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Decolonizing Culture:

Third World, Moroccan, and Arab Art in Souffles/Anfas, 1966-1972*

Abstract

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Artists affiliated with *Souffles/Anfas* (1966-1972), a literary journal founded in Morocco, identified themselves as "Third World" and "Arab" artists. This paper examines, for the first time, a logic of art-making situated at this junction, and traces its relevance within the framework of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists established in 1971.

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1 Introduction

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"The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution," or "El deber de todo revolucionario es hacer la revolución" – a celebrated call to action borrowed from the 1962 Second Declaration of Havana –

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appeared in calligraphic form in a 1968 issue of the Francophone Moroccan literary journal *Souffles* (1966-1972).¹ Artist Mohammed Melehi's rendition of the phrase in what might be termed a square-Kufic style (Fig.1), re-inscribed the legacy of the Cuban revolution and the nascent Third World liberation movement within a genre increasingly associated at the time (and subsequently canonized) as exemplary of Arab art (fann 'arabi). Melehi's work was reminiscent of the distinctive titular emblem he had designed for the cover of *Souffles*. It was described on the journal's title page as an example of calligraphie (calligraphy) and an affiche congrès (conference poster), ostensibly in reference to the Havana Cultural Congress (January 4-11, 1968); a topic addressed in depth over the course of the issue. Contributions centered on the relationship of culture to the revolutionary struggle and the role of the Third World intellectual in view of landmark political and cultural events, and anticolonial ideologies.²



Fig. 1: Mohammed Melehi, Untitled [calligraphie/affiche congrès], *Souffles*, 9, 1968, 29. Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque Royaume du Maroc.

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Souffles was founded by three francophone Moroccan poets in 1966.³ Violent crackdowns on

¹ See *Souffles*, 9, 1968, np [29]. *Souffles/Anfas* were banned in Morocco, and subsequently revived for a period in Paris. See Kenza Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles, 1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*, Casablanca: Éditions du Sirocco, 2012, 126-129.

² The issue included a French-language translation of "The Manifesto of June 5, 1967" by Syrian poet Adonis [the pseudonym of 'Ali Ahmad Sa'id], documents related to the "Havana Cultural Congress", discussions of Léopold Sédar Senghor's concept of "Négritude", and a text by Mário de Andrade (1893-1945) entitled "Culture and Armed Struggle".

³ Founders of *Souffles* included Abdellatif Laâbi, Mostafa Nissaboury, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine. See Jacques Alessandra and Richard Bjornson, "Abdellatif Laâbi: A Writing of Dissidence", *Research in African Literatures*, 23/2,

demonstrations and the declaration of a "state of exception" the year prior inaugurated the so-called Years of Lead (années de plomb) associated with the reign of Hassan II (1962-1999). In 1965, too, Moroccan politician Mehdi Ben Barka, head of the left-wing National Union of Popular Forces and an organizer of the first Tricontinental Congress, disappeared in Paris under mysterious circumstances. The journal cultivated an explicitly Marxist-Leninist perspective and offered an interdisciplinary and international platform dedicated to "la décolonisation culturelle" (cultural decolonization).⁴ This goal would be achieved, writes literary historian Olivia C. Harrison, by means of, "the elaboration of literary and artistic forms that would break with French canons without seeking a return to tradition [...] identified as a colonial construct".⁵

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Mohammed Melehi (b. 1936) and fellow artist Mohammed Chebaa (1935-2013) formed part of the core "working group" that headed the journal in the late 1960s.⁶ By 1966, they had begun delineating the contours of a distinct project defined, in part, through their opposition to the terms of an artistic and cultural status quo.⁷ An exhibition held in Rabat in 1966, helped establish Melehi, Chebaa, and Farid Belkahlia (1934-2014) as the so-called Casablanca group.⁸ All three belonged to a generation of artists that had grown up in Morocco under the French and Spanish Protectorates (both through 1956) and had undertaken similar educational trajectories, consistent with the broader contours of twentieth-century artistic pedagogy in the Arab world.⁹ After pursuing parceled educational opportunities in the arts

Summer 1992, 153. For an in-depth account of the publication see Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*. I thank Suzanne Kassab for bringing this book to my attention.

⁴ Abdellatif Laâbi, "La culture nationale, donnée et exigence historique", *Souffles*, 4, 1966, 4-12, here 5. The journal commonly featured work by "non-Moroccan" contributors including Toni Maraini, Afif Bahnassi, Adonis, Etel Adnan, Malek Alloula, and René Dépestre.

⁵ "Founded as a venue for experimental francophone poetry, from the second issue onwards *Souffles* published articles on popular theater, film, and art, and it quickly became a platform for debates ranging from national culture and language to the continued effects of what is founders called 'la science coloniale' ('colonial science') on artistic and scholarly endeavors in postcolonial Morocco". See Olivia C. Harrison, "Cross-Colonial Poetics: *Souffles*-Anfas and the Figure of Palestine", *PMLA*, March 2013, 127-128. The essay offers an especially rich account of the journal's "cross-colonial" perspective, and discusses contributors' engagement with contemporary political developments including the May 1968 protests in Paris.

⁶ Laâbi, Nissaboury, Melehi, Chebaa, and Abdelaziz Mansouri were joined by Abraham Serfaty after April 1968. See Alessandra and Bjornson, "Abdellatif Laâbi", 153.

⁷ Farid Belkahlia, Mohammed Chebaa, and Mohamed Melehi, "Des peintres protestent", *Souffles*, 4, 1966, 36-37.

⁸ "Belkahlia Chebaa Melehi", Muhammad V Theatre Gallery, Rabat, 19 January – 17 February, 1966.

⁹ I retain the spellings of names that seem to have been preferred by the artists themselves in the context of *Souffles*. Melehi was born in Asilah in northern Morocco. He attended the École des Beaux Arts in Tetouan for two years, before receiving a fellowship to study sculpture at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Seville (1955) and Madrid

available to them in Morocco, they took up advanced studies in the beaux-arts academies of one or more of Europe's postwar-era metropolises. A grant from the Rockefeller Foundation brought Melehi to the United States; in 1963, he participated in an exhibition of "Hard Edge and Geometric Painting and Sculpture" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

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In the mid-1960s all three artists returned to Morocco and joined the faculty of the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca (est. 1919). The school's curriculum was radically reconfigured to serve the goal of "visual regeneration", much in line with the goals pronounced by the editors of *Souffles*.¹⁰ "Man requires re-adaptation to the world of today, to his ambient environment, which has undergone enormous changes", claimed Belkahia in 1967. "The essential problem can be identified as an anachronism in man's perception. It is not the artist who is ahead of his age, as they say, but society that is behind its age. It's a question, therefore, of undertaking an education of the visual sense [emphasis original]".¹¹ The school sought to disassemble hierarchies of visual production, and students were trained to draw on Moroccan craft, or "plastic tradition" in the production of new work.¹²

The following pages trace the contours of an aesthetic of decolonization as it manifested in works and writings produced by these artists for *Souffles* between 1966 and 1969. In this period, artistic contributions to the journal were presented in various guises, including, as we have seen, that of calligraphy and the conference poster. In other instances, they were described as a form of action plastique. The choice of terms was not accidental. Artists affiliated with the journal, I argue, understood

(1956-1957). He studied painting, mosaic-making and sculpture in Rome (1957-60) and resided in Paris (1960-61), before traveling to the U.S. (1962-1964). He worked as a teaching assistant in painting at the Minneapolis School of Art (1962) and lived in New York. Mohamed Chebaa studied in Italy from 1962 to 1964, before returning to Morocco, where he taught architectural decoration and calligraphy at the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca. As a young man in Marrakech and al-Jadida, Belkahia studied in the atelier of a resident artist (Teslar), before teaching primary school at Ouarzazate. He studied at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris from 1954 to 1959, and went on to pursue courses in scenography and theater decoration in Prague (1959-62). He traveled to Syria, Jordan and Egypt between 1956 and 1957. Belkahia served as the director of the École des Beaux-Arts de Casablanca from 1964 to 1972. Bibliographic information on all three is available in: Mohamed Sijelmassi, *La peinture marocaine*, Paris: Arthaud, 1972, and "Situation arts plastiques Maroc", special issue, *Souffles*, 7-8, 1967. See also Melehi, Exh. cat. Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris, June 27-August 27, 1995 and Mustapha El Kasri, *Farid Belkahia*, Rabat: Imframmar, 1963.

¹⁰ See Hamid Irbouh, "Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912-1956", 337. PhD diss., Theory of Art and Architecture Department, Binghamton University, 2000.

¹¹ Farid Belkahia, "Questionnaire", 29, in: "Situation arts plastiques Maroc", special issue, *Souffles*, 7-8, 1967.

¹² See Irbouh, "Art in the Service of Colonialism", 13-14, 336-338. While explicitly opposed to the precedent of French arts education in Morocco, Irbouh argues convincingly that the approach cultivated in Casablanca retained some important consistencies with the latter.

each as central to the achievement of cultural decolonization, and they guide my own reading.¹³

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The journal developed an increasingly strident critique of the Moroccan state after 1969. Meanwhile, support for *Souffles* amongst the Casablanca group artists fractured. Following the appearance of the special edition dedicated to the arts in Morocco, Belkahia distanced himself from the review. Mounting tensions lead to his dismissal of Chebaa and Melehi from the faculty of the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca in 1969, claims Kenza Sefrioui.¹⁴ Two of the journal's editors were imprisoned on January 27, 1972, and tortured.¹⁵ More key figures, including Chebaa, were arrested in May; others went into exile.¹⁶ Subsequently, Melehi, Belkahia, Chebaa, among others, represented Morocco at the first large-scale regional biennales of art, where their works contributed to wider debates around the nature of "Arab plastic art". *Intégral* – a monthly francophone "review of plastic and literary creation" founded by Melehi in 1971 – helped nudge the terms of debate, at least initially, closer to this frame of reference. This migration towards a pan-Arab context has tended to obscure an original commitment to a Third World framework, and vice versa.¹⁷

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Against this backdrop, I am interested in shifting the focus to the ways in which understandings of Third World and Arab art constituted one another. Returning to the terms set out for the work of art on the pages of *Souffles* reveals the extent to which debates around "Arab art" in the 1970s were informed by engagements with a transregional solidarity movement committed to decolonization and class struggle. At the same time, it becomes possible to make sense of the way in which artists such as Melehi, Belkahia, Chebaa, and others moved from a platform advocating radical political and cultural transformation to institutions of Arab art often supported by increasingly reactionary and repressive postcolonial regimes.

¹³ In focusing primarily on the terms this discourse offered for its own self-explication, I reproduce some of its blind spots. A number of scholars address the ways in which the emancipatory discourse of *Souffles* and the Casablanca group artists tended to elide various axes of inequality structuring cultural life in Morocco in that period. See Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, and Cynthia J. Becker, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco: Women Shaping Berber Identity*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006.

¹⁴ Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 99. See also Mohammed Melehi, "Entretiens-M. Melehi", 350, in the same volume.

¹⁵ Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 123.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-125.

