

## Modern Art of Middle East and the Confines of Modernism (New York, 18–19 Oct 13)

NYU, Oct 8–19, 2013

Registration deadline: Jun 15, 2013

Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World

On Likeness and Difference: Modern Art of Middle East and the Confines of Modernism

Third Annual Conference of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World,  
Turkey and Iran

October 18-19, 2013

Kevorkian Center, NYU

The third annual AMCA conference seeks to problematize the comparative method with which the paradigm of modernism approaches modern art of the Middle East. This paradigm is, after all, a formulation of the historical experience of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It maps the development of bourgeois society to an apotheosis of form, and then situates the emergence of modernist concepts and styles at this juncture. As new artistic practices develop outside of Europe, artists producing work in apparently modernist styles are consistently read in comparison to their European counterparts, eclipsing their historical specificity and rendering them derivative.

The conference aims to interrogate this relation of comparison by opening up a set of interlocking questions about visual resemblances between works, uses of the concept of influence, and the availability of documentation that would enable the writing of a different historiography. Comparison is often premised on visual resemblances between the modern art of the Middle East and the modern art of Europe: "It looks like Picasso." However, the identification of those resemblances is based on the epistemological fallacy that a likeness is evidence of a historical relation; it may look like Picasso but that does not necessarily indicate an influence. At stake in the lure of resemblance is not only methodological rigor; by inviting comparison, resemblances risk subordinating one art to another, obscuring its constitutive artistic problem and the historical context in which it was produced.

On the one hand, there is a need to reflect critically on comparison as a method in art history. How does this comparative approach generate claims about influence, and how is the concept of influence used asymmetrically, denoting in a European context an historical link but in the Middle East an imitation? What do we mean when we claim an 'influence'? On the other hand, what is at issue here is the possibility of asking formalist questions outside any comparison. How can we think about work produced in what appears to be modernist styles without taking as a starting point a comparison with European modernism? And how can we critically address visual similarities and differences, not only with European modernism but also with art practices in other non-western

contexts?

In order to move out of the relationship of comparison instituted by the paradigm of European modernism, we need to address the methodological problem that much of the modern art of the Middle East comes to us de-contextualized, stripped of the historical record that would enable us to place it in the context of its production. This is partly a consequence of the region's wars, which have scattered art collections and destroyed archives. It is also the result of an archival tradition in which the documentary record for art practices is not centralized and systematized, but instead is dispersed in a number of different locations. In the absence of documentation, the artwork can only be comprehended on the basis of its visuality. Operating within the paradigm of modernism, this leads into the trap of comparison, where the artwork is evaluated in term of its similarities and differences to European modern art. This comparison only reinforces the alienation of the artwork from its documentary record, perpetuating the myth in the art world that "there is no archive."

AMCA is currently accepting individual paper proposals (250-300 words) as well as panel proposals (400-7500 words) that present specific case studies as possibilities for thinking outside the trap of comparison. We encourage papers dealing with specific studies of artworks, artists, manifestos, collectives, and discourses from the Arab world, Iran, and Turkey. Panel proposals should provide a brief overview of the panel stakes as well as a list of tentatively confirmed paper presenters and titles and suggested discussants. Graduate students are particularly encouraged to submit proposals.

All proposals to be submitted by June 15, 2013

to: [info@amcainternational.org](mailto:info@amcainternational.org)

A response will be given by early July 2013.

Organizers:

Saleem Al-Bahloly (UC Berkeley)

Dina Ramadan (Bard College)

Sarah Rogers (Independent Scholar)

Nada Shabout (AMCA President/ University of North Texas)

Salwa Mikdadi (AMCA President Elect/ Independent Curator)

Reference:

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