

# Translation and Contemporary art

IFTIKHAR DADI

*Tarjama/Translation* maps an influential subset of recent work from the Middle East and Central Asia and its diasporas as a complex and dynamic translational undertaking. Not intended as a “complete” or even a representative exhibition, *Tarjama/Translation* nevertheless understands the work of translation as being multivalent, from the specificities of textual and visual maneuvers to the larger sense of revealing fissures of the self, community, site and temporality. The exhibition foregrounds how contemporary artists negotiate the continued dislocational force of modern historical formations and track newer dilemmas engendered by globalization. Translation includes the sense of movement and process, of marking multiple locationalities, of delayed temporal receptions, and of aporias of meanings and productive (mis)readings.

Readings engendered by *Tarjama/Translation* are not to be confused by the usual orientalist tropes in which much Western representation of the region remains mired,<sup>1</sup> and which have unfortunately characterized even otherwise excellent recent exhibitions of contemporary art from the region.<sup>2</sup> *Tarjama/Translation* strives as much as possible to avoid the tropes of veiling, harem, violence, terrorism and the equation of an essentialized Islam with the region. This is not to suggest that questions of gender and sexuality, violence, and religious reformulations and the like are

not important contemporary predicaments. Indeed, artists included in this exhibition render many of these dilemmas very visible. Rather, it is emphatically to claim that understanding the contemporary concerns of regions that are in fact deeply urbanized, highly mediatized and crossed by multiple economic, social and political faultlines of globalization are ill-served by recourse to monolithic orientalist clichés and instead require “new forms of translation ... for channeling the world’s friction.”<sup>3</sup>

The regions of the Middle East and Central Asia are overlaid by a palimpsest-like web of historic and modern connections, whose density can be traced to cultural exchanges and institutional developments during the ‘Abbasid era (750-1258), the refinement of the Persianate cultural world of the late medieval and early modern period, and the political umbrella of the Ottoman empire that extended into the modern era. But as Lebanese artist Walid Sadek has perceptively noted, these labels are themselves broad and highly problematic markers papering over multiple faultlines: “I find the list of ... names such as Arab World, Pan-Arab Nation, Islamic World, Middle East, Near East, Orient, Levant, MENA, quite significant in its attempt to baptize a region. The mere repetition that defines this growing list of names is indicative ... of a lacuna that occupies the centre of a willful act of representation.” Nevertheless,

Sadek recognizes that the very insistence on attempting to characterize the region points to “a certain thickness, an insubordinate material presence that persists in exceeding that same act of representation.”<sup>4</sup> It is precisely in this sense that the terms Middle East and Central Asia are deployed here, not as essentializing labels but as dense nodes in historical and contemporary transnational exchange networks.<sup>5</sup> They mark the sense of dislocation and displacement together with belonging and affiliation, and signify the persistent residue of lives and locations marked by crisis. Rather than being simply bounded by the nation-state framework, they mark the sense of regionality as *subnational* and *transnational*: a space traversed by migration of peoples, materials and ideas, in which 20th-century nationalist ideologies are increasingly on the wane.

*Tarjama/Translation* showcases works that deploy translation as *contemporary* rather than *modernist*. Modernism had largely eschewed engagement with the temporality of the present. Rather than inhabiting a particular social landscape or engaging with immediate events, it offered instead metaphoric alternatives to the world outside the studio. By contrast, the sense of contemporaneity is immersed in a powerful sense of a temporality that encompasses the immediate present, but also extends over personal and social dilemmas condensed over the course of the

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Fatemeh Keshavarz, *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran* (University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Emram Qureshi, “Misreading ‘The Arab Mind’: The dubious guidebook to Middle East culture that’s on the Pentagon’s reading list.” *The Boston Globe*, May 30, 2004. [www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/05/30/misreading\\_the\\_arab\\_mind/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2004/05/30/misreading_the_arab_mind/). Accessed March 15, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For a cogent discussion, see Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror.” *Anthropological Quarterly*. Vol. 81, No. 3 (Summer 2008): 651-681. The recent Saatchi exhibition, which showcases some excellent work, has nevertheless been titled *Unveiled: New Art From the Middle East*. [www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled/](http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/unveiled/). Accessed March 15, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Terry Smith, “Introduction.” In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Duke University Press, 2008), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Wright, “Territories of Difference: Excerpts from an E-mail Exchange between Tony Chakar, Bilal Khbeiz and Walid Sadek.” In *Out of Beirut*. Edited by Suzanne Cotter (Modern Art Oxford, 2006), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars increasingly recognize the transnational dimensions of these regions. Representative publications include Madawi Al-Rasheed, ed. *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (Routledge, 2005); Touraj Atabaki and Sanjyot Mehendale, eds. *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora* (Routledge, 2005).

modern history of the 20th century. The wrenching transformations wrought by the Turkish Republic that overthrew the Ottoman era; ongoing Palestinian dispossession for more than six decades; the failures of Arab nationalism centered in Egypt; the reinscription of nomadic Central Asia by centralized Soviet developmentalism and its subsequent passage in the post-Soviet era toward dictatorial regimes; personal, social and political struggles in Iran during and after the Islamic Revolution; and the unimaginable human costs in Afghanistan and Iraq incurred in the last few decades are only some of the major events in recent history that continue to powerfully impact the present.