¹⁷ Critics of the term "Third World" rightly point out some of the disadvantages of its use, and suggest alternatives, including "Tricontinental". Its application in this text is intended to conjure the terms of its original appearance in the context I address. "Third World" or "Tiers Monde" was the term adopted within *Souffles*.

2 Background

In the wake of World War II, the political and cultural leadership of newly-minted states across Africa, Asia and the Arab world negotiated for positions within the horizon of a Cold War order that divided the globe into First, Second and Third Worlds, respectively. The term "Third World" originally gained currency in the early 1950s to refer to those nations that were not party to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (est. 1949), or the First World, and not affiliated with the USSR, or the Second World.¹⁸ Use of the term accelerated following the first Conference of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (commonly referred to as the Tricontinental) in Havana in January 1966.¹⁹

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At this event, the representatives of seventy participating states declared their "solidarity with all those peoples fighting imperialism," as well as the workers of capitalist countries.²⁰ They defined imperialism as operating simultaneously across multiple fields: "the political, military, economic, racial, ideological, and cultural" and identified decolonization as a goal to be pursued on each of these fronts.²¹ Meanwhile, and despite striking differences in other regards, many leading theorists of colonialism and postcolonialism insisted on the centrality of culture to the project of national liberation and nation-building. In this context, many artists dedicated themselves to what art historian Iftikhar Dadi has referred to as an "aesthetic of decolonization: one that would remain in dialogue with metropolitan developments but would also account

¹⁸ In 1952, the term "Third World" appeared on the pages of the French newspaper *L'Observateur* in an article by Alfred Sauvy. Sauvy intended to evoke parallels with the role of the Third Estate (or bourgeoisie) in the French Revolution, and the article concluded: "In the end, this Third World, ignored, exploited, and scorned like the Third Estate, wants, too, to be something". See Alfred Sauvy, "Trois mondes, une planète", *L'Observateur*, no. 118. August 14, 1952, 14. Also see Vijay Prashad's account of the history of the term in *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, New York, London: The New Press, 2008, 6.

¹⁹ Robert Young frames the Third World platform established in Havana as both the culmination of the non-aligned movement and its substitute: "The Bandung Conference of 1955, which is better known today, as the first major conference of independent African and Asian states, represented a coming together of recently decolonized nations and a strategic decision of non-alignment with respect to the major two powers of the Cold War. The difference of the Tricontinental of 1966 was in the first place that it gathered together representatives from the entire non-western world, the three continents, and secondly that it aligned itself with a radical anti-imperialism located firmly in the socialist camp, through emphatically independent from any direction from the Soviet Union or China". Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, 213. The same period marked a shift, argues Dipesh Chakrabarty following Arjun Appadurai and others, from a model of decolonization that aspired towards the "Europeanization of the earth" to a contemporary form of globalization in which the West is no longer considered "as the most important agentive force in the world". Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Legacies of Bandung: Decolonisation and the Politics of Culture", *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 12-18, 2005, 4815.

²⁰ See "Déclaration Générale de la Tricontinentale", *Bulletin Tricontinental*, 1, April 1966, 18-22. Portions of the General Declaration were reprinted in the first issue of *Tricontinental*, published by the General Secretariat of the Tricontinental Conference.

²¹ "Appel de la Havane", republished in *Souffles*, 9, 1968, 32-33.

for regional and nationalist specificities".²²

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In the same period, an internationalist framework for the arts emerged with the establishment of institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO (est. 1945), just as a new generation of initiatives based on principles of solidarity and identity coalesced outside of a Euro-American context. Often, the principles of Asian-African (non-aligned) solidarity or the promotion of Négritude, Pan-Africanism, and Pan-Arabism served to further the political clout of specific regimes, heightening competition amongst postcolonial nations seeking to establish regional spheres of influence.²³ On the other hand, the same initiatives served, at times, to facilitate a critique of postcolonial statehood.

The 1940s through the 60s (a period generally designated within Euro-American art history as "postwar") were marked by great violence, and, indeed, war. As Hannah Feldman points out, art produced in these decades, "was created within, shaped by, and fully legible only in the historical context of ongoing war—or wars, as the case may be".²⁴ By the mid-1960s, many anticolonialist leaders and thinkers deemed the legitimacy of armed struggle an unfortunate yet necessary step towards independence. Portuguese colonial rule in Africa faced armed resistance, while victories in Cuba and Vietnam appeared to vindicate the efficacy of guerrilla warfare.²⁵

²² Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective", *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109/3, 2010, 561.

²³ Political scientist Robert Vitalis argues that the assertion of Asian-African solidarity identified with the Bandung Conference of 1955 is productively understood as masking the political tensions animating relations between the leaders of major postcolonial states in the Cold War period. See Robert Vitalis, "The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development*, 4/2, Summer 2013, 266-288. Vitalis writes: "Those who hold up the banner of Bandung today prefer to imagine that these sometimes rival, sometimes simply orthogonal convocations track the evolution of a 'movement': the meeting of Afro-Asian, including Russian, peoples, not states, at Cairo in 1957, which led to the creation of the Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organization with backing by the Soviets; the meeting of Independent African States in 1958 and of Pan-Africanists in Accra in 1959; [and] of Non-Aligned Heads of States or Governments in 1961". *Ibid.*, 267-268. I am grateful to Timothy Mitchell for bringing this text to my attention.

²⁴ Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014, 2. While Feldman focuses on France, the observation applies, of course, to art produced outside of Europe.

²⁵ See Young, "From 'Positive Action'", 248-252, in: *Postcolonialism*. "In 1961 the CONCP, a united front to co-ordinate the armed struggle against the Portugese colonies in Africa, was formed, and at the Khartoum Conference of 1968 this alliance developed links with other freedom organizations that had moved to armed struggle, notably the ANC, ZAPU and SWAPO of South Africa, Zimbabwe and Namibia". *Ibid.*, 250.

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The 1966 Tricontinental helped enshrine armed struggle as a guiding principle of the Third World liberation movement.²⁶ The militarization of the Palestinian liberation movement followed the humiliating defeat of Arab armies to Israel in June 1967.²⁷

A 1968 poster commemorating the third anniversary of the Tricontinental made explicit the significance of the guerrilla fighter as an emblem of Third World identity. The image, designed by the Cuban artist and graphic designer Alfredo Rostgaard (1943-2004), points to the figure's dual nature as a universal symbol of anticolonial resistance and a figurehead of struggles taking place in specific locales around the world. Rostgaard juxtaposed the image of the fighter with an index of racial typologies: each standing in for one of the three continents.²⁸ This racist classification of world "peoples", which drew on a tradition of nineteenth-century social-scientific discourse and had so recently played an important role in justifying and furthering repressive colonial regimes around the world, returned here under the banner of Third World solidarity and militant anticolonialism.

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Within both Arab and Third World frames of reference, the Palestinian revolution was understood as emblematic of global struggles against political and economic oppression. It provided a crucial point of reference in mediating Third World, Moroccan and Arab identities on the pages of *Souffles*, argues Harrison, in the guise of "a literary interlocutor that was neither European nor Maghrebi, yet offered a

²⁶ "The General Declaration" authored at the Tricontinental echoed the opening sentence of Frantz Fanon's influential work *Les damnés de la terre*, first published in 1961, in which he stated: "decolonization is always a violent phenomenon". See *Tricontinental*, "Déclaration Générale", 22.

²⁷ A new visual identity was developed for the Palestinian liberation movement following the humiliating defeat of Arab armies by Israel during the so-called Naksa, or Setback of June 1967: a five day war that led to Israel's annexation of the Gaza Strip, as well as territories in Syria, Egypt, and Jordan, and the flight of thousands of Palestinian refugees to neighboring countries. In 1968, the wing of armed resistance within the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Fatah) took over leadership of the organization. In the same moment, the PLO's original charter, authored in 1964, was rewritten to reflect a new emphasis on an "Arab" identity for Palestine, Palestinians, and the organized resistance to occupation. Nadine Picaudou, *Le mouvement national palestinien: Genèse et structures*, Paris: Éditions Hartmann, 1989, 126. As historian Nadine Picaudou points out, Article 1 of the 1968 charter begins with the assertion that, "Palestine, the homeland of the Palestinian Arab people, is an inseparable part of the greater Arab homeland, and the Palestinian people are an integral part of the Arab Nation". See *ibid.*, 126. The "Palestine National Charter" was adopted on July 17, 1968 in Cairo at the fourth session of the Palestine National Assembly. Reproduced in Edmund Jan Ozmańczyk, *Encyclopedia of the United Nations and International Agreements*, ed. Anthony Mango, 3rd ed, vol. 3: N-S, New York and London: Routledge, 2003, 1744.

²⁸ David Kunzle, "Cuba's Art of Solidarity", 72, in: Susan Martin (ed.), *Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Viet Nam, Cuba, 1965-1975*, Santa Monica, Cal.: Smart Art Press, 1996, 72.

model for political and aesthetic revolution in the postcolonial Maghreb".²⁹ By 1969, the image of the Palestinian guerrilla fighter, or "fida'i" (literally, martyr), a "secular saint" equipped with gun and grenade, circulated as a cipher for the Palestinian liberation movement, as well as the broader transnational cause of popular resistance against surviving colonial outposts and the devastating effects of colonialism in newly established states.³⁰

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The guerrilla fighter merged with the artist (and the writer) on the pages of *Souffles*.³¹ Meanwhile, within the fida'i nestled a series of other figures: the scientist, the technocrat, the lexicographer, and the archon. Artists were armed with the visual and technical "expertise" capable of effecting an epistemic break with colonialism, and regarded as specialists of a revolutionary vision or as educators and technicians of the collective: a function well-served by the expansion of the arts into various fields of graphic, industrial, decorative, and architectural design.³² Third World works of art served simultaneously as a vehicles of destruction and construction. The tension implicit in this dual function seems at times to manifest as a latent, if barely-repressed energy that threatens to detonate within the pages of the journal and its associated networks of cultural decolonization/armed struggle.

These developments linking cultural production and guerrilla warfare took place on the cusp of a decade that witnessed the creation of the first major transnational institutions of Arab art. In 1969, Kuwait inaugurated a modestly scaled biennale of Arab art.³³ In 1970, the Arab League established an organization focused, specifically, on coordinating regional cultural policies at the state level.³⁴ The Arab

²⁹ Harrison, "Cross-colonial Poetics", 354.

³⁰ The appearance of the fida'i on the pages of *Souffles-Anfas*, Harrison has argued, manifested as "a vector of protest" against many of the autocratic governments that paid lip service to ideals of pan-Arab solidarity and anticolonialism. See Harrison, "Cross-Colonial Poetics", 356, 360.

³¹ The same relationship was posited by writers contributing to *Souffles*. "[Khaïr-Eddine] refers to his poetics of textual violence as a form of 'linguistic guerrilla' whose primary aim is to prevent the birth of a plot or any sense of character development". Hédi Abdel Jaouad, "Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine: The Poet as Iconoclast", *Research in African Literatures*, 23/2, Summer 1992, 147.

³² In doing so, they drew on the writings of Frantz Fanon among other influential theorists of the time. "For Fanon", notes Harrison, "this did not signify a return to tradition or what he called 'coutume' (custom [...]), the reified, fossilized product of a stultified culture that was the fruit of colonial, orientalist fantasies. To the contrary, he called on the formerly colonized world to cease imitating its old masters and develop 'une pensée neuve' ('a new way of thinking [...])". Harrison, "Cross-cultural", 353.

