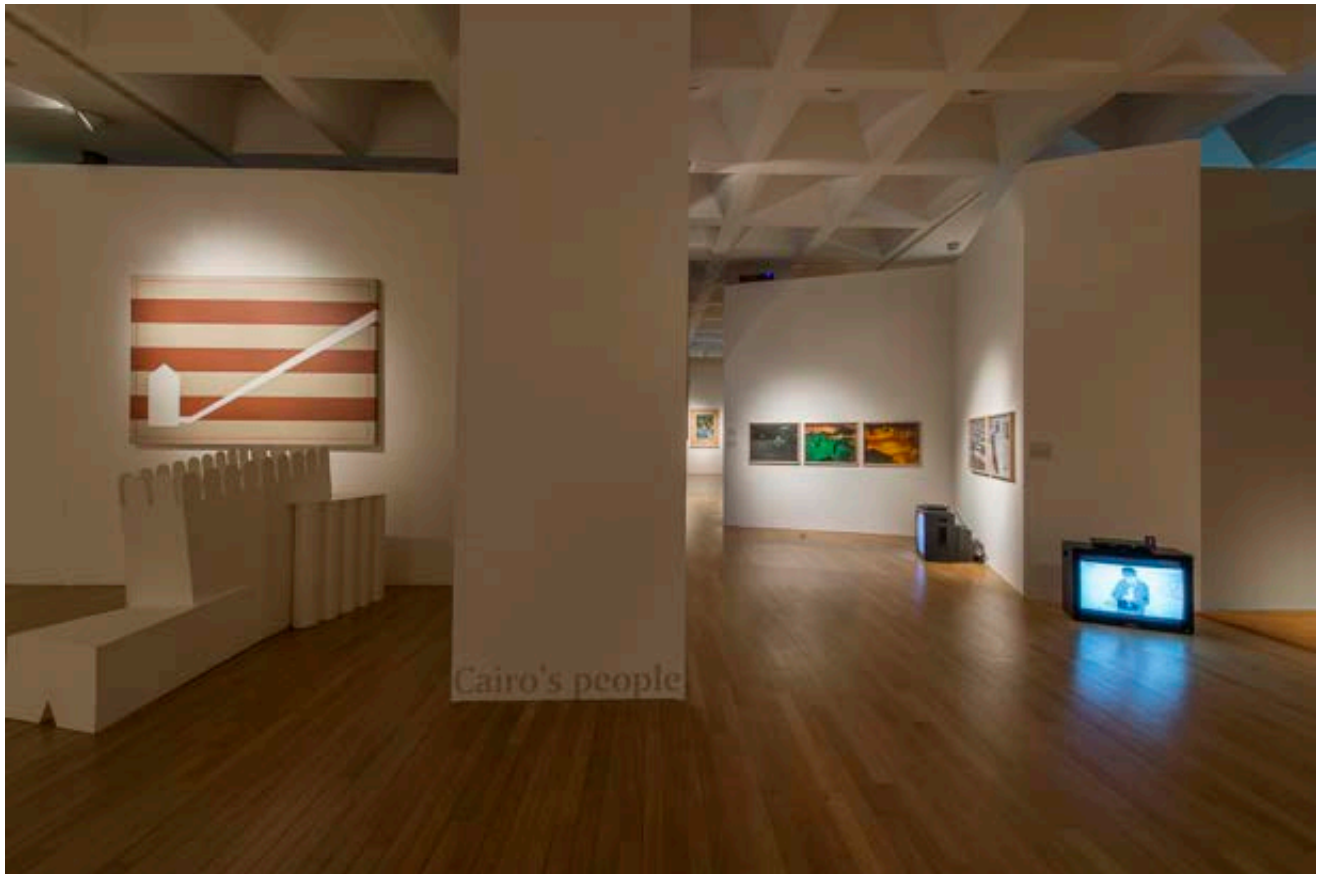


Crossing over to Modernity: Too Early, Too Late and the dichotomy Islam/West

During my studies of History of Art I had two obsessions, better say, two artists I was obsessed with. I am talking about Antonello da Messina and Gentile Bellini. Both of them were not only artists but connectors – able to unite different cultures and different aesthetics in their artwork. It is not unexpected that Mehmed II – also known as Muhammed bin Murad, Mehmed the Conqueror, and Kayser-i Rûm – believed that Gentile Bellini was the right person to realize his portrait. The Venetian artist painted the Sultan's portrait in 1479, and today the picture is at the National Gallery of London. We're not talking about a simple portrait. The Venetian senate sent Gentile Bellini as cultural ambassador to Constantinople as part of the 1479 peace settlement. Mehmed II stimulated science studies and intercultural dialogues as well. Let me say he was a pre-modern figure for the Islamic world. Speaking of that era, Gentile Bellini worked in the Middle East, and he could be considered as the perfect engaged figure of Eastern representation with an Italian and Western background. But it wouldn't be quite unquestionable, since history is not that direct.

