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New Middle Eastern Studies

Publication details, including guidelines for submissions:

<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/>

Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring

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To cite this article: Demerdash, Nancy, Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art, and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring. *New Middle Eastern Studies*, 2 (2012), <<http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/970>>.

To link to this article: <http://www.brismes.ac.uk/nmes/archives/970>

Online Publication Date: 3 December 2012

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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN QUICK STUDIES

Consuming Revolution: Ethics, Art, and Ambivalence in the Arab Spring

NANCY DEMERDASH*

Introduction

The scenes from the momentous spring of 2011 are all too familiar to us now: masses of people crowding the streets of downtown metropolises, holding up signs, waving their flags, proudly marking what is theirs—their nation—and what deserves to be theirs—a civil democracy. These reclamations have been appropriately dubbed by many in the Arabic press as “dignity revolutions.”¹ With the help of virtual public blogospheres and social networking behemoths like Facebook, the loftiest of socio-political ideals were reignited, mobilizing millions, sparking an unprecedented techno-boom of civic engagement. At the same time, some of the highest turnout protests occurred during periods of state-issued internet and telephone blackouts, which means that the social organization and scale of these protests cannot be solely attributed to technological platforms.² In Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, dictatorial and authoritarian regimes that were steeped in corruption, kleptocracy, and scandal eventually toppled at the hands, and lives, of the thousands who demonstrated against such misrule. Apart from the obvious desires for democratic governance and improved living conditions and infrastructures, accountability is a prime underlying motivator propelling this continuing struggle. Across the region, varying groups, communities, and activist organizations have grown weary of empty promises of accountability, justice, and human dignity: trials for the former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak have been placed on the backburner; former Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, though sentenced with 35

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¹ Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, “A Minute with Middle East Experts Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera,” February 25, 2011, <http://illinois.edu/lb/article/72/48698>: “I think this revolution would have been impossible—although this is a broad-based revolution, it’s not a youth movement alone—without the change of consciousness and political behavior of a whole generation of young people... the virtual space was being used as a public square for deliberative democracy. And during the revolution we witnessed the transference of certain behaviors and ethical codes from the virtual square to the physical space of Tahrir Square, which became the symbol of non-violent revolution, freedom, and the extraordinary power of the people.”

² In a lecture delivered at the American University in Cairo, entitled “Old Media, New Futures: Fanonian Reflections on Arab Uprisings,” Professor Michael Allan of the University of Oregon-Eugene rightly scrutinized the media’s constant refrain on the novelty and mythologizing of social networking systems. This fails to give due credit to the actors involved and the organizational abilities of the public during the blackouts in Egypt, when some of the largest demonstrations happened.



Figure 1: Ahl al-Kahf, Stenciled image of Farhat Hached, Tunis, Tunisia (2011)

years in prison for embezzlement and money laundering,³ immediately fled to Saudi Arabia and has not yet begun his sentence; in Libya, armed militias are still actively hunting down former Gaddafi loyalists, who are then placed in independent prisons; and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, in spite of the humanitarian and diplomatic interventions of the United Nations, unrelentingly grips onto his dictatorial throne, engaging in a gruesome and horrific war with his own civilian populace.

It is true that the spirit of nationalistic reclamation and democratic fervor we have witnessed in the popularly dubbed “Arab Spring” (a nod to the unsuccessful 1968 Czech uprising against the communist regime of the Soviets)⁴ has yet to translate into constitutional or economic reforms, and affect the everyday lives of these citizens. The road to recover some degree of economic prosperity in the region has been rocky, not unlike the economic crises that imperil Europe and the United States. Optimists suspect that such democratic transitions could bring fiscal stability to a region whose economic conditions have been blighted by the global recession and in some instances exacerbated by the uprisings themselves (resulting in high unemployment and exorbitant food prices).⁵ Despite the initial promise of revolution, exuberance has waned to exasperation through much of the Middle East and North Africa.

³ Hamadi Redissi, “The Revolution Is Not Over Yet,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com>.

⁴ Niall Ferguson, “The Revolution Blows Up,” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/2011/06/05/egypt-the-revolution-blows-up.html>. See also Niall Ferguson, “The Mash of Civilizations,” *Newsweek*, April 10, 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/2011/04/10/the-mash-of-civilizations.html>.

⁵ “Revolution Spinning in the Wind,” *The Economist*, July 14, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/18958237>.



Figure 2: Ahl al-Kahf, Stenciled image of Mohamed Bouazizi, Tunis, Tunisia (2011)

But for many people in the Middle East—especially artists and writers—the revolution is an unfinished, unrealized, and ongoing project, fueling their art and praxis. In spite of these challenging economic and political transitions, cultural production boomed in the immediate wake of the revolutions and continues to do so, ranging from an outpouring of political cartoons, to hip-hop and rap, to graffiti and mural arts. Though these multifarious forms and outlets of creative expression certainly have their antecedents within the region,⁶ their novelty stems from this resistance, rendering a coherent concept of ‘popular culture’ unfixed. ‘Revolution’—the Arabic *al-thawra*—has come to signify an epistemological shift in the way that the workings of the world are perceived and understood. My paper here addresses questions of revolution and the dissonances between local and global reception and consumption of recent artistic production in the Middle East. As the events of 2010-2011 continue to unravel, understanding Middle Eastern artists’ undergirding political commitment⁷—and the formal ways in which their praxes

⁶ For a literature on this, see Wijdan ‘Ali, “Modern Arab Art: An Overview,” in *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, ed. Salwa Mikdad Nashsashibi (Washington DC: The International Council for Women in the Arts and the National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), 72-116; Silvia Naef, *A la recherche d’une modernité arabe: L’évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Irak* (Geneva: Slatkine Editions 1996); Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007).

⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* (London: New York: Continuum, 2004), see “The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill,” 60. “It is an in-between notion that is vacuous as an aesthetic notion and also as a political notion. It can be said that an artist is committed as a person, and possibly that he is committed by his writings, his paintings, his films, which contribute to a certain type of political struggle. An artist can be committed but was does it mean to say that his art is committed?”



