

**CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE
IN THE MIDDLE EAST – THE CASE OF THE CAIRO
TOWNHOUSE GALLERY**

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Abstrakt

Článek se věnuje současné výtvarné scéně v regionu Blízkého východu, zvláště se pak zaměřuje na aktivistické umění, které lze chápat jako formu kulturního odporu. V úvodu problematizují podmínky, které vedly k transformaci z tradičního islámského umění k současné umělecké produkci. Ta se v mnohých případech dotýká palčivých sociálních a politických otázek. Formy soudobé reprezentace aktivistického umění (tzv. artevismu) dále rozpracovávám na konkrétním příkladu nevládní káhirské galerie Townhouse. Nezávislé galerie a neziskové kulturní organizace dnes v regionu fungují jako alternativa ke státem kontrolovaným institucím, které ve většině případů podléhají cenzuře. Tento článek poukazuje na jejich nezastupitelnou úlohu ve společnosti, a jeho cílem je obohatit čtenáře o stručný vhled do struktur současného egyptského uměleckého disentu. Obsah textu je založen na datech získaných v průběhu terénního výzkumu v Káhiře (říjen až prosinec 2015).

Klíčová slova: *Egypt, Káhira, islámské umění, moderní umění, současné umění, artivismus, Townhouse gallery, MVO*

Abstract

The article is focused on contemporary art in the Middle East with regard to activist art as a form of cultural resistance. The introduction is questioning the reasons for transformation from Islamic art to contemporary art production, which is now linked mostly to social and political issues. Situation of art in this region is further elaborated on the specific example of Townhouse gallery. Founded in 1998 in Downtown Cairo, Townhouse is today region's leading venue for contemporary arts. Independent spaces and initiatives in Middle Eastern region are functioning as an alternative to government cultural venues which are in most cases controlled and censored. The article points out its irreplaceable role in society, while giving a brief insight into the structures of local Egyptian art dissent. Content of the text is based on data collected during field research in Cairo (held from October till December 2015). Informants are not named.

Key words: Egypt, Cairo, Islamic art, modern art, contemporary art, activism, Townhouse gallery, NGOs

Adopting Modern Art in the Middle East – from arabesque to contemporary activism

Contemporary art in the Middle East is relatively young phenomenon. During 19th and 20th century art was limited only to educated elites and the wealthy audience and modern artistic trends were inherently associated with Western idioms. In many cases modern art¹ in Middle Eastern region was and still is in its content considered 'too Western' and incomprehensible for the general public (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 166). Of course there has always been art in the Middle East but not always public for the art itself.² Before modern art was presented, this region had a great artistic tradition in Islamic art.³ The absence

¹ According to Tate dictionary of art terms Modernism refers to a rejection of history and conservative values (such as realistic depiction of subjects); innovation and experimentation with form (the shapes, colours and lines) with a tendency to abstraction; and an emphasis on materials, techniques and processes. Modernism has also been driven by various social and political agendas. In the context of the Middle East, Modernism is a Western import based on imitation. Thus 'modern art' is in this article used as an umbrella term for any artistic technique different from traditional Islamic art. Such art was introduced by European tutors. Academism is therefore considered 'modern' for local society, as for example, expressionism.

² Islamic art was mostly presented by architecture. Cities were surrounded by mosques and madrasas – thus it was naturally available to all social strata, contrary to modern art.

³ Islamic art is phenomenon that encompasses many forms of visual arts, mostly architecture, calligraphy, manuscripts, carpets or ceramics. It was produced from 7th century in vast area from Spain to Central Asia as far as China.

of written sources documenting an artistic process, techniques or aesthetics left Islamic art largely isolated from its social context. Thus Islamic art, despite its long tradition and indisputable contribution to history of art, is still erroneously labelled as ‘minor’. One of the causes of such perception could be the alleged Islamic ban against representation – which led to consideration of most art historians that Islamic art is mostly superficial and decorative. The unrecognized problem was simply that Islamic art did not fall within the scope of Western aesthetics. Islamic abstraction is cultural, intellectual and communal expression of faith and its main goal is to serve Islamic monotheism (Shabout, 2007, p. 35).

While evaluating contemporary art practise it would be negligence not to take an insight into cultural heritage of this region. Even though we can suspect that modern art in Middle East replaced traditional Islamic art, it overlaps considerably more than it seems. Many questions about modern art appeared, such as it could be the continuation of Islamic aesthetics, perhaps modified to fit the modern age. In this regard it would be interesting to mention opinion of art critique Toni Maraini. She argued that modern art always was and still is influenced, directly or indirectly, by various artistic traditions. Many artists such as Manet, Monet, Degas, van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky or Klee have adopted techniques and forms of other cultures – African masks, Chinese calligraphy, Japanese prints and Islamic arabesques (Shabout, 2007, p. 43-44). Thus, who accuses modern Middle Eastern art of being a secondary product of Western art shares a ethnocentric conception approving superiority of one cultural sphere above another.

