TONY CHAKAR

The Present Postponed

The author seeks to expose what really lies behind the widely-used expression "the Arab world" and reveals some of the misunderstandings regarding the formation of modernity in the Orient, and thus offers instruments for understanding the present. Is art capable — she wonders — of throwing the systems defined by the East/West dichotomies into crisis?

Arab world
Does the *Arab world* exist? The expression is used quite often, we hear it on CNN, the BBC or Al Jazeera, we read about it in the newspapers trying to cover the century-old Arab-Israeli conflict; we listen to politicians from the four corners of the world making speeches and having opinions about what the Arab world should or should not be like; and for those of us who actually live in this region of the world, we've been hearing and reading about it extensively a long time before the current sudden interest- and paradoxically we seem to be the ones who are the most disinterested about the notion itself and all that surrounds it. Empirically, one could think that the geographic proximity would be a sufficient enough condition to group certain countries in one big region, for the purposes of analysis or maybe simply facility; after all, one could take a plane from Cairo and be in Baghdad in less than a couple of hours, flying over Amman, Jerusalem, Beirut and Damascus. And surely one might think of the existence of a shared language and a long history, and in some cases a shared religion, and decide that this is all the proof needed. So why the question then? What are the motives behind asking it, what would be its potential answers and what would be the consequences of these answers?
The question itself can be disconcerting, and might lead to acute misunderstandings: For instance, the Italian art magazine *Flash art* wanted to do a feature on the art in Beirut and "the region". They contacted Stephen Wright from the Canadian magazine *Parachute* asking him to write the article and he accepted, suggesting publishing e-mail exchanges between himself and artists from Beirut. In my reply to Stephen, I insisted that the region in question doesn't exist, and that consequently he cannot write about it- so he'll have to find another way. Stephen's reply tried to debate the issue from the current state of the globalized world, from the point of view of the individual who is being pushed more and more into isolation and atomization. In this case, Europe too would cease to exist for a Canadian living in Paris and showing no desire to get to know the region that he's in. One of the theoretical foundations for this path would be the book *Empire* by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt (1): national sovereignty does not exist any more, the only sovereignty is that of the Empire, all the conflicts evolving into wars can be considered to be *civil* wars because they don't erupt between sovereign nation-states etc. (2). In the light of what's going on in the region now, from the invasion- or liberation, depending on where one stands- of Iraq and the talk about ending the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, that would be a very appealing option. But at this point that is not what interests me; the American and British troops will eventually leave Iraq, and the Palestinian/Israeli conflict will eventually end, but there is something more pervasive, more persistent, and I will

venture and say that it is, at least in part, the cause of what seems to the outsider as never-ending conflicts. It is this 'something' that prompted my question.

One
The Arab World, the Orient, the Levant, the Middle East or the more recent Islamic World are all terms that seem to be leading a life of their own in political and/or ideological discourses. This life is in sharp contradiction with a lived experience that is negating these concepts more and more, and yet they do not subside. In fact, not only do they not subside, or play a passive role, but they are hindering a certain consciousness ("*une prise de conscience*"), a consciousness of difference among the people of the said region. These political and ideological discourses insist, and have been insisting for almost 200 years, that the Arab Nation is one and that, if it is divided now, it is because of colonial interests and/or imperialism and/or Christian Western culture (it depends on who is doing the talking). What is latent in all these discourses, or more accurately what is considered to be 'natural' (from Nature, i.e. as self-evident as the blueness of the sky or the succession of night and day) is the irrefutable and immutable fact that we are one nation- that there is actually a "we", an "us".

All these irrefutable facts find their legitimacy in the past. In fact, in these predominant political and cultural discourses, the present is always already transformed into a past for a certain future; expressions like "this is a historical moment", "a historical speech" or "a historical event" and so forth are excessively abundant in political and/or cultural discourses. These expressions not only pre-suppose that the speaker has insight from the present into the past, but also from the past and present into the future, meaning that he has the ability to place himself in the future, to look at the present (transforming it into a past), and decide that the present moment is a 'historical moment'. In this case, the present becomes only a moment, an already transitory moment, in a time span that encompasses, encapsulates and collapses past, present and future in one large pendular movement, moving back and forth but really going nowhere. Thus the present is turned into a mere pretext, a platform, a vantage point allowing the observer to look back into the past or forward towards the future- but it is never looked at in itself.

