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Curating Cultures: An Empirical Inquiry

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Toni Laviece Calder

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The Graduate School

Toni Laviece Calder

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the
Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend
acceptance of this thesis.

Shoki Goodarzi
Lecturer, Department of Art History and Criticism

Barbara E. Frank
Associate Professor, Department of Art History and Criticism

This thesis is accepted by the Graduate School

Lawrence Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

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By looking critically at three recent exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, namely, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, and *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art From Pakistan*, we will examine some of the nuances and complexities of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art practice and its dissemination. These exhibitions serve as case studies with which we can articulate some of the strategic curatorial approaches adopted within the exhibitions, unpack the theoretic underpinnings of such curatorial tactics, and elaborate on the ways in which the exhibitions succeeded and failed in their aims and within the larger project of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. If art institutions more rigorously investigate and acknowledge the enormous discursive power of the art exhibition within contemporary socio-political and cultural arenas, then there might be a genuine possibility that the non-*Western* art exhibition might achieve that which it has claimed to do all along: to educate, and to foster inter-cultural understanding and communication. A dire need for widespread investigation of contemporary non-*Western* art exhibitions exists; with enough data we might learn something about how we continue to frame art and artists categorized as non-*Western*, which applies not only to the *Middle Eastern* artists addressed in this project, but also to artists from other *marginalized* areas of the world, including Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, as well as the indigenous populations of the Americas and Australia, and other communities *marginalized* by gender, sexuality, religion, and other 'othering' categories.

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Preface

When I began this project, I would never have guessed that my work would be fraught with the seemingly insurmountable problem of language from the very first word – the *Middle East*. The simple task of outlining the inquiry at hand – using exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art in the United States as case studies to examine some of the successes and failures of *Western* curatorial strategies concerning *non-Western* art – became an enormous conundrum of linguistics, semiotics, epistemology, and philosophy, most of which I was wholly unprepared to grapple with within the scope of this work.

The practice of *naming* has a long and complex history of inquiry, the theories of which are well outside of the needs of this thesis. Yet, one cannot simply take words and phrases like the *Middle East*, the *West*, or even *non-Western* at face value. These labels, and so many more like them, are laden with a myriad of unintended and, even dangerous, origins, connotations, usages, and meanings, which a writer cannot simply ignore. The problem then, is how can one can find an operational language with which to express ones ideas without participating in the negative discourses that any given word carries with it at all times? While certainly not a perfect, nor a permanent, solution, I have chosen to “keep” some of these labels and abandon others. However, I have elected to italicize the words that I believe have the most potentially harmful assumptions attached to them. Through this syntactical strategy, I hope that the reader will not be lulled into a false sense of comfort with these labels and the ideologies that accompany them.

Chapter 1

Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

In the last decade, interest in contemporary *Middle Eastern* art and its diasporas has grown tremendously. Auction sales have skyrocketed; media coverage is more prevalent than ever before, and exhibitions of *Middle Eastern* artists can be seen around the world. For many art world insiders, the *Middle East* represents *the* emerging market for contemporary art. Despite their recent “discovery,” or perhaps because of it, artists from regions as geographically removed and culturally diverse as Northern Africa, Iran, the Arabian Peninsula, and India are being grouped together under the generalized heading of the “Middle East,” the “Arab World,” the “Islamic World,” or even today, the “Orient.”

The recent surge in *Western* and international interest in the arts of the *Middle East* stems from a number of sources, including market forces, as well as the highly publicized and extremely contentious relationships between the countries of the *Middle East* and the United States and Europe. In May 2006, Christie’s held its inaugural auction of Contemporary *Middle Eastern* art in Dubai, widely seen as the watershed event in the establishment of the *Middle Eastern* art market. Sales at Christie’s first Modern & Contemporary Arab & Iranian art auction in 2006 nearly tripled the presale estimate, reaching \$2.2 million, followed by \$12.6 million in October 2007, and \$18 million in April 2008.¹ Only four years after the inaugural auction, the 2010 auctions showed sales “in excess of \$29 million...the highest total to date for the category and an increase of 117% over 2009.”² From the most recent Dubai auction, Christie’s April 21, 2011 press release declared: “Increased interested in contemporary art from the Middle East; New bidders make up 40% of

¹ From HSBC Private Bank webpage, Focus on: art and design: “The Middle East – art market overview.” <http://www.hsbcpb.com/perspective/the-middle-east-art-market-overview.html>.

² From the Christie’s webpage, “MODERN & CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EASTERN & TURKISH ART.” <http://www.christies.com/departments/modern-and-contemporary-arab-and-iranian-art/>.

saleroom audience; 42 world auction records broken.”³ Clearly the market for contemporary *Middle Eastern* art has become firmly solidified in the international art world and continues to attract the attention of dealers, collectors, curators, critics, historians and theorists to the rich and complex production of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art.⁴

There has been a great deal of literature written on the various theoretical constructs related to the art of the *Middle East* and its diasporas – Orientalism, Primitivism, and Post-Colonialism, for example – as well as the relationship between post-modernism, museum studies, and contemporary art, and yet there is, nonetheless, a conspicuous lack of scholarship that ties these critical discourses and disciplines together in order to evaluate how the curatorial approaches of recent exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art in *Western* art institutions are organized, how the artworks are re-presented and framed, how meaning is mediated, how they address the theoretical discourses relevant to contemporary *Middle Eastern* art practice, and how they position the work within larger socio-political, historic and contemporary contexts.

Three recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East* and its diasporas exhibited in *Western* art institutions provide a platform for investigating how specific curatorial strategies of representing contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, including the focus on geography, *authenticity* of style and form, and identity, engage with the theoretical discourses of the art of the “other,” perpetuate and/or disrupt binaries, stereotypes, etc., foster cultural exchange, weaken aesthetic Eurocentrism, and enfranchise *Middle Eastern* artists. By specifically examining how contemporary *Middle Eastern* exhibitions “speak” to *Western* and international audiences and the

³ From Christie’s April 21, 2011 Press Release, <http://www.christies.com/about/press-center/releases/pressrelease.aspx?pressreleaseid=4707>.

⁴ Though the market for modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art continues to be driven largely by buyers from the region, there are signs of growing international interest: From Christie’s April 21, 2011 Press Release: “Increase in international participation in the sale – rising to 45% up from 40% in 2010 – a sign of continued international interest in this marketplace Most significant buyers, making up 55% of the successful bidders, are from the Middle East.” <http://www.christies.com/about/press-center/releases/pressrelease.aspx?pressreleaseid=4707>

ways in which they are successful in their stated aims would allow future curators, art critics, theorists and historians to offer new, innovative, and inclusive opportunities for non-*Western* artists and *Western* engagement with their work.

Defining the *Middle East*: Labels and Concepts

To even begin to discuss exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art in the *West*, requires one to first address the terminology necessary to frame such a discussion. The myriad labels used by writers, historians, politicians and the media to describe and categorize the vast geographic region spanning from Northern Africa to Afghanistan are often used interchangeably and without qualification. These labels include the *Middle East*, the *Arab World*, the *Islamic World*, *MENA* – the Middle East and North Africa, *MENSA* – the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, and the *Near East*. A preeminent scholar on the region, Bernard Lewis acknowledges that these labels are “meaningless, colorless, shapeless and for most of the world inaccurate.”⁵ At their most benign, such labels are simply cultural misunderstandings, vague and subjectively determined. At their most malicious however, such labels are the deliberate tools of *Western* neo-colonialism aimed at misrepresenting, essentializing, and controlling the region through denigrating and homogenizing categorizations. Unpacking some of these labels will offer a more critical understanding of their complex histories, their common usage over time, and how they relate to contemporary art practice and curatorial approaches.

The *Middle East* is an ambiguous geographic reference that does not independently indicate to what it refers – in the middle of what? east of what? Historian Clayton Koppes believes that the neologism *Middle East* was first used in print by an American, Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, in the

⁵<https://myaccount.nytimes.com/auth/login?URI=http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/02/reviews/000102.02wheatct.html&OQ=Q5f07203d031>

1902 issue of *National Review*, though there is evidence that the phrase may have originated with a British Naval officer, General Sir Thomas Edward Gordon, two years earlier.⁶ Koppes argues, “the designation ‘Middle East’ arose from the imperatives of late-nineteenth-century political strategy and diplomacy, which needed a name for the region between the ‘Near East,’ based on Turkey, and the ‘Far East,’ based on China.”⁷ All three of these labels demonstrate the Eurocentrism of their construction; *Near, Middle, and Far East* are only meaningful geographically from the perspective of Europe. Lewis elaborates: “‘Middle East’ is self-evidently a Western label, and dates from the beginning of this century. It is striking testimony to the former power and continuing influence of the West that this parochial term...has come to be used all over the world. It is even used by the peoples of the region it denotes to describe their own homelands. This is the more remarkable in an age of national, communal, and regional self-assertion, mostly in anti-Western form.”⁸

Although widely criticized today for its Eurocentricity, the label *Middle East* is still recognized for its usefulness in referencing the region, in spite of its geographic ambiguities.⁹ This flexibility of geographic designation becomes much more complex when compounded with its conflation and interchangeability with other labels for the region, especially non-geographic identifiers such as the *Arab* or *Islamic World*. Although the majority of inhabitants of the *Middle East* are speakers of Arabic, the region is in fact home to dozens of other languages and ethnicities. Most notably, though Iran, Israel, Algeria, and Turkey are frequently designated *Middle Eastern* and

⁶ Clayton R. Koppes, “Captain Mahan, General Gordon, and the Origins of the Term ‘Middle East,’ in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Jan. 1976), 95.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Bernard Lewis quoted Geoffrey Wheatcroft in “Where the Historical Is Political,” *NY Times*, January 2, 2000. <https://myaccount.nytimes.com/auth/login?URI=http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/01/02/reviews/000102.02wheatct.html&OO=Q5fQ72Q3dQ31>. See also Bernard Lewis, *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*.

⁹ Though subject to a great deal of debate and a wide variety of alternate configurations, according to TeachMidEast.org, the roster of countries commonly understood to be part of the *Middle East* include, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, The Palestinian Territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Included in what is sometimes called the *Greater Middle East* are also Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. To complicate matters further, because of their political and religious associations with the region, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and sometimes Sudan, are also considered to be part of the *Middle East*. I have chosen to adopt the inclusion of Pakistan under the heading of *Middle East* for the purposes of this thesis.

subsequently, *Arab*, the spoken languages of these countries are not Arabic, but rather Persian, Hebrew, French, and Turkish, respectively. More importantly, perhaps, are the gross misuses of the label *Arab World* irrespective of its relationship to the *Middle East*. The *Arab World* may be said to include the twenty-two nations voluntarily associated with the Arab League, the informal name for the League of Arab States founded in Cairo in 1945.¹⁰ Though these nations are linked not only by a common language, Arabic, as well as the vested interests of their governments “to strengthen ties among the member states, coordinate their policies, and promote their common interests,”¹¹ there are nonetheless enormous problems with how these nations are lumped together by the looseness of the label *Arab World*. According to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, “‘Arab’ is a cultural and linguistic term...not a race. Some have blue eyes and red hair; others are dark skinned; many are somewhere in between. Most Arabs are Muslims but there are also millions of Christian Arabs and thousands of Jewish Arabs, just as there are Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Americans.”¹² The unfortunate reality is that for most laypersons, the *Arab World* does not merely denote the countries of Arabic-speaking inhabitants who belong to the Arab League, rather it carries with it the implication that *Arabs* are all dark-skinned and Muslim. In one fell swoop, millions of citizens from twenty-two nations, each with rich and complex histories and incredibly diverse populations of ethnicities, religions and cultures are all homogenized and essentialized into one generic identity: *Arab*.

The same reductionist tendency characterizes the usage of the label *Islamic World*. Arguably an even vaguer label than the *Arab World*, the *Muslim* or *Islamic World* presumably implies those countries whose official or dominant religion is Islam. Yet, because *Middle East*, *Arab* and *Islamic World* are so frequently used indiscriminately, one might infer that this imaginary *Islamic World* contains all of the countries associated with the geographic region of the *Middle East* and the *Arabic*

¹⁰ <http://www.arab.de/arabinfo/league.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.arab.de/arabinfo/league.htm>

¹² <http://www.adc.org/index.php?id=248>

World, and that most of the world's followers of Islam live in these areas. Surprisingly, however, the top five largest populations of Muslims live in neither of the assumed regions, but in China, India, the United States, Indonesia, and Brazil!¹³ Even the more commonly affiliated Islamic countries of the so-called *Muslim World* are extraordinarily diverse – politically, ethnically, religiously, linguistically, as well as geographically. Unqualified usage of the label *Islamic World* does not take into account the enormous differences between those countries for whom Islam is both a religion and a political structure, like Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, for example, and those countries in which it is simply the official religion of the state, such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates. With only this severely abbreviated list of *Islamic* countries, one can already discern how dangerously misleading are the connotations of *Islamic World* to our understanding of these complex nations. Unless we want to continue to perpetuate the hegemonic narratives that frame the *Middle East* and the *Arab/Islamic Worlds* as monolithic, homogenized, and unified by common identity, then we must cease using these labels unproblematically and without critical awareness of their inherently flawed origins, connotations, and implications.

¹³ Statistics taken from Aneki.com, an “independent, privately operated website based in Montreal, Canada...dedicated to promoting wider knowledge of the world's countries and regions,” and whose data “is derived from numerous sources including United Nations agencies and the United States’ Central Intelligence Agency’s *World Factbook*.”
http://www.aneiki.com/countries2.php?t=Largest Muslim Populations in the World&table=fb34&places=*&unit=*&order=desc&orderby=fb34.value&dependency=independent&number=5&cntdn=n&r=-274-276-277&c=&measures=Country--Population%20-%20Muslim%20and%20other%20faiths&units=*-&decimals=*-*&file=muslim

Chapter 2

The Influence of Theory: Discourses and Disciplines

Unfortunately, the three socio-political and geographical labels we have just examined make up only the tip of the linguistic iceberg concerning the discourses of the *Middle East*. Scholarship from a variety of intellectual constructs and academic disciplines, especially Orientalism, Post-colonialism, and Post-modernism have saturated art history with palimpsestic words and concepts with which the critic, curator, or historian is forced to negotiate in any relationship with non-*Western* art. It is my hope that a better understanding of how these theoretical inquiries have impacted not only the abstract discourses of art history, but also the concrete realities of art institutions and the curated exhibition, will allow for a fruitful evaluation of their positive and negative contributions and permutations in their relationship with *Middle Eastern* art.

Orientalism

The 1978 publication of Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism*, took as its foundation the formerly "benign" scholarly field of the same name. Orientalist studies was a popular field of academic inquiry for European scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries interested in the languages, societies, literature, arts, and religions of the *East*.¹⁴ 'Orientalism' was also the designation of a principally French artistic movement of the 19th century, whose stereotypical depictions of *Oriental* genre scenes, including exoticized markets, harems, odalisques, and battles, among others, were the successful subjects of artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Eugène Delacroix.¹⁵ John M. Mackenzie suggests that "in both cases the word had a positive or at the very

¹⁴ John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), xiii.

¹⁵ Jennifer Meagher, "Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art" in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm (October 2004).

least neutral ring to it” until it was radically refigured by Said’s polemical text.¹⁶ “Indeed,” MacKenzie declares, “few books have at the same time stimulated so much controversy or influenced so many studies. Not only has it become almost impossible to consider the relationship between *West* and *East* without grappling with [*Orientalism’s*] insights, but its method has also been applied to Europe’s relationship with other parts of the globe.”¹⁷

Orientalism is essentially a critique of how knowledge of the *Other* is produced.¹⁸ Said argues that the original academic study of the *Orient* was merely a means of making it ‘available to the *West*’ and was employed as a critical tool in the successful intellectual, political, and military dominance of Europe’s colonial project. “Orientalism,” writes Said, “is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the ‘Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident,’” whereby “European culture was able to manage – and even to produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.”¹⁹ The most critical component of Said’s text is the *West’s* construction of oppositional identities via *naming*. Using what Said calls “imaginative geography,”²⁰ Orientalist scholars created the binary dichotomy between *East* and *West*, or *Orient* and *Occident*, as the foundation of the paradigm of Orientalism. *Western* “empirical” knowledge established by Orientalist scholars legitimized its power to encapsulate a vast and diverse region under a singular identifying construct: the ‘*Orient*.’ Thus, to define it was to *control* it. The *Orient* became a monolithic, essentialized, fabricated entity, existing only for those who had created it.²¹

¹⁶ John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*, 2-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4. My emphasis.

