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# (UN)VEILED: ANTAGONISMS OF RECENT PAST

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**THIS TEXT** was intended to be a review on the recent large-scale Saatchi-initiated exhibition of Middle Eastern art entitled *Unveiled*. It was unavoidable to scrutinize the contemporary act of producing a geographically marked exhibition regarding its contexts of post-colonialism, construction of identity, notions of difference, binarism of the exotic and the primitive; and its two decades of presence in the field of art.

I will introduce selected gatherings and discussions on exhibitions as 'culturally' representative, on the institutional reproduction of localized art practice in relation to its conceptual positioning and on relevant production of meaning. Throughout the discussion I will focus on the exhibition *Unveiled* as containing a filtered variety of iconography and will conclude with the questions of what it means in our contemporary world of understanding diversity and positioning difference.

## THE CONTENT SPECIFIC

In 1997, Michael Brenson participated in a conference at the Rockefeller Foundation's Conference and Study Center in Bellagio, Italy, which aimed to investigate the rapidly developing field of international contemporary art exhibitions. The panels were made up of fifteen curators from Africa, Asia, Australia, Latin America, Europe and the United States. The conference took the form of individual presentations of each curator marking the new era on the broader stage of global cultural politics. The year 1997 is a significant marker in the international sequence of art events if we recall the international biennials such as Cairo, Havana, Venice, Istanbul and Johannesburg as well as documenta X, which all coincidentally focused on issues of "nationalism versus internationalism or transnationalism; indigenous cultures versus the global media; handmade traditions versus technological networks; respect for the intimate experience of art versus a belief in curatorial interventions that can make the artistic message, and sometimes even that intimacy itself, broadly accessible; belief in the intrinsic value of art versus obligation to put art in the service of extraordinary social and political needs." (1) These investigations have been important to further develop the discussion of global politics of art into a rather self-aware dimension of doing and making. That is to say, the questioning of binaries and polarities in the aesthetics of production leads to the legitimization of the cause that the artist serves and the political struggle he is identified with, into a poetic, thematic, psychological, philosophical and political discourse. Throughout the conference, the issue of transparency and openness was discussed marking a common meaningful perspective of approaching and elaborating the new condition of socio-political strands. One of the main outcomes of that gathering was the questioning of the fundamental aspect of production of common knowledge; thus the participants investigated the possibility of awareness and acceptance of instability and uncertainty becoming a source of community knowledge, wonder and revelation. As Brenson reports: "The discussions in Bellagio underlined the importance of several related constellations of words. The constellation that includes impurity, partiality, and incompleteness suggests the rejection of any assumption of absolute authority, conclusive knowledge,

or human or cultural essence. Another constellation includes words like hybridity, reciprocity, negotiation, and reconciliation, suggesting the pressing need many people feel to listen to one another and to acknowledge and communicate with realities different from their own." (2) Starting from the late 1980s, we can observe an increasing transformation from situation-specific to context-specific exhibitions where exhibition making is handled as quantifier of politics that led to production of meaning towards the reproduction of social process. In this view, the geographically marked exhibitions cause modes of engagement to be perceived as modes of reception of a certain understanding and production of modernity. The modernity that has been elaborated is not singular, but rather a multitude of diversity in the sense that each locality absorbs and formulates a modernity of its own in relation to its social, political, historical, sensual and economic constellations. Hence, rather than centralizing an understanding of modernity and its aspects, it is more productive and enriching to recognize other modernities that are similar to or distinct from the one that is subjected. That is to say, if we talk about western modernism as the only modernity possible, it will lead to denying the validity of other modernities like Indian, Turkish etc. which do not necessarily completely overlap with the former yet still perform a modernist position of some sort.

Questioning global modernities as a multitude of modernities sprung in the aftermath of three main exhibitions that took place in 1989, such as Havana Biennial; *The Other Story*, Hayward Gallery, London; *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. These exhibitions were the main focus of the conference entitled *Exhibitions and the World at Large* that took place early spring this year at Tate Britain. Among the speakers of the conference were Oriana Baddeley, Jean Fisher, Sarat Maharaj and Charles Esche who have been thinking around the notions of multitude, difference, western and non-western separation. Throughout the conference, institutionalized criticism was at stake while the autonomy of the artistic practice was investigated. One of the artists, Sonya Boyce, who has participated at the exhibition *The Other Story*, argued that they were, as artists, positioned as passive and active at the same time while they were categorized as representatives of Black Art. In respect to Boyce's remark, Jean Fisher commented that non-western means black people and foreigners, and multi-cultural stands for the non-British in the special case of *The Other Story*, which stood strongly among the discussion.

