

Exhibiting and Writing on Art from the Middle East — Some Recent European and North American Exhibitions and their Catalogues

25 ans de créativité arabe, Paris/Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) : Institut du Monde Arabe/Silvana Editoriale, 2012, 215 pp. b/w and col. ill., \$ 32.95 paper ISBN 9788836624317

Massimiliano Gioni, ed. *Here and Elsewhere*, New York : New Museum, 2014, 279 pp. b/w and col. ill., \$ 55 paper ISBN 9780915557059

Unedited History, Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2014, 199 pp., ill. € 39.90 paper ISBN 9782759602452

Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, eds., *Iran Modern*, New York/New Haven and London : Asia Society Museum/Yale University Press, 2013, 256 p. ill., Cloth ISBN 9780300197365

Omar Kholeif, ed., *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary — Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, London/Munich/New York: Whitechapel Gallery/Prestel Verlag, 2015, 272 p. ill., \$ 65 cloth ISBN 9783791354859

Silvia Naef

Volume 42, numéro 1, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1040841ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040841ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Naef, S. (2017). Compte rendu de [Exhibiting and Writing on Art from the Middle East — Some Recent European and North American Exhibitions and their Catalogues / *25 ans de créativité arabe*, Paris/Cinisello Balsamo (Milan) : Institut du Monde Arabe/Silvana Editoriale, 2012, 215 pp. b/w and col. ill., \$ 32.95 paper ISBN 9788836624317 / Massimiliano Gioni, ed. *Here and Elsewhere*, New York : New Museum, 2014, 279 pp. b/w and col. ill., \$ 55 paper ISBN 9780915557059 / *Unedited History, Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours*, Paris : Paris-Musées, 2014, 199 pp., ill. € 39.90 paper ISBN 9782759602452 / Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, eds., *Iran Modern*, New York/New Haven and London : Asia Society Museum/Yale University Press, 2013, 256 p. ill., Cloth ISBN 9780300197365 / Omar Kholeif, ed., *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary — Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation*, London/Munich/New York: Whitechapel Gallery/Prestel Verlag, 2015, 272 p. ill., \$ 65 cloth ISBN 9783791354859]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 42(1), 73–79. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040841ar>

Tous droits réservés © UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada), 2017

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Exhibiting and Writing on Art from the Middle East—Some Recent European and North American Exhibitions and their Catalogues

Silvia Naef

Most art historical writings date the globalization of the art world from the 1989 Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre* and the end of the Cold War, which opened the art scene and art markets worldwide.¹ Contemporary art events followed across the globe, new biennials in particular: Istanbul (1987), Dakar (first a literary event, then a showcase for living artists since 1992), Gwangju (1995), Shanghai (1996), Sharjah (first held in 1993; strictly for international contemporary art since 2005).² Since the 1990s, artists from non-Western countries, for instance Ai Weiwei and Walid Raad, have found prominent places within the formerly exclusively Western world of contemporary art exhibitions.

As part of this global phenomenon, the Middle East has its peculiarities. (By Middle East, curators and writers generally mean the Arab world and Iran, as Saeb Eigner explained in the 2010 publication of his Middle Eastern collection, and it is in this sense that the term will be used here, although it can include Turkey and Afghanistan.)³ Because the media and popular

opinion have equated the region's political situation with war and terrorism, exhibitions of Middle Eastern art pursue a specific aim, reaching far beyond art historical purposes. Especially since 9/11, contemporary art has been appropriated as a device for creating a new, positive image of the region. Art has become a tool of brotherhood, a means for improving the perception of the Middle East in the rest of the world, through the works of artists who critically or ironically deal with the anxiogenic stereotypes of war, terror, political repression, and women's rights. This is what led to the creation in 2004 of *Bidoun* magazine, which was founded after 9/11 and which publishes articles on Middle Eastern culture in English;⁴ it is also what drove the 2007 MoMA (New York) exhibition *Without Boundary*.⁵ Regeneration of the region's reputation might also be one of the driving forces behind museum projects, planned or recently built, in the Gulf: as in Bilbao, where the opening of the Guggenheim Museum in 1997 turned a declining industrial town into a tourist attraction, the Middle East hopes to find its place as an international cultural destination thanks to these initiatives.⁶

On the scholarly level, the globalization of the art scene has raised the issue of how to write a truly global art history. In the last decade, art historians including James Elkins, Hans Belting, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel have considered this

question.⁷ However, for the most part, this global art history, especially as it pertains to the Middle East, has still to be written. Thus, exhibition catalogues—in their variable shapes and sizes, from visitor's guides to substantial books—are often the only available references and play an important role in the field of modern and contemporary art of the Middle East, although many new books and articles have been added to the bibliography in the last few years.⁸ Catalogues, as Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Olivier Marcel stated in 2015, contribute to “the production of aesthetics and ideas, classifications, works of art, and as well as to the constitution of representations and interpretation schemes. Power relationships, market, journals and other media, critique, importation and translation, networks of sociability, teaching institutions, art market, dealers and curators, etc., the whole field of art is also present.”⁹

With this in mind, it is interesting to review a few recent exhibitions and catalogues and to consider how they present art from the region, what their declared purpose is, and how the specific situation of the Middle East affects curatorial choices and catalogue presentations.