Nahda
This collapsed time is not limited to merely this example (i.e. labeling certain apparently insignificant or ordinary events as historical) – in fact it pervades many aspects of ~~the~~ political and intellectual life, and it finds its logic in a deep-rooted misunderstanding, in the formative moment of modernity in this region of the world. When they first encountered the conquering West, after centuries of living in the sleepy Ottoman Empire, the early Arab intellectuals were in awe, and their writings abound with descriptions of that West and the awe they felt upon experiencing it. The shock was great, and it engendered a need for ~~an~~ immediate action to save the Orient from the sorry state that it's in. An "Arab Renaissance" immediately exerted an overwhelming seduction. Underneath this simple and seemingly rational equation ("in order to progress we must have a Renaissance of our own") lie some implacable assumptions. The first one is accepting the West as a reference, and thus creating an uneven relationship of non-equals, which can be metaphorically represented by dualities such as center/periphery, in front/behind, advanced society/backward society, etc. Another assumption lies in the mistranslation of the word Renaissance itself (a mistranslation acting almost like a Freudian slip): in Arabic the word became

"Nahda", from the root-verb N/H/D, pronounced NaHaDa, which means "to rise" (after a stumble or a slumber). While the word Renaissance, coming from the French "Renaître", to be reborn, implies a death and a second life, or the death of an Old and the birth of a New, the Arabic word implies the rise of the same (old) thing from a temporary crisis- or better yet from an "illness" that overtook the "Body" of the Nation. From that point on, the biological metaphors will inundate all aspects of the Arabic cultural and political life, especially the metaphor of 'blood', in all its symbolic resonations, from the blood that binds the Nation, to the blood of martyrs, the one that irrigates the soil of the Arab Land. According to Hazem Saghiyeh, writing about the early Nahda intellectuals, […] the space occupied by blood in the literature of the radical Arab movement was remarkable, the blood as a sign binding the Nation and setting it apart from other nations […] (3).

These two assumptions function as a paradoxical duality, precisely because what is holding the Nation down was now (shortly after the demise of the Ottoman Empire) the West, the same West that is looked at with awe, and whose Renaissance was the reference to the Arab Nahda. The 'Us and Them' system of thought quickly became an 'Us versus Them', where the term 'They' represents all that is coveted and abhorred at the same time, from 'progress' to 'rationality', or in short all what was associated with modernity.

Angel

Rethinking Walter Benjamin's metaphor about the "angel of history" would be useful at this point. He wrote: His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (4)

In this region of the world, and caught in the dualities elaborated above, the angel of history hovers around the wreckage and thinks that it's not really broken, that it can be fixed, even though he doesn't really know how; as for the dead, he doesn't see them as really dead, they just dozed off for a while, so he shouts for them to wake up, take his hand and protect him from the fierce winds coming not from Paradise, but from the coveted/abhorred West. He is even willing to cut off his wings so that the Western winds don't propel him away from his dead, and he does- he becomes a mere human, a garbage collector roaming around the great wreckage of modernity. The dead are dead, and the past is in the past, but he keeps invoking it, he keeps on talking of the dead he's holding in his hands, of what they were, of their glorious past, of the Golden Age when everything was perfect. He blames that cursed wind for all his woes, "if that wind was a person I would kill it", he says, thus reviving the old tribal salute "May peace be upon you, and death upon your enemy" (5).

In popular culture, this whole dilemma can be summarized in the expression "Let's take what's good from Western culture, and leave out what's bad". But what is good and bad in this equation? The answer is eloquently provided on a daily basis on television shows, in newspapers, in magazines, on radio stations, etc. For instance, a new advertisement is running nowadays on one of the cable TV stations, concerning a

new "Parental security lock" for the viewers of this cable network. In it, a man's voice is heard talking about how important it is to be "connected to the world" in this day and age. But this man is facing a dilemma: he is vividly concerned about his family. He knows that being 'connected' is inevitable, but what if one of the stations he receives airs some program that contradicts "our values"? Obviously, being connected is "good", but receiving "immoral" programs is "bad". The new parental lock offers the solution, giving the man control over what his family watches, and allowing him to protect them from harmful western ways.

