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A New Global Art History: The Impact of Art Institutions and Contemporary

Art in Arabia and the Extended MENASA Region

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In contemporary art, the West might be seen as the arbiter of taste, while artists in other areas of the world follow along in a derivative manner—a supporter position made possible because of the increasingly globalized nature of the art world. However, art that is being made in regions beyond Europe and the United States should no longer be considered the West’s “other” because it probably never was.

The presence of art fairs, biennials, and institutions indicates that contemporary art in these parts of the world is thriving. Seen from another perspective, it is these developments that have allowed for the growth of the field. In particular, artists from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) region have found opportunities in places like the United Arab Emirates for presenting their artworks through which they have been exposed to international audiences. *For example, the Sharjah Art Foundation hosts a biennial that displays recent works of practitioners from around the globe. A major role that it plays is to showcase artists from the region. *Pakistani artist Imran Qureshi made a site-specific installation in the 2011 Biennial that resulted in a commissioned project at New

York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2013. *Meanwhile in Dubai, Nazgol Ansarinia from Iran produced a carpet in 2009 for the Abraaj Capital Art Prize in conjunction with Art Dubai Art Fair. This artwork traveled to many points internationally.

Indeed, the advances in art and its infrastructure in Arabia provide, on one level, the "evidence" that contemporary art is everywhere. Yet it also causes us to wonder about what has happened in the past. Is it only now that art and culture are thriving in Arabia and the extended MENASA region? On one level, the answer is obviously no. Yet, art history fails to acknowledge the important contributions of the region to how art in various parts of the world looks today. The role of art historians is crucial at this juncture to understand and outline the truly global affair that art actually has been and continues to be. It is crucial to revisit art history and add to the well-established discourse on revisionism that was so vital in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when feminist art historians and scholars from diverse backgrounds insisted that a change was needed. Now, as was the case a few decades ago, the revising of art history has to happen in more nuanced ways than simply slipping in overlooked art and events. The revision has to be something new to acknowledge the change that is occurring in the world of art and beyond.

Even as it necessary to extend the discussion outside the facile inclusion of art and events, certain happenings have come to define the change that is taking place in the order of global art. *One such occurrence is Art Dubai. In the last decade since the art fair has been around there has been tremendous

development. Beginning in 2007, Art Dubai has offered opportunities to artists and arts organizations in the region to present work. Dubai has become a center for art in the ever-expanding field of global contemporary art. It goes without saying that New York and London can no longer lay claim to being the only places one needs to visit to know about contemporary art.

*Although art fairs, and Art Dubai in particular, are considered to be no more than consumerist, insubstantial events, there is much to be said for what they can mean. *Art Dubai offers a safe haven for those interested in the art of the MENASA area. Much of this volatile region is difficult to traverse. *Dubai provides a relatively secure zone where people from different parts of the world can meet. Last year, about 25,000 attended the fair.

However, beyond considerations of safety, Dubai and the other Emirates are crossroads for contemporary cultures, as they have been in the past. Arabia has served as the meeting point for people from different parts of the world for centuries. The idea of coming together in one place was investigated in an event that took place the week before the art fair this year. *March Meeting 2014 happened at the Sharjah Art Foundation and provided an opportunity for the global art world to congregate. This is a substantial annual event that started in 2008 as a forum for artists and professionals in the region to discuss the state of art.

*Six years later in 2014, many individuals and institutions reported on the fertile contemporary art worlds throughout the area. As such, one could confirm that

the region has much to contribute to the global understanding of art. *The artists from here offer varied ways to think about artistic practices today and throughout history. Their works are nuanced. *Note the installations of Rayyane Tabet. *One work, *Home on Neutral Ground* explores a story that connects Afghanistan, Pakistan, the UAE, and perhaps the rest of the world in a piece that deals with sports, politics, and human nature and is a testament to kind of impact that artists in the region can make to the field of global contemporary art.