The question is still being discussed although Islamic art remains associated more with classical craft than original artistic movement.⁴ With very little exceptions Islamic art is studied from historical point of view rather than analytical perspective and only little attention is paid to new trends in contemporary art. Minor number of scholars deals with continuity between traditional Islamic art and modern artistic expressions. One of the very fundamental reasons of such actuality is that modern art was introduced to Arab world by the Colonialists and therefore modern art education was based on European art techniques and styles (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 166). Modern art was introduced to Arabic world at time when traditional Islamic art stagnated.⁵ Modern art was something

⁴ *Islamic art*, a term used widely today among art historians, covers a range of artworks made by Muslims as well as made by non-Muslims and therefore it's not a classification comparable to *Jewish art* or *Christian art*. In one point of view term *Islamic art* implies a cultural period just as a *Gothic* or *Baroque* does in European cultural context.

⁵ The great Islamic period represented by Ottoman Empire was replaced by new era of Western colonial powers. In such conditions, traditional arts were neglected.

external and for the local communities it presented mostly western import. We can also attribute that public's disregard to modern art, which occasionally remains till these days, is not because of the ignorance, but due to the lack of cultural ties to their heritage (Ali, 1997, p. 2). As it was said the Western notion of Islamic art became more of traditional craft based on imitation and repetition.

European aesthetics were fully adopted by the early 20th century – easel painting and sculpture replaced all forms of traditional art, especially in French dominated North Africa and Egypt. Ironically, at that time, it was West looking to East for inspiration which led to new genre of 19th century Academic art – Orientalism. The period of imitation began – local painters were directly influenced by the styles of European Orientalist. These images represented typical Arabic odalisques, Bedouins, the *suq* (market place), exotic landscapes etc. Nude female body was for many local authorities unacceptable and considered anti-Islamic. Not only the visual form was often misunderstood but as well there was a lack of spiritual content, so important for Muslim community. Many local artists used particular artistic style without any deeper philosophical background and considered Western model the most advanced from art. Furthermore West dominated East economically and politically, the resulting physical and cultural foreign domination led to loss of confidence in own heritage (Ali, 1997, p. 137). Many Islamic masterpieces were transferred to European museums and local artists lost access to their heritage and inspiration (Shabout, 2007, p. 8-10).

We can state that artistic achievements based on imitation were during 20th century refused by major society but positively evaluated in elite circles. Western art was more than attractive among ruling family. Artist were asked to depict great historical times and portraits of royals, intellectuals were fascinated by *-isms* that revolted against artistic rules (Expressionism, Fauvism, Dadaism) and socialist of course demanded social realism. The situation changes during the period of national struggles in first half of 20th century; many local artists abandoned the orientalist clichés and focused on local motives to strengthen national pride. Many new trends occurred but did not follow any concrete style. Some artists took inspiration from Islamic artistic styles while still using three-dimensional perspective, others recalled great times of Arabic calligraphy formed into abstract paintings on canvas. Therefore traditional Academic style was replaced by renewed artistic creativity (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 166). However, this period was stigmatized by identity crises; artists were caught between their Westernized bourgeois education and postcolonial political and social consciousness. Second generation of local artists reacted against the previous generation. Anti-Western sentiments were born in hand with raising Palestinian question and of course

other significant factors occurred, primarily birth of Arabic nationalism⁶. Due to current circumstances Academism in art was marked as something unimportant. This period is related to new avant-garde groups which, in the contrary to the imported artistic practises, evolved from the local sociocultural and political realities based primarily on fight for independence.

Within this context, what we can see as first attempt to seek emancipation in art the action of Egyptian surrealist group.⁷ In the history of modern art in Middle East it was the first significant movement which operated with clearly stated manifesto. Statement *Al-fann al-hurr* (Art and Freedom), published in 1938, emphasizes individual creativity and condemns rigidity in art academicism. But it wasn't only dissatisfaction with artistic academics methods. The political and intellectual atmosphere in Egypt during the late 1930s opposed Egyptian puppet government led by the British. Surrealist group responded to such situation, and simultaneously reacted to the political situation in Europe. After forming an alliance with André Breton and the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, they rejected fascist art and championed freedom. Surrealism in Egypt kept strong ties with European surrealist group throughout – leading figure George Henein participated in gatherings and activities with expatriate French intellectuals in Cairo. However, local audience did not response positively to their work. They raised controversy by adopting artistic trends as Surrealism, Cubism and abstraction based on individualism so contrary to sociocultural foundation of traditional Arab society (Ali, 1997, p. 27). On Group exhibitions they intent to shock and break established rules. Even though this movement was criticized and accused to be too distant from Egyptian reality, surrealist group played a crucial role in the perception of artistic freedom in Middle Eastern region (Nováková, 2011, p. 50). By the words of artist Ramsis Yunan, the spokesman for the group, Surrealist movement in Egypt helped relate local artists to the contemporary world and relate the concept of art to the concept of freedom. This raises the question whether this group should be viewed as a result of colonization efforts without any link to local traditions. Ramsis Yunan is giving an answer: “It is often said that modern art became international as a result of colonialism, which culturally as well as militarily invades the colonized countries, thus destroying their traditions and their arts. However, we should realize that modern European art had been influenced by Eastern and African arts before any Eastern or African artists was influenced by European art. Therefore, cultural invasion is not the

⁶ Arabic nationalism is nationalist ideology calling for political union while glorifying Arab civilization, Arabic language and literature.

