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## “Dirty Dark Loud and Hysteric”: The London and Paris Surrealist Exhibitions of the 1930s and the Exhibition Practices of the Art and Liberty Group in Cairo

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# “Dirty Dark Loud and Hysteric”: The London and Paris Surrealist Exhibitions of the 1930s and the Exhibition Practices of the Art and Liberty Group in Cairo

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## Introduction

Several studies on the international proliferations and appropriations of surrealism have taken notice of the short-lived yet significant Art and Liberty Group (*Jama'at al-Fann Wal-Hurriyyah*)<sup>1</sup> (1939-1947). Established on January 19, 1939, in Cairo, it comprised a core group of intellectuals and artists who aligned themselves primarily with surrealism. While many of the artists who were affiliated with the Art and Liberty Group did not work in a surrealist style—at least not in what is conventionally defined as surrealist based on the movement's aesthetic and political considerations within its originating European context—they seem to have been attracted to, or at least sympathetic towards, its leftist revolutionary project. Through the manifestos, bulletins, and journals that they published between 1938 and 1955,<sup>2</sup> the formal and informal conferences and meetings they organized mainly between 1939 and 1947 in their headquarters, and the five main group exhibitions they staged from 1940 to 1945, the Group provided a generation of disillusioned Cairo-based Egyptian and non-Egyptian artists and writers with a platform of cultural and political reform. These artists implemented a number of creative and political projects that rejected what they perceived as an imported and stale salon-like artistic academicism endorsed by an oppressive colonial/monarchic regime and a conservative middle-class morality that fostered bourgeois art.

Much of what has been written so far about this movement has favored an exploration of the political context and concerns of the Group over a serious interrogation of the artistic contributions it made to two critical areas of artistic activity: exhibition practices and art criticism. With the exception of Avinoam Shalem's paper on al-Gazzar<sup>3</sup> and to a certain degree, although less successfully and with critical omissions and factual inaccuracies, Samir Gharib's book on surrealism in Egypt,<sup>4</sup> almost every study of the Art and Liberty Group has been driven by attempts to frame it primarily within an agenda of socio-political resistance. In his 1987 essay on surrealism in Egypt, "The Nile of Surrealism," Abdel Kader al-Janabi, for instance, problematically fixes the thrust behind the entire movement as well as the cause for its demise within an essentialist reading of what Nadav Safran had described as a "crisis of orientation";<sup>5</sup> one that is reflective of a failed attempt to imitate an advanced "western" modernity within a stagnant local "non-western" reality:

We have witnessed the trajectory of the surrealist adventure in Egypt. These surrealist baby elephants were born—certainly to be wild—in an environment marked by regression and an internal crisis of orientation. Their aim was to effect the project of occidental (that is European) modernity, which emerged from a *constant revolutionizing of the means of production, i.e. permanent sweeping away of all earlier fixed, fast frozen relationships* (as Marx put it) in a society where, on the contrary, the socio-economic structure had remained stagnant and undisturbed for centuries under the sway of the traditional archaic mode of production.<sup>6</sup>

Another contextual analysis of the Group by the late Don LaCoss in his essay "Egyptian Surrealism and Degenerate Art in 1939"<sup>7</sup> is charted along a predominantly socio-political reading of a series of articles that were exchanged between the editors and writers of *Al-Risala*, a weekly literary, scientific, and artistic journal, and three founding members of the Art and Liberty Group, Anwar Kamel, Ramses Yunan and Kamel el-Telmissany, in July and October 1939. The exchange was prompted by an initial article that appeared in issue 314 on July 10, 1939, that announced the imminent disintegration of a circle of Egyptian artists who called themselves the Group of Degenerate Art.<sup>8</sup> LaCoss reads the several arguments made by members of the group in their explication of surrealism as an artistic movement and their critique of outdated art forms that need to be invigorated with the new as pointers towards a struggle between the movement's leftist agenda and middle class conservative morality. In doing so, he shifts the analysis away from any critical art-historical contextualization. Instead, he chooses to focus primarily on the implications of the challenge raised by the journal's writers about the dubious western character of the Group and the pressing question, on the eve of World War II, of the political agency of art.

In this essay, I intend to divert the discourse around the Art and Liberty Group from the more obvious political aspects of their "program"—that is, the polemical content of their collective and individual publications and the formal choices and semantic attributes of their art. Instead, I would like to propose that, given the environment in which they operated, it is in their negotiation and adaptation of nonconformist approaches to exhibition design and display that their surrealist counterparts were employing, particularly in Paris and London in the 1930s, that they were most successful in instigating a rupture within the cultural and political structures that they sought to reform.

To do this, I will begin by charting a brief analytical history of some of the surrealist exhibitions in Paris and London in the 1930s, illustrating a shift in orientation towards

political engagement, rather than a withdrawal. I will cite specific installation tactics, modes of display, and approaches to spatial organization to further illustrate how exhibition design and presentation in itself had become the surrealists' primary means of reversing the colonial, racial, and ethnographic ideologies long inscribed into such practices. I will then move on to a discussion of the close ties between the Art and Liberty Group in Cairo and the surrealist movement in Paris, centered mostly around the person of Georges Henein, one of the Group's main founders. The discussion aims to reveal a simultaneous awareness by the two parties of one another's undertakings and will set the foundations for the methodological comparison that will follow of the two groups' exhibitions, in particular of the Art and Liberty Group's 1941 exhibition and the surrealist international exhibitions of 1938. I will conclude this section by briefly delineating the historical and cultural parameters within which a local tradition of exhibition practices had developed in Egypt, especially in Cairo, in order to explicate how the Art and Liberty Group's choices of location, exhibition design, models of display, and selection of artists were reflective of a self-aware rupture with the local official exhibition practices and the "mainstream" bourgeois-oriented cultural system that was prevalent at the time.