¹⁸ According to MacKenzie, “Said combined and adapted two influential theoretical constructs of the twentieth century to produce his major reevaluation of Orientalism. He took Michel Foucault’s concept of the discourse, the linguistic apparatus through which the articulation of knowledge becomes an expression of power, and linked it to Antonio Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony through which elite control is maintained over the masses.” *Ibid.*, 3-4.

¹⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1979), 2-3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

Crucial to the project of *naming* the *Orient* was the positioning of the *Occident* as ‘self’ and the *Orient* as ‘Other’. This polarization created a relationship of opposition, where the *East*’s identity served as a foil for the *West*’s. The result of this oppositional relationship was the construction of binary identities such as *East/West*, stasis/progress, barbaric/civilized, inferior/superior, passive/active, etc., many of which still exist in some form today. Visual imagery disseminated through a variety of media, including postcards, photographs, travel books, news sources, literature, and of course, painting, served as powerful aids in the service of colonialism, and were seen as optical, and thus, objective, evidence of the mythical and exotic *Other*.²² Contemporary Orientalism still persists in the stereotypical depictions of the *Middle East* prevalent throughout popular culture, news media, advertising, and cinema, among others; even in supposedly scholarly contexts, one can find traces of the labeling, essentializing, and exoticizing tendencies central to Said’s Orientalist critique.

Said’s assertion “that neither the term *Orient* nor the concept of the *West* has any ontological stability”²³ resonates with the critiques of the geographically framed exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas. Far from being obsolete, the identities constructed through the subjective application of these terms within and without the institutional setting require the ongoing negotiation of the criticisms posed by Said over thirty years ago. Moreover, the aftermath of the Gulf War, the events of September 11th, and the continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, represent just a sliver of the tumultuous socio-political situation that continues to challenge the interactions between Europe, the United States, and the *Middle East* today. Said’s text encourages us to remain mindful of the dangers of “territorially reductive polarizations like ‘Islam’ v. the ‘West’” and the invention of imaginary collective identities

²² See, for example, Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts, eds., *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2005).

²³ Said, *Orientalism*, xvii. My emphasis.

used as social and political tools, and to consider the incumbent responsibility of the scholar to foster understanding and intellectual exchange.²⁴

The legacy of Said's project underwrites two other major discourses pertinent to the study of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art: post-colonialism and post-modernism. The birth of the discipline of post-colonial studies is quite often linked to the publication of Said's groundbreaking text; likewise, its publication just one year before Jean François Lyotard's seminal book, *The Postmodern Condition*, places Said's project at the intersection of two of art history's most influential discourses. A brief look at these two prominent critical theories will elucidate many of the terms and concepts necessary to an informed and productive investigation of contemporary exhibitions of *Middle Eastern* art and its diasporas.

Post-Colonialism

Post-colonialism is not a unified field of inquiry, but rather a divergent set of transdisciplinary discourses²⁵ inaugurated by Said, consolidated by the 1989 publication of *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, and built upon by authors incorporating a number of diverse theoretical strategies, including Homi Bhabha and psychoanalysis, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and deconstruction, Chandra Mohanty and feminism, and Aijaz Ahmad and Marxism, to name a few.²⁶ In general, post-colonial studies concerns itself with ('formerly') colonized societies and their

²⁴ Ibid., xxii-xxiii.

²⁵ Though not addressed specifically here, feminist and Marxist theories are inextricably tied to the discourse of Orientalism, post-colonialism, and post-structuralism/post-modernism. See, for example, Alexander, M. Jacqui and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997)., Minh-ha, Trinh T., *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989)., Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (London: The Women's Press, Ltd., 1981)., Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

²⁶ Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 5.

European colonizers, the impacts of colonialism, and the study of postcolonial literature and criticism. Post-colonial theory has been praised for the ability of its holistic approach to address wide-ranging topics like the formation of empires, power relations between colonizers and colonized, agency and minority groups, and the socio-political contexts of post-colonies, for example. These same holistic characteristics have also been the impetus for criticisms concerning post-colonialism's lack of historical and material specificity, as well as its imprecision.²⁷

Post-colonial studies are tied to post-structuralism's critique of the autonomous subject and post-modernism's rejection of the Enlightenment's 'grand narratives' through their mutual investigations into the question of agency, as well as in their questioning of the conceptualizations of ethnicity, race, and gender as formations of identity. Some critics have noted that the linking of post-colonialism and post-modernism risks privileging hybridity, pluralism, syncretization, and pastiche over the particularities of individual, local, and regional experiences. Similarly, post-colonialism and post-modernism both have a tendency to champion the migrant sensibilities of the transnational and diasporic individual at the expense of individual and group struggles still occurring within the local contexts of the post-colony.²⁸

It is from post-colonial studies and moguls like Homi Bhabha that a great deal of the terms and concepts found in the literature on non-*Western* art originated. Because of their ubiquitous use in contemporary writings, it is not necessary to trace their exact lineages – with some exceptions – but some of the more prominent ideas and issues include: hybridity, 'in-between' or 'third-spaces,'²⁹ authenticity and identity, centre and periphery, multicultural, trans/international, and 'double-

²⁷ See Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, "Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1-20.

²⁸ Ibid. See also, Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/postmodernism/>.

²⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1994), 53-6.

consciousness,'³⁰ just to name a few. Many of these will play a crucial role in the discussion and understanding of contemporary exhibition practices of *Middle Eastern* art.

Post-Modernism

Few terms get spread around more liberally in contemporary discourse than that of 'postmodernism.' Quoted by art critics, journalists, theorists, historians, artists, and curators, as well as by individuals in a variety of contexts outside of the art world and academia, 'postmodern' is easily one of the most used and abused buzzwords of our times. First uttered by Jean-François Lyotard in his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition*,³¹ the theories of 'postmodernism' continue to evolve, affecting nearly every academic discipline with manifold meanings in each new context. Lyotard's most famous quote from *The Postmodern Condition* also represents one of the most important aspects of postmodernism at large: "I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward meta-narratives."³² Art historians have translated this critique of metanarratives to mean the rejection of the 'grand narratives' of modernism, especially its emphasis on teleological progress as the driving force of the avant-garde, and also its faith in the totalizing narratives of history, science, and culture. Postmodernism deconstructs modernism's master narratives and substitutes them with localizing and contingent histories.

Modernism also promoted myths of cultural and social unity made up of shared national and ethnic values, as well as hierarchical social, class, and gender relations. In their stead, postmodernism emphasizes fragmentation, cultural and social pluralism, and decentered identities. Rather than seeing the world as comprised of unified, "pure" centers of cultural identity, postmodern theory proposes the viewpoint of the 'global village,' which is marked by the

³⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903).

³¹ Gary Aylesworth, "Postmodernism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/postmodernism/>.

³² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

globalization of cultures, hybridization, eclecticism, multiculturalism, and trans/inter-nationalism. This shift applies as much to individuals as to community groups or nations.

Postmodern critique in the arts focuses heavily on the demand for greater intellectual and institutional *reflexivity*. Recognition of the ideological underpinnings of *Western* modernism, and the exclusivity of the art historical 'canon' illuminated the gross inequalities of access and representation rampant in the twentieth century art world. Support from feminist and Marxist theories, as well as post-colonial and cultural studies fueled the demand for greater inclusion and representation of groups marginalized because of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality. Likewise, 'minority' groups also criticized museum narratives as '*mediated* representations.' Far from being the neutral and objective educational centers they claimed to be, art institutions were actually influenced by complex political, social, cultural, and economic interests, with dire consequence for artists who did not fit the modernist view of art history and its canon. This critique from marginalized groups was also directed at the cultural imperialism and hegemony of *Western* art history and its institutions, another issue found throughout post-colonial studies.

In its purely formal sense, postmodern aesthetic theories advocate the erosion between 'high' culture and 'low' culture, also known as mass or popular culture, and kitsch, as well as between the traditional divisions of fine arts and crafts. Artists and architects frequently adopt modes of pastiche, juxtaposition, parody, irony, appropriation, mimicry, simulacra, deconstruction, hybridization, and the fusion of styles and genres from diverse sources, cultures and historical time periods.³³ Contemporary art has been irrevocably affected by the theories and arguments brought to light via post-modernism. Artists from the *Middle East* and its diasporas, no less than anywhere else in the non-*Western* world, have harnessed the formal attributes of post-modernism, especially

³³ Homi K. Bhabha, "Postmodernism/Postcolonialism" in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff, eds. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 435-451. See also, Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

the adoption of new media and the invention of new visual vocabularies no longer tied to one culture or another, in order to negotiate the complexities of their fragmented post-colonial and diasporic identities, as well as to continue post-modernism's project of dismantling the intellectual and institutional hierarchies and exclusivity of the *Western* art world.

Chapter 3:

Exhibiting the *Other*: Exhibitions and Approaches

The history of art has always been synonymous with the study of the aesthetic objects of so-called *Western* culture, which is to say, ancient Greece and Rome, Western Europe, and the United States. This narrow field of study locates the overwhelmingly enormous remainder of the world under the broad umbrella of non-*Western* art. While *Western* art points to a relatively small category of art and artists from a mere two continents, non-*Western* art denotes a vast and complex grouping that includes parts of Eastern Europe, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, the *Middle East*, Asia, Malaysia, and the indigenous populations of the Americas, New Zealand, and Australia. Despite the total lack of any overarching aesthetic cohesion between these geographic regions, they do share a number of important traits, not the least of which is their widespread marginalization by the *Western* art world. Buoyed by calls for the rejection of *Western* art history's universalizing narratives and demands for greater intellectual and institutional inclusivity ushered in by the discourses of Marxism, feminism, and post-colonialism, non-*Western* artists joined the ranks of other disenfranchised artists in the representational and institutional critiques that became widespread from the late 60s onward. Efforts to expand the *Western*-controlled canon of art history and to expose the preconceptions and prejudices of the *Western* art establishment, led to the contemporary art world's first attempts to exhibit non-*Western* art in *Western* art arenas.

Approaches to curating the art of the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas have changed tremendously over time. Two exhibitions that literally put non-*Western* art 'on the map' continue to stir debate today: "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York from September 1984 to January 1985, and *Magiciens de la Terre*, shown from May to August 1989 at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Situated at the cusp between Modernism's last grasp for aesthetic authority and the post-modern upheaval of the

'grand narratives' of the art world, these two exhibits set the stage for the complex and contentious discourses that continue to frame non-*Western* art within the larger contexts of art history, post-colonial studies, anthropology, and museum and cultural studies.

Curated by William Rubin, the head of MoMA's Department of Painting and Sculpture, the aim of "*Primitivism*" was to demonstrate the "Western response to tribal cultures as revealed in the work and thought of modern artists." By juxtaposing the *modern* and the *tribal*, Rubin hoped to illustrate the "parallelisms that exist between the two arts."³⁴ Unlike the conventional display of objects of material culture exhibited in ethnographic museums with textual information about the geographic, cultural, and historical context of the work and its ritual or functional uses, MoMA's intentions were to show *affinities* between the formal, aesthetic characteristics of tribal artifacts and the canonical works of Modern art, which were known to have been "influenced" or "inspired" by *primitive* art; the specific formal connections of which were, as of then, largely unstudied.

"*Primitivism*" elicited an immediate controversy and sparked numerous debates that would irrevocably alter the language, framing, and presentation of non-*Western* art in countless exhibitions to come. The exhibition was criticized from several sides, from art critics and historians, anthropologists, and budding post-colonial and cultural studies intellectuals. To begin with, despite the placement of the term *Primitivism* of the exhibition's title in quotation marks, critics immediately seized on the show's framework of the *primitive* versus the *modern* as extremely problematic. Use of the term *primitive* as a descriptor of the non-*Western* pieces creates a polarity between the two categories of art on display: the *primitive* tribal objects are understood as timeless, naïve, unchanging, *authentic*, intuitive, and exotic, while, in direct opposition, the *modern* artworks are interpreted as progressive, innovative, civilized, intellectual, and universal. In essence, the "*Primitivism*" exhibition overtly *primitivized* the non-*Western* pieces while championing the modern

³⁴ http://www.moma.org/docs/press_archives/6081/releases/MOMA_1984_0017_17.pdf?2010

European artists who appropriated these qualities for the purposes of invigorating and transforming *Western* art.

Another problematic factor concerned the choice and framing of the items on display. The press release for the show announced that approximately 150 works of *modern art* would be exhibited alongside 200 *tribal objects*. Again, a clear line is being drawn between the non-*Western objects*, as opposed to the *Western artworks*, as if non-*Westerners* only make artifacts and objects of material culture, but not art. This particular criticism was also voiced from the angle of decontextualization and anonymity. The exhibition's wholly formalist approach failed to provide any contextual documentation about the non-*Western* artifacts' makers, geographic or cultural sources, or potential function within their societies.

Because of the emphatic critiques of the exhibition, its framework as well as its presentation, indeed, the contributions of "*Primitivism*" were invaluable to the successes of future exhibitions of non-*Western* art. Ultimately, MoMA's show became the go-to example of what not to do in an exhibition of non-*Western art*; that it made blatantly clear the ethnocentric, culturally imperialist, and hegemonic nature of the *Western* art world, paved the way for more critical self-reflexivity on the part of art institutions and curators, and became the impetus for changing approaches to the art of the *Other*.

Specifically responding to the critical controversies and perceived failures of "*Primitivism*" in the 20th Century, the Centre Georges Pompidou's *Magiciens de la Terre* attempted a significantly different curatorial strategy in the exhibition of non-*Western* art. Arguably the first "global show," Jean-Hubert Martin, the exhibition's curator, stated that he wanted to counter the ethnocentrism of the contemporary art world by addressing cultural hegemony and investigating artists' relationships with one another. The show consisted of artworks by one hundred artists – 50 from the so-called "centers" and 50 from the "margins" – which Martin chose for their visual and sensual

qualities, and not as representatives of their country or culture of origin. Martin's "whole earth show" was a conscious and well-intended attempt to highlight the work of marginalized non-*Western* artists and an important move in argument for a de-centralization of the *Western* art world hierarchy.

Unfortunately, not unlike a number of contemporary exhibitions of *Middle Eastern* art, good intentions on the part of the curator do not always translate into well-received or compelling exhibitions. Like its oft-disparaged MoMA predecessor, *Magiciens* incited widespread criticism and controversy. To begin with, the centre-periphery model employed by Martin, while quite popular with early post-colonial scholars interested in overcoming Eurocentric and empire-driven domination of knowledge and culture via the recuperation of subaltern or indigenous voices, has since been censured for reinforcing the exact hierarchies it sought to combat. Post-colonial theorists like Said, Bhabha, and Spivak located the 'original' sites of power and knowledge as the *Western* colonizers or 'centres' and situated the non-*Western* colonies or 'peripheries' as sites of resistance and marginalization. Attempts to correct for the inequality of authority created by this binary political model, both art historical, museological, and otherwise, only led to an ironic reaffirmation of the polarized hierarchy of power fixated upon the domination of the *West*.

Furthermore, writers, critics and historians disputed Martin's criteria for choosing the works from the "margins," arguing that he had deliberately avoided any works which could be construed as *modern non-Western* art, choosing instead works that appeared *authentic*. The works of art from the "centers," in contrast, spoke to modern themes like urbanism and contemporary socio-political contexts. For many critics this was merely a reiteration of Rubin's assumption that *Western* artists have a monopoly on *modernism*. And once again, the non-*Western* artworks were decontextualized and conspicuously avoided any references to political or social issues. In the end, by attempting to place works of non-*Western* and *Western* art in an overtly aestheticized,

decontextualized, global-village framework, Martin did not succeed in his aims of showing the global universality of art. Instead, *Magiciens* obliterated cultural specificity, ignored personal or cultural identities, and reinforced the authenticity vs. contamination dichotomy often applied to non-*Western* art.

Despite their apparent failures in dissolving the ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony, and imperialism of the *Western*-dominated art world of the 1980s, the long-term impacts of these two exhibitions cannot be overestimated. Nearly every critical concern of contemporary curators of *Middle Eastern*, North African, Latin American, Asian, or Caribbean art found its first iteration in the pioneering, albeit flawed, approaches of these seminal exhibitions. The themes and organizing structures of the exhibitions of non-*Western* or other groups of *marginalized* artists of the last 20+ years, still operate either as radical renegotiations or rejections of the strategies of “*Primitivism*” in *the 20th Century* and *Magiciens de la Terre*.

