sajjil

a century of modern art

mathaf

arab museum of modern art

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sajjil... a space to question[1]

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Exhibiting the visual manifestation of Arab modernism is admittedly a very complex and contentious task. Before approaching the subject, however, one has to contemplate two important questions that will be raised by many in regards to this exhibition: why now, and why in Doha? There are two main reasons for these queries. The first has to do with the understanding of conventional narratives of modernism in general, and in/of the Arab world in particular. The real question is, where does Arab modernism fit in relation to European modernism, especially today when the topic has been intentionally passed over in the celebratory circles of contemporary Middle Eastern art; consequently, this is precisely the reason for the urgency of this task. Nevertheless, the "why now" is a pertinent question that will be dealt with further in individual essays.

The second question is more connected to geography. Doha, Qatar, is part of what is now considered the new Arab world—a major player along with the United Arab Emirates in the new Middle East in terms of politics and economy, but more importantly, in establishing the image for a new Arab identity. This new identity no longer conforms to secularized newly independent Arab countries, such as Egypt and Iraq, of the middle of the twentieth century. As Samir Kassir asserts, the new face of the Arab world, as portrayed on the cover of *Times* and *Newsweek*, wears a white *ghutra* or black *abaya*; in other words, it is the face of the gulf, particularly Qatar and the UAE.[2]

The relationship between this "new" Arab world and the traditional, "old" Arab world is quite controversial. The main contention is not only related to status (the old Arab world historically provided centers of political, economic, and cultural powers) but also to identity. How could Doha serve as the site for exhibiting and disseminating Arab modernism, becoming a center for the art of the old Arab world, where modern art has flourished for more than a century, while it has only recently been introduced into the Gulf region?

This question is in fact of particular concern to Mathaf by virtue of its strategy and politics of representation.[3] Mathaf's vision is based on a regional cultural unity that justifies its name: an Arab perspective on modernity in the region's visual creation and production. It accepts and promotes an ideal, no longer popular in contemporary rhetoric on art, but nevertheless essential to

its understanding, namely, cultural Arabism. It provides a space to understand connections, intersections, and overlaps between the regional artists.

Moreover, Qatar is certainly positioning itself as a major cultural leader in the region. The National Vision 2030 sets as its social goal to "preserve Qatar's national heritage and enhance Arab and Islamic values and identity." In this manner Qatar explicitly connects the national-self to an Arab/Islamic one. Furthermore, Qatar's cultural policy prefers a distinctive regional approach. Whereas Qatar equally situates itself as a model and a global leader, the emphasis on a post-national direction in its cultural policy is manifest in the specific museum projects Qatar is developing. Qatar's aim is to highlight the Arab and Islamic relationship, important agencies for the country's constructed image and history, as increasingly relevant for the local as well as the global. Mathaf's vision and aim to grant research opportunities is a prime realization of this policy, as particularly evident in the construction of its identity (packaging, branding, etc.).

Curating Arab Modernity

Negotiating Arab modernity through regional visual production has been continuously contested on the basis of its historical formation. The popular theory about modernity outside of Europe in general is ambivalent, and consequently histories of modernity and their modern art productions are seldom articulated or nuanced. The centrality of originality in European modernism, in its conscious effort to distinguish itself from all that historically preceded it, necessarily situated it as *the* point of reference. In the case of Arab modern art, the one dominant and popular narrative this far has been advanced and argued through the colonial lenses of hybridity and inauthenticity, which consequently denies Arab modern aesthetic worth and validity as visual expression of its time. It does not accept Arab modern art without a comparison to European modern art as it source of origin, and consequently designates it as derivative and belated.

In its inaugural exhibition, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art," Mathaf presents a narrative of possibilities that tells one story of the formation and development of modern art in the Arab world. "Sajjil" performs the act of recording the works and experiences, and of restoring agency to the artists and their negotiations of making culture and history. "Sajjil," thus, proposes to initiate a discourse within which various narratives can be articulated in an effort to allow Arab modern art its historical place within a wider tradition of art history.