## The Art and Liberty Group and the Surrealist Exhibitions of the 1930s

In remembering the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen on November 26, 1922, Howard Carter wrote the following words: "I was struck dumb with amazement, and when Lord Carnarvon, unable to stand the suspense any longer, inquired anxiously, 'Can you see anything?' it was all I could do to get out the words, 'Yes, wonderful things.'"<sup>9</sup> Much has been said and written about the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb and the Egyptomania that ensued. Less discussed though is the contemporaneous critique of the prevalent norms governing the display of what Elliott Colla refers to as "conflicted antiquities."<sup>10</sup> The surrealists, for example, took a highly critical stance towards the exhibiting of the arts of the colonies. Many of the wonderful things of which Carter spoke were to eventually join the immense host of "artifacts" that had become fundamental to any major museum collection in the West. Some would remain in Egypt at the Egyptian Museum, which itself was modeled after its European predecessors. Soon they were to become part of a complex system of classification and display, appropriation and signification that had begun around a century earlier and that was predominantly conceived and developed as either a tool of self-assertion within the expansionist ambitions of imperialism/colonialism or, later on, as a mouthpiece for a reactionary indigenous nationalist/identitarian project. The arrival of Carter's wonderful things in Europe, however, occurred at a time when those systems of display, or exhibition practices, were being challenged as hallmarks of a colonial, capitalist, and bourgeois order by the propagators of an avant-garde that was as much concerned with socio-political reform as with artistic experimentation.

The surrealists were at the forefront of this shift, their literary and artistic manifestations reflective of a broader revolutionary desire that was symptomatic of many intellectual and cultural formations of the time. *La Vérité sur les colonies*, the surrealist exhibition of 1931 organized by Louis Aragon (before his split from André Breton), Paul Éluard and Yves Tanguy alongside André Thirion, a political activist and member of both the French Communist Party and the surrealist group, was staged as a glaring criticism of the

*Exposition coloniale internationale* held in Paris for six months during the same year. Among other nonconformist modes of display, the organizers infused the exhibition with supplementary texts that, "rather than provide cultural, historical or aesthetic context, exposed the destruction of such objects under colonial rule: missionaries burned them 'pour consacrer les progrès du christianisme.'"11

Other "curatorial" formulations featured the juxtaposition of sculptures and objects acquired from the colonies with cheap French religious statues poignantly labeled as "fétiches européennes."<sup>12</sup> The surrealists' acute understanding and employment of the power of display was an inescapable evolutionary phase in their constant search for forms of rebellion that had started a decade before, in the creation of hybridized artworks in which an attempt to level hierarchies of aesthetic classifications between the arts of the European metropole and that of the colonies was a major strategy, if not a goal in itself. Man Ray's *Noir et Blanche* (1926) is a good example of this concern with "cultural hybridity."<sup>13</sup> Other non-surrealist artists were adopting similar concerns, as evident in Hannah Höch's *Die Süsse* (1926). In other words, the surrealist's dissident exhibition practices as a means of contesting the established order of ideological promulgation that had been used for decades by the colonial exhibition, the ethnographic museum, and even the bourgeois commercial art gallery mark a phenomenological rather than a qualitative transition in their political engagement. Unlike what several scholars have described as a retreat from the political arena, or a migration from the "Marxist street" to the "bourgeois Salon,"<sup>14</sup> more recent scholarship ascribes to the surrealists' exhibition practices of the 1930s and the 1940s an "ethical and ideological criticality"<sup>15</sup> that is primarily manifested in the group's practice of exhibition organization and display, as foreshadowed by the 1931 anti-imperialist exhibition and solidified in the controversial exhibitions of 1935 and 1936 (Galerie Charles Ratton, Paris; The Burlington Galleries, London; MoMA, New York) and 1938 (Galerie Georges Wildenstein, Paris).

The 1935 and 1936 surrealist exhibitions at the Charles Ratton Gallery in Paris confronted the viewer with a network of complex juxtapositions whereby the "savage" object was presented alongside the surrealist artwork. Janine Mileaf contends that it was these exhibitions, with their disquieting mix of eclectic objects, rather than the overtly ideological protest exhibition, that came closest to the surrealist conception of political praxis.<sup>16</sup> While none of the hierarchical constructs that usually dictated the orders of display within the colonial or ethnographic institutions were adhered to, the visual and material elements of display, such as pedestals, glass vitrines, and the like, were still employed. The recruitment of familiar museological apparatus for the construction of a counter narrative "was to create ties between those two realities in order to arrive at the point where they will cease to be perceived contradictorily."<sup>17</sup> According to Krzysztof Pomian, an object that has been used in some other context and by other individuals can take on a "partially transformed meaning and be laden with new signs."<sup>18</sup> For their 1938 exhibition held at the Beaux-arts Gallery in Paris, the surrealists wanted to further blur the lines between the art on display and exhibition as art, so they called upon Marcel Duchamp to up the ante. The result was a complex array of displays, installations, and juxtapositions consisting of 20 female wax mannequins, 1,200 coal bags suspended from the ceiling creating a cave-like atmosphere, and a display comprising 300 artworks made by 60 artists in an exhibition that "scandalized the viewers."<sup>19</sup>

The surrealists' strategies to suggest alternative worldviews, construct polemical narratives, and defy a status quo, artistic, political or otherwise, through the recruitment

of the spatial and material parameters of exhibition practice, quickly became tactics employed by several art collectives in other cities in Europe and beyond; the Art and Liberty Group was one of them. These groups either proclaimed themselves as surrealists or aligned themselves both broadly and selectively with the surrealist movement in Paris. As I illustrated earlier, the Art and Liberty Group fit within the second category. The question that arises at this point is how aware the members of the Group were of surrealist exhibition strategy when they were envisioning the staging of their own shows a few years later. Answering this question requires a thorough investigation of certain facts and dates that closely connect the members of the Group to the protagonists of some of these exhibitions within a temporal and geographical framework that makes such consciousness plausible. For that we must turn to Georges Henein, the main propagator of surrealist thought and literature in Egypt and one of the co-founders of the Art and Liberty Group.