On an institutional level, Sharjah Art Foundation is quickly establishing itself as a leader in the presentation of contemporary art, full stop, and not just regional work. The exhibitions in Sharjah are not directly for commercial purposes, setting up a clear difference with Art Dubai. Recent exhibitions organized by the foundation include a range of projects that highlight artists from the MENASA, both those that have been receiving a lot of attention lately, as well as those who have been forgotten. The foundation was actually first established as a biennial, a relatively small happening that has grown into an international affair, as evidenced by the appointment of a Japanese curator last year and a Korean-American curator for the upcoming biennial in 2015. *Under the leadership of Eunjie Joo, a product of multicultural United States, Sharjah Biennial 12 will include artists from the region, Africa, Latin America, and elsewhere.

The biennial is arranged to coincide with the annual Art Dubai Art Fair in March. And while the Sharjah Art Foundation has a more educational bent, there is much more than galleries selling their wares at the art fair. *Art Dubai is

organized in a manner to allow ideas to develop and debates to ensue. There is a “think tank” quality to the event.

This year, as in previous editions of the fair, visitors could attend lectures in the Global Art Forum. The presentations ranged from the academic discussions to practical concerns. Significantly, three curators of past and upcoming biennials in Europe discussed their ideas in a panel that Hans Ulrich Obrist moderated. He is widely considered a top curator of contemporary art.

*Adam Szymczyk, the curator of the upcoming Documenta, one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art, stated that it is quite telling that they were sitting in Dubai and having a discussion. Although he did not want to give away names, Szymczyk did note that his organization of Documenta in 2017 will keep in mind the pluralistic nature of art today and will include many artists from outside of Europe and the United States. He was seemingly joking when he stated that his version of the exhibition would include 50 artists from the East and 50 from the West, a reference to *the 1989 landmark exhibition “Magicians of the Earth” that had its premise to include the same distribution of artists. Much criticized, “Magicians of the Earth’s” framework of “inclusion” might not have allowed for a more complex understanding of art and artistic practices outside of the West. In light of what has happened over the last two decades and more, today it is not prudent to insert an appropriate number of artists from around the world. Rather, in organizing major contemporary art exhibitions, a more meaningful understanding of global developments is a requirement.

In fact, how could it not? Art is thriving in areas well beyond the scope of the West. And Art Dubai makes that apparent. A quick scan of the galleries present in the fair shows that there are sophisticated voices existing in Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, as well as in many other places. *The Marker project, as part of the non-profit programming of Art Dubai, presented the latter location in a curated presentation of art spaces. Slavs and Tartar, a group of artists, organized this year's edition that focused on Central Asia. Since 2011, Marker has highlighted a selected region.

This and a number of other initiatives add to the exhibition feel of Art Dubai, rather than it simply being a commercial affair. As such, this event is not just a marker of the growth of contemporary art in the region; it is a catalyst for its future development.

Today, foundations, museums, and other institutions in Beirut, New Delhi, Dubai, Cairo, and other cities in the MENASA region have better knowledge of art made here and help to frame the global view of it. *Going back to the proceedings of the March Meeting 2014, this impression was clearly made as several regional organizations and artistic and curatorial collaboratives presented their missions. In a collective research session entitled, "In the Labyrinths of Exhibition Histories: International Art Exhibition in Solidarity with Palestine," curators Kristine Khouri and Rasha Salti took the audience on a journey around the world in their search of art to support Palestine. Their stories linked together quotidian moments and major historical events and the outcome of their research could provide new avenues for thinking about modern art. Their research revealed the

interlacing of practices happening in Europe and North Africa, for example, provoking the question: Is modern art really something that belongs to the West alone?

Regional arts and cultures in Arabia and the extended MENASA area from different historical periods have added to and shaped the way that art around the world looks today, meaning that this expanse of land has had an impact on artistic developments for a much longer moment than just the present. The crossing of influences around the globe needs to be acknowledged in a more complex and sophisticated reading of art's past. In essence, a new global art history needs to be analyzed and written. It should provide guidelines for rethinking the shifts and changes in art internationally from different periods in history.

As noted above, the field of art history has been challenged previously. Now it is time for further refinement in order to question the superiority of the West in the history of art.