In the course of preparing the selection of works for "Sajjil," which presents a glimpse of highlighted works from the collection at Mathaf, there

were many logistical challenges that further illustrate the problematics faced by the field in the last few decades. The particular challenge of translation versus transliterations of artists' names in accordance with new postmodernist theories was further complicated by the plethora of misspellings in English and French found all over the internet today. A system of consolidating the different spellings to ultimately create a record of reference was researched and devised, based on artist's preferred spelling when information is available, most commonly used by artist or scholars thus far, or otherwise based on standardized English or French spellings. The variation between English name spelling in most of the Arab countries of al-Mashraq versus French spelling in North Africa and Lebanon is indicative of the colonial cultural interference. Moreover, in compiling factual data for the biographies of presented artists in "Sajjil," we were eminently challenged by the lack of recorded information on the currently less popular and hence unjustly lesser-known artists; that in itself is the result of the dearth of art historical knowledge and literature in the region. Providing some of the basic tools to facilitate research is one of Mathaf's important goals.

Nevertheless, the curators acknowledge the challenge and almost absurdity of the task of mounting an exhibition that not only claims an impossible inclusiveness, but also attempts to curate places and histories of the vast and varied regions we call the Arab world. Alternatively, however, the question remains, how will scholars study a history that is neither written nor collected? It is equally absurd to ignore the realities of the current situation. How could we neglect a long history of absence, and then expect to pick up on the same level with what is happening globally? How could contemporary artists from the Arab world not be grouped regionally or ethnically, when the world still abides by old formulas and perceptions?

Mathaf acts upon the urgent need to allow for new understandings of the visual production within its historical contexts, but also the need to contribute to renegotiating Arabs' positions to and in modernity. "Sajjil" is not, however, an attempt to explicate an alternative modernism, or to define or justify "Arab modernism." Nor is it an attempt to establish a new canon.[4]

Additionally, the curatorial team acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of collecting as necessarily an aspect of a private collection turned public. The objectivity of the collection is further complicated by the lack of a regional or international tradition of collecting Arab art, which makes comparative analysis impossible.[5] Pertinent to appreciating this collection, however, is grasping the motives of its patron. It is, thus, imperative to highlight the experimental nature of this collection; the unique goal of the patron to understand Arab aesthetics and cultural connections through observing the works in one space. We must, however, fully acknowledge the ideological

bend present throughout: the need to assert the Arab visual creation in relation to the rest of the world. That vision, nevertheless, does not in the least deter from the value of the works collected or the potential of the stories told.[6]

Finally, it is the ultimate hope of the curators of Sajjil that first and foremost the art works themselves be the focus and are viewed and enjoyed for their worth as object of art.

[1] The title *Sajjil* is borrowed from Mahmoud Darwish's famous poem, "Sajjil ana 'arabi" ("Record! I Am an Arab;" published in English under the title "Identity Card"). *Sajjil* invokes both affirmation and documentation of an existing record. It declares its being and provides a space to engage with that being.
[2] Kassir, Samir. *Being Arab*. London: Verso, 2006.
[3] See Deena Chalabi's essay "Articulating Mathaf: Arab + Museum + Modern + Art".
[4] See Nada Shabout, "Record, or Arab Art Again," for detailed discussion of *Sajjil's* objectives and themes.
[5] To clarify, it is not that the Arab world did not collect art, but collecting meant a very different thing than we are now accustomed to, and did not follow in the same European practice.
[6] See Sophia al-Maria essay "A History of Mathaf".

record, or arab art again

Nada Shabout

Admittedly, invoking the term "Arab" today carries a great many connotations. Depending on the sphere in which it is applied, the term resonates positively or negatively, and consequently can project distinctly different meanings. Thus, to resurrect the term again on such an institutional level is bound to have repercussions, and should therefore not be taken lightly. However, in my humble opinion it is high time to unpack, confront, and reevaluate the term Arab, instead of shying away from it, or simply rejecting it outright.

First and foremost, an important clarification has to be made. The curatorial premise of "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art" does not pivot on the assumption of a single or unified Arab experience that is represented here in one exhibition. On the contrary, it admits a multiplicity of experiences, but realizes the several common moments that justify a collective identity, which is to a large extent imagined and constructed, as all identities inexorably are. Art made in response to special historical and political conditions, including shared senses of anticolonialism and Arabism, communicates similar objectives.