Henein's father, Sadik Henein Pacha, was an Egyptian diplomat. His mother was Mary Zanelli, an Italian-Egyptian woman. His father's career meant that he would spend his childhood between Cairo, Madrid, Rome, and Paris, where he eventually completed his secondary education at the Lycée Pasteur de Neuilly and went on to study at the Sorbonne. This early cosmopolitanism allowed him to master Arabic, Italian, Greek, English, and French equally. This in turn enabled him to navigate the various worlds in which he roamed with the ease and confidence of a "flâneur des deux mondes."<sup>20</sup> Henein's surrealist and leftist leanings began to surface in 1935 through his contributions to two publications: *Un Effort*,<sup>21</sup> a monthly periodical published in Cairo by Les Essayistes, a Francophone literary group, and *Les Humbles*,<sup>22</sup> a Marxist-Leninist journal that was printed in Paris. In 1936, Henein met Breton. In a letter dated April 8, 1936, Breton already revealed to Henein his awareness of the latter's efforts to nurture surrealism in Egypt: "The imp of the perverse, as he deigns to appear to me, seems to have one wing here, the other in Egypt."<sup>23</sup> Later in the same year, and during Henein's sojourn in Paris, he attended the surrealist meetings that Breton called in order to discuss and take a stand towards what became known as the Moscow Trials. A manifesto, or more precisely a declaration, entitled *La Vérité sur le procès de Moscou* was read by Breton in a meeting on September 3, 1936, and was signed by those present. Henein was one of the signatories. It is worth noting that Yves Tanguy, one of the main organizers of the 1931 anti-colonial exhibition, was also one of the cosigners who attended that meeting. All of this was happening only around two months after the opening of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London. During that exhibition, Éluard had presented his famous poems of *L'Évidence poétique*. The first issue of the Art and Liberty Group's periodical *Al-Tatawwur* included an Arabic translation of selections from those poems. By then they had become available through Herbert Read's compilation of surrealist writings, *Surrealism*, from 1936.

<sup>24</sup>

Regardless of how they reached the editors of the publication (including Henein), their inclusion signifies a contemporaneous awareness of the international activities of the surrealist movement. In a letter to Henri Calet from December 1938, Henein asks his friend if he could pass on the manifesto that was circulated "yesterday" to the *Nouvelle Revue française*.<sup>25</sup> Calet obliged, and a short announcement was printed in the issue of February 1, 1939, with the heading "The East is working for the defense of Western culture." The above citations are but a few indicators of an ongoing trail of correspondence, publication, travel, and participation that points towards a simultaneous

involvement with surrealist matters on both sides of the Mediterranean that was made possible through a close network of friendships and personal acquaintances. It is safe to argue that there was an overall awareness, albeit slightly delayed due to the communication restrictions of the time, of the surrealist activities in Europe and beyond by the core protagonists of the Art and Liberty Group. The most decisive conclusion, however, that one could make about the Group's conscious appropriation of the surrealist shows of the 1930s in their search for an exhibition model that is critically engaged both culturally and politically can be arrived at by a careful analysis of the remarkable similarities between the surrealist exhibitions and the five that the Group mounted from 1940 to 1945.<sup>26</sup> To begin with, the choice of locations by the Group was reflective of their intent to dissociate themselves from what was traditionally deemed "appropriate," even "respectable," by the local cultural milieu. The second exhibition of 1941, in particular, calls for special attention. Due to limitations of space, I will restrict my detailed analysis to this particular exhibition, which I believe is sufficient to elucidate the point at hand.

Open to the public from March 10 to March 25, it was staged in an unfinished space within the newly constructed Immobilia building. In a criticism aimed at the conventions of the art space and the artificial spatial constructs within which art objects are displayed, the organizers scattered pots of paint used to cover the freshly coated, not yet fully dried walls all around the exhibition space.<sup>27</sup> The layout was designed as a dimly lit labyrinth with hand-shaped cutouts and upside-down posters hanging along the way in an attempt to confuse rather than guide. In her review of the exhibition, Marie Cavadia, known to be very sympathetic to the Group's activities and to surrealism in general, reads in this unusual exhibition plan and signage a determination on behalf of the organizers to rid the visitors of "their daily honest little logic, rife with bourgeois imagery that life challengingly throws before our eyes."<sup>28</sup> Not everyone, however, took so well to such "over-original" tactics.<sup>29</sup> A writer by the name of Spencer Brook is quoted in *La Bourse égyptienne* on March 25, 1941, from a review that he wrote earlier that month for *The Egyptian Gazette*. In his concluding remarks about the exhibition he states: "Unfortunately, it is all too original" (Spencer 28).<sup>30</sup> Three articles appeared in the same periodical between March 29 and April 2, 1941, with the heading "The Tortuous Maze" after the title of the initial article.<sup>31</sup> The title was an unfavorable reference to the exhibition layout.<sup>32</sup> Another review by Jean Bastia that appeared in the *Journal d'Égypte* on March 16 starts as follows: "After a million turns in a labyrinth, where inverted posters serve as Ariadne's thread, we are finally there at the entrance of the second exhibition of independent art. First impression: we would really like to know how to get out."<sup>33</sup> Even some of the artworks were hung in strikingly nonconformist methods. An Italian artist who visited the exhibition said,

