

OVER TWO DECADES OF CAIRO BIENNALE. UNIQUENESS, LIFE CYCLE AND EFFECT ON CURRENT CONTEMPORARY LOCAL ART PRACTICES

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The Dynamics of the Region

In the 1980s, the Middle East was ravaged by three military events that rendered art practice difficult, if not impossible, in some countries: the civil war, in Lebanon, the Iraq-Iran war and the continuous Israeli / Palestinian war of attrition.

The only conspicuous contemporary art scene in the region, besides that in Israel, has been in Egypt, since Lebanese and Palestinian artists have been forced to join the Diaspora, and the Maghreb artists have oscillated between their own countries and France or Spain, respectively. Contemporary art did not come to a halt in Iraq, but was limited to painting and sculpture and forced to adopt various forms of social realism.

The Dynamics in Egypt

Egypt is one of the countries in the Arab world that has had a steady, uninterrupted flow of art movements. Although artists in the fifties and sixties worked for the Pan-Arab project (also known as the National Project), there has always been a freedom to experiment with alternative forms of expression, including abstraction, away from the control and support of the state, which, for its part, owned and controlled all cultural outlets until well into the mid-'80s.

The main players on the Egyptian art scene in the '70s and '80s were the artist, the critic and the state-owned gallery. Most practices, with a few individual exceptions, were confined to modernist to late-modernist painting and figurative sculpture, often heavily influenced by years of social realist practice, since both artists and critics were trained in a Soviet-style political climate, in which all aspects of artistic creation were tightly controlled.

The Birth of a Biennale

The Cairo Biennale was initially set up in 1984, as a state-sponsored international art event for participants from Arab-speaking countries.

The event's elder sister the Alexandria Biennale was established in 1955, in imitation of the Venice Biennale, though it was – and is – broadly restricted to countries adjacent to the Mediterranean.

After the first four editions of the Cairo Biennale its organizers decided to open the doors to participants from countries in other parts of the world, in an attempt to raise the hitherto rather mediocre standard of works submitted and turn this into a genuinely international event.

This decision rescued, rather than resurrected, the Biennale, since Spanish, Italian, German, Scandinavian and American contributions over the years primarily had the effect of showing up in

the inadequacies of the less good work from other countries (including Egypt itself, on many occasions), when the selection had been determined by issues other than those of strict quality.

The involvement of all state owned galleries in the Biennale helped to disseminate the work to a wider public, including students.

The Biennale at its Peak

In the late '90s, the Biennale was successful in introducing new media and new artistic practices and enabled the Egyptian public to see work by artists such as Nancy Spero, Claude Viallat, Gio Pomodoro, Joseph Kosuth and Mona Hatoum. The exposure of younger Egyptian artists and practitioners to the works of international artists who enjoyed both a career and fame had a massive impact on their practices in the late '90s and was reflected in the first two Biennales of the new millennium.

At one point, this exposure to the work of foreign artists offered young artists and professionals the only window onto the outside world, and the only way, in practice, that they could see and interact, at first hand, with contemporary art from elsewhere.

Many Egyptian artists who have an international career today made their debut at the Cairo Biennale, including Hamdi Atteya, Amal Kenawi, Shadi el Noshoukati, Weal Shaky and Moataz Nasr.

One unique, and distinct, benefit we may attribute to the Cairo Biennale is that it has now clarified the newly forged identity of the curator.

Curators were called commissioners in local Egyptian art practice, and their role was a purely administrative one, devoid of any responsibility for conceptualizing a project, selecting an artist or writing a text.

The Cairo Biennale introduced art professionals and the public to the distinctive roles and functions of the international curator and thus added a new player to the now effervescent art movement. A new generation of art historians, such as Aleya Hamza, now develops plenty of new projects each year and is gradually gaining recognition at an international level (e.g. at the both the Berlin Biennale and Dak'Art, in 2006).

