

REMODELING REQUIRED: OFFICIAL BIENNALES IN EGYPT AND INTERNATIONAL BIENNALE CULTURE

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Rejecting Contemporaneity by Negatively Interacting with Nationalism, Mythology and Globalization

The current Egyptian art scene is sadly divided into two parties, actually two specific scenes, the official scene supported and funded by the Ministry of Culture and the non-official, independent scene run by NGO's and independent spaces with mostly foreign funding. The visual arts sector of the Ministry organizes both the Cairo and Alexandria Biennales. The Cairo International Biennale was first organized in 1984 as the Cairo International Biennale of Arab Art, but the Arab Art segment in the definition was dropped later to include a wider variety and quantity of works from around the world. The Alexandria Biennale, established in 1955, however is still gripping on to a regional definition in its title as the Alexandria International Biennale for Mediterranean Countries, encompassing countries from both sides of the Mediterranean.

One could go so far as to make the conclusion that the Cairo and Alexandria Biennales are constructed platforms for the reissuing and revitalization of ideologies that have played and still play an important role in the formulation of an official interpretation of "Egyptianess". In other words, these two events willingly or unwillingly are constructed as part of a larger strategy that imposes an ideologically-old but still quite powerful definition of modern Egyptian identity. A major problem that these biennales face is that they still have strong structural links to a certain Nasserist definition of Nationalism, more known to us as Arab-Nationalism. This is particularly evident in the Cairo Biennale, especially when we come to know that it started as a Biennale for the Arab region, although it is now an international event with 56 countries participating in its last edition, much of its structure and temperament has not changed since 1984. Although Arab-Nationalism still has a strong effect on the majority of the Egyptian peoples' sense of identity – this is basically due to the powerful implementation of its theories through the official and sometimes non-official media, mainly television and radio – it is an ailing ideology with little effect on regional or international politics. With the Arab League – the Arab world's version of the EU – in a state of constant deterioration and lack of power, and Egypt facing serious disturbances in its cultural fabric with the ever-growing voice of religious conservatism and the 'more than real' implications of globalization, it seems that the official sectors are only clinging on to the rhetoric's of an outdated nationalism because of its sense of familiarity and comfortableness and it's power to keep the fears of a new globalism at bay.

In reality, Arab-Nationalism today can speak of no more than pop-culture links and a shared sympathy within the region towards certain social problems and political conflicts. So, how does this mode of Nationalism interpret itself through the Biennales? The answer is through most of its elements, through the choice of themes and through the selection of artists and so on. For example, the theme for the 9th Cairo Biennale was "Mythology, a bet on Imagination and a bet on Art". In the opening pages of the catalogue, the problematics of the Biennale's position on such a theme were unveiled in such statements as "*We hope that works in the 9th Cairo International Biennale will defeat Globalization in its defined sense as the authority to destroy humanity and force the nations to kneel down, perhaps this will be our last stand before we are swept out by the flood*". This later statement is a political stance that stems from the fear of loosing ones heritage and local culture to globalization. Although this might be a valid fear, the dramatic aspects of such a realization seem to only see globalization in its negative economical and aggressive political manifestations – notably from the perspective of neo-colonialism, which is always

symbolized in the form of American politics. But, coming into contact with globalism's dilemmas, tools, effects and banal manifestations, is a daily experience for most Egyptians as for most people in today's world. Today, there can no longer be a purely local culture and for that matter, by sensing the reality of our daily lives and touching upon historical facts, it is impossible to ever reach the conclusion that there ever will be a purely global culture.

The official biennales of Egypt have become "Kitsch Biennales", not just because most of the works they exhibit are of poor quality, but mainly because their structures are derivatives of old outmoded biennales or "Big International Exhibition" models. It is also apparent that this kitsch factor is the result of their usage of political, geographical and mythological histories that simulate the past but don't seriously negotiate with the present. Rather than structuring frameworks that deal with issues of identity and globalization, the Biennales address these complex issues through off-centered and imposed cultural-political outlooks that are nationalistically impulsive. The result is that the latent issues at hand are represented in an air of confusion and cultural misunderstanding. What complicates the structure even more is the haphazardness in the organization and selection process, which allows for a few examples of "progressiveness" to be exhibited alongside works that can hardly be linked stylistically or philosophically to the current status-quo of the arts in general. Instead of "conquering globalization", the 9th Cairo International Biennale caused a major commotion for most of the Egyptian audience in that, by far, the best work exhibited came from the American artist Paul Pfeiffer.

Pfeiffer's multi-screen video installation was the only curated presentation in the Biennale. Curated by Holly Block and Jane Farver, the installation was allotted the largest space for a single artist in the biennale, the lavish expenditure on the artist's presentation was made possible through various grants from American foundations. The biennale's organizing committee made an obvious political statement by awarding the installation a mere jury prize instead of the grand prize it rightfully deserved. The Cairo biennale always seems to somehow identify globalization as the main oppressor, it seems to function with the democratic tools of an Olympic sports event that favors internationalism over globalism because the later might disrupt its system of reinforcing the past for fear of actually facing the present. The "past" one is referring to can be witnessed in the majority of works featured in the biennale. The mediocre majority of works that are various derivatives of abstract expressionism, cubism and other modernist vocabularies are selected on behalf of the biennale by the ministries of culture of the invited countries, with no apparent "quality control" practiced by the biennale's organizers.

History takes on an even more nostalgic turn when one investigates the mechanisms behind the Alexandria biennale. On taking a closer look at the biennale's archives, it is quite evident that the biennale has had almost one theme since it first appeared in 1955. This theme with its multitude of poetically reconstructed clones is "*Alexandria as a Cosmopolitan City through the Ages*" or "*The Shared Spirit of the Mediterranean as Embodied by Alexandria*". The latest version of the biennale, which happened to be its golden jubilee, opened in December 2005 under the title of *Transparency of the universe, the Mediterranean spell*. But what the biennale fails to see is that one cannot create strong and mutual contemporary cultural links with the "New Mediterranean" by enforcing a hackneyed reading of Alexandria's cultural and historical legacies. It is easy to romanticize about the Alexandria of Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet* and to highlight its multicultural, multiethnic, and super cosmopolitan past. But what about the Alexandria of the 21st century, where and how do we position and recognize it geographically and philosophically? How do we negotiate its identity in the midst of today's tumultuous cultural climate? The conflictual experiences of globalization and many other inflected phenomena are causing the ancient city to unsteadily exist in a state of constant flux. However, it seems that it is satisfactory enough for the Alexandria biennale in 2005 and 2006 to hold its seminars on topics such as "Greek Mythology" and "Leonardo Da Vinci"...