The paintings were hung on walls (partitions) erected in complex ways. Here and there were hung ornaments of black-gummed tape; and some of the pictures were hung by clothespins on a hangman's noose [...]. When I saw a clean piece of cloth and a scrap of paper hung on a wall, I remarked to my companions "That's a bas-relief of a dog chasing a horse"; and they liked the reasonability of the title.<sup>34</sup>

A black veil (or a partition-like device made of black fabric), for instance, covered the two paintings exhibited by Ramses Yunan.<sup>35</sup> Sam Kantorowits refers to this device in his review of March 18 in *L'Égypte nouvelle* as a "jeux d'intérieurs."<sup>36</sup>

Kantorowits also proceeds to talk about a display of mannequins that was executed in bad taste.<sup>37</sup> The employment of mannequins in the exhibition design presents a direct connection with the twenty female wax mannequins that Duchamp included in the 1938

Paris surrealist exhibition. Samir Gharib mistakenly ascribed this installation to the Group's first exhibition.<sup>38</sup> However he sheds further light on the overall installation by mentioning that the mannequins were displayed in a street-like scene entitled *Bad Business Alley* with a composition (in Arabic *tarkeeb*, which could also be translated as installation) by Georges Henein entitled *The Murdered Poet*. In a recent conversation the 95-year-old Bertho Farhi, a close friend and collaborator of Georges Henein, recalls the mannequins and contends that Henein never executed any paintings. Farhi's accounts, alongside Gharib's choice of words, point towards a multimedia installation rather than a painting. The overall terminology in the description provided by Gharib also seems to point in that direction:

Thus they laid out the galleries of the exhibit in a manner bold and unfamiliar to the art sphere in Egypt, and put on "*Bad Business Alley*" with Georges Henein's composition *The Murdered Poet* as the key work. This was the first and the last time that Georges Henein submitted a work of art. The murdered poet's ivory neck tilts in death agony toward his stooped shoulder disappearing amidst the folds of cloth. Scattered over his body are numerous minute human figures; and scattered on all sides of the alley are "wooden models" whose stony bodies tower symbolically, with all imagery and fantasy in attendance. On these symbols are built the psychological effects which the creatures' inventor desired.<sup>39</sup>

One last indicator that makes it more likely that Henein's *The Murdered Poet* was indeed an installation is that the most aggressive denunciation in all the examined reviews was prompted by the mannequin installation. In the review of the exhibition mentioned earlier, Kantorowits, although he doesn't mention Henein by name, blatantly attacks the person behind the mannequins: "instead of simply engaging in an otherwise praiseworthy activity, such as that of an organizer, he contorts himself into seeking refuge between a Telmissany and a Ramses Yunan. [...] He has only to declare himself the Pope of surrealism in Egypt and ring the bell of revenge from the clock tower of Charlatanism."<sup>40</sup>

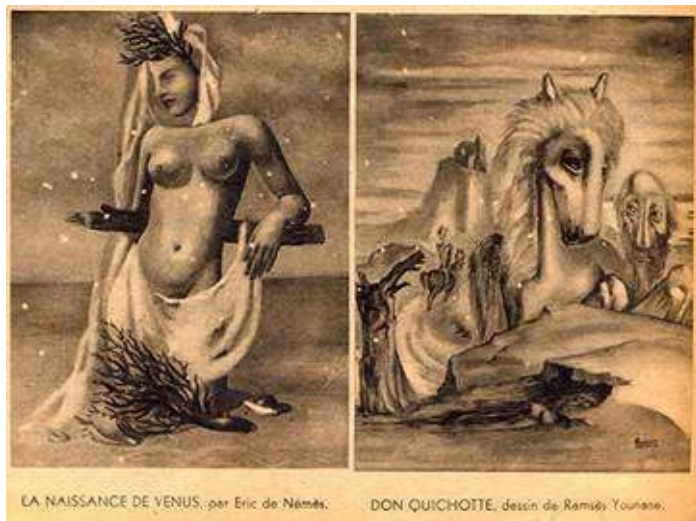
The last element I would like to draw attention to from this array of display tactics employed by the Art and Liberty Group is their recruitment of performance art to accentuate the peculiarity of the exhibition space. In an unpublished manuscript from Yunan's archives, an exhibition checklist includes, among other things, tape, rope, paint, posters, and "people who can sing." The staging of singers and dancers in the inner part of the maze is mentioned by Gharib as well and is based, according to him, on an interview with Paula (Boula—her original name was Iqbal al-Alayly), the wife of Georges Henein: "Fastened on the walls were hand silhouettes pointing toward an open door from which loud humming was escaping. Inside couples were dancing."<sup>41</sup> More research is necessary to fully comprehend the nature and significance of the performance art dimension in the overall work of the Art and Liberty Group. However, the fact that their 1941 exhibition did include some performance element presents us with another link to the Paris surrealist exhibition of 1938, which also featured a dance performance by H  l  ne Vanel.

The remaining four exhibitions of 1940, 1942, 1944, and 1945 had a similarly nonconformist nature and were equally concerned with challenging the prevalent exhibition and display practices. Yet while the surrealists were primarily concerned with leveling aesthetic hierarchies assigned to artworks based on their geographical origin, thus defying the hegemony of the mainland metropole over that of the peripheral colonies, the exhibition practices of the Art and Liberty Group were more intent on



challenging, or at least offering an alternative to, the rigid cultural structures of state patronage and the academic salon of Cairo. In order to fully understand the group's disposition, we need to demarcate, albeit concisely, the main historical and social contours within which a tradition of art practice and exhibitions had developed in Egypt. In other words, we must interrogate what they were reacting against. It is not insignificant that almost every review of their exhibitions had come to use the word "the independents" in some form or another. If they had indeed succeeded in becoming independent, then the next logical step is to understand what it is that they had become independent from.

Figure 1: *La 2<sup>e</sup> Exposition de l'Art Indépendant*, exhibition review by Marie Cavadia.



