

Cultural Sovereignty in a Global Art Economy: Egyptian Cultural Policy and the New Western Interest in Art from the Middle East

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On a January evening in 2000, the streets of downtown Cairo were flooded with people attending the opening night of an arts festival arranged by the city's newest gallery owners who had recently come to Egypt from abroad. During the following week, the various exhibitions, concerts, plays, and film screenings drew both Egyptians and Westerners, many of whom had not previously socialized together. A palpable excitement filled the air: the galleries were packed (a rare occurrence), and large audiences enjoyed performances that lasted well into the night. The Nitaq Festival was unlike anything seen previously in the Egyptian art world. The event was such a massive success that it was repeated the following year. However, problems inherent to this festival became especially insurmountable after the U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and the escalation of Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and it was discontinued after 2001.

On the opening night of the first festival, members of the Fine Arts Committee of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Culture, which had for years supported international trends in Egyptian art, spent their monthly meeting debating the negative effect that a mostly foreign-run festival might have on Egyptian art and audiences. Meanwhile, Egyptian artists whose work had not been selected complained about the caprice of the market and the selectiveness of Western taste. In contrast, Western audience members lauded the festival's organization as better than anything the state had ever done while at the same time voicing their usual disparagement of the "quality" and "level" of the art made by Egyptian participants. Market instabilities, competition among gallery owners, and some Egyptians' refusal of foreign funding hastened the festival's demise.

The Nitaq Festival brought to the fore many of the tensions that had been building in the Egyptian art world since the mid-1990s, when a foreign-dominated

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private-sector art market emerged for the first time since the colonial period. This shift was partly the result of attempts by the Mubarak government to attract foreign investment. Market liberalization pressured by the IMF and the United States, combined with the growth and availability of global communications technologies, enabled an unprecedented expansion of private-sector art institutions, markets, and audiences. Curators new to the Egyptian art scene developed significant ties to arts institutions outside the state purview, such as Western museums, commercial galleries, and Egyptian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). They also cultivated a lucrative market among foreign and Egyptian young professionals who worked in the new finance, technology, and real estate companies. Reactions to the Nitaq festival and to the emergence of these new art markets suggest how artists working in the postcolony perceive the retreat of the socialist state and the influx of foreign capital as both liberating and predatory—particularly in the Middle East where the memory of past imperialisms looms large over current events.

This article is concerned with what happens in state-centric fields of cultural production when the intensified global circulation of art and money pushes for the privatization of the culture industries and the disaggregation of the nation. This process is occurring in other countries exiting socialism, but it has been especially fraught in places where socialism arose from the struggle for national liberation and where ideologies of culture were cast in anticolonial nationalist terms and instrumentalized in state institutions.¹

International pressures to liberalize markets raise questions among artists and other culture producers in Egypt and beyond: Is neoliberalism the new imperialism? What should be the role of the state in fields of cultural production no longer bound by the socialist project and the territorial nation-state? How does one take advantage of new international opportunities without ceding cultural integrity? Alongside the war in Iraq and the Palestinian intifada, such questions are particularly charged for Egyptian artists and intellectuals who regularly position themselves as spokespeople for the Arab world.

Colonial Legacies and Cultural Sovereignty

As art from the Middle East has begun to circulate internationally, new forms of cultural sovereignty emerge from this process, reproducing colonial logics and cultural national attachments despite the best intentions of both Western curators (who are generally critical of U.S. and Israeli policies in the region) and Egyptian art world actors (the majority of whom are uncomfortable with patriotic nationalism and state control of the arts). The persistence of these logics is caused partly by international political discourse that figures the Middle East as a premodern, undemocratic space in need of Western salvation. Also, aspects of modern art theory and practice especially trigger such colonial logics and national attachments in the era of neoliberal economics. Fields of modern art production often have an ambivalent relationship to processes of commoditization. Pierre Bourdieu (1993)

describes how the “economy of practices” within such fields is based on a reversal of the principles governing ordinary economies in which high profits, honors, and institutional consecration both confer and signify value in and of themselves. He shows how Kantian-inspired notions of the pure aesthetic and the autonomous artist create a disavowal of economic value or interest in cultural fields. However, Western curators’ denial of economic interest and their invocation of “universal” standards are understood by many Egyptians as a justification for market exploitation.

Although Egyptian artists organize value differently from Bourdieu’s account (see Winegar in press), they do not want the value of art to be determined solely according to its commodity worth and defined by standards posing as universal. Colonial logics and national attachments are further reinvigorated in the visual art field because evaluation of art is still dominated by modernist ideologies of development and progress that map easily onto hierarchies between the West and non-West in formerly colonized societies. For those nations that have a claim to ancient art (Egypt being foremost among them), such a teleological ideology of art evaluation produces a narrative (among both Egyptians and Westerners) of former glory and current decline. Moreover, postcolonial fields of modern art were also built through anticolonial nationalism, creating significant tensions surrounding the authenticity and purpose of art that are reinvigorated whenever there is a political need to represent the nation or to fend off external control.²

In Egypt, the concept and practice of European modern art was introduced through the colonial encounter and subsequently patronized by colonial and aristocratic elites. In concert with the burgeoning nationalist movement, artists tried to give modern art an Egyptian specificity. They did so mainly by using styles inspired by European modernism to portray pastoral or folk scenes as aspects of Egyptian life that were seen to be the most protected from Westernizing influences (cf. Chatterjee 1993). For example, pioneer artist Raghīb ‘Ayad’s *Village Scene* (1930) is an expressionistic rendering of an Egyptian peasant woman riding a water buffalo carrying a bowl on her head (see Figure 1). This kind of image still appears in art, literature, and nationalist discourse as a timeless embodiment of Egyptian authenticity.

Following national independence, the elitist and colonial connotations of modern art were downplayed by the new Egyptian Ministry of Culture in an effort to incorporate art into the national project. Modern art was to be a visual representation of the modernizing socialist nation in which social class hierarchy would disappear. For example, in the widely acclaimed painting *The Charter* (1962), ‘Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar depicts a symbolic Egypt holding the new national charter with the new Aswan High Dam in the background (see Figure 2). Peasant and worker are depicted in socialist–realist style as equal parts of the nation. In the 50 years since independence, these relatively different modes of making Egyptian modern art have persisted alongside numerous other visual solutions to the tensions between modernization and cultural authenticity.³



Figure 1
Raghib 'Ayad, *Village Scene*, oil on canvas, 1930.

Indeed, the elitist, colonial, socialist, nationalist, and internationalist cosmopolitan histories of modern art continue to shape the Egyptian art world today. Ongoing tensions in the Middle East (and the spread of political Islam they help to provoke) add to the ambivalent interpretations of the events that I describe here: the Nitaq Festival, exhibitions in Egypt and abroad coordinated by the new galleries, and a seminar organized by U.S. curators and critics ostensibly to promote dialogue with Egyptian counterparts. The controversies over these events signify the struggles documented by many scholars over how “culture” is to be represented, consumed, circulated, governed, and owned in an era of neoliberalism (Brown 2003; Coombe 2005; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Marcus and Myers 1995; Mazzarella 2004; Myers 2002; Schein 2000; Urban 2001; Yúdice 2003). They also show that struggles over art in particular tend to reinvigorate colonial logics and national attachments. In what follows, I focus on the contests among two groups of culture brokers: those art critics and curators whose professional expertise was formed primarily in Western art and educational institutions and those whose expertise was shaped primarily through experience in Egyptian institutions. Although Western curators present their hierarchy of value as universal,⁴ Egyptians struggle to relativize the value of Euro-American models of art to articulate a different kind of cosmopolitanism that can make room for national and cultural belonging. In this struggle, four main areas of contest have emerged: the recognition of young