Needless to say that what is being protected are the ghosts of the past, the dead who refuse to die, their hands extended to the garbage collector of history who is afraid of being swept away by (what he perceives as being) the Western winds, afraid of being propelled to the future, and refusing to live in the present because it is the realm of that wind: it is inevitable- and he knows and admits it, it sets the pace and the rules of his existence, so he sets out to achieve his self-appointed Sisyphean task, to build a wall to 'control' the wind, leaving only one window in it, a window small enough to filter the wind and turn it into a tamed breeze incapable of sweeping off anything. Of course, if it wasn't for the wind, there would be no need for the wall- but he confuses cause and effect, and assumes that the wall that he's constructing has been here forever. This wall is our Identity, who we are- or at least, who we think we are. This identity is precisely like this wall: monolithic and defensive, rigid and futile, and finds its only reason of existence in a mythologized past in urgent need of scrutiny.

New Taste

What is believed to be our identity then (to be understood in this context as our 'essence') is inexorably linked to the changes brought upon by modernity in Arab societies. Furthermore, it is modernity that precedes this imagined and constructed identity and defines it, not the other way around, and the issue cannot be reduced, as it usually is, to easy dualities such as the Permanent vs. the Transitory, or the Authentic vs. the Unauthentic, the False, the Non-Genuine. These dualities hinder any serious debate on the question of identity, and play a formative role in the political and cultural fields of the region. They prevent the formation of a consciousness of an identity based on the present, based on the experiences of daily life - experiences which are modern *par excellence*, and in that sense fragmented, splintered, contingent, trivial, etc., and thus resulting in an identity which embraces differences instead of negating and denying them- and if we had to return to the metaphor of the wall, the identity would not be that of the wall itself, but that of its builder, or rather that of the act of building.

What is latent in the construction of the said identity is the idea that modernity is for and from the West, and tradition (or 'authenticity') is for the East; that a preservation of this authenticity is essential if we wanted to 'remain who we are'. In that sense, modernity is refused on the basis of being 'external', and this exteriority is its essence, the thing from which it cannot escape. Modernity and ('authentic') tradition are thus doubly defined: Modernity is exterior and from the present, while tradition is interior and from the past (6).

In the field of thought produced by these dualities, modernity and tradition are defined once and for all, monolithically; in that sense, the idea that the politics of the colonial West in the 18th and 19th centuries may have *started* a process that later became relatively local (in spite of the uneven relationship that binds the modernity of the West and that of the Levant, subjugating the latter to the former, while at the same time giving it a relative freedom of movement). This local aspect of modernity is

simply and hastily dismissed, even though the evidences for its early existence are numerous. Here is, for instance, a passage taken from a 19th century Beiruti magazine:

The new buildings decorating the city of Beirut over the past years are becoming abundant and a common knowledge to all; these buildings are beautiful and ordered, delightfully elegant in their simplicity […], and since the 1850s they gained in levels and started expanding outside the city from its three sides, and they are still doubling because of the competition between builders and land owners, especially since the last four years, and now one can find in all the outside quarters big mansions and giant palaces that catch the eye because of their well chosen emplacements and their architecture […], they are better now because they have (tiled) roofs and their stones are ordered according to the new taste […] (7)

The 'new taste' is an interesting expression, a new taste emerging after centuries of hegemony of an 'old' taste- a new taste within which 'order', 'elegance' and 'simplicity' play a prominent role, and aim at 'catching the eye' of the passers-by (the new *flâneurs*, perhaps?) doodling on the new roads accommodating the new mansions and palaces.

Bloom
What these dualities also negate is the multi-temporal nature of modernity itself. In the West there is an abundance of literature on the subject and what surrounds it, like nostalgia and so forth. There is an abundance also in the analysis of the phenomenon, from Baudelaire to Benjamin to Barthes, to name but a few illustrious writers (8). In this region of the world, where intellectual thought is determined by the dualities of East vs. West etc, these multiple temporalities were banished to the margins of popular culture, and can be found in the then relatively new *Taqtouqa* genre of singing or in the countless photographs left behind by the new photographers (9), when people were unashamed of their modernity, and even showed a humorous contempt to the old ways: One photograph, for instance, shows a turn of the century Beiruti woman sitting in the *Dar*, the central part of the house usually reserved for men, dressed up as a man (with the *Tarboush* and all the accessories) and smoking *Narguileh*, probably listening to Omar Zo'onni (10) singing about Beirut on her new phonograph:

Beirut, a flower blooming before its time,
Beirut, how beautiful it is and how beautiful its old times were.