The fact that international artists with a career behind them have been invited by the organizers to take part in the Cairo Biennale does not imply that the selection procedures have always been flawless and fair: on the contrary, a high degree of arbitrariness in the selection procedures has always reflected the continuing incidence of nepotism, favouritism and major conflicts of interest. Over time, the arbitrary decisions, which have defied both logic and public opinion, have tended to become increasingly numerous, brazen and conspicuous.

The Biennale in the new Millennium, in relation to current Art Practices

Nowadays, artists living and working in Egypt do not count on the Cairo Biennale as their sole source of art information, education or communication (IEC).

Art practices today in Egypt are principally driven by two major factors, working in tandem:

a. Sources of information

The sources of information are now diversified, owing to the massive increase in the opportunities for art professionals to travel and for direct contact and exchange between artists selected for international manifestations (Venice, São Paulo, Istanbul, Havana, Gwangju and Dakar) and their international peers.

b. Sources of influence

Egyptian art professionals living and working in Egypt have experienced the effects of the new parabolic satellite culture of the last two decades, dominated by Western/American media and advertising.

The ferocious new audio-visual *materiel* of the budding mass consumerist culture has propelled the previously sluggish societies of the Middle East into a global visual culture, and this, in turn, has induced a dramatic confusion of identities, especially among the young, and a state of cultural ambivalence, in their love-hate relationship to the West.

The changes in Egyptian society are conspicuous and are clearly reflected in contemporary Egyptian art.

Nowadays, artists are free to experiment with new and alternative visual platforms, thanks to the diversity of sources of information, and the fact that their near-total independence from state support has been offset by the growth in private sponsorship from international foundations. This has left them free to experiment with new media and materials, including installation, video, performance, sound and digital media. For this reason, the international cultural foundations must be viewed as a major influence, in providing both information and practical assistance.

New and interesting forms of local artistic expression suggest a strongly hybrid amalgamation of East-West visual alphabets and represent an attempt to formulate a new vocabulary, capable of bridging the gap to the “Other” and seeking to accommodate its values. Indeed, expressions like “hybrid values”, “power of the ordinary”, “dialogue”, “fusion”, “the aesthetic versus the intellectual” and “bridging” have replaced the terms that existed in the critical vocabulary of the ’50s ’60s and were kept alive for a further two decades and more – e.g. “decadent western values”, “the modern versus the authentic”, and similar terms drawn from the vocabulary of formalist art criticism.

The Biennale at Risk

Over the years, the Cairo Biennale has developed a strong platform of supporters, as well as a good many enemies. A new range of challenges has also emerged in recent years, at both local and international levels.

a. Biennale Supporters

In the ’90s, the participation of international career artists in the Biennale created a wave of excitement among younger art professionals; the organizers of the Biennale also took a successful initiative, in soliciting the participation of young artists who emerged from the Egyptian annual Salon of Young Artists. Today, however, most young artists have turned away from the Biennale, since the artists selected to take part in it are still almost always drawn from the stratum of the officially approved.

b. Enemies from within

Established critics (i.e. those belonging to the Egyptian Society of Art Critics) have been totally overlooked, from the beginning of the Biennale right up to the present. The problem was aggravated in the very early ’90s, when the President of the Biennale managed to establish a branch of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Egypt and still presides over it, personally. This has been the cause of polemics in the press, which continue to this day.

Young art professionals find it impossible to be included in the selection for the Biennale, if they do not play the game along approved lines.

The Biennale neglects most, if not all, of the artists who decide to work with private galleries.

Many artists who manage independently to participate in international events do not find it important to be included in the Cairo Biennale.

Challengers from within

Private galleries in Egypt are not numerous; Mashrabia (created by Christine Roussillon in 1984, run by Stefania Angarano since 1990), Karim Francis Galleries (established and run by KF since 1994), and the Townhouse Gallery (established and run by William Wells since 1997) are the only one

that could be described as professional, by international standards. The Townhouse Gallery (5 spaces and a library, with wireless internet access) will participate in ARCO 2006, as the first Egyptian gallery ever to be recognised in this way. These private galleries provide an alternative space for younger and/or independent artists with personal projects who cannot make it into the Biennale or into the state-run galleries, that seem doomed to extinction.