Over the last two decades, exhibitions of artists from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas have been held in museums and galleries around the world. No longer just blips on the international biennial circuit, dozens of exhibitions have showcased the work of contemporary *Middle Eastern* artists through a kaleidoscope of curatorial tactics. Shows have been held in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Spain, Italy, and the United States among others, in a wide range of venues, including prestigious museums like Tate Britain, British Museum, and MoMA, high-profile art galleries like the Saatchi, Gagosian, and Hildebrand galleries, as well as university settings including the Art Institute of Chicago, the Wexner Center, and Krannert Art Museum.

Three exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas, markedly different in emphasis and scope, offer a constructive forum for investigating how non-*Western* and *transnational* art is mediated in *Western* art institutions, as well as how

exhibitions are addressing, or failing to address, many of the issues raised by the theoretical discourses and disciplines of post-colonial studies, postmodernism, and museum studies within the exhibition context. These case studies, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists, Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, and *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art From the Pakistan*, were deliberately selected to reflect some of the diverse institutional venues, missions, and approaches related to exhibitions of the contemporary art of the *Middle East* held in the United States in recent years.

Krannert Art Museum, located on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, became the architectural home for the University's art collection in 1961. Alongside twelve to fifteen temporary exhibitions presented by the Museum annually, the Museum's permanent holdings include geographic collections from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Europe, and the Ancient world, as well as collections based on form and medium, as seen in their departments of decorative arts, works on paper, photography, and intermedia/canvas. Much like any museum, Krannert's aims are "acquiring, preserving, exhibiting, researching, and interpreting its collection," as well as engaging with its diverse audience of students and faculty, the local communities of Urbana and Champaign, including area schools and community groups, as well as other visitors from the greater region of Central Illinois.³⁵

What is unique about Krannert Art Museum compared to other venues for contemporary art is its academic setting. The mission of the Museum, "to support interdisciplinary collaboration and the synthesis of knowledge for the benefit of current and future generations," distinguishes it from the traditional educational goals of most museums. Because it is located on a university campus, Krannert has greater opportunity to involve distinct groups in the production and reception of visual arts. Collaboration with students and faculty from a variety of departments and

³⁵ From the website for Krannert Art Museum and Kinkead Pavilion: College of Fine Arts at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <http://www.kam.illinois.edu/>

disciplines, as well as other campus groups and organizations, offers the possibility for administrators and curators at the Museum to incorporate multifaceted discourses and voices into the Museum's exhibitions and programming. Also, as evidenced by the recent exhibition, *Beyond East and West*, exhibitions can be organized concurrently with conferences and workshops that enable students, professors, scholars, artists, and curators the chance to collaborate across academic fields and disciplines and to explore the intersections between scholarship in the university and museum settings, resulting in increased possibilities for beneficial social and intellectual interaction.³⁶

Asia Society in New York is a community or culture-specific museum founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller 3rd. Though the Museum's central premise is not wholly unlike that of Krannert's – the exhibition and conservation of its permanent art collection, and the presentation of changing art exhibitions to engage audiences – Asia Society's position as the “leading global and pan-Asian organization” of visual arts and culture distinguishes it from other art contemporary venues in several ways. To begin with, as a culture-specific museum, Asia Society is solely devoted to the promotion and exhibition of the arts and culture of the *Asia-Pacific region*, as opposed the visual arts in general. Also, although it is the goal of all museums to function as educational sites that encourage learning and contemplation for broad audiences, Asia Society expands this aim to include more culturally specific socio-political components. The Museum defines itself as an “organization working to strengthen relationships and promote understanding among the people, leaders, and institutions of the United States and Asia,” one that will “increase knowledge and enhance dialogue, encourage creative expression, and generate new ideas across the fields of arts and culture, policy and business, and education.”³⁷ Thus, Asia Society hopes to be more than a site for the aesthetic appreciation of art and culture, but has also “recognized the power and importance

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ From the Asia Society webpage, “About Asia Society.” <http://asiasociety.org/about/mission-history>.

of art in promoting understanding” and “forging productive relationships” between Asia and the United States.³⁸ This pragmatic socio-political mission makes Asia Society a unique art institution with countless opportunities to connect the Museum’s activities and goals to an extremely wide-range of individuals, communities, cultural groups, municipal, state, and national government agencies and actors, artists, and museum professionals from the United States and Asia.

Founded in 1929 as an educational institution, the Museum of Modern Art in New York is without argument one of the most prestigious and authoritative museums in the world, and has also the most ‘traditional’ museum mission of the three case studies. By ‘traditional,’ I mean that MoMA “is dedicated to being the foremost museum of modern art in the world” and that its primary goal is “establishing, preserving, and documenting a permanent collection of the highest order that reflects the vitality, complexity, and unfolding patterns of modern and contemporary art.”³⁹ Unlike Krannert Art Museum, which focuses on the confluence of art and academic interdisciplinarity, or Asia Society, which uses art and culture to foster social and political exchange between the United States and Asia, MoMA could be described as an “art for art’s sake museum,” whose success as educational and entertainment institution is entirely contingent on its unparalleled collection of modern and contemporary art and its commercial dominance.

The Museum of Modern Art has one of the largest and most diverse audiences of any museum in the world, hosting local, national, and international visitors in astonishing numbers. As such, MoMA’s exhibitions, educational programming, and public events cross an enormous range of issues and approaches. Across the board, the Museum of Modern Art strives to be the undisputed leader of the world’s art museums; its assets include outstanding research facilities such as its library, archives, and conservation laboratory; lectures, workshops, and conferences supported by

³⁸ Vishakha N. Desai, Foreword to *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan* (New York: Asia Society, 2009), 7.

³⁹ From the Museum of Modern Art, New York website page, “About MoMA.” <http://www.moma.org/about/>

the world's most preeminent scholars, artists, collectors, dealers, and museum professionals; and public events attended by celebrities, political figures, and corporate moguls. The sum total of these resources makes MoMA one of the most powerful museums in the world, a trendsetter in nearly every aspect of its operation, and the singular figurehead of modern and contemporary art with infinite opportunities to shape the art arena today.

Contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas have found their way into a number of diverse art venues and institutions over the last two decades. Museums are the most common exhibition site, but are also quite heterogeneous in type and approach. Examples include: local and regional museums, such as the Brooklyn Museum, MASS MoCA, SITE Santa Fe, SF MOMA; as well as other 'blockbuster' venues similar to MoMA, such as Tate Britain and the British Museum. Galleries have also begun exhibiting contemporary non-*Western* art and artists in growing numbers, among them are the Saatchi Gallery, London, Lehmann Maupinn, New York, Lisson Gallery, London, and Leila Taghinia-Milani Heller Gallery, or LTMH, New York. Likewise, contemporary art from the *Middle East* and North Africa is achieving greater attention via international art fairs and biennials, including of course, the Venice Biennale, as well as in Sharjah, Cairo, Sao Paulo, South Africa, Kassel, and Istanbul. Lastly, art museums, galleries, and fairs are opening throughout the *Middle East*, offering greater opportunities for artists from the region to be exhibited locally and regionally – the Dubai Art Fair, the Abu Dhabi Art Fair, and the Museum of Middle East Modern Art, Dubai, for example.

Exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas tend to fall under four major curatorial frameworks or strategies. These exhibition genres, if you will, consist of geography, form and style, identity, and themes or issues. Geographic exhibitions are framed as surveys or highlights of the work of artists from a particular place, such as a region or country of origin. Examples of this type of exhibition include *Made in Palestine* at the Station

Museum, Houston, Texas in 2003, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* at Saatchi Gallery, London in 2009, and *Looking Both Ways: Contemporary Art from the African Diaspora* at the Museum for African Art, New York in 2006.

Organizing exhibitions according to artists' shared use of a specific form or medium is another popular curatorial tactic. *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* at the British Museum in 2006, for example, focused on artists who incorporate or utilize writing and calligraphy in modern and contemporary practice, whereas *Image Stream* at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio in 2003-2004 showcased recent film and video works. *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2006 also employed a formal curatorial approach in the exhibition, looking at so-called *traditional Islamic* art forms such as calligraphy, miniatures, and carpets reinvented by contemporary artists.

Though they are losing some of their former currency among art curators and critics, exhibitions framed around questions of identity are still a common approach. Frequently, exhibitions use identity as a descriptive qualifier in order to group artists together, for example *women-artists*. *A Thousand and One Days: Pakistani Women Artists* held at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in 2005 and *Girl's Night Out* at the Orange County Museum of Art, California in 2004 are two examples of this type of exhibition. Other identity-based exhibitions might focus on *black-artists*, *queer-artists*, or *diasporic-artists*: *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists* at Krannert Art Museum, Illinois in 2005, for example.

Many exhibitions explore a particular theme as a curatorial lens through which to view the artworks, while others address a pertinent social or political issue. An example of this institutional strategy can be seen in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International Center of Photography, New York in 2008, which explored the interplay between documentation, categorization, and history. *Veil*, shown at The New Art Gallery, Walstall, Bluecoat Gallery and Open

Eye Gallery, Liverpool, and Modern Art Oxford, UK in 2003-2004, looked at various representations of veiling in contemporary art, and is an excellent example of an issue-driven exhibition.

It is important to note that these are merely loose designations of exhibition genres; not only are there countless other ways of creating narratives in the context of an art exhibition other than those mentioned here, even the four genres of geography, form, identity, and theme rarely fit into such tidy or fixed categories. More often than not, exhibitions could be classified under multiple categories at once. *A Thousand and One Days: Pakistani Women Artists*, an exhibition of fifty-one contemporary miniature paintings by eight Pakistani women artists, for example, uses three curatorial methods, including geography (Pakistan), identity (women), and form (miniatures). Likewise, individual parts of an exhibition might fulfill more than one role simultaneously. You could just as easily re-categorize the previous exhibition as identity (Pakistan), issue (women), and theme (miniatures). I believe that one might use these exhibition genres as investigative tools to evaluate how exhibitions mediate artwork and create meanings through the various ways in which they are framed and organized, but without suggesting that there is any singular or 'true' hermeneutic.

Though Museum Studies has been forging its acceptance as an academic discipline for over a decade now, there remains a great deal of uncharted ground for scholarship in the realm of exhibition studies, including the history of exhibitions and the various approaches to contemporary exhibition practices. The production and dissemination of new knowledge can only be achieved via a focused examination, contextualization, and documentation of institutional exhibition policies, their relationships to larger socio-political concerns, and their significance within art and cultural history. Three exhibitions investigated here offer the necessary platform for such an investigation and analysis of exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art.

Chapter 4:

Museum Studies: Challenging Institutions

Prerequisite to even the most cursory examination of the exhibition strategies of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art found in *Western* art institutions is an introduction to the critical inquiry of the art museum itself: Museum Studies. Just as Orientalism laid the foundation for understanding the discursive power of the linguistic and geo-political binaries of *East* and *West*, post-colonialism highlighted the Eurocentric hegemony of art history and its canon, and post-modernism emphasized the political and cultural contingency of *Western*-dominated narratives of history and identity, Museum Studies questions the art institution, the exhibition, and the mediation of meaning.

Museum studies is a relatively young discipline, and although more than one hundred universities in the United States currently offer museum studies graduate programs,⁴⁰ museum studies, as a discrete field of inquiry, is still struggling to establish itself as a legitimate and valuable academic field distinct from other overlapping disciplines like cultural studies and art history. The roots of museum studies can be traced to the 1989 publication of *The New Museology*, edited by Peter Vergo, which compiled essays from a number of renowned authors addressing wide-ranging issues of museology and museum practice. Contributors advocated that museologists and art historians incorporate diverse methodologies and draw from a broad empirical base, in order to better study the conceptual foundations of museums and their application in practice, as well to reveal new avenues for critical inquiry and improved museum performance.⁴¹

⁴⁰ From the museum studies website page at "GraduateSchools.com." <http://www.gradschools.com/search-programs/museum-studies>.

⁴¹ Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, Ltd., 1989). See also, Sharon McDonald, ed., "Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction" in *A Companion to Museum Studies* (Chinchester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2011), 1-12.

Many of the concerns raised by this seminal work continue to provide the foundation for museums studies today. One of the most pivotal investigations of the field questions the contingent nature of museum objects and their contexts, or in other words how museums create meaning through display. The study of the production of knowledge in the museum and the reception of audiences is also related to these inquiries. Connecting museums to outside spaces and activities also informs a large part of museum studies. Challenging the supposed 'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of the educational art institution, museum scholars address how entertainment, tourism, commercialism and the 'spectacle' relate to various museum practices.

Another important aspect of museum studies' research lies in its trans and inter-disciplinary intersections with other discourses including art history, post-colonial studies, and postmodernism. The 1980s witnessed a flowering of 'representational critique' brought to bear on many parts of the art world, including art history and its 'canons,' art institutions, and the art market. This 'representational critique' highlighted failures on the part of museum professionals and art historians, among others, to adequately address the inequalities of representation in the art world, particularly in regards to ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Similar to approaches found in post-colonial studies, feminist and Marxist theories, and postmodernism, critics called for greater institutional and intellectual reflexivity, and deconstruction of the ways in which the museum and its exhibitions' production and dissemination of knowledge become instruments of social and political power.⁴²

Museums have come a long way from the European *wunderkammers* of the 16th century to the postmodern spectacle of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. And yet, in many ways, the core values and aims of the museum remain the same. On the one hand, museums strive to be humanist and democratic institutions, whose goal is the cultural and aesthetic education of the public,

⁴² Sharon McDonald, ed., "Expanding Museum Studies: An Introduction" in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, 3.

through the neutral, scientific, and objective display of art and artifacts. On the other hand, museums are also 'spiritual' sites where precious and rarified objects are displayed for the contemplation of those equipped to understand and interpret them. They are also capitalist and corporate institutions, where the conspicuous accumulation of wealth and cultural capital is displayed for the prestige and enjoyment of the elite, as well as the increasing commercial success of the institution itself.⁴³ The confluences and contradictions between these divergent threads of museum policy and practice form the theoretical heart of museum studies, and requires museologists to inquire well outside of the discourses of art history and criticism. In order to fully investigate the complexities and nuances of contemporary museums, scholars must incorporate diverse methodological tools, drawn from anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, and cultural studies, among others.

In many ways, Museum Studies constitutes the intellectual fulcrum of this project. By drawing on the methodologies offered by the theoretical constructs of Orientalism, post-colonialism, and post-modernism, applying them to new avenues of inquiry such as contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, and drawing on the broad empirical base of exhibitions in practice, art historians and museum professionals have the unique opportunity to fuse theory and praxis into possible solutions for improved museum performance and innovative exhibition approaches.

Museums and the Mediation of Meaning

In his essay, "Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense," writer and curator Bruce Ferguson points out that despite the centrality of "the politics of *representivity*" within

⁴³ Nancy Einreinhofer, *The American Art Museum: Elitism and Democracy* (London: Leicester University Press, 1997), 2. See also, Edward P. Alexander, *Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Function of Museums* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 1996); and Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc., 1998).

postmodern theory and the arts, exhibitions – “meaning who is represented, how and in what ways” – are rarely the discrete focus of scholars or theorists.⁴⁴ For Ferguson, the narratives created by art objects in the exhibition context are “the ‘voices’” heard by the audience. Which voices are allowed to speak, how, and to whom, “constitute[s] a highly observable politics, with representation as their currency and their measure of equality in a democratic process.”⁴⁵ Ferguson argues, “exhibitions are the material speech of what is essentially a political institution” and that “what they do and in whose name are important to any sense of democracy, especially a democracy of representations.”⁴⁶

Looking at what a museum exhibition ‘says’ through its construction of “lines of nationality, lines of inter- or trans-nationality, lines of biography, lines of chronology, lines of connoisseurship, lines of thematic unity,” suggests Ferguson, “might offer up a typology of vocal or filmic genres – a series of exhibitionist tropes and audience expectations.” The ability to identify exhibition genres in this way would illuminate how exhibitions construct dialogues with audiences. Ferguson expands:

The management of meanings is explicitly the goal of any strategy of representation that is any medium’s prime objective. How exhibitions do this and under what conditions they do it in order to maintain essential identities or to disrupt them, is not just (if at all) a matter of content but a matter of medium. The number of ways in which art can move on any trajectory of meaning is opened up or constrained by judicious use of the exhibition’s many instrumental elements. The codes of the exhibition itself must be deconstructed in order to produce effective art and effective institutions.⁴⁷

Emma Barker shares Ferguson’s approach to the study of the medium, as well as the message, of exhibition speech. In her introduction to *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, she writes, “display is always *produced* by curators, designers, etc. As such, it is necessarily informed by definite aims and

⁴⁴ Bruce Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics: Material Speech and Utter Sense” in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 175.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

assumptions and evokes larger meaning or deeper reality beyond the individual works in the display. In short, it is a form of representation as well as a mode of presentation.”⁴⁸

Barker also highlights another important concern of museum studies, the supposed *neutrality* of the art institution. Because museums strive to be both educational sites and places for aesthetic contemplation, they often attempt “to bracket off, or ‘neutralize’ the wider world beyond the museum.”⁴⁹ To demonstrate the significance of this practice, Barker cites Ivan Karp: “The alleged innate neutrality of museums and exhibitions is the very quality that enables them to become instruments of power as well as instruments of education and experience.”⁵⁰ Barker continues by pointing out that this so-called neutrality also provides the framework for Carol Duncan’s notion of the art museum as “‘ritual site’” where the ideological norms of the institution and society as a whole are reinforced through the ‘sacralized’ aesthetic display of the museum and through “participation in its seemingly rarified ‘rituals.’”⁵¹

Museums often continue this practice of ‘bracketing-off’ the world outside the museum by refusing to acknowledge socio-political issues and denying their commercial operations to the public. Barker points out “the role for exhibitions (and their curatorship) at the centre of the economics of the art world is also in tension with their educational role as a vehicle for communication with the public.”⁵² Addressing the museum’s attempt to remain apolitical, Des Griffin, Director of the Australian Museum in Sydney, contends: “Some museum management and museum people seem to think that it is possible for a museum to be non-political, to be objective.