Source: Cairo (Egypt), Dominican Library, *Revue Images Archives*.

## The Art and Liberty Group's Surrealist Project: The World as Exhibition or the Exhibition as a Means of Changing the World

The nineteenth-century rediscovery of Egypt by Europe's imperialist powers, notably France and Britain, and the consequent exporting and display of its arts, coincided with a predominantly European interest in the world as an object of representation. From "scientific" ethnographic exhibitions, where objects under glass and on pedestals evidenced a system of cultural hierarchies, to the extravagant scale of the "expositions universelles," which prided themselves on authentic representation while at the same time providing mass entertainment through the staging of cultural otherness as an object of attraction and wonder,<sup>42</sup> non-European visitors to cities like Paris or London in the second half of the nineteenth century could not help but notice and comment on the conflation of several aspects of their cultures within systems of visual and spatial representation that were entirely alien to them, to say the least. In the first chapter of his seminal *Colonizing Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell gives a detailed account of the impressions of several Egyptian students and delegates who witnessed this "machinery of representation" and sums up the overall sentiment towards such display as follows:

The Europe in Arabic accounts was a place of spectacle and visual arrangement, of the organization of everything, and everything organized to represent, to recall, like the exhibition, some larger meaning. Characteristic of the Europeans' way of life was their preoccupation with what an Egyptian author described as *intizam al-manzar*, the organization of the view. Outside the world exhibition, it follows paradoxically, one encountered not the real world but only further models and representations of the real. Beyond the exhibition and the congress, beyond the museum and the zoo – everywhere that non-European visitors went, they found the technique and the sensation to be the same [...].<sup>43</sup>

Building on Foucault's concept of microphysical power, Mitchell outlines how, through the colonial system, power was understood through the manifestation of structured visual representation. The first official decree (*firman*) to establish a museum to rescue Egyptian antiquities from foreign plundering was issued by Mohammed Ali in 1835 upon the advice of Rifa'a al-Tahtawi. The latter was one of the delegates who were sent to Paris in 1826 on Ali's first student mission. While in Paris he was at once fascinated and perplexed by the European affinity for visual experience. "One of the characteristics of the French is to stare and get excited at everything new,"<sup>44</sup> he wrote in his lengthy 1834 account of his stay in Paris. Throughout his stay he had come to understand the power that visual display could have on the beholder and the narratives it could disseminate. Ali consented and entrusted al-Tahtawi with the task of overseeing this museum. "Foreigners are destroying ancient edifices, extracting stones and other worked objects and exporting them to foreign countries," begins the decree. "Having considered these facts, the government [...] has decided to display them for travelers who visit the country, to forbid the destruction of ancient edifices in Upper Egypt, and to spend the greatest possible care on their safekeeping."<sup>45</sup> The decision to display the artifacts primarily for viewing not by Egyptians but by foreign travelers who more often than not came from countries that were associated with imperial and/or colonial powers clearly illustrates how structured visual representation as an effective means of asserting authority and dictating narrative was now being used to reverse the dynamics of power.

Over the 104 years that separate the founding of the first antiquities museum in Egypt from that of the Art and Liberty Group, the manifestation of power through the structuring and control of the visual experience had undergone a variety of iterations. The Khedive Ismail's major urban planning projects of the 1850s and 1860s signified control of the spatial experience of public spaces. The establishment in 1881 of the Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe marked the embracing of a medieval architectural past primarily embodied in the Mamluk style and a disregard for the more recent Ottoman forms. Even the pompous royal fanfares at parliament, on public and national holidays, and during special events like weddings and coronations contributed to the consolidation of an unchallenged hierarchical order that was communicated through elaborately staged mass visual experiences. The alliance between the official point of view and the multitude of organized visual constructs through which it was disseminated would soon necessitate the creation of a fine arts school that would produce artists who would in turn supply the official forms of display with an art in keeping with the espoused rhetoric.

Prince Yusuf Kamal founded such a school in 1908 and entrusted it to one of his advisors, Guillaume Laplange. Laplange and other European artists, mostly French, Italian, and British, were to constitute the first group of teachers at the school. Artists such as Mahmoud Moukhtar, Ragheb Ayad, Ahmad Sabri, Mohammad Hassan, and many others

would graduate from the school within five years of its inception. These artists would then be expected to continue their training in Europe, mostly in Paris at the *École des beaux-arts* or in Rome, where the Egyptian government had founded an Egyptian arts academy as early as 1927. By the time the Arts and Liberty Group came into the picture, these role models, and other artists such as Mahmoud Saïd and Muhammad Nagi, had become canonical figures associated with a sense of cultural and national pride. Along with several European artists residing in or passing through Egypt, they began to exhibit in different types of spaces ranging from private residences and commercial gallery spaces to public/state buildings and make-do galleries within educational institutions.

In 1919 a seminal exhibition took place that was to lay the foundations for the annual Salon du Caire. Under the auspices of several state officials, royal patrons, wealthy elites, and leading national reformists, this was no small affair. Moreover, unlike previous exhibitions that consisted almost exclusively of non-Egyptian artists residing in or passing through Egypt, this exhibition also included artists of the first generation such as Moukhtar, Saïd, Chafik Charobim, and Youssef Kamel. Salon-style hanging and the organizing of artworks according to academic classifications was the primary methodology of display. Previous exhibitions followed the same methods. They differed, though, in that they consisted only of non-Egyptian artists. The first such exhibition was in 1891 at the Royal Opera House. The second took place in 1902 at Nehmann's antique stores at 21 Al-Madabegh street (now Cherif Street) in what is now downtown Cairo. The khedive's attendance at both of these exhibitions, as well as at the 1919 show, legitimized them as a model to be pursued and placed them alongside other exhibition and display practices that were perceived as manifestations of power. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that, as the article "The Secretary of the Society of Fine Arts speaks to us about the Idea behind the Organization of Art Exhibitions" published in *Al-Musawwar* in 1928 states, the number of visitors to the annual exhibition of French art in 1927 was in excess of 50,000.<sup>46</sup>