⁷ Before Surrealist group, in 1930s a national Egyptian movement in the arts was established. Artists in their work represented struggle against colonialism and hailed nationalist ideals.

issue; it is rather cultural response, expressed in breaking out the boundaries of national tradition into the international heritage” (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 167).

By speaking about Egyptian surrealists we can track down first attempts and initiatives, in this region, which through artistic achievement expressed opposition to current conditions. In such acts, far from mercantile art, we can distinguish roots of art activism in this region. Before mentioning concrete examples how modern art further transformed to art activism under specific conditions I must quote last comment to Islamic art. There has been a fundamental change in art practise contrary to the Islamic period. It is a matter of debate, if it was an intellectual need or Western influence, which caused this new era of art, the fact remains that modern aesthetics did not respond to static religious ideals but it was a current expressions of ideas, visions and emotions which of course emanated from contemporary Arabic cultures. As art historian Nada Shabout notes, modern and contemporary plastic arts are not an extension, continuation, or revival of old Islamic forms of art. Rather, they represent an innovative means of self-expression, formulated in response to artist’s psychological and social motivations. Although we must never forget that modern art in Middle East has its roots in West and not in Islamic art, artists were and still are surrounded by system of unique values related to Islamic culture (Shabout, 2007, p. 36).

While objectively dealing with forms and manifestations of contemporary art in Middle East it is important to understand by whom it was originally presented and under what conditions it domesticated in this region. Further this article examines concrete artistic background in Egypt – the cradle of local modern art. Intention of this paper is to introduce a specific artistic community around independent gallery Townhouse located in Cairo, Egypt. Most of the artists struggle for human rights in a state that does not respect freedom in arts, nor freedom at all. Description of Cairo’s independent artistic scene and its atmosphere under unpleasant political conditions is based on filed research.

Egypt - the cradle of Modern and contemporary art

Case of Egypt has always been a bit different – it was the first country to open art academy and art had its place in Egypt from 19th century as an import during Napoleon’s invasion (Nováková, 2011, p. 11-12). After the French withdrawal, Egypt gained short time of independency under Muhammad Ali Pasha,⁸ the successful ruler of Egypt. Muhammad Ali supported arts by sending many art

⁸ Muhammad Ali Pasha (1769 – 1848) was Ottoman commander who effectively reformed Egypt. He is regarded as founder of modern, and for a short while, independent Egypt.

students abroad, usually to France. On the contrary, a number of foreign artists visited Egypt, among them Orientalists David Roberts, Eugène Fromentin or Théodore Frère (Ali, 1997, p. 22). In first three decades in 20th century, Egyptian government directly supported underprivileged art students. Students received grants and in 1925 government even guaranteed freedom of expression. Many museums were founded and several art societies were formed. There were no commercial galleries at that time and art was mainly exhibited in governmental venues. The access was therefore limited to elites (foreign diplomats and wealthy Egyptians) and royal family. These first ambitious initiatives were also held back by colonialist policies and had nothing to do with needs of society (Mikdadi, 2009, p. 23). Attempt to create egalitarian cultural policy failed and did not achieve further goals.

As it was said, impact of colonialism in Middle East created generations of local artists with feeling of inferiority about the past. Paradoxically, these feelings were the first step towards artistic awaking. Artists in the beginning mostly drew on pharaonic symbols and ideals of peasant life. For example painters Mahmoud Mukhtar, Raghib Ayyad and Mahmoud Said managed to free work of Egyptian artists from academic school and pave a new way for unique Egyptian art. These rejectionist movements later on crystalized into Surrealistic group which was already mentioned. Not only groups but individual artists started to confess freedom of expression. Nevertheless stage of imitation, often rated as insignificant, had its social importance. Surprisingly mostly women were taught. One of women artist was famous leading feminist Huda Sharawi (1879 – 1947)⁹. Art was considered as safe occupation for woman even in other countries like Lebanon (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 168).¹⁰ Although women artist appeared predominantly among upper class, in traditional patriarchal society in Egypt it made a significant step towards women emancipation. Famous social activist and feminist Inji Efflatoun (1924 – 1989) was taught in art by the member of mentioned surrealistic group Kamel Al-Tilmisani. He introduced to her desperate and poor life of Egyptian peasants¹¹ and their struggles for human rights – an issue which is so relevant in contemporary Egypt. Because of her political beliefs she was imprisoned for four years. She later stated that: “Imprisoning women for

⁹ Huda Sharawi (1879 – 1947) was a Egyptian feminist and nationalist who established numerous organizations dedicated to women’s rights and she is considered the founder of the women’s movement in Egypt.