⁴⁸ Emma Barker, ed., “Introduction” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 13.

⁴⁹ Barker, ed., “Introduction” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, 14.

⁵⁰ Ivan Karp, “Culture and Representation” in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 14. Cited by Emma Barker, ed., “Introduction” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 14.

⁵¹ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 114-15. Cited by Emma Barker, ed., “Introduction” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, 14.

⁵² Barker, ed., “Introduction” in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, 117.

Nothing could be further from the truth. All decisions made by museums as to what they say or don't say, show or don't show, are political."⁵³

⁵³ L. Griffin, "Listening to Different Voices," *MUSE* (June-July): 3. Cited in Moira G. Simpson, *Making Representations: Museums in the Post-Colonial Era* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 37.

Chapter 5:

The Global Village: Hybridity, Multiculturalism, and 'Ethnic'-Arts

As part of the postmodern and postcolonial demands for greater inclusivity and representation of previously marginalized ethnic and cultural groups within art history and its canon, beginning in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century art institutions have begun to initiate new practices to answer these calls. Among the divergent approaches to the phenomena of the 'global village' are geographically oriented curatorial tactics categorized under the terms *multiculturalism*, *hybridity*, and so-called '*ethnic*'-arts.

Multiculturalism and hybridity are both the products of discourses related to cultural and identity politics, with ties to post-colonial and post-modern studies. Multiculturalism represents the 'salad bowl' of political philosophy, where recognition and accommodation of cultural groups, especially those considered disadvantaged due to minority status, allows for the 'protection' of cultural diversity and uniqueness. Multiculturalism may be viewed under the umbrella of post-modern pluralism and the fragmentation of identities, as well as supporting the recognition of competing views of history and tradition, and of explicitly contingent cultural narratives.

Hybridity, on the other hand, is the socio-political 'melting pot,' which adopts post-modernism's notion of the 'global village' to emphasize that identities – cultural, national, ethnic, linguistic, etc. – may no longer be seen as pure or uncontaminated, but have been eroded by the ongoing interaction and exchange of globalization. In the arts, hybridity may take the form of cultural hybridity, as in the mixed cultural identities of the diasporic or transnational artist, as well as formal hybridity, as in the 'promiscuous genres' of post-modern eclecticism and the pastiche.

The so-called '*ethnic*'-arts may be described as the 'separate-but-equal' approach to the cultural politics of contemporary art. Attempting to correct for the long-term exclusion of certain

minority groups from representation and acknowledgment by the *Western* art community, the promotion of 'ethnic'-arts functions as a kind of affirmative action for marginalized art and artists. A number of culturally and ethnically specific art institutions and exhibitions were created along these guidelines, such as Asia Society and the Museum for African Art, for example.

Though many curators and institutions may have adopted strategies based on multiculturalism, hybridity, 'ethnic'-arts, and the 'global village' in good faith, there have, nonetheless, been a wide-array of criticisms raised. Catherine King, editor of *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art*, cites artist Rasheed Araeen's viewpoint of having been "placed in a ghetto of cultural hybridity" because of his African ancestry, rather than being accepted as an artist with the same "freedom from cultural ties" as his European counterparts.⁵⁴ Araeen contends that "AfroAsian artists have now been pushed into a new marginality of multiculturalism, in which only the expressions of cultural differences are seen to be authentic."⁵⁵ Particularly disturbing for Araeen is the fact that even the cultural theories of post-colonial studies and art history are failing to acknowledge the problem, and "continue to privilege cultural differences as the basis of artistic practice by the post-colonial artist."⁵⁶ Araeen elaborates in his essay, "New Internationalism, or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans," published in the volume *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*:

There is nothing wrong with multiculturalism *per se*, so long as the concept applies to all. But in the *West*, it has been used as a cultural tool to *ethnicize* its non-white population in order to administer and control its aspirations for equality. It also serves as a smokescreen to hide the contradictions of a white society unable or unwilling to relinquish its imperial legacies. It is in this context that we should understand the fascination and celebration of cultural difference.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Catherine King, ed., *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 257.

⁵⁵ Rasheed Araeen, "The artist as a post-colonial subject and this individual's journey towards the 'centre' in *Views of Difference: Different Views of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 233.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Rasheed Araeen, "New Internationalism, or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. Jean Fisher (London: Kala Press, 1994), 9.

“The idea of ‘hybridity,’” writes Jeremy MacClancy, editor of *Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World*, “popularized in anthropology by [James] Clifford, wish[ed] to celebrate cultural contaminations, in a world where surrealism is not out of place and it is notions of pure products which are crazy.”⁵⁸ The risk however, according to MacClancy, is that an oversimplified and generalized notion of hybridity erases particularity and “runs the risk of celebrating a global notion of difference at the expense of recognizing local differences.”⁵⁹ For MacClancy, rather than combating the essentializing narratives of modernism, postmodern emphasis on *hybridity* merely practices “a time-honored form of essentialist labeling.”⁶⁰

Another geographic exhibition strategy addressed in the theoretical literature concerns the use of qualifying adjectives used to define artists via their ‘geographic identities,’ as in *Pakistani* or *African*-artists. This ‘othering’ practice, according to Jean Fisher, “has led certain cultural disciplines to a reduction of art to a ‘symbol of collective identity,’ which denies to ‘other’ artists precisely that individuality and specificity of vision upon which the genealogy of western art is founded.”⁶¹ Fellow contributor to *Global Visions*, Gordon Bennett cautions that these ‘othered’ artists may easily become “trapped in a representative role of Eurocentric racialized identity” or worse still, “becom[e] ethnicized to the point of caricature.”⁶² Practiced in conjunction with these ‘ethnic identities’ is what art historian Judith Wilson calls “the syndrome of separate-but-unequal programming.”⁶³ Araeen asserts a similar criticism: “the creation of a separate ‘ethnic minority arts’ category created further divisions and separations, very much in the pattern of cultural Bantustans.

⁵⁸ Jeremy MacClancy, ed., *Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 15. See also, James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

⁵⁹ MacClancy, *Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Jean Fisher, ed., “Editor’s Note” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts* (London: Kala Press, 1994), xii.

⁶² *Ibid.* See also, Gordon Bennett, “The Non-Sovereign Self (Diaspora Identities)” in *Global Visions*, 120-130.

⁶³ Judith Wilson, “Art” in *Black Arts Annual, 1987/1988*, ed. Donald Bogle (New York: Garland, 1989), 7. Cited by Maurice Berger, “Are Art Museums Racist?” in *How Art Becomes History: Essays on Art, Society, and Culture in Post-New Deal America* (New York: Icon Editions, a division of HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 146.

This cultural apartheid...continues today. Its harmful effects are disguised by institutional separate funding for multicultural or cultural diversity programmes."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Araeen, "New Internationalism, or the Multiculturalism of Global Bantustans," in *Global Visions*, 8-9.

Chapter 6:

Multiple Authenticities

The concept of *authenticity* in contemporary art, like its counterpart, *identity*, is a vague and problematic term, without any fixed definition, highly susceptible to the agendas of its users, and entirely contingent upon its context of use. Nevertheless, it remains a popular construct in cultural studies and art discourse. The simplest understanding of authenticity in art concerns what Denis Dutton calls *nominal authenticity*, meaning the “correct identification of the origins, authorship, or provenance of an object, ensuring, as the term implies, that an object of aesthetic experience is properly named.”⁶⁵ This usage is also aligned with the Modernist concern with the originality and validity of the unique work of art.

The second, more complex and widespread, use of the concept refers to Dutton’s notion of *expressive authenticity*, or “having to do with an object’s character as a true expression of an individual’s or a society’s values and beliefs.”⁶⁶ This *expressive* approach to aesthetic authenticity may be further divided into two distinct, but still intertwined, subcategories: the *expressive authenticity* of the artwork and the *expressive authenticity* of the artist. Once the nominal authenticity of the art object, in other words the “provenance, origins, and proper identity,”⁶⁷ is established, then the “genuineness” of its expressivity can be evaluated in terms of how closely it conforms to normative understandings of itself. In the case of non-*Western* art, there is a particular interest in objects that display the cultural and ethnic “heritage” of their makers, and which exhibit certain “traditional” aesthetic characteristics of form, medium, or style. Privileging of this type of authenticity is closely linked to interest in the so-called honesty of the ‘primitive,’ ‘tribal,’

⁶⁵ Denis Dutton, “Authenticity in Art” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), <http://www.denisdutton.com/authenticity.htm>.

⁶⁶ Dutton, “Authenticity in Art” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics*, <http://www.denisdutton.com/authenticity.htm>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

'primordial,' 'naive,' and 'folk' arts. Likewise, perceived conflicts between art objects born of one "pure" culture versus "hybrid" objects influenced by multiple cultures, or in other words, "tradition" and "heritage" versus "appropriation" and "contamination" have also complicated this understanding of *authentic* art.

More important than the formal or aesthetic *authenticity* of the art object, is the current craze with the *authenticity* of the artist, and the subsequent fixation on the artist's biography. The geographic, ethnic, racial, and cultural origins of non-*Western* artists have to a large extent superseded the formal and aesthetic considerations of their art itself. Art historians and museum professionals look to artists to express the collective social and cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors of what is conceived as *authentic* to their biographical heritage. Married to the artist's perceived *identity*, the expressive *authenticity* of the artist is used both as a curatorial framework, as well as an interpretive tool intent on unraveling the underlying meaning of an artist's work as a product of her biographical identity.

Scholars from art history and museum and cultural studies have addressed the multiple invocations of *authenticity* and highlighted a great number of problems with their use. In her essay, "Africa on Display: Exhibiting Art by Africans," Elsbeth Court calls attention to one of the many "haunting" notions concerning the discourse on 'African art.' "There is a demand for "*authentic* art," she writes,

identified with timeless 'tribal' *traditions* as opposed to modern individual creation. The key criterion here is freedom from external influence; as we will see, this can entail an exclusive focus on art of the past. For living artists, '*authenticity*' means lack of exposure to a western-style, academic art education, now widely available in Africa. André Magnin, an influential curator, claims that this kind of training produces artists capable only of an arid technical mastery and generates a 'fuzzy aesthetic' caused by the accompanying *hybridization* of different representational systems. The extensive international promotion of 'autodidact' or 'naïve' art as *the* authentic contemporary African art has been widely criticized as a denial of the real conditions of artistic practice in Africa.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Elsbeth Court, "Africa on Display: Exhibiting Art by Africans" in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 149-50. My emphasis.

In this way, *authenticity* of artistic identity and stylistic characteristics are often used interchangeably. Certain elements of artistic behavior are defined as characteristic, according to Maruška Svašek, while other, so-called “deviant behaviour is called artificial or commercial, and if one acts in a deviant manner one may be accused of loss of identity, and loss of artistic integrity. Artistic style is represented as evidence of identity, and identity as evidence of artistic style. Thus, both terms serve as normative tools, used to structure and control both artistic and non-artistic behaviour of individuals and members of specific social groups.”⁶⁹ Fred Wilson elaborates on this phenomenon further:

Such commentary is symptomatic of a type of critical apartheid in which artists of colour are condemned as ‘inauthentic’ or ‘unoriginal’ if they tap aesthetic sources beyond their designated ethnic turf, while white artists’ tendencies to raid the aesthetic cookie jars of the world go blithely unchallenged! A viscous cycle of historical amnesia and cultural essentialism produces and maintains this double standard; which has played a crucial role in obscuring the engagement of Third World and Third World-in-First World artists in modernist and postmodernist projects.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Maruška Svašek, “Identity and Style in Ghanaian Artistic Discourse” in *Contesting Art: Art, Politics and Identity in the Modern World*, 30.

⁷⁰ Fred Wilson, “The Silent Message of the Museum” in *Global Visions*, 64.

Chapter 7:

Elusive Identities

Identity as a curatorial strategy is virtually inseparable from other framing devices used in exhibitions, such as geography, ethnicity and heritage, or *authenticity* of form or style, because each of these categories is inevitably yoked hermeneutically to the process of defining the artist's *identity*. The politics of identity, agency, and representation remain central to the discourses of post-colonial studies, postmodernist theories, and museum studies, and are also uniquely important to any discussion of contemporary non-*Western* art. Identity is specifically addressed by the 'centre' – 'periphery' model of post-colonialism, as well as the multicultural – hybrid concerns of post-modernism, both of which continue to affect contemporary exhibitionary practices.

'Centre' and 'periphery,' as previously mentioned, are theoretical constructs used by post-colonial scholars to describe the socio-political, economic and geographic relationships between colonizers and colonized in the colonial and post-colonial eras. The 'centre' is the site where knowledge is produced and power is held, while the 'periphery' is the site where knowledge is disseminated and power is administered. This model presumes that the interaction between the two is always univocal and unidirectional, from the 'centre' to the 'periphery,' but never in reverse. One of the primary aims of early post-colonial writings, then, was to give a "voice" to the 'peripheries' allowing them to effectively reverse the dynamic of knowledge and power such that colonizer would no longer 'speak' for the colonized, but instead enable them to create their own narratives. This approach is closely aligned to the multiculturalism of post-modernism in that it emphasizes individual, local histories over the 'totalizing' narratives of modernism and celebrates the cultural differences of formerly marginalized groups.

Later post-colonial and post-modern scholars problematized both the 'centre'/'periphery' model and multiculturalism by pointing out that the inversion of 'centre' for 'periphery' does not

disrupt the binary relationship of colonizer and colonized, but merely substitutes one for the other. And keeping the *Western* 'centres' as the dominant reference point needing to be over turned, denies agency to the 'periphery' and leaves the hierarchy of power intact. In lieu of this *inversion*, intellectuals like Homi Bhabha advocated a *subversion* of the colonizer/colonized system achieved via *hybridity*. A hybrid relationship breaks down binaries by emphasizing the multidirectional exchange of influence and power, concerned less with who exerts their will on whom, but rather with *how* each exert upon one another. In place of the 'centre'/'periphery' relationship, a plurality of 'centres' emerges. This multi-centred model also characterizes a later development of post-modern thought: pluralism and fragmentation, or the multiplicity of emergent identities.

Another important result of the *hybridity*-turn of post-colonial and post-modern discourse is the corresponding privileging of the *hybridity* of the individual as well as cultures. The aftermath of colonialism left a wake of exiles, émigrés, migrants, and diasporic persons. Likewise, increased globalization and technological advances created a new category of transnational individuals moving freely between multiple worlds. The *identities* of these unique individuals found a new position under the umbrella of *hybridity*, identities not defined by or limited to one specific place, but characterized by composite, syncretic sensibilities informed by multiple cultures simultaneously.

