Scripting Inclusion

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Submitted to the
Department of Architecture
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science in Architecture Studies

at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

June 2021

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ABSTRACT:

Efforts to bring underrepresented modernist women artists of Arabic speaking countries into the scope of Western art exhibitions has been on the rise, particularly since the early 2000s. Who decides what artists get shown and how their stories are told? What are the power structures guiding their inclusion? I inspect the consequences of the prevailing power dynamic through a feminist lens. This thesis is meant to offer a way of reviewing these systems of power so it can be more explicitly analyzed and discussed in tandem with how art is inscribed into Western discourse.

Thesis Adviser: Renée Green

Acknowledgments

As part of the cohort that experienced the onset of Covid-19 – I want to acknowledge the challenges everyone has had to go through in order to get to this point. This thesis is a culmination of both my personal and professional journeys. It is stitched together with a lot of emotional threading that has opened up new ways of seeing the world, let alone artworlds. It is as much a document of research as it is a document of a turning point in personal healing. There are alas, so many wonderful people to acknowledge who have been crucial to this thesis and my own personal development. I first want to thank my inspiring thesis committee in the Art, Culture and Technology department, who have been integral to the dynamic form this thesis was able to take:

Thank you to my incredible adviser, Renée Green who took a chance on me. Your immediate enthusiasm and generous spirit have been so energizing and generative. This thesis would not have been possible without your gentle, discerning wisdom and astounding range of reference points from science fiction, art criticism to poetry and so much more.

I want to thank my readers: Jesal Thakkar Kapadia, thank you for walking with me. You have been so encouraging, insightful and your deep engagement in the feminist theoretical potential of collectivity has shifted my own subjectivity; Lara Baladi, your brilliant ability to see the big picture and provide such succinct direction and insights with such care has been so important and crucial.

Elizabeth Wood for doing a formative independent study with me in tandem with your feminist thought class in the Spring of 2020. Your kind, insightful and humane spirit during an uncertain time guided the initial trajectory of this research.

Thank you to Nasser Rabbat for bringing me into the orbit of the HTC/AKPIA program and your important work; coming to MIT was a lifeline when I needed one most. I want to send my gratitude to everyone who was able to take the time to speak or correspond with me at various stages during my time at MIT: Salwa Mikdadi, Anneka Lennsen, Nada Shabout, Patrick Kane, Rania Ghosn, Jessica Gerschultz, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty. Thank you to Sarah Rogers and Kirsten Scheid, who's work I draw on heavily in this thesis. Thank you, Mary Kelly, and Ceren Özpinar for your incredible new resource *Under the Skin*.

I want to thank my family (Mom, sisters, brother-from-another-mother, and my nephews). To my sisters, who have been my rocks through so much difficulty and complexity these past few years. I have such deep gratitude to you Daliah, your brilliant, poetic, coherent editorial guidance on the page and off. You are incidentally a secret expert on the art world. Jasmeen, you are my warm, comforting refuge – your love, support and brilliant clarity of advice has gotten me through so much.

Thank you to my close friends and fellow comrades in the arts in the Arab Gulf and beyond who inspire and shape my thinking: my dearest, cosmic friends Alia Al Sabi, Tima Ouzden; Tina Barouti for our wonderful conversations; Kathy Zarur, Nabila Abdel Nabi, Laura Metzler, Rachel Dedman, thank you for your care and insights. Beth Derderian and your incredible, necessary dissertation.

My cohort companion and kindred spirit Reza Daftarian, Meitha Al Mazrouie, for your warmth though we are now cold oceans apart; Manar Moursi, Ayesha Shaikh, Zainab Taymuree, Rachel Hirsch and Daniella Maamari – we shared so much love, care and laughter. Aidan Flynn for our long, consoling conversations.

Cathleen Collins of the Office of Graduate Education for being supportive, insightful and deeply understanding. Marylin Levine of the Writing Center who helped me probe the undercurrents of my thesis story. Thank you to the incredible administrative team Jose Luis Arguello, Cynthia Stewart, Kathleen Brearley and Renée Caso – your tireless labor behind the scenes is deeply appreciated.

And to my therapists, the unsung women that have quietly held me over the years with such care, and who have brought me through the toughest times to guide me to some of the most important, seismic life lessons so far.

I also want to thank my lawyers too, I've learned a lot. ☺

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1. Introduction

On women artists and simulacrums

Figure 1 Walid Raad, *Yet more letters to the reader, exhibition view*, Fondazione Volume, 2017, © 2016 Federico Ridolfi, courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg. (credit note from gallery)

To begin exploring the question of how artists of the Arabic speaking world are represented in the West, I needed to trace the trajectory of my own curiosity around this subject.[1] My exploration of this

[1] When I use the term "West" I am referring to art institutions and epistemologies that are based in and primarily generate out of North America, United Kingdom and Europe and how they have been involved in and with art sectors of the "Arab world." However, there are distinctions and variations between these locations and other territories part of the Global North. In terms of the "Arab world" or Arab countries, I am referring to Arabic speaking nation-states that in and of themselves comprise diverse cultures, ethnic groups, sects, languages, and among other delineations. In this thesis the key areas I will be focusing on is the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon and Egypt.

question as it relates to women in particular, began in 2017. It was during my final year working as a curator for a private art collection based in the Arab Gulf, which had a mandate to include modernist artists of Arab countries. One day, I received a message with an image of an art installation in Rome by Lebanese-American conceptual artist Walid Raad (b.1967), which left me feeling uneasy for a reason that, at the time, I couldn't put into words. The installation, called *Yet More Letters to the Reader* (2015) (Fig.1), included a series of wooden crates stacked upright and against each other. Painted on their surface were enlarged reproductions of modernist artworks drawn from the collection I had worked for since its inception in 2010.[2] The replicas were of paintings by artists such as Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989), Huguette Caland (1931-2019), Marwan (1934-2016), Jafar Islah (1946) and others. The works, which I was still involved in curating, were of course familiar to me — I'd been intimately involved in researching and writing about them, frequently moving them across geographic borders and giving them a wider online presence in an effort to help the artists reach new audiences. That was the collection's aim and I was diligently trying to bring it to fruition, naively thinking that raising the profile of regional artists meant that I was part of a call to redress Western domination of the global art world, still centered on a reverence for Euro-American artistic production and practices.

Yet somehow seeing how Raad had appropriated this collection, dramatically enlarging the artwork and replicating them on crates — changed the way I looked at all my hours and years of labor, behind the scenes, I had to ask myself: what is my role in this exaggerated appropriation that Raad—a contemporary artist often engaged in meta-narrative critique—has created? Rather than being part of a change aimed at

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[2] In the years between 2010 and 2018 I worked in various capacities as a founding member and curator for the Barjeel Art Foundation - an unofficially incorporated foundation during such time - that fronts the collection of currently over 1000 artworks of a local collector based in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The collection hosted 31 exhibitions since its inception and in the years between 2015 and 2018 in particular was a peak time where 19 exhibitions were mounted. Seven of which took place in 2017 at international venues before the institution suddenly scaled back its operations in late 2017 to pause the rapid campaign and allow for more collection purchasing power. See Al Qassemi, Sultan Sooud. 2020. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi: Developing Art Histories. https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/sultan-sooud-al-qassemi-developing-art-histories/.; Dawson Aimee, "Barjeel Art Foundation Regroups with Long-Term Loans and New Partnerships," *The Art Newspaper*, March 20, 2018, http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/the-next-step-for-barjeel-art-foundation.The Art Newspaper and The National

empowering artists excluded from the Western-centric canon of modern art, he had forced me into seeing myself as part of the complex, imbricated problem of how patriarchal power structures create and shape artistic canons. I had thus become part of an already well-established, well-oiled machine that was sending works to Western institutions for validation – a mostly invisible role, executing someone else's vision, with little actual agency of my own. What I didn't realize until I started embarking on my thesis research in 2020 was that Raad is also part of this well-oiled machine, despite all of his meticulous, well-researched critiques of institutional domination that determine how history is written. Notably, Raad is highly respected and praised by Western critics and scholars for his incisive objections to the way institutions control how we see and codify art. I needed to look no further than the appropriated paintings on the crates to see that he was, in fact, part of the system he was criticizing.

The artist credited for painting the replicas was Suha Traboulsi, a fictional woman invented by Raad as an avatar for himself and some of his artistic output. He's described her as a Palestinian conceptual artist who quit painting, dabbled in performance art and in the 1970s, was dubbed "the witch of contemporary art" in the Arab world.[3] One art critic in *Frieze Magazine* hailed her emergence in his practice as representing a "perfect surrogate and ideal predecessor—a feminist forebear with the capacity to restore an art-historical narrative that has been otherwise broken, forgotten or dismissed."[4] This critic's reading seemed compelling, but also sparked a new unease in me; I wasn't sure I believed it. How could a simulacrum of a woman artist scripted by a male artist represent a forgotten history when real women artists exist and have existed? From here, my curiosity on the power structures behind inclusion in art took on a feminist dimension. Using tools of decolonial feminist theory to pivot my investigations made it clear to me that the gendered relation

[3] Massimiliano Gioni et al., eds., *Here and Elsewhere* (New York, NY: New Museum, 2014).

[4] Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "One Take: Postscript to the Arabic Translation | Frieze," *Frieze* (blog), accessed November 12, 2020, https://www.frieze.com/article/one-take-postscript-arabic-translation.

between this artist and avatar was very much connected to the larger intertwined patriarchal structure and power dynamic behind the concocting of art historical canons.

Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's research into institutionalized diversity is especially relevant to offering a reading of the situation in two particular ways. Firstly is her analysis on citational practice – how researchers and writers repeatedly cite some voices over others, creating over time what she calls "disciplines."[5] When this happens, the danger is in unconsciously repeating what has already been done without analyzing what can become a kind of chain of command. (Fig. 2) This is crucial in understanding the development of art histories and the making of canons that involve layered power structures, which determine what gets included and excluded and why. What I was able to discern in my inquiry is that there

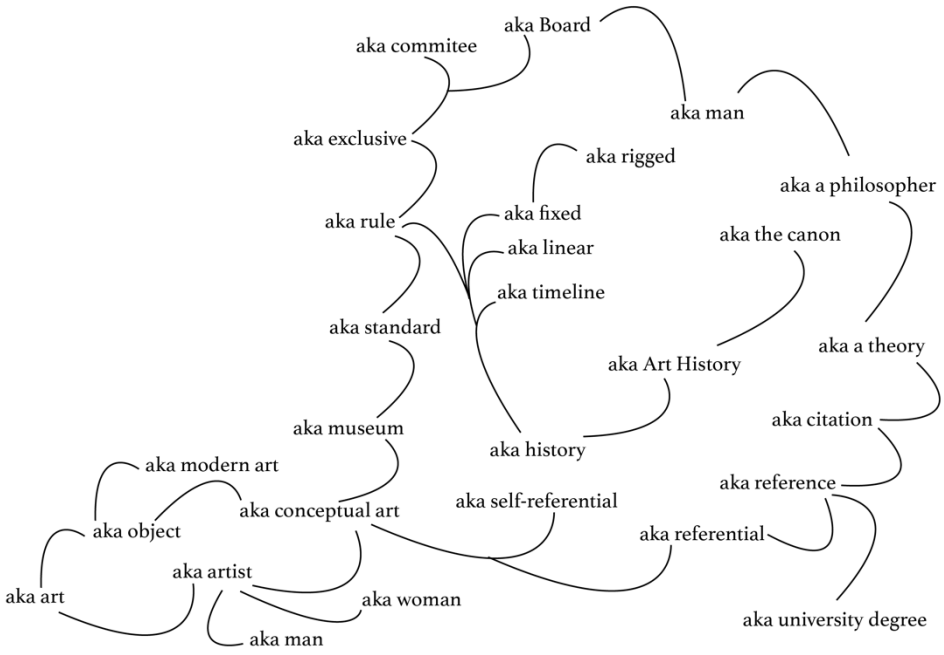

Figure 2 This was a thought experiment in Jesal Thakkar Kapadia's Performance Art Workshop in 2020 where I tried to string together ideas I associate with the building of artworlds. I drew from Raad's use of the abbreviation "aka" to create a type of citational structure: *Untitled aka* mind map, 2020

[5] Sara Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points," *Feministkilljoys* (blog), September 11, 2013, https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/.

needs to be more critique of the system of transmission of art and a greater understanding of who controls the modern art narrative from the Arabic-speaking world. At the moment, I observe that this is not happening in a concerted way. In fact, in the case of Raad as I will unravel in the second chapter, such a robust citational structure has formed around his work that he has not only gained legitimacy but is practically immune to criticism.

Ahmed's second valuable concept is her ideas on how Western academic institutions that have a mandate to diversify their programming, hiring practices, and policies can often have "a gap between words and deeds."[6] An institution can say it has a commitment to do something that may in practice not be happening. This idea of commitments holding a symbolic function is an important tool for public facing institutions to stay relevant, and is certainly not new. Interpreted into the context of art history, critic Aruna D'Souza has called this an "additive" approach, where institutions just add diversity to their existing infrastructure without questioning the underlying institutional framework that has been built on practices of exclusion.[7] Another dimension to this "gap between words and deeds" can be traced in the work of decolonial feminist Chandra Tapalde Mohanty, who probes the colonial dimensions of capitalist, American brand feminist methodologies and how implicit Euro-American centric attitudes seed into the work of feminist scholars. Her work comes out of the paradigm of transnational feminism that emerged in the 1970s as a way to examine the connections between capitalism and gender relations. She mentions that these attitudes apply certain standards of feminism and solidarity to research that ignores cultural differences and treats women as a broad collective.[8] As such, feminist approaches under this influence project into their research, theoretical frameworks constructed by European and American women, which largely draw from

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[6] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 107.

