THE SUBLIME IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND POLITICS:

"The post-9/11 Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora in North America"

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Abstract

The Sublime in Contemporary Art and Politics: The post-9/11 Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora in North America

This dissertation takes ethnographic approach to researching art with an emphasis on the artistic practices of Middle Eastern diasporic artists in Canada and the USA. This dissertation moves from an account of aesthetic theory to the revival of public interest in art related to the Middle East and the artistic challenges faced by diasporic artists from the Middle East in presenting depictions of their own subjectivity. The Arab Spring, revolutions, bloody protests and riots, as well as the attacks of radical Islamist groups have crowded mainstream news coverage with images of terror and the paradigm of radical destruction. Such reflections of horrific scenery emulate the aesthetics of the sublime in the imagination of contemporary politics. The increasing body of art emphasizing the region of the Middle East has also regenerated this mainstream media focus on the Middle East, Arab lands, and the “Muslim landscape" with the same connotation of sublimity. I argue that these artistic reflections presume a particular Middle Eastern diasporic subjectivity that comes into visibility simultaneously as the translator and the witness, as well as the victim or perpetrator of this catastrophic imagery of the Middle East. I explore the artistic practices of the Middle Eastern diaspora in order to understand how they reflect their own self-image in the contemporary art scene to challenge this stereotype of the “disaster carrier”. I also investigate the novel ways in which the new social movements in the Middle East, such as the Green Movement in Iran or the various Arab Springs, are represented by the art works of critical diasporic artists living in North America and how such representations settle within the landscape of contemporary art. In this study, I consider two major subject matters that are present within diasporic artworks related to Middle East: the artistic representations of home countries and the current socio-political landscape; and the self-

design art practices enacted through memories of immigration, performances of body and religiosity in the North American art scene. Rather than an analysis of hegemony, this dissertation analyzes how these art trends claim to be artistically valuable and aim to reach a wide audience, as well as what kinds of artistic desires they evoke. Drawing on critical studies of democratic process and social equity, this book contributes to aesthetic theory on contemporary art and puts forward questions concerning whether or not the oppositional capacity of contemporary art has withered away in neoliberal democracies.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, Tevfik Seno Arda, professor of civil engineering in steel construction, who taught me the love of art.

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A particular debt of gratitude is owned to Johannah May Black and K. Murat Guney for inspiration and mentorship as well as for encouragement, advice and friendship. Johannah, my true friend and PhD fellow, brilliant thinker and advocate of social justice, not only edited my first draft of dissertation but navigated me through artistic environments in Toronto and beyond during my research. Her willingness to comment on drafts of my chapters has been incredibly helpful and her patience in this task is deeply appreciated. Murat, my partner in all of the challenges that I got into in my life from the early years of undergraduate studies, is an excellent critic and skillful social analyst. Conversations with him about the issues dealt with in this study have been invaluable in the process of planning and compiling it. Without them, this dissertation could have never come out.

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An Introduction: The Contemporary Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora and the Politics of Terror

Organized around a series of content paradigms relating to diasporic artworks on the Middle East and "Middle-Easterness", this dissertation explores key questions regarding the relation between politics and aesthetics, the representation of diasporic subjectivity, the imagery of the Middle East, sublime aesthetics in contemporary art, and the emancipatory promise of art in the age of terror, discriminatory politics and xenophobic social relations. Focusing closely on the dominant artistic trends and their powerful examples, this study analyzes aesthetic innovations that challenge or acknowledge the dominant imagination of our current world as one structured by a reign of horror and insecurity, and examines how the sublime aesthetics of this imaginary of the reign of terror is generated in their art.

More specifically, this research investigates how contemporary art provides insight into the possibility of democracy and emancipation in a climate of othernization for the Middle Eastern diaspora or diaspora from Muslim majority countries and the humanitarian emergency for socio-political crises in different parts of Middle East overrules the world's spotlight with a focus on the current refugee crisis. For Jacques Rancière, democracy is politics and furthermore, politics is present from the moment when a subject exists in the sphere of appearances, the people, whose particular attribute is to be different from itself, internally divided. Following Rancière's account of democracy in relation of the partition of the sensible, this project suggests that aesthetics as the science of the sensible, as much as a theory of art, not only discovers but shapes and redefines specific historical organizations of social roles and communality.

It is important to commence by closely considering the term "sublime" in order to better understand the dominant imagination of the roles and actors prescribed within the system of the

war on terror. The relationship between art and terror has been traditionally constructed as contradictory. The "terrorist" kills (destroys) and the artist creates (gives life). However, this relationship becomes more ambivalent in the current "perceptional regime[1]" even though "terrorist" attacks seem to dominantly target artists or cultural events, for example the Charlie Hebdo massacre, the Paris Attacks or the destruction of ancient Assyrian sites and cultural heritage by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Contemporary images of terror along with the radicalism of destruction and self-destruction have already become the banner of the early years of the 21st century from September 11(2001) by Al-Qaeda to the Paris Attacks (2015) by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Damien Hirst defined the September 11th attacks as, "kind of like an artwork in its own right": "You've got to hand it to them on some level because they've achieved something which nobody would have ever have thought possible, especially to a country as big as America.[2]" Thus, the World Trade Center attacks became a high profile incidence where sublime aesthetics visited North America. In other words, terror has an aesthetic component shared with contemporary art although the reflection of the sublime that each presents differs significantly, as well as the impact that each has on our current collective imagination.

The postmodern sublime has existed in the forefront of the perceptional regime of the sensible since the end of World War II[3]. Contemporary art sits at a crossroads of sublime perception, bearing witness to the Other, in the sense of loss of subjectivity and the failure of utopian thinking and human progress on one hand, and a focus on expressing agonism and the

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[1] Perceptional regime as a term is generated from the "partition of sensible" that Jacques Rancière defines as an understanding that politics are aesthetic in principle because they reconfigure the common field of what is seeable and sayable, while policing on the other hand maintains the status-quo through defining the roles and the actors of the system.

[2]Rebecca Allison, "9/11 Wicked but a Work of Art, Says Damien Hirst," *The Guardian*, September 11, 2002, sec. UK news, http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11.

[3] The section "The Sublime of Contemporary Art" in Chapter 1 studies the relation of contemporary art with sublime aesthetics after the Second World War in more detail.

idealization of multiplicity emphasized with the impossibility of universality and a deep respect for different formations of knowledge and traditions on the other. Arthur C. Danto states that beauty is morally good in contemporary art and beauty in these artworks aims to generate a sense of well-being in the viewer who registers this beauty as morally good[4]. However, in the regime of contemporary art, the good becomes the beautiful in contrast to Kantian terminology. Kant states that the good is good because of the interest-drive, for potentiality in utility, whereas the beautiful is objectively good without the spectator's interest. Hence, in the contemporary art scene, the utility of artwork, its message, the artist's statement and background, as well as the assumed viewer's gain in the spectacle are major discussion topics in the process for all artwork to become beautiful. Now all artworks are considered to reflect an interest in contrast to Kantian disinterestedness in the perception of the beautiful in accordance with the dominant thought of the Enlightenment. Beauty has been regarded as an ideological construction whose norms vary historically and across cultures[5], and artworks become beautiful according to the interests that they declare, aim at or are assumed to project in the first place. In this spirit, Danto interprets the 1993 Biennial presenting Americans as victims and as victimizers[6]:

> There was little beauty in the show, but how critically, could there have been if beauty would be incompatible with such contents? The difficulty was not with the individual items so much as with the sense that the entire show was like a market-place for grievances. It was like a congress of street-corner moralizers, each attempting to make the viewers conscious of their moral short-falls.

