

Here There and Elsewhere

Recent exhibitions of 'Middle Eastern' art
rely on very old generalisations
argues **Pryle Behrman**



Lamia Joreige *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* 2003 video still

IN LAMIA JOREIGE'S VIDEO *HERE AND PERHAPS ELSEWHERE*, 2003, THE ARTIST WALKS ALONG THE ROUTE OF THE FORMER GREEN LINE THAT DIVIDED BEIRUT DURING THE LEBANESE CIVIL WAR, separating the predominately Christian east from the Muslim west. Interviewing local residents she encounters on the way, she asks if they can recall anyone from the area who went missing during the war, a fate that befell an estimated 18,000 people, usually, it is believed, as a result of being kidnapped at one of the checkpoints set up unilaterally by the sectarian militias. Joreige's questioning prompts one interviewee to exclaim in exasperation: 'There are many stories, but I can't tell you here'. 'You're scared of them being recorded?' Joreige enquires. 'No, I'm not scared of them being recorded. But there's no reason to record them. Because they may be true and they may not, you see? Because they won't give you the answer you're looking for.'



Claudia Zanfi &
Gianmaria Conti
Mobile Book Shop,
Baghdad 2002

This exchange has stuck in my mind because it seems an apt characterisation of a wider malaise affecting a raft of exhibitions that have recently taken place in Europe and North America purporting to examine, in some shape or form, 'contemporary Middle Eastern art'. Although the curators involved will undoubtedly go to great pains to distance themselves from a reliance on any simplistic 'binary polarities', it seems that they end up situating themselves firmly in one of two camps: on the one hand you have a strategy that, like Joreige's interviewer, seems intent on examining the local with all of its specific historical and political inheritance; on the other you have the interviewee, who is dismissive of what local narratives can tell us and would rather philosophise about broader questions, such as 'what is truth?' In essence, this could be characterised as a battle between a belief in the importance of politics and identity on one side and an apolitical universalism on the other.

A politics-free, transnational approach was very much in evidence in 'Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking', which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in New York earlier this year with the stated desire, according to the press release, to 'explore contemporary responses to Islamic art'. For many of the artists in the show – such as Shirin Neshat, Shirazeh Houshiary and Emily Jacir – geopolitical issues are an integral part of their practice, but you wouldn't have known it from 'Without Boundary'. The exhibition gently elided any reference to the overlap between Islam and politics, with no mention of the United States occupying large swathes of two Muslim countries, no mention of its ongoing conflict with Islamic fundamentalism under the guise of a 'war on terror' and no mention of the denial of judicial process and basic civil rights to the Muslim inmates of Guantánamo Bay. As a result, even the exhibiting artists were upset. Shirin Neshat told the *New York Observer*: 'What I found disappointing was how, when Glenn Lowry [MoMA's director] wrote a lengthy article discussing the exhibition, he managed to reduce his discussion and analysis of so-called "contemporary Islamic art" to only those who avoided the subject

of politics all together.'

The overriding philosophy of 'Without Boundary' is, as its title suggests, to promote an easygoing universalism that treats national distinctions as an irrelevance. Unsurprisingly, the example of Emily Jacir's practice selected for the exhibition was *Ramallah/New York*, 2004, one of her least political works. It depicts a succession of deliberately prosaic scenes from the eponymous locations side by side, prompting a self-defeating guessing game as to which is which because, from the evidence presented, it is in fact impossible to tell them apart. This disregard for nationality was further evinced by the (reportedly late) inclusion of Bill Viola and Mike Kelley. What was the rationale for suddenly parachuting two Americans into the show? Well, quoting from the press release again: 'Works by American artists Viola and Kelley are included in the exhibition to question origin as a defining factor in the consideration of art.'

There is unquestionably nothing wrong with claiming that there is, or should be, a fundamental empathy between people that transcends national and religious differences. What should be disputed is the concomitant doctrine that political discourses play an insignificant role in the ideological make-up of artists and thus the wider cultural landscape. This harks back to an Enlightenment-era view that dismissed non-aesthetic factors as somehow an obstruction to artistic understanding, as seen in David Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste*, 1757, which argued that critical judgement is really universal and 'intersubjective'. However, as Edward Said warned in *Orientalism* back in 1978, the idea that there is such a thing as apolitical objectivity is merely a smokescreen to prevent contrary viewpoints from being expressed: 'What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that "true" knowledge is fundamentally non-political (and conversely, that overtly political knowledge is not "true" knowledge) obscures the highly if obscurely organised political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. No one is helped in understanding this today when the adjective "political" is used as a label to discredit any work for

daring to violate the protocol of pretending suprapolitical objectivity.'