³³ Toni Maraini, "Baghdad 1974. Première Biennale Arabe des Arts Plastiques: Un compte-rendu", *Intégral*, 1/9, December 1974, 16.

³⁴ The Arab Cultural Unity Pact and the Statutes of the Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization were approved by the Congress of Arab Ministers of Education convened in Baghdad in February 1964, and adopted by the Arab League Council in May. In 1970, the cultural services of the General Secretariat of the Arab

League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO) hosted, for example, the "First Conference of Arab Ministers of Culture" in Amman in 1976.³⁵

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However, it was a series of parallel initiatives that took on the mantle of Arab art in this period and were funded primarily by individual Arab states.³⁶ The General Union of Arab Plastic Artists (al-Ittihad al-'amm li-l-fannanin at-tashkiliyin al-'arab) was founded in Damascus in December 1971 at the First Arab Conference of Fine Arts (*al-Mu'tammar al-'arabi al-awwal li-l-funun al-jamila*). The Union required the participation of an "association of artists" representing each state.³⁷ In April 1972, the Iraqi Ministry of Information hosted the "Yahya al-Wassity Festival" (Mahrajan al-Wassity) in Baghdad, while later the same year in Damascus, the Syrian Syndicate of Fine Arts hosted the First Arab Festival of National Plastic Art (*al-Mahrajan al-'arabi al-awwal li-l-fann al-qawmi al-tashkili*).³⁸ The Union convened in Baghdad in April of the following year, and the "The First Two-Year Arab Exhibition" (*Mar'id al-sanatayn al-'arabi al-awwal*) (the Arabic-language phrase was intended to replace the French loanword "biennale") was inaugurated, again in Baghdad, in March 1974.³⁹

League were transferred to a dedicated organization: the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALESCO). See M. J. Menou, "The Department of Documentation and Information of the Arab League Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (ALESCO), November 28-December 27, 1972", Paris: UNESCO, May 1973.

³⁵ "Final Report: Meeting of Experts Preparatory to the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in the Arab States, Hammamet, Tunisia 18-21 September, 1978", Paris: UNESCO, February 16, 1979, 2.

³⁶ More research needs to be done on this topic. However, according to Ismail Shammout, the Iraqi state contributed 25,000 dinars (100,000 USD) to support the "First Two-Year Exhibition". The Arab League also contributed funds, as did a number of other Arab states not mentioned by name. Ismail Shammout, interview with Mostafa Nissaboury. "Entretien avec Ismail Shammout", special issue, "Biennale arabe de Baghdade", *Intégral*, 9, December 1974, 34.

³⁷ Union of Arab Artists, "Constitution Statuts", 1973.

³⁸ See Syndicate of Fine Arts, *al-Mahrajan al-'Arabi al-'Awwal li-l-Fann al-Qawmi al-Tashkili* (Damascus: Mataba' al-'Idara al-Siyasiyya li-l-Jaysh wa-l-Quwat al-Musallaha, 1973). The publication cites conflicting months for the date of the event, or both October and November 23-28, 1972.

³⁹ General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, "Manhaj f'aliyat Ma'rid al-sanatayn al-'arabi al-awwal/Programme and Activities of the First Arab Biennial [sic] Baghdad 1974", Baghdad: Ministry of Information, Directorate General of Art, 1974. The exhibition ran from March 15 to April 15, 1974. A second "two-year exhibition" was held in Rabat (December 27, 1976-January 27, 1977) and third (and final) exhibition in Tripoli, Libya (March 1980). See Alia Nakhli's account of the three events in "Les grands messes panarabes: festivals et biennales d'art arabe dans les années 1970", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, published online May 23, 2014, Etudes libres inédites, <http://remmm.revues.org/8577>. A print version of the article is due to appear in *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 138, Fall 2015. I thank Sama Waly for sharing this reference.

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These developments helped embed the Arab plastic arts movement in an intergovernmental platform, while further centralizing resources, professional networks, and arts institutions at the national level. A number of participating nations achieved independence from colonial rule in the same period; others were fighting for autonomy and asserting claims to a national existence.⁴⁰ The Naksa, or Setback of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War appeared to discredit sitting Arab regimes and to effect a shift towards an extra-national site of action, while also acting as a catalyst for self-organization amongst artists in the region.⁴¹ "[W]hat had been a state-sponsored battle for Palestine between armies had become a dispersed choreography of paramilitary actions with multiple heads and myriad headquarters", notes art historian Anneka Lenssen: a development that carried with it implications for art patronage and practice in the region.⁴² In the wake of 1967, the consolidation of state control over various domestic sectors, including artistic production, corresponded with the reassertion of state power at a regional level.

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In this context, statehood and its consolidation were not to be taken for granted. Neither was it clear, however, that the institutional framework coalescing around the project of Arab plastic arts was capable of serving the cause of "national culture" and realizing the aim of cultural decolonization, despite the ready embrace of both within Union discourse. As was the case with similar initiatives elsewhere, many artists associated the new institutions of Arab art with state-sponsored agendas: a relationship that seem to

⁴⁰ At the First Two-Year Exhibition in Baghdad, the Palestine Liberation Organization was granted its own pavilion and participated in the biennale on an equal basis with other states, a development that mirrored its recognition as the sole legal representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League and its observer status at the United Nations.

⁴¹ See, for example, Ghazi al-Khalidi's account of the prehistory of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, which he traces to a meeting called in Damascus "in the first days of the June 1967 war" to discuss the creation of a union of plastic artists. Ghazi al-Khalidi, "Harakat al-funun al-tashklyiya fi-l-qutr al-'arabi al-suri", *al-Ma'rifa*, July 1, 1975, 170-171.

⁴² Anneka Lenssen, "The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964-1970", *ARTMargins*, 2/2, June 2013, 43. The PLO drew primarily on a "foco" theory of revolution, inspired by Guevara's successful 1959 insurrection in Cuba. The latter prescribed small-scale, targeted offensives undertaken by guerrilla resistance groups, popular uprising and, ultimately, revolution. Picaudou, *Le mouvement national*, 115-116. French philosopher and sometime associate of Guevara, Régis Debray (b. 1940) articulated a foco theory of armed struggle with reference to Cuban and Vietnamese precedents. "By restricting itself to the task of protecting civilians or passive self-defense, the guerrilla unit ceases to be the vanguard of the people as a whole and deprives itself of a national perspective. By going over to the counter-attack, on the other hand, it catalyzes the people's energy and transforms the foco [the guerrilla group] into a pole of attraction for the whole country". See Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America*, trans. Bobbye Ortiz, New York and London: *Monthly Review Press*, 1967, 44-45. Compare with Abraham Serfaty's comments on foco theory in "Entretiens-A. Serfaty", 330-331, in: Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 330-331.

have elicited as much anxiety and resentment as expressions of gratitude and support.⁴³ Meanwhile, these regional institutions of art founded within an intergovernmental framework continued to draw on the terms established in the 1960s for the mobility of the work of art and its relationship to national, regional and international publics.

3 Mobile Works of Art: Art Print/Conference Poster

[<18>](#)

In the 1960s, the poster, print, and other reproducible media emerged as a privileged site for the elaboration of a new self-identified Third World aesthetic.⁴⁴ High-profile initiatives aimed at re-founding culture on an international footing in the wake of the Second World War presented the color print as a vehicle for the dissemination of a new global canon of art. Meanwhile, the rise of new solidarity initiatives embraced graphic arts, printmaking, and poster design as effective tools of anticolonial pedagogy and propaganda. An internationalist model of art and emerging postcolonial networks of contestation intersected in these mobile media. In focusing on graphic art and poster design, artists could claim an international purview for their practices without compromising the status of the work of art: "The poster", claimed Chebaa, "is a painting that is accessible to all".⁴⁵ As early as 1973, prominent Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi published an account of the development of the "artistic poster" (al-mulsaq al-fanni) in Iraq, positioning this history within the scope of international developments.⁴⁶ In the 1960s and 70s, regular international exhibitions of posters helped claim the medium for the self-identified "Third World" artist.⁴⁷

⁴³ Interview with Youssef Abdelke. October 5, 2014. See also Nancy Adajania's discussion of the inaugural Triennale of Contemporary World Art held in New Delhi in 1968. Nancy Adajania, "Globalism Before Globalization: The Ambivalent Fate of Triennale India", 168, in: Shanay Jhaveri (ed.), *Western Artists and India: Creative Inspirations in Art and Design*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2013, 168. I thank Nida Ghouse for bringing this text to my attention.

⁴⁴ It seems worth noting that many of the posters referred to in this section and the networks they originally inhabited have acquired a second life today via the Internet with initiatives such as the Modern Art Iraq Archive, <http://artiraq.org/maia>, [accessed: 19.05.2015]; the website of the Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa & Latin America, [www.ospaaal.com](http://ospaaal.com); and the Palestine Poster Project Archives, <http://palestineposterproject.org>, [accessed: 5.2.2015].

⁴⁵ Mohamed Chebaa, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 41.

⁴⁶ Dia al-Azzawi, *Fann al-mulsaqat fi-l-Iraq: Dirasat fi-bidayatihi wi-tatwirih*, 1938-1973, Baghdad: Ministry of Information, 1973.

⁴⁷ The first "Biennale Internationale de l'Affiche Varsovie" in Poland took place in 1966. Towards the end of the 1970s, Iraq was especially active in organizing poster exhibitions. Notable examples include: Iraqi Cultural Centre, "Ma'rid Baghdad al-'alami li-l-mulsaqat/The Baghdad International Poster Exhibition '79", London, March 28-April 17, 1979 and Baghdad, May 9-30, 1979 and "Ma'rid al-mulsaqat al-jidariyya/Exhibition of Iraqi Posters", National Gallery of Modern Art Gulbenkian, Baghdad, April 1-8, 1979.

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During the First World War, French propaganda campaigns made use of new reproductive technologies to organize exhibitions of color prints of works of art with the aim of modeling French cultural and civilizational prowess. Subsequently, the French state played an important role in disseminating this approach within the framework of a model of international intellectual, cultural and artistic exchange developed under the auspices of the League of Nations (est. 1919). The League's Institute for International Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC) was inaugurated in Paris on January 16, 1926, with Julien Luchaire (1876-1962), Inspector General of the French Ministry of Education, as its president.⁴⁸ Its predecessor, the International Committee for Intellectual Cooperation (est. 1922), had identified international intellectual cooperation with the moral authority of individual thinkers working in the arts and sciences. In contrast, the IIIC sought out an intergovernmental framework for exchange focused on the creation and dissemination of reproductions of books and works of art, the development of international agreements regarding intellectual property and copyright law, as well as the establishment of networks of museums and other cultural institutions.