I would like to end this account, in which I have attempted to outline the evolution of the exhibition and display practices that the Art and Liberty Group inherited and chose to reject, with a citation from a review of the opening of the 1927 Annual Salon, published in *Al-Musawwar* on 30 December 1927:

Last week, his Majesty the King inaugurated the annual Egyptian exhibition of the friends of fine arts society at Tojran Pasha Palace [...]. And this would be the second exhibition of this kind held by the society. It is distinguished from the one that preceded it by the profusion of its exhibits, which have reached 662 pieces displaying the abundance of precision and dexterity of its artists who are of different races (nationalities), with many Egyptians amongst them. [...] And the top floor has been dedicated to oil paintings and pastels where almost every nation has its own gallery with the largest for the Egyptians, while the basement has been assigned for the exhibits of the public schools like the school of engineering, the art and crafts, decorative arts and the exhibits of the atelier of Mrs. Huda Hanem Shaarawi and the Russian Ladies.<sup>47</sup>

It is evident from the above description that, by the time the Art and Liberty Group was formed, an established hegemonic and exclusive culture of exhibition practices had been already in place for decades. The conflation of national pride with artistic critique, the propagation of social hierarchies and institutional rhetoric, the adoption of the western distinction between high art and low art, the fine arts and the decorative arts, and the classification of artists as Egyptian and non-Egyptian were all narratives and ideologies engrained within the official visual order. What had evolved into a science of exhibitions

was now so shaped by the European view of the world as picture that it had become nearly impossible to disentangle one from the other.

Figure 2: *La 2<sup>e</sup> Exposition de l'Art Indépendant* (detail), exhibition review by Marie Cavadia.



Source: Cairo (Egypt), Dominican Library, *Revue Images Archives*.

Figure 3: Anonymous, *The Art and Liberty Group*, 1941.



Source: © Sonia Younan.

## The Art and Liberty Group: Challenging the Local Canon and Dismantling the Aura of Nationalism

So what was the alternative that the Art and Liberty Group proposed, and were they successful in implementing it? The answer is twofold. The first achievement of the Art and Liberty Group is the disruption of an unchallenged local canon. The nonconformist paradigms of exhibition practice and display that the Group's members sought through their critical praxis allowed for an effective questioning of the status of the artist. Many artists from the previous generations had assumed a canonical status beyond criticism. The members of the Group were the first to challenge this untouchable status in their writings and selective collaborations with a very few of these artists. The example of Mahmoud Saïd is a good illustration. In an article entitled "Towards a Free Art" that appeared in the first issue of the Group's short-lived periodical *Al-Tattawur*, Kamel el-Telmissany deplores the earlier generation of Egyptian artists who were enslaved by the academicism of the art education that they received in Europe. "When the first and second generations of Egyptian artists traveled to study art in Europe," he writes,

they each stood weak and humiliated before the dominant and felt inferiority running through their veins until they started to copy the images of the dominant and strong [...] prisoners of museums and churches, and of church-like academies, you could easily see the features of the saints and characters that were inscribed by Raphael and Michelangelo and others [...] you could simply see them behind the characters that were drawn by these enslaved copiers of church befitting images from when they were in Europe.<sup>48</sup>

Although he then proceeds to exclude Mahmoud Saïd, Mahmoud Moukhtar, Ragheb Ayad, and Muhammad Nagi from the mix, his exoneration does not come through with equal intent or conviction. Even Saïd, whom he praises over the course of two pages and deems as capable as Leonardo da Vinci and as sensitive as Delveaux, must quit his ivory tower and this worn-out and humiliated circle of artists and search for his freedom.<sup>49</sup> Some could argue that this may well have been a camouflaged invitation to exhibit with the Group. Whether Saïd fully embraced el-Telmissany's call is a separate matter, but he did go out in search of new towers and landed in the Immobilia building, literally the tallest tower in Cairo at the time and the site for the Group's first two shows. Saïd would exhibit in the next two as well. In a letter from December 1938 written by Georges Henein to Henri Calet, Henein mentions that Saïd had sent him a touching letter with a great sense of poetry regarding the publication of his book *Déraisons d'être* and describes him as the artist who is most sympathetic to them.<sup>50</sup> We may conclude that the Art and Liberty Group's new parameters of art-critical thought and evaluation led to the creation of a classless type of exhibition space. Seeing a work by Saïd exhibited next to one by any of the younger, lesser-known artists in the group was a tangible manifestation of their ability to shuffle the canonical parameters of their time.

The second accomplishment of the Art and Liberty Group resides in the fact that its various undertakings, particularly in areas of exhibition practice, allowed for a dismantling of the nationalist aura that was inserted into the public discourse about art and the forms of its display. The structure of the annual Salon and other state-endorsed types of shows emphasized the difference in nationality between Egyptian and non-Egyptian artists. Yet the exhibitions of the Art and Liberty Group included artists from a host of countries. Hardly any reference was made to the nationalities of the exhibiting

artists. Instead, artists' statements were included and scarcely edited to allow the individuality of each artist to come through. Some of the statements from the Group's 1941 exhibition make the point very well. In an article that appeared in *La Bourse égyptienne* on March 25, 1941, another review that had run in *The Sphinx* a few days earlier is quoted. The critic's fascination with the artists' statements from the exhibition catalogue leads him to cite them at length:

Raymond Abner admits that he paints only so that he can stay awake. Hassia says that photography allows her to escape one man and possess all men. Eric de Nemes says that art is a packet of surprises enveloped in golden paper and containing artificial flowers that engulf a bomb, which explodes in the hands of the public. Amy Nimr recognizes that she likes Dali and Picasso and detests Rubens. Arte Topalian believes that if you paint an apple by tracing its likeness you are simply a servile copyist: be original, paint a triangle with blood springing out from it and two green leaves, call it all an automobile and you will see Arte and all his friends applauding you. Very good, very good, very good.<sup>51</sup>

So we see how such artists' statements shifted the focus away from nationality to individuality.