Ghost
In these circumstances, the present is looked at with embarrassment and contempt. The present is not here a mere instance in the flow of events, in the unfolding of the future; it is not just a temporality, but a location where individuals experience modern life in all its contradictions, its comforts and illusions, its spectacles and limitations, its possibilities and alienations- and more importantly, how individuals experience the outside world as something other than themselves, a place and time where they can become actors in the public space, whether through politics or culture, a world they can invest with meaning, and which can give meaning back. The notorious military or religious dictatorships governing practically all the Arab countries (with the problematic exception of Lebanon, where a margin of freedom still exists in spite of the wars and the disastrous post-war policies of a corrupt political class) are not solely

the result of the military seizing power by force, but also of the field of thought defined by the dualities described above, that prohibits asking any correct questions, let alone answering them.

But if the present in the Arab societies is perpetually postponed, where does it disappear into? What happens to the individuals' experiences of the modern? They enter the realm of the Un-thought, the Un-spoken, or at best, when they are spoken of, they become so distorted by the prisms of dominating discourses that individuals have a hard time recognizing their experiences. An example of this was provided recently, and the event took place between Beirut and Cairo. A Lebanese pop singer released a song and a video clip that goes with it- the success was immediate. The girl, Nancy 'ajram, is young, beautiful and sexy, and she's not afraid of showing it. Her song became a big hit in Beirut and a huge one in Cairo. What was remarkable, especially in Egypt, was the discrepancy in how the song (and the video clip) was perceived by the public and the press, by the individuals experiencing their modernity and the 'intellectuals' caught in the East vs. West duality. The Egyptian press spared no words to attack the singer and her video clip, calling it a 'porno clip', and wondering how a video clip that so contradicted 'our values' could be shown on television. These attacks didn't seem to bother the Egyptian public much, considering that the song is even more successful now, and the singer was re-named Nancy Ajraam (by dropping a letter, the name came to mean 'stars' or 'planets'); the Egyptian press caught on to that and changed the name once again to Nancy Ijram- Nancy 'Criminality'.

This is merely one example of a daily phenomenon, of a culture that represses its present- but this present keeps on coming back and, adding a new twist to the notion of the uncanny as defined by Freud, it comes back as a ghost to haunt itself. In this region of the world it is the present, not the past, that haunts the present, and thus generating an anxiety that is particular to Arab societies (11). Dealing with that present and the uncanny feelings it generates in the consciousness of people differs enormously from one Arab society to the other, and that in turn affects the way individuals relate to their outside world, to their experiences in that world. In fact, the differences are so great that one can hardly speak of the supposed existence of the Arab World anymore, relegating the presence of this already obscure entity to political and ideological discourses that are becoming more and more hollow as time and events go rushing by, and as more of the present (as the experience of the modern) erupts into the present (as temporality).

Bastards

Would art —here defined as yet another experience that modernity offers to individuals— be able to contribute to putting the systems defined by the dualities spoken of above in crisis (*Les mettre en crise* would be the French expression)? Or more accurately, would it be able to aggravate an already existing crisis- a crisis that in a way is also defining the production of art and its practices?

Needless to say that, up until this day, most of what is produced as ('high') art in this region falls into the dualities of East vs. West- more precisely into the duality of ('imported') modernity vs. ('authentic') tradition. The root of the 'problem' lies, again, in the very beginnings of the Arabic Nahda, in the formative moment of modernity (12) in this region of the world. In addition to the intellectual milieu that the early Arab artists lived in and the prevailing discourses that shaped their ideas about art, its relationship with their societies and their role as artists, they had to deal with a very particular problematic that resurfaces every now and then, gaining a bit more in absurdity each time it does so: the forms of the new arts were absolutely alien

to the Arab societies. Before the Nahda, painting, sculpture and theater simply did not exist, and the Arab artists who were exposed to these forms upon their studies in Europe (and later in the United States) certainly could not restart their investigations from the European Renaissance; they had to start where European art was at the time. Their dilemma started upon their return home; they were treated as bastards speaking an unfathomable language, and they fought hard to prove their legitimacy. In order to do that, they had to proclaim a certain continuity, they had to belong to a certain tradition- so they behaved exactly like they were supposed to behave. They didn't search for their legitimacy in the present of their societies, but in their past(s), and thus not only falling into the trap of the existing dualities, but also helping to strengthen them, alienating art and themselves from their natural milieu. Furthermore, Arab artists had come from the West, where they had studied, to face a paradox: the schools and the ateliers they studied in didn't just teach them how to make art, but how to think about it, and they were exposed to a lot of debates about art, the same debates that generated the European avant-gardes of the late 19th and early 20th century. They had to cross an extra mile to 'catch up' with all what was going on around them, to shed a lot of their ideas and to substitute the way they used to view the world by a new way of looking at things. Stories about Arab artists and nude models and how they had to bypass their original shock of seeing a naked woman, how they had to transform the woman in front them to an artist's model, to a group of forms and lines, are abundant in the literature about Arab art. Upon their return, they had to deal with different issues that their studies didn't prepare them to; they wanted to contribute to the Arabic Nahda, but in order to do that, in order to enter the field of thought defined by the dualities of the Nahda, they had to unlearn what they had learned, and go through the same ordeal once again. 'Torn apart' would probably be the best expression to describe the situation, and on top of that, because they couldn't connect to their people's present, they were completely ignored by the same people they thought they were 'saving' from the grip of the old. That led to a complete isolation of Arab artists, and some of them even reveled in that isolation because they remembered learning that all 'Great Art' was misunderstood, and that future generations will give them justice.