¹⁰ Families refused to permit their daughters to study ‘male dominated’ professions as law or medicine. Art was in 19th century and the first half of 20th century evaluated as something harmless and ideal for woman as leisure time.

¹¹ It is interesting to watch a significant change from motif of ‘glorified’ countryside to ‘pathetic and neglected’ countryside. Attention began to turn towards social and political issues.

their political ideas was an irrefutable admission of their political power and a public proof of their equality with man” (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 168).

Key moment towards development in contemporary art was the revolution in 1952¹² as it produced fundamental changes in the social structure of Egypt; from that moment Egyptian artists become embraced by politics and never actually shook of this “alliance”.

Political change in Egypt in the middle of 20th century led to the definitive end of colonialism and the monarchy. Old affluent segment wasn't able to patronize art anymore; in new era of socialism it became impossible for art to maintain bourgeois status. The new army regime had no interest in art practise as it was associated with old structures. All private companies and enterprise were nationalized and private property confiscated. The budget that was annually given by the government since 1925 to purchase art was cut off and once it was resumed again, the subsidies were significantly reduced (Ali, 1997, p. 30). Yet, the regime soon realized the importance of artistic development in country and encouraged artists to regroup. This was possible only under supervision of the Ministry of Culture, as the modified law after the revolution allowed to the authorities to arrest any gathering of more than five people. Art groups were disintegrated and formed none in 1950s, later in 1960s several societies were founded but did not last long.¹³ Artists started to work independently and isolated because of the political situation. We should contribute that, art could actually exist; even it happened to be under restrictions. Authorities made some important steps towards preserving Egyptian contemporary collections. In Cairo districts Gezira and Zamalek approximately thirty museums and government galleries were established and are functioning till these days. Thereby Egypt belongs to leading countries in artistic production. But this situation, at first glance ideal, has a hitch. Artworks were under constant spotlight from Egyptian officials and artists themselves were censored and controlled. Desire for freedom of expression, which was so demanded by Surrealists and several individual artists, was silenced. Yet some artists still followed Western styles ranging from impressionism, expressionism, abstraction even to Pop art in late 1970s. However such art was legitimate and even played an important role in modernization of the country.¹⁴ Of course only in the case that content did not contradict to official ideology. During second half of 20th century situation varied from a time of stagnation to a period of intense

¹² Group of army officers led by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Muhammad Naguib caused coup which led to the end of monarchy and the birth of Republic. The new revolutionary government adopted anti-imperialist and nationalist agenda.

¹³ Among them were the Group of Five Artists (1962) and the Group of Man and Art.

¹⁴ Many artists worked for official state propaganda.

artistic activity with Anwar Sadat's new open-door policy (Ali, 1997, p. 33). Number of cultural events and centres occurred – for example the Cairo Biennial was inaugurated in 1982. Political situation in Egypt always directly influenced the form of art. Artists either worked in tight connection with government and official ideology or were subjects of restriction. This situation led to genesis of two different scenes – the official one, donated and propagated and the other one – local dissent without funds and sanctioned.

Independent galleries and NGOs in the Middle East – place where cultural resistance in born

For several decades it was impossible to receive university degree in art, simply because there weren't any art academies in the Middle East¹⁵ (Nashashibi, 1998, p. 166). Art gradually lost its elitist status and was in general a marginalized field of study and working profession. With disappearance of Islamic art, contemporary production wasn't still accepted by people as something domestic. After all, the word in Arabic used for artists was *naqqash* (wall painter) (Nováková, 2011, p. 126-127). Significant change came in 1990s and high school graduates started to study art and mostly new inventions – photography, animation, video art, performance or graphic design. Reason of such shift towards new forms of art was caused to some level by progressive development in artistic techniques associated with technological progress in general. Although in 21st century we can finally put aside the debate over authenticity in Middle Eastern art, the fact remains that local contemporary art recognize identical techniques as anywhere in the West. Thus there is no difference between forms, but the content of course reflects social and political reality. With increasing number of art graduates and with and ever-expanding youth generation¹⁶, art as a form of cultural resistance is in this region favoured (Boubia, 2015, p. 2).

The question therefor is resistance against what? According to definition of term *artivism*: “artivism is used to describe art that is grounded in the act of ‘doing; and addresses political or social issues.” Amina Ejaz in her essay on artivism notes: “Art and politics are intrinsically linked together in this turbulent, fast moving time.” (Ejaz, 2014). The Middle East over 20th century experienced, without

¹⁵ The only exception was Egypt – the first institution to offer classes in art was opened in 1908.