In 2014, Media Farzin summarized twenty years of major Middle Eastern exhibitions in the West, starting with *Primitivism* (MoMA, 1984), which, with its concentration on Western art, was the leading impulse for *Magiciens de la terre*.¹⁰ She illustrated how major international events such as Documenta and the Venice Biennale, as well as galleries and museums, have opened to artists from the region.¹¹ In the last years, the trend has dramatically increased, and exhibitions of art from the “Middle East,” the “Arab world,” or the “Islamic” world have found their place in Western institutions. *Unveiled* at the Saatchi Gallery in London in 2009¹² was followed in 2010 by the Kunstmuseum Bochum's *Unexpected, From Islamic to*

*Contemporary Art*¹³ and, at the end of the same year, by the opening exhibitions at Mathaf, the Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar.¹⁴ In the Munich exhibition *The Future of Tradition—The Tradition of the Future*, which commemorated the one hundredth anniversary of the 1910 Munich Islamic art exhibition *Meisterwerke Muhammadanischer Kunst*,¹⁵ works of contemporary artists from the “Islamic world” surrounded selected pieces from the 1910 exhibition.¹⁶ In 2011, *Paris and Contemporary Arab Art*, an initiative of the art magazine *Art Absolument* curated by Pascal Amel, featured thirteen artists with Arab backgrounds.¹⁷ Most of these shows, as well as *But a Storm is Blowing From Paradise: Contemporary Art of the Middle East and North Africa* at New York’s Guggenheim Museum in 2016,¹⁸ were aimed at giving an overview of contemporary art in the region; some introduced a historical perspective.

The focus in this essay will be on five recent exhibitions or series of exhibitions and their catalogues. They were shown in what are still considered the main art capitals—New York, Paris, and London—in spaces that play a prescriptive role in contemporary art.

25 ans de créativité arabe

Paris/Cinisello Balsamo (Milan): Institut du Monde Arabe/Silvana Editoriale, 2012
215 pp. b/w and col. ill.
\$ 32.95 paper ISBN 9788836624317

The first of the five is the 2012–13 exhibition *25 ans de créativité arabe* at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris, organized to celebrate the IMA’s twenty-fifth anniversary, with its catalogue published in French and Arabic. The IMA results from the cooperation of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the countries of the Arab League; thus it was, at least at its start, less a cultural than a political institution, a French showcase for the Arab world. It owns an important collection of four hundred works of

modern and contemporary art from Arab countries.¹⁹ After having been on permanent display in the first years after its opening in 1987, that collection was relegated to storage,²⁰ and none of it has been included in the new presentation of the permanent collection that opened in 2011. One hundred and twenty pieces from the modern art collection were presented briefly in 2007–08 under the title *Plural modernity (Modernité plurielle*²¹), but no catalogue was published except for a sixteen-page press map with colour reproductions of selected works and short biographies of the artists.²²

Following Mona Khazindar, IMA’s Director General at the time, the 2012–13 exhibition “was in line with the work accomplished by the IMA since a quarter of a century” and “aimed at showing the main trends that had developed in recent years” (13).²³ Curated by Ehab Elabban, who had been in charge of the Cairo Biennale in 2004 and 2008–09, it showcased forty artists from sixteen of the twenty-two member countries of the Arab League, with a strong Saudi, Egyptian, and Moroccan representation.²⁴

In the catalogue, curator Ehab

selection of the works, he retained four possible criteria: their dealing with political issues, their address of social or economic questions, a personal aesthetic approach, or their involvement with the effects of globalization. No medium was privileged: in order to give an overall picture of the state of contemporary creation in the Arab world, the exhibited works ranged from painting and sculpture to videos and installations.

The catalogue also includes texts by Iraqi art critic and writer Farouk Youssef and French art historian Véronique Rieffel, former director of the Paris-municipality run Institut des Cultures de l’Islam (IC1); they reflect on changes in the art scenes of the Arab world in the last twenty-five years.