[7] Aruna D'Souza, "In the Wake of 'In the Wake of the Global Turn,'" *ARTMargins* 1, no. 2–3 (June 2012): vii, https://doi.org/10.1162/ARTM_r_00027.

[8] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, no. 30 (1988): 61–88, https://doi.org/10.2307/1395054; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, 35275th edition (Durham ; London: Duke University Press Books, 2003).

experiences and contexts based in the West or Western tradition.[9] Other thinkers that have also factored in to my approach to understand the power dynamics involved in the scripting of women artists, have dealt more broadly with the undermining of women's labor and collectivity. This includes scholar Silvia Federici, and her historical research into the demonization of women's solidarities and friendships to consider what gets lost in the production of knowledge about women over time when solidarities are intentionally broken by patriarchal maneuvers to oppress women's voices and connections with one another.[10] These readings have been essential to formulating a position and critique of the power dynamics involved in how modernist women artists are scripted to be included into the fold of Western art institutions. [11]

So far, creating greater inclusivity at Western art institutions has been very much focused at the top level of exclusion: looking at ways of addressing how the Arab world is not reflected in the Western art canon as a whole.[12] This push to reflect a more 'global' view of art history seems to have risks to just expand the purview of Western frameworks and ways of evaluating and valuing art, which means that this relatively new transnational dimension of canon making is still tethered to a Western center.[13] The fastest way to resolve this problem with Euro-American-centric canons is to absorb the artworks being readily packaged and offered by

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[9] In her article, Sara Salem speaks to the emergence of transnational feminism Sara Salem, "On Transnational Feminist Solidarity: The Case of Angela Davis in Egypt," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43, no. 2 (January 2018): 247–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/693535.

[10] Silvia Federici, "How the Demonization of 'Gossip' Is Used to Break Women's Solidarity," In These Times, 2019, https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-subversive-feminist-power-of-gossip.

[11] See writing on calls to "decolonize" art history: Read more on these calls to decolonize here: Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, "Decolonizing Art History," *Art History* 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12490.

[12] Consider Kirsten Scheid's critique of New York's Museum of Modern Art's exhibition in protest of Trump's Executive Order travel ban on a selection of Muslim countries in 2017. The curators decided to punctuate the gallery of canonical Euro-American art temporarily with artists from the list of countries in the executive order in such a way to be "inclusive and not disruptive" of the major artworks on display. This approach compelled Scheid to ask "what is "inclusion" when the enclosed space to which one is admitted has been created through exclusion?" Kirsten Scheid, "Scheid on Museum of Modern Art, 'Installation Following the Executive Order of January 27, 2017' | H-AMCA | H-Net," H-AMCA, August 2017, https://networks.h-net.org/node/3444/reviews/192655/scheid-museum-modern-art-installation-following-executive-order.

[13] This expanding purview can be attributed to what is referred to as the 'global turn' in the humanities and social sciences in the 1980s, where Western academia began to account for the study of cultures outside Euro-America.

the cultural elite in Arab countries. Western art institutions are so keen to show they are doing their part in diversity and inclusion they are uncritically aligning themselves with the very elite power structures who exacerbate hierarchies of exclusion. To some extent, this is happening because, without this very elite, they would not have access to the art they are trying to include, a subject I will explore in the next section. At some point, though, this reliance on an elite to determine who is included or excluded needs to be examined to understand the consequences for those who fall lower on the rungs of the hierarchical ladder. Within the Arab world, there are multiple potential layers of exclusion depending on gender, language, citizenship, geographical location, income, aesthetic choices, access to capital – to name a few. My purpose in this thesis is not to delve into the vast intricacies of the hierarchy of exclusion, but to point out that this exclusion exists and at the moment is not being widely studied or discussed by Western institutions. I will now explore the historical context of how we reached this quandary.

2. Historical Context

Modern art in the Arab world

Figure 3 Selected exhibition catalogues, academic books, and auction catalogues on art in the Middle East and Arab world (2007-2020)

The interest in modern art of places outside Euro-America began in the latter part of the last century with a curiosity from the West to research artistic output from formerly colonized countries, including those in the Arabic-speaking world. I will offer a brief, selective overview of this history in order to see how we have come to a juncture today where a regional elite is able to wield power over the export of artistic inclusion to the West, with little commentary or criticism. This dimension is in addition to the complexities of dominant Western, neo-liberal power structures that control how art history is filtered, valued and framed in the region. This section gives an overview of a small selection of literature around the complex power relations that shape how artists of the Arabic-speaking world are framed in the West. This includes a range of

literature in the field of art history that form part of my analysis of the developing art historical discourse of modern art of the Arab world; an area of study that focuses primarily on artistic production of the early and mid-twentieth century.

First, it is important to consider some English-language literature, mostly produced in North America, on the historical distortion that happened at the turn of the millennium when Western institutions en-masse started to include contemporary artists with links to the region in their exhibitions.[14] The interest stemmed from a growing fascination with the region Post-911 and in the wake of the Iraq War in 2003 to try to fill in gaps of knowledge. Because this focus was only on a select number of younger artists who were at the time in the process of making art, it left a gap of time unaccounted for. In particular, as contemporary art was brought into the Western fold, art of the early and mid-20th century remained in the shadows, which prompted some art historians to scramble to research this period in an attempt to understand what was missing. [15] Also up until this point, the study of regional art in the North American context was focused on Islamic art up to the year 1800 only, leaving a huge period of artistic production rendered invisible to the West.[16] The category of Islamic art, too, should be understood as an invention of Western Orientalist

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[14] Art historian Sussan Babaie writes that there was an influx at this time in producing exhibition catalogues and pamphlets for these new artists that had the tendency to fetishize cultural differences and "to forfeit deeper interrogations of individual biographies and art histories in favor of collapsing the artist's varied cultural and geographic experiences into a superficially unified category of the contemporary Middle East" Sussan Babaie, "Voices of Authority: Locating the 'Modern' in 'Islamic' Arts," *Getty Research Journal*, no. 3 (2011): 136.

[15] The research and work of scholar Salwa Mikdadi in the 1980s and 90s is pioneering in this area, bringing attention to art in the Arabic speaking world to the United States through writing and exhibitions. She engaged in a significant amount of on the ground research with artists living and working in a number of Arab countries. In 1993 she organized the touring exhibition *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World*, which featured 70 artists, all of whom were women, from fifteen countries. In a similar period Princess Wijdan Ali founder of the Jordan National Gallery of Art in 1980 also edited the 1989 book *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World.* Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, Etel Adnan, and Laura Nader, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Lafayette, Calif, Washington, D.C: International Council for Women in the Arts, 1994); Wijdan Ali, ed., *Contemporary Art from the Islamic World*, 1st UK edition (London: Scorpion Publishing, Ltd., 1990).Salwa Mikdadi, "West Asia: Between Tradition and Modernity | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History," The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, accessed November 30, 2020, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/trmd/hd_trmd.htm.

[16] For more on the state of Islamic art as a discipline read: Gulru Necipoglu-Kafadar, "The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches," in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. Georges Khalil et al. (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 27; Wendy M. K. Shaw, *What Is "Islamic" Art?: Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108622967.

scholars, who defined the artistic production through a lens of Western aesthetics and therefore much of their scholarship and literature was disconnected from the lived social reality on the ground.[17] As art historian Nada Shabout notes in her foundational 2007 book *Modern Arab Art*, "the absence of written sources documenting an artistic process, techniques, or aesthetics left Islamic art largely isolated from its social context. As such, the hierarchies of Western aesthetics became the point of departure for those Orientalist scholars who initially documented and studied Islamic art."[18] Because of the limitations in Western literature and media, the sudden influx of contemporary artists featured in the West Post-911 was construed by some in North America and Europe as a sort of artistic awakening, ignoring the rich and complex history of artistic production that happened while the West wasn't paying attention. The newfound research into the modern period that unfolded after this did help fill some of these gaps, but there were drawbacks, according to Shabout, who works in the field of modern art in the Arab world. She writes, "At worst, it has frustrated scholars of Arab art into intensifying their research for fear of historical distortion – in other words, the acceptance of the contemporary by the international art world as a detached and new phenomenon." [19] The increased prevalence in exhibitions and circulation of contemporary art thus began deepening a temporal rift; output readily available by contemporary artists overshadowed the developing research around modern art that was "fragmentary and piecemeal" because of numerous hurdles associated with access to art and archives, which I will look at later in this section.[20] As a result, a generation of artists who lived under

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[17] Varela Braga, "Owen Jones and the Oriental Perspective," in *The Myth of the Orient: Architecture and Ornament in the Age of Orientalism*, ed. Varela Braga and Francine Giese, 2016, https://www.peterlang.com/view/9783034323574/chapter10.xhtml.

[18] Nada M. Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Reprint edition (University Press of Florida, 2007), 13–14.

[19] Nada Shabout, "Framing the Discipline of Contemporary Art of the Arab World through the Press," in *Contemporary Art from the Middle East : Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshekan, 1st ed. (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 54, http://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/contemporary-art-from-the-middle-east-regional-interactions-with-global-art-discourses/ch3-framing-the-discipline-of-contemporary-art-of-the-arab-world-through-the-press/.

[20] Haytham Bahoora, "Locating Modern Arab Art: Between the Global Art Market and Area Studies," *Review of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (June 2020): 29, https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2020.15.

European colonization across Arab countries in the early to late-twentieth century were left out of the narrative being presented to Western audiences.

A key reason for this exclusion was perceptions of colonized peoples as failing to meet the bar of what would be considered modern art. In short, their work was dismissed as imitative, if acknowledged at all. In her article "Authenticity and its modernist discontents: the colonial encounter and African and Middle Eastern art history," art historian Prita Meir writes, "the overarching division made between "non-Western" and "Western" fields of study mirrored the seemingly planetary division of colonizer and colonized. The colonized occupied the pre-modern or counter-modern position in the resultant schemas and "non-Western" peoples were understood to be the object and even victim of modern colonization, but not modern subjects."[21] In other words, the work of artists of the former colonies who developed their own modernist approaches, sometimes integrating local references and motifs, were often considered derivative and not on equal footing with Western periodization and progress. They were, in a sense, denied membership to this progressive artistic movement because they were viewed as 'less developed' or 'inferior'. As such, Meir continues, "bringing formerly colonized places underneath the analytic umbrella of modernity creates a terrain where the relationship between colonialism, decolonization, and post-independence nationalism constantly demands accounting." [22] What Meir seems to convey is that in order to have a more holistic picture of modernism in art, the geographic scope needs to be broadened. It's been hard to convince Western institutions of this argument because it involves circumventing inherited, outdated institutionalized ideas on who gets included under the rubric of the "modern." It would require a reckoning with the very taxonomies influenced by colonial regimes that have passed down ways of seeing the world through negative terms: non-European and non-Western. [23]

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[21] Prita Meier, "Authenticity and Its Modernist Discontents: The Colonial Encounter and African and Middle Eastern Art History," *The Arab Studies Journal* 18, no. 1 (2010): 12.

[22] Meier, 14–15.

[23] This idea of membership to the modern is further complicated in the work of anthropologist Michel Rolph Trouillot, who considers terms like 'modernity' as a "North Atlantic universal," which means that the West is made to seem like a neutral reference point and is implicitly "prescriptive" because it enforces "a correct state of affairs—what is good, what

Given the climate of art historical discourse, it is especially challenging in the context of researching modern art in Arabic speaking countries, often defined by challenges of authentication, provenance and access to art and archives, or lack thereof. There are many destabilizing factors unique to the region that have contributed to difficulties around the research of modern art, including war, invasion, destruction, loss, looting, migration, exile as well as reckoning with an aging generation of artists, many of whom have passed away.[24] Another challenge is in taking into account artists' cultural milieus, local relevance, collectives and exchanges that are not always easy to trace through archives.

There have been some real strides in trying to gather materials on regional artists nonetheless. The most recent is the Museum of Modern Art in New York's 2018 publication *Primary Documents: Modern Art in the Arab world.*[25] This edited volume has been widely hailed as a formative compendium of collated primary materials translated into English, essential for the study of artists, collectives and movements across the Arab

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is just, what is desirable—not what is, but what should be." Trouillot also mentions that the delineation of 'modernity' is "structurally plural" and that it requires "an alterity, a reference outside of itself" that is not considered part of its scope in order to have legitimacy. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Otherwise Modern Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," in *Critically Modern : Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 2002), 222, http://archive.org/details/criticallymodern0000unse.

[24] In the case of Iraqi art history and authentication, the pioneering artist Dia Azzawi (1939) has become an interlocutor for scholars, galleries and auction houses to authenticate works by his contemporaries. There are countless examples of destroyed collections of cultural significance, this includes Palestinian novelist, scholar, translator and artist Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's (1920-1994) residence, which contained art and literature that was gravely damaged by a car bomb in Iraq. See references to both these examples: Anna Brady, "Race to Write Modern Art History in the Middle East," *The Art Newspaper*, March 20, 2018, http://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/race-to-write-modern-middle-eastern-art-history; Anthony Shadid, "In Baghdad Ruins, Remains of a Cultural Bridge," *The New York Times*, May 21, 2010, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/22/world/middleeast/22house.html.