One of the significant questions one has to ask herself is the question of: How can a visual argument precede its conceptualization when that very argument is preconditioned as a cultural representative of the unknown? Here the unknown refers to the exotic, unfamiliar, and uncommon. This is the main question to be answered when we talk about exhibitions marking artworks as cultural artifacts, which imply the formulation of socio-historical, psychological, economic, and political territories. If unanswered these questions will stay as the affinities of the tribal of the modern where the hegemonic containment will define visual production and artistic autonomy.

## THE EXHIBITION SPECIFIC

*Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (3) took place in the Saatchi Gallery between January 30 and May 9 in London. The exhibition displayed almost 90 works, mostly large-scale paintings with a selection of sculptures and installations, by 19 artists originating from various countries such as Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Syria and Algeria, framed as the Middle East. This is the second exhibition to have been held in the new premises of Saatchi. The first exhibition, in a similar attitude of encapsulating a geographically marked practice, focussed on art from China under the title *The Revolution Continues: New Chinese Art*; whereas the following exhibition, on show at the moment, focuses on American art, namely *Abstract America—New Painting and Sculpture*. In its location on



Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London  
Photographs: © Stephen White

Sloane Square, the new building stands like a fortress of art. Consisting of 13 galleries and a project room for displaying art with additional function rooms, the new building has three floors and a grotesque entrance marked by columns and a generous garden.

The exhibition, in line with its title, objectifies, demystifies, repeats, and scrutinizes the veil. Most of the artworks deal with the veil directly and, most of the time, bluntly. The most obvious example of such utterances is by Shadi Ghadirian. Ghadirian stages floral-patterned chadors worn at the shrines of Iran as portraits of women bearing various kitchen and household items instead of their faces in her series of c-print photographs entitled *Like Everyday Series*, 2000-2001. That is to say, the photograph series displays the faces of women which have been replaced with graters, sieves and irons. These series of photographs are announced as a humorous approach to the condition of the women as domestic prisoners in Eastern countries. In the guide, the curator of the exhibition announces one of the pieces in the series in these words: "Replacing the expected monotone of the black chador with vibrantly patterned fabrics, each portrait suggests a vivacious individuality and character, belying the limitations of stereotype. Similarly, the mundane objects, when transformed into faces, become highly poised and charismatic caricatures, embodying individual personalities." (4) The constellation of the words such as individual, character, and stereotype brings forth a cliché reading of a literal artwork. These words, belonging to the Western conceptualization of the social, achieve nothing but a murmur around a piece, whereas the piece in itself cannot posit anything beyond a bare translation of its imagery into the preconditioned Western discourse of receiving works from a different locality. Hence, the works become illustrations of the prejudices about women in veils domesticated in household facilities and without the will to decide or the mind to think. That is to say, the works reproduce what is already expected to be the norms of the Middle East and the dominant aspect of conservative societies of Islam.

Ghadirian is not alone in her depiction of the veil as an object of demarcation. Kader Attia, in his piece entitled *Ghost* (2007) fills one of the galleries with 240 figures carved of aluminum foil, creating an 'as if' condition of ranks of veiled women, kneeling in prayer. *Ghost*, celebrated as one of the striking pieces in the exhibition through its depiction of void in these figures, stands out as a dry enactment of a like situation. The scale of the installation creates the illusion of impact, as it occupies almost the whole space of Gallery 6. The work is rather a poor appropriation of the supposed condition of women in the Middle East. The hollow depiction of emptiness creates a one-to-one matching of banalities assigned to women in veils living in Eastern Countries. The set of references of the piece might be the divergent struggles of women captured in the state of obedience, even this reference for me an over-reading of the work.

