

Investigating Issues of Social Reality in the Visual Arts

Mengkaji Isu Realiti Sosial dalam Seni Visual

Mohammed Baker Al-Abbas

Mohd Fauzi b. Sedon @ M. Dom

Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak

mohd.fauzi@fskik.upsi.edu.my

Abstract

The middle-eastern artworks exhibited at the Singapore Biennale reflect contrasting notions of what is art, produced in cultures that are equally diverse. The Arab spring has left an indelible impact on the region, spreading from the Maghreb to Iran both in term of politics and art. Individual artist using whatever available materials at hand deals with the social realities, economic hardships and political constraints that pose huge challenges to art historians to posit meaning on any given artwork, self-portraits, or installations, juggling between stereotypical and authentic criticism.

Keywords *social reality, visual arts*

Abstrak

Karya seni timur tengah yang dipamerkan pada Biennale Singapura mencerminkan gagasan yang bertentangan tentang apakah itu seni, yang dihasilkan dalam sebilangan budaya yang juga berbeza dan bertindih. Kebangkitan semula Arab meninggalkan kesan yang mendalam di daerah yang merentasi di antara Maghribi hingga ke Iran daripada segi struktur politik dan juga daripada segi politik seni. Seniman menggunakan apa sahaja bahan sedia dan berhadapan dengan realiti sosial, kepayahan ekonomi, dan kongkongan politik yang merupakan cabaran terbesar kepada pensejarah seni yang ingin meletakkan makna pada sesuatu karya seni, potret diri atau instalasi, mengimbangi kritikan yang streataip dan kritikan yang sah.

Kata Kunci *realiti sosial, seni visual*

INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL REALITY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Issues of social reality appear in different art forms. These issues have impacted the urban landscaping, creative industries, and the visual arts. However, social reality can be indeed a subject of an artwork. Issues represented in an artwork have links to social manifestations (Sloman, 2009).

Investigation concentrates on the content of the artwork, and then, on the links with social systems. Formal studies investigate the elements of artworks succeeding in finding out common influences on the stylistic differences between western art and Middle Eastern art. Formal comparative studies in art and design lack for independent paradigms for the study of Middle Eastern art, because it depends on western aesthetics, which do not provide the conceptual bases for the analysis of Middle Eastern arts (D'Alleva, 2005).

This kind of comparative studies found a set of differences and similarities in artworks by artists from different countries or cultures, but still grounded in western aesthetics (Nanjo, 2012).

Contemporary Art in Middle Eastern Social Reality

Social realities across the Middle East differ because of the plurality of cultures, geographic location, historical events, and political events. The social structure of the community influences its own social reality. When gender rules in various conditions in a given country, or when social structures play a definite function in a community, then this is the case in which the structure of social class influences social reality (Pappe, 2010).

Middle Eastern social realities deal with various issues, which can be categorized as political and cultural. History shows how social realities influence individual as well collective experiences.

The first theme is political. We find communities influenced by communism, or capitalism. These collective thoughts in the community influence the individuals. Then, the second theme cultural. This includes gender roles and feminist movements in the Middle Eastern communities. We find several examples that integrate the political issues with feminism (Pappe, 2010).

Political and cultural dynamics of social reality change the common norms and the traditional aesthetics of communities. Those changes occur when governments and political systems change, force immigration, and civil conflicts. These changes impact aesthetic and poetic developments, highlighting a number of issues, such as historical memory, nation-building mechanism, dispossession, the physical and psychological impact of wars and sectarian conflicts. These are topics that construct the reality of the artist, through which he lives his everyday life (Pappe, 2010).

The subject of an artwork indicates something deeper than its physical appearance. The artwork is the unit that represents the artist's own human reality, through which he reflects his expressions in a visual representations.

Hans Belting (2009) discusses in his article the interventions of cultural and political factors in the frameworks of global art, in his "contemporary art as global art":

Global art may be critical in political terms, but it is also critical in terms of art categories defined by inclusion or exclusion. New art often blurs any kinds of borders between mainstream art, on the one side, and popular art, on the other, and thus abolishes the old dualism between western art and ethnographic practice by using indigenous traditions as a reference, as Justo Pastor Mellado has shown for Chile and Paraguay. Seen from western point of view, global art represents a geopolitical or even “geo-aesthetic” brand, as Joaquin Barriendos explains in his contributions to his volume. It is symbolic capital whose value changes from one place to other, even if western revisionism tries to control its currency with its own exchange rates, difference, with the label of foreign culture, has become marketable and thus an entrance ticket for newcomers on the art market.

(Belting, 2009, p.3)

The art in the Middle East is more understandable because of the global art approach, based on indigenous knowledge, science and aesthetics. If we look at different civilizations across the world, we would find various aesthetical perceptions; accordingly, the cognition of the artists across different cultures would be constructed according to this aboriginal aesthetics. This variety in artistic cognition will feed the artistic process with different data, which we need to give more attention to understand.