After the Second World War, UNESCO built upon the foundations laid by the IIIC in assembling a collection of "fine color reproductions of the world's greatest works of art".⁴⁹ This collection was subsequently exhibited in various countries across the Arab world.⁵⁰ An article published in the *UNESCO Courier* on the occasion of the first traveling exhibition of the prints made explicit the resonances of this approach with the concept of the musée imaginaire (most consistently translated into English as "museum without walls") famously elaborated by novelist, art theorist, and France's first minister of cultural affairs (1959-1969), André Malraux.⁵¹

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UNESCO's collection of reproductions appeared to inaugurate a new, global model of museum that relied on reproductions to facilitate ease of travel and ensure the inclusion of non-Western cultures, while continuing to rely on a trope of universal culture and the assertion of an international "superoeuvre"

⁴⁸ On the French role in the founding of the IIIC see Jean-Jacques Renoliet, *L'UNESCO oubliée: La Société des Nations et la coopération intellectuelle (1919-1946)*, np: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1999, 73, 203-205. See also Section d'Information, Secretariat de la Société des Nations. 3rd ed. *La Société des Nations et la Coopération Intellectuelle*, Nancy, Paris, Strasbourg: Imprimerie Berger-Levrault, 1927, 46.

⁴⁹ See "Colour Reproduction: Unesco's First Traveling Exhibition", *UNESCO Courier*, 2/7, August 1949, 12. I am grateful to Kristine Khouri for generously sharing with me her collection of documents related to this initiative.

⁵⁰ "Traveling Exhibition. Country numbers 60/66", File 7 A145.02, *UNESCO Archives*, Paris.

⁵¹ See "Art Treasures to Be Put Within Reach of All", *UNESCO Courier*, 1/8, September 1948, 6. The relevant resolution is numbered 6.1331, and was adopted at the General Conference of UNESCO (Beirut, 1948).

grounded in a European (and predominantly French) artistic tradition. Malraux's "erasure of the contextual in favor of a universal abstraction grounded in the photographic optic", writes Feldman, "is the prerequisite for a colonial project that rests precisely, and especially in Malraux's case, on the authority inherent in surveying and ordering the world and its history from the totalizing vantage point of the museum".⁵² In contrast, the Third World artist relied on new technologies of reproduction to displace Eurocentric models of internationalism and the museum. The Cuban revolution (1953-1959) brought poster design to the fore of artistic practice as a vehicle of political and cultural agitation. Subsequently, the inauguration of the Third World liberation movement in Havana in 1966 helped establish the relevance of the conference poster, or *affiche congrès*, to postcolonial configurations of the international, and defined parameters for its success or failure.

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A Third World aesthetic aimed to disrupt established habits of vision (and of being) within occupied territories and the postcolonial state. One tactic involved artists in "correcting" colonial-era tropes that dominated the representations of the non-Western world. UNESCO publications and ephemera tended to draw on ancient artifacts and monuments as stand-ins for non-Western societies, predicating their "authenticity" on their reification as artifacts and images. Notably, UNESCO's adoption of these terms for the representation of Third World nations reflected the latter's rising influence within the organization, as former colonies turned nation states joined its ranks. Nevertheless, this effort to valorize non-Western cultures tended to re-inscribe a logic of representation that consigned Asia, Africa and the Arab world to "history", while Europe raced ahead into "modernity".⁵³ At this stage in the decolonization process, reflected the poet and co-founder of *Souffles*, Abdellatif Laâbi, "[c]ulture is an exhibition object".⁵⁴

Artists associated with the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (OSPAAAL) in Cuba, and its quarterly journal, *Tricontinental*, took up familiar emblems of Third World cultural heritage – i.e., a statue of the Buddha, the African "tribal" sculpture, the Pharaonic wall relief– and wedded them to symbols of armed struggle (Fig.2). In the catalogue of a 1971 exhibition dedicated to

⁵² Feldman, *From a Nation Torn*, 23-24. Douglas Crimp has described the universalism of Malraux's museum in the following terms: "All of the works that we call art, or at least all of them that can be submitted to the process of photographic reproduction, can take their place in the great superoeuvre, art as ontology, created not by men and women in their historical contingencies but by Man in his very being. This is the comforting 'knowledge' to which the Museum without Walls gives testimony. And concomitantly, it is the deception to which art history is most deeply, if often unconsciously, committed". Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins*, with photographs by Louise Lawler, Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1993, 56.

⁵³ Chloé Maurel, *Histoire de l'UNESCO: Les trente premières années. 1945-1974*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010, 141.

⁵⁴ Laâbi, "La culture nationale", 6. He is describing Frantz Fanon's schema of cultural decolonization.

Cuban posters of the period, novelist and one-time editor of *Casa de Las Americas*, Edmundo Desnoes, describes OSPAAAL's détournement of this visual trope in the following terms:

Combining the traditional cultural symbols of each country with those of armed struggle (rifles, grenades, bullets), numerous [OSPAAAL] posters developed merging armed struggle with those national values imperialism tries to destroy: from the bas-reliefs of ancient Egypt in which the hieroglyphs become bullets and grenades to African sculptures carrying rifles in their arms and grenades in their thoughts, and the symbolic winged figures of pre-Colombian culture turned into guerrillos.⁵⁵

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In this manner, the familiar proxies of non-Western peoples were literally armed and sent back into the field to destroy those who would produce them as the static symbols of dead civilizations. This approach brought into relief the context within which these artifact-symbols circulated historically, while the addition of "rifles, grenades, bullets" annexed them to the cause of the Third World liberation movement. These rectified images of Third World heritage circulated as a form of revolutionary political and cultural education. At the same time, they suggested the conflation of the figure of the guerrilla fighter with the ancient artifact, as well as the contemporary artist.

It was not only the quality of mobility associated with the poster and print, or the movement of images from one site, frame, and medium to another that helped define Third World art, but the nature of the networks they traversed as a result. The possibility of mobility implied in the model "of the Third World work of art as print" could hardly be made to rely on the channels facilitated by a global market system associated with capitalism and dominated by former European colonial powers. It was the situated nature of artistic practice and its relationship to existing modes of production that determined the nature of the work of art as revolutionary in this regard.

⁵⁵ Edmundo Desnoes, "From Consumerism to Social Conscience: The Poster in the Cuban Revolution, 1959-1970", *Cubaanse Affiches*, Amsterdam: Stadsdrukkerij, 1971, 18; 20. Published in coordination with the eponymous exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, May 7-June 6, 1971. *Souffles* and *Cases de las Americas* were known to each other. See Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 78.

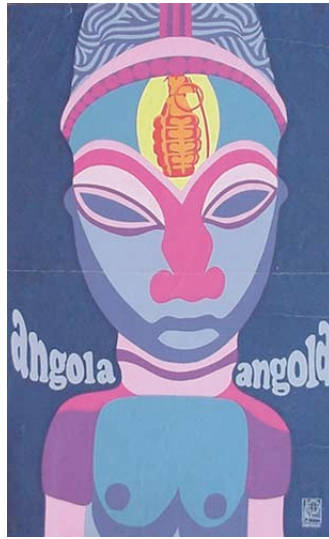


Fig. 2: Daysi Garcia, *Angola*, 1969. Offset print, 33 x 56 cm. Source: Poster Index, Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

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Contributors to *Souffles* accused the former French colonial arts administration of reducing Moroccan art to tourist-trade trinkets produced for sale abroad and in local resorts.⁵⁶ Counter to this, it was claimed, the postcolonial-era artist operated in the absence of a market: a condition that helped guarantee their status as "militant".⁵⁷ That is, the Third World work of art was to circulate within a network that shielded it from market forces, which threatened to transform works of art into commodities, thereby assimilating them to First World conditions and neutralizing their critical charge.⁵⁸ Similarly, the model of international intellectual exchange promoted by UNESCO positioned its peripatetic, global museum of reproductions within a coordinated effort to establish and enforce international copyright laws. Within this "postwar" framework, both works of art and artifacts and their reproductions were to be increasingly assimilated to a global system of exchange subject to regulation from the metropole.

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On the other hand, Third World artists relied on what Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray have subsequently

⁵⁶ Various discussions of arts policies in the period help contextualize this claim. See Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 2003; Hamid Irbouh, "Art in the Service of Colonialism: French Art Education in Morocco, 1912-1956", PhD diss., Theory of Art and Architecture Department, Binghamton University, 2000; and Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

⁵⁷ Melehi, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

termed, "the new modes of production, exhibition, distribution, pedagogy and training made possible by forms of political organisation and affiliation".⁵⁹ This was to be an "art of combat" (art de combat), wrote Tahar Ben Jelloun in an essay published in *Souffles*, explicitly positioning the works featured on the pages of the journal in relation to guerrilla-cinema and guerrilla-theater, and distinguishing them from the "art of the salon and of mystification".⁶⁰ Ultimately, artistic production was to be inscribed within an international horizon of critical engagement rather than a species of colonial and postcolonial coercion that was at once cultural, political, and economic in nature.

Beginning in 1968, artistic contributions to *Souffles* were consistently identified as a form of action plastique. One term recalls another: The phrase arts plastiques (plastic arts) was associated at the time, notes Lenssen, with internationalist initiatives in the arts spearheaded in the postwar period by UNESCO; in the 1950s, official arts institutions in the Arab world increasingly adopted the Arabic-language translation of the French-language term, or funun tashkiliyya.⁶¹

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In Morocco, as elsewhere in the Arab world, the "plastic" artist exercised control over not only artistic material, but the material of the social and political life of a nation. A special issue of *Souffles* titled "Situation arts plastiques en Maroc" sought to clarify and make explicit this relationship of art to a national

⁵⁹ "Ciné-geography designates situated cinecultural practices in an expanded sense, and the connections - individual, institutional, aesthetic and political - that link them transnationally to other situations of urgent struggle. It refers not just to individual films but also to the new modes of production, exhibition, distribution, pedagogy and training made possible by forms of political organisation and affiliation". Kodwo Eshun and Ros Gray, "Editor's introduction", special issue, "The Militant Image: A Ciné-Geography", *Third Text*, 25/1, January 2011, 1.

⁶⁰ T.B. [Tahar Ben Jelloun], "Souffles. Arts", *Souffles*, 18, January-February 1970, 46. Contributors to *Souffles* believed that the threat of mystification was not confined to the salon, but also could imply a critique of identity-based solidarity initiatives such as "Négritude". See Abdallah Stouky, "Le Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, où les nostalgies de la négritude", *Souffles*, 2, 1966, 41-45.