[25] For further reading on modern art in the Arab world: (Egypt) Patrick Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt: Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation-Building* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Alex Dika Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary*, *Modernism on the Nile : Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary / Alex Dika Seggerman.*, 2019, https://lib.mit.edu/record/cat00916a/mit.002812581; Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, *Fulcrum.Org* (Stanford University Press, n.d.); Anneka Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2020); Ceren Özpinar and Mary Kelly, eds., *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, Proceedings of the British Academy (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Hamid Keshmirshekan, ed., *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* (I.B.Tauris, 2015), https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755604432; Sam Bardaouil, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

world. Even here, though, there are limitations in its inclusivity and other aspects related to its formation.[26] For instance, only a handful of the primary documents presented are by women, while the breadth of materials generated by men is vast: everything from letters and manifestos to diary entries. Meanwhile there is the difficulty in making a publication such as this that becomes a go-to resource for countries that have a diversity of cultures, religions and languages that also get siloed from more dominant groups. These drawbacks are articulated to some extent by editors Nada Shabout, Anneka Lenssen and Sarah Rogers, who also note that some of the key challenges in this study and the study of the region overall relates to the, "limited number of public museums and other repositories compared with private holdings. Large bodies of work remain with artists' families or in state collections that lack public mandate."[27] At the same time, in parsing what is made accessible and available through collections, publications and the art market, "the same selection of one or two individual works has been repeatedly reproduced, serving as stand-ins for entire careers and movements." [28] From my time working at a Gulf collection, I can relate to the limitations of private art holdings and the tendency to use certain works to represent an artist's entire career trajectory in a way that diminishes the nuances of their life's production. It's in the nature of a private collection to be selective rather than encyclopedic in its scope, but this often doesn't have many real outward consequences because it is not in the public sphere. In my case, I worked for a private collection with an unprecedented public mandate: its aim was both to hold local exhibitions for people to see, often for the first time, artworks from artists across the region, while also eventually exhibiting extensively abroad to raise the profile of artists of the ever-growing collection. A privately owned collection sourced from numerous interlocutors that include auction houses based internationally, artists, artist's families, galleries to name a few and is predominantly paintings, drawings, sculptures. What I observed is that marketing in this way succeeded at

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[26] See this article for further information on the book's conception: Anneka Lenssen, Nada Shabout, and Sarah Rogers, "On Language and Modern Art: A Reflection," *Review of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (June 2020): 71–79, https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2020.16.

[27] Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds., *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York, NY: Duke University Press Books, 2018), 21.

[28] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, 21.

bringing some proclaimed 'iconic' pieces to the West, giving them more legitimacy.[29] But there is a consequence: The collection itself, despite its limited scope, becomes a reference point for writing a history. It can look representative and be received as encapsulating the output of an entire region, when the image being projected is actually a very limited fragment that abbreviates the diversity on the ground. This is not to say that opportunities to share the artwork should not be leveraged. However the limitation of this framework and how beholden it is to largely insular decision making, needs to be articulated and incorporated more fully within Western scholarship on the inclusion of art from the region so that there is a more holistic understanding of the contemporary forces and power structures that are guiding how history is written.

Now that I've conveyed the constraints to studying modern art in the Arab world, mainly from the vantage point of researchers, I will zoom into the way artistic canons are shaped and shipped to the West by emerging elites in the Arab Gulf. This is another important facet in understanding how these elites came to wield a degree of influence over how inclusion happens in Western collections. Aside from the literature that focuses on the historical distortion created in the West by not considering the modern art of Arab countries, there has also been a body of work looking at the shift in cultural capital in the Arab world in such a way that oil-producing Gulf Arab countries have dominated the representation of the wider region because they have had the means to do so. According to professor of modern Arabic literature and visual culture, Haytham Bahoora, that means has been through a centralizing and proliferation of art programming, infrastructure and collections into major Gulf cities.[30] This is described by a shift in cultural capital "from the historic cultural centers of the Arab world (Cairo, Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad) to the Arab Gulf, [that] has mirrored

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[29] *Barjeel Art Foundation: Reflection and Retrospective (2010 - 2018)* (Dubai: Capital D Studio, 2018), https://vimeo.com/251606061.

[30] The new art infrastructure in Gulf cities does not mean there was not any before. Consider Kuwait's art infrastructure and the opening of its first commercial gallery in the 1960s. Read Kristine Khouri's research: Kristine Khouri, "Mapping Arab Art through the Sultan Gallery," ArteEast, April 15, 2014, http://arteeast.org/quarterly/mapping-arab-art-through-the-sultan-gallery/.

geopolitical and financial trends in the region; the globalization of modern Arab art is thus coterminous with the globalization of the Gulf economies and their increasing political, financial, and military influence."[31] [32]

The introduction of new art infrastructures in the Arab Gulf since the early 2000s – that happened alongside existing art initiatives and museums – allowed for a burgeoning of its commercial art sector through commercial galleries, art fairs, biennials, art magazines, local collections of both modern and contemporary art that cover the scope of the wider region and more recently, the announcement and opening of new museums like Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern art in Doha in 2010, Western-branded museums like the Louvre Abu Dhabi (opened in 2017), Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (unbuilt) and universities.[33] On the theme of the centralizing of art of the wider region in the cities of the Arab Gulf, Bahoora writes: "One of the most distinguishing aspects of this new infrastructure of modern Arab art is how it selectively collects, assembles, and curates de-historicized objects, paintings and mixed media art, through which to narrate a new pan-Arab visual canon that is fragmented and arbitrary yet intended to offer the viewer a coherent assemblage of the Arab world's visual identity."[34] The new art infrastructures set up in locations like Dubai, Sharjah, Abu Dhabi, and Doha in particular have effectively centralized collections of art drawn from the wider region into national and private collections that can become conflated with national patrimony.[35] This has attracted international attention (both praise and superficial, neo-Orientalist condemnation) and attendance in a way

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[31] Bahoora, "Locating Modern Arab Art," 28.

[32] Consider the implied military influence of France and UAE's building of the Louvre Abu Dhabi near the French naval base: Nasser Rabbat, "France's Oriental Dream: The Louvre Abu Dhabi," accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.artforum.com/architecture/nasser-rabbat-on-the-louvre-abu-dhabi-73429. Also Amy Qin, "'Museum Diplomacy' as New Pompidou Center Opens in Shanghai," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2019, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/05/arts/design/pompidou-center-shanghai.html.

[33] For more on the proliferation of art biennials in particular read: Chin-Tao Wu, "Biennials Without Borders?: Landmark Exhibitions Issue – Tate Papers," Tate, accessed May 5, 2021, https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/biennials-without-borders.

[34] Bahoora, "Locating Modern Arab Art," 28.

[35] Anneka Lenssen and Sarah Rogers express this conflation of regional patronage and power relations, stating: "When a wealthy oil-producing country professes a commitment to pan-Arab commonalities and presents itself as a benevolent regional patron, the appearance of largesse may also obscure the inequities of the patronage power relation."Anneka Lenssen and Sarah A. Rogers, "Articulating the Contemporary," in *A Companion to Islamic Art and Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 1333, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119069218.ch51.

that both challenges the Eurocentrism of the art industry, but also highlights how the Gulf Arab cities have assumed "the right to represent and market Arab art," according to Bahoora, while also laying "claim to the knowledge and expertise that bring together selected pieces of the region's modern art into new canons of consumption by local and global audiences." [36] As such, these collections are able to take advantage of this liminal space to monopolize and cannibalize the representation of a region's history of artistic output. It should be noted that while those who own the art infrastructure and institutions mentioned here comprise mainly locals, the other ranks within the art sector are dominated by people from other countries in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Europe and North America. This is important because everyone is bringing with them experiences with the art world, sometimes influenced by Western education, myself included, that inform how they shape the art sector.[37] This, again, is happening often behind the scenes and these individuals are not always central to the conversation happening abroad or even the major organized events held locally; the latter of which are largely geared to the international audiences of global art elite that attend fairs, conferences and biennials.[38] These individuals are essential to gaining a more nuanced understanding of the politics of inclusion and the power structures that they understand more intimately than any observer of the region from the outside because they are embedded within it. Because of the tendency by Western institutions to speak only to those at the top echelons of the art sector, such as directors, collectors,

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[36] Bahoora, "Locating Modern Arab Art," 29.

[37] Anthropologist Elizabeth Derderian builds on this idea of a Western educated art-sector and points out how this is causing art institutions in the Gulf region to conform to certain aesthetic standards set out by the global contemporary art elite. She argues that the art-scene is becoming dominated by art institutions, such as galleries, biennials, conferences and art fairs, that adopt Euro-American aesthetic standards and definitions of contemporary art. This trend is having adverse effects on artists that do not conform to these standards and thus isolates them from being included in the core of the art scene's activities. As such, curators who are clued into these professionalized standards and are looking for new artists that represent diverse art practices in the UAE in particular, she argues that "novelty must appear in codified forms" in an artist's practice, such as new media, in order to be recognized and made legible. In other words diversity is determined by how much it still resembles current trends of contemporary art. Elizabeth Derderian, "Challenging Terms: Contemporary Art and the Disciplining of Novelty in the UAE," *Museum Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (November 22, 2020): 79–93, https://doi.org/10.1111/muan.12223.

[38] Some of the key events that garner international audiences that take place (pre-Covid 19 pandemic) include Art Dubai and Global Art Forum, Abu Dhabi Art, Sharjah Biennial, March Meeting, Sharjah Architecture Biennial, among others. The month of March in particular, is a key month where many art events coincide to align with the of arrival international visitors from major art institutions both in the region and from Western countries.

headline curators and other leaders, the embodied knowledge of those who do the daily labor are rarely reflected in the narrative because they are rarely asked. My experience working with several Western institutions, including galleries and museums, was that there was sometimes a tendency toward an elitist attitude in how my input, and that of others on the ground like me, was dismissed or belittled. Not unlike how the West has historically projected a view of modern art from outside of Euro-America as being derivative, I experienced first hand that this colonial structure is still repeating itself, perhaps more subtly, in the way those in the art sector labor force are considered peripheral and ultimately less important to larger conversations. I was, for instance, not considered for inclusion in an advisory committee for a major exhibition in a Western city that was heavily using the collection I had intimately managed and watched grow, giving the Western curators exclusive control over how they would frame the story of the collection without any inputs on its formation and infrastructure. I was later invited to attend a concurrent event that would speak about the collection and region so that I could learn about it. There are numerous examples like this of this extractive tendency among Western institutions in their efforts to create a nuanced picture of art and art institutions from the region.

In sum, the desire on the Western side to be inclusive of art histories left out of the canon through increased scholarship and exhibition programming is being met by a regional elite keen on exporting an artistic canon – and in the process deciding what diversity means and how this narrative is presented locally and internationally. While these exchanges have helped bring artists into Western spheres of influence, it has also upheld the patriarchal power structure that guides the process of inclusion. The reason it may be difficult for Western institutions to criticize the way inclusion is imported is because access to the regional art scene is so closely controlled, as I have described. They are, in effect, reliant on the goodwill and generosity of the elite to have access to necessary resources that will help them meet their diversity targets.[39] One artist who

[39] Curator and writer Tirdad Zolghadr has mentioned that in order to maintain good relations in the art world having "polemical positions" is discouraged. The nature of being integrated and accepted means having "complex personal friendships and fiendships that will come to haunt you sooner or later." Likely because a person you may want to critique could "be standing next to you at an opening… [or] on a grant committee... recruitment panel, that jury, or

has pivoted an entire body of artwork on parsing these intricacies, specifically looking at the power dynamics behind the creation of art historical canons, is contemporary artist Walid Raad. Raad was one of many artists who became renowned during the uptake of contemporary artists by the West in the early 2000s, described at the start of this section. He is largely revered and commended for his meta-narrative style critique of the power structures that guide the making of dominant histories. And yet, as the next chapter will demonstrate, even his work has limitations. Shrouded in the critical lens of his practice is another more subtle layer of the very power dynamic that he exposes.

advisory board" that you need to get professional opportunities. Tirdad Zolghadr, *Traction* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 44–45.

3. Case Study

Walid Raad aka Suha Traboulsi

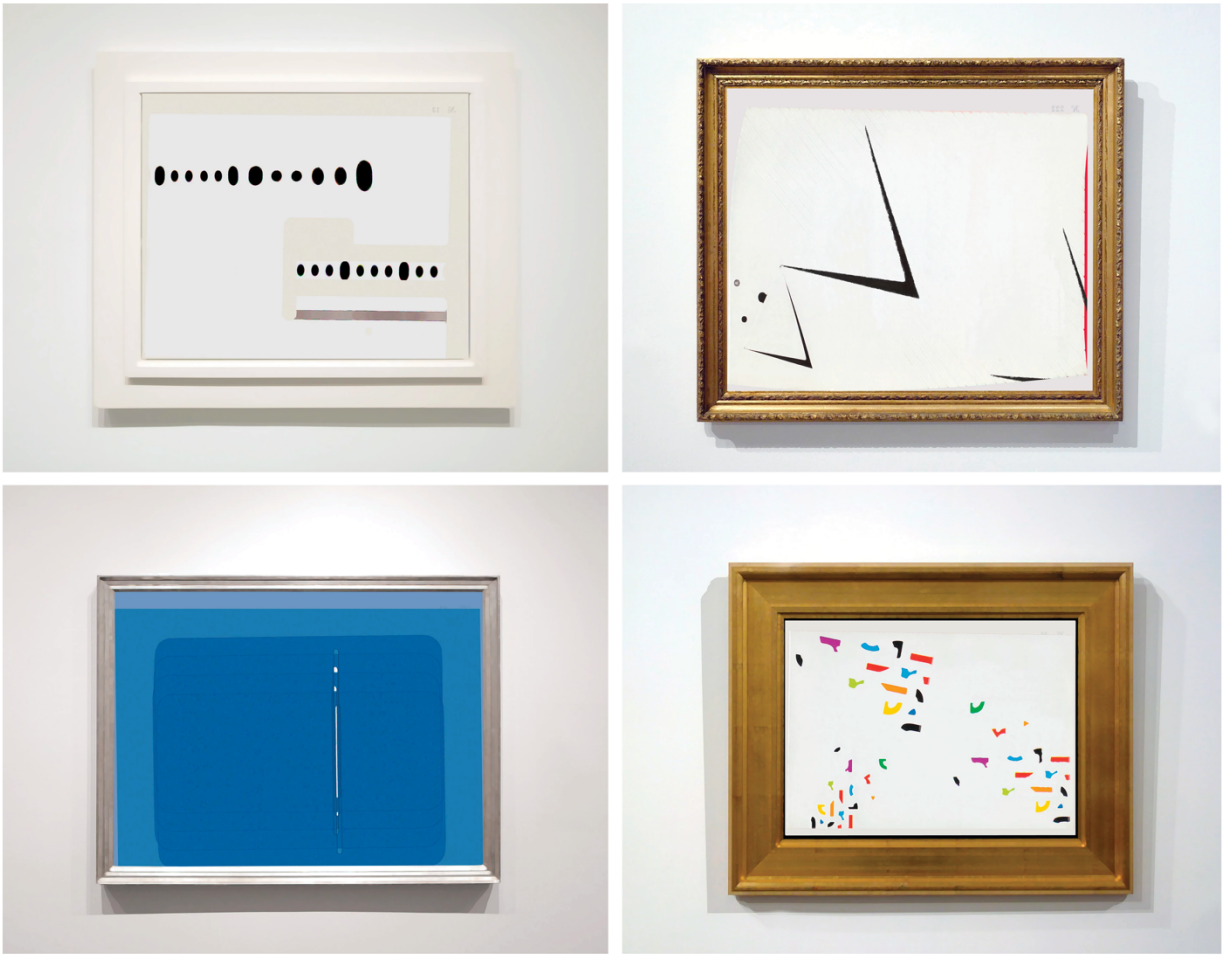

Figure 4 An iteration of some these digitally produced works appeared in the 2014 exhibition "Here and Elsewhere" in white box frames that were attributed solely to Suha Traboulsi. The installation caused some of the show's reviewers to think she was real. These versions are from Raad's website. Walid Raad attributed to Suha Traboulsi *Untitled* 1943-1949, 2014. Image source: https://www.scratchingonthings.org/untitled-1943-1949 Courtesy of the artist's website.