¹⁶ It had been repeatedly pointed out that youth constitute the largest part of the population in Middle East. Apparently dissatisfaction and frustration of this young generation, beside enormous poverty, is one of the major causes of demonstrations across Arab countries which escalated to so-called Arab spring in 2011.

a doubt, tremendous upheavals. Former Ottoman provinces were transformed into national entities, the process was long and new independent nations had to struggle over host of issues. It was necessary to define relationships with outside powers, neighbours and with own population. It is question to what level was this difficult task successful. In Egypt, state regime simultaneously took on the task of fostering national consciousness and artistic production (Zuhur, 1198, p. 1). Highly institutionalized Egypt allowed creation of education structures, on the other hand the country was set to be an authoritarian regime and this fact remains till these days. After revolution in 2011 many journalists, activists, artists were imprisoned, persecuted or simply vanished. Unemployment remains high and everyday life of street grocer seems to by fight for survival. Anyone who expresses disagreement is risking the worst. And still, there is someone. Several exhibitions expressed directly contemporary social problems and disagreement with political decisions. Such events presented artworks mostly as a political statement rather than subjects of admiration. I must point out that these exhibitions were arranged in independent spaces, insomuch as culture events supported by government are immediately controlled and thus the freedom of speech is limited. Independent galleries and NGOs play vital part in resistance against despotism across this complicated region.

In last two decades most of the NGOs across the Middle East offered young artists not only space to exhibit their art, but as well it functioned as a regular gathering place for local communities. Nevertheless socio-political context of art production did not change over the century much – art is still in most countries limited again to elites, support system is depended on governments primary in Gulf States¹⁷, the rest are individual initiatives.

NGOs and other independent cultural spaces have made important contribution to perception of regional art. In the contrary to official cultural spaces such as museums, non-profit platforms are much more flexible and they usually respond immediately to audience. On the other hand there are dependent on foreign foundations and thus their future is always unpredictable and unsure.¹⁸ Alongside official controlled initiatives, there are other remarkable organizations through the Middle East. Unfortunately organizations aren't uniform in terms of functioning. They have been experiencing various degrees of government support

¹⁷ Interest in artistic production by Gulf States (United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain) is mostly nourished by vision of wealthy growing art market. On the other hand, present day art patronage and cultural practices in Gulf States are mostly in women hands. That can be positive finding with regard to the fact that in most countries of Arabic peninsula women are fighting for their rights to vote or even to drive a car.

¹⁸ Interview with independent curator (Cairo, 2015).

as well as varying degrees of control and oppression. One of the first individual initiatives *Dar el Fan* (House for Arts) was founded in Beirut. Lebanon and especially Beirut was the intellectual centre of Arab world in 1960s. *Dar el Fan* was the first non-government and non-profit art space in the Middle East and it had founded a precedent for other similar art venues later on (Ali, 1997, p. 38).

However, in countries where independent spaces are the only cultural agencies and where state is not functioning as full-featured supporter, the story of art is maybe not fully told but the production is less burdened by aesthetics and art is more involved in social and political issues. Modern art in past experienced public's disregard, while at the turn of the century situation rapidly changed. The desire for art comes from the bottom of society. Art is seen as an effective mean in the fight for humanity. Individual leadership and NGOs support this fight and it's a clear proof of individualistic thinking and of strength that art communities dispose even under restrictions and without financial stability. But this success does not absolve governments from their responsibility to support cultural initiatives and develop artistic and cultural sector. Reason why this is not happening is that in many cases art is seen as a potential threat and inverting element to the officials.¹⁹

Townhouse gallery – support, protest and dialog

Townhouse gallery is a non-profit independent²⁰ art space established almost twenty years ago in the very heart of Downtown Cairo. This unique art venue is today without a doubt one of the most popular leading galleries in the Middle Eastern region and at the same time one of the most controversial space to visit. Egyptian artist Yasser Gerab and Canadian citizen William Wells created place with almost legendary status – alongside acting as a space for contemporary visual art, performances and theatre, Townhouse also runs a range of initiatives which are significantly influencing local communities and artists (Shabout, 2009, p. 217). Townhouse started as an experiment and it was unpredictable if such a project would work. Contemporary art creativity in Egypt stagnated and conservative approach to painting dominated. Wells and Gerab decided to wait until the palpable sense of change began to be obvious within contemporary art

¹⁹ Information is based on interviews held in Cairo (2015) and Teheran (2015).

²⁰ As a non-profit organisation, Townhouse relies on donations, grants, in-kind contributions and sponsorship to implement programmes and projects. Generous financial support is provided by western embassies. Townhouse is legally registered as a non-profit foundation in Sweden, as Stiftelsen the Townhouse Foundation (registered number 1022006).

production.²¹ During 1990s new art forms begun to appear and art stopped to be a matter of commercial art venues situated mostly in Zamalek.²²

With increasing number of young artist experimenting with new forms of installation and unconventional materials, risen demand for space that would fit ideologically within the scope of free expression and creativity without any boarders. Although the change was slow and had to fight the state imposed conventions, it was successful. In the words of Wells:

*The work reflected a tangible energy within small pockets of this younger generation, who were now responding to critical social issues and exploring their own experiences - an approach which was both marginal and unorthodox compared to the mainstream representation of art at that time.*²³