Farouk Youssef observes that artistic commitment, formerly a mere aesthetic question, has turned into something else (20). The US invasion of Iraq and the recent upheavals, but also the new role of photography (24) and of women artists (28) and a newly acquired freedom, have moved Arab artists, who had spent most of their energies under autocratic rule in perfecting the “tools of modernity,” to turn toward the political and social meaning of art (29). Art is no longer a metaphor aimed at embellishing life; it is rather, as he concludes pessimistically, “maybe that unique document that proves that we [i.e., the Arabs] are still alive” (29). Youssef’s reflection describes the passage from “modern art” in the media of painting and sculpture to those contemporary forms of expression that French sociologist of art Nathalie Heinich has defined as a “new paradigm” opposed to classical modernity.²⁵ Writing from inside the Arab world, Youssef addresses Arab readers who are used to the local context, and not the Western visitor to the exhibition. Herein lies the strength of the text: rarely has an Arab author writing in Arabic had the chance to contribute to a catalogue



Ellaban asserted that although there is no such thing as a unified Arab culture, each country having its own history and experiences, there are some specific cultural traits that are shared in the Arabic-speaking region, allowing one to trace a common picture (14). He explained that for the

of a Western exhibition. But it is also its weakness, since it is difficult reading at some points for those who do not know much about modern art in the Arab world.²⁶ Véronique Rieffel's contribution turns on two points: the importance of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the Orientalist view from which Western curators and audiences write on art from the Arab world (30–37). An Orientalist bias can still be found in the comments on the street art exhibitions held in numerous galleries which became popular after the overthrow of autocratic regimes: for Rieffel, the veil and the beard, the topoi of the popular Orientalist view, have been changed for the banner and the slogan in a new form of exoticization of the Orient. She calls for a re-appropriation of Arab identity by Arabs themselves (34) and thinks that the choice of an Egyptian curator for the present exhibition is a step in the right direction.

Both Youssef and Rieffel pose relevant critical questions, but they are generic ones: the authors do not mention the exhibited objects and one may question whether they offer any clue as to how the artists' works can be understood. As in most similar exhibitions and their related publications, no distinction is made between the diaspora and artists living in the region, and on the ways this may impact on art production.

Massimiliano Gioni, ed.

Here and Elsewhere,

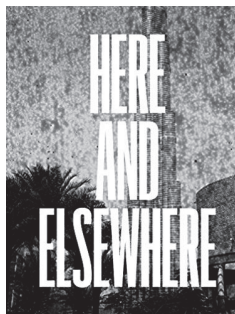
New York: New Museum, 2014

279 pp. b/w and col. ill.

\$55 paper ISBN 9780915557059

Here and Elsewhere, an exhibition held at New York's New Museum in 2014 (July 16–September 28), was conceived very differently than its Parisian counterpart. It was the first exhibition of contemporary art from the Arab world in a well-known New York museum (11). An accompanying book was published with the ambition of enabling the interested reader

to situate the exhibited works within the contexts in which they were created.²⁷ In their introduction, curators Natalie Bell and Massimiliano Gioni explain that they took inspiration for the title from the 1976 Godard documentary movie *Ici et ailleurs*, which had been commissioned by the Service Bureau of the Fatah in order to report the deeds of the revolutionary Palestinian movement (17). In line with Godard, who rather than make a political film decided to “make films politically” (17), the curators intended to show the “concerns about the politics of representation” that have prevailed when Arab artists are showcased in the West. With the increasing number of exhibitions, the question of how artists from this part of the world should be presented had become crucial. Strong criticism has been expressed by artists, curators, and critics from the Arab world, who feel that the schemes of Orientalism, as criticized by Edward Said, are still at stake (18). Refusing to frame Arab artists within a preconceived “Arab” identity, the curators have also rejected the homogenizing view that presupposes a global audience sharing concerns and tastes (20), preferring to present a “diversity within a specificity” (23). It is this “corrective intent” that is specific to most exhibitions about the Middle East as Edward McDonald-Toone puts it.²⁸



In three roundtables associated with the exhibition and moderated by *Bidoun* magazine, selected artists discussed the past, the present, and

the future of the Arab world. The roundtable on the past addressed issues such as nostalgia, childhood experiences, and historical memory (34–41).²⁹ The one on the present had a more immediate political character, dealing with the condition of the Arab world as artists reflect it in their work, with concerns ranging from migration to political oppression (98–105).³⁰ The third panel discussed works that tried to imagine what the artistic prospects of the Arab world could be with ongoing political repression, consumerism, and ever-higher buildings (145–53).³¹

The publication that accompanies the exhibition further includes the essay “Khamaseen” by Yasmine El Rashidi, where the author shows how political and artistic changes in her city, Cairo, are intimately entangled (137–42), as well as “*Bidoun Folio*,” an anthology of recently published critical texts from the magazine on art from the Arab world (201–48).³² And finally, the catalogue contains the already mentioned review article by Media Farzin on exhibitions of Middle Eastern and Arab art (89–97).