That said, contemporary art often follows an underlying ethic for giving voice to what is unsaid, unrepresented and unconventional. Here, the sublime event comes from the danger of the loss of self to the Other through the ethical demand of multiplicity because the Kantian engine of

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[4] Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: The Paul Carus Lectures 21*, 21st edition (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 2003).
[5]Beth Hinderliter, William Kaizen, and VeredMaimon, eds., *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics* (Durham: Duke UnivPr, 2009), 3.
[6] Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty*.

transcendental activity has not survived the era of the post-Enlightenment. Similarly, I suggest that contemporary art engages with the Middle East and related subjects and topics because of the current cultural focus on the "Other".

The contemporary art regime has a tendency to deconstruct granted realities, categories and historical claims. Accordingly, I contend that imagination of the Middle East and of "Middle Easterness" in the mainstream discourse of the reign of terror in the global sphere offers a large range of topics for the contemporary art scene to engage with. Following the age of the war on terror and the assumed reign of terror following the September 11th attacks, the Anglo-American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the consecutive jihadist atrocities, "Middle Easterness" has become the primary motif for "Otherness" in opposition to Western hegemony within mainstream discourse. In the language of mainstream discourse, a terrorist is the very exception not included in the "humanity" of current neoliberal politics. Thereby, Jessica Winegar states that, "there is no greater contrast to the image of a suicide bomber than the image of an artist."[7] This figure of the artist vis-à-vis the terrorist embodies the very discernibility between the cultural realm and the profane realm that today's dominant societal value regime cannot transcend. I argue that the popularity of otherization of the "Middle East" and "Middle Easterness" in the mainstream discourse and mass media activates artistic sensibilities of communal well-being and cancels hostilities. It also engages in art's responsibility to bear witness to the other and the suffering of victims in different parts of the Middle East in diverse civil wars and unrest.

[7]Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror," *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 675, doi:10.1353/anq.0.0024.

One of the key problematics at the heart of the debates on contemporary art is whether its oppositional capacity has withered away. The primary critique here resides in the consideration of contemporary art as deconstructive rather than constructive. The "art of the after" has attacked norms and traditions, taboos and institutions, and it has also criticized war. This critical argument about contemporary art points out that there is a retreat in emancipatory projection in the current art scene and that contemporary art reproduces the contemporary politics of terror. Thus, this study contributes to aesthetic theory on contemporary art through an ethnographic case study analysis of diasporic art related to Middle Eastern subjects and subjectivities. My research proceeds from this tactical resemblance of the contemporary arts and the contemporary realm of politics and its images. Boris Groys asserts that, similar to the tactics used in contemporary art, in the mass images of terror such as the famous photographs and videos from the Abu-Ghraib prison in Baghdad, "the same subversive aesthetics was used to attack and to undermine a different, other culture in an act of violence, in an act of humiliation of the other[8]". Groys states that:

> These videos and photographs demonstrate an uncanny aesthetic similarity with alternative, subversive European and American art and filmmaking of the 60-and 70s. The iconographic and stylistic similarity is, in fact, striking. (Viennese Actionism, Pasolini etc.). In both cases the goal is to reveal a naked, vulnerable, desiring body that is habitually covered by the system of social conventions.

Groys interprets the reign of terror in the imagery of the mass media as the repolitisation of the sublime in the sense that, "the contemporary politics represents itself as sublime again – that means as ugly, repelling, unbearable, terrifying." That is because the act of war itself engages with its own documentation and representation. Thus, the first question that led me to investigate

[8]Boris Groys, "The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror," *Centre for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths, UK.< Http://roundtable. Kein. Org/sites/newtable. Kein. Org/files*, 2005, http://zeitgenoessischeaesthetik.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/GROYS_the_fate_of_art.pdf.

contemporary art related to the Middle East was how can oppositional art compete with images of terror and war that construct dominant communal imaginaries while both utilizing the same tools of deconstruction as an artistic strategy and sublimity as imagery?

But what drives the urgency of thinking on diasporic subjectivities and the representation of the image of the Middle East? In the age of high speed communication and transportation, the diaspora also reflects dualities of places and the omission of boundaries between what is assumed to be "homeland" and "host country". Even before these inventions, a diasporic visual image can be necessarily understood through fragments of the past and the present in literature. In the case of the diasporas from Middle Eastern or Muslim majority countries, I argue that a sense of borderlessness connects the Middle Eastern diasporic subject to the assumed cultural habits and life styles of the Middle Eastern geography, as well as to the spread of socio-political disasters, such as totalitarian governance, a generalized lack of order, collapse of the judicial system and justice, harsh socio-economic hierarchies, a lack of tolerance for diversity, and sovereign violence, civil wars, chaos and brutal death. From this perspective, the diaspora from the Middle East is assumed to be a carrier of these traits of disaster, terror and horror in and through its body. Thus, I contend that "Middle Easterness" is generated from the subject's belonging to historical cultures whereas Middle Eastern culture has been equated with the permanent experience of "disaster". This also gives rise the idea that any sign of non-adaptation means the contamination of the assumed disaster-free West by Middle Easterness[9]. This assumption has been fortified by the fact that the attacks of the Boston marathon in 2013, the Paris massacre or the San Bernardino attack in 2015 were partially or completely planned and executed by diaspora members from the Middle

[9] More detailed study of this argument can be found in the section "Sublimity of Middle-Eastern Subject Matter in the Age of Terror", Chapter 2

East or Muslim majority countries and that the knowledge of recruitment of numbers of members of the diaspora into radical groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS). Consequently, Middle Eastern diaspora live under suspicion that they are the Other bringing the disaster to the "West".

In this sense, I take diasporic art related to the Middle East to possess an advantageous position from which to attract art audiences who interpret the artwork in the realm of the discourse of the war on terror. This is valid even in cases where the interpreter is a dissident or disagrees with these kinds of policing politics since even the oppositional view posits itself within this consensual regime. I have aimed to study the self-representation of the diaspora in reacting, reconfiguring, deconstructing and settling their own visuality, as well as their attempts to interpret and transform the images and ways of seeing the Middle East in the public sphere. As Nicolas Mirzoeff has emphasized, "visual culture is not an optical process but a contest as to who is capable of visualizing events, whether in and as the History proposed by the state, or as alternative subaltern or decolonial readings[10]". So, a critical stance in contemporary art can be understood as an act of claiming place for those who have no place or voice in their own representation, as well as within the dominant discourses in the public sphere. Thus contemporary art has special tendency to engage with local or individual reflections of history and memory in the post-Enlightenment period marked by the denial of universality and Western supremacy in representing others[11]. Critical visuality that can be reflected in artistic practices is used, "not only to find a different place from which to visualize but who may decide whether the line falls[12]". Therefore,

[10]Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*, 3 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2012), sec. Introduction.

[11] This issue of contemporary art's focus on ethnically and culturally marked art is studied in Chapter 2, "The New in Contemporary Art: The Emergence of Local Informant Art"

[12]Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999).

my unit of analysis focuses on the artistic performances of diasporic artists on the Middle Eastern imagery in the public sphere.

I will also examine the tension of identity politics and the terms of opposition in contemporary art. Categorizations of acts and actors, "restructure the physical and cultural environment by dividing cities into ethnic zones, where none may have previously existed, designating regions as safe or dangerous, constructing separation walls, and declaring no-fly zones[13]". According to Jacques Rancière, this is the policing effect of consensus while politics in fact refers to the aesthetic in principle because it reconfigures the common field of what is seeable and sayable. For Rancière, critics start with dissensus through forming a surplus in the framing of specific appearances in the consensual system. This is not about giving voice to the oppressed or revealing what is concealed in the reality of the social but, "the introduction of a visible into the field of experience, which then modifies the regime of the visible[14]". In other words, the truth of politics resides precisely in what politics is meant to conceal. The main function of the traditional discourse of opposition and critical stance, designated by Rancière as metapolitics, is always to detect signs of untruth in every political practice by pointing to the gap between names and things, or between appearances and realities[15]. However, Rancière agrees that politics starts when the actors and acts designated to them, namely the partition of the sensible, is disturbed[16]. Thus, according to this logic, the importance of the art practices of the Middle Eastern diaspora reside in their role and capacity in reconfiguring the dominant imagination of subjects and actors and not in giving voice to the oppressed or unrepresented agent and subjectivities.