It was more than evident that this new perspectives and emerge of unorthodox art practices were seeking shelter. Within postmodernism²⁴ as a new artistic approach, old structures were broken and artists were collapsing distinction between high culture and mass culture. They tend to get rid of the boundaries between art and everyday life. New generation of artists refused to exhibit in expensive galleries apart from Egyptian reality. Instead of seeking profit, they wanted to react on contemporary situation. Within this context Wells realized how urgent is to created new independent platform that would associate all artists that are simply stopping to fit in obedient frame of art production. Most of the Cairo art galleries and venues in late 1990s were situated in elite districts and traditionally attracted upper classes of Egyptians and foreigners. In 1998, Townhouse gallery was opened on the second floor of an old building recalling English colonial era surrounded by backstreets of car mechanics, craftsman's workshops and coffee shops. Metal workers and carpenters soon realized that considerable numbers of customers are local artists. It was the first hint of new relationship with the surroundings. High ceilings and wide open spaces were ideal for exhibiting various forms of contemporary artefacts and the location was and still is an important part of gallery's philosophy – the venue is completely

²¹ Interview with William Wells (Cairo, 2015).

²² Al-Zamalek is a residential district of Cairo where mostly European expatriates live. Alongside of many western bars and restaurants al-Zamalek has a great concentration of museums and art galleries.

²³ Interview with William Wells (Cairo, 2015).

²⁴ The term postmodernism is used to describe the changes that took place in Western society and culture from the 1960s onwards that arose from challenges made to established structures and belief systems. In art, postmodernism was specifically a reaction against modernism which had dominated art theory and practice since the beginning of the twentieth century. By many art historians postmodernism is an umbrella concept which brings together vast artistic styles and techniques that arisen at the turn of the century.

integrated and now perceived by many as an inseparable part of the local neighbourhood (Shabout, 2009, p. 217).

Townhouse never intended to be a typical ‘white cube’ gallery space rather it wanted to be part of certain peculiar urban sphere defined by the needs of local community.²⁵ Townhouse started with exhibitions and beside these activities it had another important overlap. First, art started to be used in terms of social integration – working children, Sudanese and Iraqi refugees and other marginalized groups were not only welcomed, but Townhouse provided for them all kinds of supportive opportunities. Second, exhibitions contained artwork made by street children from excluded parts of neighbourhood through workshop held at the gallery. Townhouse started to work in a different way than most of the cultural centres ran by Egyptian government. State ideology was something that was in this space refused from the very begging and artists started not only to exhibit their work but as well they were regularly gathering in and around Townhouse, as the edge of exhibition spaces and street started to blur. Townhouse established itself as a crucial nongovernmental platform where was permitted to discuss social, religious and political issues without any hesitation about crossing the censorship restrictions.

Townhouse gallery - the participant in 2011 uprisings

Townhouse started to be more and more successful within building new initiatives and establishing dialogue with other kin platforms. Other four independent galleries in 2000 organized Nitaq festival and it successfully offered alternative choice to those cultural events organized by Ministry of Culture. Al Nitaq was Cairo’s first independent art festival which included visual arts, poetry, theatre, cinema, music and dance. Although Nitaq festival did not continue in following years, as the Egyptian cultural politics weren’t supportive with such projects, it had a great future impact on similar ventures. Townhouse, due to its willingness and openness, started to attract not only local artists but as well international ones such as Emily Jacir or Mona Hatoum.²⁶

Since opening, Townhouse soon expanded, first in 2001 and then one year later when gallery over took former factory and created another alternative space. With its newly established Open Studio residency program, gallery allowed several of international artists to bring new insights, ideas and ambitions to Cairo. In 2006 another close warehouse Rawabet has been transformed into performance

²⁵ Interview with Townhouse employees.

²⁶ Interview with Townhouse employees.

space to strengthen ties with local audience (Golia, 2015). Meanwhile Friday Workshops where provided weekly bringing working children (of which Egypt has an estimated 300,000) into creative space and interact with other children. Parallel working SAWA workshops are opened to anyone and form a place where people can draw, paint, sculpture or use own creativity to enjoy any art technique they want. Even though, Townhouse has played critical role in educating, supporting and sustaining artists and art lovers at the same time, it gone through many obstacles.²⁷

Those obstacles happen to be from an official art world as Wells confirms: “We can’t send our posters or our invitation into art colleges, we are not allowed to post the up onto a lot of public institutions because the work that is being produced tends question” (Shabout, 2009, p. 271).

Townhouse opened its door at the time when regime of president Hosni Mubarak had control over every single cultural venue or artistic putout and Townhouse was something out of surveillance – it wasn’t only independent practically (had its own financial source) but at the same time it ensured freedom of speech and supported creativity of independent thinking. Just after few month of opening, owner of one state-controlled gallery Fuad Selim accused Townhouse of being Zionist enterprise. Over the years, situation has calmed, apparently because other independent art venues emerged as many young artists and curators were inspired by Townhouse and realized that this is possible even under regime with lacking respect to human rights. Second reason was that Townhouse artists started to attend more in state-run exhibitions as well. The atmosphere was more open-minded, nevertheless state security kept Townhouse on its radar all the time (Golia, 2015).