As a whole, the catalogue assembles useful information, ranging from discussions with the artists to texts that it would otherwise be difficult to gather (although *Bidoun* is accessible on the web³³). However, a deeper art historical perspective is missing, as is a contextualization of the works beyond the artists' own statements. The palette of selected artists does not greatly vary, being limited to those who have participated in biennales around the world or in blockbuster exhibitions, or have been seen in top galleries. And, as in other exhibitions, there are many diaspora artists, many of whom were born abroad (Kader Attia, Maha Maamoun, or Yto Barrada), but these are presented without a discussion of how living outside of one's homeland impacts on their ways of expressing themselves and on their perception of the Arab world.

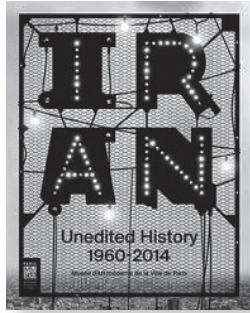
Unedited History, Séquences du moderne en Iran des années 1960 à nos jours

Paris: Paris-Musées, 2014

199 pp., ill.

€ 39.90 paper ISBN 9782759602452

The exhibition *Iran, Unedited History, 1960–2014*, held almost contemporaneously at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris (16 May–24 August 2014), tried a different approach, although with a similar aim, i.e., making modern Iranian art accessible and understandable to Western audiences.³⁴ Interestingly, as in *Here and Elsewhere*, the title of the exhibition refers to cinema (9),³⁵ as if motion pictures would be the only way to grasp an art history still to be written. The exhibition itself had been conceived in three sequences, like a movie: “The ‘modernization’ years, 1960–1978,” “Revolution and Iran–Iraq war, 1979–1988,” “Contemporary Issues, 1989–2014.” Rather than concentrate on the art production itself, *Unedited History* expanded to the development of a modern visual culture in the country, including cinema, photography, cartoons, religious culture, and art festivals. A large part of the exhibition was dedicated to the Shiraz Art Festival, one of the main cultural events of the 1960s and 1970s (52–59). Social criticism in the pre-revolution period appeared in the photographs taken by Kaveh Golestan in Tehran’s New City (Shahr-e No), the red light quarter. Shahr-e No, a citadel in which prostitutes lived isolated from the rest of the population before the Revolution, was completely destroyed and replaced by a green park with a pond in its centre in 1979, a clear sign of the cultural policies of the new regime. Golestan’s work on this area was part of a triptych in which he showed poor men, children with mental diseases, and women living on the margins of society (64). Together with the documentation on the Shiraz Festival, the photographic reportage on this former prostitution site in the capital was part of



the project “Archaeology of the final decade” curated by Vali Mahlouji. The intent was not, as one might guess, to stress the differences between the times before and after the Islamic Revolution, but on the contrary, to render the complexity of the symbolic and relational power systems existing between the two periods.

The second sequence focused on photography and documentary films (for instance those produced by Morteza Avini), as well as on such emblematic artists as Kazem Chalipa, while the third sequence presented contemporary artists, including Narmine Sadeg or Mitra Farahani. Social, cultural, and political developments were thus highlighted in this show, giving the reader/visitor insight into Iran’s cultural and social life. Not surprisingly, the curator behind the exhibition was Catherine David, the first European to deal in depth with art from the Middle East (between 2001 and 2007, she had organized *Contemporary Arab Representations*, a series of exhibitions, workshops, and publications that explored the region’s intellectual environment and gave place to thinkers and theoreticians in order to situate the works of art presented³⁶). David has also been involved in scholarly seminars about the topic and has made the art history of the region one of her priorities. The texts in the catalogue, or rather book (*livre de l’exposition*)—in French only—reflect the concept of the exhibition.³⁷ They include considerations of the relations between art and politics by scholar Anoush

Ganjipour, an article on how oil changed the formerly romanticized archaeological landscape into an industrial one by co-curator Morad Montazami, a contribution by art critic and documentarist Hamed Yousefi on film-maker Morteza Avini, a reflection on image-making in post-revolutionary Iran by researcher and curator Behand Behpoor, and Catherine David’s discussion of the importance of documentaries in the Iranian context.

Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, eds.
Iran Modern

New York/New Haven and London:
Asia Society Museum/Yale University
Press, 2013

256 p. ill.

