

## Essay

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# On Being ‘The Other’ In Post-Civil War Lebanon

## Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production

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Hanan Toukan

FOREWORD

by Hanan Toukan

The introduction published here is excerpted from the article ‘On Being the Other in Post-Civil War Lebanon: Aid and the Politics of Art in Processes of Contemporary Cultural Production’ published in *Arab Studies Journal* 18 no. 1 (Spring 2010): 118-161. The larger piece addresses the practice, production, exhibition, reception, circulation and sustainability of what has become known as post-war contemporary Lebanese art through a series of conversations

Rabih Mroue and Lina  
Saneh, *Biokraphia*,  
2002. Courtesy Askhal  
Alwan.



between members of the public, artists, cultural critics, curators, and public intellectuals. At the time of its publication it offered one of the first attempts to tackle from a new and comprehensive perspective the politics of 'postmodern' visualities. It proposed an explanation of visual cultural production that went beyond the dominant postcolonial framework that has tended to read it as the result of subjective formations in hybrid contexts and captures a moment in time during one country's cultural history, an instant when it was, like many other countries, working through the significance and implications of encountering the global.

What the article attempted to show is that art and the way it is perceived, related to, represented, circulated and discussed is a form of insight into the context from which it emerges as well as an aesthetic object in its own right. Cultural production is not only constituted by artefacts that may or may not emanate a transcendent 'political', the article argued; it is also a state of being that may be translated and explicated in aesthetic terms that are in turn always a manifestation of the larger critical condition of society itself.

Yet, the research for the article, undertaken as part of the larger PhD project in which I was involved at the time, was carried out in the pre-Arab revolutionary period; a time when contestations over power seemed all too often restricted to the confines of overarching tensions playing out between internationally funded non-governmental organisations, religious dissidents, and oppressive security-state apparatuses. Accordingly, prior to the revolutionary period, the new internationally funded pockets of cultural spaces and production that increasingly came in to being at the turn of the millennium were often located at the heart of debates which tended to conflate foreign supported democracy with neo-liberalism and imperialism-tense debates that emerged in most domains of foreign-supported civil society NGOs throughout most of the region from roughly 1990 onwards.

Hence, the heated deliberations on the relationship between certain forms of cultural practices benefiting from international exposure and their more often than not internationally funded and top-down processes of production seemed for some time too caught up in defensive rather than critical takes on what some cultural actors operating in these fields understood as attacks on their perceived 'in-authenticity' due to what were, in certain cases, regarded as aesthetical re-adjustments supposedly being made in light of the onslaught of foreign-funded 'postmodern visualities'. Largely wedged in the throes of these inflammatory discussions on authenticity and the conspiracies of hegemonic foreign funding, what often appeared to go amiss, amongst the post-Cold War generation of cultural producers were the more relevant issues relating to the need for a bottom-up and local discourse on art and visual culture that critically questions the meaning and implications of – what was at the time – mostly international investment in only certain forms of local cultural production; as well as pushing forth discussions and advocacy

of relevant national cultural politics in transnational times; the implications for art processes and aesthetical practices of grandiose art institutional construction in the Gulf; the local art world's relation to the global art industry and the significations and meanings that flow within it; the curatorial selections, evaluations and critique of works; and last but not least, their place in local publics, the creation of counter-publics and the engendering of new subjectivities and civic practices.

But then, starting in December 2010, the peoples of the Arab Middle East entered what was to become a long, ongoing and trying period of revolt. Through fearless and graceful acts of resistance and dissent driven by an uncompromising rejection of the regimes of thought that have governed their lives for the most part since independence, the peoples of the region have been thrust in to a time and space re-defined by a series of radical ruptures in the economies and significations of their lived realities, identity formations, normative relations and authorized discourses. What seems to be emerging in their place is a series of cognitive 're-organisations' of historically designated spaces, identifications and modes of thinking ordered along the axioms of age, class, gender, sexuality and religion to new counter-public formations of collectivities, subjectivities and agencies still in the making.