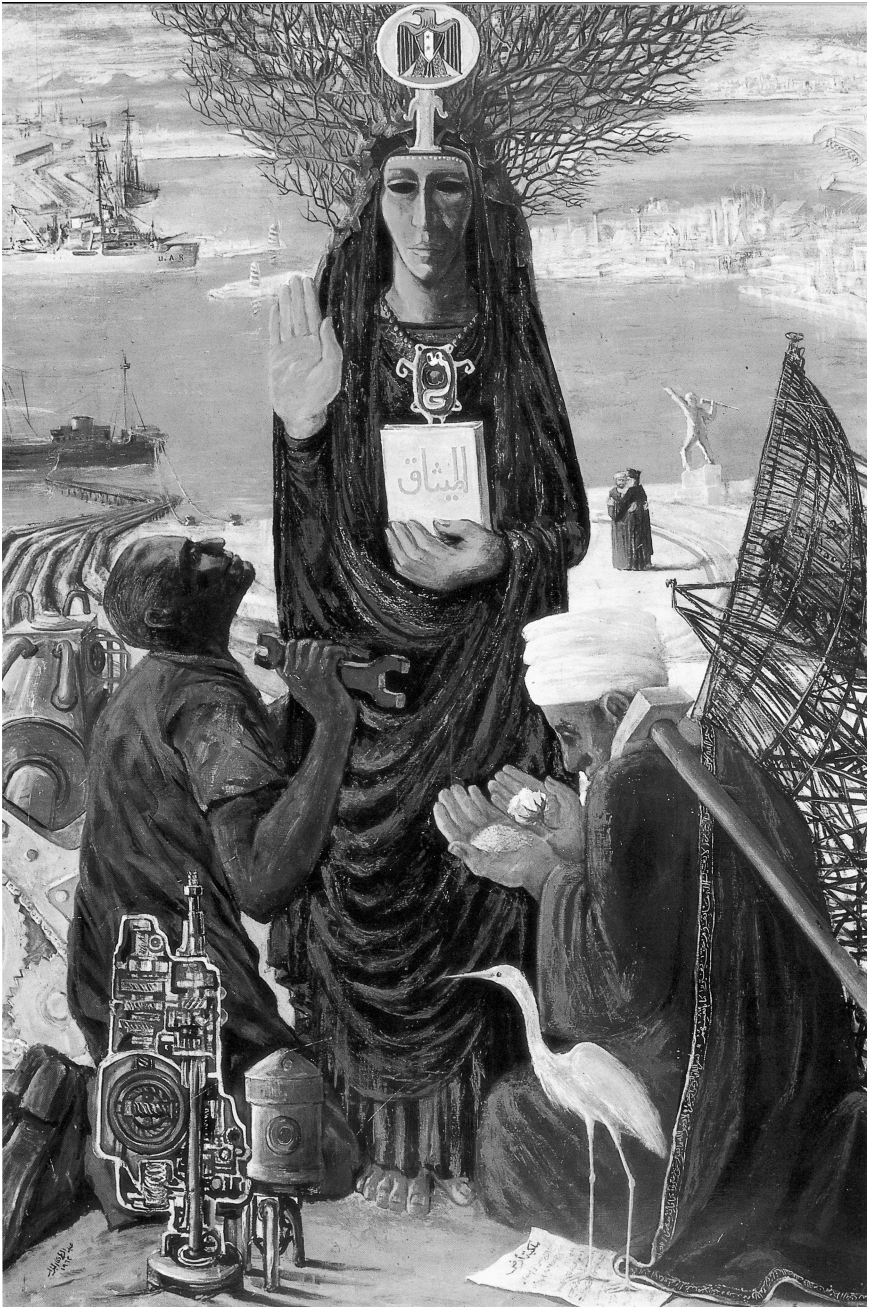


Figure 2
‘Abd al-Hadi al-Gazzar, *The Charter*, oil on wood, 1962. Courtesy
of Laila Effat.

artists, claims of expertise and knowledge, rights to represent Egypt abroad, and the ethics of capitalism. The battle over whose values should dominate in each of these areas has provoked unexpected critiques, realignments, and consolidations of power that complicate the simplistic story of a triumphant free market forcing a “transition” out of socialism.⁵

Recent work in anthropology has sought to go beyond the dichotomizing debates over whether or not globalization erodes the sovereignty of nation-states by examining the specific changes that it has brought to the practices and effects of modern governance (Perry and Maurer 2003). Modes of “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 1999) emerge as nation-states cede control over some aspects of global flows while intensifying control over others. I extend this line of inquiry into the realm of cultural production and more specifically into the relationship between cultural policy and markets. Cultural studies scholars have recently begun to consider how cultural policy in North America and Western Europe has become a part of modern strategies of neoliberal governmentality (Lewis and Miller 2003; Miller and Yúdice 2002; Stevenson 1999). Little consideration has been paid, however, to non-Western situations, particularly in nations formerly colonized by European powers.⁶ Yet, as Tony Bennett (1992) has argued, culture has become both an “object” and “instrument” of governance in such nations.

In Egypt, post-1989 state cultural policy was responsible for initiating the privatization of the art market and for promoting a neoliberal artistic subjectivity.⁷ This development was not simply a reaction to imperatives imposed by international donors but was partly the result of a new outlook on the part of state officials. Along with many Egyptian artists, they no longer accept the idea that the state alone can produce a dynamic art scene. At the same time, most Egyptian artists still feel that the state should limit the infusion of market values into all spheres of artistic production and consumption. In this sense, most artists and state curators do not completely abandon socialist or nationalist cultural ideologies. Rather, neoliberal policies within art worlds have weakened and strengthened different aspects of older national and socialist attachments, as well as enabled the articulation of the nation as a cosmopolitan and international entity. At the same time, however, neoliberalism has also instigated new practices of state surveillance over culture producers.

Just as the new cultural policy has opened some avenues of artistic activity while trying to foreclose others, foreign curators have offered artists new channels of exposure to foreign markets and galleries—but they have done so at a price. Despite (or perhaps because of) their best intentions, these newcomers have not been able to escape the legacy of modernist art movements which place emphasis on a break between “old” and “new,” putting a value primarily on the latter. Neither have they been able to escape how this legacy has been grafted onto the logics of colonialism (e.g., Euro-American culture as representing the pinnacle of innovation and value) and those of neoliberalism (e.g., the free market as defeating “backward” socialism). These curators were engaged in laudable

attempts to break the Western canon's exclusion of contemporary Middle Eastern art by providing artists with an alternative to state institutions. However, their position as brokers of Egyptian art representing artistic and institutional traditions different from and more highly valued internationally than those in Egypt has made it very easy for them to slip into colonial logics in their efforts to create a market niche. Furthermore, in offering alternatives to the state, these curators have inadvertently consolidated their own power by using the same techniques as those used by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Consequently, we see two major regimes of power in the culture industries today—one state based and the other consolidated through international NGO circuits—both of which conflict and collude with each other in asserting their claims to cultural authority.

In Egypt, and perhaps in other similarly situated art worlds, the combination of expanded markets and new, although historically constituted, national attachments has produced a range of subjectivities that not only emphasize flexibility and mobility (Ong 1999) but also cultural allegiance broadly defined. At the time of the Nitaq Festival, Egyptians began asserting a kind of cultural sovereignty that was related to earlier ideas of national sovereignty developed in the colonial period while also transforming them. Expressions of self-determination drew their power from the colonial-era notions of “national culture” and domestic sovereignty independent from external systems of authority (see Gershoni and Jankowski 1987, 1995). What was new, however, was that these exercises of sovereignty were primarily nonjuridical, relational, and could be strategically disaggregated from territorial nationalism and the nation-state.⁸

As Stephen Krasner (1999) and Aihwa Ong (1999) have suggested, different kinds of sovereignty can overlap or become disconnected and aspects of them can change while others remain the same. Most Egyptian artists, critics, and curators have attempted to exercise a kind of sovereignty over the ways in which their art is circulated in the global cultural marketplace, but they have not sought to erect barriers to this circulation. In fact, they welcomed the cultural channels that the Nitaq Festival opened to them and believed that the future health of Egyptian art depended on an engagement with the rest of the world. Meanwhile, sovereignty claims have been noticeably absent in other aspects of the Egyptian art world. For example, cultural patrimony laws do not govern the movement of modern art objects out of the country, nor are there policies to control the flow of non-Egyptian art images or styles into the country or curb their influence on Egyptian art. Indeed, I would argue that Egyptian art worlds show evidence of the workings of a “graduated sovereignty” (Ong 1999) at work in the field of cultural production and that the usefulness of this notion should not be limited to the sectors of technology and finance so favored by globalization scholars.