Cloth ISBN 9780300197365

Fereshteh Daftari and Layla S. Diba, the curators of *Iran Modern*, held in New York a few months earlier, wanted to furnish a panorama of Iran’s modern art, or, to be more precise, of its “classical” modernism, which was strong in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁸ In addition to providing “a deeper understanding of the period,” their purpose was to contextualize contemporary creation within this history (6). The show was preceded by four years of scholarly research. As for the Paris exhibition, the catalogue includes texts on the history of Iranian modern art, architecture, art exhibitions, and the Shiraz Festival. It reproduces some foundational texts, such as the forewords to the Tehran Biennials of 1958 and 1966 and a series of selections from the 1977 Saqqakhaneh group catalogue (225–33).³⁹ The exhibited works were all produced between 1958 and 1979, covering the period from the opening of the First Tehran Biennial to the Islamic Revolution (103–223). Compared with the Paris exhibition, which sought to demonstrate the continuity of certain artists and trends after the Revolution, *Iran Modern* concentrates on the modernist movement in the arts of the pre-revolutionary period. This curatorial choice does

give the exhibition a clear focus on Iran's "roaring sixties and seventies" which, under the patronage of Empress Farah Diba, saw the visual arts becoming a social habit of the elites, before the Revolution imposed "new values" (40). Besides a preciously informative interview with Kamran Diba, former director and architect of the Tehran Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (79–85), two articles by the curators retrace the hist-

revivifying Safavid miniature painting. With the first modernist experiences that followed the foundation of the Faculty of Fine Arts at Tehran University in 1940, Iranian art combined local character and motifs with Western visual language. For Diba, Iranian modernity "was grounded in the nineteenth century, institutionalized as national policy during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, and reimagined in the postwar period" (59).⁴⁰

Omar Kholeif, ed.

Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary—Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation

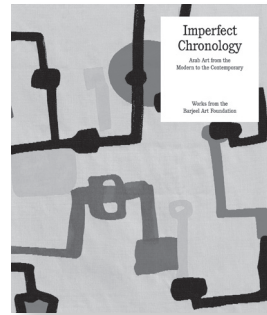
London/Munich/New York:
Whitechapel Gallery/Prestel Verlag, 2015
272 p. ill.
\$ 65 cloth ISBN 9783791354859

Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary is a series of four exhibitions at London's Whitechapel Gallery beginning in 2015. The first two featured modern and the last two are featuring contemporary art. The exhibited works all come from the collection of the Barjeel Foundation in Sharjah (United Arab Emirates), created by Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi. In the introduction to the catalogue Al Qassemi states that in spite of great differences and varieties in beliefs and tongues, Arab art is a reality. For him, there are issues shared by Arab artists, first of all their concern for the Palestinian cause, the Algerian struggle for liberation from French occupation in the 1950s, and the Arab Springs. "Arab art movements," he asserts, "should not be measure[d] according to a Western art historical timeline," since they are "influenced by local and regional political struggles and changes" (15).⁴¹ At a time when the idea of the very existence of an Arab culture is contested by many, Al Qassemi does not hesitate to affirm that common values, founded in the struggles for the region's freedom, tie Arabs together. In the second part of the catalogue's introduction, Omar Kholeif presents the

exhibition concept and the selected artists. Various other texts highlight particular aspects of art and creation in the Arab region (16–24). Palestinian artist and writer Kamal Boullata stresses the importance of the word in the Arab context and the perpetuation of this trend in the modern period, while he thinks that the lifestyle of contemporary artists brings them back to the nomadic habits of their



ory of modern Iranian art. "Redefining Modernism: Pluralist Art before the 1979 Revolution," by Fereshteh Daftary, after discussing in its introductory part the necessity of breaking the "western monologue" on modern art (26), concentrates on the main trends of the 1960s and 1970s: the Saqqakhaneh group with its return to popular visual expression and the abstract movement, where the case of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian illustrates that its inspiration goes back to Iran rather than to New York. Daftary defines Iranian modernism before the Revolution as "polyphonic" and diverse, no single label being apt to summarize it (40). Layla S. Diba, in "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art. From Kamal-al-Molk to Zenderoudi," inserts those same modern developments discussed by Daftary within the longer history of modern art in Iran, starting in the nineteenth century under Qajar rule. She shows how the academic Westernizing orientation under the influence of France-trained painter Kamal-al-Molk coexisted initially with initiatives aiming at



ancestors. Iftikhar Dadi insists on the historical and contemporary relations between the Middle East and South Asia. While detecting the Gulf region as the pivotal point, he also sees in the use of calligraphic signs in modern art a strong tie. Edward McDonald-Toone critically retraces the history of Catherine David's *Contemporary Arab Representations*, whose project had "exemplary resonances for subsequent exhibition projects about the Arab world and the Middle East" (46). Three essays address the influence of the political situation in the region on the visual arts. Nada Shabout writes on Iraqi art and the dispersion of national collections after the 2003 American invasion, while in a contribution on Egypt's participation at the Venice Biennale, Gilane Tawadros focuses on the paradigmatic break that 1967 represented; and Rasha Salti, takes the painting *Al-Wahesh wal Miskeen* (1987) by Fateh Moudaress as a pretext for a sketch on the oppressive situation in Syria.⁴² A fictional text by Rasha Salti and a visual poem by Etel Adnan complete the collection. The exhibited works are reproduced on pages 98 to 238.