The installation is a static work of art, which functions more on the level of assuring the viewer in his prejudices and claims without depth.

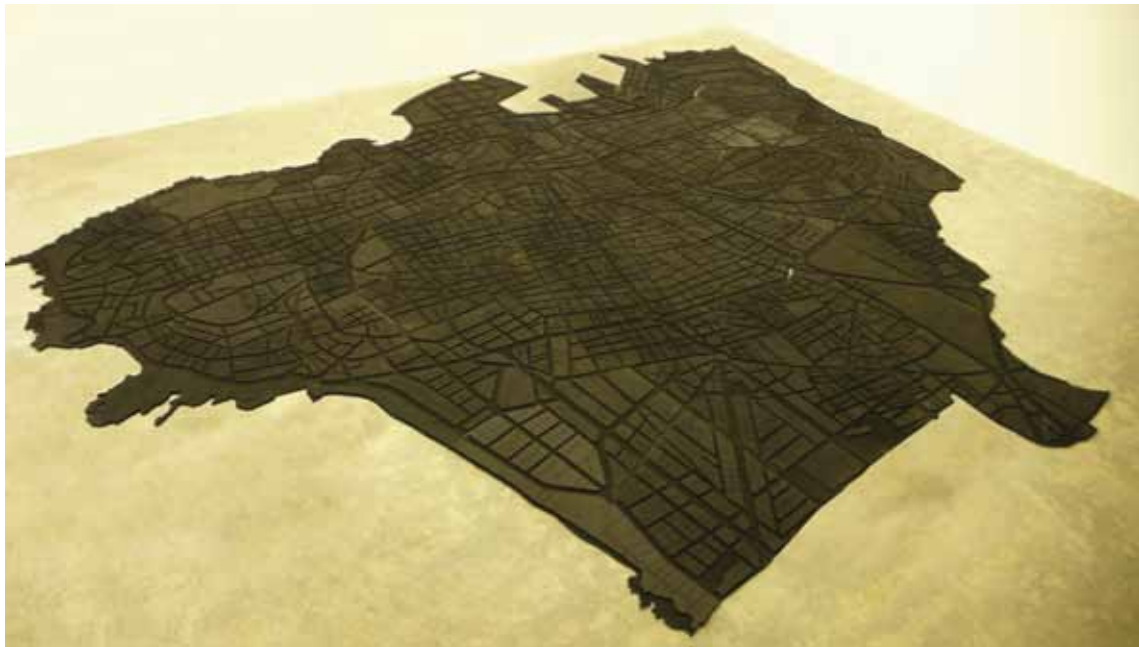


Shadi Ghadirian, Untitled from the Like Everyday Series, 2000-2001  
C-print, 72 x 72 in / 183 x 183 cm





Jeffar Khaldi, Frozen, 2007  
Oil on canvas, 90.6 x 102.4 in / 230 x 260 cm



Marwan Rechmaoui, Beirut Caoutchouc, 2004 - 2008  
Engraved rubber, 1.2 x 324.8 x 265.7 in / 3 x 825 x 675 cm



Kader Attia, Ghost, 2007  
Aluminum foil, dimensions variable





Rokni Haerizadeh, Typical Iranian Wedding, 2008  
Oil on canvas, 78.7 x 118.1 in / 200 x 300 cm (each panel)  
78.7 x 236.2 in / 200 x 600 cm (overall)





Nadia Ayari, *The Fence*, 2007  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 56 in / 152.5 x 142.3 cm



Diana Al-Hadid, *The Tower of Infinite Problems*, 2008  
Polymer gypsum, steel, plaster, fibreglass, wood, polystyrene, cardboard, wax and paint  
Part 1: 95 x 174 x 99 in / 241.3 x 442 x 251.5 cm  
Part 2: 63 x 83 x 105 in / 160 x 210.8 x 266.7 cm



Ahmed Alsoudani, *We Die Out of Hand*, 2007  
Charcoal, pastel and acrylic on paper, 108 x 96 in / 274.3 x 243.8 cm





Tala Madani, *Holy Light*, 2006  
Marker and oil on canvas, 48 x 48 in / 122 x 122 cm