Some social theorists might see Egyptian critics of the new private sector as breathing the last gasp of nationalism, struggling to hold onto something whose demise is certain. However, they would be (unwitting) bedfellows of Western art critics who came to Egypt promoting the idea that nation-based art is inherently

retrograde and declaring the inevitability of nationalism's decline. Instead of seeing Egyptians as having reactionary reactions to neoliberalism, I suggest we read their responses as critical and active engagements with the global cultural economy. The actions of state curators discussed here do not reflect a nation-state's loss of power but rather the changing nature of governance, in which the state cedes control over the mobility of its internationally oriented subjects and the media they use in their work while at the same time monitoring them so that they do not sell out their culture. The articulations of cultural sovereignty being expressed by Egyptian artists today are not assertions of identity locked in the past but are part of an ongoing historically and socially constituted engagement with new market forces in the cultural realm. For them, nationalism had always been a way to counter unwanted external control and express cultural identity, and state socialism was very important in shaping who they were as artists. These were leftist secular intellectuals who, for the most part, gained entry into the art field through free higher education and acquired their cultural capital through state exhibitions and employment. This experience shaped a commitment to art serving a broader social purpose than a foreign or elite-oriented market would allow.⁹

Therefore, Egyptian critics of Western-driven art market privatization articulate a desire to make the global circulation of Egyptian art happen on their own terms for the benefit not only of the artists themselves but for society as a whole. They have done so through a complicated framework of cultural sovereignty shaped by the legacies of colonialism and socialism. These newly articulated post-colonial national attachments and ideologies of culture have become especially pronounced in arenas of cultural production, such as art, because these arenas have been historically linked for over one hundred years to notions of national authenticity.

The Rebirth of the Private-Sector Art Market

In the colonial period, a private-sector market in modern Egyptian art emerged with the first graduates of the European-staffed College of Fine Arts in Cairo. This art market included European residents in Egypt and the aristocracy remaining from the Ottoman era. With independence in 1952, many of their private collections were nationalized by the state, and art sales made outside state channels drastically decreased.¹⁰ In the 1990s, however, a large number of private art galleries opened. This significant development was owing to a number of factors, including an increase in state encouragement of the visual arts. Also, the government's economic "reform" program produced greater numbers of Egyptian *nouveaux riches* and foreign executives eager to buy art. New laws allowed foreigners to open businesses, including art galleries. These developments coincided with the burgeoning interest in the West to find new frontiers in contemporary art. Curators had already

scouted art scenes in Latin America, South Asia, and East Asia. Middle Eastern art became the next hot commodity, especially after September 11, 2001.¹¹

The Quartz Gallery is the most prominent foreign-owned gallery to open in Egypt in the past ten years.¹² The circumstances of its opening and its architectural features clearly embody the dramatic shifts in economy, politics, and international relations in postindependence Egypt. In 1998, a Canadian resident of Egypt renovated the first floor of a three-story building in downtown Cairo in which the grand, high-ceilinged apartments had become badly dilapidated after Nasser's rent control laws limited the amounts that rents could be raised. In the 1990s, Nasser-era laws regarding national protection and income redistribution not already reversed by Sadat were being overturned. It became legal for a non-Egyptian to open and run a gallery in Cairo at the same time that the People's Assembly was revamping the rent control law.

The building that houses the Quartz Gallery, with its French doors, marbled-tiled floors, floor-to-ceiling windows, and ornate iron balconies, is a nostalgic reminder of grander times.¹³ After renovation, the space bears traces of pre-Nasser wealth but also reflects the reversal, over a 25-year period, of the economic, political, and cultural direction of the country. The gallery owner, who had already spent several years in Egypt as a business entrepreneur in other areas, opened a space whose aesthetic was a mixture of a colonial elite past and a contemporary Soho chic, both of which reference a certain history of Egypt's engagement with foreign elites.¹⁴

Drawing on his own experience working in the arts in England, the owner of the Quartz Gallery told me that the key to building a more progressive art movement was to develop the private sector. He was able to convince other new gallery owners that their efforts to develop a new market would be strengthened if they ignored the state altogether. Most Egyptian artists agreed that the private sector needed further development. The 5,000 member artists' union even held a major symposium in 1999 to strategize how to get Egyptian businessmen involved in supporting the arts. Thus, they were not against private-sector support, but they became concerned when the new art market did not appear to be the equitable multicultural globalizing private sector that they desired it to be. In fact, the majority of artists argued that although the new private sector had the potential to counteract the stagnancy of the government, it was anything but benign. Indeed, the growth of this new private sector was both producing and reproducing certain hierarchical relations in the art world even as it challenged others. Westerners contested the existing local hierarchy of value, which generally privileged the public sector over the private and gave older artists more respect and prestige than those who were younger. At the same time, however, as the new private-sector players celebrated younger artists, they also used familiar ageist techniques (among others) to place these artists in a lower position within a neocolonial hierarchy that valued the West above the rest.

The Battle over “Young Artists”

I went to the Quartz Gallery for a seminar on design. All the panelists spoke English. I asked the organizers where the translator was. They said they didn't have one. I felt like a foreigner in my own country. I felt like I was living back in the days of the British.

—Younger generation Egyptian artist, 2004

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have called attention to the ways in which youth have come “to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local” and how anxieties around neoliberalism are often located in the category of “the youth” (2000:308). It is no accident, then, that young artists have become the focus of such intense battles between established Egyptian curators and the newcomers. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signified the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new world order. In Europe, a London-based group of young artists became all the rage. Famously referred to as the YBAs (Young British Artists), they became known for radically pushing art's accepted boundaries (e.g., Damien Hirst's animals in formaldehyde). Also in 1989, the Egyptian visual art scene was put on a new course with the appointment of Faruq Husni as Egyptian Minister of Culture.

Husni, a member of the postindependence generation, was an abstract painter from Alexandria who had trained at a state art college and had been a cultural attaché in Europe. In his new post, he set out to put Egypt on the international art map by creating and nurturing a young generation of artists doing new kinds of art.¹⁵ Through a series of initiatives (including competitions, prizes, and residencies abroad), he encouraged conceptual, abstract, and installation art in new or unusual media to prove to the world that Egyptians still made “Egyptian” art but were also keeping up with international trends. Officials also hoped that a vibrant young art scene would halt the spread of radical Islam in a society in which Islamist violence had become increasingly common. Opponents of this new policy, many of whom held lower positions in the government, advocated representations of folkloric or pastoral imagery executed in traditional media such as oil, granite, and bronze. Their complaints that Egyptian artists were now imitating the West fell on deaf ears.¹⁶ With state resources in their hands, top officials encouraged artists to be flexible and to mix “local” elements with “international” media, styles, or concepts. They allocated prizes accordingly.

For example, Ayman al-Simari was selected as an exceptional young artist for his work that combined remnants of rural mud brick houses and aluminum sheeting as a comment on the visual transformation of provincial Egypt as it was integrated into the world economy (see cover image). Work such as this, combining materials or styles seen as local and traditional with those considered to be international and modern, were seen by their supporters as reflecting an Egypt that was open to the outside and always changing—a visual representation of the modern nation intended as a message both to the nation's (“unmodern”) citizens as well as to

Western audiences. Among ministry officials and young artists of this aesthetic persuasion, a strong sense prevailed that a new “modern Egyptian art” was being made.

This cultural policy assumed an interdependent, relational form of cultural sovereignty. It was also part of a new strategy of governance. As the Egyptian government was enacting neoliberal reforms in the economic sector, it was contributing in the cultural sector to the production of a new kind of national subject among young artists who would be secular, “progressive,” and amenable to the direction Egypt was heading. To the irritation of their opponents, the new artists were wildly successful, and contemporary Egyptian art eventually grabbed international notice in venues such as the Venice Biennial.¹⁷

When foreign curators arrived on the scene, they brought their own interests in promoting “young Egyptian artists.” However, their approach denied the state’s early role in creating this same “young generation” when they selected artists, such as al-Simari, who had first shown their work with government sponsorship. Instead of interpreting the works themselves as having to do with Egypt as such, foreign curators and audiences viewed these works in terms of personal expression, as being about personal lives and histories within a particular cultural context. As one Egyptian artist kept saying, “Everything now is about ‘al-personal.’” He said the sentence in Arabic, but the word *personal* was in English, thus echoing a favorite word among Western art critics. Photography and video art became especially popular among foreign curators and buyers, particularly works dealing with personal psychological issues and the intimate or daily lives of urban Egyptians. The emphasis on the personal tended to displace the political, and in that sense the new work could be made to fit the alienating logics of neoliberal capitalism.¹⁸

While asserting new hierarchies of artistic value, Euro-Americans were also overturning the local age hierarchy. The growth of a younger generation was originally enabled and constrained by a kind of paternalist gerontocracy coupled with cultural respect for elders. Younger artists criticized the domination of the older generation, but they also emphasized their indebtedness and respect. The newly arrived foreign curators, however, regularly categorized locally esteemed older generation artists as outdated. This categorization was coupled with the opinion that a large public arts sector directed by older artists and curators was indicative of a lagging art movement. They constructed a modernist and arguably neocolonial ideology that legitimated this opinion and, by extension, their own activities. Thus, they mounted several challenges to the ministry’s conception of its role in the Egyptian art movement, and a battle began in which older generation state curators and private-sector curators fought over who could lay claim to the patronage of young artists.