"The only potentially permanent thing about this state of affairs," notes Terry Smith in a related context, "is that it may last for an unspecified amount of time: The present may become, perversely, 'eternal.'"<sup>6</sup> The larger movement toward contemporary modes of artistic practice has been quite rapid in the region.<sup>7</sup> Contemporaneity as an artistic modality, however, brings additional complications, both blockages and openings, in the works' legibility. The contemporary work of art, unlike modernism, resolutely offers no transcendence and no attempt to redeem events and crises into a metaphor. Rather, it insistently maps the multiple dislocations and antinomies in a region characterized by nationalist ideological fantasies and widespread political repression that persist despite their increasingly hollow status. In this

sense, the contemporary work of art seeks to speak from a location in which hegemony is increasingly suspect, due in part to the intensified communication engendered by globalization, yet no ideological substitute is ready at hand to provide a sense of direction. Nevertheless, contemporary art also powerfully offers new ways of imagining the region, as located in-place, yet open to transnational exchanges, but without recourse to appeals to authenticity.

Translation has usually been understood primarily as a language-based operation—indeed the now superseded English word *dragoman* (based on the Arabic word for translation, *tarjuman*) was the official title of a native speaker of Arabic, Persian and Turkish assigned to European diplomats and traders during the Ottoman era. In *Tarjama/Translation*, language and text remain important, but the exhibition offers approaches of visual translation for engaging with the complexities of our present era that is saturated with intense mediated visuality. Apart from Ayad Alkadhi's paintings, the Arabic, Persian and Ottoman scripts and spoken languages offer Hamdi Attia, Emily Jacir, Pouran Jinchi, Sharif Waked and Dilek Winchester incisive textual and visual tropes. Rey Chow had argued that a translation between two terms, or a purely linguistic translation between two languages, cannot escape the problem of asymmetric power relations that structure our world, or cease looking for ordinary meaning. The advantages of a visual translation are precisely that by

its mediating function it provides a third term that can bracket off these questions, and the visual maneuver now insists on the *coevalness* or presentness between the entities that comprise our era: "Once the coevalness of culture is acknowledged," notes Chow, "cultural translation can no longer be thought of simply in linguistic terms... [but] as the co-temporal exchange and contention between different social groups deploying different sign systems."<sup>8</sup> Strikingly, every artist in this exhibition rigorously explores their specific artistic form—painting, video, photography, etc., providing precisely such a series of mediating *third terms* for translating between cultures on the basis of artistic contemporaneity.

The work of artists in *Tarjama/Translation* is multidimensional and polyvalent. However, for the sake of a simplified analytical understanding, the themes of *self*, *community*, *site* and *temporality* may be identified here. Ayad Alkadhi powerfully examines the *self* in his paintings that draw upon the historical and modernist significance of the Arabic script in Iraqi art to address the dislocation of the Iraqi self in the current era. Farhad Moshiri considers the Iranian self as a mediated body with a lingering sweetness associated with it. A number of artists examine aporias of *community*, including Rahraw Omarzad, whose leadership in fostering collaborative artistic activities in Afghanistan in the face of violence and division translates social paralysis into a praxis-based modality. Esra Esren reterritorializes the meaning of

<sup>6</sup> Terry Smith, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>7</sup> Although diaspora artists such as Mona Hatoum have provided important precedents for some time. On contemporary modalities in the Arab world, see the review essay by Maymanat Farhat, "Circuit Breaking: New Approaches to Art in the Arab World." *Contemporary Practices: Visual Arts from the Middle East*. Volume 4 (2009). [www.contemporarypractices.net/index.html](http://www.contemporarypractices.net/index.html). Accessed March 26, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Rey Chow, "Film as Ethnography; or, Translation Between Cultures in the Postcolonial World." In *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (Columbia, 1995), 196-97.

Turkishness by transferring its supposed characteristics onto others. The displacement of geographies and the translation of *site* are evoked in the work of Gülsün Karamustafa, who offers an evocation of an underground women's fashion-based community in an otherwise faceless city. Yelena Vorobyeva and Viktor Vorobyev track the movement of Central Asian architecture as it migrates from the Soviet sphere into a globalizing capitalist realm. And Solmaz Shahbazi shows us a key dimension to the region's architectural modernity that can no longer be distinguished from the "West." By her understated and reflective documentary work, she demonstrates the globalization of built form, and the placelessness of place. *Temporality*, an abiding referent in many artworks, undoubtedly spurred by the persistence of social and political crises the region has experienced during the 20th century, is poetically approached in Akram Zaatari's excavations and in Rabih Mroué's memory-based videos, along with the work of many other artists.

Every translation is *necessarily* incomplete, and as a meta act of translation, this exhibition makes no claim to the contrary. Indeed, an inadequate translation can and must be subject to ongoing critique, but the critique itself has no position outside the nexus of translation and has no choice but to offer a better translation as a substitute.<sup>9</sup> It is our hope that *Tarjama/Translation* will offer exactly such a provocation to its visitors and critics.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this insight to Naoki Sakai.