Does the title of the exhibition, however, privilege identity politics? I imagine that the more appropriate question here should be whether the issue of identity or politics can be avoided anywhere in the world, let alone in the so-called Middle East. I would argue not only that there is no escaping the issue, but also that a strong return to a similar preoccupation is currently in evidence everywhere. Moreover, despite today's rhetorical claims against making definitions, and the declared fear of seemingly fixed identities, the term "Arab" is continually invoked both politically and culturally. Even those who resist the word's political, pan-Arab, and ideological connotations *à la* Nasser are quite ambivalent regarding its frequent and indiscriminate use in the media. Could it be that despite all arguments, it still has validity today? With its generality and universalism, Arabism is as familiar and comforting a term as it is threatening and out of step with contemporary theories of the postmodern condition.

Most contemporary artists of the Arab world—the "globalized" artists of the diaspora—reject the term Arab because they are convinced that they belong to a global world that accepts them as artists per se, a category in which identity is not a factor, and have thus accepted the claim that postmodernist theory initiated a process of reconciliation that globalization has duly delivered. The question here is not about the truth of such a claim, for

there are valid arguments to be made on both sides, but rather about the willingness to accept this idea without accordingly reevaluating modernism itself. Is it because this claim is related by the hegemonic center of power, the West? Consequently, should we dismiss the belief among Arab artists of the twentieth century that they were participating and engaged in the internationalism and cosmopolitanism of the modernist project, because their work was not recognized and validated by the European powers?

Within the Arab sphere itself, the generational divide seems to be dictated by "official" politics vs. so-called "global" politics, with the corresponding division into modernist and postmodernist Arab artists, and appears to revolve around nationalist sentiments.[1] The previous generation of mid-twentieth century "nationalist" artists are seemingly baffled by the rejection of nationalism on the part of the generations of artists that have followed, particularly those of the late twentieth century. After all, the formers' nationalism is only political to the extent that the historical circumstances of their earlier times dictated. Their insistence on a form of restrictive Arabism, which alienates them today from the global scene, is in fact a mode of reaction to the new generation's lack thereof. A similar rise of the post-9/11 wave of patriotic nationalism among people in the United States is a case in point.

One of the issues that the mobility of globalization claims to have solved, which further segregates the two generations, is the theory of conflict between two contradictory worlds, a perceived clash between East and West that contemporary artists are presumably immune to, being comfortable in both as they move in continuous flux between the two. It is argued that such artists are not caught *between* two worlds—as was the case with artists of the modernist period—but instead straddle both. Does such a claim, however, assume that contemporary artists have seen through the popular rhetoric of the "clash of civilizations" under which most international politics and policies—including those for the arts—seem to labor, and with which most international contemporary exhibitions about the Arab/Islamic world tend to comply? Such assumption, of course, would justify their frequent appointment by international curators to serve as "ambassadors" of their places of origin to the countries hosting the exhibition.

Yet, while media and curators almost invariably politicize contemporary art by artists of Arab origins, Arab modern art is still rejected because of its purported political implications. As historians of modernism, those of us working in the field of art criticism have been increasingly inundated with identity politics in the arts, and have rightly feared that this discourse was subsuming the arts. After all, modernism to us signified the identity of that particular age. On the surface, it was certainly advocating global unity, until later the problematics of the national became the issue, particularly as post-

colonialism seemingly allowed the historically marginalized Other—the colonized—a voice of their own. As a result, Arab nationalism became a central motivator and new identity marker in the region.

Are identity politics therefore a hurdle for understanding aesthetics? A positive response to this question assumes that there were at least periods of time when art and art history were apolitical. However, there is no denying that nation-building politics and ideology were instrumental during most of the twentieth century for all post-colonial constructs, and by no means unique to the Arab world. In fact, one could easily argue identity politics in the development of several trends in European art as well, particularly during the modern period. More importantly however, while the roots of Arab nationalism are certainly political, we should not forget that Arabism was built on cultural intersections and only succeeded culturally. I argue, thus, that it is time to re-evaluate the role of identity in the arts from a global perspective, instead of further marginalizing that of Arab art.