Townhouse engaged outside groups on questions about local community needs, official politics, economics, social issues and human rights. Politics play a crucial role in everyday life. Conceptual artists Moataz Nasr in this context states: “contemporary art is exactly about what is happening around us, as an artist in the Middle East you go to bed with politics on the television and newspapers, and you wake up with it” (Amirsadehgi, 2009, p. 232). During so called Arab spring and first political turmoil it became evident, that Townhouse will be involved – directly especially when its location is close to Tahrir square.²⁸

Gallery started to function as a refuge for the protesters during the first uprisings. When January 2011 protests came, many people spontaneously started

²⁷ Interview with respondent (Cairo, 2015).

²⁸ Tahrir square is central and mayor public place in Downtown Cairo also known as *Martyr square*. It is today’s symbol of 2011 revolution and the space continues to be a focus for political demonstrations.

to produce art. What we must consider is that artist became activists and actors of revolution at the same time. As artists Hany Khaled tells the story of his own rebellion:

That moment when someone carries me on his shoulders to help me write my proud graffiti 'down with Hosni Mubarak' ... and we turn down to the protesters, and I swear I see every single eye staring at me. And so I shout: "Down, down with Mubarak" and everyone repeats after me.

This happened at the first week of the protests and the streets continued to manifest collective consciousness. Army tanks and armoured vehicles entered Tahrir Square, in first confrontation with the military; revolutionaries overtake and set fire to army vehicles that were seen delivering ammunition to the embattled police (Soueif, 2014, p. 5) Artist were fully integrated fighters against authoritative regime and Townhouse had been involved immediately. A group of artists calling themselves 'Artists of Revolution' entered the gallery and asked for a space to produce political art. They were the youngest generation of the protestors and met at the Tahrir square – coming from different social backgrounds they were fighting, sleeping and producing art together. Townhouse accepted group from fifty to hundred people (Aly, 2011). The gallery fully worked as drop-off for medical supplies and equipment and provided a technical support for artist which became within hour activists. After Hosni Mubarak left the post of the President and the regime changed, Egypt experienced post-revolutionary ecstasy and Townhouse enjoyed unprecedented freedom. Freedom of expression unluckily was only temporary. But during these days full of new hope and expectations, many new projects were crated and progressive exhibitions installed.²⁹

Contemporary Middle Eastern Art was after the revolution receiving considerable attention in the West among collectors, art critics, museum curators and historians. Many exhibitions dedicated to revolution and its consequences came to being. High number of books has appeared recently, as well as many exhibitions, which were held in city capitals all over Western Europe and the USA. It seems that there was and still is a link between rising interest in contemporary art and conflicts in the region. During the last two decades, war and revolutions are the foremost drivers of Western interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Even though Townhouse has reached to much broader world and many artists became internationally known, it always stayed firmly grounded in the city centre of Cairo. Culture significantly participated in process of social change during the riots. Street art, various performances, satirical magazines, books, poetry and art exhibitions recorded emotions and constructed dialog. At the same time

²⁹ Interview with William Wells.

many international artist felt pressure on producing more ‘revolutionary art’. After the revolution Townhouse turn more into multi-disciplinary place, many art performances and exhibition were discussing recent events. Revolution and overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak were main themes and the community had to deal with becoming reality. Such projects as *Tahrir Monologues*’ (2011) initially emerged to preserve the struggles of the ongoing fight for change and freedom. By storytelling experiences of millions Egyptians were shared and the memories of revolution fight was captured. Post-revolution art in Egypt dramatically changed and it took a notably political twist. Artists together with revolution participants narrated their experiences, impressions, ideas and fears. Storytelling was happening naturally in various places around Egypt, started in coffee shops and soon it became organized event that took place in local independent theatres and galleries around Cairo (Elkamel, 2012). Townhouse gallery soon organized exhibition *This is not graffiti* (2011) responding to the revolutionary art in the streets of Cairo. This exhibition questioned how would, such a form of raw artistic expression created in public space, function out of the streets – in private gallery. Another exhibition *Politics of representation* (2011) was dedicated to first Egypt’s parliamentary election after the political turmoil. Townhouse analysed what visual strategies are used by particular political parties. In first floor gallery political pamphlets, posters, fliers, stickers and banners were organized chronologically and by party. The exhibition functioned as a tangible witness to the construction of this key moment of contemporary Egypt’s history.

...and the revolution did not end...