Unfortunately, neither the multi-cultural nor the hybrid identity projects are free from flaws. On the one hand, multi-culturalism can be seen to reinforce the notion of 'pure,' uncontaminated individual and cultural identities. This risks the creation of monolithic, simulacral, imaginary identities, fixed in space and time, and needing to be isolated from outside influence. Moreover, in the process of celebrating and 'preserving' individual and cultural difference, one is also liable to essentialize, exoticize, and even fetishize those differences. Hybridity, on the other hand, privileges the diasporic, transnational individual, in other words, the global at the expense of

the local, with little regard for the socio-political realities still ongoing elsewhere. One could argue that the so-called *subversion* of the 'centre'/'periphery' model via the mythic 'in-between' space not only relies on the binary relation it hopes to transcend, but also creates new 'centres' and 'peripheries' of its own. Rather than the colonizer/colonized dynamic, hybridity creates a post-colony/diaspora relationship nearly as hierarchic as its predecessor. Furthermore, in the same way as multiculturalism can be said to lionize difference, hybridity can be seen as erasing it altogether. In an attempt to combat the black and white, reductive and essentializing tendencies of multiculturalism, hybridity favors the grey area of cultures interconnected and merged into one. The criticisms with this viewpoint, however, revolve around its ambiguity and lack of any individual or cultural specificity. Grouping together the divergent experiences of a wide variety of individuals under the larger heading of *hybrid*, results in the same homogenized, essentializing, fictional identity of its counterpart. Both of these approaches are manifest in contemporary exhibitions of non-*Western* art and will be key to illuminating how curatorial use of *identity* as a construct affects the efficacy of those exhibitions.

Chapter 8:

Curating Cultures: An Empirical Inquiry

The last twenty-five years have witnessed not only a veritable explosion of critical discourses across the entire gamut of academic disciplines, but also the virtual inseparability that characterizes their contemporary entanglement with one another and within the field of art history. Moreover, it is safe to say that each and every one of those fields of inquiry has made its mark on the discourse of non-*Western* art in some way. But while the *post-colonial* writer may address the visual arts and their involvement in *Western* cultural hegemony, or the curator of an exhibition might quote Said, or the catalogue might include an essay by Bhabha, the gulf between theory and praxis remains wide and largely ignored by individuals on both ends of the divide.

Despite the recently-booming *Middle Eastern* art market, despite the successes of magazines and journals like *Third Text*, *Nafas*, *Canvas*, and *Bedouin*, despite the recent openings of modern and contemporary art museums and galleries throughout the *Middle Eastern* region, despite the brilliant insights and contributions of critical theory, anthropology, cultural studies, and the new museology on the disciplines of art history and criticism, despite the establishment of academic and professional associations like the Middle East Studies Association and the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey, and most specifically, despite the recent surge of exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East* and its diasporas both in *Western* art institutions and internationally, there nevertheless remains a conspicuous lack of self-reflexivity and criticality on the part of art historians, scholars, theorists, critics, and curators in terms of how contemporary *Middle Eastern* art is framed, mediated, and represented, *specifically in and through the art exhibition*.

By looking critically at three recent exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, namely, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*,

and *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art From Pakistan*, we will examine some of the nuances and complexities of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art practice and its dissemination. These exhibitions serve as case studies with which we can articulate some of the strategic curatorial approaches adopted within the exhibitions, unpack the theoretic underpinnings of such curatorial tactics, and elaborate on the ways in which the exhibitions succeeded and failed in their aims and within the larger project of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. Exhibitions cannot simply *appropriate* the buzzwords of theory – the *Other*, *hybridity*, and *transnational*, for example – without taking responsibility for how their particular exhibition participates within the larger discourses they claim to address. If art institutions more rigorously investigate and acknowledge the enormous discursive power of the art exhibition within contemporary socio-political and cultural arenas, then there might be a genuine possibility that the non-*Western* art exhibition might achieve that which it has claimed to do all along: to educate, and to foster inter-cultural understanding and communication. A dire need for widespread investigation of contemporary non-*Western* art exhibitions exists; with enough data we might learn something about how we continue to frame art and artists categorized as non-*Western*, which applies not only to the *Middle Eastern* artists addressed in this project, but also to artists from other *marginalized* areas of the world, including Latin America, Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, as well as the indigenous populations of the Americas and Australia, and other communities *marginalized* by gender, sexuality, religion, and other ‘othering’ categories.

While post-colonial studies, postmodernist theories, and museum studies may have once belonged to the larger discourses of *critical* theory, I would argue that in their failures to pursue practical verification of their conclusions, they have lost their critical edge. Critical theoretical discourses must not only describe and evaluate diverse fields of social, cultural, and political practice, but also provide practical proposals to implement their critique in the form of normative social change. In other words, legitimate critical theory must be transformed into praxis. Practical

validation of theory is a key part of the process of critical inquiry itself. The confluence of this dual inquiry is the site where the research of this thesis may illuminate new areas for the application of practical social theory as well as possibilities to improve the production and reception of future exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas.

Chapter 9:

Exhibitions and the Burden of Representation

Choosing three exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art shown in *Western* art institutions as case studies for critical explication is immediately fraught with the same issue that lies at the heart of the exhibitions themselves – the burden of representation. To this end, I have chosen three exhibitions that approach the field in a number of divergent ways and that may offer us a broad selection, though certainly not exhaustive nor representative, of various curatorial approaches, methodologies, and incarnations of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art found in *Western* art institutions.

As we established in the second chapter of this thesis, which focused on some of the background concerns of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, despite the enormous variety of venues, curators, artists, and exhibitions, one can nonetheless recognize certain reoccurring tendencies and approaches found in a number of exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. These common threads, namely the focus on geography, *authenticity* of form/style, and identity, will serve as the thematic lenses through which we will examine three specific exhibitions. This will allow us to unpack some of the complexities of these exhibitions and the ways in which they succeeded in their stated aims, or failed to create compelling frameworks for the presentation of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art.

Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists, was organized by Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2004. It is unique in its specifically transnational approach and in its academically located venue, as well as being the only travelling exhibition of the three. *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* opened at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 2006. This exhibition also takes a transnational approach, though quite different from the Krannert exhibition, and is noteworthy for its exhibition at one of the most

prestigious and authoritative museums in the United States, and arguably worldwide. *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, was held at Asia Society, New York, in the fall of 2009 and focused on a specific geographic place and was held at a community-specific institution.

Curating Geography

Geography may seem like an obvious and even neutral curatorial approach, as well as a redundant theme perhaps when investigating contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. Categorization based on geographic factors is already understood in the framework of this research question. But in the context of non-*Western* art in general, geography is never a neutral determining factor. Especially in the context of art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas, geographic identifiers are always laden with complex connotations, implied associations, and theoretical assumptions. Moreover, using geography as a curatorial framework is not as straightforward or unproblematic as it may seem. Using our three exhibitions of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art as case studies, we'll examine how curators use geography to determine their choice of artists, their curatorial missions, and the overall methodologies of their exhibitions. Simultaneously, we will address if and how geographic exhibition strategies relate to some of the discourses of the field, namely post-colonialism, post-modernism, and museum studies.

Beyond East and West

The Krannert Art Museum at The University of Illinois took a very different approach with its exhibition, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, than that of its counterpart, *Hanging Fire*. Unlike Asia Society, which is a community-specific institution whose mission is to foster awareness of Asian art and culture and facilitate cooperation between the United States and Asia in the realms of art and culture, Krannert Art Museum is part of an educational institution with

a broad constituency and unique academic attributes. Josef Helfenstein, director of Krannert Art Museum, addresses the exhibition's singularity in the foreword to the catalogue, stating: "With its focus on issues of identity and geographical displacement, it is particularly fitting that this exhibition is presented on a university campus populated by scholars and students from many other countries and cultures."⁷¹ As such, rather than focusing on art from a specific geographic location, such as Pakistan and *Hanging Fire*, Krannert Art Museum takes its own geographic diversity as a jumping off point for the framework of its exhibition.

While the category *transnational* may seem, like Pakistan, to be a concrete category for artists living and working in more than one geographic location, it is not a specific, but rather an abstract *place*, the mythical 'in-between'⁷² *place* of the diasporic artist, and in the case of *Beyond East and West*, is framed as site of cultural hybridity, universality, and interaction. One result of this exhibition's focus on transnational *place*, as opposed to a specific one, is its ability to address the larger global processes of mass migration and mobility, displacement, diaspora, and exile, which may have equal importance to discussions of individual geographic locations such as cities or nations, but may be more holistically viewed under the transnational umbrella. Additionally, the focus on the transnational geographic identity of contemporary artists may highlight the inadequacies of geographic binaries such as *East* and *West* and reduce stereotypes associated with the artist's *place* of origin.

Beyond East and West's collapsing of borders also has the opportunity to address the reality of global socio-political events, such as ongoing wars, political strife and upheaval, technological changes and the rise of mass media, tensions between cultural groups and nations, and the interconnectivity and interdependence of political societies. Because these are just a few of the concerns of artists living and working *transnationally*, Krannert Art Museum has a broad platform

⁷¹ Josef Helfenstein, Foreword to *Beyond East and West*, 8.

⁷² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

of aesthetic issues to consider, and is not limited to the context of a specific ethnic, cultural, or national group.

In the same way that the Museum's abstract geographic framework has the potential to 'collapse borders,' the transnational artists themselves have the privileged potential to offer alternative viewpoints because of their knowledge of multiple *places* and cultures. This "double-vision,"⁷³ according to the exhibition's catalogue, "makes the artists' personal experience of crossing cultures accessible to and compelling for a broad audience" and "helps to create and confirm a transnational public whose concerns extend beyond those of either local communities or the global networks and markets envisioned by transnational corporations."⁷⁴ David O'Brien, one of the exhibition's curators, posits hopefully, though naively perhaps, "there is much in this art that impresses upon us an awareness of our common nature and encourages us to surmount the customs, interests, and other particularities that divide us. In short, this art helps us to recognize the possible common ground for an equitable global community."⁷⁵

Sadly, despite the inherent diversity of the term transnational, curatorial approaches that use diaspora as a geographic category rather than the nation, still participate in the homogenizing tendency that plagues much of the exhibitions of non-*Western* art. That is to say, that even though diasporic exhibitions aim to represent the very divergent experiences of artists living and working in multiple *places* and cultures, the term itself, and the subsequent categorization, merely becomes yet another monolithic identifier, lumping-together very diverse individuals, groups and experiences under a singular descriptive heading of *diaspora*. An artist of the Senegalese diaspora and a Palestinian exile, for example, cannot simply be neutrally joined together as *transnationals*,

⁷³ W. E. B. DuBois

⁷⁴ David O'Brien, *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, 12.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

negating their unique personal experiences and denying the socio-political contexts specific to their individual histories.

Likewise, though transnational exhibitions try to reject geographic origin as an identifying factor, they merely substitute one geographic schema for another. The specific *place* of the nation of origin is exchanged for the imaginary “in-between” *place* of the transnational, and the artist is still identified as ‘Iranian-born, living in London,’ for example, which fails to remove geographic origin from curatorial framing. And not unlike the artists in *Hanging Fire* who become stand-ins for all Pakistani-artists, transnational artists are also burdened with the charge of representing their country of origin and/or the experience of diaspora as a whole. This expectation of representativeness does a disservice to both parties: the local artists still living and working in their home countries have a very different understanding and experience of the world than their transnational counterparts and cannot be represented by other artists who may have been born in Iran or Egypt, but have little lived reality of the conditions of contemporary life in those countries. Moreover, artists can only be responsible for speaking of their own unique vision of the world, and cannot be asked to become spokespersons for *Diaspora* or *Exile* as a monolithic and fixed category of identity.

The greatest risk of the transnational exhibition, however, is not the false sense of representation, but the fetishizing of the *hybrid*. In our increasingly *globalized* art world, the fetish of the so-called hybrid, cosmopolitan artist is becoming a highly marketable tool for curators to display and commodify multi-culturalism. Exhibitions are becoming obsessed with syncretism and *hybridity* is a buzzword found throughout the catalogues and press releases of contemporary non-*Western* art shows. Sarat Maharaj argues that there is a real “danger of hybridity becoming the privileged, prime term, a danger of it swapping places with the notion of stylistic purity.” He fears that “with this, hybridity – vehicle for demarcating and disseminating difference – seems

paradoxically to flip over into its opposite, to function as the label of flattening sameness, as ‘new international gothic.’ The concern is with safeguarding its volatile tension, its force as a double-voicing concept. The aim is to prevent it from narrowing down into a reductive, celebratory term.”⁷⁶ The problematic nature of the terms *transnational*, *diaspora*, and *hybrid* have been addressed by numerous writers in the fields of art history, post-colonial and post-modern studies, and cultural and museum studies. Art historian and writer, Gilane Tawadros asserts:

The value of the term diaspora and its symbolic character, after all, resides precisely in the fact that it dispenses not only with the universalizing and transcendental claims of the ‘grand narratives’ of western culture, but equally with the notion of a ‘pure, uncontaminated or essential blackness anchored in an unsullied originary moment.’ The implications of this for critical writing which addresses itself to the cultural production of artists in the diaspora and artists from different cultures, are that it must articulate the ways in which these artists displace and contest those grand narratives without, in the process, reinventing an alternative, totalizing ‘grand narrative’ which is equally fixed and exclusive.⁷⁷

Beyond East and West, as an transnational exhibition, attempts to take a critical stance on the curatorial practice of using artists’ origins as a framing device, but must also remain critical of oversimplifying diverse experiences into a generalized and romanticized notion of hybridity. As quoted by Jeremy MacClancy, “one Senegalese painter put it: ‘I am not between two worlds; I am not a hybrid – I am Moustaphe Dimé and I represent only me. I will not let anyone imprison me in a little ghetto.’”⁷⁸

Without Boundary

The 2006 exhibition, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, hosted by MoMA, used yet another geographic curatorial strategy as the framework for their show, but one that differed

⁷⁶ Sarat Maharaj, “‘Perfidious Fidelity’: The Untranslatability of the Other,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, edited by Jean Fisher, 29.

⁷⁷ Gilane Tawadros, “The Case of the Missing Body: A Cultural Mystery in Several Parts,” in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, edited by Jean Fisher, 110.

⁷⁸ Jeremy MacClancy, *Contesting Art*

from its two counterparts in a number of ways. Adopting an abstract notion of *place* along the lines of *Beyond East and West, Without Boundary* chose artists “who come from the *Islamic World* but live and work elsewhere” in order to emphasize “the enormous diversity of the work that is emerging from what is simplistically viewed as a homogenous culture.”⁷⁹ The exhibition’s curator, Fereshteh Daftari, acknowledges in the catalogue that “we often think of artists in terms of their origins, even when their life and work takes place elsewhere.” Her mission as curator of *Without Boundary* was “to highlight the difficulty of making origin a determining factor in the consideration of art” by examining the ways in which contemporary artists are disrupting conventional expectations and stereotypes of “*Islamic art*.”⁸⁰

Without Boundary successfully recognizes that using geography as a curatorial framework is problematic in its applicability to artists living and working outside of their countries of origin, as well as how often it is attached to the work of artists who would not characterize themselves in such terms. Daftari also suggests that to call the region from “Indonesia to the Atlantic coast of Africa...contemporary Islamic art is surely reductive...”⁸¹ She attempts to question and combat geographic categorization by examining the work of seventeen artists, fifteen of who are “from the *Islamic World*” and by including two *Western* artists who “share interests, references, and strategies with them. Her aim then, is to demonstrate that they are linked not by common ethnicity or religion, but through their work and “in their way of revising, subverting, and challenging the aesthetic traditions they deal with.”⁸²

Unfortunately, despite Daftari’s ambitious curatorial intentions, *Without Boundary* is easily the most geographically problematic of the three exhibitions. To begin with, though the show’s geographic framework was meant to disrupt the link between geographic origin and identity, the

⁷⁹ My italics. Glen D. Lowry, “Foreword,” in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*,” 7.

⁸⁰ My italics. Fereshteh Daftari, “Islamic or Not,” in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*,” 10.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 25.

simple use of the label *Islamic World* already participates in the reductive dialogue it hopes to combat. Worse still, neither the curator nor the director of MoMA interrogate their casual use of the *Islamic World* as a construct, but rather use it without question, qualification, or critique in both of the catalogue's essays. Though Daftari admits that the region of the "Islamic world" is broad and cannot be reduced to the simple classification of "contemporary Islamic art,"⁸³ she doesn't address the abstract quality of the label itself, nor does she contextualize what she means by this label, which countries are included, or the way it is misused in popular discourse and in the media. For a curator as versed as Daftari in the dangers of misrepresentation and misperceived notions of different cultures, it seems an oversight on her part to use *Islamic World* in such a loose and uncritical manner.⁸⁴

Both the catalogue's foreword and its main essay frame the show as being interested in artists "from the Islamic world" who neither live nor work there in order to question whether there is "any identifiable commonality in their art."⁸⁵ The inclusion then, of the two *Western* artists, Bill Viola and Mike Kelley, appears only to be an afterthought, a token gesture, aimed at repelling criticisms of a purely geographically constructed exhibition. The gesture, however, is not only confusing, but also seems arbitrary, and is ultimately unsuccessful in dispelling the appearance of a curatorially imposed geographic framework for the show.

