villa was initially used as a guesthouse for visiting heads of state, eventually the will had to be honored and a committee was appointed to transform the mansion into a museum. In 1961, the Museum opened its doors and presented its first exhibition from November 18 – 28, its 1st Salon d'Automne. The Museum soon became known for this annual Salon, a group exhibition of contemporary art in Lebanon. The Salon was launched at a dynamic period for contemporary art in Lebanon and quickly became a symbol of the Museum.[16]

The Salon strove to guide both the artist and the public, and to institutionalize Lebanese contemporary artistic production. The selection process of works through a jury appointed by the Museum committee was crucial in this endeavor. In all thirty-three editions that have taken place between 1961 and 2018, there has been a rigorous selection process by a jury appointed by the Museum committee. These juries have been dominated by men. The first woman to participate in the Sursock Museum's Salon jury was Aimée Kettaneh, the former president of the Baalbeck International Festival (1956-1969), for the 10th Salon in 1982-83. Following this Salon, women regularly participated in the jury – in particular the Sursock Museum's curator Sylvia Agemian and long-term board member Hind Sinno –, although it continued to be dominated by men until the 1990s. Nevertheless, women artists made up around one third of the selected artists at the Salon, a percentage that stayed more or less consistent in the first twelve Salons under review here: between 1961 and 1986, 226 female artists exhibited compared to 455 male artists. The quality of their works was also recognized: the jury awarded them prizes from the beginning. Saloua Raouda Choucair was the only artist who won prizes in four consecutive Salons (5th to 8th Salon). The overall ratio of prizes awarded in the 4th to 8th Salon[17] showed that the jury slightly preferred works by male artists, as only one quarter of awarded prizes went to women. However, they received nearly one third of the first prizes.[18]

Who were these women artists? In the following, I will give a short portrayal of four selected artists who exhibited in the first twelve Salons.

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[15] Loutfalla Melki, "Nicolas Sursock: l'homme et son musée," in *Musée Nicolas Sursock, Le Livre* (Beirut: Chemaly & Chemaly, 2000), 19-23.

[16] For a detailed discussion of the Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, see Nadia von Maltzahn, "Guiding the Artist and the Public? The Salon d'Automne at Beirut's Sursock Museum," in *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, ed. Nadia von Maltzahn and Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), 253-280.

[17] The first three Salons awarded no prizes, nor the 9th up to the 12th Salon.

[18] Data gathered from the Sursock Museum Salon d'Automne catalogues. Beirut: Sursock Museum.

Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017)

Saloua Raouda Choucair, best known for her sculptural work, exhibited twenty-four works in ten Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 12th Salon in 1986, and is one of the most exhibited and recognized artists by the Museum's Salon. Her work was awarded many prizes by the Salon juries. Choucair is often considered the first abstract artist in Lebanon, inspired by her interest in Islamic art and her studies of the natural sciences. She underlined in an interview with Helen Khal that she was an artist and worked as a *person*, not as a woman or a man. Choucair started painting in the 1940s, taking classes in the ateliers of Lebanese artists Omar Onsi and Mustafa Farrukh. She went to Paris in 1948 where she studied at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts with a brief sojourn in Fernand Léger's studio, returning to Lebanon in 1952. Allegedly she did not sell any of her works until her 1962 exhibition in Beirut's Unesco Palace[19], one year after the 1st Salon d'Automne in which she exhibited three works. This might suggest that the Salon played a role in making her work known and valued. Today she is one of the best-known Lebanese artists, one of the few of her generation who have achieved international recognition with solo exhibitions at London's Tate Modern (2013) and Doha's Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (2015).[20]

Nadia Saikali (b. 1936)

Nadia Saikali exhibited seventeen works in nine Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 10th Salon in 1982, and received the Sursock Museum Prize in the 8th Salon in 1968 for her painting *Rampant Sun*. Saikali's work is characterized by her interest in light and movement; she became a pioneer of kinetic art in which mechanical movement becomes an essential part of the work of art. She explains:

> Physically, I need to move; and my paintings must move too, whether figurative or abstract. But this movement can be either an inner movement or an actual one. […] This sense of movement in life, of cosmic energy, grows out of me, enters the painting, and becomes a separate, living entity.[21]

Her Beirut exhibition at the showroom of *L'Orient* newspaper in 1970 is considered the first exhibition of kinetic art in the Middle East. Saikali's first Paris solo exhibition took place at Galerie Jacques Lacloche in 1973. Etel Adnan wrote the preface to the catalogue, in which the symbol of the sun that we have discussed in the introduction comes to the fore again:

> Electricity now carries the sun. The circle and the square are no longer geometrical forms, but moving forms at times coming to life, at others, reaching for self-destruction. This battle of the matter and the mind happens now over the fields proposed by works such as the ones you will see, leading us beyond the extreme boundaries of what can be possibly expressed.[22]

Saikali experimented with her art between 1968 and 1975, and moved from oil painting to three-dimensional art, in which colors, light and movement are produced organically, before returning to painting.[23] Having first studied at the Académie Libanaise des Beaux-Arts (ALBA) in Beirut (1953-1956), where she also taught art (1962-1974) as well as at the Institute for Fine Arts of the Lebanese University (1965-1974), she moved to Paris in 1974 where she had already studied for two years at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière (1956-1958). She continued her education at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (1974-1978), with a scholarship from the Lebanese

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[19] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 55-61.

[20] For an analysis of Choucair's work, see Kirsten Scheid's work on the painter such as her chapter in *Saloua Raouda Choucair*, ed. Jessica Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), and "Toward a Material Modernism: Introduction to S.R. Choucair's 'How the Arab Understood Visual Arts'," *ARTMargins* 4/1 (2015): 102-118. Also see Ari Akkermans, "Reconsidering the Work of a Lebanese Female Artist Who Deserves a Closer Reading," *Hyperallergic*, March 13, 2017, https://hyperallergic.com/362341/reconsidering-the-work-of-a-lebanese-female-artist-who-deserves-a-closer-reading/.

[21] As quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 63.