⁶¹ Anneka Lenssen, "The Shape of Support: Painting and Politics in Syria's Twentieth Century", no. 613, Ph.D. diss., Department of Architecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, September 2014, 285-286. Addressing the transfer of the French term into Arabic within the context of a discussion of the work of Syrian "plastic abstractionists" at the College of Fine Arts in the 1960s, she remarks: "[T]he concept of art's formal malleability that lies within the Arabic word for plastic formation—tashkīl—is a particularly appropriate term. Literally describing the quality of having been formed (rather than the possibility of continual reformation, as in the English term plastic), the idea of plastic art would, after 1967, accrue a heroic quality. Where once the forward-looking arts had been abstract, they became, by their reclamation by new liberation movements, plastic examples of total creative mastery". Ibid, 285-286. On the application of the term Egypt, Patrick Kane writes: "In early twentieth century Egypt, the notion of the 'modern' was averred through an emphasis on form, hence the prevalence of the term al-funun al-jamila (the fine arts), for the pre-revolutionary period, and the term al-funun at-tashkiliyya (the plastic arts), for the post-revolution period. See Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-Building*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 12.

public, and the centrality of the artist within it.⁶²

It was not necessarily the introduction of the term that sparked this approach. Indeed, elsewhere in the region, a similar logic of art-making far preceded the widespread use of funun tashkiliyya. In early twentieth-century Egypt, for example, the artist adopted a role predicated upon that assigned to an anticolonialist cultural and political elite within Nahda-era discourse: As "sculptors of the nation", the artist bestowed form upon the otherwise "formless" (and, hence, potentially threatening) masses.⁶³ Similarly, at the height of the Iraqi state's prowess as primary patron of Arab plastic arts in the 1970s, the artist and the intellectual were to play an important role in remaking the population in the image of the regime, albeit perhaps in a more explicitly coercive or baldly "utilitarian" manner.⁶⁴ In this period, writes historian Eric Davis, "[s]tate-sponsored cultural production sought to create a new definition of the citizen as subject, based on corporatist ties to the Iraqi nation-state".⁶⁵

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However, within the terms of the critique presented by *Souffles*, the constructive role of the artist in the processes of modernization and nation-building coincided with the destructive potential of the work of art; the decolonization of culture required the development of a "new way of thinking". Asked on the pages of *Souffles* to identify how painting might contribute to the "elaboration of a national culture," artists adopted military terminology. "We must fight a battle in the arena of visual education", Chebaa declared.⁶⁶ The French verb *plastiquer* translates as "to blow up, to carry out a bomb attack", while the nouns *plastique* and *plastiqueur/euse* denote "explosive/bomb" and "bomber," respectively. The identification of works published in *Souffles* as examples of an action *plastique* identified them as explosives capable of destroying the distortions within Moroccan culture and society degraded by decades of colonial rule. As a play on "arts plastiques", the term simultaneously situated artistic contributions to the journal within the institutional frameworks established for the arts within individual Arab states, as well as an expanded field of Third World struggle and resistance to the "false independences" headed by postcolonial regimes around the world.

Katarzyna Pieprzak describes *Souffles* and related publications as "discursive museums". The journal,

⁶² "Situation arts plastiques Maroc", special issue, *Souffles*, 1967, 7-8.

⁶³ See Clare Davies, "Modern Egyptian Art: Site, Commodity, Archive, 1891-1948", Ph.D. diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2014, 59-60.

⁶⁴ Silvia Naéf, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Égypte, au Liban et en Irak*, Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 1996, 278.

⁶⁵ Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 170. I am grateful to Sonja Mejcher-Atassi for bringing this source to my attention.

⁶⁶ Chebaa, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 42.

she argues, offered Moroccan artists a way out in the face of "constant marginalization at home and abroad", while affirming their commitment to "being a transformative force in Moroccan society, providing a critique of the restrictions of a nationalism that at was fixated with the past, and arguing against a superficial modernity that attracted those in power".⁶⁷ Meanwhile, textual contributions to the journal served to frame works of art, helping readers/viewers to understand the latter's intended terms of reception. According to Pieprzak: "The critical frame of the journals functioned as did the critical practice of valorization in a museum. It staged modern Moroccan culture and ultimately educated and disciplined its visitors".⁶⁸

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At the same time, I would argue, this approach offered a way of repositioning the work of art in Morocco in relation to a viewership or public, or outside of the otherwise dominant binary of the autonomous object encountered within the discreet space of the gallery (a luxury commodity circulating within a Western market system) and the tourist trinket produced under the supervision of colonial arts administration for sale in the "Arab bazaar".⁶⁹ In this sense, *Souffles* is perhaps best understood as reconfiguring the relationship of the work of art to existing conditions of display. Rather than "simulating" a visit to an art museum or extending the parameters of the gallery and bazaar to print media, *Souffles* appeared to encourage the opposite: substituting the network of contestation for the market.⁷⁰

Moreover, as the significance of the journal and the poster became increasingly salient, artists were testing new approaches to the display of work, and, especially, its relationship to the gallery. Members of the Casablanca group continued to exhibit in galleries in Morocco and Europe, but declared in 1969 that they would no longer agree to display their works in foreign cultural centers, which represented some of the few formal exhibition spaces available in Morocco.⁷¹

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The same year (May 9-19, 1969), they famously set up an exhibition of their work in Marrakech's main square, or Jami' al-Fina, doing away with the gallery space entirely in favor of "direct" engagement with

⁶⁷ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, 125.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 96. I draw the term "contestation" from Ilham Khuri-Makdisi's history of the rise of a global "culture of contestation" linking the Eastern Mediterranean with other areas of the Ottoman Empire and with diasporic populations in South and North America. See Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010.

⁷¹ Irbouh, "Art in the Service of Colonialism", 337.

the public; an account published in *Souffles* identified the event as action plastique.⁷²

This interest in the circulation of the work of art outside of the gallery and bazaar (and its identification as a potentially disruptive encounter rather than an object) carried over into some of the first events dedicated to "Arab plastic arts". Writing for *Intégral* in 1972, art historian Houcine Tlili recognized this approach at the Yahya al-Wassity Festival in Baghdad in a text dedicated to the posters that "paper[ed] the walls of Baghdad by the hundreds" rather than the works of art on view inside those walls. The posters possessed a rare "artistic" quality and a "caractère engagé", he claimed, pointing to the poster's place with public thoroughfares and centers as a form of address to "the people".⁷³

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A book published five years later on the anniversary of the foundation of the Ba'th Party in Iraq and dedicated to the topic of "art engagé" described the poster as, "one of the major accomplishments of the 1970s", while at the same time, arguing that it, "must evolve in its contents and, too, its essence towards the universe of mural painting".⁷⁴ Nevertheless, in arguing for the necessity of this shift, the author appears primarily to monumentalize the poster, or rather, to translate its "direct effect on the masses" to the scale of the public monument and statue.⁷⁵ In the 1960s, the poster offered artists expanded possibilities of circulation and implicated artistic production within far-flung networks of political and cultural affinity and solidarity. However, as governments sought to institutionalize the terms of various cultural agendas, they tended to translate the logic and aesthetic of the poster into more permanent and stable forms.

⁷² The text described the artists as ridding themselves of the mediating role of the gallery and boasted of the novelty of the approach: "Cette manifestation constitue la première exposition en dehors des galeries dans l'histoire de la peinture moderne au Maroc". See "Action Plastique", *Souffles*, 13 and 14, 1969, 45. The terms of this institutional critique supported participating artists' identification with an international "avant-garde" and their self-stylization as an alternative to the Moroccan arts establishment. At the same time, their complaint allowed for seemingly contradictory positions. For example, while developing a critique of the museum and gallery space per se, Chebaa and Belkahia suggested retrospectively that they were interested in protesting the exclusionary, provisional, and makeshift nature of exhibition sites available to them in Morocco at the time, and, in fact, sought the allocation of energy and resources towards the transformation of these spaces rather than their dissolution. These positions could be understood in 1969 as situated in opposition to a multifaceted cultural status quo that demanded consistent negotiation. See "Entretiens-F. Belkahia", 341-342 and "Entretiens-M. Chebâa", 365-366, in: *Sefrioui, La revue Souffles*.

⁷³ Houcine Tlili, "Le Poster en Irak", *Intégral*, January 1973, 30. In a telling that may have been intended to recall the 1969 action plastique of Jami' al-Fina, Tlili quoted al-Azzawi's assertion that the posters advertising the festival "sont [...] 'confronté' aux masses." Ibid., 31.

⁷⁴ Muhammad al-Jaza'iri, *al-Fann wa-l-qadiya*, Baghdad, 1977, 107. Qtd. in Naéf, *À la recherche*, 281.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

4 Figuration and Abstraction: Defining Didactic Form

The work of art's mobility and relationship to the market played a key role in determining its ability to realize the goal of cultural decolonization within both "Third World" and "Arab" framings. At the same time, the stylistic coordinates assigned to both were often explicitly left open to debate. Artists appeared free to engage with the same visual idioms as their peers in the United States and in Europe, while the circulation of their works within alternative networks necessarily injected them with a critical faculty otherwise missing from forms destined for commodification by the art market.

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Art historian David Craven identifies visual idioms of Western consumer culture and the high-art forms that engaged them as such as Pop art and Op-art as important influences on the development of OSPAAAL design in Cuba. A Third World aesthetic invested in a definition of visual experience as a form of political and cultural reeducation responded to the use of bright colors, the repetition of geometric motifs or of text, and the application of bold graphic effects evident in so-called Western advertising and mass culture. At the same time, Craven argues, Third World artists turned Western mass culture and advertising strategies to their own ends: "[E]ven when the genuine popular culture of a Third World country recycles Western mass cultural forms, the result is necessarily generated from below by the most exploited sectors and in marked opposition to the above mentioned values of corporate capital".⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Third World artists remained susceptible to the threatening embrace of the Western gallery system. Their works were perfectly capable of passing through the formalist readings and art historical filters applied by the latter, he argues; and, once commodified, the Third World work of art was not necessarily distinguishable from those "First World" works of art traversing the same market system.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ "Populist images of Western mass culture (Coca-Cola billboards, Walt Disney Comics, Las Vegas architecture, TV soap operas and the like) are largely engineered from above by multinational corporations in order to sell products, inculcate hierarchical values, and even promote Western ethnocentrism," he writes. The American and European art forms that transferred mass culture into the gallery context were uncritical because they were implicated in the same market system. David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910-1990*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002, 92.

⁷⁷ In this vein, Craven offered the negative model of the six-member Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), which included Julio LeParc and Francisco Sobrino, who met at the Escuela de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in the 1950s. The group's 1966 manifesto called for a dematerialization of the art object as a means of resisting its potential for commodification, to facilitate new forms of spectator participation, and serve the cause of "social incitement". See Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel (GRAV), "Manifiesto", 1966. Republished in: Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (eds.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 411. Here, Craven echoes a criticism of the group articulated in a 1969 article by Jean Clay titled "Art Tamed and Wild". Jean Clay, "Art Tamed and Wild", in: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999, here 137. Originally published in: *Studio International*, June 1969.

In a glossary of terms produced for the special issue of *Souffles* devoted to the plastic arts in Morocco, contributors embraced a "functionalist" Bauhaus approach, and defended abstraction as an investigation into the "atemporal, intrinsic, essential, and permanent" qualities of things.⁷⁸ At the same time, they identified socialist realism with Marxist theories of art elaborated in Latin America and Europe, rather than with the normative optic enforced as official policy in the Soviet Union.⁷⁹ In principle, abstraction and figuration inhabited a continuum of practices available to the Third World artist, while the principles of creative freedom and the significance of the artist's role in guiding popular taste were affirmed. In practice, laying claim to one or the other might require the artist to elucidate their choice within the broader terms of their practice and to elaborate its implications for the art work's relationship to a Third World frame of reference.

Figuration ensured a clarity of communication. As a result, works burdened with an especially urgent political message were often expected to avoid excesses of abstraction and forego all but the most symbolic imagery and allegory. Belkahia forthrightly rejected the binary of figuration-abstraction: a testament perhaps to the pressures the latter could impose on an artist. At the same time, the artist's description of his own development aligned figuration with political or humanist concerns: i.e., his preoccupation with histories of horrendous violence he witnessed in Morocco in 1950-52 and encountered on a trip to Auschwitz.⁸⁰ On the other hand, abstraction appeared better suited to his more recent exploration of "sensuality" as a productive rubric for artistic production.

