"Contemporary Arab Art": Esthetic Renaissance or Neo-Oriental Avatar?

– Véronique Rieffel

Creation to the tempo of the revolution

The events that have taken place over the past year in North Africa and the Middle East have given the region a newfound visibility. If the area was previously synonymous with the toppling of dictatorial regimes, rampant Islamization, and a failure to act on political, economical, social, and cultural levels, then these events have served as inspiration for the indignant everywhere, from Beijing to New York and Madrid. *Time* magazine honored the protesters of the Tahrir Square as 2011's "Personality of the Year"—supplanting clichés of terrorists, human bombs, and bearded fanatics that usually comprise news from the region.

Specialists are still debating whether these uprisings constitute a tried-and-true revolution, à la the US and France—or even Iran, though in a less consensual register (at least according to Western criteria). Regardless, there was inarguably a revolution in perspective.

January 14, 2011 thus signaled the birth of a new perception of the Arab World. Suddenly, the West changed its viewpoint about a place it had always considered both frozen in time and marked by an irreducible otherness. Now motivated by a movement racing forward at a phenomenal speed, the values of liberty, equality, and democracy no longer seemed the sole privileges of the Western world. Suddenly, Arab streets gave off the smell of gunpowder rather than the intoxicating odor of jasmine. This terra incognita, for millennia the breeding ground of a Mare Nostrum left and right, transformed itself in this early twenty-first century. Under the incredulous eyes of the disoriented West, the region turned overnight into a symbol of popular uprising against the chains of despotism, soon after breaking those of colonialism in the preceding century.

The media instantly echoed and latched on to the surprise that had captured the attention of incredulous spectators around the world. Time sped up to such a degree that, in the heart of winter, journalists heralded in unison the apparition of an "Arab spring."

However, only some months later, emphatic and empathetic enthusiasm gave way to a fear just as intense, and just as hyperbolic, due to the turn of post-revolt events. The coming to power of the Ennahdha Islamist movement in Tunisia, the violently repressive Baathist regime, and the phenomenon of a bloody counter-revolution in Egypt were a cold shower for the movement, a warning of a too-brutal awakening. In this aftermath, one feared that the dream was too beautiful to be true, that it was merely a Western fantasy, a tale of a thousand and one nights told by a naïve idiot.

In unison to these developments, artists began to ask similarly panicked questions. After the cry for liberty—"Fear no more!"—defiantly proclaimed by Tunisian director Mourad Ben Cheikh, the Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki asked "Where do we go from here?" in her 2011 film.

Cultural events gave way to violent turmoil during the screening of the film *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. The artist JR furiously ripped down giant posters on the city walls of Tunis, replacing portraits of the fallen dictator with those of anonymous people. These incidents were painful reminders that a regression could surface. A nameless censorship put a damper on the faith that a new art would emerge, an art set free by the elimination of tacit or explicit limits of bygone regimes.

In this state of confusion, the artistic world has become the backdrop for tension and revolutionary acrobatics. Artists have taken up the questions spawned by the upheaval—spectacular enough as it was—in order to interpret the events in their own fashion, by way of sounds and images. Questions about the status and role of the artist originating from or living in Arab societies; this questioning was not simply a superfluous query concerning a restricted circle of Arabic historians

and art critics, but rather a fundamental tactic to attempt to give form and meaning to the lively and elusive identities of North Africa and the Middle East.

The Revolution—engendering act par excellence—transformed the plazas and streets into gigantic arenas for artistic performances, and made anonymous heroes into artists despite themselves. This would come to establish art as a central element of the debate while highlighting crucial questions: what if the artistic revolution actually preceded the street revolution? What if certain artists, far from being simple spectators, had anticipated and even contributed in provoking this vast movement by calling into question the established order, and by giving us a glimpse of another possible world?

Birth of Mathaf and Death of Bouazizi

Given this context, it seemed pertinent to question the emergence of a specific Contemporary Arab art. This idea has acquired a certain success since the revolution, particularly through the impressive flourishing of exhibitions dedicated to this concept. From "The Future of a Promise" at the latest biennale in Venice (2011), from "Images Affranchies" at the Marrakech Art Fair to the "Arab Revolution" at Bamako's photography festival, what (beyond the Arabian identity of included artists) is the common denominator of the work exhibited?

Moreover, does such an interest represent a fruitful attempt to comprehend the contemporary Arab world? Is a purely Arab identity in the field of visual arts in the midst of being built?

This passion for contemporary Arab art (for lack of a better term) was not born ex-nihilo after the uprising of Tunis and Cairo. The synchronicity between the immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010—the starting point of the unrest of the Arab world—happened only two days after the inauguration of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Doha Mathaf. These two events would each, in their own way and in diverse proportions, mark the emergence of a dual revolution: one political, the other artistic, one answering the other in an echo that crosses through the vast expanse of the *Ummah*, from Tunisia to Qatar.