[22] Etel Adnan, "Préface," (Paris: Galerie Lacloche, 1973), as quoted in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy Editions d'art, 2011).

[23] Gérard Xuriguera, "Préface," in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2011), 6.

Figure 2: Nadia Saikali receiving the Sursock Museum Prize in the 8th Salon in 1968 for her painting *Rampant Sun*. Courtesy of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum.

University granted in view of expanding its Institute of Fine Arts and developing its teachers' skills. She focused on traditional mural arts techniques and took a studio at the Bateau-Lavoir in Paris.[24] As art critic Joseph Tarrab writes about her art:

> Nadia Saikali's paintings appear as a subtle and playful counterpoint between the enigma of seemingly foreseeable, controllable space, and the mystery of the unforeseeable, uncontrollable time. Both the best and the worst can emerge at any moment: evenings of happiness and mornings of catastrophe, and thus the wars, tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes are depicted in the Space to be worked upside-down.[25]

She explains herself that her paintings – specifically her series *Self-Portrait Imprints* – are expressions of her abandoning herself to painting, whether in its joy or suffering, rather than following a political agenda.[26] She takes inspiration from her experiences and life in general, drawing on her Lebanese roots; Saikali considers light and movement as integral parts of her heritage.[27]

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[24] Nadia Saikali, "Milestones," in *Saikali* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2011), 116. Also see her "Biography" in *Saikali*, 119 and César Nammour and Gabriela Schaub, eds. *Resonances: 82 Lebanese Artists Reviewed by Helen Khal* (Beirut: Fine Arts Publishing, 2011), 278-281.

[25] Joseph Tarrab, "Enigma of Space – Mystery of Time," in *Saikali*, 75.

[26] Nadia Saikali, "Empreintes: Autoportraits," 1986, as quoted in *Saikali*, 62.

[27] Nour Salamé Abilama and Marie Tomb, *L'Art au Liban. Artistes modernes et contemporains 1880-1975*, Tome 1. (Beirut: Wonderful Editions, 2012), 328.

Juliana Seraphim (1934-2005)

Juliana Seraphim exhibited twelve works in six Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 10th Salon in 1982. She was born in Jaffa in Palestine and came to Lebanon in 1948 at the age of 14, where she attended a Catholic boarding school in Saida. As the eldest child, she had to contribute to the family income after finishing school. At the age of 18, she thus started working as a secretary at UNRWA in Beirut. Seraphim was known to have a strong urge to express herself. It was a family friend, Camille Aboussouan, who later became the curator of the Sursock Museum, who convinced her to start painting. She first took classes with the artist Jean Khalife, and later at the atelier of the Beirut-based French painter Georges Cyr. From the beginning, she was interested in human forms in a dream world, in mysticism and surrealism. Against the will of her family, who did not consider it appropriate for a girl to travel alone to Europe and give up her work that helped support them, she took up a scholarship to study in Europe. Seraphim studied first at the Fine Arts Academy in Florence and then became a student at the Academy San Fernando in Madrid and at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Paris, before returning to Beirut.[28] Her work deals with desire, eroticism and femininity, and is deeply sensual. In an interview with Khal she explains:

> The images in my paintings come from deep within me; they are surreal and unexplainable. Consciously I want to portray a woman's world and how important love is to a woman. Few men understand the quality of love a woman seeks. I try to show them.[29]

Seraphim was one of the first Lebanese artists to earn a living from her painting.[30] While she struggled financially at first, her mind was set on becoming a professional artist. She was also driven by the need to support her family.[31] Juliana Seraphim established herself within the Beirut art scene and exhibited in the leading art spaces of the 1960s and 1970s.[32]

Sophie Yeramian (1909-1984)

Sophie Yeramian exhibited twenty-two works in eleven Salons d'Automne between the 1st Salon in 1961 and the 12th Salon in 1986. She was born in Ankara and came to Beirut in 1915 in the wake of the Armenian genocide. Yeramian was a self-taught painter, and started late in life. She took up painting in the late 1950s, after her husband had become blind, in order to financially support her husband and son. Her very first exhibition was at the Sursock Museum.[33] After her participation in the first Salon d'Automne, she held regular exhibitions until her death in 1984 at institutions including Beirut's Carlton Hotel (1963), Unesco Palace (1964, 1966, 1968), l'Orient newspaper (1965), College Palandjian (1969), Hotel Vendôme (1970, 1972) and the Hotel St Georges (1969, 1974), as well as in Brazil (Sao Paolo, 1969) and in France (Salon du Grenier à Sel, Orléans, 1971).[34] Known for her naïve paintings, her work abounds with movement and life. Her canvases usually depict simple daily life village scenes, such as village feasts, picnics, dances, *dabke*, weddings, nature, modest village houses, fruit trees, fountains, people in action, animals, and flowers. She believes that "art imitates life… and not that life imitates art."[35] The quality of Yeramian's work was recognized by the Sursock Museum's Salon jury. She received the second prize for painting in 1968, the three first prizes going to Nadia Saikali, Khalil Zghaib and Levon Moumjian. Alongside the artist Khalil Zghaib,

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[28] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 72-78; Salamé Abilama and Tomb, *L'Art au Liban*, 291.

[29] As quoted in Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 71.

[30] Salamé Abilama and Tomb, *L'Art au Liban*, 291.

[31] Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 77.

[32] Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art From 1850 to the Present* (Beirut: Saqi, 2009), 151.

[33] "Sufi Yiramian aw 'al-khafir Rousseau' al-lubnaniyya". Undated newspaper clipping, archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

[34] Exhibition invitation card, archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

[35] Nuha Samara, "Lawhat al-rasm fi itar al-kharif," Undated newspaper clipping (from 1963), archives of Richard Chahine Gallery at the Sursock Museum.