In thinking about the question of how a simulacrum of a woman artist scripted by a male artist could represent a forgotten history when real women artists exist and have existed, I needed to critically examine the work of Walid Raad, and particularly his avatar Suha Traboulsi, through a feminist lens. In his artistic practice, Raad takes on the heavy burden of studying the politics of the art world as it relates to the region. For instance, his ongoing body of work called *Scratching on things I could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* (2007-ongoing) is a critique of the art infrastructures that proliferated over the past 15 years, with a

particular focus on Lebanon and the Arab Gulf. In this series, Raad sometimes uses Suha Traboulsi as a proxy for his work. Raad critiques the power relations that are involved in how art is marketed, framed and circulated within museums and collections, sometimes in ways that fail to recognize the complexities of their origins and histories. Raad's work in this area has been crucial to understanding themes that until now, have not been fully explored or articulated in scholarship. Perhaps because of this, whatever he comes up with and says carries a great amount of authority and credibility. In fact, as I will describe below, his work is so widely cited and praised by scholars and critics that he has developed an air of invulnerability to criticism, thus making much of the literature around his work devotional in nature.[40]

Take, for instance, how readily his name comes up as the go-to person for any analysis of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1991) or discussions of the shortcomings of regional archiving practices. One of Raad's most-widely cited art projects is called the *Atlas Group* (variable-2004), a fictional foundation that was meant to imitate and probe prevailing archival practices, particularly as they relate to the traumatic reality of postwar Beirut, in a way that circumvents our trust in them. Raad set himself up as the spokesperson for the foundation and held lecture-performances in North America, Europe and Lebanon describing its activities and showcasing invented archival documents donated and informed by a team of imaginary characters. When it was first introduced, this project was featured in major exhibitions in Europe and the United States (Whitney Biennale in 2001 and 2002, Documenta XI in 2002 and the Venice Biennale in 2003).[41] It has been

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[40] In his short essay "Writing and Indifference" for the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, curator Dieter Roelstraete writes on the devotional nature of writing about art saying, "contemporary art writing is promotional in spirit, intent and execution... it is a well-known fact that the best writing is often inspired by disgust, disdain, disappointment, disagreement—key ingredients of much of what historically has been allowed to pass for criticism. This is simply not a stance that the curator, ensnared in a web of art world dependencies… is in a position to entertain." In this essay that speaks specifically to curatorial prose, and is grandiloquent in its own right, considers how some arts writing tends to create elaborate framing that is "beside the point" to an artist's work that is a practice of being able to "pimp the work's theoretical credentials." Dieter Roelstraete, "Writing and Indifference," *Red Hook Journal*, accessed March 12, 2021, https://ccs.bard.edu/redhook/writing-and-indifference/index.html.

[41] The first presentation of the *Atlas Group* took place in Beirut in 2000, and also draws on Raad's PhD research in the 1990s. See Walid Ghanem Raad, "Beirut...(a La Folie): A Cultural Analysis of the Abduction of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980's" (Ph.D., United States -- New York, University of Rochester, 1996), http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/304276425/abstract/723AF8FC6C1B49D8PQ/1.

cited widely in art press (*Frieze magazine, Art Forum, Bomb Magazine, Art Review, Art Asia Pacific*, among many others), and mentioned in PhD dissertations and scholarship in subjects spanning art history to philosophy. Raad has become an authority in institutional and academic circles, as well as being an academic himself.[42] In combing through dozens of references to his work for the purposes of this research, what I noticed was that none of the authors offered any criticism of his practice, but rather spoke about his work from the perspective of using it as a basis for arguing their own points. Raad has in many ways become a conduit through which to posture a fluency and proficiency of high theory.[43]

There are reasons to examine his work with some skepticism, however. Just look at how Suha Traboulsi has been received in Western publications, some of which weren't even aware that she wasn't real – which at a very basic level creates a scenario where attention is drawn away from real women. Suha Traboulsi

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[42] Raad is a professor of art at the Cooper Union in New York, USA.

[43] These are just a small selection of the publications citing Raad's work: Paolo Magagnoli, "A Method in Madness," *Third Text* 25, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 311–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2011.573316; Mirene Arsanios, "Walid Raad: A History of Modern and Contemporary Arab Art," *Bidoun*, 2009, https://www.bidoun.org/articles/kids-walid-raad; Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad's Spectral Archive, Part One: Historiography as Process," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 69 (January 2016): 10; Vytas Narusevicius, "Walid Raad's Double Bind: The Atlas Group Project, 1989-2004," *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 39, no. 2 (2014): 43–53; Alan Gilbert, "Walid Raad (Re)Invents the Archive," *Aperture*, no. 198 (Spring 2010): 60–67; Eva Respini, *Walid Raad*, 1st edition (New York, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2015); Alan Gilbert and Walid Raad, "Walid Ra'ad by Alan Gilbert," October 1, 2002, https://bombmagazine.org/articles/walid-raad/; Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, "Lecture as Performance," *Aperture*, no. 221 (2015): 50–56; Jong Chul Choi, "Representing the Unrepresentable: Ethics of Photography in Post-Photographic Era – Post-Documentary of Luc Delahaye, Walid Raad (the Atlas Group) and Aernout Mik" (Ph.D., Florida, United States of America, University of Florida, 2012), http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/1369842109/abstract/783484E7C61B4708PQ/2; Andria Hickey, "In the Wake of Trauma: Representing the Unnameable in Contemporary Art" (M.A., Canada, Concordia University (Canada), 2009), http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/578522092/abstract/783484E7C61B4708PQ/3; Stefanie Baumann, "Heterodox Mediations. Notes on Walid Raad's The Atlas Group," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 1633192, https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2019.1633192; Magagnoli, "A Method in Madness"; André Lepecki, "'After All, This Terror Was Not without Reason': Unfiled Notes on the Atlas Group Archive," *TDR (1988-)* 50, no. 3 (2006): 88–99; Maria Domene Danes, "Ar(T)Chive Production in Post-War Lebanon" (Ph.D., United States -- Indiana, Indiana University, 2018), http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2088363489/abstract/9F35FCC518C44ECAPQ/3; Elisa Adami, "Writing History under Erasure : Radical Historiographical Practices in Lebanese Postwar Art" (Ph.D., England, Royal College of Art (United Kingdom), 2019), http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/2307334839/783484E7C61B4708PQ/15; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October* 129 (August 2009): 51–84, https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2009.129.1.51; Laura U. Marks, "Signs of the Time:: Deleuze, Peirce, and the Documentary Image," in *The Brain Is the Screen*, ed. Gregory Flaxman, NED-New edition, Deleuze and the Philosophy of Cinema (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 193–214, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttttq6p.11.

has appeared as an artist in her own right on the pages of *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *Wallpaper*, *Artnet News*, *Artsy,* and *The Village Voice.*[44] *The New York Times* acknowledged her work in abstract drawings in the 1940s, shown in the New Museum in 2014, as "cool-minimalist-before-Minimalism."[45] (Fig. 4)
It's clear that Raad has scripted every instance of Suha Traboulsi's appearance in such a way to specifically appeal to Western sensibilities, so such articles are not surprising and are, in effect, an intended result of his projects with her. But even publications that reference her as an avatar, including *Frieze Magazine, Art Asia Pacific, Ibraaz, The Nation*, do not acknowledge any problems with a man using a simulacrum of a woman as a way to further his own art practice.[46] I want offer here an alternative way of looking at Raad's work through a feminist lens.

When I began to inspect this question about how a woman scripted by a man could represent what one art critic in *Frieze Magazine* described as a "perfect surrogate" for a history of lost women artists, it seemed appropriate to apply Sara Ahmed's theories on citational practice. In her book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and her blog *feministkilljoys*, Ahmed traces the ways feminist theory is connected to everyday life and reviews her past research into how diversity is practiced in academic environments. Citational practice relates to how people conduct their research and writing on certain subjects in ways that reference some voices over others. Some of these references can include particular philosophers and scholars that may be of a certain

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[44] Holland Cotter, "Far From Home, an Arab Summer," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2014, sec. Arts, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/18/arts/design/here-and-elsewhere-contemporary-work-from-the-middle-east.html; David Markus and David Markus, "'Here and Elsewhere,'" *ARTnews.Com* (blog), October 29, 2014, https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/here-and-elsewhere-2-61796/; "Suha Traboulsi and Walid Raad's Postscript to the Arabic Translation | Wallpaper*," accessed November 12, 2020, https://www.wallpaper.com/art/box-fresh-suha-traboulsi-and-walid-raads-unexpected-installation-in-beirut-ashti-foundation-tribute-to-stolen-art; Kevin McGarry, November 2, and 2015, "At Aishti Foundation, Art Is a Commodity," Artnet News, November 2, 2015, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/aishti-art-commodity-351914; Myrna Ayad, "Amid Fears of a Cholera Outbreak, the $100 Million Aïshti Foundation Opens in Beirut," *Artsy*, November 5, 2015, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-amid-fears-of-a-cholera-outbreak-the-100-million-aishti-foundation-opens-in-beirut.

[45] Cotter, "Far From Home, an Arab Summer."

[46] Wilson-Goldie, "One Take"; Ana Vukadin, "ArtAsiaPacific: Yet Another Letter To The Reader," *Art Asia Pacific*, 2017, http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/WebExclusives/YetAnotherLetterToTheReader; Reema Salha Fadda and Hammad Nasar, "History in Play | Ibraaz," *Ibraaz*, May 8, 2017, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/219; Barry Schwabsky, "Under Pressure," *The Nation*, September 23, 2014, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/under-pressure/.

gender, geography, language or thinking tradition. These practices, when repeated by many people over time, can become tendencies that form what can seem like an important directive. As such, when certain voices dominate an area of study there can be a roster of usual suspects we may feel required to enlist in order to be accepted and have our research validated. This can form expectations about what makes an analysis good, and these expectations can form a robust citational structure around how a topic should be analyzed. When this structure keeps getting replicated, Ahmed writes, it can "form what we call disciplines."[47] If citational structures make disciplines, then there is a danger in repeating what has already been done without analyzing what can become a kind of chain of command.[48]

It's natural that over time, such voices would gain more and more immunity from criticism, which is precisely what we see unfolding in how canons are being developed and transmitted by power structures in the Arabic speaking world who determine what gets included and excluded. This is happening in explicit and subtle ways. Raad, for instance, is almost universally praised for his critique of institutional structures and his creation of Suha Traboulsi, as I have demonstrated.

On one level, making up a female avatar could be regarded as a clever way to comment on the gaping hole in art history created by the absence of women who hail from the global south. Artists making up fictional scenarios and characters is not new. The case of Suha Traboulsi is but one of numerous examples of how artists enlist fictional characters or encounters in their practices – such as French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) in his invention of his female alter-ego Rrose Sélavy, American artist Elanor Antin's various impersonations or even more recently Ryan Wong's invention of the white male, academic and artist Joe

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[47] Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points."

[48] Consider the anthropological case study "Professionalizing practices: performing education, evaluation and objectivity" in Derderian's PhD dissertation where during a seminar in Dubai on how to write an artist biography for emerging artists, one of the seminar leaders uses Raad's artist biography and contemporary practice to set an example of what is correct and legible to a global contemporary art audience. In this case, Raad's notoriety has become an example of what the contemporary art world is looking for because of the citational structure that buttresses his work: Elizabeth Derderian, "Displaying Culture: The Politics of Art, Liberalism and the State in the UAE" (Ph.D., United States -- Illinois, Northwestern University, 2019), 157, https://search.proquest.com/docview/2300628786/abstract/D85E01F96AF9401DPQ/1.