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[13]Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader*, xxxii.
[14]Hinderliter, Kaizen, and Maimon, *Communities of Sense*, 8.
[15]Ibid.
[16]Jacques Ranciere, *Disagreement: Politics And Philosophy*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004), 99.

This study brings together a constellation of terms related to identity, diasporic subjectivity, terror, violence, bare life, and migration. These terms are developed in their theoretical specificity in relation to diasporic artistic paradigms extracted from visual culture. Specifically, this dissertation covers the following:

- In the aftermath of this already constructed setting in the global visual imagination, what kind of art approach and artistic tactics have been taken up by diasporic artists?
- Has contemporary art's power of deconstruction withered away in its encounter with the contemporary politics of terror? How have diasporic artistic expressions of contemporary art represented positive change, social justice and equality, in a political context where emancipatory discourses have already been denied in the postmodern imagination?
- How is it possible to artistically represent victimhood and suffering as well as traumatic othernization?
- How have diasporic artists from the Middle East explored their current global positioning of otherness? How have artists invented and reconfigured current politics in their artistic strategies to intervene in and to employ the reign of the sublime?

Conceptualization

Imagery

The term *imagery* calls up the dominant imagination where the image is an object displayed within a visual communication. I use this concept to describe the stereotyping of an image under a specific title, formulation, or design through sociocultural, political, technological, and economic forces. Thus, *imagery* indicates the perceptional logic in the collective language of the sensible in mainstream use because it defines a preconceived notion of a given image. Following this argument, *imagery* reflects the constitution of specific orders of visibility and sense through which political divisions manifest themselves as assigned roles and defined parts, in other words, the partition of the sensible in the terminology of Jacques Rancière.

The Sublime and Terror

The long-standing relationship between sublime aesthetics and the concept of terror, a phenomenon well-known, but it always faces possible re-evaluation in the light of historical advancement of collective imagination. For instance, our understandings of the sublime and the feelings of terror that it provokes change according to our changing perceptions of human capacity because the sublime reflection designates unrepresentability and the accordance of this unrepresentability with human imagination. This unrepresentability evokes terror because it predicts a loss of self through its urgent demand for expansiveness in the self-imagination. That is why the notion of the sublime was outlined by Edmund Burke as an aesthetic quality that was fitted to excite ideas of pain and danger[17]. The perception of the possible physical, emotional, and intellectual human response to the expansiveness of nature or art is akin to revision. Importantly,

[17]Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Basil Blackwell, 1987), 39.

the sublime of Enlightenment period in Kantian terminology differs from the postmodern sublime found in the art that follows the Second World War. Consequently, the terror that the sublime appearance incites corresponds to what is expected and/or not expected in the collective vision of the human condition. To acknowledge the sublime always means terror, but it does not always become a self-loss that can be defined as transcendence and positive pleasure at the end of the sublime reflection.

Middle Easterness

I use the term Middle East and Middle Eastern even though I am aware that such a conceptualization follows the homogenization of a large region with diverse histories, cultural and ethnic traits as well as socio-political stances and imaginaries. Indeed, I use the term "Middle East' for all Muslim majority countries although there are many artists and artworks from the South Asian diaspora that participated in or are studied in this research. What is the Middle East? While I agree that *Middle Easterness* does not refer to a region, I argue that in mainstream discourse it reflects some kind of a mixed identity with racial and regional connotations enclosed within the informal definition of the term of "Muslim" in North America, even though the term Muslim does not define all people from Muslim majority countries. In fact, some of these people are not religious or are members of another religion, but they can still be considered "Muslim" in the mainstream North American discourse because they are from Muslim majority countries or they have "brown" skin or an oriental sounding name. On the other hand, within this same mainstream political imaginary, the Middle East also signifies a comparatively limited content where the rule of socio-political disaster exists[18]. The term "Middle East" does not define any

[18] This term is studied in detail in Chapter 2 in the section, "The Sublimity of Middle Eastern Subject Matter".

specific place or any particular countries, precise histories, or even a defined religion, because the discursive construction of the so-called Middle East's borders is a never-ending process. Therefore, I embrace this ambiguity and refer to the imagery of the Middle East and the Middle Eastern rather than a specific region, origin and its habitants. I use this concept as it is used in the dominant discourse because I intend to examine the visuality of this ambiguous identity in global culture and in art practices that draw on this imagery and whether they reflect it, react against it, reproduce it or make a mimicry of it.

Methodology

In order to conduct this study of the artistic self-representation of the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America, I drew on various methodologies of content analysis, one-to-one qualitative interviews, and participant observation. Content analysis of selected artworks and performances by diasporic artists and institutions has allowed me to articulate the themes of artistic value within identity politics as well as the diasporic artistic manoeuvres within the contemporary art scene to build alternative visual representations in the contest of mainstream imagery of Middle Eastern stereotypes in the mass media. In addition to this content analysis, I also conducted qualitative interviews with selected artists and institutions and engaged in participant observation at various gatherings and artistic spectacles in order to provide more detailed answers to the questions proposed in this study.

To implement an outstanding interpretative set for my study and to engage in solid involvement in the field area, I conducted ethnographic research in order to collect data based on first-hand and long-term observations. My aim was also to gain a familiarity with the interviewees and their environment as well as to establish a sense of trust between the interviewer and

interviewee. I provided flexible interview time and semi-structured questions to meet the ultimate goal of the exchange of ideas between the participants and the researcher. I conducted interviews with several diasporic artists engaging in the contemporary art scenes in Canada and the USA.

This ethnographic aspects of the study mentioned-above follow the guidelines of an interactive research paradigm and a hermeneutic approach where the researcher becomes a part of the study. I drew extensively on the hermeneutic methods of Hans-Georg Gadamar, who defines understanding as interpretation. This hermeneutic research design allowed me to recognize people as culturally and historically constructed beings, including myself, the researcher. Here, I define 'culture' as a discourse of contested familiarity that one refers to in order to communicate via the language of present geopolitical structures of power, and hence, a construct that reproduces without perfectly copying dominant power networks. To be more specific, I use a broader definition of 'culture' which is a necessary condition of intersubjectivity, a form of relationality where one receives 'messages' from the other.

The content analysis of selected popular representations of Muslims on the global scale was carried out using qualitative methods. I performed close textual readings that focus on aesthetic theory and art history. Thus, in my content analysis, I investigated the artistic context together with cultural themes and contemporary trends and issues affecting the Middle Eastern diaspora such as those used in defining "terrorism" in reference to the "sublime", "Middle East" with the "aesthetics of the after", and "impossible representation", otherization, disidentification and universality in artistic stances and through the discourse of contemporary art and major debates on aesthetics. Style and structure of aesthetic narrations are inextricably linked to social representation and thus the potential for identification, solidarity, sympathy and also the lack of these same connections. In this sense, my methodological approach followed Ella Shohat's textual

readings of Israeli Cinema wherein she argues that a political analysis must address specific instances through which aesthetic artifacts "speak" in the sense that the narrative structure, character, genre and point-of-view conventions, together with lighting, editing and camera movement, broadly disseminated cultural and ideological codes of Jewish identity[19]. Hence, in my content analysis, I engaged with the codes of the image which allow one to perceive and understand perceptual codes and codes of recognition. I selected several works of art through art exhibitions, festivals, cartoons, YouTube videos, TV series and movies for this content analysis.