The downtown galleries created the Nitaq Festival to “invigorate” the art movement in Egypt. The gallerists thus employed the same language that had first been used by the new minister in 1989 when he launched an annual young

artists competition called Salon al-Shabab (Salon of Youth). But the Nitaq Festival organizers and their supporters argued that their event, and the private sector more generally, gave these artists exhibition opportunities that they would not have otherwise. They also said that the private sector encouraged young artists to work in genres that the older generation would not accept. For example, one gallery owner explained, “the majority of artists that the downtown galleries deal with are young. Because the older artists, the established artists, they’ve got exhibition spaces.” When I countered that for the past ten years, young artists had actually been getting a lot of exhibition opportunities from the government, the gallerist paused, then agreed. However, he went on to recuperate the private-sector narrative. He said that he wanted to “give some credence” to installation work “because it’s so accepted everywhere else. Video work, it’s accepted everywhere else. And you don’t get older people doing it, at all.”

This narrative has also dominated the English- and French-language arts pages, in which Americans, Europeans, and wealthy graduates from the American University in Cairo have often praised the new downtown galleries to the exclusion of public sector and Egyptian-owned private galleries in other areas of Cairo. These curators have persisted in this narrative, despite their lack of evidence to support it, because of their need to create a private-sector market niche while also producing themselves as the legitimate developers or representatives of that market. The colonial framing of Egyptian art as a backward space that could be developed has been a particularly effective method resulting in increased sales, popularity among foreign audiences, and notice in famous magazines such as *Art in America*. Such a framing, however, is contingent on the silencing or erasure of other voices in the Egyptian art scene.

Younger artists are aware that most Euro-American curators critique state activities and the older generation. When interacting with Westerners, they tend to emphasize their own criticisms of older artists and downplay their ongoing connections to them. The highly contextualized nature of these expressions is often unrecognized by the new curators, who are usually unaware that most young artists maintain active ties to the state for employment, exhibitions, commissions, and acquisitions. This is partly because the Westerners are both culturally and linguistically hampered in their communication with them.¹⁹

Those older generation artists most connected to the ministry have resisted these challenges to their claims on young artists and their support of newer media. The young artists who participated in the Nitaq Festival and were first selected by Western curators for shows abroad were in large measure those whose careers began in the ministry’s annual competitions. In the eyes of many artists, the private sector was not only capitalizing on the state’s achievements, but the Egyptian Ministry of Culture was being denied credit as well. For example, one older artist criticized a local English-language magazine for claiming that the Nitaq Festival was an opportunity for young artists to exhibit because they were shut out by the state. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find Egyptians (of any age or aesthetic

persuasion) who thought that the state ignored younger artists or artists working in new media, given the preponderance of state support for both.

Even though the private-sector narrative lacks substantial evidence, it does reveal the tension within the ministry's policy of promoting young artists while also insisting on an age hierarchy. This tension was made clear in the minister's reaction to the exodus of young artists to the private sector, as noted in a newspaper interview:

This gallerist can take whomever he wants from the young artists. It doesn't concern me that he takes the sons of the Youth Salon. First of all, you cannot refuse any artist his freedom. . . . They [the young artists] can make mistakes; they are not children. But there is no doubt that we are aware of [them] and know where they are in the end. [Ali 2001b:27]

Here we see the tension and a common attempt to solve it through a form of graduated sovereignty: the language of artistic freedom is paired with a patronizing reminder of the state's panoptic authority over young artists. In another poignant reminder of surveillance, a state curator called artists to tell them that it was inappropriate for them to exhibit in a new gallery at the American University in Cairo while the Israelis were killing Palestinians with U.S.-supplied weapons.

In this post-1989 system of cultural governance, artists are encouraged to move freely, to draw on a variety of international trends for inspiration, and to exhibit their work outside of the country, but they are admonished to do so in a way that maintains their cultural integrity as artists who were first nurtured by the state. The activities of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture also show that as part of this governance, nation-states are redefining some forms of nationalism as internationalist, particularly in realms of cultural production (see also Ong 1999; Wang 2000). This strategy makes their cultural goods more competitive internationally (e.g., Egypt wins the Venice prize) and creates a friendly and progressive international reputation that encourages foreign investment (i.e., Egypt has avant-garde artistic youth instead of backward terrorist youth).

Young artists have thus become subjects of two regimes of power. Just as state officials "create" young artists to prove Egypt's cultural progress, Western curators "create" young artists in a way that emphasizes Western cultural superiority. Whereas the state awards prizes to certain kinds of art and emphasizes surveillance, Western curators choose the same kinds of art, using a combination of neoliberal and neocolonial discourses to justify and market those choices.

Although young artists are being pulled back and forth between these two regimes of power, most do not fully submit to either of them. They seek to take advantage of the (often unexpected) opportunities offered by each, and they have formulated artistic stances that meld the least offensive aspects of free market ideology with the least restrictive aspects of state socialism and nationalism. Although some may have ended up choosing sides, most have tried to navigate the situation by adopting a new kind of flexibility rooted in freshly articulated notions of

cultural sovereignty and artistic integrity. They have found ways to frame discursively the art they were already producing that match both cultural policy initiatives and international marketing strategies. Some have capitalized on newly created social connections and have learned foreign languages to move more easily among these different worlds; others have been inspired by the artistic possibilities offered by new media and new dialogues within Egypt and emerging international channels. At times, their art has changed dramatically as a result. For example, the artist Shadi al-Nushuqati, whose large paintings of beds and distraught figures had been a Youth Salon favorite, has moved to work in video on topics related to his family heritage (see Figures 3 and 4). In contrast, artists whose articulations of cultural sovereignty were mainly expressed through iterations of pastoral and folkloric motifs have remained marginalized. These artists are the hidden majority that has found no place in the battles between state and foreign curators and in the struggles of young artists to resist the limitations of either side.²⁰

Claims and Assumptions of Authority

Claims to knowledge and expertise are another flashpoint in the struggle over which terms would dominate the new global circulations of Egyptian art. International conflicts over flows of cultural knowledge and objects appear to have become particularly prominent after the end of the Cold War (e.g., Brown 2003). Egypt is no exception, as the government's recent attempts to reclaim Pharaonic objects held by European museums indicate. However, a curatorial seminar held by Americans at the American University in Cairo around the time of the Nitaq Festival provoked claims to expert knowledge of cultural objects and artists, rather than claims on the objects themselves. On the surface, state curators appeared to articulate a traditional notion of domestic sovereignty over who has legitimate authority over Egyptian art and artists. At the same time, however, their assertions of cultural sovereignty were not limited to the national space but were meant to apply to certain circulations beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Objects and artists could move internationally and were in fact encouraged to do so, but it should be Egyptians who determine the terms of this circulation.