Scanlan and his African-American alter ego emerging artist Donelle Woodford in 2014.[49] Sometimes these approaches are ways of destabilizing notions of truth and trust.[50] Sometimes they are strategies to investigate gender, racism and sexism in the art world in controversial and ethically questionable ways. They are meant as critiques of the underlying institutional frameworks that exist.[51] Unlike these individuals, though, while Raad's approach to creating imaginary characters throughout his career has been widely analyzed, it has not been in any substantially critical way. Some admirers regard Raad's strategy to hide behind a female avatar as a benevolent gesture to draw attention to a cause and give a platform to a voice that isn't heard. Wilson-Goldie, for instance, suggests: "Attributing works to her, or enlisting her as an ally, allows Raad to participate in projects while distancing himself from them. She appears in his place; the organizing entity is often denied the use of his name or acknowledgement of his involvement."[52] She then acknowledges the trickiness of asking institutions to be complicit in a lie, but does not probe the gendered nature of the fiction. Nor does any of the coverage address how strikingly similar aesthetic choices are to Raad's practice overall. (See Fig. 5-6).

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[49] See more coverage of the Joe Scanlan and Donelle Woodford project here: Ryan Wong, "I Am Joe Scanlan," Hyperallergic, June 17, 2014, https://hyperallergic.com/131687/i-am-joe-scanlan/; Coco Fusco, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? Thoughts about the Donelle Woolford Debate," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 6, 2014, https://brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/one-step-forward-two-steps-back-thoughts-about-the-donelle-woolford-debate.

[50] Art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty includes Raad in her 2009 article "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility" where she calls approaches to art-making that contains the premise of fact, which is later revealed to be fiction as "parafiction" and that its operation primarily engages with the "pragmatics of trust": Lambert-Beatty, "Make-Believe"; Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Carrie Lambert-Beatty: Truth Bias," *Art Papers*, February 5, 2020, https://www.artpapers.org/carrie-lambert-beatty-truth-bias/.

[51] Raad's work has also been incorporated into the American canon of institutional critique beginning in the 1960s, and is noted as reminiscent of the work of Hans Haacke, Sherrie Levine, Joseph Beuys and Andrea Fraser. This incorporation was outlined by curator Eva Respini in her curatorial essay for Raad's major retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2015. Respini, *Walid Raad.*

[52] Wilson-Goldie, "One Take."

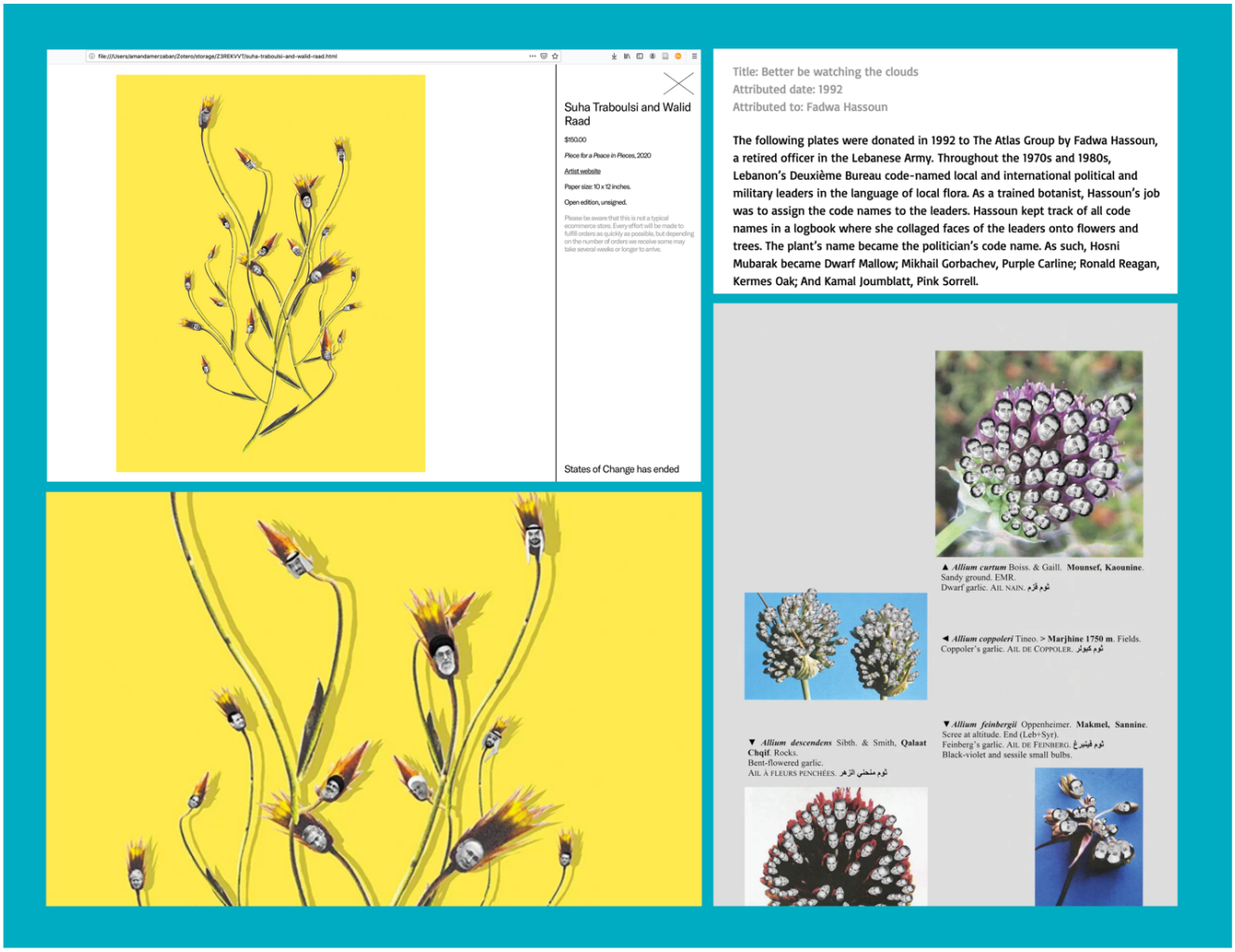

Figure 5 This above compilation include pieces by Raad that share aesthetic similarities attributed to different names.

(Left) *Piece for a Peace in Pieces*, 2020 attributed to Suha Traboulsi and Raad. Image source: https://statesofchange.us/products/suha-traboulsi-and-walid-raad.

(Right) *Better be watching the clouds*, 1992 attributed to the imaginary character Fadwa Hassoun of the *Atlas Group* project. Image source: https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/clouds Courtesy of the artist's website.

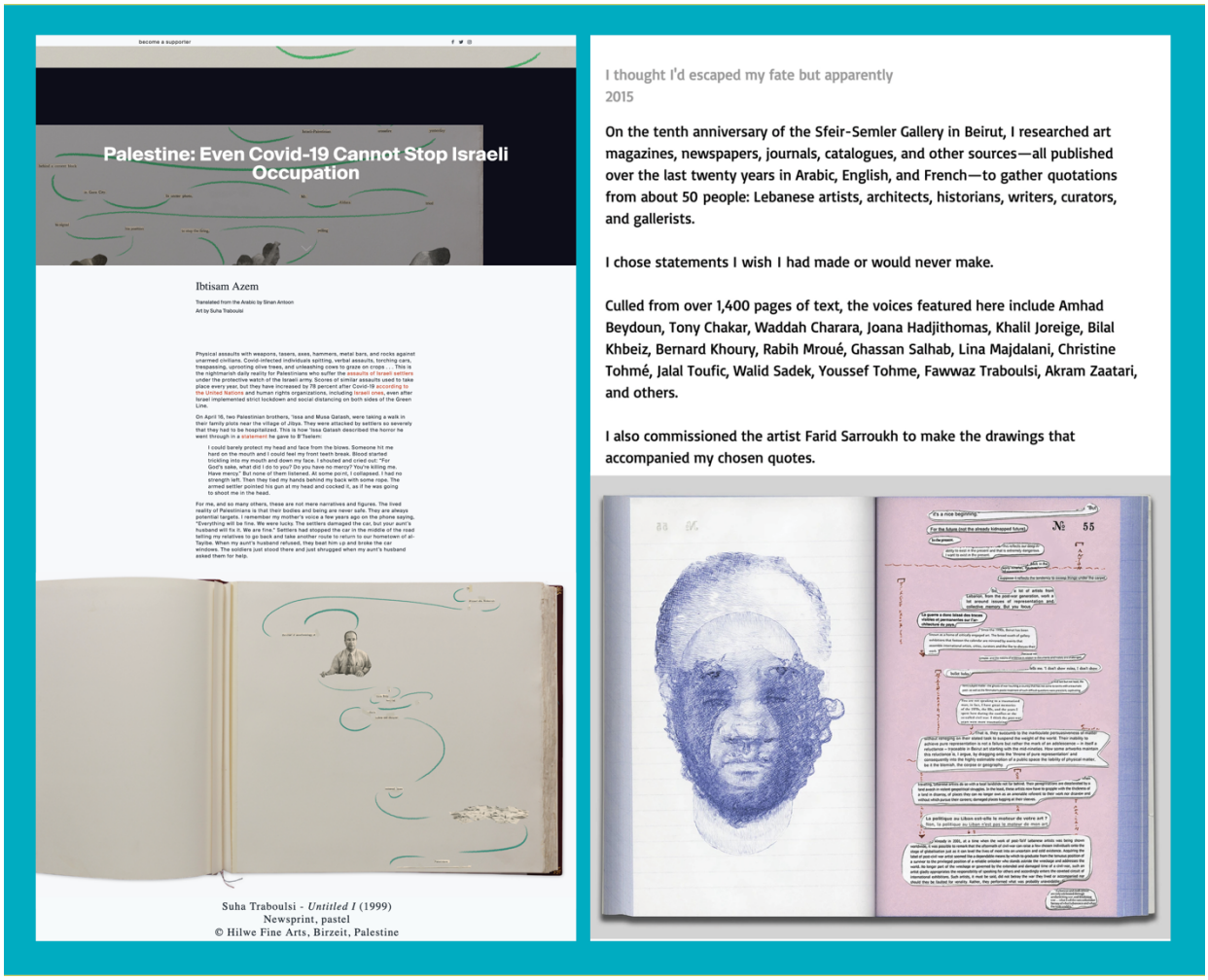

Figure 6 This compilation includes works attributed to Suha Traboulsi and another attributed to Raad.

(Left) This is an article that contains artwork that is attributed to Suha Traboulsi. Image source: https://evergreenreview.com/read/palestine-even-covid-19-cannot-stop-israeli-occupation/

(Right) Walid Raad. *I thought I'd escaped my fate but apparently*, 2015. Image source: https://www.scratchingonthings.org/i-thought-i-d-escaped-my-fate. Courtesy of the artist's website.

Others praise Raad's attention to detail in the creation of his avatars and his ability to offer new ways of thinking about artistic production because he is sensitive to nuances. For instance, in one project, Raad creates a fiction of Suha Traboulsi's encounter and collaboration with Ha Bik Chuen (1925-2009), a Hong Kong-based artist who actually lived, spanning over 40 years. In an interview published in an online art platform *Ibraaz*, writer, editor and researcher Reema Salha Fadda comments that the focus on this fictional friendship offers an approach to knowledge production that "art historical narratives often gloss over, often preferring periodization over narrative details."[53]

Figure 7 This is one of Raad's small scale installations at Asia Art Archive that is attributed to Suha Traboulsi and Ha Bik Chuen. It also contains a small scale replica of a painting by Iraqi modernist artist Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925-2004) on the right: Section 39_Index XXXVII- Traboulsi (Editor's Introduction IV), 2016. Image Source: Courtesy of Asia Art Archive Archive https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/section-39_index-xxxvii-traboulsi.

[53] Fadda and Nasar, "History in Play | Ibraaz."

A few of Raad's interventions into Asia Art Archive's library involved small 3D-cardboard box models (Fig. 7) meant to capture the "spirit of Ha's work" in collage in such a way to co-mingle with the "Arab art history" brought in by Suha Traboulsi. Salha mentions Raad's delicate approach to bringing Suha Traboulsi to Ha, in a rather confusing conflation of exchanges: "Traboulsi uses Ha's approach of producing collages in magazines and text, by inserting fragmented and scattered images of famous paintings by Arab artists (Inji [Efflatoun]; Abdel Hadi Al Gazzar; Hamid Nada and Marwan) thus positioning Arab art histories within a practice foregrounded by a Chinese artist… translating the archive in a different visual code, [that] also renews Raad's aesthetic practice."[54] If Suha Traboulsi is using Ha's approaches, and Raad is using a renewed visual code, what does it matter if she is or is not there? I can only discern that she is a placeholder for the interchange these men's ideas.

While his approach has been lauded for creating avenues of thinking about the dominant narrative frameworks through which we define art history, I consider that this invention has an unexplored gendered inequity and that this can have the effect of stealing attention away from real women who have made and are making art. In a way, he is subsuming living women and their legacies by fictionalizing them. What's more, the invention actually serves to bolster his own reputation, perhaps at the expense of deepening and diversifying perceptions of art historical narratives of women in the global south.

This tendency appears in other areas of Raad's work as well, including the *Atlas Group,* (Fig. 8) a project that has placed him as an authority on the Lebanese Civil War.[55] The purpose of the fictional foundation was to collect and create documents about the war which also occurred at a time when there was

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[54] Fadda and Nasar.