Yeramian became one of the best-known naïve painters in Lebanon, although she has been completely overlooked by art historical accounts.[36]

In the reviews of the Salon exhibitions published in the French-language press in the first decade of the Salon in the 1960s, Yeramian is always mentioned together with Khalil Zghaib. Whereas Yeramian started exhibiting at the Salon d'Automne, Zghaib was already known as a naïve painter before participating in the Salon. Nevertheless, the two of them are always mentioned in one breath. In a review of the first Salon in 1961, *Le Jour* mentions them only briefly – "There are also the 'naïves' with Khalil Zaghaib [sic] and Yeramian."[37] *L'Orient Littéraire* goes into more detail:

> Three naïves are presented at the museum. Two certainly deserve some attention. To each gentleman all honor: Khalil Zgaib [sic], the most famous hairdresser, whose submission resembles (naturally) that which he does not cease to produce since many years, and Sophie Yeramian, a newcomer of undeniable class. This latter proposed café scenes composed in a very original way and painted by uniform and opaque touches, in a *papiers collés* technique. The proportions are more respected than with Zgaib, but perspective and rational structure are inexistent. The "naivety" of Sophie Yeramian is less immediate, and maybe even less altered. Naïve art does not stop surprising, provoking our sympathy.[38]

Figure 3: Exhibition detail of the 7th Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum, 1967-8, with Sophie Yeramian's work on the left and Khalil Zghaib's work on the right. Courtesy of the Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock Museum.

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[36] In Helen Khal's work on women artists, her name is listed under "other artists", but she is one of the few artists without any bibliographical statement. It simply says "no statement available". Khal, *The Woman Artist*, 162.

[37] "Il y a aussi les 'naïfs' avec Khalil Zaghaib et Yeramian. Gladys Chami, "Beyrouth possède enfin son foyer d'art: Le Musée Nicolas Sursock," *Le Jour*, November 17, 1961, page numbers unknown.

[38] "Trois naïfs se sont présentés au Musée. Deux méritent certainement de retenir l'attention. A tout seigneur tout honneur: Khalil Zgaib, le plus célèbre des coiffeurs, dont l'envoi ressemble (forcément) à ce qu'il ne cesse de produire depuis de longues années, et Sophie Yeramian nouvelle venue de classe indéniable. Cette dernière propose des scènes de café composées de façon très originale et peintes par touches uniformes et opaques, dans une technique de papiers collés. Les proportions sont plus respectées que chez Zgaib, mais la perspective, la structuration rationnelle sont inexistantes. La 'naïveté' de Sophie Yeramian est moins immédiate, et peut-être même moins altérée. L'art naïf ne cesse pas d'étonner, de surprendre, de provoquer la sympathie." Jalal Khoury, "Aujourd'hui, jour 1 du Musée Sursock," *L'Orient Littéraire*, November 18, 1961, page numbers unknown.

Le Soir emphasizes a potential rivalry between the two. "The naïves. Khalil Zghaib was king in this field. Sophie Yeramian, new recruit, outdoes him through her freshness and organization of space. She can become a dangerous rival, if Zghaib does not try to shake himself."[39]

In subsequent salons, the two of them continue to be mentioned together. "Our two naïves" (4th Salon, 1964), who are seeing "their own innocence" (5th Salon, 1965).[40] "In the kingdom of the naïves, Khalil Zgaib [sic] divides his brush between rural and urban sketches; Sophie Yeramian remains faithful to her fairground characters" (6th Salon, 1966).[41] The two are the constant ones in the Salon d'Automne of the Sursock Museum, "neither more nor less naïve than usual: two marvelous benchmarks to measure the multiple transformations of successive Salons" (7th Salon, 1967).[42] We can see that they are both treated in the same manner, even though Khalil Zghaib is generally named first. There is no differentiation between the two artists based on their gender. They are not only discussed together, but also hung side by side in the exhibition space, which of course can also influence the way they are reviewed.

Conclusion

We have seen that the Salon exhibitions at the Sursock Museum in the 1960s through the 1980s provided an important platform for women artists. As for many male artists, the Salon enabled them to become known. As art critic Cesar Nammour wrote in 2015, looking back at the Salon: "There was a lot of enthusiasm to exhibit. (…) If you were accepted by Sursock, you'd reached a certain standard." Etel Adnan equally praised the value of the Sursock Museum's Salon, stressing that it helped many artists to become renowned and was thus especially relevant for emerging artists.[43] Often artists had individual exhibitions after exhibiting at the Salon; as with the Paris Salon, exhibiting at the Salon elevated the status of artists and their works, and gave prestige. The short portrayals of four women artists who exhibited regularly at the Salon in the first two decades show us that women artists were neither a homogenous group nor singled out for their gender. They treated very diverse subjects and adopted various styles, came from different social backgrounds and generations, and were often pioneers in their fields – Saloua Raouda Choucair as an abstract artist, Nadia Saikali in kinetic art, Juliana Seraphim in exploring erotic themes, and Sophie Yeramian not as a pioneer but as one of the country's two main self-taught naïve artists.

In conclusion, we can say that the Salon d'Automne provided an egalitarian space, meaning that gender played no role in the selection of artists. However, this was no exception in Beirut from the 1960s up until the 1980s. The growing number of exhibition spaces in the city were open to both male and female artists. The Museum as an exhibition space was an important vehicle through which to form public taste, both during the temporary Salon exhibitions and through its permanent collection displays by which it marks its place in Lebanon's art history. After the Museum reopened in October 2015, the permanent collection displayed on its second floor included many female artists and works by all four artists discussed above. When the Museum rearranged the display of its

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[39] "Les Naïfs. – Khalil Zghaib était roi dans ce domaine. Sophie Yeramian, nouvelle recrue, lui dame le pion par sa fraîcheur et son organisation de l'espace. Elle pourrait devenir une dangereuse rivale, si Zghaib n'essaye pas de se secouer." Y. A., "L'Exposition d'œuvres de peintres et de sculpteurs libanais du Musée Nicolas Ibrahim Sursock," *Le Soir*, November 23. 1961, page numbers unknown.

[40] Nazih Khatir, "Salon d'Automne 1964: Trois prix… et des problèmes," *L'Orient*, December 20, 1964; Mirèse Akar, "Salons d'Automne: Au Musée Sursock : Le savoir-peindre libanais," *L'Orient*, December 5, 1965, page numbers unknown.