Figure 3: INSIDE OUT, Porte de France, Tunis, Tunisia (2011)

convey this communal, collective sense of a shared fate. And in a region where autocratically enforced censorship laws still clamp down on creative expression, how is this renewed collective consciousness channeling artistic will under a newly emerging cultural policy paradigm?⁸

What connections can be drawn between the spirit of revolt that has swept the region, and revolutionary aspects of contemporary Arab art praxis? How does the persistence of certain themes and motifs in contemporary art praxis (e.g. war, memory, exile, home, archive, etc.) inform our own responses to the Arab Spring, and how does this persistence comply with or fall into the constraints of a certain art

Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or meta-politics.”

⁸ Sonali Pahwa and Jessica Winegar, “Culture, State, and Revolution,” in *Middle East Report* Issue 263, *The Art and Culture of the Arab Revolts* (Spring 2012). Authors Pahwa and Winegar note that in the aftermath of the revolution, some politicians sought to dismantle the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. There are now ongoing new proposals for reworking the existing cultural policy paradigm, see also “Proposal for a General Framework for a New Cultural Policy in Egypt” submitted to the People’s Assembly Culture, Media, and Tourism Committee, by the National Cultural Policy Group (March 19, 2012), in *Al-Mawrid al-Thaqāfi* (*Cultural Resource*). The general principles forming the foundation of this proposal are adopted from UNESCO’s universalizing, secularist definition of culture “as the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society of a social group. It encompasses not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs... It is culture that gives man the ability to reflect upon himself. It is culture that makes us specifically human, rational beings, endowed with a critical judgment and a sense of moral commitment. It is through culture that we discern values and make choices. It is through culture that man expresses himself, becomes aware of himself, recognizes his incompleteness, questions his own achievements, seeks untiringly for new meanings and creates works through which he transcends his limitations.”



Figure 4: INSIDE OUT, Former RCD Building, Sfax, Tunisia (2011)

market niche?⁹ For whom are these works primarily produced, and what is the nature of this consumption? And finally, can contemporary art praxes in the Arab world, in all their varied forms, be deemed ‘revolutionary’? At the crux of this paper, are the very dialectic conditions of consumption, prompted between its artistic producers and audience receivers.¹⁰ Understanding the revolutionary call to arms that motivates much of artistic praxis in the Middle East today will enable us to comprehend larger cultural currents and the multiple and rapidly changing (and often conflicting) public spheres¹¹ in the region.

⁹ Sussan Babaie, “Voices of Authority: Locating the ‘Modern’ in ‘Islamic’ Arts,” *Getty Research Journal*, no. 3 (2011): 133-149; 136. “...there seems to be an insatiable market demand for utilizing what are basically ethnocultural identity markers, often reduced to universalized symbols and geopolitically articulated concepts: calligraphy standing for Islam, motifs from ancient civilizations of the Middle East and figures of modern history for secular nationalism, or the veil for essentialized cultural views towards women, gendered experiences and the body. My concern here then is also the double standard applied to the contemporary arts of and out of the Middle East in that they remain tied to its regional geopolitics while contemporary art as a phenomenon has prided itself on transcending the politics of the locale.”

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, Translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990 [1867]), “Chapter 1, Part (4) The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret.” “...the commodity-form, and the value-relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [*dinglich*] relations arising out of this. It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things... To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things.”

¹¹ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989). The term ‘public sphere’ here denotes a community that arises when



Figure 5: Mural of Martyr Muhammad Sary, Muhammad Mahmoud Street, Cairo (September 2012), Photograph by the Author

To grasp how these artists and their works are received by different audiences, and in some cases constructing and creating new publics, I will attend to two scenes of this artistic consumption: graffiti mural arts in the streets, and “fine” art in the exhibition spaces of galleries, museums, and biennials. The first part of my paper will introduce a sampling of street artists and their performative formal strategies, whereas the latter sections will be dedicated to an analysis of how the notion of revolution is being commodified by art markets, galleries, and to perhaps a lesser degree in the framings of recent art biennials, namely the Venice Biennale and Sharjah Biennial of 2011. Together, these analyses might enable us to envision the double roles of dissidence¹² and compli-

individuals reason and discuss collectively about their common interests. The function of such a sphere is to restrain and legitimate the political power exercised by the administrative state. The term ‘bourgeois public sphere’ emerged amidst the social and economic changes of liberal capitalism, and it refers to those sociocultural institutions that came about in the mid- to late eighteenth century in opposition to the absolutist powers of the state (e.g. private clubs and coffeehouses, learned societies and literary associations, publishers, newspapers, etc.). Taken as a whole these institutions constituted a ‘public realm of reasoning private persons’ that was partially secured through the enactment of various constitutional rights and liberties.

¹² Miriam Cooke, *Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).



Figure 6: Alaa Awad and Ammar Abu-Bakr, Mural on Muhammad Mahmoud Street, Cairo (September 2012), Photograph by the Author

ance in the creation of a revolutionary aesthetics, both of which occupy ambivalent positions. Just as these emergent aesthetic strategies operate as active political agents in shifting relations of power, they too are being consumed and commodified by art markets in the West and the Middle East alike. Institutions across the world are problematically couching these cultural phenomena within discourses of authenticity (*asāla* or *turāth*)¹³ on the basis of their ethnographic “otherness.” The resonances and operations of *al-thawra* in street art contrast greatly to those in the art world, whereby revolution risks being reduced to a potent, but ultimately transparent and consumable trope. Curators of arts from the region bear an incredible onus, needing to carefully mediate between the local understandings of any given piece and global expectations mapped on to it.¹⁴

Amidst all of this societal upheaval and very trying economic times, issues of cultural production seem to be at the bottom of the interim governments’ priority lists. Inasmuch as military tanks, machine guns, tear gas and torture are the primary tactics of control, the entity of the state—regardless of country specificity—has enforced other tactics of erasure, censorship, and collective forgetting. The ironclad grip of many countries’ centralized ministries of culture (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, etc.), with their dogmatic state ideologies, continues to obstruct free cultural

¹³ Kirsten Scheid, “The Agency of Art and the Study of Arab Modernity,” *MIT-Electronic Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 7 (Spring 2007).