[55] I noticed this idea of Raad being a reference point for the Lebanese Civil War in art during the Q&A section of a talk by artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan at MIT, where one of the first questions from the moderator right after his presentation was how Abu Hamdan's work relates to what Raad has done around the War. It struck me as a way of tethering and glossing over the very distinct themes of Abu Hamdan's work to what has already been done by Raad."March 15 | Lawrence Abu Hamdan | Natq (Impossible Speech) | ACT Spring 2021 Lecture Series - News," accessed May 5, 2021, http://act.mit.edu/news/2021/02/26/march-15-lawrence-abu-hamdan-natq-impossible-speech-act-spring-2021-lecture-series/.

more Western attention shifting toward Lebanon and the collective activities of artists on the ground.[56] The project shows how historical documents and archival materials are fragmented, partial, divorced from their referents, the traumas of war and serve only to add legitimacy to dominant, nationalist and patriarchal views of history. However, this project that is about the absurdity of archiving in the wake of disaster has other less pronounced dimensions that are divorced from referents too. To the outside observer, Raad's work is clever and prescient in highlighting something that appears to be absent on the ground—in this case the absence is collaborative infrastructures of people reckoning with the absurdity of archival information and substantial loss due to the wars.[57] Echoing the situation with Suha Traboulsi, though, these people did in fact exist. There were those on the ground and returning to Beirut, reckoning with the aftermath of the war and how to document, envision and discuss this transformed landscape, himself included. An example of one institution that shares a likeness to the Atlas Group is the Arab Image Foundation, which was incorporated in 1997—around the same time as this project— to collect, research and activate an ever-growing collection of donated photographs from across the Arab world and beyond.[58] The foundation, before it was a formalized as a foundation, involved artists coming together, much like the initiatives of this time, and thus included a multitude of voices and informal labor. As Wilson-Goldie notes in an essay, "However true or false, the Atlas Group was emblematic of Lebanon's postwar era, a time for sifting through the wreckage of the past to find the materials for building a better future, not least through the creation of new institutions."[59] As one of his early projects that introduced his approach in instituting simulacrums, could we say that this is an imitation of

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[56] In her PhD dissertation, Sarah Rogers writes that the decade of the 1990s "catalyzed new platforms for experimental practices deeply embedded in postwar Beirut," which captured the interest of Western curators. "In the absence of an institutional structure for ephemeral practices-installations, performances, leaflets… [Western critics began] labelling Beirut as "protoinstitutional" [which controversially implies] that this body of work emerges out of a postwar tabula rasa: no institutions, no market and no audiences." Sarah A. (Sarah Anne) Rogers, "Postwar Art and Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism" (Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008), 13, https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/45935.

[57] For a more philosophical rendering of this circumstance, read Lebanese thinker and artist Jalal Toufic: Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster* (Los Angeles: Redcat, 2009), https://ulib.aub.edu.lb/ebk/ebk000090_jalal-toufic.pdf.

[58] Raad was a founding board member of Arab Image Foundation.

[59] Wilson-Goldie, "Lecture as Performance," 52.

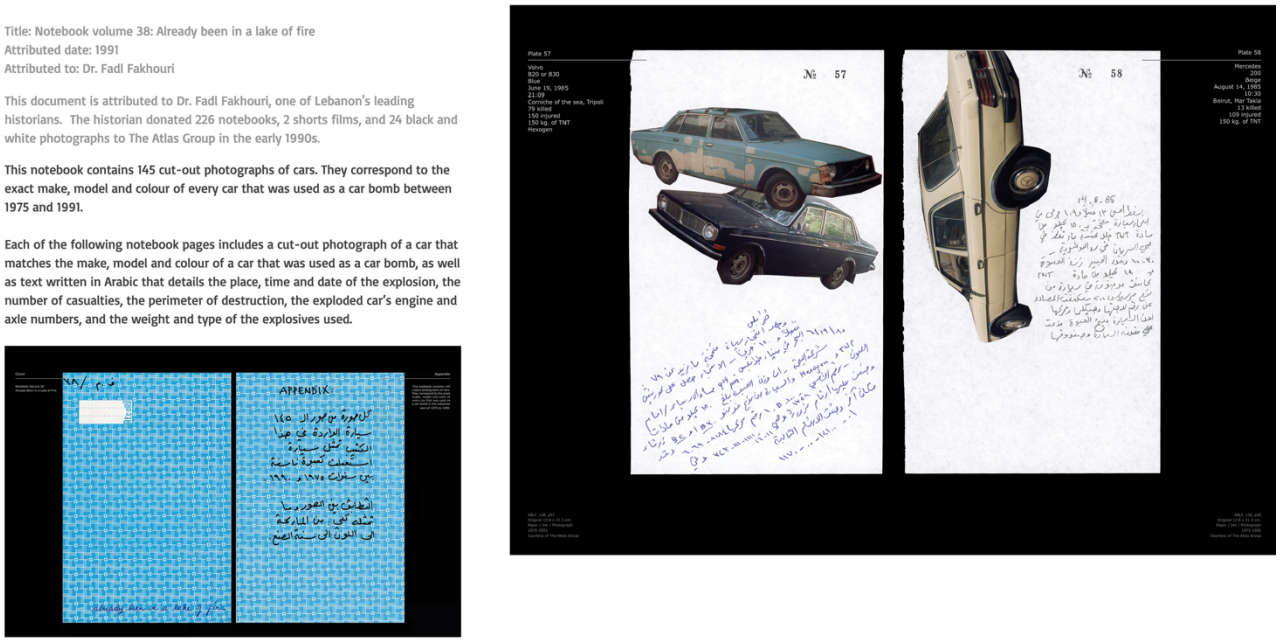

Figure 8 Works from the *Atlas Group* series that are attributed to the imaginary character of Dr. Fadl Fakhouri. Image source: https://www.theatlasgroup1989.org/n38. Courtesy of the artist's website.

this collective act of collating and sifting through wreckage? Essentially it is a reflection of the communal, shared energy of individuals coming together that catalyzed the making of Beirut's postwar arts infrastructure before it was formalized or institutionalized. Where does that collective labor go in this simulacrum, particularly when it is presented to audiences who do not know where it comes from? By drawing attention to itself as a fiction, the Atlas Group clouds the reality of what I discern as the collaborative spirit and more importantly the actual labor of others that existed in the years after the Lebanese Civil War.[60] This collective, invisible, labor is informal and unrecorded in institutional memory. In this way, Raad eclipses reality — he draws attention away from the very real efforts that were happening. He is bolstered, again, by conflating something living with something fictional; subsuming life by fictionalizing it. In sum, I stress that alternative,

[60] For more on the informal collaborations and institutions of Post-War Beirut's art scene and the artists that are considered the post-war generation read: Rogers, "Postwar Art and Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism"; Sarah Rogers, "Out of History: Postwar Art in Beirut," *Art Journal* 66, no. 2 (June 1, 2007): 8–20, https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2007.10791250.

contentious readings of the imaginary dimensions he creates are possible and yet – from all the literature I was able to parse – this is not currently being considered by critics or scholars.

3.1 Fictionalizing the lost modern woman artist

Suha Traboulsi (b. 1923? 1943? 1969?)

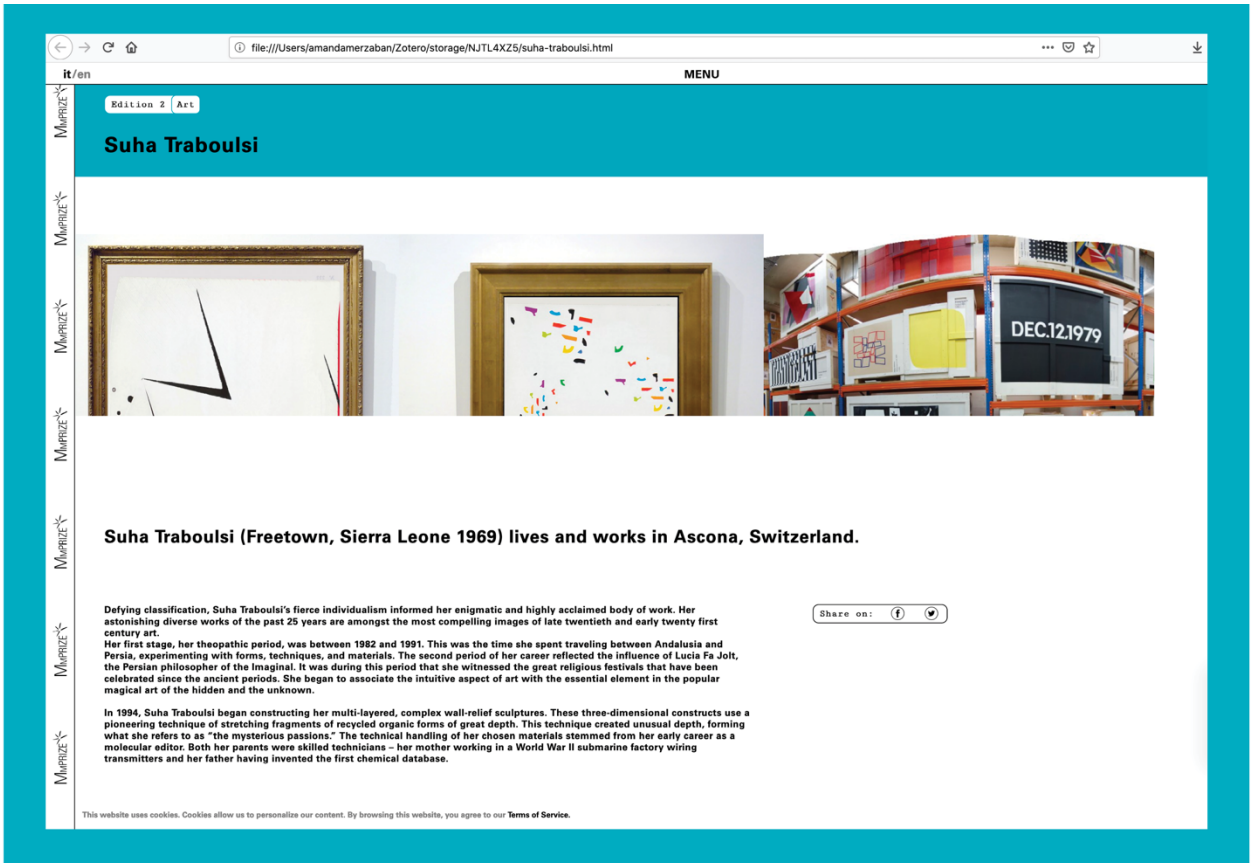

Figure 9 This is one of a few biographies of Suha Traboulsi and is from the Mario Merz art prize recipients page, which was given to Raad but attributed to Suha Traboulsi. Image source: https://www.mariomerzprize.org/en/suha-traboulsi/

To return to the study of the setbacks of having a female avatar, it is important to look at the consequences for real women. Raad scripts Suha Traboulsi in such a way that makes her appear to be cutting edge and daring, in order to be recognizable to a Western audience in those terms. The biography, or rather numerous conflicting biographies (Fig. 9), Raad constructs for her includes the following characteristics: [61]

[61] Suha Traboulsi is listed as being born at various times including 1923, 1943 and 1969 and living in various locations from Birzeit, Cape Cod, New York, Sao Paolo, Beirut, Heidelberg to name a few. Some of these biographies can be

- She is Harvard-educated
- Her performance practice is described as "sensationalist and scandalous," earning her "the epithet "the witch of contemporary art""
- She uses her body in a way that seems unusual for her time and location
- She is noted to be a "controversial figure in the Amman, Cairo, and Beirut art scenes"
- Her work explores "the psychological experience of personal danger and physical risk"
- Her drawings from the 1940s use a "minimalist aesthetic soon to prevail internationally, yet uncannily ahead of their time"
- She is known for her "multi-layered, complex wall-relief sculptures" which is a "pioneering technique"
- She is "a Palestinian artist who greatly influenced Walid Raad"

In this way, even though she is a fictional character, Suha Traboulsi has the very real effect of becoming a barometer against which actual artists need measure themselves in order to be considered in Western circles. Raad's intention seems to be to put a spotlight on the ways the West wants to see the world and perhaps highlight the absurdity of it. How easily some Western publications and critics took the bait proves his point to some extent. Part of this is about riding the wave of an intended controversy and seemingly having the upper hand intellectually in pointing the accountability elsewhere: the ignorance of the reviewer. In a sense, these critics are showing their lack of knowledge and tendencies in leaning on Western ways of defining art that is now conflated with the buzzword "global." In devising Suha Traboulsi's biographies, though, Raad is ultimately projecting his own assumptions of the complexities of a woman's experience and the risk is that he ends up oversimplifying and overshadowing what a real example of a woman artist may bring to our attention.[62] I am called to think about feminist writers who speak to the

found in: Gioni et al., *Here and Elsewhere*; Walid Raad, "Walid Raad | Art," WGR, accessed May 3, 2021, https://www.walidraad.com; "Suha Traboulsi," *Mario Merz Prize* (blog), accessed October 27, 2020, https://www.mariomerzprize.org/en/suha-traboulsi/; Wilson-Goldie, "One Take"; Paula Cooper Gallery, "Dissolving Margins," Paula Cooper Gallery, 2015, https://www.paulacoopergallery.com/exhibitions/group-exhibition/press-release.

[62] This indifferent attitude to the nuances of women's experiences also echoes what feminist thinker Maria Lugones. She mentions in her article "The Coloniality of Gender," where Lugones traces tendencies of "indifference" in the scholarly writing of men "who have been racialized as inferior" and how this indifference contributes to the "systemic violence's inflicted upon women of color." One of the ways that this gendered relation between Raad and Suha Traboulsi has gone unnoticed may also be a result of these implicit attitudes toward indifference. Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of

innumerable ways women are undermined, and their labor and voices, co-opted. Consider scholar Silvia Federici's writing on the undermining and breaking up of women's collectivity and solidarity through the demonization of 'gossip', she writes, "in many parts of the world, women have historically been seen as the weavers of memory — those who keep alive the voices of the past and the histories of the communities, who transmit them to the future generations and, in so doing, create a collective identity and profound sense of cohesion."[63] There are particular histories of cohesion brought about by women's friendships, allyships and experiences that are at stake here in the way Suha Traboulsi is reduced to a simulacrum, a placeholder of a woman that exists in a vacuum and not as a production of relationships and struggles of a life lived. Federici brings to our attention what is lost when the production and passing down of knowledge about women is inextricably tied to histories of struggle, condemnation and ultimately erasure. He doesn't need to invent and amalgamate complexities because they already exist. There's also the issue of consent. His fiction has legitimized itself as though it has permission from the voiceless to do so. And yet, is any of this really consensual? Can we say this is a fictional scenario of consent and trust? The fictional narratives around Suha Traboulsi is that she confides in Raad and tells him her stories. I am reminded here of feminist activist and writer Audre Lorde, who alluded in her 1978 paper "Uses of the Erotic" that co-opting another's experience without consent is a form of abuse.[64] Using this example is not to say that there is a way for Raad to request consent from Suha Traboulsi and I'd like to clarify that there isn't anything wrong with inventing fictional characters or using fiction to bring light to complex issues. But there is still a dimension that should be considered in the way Raad's work is read by critics. A dimension that gives thought to how he takes permission to manufacture a woman's subjectivity that has real consequences in the world that is beyond

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Gender," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 13–33, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-38273-3_2.

