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Towards a Plural Aesthetic in the Maghreb

Abstract: The study and interpretation of the art of the modern and contemporary Maghreb is a developing field, in terms of artistic production, exhibition, marketing, and theoretical discourse. In recent years, artists of North Africa and the Middle East have achieved high visibility on the international scene, even as they suffer from many lacks, including the structures of art production, and critical discourses, and theoretical approaches. The principal aim of this paper is to avoid the radar screen of the western world and to think about the specificity of this region, such as a possible world of contemporary art. We can consider these artists and artworks beyond the cliché image repertoires of terrorism and tourism, Orientalism, and clandestine migration that dominate most representations of the Maghreb. We want to explore visual art, and its dynamic, not by describing movements or putting together a chronology, but by guiding many reflections about the relation between theory and practice in this specific geographic area. This paper will address key points of the problems of terminology: the problematic use of such terms as Modern Islamic Art and the frequent application of the terms Modern and Contemporary without sufficient acknowledgment of their contextual connotation. It will examine the recent developments in art practice in the Maghreb and its diaspora and their broader context, analyzing the impact of globalization and other transnational cultural and social links.

Keywords: aesthetics; contemporary art world; cosmopolitan; plural; identity; Maghreb; singularity.

Introduction

The Maghreb is a geographical area composed of five North African countries: Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Libya. It is a region that was shaped by a myriad of cultures. It can be considered as a multicultural area or a transcultural area with Mediterranean, African Arab Islamic dimensions. The analysis and interpretation of culture should consider the Mediterranean dimension as a critical and hermeneutic tool to study the diversity of symbols and the variety of artworks.

For this reason, it's necessary to avoid many stereotypes when we try to think about the condition of the arts and aesthetics in this particular area of the world. First,

we must avoid the screen or mirror of European culture that was carried by colonization and that still lives on many occasions (production of postcards depicting lands, exotic views, specific architecture, images of Berber life, images of women).

We must point out the necessity of mapping artistic practices in the Maghreb (with its modern and contemporary aspects) and tracing the contours of different spaces of creativity. These analyses should consider the relationship between global and local, endogenous and exogenous. According to the critique of philosopher and art historian Rachida Triki, artists of the Maghreb are “creating differently, with a sense of self constancy that respects their singularity and their commitment to the present.”¹ This article will analyze the experience of modern and contemporary art in this region and will reflect the conditions of its production and reception or consumption. This approach leads us to think about the relation between the Maghreb and the Middle East. Yet, it encourages us to go further, to a mapping of diversity in contemporary aesthetics in different continents.

The Maghrebin art world

Neither Middle-Eastern nor Western, the Maghreb is a specific area of production and reception of modern and contemporary art. A plural approach is necessary for all actors of the art world today: no center, no periphery, but a myriad of cultural and artistic expressions that reflect the problems, the situations, and the ambitions of every local world art. The modern and contemporary artists are trying to create their specific identity, their works are full of symbols of the past, but they carry a powerful sense and presence.

Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934–67) was a representative of modern art. He exhibited with Farid Belkahlia, and he admired the work of Paul Klee. He was attentive to local practices and symbols like tattooing, pottery marks, and calligraphic signs. These practices permit to avoid the rules and values of the globalized art market. The transgression of social norms and religious symbols is also the main topic that allows expressing the political and social situation.

The point of view or the mirror of visual arts in the Maghreb is not the projection into a European-centered experience, but a complex experience. We need to compare artists established in the international scene with local artists to grasp the complexity of this situation.

On many occasions, Europe-based émigrés artists are chosen to represent the art of Maghreb in large international exhibitions that would include the periphery, and recognize the other, the stranger. On the other hand, local artists are disfavored, and not recognized; they suffer from lack of visibility. Alice Panel showed this contradiction between local artists and artists of diaspora: “we need to move away from

¹ Rachida Triki, “Aesthetic value, creation and emotion,” in *Art, Emotion and Value. Proceedings of the 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics*, ed. José Alcaraz, Matilde Carrasco, and Salvador Rubio (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2011), 28.

‘hybridity’ and ‘global art’ towards an understanding of artistic production and reception that recognizes multi-axial power relations as audiences and artworks attempt to travel between different geographies.”² For example, Zineb Sedira was born in France and works in Paris, London, and Algiers. Katia Kameli was also born in France and works between Paris and Algiers; Bochra Khalili was born in Morocco and works in France and Morocco. Mouna Jemal was born in France and works in Tunis.

Are these artists representative of the Maghreb? We must note that their works are anchored within European terms of artistic production, where is their ‘Maghreb-ness’? Artists like Sedira, Kameli, Khalili, and Samta ben Yahia, work in Paris, London and New York, and are frequently chosen to represent the artistic production of the Maghreb in international exhibitions such as *Africa Remix* (2004) or *Uneven Geographies* (2010). This specificity of belonging to the Maghreb is not only an origin (far origin) but a feeling, a common feeling, a singularity, a resistance.