The purpose of this series of exhibitions is to give an overall vision of creativity in the Arab world from the early twentieth century onward, from both a historical and a contemporary perspective. In this sense, *Imperfect Chronology* builds up a frame into which the contemporary works exhibited “here and elsewhere” can be placed, as *Iran Modern* and *Unedited History* already did for Iran.

Common to all these exhibitions was the intent of presenting the art production of a whole region, or of a whole country, for longer periods of time, a concept rarely adopted when presenting modern and contemporary Western art (but also common with Chinese or Latin American art). Nat Muller wrote in 2009 that although these all-encompassing exhibitions “end up homogenising instead of diversifying” and create a canon, they are a “necessary evil” since they give artists from the Middle East the opportunity to exhibit it all over the world.⁴³ Interestingly, all three exhibitions on art from the Arab world—*25 ans de créativité arabe*, *Here and Elsewhere*, and *Imperfect Chronology*—questioned the very existence of an Arab identity, of an “Arab art.” This can be understood in a historical perspective and pinpoints the collapse of the ideology of a political Arab unity, but indicates that there is still a solid sense of common belonging to a cultural area defined by the Arabic language. It is a strong statement in face of the present state of destruction of large parts of the Arab world, and goes with a recognition of its differences, be they religious or ethnic, by the curators. In the case of Iran, a state with a long historical tradition of unity, such issues are not relevant (although there are ethnic and religious minorities within the territory). There, it is rather the political question of the rupture caused by the Islamic revolution in 1979 that is foregrounded. While *Iran Modern* suggests by its very conception that modernity

existed in Iran but ended with the advent of the mullahs, *Unedited History* tries a more complex approach, tracking the strategies modernist artists employed in order to express themselves under the new rules dictated by the religious regime.

If these shows share anything, it is that political aspects in a broad sense dominate in the end over art historical considerations, especially when it comes to contemporary art. Neither the works nor the artists’ paths are the focus, but rather the statements their works are supposed to make, statements that respond to the viewers’ expectations when it comes to the Middle East. Even though statements are a central issue in much contemporary art, for Middle Eastern art they seem to dominate over all other considerations. This can be explained by the political situation of the region and its worldwide impact, but Western curators’ limited knowledge of the local art scenes, of their present state, or even more, of their history, is another key to understanding this prevalence of politics over artistic considerations. Thus, artworks cannot but be the signifiers of an anticipated signified, of an expected stance on regional issues. However, if this type of show tended to monopolize the scene in the earlier years of the millennium, exhibitions with a historical background such as *Iran Modern*, *Unedited History*, and *Imperfect Chronology* open new paths and constitute an important contribution to understanding non-Western art contexts. Thus, they are first steps in the building of a global art historical consciousness in international audiences. The works of art chosen for these exhibitions allow an understanding of how art movements, intellectual trends, and political issues came together and forged modern art in the region. And by showing the “missing modern,” this forgotten period of art history of the Middle East, i.e., its “classical modernity” and its academic predecessors, they reconnect the contemporary to its sources. This brings

widely shown contemporary art back to its place within the creative production of the region, and evidences the fact that it does not come out of “nothing,” or, as often incorrectly stated, that it is an avatar of Islamic art. Even though the catalogue texts might not in many cases provide deeper knowledge, and although their quality may be uneven, they constitute the basis for a first approach. Monographic shows on artists, such as those produced by the Tate Gallery on Lebanese sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair (2013), Sudanese calligraphic abstractionist Ibrahim El-Salahi (2013),⁴⁴ and pioneer artist Fahrelnissa Zeid (2017) or by the Mathaf in Doha on Lebanese-American writer and artist Etel Adnan (2014) and on Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi (2016–2017)⁴⁵ to name just a few, consolidate this basic work, and, with their accompanying catalogues, which are often rich with historical documents, help to fill the gaps in the region’s art history. Middle Eastern art might have a timeline separate from that of Western art, but such exhibitions begin to situate it within global art history and contextualize its contemporary production. The discontentment that the average visitor may feel at exhibitions of contemporary art from the Middle East, which is caused by a lack of information that prevents any but immediate and superficial readings, can be alleviated by initiatives of this kind. They give back to the region its broader cultural dimension and potential through the development of historical and documentary richness. ¶

Silvia Naef is professor in the Unité d’Arabe of the University of Geneva.
—silvia.naef@unige.ch

1. *Magiciens de la terre. Exposition présentée du 18 mai au 14 août 1989, Musée national d’art moderne—Centre Georges Pompidou et la Grande Halle—la Villette* (Paris, 1989). In 2014, the Centre Pompidou celebrated the event with a commemorative exhibition, from 2 July to 8 September. Catalogue: Annie Cohen-Solal and Jean-Hubert Martin, eds., *Magiciens de la terre. Retour sur une exposition légendaire* (Paris, 2014).