[63] Federici, "How the Demonization of 'Gossip' Is Used to Break Women's Solidarity."

[64] Audre. Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Out & out Pamphlet ; No. 3 (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Out & Out Books, 1978).

being contained in a fictional story. In doing so he also denies a way of representing the truer nature of real complex experiences that are already underrepresented. It could be argued that Raad's artistic practice could be just as silencing as the institutions he critiques. There are great risks of giving carte blanche to this approach without at least looking at the consequences.

There is already a population of avatars that exist in Raad's universe. One has to ask how many times can you repeat this formula before it is recognized not as a critique of power structures but a power structure in and of itself? This may not be intentional, but it is an unintended effect of how citational structures work to empower certain bodies. It is important to intervene and question these structures in ways that are informed by how they are excluding other bodies.[65] Imaginary characters like Suha Traboulsi serve a purpose in destabilizing power structures that need to be questioned. The risk, though, is they also oversimplify the experience of real women who not only need to cultivate their unique practice but also reckon with a myriad of challenges that come with entering art scenes that are competitive and still predominantly male-dominated.

[65] I am reminded here of a letter artist Renée Green writes to b-books after they invited her to contribute an essay about her relation to the Situationists International. She initially imagines the ways she may have absorbed, indirectly the influence the Situationists had on various kinds of cultural production, but conveys that her gut reaction was "to imagine a fictional female Situationist protagonist. I sensed an absence of these in the literature in contrast to a prevalence of images of female bodies as spectacle." Provocations such as this intervene into what we consider established dynamic approaches to art, to offer new ways of knowing what we think we already know. She writes, "imagine Billy Holiday on a derive or maybe more likely Angela Davis. Would either of them have been interested in talking to others in different parts of the city on walkie-talkies, describing the neighborhoods they traversed?" Unlike inventing a simulacrum – the imagining is pivoted on what would have shaped this protagonist at a particular time, place and cultural context. Renée Green, *Other Planes of There: Selected Writings* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 100–101.

4. Contesting Frames

Women, modern art and the exhibition

Since the early 1990s there have been dozens of exhibitions with the premise of surveying art from Arab countries and the diaspora that have taken place in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Arab world. One of the early examples of survey exhibitions of this time frame is *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (1993), which featured 70 artists at various stages in their careers including Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017), Inji Efflatoun (1924-1989), Etel Adnan(1925), Huguette Caland (1931-2019), Simone Fattal (1942), , Mona Hatoum (1952), many of whom listed here have had major exhibitions in museums internationally since, while others have remained lesser known.[66] Exhibitions that have had a feminist premise such as Brooklyn Museum's *Global Feminisms* (2007) and the New York Museum of Modern Art's *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007) for the most part barely included artists of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) overall. While the major publication *Modern Women* (2010) published by New York's MoMA had only a handful of artists and the exhibition *Women in Abstraction* (2021) at the Centre Pompidou covering work from the 1860s to 1980s includes one of the artist's discussed in this section, Saloua Raouda Choucair. In this chapter I reflect some of the power structures that have framed the life and work of two major figures in modern art in Lebanon and Egypt that are recognized regionally and in varying degrees in the West. Choucair had substantial local relevance and a retrospective at the Tate Modern in 2013 and scholarship devoted to her work. Efflatoun has been included in survey exhibitions, scholarship and arts writing but has yet to be exhibited at the same scale in a Western center.[67] Given these two examples, the question of what kinds of

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[66] The curator of this exhibition, Salwa Mikdadi, now has her personal archive of correspondences with artists in the Arab world at New York University Abu Dhabi's Library. Salwa Mikdadi, "Guide to the Salwa Mikdadi Papers AD.MC.022" (New York University Abu Dhabi, 2019 1960), http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/nyuad/ad_mc_022/.

[67] Other artists that have been recently highlighted in major exhibitions in Western centers include Turkish-Jordanian artist Fahralnissa Zeid (1901-1991) in 2017 at Tate Modern and Lebanese artist Huguette Caland (1931-2019) at Tate St. Ives in 2019 and Algerian artist Baya (1931-1998) at New York University's Grey Art Gallery in 2018. For more coverage, consider: Sarah-Neel Smith, "Fahrelnissa Zeid in the Mega-Museum," *Ibraaz*, July 14, 2016, 10; "Third Text,"

power structures guide inclusion is revisited to consider how their work has or may be inscribed and made relevant or legible to Western audiences. For Choucair this has happened to a greater degree and while for Efflatoun, her increasing notoriety raises questions in how the complex circumstances of her life and work may be taken up in the coming years.

accessed May 1, 2021, http://thirdtext.org/Ozpinar-Fahrelnissa-Zeid; "Baya: Woman of Algiers," Grey Art Gallery, 2018, https://greyartgallery.nyu.edu/exhibition/baya-woman-algiers/.

4.1 Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017)

Figure 10 Saloua Raouda Choucair, Bench 1998, stone, 170 × 570 × 70 cm, installed in Mir Amin Square, Beirut, 2006. Copyright Solidere, Beirut. Courtesy Agial Art Gallery, Beirut. Image source: http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/88/MemoryCorrected

These complexities of how an artist's work is inscribed can be shown in a brief examination of Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair (1916-2017). The oeuvre of this artist, which traverses sculpture in a range of materials from metal to wood, painting, architecture, jewelry and textiles, has been reviewed in a variety of ways throughout her career in Lebanon and France. Choucair's work has also been taken up by Western institutions and curators in the past decade; she had her first major museum exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2013 at the age of 97.[68] Even before her foray to the West late in life, Choucair spent her career

[68] Another key example of an artist 'discovered' late in life is Lebanese poet, writer and artist Etel Adnan (1925), who was singled out by well-known curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, artistic director of London's Serpentine Galleries. These discoveries often become part of the roster of artists that major curators lay claim to.

primarily in Lebanon, maneuvering around various power structures that sought to read her work through certain lenses. Art historian and anthropologist Kirsten Scheid has probed the reception of Choucair's work in arts writing to discern a range of interpretations at different stages of her career. In her PhD dissertation Scheid notes that the artist was seen as "a colleague of famous French artists" in the 1950s when Choucair was living in Paris, a "woman pulled between different demands" in the 1960s because of her role as a mother and artist, and an "authentic Arab-Islamic artist" in the 1970s-80s.[69] The multitude of ways her work has been taken up has created a situation where Scheid observes how she is both celebrated and also ignored to the point where her practice becomes undermined. To pluck just one example, the artist's 1962 retrospective at the UNESCO hall in Beirut's western suburb that featured objects such as paintings, rugs and ceramics, pronounced an emerging tendency to gender aspects of her work. "Readers of the 1962 exhibition reviews were consistently directed to notice Choucair's sex in her art-making," writes Scheid.[70] "She was said to be a professional artist 'in spite of her familial and social responsibilities' (T. Ghurayib 1962) and despite the 'seductions of complaisance' to which young women 'generally cede' (Hakim 1962)."[71] This framing of her domestic versus professional roles as a mother and artist was so frustrating for Choucair that she actually changed her art-making to prevent it being viewed through the lens of gender. As Scheid notes, Choucair "greatly decreased her showing of practical objects that could be construed as domestic decor" and "ceased painting altogether and turned her energy to that medium recognized as the most masculine of arts, sculpture."[72] These examples show in a very real way how Choucair contended with the prevailing patriarchal

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[69] Kirsten Scheid, "Painters, Picture -Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State" (Ph.D., United States -- New Jersey, Princeton University, 2005), 64, http://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/305386754/abstract/BAE8237EB8A44F5EPQ/1.

[70] Scheid, 343.

[71] Scheid, 343.

[72] Scheid, 357.

Figure 11 Video stills from Tate Modern's promotional video for Choucair's exhibition in 2013 that contains older footage of the artist and process of making the exhibition: Imane Belle. *Saloua Raouda Choucair – From Beirut to Tate Modern,* 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB1K4H0vx0g.

system. She also vocally opposed being relegated to the category of "woman artist," telling Scheid in 1999 why she disliked the delineation: "I challenge all men. Why women's art? Just because I'm a woman?" As Scheid explains, "Choucair did not attack the premise that being female and being an artist were at crosscurrents."[73]

When Choucair's work was acknowledged by a major Western art institution just a few years before her death, this added another dimension of complexity to the way her work was read. An example is how she was framed in an oversimplified way by curators at the Tate Modern in 2013. Her repertoire was described in

[73] Scheid, 357–58.

Figure 12 Video stills from Tate Modern's promotional video for Choucair's exhibition in 2013 that contains older footage of the artist and process of making the exhibition: Imane Belle. Saloua Raouda Choucair – From Beirut to Tate Modern, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB1K4H0vx0g.

this way: "A rare female voice in the Beirut art scene from the 1940s onwards, Choucair's work combines elements of western abstraction with Islamic aesthetics."[74] This description, while appealing to the Western audience that understands abstract art in the Western tradition and views the Middle East as a monolithic terrain signified primarily by Islam, does not capture the full scope of her work and artistic trajectory, nor is it true that she is a rare female voice.[75] Choucair's work is sanitized in a way that can be easily digested in the West: she's a woman, from Lebanon, who is inspired by established Western art aesthetics and also

[74] Tate, "Saloua Raouda Choucair – Exhibition at Tate Modern," Tate, accessed March 5, 2021, https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/saloua-raouda-choucair.

[75] See artist and critic Helen Khal's book on a great number of women artists working in Lebanon in the 20th century: Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, 1988).

incorporates Islamic motifs. She represents a bridge between worlds in a way and her work is simplified to conform to an idea of what needs to exist in order for the presence of an artist from the Global South to be justified.[76] In her Master's thesis at the American University of Beirut, Laura Metzler comments on this oversimplification by pointing out that Choucair's practice was much more dynamic, including a longstanding interest in quantum mechanics. Tate curators named abstract artists Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935), Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) as possible influences of Choucair's. Metzler argues that this "acts as a severe limitation by reducing a potential new vocabulary to an existing language."[77] The bottom line is that Choucair's work cannot be reduced to a Western label like "abstraction" in the way that abstraction is understood in the Western tradition.[78] Which highlights the shortsightedness of the trend to transmit artists from the Arabic speaking world to fulfil a diversity quota. It's not so dissimilar to how Raad scripts Suha Traboulsi; in a sense, inclusion is scripted too because it hinges both on how elites frame the artists they are marketing and on the pervading influence and privilege of Western institutions to apply existing ways of judging art's value onto artists of the global south. A greater understanding of these complex power dynamics will be important as more artists are brought into view through Western art exhibitions.

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[76] It seems apt to mention that Choucair's artistic ethos, according to art historian and curator Salwa Mikdadi "began as a challenge to her philosophy professor at the American University of Beirut," which she notes in her curatorial essay for the traveling exhibition *Forces of Change*. Drawing on correspondences with the artist in the 1990s, Mikdadi highlights how the artist's study of Islamic art, mathematics and physics allowed Choucair to develop "her abstract forms entirely on her own and was surprised, therefore, to find that other artists were working in abstraction when she traveled to Paris in 1948." Nashashibi, Adnan, and Nader, *Forces of Change*, 20.

[77] Laura Triggs Metzler, "(And so On…): Genetics, Quantum Mechanics, and Transcendence in the Later Work of Saloua Raouda Choucair" (American University of Beirut, 2014), 11–13.

[78] In the Tate Modern's promotional video (Fig. 3), clips are shown of Choucair speaking about her work in ways that directly contradict how the museum is framing her in the exhibition. For instance she says (translated from Arabic) "A critic once told me that my work has a European influence" and retorts, "no. It is a universal influence, in fact." However moments before, the conservator in the video mentions that she "absorbed the classical painting technique" while in Paris, working in Fernand Léger's studio, as a way to allude to Choucair's refined sensibilities. Imane Belle, *Saloua Raouda Choucair – From Beirut to Tate Modern*, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB1K4H0vx0g.