I would like to start from Gentile Bellini to talk about *Too early, too late. Middle East and Modernity*, Marco Scotini's new project for *Arte Fiera Collecting*. The exhibition project examines the relationship between the East and Western modernity. It includes 60 artists and more than 100 works, and it is hosted inside the fantastic exhibition spaces of Bologna's Pinacoteca Nazionale. *Too early, too late* – the exhibition's title is taken from 1981 film on Egypt *Trop tôt/Trop tard*, directed by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet – could be considered as the second chapter of the continuation of the discourse that Marco Scotini started in Bologna last year with the exhibition [*The Empty Pedestal – Ghosts from Eastern*](#)

Europe. As a matter of fact, the exhibition aims to understand the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Block on Middle East. Over and about this time Marco Scotini would like to stress the idea of "time" in its complexity and different shapes. History is put under the spotlight again by suggesting to replace the old dichotomy "Communism/Capitalism" with a new one: "Islam/West".



Too early, too late. Modernity and Middle East, Installation View, curated by Marco Scotini, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, 2015. ph Paolo Emilio Sfriso.



Akram Zaatari, *Twenty Eight Nights: Endnote*, 2014, HD Video, E. Righi Collection

As Hamadi Redissi wrote in his essay, the “political” opposition of the Past has been substituted by a “clash of civilizations” belonging to different temporal domains, with archaic cultures in opposition to modern societies, and the idea of Modernity (*al-hadatha*) as its distinctive feature. *Too early, too late* is a reconstruction of the West meeting the Islamic world, and at the same time it shows the urgency to keep the memory of the Middle East. This was achieved through the research of original documents and archive materials, photographs and films. For instance, artist Akram Zaatari shows how an extensive research on vernacular photography led him to create the Arab Image Foundation with a few other fellow artists, an original collection of photographs from the Middle East.



Vahap Avşar, Baskomutain, Chief Commander, 2011, C-Print , Courtesy the artist and Rampa Istanbul.

In parallel, Vahap Avşar also deals mostly with archive and archival material. With his work *Chief Commander*, the artist allows me to recall Gentile Bellini with his work about the representation of power. *Chief Commander* is a series of seven large-scale photographs of popular Turkish postcards depicting monumental statues of Atatürk. The statues, the earliest ever made of Atatürk, were produced by two European sculptors in 1920: Heinrich Krippel and Pietro Canonica. As it happened for Mehmed II, an Eastern government turned to Europeans for the representation of Atatürk, as there were no Ottoman or Turkish artists available to produce images and statues, since the representation of the human form is forbidden in Muslim culture. Vahap Avşar seems to assume that if Atatürk is pictured as Chief Commander, instead of Father of the Nation, it is because these European sculptures not only bring their

technical know-how, but also their ideology, from Europe. As with Bellini, the representation is not neutral, we have to double check the meaning, because of the Western political agency disclosed under the representation. Thus the representative politics and the politics of representation are spread by the form and are interfaced with the meaning.



Too early, too late. Modernity and Middle East, Installation View, curated by Marco Scotini, Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna, 2015. ph Paolo Emilio Sfriso.

Too early, too late associates the West and the East. At the same time, the exhibition starts its analysis from the Italian perspective. Thus we have the opportunity to read again the articles-reportages that Michel Foucault wrote for Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera* when the Iranian revolution broke out in 1978. In his series of articles, Foucault claimed that modernization in Iran was itself an "archaism," i.e., "Modernization is a political project and, as a principle of social change, it is a thing of the past" – and in Iran that modernity is a principle of social change. In the exhibition, the "Stone Guest" is actually Pierpaolo Pasolini. We have the

rereading of Pasolini's work in Palestina by Ayreen Anastas with *Pasolini Pa**, and the editing of "Sopralluogi in Palestina per 'I vangelo secondo Matteo'" by Amir Yatziv and his *This is Jerusalem Mr. Pasolini*. This last work is installed among the museum's prestigious 14th-century collection, comprising works spanning from Vitale da Bologna to the Late Gothic schools.



Amir Yatziv, *This is Jerusalem Mr. Pasolini*, single channel b/w video 7'47" Collezione AGI Verona Courtesy Galleria La Veronica, Modica, ph Paolo Emilio Sfriso.

By chance I'm writing this article in Istanbul, and as I'm crossing the Bosphorus strait on a ferry boat my eyes are filled with the images of a city under the attack of speculation. Modernity seems to have taken the shape of Westernization in the way of Taksim Square and Gezi Park. Pierpaolo Pasolini's words come to mind, as he warned us on how useless is development without progress. *Too early, too late* lets us think about

how everyday artistic practices are feeding the wind of political transformation. Marco Scotini highlights how the analogy between wind and history is made of different phases. The wind of history is multifaceted: it is the invisible one that we would like to catch; or the strong one that destroys the status quo; or the one we should face. In Istanbul today the wind is not blowing, instead there's fog hiding Hagia Sophia. But isn't it fog what artists deal with every time they deal with History?

Too early, too late. Middle East and Modernity, in occasion of [Arte Fiera Bologna art fair](#), at [Pinacoteca Nazionale Bologna](#), 22 January – 12 April 2015.



Amir Yatziv This is Jerusalem Mr. Pasolini single channel b/w video 7'47" Collezione AGI Verona
Courtesy Galleria La Veronica, Modica