Arranged around a series of terms and paradigms, the selected material was collected according to its experienced capacity of inciting public discussions about 'Middle Eastern" diaspora, diaspora from Muslim majority countries and Muslim communities in Canada and the US. My content analysis focusing on selected pieces of Middle Eastern representation in popular culture also included attention to comments, posters and blog posts on the internet. Contemporary art is vast, and the selected artworks studied in this research cannot possibly present all of the terms that emerged within these diasporic art practices. However, the terms and paradigms taken up here serve as guidelines for the critical drive in contemporary art through a case study of Middle Eastern diasporic art practices in North America. I aim to "test" terms such as sublimity, tragedy, "selfie-making" on pertinent practices and vice versa to clarify what is at stake in the partition of the sensible and how a critical stance through which artistic tools and strategies were employed has been evaluated. My project is to extract the prevalent concepts embedded within diasporic artistic practices and to situate them within the context of the current politics focusing on terror and the otherization of Middle Eastern subjectivities.

[19] Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, New edition edition (London ; New York : New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010).

Chapter Outline

In the *Introduction*, I outline the *raison d'être* for this research and outline the contribution that this study will make to our broader understanding of the current dominant global politics and cultural imagination. I includes some of the terminology employed throughout this dissertation and explain the research methodology that I used in the study. I explore the implications of thinking through sublime aesthetics to understand the design of contemporary politics in the context of the war on terror and what contemporary art can offer through diasporic artistic practices related to Middle Easterness for the analysis of diasporic subjectivity, the terms of contemporary art, and the popular imagination of the Middle East and Middle Easterness.

Chapter 1, *Contemporary Art and Identity*, addresses the major theoretical debates on contemporary art and its prevalent subject matter of sublimity both in art and politics. In this chapter I present my conceptual framework and use examples from current news coverage to demonstrate its applicability. I engage with the issue of what is specific in contemporary art and how local, ethnic, cultural and individualized reflections, that I call "local informant art", are taken up in the current art regime. I provide a detailed discussion of the use of identity politics in contemporary art and how this trend reflects a sense of self-loss that corresponds to the imagery of sublime aesthetics and terror. In doing so, I argue that local informant art related to Middle Easterness necessitates a supplementary dimension to this paradigm as it emulates sublimity as subject matter in terms of both contemporary politics and contemporary art.

In Chapter 2, *Exhibiting the Middle East in North America*, I focus on the representation of the Middle East and Middle Eastern subjectivities in art exhibited in the diaspora. Here, I examine the term 'tragedy' in contemporary art and its use in depicting Middle Eastern narrations. I critically engage with the rebirth of tragedy and its meaning through a historical analysis of the theoretical

discussion of tragedy as genre and how it deals with the subject matter of victimhood in the case of narrations of Middle Eastern socio-political disasters. I engage in the discussion of the aestheticization of suffering and violence, as well as its ethical problematic, through exploring the meaning of Middle Eastern pain and the place of the Middle East in understanding of universal history of humanity. In doing so, I draw upon alternative ways of conceptualizing representations of Middle Eastern socio-political disasters and victimhood to remedy the banalization of this very subject matter in diasporic art.

Chapter 3, *The Sublime in the Selfie Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora*, considers the trend of "selfie-art" in contemporary art through the case study of artworks by the Middle Eastern diaspora. In this chapter, I formulated three types of "selfie-art-making" through drawing on the examples selected, such as self-body art, self-memory art, and self-identified Muslim art. The section on 'self-body art' explores artistic tools for deconstructing and generating stereotyped attributes on the 'brown' body with Middle Easterness. Following the same precept of focusing the physical traits highlighted in stereotyping, the sub-chapter 'self-identified Muslim art' investigates the artistic value of exposing 'Muslimness' in diasporic art. 'Self-memory art', another section in this chapter, may at first appear different from the other sections that are much more focused on self-design, physical traits and image- making. This part addresses the issue of representing "bare life", the responsibility of witnessing non-subjectivity for diasporic artists in their own artistic depictions of individual history, as well as the reflection of diasporic memory-building which I call the philosophic journey of diasporic logos. Here, artists' performances of memory reflection borrow from the dominant imagery of the "immigrant", the "Middle East" and "Easterness", and constitute a selfie-display through the play of these imageries. The theorization of all these artistic gestures is meant to reveal the complexity of "selfie-making" and its

signification during the advanced stage of visual communication, as much as the emancipatory potential of diasporic art in terms of erupting dissensus in the consensual regime of terror-focused politics.

In the *Conclusion*, I push back against the terms of critique available in the contemporary art scene through the implications of the sublime aesthetics present in these diasporic artworks and the images of Middle Easterness. This final chapter re-considers the major points gathered throughout the earlier chapters and their subjects of analysis. Focusing on the examples of artwork and artistic stances already examined, I argue that diasporic art related to Middle Easterness has acquired a new momentum that signals the rebirth of tragedy. This also corresponds to the end of postmodernity and the postmodern sublime while the tragedy provokes a positive encounter with sublimity and pleasure in the name of a universal humanity.

1. CONTEMPORARY ART AND IDENTITY

What the sublime mean or signify in contemporary art and politics, and what is the relation of sublime aesthetics to the theme of identity? In the first part of this chapter, 'The Sublime and Contemporary Art", I examine how the sublime has been reconfigured in contemporary art trace the theoretical development of the concept in light of various socio-political developments since the decline of the modernist ideal. In the second section, I analyze how Middle Easterness and the Middle Eastern diaspora relate to contemporary configurations of the sublime. As such I will outline the main themes of otherness that surface in contemporary art in the imagination of the consensual political order. Before focusing on the subject matter of this research, the contemporary art of Middle Eastern diaspora and diasporic art practices in North America in the following chapters, I will summarise the dominant polemics that contemporary art has given rise to in dealing with identity politics in the following sections of this chapter focusing in local informant art and its theoretical underpinnings of democratic supremacy. My emphasis on the theme of identity at large in contemporary art derives from the fact that a vast body of literature exists that debates the potentiality of contemporary art and its handling of otherness. Thus I provide in this first chapter the chief terms, schematization, theoretical background and ongoing discussions of contemporary art and politics in order to situate the subject matter of art practices in the Middle Eastern diaspora and to elaborate on what could be the main challenges that artists come across in developing their artistic stance.