Clearly, the politics of the twentieth century did not allow artists to take a distance from identity politics. As humans, Arab artists needed to assert themselves as equals, a stance that seems only possible by stressing a particular distinctiveness. Granted, the nation-building project mandated a chauvinistic approach to national character, but we must admit that this chauvinism seems to have taken hold in all cultures present today. Are contemporary artists above all this? Does claiming to be say a Lebanese artist above identity politics? Is it perhaps a question of authenticity? Is "Lebanese" not an equally imagined community that is very much understood today by all on the basis of the modern nation-state?[2]

Arab Art Today

During the last decade, Arab art finally began to gain the attention that was long overdue. The growing regard via world-wide exhibitions that aim to bridge and/or explain the cultures of the Arab and Islamic worlds, along with the newly developed market-value and the sudden surge in publications on Arab modern art will undoubtedly be of great benefit. While occasional references to a historical amnesia in relation to the Arab world have been made, it is curious how this is highlighted in the field of the arts whenever the contemporary factor is never contextualized. Furthermore, it is of particular interest to note that the classic conflation of Islamic and Arab is brought back into the discussion, but this time it warrants a new scrutiny in light of the recent rhetoric that has proliferated through Gulf cities and policies.

In the special issue by the *Arab Studies Journal*, "Visual Arts and Art Practices in the Middle East," the editors emphasize the recent "tremendous

transformations for artscapes of the Middle East."[3] Among these changes they list: regional ones resulting from new unofficial initiatives; global ones initiated after September 11; and more recent ones stemming from the Arabian Gulf art initiatives, including that of Mathaf. They correctly point out that these changes have generated new interest, which is mainly directed toward contemporary art production. More importantly, however, is to understand that by virtue of the causality of that interest, this production is highly conditioned. That is to say, new production is driven by factors that are not based in aesthetics, but by politics.

As I said earlier, there is simply no escaping politics! This argument is particularly valid for contemporary art, and especially for what is termed "globalized" art, that is, art which looks the same all around the world, wherever it originated—a phenomenon that started during the 1990s with the intensity of the diaspora discourse. In contrast, art of the 1950s and 1960s did not look the same in New York as it did in Baghdad, and was separated by both temporal and spatial distances. As the art historian, educator and curator Enwezor argues, why would there be an Andy Warhol in Mao's China, when China had no consumer society or capitalist structure to which Warhol was reacting?[4]

Revisiting Modernity

Modernity united Europe through its desire for a fresh beginning, one that would be unburdened by history, heritage and religion. Modernism was to be secular, and about the *new*. Equally, in the case of Arab artists, modernity united them in their desire to rediscover their heritage, which, although never absent as part of their inherited daily culture, was not immediately cognizable, epistemologically speaking. However, their individual efforts to decipher its inherent symbolism led them to forge a historical language common to the whole region. After all, it is in these post-national commonalities that we find validation or cultural Arabism, despite the different spoken dialects and colonial influences, not the politics.

Thus, to accept that there is only one modernism, and that this is Western, is to argue that the rest of the world's developments should be discarded.[5] In the quest for a way to escape this unifocal and Eurocentric disregard of the rest, the Other, there have been several theories of alternative, parallel modernities, and recently even polycentric ones.[6] Many scholars, however, argue that modernism is an unfinished project, and that it continues today.[7] That is, it is not yet a thing of the past, any more than Arabism is. The question then should be how to reconcile the Other's absence from the history of modernism with its reappearance in postmodernism, particularly if modernity still governs.

In his *Altermodern* manifesto, Nicolas Bourriaud argues for a new age of modernity emerging today that is largely based on hybridity. He states, "if twentieth-century modernism was above all a western cultural phenomenon, altermodernity arises out of planetary negotiations, discussions between agents from different cultures. Stripped of a centre, it can only be polyglot. Altermodernity is characterized by translation, unlike the modernism of the twentieth century which spoke the abstract language of the colonial west, and postmodernism, which encloses artistic phenomena in origins and identities."[8] Ironically, could we not argue many of the points, if not all, presented in Bourriaud's manifesto about twentieth-century Arab modernism?

Globalizing Arab Modernity

The notion of a polyglot, decentralized modernity brings to mind theories of cultural globality. In theory, globalized art accepts a dialogical understanding of globalization; that is, it admits a decentralized discourse of inter- and trans-national cultural discussions. The current acceptance of a dialogical nature of knowledge resulted from postmodern efforts to correct the unifocal tyranny of modernism.[9] I contend, therefore, that the same open dialectic celebrated today in global art existed in modernism too, though it was neither accepted nor acknowledged by the powers of the time.