¹⁴ Professor Nada Shabout has been spearheading many conferences and panels addressing this issue, namely roundtable organized by Nada Shabout and Ella Shohat, entitled “Exhibiting the ‘Orient’ in the Age of Globalization,” at the Middle East Studies Association meeting in 2006, or the panel at the Robert Schuman Centre in 2006 entitled, “From Local to Global: Visual Arts in the Eastern Mediterranean between International Markets and Local Expectations.”



Figure 7: Nermine Hammam, *Uppekha*, printed on fine art pearl archival paper (2011), Part 1

expression.¹⁵ Though it is precisely at such moments when a populace begins to actively reconsider, remember and record their histories—their origin stories and their future self-definitions.

Graffiti, Memory and the ‘Political Street’: The Production and Reclamation of Public Space

Artists across the region are also taking their craft to the street, the very locus of resistance. Of course, there is a long and sustained tradition of graffiti and mural arts in the Middle East, mainly in Palestine and the Occupied Territories.¹⁶ But since the revolutions, these public art forms have exploded in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and to a far lesser degree in Syria.¹⁷ Recognizing the Lefebvrian social and political production of urban space and its constant reconfigurations,¹⁸ artists

¹⁵ In Egypt, President Gamal Abdel Nasser oversaw the formation of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1958, which was essentially preoccupied with defining arts and cultural patrimony along nationalist lines. As Liliane Karnouk has argued in her book *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003* (Cairo; New York: the American University in Cairo Press, 2005), Nasser’s institutionalization of culture tended to limit artistic freedoms and creativity in Egypt, and instead strengthened an overpowering state art bureaucracy that promoted stagnant art education.

¹⁶ See the very compelling and sensitive compilation of imagery and text in William Parry, *Against the Wall: the Art of Resistance in Palestine* (Cairo; New York: the American University in Cairo Press, 2010). See also Mia Grödhall, *Gaza Graffiti: Messages of Love and Politics* (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Public arts projects in Syria have been minimal, but one notable instance was the red dye placed by Syrian arts activists in Damascus public fountains to protest the bloodshed and violence of Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gc_cE_EfJww.

¹⁸ See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), chapter 1. See also Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 1-29, 91-130. Modernity stems from displacements in everyday experience. Space is produced and reproduced through social interactions, relationships, and negotiations. Space, to Lefebvre, is not a neutral container for economic produc-

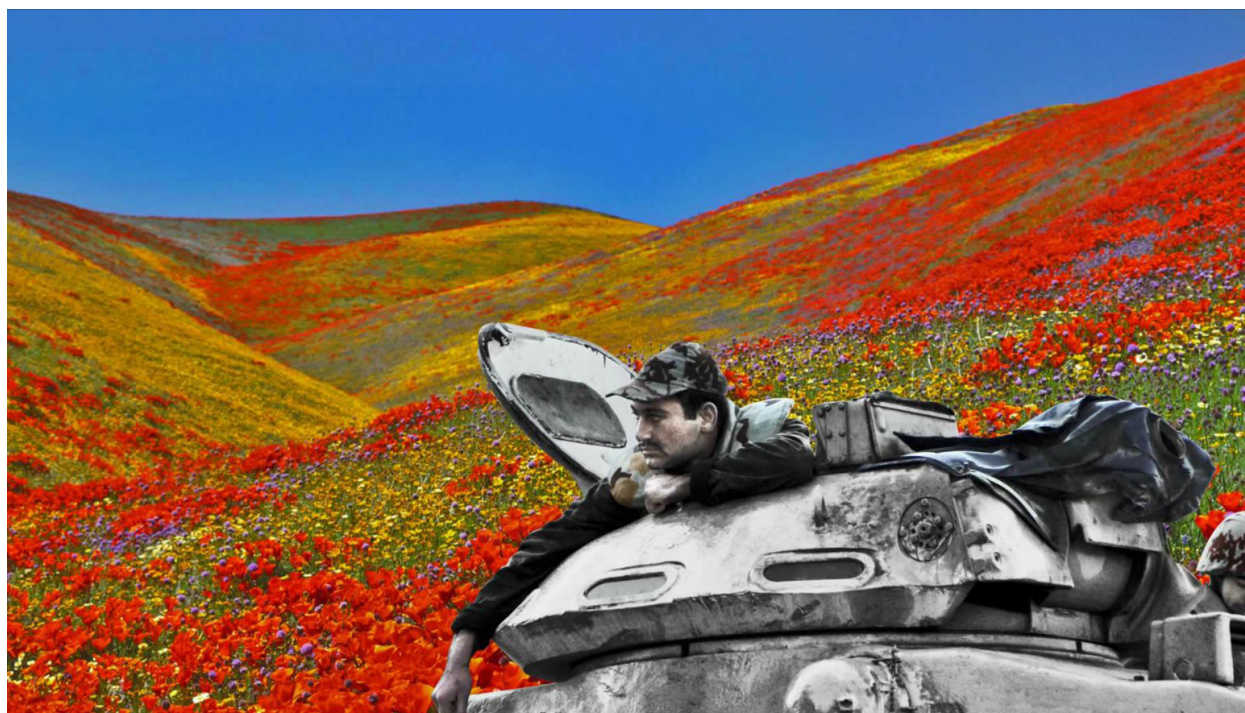


Figure 7: Nermine Hammam, Uppekha, printed on fine art pearl archival paper, Part 2

identify with the urban marginals who continually negotiate their integration with and contestations to the disintegrating systems of state and bureaucratic power.¹⁹ Meaning, for these urban artists and everyday locals alike, is constituted from lived experiences within the spaces of revolution. Street artists have come to inscribe on public walls past memories and memorials to those struggles and lives lost in the revolutions. But for the general public, the spaces on these walls have acquired profound collective and personal meaning. Murals and graffiti panels embody concrete memories for passersby and neighborhood locals; people gather around the walls, engaging in discussions of what should be represented and how a particular piece moves them or invokes a certain memory.²⁰ These art forms have transformed public spaces and streets into what Asef

tion. It is fundamentally the site of political struggle and economic competition. This analysis holds for the contested urban spaces of the Arab Spring. De Certeau calls our attention to the oppositional practices of everyday life, played out by marginalized, but pivotal actors. See Michel De Certeau, Fredric Jameson and Carl Lovitt, "On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life," *Social Text*, no. 3 (Autumn 1980), 3-43; 5-6. "An initial approach to the understanding of the oppositional practices of everyday life may be made through the distinction between strategy and tactics. I call strategy the calculus (or the manipulation) of relations of force which becomes possible whenever a subject of will and power (a business enterprise, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated... I call tactics the calculated action which is determined by the absence of a proper place."