In the spring of 1999, I was told of a screaming match that occurred between the Egyptian director of a major public art gallery and a U.S. art professor at the American University in Cairo. The art professor told me that he had invited the director to a two-week seminar, which he had arranged with a colleague from a visual arts institute in the U.S. Midwest. The two had given the seminar the title of "Contemporary International Curatorial Practice: Integrating East and West." They devised a program of readings and several speakers, including themselves, along with two of the new downtown gallery owners, a Turkish curator, and a young Egyptian artist and art critic. The objective listed on the syllabus was:

To bring curatorial expertise to Egyptian art students, to provide them with the tools to contribute to the complex commentary of contemporary artistic practice and



Figure 3
Shadi al-Nushuqati, *The Bed*, oil on canvas, 1995. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 4

Shadi al-Nushuqati, Still from *The Tree of My Grandmother's House—The Dialogue*, video, 2001. Courtesy of the artist.

presentation, *to prepare students* to think critically about the historical, social and cultural differences between *east and west* when dealing with contemporary culture, and to open a dialogue between the next generation of critics and artists so that they can have a positive affect [sic] on contemporary cultural dialogue. [emphasis added]

The professor told me that he had wanted to invite one of the prominent government curators personally because he was sure that she would be interested in such an event. He was wrong. She was livid that she had not been consulted prior to the planning of the event and that these outsiders were coming, in her words, to “tell us what to do” and “Americanize” Egyptian art. The battle that ensued was the direct result of conflicting claims to expertise in the contemporary Egyptian art scene that reveal both the interplay and clashes between two regimes of power. Whereas many European and U.S. curators claim to know what is best for Egyptian art on the basis of “international expertise,” Egyptian curators assert sovereignty through claims based on their own knowledge and expertise.

Western seminar organizers, critics, and gallerists construct their expertise on the basis of two distinct sets of knowledge. First, they present themselves as having technical curatorial and administrative expertise—often merely by virtue of the fact that they are not Egyptian. Although some in this group have never been in head curatorial or administrative positions in galleries outside of Egypt, they

do not perceive this as a deficiency. They feel that they know more about running a gallery “properly” than administrators at the Egyptian Ministry of Culture, who they criticize as being too “traditional” or not sufficiently knowledgeable about the basics of running exhibition spaces.

Their critiques of the government have been articulated through a stance of superiority that presumes that most Egyptians are unaware of the existing problems or are incapable of addressing them. This stance has reminded many Egyptians (not just state officials) of the posturing of colonial administrators and has activated long-standing anxieties of backwardness. For example, participants of the seminar told me that one of the most dramatic and embarrassing episodes was when the U.S. curator led them to the state-run museum of modern art. She asked the manager questions about the philosophy of the museum and its system for changing exhibits. The manager had no answers, in part because in Egypt (as elsewhere) such matters are the responsibility of the museum director and not the manager (who oversees the staff and facilities). The seminar leader then led the participants through the museum and harshly critiqued the layout and lighting. Similarly, in an *Art in America* article, U.S. curator Marilu Knode criticized the Cairo Biennial organizers for having an “opaque curatorial process” that resulted in “too much substandard, hackneyed work” (Knode 2002:52).

The second kind of knowledge that the new critics and curators have used to claim expertise is knowledge about “global” or “Western” art. As one curator told me, “Many of these people [the government arts administrators] don’t know anything about art.” A U.S. artist residing in Cairo wrote in the *New Art Examiner* that Egyptian Ministry of Culture officials “as political appointees” are “generally unaware of the global art world” (Bailey 1999:38–39). Although a number of foreigners acknowledged that some state curators were aware of art trends outside of Egypt, most argued that even these curators must not really understand them or else they would have encouraged their local development in what they called less “superficial” or “imitative” ways. For example, the director of one downtown gallery complained that in the annual young artists’ competition, state judges encourage installation art or large paintings just to follow a trend and that the work indicates that the young artists “do not really know what they are doing.” Such statements are an indication of how Western curators and visitors to Egyptian art exhibitions claim authority based on a privileged knowledge of contemporary art outside of Egypt.

Although Egyptian artists and administrators often recognize these claims to expertise based on knowledge procured overseas, they assert their claims to another kind of knowledge, about Egyptian art and its history, which they consider equally important. In fact, artists often use the term *khafir* (expert) to describe those who know in detail the major trends in Egyptian art from Pharaonic times through the modern period. During their heated argument, the Egyptian government curator rhetorically asked the U.S. seminar organizer, “What do *you* know about Egyptian art?” For Egyptian art professionals who have spent their entire careers studying

Egyptian art, the sight of newcomers quickly asserting their expertise over this domain was hard to bear. Even though many of the newcomers might recognize that they ought to know more about Egyptian art history, their inherent position of dominance lends an air of hubris to any claims to this knowledge they might make. For example, when one of the seminar speakers decided to show the participants slides of the work of Inji Aflatun, a painter jailed for her communist activities in the 1960s, she explained to me that her aim was to encourage students to do political art by “showing them that they have political artists in their own art history.” However, the assumption that Egyptians would not know about Aflatun was grossly inaccurate, as this painter is one of the most famous names in the contemporary Egyptian art world. Although this curator could be quite sensitive to the importance of local modernisms and was likely to admit that some Egyptian curators had more knowledge of Egyptian art than she did, her actions are an example of how foreigners are liable to underestimate the extent to which this knowledge, as well as age and institutional location, is crucial to the local construction of expertise.²¹

This point was further clarified when the U.S. art professor showed the public sector curator the program of speakers for the seminar. The curator latched on to the name of Khalil Amin, a younger generation artist turned art critic. He was to give a lecture on the history of modern Egyptian art. She said in disgust, “Khalil Amin? I *made* Khalil Amin!” She was angry that a young artist that she had first introduced to the public had been invited before her and thus was asserting her own status and expert knowledge in the Egyptian art world to someone who she considered to be an ignorant outsider. This statement clearly shows how the state concentrates its subject-making efforts on younger artists. It also shows some Egyptians’ indignation when foreigners do not recognize (intentionally or not) the local structures of authority bolstered by a paternalist gerontocracy and the socialist state bureaucracy. Directors of public galleries in Egypt are granted expert status. Other older generation arts administrators at the National Center of Fine Arts are readily asked to serve on panels of experts to give lectures about Egyptian art, to curate shows, or to judge art competitions. Thus, both age and institutional location are necessary to the construction of expert authority and in making strategic claims to expertise among most Egyptian art world actors.

Thus, we see some overlaps and some crucial differences between these various claims to expertise. Knowledge of Western art and curatorial practice and experience in the West, although more than sufficient for the newcomers, are only one part of the local construction of expertise. For most artists in Egypt, knowledge of Egyptian art, age, and institutional location are just as important. Yet the claims made by the organizers of the seminar assume that there is no locally constituted expertise. In a seminar purporting to “[integrate] East and West,” none of the major Egyptian curators were invited to speak.²² The organizers introduced the seminar by saying that their goal was to “improve” curatorship in Egypt, to “bring their expertise,” and to “provide the tools” for discussing contemporary artistic practice. This framing positions the organizers as the sole agents, and the proceedings

of the entire seminar indicated that “Western” curatorial practices are set as the international standard. One younger generation attendee was disappointed by the organizers’ patronizing pedagogical attitude. She told me, “It took the form of teacher–student really fast. They just came here to teach us.” She had been eager to participate in the seminar because she had recently fallen out of favor with a state curator after a fight over his meddling in her work. But not long after being irritated with this posturing by participants from the United States in the seminar, she left the art scene.²³

Significantly, the state curator framed her response to this challenge in more resolutely nationalist terms than she normally would have in other circumstances, for example, when facing local critics who advocated pastoral or folkloric nation-based works. We may see an act of resistance in her retort, “What do *you* know about Egyptian art?” However, the form this resistance takes is revealing, not only of the forms of power emerging within this art world but also of what it was up against. Using Lila Abu-Lughod’s concept of resistance as a diagnostic of power (1990), we see that this curator’s response shows both the confidence and usefulness of nationalist claims and the exclusionary power of foreigners who claim “knowledge” about the “international” art scene. She reiterated her expertise in Egyptian art but maintained a significant silence regarding art from elsewhere, despite the fact that she had been instrumental in increasing Egypt’s connections to Europe and the United States, particularly through her founding of the Egyptian section of the International Art Critics Association. Importantly, then, her expert claims and assertions of cultural sovereignty were both strategic and context specific.

When she and other state curators continue their attempts to make Egypt “international,” they increasingly lock horns with others trying to do the same thing. Local actors compete with newcomers over who should control the value of Egyptian art as it goes global and, ultimately, who should reap the benefits of this process. They want to decide what constitutes the nation and its art without this decision being made solely by market forces. Thus, they claim sovereignty over constructions of knowledge and expertise in the production of cultural goods. Yet, in other contexts, they redefine the nation as an international entity. Although assertions of sovereignty have been especially vociferous when Westerners lay claim to Egyptian cultural production within the national space, they have also been poignantly articulated when cultural goods travel outside Egypt.

Who Has the “Right” to Represent Egyptian Art Abroad?