The curatorial premise of "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art" expands on an argument I have been developing for some time. In an essay for an earlier exhibition titled "Future of Tradition-the Tradition of Future", I proposed the relocation of modernist art originating in so-called "peripheral" sources within a globalized context.[10] The aim was to retrospectively apply what various initiatives today are doing with contemporary art in general, and extend the same postmodern methodologies used today for understanding contemporary production, to Arab modern art. I propose to take Arab art out of the confines of identity politics currently holding it hostage, but without denying their effects on its formation. In my opinion, this approach is much more useful than trying to reverse the misconception of a complete divorce from history, whereby contemporary art from the Middle East is widely celebrated as if it were a novel and sudden phenomenon. Accordingly, this exhibition offers a space to unravel, confront, and interrogate the various problematics, including such issues as regional historical continuity, what it meant (and means) to be an Arab artist, and how such meaning was (and is) articulated through the visual. On a more mundane level, it tackles the issue of how Arab art might be approached methodologically and practically.

Explicitly, and most importantly, the exhibition argues the history of Arab modern art as a discursive formation in Foucault's sense, whereby

discontinuity and rupture are intrinsically part of the discourse.[11] The premise that the exhibition's narrative advances, however, operates on two conditions. One, it requires recognizing modern Arab visual production as legitimate and equal, and not as something "Other" or from "outside." Two, it requires acknowledging a continuity of Arab production that spans the modern and postmodern, and which rejects the Euro-American canon of art history, with its myriad -isms and categories as the ideal model.

Moreover, the narrative presented here at Mathaf's inaugural exhibition is specifically not linear in history or production, and hence not strictly chronological; nor is it geographically isolated by country or nation. Instead, various themes are proposed in parallel, offering the means to negotiate the complex and rich history of post-national connectivity, intersections, and at times collaborations between artists of the different Arab countries. Most importantly, however, it posits this plethora of visual experimentations, formulations, and assertions as loci of resistance to and contestation of European modernism, and not the imitations that they are regularly perceived and incriminated as being. In other words, the narrative declaims that the work of the twentieth-century Arab modernists was *subversive* rather than submissive, as is often imputed. Significantly, nation-building (and self-affirmation) is an underlying theme that permeates much of the work presented here. Its prominence is a necessity of the region's historical development, and of the artists' ways of confronting their realities. The role of nation-building should be seen, however, as more than merely a state's national agenda; it was a postcolonial inevitability for the emergence of a modern subjectivity. Moreover, the centralized government policies of cultural industries were very much upheld by the artists themselves till the last decade of the twentieth century when institutions and structures became more the domain of non-governmental agencies. Expressing and questioning the "self" is integral in the works. The self, however, does not take precedence over the collective, nor is it perceived without its relationship within the collective.

To a large extent, the themes proposed here as a means of grouping the works to simplify the narrative are common to other narratives of Arab art, but they are equally very particular to this collection. These thematic groups were determined and identified on the basis of the works themselves, rather than through slotting the works into pre-determined categories. Nevertheless, the themes presented reference specific historical moments that either instigated the subject, or signaled a shift in topic. They consequently explain the artistic developments taking place in the region, and, at times, unintentionally express a certain chronology of process, which differed in dates from one country to the other, depending on a distinctive confluence of factors throughout the region. Most significantly, these themes do not intend to create fixed or defined

universal categories. On the contrary, all the themes tend to overlap and interconnect, and, as such, defy categorization, further complicating the narrative presented, while offering multiple readings of the dominant art historical narrative.

While there is no specific date of beginning or end for the narrative presented here—that is for the beginning and end of Arab modernism—our starting point is the moment when individual modernism manifests itself in technique and production in diverse points within the region, which admittedly again varied in dates but is linked to a number of historical events. Works exhibited range from the classic Daoud Corm's still-life of 1899, Abdul Qadir al-Rassam's Tigris river scene of the 1920s, and Georges Sabbagh's *Motherhood* of 1920–21, to works executed in the 1990s. While the collection of Mathaf includes contemporary works, the consensus was to establish a cut-off date in the 1990s, when the dynamics of creativity, the market, and social concerns shifted dramatically. Thus on the surface, this exhibition expands the dates of Arab modernism through to the 1990s, which therefore overlaps with what the West designates as postmodernity, and thereby further rebuffs the influence of the European model.