The exhibition "Told, Untold, Retold" (December 30, 2010 – May 28, 2011), presented on this occasion by the Mathaf, was conceived as a manifesto for the recognition of contemporary Arab art. The exhibition represented an event without precedent—and inaugurated a new era, as it constituted the first initiative of this scale in the region. The exhibition attempted to define a possible Arab identity in the esthetic field by resisting the prior tendency of Western institutions to define it for them. As we are reminded by the Palestinian intellectual Edward Saïd, a distinctive feature of Orientalism (schematically: the political, intellectual and artistic construction of the Orient by the Occident) consists in the Occident's continued hold upon the Other even after decolonization. This occurs through the Occident's imposition of a definition of that which is oriental, Arab, or Muslim in relation to its own references and interests. The definitive end to colonialist apprehension regarding Arab art was set in place by the appropriation of this process of self-representation by those who had until recently produced few outward signs, at least outside of alternative places (Darb, Townhouse in Cairo, Darat el Fanoun in Amman etc.), which considerably limited visibility on an international stage.

This exhibition of contemporary art was accompanied by another: "Sajjil (Memorise!)" (December 30, 2010 – October 1, 2011) which drew up a hasty panorama of a century of modern Arab art. The categorical imperative in the title becomes a much-needed warning against the tendency to forget one's own history, as happens when one considers contemporary Arab art as if it suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

The idea of revolution, viewed etymologically, is a return of self, a process of re-appropriating one's destiny. To live out an identity that produces meaning and allows a reinvention of self through the establishment of new paradigms, we cannot conceive of revolution as a creation ex-nihilo—which under these conditions could only be artificial. Art was not born last spring in the blood spilled by

the insurgents. It is especially— a new (Western) viewpoint, a new pride and a spotlight on what must be regarded as a timely release mechanism rather than a tabula rasa.

Producing meaningful identity involves taking up the task of memory by rebuilding a history of art in the Arab world without cutting it off from its ties to the European influences that greatly impacted it. This world, after all, was modern before it was contemporary.

In Morocco, for example, it is necessary to refresh one's memory: before Mounir Fatmi and Hassan Darsi, there were Cherkaoui and Gharbaoui, the fathers of oriental abstraction. Today, there are painters such as Belkahia, Bellamine, and Binebine, who proffer an esthetic that is both unique and inscribed in the extension of this shared history of art—or, to apply Goethe's beautiful neologism: "eastern-western." In the lineage of Mona Hatoum, Yasmina Bouziane proposes a particularly enlightening extension of postcolonial reflection through her photographic series "Inhabited by Imaginings we did not choose," while Majida Khattari follows in the heritage of the history of occidental art (she studied at the Fine Arts School of Casablanca, then in Paris) via rereading it with humor and with removal. It is no longer a matter of these artists making work with a vengeful reaction; now they position themselves in a critical resonance.

Scheherazade Guiding the People

Until very recently, artists from the Arab world were generally exhibited on the walls of European museums, due to the absence of local institutions or an *in situ* art market. Moreover, curators that took an interest in such artists were few and far between. In the best of cases, the choice of work was often guided by a pronounced taste for "elsewhere" and for the divergent, for a desire of the Orient worthy of the richest hours of oriental painting. In this context, works were frequently exotic products created for consumers hungry for "oriental delights." Exhibitions popped up as types of neo-souks, assembling pieces that avid collectors of the novel would then seek to purchase. Numerous artists interiorized an Orientalist image complacent with an attitude of auto-exoticism. This so-called Arab identity was reduced to a condensed series of several imposed figures, reproduced over and over again: veils, violence, calligraphy, Turkish baths, and the odalisque: essential ingredients to the elaboration of an "Arab" work of art whose criteria of Arabian identity were determined by the categories of occidental taste, and prized more for their accentuation of otherness than for a search for connection (an operation that, in Saïdian language, consists of "orientalizing the oriental").

September 11 did much to contribute to the accentuation of this phenomenon, even if it allowed artists to reflect about their identity by questioning how they were perceived. In a semantic shift that is interesting to underline, they went from being Arab artists to being Muslim artists. Disoriented, curious observers looked into their artwork keys to comprehend and analyze terrorist attacks, as if the artists originating from Muslim countries had somehow become expert sociologists, or ambassadors of an appeased form of Islam.

The Arab Spring might leave one to imagine a radical change from which to consider things. Ever since the events of Tunis and Tahrir Square, a phenomenon has emerged which shows, in place of exhibitions, the brut elements of the revolts on gallery walls: posters, banderoles, images of crowds, and sound work of recorded demonstrations. These materials, manipulated in different ways, make up an already-written partition, a sort of imposed crossover which corresponds to our expectation: we want to see the sensational by way of snatches and bits of noise and the furor of a people in revolt, as if the media had not done enough already to feed this buzz on a daily basis.

In this now frequent case, the intention of organizers is commendable: they show a proud, smiling face even when confronted with adversity of the Arab world, a world which as previously he subject of public obloquy. These exhibitions served in part to raise the artists to the status of privileged witnesses with a ringside seat to history in the making. However, as we know, hell is often paved with good intentions; this approach seemed to lock Arab artists into a form of refractory

Orientalism, in which the topoi of the banner and the slogan replaced the veil and beard in a manner that is just as mocking and limited.

