
Art and the Arab Spring: Aesthetics of Revolution and Resistance in Tunisia and Beyond

By Siobhan Shilton

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Siobhan Shilton, professor of French Studies and the Visual Arts at the University of Bristol, brings art and visually aesthetic material into conversation with the reader and presents different perspectives on the Arab Spring in this thought-provoking book, *Art and the Arab Spring: Aesthetics of Revolution and Resistance in Tunisia and Beyond*. The author sets out with the focus on art that finds a means to reconcile a variety of symbols, such as these revolutionary (or anti-revolutionary) people or things; in other words, art that makes visible what is unseen, unspoken, and unshared about revolution which renders the book different from the others concentrating on similar subject matters.

Consisting of 4 chapters, the book combines art and activism, and these pieces invite viewers of the selected pieces to go beyond simplistic interpretations of the revolutions and, instead, allow for a broader definition of revolution that takes transition, compromise, and variety into account. The general notion of the Arab Spring, as it is a widely discussed phenomenon, might be considered problematic for some; according to the author, one of the reasons for that claim is the Western binary definitions regarding the concept and the internal and external clichés surrounding it. This book, with clear illustrations of works of art and multilayered meanings, raises awareness about the controversial nature of



the concept, and it gains a relative tangibility.

The first chapter demonstrates the link between visibility –in terms of tangible works of art– and invisibility –in terms of conceptual works– to challenge essentializing viewpoints about particular revolutions.

This chapter paves the way for the visual and detailed conceptual analysis in the following chapters toward a better understanding. Moreover, in this chapter, the author bases her argument on the notion of infra-thin critique by demonstrating how to reference and expand upon more contemporary or lasting local or transnational practices and grounding them in connection to particular revolution settings.

The author asserts that certain artworks permit a reworking of the Western modernist idea and practice of the infra-thin. French artist Marcel Duchamp coined infra-thin, which satirically alludes to the imperceptible transition and division between two objects. Among the instances, the author suggests, for example, the scent of freshly disposed tobacco smoke, the warmth of a seat that has just been vacated, and the reflection in a mirror or glass. The author also contends that the concept manifests using tools like molds and castings in his work. Those illustrations might be considered everyday aspects of the subject matter rather than the general idea of the Arab Spring.

In chapter 2, the author examines the works that employ dependent processes and materials. She goes into “contingent encounters of resistance” (p. 28), contending that they are fundamental to transnational aesthetics of contingency. In this work of art, the contingent encounter between stable and unstable forms or substances (like ink, bread, water, or jasmine), parameters and processes (like local weaving or ceramics practices), or artists and participants (like amateurs, artisanal weavers, or spectators) creates the dynamic between stability and instability. She underlines that these sculptures’ aesthetic opposition to form alludes to political opposition against dictatorship. According to the author, to transmit a continual revolution between limitation and emancipation, certainty, and uncertainty, this diversified artwork, like that communicating an infra-thin critique, adapts current methods or creates new ways of balancing control and contingency.

Chapter 3 advances the concept that contingent encounters are anchored in diversely international aesthetics of contingency but that this art also invents new combinations or methods to surpass iconic visions. It emphasizes work that produces contingency by using local or regional weaving and pottery traditions, as well as craftspeople themselves. This chapter also discusses art in a way that involves viewers through modern international practices, such as exchanges typified by social media use, and it demonstrates how this work deviates from typical notions of random aesthetics and interactive art. Concerning a third notion, the author’s transnational approach entails dealing with the views of a Tunis-based Franco-Tunisian artist and curator, Meriem Bouderbala, on the interface and a North American art historian, Amelia Jones, on the gap between self and image produced by representations of the body. In this

respect, she proposes an alternative concept of the multi-layered interface, which simulates but distances diversely positioned (and traveled) viewers to express continual revolutions between restriction and resistance. This chapter and the final chapter form the backbone of the book and can be considered the strongest part as they successfully lay the ground to grasp the interpretation of the visuals and the political backgrounds surrounding them better.

Finally, chapter 4 further develops the concept of the multi-layered interface to investigate the interaction between the work of art and its diverse audience. She contends that this work engages viewers beyond past theory and practice investigating pictures of the body and concentrates on performance in photography and video, which is displayed in galleries or disseminated online. This work navigates a complex web of iconography, from Samuel Aranda’s shot of a fully veiled Yemeni lady carrying her injured infant to the controversial naked selfies uploaded on social media by Tunisian and Egyptian women in 2011. These selected illustrations are valuable visual data to be interpreted as the author does.

While the first 2 chapters focus on works displayed in galleries mentioned throughout the book (pp. 12-75) and largely on art examining the Tunisian revolution, chapters 3 and 4 compare works (pp. 118- 171) across a broader range of mediums, genres, and situations. The conclusion considers the concept of the multi-layered interface as important to work in this corpus, regardless of whether they engage an ever-present iconic body, object, or place. It also returns to the book’s methodology, considering how these works of art allow for an overhaul of current concepts and practices and a journey beyond them.

While the range of the visual data is commendable, the approach to all of them as if they were of the same genre and the frequent usage of French in several chapters may be minor criticisms. Put differently, the author's choice of data and interpretation of them is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, using diverse artworks can be considered inspiring and thought-provoking. On the other hand, each of these diverse forms requires a different methodological standpoint.¹ To illustrate, as proposed by Theo van Leeuwen (2001), visual analysis is predicated on the idea that to understand an image as a text, its written or spoken language, sounds, visuals, and other modalities must be analyzed simultaneously. Therefore, it can be argued that photographs and other visual data considered in the book might have been categorized and analyzed as separate materials. For example, Figure 2.1., a sculpture by Aïcha Filali, and Figure 2.2.,

photographs by Meriem Bouderbala (p. 75), might have required a different analytical perspective from each other, and then Figure 3.1. (p. 118), a collective art project by Selma and Sofiane Ouissi. As they include various components and have different representative powers, these figures require analytical perspectives specific to their own genres. Last but not least, the book's primary audience is scholars of international relations who are interested in the Arab Spring but wish to look at it from a new angle, as well as multidisciplinary researchers interested in the subject matter. Overall, it is an important piece of work that should not be neglected.

Endnote

1. For a more detailed information on visual analysis see: Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt, "Introduction," in Theo Van Leeuwen and Carey Jewitt (eds.), *The Handbook of Visual Analysis*, (New York: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004).

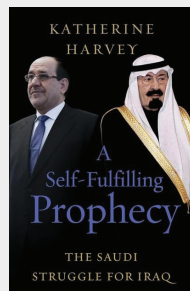
A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq

By Katherine Harvey

Hurst & Company, 2021, 392 pages, £35, ISBN: 9781787385665

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The ideological hostility and walls of suspicion between Riyadh and Tehran have become a significant dynamic in the relations with post-Saddam Hussein Shiite-led Iraq. The policies thoroughly analyzed in this work, *A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: The Saudi Struggle for Iraq* by Katherine Harvey, exemplify how historical traumas and prejudices can profoundly influence the foreign policymaking process.



This study suggests that the negative stance of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy towards Nouri al-Maliki during King Abdullah's era contributed to Iraq's regional isolation and increased its susceptibility to Iranian influence. The controversial steps taken by King Abdullah towards the post-war Iraqi government and his misreading of his neighbor's politics have resulted in heightened Iranian influence in Iraq. The book highlights the consequences