The Sublime of Contemporary Art: Self-Loss and Multiculturalism

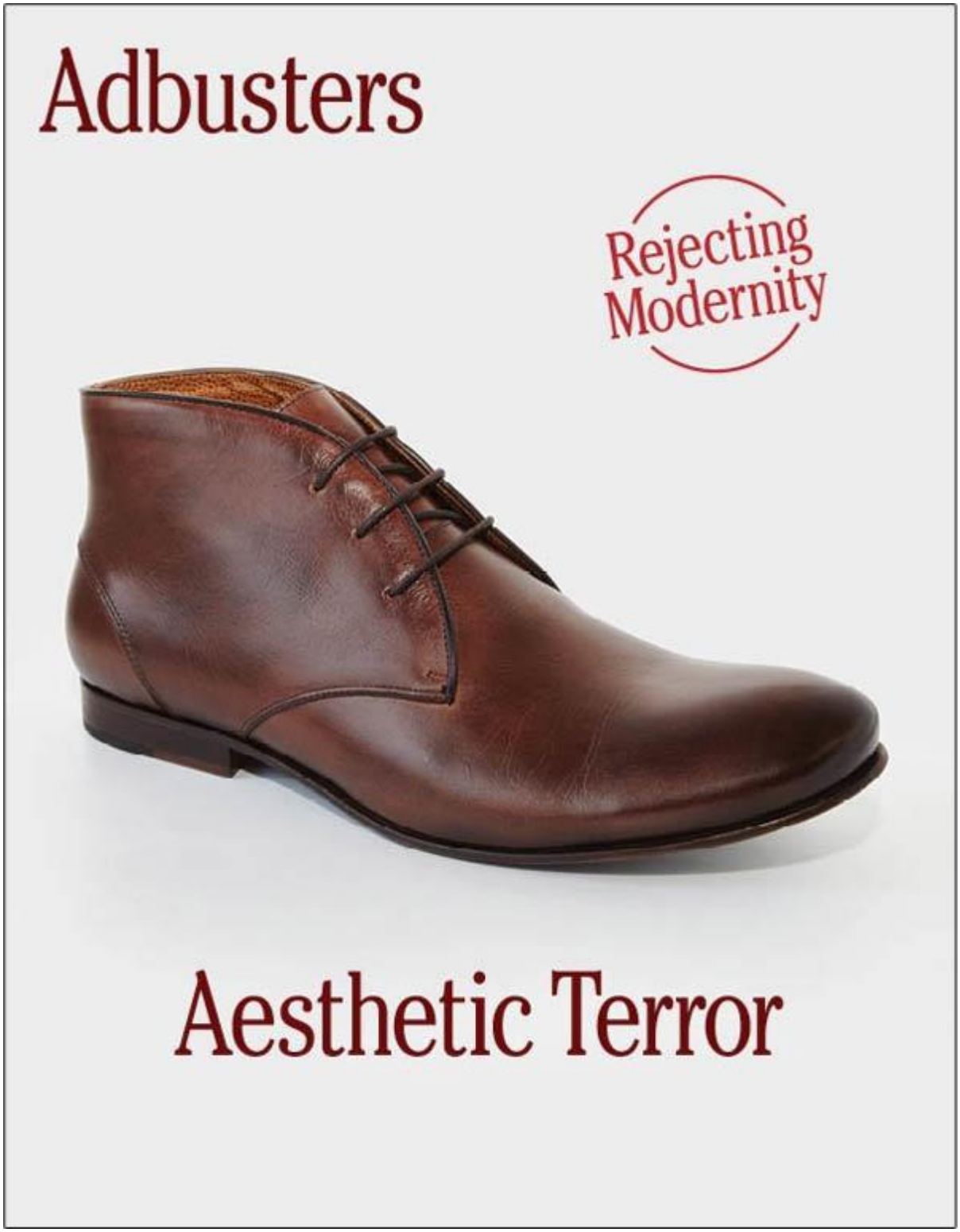

Figure 1-1. Cover of Magazine "Adbusters for the issue of January 2016

Contemporary art is preoccupied with the deconstruction of high art's ideal of the beautiful following a mass disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals and the ideal of universality in the postmodern era. Thus, in the current art regime, art deconstructs rather than creates. However, according to Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant, the beautiful is based on a feeling of pleasure. Kant further claims that everyone ought to share the subject's feeling of pleasure, thus postulating the "universal communicability" of aesthetic pleasure[20]. This conceptualization implies that the viewer first feels pleasure and then is able to understand the object as universally beautiful based on the disinterested nature of his aesthetic pleasure. In contrast, Boris Groys argues that the current "critique of representation was driven by a suspicion that there was something ugly and terrifying hidden behind the surface of conventional idealized image[21]". Thus, the beautiful has lost its artistic value because the Kantian universal reason of the Enlightenment age, the engine of progress that the beautiful embodies, has widely been considered a failure ever since history witnessed what human reason is capable of in the Second World War. Events such as the Atomic Bomb and the systematic human annihilation in Auschwitz shook the Enlightenment ideals of reason and universality to the core within Western dominant discourse. Furthermore, the beautiful has lost its universality and the sociality that it once promised in the contemporary era because it is already assumed to be socially constructed. Following Pierre Bourdieu's argument in *Distinction*, what is "beautiful" is already determined by the existing economic, social, cultural norms and restrictions of society. Hence, the "beautiful" does not offer "a free play" that anybody can pursue. It is not egalitarian in this sense, because it is considered as an ideological tool to distinguish between high and low cultures, a tool of bourgeois critique. That is why, in the contemporary art regime, Groys states that, "each artist is only suspected of producing just one further arbitrary image among

[20]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Revised edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[21]Groys, Boris. 'The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror'. The Aesthetics of Terror. Charta. 2009

many[22]". What the artist produces is reduced to a particular reflection of taste. Groys interprets the fascination with images of terror and the political sublime as a nostalgia for the masterpiece which belongs to the time of singular and precious artworks that were revered with the claim of the Kantian beautiful. In his account, this derives from the fact that images of terror are singular and mostly limited even though they are shown over and over in the mass media, while images of mass culture, entertainment and kitsch have been envisaged as equal through the regime of contemporary art.

Although contemporary art is interpreted as the engine of deconstruction towards the Kantian beautiful, it borrows from the aesthetics of the sublime, a term also studied by Kant. Paul Crowther says, "whereas the concept of beauty seems outmoded – passe – even – in relation to the current practices of criticism in the arts, sublimity has suddenly become- fashionable"[23]. The beautiful is a question of the form of the object yet the sublime can be found in an object even devoid of form as it immediately involves or provokes a representation of limitlessness[24]. In the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant defines the sublime as the idea of absolute greatness where the failure of imagination provokes a movement of pain towards pleasure for the viewer. Thus, the sublime identifies with formlessness or the absence of form as a possible index to the unpresentable: it exceeds its power of presentation. Yet, the Kantian sublime does not inspire contemporary art in its positivist account of the human capacity for transcendence. In Kant, the fact that the overwhelmingly vast and powerful object can be comprehended in rational thought means that human beings can transcend the limitations imposed by their embodied existence. Crowther asserts

[22] Boris Groys. 'The Fate of Art in the Age of Terror'. The Aesthetics of Terror. P59
[23]Paul Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde, and the Postmodern," *New Formations* 7, no. 1 (1989): 67–75.
[24]Kant, *Critique of Judgement*.

that the Kantian sublime is a mental movement where negative moments give way to positive ones in the sense that Kant makes the claim that it is not the vast or powerful object which is sublime, but rather the supersensible cast of mind which enables us to cope with it[25]. Crowther continues, "It should be noted that whilst this reformulation of Kant's theory does hinge on an enriched awareness of the scope of our rational powers, it does not commit us to the view that our rational being is located outside the spatio-temporal world"[26]:

> The sublime is thus, at heart, both a paradoxical and intense experience. It is the sensible world in its excess which limits perceptual cognition, yet it is a particular instance of this excess which gives the scope of rational cognition such a dramatic impact. We feel ourselves to be both imprisoned and liberated by the very same force[27].

Hence, Crowther suggests that Kant's real point is that the sublime demonstrates our supersensible being[28].

However, the figurations of the sublime in the contemporary art scene differ significantly from the Kantian account of the sublime. This is because, "the sublime depends on what it means to be human, because it is the response of a human – physically, emotionally, and intellectually"[29]. As mentioned earlier, the atomic bomb, the Holocaust and the atrocities of the Cold War which dominantly marked the ex- century propagated a deep suspicion of progress and of the human ability to change for the good. For Jean-Francois Lyotard therefore, what remains for thought is to be witness to the historical violence that humanity endures. The post-enlightenment sublime sentiment is the effect of a different and unresolvable dispute among the subjective faculties, between Imagination and Understanding. This follows, in Lyotard, the ethical necessity of art as

[25]Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde, and the Postmodern," 67–68.
[26]Ibid., 68.
[27]Paul Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime: From Morality to Art* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 150.
[28]Ibid., 91.
[29]Bill Beckley, "Sticky Sublime," in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 4.