There is certainly a form of opportunism and lack of effort in the positioning of artists who answer to this type of order—surging forward, head bowed in this open breach.

Nahda—Arab Renaissance—Born Again!

The newly announced renaissance of the Arab Spring could well be the opportunity of a lifetime to leave behind a fixed and stifled identity and shed its Orientalist rags. This renaissance can only arise under certain conditions. It advances, as we have remarked, through a return to self, but also in the demand for and affirmation of plural identities signifying to a neophyte public that the so-called "Arab world" is composed in reality of as many worlds as there are artists. In a word, it is an issue of approaching identity as something that, instead of closing and separating, as something that has cultural adherence for the world.

Beyond the neo-Orientalist phenomena evoked above, we can recognize with relief that many recent initiatives are heading in this direction. We can cite for example the beautiful exhibition "Saraab" (Mirages) (December 5, 2011 – May 26, 2012) by the Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang, which is shown at the Mathaf. If initially we are taken aback by the curatorial choice to devote the entire space to a single non-Arab artist (succeeding, after all, the inaugural exhibition of a collective of Arab artists), one only has to enter the first rooms to seize upon the intelligence of this choice. The artist is a native of the Quanzhou region, a trade stop of the Silk Road that happens to contain a large Muslim community. He accepted the invitation from the Museum in Qatar as a pretext to travel in the footsteps of his ancestors, weaving ties between Chinese culture and the countries Muslim merchants of past times had crossed. This project allowed him to conjure up curious comparisons, such as the primacy of the number 99 in Muslim culture (linked to the number of divine attributes), and its significance in Chinese culture, where it symbolizes infinity. The curator's choice offers a refreshing glimpse of art which deviates from the omnipresent postcolonial approach that artists of the Arab world have embraced, and deepens the "East to East" link to engage in a decentralization of questions around identity while opening doors onto another part of the world.

In North Africa, the panorama of pre- and post-revolutionary initiatives is also encouraging. In Tunisia, the revolution gave birth in late April 2011 to Belvedere Contemporary Art, founded by the young artist Sana Tanzani, as well as the B'chira Art Center, founded by the artist B'chira Triki Bouazizi.

In Algiers, the International Festival of Contemporary Art (as an echo to Paris' FIAC) skillfully contributes to the redevelopment of former shopping arcades. These immense and emblematic buildings of the colonial period are now museums of modern and contemporary art, open to works from there and abroad.

In Morocco, numerous artistic institutions were initiated prior to last year's revolt: the artists' residencies Dar Al-Ma'mûn and El Makan, the art centers La Source du Lion and L'Appartement 22, or the Higher School of Visual Arts, which finds a special place next to two schools of Fine Arts inherited from the colonial period.

The existence of the Marrakech Biennale and the two-year-old Marrakech Art Fair, which both enjoy an international reputation, helps shed light on a city that can no longer be reduced to a place of holiday resorts, where European tourists raid the souks and rest and relax at the Mamounia.

The new concept is to promote this Arab city by showing artwork that no longer presents merely exotic attributes, and by reuniting artists who are not selected for their Arabian identities but for the talent curators are seeking in their work. In doing so, the city is unveiled in its full potential as a cultural and artistic capital that follows in the likes of London, Paris, New York or Istanbul.

These initiatives on the whole participate in a collective and progressive elaboration of an esthetic, autonomous space which reaches further than the mirroring of foreign politics in the Arab world and which offers the conditions of production for open identities in North Africa and the Middle East.

In *Culture and Imperialism,* published in 1993, Edward Saïd skillfully reminds us that "no one today can be only this or that. Indian, woman, Muslim, American, these labels are merely starting points." This affirmation seems particularly apt today, in a post-revolutionary context where Arab artists, no longer reduced to their geographic origins or patronymics, are above all initiated into a contemporaneity that has once and for all reached beyond the frontiers set by the West. Far from playing a marginal role or producing simple copies, it now falls fully within the scope of an inspired revolutionary enthusiasm (*Schärmerei*) and a desire to salutary creation, bringing new life to the foundation of an art whose same principal is to cling to perpetual evolution. We therefore discover an esthetic Renaissance whose starting points are multiple and which will be henceforth situated somewhere south of old Europe, between Casablanca, Algiers, Tunis, and Cairo.

In order for the term "Arab" to surpass the simple label that defines it, a label placed upon art according to a passing mode, and one weighed down by the desiderata of an unpredictable history and a versatile market, it is necessary to dig further and take up this task of self-determination, one which re-writes the region as an accessible place for art that is not ethnocentrically Westernized. Under these conditions, a truly universal contemporary art can emerge, one in which the Arab world will become an essential component and not merely an insignificant shadow.

First published in *Higher Atlas / Au-delà de l'Atlas – The Marrakech Biennale [4] in Context*
Sternberg Press, February 2012, English/French. ISBN 978-3-943365-03-0