Many scholars have noted the recent ascendancy of rights discourse and in particular the application of this discourse to the global circulation of cultural knowledge and objects (Brown 2003; Coombe 2005). In the Egyptian art world, the issue has not been one of “copyright,” but rather of ethical rights to cultural representation outside the boundaries of the nation-state. Egyptian cultural

policy makers have spent several years building bridges between the Egyptian art scene and the rest of the world. Most of these attempts have been through official channels, such as cultural centers, consulates, and state-run international biennials. However, by the late 1990s, people in the new private sector were rapidly building connections abroad through nonstate channels in a pattern well known to scholars of globalization. The Nitaq festivals were major social events in which these sorts of connections were being developed.

The challenges these connections posed to Egyptian sovereignty over cultural production were both enabled and fortified by the long-standing Euro-American dominance in the international art market and its structures of judgment. Such dominance still relies on neocolonial framings of non-Western art, despite the attempts made by some Westerners to challenge them (Oguibe and Enwezor 1999). Indeed, Western interest in Egyptian art was not primarily motivated by a desire to exploit and control; many curators and viewers were genuinely excited by the work. Some tried to get to know artists and learn more about Egyptian cultural life, especially those who live in Cairo (as opposed to those curators who flew in for a weekend). But the overwhelming conceptual framework for this Western engagement with Egyptian art remains one of modernist teleological progress, in which Western art figures as more avant-garde than Egyptian. In response, many Egyptians (those embedded in state institutions and those outside of them) try to assert their sovereignty over how this art—what they perceive to be the cultural production of their nation—will circulate internationally. These assertions do not imply that these artists are inherently against Western curatorship. Rather, they (young artists, especially) wish to take advantage of these new opportunities on equal terms and be respected as people with their own culture and artistic traditions. Just as Western curatorial projects are bolstered by an apparatus of power rooted in the colonial era, Egyptian claims to cultural sovereignty tap into the reservoir of anticolonial national ideology. These historical connections do not completely determine people's engagement with the new global cultural economy, but they certainly shape how participants stake claims to cultural authority and how they perceive one another.

In listing the goals of the Quartz Gallery, the owner stated that he wanted to “have contemporary Egyptian art acknowledged internationally and ensure that Quartz Gallery is recognized as a major part of that process.” It was clear to many Egyptian artists that he was actively promoting their art abroad. He traveled frequently and invited foreign curators and critics to Egypt. Like the owners of the other private galleries downtown, he also networked extensively among the foreign elite in Cairo culling contacts among the directors of foreign cultural centers and businesspeople in private companies. In a short time, he built a reputation for his gallery such that it drew attention from many foreign collectors and curators, including those living in Egypt and those residing abroad.

Many young artists, eager to advance their careers in Europe and the United States, excitedly took note of this success. Prior to this time, government channels

had also offered opportunities to exhibit abroad, especially through cultural centers or biennials. Artists welcomed these state-sponsored chances to exhibit overseas; however, many saw the private sector as offering additional opportunities to get their work into foreign galleries, to gain access to residencies abroad, to sell work for higher prices than those set by the state acquisition structure, and to obtain funding for large projects. They have since become bricoleurs of the neoliberal era, flexible in picking and choosing opportunities from public and private sectors and local and international sources.

In the opinion of the private-sector gallerists, increasing the international visibility of the artists they represent is one way of expanding the art market beyond the state to create a new profile for Egypt as a nation that has a vibrant private-sector art scene and interesting young artists. If artists become well known in the West, then their foreign caché increases the market value and sales of their art both at home and abroad. In addition to the marketing of individual artists, some curators and critics explicitly aim to advance the image of the Egyptian art scene abroad, to promote the idea that “things are happening” there. The Quartz Gallery’s early efforts in this regard culminated in an exhibition titled “Cairo Modern Art in Holland.” Very successful in Europe, the exhibit caused a fair amount of controversy at home.

Young artists, state curators, and Egyptian art critics emphasized that this advocacy of Egyptian art abroad was not as novel as the gallerists claimed it to be. Putting Egypt on the international art map had been a government goal for over a decade. Furthermore, older generation artists continued to believe that the state should be primarily responsible for representing Egyptian art abroad. This perspective, legitimated by the continued international practice of national representation at biennials and triennials, has a long legacy dating back to the socialist period. When the Quartz Gallery staged exhibitions with titles such as “Made in Egypt,” these older artists felt that the gallery was usurping the state’s prerogative to represent Egyptian art abroad. In this case, a struggle for sovereignty emerged over the representation of Egypt in Europe through its cultural goods.

Articles in the ministry’s newspaper represented various attempts to reconcile the government’s goal of increasing international visibility for Egyptian art with the fear that the private galleries were pulling the rug out from under them. One arts page editor repeatedly brought her readers’ attention to this matter. In an article titled “Is it the Right of Quartz [pseudonym] to do an Exhibition Abroad in Egypt’s Name?” (‘Ali 2001a:27),²⁴ she asserts the opinion that only the state should represent a nation of artists in another country. She argues that any individual—and in this case a foreigner no less—claiming to represent Egyptian art abroad does not conform to “the protocols of cultural and artistic exchange.” Clearly the protocols to which she refers are those dating from the 1950s, built on the model of biennials or exchanges between government cultural bureaus. According to this view, if an exhibition is marketed as featuring “Egyptian art,” it is the state as the nation’s representative that should organize it. The editor states in her article that

the Quartz Gallery has a right to do exhibitions abroad of individual artists, so long as the owner does not claim to “use the famous name of Egypt to market the gallery’s works.” In an earlier interview with the minister of culture appearing in the same paper, he again pairs the language of artistic freedom with a reminder of state prerogative. He states, “They are welcome to exhibit in Amsterdam or Beirut, but not in Cairo’s name. This is completely unacceptable” (‘Ali 2001b:27).

This case highlights the central issue at stake in many of these battles: who has the right to represent a nation? When state officials discovered that private-sector curators were engaging in similar activities (e.g., arranging seminars, holding group exhibitions abroad, or exhibiting young artists), their reaction was to challenge them on nationalist grounds in a language of rights that was also part of the new strategy of governance. Instead of creating new cultural patrimony laws to manage the global flow of modern Egyptian art (as is done with antiquities), state officials emphasized the moral unacceptability of allowing a foreigner to represent Egypt abroad without any consideration for the desires of Egyptians themselves.

This kind of argument made sense to many artists (even those less dependent on the state) for several reasons. First, Nasserist ideology from the 1950s and 1960s was being revitalized in the 1990s among Egyptians who were from social classes that had suffered under colonialism and who were not easily able to navigate the waters of the neoliberal economy (see Gordon 2000). Also, the history of Nasser’s leadership of the Non-Aligned Movement led contemporary Egyptians to assert their ability to manage their international affairs without foreign intervention or representation. Second, the moral nature of the rights language made sense to a young generation of Egyptians who had been brought up during the first phase of market liberalization (in the 1970s and 1980s) in which foreign intervention was increasingly deemed immoral and counter to Islamic religious ethics. Third, this framing made sense to many Egyptians in view of U.S. and Israeli aggression in the Middle East, which they felt threatened the very moral core of their culture.²⁵

The broad support for state-generated moral language about this process indicates the partial success of the new governance narratives, but it also highlights the ethical dimensions of cultural sovereignty claims. These ethical dimensions have also been shaped by concerns that capitalist (and potentially amoral) values would come to dominate the cultural realm.

Culture and Capital

They take our art and sell it abroad. We get nothing from it. They do nothing for Egyptian art here. What’s the difference between that and what the British did with our cotton?

—Younger generation Egyptian art critic, 2003

Egyptian artists may not subscribe to the view that economic interest always pollutes artistic production, but the history of colonialism and postindependence socialism means that the relationship between culture and capital is especially

fraught in other ways. The concern that the unchecked spread of free-market values could compromise the integrity of Egyptian art reflects a wider concern in Egyptian society: if U.S.-driven neoliberalism opens the Egyptian economy to Western products, it also makes Egyptian culture susceptible to unwanted Western control. This fear that the commoditization of art might take away their power to assign it cultural value has made it that much more crucial for many artists and curators to reassert expertise rooted in knowledge of Egyptian art.