[41] Mirèse Akar, "Hier soir, ouverture du Salon d'Automne au Musée Sursock. Le paradis officiel de l'art libanais," *L'Orient*, December 29, 1966), page numbers unknown.

[42] "Seuls Khalil Zgaib et Sophie Yeramian paraissent immuables, ni plus ni moins naïfs que tantôt: deux repères merveilleux pour mesurer les multiples transformations des Salons successifs." Mirèse Akar, "Hier soir, au Musée Sursock, ouverture du 7ème Salon d'Automne: Une Diversité Dynamique," *L'Orient*, December 13, 1967, page numbers unknown.

[43] Conversation with Etel Adnan, Paris, September 2017.

permanent exhibition between September 2017 and September 2018, one room was dedicated to Etel Adnan.[44]

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[44] They also included a tapestry that she had drawn between 1963 and 1964 that was produced in 2016 (entitled *Playground*) in another room focusing on tapestry.

Biography

Nadia von Maltzahn is the Deputy Director of the Orient-Institut Beirut (OIB), currently on parental leave. Her publications include *The Art Salon in the Arab Region: Politics of Taste Making*, co-edited with Monique Bellan (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2018), *The Syria-Iran Axis: Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013/2015), and other publications revolving around cultural practices in Lebanon and the Middle East. She holds a DPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from St Antony's College, Oxford. Nadia's research interests include cultural policies, artistic practices and the circulation of knowledge. Her current research project deals with cultural policies in Lebanon, in particular cultural institutions and their role in the public sphere. In October 2020 she will start a new research project entitled "LAWHA – Lebanon's Art World at Home and Abroad: Trajectories of artists and artworks in/from Lebanon since 1943," funded by the European Research Council (ERC).

Joan Grandjean & Mirl Redmann[1]

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 leporellos, 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 mountain[6] 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

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[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 Obrist[11] 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.

Artist's Statement

Samia Halaby[1]

The Political Basis of Abstraction in the 20th Century As Explored by a Painter[2]

Abstract

The political nature of abstraction presented from an artist's point of view – one who considers the most advanced task is the exploration of the language of pictures. Such exploration is understood as a separate discipline from the many others that employ pictures for practical functions. The author examines the development of 20th century abstraction as an effect of revolutionary social motion. Historic steps to abstraction, taking shape as rising and receding artistic movements, are correlated to revolutionary motion. The materialist underpinning of abstraction is distinguished from the idealism of Post-Modernism. The paper ends with an examination of contemporary discourse in the Western art world that attempts to erase the internationalism of abstraction and, thereby, marginalize non-Western practitioners.

Keywords: abstraction, art history, materialism, painting, revolution

Preliminaries and Parameters of Inquiry

An important parameter that guides my thinking on painting is to define paintings as a subset of all pictures, which are visual images on a flat surface distinct from mixed media installation. Pictures are visual images that possess a formal language that is separate from words, and that visual thinking is not first born in words but grows independently of them. While both words and images reflect reality, I see visual images as being closer to reality than words. I see words as more highly developed symbols about which we possess greater social agreement as to their meaning, as is borne out by any dictionary. I cannot imagine a dictionary that defines billions of images. Agreement on the signification of an image is looser by far than that of words. But we do agree that they give us reflections of reality. Word and image form the two primary media of human communication and they are often used together.

As I talk to an audience of academics with certain definitions in scholarly discourse and since I am now distant from this discourse as an artist independent from academia for the past thirty-six years, I would like to clarify some of my terms. I make a strong distinction between what is aesthetic and what is mystical. Many will describe a beautiful visual experience as being mystical. Because the formal language of pictures – how painters talk to each other about their work – is so rarely part of

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[2] The following is an adaptation of the keynote speech held on September 28, 2018, at the symposium "The Arab Apocalypse: Art, Abstraction and Activism in the Middle East", Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

historical and general discourse, the term mystical is often confused with aesthetic experience of something considered beautiful and moving.

Advances in the art of explorative picture making does not mean that imitating earlier methods do not produce beautiful pictures as would be for example the making of an Impressionist landscape in the 21st century. But, the beauty of pictures executed as variations of known historical methods might be admired differently from explorative ones. New explorative modes may seem strange, even uncouth to many on first experience. In the following paragraphs abstraction will be positioned as the most advanced exploration in picture making, today mostly done as pigments on a ground that is as painting, and that what sparked and fed this advance was working class motion such as the Paris Commune, the struggle for the eight-hour day, the Soviet revolution. And the industrial union movement in the United States.

What is 20th Century Abstraction?

The aesthetics of abstraction are present in daily life but most people practice it without having a name for it. Two gardeners may consider the attributes of similar rose bushes, exchanging what is essentially an aesthetic discourse about color and shape. I once heard two Arab women talk about the attributes of color, shape, rhythm, and materials of woven rugs and wall hangings that are totally abstract, admiring some and criticizing other, all the while unconscious that they were evaluating what is essentially visual abstraction. All four individuals would proclaim they know nothing about abstract painting. Yet they engage in discourse on the aesthetics of visual abstraction and almost always agree as to what is right and beautiful. Abstraction, like earlier, i.e. figurative modes, is a reflection of reality and results from our experience of it. As an abstract painter, I am highly aware that I move in spaces with gravity and light, measuring my surroundings by walking and seeing, having been myself, like everyone else, molded like clay by this same space. Our steps measure distance and the beating of our heart measures time. We comprehend time, space, and motion through advancing technology and now we have extensive common knowledge of scientific advances such as Einstein's theory of relativity. These experiences shape concepts developed in the practice of making abstractions.

Our visual experiences provide information that we store in memory. For example, as we experience trees, thousands of them, at different times and places, we store a universe of visual information. A picture of a particular view at a particular time captures only one aspect of the multitude of experience. On the other hand, when we see an abstract image that substantially taps into this storehouse, we feel a connection developing, a whisper of future communication, and relief that this storehouse in our minds has taken concrete form, has gained the power to help us communicate. If no one recognizes my abstract paintings in this way, then my paintings have failed. This recognition does not have to be in words. It is enough that people know that they like something. Expression in words in reaction to abstract pictures is difficult.