the politics of bearing witness to the Other. Lyotard assumes that art's role is to disrupt the amnesia of postmodernity relating to the historical violence of World War II[30]. Thus the currency of the sublime in the post-Enlightenment era corresponds to its ability to bear witness to terror, but not as the mutation into pleasure nor as an adulation of the experience of terror[31]. The concept of "differend" defines the gap between the victim and the survivor: "The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be[32]". This reflects Lyotard's postmodern account that artwork is, "the silent feeling that signals a differend remains to be listened to[33]". Thereby, contemporary art reflects the sublime through signaling, "the unbridgeable chasm between sensible and supersensible worlds, between the human and the inhuman, between the individual and his/her obliteration in the absolute[34]". This is the reflection of Lyotard's differend that demands justice. However, for Kant, the sublime feeling of the Enlightenment was significant for the way that it achieved a sense of relief and even elation in so far as the formless phenomenon can be grasped as a totality in terms of a rational idea[35]. The sublime thus demands a loss of self in order to bear witness to the Other without achieving a feeling of Oneness. Hence, "terror is the ruling principle of the sublime[36]" as Edmund Burke projects in Lyotard's mind. Thomas McEvilley defines terror in the sublime and terror-based sublime:

> There is an implication that the sublime is the One, or the Oneness aspect of things, which constantly threatens to annihilate the Many, or the multiplicity aspect of things. When a finite thing 'enters' either metaphysical Oneness or infinity, it ceases

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[30]Stephen Zepke, "Contemporary Art - Beautiful or Sublime? Kant in Rancière, Lyotard and Deleuze.," *Avello Publishing* 1, no. 1, accessed December 15, 2015, http://www.academia.edu/6464972/Contemporary_art_-_beautiful_or_sublime_Kant_in_Ranci%C3%A8re_Lyotard_and_Deleuze.
[31]Andrew Slade, *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime*, 1 edition (New York: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2007), 1.
[32]Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (U of Minnesota Press, 1988), 13.
[33]Ibid., 171.
[34]Zepke, "Contemporary Art - Beautiful or Sublime?"
[35]Crowther, *The Kantian Sublime*, 81.
[36]Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (OUP Oxford, 1990), 54.

> to exist as a separate entity and becomes distributed amongst all things – for in unity, or in infinity, everything is everything…The sublime, however, is always outside the comfort zone; it is everything that will not allow one to be comfortable in one's existence, that threatens one's security and injects chaos into harmony and order – everything, in short, that tears cosmos apart.[37]

Thus, contemporary art and its sublime reflections possess an ethical urgency to the Other and by following this it demands multiplicity. Here, the sublime can also mean the possibility to experience a new self within the physicality of one's own being: "It is the loss of a self, which first must be acquired – through study, connoisseurship, though one's varied relations to other people – though the impulses, memories, principles, and energies that evolve into a sense of self[38]". Hal Foster states that this regulation in contemporary art means that the liberation from history and society is affected by a turn to the self – extreme subjectivity is critical in this sense[39]. This corresponds to the political ideal of multiculturalism. McEvilley states that in the post-sublime every otherness is sublime:

> … so each entity is sublime to every other entity, and the concept sublime has become a universal blank like the concept other. This fits into the whole post-modernist attempt to promote more attention to difference and how to handle it in practical terms for the sake of the living. It also reflects the post-modernist fear of modernist ego-inflated ambitions. [40]

Within the postmodern ideal of the sublime is the possibility of acknowledging varieties of culture as well as a multifarious self but without resolution. In this sense, multiculturalism as the ideal residing in the acknowledgement of differences and the assumption of the impossibility of transcendence reflects the post-sublime aesthetic and the terror of self-loss in the midst of the expansiveness of other entities unreachable to one's grasp of imagination. Foster contends that the

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[37]Thomas Mcevilley, "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart," in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 57.
[38]Bill Beckley, "Sticky Sublime," 5.
[39]Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1998), 17.
[40]Mcevilley, "Turned Upside Down and Torn Apart," 77.

idea of pluralism in art is often conflated with the idea of pluralism in society[41]: "Somehow, to be an advocate of pluralism is to be democratic – is to resist the dominance of any faction (nation, class or style)," while the converse, "to be a critic of pluralism is to be authoritarian". Therefore, contemporary artists simulate schizophrenia which Craig Owens interprets as an emancipatory principle in a way that they produce originality but also conform to the established norms[42]. Their originality comes from their difference and their bearing witness to difference while these differences are assumed to be that which cannot be transcended. In this sense, "the artist flaunts alienation as if it were freedom[43]". Foster also notes that such art can pose provocative contradictions, but more often the mix is promiscuous in the sense that the many artworks can be mixed-media works or amalgams[44]. Therefore, while the designation of emancipation as transcendence can be authoritarian, Owens argues that predicting freedom only in plurality is schizophrenic and not complimentary because it fixes the emancipatory route.

The sublime, as the sensation embodied the absence of the human, urges everyone to be, "exiled from the ownership of yourself[45]". Hence, the postmodern sublime cancels the transcendence, universality and redemption of the old Kantian sublime of the Enlightenment era. As Lyotard puts it:

> The idea of the infinite as a whole cannot give rise to a necessary synthesis of the heterogeneous, that is, to a dynamical synthesis complete with presentation. As the object of an Idea, this absolute infinite is obviously not presentable, and in this sense there is indeed heterogeneity of this object of thought with any object presentable in intuition. [46]

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[41]Foster, *Recodings*, 30.
[42]Craig Owens and Scott Stewart Bryson, eds., "Honor, Power and the Love of Women," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (University of California Press, 1994), 149.
[43]Foster, *Recodings*, 20.
[44]Ibid., 19.
[45]J.-F. Lyotard, "Anamnesis: Of the Visible," *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 107–19.
[46]Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), 140.

Accordingly, the aesthetics of the sublime that have been reincarnated in contemporary art express a catastrophe without calling for a future redemption. "Art of the after" tends to assume historical forms out of context while denouncing the linear flow of history as an emancipatory resolution. It is thus ahistorical while reflecting a return to history: "the context of history is disregarded, its continuum is disavowed, and conflictual forms of art and modes of production are falsely resolved in pastiche[47]". That is why the "return to history" is a "return to the self" in the post-Enlightenment art scene.

Foster paraphrases Kelly Baum who contends that heterogeneity is both contemporary art's condition and its subject[48]. While contemporary art performs agonism, disaggregation and particularization as its subject matter, the emergence of a new technological imagination following the global expansion of high-speed communication and information capacity has shaped the transnational scope of contemporary art in discursive, institutional, and economic terms. Therefore, the sublime embodiment that patronizes multicultural respect for difference as the subject matter of contemporary art has also echoed through its form. Technology is, "ungraspable because of its uncontrollable immensity, and also in that it is a matter of mathematical extension, pure ratio[49]". In fact, the post-sublime had already acquired its technological dimension in the Second World War. While the Kantian sublime reflects on nature, the postmodern sublime becomes a human work after the human-made apocalypses crowded their way into history. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe states that nature's sublime requires that one take note of one's continuity within

[47]Foster, *Recodings*, 16.
[48]Hal Foster, "Contemporary Extracts," *E-Flux*, no. 12 (January 2010).
[49]Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "I'm Not Sure It Is Sticky," in *Sticky Sublime*, ed. Bill Beckley (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 84.

this sublime, as part of the same life force. However, one cannot experience the same kind of continuity with the technological[50]:

> We like techno-capitalism while knowing it to be terrifying: We know how preposterously cruel the market is, what bullshit the arguments for it are, how deadly global warming and the spread of massive pollution are. We don't think we can do very much about these, and it constantly produces for us unprecedented things that we immediately find both indispensable and irresistible… We experience ourselves as powerless before it, not because we're seduced, but because it is uncontrollable.

That said, contemporary art engages in this absolute condition where the image does not own a place or ground while the excess of identities and otherization end up in blurry vision of the current global agenda. Such a demonstration reflects Lyotard's reading of Burke's 'terror': This sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening and hence it designates pain and it impends death[51]. That is because the post-sublime does not see beyond self-loss and this ends up obsessing with self-preservation and the capturing of self-difference to maintain the self.