After *coup d’état*, art scene had many casualties and the gallery had to re-address the relationship between art production and political art as a statement. Hopes vanished and dissolution came with first elections, next two years Townhouse gallery continued to exhibit art as always, but events of the summer of 2013 appeared and artists experienced oppression much bigger than ever before.³⁰

In the end of December 2015, Townhouse gallery has been shut down by Egyptian authorities and raided. It was one of the last actions planned in the

³⁰ Mass protests occurred in In Egypt on 30 June 2013, the events led to coup d’état after millions of protesters in Cairo and across the whole country demanded immediate resignation of pro-Islamic president Muhammad Morsi. Reasons that ended rule of president Morsi were increasing authoritarianism and his pushing of Islamist agenda. Army regime came to power and year after on 8th of June 2014 general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was elected as president.

context of cracking down Cairo's dissent which included independent platforms popular with activists and artists. In the first raid – on Monday 28th government agents from Tax Ministry, National security Agency, Ministry of Manpower and Censorship Authorities confiscated laptops and documents that were found in the stuff office (Neuendorf, 2016). Next day other cultural spaces experienced almost the same situation. These episodes were directly related to actions against cultural centres which are located close to the Tahrir square (Townhouse..., 2016).

Tahrir square was and still is a significant revolutionary symbol, on the fifth anniversary of the 2011 uprisings; situation had been evaluated by the Egyptian forces as a security risky. All potential gathering places were monitored especially those which already actively participated before and supported revolutionaries and activists (Faheem, Ismail, 2015). Gallery was charged only with one regulatory breach, other charges were related to safety requirements (Batty, 2016). Many international media including The New York Times or The Guardian informed about this very situation and it provoked rich discussions among art historians, curators, human rights lawyers, artists and activists in and outside Egypt. Townhouse is by Egyptian authorities viewed as a place popular with free speech and other individuals – initiators of political unrest. Anti-protest law,³¹ currently in place, prohibits all demonstrations which are not authorized. For that reason Townhouse was seen as potential state security threat (Geiger, 2013).

After all the political turmoil which has Egypt been through – nasty remnants of Nasserite regime, dictatorship of president Hosni Mubarak, Egyptian state is, contrary to Lebanon for example, supporting culture at least to some extent. The situation is not bright; Egyptians in general suffer from 'over-institutionalisation'. Institutions are plagued with corruption and bureaucracy. Government sponsored venues, such as museums are without any special concept or representable art collections. Pro-regimes elder artists do not speak on behalf of Egyptian artistic society. As Salwa Mikdadi notes: "the attempts made by the Egyptian government to promote their artists locally and internationally were commendable, but without a diverse audience, a research-based curatorial project and an art market, it is not possible to sustain in any ambitious art policy" (Mikdadi, 2009, p. 27). Townhouse gallery reopened in April, almost two month after being shut for no apparent reason (Deyaa, 2016).

³¹ The anti-protest law was part of the regime's plan to repossess public space from protesters. This law was applied in 2013 as the government tried to prevent pro-Morsi supporters gather in the streets of Cairo. The Egyptian anti-protest law is mostly seen as a tool of oppression allowing military forces and police to violently strike against even peaceful protests such as happened two days after the law's enactment.

Conclusion

This brief insight into Cairo's art venue demonstrates how is artistic production tolerated and supported across region. The rift between conservative states supporting art scene and foreign-funded independent scene had overall produced very fragmented local artistic community (Muller, 2009, pp. 12-13). As independent curator and critic Nut Miller points out, in addition, strong Egyptian nationalism and unshakeable historical and geographical clearly demarcated position are hampering contemporary artistic development (Muller, 2009, p. 23). By referencing to the past, such as epic Pharaonic era, equally emphasized great Islamic times within Muhammad Ali as a leader icon, perception of Egypt as *Oum el Dunya* (Mother of the World), the official art scene seems to stagnate and complex Egyptian society remains understood. We can easily spot how many contemporary Egyptian artists are affected by this actuality. Huda Lutfi, Cairo born art historian refers to Egyptian golden ages, mostly depicting icon of Egyptian popular culture diva Oum Kalthoum while Khaled Hafez uses in his paintings iconography of ancient Egyptian gods (Bayliss, 2011).

This permanent nostalgic referring to the past by many contemporary artists can raise many questions. The constant attachment to history is strengthening national sentiment and soothes the sharp edges of dissolution from failed revolution. On the other hand, case of Townhouse gallery demonstrates that contemporary art production is state of mind. Existence of activist art proves the umbilical cord between the society and artists. Egyptian artists work under authoritarian regime and whatever art they produce, it has to fit with official ideology. With constant political turmoil artists are questioning historical precedents to understand the present; most of them are building new communities and carrying out democratic communication. Egyptian art scene is currently disunited and Townhouse gallery seems to be one on the few spaces in the Middle Eastern region where open discussions are possible and where many artists and activist are supported regardless of the possible consequences of the Egyptian regime. Within reference to the past – Islamic art was a communal expression of faith, why cannot contemporary art be production of society's unity in uneasy times? Egypt is among the first countries in this region that have already a great tradition of activist art as art seems to be only one of the few means how to effectively stand up for their rights. By looking in and reaching international art scene, the Middle Eastern art will undoubtedly continue to prosper, but not without independent artistic scene.

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