

MIGRATIONS OF MEANING: A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LARA KHALDI AND GHALYA SAADAWI

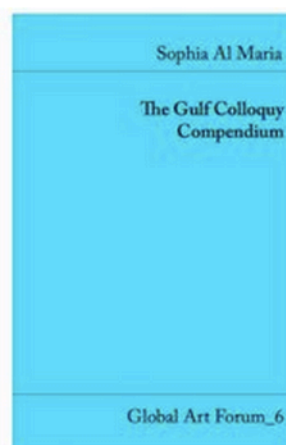
Ghalya Saadawi

2 May 2012

At the 2012 Global Art Forum in Doha, a new collaboration commissioned by Art Dubai, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art (Qatar Museums Authority) and lead by curator Lara Khaldi, was announced. Its ambition was to create an interactive Arabic Art Glossary, the first of its kind. Over the course of a year, a database of art terms and definitions in Arabic will be created, responding to the lack of any such existing glossary of terms and providing an invaluable resource for curators, writers, students and artists in the MENA region. In this interview for Ibraaz, Khaldi speaks to writer and Ibraaz Contributing Editor Ghalya Saadawi about the genesis of the project, why the question of cultural translation is so important in the MENA right now, as well as the traps, pitfalls and elisions of meaning that occur in any translation exercise.

Ghalya Saadawi: Tell us a little about your art glossary translation project and why you think it's necessary at this time? I find that translation has its traps as much as not translating has its pitfalls. It raises important questions about notions of the original, simulation, fiction (in the vast sense of the term), lies, power, misconception, mistranslation, corruption, intertextuality, and so on. Tropes of a detective story! I'm curious about the problem of there being an alleged or diagnosed 'lack' somewhere that is then treated or spread through translation. What do you think?

Lara Khaldi: The idea for working on an Arabic art-term glossary started while I was working with Antonia Carver on the two Sharjah Biennial 9 catalogues entitled *Provisions*. It sprang out of our frustration to find two translators who used the same translation for the same term, or who pay attention to the context in



The Gulf Colloquy Compendium, by Sophia Al Maria, commissioned by Global Art Forum_6, Art Dubai, 2012.



which texts were being produced. This frustration was less about producing a unified language and more about the time needed for a discussion about, and a rethinking of, terms! But I soon found out that many visual art institutions in the Arab world were equally frustrated, and some have already started compiling a glossary of terms. But those glossaries are mostly technical and lack the much-needed discussion around which terms and why. I think a translation disconnected from the cluster of artistic practices and practitioners from which it springs, without a look at correspondences, biographies, gossip, debates or criticism, objectifies language rather than considers it a part of a given social, political, cultural fabric in both languages. Translation can be an incentive, even an excuse to invent new words, ideas, connections and relationships in and through language.

With more artists, art academies, and visual art institutions in the Arab region, and with seemingly more journalists and writers interested in writing on contemporary art, shouldn't we be thinking about a vocabulary? I think multiple translations and endless debate about whether to translate the word 'installation' as 'tajheez' or 'tarkeeb' are an indication that there is a need for discussion. This isn't the only endeavour of its kind, however. Take for instance the great new translating/writing residency initiative that Omar Berrada has started at Dar Al-Ma'mûn, with a focus on translating texts related to art and art history into Arabic. One other example is artist Yazan Khalili who is using translation as a teaching method at the art academy in Ramallah by asking students to translate Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', since it has not yet been translated into Arabic. Other artists that teach in numerous arts academies across the Arab world feel that there is a lack of resources in Arabic, making certain essential texts and ideas inaccessible to some students, where language becomes a barrier.

The idea is to build this glossary as a web-based project that begins to amass terms related to contemporary art practice, and gradually settle on a meaning/term via a kind of crowd-sourcing approach – i.e., actively soliciting contributions from those in the field, and encouraging a sense of debate regarding different translations, meanings, and nuances of these terms. Over time, the glossary could begin to settle on words and meanings, and could become a point of reference for those working in this part of the world, as well as for translators.

GS: I've tried to tease out a few points. One is the notion of access that you mentioned above. As in, contemporary art/terms remain inaccessible to a portion of people due to the language barrier, and that this glossary hopes to facilitate that access. My first potential problem or question rather is: who is making this access possible? Are we sure we would like to frame it as access (since this sort of reinforces the idea that the world and language of contemporary art are indeed hermetically sealed/inaccessible)? Second, glossaries and dictionaries also risk becoming ossified and authoritarian in their approach – as in, they foreclose one or more set ways of using language. Or more controversially, maybe problems arise especially when translating from a language of dominance in the arts to a language that has not yet come into being, as it were. Or is it a question of knowledge production in the arts in the Arab world? If the idea is to keep terms open to change of context then perhaps 'tajheez' and 'tarkeeb' might both work depending on the translator and the circumstances, or perhaps a new term needs to be thought of, one that might over time affect the original in English. With regards to this last comment, what is the role of the translator here? Do you think



this project takes into consideration the creative, authorial work of the translator in the methodology of working collectively? In which case can you also say something about the methodology?