⁷⁸ "Lexique", in: "Situation", 72.

⁷⁹ Ibid. It is perhaps useful to compare this approach with the way in which developments in the arts in Cuba have been defined in opposition to a Soviet model. "In Cuba, as contrasted with Russia, there has been no attempt to create a simple art that can be immediately understood by the people; rather there has been an education of the people to the point where they understand the complexity of art. I was told that this has been the official policy of the Cuban Revolution". Ernesto Cardenal, *En Cuba*, 189, qtd. in: Craven, *Art and Revolution*, 94.

⁸⁰ Belkahia, "Questionnaire", 27, in: "Situation".

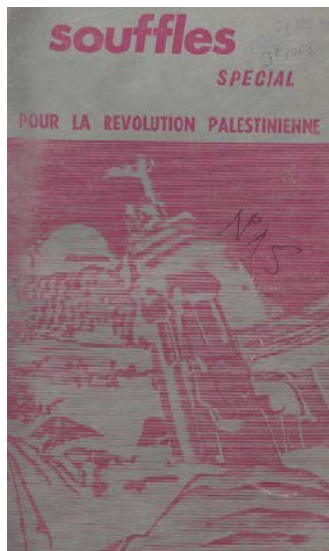


Fig. 3: *Cover of Souffles, 15, 1969*. Layout: Mohammed Chebaa, print: Emi Tanger. Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque National du Royaume du Maroc.

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The opposition of figuration and abstraction and the disavowal of this binary carried over from discussions of the Third World work into discussions around Arab plastic art. An account of the Palestinian pavilion at the First Two-Year Exhibition in Baghdad published in *Intégral* was adamant regarding the proper application of figuration. The author contrasts the "descriptive realism" of Ismail Shammout (1930-2006) with the "obscure and surrealist" allegories of Mustafa al-Hallaj (1938-2002).⁸¹ By this account, Shammout's painting, "evokes a heroic image of the Palestinian people and places the accent on 'iconic' effects, that is ennobled and composed situations and figures whose classical nature is accentuated by the fixity of their gaze".

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In contrast, works by al-Hallaj are condemned as "too obscure and surrealist"; his allegories, "too obscure, too pessimistic, too erotic and over intellectualized. In short, too difficult to comprehend for the correct assessment of the struggle of his people, even if this struggle, in one manner or another, is the sole and obsessive theme of the work". Notably, both artists were working in a figurative vein. It was not figuration, per se, that was at stake, but, rather its proper nature as "didactic and explicative" that determined the work's success.

⁸¹ Maraini, "Baghdad 1974", 12. All quotes in this paragraph refer to this source. See also Mohammed Chebaa, "Révolution palestinienne et peinture révolutionnaire", *Intégral*, 9, December 1974, 41.

A special issue of *Souffles* and its Arabic-language companion *Anfas* (c. 1969/1971-1972)⁸² published in Morocco in 1969 celebrated the Palestinian revolution with an image of the fida'i (Fig.3).⁸³

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Adapted from a poster designed by Mohamed Chebaa, the figure is seen from below and at close range: a perspective that monumentalized the fighter, while also forcing an uncomfortable proximity. Chebaa's fida'i appeared as an article header inside the journal's issue of March-April 1970.⁸⁴ It surfaced again in the same issue on a placard held aloft in a photograph of Moroccan workers commemorating the centenary of Lenin's birth and celebrating International Labor Day.⁸⁵ Later, details annexed from the image appear on the cover of the journal's November-December 1971 issue. In this instance, elements of the figure's machine gun are confined to two square frames, while a third contains what appears to be a detail of the distinctive Palestinian scarf, or kufiya covering the lower part of the fida'i's neck and face. The original image, now almost entirely dissimulated, is reconstituted again inside the issue: one of a series of

⁸² The special issue of *Anfas* dates to 1969. Information provided on the title page lists the issue as "Special issue, no. 15/Year 4, volume 3". To my knowledge, however, this specific enumeration pertains exclusively to *Souffles*, and no previous issues of *Anfas* exist. Evidence speaking to the logic of this conflation can be found in the use of a calligraphic rendering of the Arabic-language title "Anfas" (a translation of the French *souffles*, or breaths) before 1969 on the pages of the French-language journal. This gesture suggests that the editors always considered the French and Arabic language publications as coexistent, with the Arabic always (already) present in the French. The next issue of the Arabic-language publication did not appear until May 1, 1971, and is listed as year two/issue one. It was published in Rabat by Matba't al-Tumi. Sefrioui cites this as the first issue of *Anfas*. See Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 101.

⁸³ The journal's engagement with the Palestinian revolution in 1969 seemed to herald a new "Arab" identity for *Souffles*. Various scholars have identified the significance of this issue in marking a shift in the direction of the journal. See, for example, Harrison, "Cross-colonial Poetics", 362; Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 92; and Mary Ellen Wolf, "Textual Politics in Contemporary Moroccan Francophone Literature", *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 25/1, Spring 1992, 36. In the double issue of January-February 1970, the journal's tagline was changed from "*Souffles*: A Moroccan Literary and Cultural Review" (*Revue littéraire culturelle maghrébienne*) to "*Souffles*: An Arab Cultural Review of Morocco" (*Revue culturelle arabe du Maghreb*). The journal had originated as a "revue poétique et littéraire" (issue no. 1, 1966) or, simply, as a "revue trimestrielle" (issue no. 2, 1966). In practice, however, this shift towards a more explicit alignment with an Arab frame of reference tended to extend the terms of an inclusive, Third World identification debuted in the first year of the journal's existence. Dedicated to African cinema, the Pan-African Cultural Festival in Algeria (1969), and "the Arab Nation", the first issue to describe the journal as "An Arab Cultural Review of Morocco" also featured on its cover a photograph of a performer at the festival, and, to the right, the by-now familiar figure of the fida'i.

⁸⁴ Abdelkarim Dhofari, "Nation Arabe: La lutte des classes en Égypte de 1945 à 1968 de Mahmoud Hussein", *Souffles*, 18, March-April 1970, 9.

⁸⁵ In this instance, the image of the fida'i is sandwiched between two phrases; the French above states, "Palestine vaincra" [Palestine shall overcome], while, below, the Arabic reads, simply, "Filistin" [Palestine]. The photograph accompanies a text by Abraham Serfaty, "1er Mai et centenaire de Lenin", *Ibid.*, 7.

otherwise nonfigurative emblems introducing journal articles.⁸⁶ The migration of Chebaa's guerrilla fighter across pages and posters highlighted the quality of mobility and insisted on the image's inscription with the framework of solidarity offered by the Palestinian revolution. At the same time, it pointed to some of the ways in which a didactic and explicative art might manifest along a continuum of figurative and abstract approaches.



Fig. 4: Mohammed Melehi, *Untitled* [action plastique/ affiche], *Souffles*, 15, 1969, 4. Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque National du Royaume du Maroc.

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Inside the "Palestinian revolution" issue of 1969, the reader encountered a series of six graphic works dedicated to the same cause and interspersed between texts.⁸⁷ Each modeled a distinct solution to the problematic posed by a work of art that was positioned at once as Third World, Arab, and Moroccan in nature. A work produced by Melehi featured stark black and white "waves" (ondes) topped by the French-language proper noun "Palestine" in capital letters (Figure 4). The meticulously undulating lines

⁸⁶ See for example, *Souffles*, 22, November-December 1970.

⁸⁷ Artistic contributors to the issue included Melehi, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mohammed Hamidi (b. 1941), Abdallah Hariri (b. 1949), Ali Noury, and Saâd Benseffaj (b. 1939). Ben Jelloun is better known today as Francophone novelist. Hamidi attended the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca (1955-1958), the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, and the École des Metiers d'Art. He received a degree in the "teaching of monumental art", and served on the faculty of the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca. Hariri attended the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca between 1965 and 1969 and the Institut Européen d'Architecture et de Design in Rome in 1973. Benseffaj graduated from the Institut National des Beaux Arts Tetouan. He attended the École Supérieur des Beaux-Arts in Seville and took courses in art history at the École du Louvre, Paris. He served as a professor of art history, painting and drawing at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Tetouan.

dissolve into a flame-like movement.⁸⁸ In 1967, he identified the enigmatic quality of the abstract work of art as the site of "visual education":

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Our [Arab] artist offers contemplation rather than a frozen reality. Our [Arab] art, which appears static and artificial is an art of the transcendental, of mobility and vibration. This mobility and vibration remain the sole points of intrigue for the spectator, wherein manifests a visual message and education.⁸⁹

Moreover, Melehi went on to link the ahistorical nature of abstraction, as developed within a tradition of Islamic art upon which the Arab artist relied, to its expanded terms of address. Notably, he associated the universal nature of a work of art with the terms required of the viewer for its consumption:

When the occidental artist paints a scene, the spectator must be familiar with the event so as to better consume the work. On the contrary, our art is permanent, present and accessible to every individual, independent of their education or culture. An art unlimited, necessarily, to a dynasty of styles or periods. Our culture thus elaborates a universal art at the level of consumption.⁹⁰

According to Melehi, figurative art (associated with a Western tradition) relies on the cultivation of taste through a bourgeois education. The terms of its reception further propagates class difference and unequal terms of access. In contrast, what he described as the "functionality" of art in the Islamic world circumscribes this requirement of social and cultural privilege, opening the work up to a broader spectrum of potential interlocutors.⁹¹ The flame- or wave-like motif that had appeared under the banner of "Palestine" in 1969, reappeared on the cover of the inaugural issue of *Intégral* (October 1971). Inside, texts approach Melehi's ongoing work in the terms he had set out for them in 1967.

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Ultimately, I have argued, a carefully constructed logic of cultural decolonization engaged by the Third World work of art relied as much on a consideration of form as on the possibilities it posed for its own

⁸⁸ Sefrioui describes the piece as symbolizing "the re-awakening of the Arab world". It's not clear what her basis is for this analysis. See also her discussion of Ben Jelloun's contribution as a reworking of the journal's cover design. See Sefrioui, *La revue Souffles*, 91.

⁸⁹ Melehi, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

mobility; indeed, the interrelation of form and mobility offered the necessary conditions for the mutual constitution of the work of art and its public. Melehi's "Palestine" appeals to an expanded public through the terms of a synchronic reading: an immersive act of contemplation capable of dissolving convention and intellect within presence.⁹² At the same time, Melehi identified the universal quality of the work of art with the act of consumption; a gesture reminiscent of OSPAAAL's engagement with Western advertising and popular culture. The following section considers the status of script and sign within the terms posited for them in this manner on the pages of *Souffles*, and later, at the first biennale of Arab plastic arts.