¹⁹ See Asef Bayat, "The Quiet Encroachment of the Ordinary," in *Tamass 2: Contemporary Arab Representations* (Barcelona, Spain: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 2004), 44.

²⁰ Recently, when the murals on Muhammad Mahmoud Street near Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo were suddenly whitewashed one night, people were outraged, speaking as though they had lost a personal, physical possession. I spoke to many Cairenes that day about the occurrence. There was and still is a deep sense of ownership over these murals, for they have come to signify public memorials and mournings. The memory of them, though covered in paint and plaster, lives on. It is indeed a rich palimpsest through which Egyptians are, at once, remembering the martyrs of the revolution, and reclaiming and rewriting their own historical narrative. See Merrit Kennedy's "A Whitewashed Wall Erases Egypt's Revolution," *NPR*, October 6, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/06/162415964/graffiti->



Figure 8: Zakaria Ramhani, *You Were My Only Love*, oil on canvas (2012)

Bayat terms the “political street,” signifying “the collective sensibilities, shared feelings, and public judgment of ordinary people in their day-to-day utterances and practices... The Arab Street... should be seen in terms of such expression of collective sentiments in the Arab public sphere.”²¹

In Tunisia, a group of underground art students, self-titled “Ahl al-Kahf,” or “People of the Cave,” have taken their artistic skills to the streets and public spaces. Through graffiti activism, these youth work at night, employing a hybrid blend of media—paints, stencils, collages, etc.—to provide political commentary. “Don’t fall in love with power,” reads one caption next to a stenciled portrait of Tunisian Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi. Figures like Farhat Hached (Figure 1) who are associated with the nationalist movement and decolonization are honored (the text next to his portrait reads “I love you, people”), as are martyrs of the Jasmine Revolution, such as Mohamed Bouazizi, the young fruitseller who literally ignited the Arab Spring through self-immolation (Figure 2).²² Ahl al-Kahf also calls attention through their stencils to the realities of Foucauldian governmentality—whereby brutalities are afflicted so as to oppress the public; here we see representations of common occurrences of police beatings. An Algerian artist who goes by the name of “Zoo

[recalls-revolution-in-tahrir-square-for-now](#); Claire Talon’s “Cairo’s Superficial Clean-Up Brings Graffiti Artists Out in Force,” *The Guardian* October 9, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/09/cairo-graffiti-egypt-morsi>.

²¹ Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Cairo: New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), 212.

²² “Graffiti Artists Show Their Support for the Tunisian Revolution,” *The Observers*, June 6, 2011, <http://observers.france24.com/content/20110606-graffiti-artists-show-support-tunisian-revolution>.

Project” has similarly commemorated those who fought against the despotic regimes of the Middle East.²³ Operating out of Tunisia, Zoo Project pays tribute to the people’s solidarity and sacrifice by posting life-size cut-outs, which almost seem to have emerged out of a graphic novel. In Libya as well, imagery denouncing the cruelties of Gaddafi’s regime overwhelm public spaces and streets.²⁴

More recently, the global art project “INSIDE OUT” has expanded their artistic ventures in Tunisia. Entitled “Artocracy in Tunisia,” this project by INSIDE OUT features the portraits of hundreds of ordinary Tunisians posted in public spaces, walls, and billboards, replacing the images of former presidents. This project posits new methods of inscribing the voices of citizens in the public forum (Figures 3 and 4). Yet the interim government has actively torn down such posters; in La Goulette, a suburb north of Tunis, the collective’s projects were demolished.²⁵

In addition to street graffiti, signage is and was an important visual actor in the revolutions; subversive texts on posters, slogans of dissent, and signs of scathing critique held by the Tahrir demonstrators in the heat of the Egyptian revolution resonate in public memory.²⁶ That posters, banners, graffiti and other forms of visual media have worked to build community and solidarity is without question. Thought-provoking defacement combined with compelling visuals and gripping text provide, perhaps, the ideal medium of public dissent. On the exteriors of buildings lining Tahrir Square and Muhammad Mahmoud Street in downtown Cairo, street artists have painted murals depicting wounded demonstrators, activists, politicians and revolutionary martyrs adorned with angel wings in order to commemorate their struggle (Figure 5). Street artist Mohammed Fahmy, whose alias name is Ganzeer, has been detained by the interim military regime for his murals; he states, “I chose graffiti over other types of artistic expression because there was a need for alternative media... street art is the only way we can tell our story.”²⁷ Murals enable the articulation of rebellion and resistance in multiple artistic vocabularies; muralists Alaa Awad and Ammar Abu-Bakr (Figure 6) have created composite visual forms and stylistic techniques, employing vocabularies drawn from medieval Islamic calligraphy, Pharaonic temple paintings, and contemporary art, particularly in their ‘Buraq’ series on Muhammad Mahmoud Street (which has since been whitewashed).²⁸ Recently, however, much like the IN-

²³ “Tunisia Murals by Zoo Project,” *The Guardian*, May 20, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/gallery/2011/may/20/tunisia-murals-zoo-project-in-pictures>.