LK: Access is one of the possible outcomes of the glossary. I spoke of the glossary allowing access, or a better, more complex understanding of some terms and ideas to art students who are already part of the art world. So the project is not that ambitious. If I may say so, it does not purport to educate or spread knowledge of art in the Arab world. If anything, it attempts to complicate issues since, once a discussion is opened up about language and art, this begins to sow doubt, and doubt could always be the beginning of criticism. I would also like to answer your first question again (think of it as multiple translations of a question): while presenting the project at the Global Art Forum in Dubai recently, I invited Jack Persekian to have a discussion about the translation of the term 'curator'. When Jack started working as a curator at the beginning of the 1990s in Jerusalem, he came up with the interesting proposition of using the term 'munasseq fanni' to mean curator. It literally translates as 'artistic coordinator'. When he started out by using this term, he found that it was quite helpful to audiences, neighbours of the gallery and family members. It wasn't until around 10 years ago that he started using another more updated translation of curator: 'qayim', once a more specialised audience of artists and practitioners began to form. I found it interesting to trace the use of different terms historically and to see how different translations are used according to what is taking place in a specific locale, in addition to the fact that one can alternate between translations in the present, where one can write different texts addressed to different audiences with certain terms becoming key to creating different meanings.

In response to your second question about glossaries becoming sites of ossification; this is one of the more difficult issues to deal with. The project is still in its infancy, conceptually. I think format and method can become strategies to avoid this stagnation of language and terminology. Through an updated website, the glossary becomes a platform for a changing economy of terms, translations, perhaps even neologisms, rather than a reference for an absolute answer. I was recently asked by a journalist whether the project will be linked to the Academy of Arabic Language in Cairo, or whether the terms will be sent to them in order to be included in their regulation of language usage. But the glossary is not aimed at becoming a reference or a regulator of language. It will not legitimise nor seek to be legitimised by those who produce or use this language, or its translation. So it's not a question of legitimacy, as even when some terms are legitimised by some power, people still use more popular terms. The best example is street names; municipalities change names of streets, but people keep on using older, more intimate names that have more to do with their own relationships to the city. Language, in that sense, is very much linked to usage and practice.

I hope the glossary will contribute to the ongoing work of translators and open a discussion with them about the practice of translation. I think the best translations – at least in art practice – come out of discussions and collaborations between the translators and the artists/writers. It is not a matter of whose authority is at play, but rather of movement; that is, an understanding that language is a lived experience, rather than an object that can be transformed into another.

Regarding the methodology, one way of including different voices is by inviting institutions to contribute and upload their own glossaries, and to invite artists, translators and other practitioners to respond to it, as well



as solicit answers about certain terms through a chain of replies. And of course, another way will be through workshops.

GS: It seems we agree that translation is as much at risk of becoming a closure or a stoppage as of opening and movement. The anecdote about Jack Persekian's use of different words for the same thing over time is interesting, in that the work of translation not only translates/transliterates as such, but is a form of writing in its own right, creating a new vocabulary and new audiences over time. I think that might be a way to also avoid potential stagnation, or 'glossarification' – a neologism – as well as the policing and exclusion that agreements in language sometimes fall prey to. I think we both remember Yazan Khalili's translation stories and problems while he was working on the 9th and 10th Sharjah Biennials. What happens when the people installing the art – the labourers, workers, technicians – do not speak either English or Arabic? Or does it not matter that they understand the nature of the artist's work, but only hang or install it? It is clear that the dominant language of these art events and possibly even that in which they are conceived is neither Urdu nor Hindi. But that is just to say that translation also has to do as much with power and visibility as with technicality, and raises questions about the conversations that happen behind the scenes during the production and installation of works and exhibitions and all of the attendant politics. I wonder what form this glossary will eventually take, and whether it can broach these questions? Will it be made for the sole use of Arabic- and English-speaking audiences? Will it remain, in form and method, a work in progress? How can it also, as a glossary and as a research project, invent new terms and forms that will in turn be re-translated/redistributed back into other languages, where movement, not just spatial replacement, is key?

LK: I think not only will it create new vocabulary, but it is also a way to find out about relationships between languages — the spaces in-between. I think that this could add to the other language, in this case English, in ways not particular to language itself, but to context, and context is always about time and space. This issue came up while I was having a similar discussion with Yazan Khalili when I invited him to discuss the translation of 'installation art' in Doha. One possible suggestion we arrived at was to use both translations. He spoke about how in Arabic, more often than not, there are different words for the same result, but that it happens in phases, as part of a process. So, one proposal was to use both words: 'tajheez' when referring to the work in the present; and 'tarkeeb' when it is absent (in the future or the past). I'm not sure if this difference is even possible if discussing the term in English ...

The website itself will be mainly in Arabic, but will be open not only to English speakers, but also to people speaking other languages – integrating a way of thinking other than Arabic or English. One of the things unlocked in the process of translation is the potential for certain different ideas to be produced. Of course sometimes it also compels one to say what one doesn't want to and enforces order, but we are conscious of that, and can employ 'play' as one way to subvert it, but also look at other languages and different relationships that can change our conceptions or responses to both art and language. I think one way of trying to speak to other languages through this project is to constantly translate back and forth. But this can happen later on, once a discussion has started to shape around the terms in Arabic.



About the artist

Lara Khaldi (born in Jerusalem) received her B.A in Archaeology and Art History in 2005. Lara curated the Jerusalem Show IV: *On/Off Language*, October, 2011. Khaldi has curated several video and film programmes in Cairo and Jerusalem. She was Assistant Director for programmes at the Sharjah Art Foundation, UAE from 2009 to 2011 and Co-edited Provisions I&II (Sharjah Biennial 10 catalogues). She currently lives between Beirut, Amman, and Jerusalem.

About the author

Ghalya Saadawi is an independent writer and editor who lives between Beirut and London, and Contributing Editor to Ibraaz.