But will these processes of deconstruction and reconstruction now in flux altogether do away with the constructed yet bifurcated experiences of postcolonial nationalisms in their violent secular and religious forms versus the equally violent twin effects of imperialism and capitalism embodied in westernized liberalism? And more relevantly, how will the world of art – in its broad conceptualisation including the formal and the informal – capture, reflect, embody and experience this dizzying morass of emotions and politics collapsing into one over the coming period? Finally, how will our understandings of 'critical' art practices shift in accordance with the volatile tides of the ongoing revolutionary process? Will a concerted re-conceptualisation of the meaning of 'criticality' in art ever take root? One that will insist on its practice being defined not solely by its ability to represent what politics appears to conceal – as was so often the case prior to 2011 – but by going a step further to interrogate art world structures in sometimes perpetuating this very concealment?

## ON BEING THE 'OTHER' IN POST-CIVIL WAR LEBANON

### AN INTRODUCTION

*S/he who deconstructs will be deconstructed:  
s/he who historicizes will be historicized.*

– Ian Almond

Rabih Mroue and Lina  
Saneh, *Biokraphia*,  
2002. Courtesy Askhal  
Alwan.



In an article entitled 'Why Does the Euro-Med Need to Support and Develop Contemporary Art and Exchange,'<sup>[1]</sup> Mary Anne DeVlieg, Secretary General of the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts, distinguishes between what she describes as the high-end Arab visual arts market recently discovered by Sotheby's (Contemporary Arab and Iranian Art Auction) and Christie's (International Modern and Contemporary Art Auction) and another kind of art, a less marketable one, one that asks questions and, according to DeVlieg, 'interrogates rather than celebrates.' DeVlieg explains that not only have Swiss banks, art auction houses, wealthy art collectors, and galleries discovered this new market of Arab visual arts, but governments have as well. She then provides an example of a contemporary traveling art exhibition, Arab Artists in Italy and the Mediterranean, to ask: 'how is it that Egypt, a country that physically punishes homosexuality as illegal, is proud to host a contemporary art exhibition?'

Said phenomenon is quickly dismissed as merely 'political chic'.

[1] Mary Anne DeVlieg, 'Why Does the Euro-Med Need to Develop and Support Contemporary Art and Exchange?' [http://www.babelmed.net/Countries/Mediterranean/why\\_does.php?c=3223&m=9&l=en](http://www.babelmed.net/Countries/Mediterranean/why_does.php?c=3223&m=9&l=en). [Accessed 15th August 2008].

For it is a show that uses what are commonly perceived as the more traditional means of painting and sculpture to demonstrate how Italian artists have historically influenced those from the Arab Mediterranean. The show is also overtly tied to European and, specifically, Italian diplomatic efforts in the region (as opposed to the host of newer international funding organisations and local cultural NGOs working in the domain of contemporary visual arts) often perceived as independent and non-ideological by their local partners – and therefore more easily dismissed as pawns in the hands of politicians in both Italy and the Arab Mediterranean countries on which it focuses.<sup>[2]</sup> By drawing a clear boundary between the old and the new, DeVlieg therefore establishes what types of art and which art processes are more worthy of support. She goes on to examine the less marketable and institutionally unsupported contemporary art scene that is also emerging. As this article argues, the latter has been pushed forth since the late 1990s and, especially in the aftermath of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, by a host of international culture funders on the grounds of being both an answer to the quandary in which some western nations today find themselves vis-à-vis multiculturalism and their growing Muslim communities and a quick fix for the challenges of cultural renewal within the Arab region itself.

The specific art that DeVlieg believes is worthy of supporting is one that, in her own words, does not so easily reach the Google heights – that which is proposed by young experimental, interdisciplinary artists, artists for whom the prefix ‘re’ is central: re-locating, re-positioning, re-configuring, reflecting, representing... Contemporary art looks at society; observes; reflects on current issues; comments; provokes thought; looks from alternative perspectives. Young artists act as sensitive antennae picking up what is all around them and representing it in order to engage its public in a joint reflection on its chosen topic.<sup>[3]</sup>

Hence, the description of this ‘other’ simultaneously unfolding art phenomenon put forward by DeVlieg is adequate insofar as it summarizes the complex recent dynamic of interested foreign funders increasingly investing in a certain type of contemporary cultural production in both Lebanon and the Arab world at large. DeVlieg’s remarks confirm the existence of an ‘other’ – a more crucial art for whom the ‘re’ is central in addressing tried-and-tired thought concerned with contemporary society, politics, culture, and ideology in the region. It is a scene distinctly separate from the mainstream contemporary arts market epitomised by Christie’s and Sotheby’s – one that does not reach the height of Google searches: an indication that the works are marginal in that they receive less

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[2] The Italian Foreign Ministry and the Arab League supported the touring exhibition in 2008. According to the ministry website, the exhibition was planned for the “purposes of strengthening Italy’s cultural policy in the Middle East and the countries of the southern shores of the Mediterranean by emphasising positive interaction in various sectors between Italy and the Islamic countries.” The exhibition is made up of works from both Italy and participating Arab countries.