We can read Fumio Nanjo’s introduction of the first Singapore Biennale catalogue (2006), where he creates an analogy between globalism and localism. He cites the ideas of Amartya Sen about culture and development in which he suggests that following the global free market policies is not the only option to develop a local market, which may lead to a consumer rather than a productive society. Instead, he proposes to develop local economies by enhancing the local cultural values. Local cultures and ethnic identities will create sustainable development. However, this cultural approach balances between the global and local values, which will influence the artistic process in such communities.

Nanjo compares the two contrasting points of views. The first is Francis Fukuyama’s claims of ‘the end of history’ after the collapse of the Soviet Union. History is a conflict between two different world-views, socialism versus capitalism. Nanjo then mentions Samuel Huntington’s “the clash of civilizations”. Huntington divides the world into seven different views according to the beliefs, culture, and social identities. The conflict between these views would be the greatest international problem we face in the future.

Nanjo then shifts to the second point of view, which he calls “the vision of the multitude”, explaining the balance between globalized unification and the localized variety in society. In the book “Empire” Antonio Negri and Michel Hardt illustrate their concept of peaceful and multicultural globalization where different societies live together in harmony.

The contemporary artist believes recently that each civilization is significant. We cannot judge or evaluate a civilization or a form of human creativity according to another civilization’s point of view, for each community has its own aesthetics (Belting, 2009).

Visual Representations of Middle Eastern Politics and Cultures

In Middle East communities there is a blur line between cultures and politics, especially, when we think of their influence on the creative processes of making arts, cinema, and literature. Researchers make decisions, and identify those blur areas, in order to categorize themes, issues, and representations. Researchers use categorization as an analytical tool to locate data within their investigation (Seale, 2012).

In 2011, the “Arab Spring” occurs in which people in different countries move forward to change their social realities; starting in Tunisia to change the old regime. It moved to Egypt that soon influences other countries in the area, due to political, cultural, and historical prominence of Egypt. One of the results is the formation of a new government in Libya, initiating diverse cultural changes. We now observe new social realities in front of us.

The Middle East has long history of political issues, regional, civil and sectarian conflicts. Millions are displaced who later become refugees in Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, causing changes in culture, economy, art, and social identities (Pappe, 2010).

Political and cultural realities impact the daily life of communities and individuals. People in Iran now face another kind of challenges on the local scale, and on the international scale, after the actions of the International Community. Iranian economy stalls Iranian currency devalues. Their economy is not able to integrate with other economies in other countries, resulting in vast differences in the cultures of Iran, Turkey, and Arab countries (Pappe, 2010).

Middle Eastern artist reflects through different mediums, according to his individual experience. This individual is influenced by a verity of sources, including his social reality, his environment, and his relationships to his society. Society is where an artist receives his experience; it is a self-portrait in which the artist represents his own social reality (Sloman, 2009).

These cultural realities change every day due to the political dynamics in the Middle East. Artists create new themes to reflect the social status of the people, who engage in the ever-changing politics. People protest against that do not go along with their needs. They advocate a new social and political systems that can meet their demands.

The latest examples is what has happened in Egypt. Continuous social protests from 2011 to 2013 put presidents, Mohammed Morci in power and Husny Mubarak is deposed after ruling Egypt for 30 years.

According to Tinkler (2013), art in these occasions documents the social changes. We can see different art forms such as graffiti art, pop art, and photography are being the right approached in such circumstances.

The political and cultural environments in the Middle East influence different aspects in the people’s lives. Visual arts play a direct role, expressing different political subjects or political attitudes that have cultural significance. Visual arts are part of the cultural propaganda that nations create to promote ideologies to educate people (Shalabi, 2008).

Social Political systems exist in all communities, where they construct the mainstream ideologies for individuals, groups and institutions to follow up, such as Nationalism, Capitalism and Communism, along with other local social systems that

suite the cultures, beliefs and traditions of local people. Nowadays national states have their own approaches in building the state, according to their cultural and national identity. Reflecting upon the different life aspects, art critics adopt found different methods in locating the intersections between politics, social systems, and visual arts to understand the relation between the socio political change and modernism in arts (Harris, 2001).

We identify different systems across the Arab countries, Iran, and Turkey. The ruling Turkish regime is secular and capitalist, while the Iranian regime is religious and republican. The ruling regimes in Arab countries are diverse, capitalist, Marxist, religious and secular. The Middle East is unstable politically due to wars and upheavals. These variables create different social realities for artists, if they share the same common issues or express the same themes (Pappe, 2010).

The critical accounts of politics and cultural systems in visual the art provide art critics and historians diverse perspectives. To interpret artworks according to the artist's perception, and according to the people's perceptions, the art critics locate the links between artworks and politics. They identify those elements in reference to their meanings, which appear in the different layers of the dislocated social unrealities (Tinkler, 2013).

Cultures construct social realities that affect artistic experience. Creative individuals involve themselves in different ways with the social circle. They become a part of the socio political orders in the community.

Clark T. J. builds an argument about the relation between art and socio political changes. Taking the European social reality as a background of his study to analyze and understand the motivations behind Courbet's visual representations, he describes the social history of art as a limited framework of analysis. The analysis is more like an open-ended process, which includes the factors of time, culture and values. Art critics and historians should locate those social elements inside the artwork and relate them to the political situations to avoid prejudgments in their investigation (Harris, 2001).