Some of the works in the exhibition are well-known classics, as expected (key works by leading artists), but others are by lesser-known Arab artists who deserve reconsideration. Additionally, one of the issues we had to deal with is the different priorities observed by Arab artists in identifying their own work. It has become globally customary to identify works of art by certain factual elements, such as the name of the artist, the title of the work, and the date. While this system of identification is useful for archiving and research, not all Arab artists observed it, nor believed that a title to their work was necessary. Given this premise, we opted to label works for which we did not have a title as "title unknown," regardless of whether the work was originally titled or not, in a conscious decision to eschew the Western practice of inventing descriptive titles for works, as is widely applied today in the art market.[12]

Politicizing Aesthetics

Politics has always played a central role in defining and redefining form, injecting meaning into the visual production of Arab artists, as it continues to do so today. On many levels, politics provide a space of continuity for Arab art of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Colonialism and existential struggles, mostly on an epic scale, addressing themes of independence or the ongoing Palestinian tragedy, for instance, have been a constant with most Arab modern artists, even when expressed through intimate subjects. Irrespective of their particular region of origin, Arab artists of the twentieth

century have engaged with, and invoked, the Palestinian question as a central component of their identity formation as Arabs. Politics was also instrumental in changing artists' relationship to technology and material, as manifested though specific transformations and rejections based on political belief and ideology. Examples abound throughout the region and its twentieth-century history, affecting and changing artistic expression, such as Morocco's experiments by Ahmed Cherkaoui in the 1950s, and Farid Belkahia in 1964, and Sliman Mansour during the first Palestinian Intifadah.[13]

Much has been said about the period of self-questioning during the post-1967 defeat era, and the ensuing debate over the cultural crisis, questions of inauthenticity, the role of tradition, and so forth. The discussions necessarily echoed in the visual arts as well. Visual production witnessed a shift from the romanticized images of the nation, to more vigorous negotiations and expressions of individualism. Both a product and a victim of colonization, the colonized, Memmi had decried, have utterly failed to decolonize themselves. It is precisely a process of decolonization (cultural more than physical) that Arab modern art elaborates.

We should always remember that the artist is first and foremost an artist, and artists are concerned mainly with materials, techniques, and aesthetics. The expression of the content is after all an expression that manipulates form, color, media, and artistic values, in specific subjective and imaginative ways.

However, ideological resistance permeated and motivated most Arab experiments in aesthetics and form, particularly as formulated by and through the various art movements and artists groups.[14] Examples of an art that proposed resistance, which only intensified through the century, can be found in art movements around the Arab world. An early case is evident in Mahmoud Mokhtar's Neo-Pharaonist style. Stylistic defiance continued in the work of many artists around the region as a means of countering Orientalist narratives, a prime example being Mahmoud Said's stylized realist depictions of folk events. Iraqi artists of the Jamaat Baghdad Lil Fan al-Hadith (the Baghdad Group of Modern Art), particularly Jewad Salim, furthered the quest through abstraction, systematically de-exoticizing and thus de-orientalizing the visual production in the Arab world. Arab artists' defiance of the parameters of modern art as set by Europe includes their continued fascination with symbolism, despite propounding a new abstract language. Consequently, the concept of narrative was never entirely abandoned in Arab art, even by those who explored transcendental abstraction. The transcendental approach is specifically exemplified in the contemplative work of Shakir Hassan Al Said, and by some experiments of Huroufiyah, who retained a pre-occupation with literature, philosophy, and intellectual thought.

Granted, artists of the first and second generation in the Arab world aimed

at entering the art historical tradition established by Europe, which was seen to be lacking in their own countries. Arab artists saw in European modern styles (which to them at first did signify modernism) an arena for experimentation and not an end in itself. Many continually questioned its usefulness in the history of art, and its purpose for their culture specifically. In an interview, the Iraqi artist Akram Shukri stated: "I truthfully say that I am bored of this modern way of painting, because I deeply feel that if I continued painting like this for a hundred years I will not advance my work any further. That is why I need to change the path I have chosen to achieve the results I seek."[15]

Moreover, Arab artists soon realized that this lack of an art historical tradition was rooted in the historical conditions of their region, which did not necessitate categorization and genres, and they grasped that the so-called Western canon, itself a historical product, cannot be Arabized. Thus, Arab modern art continued to defy classification. Instead, in their writing, Arab artists of the early to mid-twentieth century perceived modernity as a historical development, and not as a specific period development as articulated in European art history. That is expressly why they did not accept or practice the European severance with history, and found no contradiction between modernity and the past. Whereas through modernism, Europe's intellectuals rejected the legacy of the Enlightenment, this was not of direct consequence to Arabs. To Arabs, modernity represented a moment of renewed energy and creativity, which allowed that mode of understanding to continue in the Arab world, beyond its critique and subsequent rejection in Europe.