²⁴ Soumiea Abushagur, *The Art of Uprising: the Libyan Revolution in Graffiti* (2011), preface. “All the spray-painted type of graffiti was being painted over during my two week stay and being replaced by meticulously detailed street art. Every day, I saw new paintings popping up all over Tripoli. It became apparent that the Libyan people’s new found freedom was being expressed where everyone could see and share it. No need for an art gallery exhibit when all the walls along the streets in Tripoli were beckoning. Artists were seen all over the city, working for days at a time to produce each painting. For the first time in forty-one years, artists were proudly signing their names with no fear of retribution.”

²⁵ Yasmine Ryan, “Art Challenges Tunisian Revolutionaries,” *AlJazeera*, March 26, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/03/201132223217876176.html>.

²⁶ Karima Khalil, *Messages from Tahrir: Signs from Egypt’s Revolution* (Cairo, Egypt: American University of Cairo Press, 2011). Speaking of her book, Khalil states, “I felt the images had to represent the range of emotions I saw in Tahrir: mourning, rage, anger, determination, pride, sarcasm, steadfastness, good humor and satire, and ultimately, celebration as well as caution...” See Abdel-Rahman Hussein, “Messages from Tahrir, Revolutionary Photography,” in *Egypt Independent*, June 8, 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/messages-tahrir-revolutionary-photography>.

²⁷ Murtaza Hussain, “Painting over History in Tahrir Square,” *Al-Jazeera*, May 30, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/201252784914722422.html>.

²⁸ Mona Abaza, “The Buraqs of ‘Tahrir,’” *Jadaliyya*, May 27, 2012, <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/5725/the-buraqs-of-tahrir>.

SIDE OUT project in Tunisia, the Egyptian military has come to whitewash these walls. The American University in Cairo has started a documentation project to combat the institutionalization of forgetting, with the “University on the Square” Archive Project, an online database of visual and textual imagery from the revolution.²⁹ However, even with many new governments in place, erasure and coerced forgetting remain the tactics of residual, dictatorial governmentality.

Renewed Cosmopolitanism: Site, Justice, and Testimonial in the Gallery Space

Themes of attestation and witnessing drive much of the work of artists responding to the revolutions of the Arab Spring. For many, their mode of creative expression is not limited to the pictorial, but rather fuses a range of media including photography, installation and performance. The haptic qualities of materiality are major tools for artists as they engage the viewer and instill a sense of empathy. Hamid Dabashi argues that the revolutions have brought about a desire for a “cosmopolitan worldliness”—the restitution of accountability and the recognition of a global conception of justice.³⁰ One nevertheless wonders how art produced in the wake of revolution can be displayed in a manner that remains true to and connected with its underlying aspirational cosmopolitanism, in spite of market-driven values.

Ashraf Foda, a Saudi artist of Egyptian origin, incorporates artifacts of the revolution into his installation pieces, namely stones thrown by Egyptian military and police forces at Tahrir Square protesters. Reedah El-Saie, a gallerist in the Modern Islamic and Contemporary Art Gallery in London, who also represents Foda’s works, indicates that art scenes now possess “...an appetite to understand the context of the uprisings.”³¹

The documentary, eye-witness account adds a layer of veracity to these artists’ productions. Art, for them, is the agent of their testimonial, their very conduit for foregrounding their criticisms of long-standing stagnation and injustice. Nermine Hammam, an Egyptian photographer and film artist based in Cairo, employs photomontage in her series *Uppekha* (2011), grafting cut-outs of photographs of Egyptian police and military officers onto bucolic, bursting Technicolor landscapes (Figure 7). Artists that were perhaps formerly eschewed or dismissed for works deemed too politically motivated or transparent are now be-

²⁹ See “University on the Square: Documenting Egypt’s Twenty-first-century Revolution,” <http://www.aucegypt.edu/OnTheSquare/Pages/About.aspx>. Another project to archive the revolution is underway by the “AUC Student Pilot Project: Wiki Biographical Dictionary of the Revolution.” It is an effort to record popular memory of the revolution, with its attendant flux and constant contestations. AUC Professor Khaled Fahmy, the Mosireen Collective, and Emad Abou Ghazi discussed in a panel entitled “Archiving the Revolution,” at AUC on September 24, 2012, the weighty task of archiving such a series of events. Even simple questions, like, “what is (was) the revolution?” or “when did it begin?” are hard to answer.

³⁰ Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2012), 115. “Cosmopolitan worldliness becomes evident in the literary, visual, and performing arts. Art makes it possible for us to see and to make visible the pre-ontological disposition of this worldliness, for here the fields of ideology semiotically self-destruct as soon as we start looking at them aesthetically. The intent of this theoretical position is to expose and decipher the palimpsestic map and read what is behind the overwritten cartography of ‘the West and the Rest.’ ... What I believe is happening in countries from Iran to Egypt and Tunisia to Morocco, predicated on ‘the end of Islamic ideology,’ is the retrieval of their organic cosmopolitan culture, at once local and global in terms specific to their historical experiences. The uprisings are geared towards the restitution of this cosmopolitan worldliness.” Dabashi explains this as a Kantian cosmopolitanism based on a moral conception of justice.

³¹ David Batty, “Arab Artists Flourishing as Uprisings Embolden a Generation,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2012/jan/18/arab-artists-spring-global-exhibitions#>.

ing sought after in the art market. Contemporary collectors are interested in artists' engagement with the notion of a revolutionary site as a place of negotiation and political struggle.

By re-presenting documentary imagery of revolutionary sites, artists seek to re-inscribe a certain legibility or authenticity to these events, while still infusing iconic images with renewed criticality. In his work *You Were My Only Love* (2012), Moroccan painter Zakaria Ramhani recreates the now famous scene of a young, demonstrating Egyptian woman being beaten and stripped by brutal riot police (Figure 8). Gorilla faces replace those of the oppressors, and Ramhani includes the awkward, body-less bystander of Van Gogh. Through this graphic rendering of one of the most horrific and memorable photographs of the Arab Spring, Ramhani reframes our understanding of violence as one which is predominantly male, unjust, and alpha. The works of Foda, Hammam, or Ramhani are indeed sensitive to the trauma and unfinished contestations of the revolutions; they are undoubtedly visual testimonials to the type of "cosmopolitan worldliness" and just morality that Dabashi speaks to.