Another shortcoming of *Without Boundary's* use of geography concerns its overt depoliticizing and conspicuous avoidance of the issue of transnationality and diasporic identities. In fact, the catalogue itself rarely uses either of those terms, nor does it address the myriad other concerns of artists living and working outside of their "home" countries, including their status as exiles, migrants, refugees, or émigrés. Attempting to maintain its institutional neutrality results, in

⁸³ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁴ Daftari is the author of several writings that address cross-cultural exchanges and global modernities. Her publications include *Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective*, 2002; "Beyond Islamic Roots –Beyond Modernism" in RES, Spring 2002, and "Islamic or Not" in *Without Boundary*, 2006.

⁸⁵ Daftari, "Islamic or Not," 10.

the best case, in a bland and unchallenging exhibition, but in the worst case, it represents an blatant lapse in institutional and curatorial responsibility. Daftari acknowledges that the “question of identity [is] a frequent issue in an exhibition of artists the majority of whom have experienced long-term dislocations across national borders,” but nonetheless refuses to acknowledge the elephant in the room: the specific socio-political contexts that are responsible for the displacement and movement of these artists from one place to another. The use of transnational or diasporic artists as *the organizing framework for your exhibition – the two American artists notwithstanding – requires that you address the underlying causes and contexts of these conditions, at least in some small manner. One cannot simply tiptoe around the controversial and highly political nature of transnationality and diaspora and still hope to provide a meaningful framework for artists for whom these experiences are inextricable from their work.*

Hanging Fire

Geographically based exhibitions first and foremost categorize artists based on a coherent sense of *place*. In some instances, this *place* may have a concrete understanding as a specific, geographically defined entity, as is found in *Hanging Fire*. This exhibition focuses on contemporary art from Pakistan, a physical and political *place* with defined topographical boundaries and a more or less specific understanding of its location in the world. One of the immediate benefits of such an approach is that it allows for a particular, focused examination of art practice in a specific context, which may limit the tendency to create widespread and reductive generalizations. Recognizing “that over the past decade a new generation of Pakistani artists has created compelling works that have largely gone unnoticed outside their country,” the purpose of *Hanging Fire* is described by the Museum Director of Asia Society, Melissa Chiu, as “an effort to take stock of some the work being done by these artists...”⁸⁶ Because this exhibition provided only a sampling of Pakistani art, curator

⁸⁶ Melissa Chiu, Preface to *Hanging Fire*, 8.

Salima Hashmi emphasized that the artworks displayed “can represent only a segment of the fertile panorama of works being created in Pakistan today.”⁸⁷ Focusing on a specific geographic *place* in this way, enables curators and art institutions to highlight and create awareness of marginalized or underrepresented groups, in this case, the artists living and working in Pakistan today. This is wholly in line with the projects of post-colonialism and post-modernism as applied to art history; some of the aims of which were to allow for the plurality and liberation of subordinated social and cultural communities.

Another benefit of the curatorial strategy of geographic specificity is the ability to engage with unique cultural histories and specificities of socio-political context which are lost or lumped together in less *place*-specific approaches. Asia Society’s director states in the preface to the exhibition’s catalogue, that it is the mission of the Museum to exhibit art whose socio-political content is key to a full understanding of the work. Their aim, then, is to provide a community-specific forum for the display and contextualization of Asian art for a more informed experience of its audience. More specifically in the case of *Hanging Fire*, Chiu articulates, “it is fair to say that in spite of the political and social instability in the country, or perhaps because of it, the past decade has been a fertile ground for creative work in many parts of Pakistan. And yet, in the western media, especially in the United States, Pakistan is often perceived through a very narrow prism of extremist violence and terrorism.”⁸⁸ Chiu hopes that by addressing the arts and culture of Pakistan, as well as “critical timely political issues,” *Hanging Fire* will be able to “build partnerships and deepen understanding between Pakistan and the United States” and “to provide a fuller picture...of Pakistani society to the American public...in order to provide a more nuanced picture of Pakistan.”⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Salima Hashmi, Introduction to *Hanging Fire*, 13.

⁸⁸ Chiu, *Hanging Fire*, 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Unfortunately, even geographically specific curatorial approaches have inherent flaws in their framework and potentially negative consequences, albeit unintended. Much like the investigational paradox of this thesis – that in order to map out exhibitions as case studies they consequently become burdened by an assumed representational-ness or homogenization of very divergent and diverse exhibition practices – so too, *Hanging Fire*, despite its geographic specificity, still creates an imaginary, and monolithic national identity of Pakistan. Likewise, the artists included in this survey of contemporary Pakistani art, become representatives for the absent artists, those not included in the show, in other words, the entirety of Pakistani artists. The viewer can assume that seeing the show is equivalent to seeing *all* of Pakistani art today. Geographic identifiers, no matter how particular, inherently lump together extremely diverse groups and practices into a homogenized, unified, fictionalized whole. This is part of the larger issue of *identity*, which is one of the main concerns of cultural studies and post-colonial studies. Geography and identity are very important questions that need to be more fully investigated in their relationships to curating and exhibitions.

Another critical flaw in geographic based exhibitions is one that is not unique to *Hanging Fire*, but concerns many contemporary artists today: the hyphenated identifying prefix. In this case, the well-intentioned separate-but-equal approach used by Asia Society in order to highlight the work of contemporary Asian artists otherwise underrepresented in Western art institutions, nonetheless has the unfortunate effect of creating a geographic ghetto for the artists represented in *Hanging Fire*. By identifying these artists under the category *Pakistani-artists*, the show participates in a larger tendency of curating marginalized groups by creating separate fields of aesthetic inquiry for their work. Thus, artists like Rashid Rana, may only be considered in the contemporary art scene pre-mediated by the hyphenated identifier, *Pakistani-artist*, rather than based on his art practice itself. This ghettoization based on geography is also found in the exhibitions that address gender, sexuality, and race, as seen in the qualifiers used for contemporary *women-artists*, *LGBT-*

artists, or *black*-artists. It is not my intention to make a firm conclusion that exhibitions should never attempt to highlight the work of groups of otherwise marginalized artists, but merely to point out that this curatorial strategy is inherently problematic and must not be adopted without critical appraisal of its positive and negative applications.

The last issue raised by *Hanging Fire*'s geographic survey approach elucidates yet another larger concern of non-*Western* art curation in the *West*, the notion of 'cultural tourism.' The aim of Asia Society's exhibition, "to open our eyes and minds to the vibrant cultural reality of contemporary Pakistan,"⁹⁰ inseparably involves bringing *Pakistan* to the *West* in the form of its aesthetic culture. In so doing, the viewers of *Hanging Fire* are not only able to view a survey of contemporary art from Pakistan, but in a way, are also offered an opportunity to be 'vicarious tourists,' absorbing and *consuming* the visual, cultural, social, and political nuances of Pakistan via the artworks on display. The curator, then, becomes what curator Mari Carmen Ramírez calls a "culture broker,"⁹¹ essentially proffering the art of the '*Other*' for easy categorization and consumption by the *Western* visitor, who can assume a privileged position of cultural voyeurism without ever having to leave the comforts of home. Much like the issue of hyphenated identifiers, surveys of particular groups of artists certainly serve a key purpose in terms of highlighting the works of underrepresented artists and creating awareness for their work amongst other, more privileged art groups. But it is critical that the interaction between these groups, artists and visitors, is a dialogue, rather than a *buffet*. The artists and the artworks themselves must be allowed to speak to the viewer and not just be displayed as mute commodities for cultural consumption.

⁹⁰ Vishakha N. Desai, 7.

⁹¹ Ramírez, "Brokering Identities: Art Curators and the Politics of Cultural Representation" in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, 22-23.

Chapter 10:

Curating *Authenticity*: Form and Style

A consideration of form and style is a necessary, even obvious, component of any exhibition, but the curatorial approaches to these elements of contemporary art practice are as diverse as the artworks themselves. A closer examination of how curators use perceptions of authenticity of form and style as framing devices in the exhibition of contemporary art from the *Middle East* and its diasporas illustrates how such exhibition strategies are successful and/or inadequate in practice, and also illuminates the ways in which *Western* art institutions and its curators are addressing or failing to address the criticisms set forth by the theories and discourses of post-colonialism, post-modernism, and museum studies. The three exhibition case studies we are investigating here demonstrate just a fraction of the divergent ways curators use formal authenticity in exhibitions of contemporary art, the methodological approaches of which are even more complex in the context of non-*Western* art, where questions of tradition versus modernity, authenticity versus innovation, and convention versus appropriation are just a few of the tensions at issue. Questions include which artists and artworks were chosen for the show and why, how choices of form and style shaped the mission and organization of the exhibition as a whole, the ways in which the framing of the works were compelling or not, and how choices made by the curator respond to the larger discourses of the field.

Beyond East and West

Beyond East and West's emphasis on form and style as a curatorial strategy is much less significant than in our other two case studies, instead emphasizing thematic issues. The exhibition's curators, David O'Brien and David Prochaska, frame the exhibition in a fully transnational setting, where the artwork is described as originating from "multiple cultural traditions and attitudes, in some instances in ambivalent, hybrid, or universalist forms, and in other instances by giving voice to

the specific concerns of local communities or pointing to existing cultural antagonisms.”⁹² In this exhibition, artists were chosen not for their ability to demonstrate a fusion of tradition and modernity in formal terms, but rather for their ability to “draw on their experience of displacement and knowledge of multiple cultures to offer alternative visions of the contemporary world.”⁹³ *Beyond East and West* is concerned less with any particular sense of *authentic* form or style than with how contemporary transnational artists are addressing timely socio-political topics like documentation, history, borders, maps, exile, war, diaspora, exile, and gender. According to David Prochaska, “this exhibition is about change, flux, the vicissitudes of artistic and personal fortunes. It is about people living in-between, artists no longer living where they were born, but often not fully at home where they live presently.”⁹⁴

Although the formal practices of the artists in *Beyond East and West* are not the centerpiece of the exhibition, this show does share an interest in hybrid forms with *Hanging Fire*, but with a distinct twist. Like Asia Society’s exhibition, *Beyond East and West* points out the artists’ use of cross-cultural iconography, as well as an historicizing style and culturally specific references to address larger local, regional, and global issues. And also like *Hanging Fire*, the artists of *Beyond East and West* were chosen because of their “use of contemporary artistic methods and approaches...that they simultaneously imbue with elements, motifs, and techniques, modes of thought and ways of seeing that reflect their own personal and cultural trajectories. Not “Beyond East and West” but more precisely “The East in the West, to employ such dichotomous terms.”⁹⁵ By contemporary artistic methods Prochaska means video, sound, and multimedia installation, sculpture and mixed media, photography, film, and video, new media like video drawing and computer animated video

⁹² David O’Brien, “Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists,” in *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, exhibition catalogue, 11.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ David Prochaska, “Untitled (2004),” in *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, exhibition catalogue, 89.

⁹⁵ Prochaska, 95.

projection, and conceptual works. The show also has elements of more traditional forms including drawing and painting, embroidery, and miniatures, but the overall emphasis is on how transnational artists are harnessing contemporary international forms and integrating them with their own personal and cultural styles.

In a similar way that curator Salima Hashmi links contemporary Pakistani art to postmodernism through its use of parody, humor, and pastiche, Prochaska compares the use of “a deliberately disjunctive style, employing juxtaposition and pastiche to mimic what a friend calls the ‘dislocations of diasporic living.’”⁹⁶ Likewise, O’Brien stresses to the reader that “the exhibition’s goal is not to define a culturally specific aesthetics or politics that unifies these artists, and certainly not to propagate an artistic movement. Rather, the exhibition focuses on a variety of cosmopolitan interpretations of displacement and intercultural experience by artists who have followed a specific trajectory.”⁹⁷ The curators believe that the artists chosen for the exhibition “transform... individual perceptions of displacement and alienation into abstracted, generalized forms,” “help us envision our common humanity,” and “encourages us to surmount the customs, interests, and other particularities that divide us.” *Beyond East and West* is less concerned with smoothing out the tensions between tradition and modernity, authenticity and innovation, and convention and appropriation frequently associated with non-*Western* or diasporic artists, but hopes to show instead, how “their work provides an arena for competing interpretations and understandings of the world” and how “they inform us about a variety of local communities even as they make these worlds graspable to a wide variety of viewers.”⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁹⁷ O’Brien, 14.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 29.

Without Boundary

Of the three exhibitions under study in this thesis, the curatorial strategy of *Without Boundary* is by far the most formally organized, as well as the most problematic. Fereshteh Daftari outlines her approach to the exhibition:

Classic traditions of Islamic art that have become well known in the West include, for example, calligraphy, the painting of miniatures, and the design of carpets. These forms might lead a Western viewer to label an artwork 'Islamic.' To explore to what measure the artists in *Without Boundary* actually depart from any conventional notion we might have of Islamic art, then, this exhibition and book will examine their work in part by approaching it through just these taxonomic types.⁹⁹

Noting that "the study of 'Islamic art' is an occidental invention," Daftari wants to bring attention to the religious and political connotations associated with 'Islamic art' as a result of the tumultuous contemporary political climate, as well as to the difficulty of applying such a descriptor to artists no longer living or working in the *Islamic World*, and whose audience and patrons are predominantly *Western*. She is also critical of the loose application of the label 'Islamic' to an entire region and argues that "only active consideration of this kind," meaning *Without Boundary* itself, "will slow down the race toward simplistic conclusions and binary thinking."¹⁰⁰ The curator's intentions, then, are to use the stereotypical "Islamic" art forms as sites to deconstruct what we think *authentic Islamic* art is, and to establish a new understanding of art produced by artists who may have "come from" the *Islamic World*, but don't fit into a tidy category of common practice or identity.

Daftari herself highlights the first problem with her formal curatorial strategy in the exhibition's catalogue: "To impose categories on artists who resist categorization, of course, is a contradiction in terms, and I do not intend *Without Boundary* to share in the homogenizing impulse that has become so widespread."¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, however, Daftari believes that the mere inclusion of two artists of *Western* origin will be enough to resist the reductive nature of formal and

⁹⁹ Daftari, 10.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

geographic categorization, when in fact *Without Boundary* merely reinforces the simplifying and flattening tendency it hopes to combat. In all likelihood, visitors to the show probably took Daftari's taxonomic categories at face value; rather than viewing them as stereotypes purposefully set up to be disproved, viewers are just as likely to have assumed that the typology of the artworks in *Without Boundary* are in fact, the *authentic* form and style of works of *Islamic* art made today. It is entirely plausible that the exhibition's audience was simply further convinced that "*Middle Eastern*" artists are still *just* making calligraphy, miniatures, and carpets.

The exhibition appears contrived and agenda-driven from the onset; Daftari chooses artists working in "Islamic" forms, the painting of miniatures, for example, or in an "Islamic" style, as in works with a spiritual component of some kind, and chooses artworks that also have visible affinities with these "Islamic" traits, but likewise, chooses artworks that deviate from the conventional expectations of these traditional forms. The resulting rupture of cultural and aesthetic stereotypes of *authenticity* via the choice *hybrid* form merely confirms what Daftari had deliberately set out to prove. In essence, she places the artists into confined boxes so that she can smile triumphantly when they "break-free." The "catch-22" of her tactic is that the artists would not have needed to free themselves at all if not deliberately placed there to begin with! Moreover, her formal curatorial bias is heightened by the conspicuous lack of any counter argument, which is to say that *hybridity* is all the show wants you to see. One could certainly find artists who still live and work in Iran, for example, who also exhibit this fusion of *traditional* and *contemporary* modes, likewise, one would not be hard-pressed to find a *transnational* artist who refuses to participate in the *internationalization* of aesthetics, choosing rather to practice the art of calligraphy in its most *traditional* form. The point is that *Without Boundary* creates a fictionalized impression of the diasporic artist freed from the restraints of tradition by displaying only those works of art that substantiate a narrow and premeditated interpretation of the diasporic experience.