Abstraction imitates reality. It imitates the general principles in nature not the appearance of them from one side at one moment in time. Abstraction incorporates motion: ours and that of our surroundings. Abstraction takes into consideration relativity of space, light, size, distance, and our location. Abstraction excludes mechanical or digital vision with a lens or computer program such as photography, architectural rendering, and virtual reality. Abstraction frees the artist from presenting images as might be seen by a camera. It frees the artist from the task of freezing themselves in one position committed to one view. The artist can look at the world and contemplate its visual beauty while moving through life. A large accomplishment of abstraction is freeing art and artists from having to praise those who rule society or illustrate their activities. In abstraction, a landmark accomplishment is the capacity to deal with general principles freed of particulars and, remarkably, freed from illustrating words.

In abstraction, luminosity replaces directional light, the interaction of color replaces shading, and relativity of depth replaces the measurable space of perspective. And most important of all, visual methods to reflect the general principles of reality replace narrative content. Kazimir Malevich's *Eight Red Rectangles*, (fig. 1) 1915, next to Leonardo's *Last Supper*, (fig. 2) 1498, demonstrates all of these principles through the distinct differences in their formal language.

Abstraction is present in every picture of mankind, since the very beginning, as a basic ingredient of the language of pictures. Composing any image is an exercise in abstraction. But pure abstraction in pictures occurred first in the panels of Islamic architecture and centuries later in 20th century abstraction. However, these two occurrences differ in their formal language substantially. This paper will not attempt in this context to properly describe the abstraction of Islamic panels but will continue focus on the political nature of 20th century abstraction.

Figure 1: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition (with Eight Red Rectangles)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 58 x 48.5 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Figure 2: Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper,* 1498, tempera and gesso, 4.57 x 8.84 m. Convent of S. Maria delle Grazie, Milan, Italy.

The Political Nature of Abstraction as Demonstrated by Art History

Current discourse divides visual art of the 20th century into two Western conceptions: Modernism and Post-Modernism. All of the abstraction born of powerful working-class revolution is termed Modernism. In this paper the more appropriate term of "20th century abstraction" is used, as this terminology does not obscure abstraction's international nature.

In the history of art, advancements occur at times of social and economic renewal. This is also true of 20th century abstraction, though its revolutionary working-class basis is hidden by concepts such as the 'avant-garde' or 'advanced art.' The notion of the 'artist genius,' whereby one or two strong artists are credited with great discovery leading to an art movement, is another such concept. In short, individual genius is used to replace the powerful influence of social motion, especially when the ideals of that social motion are antithetical to those currently holding power.

The Correlation of Revolutionary Motion with Innovation

The correlation of revolutionary social upswings with creative invention beginning in the mid-19th century may seem like unrelated incidences. However, I think careful examination betrays cause and effect rather than incidence. In Western art history, the concept that revolutionary social and economic development is the cause of renewal in art is normal practice. We understand that Leonardo da Vinci is a product of the rise of the Italian bourgeoisie and of the birth of capitalism. We are never taught that Leonardo created the Renaissance. Although, clearly, his painting and thinking are outstanding amongst a general social rebirth that affected all the arts and sciences. For the history of the 20th century however, the notion of heroic individualism and 'artist celebrity' leaves little room for the more scientific approach where the arts are studied within the environment in which they grew.

Important correlations between revolutionary social movements and artistic periods include: the Paris Commune with Impressionism; the Midwestern struggle for the 8 hour-day giving birth to May Day correlating with the Chicago School of architects and the structural advancements to skyscraper design; the Russian Revolution of 1905 with Cubism and Futurism; the Soviet Revolution of 1917 and

the birth of pure abstraction; the Mexican Revolution and the Mexican Muralists; the U.S. Industrial Union movement of the 1930s and 1940s and Abstract Expressionism; and finally, touching my life, the Palestinian working class uprisings of the late 1960s to the late 1980s gave rise to the Liberation art movement beginning in Beirut during the 1970s and continuing with the Intifada in historic Palestine till the early 1990s.

Steps towards Abstraction

Artists of the great movements of 20th century abstraction discovered and practiced a vital historical step towards a renewed formal language of pictures. The Impressionists accomplished an important first step to abstraction by giving pictures the power to generalize. Details were dramatically reduced and instead replaced by attention to atmospheric conditions. An attitude of working directly from nature was adopted by the Impressionists, which allowed color and light to become central considerations of greater importance than verbal narrative. Atmospheric luminosity replaced precision and detail in defining place, time, and season. In many Impressionist paintings, the way parts related to each other helped identify the whole, even those parts that alone are unrecognizable. In some Impressionist paintings, groups of brush marks were organized to imitate groups of things in nature. This was a first in the history of pictures: that a group of marks – by the nature of their grouping – imitate relationships of groups of objects in reality.

Figure 3: Robert Delaunay, *Champs de Mars, La Tour rouge*, 1911, oil on canvas, 160.7 × 128.6 cm. Art Institute of Chicago.

The second step, which was taken by the Cubists, was also monumental in its accomplishment. The entry of time as a fourth dimension of pictorial language is as visible in their paintings as it is in their words. However, gravity, perspective, and shading are still present. Cubist paintings present various views of a central compositional element (such as a still life or figures) and unify these disparate views to hint at the dimension of time. More profound than the notion of multiple views and sequencing of time was the externalization of ideas about how any shape or volume might relate to the space surrounding it by utilizing extensions of its general shape. These extensions were thought of as dynamics of shape and volume. It is an idea later talked about by Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov in explaining Rayonism. They described their Rayonism as a concretization of imagined rays of light bouncing between parts of an ordinary object. Robert Delaunay's *Champs de Mars, La Tour Rouge*, (fig. 3) 1911, shows clearly this understanding of space. In place of background sky or city or landscape behind the Eiffel tower, it is treated as a set of parts that affect their surroundings thereby totally hiding the background. This treatment is a disruption of the traditional logic of foreground and background normal to perspective.