One of the other works is from Shirin Fakhim. She has installed eight life-size figures under the title *Tehran Prostitute* (2008). Fakhim has been influenced by the fact that the estimated number of prostitutes in Tehran was 100,000 in 2002. This fact in relation to Iran's international reputation as a conservative moralistic country has lead her to produce figures from footballs, torn and patched stockings, exaggeratedly plumped brassieres and cheap market-stall items shoved down stockings, each one finished off with a wig on top and a pair of trademark stiletto boots down below. With their badly stitched-up crotches and wayward hanks of rope revealing pre-op transsexuals, these prostitute dolls become rude jokes, provoking thoughts of cross-dressing and the sordid reality of poverty, domestic violence and human trafficking. The piece works on the level of objectification of human trafficking and remains in the domain of semiology.

One of the other celebrated pieces in the exhibition is by Hayv Kahraman. Her poetic depiction of the sacrifice of the lamp becomes the subject of a bet by one of the critics who have reviewed the exhibition. Joanna Pitman from *Times Online* declares: "I would be prepared to bet that Hayv Kahraman, another Iraqi from Baghdad, has studied early Chinese art and the masterpieces of Renaissance Florence, as well as Islamic miniatures, because her depictions, particularly the diptych, *Carrying on Shoulder 1 & Carrying on Shoulder 2* are influenced by the serenity, delicacy and angelic beauty of these periods of explosive artistic riches." [5]

Additionally, Ramin Haerizadeh has produced a series of manipulated photographs of two semi-naked men entitled *Men of Allah*. Based on photographs of the artist, they show two bearded and heavily hirsute men cavorting in fleshy and sensuously pornographic poses. The vibrant colors in the photographs make the pieces attractive to the eye of the visitor, inviting them to a tale that is a depiction of an alternative narrative of foundations of belief.

Diana Al-Hadid's sculptures of impressive towers are made of crude materials such as plaster, Styrofoam, wax, and cardboard. Al-Hadid's pieces are the most outstanding works in the entire exhibition; they have a language of their own and a story to tell. *The Tower of Infinite Problems* (2008) poses as a toppled skyscraper which, viewed from both ends, creates the optical illusion of convergence. Thus, two towers in one embodiment, creating an infinity around the concepts of civilization, history, and futurity.

Halim Al-Karim has produced large-scale triptychs portraying mostly women's faces. The expressions and the blurred states of the images positioned on each side result in bringing the one in the middle to the front. I fail to grasp the piece in its proclaimed relation to Sufi tradition and belief. The text included in the guide mostly talks about Al-Karim's personal history of surviving the Gulf War or being friends with political prisoners in Abu Ghraib during Saddam's regime.

The exhibition is announced and guided in a way in which the works are brought to resemble, cite, and refer to well-known artists and artworks of the Western tradition of art. The specific announcements are: Ahmed Alsoudani's paintings resemble Goya and George Grosz; Rokni Haerizadeh's paintings are reminiscent of Eric Fischl's paintings of nudes on beaches; Tala Madani's painting *Pose* (2006) stages glory with clichéd romanticism redolent of Gauguin's Tahitian virgins; Nadia Ayari's *The Book* (2008) which illustrates the Quran refers to Malevich's *Black Square*; Ali Banisadr's paintings are often compared to Hieronymus Bosch. [6] All this contextualization also indicates that the exhibition makers do not even have trust in the works to stand alone as themselves but that they would rather let them stand as associates with their Westerns alike for an audience of the West to understand the East.

The exhibition is a bearer of preconceived situations told in broader perspective in order to translate what it thinks of the other. The art selected, commissioned and bought from the Middle East displays what is imagined to be taking place in the Middle East on the surface of its containments. It is very important to keep in mind that all the artworks in the exhibition have been bought by Saatchi and now belong to his collection. We will not be seeing these art works in various biennials and in high demand in the art market.