The Sublimity of the "Middle Eastern" Subject Matter in the Age of Terror

The aesthetics of the sublime in contemporary art repeats itself in contemporary politics and vice versa. The postmodern sublime in contemporary art is the Other that one cannot grasp and the artist engages with the Other's unrepresentability. The Other *par excellence* in contemporary politics, in the age of war on terror, is the terrorist. But from the start it has been clear that there is a connection between Middle Easterness or Muslimness with the terrorist in the mainstream imagination of world politics. I maintain that there are two major components in the construction of this relation between the terrorist and Middle Easterner and in the way that the sublimity accords with Middle Easterness: I distinguish these two components as the 'first nature',

[50]Ibid., 84–85.
[51]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 99.

the Godly sublime, and the 'second nature' as the human-made sublime that emerged with the catastrophe of Second World War in the collective consciousness of history. In this section, I will focus more on the second component as I think that it offers a better understanding for the reason why contemporary politics is sublime and why the imagery of Middle Easterness reflects a sublime aesthetics. Here, my major questions are: What is specific about today's understanding of the sublime and its relation to terror and to the perception of the human condition? What did the September 11th attacks add to the dominant imagination of the world and humanity in the age of the post-Enlightenment? What kind of relation exists between the mainstream imagery of the war on terror and the "Middle East" and diaspora from the Middle East and Muslim majority countries?

The official discourse of the War of Terror, besides its visual blow-up, states that the perpetrators of 9/11 acted out of hatred for the values cherished by the West, such as freedom, tolerance, prosperity, religious plurality and universal suffrage. That is to say that the principal motivation of the perpetrators was quite simply to be evil and uncivilized following the rudimentary logic of good versus evil. In this discourse, Islam here as the wrong Abrahamic religion is envisaged as intrinsically backward and hence Muslim terrorists simply followed the rules of Islam in hating what is called Western values. For instance, in the Charlie Hebdo shooting[52] on the 7th of January 2015, the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda killed twelve people including caricaturists, editors and policemen in the Paris offices of a weekly satirical French newspaper. The Charlie Hebdo massacre provoked a counter movement, "Je Suis Charlie (I am Charlie)" which started on Twitter with the circulation of the hashtag #jesuischarlie (tweeted more than

[52]Ben Doherty and Helen Davidson, "Charlie Hebdo Shooting: Police Release Names and Photos of Two Brothers Wanted for the Attack – as It Happened," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2015/jan/07/charlie-hebdo-magazine-shooting-france-police-manhunt-suspects.

162,000 times according to analytics website Topsy[53]). The "Je suis Charlie" movement was most commonly understood as a way of expressing solidarity with the ideal of 'freedom of expression'. The image of world leaders participating in a massive rally, also including thousands of French citizens in Paris to pay tribute to victims of Charlie Hebdo and to protest against terrorism became a banner of anti-terror. Here, the imagery of the Middle East certainly comes forward as a landscape deprived of the 'Western' values: The lack of democracy, the prevalence of censorship and authoritarian leaders, the absence of a functioning justice system, civil disorder and chaos, the continual threat of brutal death, fundamentalist intolerance, and the oppression of women and LGBT people including forced marriages and female circumcision. All these problems in the Middle East are regarded in this structure of thought as the inevitable outcome of Islam or the rule of Islamic culture over others in the region. In this schema, terrorists have internalized anti-Western values through their cultural identity, homeland, belief system. This understanding also considers these traits as second skin, unchangeable, fixed antagonistic features to the West-self and hence as an ungraspable problem. Therein lies one component of the current politics of

[53]Cassandra Vinograd et al., "Charlie Hebdo Shooting: 12 Killed at Muhammad Cartoons Magazine in Paris," *NBC News*, January 8, 2015, http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/paris-magazine-attack/charlie-hebdo-shooting-12-killed-muhammad-cartoons-magazine-paris-n281266.

Figure 1-2. One of pictures largely shared in medias showing the attacks of 9/11. Image retrieved from the web. Link for the image is: http://cdn.rsvlts.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/s_a04_0RTRMNRG-930x675.jpeg

sublimity. It borrows from the sublime aesthetics of first nature, from the Godly old division of evil and good. It engages with ethics rather than politics[54]: it presents a new way of defining "us" and "the other", hence a consensus, an ethical structure, in Rancierian terms, which does not allow for politics. In other words, the theme of terror follows the theme of a timeless world story and therefore no resolution or redemption is possible in this schema of articulation and the political implications become effaced. All that one can do in this schema is "Pray for Paris," as in the case

[54] Rancière, Jacques. Dissensus. September 11 and Afterwards. P99

of the twitter hashtag #PrayForParis that circulated in the aftermath of the Paris Attacks in November of 2015.

The second component of sublimity in relation to discourses of Middle Easterness is more compressive although not-pronounced explicitly. In this discursive formation Middle Easterness consists more than the imagery of Muslimness. Although mainstream discourse interprets these atrocities as "Jihad versus the West" on the basis of identity interests, there is another divide lurking beneath this same discourse. This latter divide derives from the assumed resentment of the 'Middle East' for the social, economic, political advantages of the 'West' namely, a desire for the West. The "West" has the advantageous side in the capitalist system and the "Middle East" and Muslim majority countries where Jihadists have originated from, cannot achieve consumption ideals and most of the time struggle in scarcity. This understanding reflects a sublimity with two layers. The first one resides in the fact that the socio-political order of the world system of capitalist modernity is considered as unchangeable. The societal problems and the global disputes between camps in the global system constitute an aporia. As Gene Ray put it: "The real terror is the threat that system change is no longer possible – the threat that there is no way out of this capitalist thing…and that history has ended.[55]" As a matter of fact, the desire for the West in the Middle East and the atrocities as a result of capitalist competition cannot be remedied. The second layer of human-made sublime contained within this imaginary stems from the fact that the flow of dominant global news not only tends to fortify this ethical order of 'us' and 'them', but also propagates the imagery of terror as akin to disease and contamination, such that it necessitates a containment policy for this disease in the West. In this sense, the deprivation of socio-political and

[55]Gene Ray, "History, Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear," in *Signals in the Dark: Art in the Shadow of War* (Blackwood Gallery, 2008), 33, http://www.blackwoodgallery.ca/publications/signals.pub.html.

economic goods and opportunities is imagined as being able to spread to the West from the "weak side" of the global order. This setting endangers the maintenance of the Western self through the threat of replicating what is assumed to be happening in the Middle East, the reign of terror, in the heart of the West.

The discourse of terror and terrorism and the unresolvable struggle between sides confirms the loss of belief in human agency's ability to stop the endless war, to change the schema of the global world, to imagine something beyond capitalism and repair the broken social system. In this light, the political failure to manage social disputes, contradictions and atrocities becomes acute and this indicates a deeply anxious regard for the future of humanity. Gene Ray argues that events since 2001 and the so-called "war on terror" do not change this situation in the least because it has reproduced the violent potentialities of second nature[56], or society itself[57]. In his account, the sublime today resides not only in the terror of wars as in the case Auschwitz and Hiroshima, but also necessarily in the terror and violence of the social system as a global totality[58]:

> It is no secret that the global logic of this totality is war: an unceasing and unforgiving war of all against all. With nation-states as with individuals and corporations, each must tirelessly exploit and dominate the others, so as not to be exploited and dominated out of existence[59].