The system of contemporary art is inclusive of different groups and regions. It benefits because it permits to widen the audience of artistic practices, but the local Maghreb artists suffer from a smaller audience.

Contemporary art is in perpetual flux, both geographically and theoretically, but this needs more visibility and more mobility for the artists. The dialogue between artists is a point to rely on contextual and universal aesthetics and to point to an aesthetic and ethical dimension of solidarity in diverse regions of the world. We must recognize that geopolitical issues are obstacles that hold weight in the art world, but the horizon of freedom is the plural approach that gives every element its real value.

The Maghreb is intrinsically plural. The plural in its geography, history, language, and political and economic dimensions. However, there is a common ground that unifies this region.³ The common history has a significant influence in this case, and that permits us to distinguish the Maghreb from the Middle East. I believe that the history of modern and contemporary artistic experience is different in many aspects from the Maghreb to the Middle East.

In the Maghreb, the experience of modernism and contemporaneity was specific. It began with essays of decolonization, especially in literary essays. We can say that every country of the Maghreb had its proper artistic modernity, and the role of historians and critics is to point the differences and to show the similar points between these different experiences of modern art.

Modern Maghreb art is not a copy of modern occidental art. It expresses the problems and the aspirations of this region. It has a narrow relation to ethnicity, language, and traditions.

For this reason, I think that Middle-East art cannot be lumped with Maghreb art. We should consider the difference between social, political, and financial differences between the regions of the wider Arabic World.

² Alice Planel, “Travelling back to ourselves: The Maghreb as an art destination,” in *The Higher Atlas / Au-delà de l’Atlas – The Marrakech Biennale (4) in Context*, ed. Carson Chan and Nadim Samman (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 2.

³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983): 11–12.

Aesthetics in the Maghreb: Theory, history, and critics

It is necessary – for researchers and universitarians – to work to construct a Maghrebin aesthetic of decolonization. Thus it is necessary to show the key values of Maghrebin artistic experiences, to show the manner how artists make meaning and the manner the public receives these productions, with the eyes and sensibility of Tunisian, Algerian or Moroccan spectators, in the field of Maghrebin everyday life, struggle, and conflicts. A thought of hybridity and diversity should arise from different world arts.

The magazine *Souffles* was a famous example: it was a good interface in the postcolonial period, and it has a transdisciplinary character. Intellectuals, poets, and painters were debating about questions of artistic creation and its political dimension “the multilingual condition and plural, the cosmopolitan position of the magazine’s founders, including their interest in diverse narrative formats, gave rise to many language experiments, creolizations and new literary forms.”⁴

On the other hand, I think that we have an enormous work of mapping, and writing the history of arts in this region. There’s a significant lack of history of art in education institutions and the writings of thinkers. Artists in the Maghrebin area are nowadays producing a transmedial aesthetic. They use different media from painting and sculpture to photography, video, performance, and installation; additionally, female artists are very active, and many of them are well known abroad.

The Maghreb is an area where the art of resistance is rising and developing, where hybridization of traditional signs and contemporary expressions is rich. This production needs to be guided by a critical discourse that points to its force and limits. It needs to be replaced in the historical movement of art globally and locally. In the Maghreb, we have many theorists and critics who are well known in the international scene, they analyzed this dimension deeply and pointed to this lack of sufficient writings and institutions for preservation and valorization of artworks. Among them are Triki, who has written many articles in the field of Maghrebin art and philosophy of art. She organized many exhibitions to encourage local artists and promote an authentic critical discourse:

Although Triki and Zahi are right to note a general move from painting and toward photography, video, and installation in much contemporary art from the region, particularly that which has the greatest international market exposure [...]. Significantly but only briefly, Triki mentions globalization and the very real problems – structural and fiscal – with which artists in Tunisia (as in Algeria and Morocco) must grapple, namely, the small local audiences and the difficulty of funding their work. As with the other texts, it is regrettable that their length precludes a more detailed analysis of these fundamental issues.⁵

⁴ Marion Von Osten, “Aesthetics of Decolonization. The Magazine *Souffles* (1966–1972),” *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* 70, 4 (2016): 1265–84.

⁵ Carol Solomon, Nadira Laggoune-Aklouche, Rachida Triki, and Farid Zahi. *Memory, Place, Desire: Contemporary Art of the Maghreb and Maghrebi Diaspora*, Exhibition catalog (Haverford: Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery, 2014), 11.

These exhibitions are resistant to the marginalization of Maghrebin art and the *méconnaissance* of his political, cultural, and social reality, and this region is underlooked.