Figure 4: Umberto Boccioni, *The City Rises*, 1910, oil on canvas, 199 x 301 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The Futurists painters expanded the idea of time by exploring simultaneity. By merging the many things that take place at any one time in the excitement of city life, they challenged the logic of chronological narrative, of measurable space and perspective. Umberto Boccioni's painting, *The City Rises*, (fig. 4) 1910, represents this stage of growth in abstraction building on the advances accomplished by the Cubists.

The step that completed the birth of 20th century abstraction was taken by the Suprematists during the high years of the Soviet revolution. Painting was completely freed from perspective and shading,

and the understanding of the relativity of space, time, and color allowed for the first pure abstractions of the 20th century as seen in Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist painting: *Eight Red Rectangles*, (fig. 1) 1915. Narrative and the illustration of verbal content are completely removed from abstraction. Artists need not praise the bourgeoisie or document their pastimes. They could deal with the general principles of nature and reality, a historic step in the making of pictures.

However, as a warning to those who might want to see history as tidy as our narratives about it, pictures continue to be made in all previous methods of the various steps to pure abstraction.

The Rise and Recession of Revolution Affecting Painting

The political basis of 20th century abstraction is further demonstrated by observing the correlation of the rise and dissolution of the most progressive movements in art with rise and recession of revolutionary motion. Examining the work of Suprematists and Constructivists during the upswing and downswing of the 1917 Soviet Revolution demonstrates this point. The example of the great Soviet painter Kazimir Malevich is most persuasive because the quality of his work was high at any point in his artistic life. Examining his oeuvre is a visual document of the rising Soviet revolution, its exciting progress, its peek accomplishment, and finally its bureaucratically imposed coldness. He lived through significant times, had a progressive attitude, and embraced the revolutionary motion of his time. His work progressed from Impressionism, to Cubism, to authoring the first truly abstract paintings of the 20th century with the Soviet Revolution (fig. 1), then receded during Soviet bureaucratic coldness to make paintings using the historically known space of three-dimensional illusion.

Another proof, if one is needed, of the role of revolutionary optimism is how it influences a whole group of artists with progressive attitudes all at once and in similar ways. Impressionism is not the personal feelings of its practitioners, nor is Cubism personal expression of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, nor does Constructivism emerge from the 'inner necessity' of Vladimir Tatlin. The Mexican mural movement is not the private expression of Diego Rivera, nor is Abstract Expressionism the individual invention of Jackson Pollock. In each illustration, the movements were spurred and energized by working-class revolution and in each case a whole group of progressive artists rose and receded with social motion.

An example of this that I had the opportunity to experience from its edges was the revolutionary rise of the Liberation art of Palestine and its recession. Having interviewed over 44 artists in order to write my book *Liberation Art of Palestine*, I saw the profound change in the artists as they embraced the cause both in their activism and in their art.

During the first part of the Palestinian liberation movement in Beirut in 1979, I could see the artists building the social infrastructure for the liberated arts. Bypassing established arts administrations, artists took control of all functions from writing the books to establishing galleries and museums, conducting open critiques, encouraging young artists and helping them find education opportunities, seeing to their education, creating exhibitions that travelled internationally (especially to Eastern Bloc countries), to establishing a union. Their enthusiasm bubbled over often entreating anyone who had taken brush to canvas to join them. They were zealous, charming, and inclusionary. They saw beauty and wanted everyone to share in it.

The second part of the Palestinian resistance known as the Intifada took place within the borders of historic Palestine where those who embraced the movement expressed it with various levels of intensity depending on the level of political oppression they lived under. Those living directly under Israeli rule resisted more mutely than their counterparts had in the liberated zones of Lebanon. Visiting Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and all parts of historic Palestine two or three times a year, between 1995 and 2005, gave me an opportunity to interview the Liberation artists living

Figure 5: Mustafa al-Hallaj, *Those Who Deter Revolution*, 1990, composition board engraving 5/10. Private collection. © Samia Halaby.

within the borders of historic Palestine while they were still full of the energy of the movement. The subsequent ten years also gave me the opportunity to observe its recession and the substantial return of artists to the habitual. However, something of the uprising was indelibly knit into the fabric of society and the arts. One example of the power of revolution eloquently said by Palestinian painter Sliman Mansour (b. 1947):

> I felt that it was impossible to draw the Intifada. In reality it was too strong… Before, I used to think that I was important and could help create an Intifada. The Intifada ended that ego trip and I learnt that I am a man like all others and I began to realize that not each painting had powerful influence on people.[3]

The Palestinian Liberation art movement was a late blossoming of revolutionary art in the 20th century. Just as Palestinian society was emerging into nationhood, beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Palestinians suffered British settler colonialism followed by Zionist occupation backed first by British, then U.S. imperialism. An anarchic variety, reflective of transition from feudalist into capitalist organization, dominated painting during the first half of the 20th century. When the Liberation artists came onto the scene during the 1960s, they adopted painting modes developed by 20th century revolutionary movements. The primary influences on their work, in addition to the history of Arab art, were Cubism and Mexican Muralism. They rejected total abstraction in favor of using popular symbols familiar to the rising masses.

In Beirut, a leading artist and spokesperson for the group was the Palestinian printmaker Mustafa al Hallaj (1938-2002). Awareness of revolution and the difficulties faced by revolutionaries is exemplified in his woodcut (fig. 5), 1990, where scores of small figures tug at and attempt to deter the forward motion of the revolution symbolized by a charging horse and horseman.

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[3] Sliman Mansour. Interview by Samia Halaby, November 12, 1999.

Wave Motion in the Growth of Abstraction

Each of the movements of 20th century abstraction was followed by a period of regression, fantasy, and idealist thinking. However, the accomplishments of abstraction are not negated by this regression, only temporarily delayed. A cursory overview might help my point: Impressionism was followed by Art Nouveau; Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism and Constructivism were followed by the anarchism of Dada and by the fantasies of Surrealism. Abstract Expressionism was followed by nationalist Pop Art with its American flag and hamburger. And, in critical discourse, how 20th century abstraction (Modernism) is described as being followed by Post-Modernism, reflects the same see-saw throughout history of art. These ups and downs are a reflection of current class power struggles globally.