The problematic nature of *Without Boundary's* framework of disrupting notions of *authentic* form and style worsens when one considers Daftari's choice of artists. All seventeen of the artists in *Without Boundary* not only live and work in *Western* cities, but each and every one of them received their academic and artistic educations in the *West*.¹⁰² Illustrating the ways in which contemporary artists are resisting fixed notions of *traditional* styles and forms through the works of seventeen *Islamic-born* artists – ignoring, for the moment the strange inclusion of the two *Westerners* – trained in *Western* art institutions is not a difficult task; of course, their work demonstrates an overt *hybridity* of form and style. The failure to include any artists who still live and work in the so-called *Islamic World*, or who received their artistic training outside of the *West*, significantly weakens any proof of Daftari's "erased borders."¹⁰³ Moreover, not unlike the two previous exhibition case studies, with its artists limited in both scope and diversity, *Without Boundary* poses the same inherent exhibition risk faced by so many non-*Western* art shows: the question of representation. Can seventeen artists "speak" for the entire *Islamic World*? Can transnational and diasporic artists stand-in for their "native" counterparts? If their art demonstrates a hybridity of form and style, can we assume that to be ubiquitous, and/or desirable? While I am not arguing that Daftari's intentions were to make the artists of *Without Boundary* the representatives of any overarching aesthetic paradigm, it is critical that curators consider the repercussions of exhibitions' speech; what we mean to say, and what is understood by others is not always the same thing.

In the end, the greatest flaw in *Without Boundary's* formal methodology lies in its failure to answer the central question of the exhibition itself: what is *authentic Islamic art*, or perhaps, is there such a thing as *authentic* contemporary *Islamic art*? Though Daftari never outlines the exhibition as such, the entire framework of the work of the show revolves around these critical questions, and yet

¹⁰² According to the artists' biographies in the appendix to *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, the artists studied in the following *Western* cities: London, Paris, Nice, Boston, MA, Los Angeles, CA, Santa Monica, CA, New York, NY, Wales, Memphis, TN, Irving, TX, Berkeley, CA, Oakland, CA, Valencia, CA, Ann Arbor, MI, Strasbourg, Zurich, Dortmund, Providence, RI, and Syracuse, NY.

¹⁰³ Daftari, 25.

does not offer a satisfactory answer to either.¹⁰⁴ As mentioned in the chapter on geography, the label *Islamic World* is iterated in *Without Boundary* without qualification or recognition of its problematic connotations. Likewise, Daftari seeks to explore how artists deviate from *traditional Islamic* forms without articulating precisely what she means by *Islamic* art. One can infer that some of the components of *Islamic* art might include: art made by an *Islamic* artist, art that comes from the *Islamic World*, art that references the *Islamic* faith, or art of a traditional *Islamic* form or style. But none of these components is simple in and of themselves, nor do they provide a satisfactory definition for *authentic Islamic* art.

Quoting Oleg Grabar, Daftari attempts to define *Islamic* art as “art made in and/or for areas and times dominated by Muslim rulers and populations,”¹⁰⁵ but her reference of Grabar is merely cursory because she fails to apply this definition to the artists of *Without Boundary* in any way. Moreover, she complicates this definition with an even more vague one: “Grabar has argued that the word ‘Islamic’ does not refer to the art of a particular religion’ – that ‘works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art.’”¹⁰⁶ While it is safe to say that Daftari is merely trying to illustrate that not all artists from the *Islamic World* or using traditional *Islamic* forms are Muslim, the end result is a confusing, even contradictory explanation of what precisely *Islamic* art is.

Daftari’s choice of examining contemporary artworks through the taxonomic categories of what she considers to be *traditional Islamic* art forms as her framework for exploding the

¹⁰⁴ Daftari writes in a footnote to her essay, “Islamic or Not”: “The term ‘Islamic,’ which in aesthetic discourse was until recently applied mainly to the traditional arts of the Islamic world, is now being applied to modern and contemporary art,” and directs the reader to see Wijdan Ali’s book, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*. While Ali’s book is certainly an excellent source of information on the development of *Islamic* art, I hardly think that merely citing Ali constitutes a useful or concrete definition on Daftari’s part of what *modern* or *contemporary Islamic* art is in the context of this exhibition.

¹⁰⁵ Fereshteh Daftari quoting personal communication with Oleg Grabar, in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, 10.

¹⁰⁶ Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 1. Quoted by Fereshteh Daftari in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, 22.

preconceived notions of *Islamic* art and *authenticity* as a whole, *demands* that she answer the question that is the prerequisite to her entire curatorial methodology, namely, what is “Islamic art?” Without answering this fundamental question she simply cannot demonstrate the ways in which the artists in *Without Boundary* are creating ruptures within the so-called conventions of such practice. *Without Boundary* also failed to address the most obvious implications raised by its formal strategy of deconstructing *Islamic* art: is the adjective *Islamic* still a useful descriptive category when applied to contemporary works of art from artists practicing within and without the abstract conception of the *Islamic World*?¹⁰⁷ Can the label be revised in some way to provide a more nuanced definition of contemporary practice, or should the label be abandoned altogether? These are the arenas in which *Without Boundary* had a unique opportunity to make powerful contributions not only to the field of museum studies and curatorial practice, but also to the discourses of art history, post-colonialism, post-modernism, and the study of the contemporary arts of the *Middle East*, North Africa, Southeast Asia, and the *Arab* and *Islamic Worlds*. Yet, the adoption of the *Islamic World* as an unqualified geographic *place* and the failure to define or question the meaning of *authenticity* and *Islamic* art as a whole, prevented *Without Boundary* from drawing any substantial or lasting conclusions from its exhibition.

Hanging Fire

Asia Society’s exhibition of contemporary art from Pakistan applied a curatorial strategy more concerned with *authenticity* of form and style than with theme. An essay by the show’s curator, Salima Hashmi, introduces the contemporary art scene in Pakistan and its development from historical sources, and then addresses the work of each artist individually. Other essays in the

¹⁰⁷ In her discussion of the applicability of the term *modern Islamic art* to the context of *modern Arab art*, Nada Shabout argues: “the term *Islamic art*...signifies specific aesthetic principles that evolved into a style and were tied to an Islamic religious ideal in the course of their development. These principles no longer apply in today’s traditional yet secularized Arab world.” One might question whether those principles apply to the contemporary practices of other non-Arab arts, for example, Iran, Algeria, or Turkey. See Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), 150.

catalogue, contributed by a number of renowned scholars, writers, artists, and curators, reflect on Pakistan's past and present, both socio-politically and aesthetically. But unlike other exhibitions which frame artworks under thematic headings such as gender, borders, spirituality, war, etc., *Hanging Fire* emphasizes how contemporary artists in Pakistan are negotiating a precarious balance "between rootedness...and contemporaneity."¹⁰⁸ Hashmi positions the work as cross-cultural or hybrid forms, which use international contemporary visual language combined with elements of their own culture of origin.

Perhaps the most important aspects of form and style as characterized by *Hanging Fire* are the importance of Pakistan's National College of Arts (NCA) in Lahore and the legacy of the late Zahoor ul Akhlaq (1941-1999), artist, teacher, and mentor at the college for over thirty years. Many of the artists featured in the exhibition studied under Akhlaq and went on to become faculty at the NCA, thus fostering the continuation of the visual and conceptual issues introduced by Akhlaq, including "his ability to synthesize innovation and cultural content."¹⁰⁹ It is precisely this fusion of cross-cultural iconography and medium that informed Hashmi's choice of artists and artworks, and is the framework for *Hanging Fire* as a whole. The revival and reinvention of miniature painting at NCA is the quintessential example of the hybridity of Pakistani contemporary art represented in *Hanging Fire*. Hashmi highlights how artists like Imran Qureshi embrace the traditional medium, but reinvigorate it via the incorporation of contemporary aesthetic language and iconography. In this way, contemporary artists in Pakistan are seen in the exhibition as practicing *authentic* cultural art modes, but nonetheless *innovating* the *conventional* understanding of these modes.

Another formal focus of *Hanging Fire* involves how Pakistani artists are harnessing new media, often considered to be *Western* contemporary art practices, and applying them to their own personal, cultural, and socio-political concerns. Artists who use photography, film, video, installation

¹⁰⁸ Salima Hashmi, "Hanging Fire: An Introduction," in *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 14.

¹⁰⁹ Hashmi, 14.

and mixed media are included in the exhibition to demonstrate Pakistani artists' *appropriation* of *Western* contemporary mediums, but within the establishment of a uniquely Pakistani aesthetic *modernity*. And though *Hanging Fire* is not framed thematically, the curator nonetheless emphasizes the importance of "socio-political imperatives" on contemporary art practice in Pakistan, particularly "women's status in Muslim society, the postcolonial critique of art canons, and displaced histories and identities."¹¹⁰ Recognition that "parallel to this dialogue with a remote, romantic past lies the conversation with a contentious, chaotic present," Hashmi links the hybrid forms of contemporary Pakistani art to the post-modern pastiche, full of "dissonance," "black humor," and "a sense of parody."¹¹¹

Hanging Fire's formal curatorial approach is successful in its introduction to visitors of the NCA's importance to contemporary Pakistani art, the history and revival of miniature painting, and the unique ways in which artists in Pakistan are finding their own personal artistic voices that combine elements of their cultural heritage with *international* aesthetic practices and media. Yet, one cannot help but wonder how many artists were not included in the show because their work did not fall into this field of cultural and visual fusion. Artists, for example, who are practicing so-called traditional Pakistani arts without the infiltration of *international/Western* visual languages, or artists on the other end of the spectrum who have fully embraced contemporary *international* art practices and whose work shows no easily identifiable elements from Pakistan's artistic or cultural past or present. It is not my argument that *Hanging Fire's* curator ought not to have framed this exhibition along the lines of cross-culturalism, but that it is important these artists and their work not be seen as representative of contemporary Pakistani art as a whole. Curators should remain mindful of how any framing device applied to exhibitions, formal *authenticity* included, become powerful mediators of how visitors gather meaning from the artwork and which conclusions they

¹¹⁰ Hashmi, 13.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

draw about the artists, and in the case of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art, the countries and cultures as well.

Chapter 11:

Curating Identity

The discourses of cultural studies, identity, and identity politics have been harnessed as curatorial tools for over two decades. However, in the last decade curators have begun to question the tendency of fixing identities into monolithic and reductive categories. Examining how identity continues to be defined in and through exhibitions offers insights into how contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas is framed, how artists are categorized, and how artworks are mediated in the concrete exhibition setting. Looking specifically at how exhibitions produce and shape individual and group artistic identities will allow us to gauge how curators and institutions in the *West* are responding to and negotiating with the many theoretical discourses concerning identity. These discourses include, but are not limited to, post-colonialism and the *Other*, post-modernism's 'grand narratives' and pluralist rhetoric, and museum studies' critique of *Western* institutional hegemony and cultural imperialism.

There are several overarching approaches to employing identity in the context of the exhibition, and in most cases, they are nearly inseparable from one another. By far the most common identity-based classification mirrors the first theme of this inquiry: geography. Densely entangled with geographic identity are its other sub-components, including heritage, ethnicity, and cultural origin. The second and third most common identity classifiers are gender and religious affiliations. Much less common are identifying categories based on form, medium, or style. Putting all of these identity groups together results in the most pervasive heading of all, *biography* or background. Under the broad umbrella of *biography*, one can *define* an artist by where she is *from*, what her cultural heritage and ethnicity is, her gender and religious ties or beliefs, her education and/or art training, her political stances, sexual orientation, and so on... Using these biographical tools, curators attempt to deconstruct the artist's psyche, to unravel the threads of their personal

makeup and arrive at a deeper and better-informed understanding of what their art *means*. Likewise, curators use these identifiers to group artists together with perceived commonalities, e.g. *women-artists, African-American-artists, Pakistani-artists, Muslim-artists, queer-artists, transnational-artists*, etc., in order to construct coherent exhibitions with some element of shared practice.

The pitfalls of identity-based exhibitions are numerous and have been explored by a number of scholars in a wide-range of fields.¹¹² As addressed in several of the previous chapters of this thesis, grouping artists together under any heading immediate and inherent risks. To begin with, a grouping of any kind implies coherence, or in other words, homogeneity, which creates the impression of a singular, monolithic identity, denying the existence of individual differences and diversity. Similarly, highlighting only one particular trait is reductive and runs the great risk of essentializing and stereotyping the group itself. In many cases, identifying groups can become fixed, immobile, and stifling; members may feel pigeonholed into a immutable identity. Specifically in the cases of minority and marginalized groups, identity classification often serves to exoticize, fetishize, and *other* its members; the purpose of which may be to commodify them, or to compartmentalize in order to maintain hierarchies between groups. In the end, members of any group identity are automatically understood to represent that identity characteristic as a whole. Meaning, that even those members not included in a particular exhibition are assumed to have the same identifying traits as those present; the members of the group then become synecdochic stand-ins for all of their absent counterparts. Turning again to the three exhibition case studies, we can investigate how identity played a role in the framework of the exhibitions and whether or not any of these potentially negative consequences occurred as a consequence.

¹¹² See, for example,

Beyond East and West

As previously noted, the recent strategy of negating identity-based exhibition practices has resulted in the substitution of an ‘international’ artistic identity. But as evidenced by the very different implications of this qualifier in the context of *Beyond East and West*, this substitution is far from constituting an identical curatorial approach. Josef Helfenstein, Krannert Art Museum’s Director, writes in his foreword to the catalogue, “this exhibition contributes to an increasingly international discussion of new critical methods used by contemporary artists whose work has been located both outside and inside the framework of the Euro-American contemporary art scene. The exhibition, with its many layers of representation and discussion of identities – their construction as well as their dissolution – couldn’t be more timely in the current geopolitical situation.”¹¹³ Thus, from the onset, *Beyond East and West* acknowledges that it is primarily concerned with *international identities*. But what exactly that means in the context of this exhibition requires further examination.

Beyond East and West is an exhibition of *transnational* artists who, according to its curators, “have crossed or collapsed political, cultural, and religious borders, and disrupted conventional and stereotypical representations of time and place, of history and geography,” and whose art “offers new kinds of intercultural understanding.” Not unlike Hashmi’s intentions with *Hanging Fire*, curators David O’Brien and David Prochaska position the artists of *Beyond East and West* as “cosmopolitan” artists whose works fall into categories of “ambivalent, hybrid, or universalist forms.”¹¹⁴ In this way, they resist the tendency to reduce their artists’ work into simplified categories of identity by aligning them instead with the abstract and mutable qualities of the *cross-cultural*. O’Brien elaborates:

¹¹³ Josef Helfenstein, Foreword to *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*

¹¹⁴ David O’Brien, “Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists,” in *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, 11.

These artists have sometimes been pigeon-holed through their cultural and geographic origins, their art reduced to this aspect of their identity. It would, however, be equally distorting to eliminate such issues completely from discussions of contemporary art. We wish to perform a delicate dance: to explore the common trajectory and overlapping experiences of these artists while maintaining their diversity, to focus on cross-cultural themes while accepting that these are but one aspect of their art.¹¹⁵

Stressing the ways in which the artists of *Beyond East and West* preserve their own unique identities linked to their art practice through individual experiences, histories, and cultures, the curators simultaneously concern themselves with articulating the other side of the artists' more commonly conceived identities, as one side of a constructed binary opposition between *East* and *West*.

While the vast majority of the exhibition's catalogue is devoted to a thorough discussion of the artists and the artworks in *Beyond East and West*, unlike our other two case studies, the catalogue also commits a considerable amount of text to an analysis of the historic and current constructions of *East* and *West*.¹¹⁶ It is this investigation into the abstract, polarized identities created by very disparate speakers and contexts that forms the framework for creating a *transnational identity* for the artists of this exhibition. "We selected the title *Beyond East and West*," explains O'Brien, "in order to both recognize the importance that the concepts of 'East' and 'West' have had for understanding the intercultural relations at issue in the exhibition and emphasize their present inadequacies. *East* and *West* have been used since antiquity to conjure up, at one and the same time, geography and difference."¹¹⁷ The exhibition at Krannert Art Museum is the only one of our three case studies that explicitly addresses the legacy of these geographic and abstract identifiers in the context of the larger discourses of the field, including Edward Said's *Orientalism*

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁶ My Italics. Ibid., 14.

¹¹⁷ My italics. Ibid., 12.

and “Reflections on Exile,” James Clifford’s “Diasporas,” Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, and W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks*, among others.¹¹⁸

Although *Beyond East and West* does address the socio-political and historical contingencies and implied connotations of the terms *East* and *West*, the use of *transnational* as an identifying category for the seven artists in the exhibition falls prey to many of the criticisms articulated above. Even with thoroughly cited and emphatically idealistic catalogue essays asserting the diverse identities and practices of these artists, they are still being pigeonholed under the umbrella of the *Other*. In this context it may be the cosmopolitan, ‘global nomad’ of the postmodern age, rather than the static, but exotic *Oriental* of the modern age, but the end result is that artists from an incredibly vast and diverse region of the world, as well as those no longer living in their *home* countries, are still being lumped-together, categorized, and exhibited under an imaginary and monolithic identity, the emancipated *transnational*. *Beyond East and West* perpetuates the fictional narrative of the artist freed from the ‘bonds’ of nation and aesthetic traditions, just like *all* of the other ‘transnational’ artists, choosing freely from the wide world of artistic media and styles, continually defining herself anew. This is the fairy tale of post-modernity.