[3] See DeVlieg, ‘Why Does the Euro-Med Need to Develop and Support Contemporary Art and Exchange?’

institutional support and are therefore more critically engaging. Yet today most young contemporary artists use the Internet precisely in order to advertise their work, often through personal or joint websites. In addition, any Google search indicates at its top various sites dedicated to both kinds of art – those that sell and those intended to generate a discourse. As this article demonstrates, the understanding that non-marketable contemporary art operates necessarily to engage its ‘audiences’, is not so obvious as the mere definitional use of the latter term. The implications of producing for either a local or global audience makes a difference as to the kind of ‘engagement’ this art instigates.

What DeVlieg in effect does in her analysis is dichotomise the two art worlds by romanticising one at the expense of another. The burgeoning market for Arab art, epitomised by the United Arab Emirates’ growing role as one of the major art centres in the Arab world, has if anything blurred the boundary between art that is intended solely for sale and that which is produced with the aim of engaging in a broader critical discourse on society and politics and its own role with respect to each. First, contemporary artists based in culturally thriving cities like Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, and Tehran increasingly rely on Dubai as a commercial window onto the international art scene. Rather than artists having to seek grants and exhibitions in the United States and Europe in order to produce and sell work, they now have a wider range of (arguably easier) entry points to international exposure. Exhibitions like Saatchi’s *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (2009) have provided various artists who started their careers within the ‘other’ domain so to speak, with the opportunity to sell their works for large sums of money and exhibit in spaces embedded within the global arts market. Second, DeVlieg indicates that the less marketable scene is not party to the ‘political chic’ that explains the ability of certain governments, including those with records of human rights abuses, like Egypt’s, to hold contemporary art shows. The Sharjah Biennial – a non-commercial initiative committed to exhibiting artwork without regard for market value and with an emphasis on art as process and critical discourse as opposed to marketable product – is an example of contemporary ‘other’ artists exhibiting and collaborating in settings where serious human rights violations occur. This fact, however, has not stopped Sharjah from becoming, in recent years and for various reasons, the focal point for many contemporary and young Arab artists perceived as alternative and working on the margins in non-institutional settings, as well as for the organisations that promote them.<sup>[4]</sup>

The changes seen in the recent role of the Emirates as art centre (Sa’diyyat Island), market (the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Art Dubai, Christie’s) and supporter of experimental practices in an

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[4] On the role of Sharjah in providing a space for contemporary arts initiatives in the region, see Kaelen Wilson Goldie, “The Formula,” *The National*, 3 April 2009. <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090403/RE-VIEW/812573060/1042>. Accessed 15 July 2009.

international platform (the Sharjah Biennial) are in some sense a reflection and a culmination of the politically motivated space that has been developing in between the new markets, on the one hand, and the civil society formula as the conduit for international cultural diplomacy and soft power, on the other.<sup>[5]</sup> It is within the framework of international cultural diplomacy that the civil society promotion of contemporary arts and culture production has been enabled in parts of the Arab region. In the case of Lebanon, the international support of local initiatives began in the late 1990s and early 2000s to build upon the homegrown initiatives of young Beirut-based artists and cultural organisations active since the early to mid-1990s. Hence, it is largely thanks to the sustained support in building a rich infrastructure of contemporary artistic production on behalf of international donors that some of today's new art spaces envisioned in the Emirates can be filled. This new infrastructure in Lebanon, especially since 2005, has included the funding and support of registered cultural organisations from the internal capacity building of the organisations to the training of cultural workers, exchanges and regional and international residency programs for artists to events such as festivals, exhibitions, and public fora, as well as travel grants and production costs for artworks.

Due to the difficulty of obtaining statistics on NGOs, the increase in the number of culturally oriented NGOs cannot be determined as of yet. In the case of Lebanon, according to the actors in this new field, the increased interest by international donors is obvious from the plethora of projects, training workshops, conferences, fora, festivals, and exhibitions sponsored by them in both Lebanon and the region at large.<sup>[6]</sup> Such phenomena, which have come to be understood as 'alternative' infrastructures for the production, presentation, and circulation of novel art works, have therefore mushroomed in Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, Amman, Rabat, and Damascus, partly as a result of serious interest from western governments, international NGOs such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute (among others), and other private funding bodies.