2. Artnet gives a list of the top twenty biennials: <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/worlds-top-20-biennials-triennials-and-miscellaneous-18811>.

3. "The artists in these states [Turkey and Israel] deserve a distinct analysis and a degree of attention that this book could not have given them, and for this reason I largely omitted them from my discussion." Saeb Eigner et al., *Art of the Middle East. Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran* (London, 2010), n.p. Even when the "Middle East" is given a broader geographical extension, as in the publication by Paul Sloman, ed., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (London, 2009), where the map on p. 8–9 includes Afghanistan, Turkey, and Israel (although ending with Tunisia in the West), the forty-five presented artists, with the exception of one Afghan and two Israelis, are all from the Arab world and Iran.
4. <http://bidoun.org/>.
5. Fereshteh Daftari, ed., *Without Boundary, Seventeen Years of Looking* (New York, 2007).
6. Among the vast literature on the Guggenheim Bilbao, see namely the assessment by María Alvarez Sainz, "(Re)building an Image for a City: Is a Landmark Enough? Bilbao and the Guggenheim Museum, 10 Years Together," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 42, 1 (2012), 100–32.
7. James Elkins, *Is Art History Global?* (New York/London, 2007); Hans Belting, Andrea Budensieg, and Peter Weibel Belting, *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Cambridge MA/London, 2013); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham/Burlington, 2015).
8. For a discussion of major academic publications on modern and contemporary art in the Middle East, see Silvia Naef, "Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Iran and Turkey—Reintroducing the 'Missing Modern,'" *Asiatische Studien/Études asiatiques* 70, 4 (2016): 1005–18.
9. Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Olivier Marcel, "Exhibition Catalogues in the Globalization of Art. A Source for Social and Spatial Art History," *Art@S Bulletin* 4, 2 (2015), 84, accessible online, <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/artlas/vol4/iss2/8/>. The authors' purpose is to show that a serial reading of exhibition catalogues throws new perspectives on art history and can highlight the importance of "peripheral" regions.
10. Media Farzin, "Exhibit A: On the History of Contemporary Arab Art Shows," in Massimo Gioni, ed., *Here and Elsewhere* (New York, 2014), 89–97. Another, also not exhaustive, listing of exhibitions of art from the Arab world since the early 2000s is to be found in Nat Muller, "Contemporary Art in the Middle East," in Paul Sloman, ed., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (London, 2009), 13–14.
11. In 2013, the 55th edition of the Venice Biennale included the national pavilions of Bahrain, Egypt (permanent pavilion at the Giardini), Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (and, for the larger regional context, also those of Bangladesh, Indonesia and Central Asia); the 56th edition (2015) Egypt, Iran, Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates. In the 57th edition (2017), Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates participate.
12. *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (London, 2009).
13. 18 June–10 October 2010. Hans Günter Golinski, ed., *Unerwartet/Unexpected. Von der islamischen Kunst zur zeitgenössischen Kunst* (Bochum, 2010).
14. Nada Shabout et al., eds., *Sajjil. A Century of Modern Art* (Milan, 2010); Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, eds., *Told-Untold-Retold, 23 Stories of Journeys Through Time and Space* (Milan, 2010).
15. Cf. Andrea Lerner and Avinoam Shalem, eds., *After One Hundred Years: The 1910 Exhibition "Meisterwerke muhammedanischer Kunst" Reconsidered* (Leiden/Boston, 2011), and Eva-Maria Troelenberg, *Eine Ausstellung wird besichtigt: die Münchner "Ausstellung von Meisterwerken muhammedanischer Kunst" 1910 in kultur- und wissenschaftsgeschichtlicher Perspektive* (Frankfurt am Main, 2011).
16. 17 September 2010–9 January 2011. Chris Dercon, et al., eds., *The Future of Tradition—The Tradition of Future, 100 years after the Exhibition Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art in Munich* (Munich, 2010).
17. Pascal Amel, ed., *Paris et l'art contemporain arabe/Paris and Contemporary Arab Art* (Paris, 2011).
18. 29 April–5 October 2016. www.guggenheim.org/exhibition/but-a-storm-is-blowing-from-paradise-contemporary-art-of-the-middle-east-and-north-africa.
19. Cf. Brahim Ben Hossain Alaoui, ed., *Art contemporain arabe, Collection du Musée* (Paris, [1988]).
20. Cf. Silvia Naef, "'Hidden Treasures'? Museum Collections of Modern Art from the Arab World," in Rami Daher and Irene Maffi, eds., *The Politics and Practices of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East, Positioning the Material Past in Contemporary Society* (London, 2014), 270–89.