### THE CONCLUSION SPECIFIC

If we position and think of exhibitions as the small change of the universal (*La Monnaie de l'Absolu*), then we should be able to talk about temporary actions and positions. Hence each and every exhibition produces a temporality with its duration, its content and its visual production, which relates, refers to, engages with, and produces the socio-political aesthetic realities of the present. The references are diverse in their nature due to the diversity of agencies. In the specific case of exhibitions as cultural representatives, a paradox emerges. A paradox of the temporal and the universal, since the temporality as artistic ethos is fixed to a permanency in geographically attributed exhibitions. That is to say, the main issue of the short change of the universal cannot be achieved since it is fenced in the triangle of presumptions, prejudices and radicalism. In other words, the imagery and the content attributed to the specificity of that artistic practice becomes the definer of the artistic convergences as has happened place for the Scandinavian art as art that deals with sound or for Balkan art which displays blood and is about land, or for Turkish art which deals with identity and nationalism. These definitions are rigid categorizations of an artistic practice, not only for the geographical context but also for the individual artist who does or does not focus on these issues. Hence the paradox in this specific case of the Middle Eastern art exhibition would be the fact that each and every radical artist of the Middle East deals with means of suppression generated by religion and society. This fixation on the content creates a general understanding and expectation of art from the Middle East where exceptions will not be ordinary.

Additionally, belonging anywhere in particular becomes multiple belongings. Hence defining an artist in relation to where he or she comes from and encapsulating his or her practice in the margins of expectations is actually transforming the domain of the visual into the domain of the rhetorical, which results in the institutionalization of cultural diversity. It is needless to mention the shrinking spaces of encounter or the demarcation of the body of knowledge in the light of these attitudes; or the acquiescence to promotion through the commodified signs of ethnicity which renders them complicit with the Western desire for the exotic other, against which it can measure its own superiority.

It is important to reevaluate what we are made to experience. Exhibitions such as *Unveiled* are not displayers of a radical art from geographies in conflict; rather, they produce geo-ethnic entertainment. Consuming these alike exhibitions as beholders of knowledge will lead to the overall failure of producing the aesthetics to conceptualize art beyond the boundaries of Eurocentric aesthetic theories and their hierarchical value systems that will lead to the values of art institutions becoming national patrimony, which in turn is intimately tied to myths of an idealized national identity.

### NOTES

- [1] Michael Brenson, *The Curator's Moment*, slightly abridged version of the original text from 1998, 2004, Theory of Contemporary Art since 1985, edited by Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, p. 55, Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- [2] 1810, p. 58.
- [3] Artists exhibited are: Marwan Rechmaoui, Ahmad Morshedloo, Hayv Kahraman, Diana Al-Hadid, Rokni Haerizadeh, Halil Al-Karim, Ahmed Alsoudani, Kader Attia, Tala Madani, Laleh Khorramian, Jeffar Khaldi, Wafa Hourani, Ramin Haerizadeh, Shirin Fahkim, Shadi Ghadirian, Nadia Ayari, Ali Banisadr, Sara Rahbar, Barbad Golshiri.
- [4] *Picture to Picture Guide, Unveiled: New Art from Middle East*, Saatchi, for take away, gallery 11
- [5] [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/visual\\_arts/article5592197.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/visual_arts/article5592197.ece)
- [6] All the information has been sourced from the exhibition guide, published by Saatchi Gallery to provide visitors with information.

**Fatoş Üstek** is an independent curator and art critic. Received an MA in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths College, and a BA in Mathematics at Boğaziçi University. Curated *Here..There..Abroad..* in ifa, Stuttgart, ifa, Berlin and rum46, Aarhus; *Moment of Agency* in Kunsthalle Basel and Kunstmuseum Bern; *Art-Actually* in Istanbul, among others. Currently working on the third leg of a trilogy of exhibitions. The trilogy, investigates the notion of "now" in relation to the socio-political aesthetic realities of the present; is composed of *The Last Moment*, Kunstfabrik, Berlin, 2007; *Immortality sustaining the present the past the future*, Tent, Rotterdam, 2009. The third leg will be taking place in 2011 in London. Has been publishing texts for catalogues, magazines internationally (*Kunst(h)art*; *Tema Celeste*, *Turbulens*, *Geniş Aç* in Turkey...). Founder and editor of the online Contemporary Art Magazine *Nowiswere*. Has given lectures in HfG, Karlsruhe; NBK, Berlin; Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin; Istanbul Modern; Europlast, Istanbul. Currently lives and works in London.

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