In her appeal to the EU to continue supporting the infrastructure just described, DeVlieg, like other funders, works to essentialise the notion of the 'other' art, or what is more commonly referred to as 'alternative'. Implicit in such essentialism is the understanding that independent processes of production and the works they give rise to necessarily entail all that being 'the other' could potentially represent in contemporary Arab societies, from subversion and dissidence in the face of established orders to marginality in the market and

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[5] Cultural diplomacy is a prime example of 'soft power', a term used to describe the ability of a political body, such as a state or its civil society, to indirectly influence the behaviour or interests of other political bodies through cultural or ideological means. See Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, New York, Public Affairs, 2004, 31. See also Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, London, Palgrave, 2005, 29.

[6] Examples include the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Al-Mawrid Al-Thaqafi (Egypt), Ashkal Alwan (Lebanon), Beirut DC (Lebanon), Meeting Points (regional), Makan House (Jordan), Masrah al-Balad (Jordan), and the Young Arab Theater Fund (regional).

counter-cultural stands. Such understanding discounts the possibility of producing and promoting artwork for reasons other than explicit reflexivity and discourse aimed at disrupting established status quos in non-mainstream spaces that are almost akin to underground movements. More importantly, it ignores the intricacies of friction and complexity arising within the contemporary cultural production domain as a whole on the very difficult issue of the place and role of the political in arts and if, how, and when it is affected by the politics of art, especially in an elaborate terrain like that of Lebanon.<sup>[7]</sup> For as demonstrated by the analyses of artists, critics, observers, and intellectuals in Lebanon here, the questions of 'subversive to whom' and 'counter-cultural to what' abound when contextualised locally.

Perhaps most dire is that such essentialism is a powerful reminder of a lingering neocolonial mentality that continues to nurture imaginings like the kind Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson critique when writing of Foucault's (mis)readings of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.<sup>[8]</sup> Afary and Anderson deconstruct Foucault's thinking to show the connection between his anti-imperialist and anti-modernist philosophy (as emblematic of postmodern thought) and his interpretation of the Islamic revolution. Specifically, they delve into Foucault's understanding of 'authenticity' when he argued that the experiences of people who teased death and lived on the 'edge' comprised a site where creativity could be nurtured as a means to push the limits of rationality and thereby break new boundaries.

Afary and Anderson point out that Foucault admired what he saw as the revolution's transgressive nature and its potential to attain new forms of creativity. In other words, Foucault fell for the idea of revolution and not the intricacies involved in the making of the revolution itself. Similarly, Ian Almond, writing of postmodernist thinkers' perceptions of 'oriental' society, observed that their understandings say more about postmodernism's course itself than they do about those societies the thinkers are interested in.<sup>[9]</sup> Almond's assertion goes a long way toward helping us to understand, in the particular case of Lebanon, what the funders and critics of the Lebanese postwar generation of contemporary cultural producers are actually telling us about what they would like to see as the role of the aesthetic in society. The latter gives rise to issues concerning the possibility of funders in Lebanon and elsewhere actually supporting 'art' with the stated mandate of social engineering rather than a comprehensive consideration of the intricacies involved in the evolving role of the aesthetic as more than merely a social agent in 'peripheral' settings. Hence the way in which investment in 'art' is articulated

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[7] This article borrows from Chantal Mouffe's understandings of 'politics' versus the 'political' as based on her theories set out in *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), and as discussed in an interview with Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph, and Thomas Keenan in 'Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension,' *Grey Room 2* (Winter 2001), 98-125.

[8] Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

[9] Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2007.

and processed may actually be to the detriment of supporting and allowing 'art for art's sake' to take its own course.