To date, Arab modern art has repeatedly been sympathetically explained and legitimized in relation to European imperialism and Orientalism. Acknowledging the existence of Arab modern art has been predicated on a sudden rupture in the region's history through colonialism and submission to "superior powers." This unequal and condescending relationship, as typified by Orientalism, argues that the West became obsessed with the "timelessness" and "backwardness" of the East as the exotic Other, which presupposed that Arabs were in awe of the progressiveness of the "superior civilization," thereby designating the West as leaders and the Arabs as perpetual followers and imitators. Even though this was perhaps the case at some point, surely it was bound to end in the long run. Just as armed resistance eventually erupted against colonization and imperial powers, surely a similar resistance extended into aesthetics as well. Consequently, the stage of initial imitation—accepted by all scholars—requires viewing in less pejorative terms.[16] Kirsten Scheid, for example, has argued in favor of the "necessary" nude paintings of Lebanese artists in the early twentieth century as a component of the culturing process, *tathqif*,[17] stating that at the time nudes were a token of modernity, and provided a space for the aesthetic interaction between the local and the

foreign. Could we not therefore understand Arab artists' realization of the status quo not merely as an act of submission, but as a conscious, global, theoretical and ideological reworking of aesthetics? A way of universalizing modernity, as they perceived it, in order to claim their part in it? Is it not time therefore to "reprovincialize" Europe?[18]

By the same token, we should aim to see beyond the surface resemblances of styles, and pay heed to the specifics that each artist is articulating. Is it not a continuation of the Orientalist ideology, despised by scholarship today, to assume that for a "Jewad Salim" there is always a more superior original? Evidence of the glaring imbalance can be found in the fact that while Matisse's and Klee's adaptation and philosophical reformulations of Islamic aesthetics pass without commentary, comparisons to some European counterpart are always deemed necessary when speaking of Arab artists. To my mind, the very fact that Arab art shared technologies and possible styles with European art speaks more of modernism's non-Western, external roots, and reveals the true nature of cultural exchanges and progress.

While colonialism emphasized the problematics of identity, national chauvinism—as dictated by the nation-state to express a separate and distinct identity with clear borders socially, culturally and politically—did not dominate the politics of the Arab world until later in the twentieth century. Ironically, with the failure of various attempts of political Arab unity between neighboring countries seeking political solidarity to face the dominant powers, cultural Arabism became increasingly evident. The superimposition of national politics in the second half of the twentieth century, nevertheless, ultimately deprived the visual form of its free space of movement. Arab art was thus challenged on two fronts: to assert its own visual and aesthetic identity, while simultaneously expressing its Arabness. In the eyes of the world, however, Arab modern art failed to assert its Arabness, authenticity, or modernity.

It is important to remember that Arab artists' awareness of the power structure, and their need to respond to the emergent local national discourse, generated a powerful inner dynamic that further fueled nation-building agendas. What we have termed the Arabization of modern art was not a superficial cosmetic alteration of European art, but a conscious reconstruction of the familiar into a national visual identity, which was not always conceived in the narrowest definition of nation. For Arab artists, non-representational art—intuitively proverbial because of its obvious roots in their own heritage—allowed them to articulate intellectual and visual reconciliations of their present and past, particularly in response to the presumed dichotomy between tradition and modernity, imposed by European modernism. Significantly, the supposedly irreconcilable opposition between tradition and modernity is still invoked as the cause behind the conflict between East and West. Yet as

Enwezor points out, the fast rhythm of construction in China and South Korea, which he calls the "Metalanguage of modernization," versus the "museumification" of European cities, presents a reversal of the relationship between newness and tradition.[19] Equally, one could easily see the "Metalanguage of modernization" strongly present in the Arabian Gulf, declaring it utterly modern and new.

Perceiving modernity and tradition as a single, linear continuum has been a European problem, whereby tradition is considered antithetical to change. This specifically European issue is decidedly irrelevant to the Arab world, and has distorted the understanding of Arab modernism. The supreme irony is that much of what resulted in European modern art—namely abstraction—had its very roots in non-Western traditions! Is it not time to re-evaluate this presumed opposition of tradition and modernity, infinitely much clearer in material examples from Europe than from the Arab world, in a new context? A new perspective on Arab modernism, would thus necessarily complicate our understanding of modernism in general.