Philosophical Underpinnings of Abstraction and Post-Modernism

The difference in the philosophical underpinnings of 20th century abstraction and Post-Modernism is a difficult aspect to explain. In philosophy as a discipline, 20th century abstraction is materialist, connected to the material realities of its milieu, while Post-Modernism is idealist, its artists not attending as to how they connect to reality visually and more concerned with philosophical or anthropological statements which they interpret utilizing mixed media.

In connection to abstraction we can examine the writings of the Soviet artists (or what is called the Russian avant-garde in avoidance of the word 'Soviet'). Their statements were exciting though unclear, written by enthusiastic individuals who did not fully understand the profound social upheaval they were experiencing but loved it wholeheartedly. Though they lacked clarity, their writings rarely fell into mysticism or idealism. Their critics outside of the Soviet Union were cool, undisturbed idealists, almost purposefully misunderstanding this new art. The critics' reaction is understandable. Consider how shocked you might have been if you were living in 1919 and saw a Malevich painting. Both Olga Rosanova and Kazimir Malevich described the derisive laughter their exhibitions elicited. When Malevich and his fellow Suprematists described their work as "non-objective," they meant that they would not paint images of objects as seen by a camera. Consequent bourgeois criticism converted their ideas into the opposite of their intentions, implying that "non-objective" meant their work had no basis in objective reality, thus converting material conviction into idealist intentions.

A poignant example of an abstractionist saying that his work was not personal feeling was a famous remark by the painter Mark Rothko, who it is said that at a party he told the critic Harold Rosenberg: "I don't express myself in my paintings; I express my not-self." This remark is still being interpreted in a myriad of idealist ways. In fairness, abstraction in painting is hard to understand, and even in Rothko's time fifty years after the birth of 20th century abstraction he faced accusations that his paintings were empty, that he only painted colors, and that he had an identity crisis.

With the discourse of Post-Modernism, the term 'deconstruction' became very popular and it always contained a sub-discourse that implied that Modernism would be de-constructed, superseded. The sudden appearance of critical discourse implying that formalism was *passé* and that verbal ideas were supreme began to appear. Some critics even bragged that this was a return to Western values. Actually, those critics, regressive as they may have been, were telling the embarrassing truth. It is as though they were saying "we stole the idea of abstraction, but let's not encourage it." And now, the use of anthropological methods in the making of visual ideas as well as in critical style is the most recent regression from 20th century abstraction. The book *Fashionable Nonsense* by Alan Sokal and

Jean Bricmont makes a shy but definitive criticism of the fantasies entertained by a good portion of contemporary criticism.[4]

'Feeling' and 'Inner Necessity' in Arts Propaganda

In arts propaganda, individualism is lauded. Artists are told that painting is feeling, self-expression, and that we artists paint uncontrollably out of inner necessity. I would laugh inwardly thinking that when I have inner necessity, I run to a certain little room one finds in most affluent houses. The propaganda of self-expression is aimed at all artists practicing in capitalist society; it is hugely damaging.

The individuals who believe abstraction is extracted from and reflects reality are mostly artists. During the great Abstract Expressionist period in American art, most critics could only describe abstraction as spiritual and strictly cerebral. This even while the entire sweep of art history seems to completely contradict such fatuous ideas. I could not imagine ancient and medieval art patrons urging the artist to self-expression. Can you imagine the Papacy commissioning Michelangelo to express his 'inner necessity' all over the Sistine ceiling? Can you imagine the ancient Egyptian pharaohs encouraging their crafts-people to create out of their personal feeling? The arts belonged to those who controlled society and they did not care about the heralded great masters nor the humble craftspeople that made their pictures. Only capitalism in its last stages and foggy horizons promotes such ideology.

I went back to check the notion of 'self-expression' and 'feeling' in history and found the early indications of such attitudes appeared in 19th century Romantic painting. Charles Baudelaire expressed in writing initial ideas for this seriously damaging bit of thinking. In his critique "The Salon of 1846" he wrote: "Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subjects nor in exact truth, but in a mode of feeling. They looked for it outside themselves, but it was only to be found within."[5] Though these ideas first appeared in Romanticism, they advance to excess by the mid-20th century. They have become an invitation to selfishness and pointless indulgence, robbing the painter of the rigor and intellectual challenge of understanding history and building on it. In essence, it is an invitation to self-negation.

Influence and Derivation

An insidious propaganda is the accusation of 'influence;' of being influenced by other artists and of somehow deriving your work by imitating those who have the originality to express their inner feelings. One hears an implied accusation: "You are not original therefore you are a failure. Your work is derivative." Thus, what is a necessary historical process - influence and knowledge - are denigrated in the service of unique individualism. Cut off from the proud ambition of building on the great monument of human civilization, each artist goes searching for private intellectual territory, something they are themselves 'interested in' that makes them unique – makes them worthy in the eyes of critics and the capitalist collector.

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[4] Jean Bricmont and Alan Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense. Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (Gordonsville: Picador, 1998).

[5] Most critics and art historians of the mid to late 20th century describe abstraction as idealist, mystical, formal, spiritual, based on another reality, and not based on natural shapes and forms. They imply that illusion is the right and the natural way to imitate reality. The two powerful American art critics, Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro, describe abstraction as having no relation to material reality and that besides being 'apolitical' it is 'alogical,' that is outside the bounds of logic. Jeanne Willette, "Charles Baudelaire and Art Criticism", *Art History Unstuffed* (August 13, 2010), accessed 10 August 2018, https://arthistoryunstuffed.com/baudelaire-art-criticism/.