5 Script and Sign: Calligraphy in Plastic Art

Calligraphy represented an increasingly significant point of reference for artists affiliated with the institutions of Arab plastic art. In part, this salience stemmed from the open-ended relationship of script and sign to the poles of figuration and abstraction. Biennales of Arab plastic arts pushed various approaches into the same frame; works presented by Moroccan artists figured prominently in this context. Melehi began experimenting with the wave motif in 1964 and drew on it consistently thereafter.⁹³ In the same 1967 questionnaire, the artist described the primarily visual quality of Op-art as offering an alternative to established Western art forms.⁹⁴ Moreover, in flattening perspectival space, Op-art lent itself to architectural and design applications,⁹⁵ and served as an instance of the convergence of "modern" artistic concerns and a popular "Moroccan plastic tradition" sought by the artist.⁹⁶

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Once again, the significance of this specific conjunction for the self-identified Arab and Third World artist could be traced, in part, to the legacy of the French colonial art administration in Morocco. The latter had invested in the production of an urban artisanal class rather than investing in industrialization and related "modernization" projects.⁹⁷ In contrast, the arts movement in Morocco after 1956 often identified the artist as scientist, educator, and administrator, and made participation in the development of the industrial sector central to an understanding of artistic practices. As noted, the Casablanca group described Moroccan architectural monuments, archaeological artifacts, and vernacular, or folk arts as a "plastic

⁹² Melehi relies on his understanding of "Zen" in articulating the terms of this encounter. *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁹³ Toni Maraini, "Chroniques: Expositions M. Chebaa, M. Melehi", *Souffles*, 1967, 45.

⁹⁴ Melehi, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 63.

⁹⁵ Elsewhere in the issue, Farid Belkahlia promoted Op-Art as "a striking example" of the way in which artists could collaborate with technicians to revitalize various arenas of industrial design. Belkahlia, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 30.

⁹⁶ Melehi, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 63.

⁹⁷ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, 15.

tradition" that shared affinities with Western art while offering an appropriate point of departure for the development of modern Moroccan painting capable of shattering patterns of vision and thought established under colonial rule.

Similarly, the salience of artistic motifs and genres specifically associated with Arab or Islamic art on the pages of *Souffles* constituted a response to a local history of arts discourse and institutional practices. According to Laâbi, the French regime in Morocco had imposed its own hierarchy of cultural reference with the aim of "pacification" and "colonization".⁹⁸

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Morocco's Arab identity had been disavowed in favor of a Berber lineage.⁹⁹ Colonial-era "berberophilia," as Laâbi termed it, framed the Arab presence in Morocco as a "failure".¹⁰⁰ In contrast, Moroccan artists would henceforth claim an explicitly Arab identity as one strand among others comprising the fabric of Moroccan identity. Here, as well as elsewhere, the local application of colonial policy helped mediate the terms by which artists related to a pan-Arab identity.

Melehi singled out Arabic-language calligraphy as offering a particularly significant point of reference for the development of Moroccan art. "Calligraphy is a pure form of painting", he wrote in 1967.¹⁰¹ At the same time, the absence of trained calligraphers represented not only a formal, visual, or aesthetic problem; Latin letters crowded out Arabic script along Moroccan city streets.¹⁰² Courses led by Chebaa at the École des Beaux-Arts in Casablanca introduced students to calligraphy "not as a linguistic system", writes Hamid Irbouh, "but as pictorial signs to extract their visual and gestural dynamism".¹⁰³ Likewise, the application of "calligraphy" to the pages *Souffles* and the surface of canvases produced by Melehi and others tended to emphasize the status of the letter or the word as sign rather than signifier.

In part, this approach spoke to a politics of language specific to Morocco and to which the editors of *Souffles* were highly sensitized. Speakers of French, Arabic, and/or Berber could assert competing claims to national identity. Contributors to the journal insisted on the legitimacy of each, while asserting their right to speak from within an Arab frame of reference: "no matter what language we use, in this precise phase of decolonization our literature is part and parcel of Arab(ic) literature, to which its destiny is in any case

⁹⁸ Abdellatif Laâbi, "Le gachis", *Souffles*, 7-8, 1967, 11-12.

⁹⁹ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, 9.

¹⁰⁰ Laâbi, "Le gachis", 11-12.

¹⁰¹ Melehi, "Questionnaire", in: "Situation", 67.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Irbouh, "Art in the Service of Colonialism", 337.

linked".¹⁰⁴

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The equivalence of distinct languages, in this sense, may have contributed to their interest in the application of script as sign. Indeed, it is in these terms that Amazigh script enters the so-called abstract paintings of Moroccan artist Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934-1967). Cherkaoui offered the Casablanca group a significant example of an artist capable of situating himself within both an international framework and a "healthy" popular tradition.¹⁰⁵ He is described in early biographies as entertaining a passion for Arabic calligraphy from a young age.¹⁰⁶ Before his premature death in 1967, a grant from UNESCO allowed him to study "the Berber sign and Arabic calligraphy".¹⁰⁷ His vividly colored oil paintings produced in Varsovie (Poland), Paris, and Morocco in the 1960s incorporated Tifinagh script: a choice that reinforced the identification of script and sign. Cynthia Becker describes the significance of Tifinagh in this period in Morocco in the following terms:

The Tifinagh script is an Amazigh writing form believed to be related to the ancient Punic script and used primarily by Tuareg women and blacksmiths to write short, intimate messages on household objects and jewelry [...] Although the script has not been used for hundreds of years in North Africa, Amazigh activists in Morocco and Algeria adopted Tifinagh to write poetry, songs, and political slogans promoting their Amazigh heritage. Until recently, the public display of Tifinagh was considered to be a political charged act of aggression against the Moroccan government.¹⁰⁸

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Approached from this perspective, it is possible to see how the word "Palestine" in Melehi's 1969 work could be understood to draw on the expanded legibility of the sign, inviting the viewer to "see" rather than "read". In this sense, word and wave proved interchangeable.

Conversely, the illegibility of script did not diminish its centrality to the work. A painting located in the collection of the National Gallery of Fine Arts in Amman offers another iteration of Melehi's wave motif

¹⁰⁴ "Appel aux écrivains maghrebiens", *Souffles*, 15, 1969, 100. Translation by Harrison, "Cross-colonial Poetics", 361. On the editors' relationship to language see also Wolf, "Textual Politics".

¹⁰⁵ Georges Boudaille, *Ahmed Cherkaoui*, Rabat: Imframar, 1964, np.

¹⁰⁶ Sijelmassi, *La peinture marocaine*, 58; Boudaille, Cherkaoui, np.

¹⁰⁷ Sijelmassi, *La peinture marocaine*, 58.

¹⁰⁸ Becker, *Amazigh Arts in Morocco*, 179. See also Becker's discussion of the varied reception of works of art incorporating Tifinagh script. For a discussion see gender politics surrounding use of the script Becker and Pieprzak, 103-105.

underscored by an unintelligible script.¹⁰⁹ Wijdan Ali's landmark 1997 survey of Modern Islamic Art classifies this painting as an example of "marginal calligraphy". As a result, it has entered the canon (of what she calls, at this later date, "Islamic art") as an example of those paintings in which, "writing, whether clear or obscure, is no more than part of the background of the main theme, although it might occupy a sizable part of the composition. Its purpose is to provide a setting for the principal characters and figures rather than to be the content, as in the central calligraphic branch".¹¹⁰ While eschewing semantic content, the calligraphic script that resists reading nevertheless continues to fulfill its role as sign within the terms established for it by Melehi and others; a role on par with other elements of the composition, and not marginal in the sense Ali suggests.

Indeed, one of the effects of this approach of script-as-sign was to destabilize the (hierarchical) relationship of figure to ground, producing a tense equivalence between elements of the composition. A work by Chebaa, which appeared under the title "Géométrie palestinienne" inside a special issue of *Intégral* (March 1978) dedicated to the second Two-Year Exhibition (here, La Biennale panarabe) in Rabat, combined another celebrated symbol of the Palestinian resistance with motifs associated with the Casablanca group.

¹⁰⁹ Distinct letters (but not words) are legible. Mohammed Melehi, *Untitled*, 1981, Enamel on wood, 120 x 100 cm, Collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, Amman. See Wijdan Ali, *al-Mathaf al-Watani al-Urduni li-l-Funun al-Jamila*/Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts, np, 2005, 110.

¹¹⁰ Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997, 177.

The following month, "Géométrie palestinienne" was featured in color on the cover of the quarterly *Shu'un Filastiniyya* [Palestinian Affairs] (April 1978): a magazine issued by the Palestine Research Center of the PLO (1971-1993). Here, the black-and-white kufiya was juxtaposed with a brightly hued composition in a way that makes it impossible to determine spatial precedence: Does the kufiya provide the ground against which we view the rest of the image or vice versa?

Finally, a poster titled "The ABCs of Palestine" (Alfiba'iyat Filistin) composed by Egyptian illustrator and caricaturist Mohie Eldin El Labbad (1940-2010) and produced circa 1985, offers a useful visual compendium of many of the approaches I have traced thus far in the context of Melehi's work, contributions to *Souffles*, and a Third World aesthetic of decolonization. Here, El Labbad adapted the familiar schoolroom format of the illustrated alphabet poster to the Palestinian cause (Fig.5). The design acknowledges the elevation of a series of symbols and motifs to the status of a "national" or "revolutionary" visual language.¹¹¹ At the same time, it asserts a relationship between language and image that affirms the viewer's ability to "see" language and "read" image.

The markers of identity institutionalized within a postcolonial imaginary of the international make their appearance with the flag ('alam), the map (used here to denote the watan, or nation), and the postage stamp (adh-dharf, or the envelope).¹¹²

¹¹¹ "One of the important aspects of the Nakba was the dispersion of the Palestinian people and the loss of their land. The trend in Arab countries, at the time, was to wipe out Palestinian identity. So it became the most important thing in Palestinian painting, to emphasize this identity and to make it into a major issue. To recreate Palestinian identity, painters started to use symbols such as scenes from Palestinian villages, dabke dancing, as well as the color of the flag, the flag itself, barbed wire, prison bars, etc. So much so that in 1981, the Israeli authorities passed a law forbidding the use of the Palestinian flag in all contexts. I was once summoned to the military governor in Ramallah, and was told by the officer that we were not allowed to use the colors red, white, green and black in our works". Suleiman Mansur, interview, "The Nakba and Palestinian Painting", *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture*, 5/2, 1998, <http://.pij.org>, [accessed: 6.12.2014].

¹¹² On the relevance of the "thob" in this context see Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007, 51.

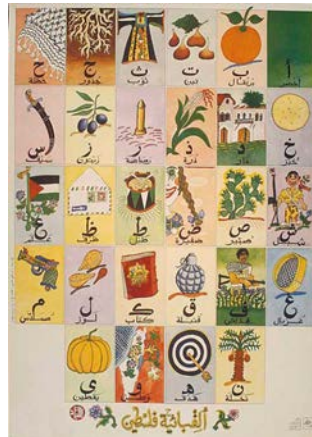


Fig. 5: Mohie Eldin El Labbad, The ABCs of Palestine, c. 1985. Poster published by Dar al-fata al-'arabi.
Source: Palestine Poster Project Archive.