21. Not to be confused with the Centre Georges Pompidou's 2013–15 exhibition of the permanent collection, *Modernités plurielles 1905–1970*, curated by Catherine Grenier. English title: *Plural modernities*.
22. *Modernité plurielle, Art contemporain arabe*, 8 December 2007–9 March 2008. For a review in English of the show, see David Tresilian, "The Institut at 20," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, issue 875, 13–9 December 2007. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/Archive/2007/875/cu32.htm>.
23. For more information on the exhibition, see the IMA's website: www.imarabe.org/exposition-ima-6413.
24. There were 6 Saudi artists, 5 for each of Egypt and Morocco, 3 for Lebanon, Tunisia and Iraq, 2 for the UAE, Algeria, Syria, and Kuwait, and 1 each for Libya, Qatar, Palestine, Bahrain, Oman, and Sudan. The Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Jordan, Mauritania, Somalia, and Yemen were not represented. The complete list of the exhibited artists can be found on www.imarabe.org/exposition-ima-6413.
25. Nathalie Heinrich, *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain* (Paris, 2014).
26. For instance, the whole passage (p. 24) on Iraqi artist Shaker Hassan Al Said (1925–2004), the theoretical founder of the *hurufiyya* movement, might be quite obscure to the average Western reader.
27. On the notion of the catalogue as a "book," see Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel and Olivier Marcel, "Exhibition Catalogues in the Globalization of Art," 86.
28. Edward McDonald-Toone, "The Exhibition and the Agora: Contemporary Arab Representations (2001–2007)," in Omar Kholeif, ed., *Imperfect Chronology: Arab Art from the Modern to the Contemporary—Works from the Barjeel Art Foundation* (London/Munich/New York, 2015), 45.
29. With artists Ito Barrada, Anna Boghigian, Rokni Haerizadeh, and Wael Shawki, 34–41.
30. With Etel Adnan, Basma Alsharif, Bouchra Khalil, Jamal Penjweny, and Hrair Sarkissian.
31. With Marwa Arsanios, Simone Fattal, ccc, Wafa Hourani, and Maha Maamoun.
32. It includes topics as reviews of the exhibitions *Word into Art* (London, 2006), *Ethnic marketing* (Geneva, 2007) or the dynamics of globalization and its effects on the perception of Middle Eastern art.
33. <https://bidoun.org/>
34. For a critical note on this exhibition (in German), see Katrin Nahidi: "Unedited History: Iran 1960–2014," Rezension der Ausstellung im Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, "Kritische Berichte 2" (2015): 135–37.
35. The catalogue was published only in French. *Unedited History* was shown again at Rome's MAXXI from December 11, 2014 to March 29, 2015, with an English website text and an Italian/English catalogue: *Iran Unedited History, 1960–2014: Sequenze del moderno in Iran dagli anni sessanta ai giorni nostri*, Rome, MAXXI/curabooks, 2014. See www.fondazioneamaxxi.it/en/events/unedited-history-iran-1960-2014/.
36. *Tamass, Contemporary Arab Representations: Beirut/Lebanon 1* (Barcelona, 2002); *Tamass, Contemporary Arab Representations: Cairo 2* (Barcelona/Rotterdam, 2004). The third part of the series, *The Iraqi Equation* (2005–06) did not result in a publication.
37. Co-curators were Odile Burluraux, Morad Montazami, Narmine Sadeg, and Vali Mahlouj for "Archaeology of the final decade". Cf. also the online press map (in French) for more information: www.mam.paris.fr/sites/default/files/documents/dp_iran_1.pdf.
38. For more information on the exhibition, see the museum's website: <http://asiassociety.org/new-york/exhibitions/iran-modern>.
39. The Saqqakhaneh group aimed at introducing elements of popular and calligraphic traditions into modern art.
40. Leyla S. Diba, "The Formation of Modern Iranian Art," 59.
41. For more information on the exhibition, see the gallery's website: www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/barjeel-art-foundation-collection-imperfect-chronology-debating-modernism/.
42. Nada Shabout, "Collecting Modern Iraqi Art," 51–61. First published in 2012: Gilane Tawadros, "Egypt at the Venice Biennale: 1967 and The Year That Changed Everything," 63–68 (there are some mistakes in the history of the Egyptian participation at the Venice Biennale), Rasha Salti, "A Speculative Reading of *Al-Wahesh wal Miskeen* by Fateh Moudarres," 77–79.
43. Nat Muller, "Contemporary Art in the Middle East," 14.
44. Jessica Morgan ed., *Saloua Raouda Choucri* (London, 2013); Salah M. Hassan, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (Long Island City, NY/Seattle, 2012).
45. Hans-Ulrich Obrist et al., eds., *Etel Adnan in all Her Dimensions* (Doha/Milan, 2014); *Dia Al-Azzawi: A Retrospective (From 1963 until Tomorrow)*, Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art and Qatar Museums Gallery Al Riwaq, Doha, 17 October 2016–16 April 2017. Curated by Catherine David. The exhibition catalogue had not been published by April 2017.