Abdelkebir Khatibi is also a famous figure of Maghrebin thought, and I think that we shall go on his path towards a plural comprehension of art and creation when we analyze the problem of legitimation; Khatibi defended the idea of the Maghreb and wanted to take the Maghreb as a horizon of thought, to discover new directions in Maghrebin aesthetic studies. The reinvestigation of calligraphy, mosaics, and other signs and forms is significant. That dialogue between calligraphy and painting is called bi-pictorial, it signifies a dialog between visual and pictorial elements.⁶

Farid Zahi, a well-known Moroccan professor and critic, tempted to write the main periods of modern art history in his country. He explains the relationship between the symbolic value of Moroccan art and the mercantile value.⁷ In the same sense, we can speak about Moulim Laroussi – a critic who is trying to align the modern and contemporary art in the Maghreb to his deep and past origins, to put a point relying on past present and future of the arts.⁸

These thinkers and critical artists have pointed out the originality of the Maghrebin experience. They have worked to link different practices and to improve critical reception. They fight for institutional foundations that can encourage artistic production. Finally, they are working in the sense of a postcolonial aesthetic or decolonization of Maghrebin aesthetics. They have struggled for the favor of local artists, and they still work to reinforce the relationship between the Maghreb and African arts.

Creation/institutions/public sphere

The third main problem is the problem of curatorial actors pointing to the absence of financial support, and the lack of an art market. Therefore there's an increase in the number of institutions that promote contemporary art –the foundation Kamel Lazaar in Tunisia and Dar AL Maamun in Morocco.

The paradox is the following: it is necessary to 'diagnose' culture and arts in the Maghreb, to show its limits and its forces, to interpret its dynamism, and to search for a cosmopolitan horizon behind these elements. This work requires a description of the artistic scene, an analysis of critical and theoretical discourses about modern and contemporary arts. But all of these approaches must be plural because the Maghreb is Arabic, Berber Greek, Roman, Ottoman, French, Italian, Mediterranean, etc.

The multidisciplinary approach is fruitful because it considers all these influences and multiple origins that shape the Maghrebin identity. I consider that we have a huge responsibility, in this case, to reconstruct this identity in a dynamic and plural dimension. The opportunity is that the cultural signs and symbols can be easily

⁶ Abdelkebir, *Maghreb Pluriel*, 1983.

⁷ Cf. Farid Zahi, *D'un regard l'autre, l'art et ses médiations au Maroc* (Rabat: Editions Marsam Rabat, 2006).

⁸ Cf. Moulim Laaroussi, *Les tendances de la peinture contemporaine Marocaine* (Casablanca: PM éditions, 2002).

deconstructed and reconstructed in artistic practice. Thus, we should be careful about the terminology: the problematic use of terms ‘contemporary’ and ‘modern’ without acknowledgment of their contextual connotation.

When we examine recent developments of arts in the Maghreb and its diaspora, we should put this in a broader context analyzing the impact of globalization and other transnational, social, and cultural links.

We should seek a reflexive dynamic that can transcend the frontiers, and share the experiences in the sense of deep solidarity. I think the theme of this congress encourages us to make an effort in this sense and to create without frontiers.

This broad conception of creation is compatible with the local dimension, and it is a step to recognize the other, to create an asymmetric relationship that could share the experiences of production, reception, theory, and critique of art.

In this case, the alternative of the occidental circuit is the solidarity and recognition all over the world, and it’s the communication crossing the continents, the emancipation from the Western radar screen, and other prejudices. The Maghrebin artist should be free from the conditions of the market and the conditions of western reception.

We must also avoid the screen of the Arab spring; if we should say something about aesthetic revolution, we can go to Rancière who said that a revolution: “rearranges the rules of the game by making two things interdependent firstly, it blurs the borders between the logic of facts and the logic of fictions. Secondly, it introduces a new model of rationality, a new way of thinking about history.”⁹ As Gerad Vilar says: “the art world today is global and tribal, democratic and snobbish, universal and singular.”¹⁰

Creativity is increasing, and it takes various forms in visual arts; here is an exciting dynamic of production. So, we need multiple approaches to models in art criticism: each experience can guide particular rules and values

The practices of contemporary art are a weapon for emancipation and a reflexive tool for the dynamic of culture, but these practices must be anchored into a historical vision and a critical approach that illustrate the renewal of cultural symbols and signs. The first step of resistance is the renewal of memory. The second is the reflection that gives legitimacy to new symbols and shows the dynamic of creativity in the arts as well as in theoretical products.

In the Maghreb, horizons of aesthetical thought are plural and rich: rethinking concepts of modern and contemporary practice, making meaning and value for emancipation and freedom, requesting a universal dimension in the particular context, and also mapping the differences and finding bridges between different geographical areas. All these efforts lead to creating possible worlds for art and aesthetics as it is announced in this congress.

⁹ Rancière Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The distribution of the Sensible* (London, New York: Continuum, 2004), 36.

¹⁰ Gérard Vilar, “Deartification and politicization in contemporary art,” in *Art, Emotion, and Value. Proceedings of the 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics*, ed. José Alcaraz, Matilde Carrasco, and Salvador Rubio (Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, 2011), 43.

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