In contrast to 'Without Boundary', a wholly different curatorial strategy is evident in Catherine David's ongoing project 'Contemporary Arab Representations'. This series of exhibitions, seminars and publications has been explicitly local in focus, addressing one country in the Arab world and/or its capital city at a time: thus 'Beirut/Lebanon' in 2002-03 was followed by 'Cairo' in 2003-04 and the third instalment, 'The Iraqi Equation', took place at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin and Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona earlier this year. Refreshingly, no one could ever accuse this project of shying away from politics. In her introduction to the catalogue accompanying 'Cairo', Gema Martín Muñoz rails against an eclectic range of iniquitous governments: 'the region of the Middle East is today suffering the consequences of barbarism on three fronts: that of the Arab hereditary regimes that operate on the basis of favouritism and that remain in power through a political practice based on preying on their societies; that of Israel against Palestinian society; and that of international policy, with the United States as an occupying force in Iraq.'

However, by devoting a series of exhibitions specifically to the Arab world, 'Contemporary Arab Representations' is implicitly perpetuating the idea that there is some unifying thread binding the region together. Catherine David has certainly been explicit in her belief that the project can help to uncover some deep-seated national characteristics in the countries under discussion. The aim of 'The Iraqi Equation', David explains in the press release, is 'to step back from the immediate horizon of destruction, confusion and chaos, a situation deliberately maintained to the benefit of a few, and to gather testimonies and actions enabling us to make an inventory of a complex inheritance (Mesopotamia, cradle of civilisation, but also modern Iraqi culture and monuments)'

This is obviously problematic. The idea that a region or even a country has an indelible effect on an artist's practice is precisely what so many, in both the Arab world and beyond, have been struggling against for years. In an email dialogue between Tony Chakar and Stephen Wright (published in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition 'Out of Beirut' at Modern Art Oxford), Chakar takes Wright to task for his habitual use of the label 'Middle East': 'The more I thought about it the more it didn't make any sense. What does it mean that I'm from the "Middle East"? ... In fact, the region itself doesn't exist. We might talk about it as much as you want but it's still not there. ... Do you think I might be able to understand what it means to live under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship or to be "liberated" by the Americans? Or would I be able to understand what it means to be living under the constant threat of being "transferred" from Ramallah to Jordan? Or would I be able to understand what it means to live in a megalopolis of 20 million people like Cairo?'

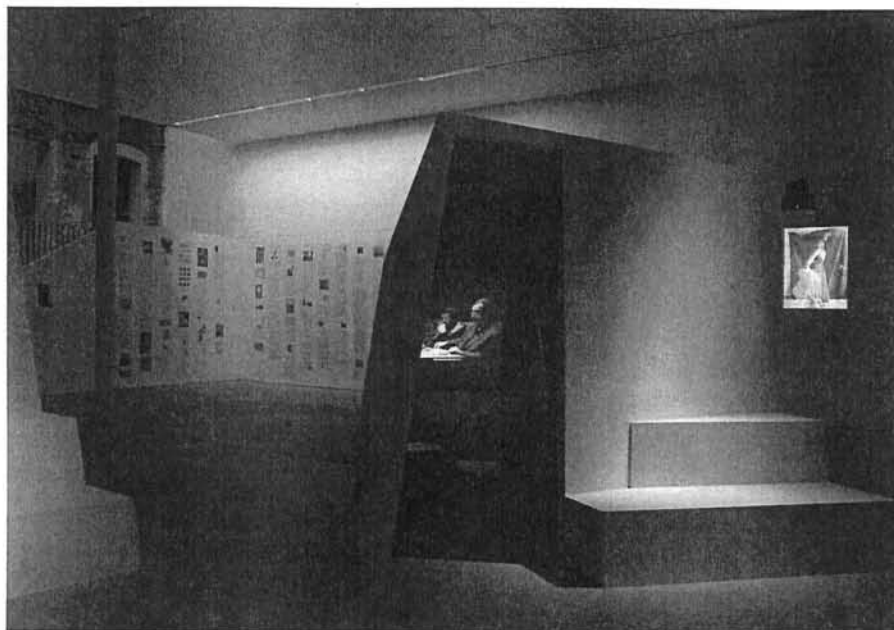
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>> Tony Chakar suggests that the use of 'Middle East', as well as similar generic labels such as 'Arab nations' or 'Islamic world', is symptomatic of the West's reliance on a counterproductive taxonomy that parcels up the world in ways that inevitably leads to dangerous oversimplifications: 'The Middle East as a descriptive term leads a life of its own in political and/or ideological discourses'.