Unsurprisingly, non-Egyptians involved in the art scene in Egypt see state support of the arts as inherently limiting or controlling of artistic production. The capitalist model of artistic production and consumption has deep roots in the United States, and it is becoming increasingly prevalent in Western Europe and parts of East Asia as well, despite the fact that many governments have ministries or socialist-inspired programs that support the arts. The Quartz Gallery owner echoed the perspective of many foreigners when he implied that although the public sector controlled artistic production in Egypt, the development of a private sector is the sure way of the future:²⁶

Whenever you have state control of the arts, that has to loosen its grip. And it only loosens its grip if the private sector makes a strong showing and then people leave the public sector. Support the private sector, invest in the private sector, and then it breaks down the public sector and loosens its control. The public sector has to recognize what's happening, and [then] it allows more freedom in the various areas. But in such a conservative country like Egypt it will take more time. But it happened in Eastern Europe, it happened in South America.

This statement reveals two assumptions shared by other Western curators of Egyptian art. One is that there exists a state-inspired conservatism that must be broken up;²⁷ the second is that the private sector will inevitably take over the public. I suggest that the assumption that the free market will eventually triumph has largely been shaped by the experiences of this generation of foreign gallery owners coming of age when Reagan and Thatcher were radically decreasing and privatizing arts funding and when corporations were becoming the main supporters of art in the United States, Britain, and elsewhere (see Wu 2002). This practice was then exported to a place, Egypt, where the public sector had done the opposite: increased its arts funding while encouraging the growth of the private sector. This assumption of market triumphalism is also part of the seductive teleological thinking underlying neoliberal projects, especially in the arts.

Although young Egyptians seek out private-sector clients as a way to make a living, many have not been convinced that a complete private-sector takeover of the art market is desirable. The economic disparities wrought by Sadat's program of market liberalization and the continued presence of the leftist socialist intellectual tradition have produced deep suspicions of wholesale privatization, particularly in the culture industries. In the view of Egyptian art professionals, one cannot ensure artistic quality—let alone cultural integrity—in a completely money-driven

environment. One Egyptian art critic articulated this perspective in no uncertain terms:

Private galleries are, by necessity, commercial galleries. And the nature of government galleries is not commercial. In one of the stages of societal change, we will still need more guaranteed protection from the predatory [nature] of the private gallery that will always strive to establish the style of the artist depending on the art market in general. And unfortunately the tastes of the buyers that are in Egypt are mostly superficial.

This sense that the audience should not dictate the production of art is pervasive. For example, the young artists I knew faulted foreign diplomats and Egyptian aristocracy alike for only wanting to buy paintings with pastoral or folkloric themes. If the market was given free reign, they argued, then artists doing more experimental work would be ostracized. Similarly, artists who were against new media believed that many Westerners prefer experimental work; therefore there was a danger that “authentic” Egyptian art might disappear from lack of support. In short, Egyptian artists of both major aesthetic perspectives remain concerned that an open market would unfairly encourage certain kinds of art at the expense of others.

The challenge they face is also framed as an ethical one: how might one take advantage of the new channels of art exposure, inspiration, and clientele without compromising one’s artistic vision and cultural integrity? For some artists, the solution has been to keep the socialist ideal of a caretaker state intact, while helping to develop a cultural policy that is updated and productive. Many artists hope that the state remains able to protect them from the vicissitudes of the global art market by offering stable salaries, acquisitions, and prize money, and they appreciate its more transparent system of assigning artistic value.²⁸ Strong government programs for the arts are also seen as important in stemming the spread of Islamism, the most extreme strands of which were born in Egypt and pose a threat to image makers such as visual artists.

This is not to say that Egyptians do not see the government as wholly impartial, nor do they always support the state uncritically.²⁹ But for many artists, the government’s problems (gerontocracy, corruption, and bureaucracy) are well known and therefore easier to face, whereas the problems of the new private sector are still unclear and therefore much more threatening. Although the U.S. curator described the ministry as making “opaque” decisions, many Egyptians feel that the newcomers’ decisions are actually less transparent. This feeling was evident in the many rumors that circulated about Western curators. For example, the rapid physical expansion of these galleries, the noticeable increase in high-quality catalogues and opening receptions, and the massive scale of the Nitaq Festival led many in the art world to wonder where all the money was coming from. One critic raised his suspicions of the Quartz Gallery’s activities in front of a packed audience at an artists’ union conference, saying that he was not exactly sure what the gallery’s intentions were. Egyptian artists and audience members sometimes discuss the

festival or private galleries using words such as “dubious” or “suspicious” and gossip endlessly about the possible ulterior motives of the new Western interest in Egyptian art. The minister of culture registered his doubt in a statement that served both as a reassurance and an assertion of government surveillance: “If there is anything around these galleries that is being hidden behind a curtain, then there are authorities that are taking care of it” (‘Ali 2001b:27).

This idea that a Western-owned private gallery could be involved in questionable activities or have dubious intentions stems not just from an ideological issue with capitalism but also from a more general suspicion of foreign conspiracies. The issue of U.S. support for Israel and famous instances of Israeli espionage in Egypt are evidence enough for Egyptians that the presence of foreigners should not be trusted blindly. For many Egyptian intellectuals, the spread of foreign capital in the cultural realm has the potential to do as much violence as the bombs over Gaza and Baghdad.

Conclusion

The transformation from socialism to the privatization of markets has produced tremendous ambivalence and anxiety in Egypt’s culture industries. For those working in this context, the stakes are just as high, if not higher, than for those working in the economic sector. Many Egyptians are finding it important to rearticulate their authority over Egyptian art as it enters the international art market. Although state actors may have the most to lose if Egyptian art were to be completely privatized, artists and critics of varying relations to the state are just as concerned that the globalization of Egyptian art solely through the private sector may disrupt local hierarchies of value constituted through anticolonial nationalism and enshrined in the policy and institutions of state socialism. Older tensions inherent in the production of modern art have thus been reinvigorated, just as previous imperialisms are viscerally remembered, particularly after the invasion of Iraq.

In this struggle, two regimes of power work in tandem and against one another in new strategies of governance and control. The players vie for the rights to represent and market Egypt; they both lay claim to art knowledge and expertise; and they both have young artists as their subjects. Western elites draw their power from the inequalities and evolutionary ideology that have persisted since the colonial era, even if they do not recognize that they are doing so.³⁰ The modernist legacy of artistic judgment based on progress and newness is harnessed along with this project, and helps reproduce evolutionary hierarchies between West and non-West through art. At the same time, state elites draw their power from national institutions and from widely shared socialist-inspired nationalist ideologies. Their articulations of sovereignty are also intertwined with new practices of Egyptian state surveillance. Although the activities of the private sector have interrupted the status quo, they have also contributed to a renewed consolidation of Euro-American power and elitism in the international art scene (see Oguibe 2004).

Corresponding assertions of cultural sovereignty are more relational than autonomous: Egyptian sovereignty is to be realized through its integration (on equal footing) into the international art scene. Furthermore, the exercise of cultural sovereignty is not all encompassing but graduated; it is meant to protect or control certain aspects of cultural production but not others; and it is strategic and context specific.

Arjun Appadurai has indicated that “there may be some embarrassing new possibilities for equity hidden in [the] workings” of capital (2000:1). Indeed, the evidence from Egypt suggests that global art world flows have caused cracks in the state’s hegemonic project and have compromised long-standing claims to authority, especially those based on generational and institutional position. It would be a mistake to insist that artists working in formerly colonized countries, or those exiting socialism, must choose between state cultural policy and a capitalist art market. Both options have their costs. This is why many young artists living in Egypt try to create another way that would blend some of the positive aspects of both the private and public sectors while recognizing both the problems and the potentials of nation-oriented art production and consumption in the current global order. As one young artist who regularly exhibits at the Quartz Gallery told me recently, “A group of friends and I are trying to create something different. A different space and set of connections that are not the Quartz and not the state.” Stephen Turner argues that sovereignty projects can be “the ground rather than the antithesis of a truly ‘critical’ internationalism” (2002:99–100). Perhaps these new articulations of sovereignty, then, will allow artists to live with the state and with neoliberalism while not being imprisoned by either.