However, what happens when a gallery commissions this revolutionary art and cosmopolitan aesthetic? What does that mean for the artists, curators, and viewers involved—is any given work still deemed "revolution"-inspired, or is it contrived? How does the demand for a historically and contextually specific sub-genre of art quickly become a commodity in a culture industry of revolution? In a rather provocative and controversial exhibition entitled "This is Not Graffiti" shown at Cairo's exclusive Townhouse Gallery in September-October 2011, nine popular street artists (including Charles Akl, Adham Bakry, Sad Panda, Dokhan, Amr Gamal, Keizer, Hany Khaled, and Hend Kheera) were commissioned to come to the gallery and paint on the walls of the gallery space. The show received mixed reviews, with many negatively noting the classist paradox of the exhibit; the gallery space itself necessarily excludes the audience the very medium of street art is thought to address.³²

Institutions, the Art Market and a Commodified Revolution

Yet how do we reconcile these different public modes and forms of artistic expression with the more private, corporate backdrop of museums, institutions, biennials and galleries? Without a doubt, contemporary artistic praxis in the Arab world has flourished within the last decade, in part due to renewed investment and capitalistic ventures. How will contemporary Arab art (re)define itself in light of these events? What shape will the patterns of collecting and buying take—for museums, galleries, patrons and donors? Though contemporary art of the region has gained more disciplinary attention since 9/11 and to an even greater degree since the revolutions, too frequently the focus is on formal analyses of art works and less on the institutions (their various political agendas) and the actual patterns of patronage and practices of production.

Even before the revolutions of 2011, art markets in the Middle East exploded. In the Gulf region alone, the opening of auction house branches like Bonham's, Christie's (March 2005), and Sotheby's in Dubai (their first sale of Modern & Contemporary Arab Art was held in London, October 2007), or Abu Dhabi branches of the Guggenheim or Louvre (the former, designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry and opening in 2013, and the latter designed by Jean Nouvel, due to open in 2012), attests to not only a growing demand for works produced by Arab artists, but points to the globalized spread and brand-name appeal of these institutions. Venetia Porter, the curator of Islamic and contemporary Middle Eastern art at the British Museum, states that artists' works from

³² Sarah Sheffer, "This is not graffiti," *Bikyamasr* September 19, 2011, <http://www.bikyamasr.com/42775/this-is-not-graffiti/>.

the region are appreciating in value, and that both the British Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum are actively in hot pursuit to expand their contemporary collections; she explains, “the Arab Spring is feeding into that interest.”³³ But other sites of interest and investment in contemporary Arab art have emerged in the last few years, such as the establishment of Mathaf in Doha, Qatar (which opened in December 2010 and was designed by architect Jean-Francois Bodin),³⁴ or the Kuwait City Museum of Modern Art. In a region which was formerly bereft of venues or institutions to support the arts, these additions not only promote the further development of a specific market and the cultivation of a clientele that will support this market. What all of these institutions have in common is a commitment to presenting a narrative of contemporary art that emphasizes its intrinsically transnational and cosmopolitan character.³⁵ That is not to say that these conglomerates are benign entities of neutrality. Even the most empathetic or geopolitically conscious of museums and cultural institutions remain painfully apolitical for a variety of economic, market-based interests.³⁶

Hamid Dabashi points to the isolation and disinterestedness of Gulf states towards uprisings and political turmoil occurring throughout the rest of the region. While arts institutions in Doha, Dubai and Abu Dhabi all attract a strong elite patronage base, Dabashi critiques these art scenes for their relative disconnect and disengagement with the public writ large, let alone other publics in the Middle East. Dabashi also illustrates the need for wealthy patrons and donors to promote unknown artists who have received null or scant journalistic attention.³⁷

Curatorial practices, it would seem, are particularly tricky when it comes to representing emerging visual arts of the Middle East, as the necessity to sustain a certain elite veneer often obfuscates the revolutionary potential of the work on display. Curators in these Gulf states are funded employees of their respective emirs. In these cases, explaining the political resonance of a piece in explicit terms becomes an especially difficult diplomatic task for the curator. Overall, the surge

³³ David Batty, “Arab Artists Flourishing as Uprisings Embolden a Generation,” *The Guardian*, January 17, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2012/jan/18/arab-artists-spring-global-exhibitions#>.

³⁴ Will Jordan, “Qatar Shakes Up the Art World,” *Al-Jazeera*, February 11, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/video/middleeast/2012/02/20122116551320898.html>.

³⁵ Nada Shabout, Wassan al-Khudairi, Deena Chalabi, “Sajjil... a Space to Question,” in *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art* (Milan, Italy: Skira Editore, 2010).

³⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 137. “Museums have long epitomized a product-driven ethos, reserving for themselves a prerogative (in the public interest) to determine what they want to say and show. This prerogative is a legacy of the bifurcation of entertainment and edification during the last half of the nineteenth century, when the public museum and art gallery as we know them came into their own...” In a talk delivered to Princeton University, called “Oil and Sugar: Contemporary Art and Islamic Culture,” Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) Dr. Glenn Lowry posed a number of intriguing and complicated issues concerning the status, potency, and high stakes of contemporary artistic praxis in the Arab world. Yet throughout his lecture he seemed to tightrope walk, diplomatically dancing around geopolitical realities of quasi-neocolonial forces, as perhaps insinuated by the not-so-casual inclusion of the commodity “oil” in his title. This lecture was reproduced in Glenn D. Lowry, *Oil and Sugar: Contemporary Art and Islamic Culture*, Volume 3, Eva Holtby Lecture on Contemporary Culture (Royal Ontario Museum, 2009).