Without Boundary

One could argue that the flaws of *Without Boundary*’s curatorial identity framework are the easiest of these three exhibitions to interrogate, simply because they are so readily apparent. Simply put, *Without Boundary* selected artists “from” the *Islamic World*, who no longer live in the *Islamic World*, no longer practice art in the *Islamic World*, were not trained or educated in the *Islamic World*, do not primarily make art for patrons of the *Islamic World*, and do not exhibit their work mainly in institutions of the *Islamic World*, in order to demonstrate that these artists cannot be categorized as *Islamic* artists! Additionally, two *Western* artists, who are also not *Islamic*, but

¹¹⁸ Cited in the footnotes. David Prochaska, “Untitled (2004)” in *Beyond East and West: Seven Transnational Artists*, 106-7.

who share supposed formal affinities with the show's other non-*Islamic* artists, were included in *Without Boundary* to highlight the difficulties of grouping artists together in exhibitions based on notions of geographic origin or cultural heritage. The blatant contradictions and logical inconsistencies of this curatorial strategy speak so loudly they hardly need explaining.

It seems reasonable to assume that Fereshteh Daftari was merely trying to participate in the same curatorial dialogue narrated not only in the other two case studies examined here, but also in many other exhibitions of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas, which is to say, the attempt to problematize the former curatorial tendency of fixing identities into essentialized categories of difference by celebrating the *hybridity* of identity and practice demonstrated by contemporary artists. The tragedy of this approach, especially in the context of *Without Boundary*, is that it inadvertently perpetuates exactly that which it hopes to combat. Unless one spent a great deal of time perusing *Without Boundary's* exhibition catalogue, the single most lasting impression that a visitor would take away from this exhibition is that it was 'an exhibition of *Islamic artists* from the *Middle East*.' The inherent flaw in categorizing the seventeen artists of *Without Boundary* within the taxonomic classifications of supposed *Islamic* art forms is that the work then became inscribed under precisely this rubric of aesthetic identity. In this way, *Without Boundary* could serve as a warning to other curators that a certain vigilance may be necessary if they hope not to fall prey to the same reductive, homogenizing *othering* tendency their exhibitions may be attempting to dismantle.

Hanging Fire

Asia Society's exhibition, *Hanging Fire*, is a unique identity-based exhibition, one less interested in representing the identities of its artists, than in promoting the cultural identity of Pakistan as a whole. Of course, it is organized as an exhibition of contemporary *Pakistani*-artists, so geographic categorization is central to the exhibition's framework, but in general, the curator does

not intend to fix the identity of contemporary artists from Pakistan in any precisely defined way. Indeed, Hashmi's introduction to the exhibition reveals the difficulty in assembling a survey of geographically chosen artists:

It is a challenge to bring together the varied artistic voices of contemporary Pakistan in a comprehensive manner. The curator may strive to assemble the most significant, the most provocative, and the most influential works, culled from a divergent pool; however, these can represent only a segment of the fertile panorama of works being created in Pakistan today.¹¹⁹

Here Hashmi addresses an important implication of geographically based artistic identity as produced through the exhibition, that it necessarily assumes representativeness; yet, no matter how mindful a curator may be in her choices, no 'survey' show can ever fully represent the heterogeneity of contemporary art practice. Recognizing this risk, *Hanging Fire* aims to show the "diversity of practice and subject that characterizes contemporary art from Pakistan" rather than to suggest a culturally or geographically specific aesthetic.¹²⁰

Despite the inherent homogeneity implied by the concrete heading, *Pakistani-artists*, the overall message of *Hanging Fire* is to negate that *Pakistani-artist* means anything singular at all; though the catalogue does suggest some elements of shared influence and practice. In her preface, Museum Director, Melissa Chiu, begins by contextualizing Pakistan's "newly minted nationhood, forged from the partition of the Indian subcontinent after the end of British rule in 1947" and contrasting this relative infancy with "Pakistan's rich and complex cultural history – one that encompasses the legacy of the Indus Valley civilization, which flourished for four thousand years," and later included the "thriving Buddhist centers in the second century, and the Mughal courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."¹²¹ Pakistan's syncretic identity continues to be shaped by the

¹¹⁹ Hashmi, *Hanging Fire*, 13.

¹²⁰ Melissa Chiu, Preface to *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 8.

¹²¹ Ibid.

history of colonialism, as well as the current socio-political conflicts related to the aftermath of 9/11, the United States' 'war on terrorism,' and the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The mission of Asia Society, then, is to combat the representation of Pakistan "in the western media, especially in the United States...often perceived through a very narrow prism of extremist violence and terrorism" by proffering contemporary Pakistani art and culture in order to provide "a fuller picture and deeper understanding of Pakistani society to the American public." In this way, *Hanging Fire's* main concern is demonstrating the "vibrant reality of contemporary Pakistan"¹²² to a presumed audience of predominantly *Westerners* in order to counteract perceived stereotypes and misconceptions. The irony lies in the fact that even as the exhibition's curator strives to combat the synecdochic relating of the artists in the show to the entirety of *Pakistani*-artists, the organizing institution hopes that the audience will see the artists and the artworks as stand-ins for the cultural richness and sophistication of Pakistan as a whole.

Turning back to the artists of *Hanging Fire*, we can address a number of other interesting ways in which the exhibition's articulation of identity takes place. To begin with, it is important to note that *Hanging Fire* includes only those artists still living and working *in* Pakistan. Pakistani-born artist Shahzia Sikander, for example, is cited in the catalogue as being one of the critical pioneers at the NCA in the redefinition of miniature painting and is credited with "leading the way for the contemporary miniature project to take shape."¹²³ Yet, her work is deliberately omitted from *Hanging Fire* because she immigrated to the United States in 1994, and is therefore considered a *transnational* or *diasporic* artist to the curator of *Hanging Fire*. Artist Hamra Abbas, whose sculptures were included in the show, spent four years a student in Germany after which she returned to Pakistan in 2006. Hashmi shares some of Abbas' reflections on that experience:

¹²² Vishakha N. Desai, Foreword to *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 7.

¹²³ Hashmi, *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 19.

Abbas asserts that there is immense pressure on artists in the diaspora to become the so-called voice of their country of origin. The lifting of this onerous duty lessens the need to make or interpret the work in the constraining context of nationality. Relieved from the burden of being labeled a 'Pakistani Artist,' Abbas settled down to a prolific period of production at home. The urge to communicate with her home audience led to work that referenced shared histories, popular culture, and humorous situations.¹²⁴

It is precisely in the intersections between these two artists, Sikander and Abbas, that the slippery relationship between identity and exhibitions becomes apparent.

As an artist living and working in the *West*, or more specifically, in the United States, to her countrymen, Sikander is a *transnational* or *diasporic* artist, and is excluded from an exhibition of art *from* Pakistan. But in other *Western* curated exhibitions, she may be expected to 'represent' those artists still living in Pakistan because it is her country of origin; as such, in the *West*, she may be interchangeably labeled a *Pakistani-born* or a *diasporic* artist. Abbas, on the other hand, returned from living in diaspora, choosing to live and work in Pakistan in order to be free of the restraints of being a "Pakistani Artist." Yet, her work, when exhibited outside of Pakistan in a *Western* institution, is again labeled *Pakistani* and carries once more the burden of representing her country of birth. The point is that how exhibitions choose to define an artist's identity varies widely depending on the context of its use: who is doing the identifying, and for what purpose. Thus, who is a *Pakistani* artist, or what is *Pakistani* art, for that matter, is never a concrete, fixed, or easily definable category of identification, but is a tool, rather, for those who would use it for very divergent ends.

Quddus Mirza, artist and professor at the National College of Arts, Lahore, suggests one more curious aspect of *Pakistani*-artists' identities in his catalogue essay, "Exile at Home: Pakistani Art in the Global Age." Citing the recent surge in international interest in the contemporary art of Pakistan, Mirza points out:

¹²⁴ Ibid., 26.

lately the works of art produced by our young artists are seen abroad first – and often more frequently, if not exclusively, than in their land of origin. This detail has been a blessing in disguise; it has added a new element to Pakistani art – a kind of international perspective in the way that artists think about and fabricate their work. As a result, the scale of the works, their mode of execution, and international media attention have liberated our art from the *ghetto* of being local. Although the connection with tradition, heritage, and region is still discernable, by and large contemporary work from Pakistan could have originated anywhere in the world.¹²⁵

The conclusion that Mirza draws from these observations is that because contemporary *Pakistani* art is becoming less and less local, artists may be seen as “exiles at home.” The further that their practice is removed from “its native soil, the more accolades it receives in the mainstream art world.”¹²⁶ Curious is the fact that Mirza doesn’t frame this exile or loss of native identity as a negative development in the least. Actually, he asserts: “Contemporary Pakistani art offers something unique, yet paradoxically, it is an art that is *beyond* the demarcation of nationhood. It is freed from a certain restricting definition of Pakistani art. Instead it is contemporary and cannot be confined to one place. In its essence it is *international*, and its wide acceptance and popularity depend upon it being in tune with the trend of our times.”¹²⁷ Here, the crux of *Hanging Fire* parallels the two other exhibitions under investigation, as well as the general stance of most of the exhibitions of contemporary non-*Western* art today: namely, the critical trend of artists, writers, and curators is the absolute refusal to be pinned down by any notions of fixed identity, whether based on geography, origin, culture, religion, gender, or otherwise. The new *identity* ‘par excellence’ is *international*, *transnational*, or *diasporic*, regardless of its iteration. It is for this reason that I started this section with the statement that the curatorial intention of *Hanging Fire* was to ‘negate that *Pakistani*-artist means anything singular at all.’

¹²⁵ My italics. Quddus Mirza, “Exile at Home: Pakistani Art in the Global Age” in *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 68-9.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹²⁷ My italics. Mirza, “Exile at Home: Pakistani Art in the Global Age” in *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*, 71.

Chapter 12:

Conclusions

Nearly twenty years ago, art and cultural historian Annie E. Coombes published a short article in the journal *New Formations*, whose analysis of curatorial approaches to non-*Western* art remains startlingly topical today. Much of the critical assessment formulated by Coombes in “Inventing the ‘Postcolonial’: Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating,” published in December of 1992, resonates loudly with the aims of this critical inquiry. Using this essay as a reference point for the three exhibitions under investigation here, enables us to draw a number of conclusions concerning current and future strategies for effective curatorial practices, especially concerning non-*Western* art and artists.

One of the most straightforward, but nonetheless cogent, observations made by Coombes concerns the simple need for more exhibitions engaging in self-conscious curating:

the dialectical relationship that needs to be articulated in the cultural sphere – between the global and the local, the national and the truly international – is thwarted by the scarcity of exhibitions which raise any of these issues and the fact that each one that does is made to bear the entire burden of responsibility of redressing the balance.¹²⁸

In addition to the burden of “redressing the balance” articulated by post-colonial and post-modern studies, exhibitions also bear the weight of representivity. Just as artists from the *Middle East* and its diasporas exhibited in *Western* art institutions are frequently seen as stand-ins for their non-present counterparts, exhibitions, too, may be viewed as generalized representations of the entire field of contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. Only the widespread increase in the number and types of such exhibitions will allay this outcome. The more art and artists from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas self-consciously organized and exhibited, the greater the likelihood is that we might

¹²⁸ Annie E. Coombes, “Inventing the ‘Postcolonial’: Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating,” *New Formations* (December 1992): 50.

broaden our understanding of contemporary non-*Western* art towards the nuanced and complex picture that exists today.

All three of the exhibitions examined here participate in some way with another of Coombes' main criticisms, namely an overabundance of self-praise, rather than an explicit self-criticality on the part of exhibitions and their curators. Many an exhibition of non-*Western art* "which claimed to disrupt radically the boundaries of that dyad 'West' and its 'Other' ... went even further and declared itself the harbinger, if not the representative of a new 'post-colonial' consciousness."¹²⁹ But as we have already seen in our analysis of three exhibition case studies, there remains a great many flaws in the application of post-colonial and post-modern theories to the exhibition context. An overt self-reflexivity and self-criticality is necessary on the part of institutions and curators interested in using these theoretical discourses for the betterment of contemporary exhibitionary practices. Moreover, continuing to examine exhibitions of contemporary non-*Western art* as sites of empirical validation of these discourses is key to their legitimization as critical theories capable of fostering normative social and cultural change.

Returning to our analysis of the exhibitions, *Beyond East and West*, *Without Boundary*, and *Hanging Fire*, we can now formulate a number of critical conclusions building on their successes and failures, which should serve as positive recommendations for the future. Of the three types of exhibitionary institutions, I argue that Krannert Art Museum, located on the University of Illinois campus, offered the most intellectually rigorous venue for the successful recognition of the complexities of curating contemporary *Middle Eastern* art. This academically oriented art space focused on an interdisciplinary approach to the art and its display, most thoroughly acknowledged and investigated the realities of the socio-political and cultural contexts of the art and artists exhibited, and sought to address specifically how the artists were negotiating these realities through

¹²⁹ Annie E. Coombes, "Inventing the 'Postcolonial': Hybridity and Constituency in Contemporary Curating," 39.

their art practices. I also commend Asia Society for enlisting the participation of guest curator Salima Hashmi, a respected artist, curator, and political activist in Pakistan. The cooperation and involvement of members of a particular group or culture being exhibited can successfully augment the diversity of vision represented through the exhibition itself. On the contrary, though *Without Boundary* had contributions from art and culture moguls Oleg Grabar and Homi Bhabha, the flawed formal framework of the show itself was not overcome by their expertise. Moreover, criticisms from the artists in *Without Boundary* after the exhibition's debut, point to the need for exhibitions to be more receptive to input from the artists themselves in the interest of improving curatorial strategies.

In terms of curatorial methodologies, several observations can be gleaned from the case studies examined here. *Beyond East and West* illustrated the benefits of specifically addressing pertinent socio-political histories and concerns necessary to an informed discussion of contemporary non-Western art. *Without Boundary*, on the other hand, failed to adequately contextualize the works in the exhibition by conspicuously avoiding any controversial or political topics. Educationally and aesthetically compelling exhibitions will neither pander to nor avoid the socio-political and cultural issues related to the artworks on display. Additionally, self-criticality demands that curators thoroughly interrogate their exhibitions, conceding their weakness and shortcomings in order to foster honest possibilities for change. Exhibition transparency, which acknowledges the underlying premises of the curatorial framework, including what is shown, but also what is omitted, demonstrates a responsible and trustworthy point of view to its audience. This combats the tendency to see exhibitions as merely objective and benign displays of art objects, recognizing rather the inherently mediated narratives present in any exhibition.

More generally speaking, I suggest that curators continue to avoid narrowly defined exhibitions based on the geographic, cultural, racial, or ethnic identities of the artists. Similarly, even

the focus on the vague and flawed constructs of multi-culturalism and hybridity, borrowed from post-colonialism and post-modernism and applied both to the art and artists of so-called non-*Western* origin, risks perpetuating exactly those aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political hierarchies and inequalities they hope to combat. Neither the celebration of difference as articulated by the multi-cultural approach, nor the erasure of difference via the syncreticism of the hybrid model adequately addresses the complex specificity of the unique individual experience. Remaining mindful of the dangers concerning the articulations of difference within the exhibition context is aptly put by Coombes:

This is especially important if we are to avoid the uncritical celebration in museum culture of a hybridity which threatens to collapse the heterogeneous experience of racism into a scopical feast where the goods on display are laid out in ever more enticing configurations, none of which actually challenges or exposes the ways in which such difference is constituted and operates as a method of oppression.¹³⁰

Overall, exhibitions that concentrate on the individuality and specificity of the artworks themselves rather than the perceived identities of the artists, in addition to curators who are attentive to the considerable discursive power of the exhibit itself – the display, the organizational and methodological framework, etc. – have the power to produce aesthetically and educationally successful and compelling exhibitions of contemporary non-*Western* art. This is truly an exciting time for contemporary artists from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas. Increased visibility for these artists is occurring as a result of academic scholarship, market interest, and institutional representation at an unprecedented rate. As new exhibitions shape perceptions about the aesthetic character of contemporary art from the *Middle East*, North Africa, and their diasporas there will continue to be new opportunities to positively affect not only art history and criticism, institutional exhibition policies and approaches, but also to foster lasting change in the social, political, and cultural arenas as well.

¹³⁰ Coombes, 42-3.

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