In short, if debates about art in the West at that time were fueled by ideas such as the refusal of the Renaissance's optical illusionism in favor of a more direct and truthful art, or a stress on the creative artist's interior world, etc, in this region of the world art was (and is still) dominated by themes such as the authentic vs. the un-authentic, the identity-laden vs. the alienating, ideas that reproduced the original duality of the Nahda, and separated art more and more from the present, where the experience of modernity lies.

This situation- turning into a predicament, and even a nightmare, is not a fatality. Some artists in different Arab cities are starting to ask themselves this question: could art find its vital role as an investigator of these uncharted territories of difference? Could art root itself and find its legitimacy in the present? The implications of such questions are enormous, especially that what is put under scrutiny is not just the production of art, its content and its forms, but all the ideas that defined and define the politics of the entire region. Acknowledging that individuals in each Arab country have had and have still, since the end of the 19th century at least, experiences that are so different, and that these experiences and these differences are what should constitute the field of play of the practices of art, would be going against all the dominating discourses in the region. But in the current situation, this seems to be the only way to invest art with meaning again, *political* meaning.

How this stuttering adventure will end no one knows, because, as Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*, "Our thoughts are ours; their end none of our own."

TONY CHAKAR is an architect. He lives in Beirut.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

(1) HARDT, M. & NEGRI, A. *Empire*, Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2001
(2) These ideas were also elaborated by Michael Hardt in a symposium on globalization which took place at the American University of Beirut, November 2002.
(3) SAGHIYEH, H. *Awwal al Ouroubah*, Beirut : Dar Al Jadid, 1993.
(4) BENJAMIN, W. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940, in: Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture, a Critical History*, London : Thames and Hudson, 1980.
(5) See Waddah Sharara, *Al Mawtu li 'adouwwikom*, Beirut : Dar Al Jadid, 1991.
(6) I would like to stress, once again, that the (mythologized) past is only recalled into the present as fragments from an anterior structure that ceased to exist. When, in the present, these fragments form links and relationships with it as a whole and with other fragments from that present. In that sense, they cease to be what they 'were' (or what they are imagined to be), and fulfill a very precise function, depending on the relationships they form. The only attempt to recall the past as a whole, as a holistic structure, was in Afghanistan when the Taliban ruled.
(7) *Hadiqat al Akhbar*, issue nb. 326, 2-4 July 1864, in. May Davie, *Beyrouth 1825-1975, un siècle et demi d'urbanisme*, Ordre des Ingénieurs et Architectes de Beyrouth, Beirut, 2001.
(8) See also: AUGÉ, M. *Non-lieux, introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris : Editions du Seuil, 1992 ; Shelley Rice, *Parisian Views*, The MIT Press, London, 1997 ; Philippe Junod, *Future in the Past*, in. Oppositions, Spring 1984 : 26.
(9) The Beirut-based *Fondation Arabe pour l'image* is doing a tremendous job collecting and archiving these photographs.
(10) Omar Zo'onni was a popular *monologiste*; he sang about cars, cinemas, the new hair-styles and Beirut. His songs are still amazingly fresh.
(11) A beautiful Arabic word, *Qalaq*, conveys the precise meaning of the anxiety in question. It would be useful in this context to quote Al Mutanabbi, the greatest Arab poet, talking about anxiety:
Anxious as if the wind was beneath me / A wind that I steer to the south or north.
The anxiousness is not conveyed through the meaning but rather through its instability, the way that it dissolves at the end of the verse and denies the first part.
(12) In the light of the above, the term 'modernities' would probably be a more accurate one.