Taking cultures and politics into his accounts, Harris (2001) gives an analogy between social accounts of Clark T. J. and Houser's *The Social History of Art*. They both analyze sequential periods of visual arts according to social frameworks; also, they relate the development of contemporary art to the socio political changes. The difference between those two approaches appears in the construction of the analysis itself, where Houser builds his arguments on the relationship between the mainstream ideas of that age and art, as he relates the development of the Soviet Socialist Realism, with the Russian revolution, according to Marxist ideology.

Clark builds his argument on empirical case study by establishing a theoretical model, where he brings a different perspective about revolution from the ideal or utopian concepts, which could be stereotypical ideologies to the actual real concepts that construct relations out of different layers of socio political realities. The social history of art traces the different aspects, from the ideal or "stereotypical", to the real or "authentic" criticisms.

The previous argument illustrates the difference between ideological and methodological approaches in social research. The established ideologies of the 20th century need to be re-examined according to contemporary empirical examples.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary cultures and politics reflect a set of similarities and differences among the Middle Eastern artists. Political landscape is constructed from a diverse point of views along with layers of explanations that cluster motivations of artistic experience with socio political settings. Cultural revival in the modern Middle East consists of the reconsideration of the terminologies of democracy, old and new regimes, as well as adopting new social systems to develop the concepts of civil rights, states, and human capital, and constructing multi party governments instead of single party domination. This is the aftermath of socio politics on the social realities, which we can observe inside the visual arts, because it constructs the setting of contemporary visual art experiences (Owen, R. 2004).

REFERENCES

- Ali, W. (2003). Clichés of Muslim women in the West and their own world. *Diogenes* (Vol. 50, pp.377-87). Retrieved from http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/7/029_Ali.pdf
- Allam, R. (No. 15. June 2008). Countering the negative image of Arab media: Toward a “Pan Arab Eye”, *Media Watch Project*, The Middle East Institute. Retrieved from http://edoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/HALCoRe_derivate_00002495/Countering%20the%20Negative%20Image.pdf?hosts=local
- Barakat, H. (1995). *The Arab world, society, culture and state*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Belting, H. and Buddensieg, A. (2009). *The global art world: Audiences, markets, and museums*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag.
- D’Alleva, A. (2005). *Methods & theories of art history*. London: Laurence King Publishing Limited.
- D’Alleva, A. (2006). *How to write art history*. London: Laurence King Publishing Limited.
- Danto, A.C. (2001). *Philosophizing art*. New Jersey: University of California Press.
- Elkins, J. (2007). *Is art history global*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Eric, Z. (2006). *Globalization & art exhibitions. International association of art critics (AICA) & zoma contemporary art center art criticism & curatorial practices in marginal contexts*. Addis Ababa. Retrieved from http://www.aica-int.org/IMG/pdf/Addis_Ababa.pdf
- Fernie, E. (1995). *Art history & its methods*. Oxford: Phaidon.
- Gombrich, E.H. (1995). *The story of art*, (16th Ed). Oxford: Phaidon.
- Harris, J. (2001). *The new art history: A critical introduction*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Harris, J. (2007). *Writing back to modern art: After greenberg, fried, and clark*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Kassler, G. E. (2004). *Voices of wisdom, a multicultural philosophy reader*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Nanjo, F. (2006). *Belief: Singapore Biennale 2006* (Biennale catalogue, 4 September to 12 November, 2006), Singapore: National Art Council.
- Nanjo, F. (2008). *Wonder: Singapore Biennale 2008* (Biennale catalogue, 11 September to 16 November, 2008), Singapore: National Arts Council.
- Nanjo, F. (2012). *Arab Express: The latest art from the Arab world*. (exhibition catalogue, 16 June -28 October, 2012), Tokyo: Mori Art Museum.
- Ngui, M., Smith, T. & Storer, R. (2011). *Open house: Singapore Biennale 2011* (biennale catalogue, 13 March – 15 May, 2011), Singapore: Singapore Art Museum.

- Owen, R. (2004). *State, power and politics in the making of the modern Middle East*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Pappe, I. (2010). *The modern middle East*, (2nd Ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Preziosi, D. (2009). *The art of art history*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Raihanah, M. (2009). Multiculturalism and politics of expression: An appraisal, *European Journal of Social Sciences* (vol.7, num. 3, P. 64- 70). Retrieved from www.academia.edu/217005/Multiculturalism_and_the_Politics_of_Expression_An_Appraisal
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Book.
- Shabout, N. (2007). *Modern Arab Art*. Florida: Florida University Press.
- Sloman, P. (2009). *Contemporary art in the Middle East*. London: Black Doge Publication Limited.
- Sullivan. G. (2005). *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*. London: SAGE Publication Ltd.
- Tarjama /Translation Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia and its Diasporas* (June, 2009). Chicago: East & West Publications. Retrieved from http://www.ahmadyarts.com/assets/exhibits/tarjama/Tarjama_Catalog.pdf
- The American Forum of Global Education. (2004). *Spotlight on the Muslim Middle East issues of identity*. U.S. Department of Education.