Ultimately, "Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art" can offer only a beginning. It does not claim to provide any answers or solutions, but poses questions that allow further possibilities for understanding. Much research is needed to fill the gaps of what has traditionally become accepted as a major rupture in the cultural history of the region, causing debilitating stagnation. It is perhaps quite presumptuous to suggest that this rupture created a complete historical and creative black-out. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inextricably hold much potential for missing links in our narratives. It is within the localities of these centuries and their possible dislocated temporalities that we must search for the emergence of the Arab modern moment. Thus is the important role Mathaf could and will play as an institution and space for making and transmitting knowledge and history.

[1] One clearer manifestation that further differentiates the division between "official" and "global" artists seems to be that official artists still respond to the state, while global artists to the market. In other words, in the new global era, the market has replaced the state as a patron.
[2] As Benedict Anderson argued, "Communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined." Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983, 1991), p. 6.
[3] *Arab Studies Journal*, "Visual Arts and Art Practices in the Middle East," Spring 2010, Vol. XVIII/No. 1: 6.
[4] Enwezor, *Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence*, p. 600.
[5] I have argued before for a reevaluation of the formation of modernism in art and architecture as a European product. I would argue that on many levels it is a translation and not an invention. My point here, however, accepts that modernism is a European historical development insofar that its specific historical circumstances and their responses mandated—that is, modernism as has been and is defined hegemonically but without negating the role of imperialism and colonialism in its formation, which necessarily allowed for non-European articulations to effect its formation.
[6] Arguing multiple modernities also allows arguing for multiple "others," instead of the general homogenizing monolith of the "Other." My use of the singular "Other" here, however, is not meant to deny the particularities of each "other."

[7] See Okwui Enwezor, "Modernity and Postcolonial Ambivalence" in the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 109.3, Summer 2010: *African Modernism*, Salah Hassan, editor. Enwezor identifies four categories "as emblematic of the conditions of modernity today," pp. 610–16.
[8] Nicolas Bourriaud, "Manifesto: Postmodernism is dead," Altermodern, *Tate Triennial*, 3 February–26 April, 2009, http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/altermodern/manifesto.shtm
[9] While I do not in the least absolve Postmodernism from the guilt of Modernism's Euro-centricity (but instead perceive a more complex and disguised continuity of that practice), I do recognize that it was through the notion of discourse articulated via Postmodernity that the acceptance of arguments proposed by postcoloniality and the multitude of "others" entering the debate, was made possible.
[10] The "Future of Tradition-the Tradition of Future" exhibition at the Munich Haus der Kunst pays tribute to the historical Islamic art exhibition of 1910, "Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art." The exhibition of 1910 was in fact essential to the development of modern art as it aesthetically evolved in Europe.
[11] See Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'Archéologie du Savoir*, 1969) translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
[12] The challenge of locating missing information for artworks in the collection is more than a logistical problem.; it speaks widely of the state of affairs for collecting Arab art, and the level of knowledge available on the artists and their works. It also highlights the grave problem of misinformation about Arab modern art, which predominantly effects today's global art market.
[13] See Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, pp. 51–53.
[14] For a detailed discussion on the formation of modern art in the Arab world, see Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Zainab Bahrani, and Nada Shabout (eds.), *Modernism and Iraq* (New York: Columbia University, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, 2009); Karnouk, Liliane. Modern Egyptian Art: The Emergence of a National Style. Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1988; 2005; Mikdadi-Nashashibi, Salwa, ed. Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World. Calif. & Washington D.C.: International Council of Women in the Arts & National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994; and Shabout, Nada. Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.
[15] Interview with an Artist: Akram Shukri, Al-Aqlam September 1964, Vol 1, No 1, p. 170.
[16] I admit that I too accepted this claim for a while. To some extent, this claim was a useful process to understand the problematics of both the postcolonial Arab world and the challenges presented by art history. I have nevertheless been reevaluating my own position since then, and am thankful for the work of the new generation of art historians that is opening up new readings and possibilities.
[17] Tathqif, she argues, is "recategorizing norms for interaction and self-scrutiny." Kirsten Scheid, "Necessary Nudes: Hadatha and Muasira in the Lives of Modern Lebanese," in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 02, vol. 42, p. 203.
[18] See Dipesh Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
[19] Enwezor, ibid., p. 579.