In a more direct criticism of the alignment of art with nationalist agendas, Kamel el-Telmissany cites the example of the sculptor Mahmud Mukhtar. This was in the second issue of *Al-Tatawwur* and may well be regarded as a continuation of the strand of critical thinking that the author had initiated in the preceding issue. El-Telmissany writes:

The inclination towards pharaonic art that is evident in the work of the exemplary artist Moukhtar has been misused to justify this new trend that seeks to limit the contemporary arts to the bounds of regionalism. [...] Nothing is more damaging to an artist than to constrain his work within the bounds of a specific culture or geographical location. Moukhtar's sculptures that fall within this category and that were hailed by the critics as Moukhtar's greatest will therefore not stand the test of time.<sup>52</sup>

El-Telmissany doesn't stop at that. He proceeds to discuss the work of Henry Moore, indirectly proposing it as a more valid reference against which to re-evaluate the work of Moukhtar. Together, el-Telmissany's writings combined with the catalogue literature cited earlier provide the theoretical backdrop against which members of the Art and Liberty Group made their "curatorial" choices. Artists were discussed and presented outside the exonerating rhetoric of the grand nationalist projects of *'Asr al-Nahdha* (The Egyptian Renaissance) and were juxtaposed with a diversity of artists, both physically in the exhibition space and theoretically in art-critical writing.

Figure 4: Amy Nimr, *Untitled*, 1936, watercolor on paper.



This painting was on show at the second Art and Liberty Group exhibition.  
Source: Doha (Qatar), Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 5: Anonymous, *Vers l'Inconnu*, 1957, Exhibition Poster.



Source: Cairo (Egypt), Sherwat Shafie Collection.

## A Final Word

In this essay, I have illustrated how the surrealist exhibitions of the 1930s in Paris and London provided the members of the Art and Liberty Group with the tools they needed to achieve an artistic break from the predominant cultural status quo. The Egyptian artists and writers directly affiliated with the Group and those orbiting it saw in the surrealist experimentation with forms of exhibition practices and visual display an effective model of cultural dissent that could be adapted to fit their local context. Yet it is primarily their exhibition practices that “defined a form of ideological critique that concentrated on the disruptive potential of process, ephemerality, instability and visual frustration against the period’s exhibitionary commonplace of stasis, solidity, sanity and visual primacy.”<sup>53</sup> It is an ironic twist of fate that the Immobilia building where the Art and Liberty Group was to host its first two group exhibitions of 1940 and 1941 was erected on the lot where the villa of the horse-trainer of Khedive Ismail, a Frenchman by the name of Gaston de Saint-Maurice,<sup>54</sup> once stood. Gaston was fascinated with all sorts of oriental displays and amassed a considerable collection of Islamic art, which he then sold to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where it remains to this day. The logic of the world as exhibition and the display of power through ordered visual structures long exemplified in these museum collections which aimed at ordering the external world were finally being challenged on the same spot where it all first began. What wonderful things indeed...



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NOTES

1. All translations from Arabic and French are by the author unless otherwise noted.
2. List of Publications by the Art and Liberty Group: *The Art and Liberty Bulletin*, 2 issues, March 1939 and May 1939; *Don Quichotte*, 6 issues, 1939-1940; *Al-Tatawwur* (Evolution), 7 issues from January 1940 to September 1940; *La Part du Sable*, 4 issues, 1947, 1950, 1954, and 1955.
3. Avinoam SHALEM, "Exceeding Realism: Utopian Art on the Nile and Abdel Hadi al-Gazzar's Surrealistic Drawings," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 109, no. 3, 2010, p. 577-594.
4. Samir GHARIB, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, Cairo: Foreign Cultural Information Department, 1986.
5. Nadav SAFRAN, *Egypt in Search of Political Community: An Analysis of the Intellectual and Political Evolution of Egypt, 1804-1952*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961, p. 165-180.
6. Abdel Kader AL-JANABI, "The Nile of Surrealism: Surrealist Activities in Egypt," *Egyptian Surrealism*, September 26, 1987, p. 14. URL: [www.egyptiansurrealism.com/files/the-nile-of-surrealism.pdf](http://www.egyptiansurrealism.com/files/the-nile-of-surrealism.pdf) (viewed February 13, 2016).
7. Don LACOSS, "Egyptian Surrealism and Degenerate Art in 1939," *The Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2010, p. 78-118.
8. A probable reason behind referring to the Art and Liberty Group as the Degenerate Art Group may be linked to the title of a manifesto, *Long Live Degenerate Art*, that several members of the Group, which was yet to be founded on January 19 of the following year, had published on December 22, 1938. The tract was circulated internationally after being signed by forty mostly Egyptian artists and thinkers residing in Cairo.
9. Howard CARTER and A. C. MACE, *The Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamen*, New York: Dover Publications, 1977, p. 95-96.
10. Elliott COLLA, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007.
11. Lynn E. PALERMO, "L'Exposition Anticoloniale: Political or Aesthetic Protest?" *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2009, p. 27-46, here p. 30.
12. *Ibid.* (note 9), p. 30.
13. Adam JOLLES, "The Tactile Turn: Envisioning a Postcolonial Aesthetic in France," *Yale French Studies*, no. 109, 2006, p. 17-38, here p. 21-23.
14. Susan Rubin SULEIMAN, "Between the Street and the Salon: The Dilemma of Surrealist Politics in the 1930's," *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1991, p. 39-50, here p. 47.
15. Elena FILIPOVIC, "Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War," in Raymond SPITERI and Donald LACOSS (eds.), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003, p. 179-204, here p. 180.
16. Janine MILEAF, "Body to Politics: Surrealist Exhibition of the Tribal and the Modern at the Anti-Imperialist Exhibition and the Galerie Charles Ratton," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 40, 2001, p. 239-255.
17. Sophie LECLERCQ, "The Surrealist Appropriation of the Indigenous Arts," *Arts and Societies*, November 23, 2006. URL: [www.artsetsocieties.org/a/a-leclercq.html](http://www.artsetsocieties.org/a/a-leclercq.html) (viewed February 13, 2016).
18. Krzysztof POMIAN, lecture for Pascal Ory's seminar on "The Cultural Memory of the Contemporary Era," École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris, February 17, 2003.
19. Calvin TOMKINS, *Duchamp: A Biography*, New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1998, p. 313-314.
20. Saranne ALEXANDRIAN, *Georges Henein (Poètes d'aujourd'hui)*, Paris: Seghers, 1981, p. 67.