4.2 Inji Efflatoun (1924 - 1989)

Figure 13 (Left) Video still of Inji Efflatoun with one of her first paintings, part of a series *The Girl and the Beast*; (Right) Full and close up of the same work. Image source: (Left) Mohamed Shaaban. "Inji." *Safarkhan Art Gallery Channel*. Cairo: al-Markaz li-l-Qawmi al-Sinima (National Cinema Center), 1988. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ulTAQaffIBU&t=401s.. Courtesy of Safarkhan Art Gallery; (Right) Inji Efflatoun, *The Girl and the Beast* 1941, oil on canvas, 70 x 55 cm © Photo: Courtesy of Museum of Inji Efflatoun. https://universes.art/en/nafas/articles/2016/egyptian-surrealists/img/inji-efflatoun

One artist who appears to be on the cusp of being featured more prominently is painter Inji Efflatoun (1924 – 1989) who has not had a major solo exhibition in a Western center like Choucair. Even so her work has appeared in numerous Western publications such as *Afterall, The New York Times, Art Asia Pacific* and numerous others as well as scholarship on the history of modern art in Egypt, particularly since the

1980s.[79] She has recently appeared as part of large scale exhibitions, including *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)* that surveyed Egyptian Surrealism – a movement of which she was briefly involved early in her career before dropping out – as well as major survey shows like *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965* and the 56th Venice Biennale.[80] As such, it would not be a stretch to expect that she would have an exhibition in a major museum in the coming years. She is recognized as a "major avant-garde figure in Egyptian modernist history,"[81] a feminist activist who was actively affiliated with communist groups and was a prolific political writer who attended feminist conferences and organized political activities in Egypt. Meanwhile her artistic practice was concerned with scenes of labor and working-class subjects, primarily women. Her life and contributions contain numerous socio-political nuances that may not translate into simplified Western tropes and transnational feminist framing.[82] Like Choucair, various levels of patriarchal power structures shaped her life and the reception of her work nationally. A key event that one could speculate would capture the attention of international modern art curators is Efflatoun's imprisonment in 1959 during President Gamal Abdel Nasser's crack down of people involved in communist

[79] Her work was first covered by instructor Aimé Azar in 1953 with the book *Femmes Peintres d'Égypte* and later by American artist and writer Betty LaDuke in 1989, the year of the artist's death.

[80] Efflatoun's work has been discussed and documented extensively in Arabic and French outlets and exhibited in Egypt, Europe, the Soviet Union, Brazil (during the 1953 Sao Paulo Biennial), and the United States and other places throughout her career. Resources on her biography, political writing, speeches at feminist conferences and artistic career include books, articles, digitized documents and photographs at the Alexandria Library, interviews with the artist and her sister Gulpéri Abdullah and a personal memoir published in 2014 (in Arabic): Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*; Kane, *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt*; Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile*; Nashashibi, Adnan, and Nader, *Forces of Change*; Mikdadi, "Guide to the Salwa Mikdadi Papers AD.MC.022"; Anneka Lenssen, "Inji Efflatoun: White Light," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 42 (September 1, 2016): 84–95, https://doi.org/10.1086/689806; Betty LaDuke, "Inji Efflatoun Art, Feminism, and Politics in Egypt," *Art Education* 45, no. 2 (March 1992): 33, https://doi.org/10.2307/3193323; Betty LaDuke, "Egyptian Painter Inji Efflatoun: The Merging of Art, Feminism, and Politics," *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 3 (1989): 474–85; Nadia Radwan, "Inji Efflatoun: Multiple Idioms of an Egyptian New Woman," in *Focus on Inji Efflatoun* (Doha: Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art, 2016), https://boris.unibe.ch/80258/; Nadine Atallah, "Have There Really Been No Great Women Artists? Writing a Feminist Art History of Modern Egypt," in *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, ed. Ceren Özpinar and Mary Kelly, Proceedings of the British Academy (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 11–25; Salem, "On Transnational Feminist Solidarity"; Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art: 1910-2003*, Revised, 2nd edition (Cairo; New York: American University in Cairo Press, 2005).

[81] Lenssen, "Inji Efflatoun: White Light."

[82] See Sara Salem Salem, "On Transnational Feminist Solidarity."

Figure 14 Inji Efflatoun *In the Woman's Prison*, 1960 Oil on canvas 58 x 52cm. Image Source: Safarkhan Art Gallery http://safarkhan.com/Artist-details.aspx?artistID=213&type=current

political activities.[83] A translated excerpt from her memoir published in Arabic in 2014 is contained in the book *Primary Documents: Modern art in the Arab World* (2018) and invites English readers into some of the tricky institutional negotiations the artist had to maneuver to first gain the right to paint, and gain the right to depict

[83] Efflatoun's feminist activism and those of her compatriots were also in opposition to the foreground of the state sponsored feminism brought about by President Gamal Abdel Nasser. This is outlined by Jessica Bier as a symbolic front to the suppression of activists that were critical of some of its commitments. She writes, "The state's championing of gender issues, however, coincided with the suppression of dissenting voices and alternative visions…Prominent feminists, such as Duriyya Shafiq and Inji [Efflatoun], were incarcerated." See Laura Bier, *Revolutionary Womanhood: Feminisms, Modernity, and the State in Nasser's Egypt*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 7. and Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

Figure 15 Inji Efflatoun Untitled, 1979, watercolor and pencil on paper, 36x54.5cm. Image Source: © Christie's Images. https://onlineonly.christies.com/s/modern-contemporary-arab-turkish-art-part-iii/inji-efflatoun-egyptian-1924-1989-309/2478

her fellow inmates (Fig. 14). Jailed along with a group of female activists, Efflatoun was a political prisoner for four years and had to barter with wardens and guards to find ways of getting materials for her paint in confinement. This negotiation created a complex power relation where her right to paint was contingent on being able to sell them and have the funds benefit the prison. When no one was buying them, out of fear of losing her right to paint she writes: "I quickly suggested that my fellow inmates and I buy the paintings out of our deposited money, and I asked him for a special discount for myself—considering that I was the one who painted them."[84] In one instance she writes of painting a fellow inmate who was sentenced to death, that was later confiscated by the Criminal Investigations Department. She writes: "I lost the desire to paint the prison and its inmates—the whole place disgusted me… In the beginning, my paintings were expressions of the

[84] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, *Modern Art in the Arab World*, 193.

prison and its great tragedies… Every inmate represented her own social tragedy."[85] In between, paintings were confiscated or smuggled out to family where possible through entrusted conduits like doctors and guards. This disillusionment eventually shifted her attention to the sparse nature that was around the prison, in particular one tree near barbed wire that she would paint "in every season," that over time became known as "Inji's tree" by her fellow inmates (Fig. 16).[86] After her release in 1963, Efflatoun carried over a painting style that continued to focus on nature, rural scenes through flecks of perforated color and light. An approach that differed from her earlier work that engaged more directly with the working class, this transition was interpreted by some critics like her former artist comrade Georges Henein of the Surrealists, that she was "giving up on the attitude of opposition."[87] This was in effect, an insinuation that her practice was no longer responsive to the causes she was once engaged, but according to art historian Anneka Lennsen, it was also an interpretation that is much more complex and gendered than it seems.[88] In one biography for the exhibition *Post War: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlanti*c, the headline is that "Inji Efflatoun was a Marxist and feminist painter," a statement that repeats across other short biographies and articles that have appeared on the artist.[89] This framing may give an indication of how her life might be pivoted by these two categories.[90] One wonders how Efflatoun's story may be formatted for the Western viewer. What aspects of her life may be pronounced and tethered to recognizable codified forms of art? Who might be providing the inputs on her life and work from the region? Where will her work be sourced? Who will speak on her behalf and why? I recommend that these questions be considered in the uptake of modern art of the Arab world to more

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[85] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, 194–95.

[86] Lenssen, Rogers, and Shabout, 194–95.

[87] Lenssen, "Inji Efflatoun: White Light," 39.

[88] See Lenssen, 39.

[89] Consider the tropes that are being used in this article in the *New York Times* and who is cited: Myrna Ayad, "Overlooked No More: Inji Efflatoun, Egyptian Artist of the People," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2021, sec. Obituaries, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/29/obituaries/inji-efflatoun-overlooked.html.

[90] "Trees Behind the Wall," Haus Der Kunst, accessed May 6, 2021, https://postwar.hausderkunst.de/en/artworks-artists/artworks/trees-behind-the-wall.

seriously consider what citational structures form around the framing of artists stepping into the North Atlantic limelight.

5. Conclusion

On scripting inclusion and hiding exclusion

Figure 16 (Left) Inji Efflatoun, *Al-achgar (Trees)*, 1960, Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Ramzi and Saeda Dalloul Art Foundation. Source: https://post.moma.org/inji-efflatoun-in-prison-1959-1963-painting-the-unrenewable/

(Top Right) Saloua Raouda Choucair *Two = One*, 1951, Oil on wood. Collection of the artist. Source: https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/saloua-raouda-choucair/two-one/ © Saloua Raouda Choucair. Courtesy of the Artist's Estate.

(Bottom Right) Walid Raad attributed to Suha Traboulsi 1943-1949, 2014, variable. Source: https://www.scratchingonthings.org/untitled-1943-1949. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery Beirut/Hamburg

I began the journey of this thesis with personal insights into how I came to question the politics of inclusion between imbricated art worlds of the West and Arab countries. These insights involved an encounter with Raad's installation, *Yet more Letters to the Reader* (2015) and how this work opened up a way for me to confront my own drives and labor in the marketing of a regional collection of modern art in the Arab Gulf. It alerted me of my own complicities in the shaping of previously marginalized modern art histories and

ultimately to question the underlying power dynamics involved in concocting canons. As I continued to probe this topic further, I stumbled on the avatar of Suha Traboulsi. As a fictional woman modernist artist, Suha Traboulsi as scripted by Raad, seemed to represent the very base-line characteristics that Western art institutions seem to be looking for in their quest to diversify and redress Euro-American views of art history in their programming. The collaged images above pronounce a tension visually that I have tried to articulate in this thesis. On the left is an image of Efflatoun's tree, 'Inji's tree,' from her time being imprisoned, of which she has made many (Fig.16). Next to it is Choucair's *Two = One* (1941) which derives its composition and tonality from mathematical methods the artist employed to make her work; a work that has since been punctured by glass shards and shrapnel obtained during the wars in Lebanon (1975-1991); and lastly, Raad as Suha Traboulsi creating an abstract work that was scripted to be prescient of Minimalism of the 1960s.[91] With Efflatoun, we are offered a window into a period of her life where her practice became shaped by what was immediately surrounding her. She was inspired by subjects she may not have captured in the same way before, she writes: "If I had been out of prison, I never would have painted a single tree, because the field of possibilities would have been very vast."[92] Meanwhile in Choucair's painting, created during her time in Paris at the atelier of French artist Fernand Léger, was generated through precise mathematical 'modules' in such a way that, as Scheid notes, "a distinction could be drawn between her "geometric" [approaches and that] of her atelier mates"; making more apparent her own voice amidst those Western influences she is often too tightly tethered to.[93] She made her own way and although "the viewer may not apprehend the ratio-structure, the overall effect of the composition is one of perfect equilibrium."[94] Both examples give us insight into the precise decisions and directions that each artist makes to cultivate their practice that respond to circumstances

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[91] For more the math behind Choucair's painting method read: Scheid, "Painters, Picture -Makers, and Lebanon," 320–25.

[92] Nadine Atallah, "Inji Efflatoun in Prison (1959–1963): Painting the Unrenewable," *MoMA: Post Notes on Art in a Global Context*, April 28, 2021, https://post.moma.org/inji-efflatoun-in-prison-1959-1963-painting-the-unrenewable/.

[93] Scheid, "Painters, Picture -Makers, and Lebanon," 320–22.

[94] Scheid, 320–22.

and constraints of their environments and cultural milieus. And what we see with Raad via the simulacrum of Suha Traboulsi, is an imitation of a modernist woman artist in the Arab world, scripted to have the kind of adventurous life that directly reflects what Western museums may be looking for. In the middle of all this hoopla, Suha Traboulsi becomes a placeholder for Raad's aesthetic and conceptual choices, more than an attempt to bring attention to a potential "feminist forebear" or "missing link" that we need to lament and inspect. This realization became an important one to consider through the lens of feminist thinkers because of the explicit gendered power dynamic that underlies this artist-avatar relation. A gendered power dynamic that has gone largely unexplored by arts writers and scholars. This indifference to the power dynamic allowed me to start to question why and to suggest that a 'citational structure' has formed around Raad's work that made it immune from this type of criticism. This prompted me to consider this case as a microcosm of a broader problem of patriarchal power structures that script the ways women modernist artists, and modern art of the Arab world more broadly, are made relevant and legible to Western audiences.

Some of the Western art institutions mentioned in this thesis may have succeeded at ticking the inclusion box when it comes to bringing in artists from the Arabic speaking world. But as I've conveyed through looking at the historical context of modern art in the Arab world and the examples of Choucair and Efflatoun, there is an interplay of power structures shaping the modern art canon in the Arabic speaking world that have patriarchal and neo-colonialist dimensions. The very forces who are being entrusted to improve inclusion are those who are unable to fully grasp the various dimensions and extent of exclusion. It is almost taken for granted that elites from the Arabic-speaking world are guiding the narrative of inclusion. There is very little criticism or acknowledgment from Western art institutions of how art from the region is managed, often with a degree of opportunism and aggrandizement. And yet, it would be impossible to understand the power dynamic of any institution by speaking to those at the top overseeing the dynamic, as I have suggested in the first chapter in relation to my own experiences and observations.

I now find myself at a crossroads as I look upon this labyrinth of power relations. I am trying to discern my own place in it; to cultivate a sense of agency rather than complicity. I want to speak from this

place of subtlety and invisibility. This thesis is not meant to propose ways of dismantling the system, but only to encourage greater reflection, analysis and criticism of it. Part of this is because Western art institutions keen to show they are doing their part in diversity and inclusion are uncritically leaning on and aligning themselves with the very elite power structures who exacerbate different, subtler forms of exclusion. This has been through 'add and stir' type of approaches, but the consequences of the wholesale adoption of this approach need to be more clearly articulated and understood. More could be learned if the discourse of exclusion and inclusivity brought into the fold voices in the art sector that do not have leadership roles within the regional art industry; people who are behind the scenes, doing a lot of the daily work but not necessarily experiencing inclusion and platforms in the same way. Even to be given the power to articulate critical thought is from a position of privilege and not, therefore, as dynamically inclusive as it appears. And so, it seems that the version of inclusion we have come to know is not only scripted, but also prescriptive—telling or even teaching us who is and is not worthy of being included.

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