Challenger no. 1: *al Nitaq*

Early in 2000, all private galleries united to create a ten-day event in the streets of downtown Cairo: *al Nitaq* (this translates as “The Zone”). This event was repeated in 2001, when it opened on the same night as the Cairo Biennale; as a result, the opening of the Biennale was a total flop, due to the overwhelming interest of the international art professionals in the fresher and more experimental art in *Nitaq*. The effect of this was to provoke an overt confrontation between the official art authorities and the Townhouse Gallery, which had initiated *Nitaq*.

Challenger no. 2: *Photo Cairo*

In 2003 - also concurrently with the Cairo Biennale - the Townhouse Gallery single-handedly organised another event in the streets of downtown Cairo: *Photo Cairo*. This event comprised lens- or image-based art works, including photography, video and video installations, as well as photo-based graphic practices. It was an enormous success and has been repeated twice, since then.

Challenger no. 3: Artists-Critics-Curators

These are the artists who write and curate, in alternation, to compensate for local deficiencies in these fields. This phenomenon is not exclusively Egyptian, since it started decades ago with the gurus of conceptual art. More recent examples have been furnished by the work of the British artist, Damien Hirst (*Freeze* and *Modern Medicine*) and, in Africa, of Olu Oguibe and Candice Breitz. The American pattern of art cooperatives and artist-run spaces has been adopted by a group of image-makers in Cairo, who are in the process of setting up a cooperative that promises to become a major force in the coming years.

What all the internal challengers promise, and never fail to deliver to the artists, are professional standards of planning and execution, integrity in the realisation of projects and continuous background support, in general.

The events described above, which were held in the downtown area of Cairo, also provided a wider exposure for contemporary art and interaction with a broad public. The fact that these events could be repeated proved that art that has a clear concept and is well produced does not alienate the lay audience and is not an elitist activity, such as state officials perform in front of the TV cameras, for the evening news.

Non-Supporters on the outside

Art professionals who have taken part as jury members in previous editions of the Cairo Biennale, as well as curators who have participated in projects at the Biennale, are unanimous, in complaining of a continuous, uninterrupted stream of malpractices, the most conspicuous of which are the horse-trading involved in attempts to influence the juries' decisions on the attribution of prizes – not least, by introducing international political considerations into the discussion.

Challengers from outside

Emergent international biennales on the continent, such as Johannesburg (discontinued), Dakar and Bamako, attract more international attention and higher visibility than Cairo, as evidenced in the international art press.

The Sharjah Biennale, nearby, which was established around twelve years ago and had been undermined for many years by the same kinds of managerial malpractice, underwent a successful reform in 2005, that promises to place it on the international art map.

In the international arena, the Cairo Biennale hypothetically had the potential to compete with Biennales like Havana, Istanbul and Gwangju, but its failure, on a qualitative level, as well as the numerous malpractices for which it became known, have put it out of the running, in an art world that speaks a totally different language, when it comes to managerial and curatorial practice.

The Biennale on its Deathbed

Due to the factors mentioned above, the Cairo Biennale has lost its lustre at the very moment in its history when it most urgently needs a thoroughgoing overhaul of its management methods and rejuvenation, if it is not to go into terminal decline. The fact that it has ceased to inspire and attract either a public or professionals of almost any age is an indication of its failure to recognise the imperatives of contemporary art practice.

The Cairo Biennale receives a subsidy in the region of one million dollars. In comparison to this, events such as the Dakar Biennale (only 600 000 \$) and the Havana Biennial attract much more attention, due to the continuous process of reform that accompanies each cycle. (Both dollar figures are unconfirmed and based on interviews with officials directly concerned with the events in question).

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Sources and Complementary Reading

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