Symbols of organic life proliferate: e.g., the olive (zaytun), the fig (tin), the orange (burtuqal). At the same time, colorful flowers form the flagpole holding aloft the Palestinian flag, burst forth from the borders of the map and the cactus, decorate the dress of the little girl (sughayara), and cozy up to the figures of the armed "youth" (shabab) and the fida'i – hinting at the irrepressible vitality of both nature and a grammar of ornament rooted in a tradition of Arab, or Islamic art and in the vibrant graphics of the Third World poster. Finally, the motif of "armed" cultural symbols explored by OSPAAAL returns with the inclusion of various hand-held weapons.

El Labbad's figure of the fida'i/the letter "fa" combines the national symbol, the organic motif, and the weapon in a single frame. Content and style help blur the lines between innocence and menace: burly arms and paw-like hands cupping a cartoonish machine gun are topped by the almost mask-like facial features of a clown. The row of flowers foregrounding the figure are sweet in their childlike simplicity, while their thick stalks belie any sense of fragility and their heavy leaves taper to sharp, thorny points. Here, the constructive and destructive tendencies of the project of cultural decolonization (of an action plastique negotiated at the intersection of armed struggle and artistic production) are returned to the guerilla fighter at the hand of the artist, and the guerrilla fighter is revealed as simultaneously script and sign.

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6 Third World Artists and the First Arab Exhibition

The nationalization of oil industries in the 1970s contributed to the development of new circuits of

intellectual artistic exchange in the Arab world. Davis describes a boom in events of this kind across various fields following the nationalization of Iraqi oil in June 1972. Designed to position Iraq as a regional leader, these events were also intended to shore up domestic support for the ruling Ba'th party:

State-sponsored conferences, professional associations, and journals invariably included intellectuals from other Arab countries, ostensibly demonstrating Iraq's commitment to Pan-Arabism, while the state's focus on its Mesopotamian and Arab-Islamic heritages underscored Iraq's cultural superiority over its main rivals, Egypt and Syria, for Pan-Arab leadership. Until the late 1980s, Iraq's oil wealth allowed it to bring numbers of Arab and foreign intellectuals to the country, where they were lavishly treated, highlighting its status as arriviste leader of the Arab world.¹¹³

In the same period, Baghdad acquired a leading role vis-à-vis the emerging institutions of Arab plastic arts, and poured funds into developing national arts infrastructure and art collections. As in other arenas of cultural production, the contours of a so-called Arab frame of reference for the arts were never predetermined. Rather, they were to be painstakingly negotiated at each turn, thereby reflecting the intricacies of a situation brokered amongst multiple actors working simultaneously at both the level of the national and the transnational.

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Nevertheless, the significance of the Palestinian struggle within regional politics guaranteed its centrality to the negotiation of the terms of a pan-Arab cultural identity, and helped inscribe a Third World politics at the center of the project of Arab plastic art as it emerged in the early 1970s. Both Palestinian and Moroccan artists who participated in the new institutions of Arab art referenced the Palestinian liberation movement as a constitutive point of Arab and Third World solidarity. In late 1974, Ismail Shammout, Secretary General of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, granted an interview to *Intégral* in which he asserted the mutual production of the Palestinian revolution, the Third World liberation movement, and pan-Arabism.¹¹⁴ Asked to expand upon the aims of the General Union of Arab Plastic Artists, he emphasized the centrality of "engagement" and stressed Arab art's simultaneous investment in concepts of Arab identity and the Third World liberation movement: "We want to define our concept of engagement: firstly as Arabs, and secondly as part of the Third World".¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Davis, *Memories of State*, 158.

¹¹⁴ Almost immediately following the 1974 biennale, Shammout and his wife, the artist Tamam al-Akhal, exhibited their work at the Galerie Municipale de Rabat at the invitation of the Association Marocaine des Arts Plastiques (May 17-25, 1974). The interview was likely conducted at the time of Shammout's visit on this occasion.

¹¹⁵ Shammout and Nissaboury, "Entretien", 33.

By the date of this interview, Shammout was well-established as the one of the most powerful figure in the arts administration of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in a period marked by the organization's accelerated attempts at self-institutionalization.¹¹⁶

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Initiatives dedicated to the production and promotion of the visual arts were included in an elaborate bureaucracy erected to support the organization. In 1965, the PLO founded an Arts Education Department headed by Shammout.¹¹⁷ In the late-1960s, Shammout, then a resident of Beirut, helped found Dar al-Karamah, reports artist and art historian Kamal Boullata, "as a gallery and meeting place hosting seasonal exhibitions of young talents emerging from the [refugee] camps".¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Born in Lydda in 1930, he was displaced alongside thousands of Palestinians by the Nakba of 1948, grew up in the Gaza refugee camp of Khan Yunis (at the time under Egyptian administration) and studied painting at the College of Fine Arts (Kuliyat al-Funun al-Jamila) Cairo between 1950 and 1954: a period bridging the Free Officers' coup of 1952. He held his first solo exhibition in Gaza City in 1953. His first exhibition in Cairo the following year (July 21, 1954) was attended by Haj Amin al-Hussayni and Yasir 'Arafat, and inaugurated by Egyptian president Gamal 'Abdel Nasser. See Kamal Boullata, "Artists Re-Member Palestine in Beirut", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 32/4, Summer 2003, 27. He studied at Academie des Beaux Arts in Rome between 1954 and 1956. Shammout and Nissaboury, "Entretien", 32.

¹¹⁷ "Established in 1965, the Department of Information and Culture did not receive official PLO sanction and support until 1978. A strong Palestinian national identity and culture are part of the PLO's program of national liberation, thus this Department is systematically collecting, preserving, creating and transmitting Palestinian culture." Cheryl A. Rubenberg, "The Civilian Infrastructure of the Palestine Liberation Organization: An Analysis of the PLO in Lebanon Until June 1982", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 12/3, Spring 1983, 70. Rubenberg records the existence of separate Plastic Arts and Graphic Arts divisions within the department and provides a brief overview of each: "The Plastic Arts division of the Department of Information and Culture supports Palestinian painters by providing supplies and funding for international exhibitions. In return for such support, the artists contribute five percent of their earnings to the General Union of Palestinian Artists. This division also runs two art galleries in Beirut, one housing a permanent collection and the other for temporary exhibits. The Plastic Arts division provides 25 scholarships each year for Palestinian artists to further their education. The Graphic Arts division of the Department of Information and Culture produces posters, placards, post cards, greeting cards, book covers, etc., for mass consumption. Graphic art is an important medium for the Palestinians to communicate their political ideas and cultural themes to their people and to the rest of the world." Ibid. Her primary source for information on this department is an interview with Michel Najjar, whom she describes as: "artist, and Director of the Graphic Arts Section of the Department of Art and Culture. May-June 1982, Beirut, Lebanon". See *ibid.*, 69/26. The PLO founded a High Committee for Education, Science and Culture in 1972. See Picaudou, *Le mouvement national*, 137.

¹¹⁸ Boullata, "Artists Re-Member", 27. Boullata offers further insight into the mission of the Art Department: "Art from the camps never made it into Beirut's art market or commercial galleries. When it was publicly viewed, it was usually at group exhibitions in improvised public spaces under the sponsorship of the Art Education Department of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Such exhibitions were generally organized to commemorate a national event or as part of a solidarity rally in Beirut or elsewhere in the Arab world or abroad". *Ibid.*, 25. See also Isma'il Shammout, *al-Fann al-Tashkili fi-Filastin*, Kuwait: al-Qabas Printing Press, 1989, 67-68. I thank Kirsten Scheid for sharing this reference.

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Shammout also served as a cofounder of the Union of Palestinian Artists (est. in 1971), as well as Secretary General of the Union, and would play a central role in the organization of the First Two-Year Exhibition in 1974.

In the same interview, Shammout pointed out that the 1974 pavilions of Palestinian and Moroccan art shared an important attribute missing from many of the other pavilions: Both enjoyed a certain internal consistency, he argued, as defined by their own "characteristics" or "artistic tendency".¹¹⁹ However, beyond the quality of internal cohesion as observed by Shammout, Moroccan and Palestinian schools of art, at first glance, appeared to have very little in common. As representatives of a colonized and embattled people, Palestinian artists were often considered beholden to an idiom that presented the Palestinian cause in (to borrow Shammout's terms) the "clearest" and most "efficient" manner. At the same time, enforcing the existence of a certain internal consistency amongst Palestinian artists, many of whom were scattered across the diaspora, helped support the idea of a spiritual and political unity of a Palestinian identity. In contrast, the Moroccan artists exhibiting at the biennale drew on a primarily (but not exclusively) abstract idiom of script and sign, as discussed.

If, in attempting to qualify a category of Arab art, writers consistently relied on a binary opposition of figurative and abstract work, the aesthetics associated with the "national" schools of Moroccan and Palestinian art could be understood to represent opposing poles of an emerging continuum of Arab artistic expression. At the same time, the so-called abstract works of artists associated with *Souffles*, on the one hand, and the figurative visual language of Palestinian resistance, on the other, were understood not only as aesthetically and politically compatible in this period, but also as examples of the same kind of creation, as defined by their simultaneous adherence to an Arab and Third World identity.

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In leveraging the term "Third World" as a means of defining the role of the Union and its biennale, Shammout was able to validate the broadest possible parameters of stylistic diversity within the category of Arab art, on the condition that artists adhere to a specific concept of engagement that rested on the centrality of the Palestinian struggle and referenced the logic of a Third World art elaborated, I have argued, on the pages of *Souffles*, and elsewhere. These qualities provided the necessary grounds upon which to assert the possibility of similarity-in-difference, or the existence of affinities between works that were essentially highly diverse in the formal choices they embraced, while circulating within, what I have termed, an international network of contestation.

¹¹⁹ Shammout and Nissaboury, "Entretien", 34.

"Arab art" has been defined consistently as a search for Arab identity in the visual arts undertaken by artists across the region, as well as a felicitous expression of that identity. Both the art and the identity are consistently understood today in essentialist terms. By this account, Arab art is, by definition, not African, Asian, European or American. The anachronism of this approach lies in its failure to acknowledge the many and various ways in which self-identified producers of Arab art deliberately positioned their practices within a variety of frameworks of artistic collaboration and exchange available to them at the time. This paper endeavors to trace one thread in a very rich and complex history of artistic debates and practices of the 1960s and 70s, which engaged in significant ways with various models of postcolonial solidarity, while claiming a place for itself within an emerging canon of Arab art.

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Image Source

Figure 1: Mohammed Melehi, *Untitled* [calligraphie/affiche congrès], *Souffles*, 9, 1968, 29.

Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque National du Royaume du Maroc.

Figure 2: Daysi Garcia, *Angola*, 1969. Offset print, 33 x 56 cm. Source: Poster Index, Organization of Solidarity of the People of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Figure 3: Cover of *Souffles* no. 15, 1969, layout: Mohammed Chebaa, print: Emi Tanger. Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque National du Royaume du Maroc.

Figure 4: Mohammed Melehi, *Untitled* [action plastique/affiche], *Souffles*, 15, 1969, 4. Source: Digitized archive of the Bibliothèque National du Royaume du Maroc.

Figure 5: Mohie Eldin El Labbad, *The ABCs of Palestine*, c. 1985. Poster published by Dar al-fata al-'arabi. Source: Palestine Poster Project Archive.