21. Georges HENEIN, *Lettres : Georges Henein - Henri Calet (Grandes Largeurs)*, Paris: Association Henri Calet, 1981, p. 11-12.
22. In *Les Humbles* Georges Henein published "Le Chant des violents" (June 1935), "Vive la Catalogne" and "Si on ne le pend pas" (December 1936), and "Projet d'un monument international" (November 1937).
23. Saranne ALEXANDRIAN, *Georges Henein (Poètes d'aujourd'hui)*, *op. cit.* (note 20), p. 17.
24. Herbert READ, *Surrealism*, London: Faber and Faber, 1936.
25. Georges HENEIN, *Lettres : Georges Henein - Henri Calet (Grandes Largeurs)*, *op. cit.* (note 21), "Lettre 14," p. 26-27.
26. The five exhibitions of the Art and Liberty Group from 1940 to 1945 took place at The Nile Club, Soliman Pasha (now Talaat Harb) Square, February 8-24, 1940; Immobilia Building, Cherif Street (previously Al-Madabegh Street), March 10-25, 1941; Hotel Continental, Downtown Cairo, May 21-30, 1942; and Lycée Français, Youssef el-Guindy, May 12-22, 1944, and May 30-June 9, 1945.
27. Samir GHARIB, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 14.
28. Marie CAVADIA, "La 2<sup>e</sup> Exposition de L'Art Indépendant," *Revue Images*, March 18, 1941, p. 16.
29. "L'Agonie d'un art," *La Bourse égyptienne*, March 25, 1941, p. 25.
30. Brook SPENCER, "The Tortuous Maze," *The Egyptian Gazette*, March 30, 1941, p. 28.
31. "The Tortuous Maze," *The Egyptian Gazette*, March 29, 1941, p. 21; "The Tortuous Maze," *The Egyptian Gazette*, April 2, 1941, p. 24.
32. The three articles all appeared under the same title, "The Tortuous Maze," in *The Egyptian Gazette* of March 29, March 30, and April 2, 1941.
33. Jean BASTIA, "L'Exposition de l'art indépendant," *Le Journal d'Égypte*, 1941, p. 21.
34. Samir GHARIB, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 14.
35. Marie CAVADIA, "La 2<sup>e</sup> Exposition de L'Art Indépendant," *Revue Images*, March 18, 1941, p. 16.
36. Sam KANTOROWITS, "Sur la cimaise : chez les indépendants," *L'Égypte nouvelle*, March 18, 1941.
37. *Ibid.* (note 23), p. 20.
38. Samir GHARIB, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 11.
39. *Ibid.* (note 21), p. 12.
40. Sam KANTOROWITS, "Sur la cimaise : chez les indépendants," *op. cit.* (note 36), p. 20.
41. Samir GHARIB, *Surrealism in Egypt and Plastic Arts*, *op. cit.* (note 4), p. 14.
42. See Zeynep CELIK, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.
43. Timothy MITCHELL, "The World as Exhibition," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1989, p. 217-236.
44. Rifa'a AL-TAHTAWI, *Al-A'mal al-Kamila*, Beirut: Al-Mu'assasa al-Arabiyya lil-Dirasat wal Nashr, 1973, p. 76.
45. Donald Malcolm REID, *Whose Pharaohs? Archeology, Museum, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2002.
46. "The Secretary of the Society of Fine Arts speaks to us about the Idea behind the Organization of Art Exhibitions," *Al-Musawwar*, no. 177, 1988, p. 10.
47. "The Inauguration of the Annual Egyptian Exhibition," *Al-Musawwar*, no. 168, 1927, p. 14.
48. Kamel EL-TELMISSANY, "Towards a Free Art" and "Al-Insaniyyah wal Fann al-Hadith," in Hisham 'OSHTA (ed.), *Al-Kitabah al-Oukhrah*, Cairo: Al-Kitaba al-Okhra Publishing, 1999, p. 34.
49. *Ibid.* (note 44), p. 38.
50. Georges HENEIN, *Lettres : Georges Henein - Henri Calet (Grandes Largeurs)*, *op. cit.* (note 21), p. 27.
51. "L'Agonie d'un art," *op. cit.* (note 29), p. 26.
52. Kamel EL-TELMISSANY, "Towards a Free Art" and "Al-Insaniyyah wal Fann al-Hadith," *op. cit.* (note 48), p. 47.

53. Elena FILIPOVIC, "Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War," *op. cit.* (note 15), p. 181.  
54. See Mercedes VOLAIT, *Fous du Caire*, Paris: L'Archange Minotaure, 2009.
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