Taking its cue from the above, this article entertains the possibility of observers and critics, from the 2000s onward, systematically over-emphasising aspects of the 'otherness' of what has come to be understood as the contemporary postwar art scene in Beirut and, in particular, its role as political/subversive in the process and logic of its production. Moreover, I contend that the latter has been applied, not in direct relation to global neoliberal capitalist culture and some of its local manifestations in Lebanon, but rather in accordance with what has come to be understood by various local cultural actors associated with the contemporary postwar art scene as well as its external supporters as an answer to perceived outmoded thought and praxis related to local ideologies and hegemonies, along the lines of what Jean-François Lyotard has called an 'incredulity toward metanarratives.'<sup>[10]</sup>

Accordingly, this article questions whether these same modernist 'universalist' tendencies are ironically now being employed in the positioning of this 'other' (or alternative) art scene as an indubitable space of

dissent and transgression, in the Foucauldian sense. If so, to what extent has this positioning been accomplished by bringing to the centre, commodifying and thereby naturalising, the marginal 'other'? Answers to such queries are necessary for the normative implications they carry within them, as control over discourse is a vital source of power. Moreover, what the answers might in turn imply tell us a great deal about how postwar and post-colonial subjects are now situating their respective discourses vis-à-vis dominant economic and political orders acting within increasingly integrated global systems.<sup>[11]</sup>

Sami Zubaida argues that 'the conditions for the development of spheres of social autonomy are not only the 'withdrawal' of the state, but also an active state intervention of another kind: clear legislation and institutional mechanisms which provide the framework of rights and obligations for these spheres.'<sup>[12]</sup> Lebanon's art scene in general, and its contemporary art scene in particular, lack that to which Zubaida refers. The country's contemporary cultural production domain has been described as 'non-institutional' or 'proto-institutional' by those writing about it, instigating various discussions revolving around the meanings of such a predicament for the production of art.<sup>[13]</sup> Yet the Lebanese have also 'generally known how to live outside of the state.'<sup>[14]</sup> As Ghassan Salamé explains it: 'The economy has been

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[10] Jean-François Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, x xiv.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Sami Zubaida, 'Islam, the State, and Democracy: Contrasting Conceptions of Society in Egypt', *Middle East Report* 179, 1992, 2-10.

[13] See, for instance, Stephen Wright, 'Territories of Difference : Excerpts from an Email Exchange between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz, and Walid Sadeq,' in *Out of Beirut*, Oxford, Modern Art Oxford, 2006, 58.

[14] Ghassan Salamé, *The Foundations of the Arab State : Nation, State,*

restricted to the private sector, and only with great difficulty can a popular trend be found supporting state intervention in the economy and society.<sup>[15]</sup> Hence, Lebanon's contemporary art scene lends itself to a reflection upon the meanings and possibilities embedded within unsupported and commonly understood independent production processes. This is despite the country's lack of a conventional infrastructure of institutionalism and due to Beirut's self-conscious positioning as a 'space for congregation, debate, and planning' or even as a 'laboratory' (as artists and writers often describe it). These production processes allow us to ponder the significance of established understandings of 'institutionalism' and its role, or perceived lack thereof, in the domain of cultural production operating within a relatively unrestricted yet also unsupported site.

Lebanon's persistent grappling with numerous identities and multiple narratives means that cultural production and representation, whether for a local or global audience, inevitably become domains of contestation. Hence, Lebanese players alone do not attend to the contentious discourse about cultural production. Reflecting Lebanon's locality in larger regional and global geopolitical trends, outside players make themselves felt via their funding, their visions, and their discourses and like local players assert themselves, directly and indirectly, through an intricate confluence of sect, class, and geopolitics.<sup>[16]</sup> Following this, debate around the contextual nature of contemporary cultural production becomes the medium through which varying ideologies express themselves and challenge each other. Accordingly, the lack of direct structural challenges in the form of either religion or regime, as is the case with many of Lebanon's neighbors, does not therefore necessitate an ideologically freer production or a better ability to escape certain diktats coming from within the international art scene itself.<sup>[17]</sup>

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*and Integration in the Arab World, vol. 1, London, Routledge, 1987, 52.*

[15] Ibid.

[16] For a critical account of power sharing between Lebanese sects, see Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988. For an account of class and social dimensions of the country's history, see Fawaz Traboulsi, *A Modern History of Lebanon*, London, Pluto Press, 2007.

[17] For an interesting discussion of the issue of Beirut's self-perceived freer standing compared with other settings in the region and its effect on the production and accumulation of layers of art, see the interview by Tirdad Zolghadr, "The Forward Thrust of Christine Tohme," *Bidoun* (Winter 2005), 64-66.

*and insightful notes and recommendations of the editors and the anonymous reviewers of the Arab Studies Journal*

### **About the author**

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