Abstraction is Capitalist Decadence

And finally, a painful punch comes from the left and from Soviet bureaucrats who declared abstraction as being capitalist decadence. This outlook denies the great art of the Soviet revolution, its proper position as the culmination of Impressionist and Cubist exploration. According to Serge Guilbaut in his book *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, U.S. Intelligence serving the U.S. ruling class was then easily able, through hidden methods, to persuade the world that abstraction belongs to New York.[6]

Abstraction is not Western

While working-class bureaucrats were denying abstraction, imperialists and the bourgeoisie were claiming 20th century abstraction as their own. Thus, the claim that abstraction is Western, and not the fruit of a creative wave of optimism riding working-class motion, means that any artist anywhere in the world who feels the optimistic pull of abstraction is imitating the West – and thus shamefully derivative. This last idea deserves a lot of attention because it redirects all artists towards dead-end pathways.

Figure 6: Samia Halaby. *Homage to Leonardo*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 224 x 421 cm. Private collection, Dubai.

Having successfully persuaded the world that abstraction is Western, its true heirs, artists all over the world, are accused of being derivative if they build on it. Artists of oppressed nations are essentially left with nothing by arts propaganda: our roots are severed and we must go looking for national history in an age where nations are no longer viable. If we focus on revolutionary art we are accused of imitating the West, of being derivative.

This propaganda inadvertently promotes negative attitudes towards capitalist art. The artist has to separate the great accomplishments of capitalism, especially during its early revolutionary

[6] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

beginnings in the Italian Renaissance, from the propaganda of its extreme decay. The artist must instead see that knowledge of Renaissance art is essential as is all art history, and that this is not reduced by Western propagandistic theft of 20th century abstraction.

Figure 7: Samia Halaby, *New York Avenues and Japanese Clouds*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 153 x 203 cm. Collection of the artist, New York.

As a Palestinian

I now shift my point of view from the general to the particular. That is, I am shifting from viewing the sweep of art history and arts propaganda to how I see myself within them. I will briefly describe how I, as an Arab painter, am seen to fit in contemporary mainstream art in contrast to how I see myself as being a natural part of the internationalist culture of abstraction in the 20th century.
I was removed from the Arab world at age 14 and, for a time, I adjusted to life in the Midwest of the United States. The power of the Arab world inside me made itself apparent in the 1960s when first Iraqi, then Palestinian students, excited by the growing liberation movements at home, began to arrive at universities of the Midwest and infected me with their spirited resistance. I was then a young professor, and as a result my youthful anguish about Palestine developed into political consciousness.

Reactions to me and my painting from Westerners generally affected me by inverse example. Zionist imperialist occupation of Palestine politicized me. It led me to analyze the forces that caused my eviction and continued separation from my homeland. My father's choice to settle us in

the U.S. forced me to measure the hostile propaganda and racism towards Palestinians (and others) by the yardstick of my Palestinian reality. It is clear that governments and the media lie copiously. In such a situation, one learns to read between the lines, in not only political propaganda but also capitalist scholarship.

How I was treated by other activists (Palestinian and otherwise) forced me to think through yet another stumbling block on the road to being a painter of my time. For example, at the opening of a small exhibition of Palestinian artists, a brave young activist asked me: "where is Palestine in your work?" I was surprised, and since I felt no confusion about the path that I had taken as painter I inverted the comment and began an analysis of who might want Palestine in my work. There are three main social groups that might want Palestine in my work, those being: the bourgeoisie who would like to box me into a convenient subcategory; the Arab bureaucrats who cover their shameful obeisance to imperialism with a fig leaf of 'identity;' and the revolutionary freedom fighter who wants to liberate Palestine. Of course, I sympathize with the last category and serve that purpose with my applied political art.[7] But in connection to my explorative painting, to such questions I respond with an affectionate counter-question: "If you fall severely ill, would you want a doctor who only knows the history of Palestinian medicine?" And I ask you also, my audience here in Switzerland: "If you fall severely ill, would you want a doctor who only knows the history of Swiss medicine?"

I always kept my painting separate from my applied and documentary work. Other than titles referring to Palestine and or other liberation movements, I devoted my painting to exploring abstraction as the most advanced art of our time, one that I am persuaded will be an important path for explorative painting in the future. It is the most important of my visual work, and the most political. That political base, the revolutionary motion of the working-class, is the most profoundly significant force of our time. Although that persuasion was strong in me, many matters arose that challenged it, and all through my life I have had to rethink and strengthen my understanding.

From all this I began to understand that pictures are of many types, like different visual languages, which range from explorative first interpretations of reality to more highly developed systems of visual symbols that become more useful to human production the more we streamline them and the more we agree on their meaning. One such streamlined visual language, for example, is highway signage (not to mention words and scientific symbols). Many useful technologies emerge from pictures. Their usefulness is great enough to make them a crucial part of the production of things that feed, house, and keep us healthy. I see pictures as useful within mankind's civilization.
With the growth of all the ideas I have so far mentioned came a persuasion and clear decision that I would keep a separation between the applied, the documentary, and the explorative artwork that I make. For me activism was energizing, and after long days of meetings and/or demonstrations, I came home to create some of the most inventive and progressive ideas of my own career. The energy of seeking liberation liberated my creative process.

In Conclusion

My explanation of the political basis of 20th century abstraction shows that advancement in art history is empowered by international working-class motion. Those who hold power are clearly frightened by its attributes, and so they try to obscure its truths by first owning them, then discrediting them, all through arts propaganda. Understanding and reclamation of 20th century abstraction's international and revolutionary underpinnings is an undertaking for all artists who hope to add to the great monument of human history.

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[7] Samia Halaby, *Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre* (Amsterdam: Schilt Publishing, 2016).

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Biography

Samia A. Halaby was born in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1936. She is a visual artist, scholar, and activist. Rounding out her sixth decade as a painter, she continues to explore abstraction and its relationship to reality. She has exhibited in galleries, museums, and art fairs throughout the US, Europe, Asia, and South America. Her work is housed in private and public collections around the world, including the Guggenheim Museum (New York and Abu Dhabi) and the Institut Du Monde Arabe (Paris). Halaby has authored and contributed to a number of books, notably: "Liberation Art of Palestine" (2001), "Drawing the Kafr Qasem Massacre" (2016), and "Growing Shapes: Aesthetic Insights of an Abstract Painter" (2018). She is the subject of two monographs and numerous reviews.