Notes

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1. This article examines a situation similar in some ways to the transformations occurring in the former Eastern bloc. Here, and in my book on the Egyptian art world (Winegar in press), we see similarities in the versatility of functions fulfilled by cultural nationalism, the reinvigoration of East–West hierarchies and competitions, the combination of a desire to engage the West while defending oneself from outsiders’ demonization of life under socialism, the important role of morality and memory in understandings of the nation, and

the general experience of dislocation. See especially Daphne Berdahl et al. 2000, Dominic Boyer 2001, Katherine Verdery 1996. However, as will become clear, there are two crucial differences that distinguish the Egyptian case. The first is that Egyptian socialism had been the outcome of the experience of colonialism, and therefore the shift away from socialism has a particularly postcolonial cast. The second is that Egypt, as part of the Middle East, plays a central role in what many have called the new “American empire.” This fact makes the transformations particularly suspect to Egyptians.

2. For particularly good analyses of these tensions in other formerly colonized societies with famous ancient art traditions, see Geeta Kapur 2000 for India and Liza Bakewell 1995 for Mexico.

3. I am glossing over an incredibly complex history here, in which there is tremendous overlap between periods, media, themes, and styles—even within individual artists’ trajectories. For more detailed discussions on how different “Egyptian moderns” have been constituted through art, see Liliane Karnouk 2005 and Winegar in press.

4. I am using the concept “hierarchy of value” as explicated by Myers (2001).

5. I follow Verdery (1996) in calling this a transformation rather than a “transition” because the latter assumes that the changes will result in Egyptian society becoming completely like Western capitalist societies. This assumption, and the teleological thinking underlying it, was held by many of the Western curators discussed herein. Therefore, I analyze the language of transition rather than uncritically adopt it.

6. For a good example of one of the few explorations of non-Western cultural policy (in Latin America), see Javier Stanzola 2002.

7. These points are discussed more fully in Winegar in press. Egypt is also an interesting comparison to postunification German cultural policy, which creates neoliberal subjects through more elaborate techniques of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense of the term (see Stevenson 1999). Also, the state security required for every meeting of the WTO or G8 reminds us of the key role played by states in enabling neoliberalism.

8. The most useful comparisons to the Egyptian case that I have found are in Native American sovereignty struggles. See in particular Wallace Coffey and Rebecca Tsosie’s (2001) development of a concept of cultural sovereignty that harnesses long-standing values to assert autonomy from external control and from definitions of political sovereignty that negate or assimilate cultural difference. See also Jessica R. Cattelino’s (2004) exploration of Seminole tribal sovereignty as (not always juridical) independence and interdependence and as in relationship to nonindigenous economies and sovereignties.

9. For elaboration on this point, see Winegar in press.

10. For more detailed information on the art market during this period, see Rushdi Iskandar et al. 1991.

11. The events of 9/11 have sparked widespread curiosity about the Middle East, as evidenced in the endlessly repeated questions, “Who are they?” and “Why do they hate us?” Curators have both responded to and promoted the idea that the Middle East can be better understood through its art. Many use art to combat the stereotypes of Middle Easterners as barbaric and inhuman and to promote a more friendly vision of the Middle East and Muslims. Funds for launching exhibitions of Middle Eastern art have also increased, especially in Europe.

12. I have used pseudonyms, such as the Quartz Gallery, for most people and place names, except public figures and the artists whose work I feature.

13. This nostalgia may be primarily attributed to foreigners and upper-class Egyptians (Bissell 2005).

14. This may be an unintended effect. The gallery owner stated that he chose the gallery on the basis of its high ceilings, which he said are best for displaying art, not out

of nostalgia for the colonial period. Still, it is interesting that no Egyptian-owned private galleries have high ceilings, a fact that makes one entertain the thought that there is an important similarity between the aesthetics of the colonial period and those of the new elites benefiting from neoliberalism.

15. Generational divisions and hierarchies have been fundamental organizing principles in the Egyptian art world. During the time of my fieldwork, the “younger generation” generally referred to artists who started their careers after 1989, whereas the “older generation” denoted artists who came of age during Nasserist socialism.

16. Unfortunately, I do not have space here to go into the many battles between the holders of these opposing aesthetic perspectives over state resources and the direction of state cultural policy. For a full accounting of these battles, especially within state institutions themselves, see Winegar in press.

17. In 1995, Egypt became the first non-Western country to win the Venice Biennial’s Golden Lion Prize for best country pavilion.

18. There is also an interesting parallel between these works and the production and circulation of Orientalist photographic representations of Middle Eastern daily or harem life during the colonial period.

19. Their best communication is actually with a very small, elite group of young artists whose English is impeccable, who have extensive overseas experience, and who were mostly educated abroad or at the elite private American University in Cairo. These artists’ structural position enables a less-tempered critique of the state. The availability of this small group, combined with many foreign curators’ view that the state is inherently bad for art, has resulted in the misrecognition that all young artists have been engaged in a valiant struggle against state control.

20. It is important to note that many of these marginalized artists found their own private market in the Egyptian-owned private-sector galleries in the more upscale neighborhoods of Cairo. These are galleries catering to Egyptian old-money elites and older Western businesspeople and diplomats who prefer folkloric representations of Egypt. These Western audiences are akin to those discussed by Katherine Zirbel (2000) in her work on the Western penchant for Egyptian “folk” music. Without the state’s involvement in expanding experimental visual arts, it is likely that most Westerners would have continued to consume folkloric or pastoral modern art.

21. In my discussions with these foreign curators, I often asserted my own expert status as someone who “knew” Egyptian art better than they (the temptation was too great). Elsewhere, I discuss my own complicity in being an “expert” and representing Egyptian art (Winegar in press).

22. The one exception was a Lebanese-Egyptian from the French-speaking aristocratic elite who had spent many years in France and returned to Egypt to open a gallery downtown.

23. She found another way in the neoliberal economy: she started an NGO that received corporate and foundation funding for arts programs in a poor Alexandria neighborhood.

24. The mere title of the article on the Netherlands exhibition suggests that proprietary notions of sovereignty of the sort critiqued by Michael Brown (2003) were also operative.

25. I should mention that this nationalist assertion of rights to represent Egypt abroad was laughed at by many of the young artists who were getting international attention through the new galleries. International success enabled their critique of the state’s claims in this regard.

26. This ideology was also contextual in the sense that, when it came to their home countries, many Americans and Europeans thought that government support for the arts was important. There seemed to be a general assumption that state funding for the arts in the Middle East meant more direct control over artists than state funding in the West, despite

infamous examples such as the National Endowment for the Arts scandals in the United States.

27. Many Westerners also believe that Egyptian artistic production has been controlled or limited by social conservatism more than artistic production in the West. Religion and gender have been seen as the main areas in which conservatism takes root.

28. This perspective on the state exists in French art circles as well and, given that the Egyptian Ministry of Culture was inspired by the French version, it is likely that this ideology of a caretaker state came partially from the French. It has mapped onto people's views of the ideal state socialist project, wherein the state protects citizens from capitalist exploitation. For another rich example of how culture producers in (post)socialist societies value the state for the comforts, prestige, and certain freedoms it offers, see Louisa Schein 2000.

29. This support for the ideal of the caretaker state is not the same thing as support for the state outright. As I discuss in Winegar (in press) most Egyptian art world people (including ministry officials) critique the state but nonetheless share a hope that it will do its job and a belief that it should.

30. It should be noted that, as this market grew, the staff of these new galleries gradually came to have some of the critiques that I had, particularly of Western critics and other curators that came through Cairo on quick jaunts. The Quartz Gallery staff in particular also changed some aspects of the gallery's operation by including Egyptians on the board of directors and trying to make sure that wall text and gallery literature were also printed in Arabic. Nonetheless, a version of this article angered them and many foreigners involved in the art scene, who accused me of being a nationalist and an apologist for the state. My attempts to clarify that explaining state actors' rationale is not the same thing as being a nationalist or apologist failed. But the episode highlights the extent to which anthropologists are often implicated in these international circulations, evaluations, and representations of culture (see Marcus and Myers 1995).

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ABSTRACT *The post-1989 transformation of the Egyptian art world reveals the particular tenacity of colonial logics and national attachments in culture industries built through anticolonial nationalism and socialism. Tensions emerged between and among Western and Egyptian curators, critics, and artists with the development of a foreign-dominated private-sector art market and as Egyptian art begins to circulate internationally. This international circulation of art objects has produced rearranged strategies of governance in the cultural realm, collusions and conflicts between the public and private sector, and, most importantly, a new articulation of cultural sovereignty. [art, neoliberalism, sovereignty, nationalism, postsocialism]*