³⁷ Hamid Dabashi, “Art as the Politics of the Impossible,” *Al-Jazeera*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2011/12/20111218113148105494.html>. “A generation of Arab intellectuals frown upon and categorically dismiss ‘Khaliji’ countries, citing the coagulation of massive wealth, reactionary politics and submission to US imperial domination embedded in its scattered military bases... Without the Arab Spring, museums and exhibitions will scarcely be different from the Doha or Dubai international airport where humanity has become a gutted and shiny commercial advertisement. Doha or Dubai might very well be to the twenty-first century what Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad were to earlier generations of Arab artists. But that possibility can only be realized if these new Arab capitals tune into the rest of the Arab Muslim world. They must find the courage and the imagination to cast off Eurocentric modernity and dare to reconfigure a renewed conception of aesthetic interiority with its rooted intuition of transcendence.”

of interest in Middle Eastern art attests to the unraveling/undoing of misconceptions; modernity and its multiplicity of experiences are no longer to be epistemologically recognized as strictly Western prerogatives. Nevertheless, there remains a disjuncture between patronage in glitzy, high capitalistic centers like Doha or Dubai, and the battlefield realities on the streets of Cairo, Tunis, Homs, Sana'a, or Tripoli. How curators and cultural critics directly address this broader moment of political urgency and engage with publics beyond their localities remains yet to be seen.

Biennials of Resistance?

Perhaps more effective than museums and institutions in engaging with broader publics are recent exhibitions and biennials, which have proven to be of critical importance not only in giving voice to otherwise underrepresented artists of the Arab Spring, but in lending credence to the diversity of their socio-cultural experiences, historical interpretations and political convictions. Such biennials work, in part, to consolidate and mobilize newfound solidarity, and they frequently attract broader audiences, coming from far and wide. But it should be noted too that biennials play fundamental roles in popularizing trends, debuting up-and-coming artists, and linking cultural institutions and art markets.³⁸ Cultural theorist Ranjit Hoskote has termed biennial exhibitions in the global South “biennials of resistance,” referring to biennials “...located in transitional societies that mark the stake of these societies in the global scenario.”³⁹ Although two recent biennials, the 2011 Sharjah Biennial and Venice Biennale, addressed the events of the Spring in a paradoxically depoliticized way, their respective curatorial framings of the concept of revolution either vilified or romanticized the uprisings.

The 10th Sharjah Biennial curated by Suzanne Cotter and held from March 16th to May 16th, 2011, featured more than 65 submissions comprising a spectrum of media—visual art, public installations, video, film, music, etc. Its theme, entitled “Plot for a Biennial plays on the word “plot” and its double entendre—referring to both a narrative plot and a plot in the sense of conspiracy, treason, sedition, or subversion.”⁴⁰ The catalogue editor Ghalya Saadawi explains that the conversations of a plot “...operate as a series of betrayals, translations, urgencies, provocations, collaborations, trades and narratives that resist and escape the subjects engaged in them.”⁴¹ Although the “plot” tagline is intriguing, its connotations I would argue seem insensitive to the revolutionary struggles of the region, criminalizing the events even. Many of the submissions can be seen as meditations on violence, injustice, or social change; here we see a range of submissions of differ-

³⁸ Silvia Bagdadli, Livia Arrigoni, “Strategic Positioning of the Venice Biennial: Analyzing the Market for Periodic Contemporary Art Exhibitions,” *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 7, no. 3 (Spring 2005): 22-31.

³⁹ Ranjit Hoskote, “Biennials of Resistance,” in *The Biennial Reader* (Hatje Cantz: 2010), 310. “...a biennial of resistance marks its host site’s claim to the world-historical importance of its own dramas of consciousness and of its own regional modernity, which emerges from the local and yet is imbricated with global circumstances. It often testifies to the belief, held by the progressive elite of a transitional society, that cultural expression can articulate a political drive towards emancipation, dignity, and an optimistic appraisal of historical predicaments.”

⁴⁰ Suzanne Cotter, *Sharjah Biennial 10, 16 March-16 May 2011* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011), 25. “We live in a time when the betrayal of trust is circulated to the world via WikiLeaks, and where popular uprisings and civil unrest against repression and despotism—galvanised through media and social networks—such as those taking place in Tunisia and Egypt at the time of writing, are poised to define our century. What is the place of art within these realms of urgency and amidst an unpredictable pace of change? What forms of address might be placed at our disposal that might convey not only this moment, but also varying cultural positions? How do the diverse voices of artists speak to multiple contexts that are both singular and coexistent? And how do we define the terrain of art at a given point in a way that is both truthful to these positions and meaningful?”

⁴¹ Ghalya Saadawi, “Editor’s Note,” *Sharjah Biennial 10, 16 March-16 May 2011* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011).

ent media, from artists like Emirati Abdullah al-Saadi (*Camar Cande's Journey* 2010, watercolor paintings), Pakistani Aisha Khalid (*Pattern to Follow* 2010, gouache and gold leaf on paper), Iranian Bahman Mohasses (*21 Assemblages on paper*, 1989-2010), Palestinian-American Emily Jacir (*Lydda Airport* 2009), or the artist collective Decolonizing Architecture and Art Residency (*Human Geography*, 2010). Imran Qureshi's grand-scale application of feathery blasts by way of miniature painting techniques and general aesthetic explicitly conveys a poignant meta-commentary on the violence of factionalism in Pakistan.⁴² It is somewhat ironic, however, (but maybe not surprising) that an exhibition such as this would incite a scandal over censorship. The display of Algerian artist Mustapha Benfodil's courtyard installation, "Maportaliche/It Has No Importance," resulted in the firing of the director of the Sharjah Art Foundation, Jack Persekian, by Sharjah ruler Sheikh Sultan bin Mohammad al-Qasimi. By pairing sound-bytes of Algerian protests earlier this spring with sexually explicit language and religious references, Benfodil's efforts to incite dialogue were seen as provocations, and consequently artistic freedoms were curtailed and censorship prevailed. In a conservative country, the voice of dissent and artistic deviance were deprived of their potentially revolutionary plot. It would seem that Cotter achieved her problematic goal to "sketch out a porous terrain that endeavors to escape from the dialectics of art and politics."⁴³