'Islamic world', is symptomatic of the West's reliance on a counterproductive taxonomy that parcels up the world in ways that inevitably lead to dangerous oversimplifications: 'The Middle East [as a descriptive term] leads a life of its own in political and/or ideological discourses. This life is in sharp contradiction with a lived experience that is negating the concept more and more, and yet the term as it exists does not subside. In fact, not only does it not subside, or, in other words, play a passive role, but the concept itself, as we hear about it in the news or read about it in the papers, is hindering a certain awareness of difference among the people from the region.'

If a reliance on generalisations based on either regionalism or nationalism is highly suspect, is there anything to be gained by becoming even more localised and concentrating instead on just one city? This is the curatorial approach that has been adopted for 'Out of Beirut' (but not, I would argue, the 'Cairo' incarnation of 'Contemporary Arab Representations', which was very much presented as a constituent element of a larger project). The exhibition takes the political, social and physical fabric of Beirut as its subject matter and it soon becomes apparent just what a fractured city it is. *Distracted Bullets, Symptomatic Video Number 1*, 2005, by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, documents the public displays of celebration – made visible through the use of fireworks and audible through jubilant gunfire – that commemorate different religious and political events. While certain sections of the city are in riotous, gleeful uproar, others are shown to be indifferent and becalmed, and thus these civic festivities map the sectarian affiliations of Beirut's different neighbourhoods.

This balkanisation is hardly surprising given the multiple religious groupings found in Beirut – Sunni, Shia, Maronite, Druze, Greek Orthodox – which less than 20 years ago were embroiled in the internecine sectarian conflicts of the Lebanese Civil War. However, it is not just religion that fractures the city, but the steady encroachment of global capitalism as well. Akram Zaatari's *After the Blast*, 2006, is a photographic



'Contemporary Arab Representations: The Iraqi Equation'
KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin 2005

montage that shows Beirut in the throes of breakneck change, as entire blocks are demolished to make way for sleek, hypermodern skyscrapers that tower over their low-rise neighbours. This 'reconstruction' has been far from uncontroversial, with lucrative contracts for a whole host of government initiatives being awarded to the big business allies of the ruling elite (the most infamous example of self-aggrandisement centred around Rafik Hariri, who was simultaneously Prime Minister and the biggest shareholder in Solidere, the company entrusted by the state with rebuilding Beirut's 'Central Business District'). The rise in corporate intervention in Lebanese society has caused Saree Makdisi to argue in *Beirut: Urban Narrative and Spatial Identity in the Age of Solidere, 1997*, that there are in fact two Lebanons living uneasily side by side: one based around the informal, unregulated economy that grew up during the civil war, and another that is dominated by multinational companies that seek to absorb as much of the state and its publicly owned land as possible.

The increasing dissolution of any sense of a unified, communal identity is what a number of social theorists, following in the footsteps of Jean-François Lyotard, have been predicting for a number of years. Seyla Benhabib argued in *Situating the Self, 1992*, that: 'Transcendental guarantees of truth are dead ... there are no criteria of truth transcending local discourses, but only the endless struggle of local narratives vying with one another for legitimation.' As there is no minimum to the number of people needed to constitute a 'local discourse', it could be argued that there may be, in effect, as many discourses as there are individuals. As was mentioned before, *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere*, which also forms part of 'Out of Beirut', documents how each person's view of the past can diverge markedly from his or her peers. Throughout the video, there does not seem to be a single fact that remains uncontested in the minds of the interviewees, who argue over exactly where the Green Line was, whether anyone in their neighbourhood really did

disappear and even if it is worth remembering such traumatic events in the first place.

If all cities, and even the communities within a city, are inevitably fractured into a multitude of different voices, could we not return, full circle, to the universalism of 'Without Boundary', which sees locality as intrinsically unimportant? This would ignore a fundamental flaw: the ideal of an apolitical universalism assumes that identity doesn't play an integral part in people's lives, but the continuing importance placed on, for example, celebrating events of sectarian importance, as seen in *Distracted Bullets*, shows that it certainly does. What artworks such as *Here and Perhaps Elsewhere* suggest is a strategy that does not ignore identity-based politics, but actively engages with its manifestations and then problematises it further. The most effective way to tackle the 'binary polarities' that are so often cited as unhelpful simplifications is not to settle upon a middle ground somewhere between the two extremes since this, in effect, merely replaces one generalisation with another. What is important is to question the need to give a fixed identity to any city, nation or region at all. ■

Out of Beirut is at Modern Art Oxford from May 13 to July 16. **Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking** was at the Museum of Modern Art, New York from February 26 to May 22; **Contemporary Arab Representations: The Iraqi Equation** was at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin from December 18, 2005 to February 26, 2006 and at Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona from April 28 to June 25.

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