At the 54th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 2011, the tenor was quite different; this year's theme, "Illuminations," took on a vastly more political flavor by virtue of the unprecedented participation of so many Middle Eastern countries—Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia (due to continued civil unrest, Bahrain and Lebanon backed out). But individual submissions, such as the surrealist biomorphisms of Iraqi artist Ahmed al-Soudani, or the works of Syrian artists influenced by postmodernist thought, of "evolving" away from certain geo-temporal realities or the submissions to the UAE pavilion seem oddly disconnected to the happenings of this spring. An especially poignant and salient submission—and probably the most overtly political pavilion therein—came from Egyptian Shady El-Noshokaty on behalf of his deceased colleague, Ahmed Basiony, a video and film artist who was killed by gunshots of the Egyptian police on January 26, 2011. The Egyptian pavilion features both a video performance recorded by Basiony earlier this year entitled "30 Days of Running in Space," which is juxtaposed with some of the artist's footage of the revolution.⁴⁴ Manal al-Dowayan, a Saudi Arabian artist, perhaps best captures the hope for national reform in her work, "Together Suspended," which features fiberglass doves covered with permission slips signed by women's guardians (as women in Saudi Arabia cannot travel except with the accompaniment of a guardian).⁴⁵

Another deliberately political and pointed auxiliary exhibition at the Venice Biennale was the Pan-Arabian Exhibition, curated by Sotheby's contemporary art specialist Lina Lazaar, which brought together 30 works by 21 artists from 8 countries.⁴⁶ The show is produced and

⁴² See the interview between Imran Qureshi and Sharmini Pereira, *Sharjah Biennial 10, 16 March-16 May 2011* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2011), 177-178. Qureshi describes his predominantly red palette: "Red entered into my work immediately after a suicide bomb attack near my house. It was a place filled with lots of nostalgic memories, but after the attack it changed from a lively place into a bloody landscape. I introduced the blood-like red in a violent and evident way." See also Sylvia Smith, "Arab Spring Inspires Regional Artists," *BBC News*, Sharjah, April 22, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13163273>.

⁴³ Ibid., *Sharjah Biennial 10*, 27.

⁴⁴ <http://www.ahmedbasiony.com/about.html>

⁴⁵ http://manaldowayan.com/-_Manal_AlDowayan_-/_Home.html

⁴⁶ Nazanin Lankarani, "Echoes of Political Unrest at Venice Biennale," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/26/world/europe/26iht-M26C-VENICE.html>.

supported by Edge of Arabia, the Abdul Latif Jameel Community Initiatives and Abraaj Capital; these three partners for the flagship of organizations committed to promoting the current artistic renaissance across the Middle East.⁴⁷ Presenting important works that range from installation, performance and photography, to video, sculpture and painting, *The Future of a Promise* included artists from across the Middle East and North Africa.⁴⁸ Aptly called “The Future of a Promise,” the exhibition concept captures both the spirit of hope and renewal, and the dire gravitas of the political situation in the region. However, the show was secluded and sequestered from the main exhibition grounds of the Biennale. This risked ghettoizing artists of the region, further adding to the already present exclusionary modes of exhibiting contemporary art from the Arab world. Though I would like to believe that these sentiments of solidarity between artists go beyond the mere “Pan-Arab” or nationalistic fervor—and that they signify universals. Contemporary artistic praxis—in its most visceral, uncensored, subversive, expansive forms—bears witness to promises, promises one hopes the legacy of this Arab Spring will keep.

Conclusion

Still, however, the question remains—how do we mindfully consume, represent, and curate arts of revolution in an ethically sound manner? Regardless of patterns of consumption or curatorial (mis)framings, contemporary Arab artists today represent a newly formulated avant-garde.⁴⁹ Their artistic praxis attests to a shift in aesthetics, mirroring this shift in historical events. Of course, it is far beyond the capacity of the artist to map out the trajectory of any given political movement. One can see however, that the transgressive properties underlying many artists’ works are being consumed by institutions. When crossing into the world of the art market, the notion of revolution gains a different buzz-worthy currency, frequently at risk of being reduced to a commodity. Nevertheless, these artists’ heroic contributions to the long, continually unraveling Arab Spring entail the imagining of emancipatory possibilities beyond political constraints; through their rejection of the status quo and visions for resuscitated individual dignity these artists’ works signal the rejuvenation of a collective consciousness, both in the gallery and on the street. In spite of their ambivalent position caught in between the local neighborhood street or public square and the global, capitalizing, trendsetting gallery and biennial scene, arts of the Arab Spring remain a locus for solidarity; they are the agents of ethical responsibility and socio-political change.

⁴⁷ http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/bien/venice_biennale/2011/tour/the_future_of_a_promise

⁴⁸ See <http://www.thefutureofapromise.com/index.php/artists> for further biographical sketches of these artists: Ziad Abillama (Lebanon), Manal Al-Dowayan (Saudi Arabia), Ahmed Alsoudani (Iraq), Ziad Antar (Lebanon), Ayman Baalbaki (Lebanon), Lara Baladi (Egypt/Lebanon), Fayçal Baghriche (Algeria), Yto Barrada (Morocco), Taysir Batniji (Palestine), Abdelkader Benchamma (France/Algeria), Ayman Yossri Daydban (Palestine/Jordan), Mounir Fatmi (Morocco), Abdunasser Gharem (Saudi Arabia), Mona Hatoum (Lebanon), Raafat Ishak (Egypt), Emily Jacir (Palestine), Yazan Khalili (Palestine), Ahmed Mater (Saudi Arabia), and Driss Ouadahi (Algeria), as well as three Abraaj Capital Art Prize Winners, Jananne Al-Ani (Iraq), Kader Attia (Algeria), and Nadia Kaabi-Linke (Tunisia).

⁴⁹ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974). I refer to the English translation by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bürger defines the progressive artistic movements after the October Revolution as distinctive and separate from those that preceded it. This “historical avant-garde” is geared towards Dada and Surrealism specifically. See Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3. “More typically the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge of the broader movement of modernism, while modernism itself reacts to this critique...” I think of avant-gardism as rejecting the institutionalization of art and promoting the revolutionizing of everyday life.