This sublime model of world politics, understood as humanity's fate, means that "the imperatives of self-preservation under the conditions of competition inevitably leads to adopt rather than

[56]Ray borrows the term of 'second nature' from Georg Lukács here. Lukács defines second nature as the understanding of institutions of social life as merely conventional and purely external (1916, The Theory of the Novel, A. Bostock (trans.), London: Merlin, 1971).
[57]Ray, "History, Sublime, Terror: Notes on the Politics of Fear," 28.
[58]Ibid.
[59]Ibid.

change the 'structural barbarism[60]' that constrains us[61]". Therefore, the difference between the Middle Easterner and the terrorist/ Islamist / Jihadist is that the latter has decided to take revenge while the former has not tried yet. For example, when CNN's website reported the beheading of an American journalist by ISIS, they cited the journalist's mother's video message pleading with ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi not to kill her son and also stated that her plea was met with taunting responses on social media by ISIS supporters[62]: "Steven is a journalist who traveled to the Middle East to cover the suffering of Muslims at the hands of tyrants. Steven is a loyal and generous son, brother and grandson," she said. "He is an honorable man and has always tried to help the weak." The Jihadists represent the return of the weak not for mercy, not for recognition or for help, or a piece of coin, but for revenge alone. Slavoj Žižek emphasized the theme of resentment in the jihadist acts in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo Attacks:

> The fundamentalist Islamic terror is not grounded in the terrorists' conviction of their superiority and in their desire to safeguard their cultural-religious identity from the onslaught of global consumerist civilization. The problem with fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but, rather, that they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior. This is why our condescending politically correct assurances that we feel no superiority towards them only makes them more furious and feeds their resentment. The problem is not cultural difference (their effort to preserve their identity), but the opposite fact that the fundamentalists are already like us, that, secretly, they have already internalized our standards and measure themselves by them[63].

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[60]Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Verso, 1997). For Adorno and Horkheimer, barbarism is not an exception but an intrinsic part of Western history. In that sense, barbarism is the flipside of progress, Enlightenment and European culture.

[61]Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory*, ed. Jack Zipes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 83, http://www.palgraveconnect.com/doifinder/10.1057/9781403979445.

[62]Chelsea Carter, "ISIS Video Shows Beheading of Steven Sotloff - CNN.com," *CNN*, September 9, 2014, http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/02/world/meast/isis-american-journalist-sotloff/index.html.

[63]SlavojŽižek, "SlavojŽižek on the Charlie Hebdo Massacre: Are the Worst Really Full of Passionate Intensity?," January 10, 2015, http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2015/01/slavoj-i-ek-charlie-hebdo-massacre-are-worst-really-full-passionate-intensity.

That said, the resolution of the conflict will not come from a hopeful representation that Jihadists and West resemble each other in the ideals of consumer society because the economic is envisaged as the realm of competition while one's odds are seen related to identity and cultural traits.

Contamination with terror means to be ruled by terror, chaos, intolerance, autocracy and violence. Terrorism's terror comes from the loss of self in chaos where we become either victims or perpetrators just like the Others in the Middle East. Thus the terrorists' goal is regarded as wanting to spread the Middle East to the West, namely the contamination of sublimity. While the 9/11 Attacks hit the icons of capitalism's power and US hegemony, The World Trade Center at the heart of the Financial district and the Pentagon, the center of US military power, the Paris Attacks lashed out at the cultural core of the Western hemisphere. The fact that the 13 November Paris Attacks targeted the center of social life in Paris on a Friday night again fortified the idea that terror means to destroy the standards of life and the Western way of being through disturbing the enjoyment of the prosperity in the West. In this incident, the attackers carried out a wave of attacks on restaurants, a concert hall and a sports stadium across Paris on a Friday evening as part of a deadly rampage claimed by the Islamic State (ISIS)[64]:

> It is where young and hip Parisians gather to drink and socialize. Le Carillon, La Belle Equipe, Le Petit Cambodge: these are ordinary neighborhood joints where you meet your buddies for a quick "demi" of watery French beer or a snack before going out somewhere else.

Muriam Haleh Davis reported that the liberal reading of terrorism presents violence as an attack on the "French way of life": "The notion that Paris is a 'moveable feast,' a symbol of festivity, and the capital of culture is of course a self-flattering image to explain one's own victimhood. It also allows the hashtag #JeSuisEnTerrasse (I am having a drink on a terrace) to appear as an act of

[64]"Timeline of Paris Attacks according to Public Prosecutor," *Reuters*, November 14, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-shooting-timeline-idUSKCN0T31BS20151114.

resistance.[65]" This "clash of civilizations" between the West and the Jihadists is not limited to identity and territory because "having a drink on a terrace" becomes something that the many cannot do although they live in France. That said, the neoliberal gospel prioritizing work, productivity and social capital obtained through success becomes a Western trait.

The danger of contamination and the containment policy of the assumed Middle Eastern disease of sublimity became revealed in the aftermath of the Paris Attacks when a popular discussion on social media escalated the double standards between Paris Attacks and Beirut Bombing, another Islamist target from one day earlier. The mass media's focus and world's leaders top priority became the Paris Attacks, while the Beirut bombing was portrayed as a regular event in the Middle East. Not only mass media but also social media received these two adjacent Islamist attacks differently. For instance, Facebook implemented a safety check feature for the Paris Attacks, as well as French flag filter for one's profile picture. Here, it is not the primarily hierarchies of suffering between the Middle East and the West but the visit of the Middle East *to* the West that made the Paris Attacks more tragic. Tragedy happens when it changes the flow of things from good to bad for Aristotle[66] and hence the Beirut bombing's tragic rating is lower than

[65]Muriam Davis, "A Moveable Feast? Reflections on the French Coverage of the Paris Attacks," *Jadaliyya*, November 27, 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/23263/a-moveable-feast-reflections-on-the-french-coverag.
[66]Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1997).

Figure 1-4. English version shared online of the figure below(Figure 1-4) "MapamundiTragico" as Tragedy World Map

Figure 1-4. MapamundiTragico. Illustration shared and translated from its original version above in CinismoIllustrado. http://cinismoilustrado.com/. The image retrieved from http://cinismoilustrado.com/image/117609140948

that of the Paris attacks. Things like that are imagined to not happen to Parisians, 130 people killed while this day, November 13, a typical Friday night, ended in tragedy. However, for the Middle

East, Beirut of Lebanon this type of violence is imagined as a normality because people in Middle East are already assumed to live in sublimity. In that sense, the socio-political-economic collapse seems natural to the Middle East, and the cultural identity of sublimity becomes Middle Eastern.

In fact, there can be no strict or invincible border design or regulation between the 'West' and the 'Middle East' if terrorists are the weak link in the system. This is because there is always the possibility of 'homegrown violent extremists'. As M.H Davis emphasizes, the cruelty of the liberal state and the specter of Islamic radicalism are not competing–but complimentary–phenomena: "Given that the attackers were born in Europe and some spent time in Syria, the line between the domestic and the foreign has never been as blurred.[67]" Rancière explains the suffering

Figure 1-5. Image showing people gathering to pay tribute for victims of Paris Attacks in November 2015. Retrieved from http://www.ibtimes.com/paris-attacks-timeline-terror-response-2184525

[67]Davis, "A Moveable Feast?"

of the weak as something that, "we face it every time the wounded faces and broken bodies of war and famine in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia appear in our screens"[68]:

> But he who suffers now is generally an Other, the inhabitants of a dark region where religion still lingers alongside poverty, hunger, and endless children, and where hygiene, investors, and leisure are slow to arrive. The suffering Bosnian thus becomes a Muslim, now the generic name for inhabitants of this dark world. Sometimes we send our armies to aid his cause. But we do so in the manner of certain well-born poets, whom a working-class poet of the last century described as going down to meet the poor in clogs before the poor rise up in dress shoes. We prefer to keep the security cordon between ourselves and these backward regions of suffering firmly in place. [69]

More importantly, as Rancière puts it, "the tragedy is that they are here among us, representatives of the proliferating multitude. Some flaunt their suffering while others mock our desire to live without boredom or suffering.[70]" Therefore, "we rapidly construct the reassuring figure of a new other; the man of the overpopulated suburbs and dying trades"[71]. Homegrown extremists were the protagonists of several of these attacks, for example the San Bernardino mass shooting on December 2015 by a couple of Pakistani origin, one of them an American citizen and the other a legal resident of the US. This couple targeted a Public Health training event and a holiday party of employees. In the Boston Marathon bombing of April 15 in 2013, the perpetrator brothers Tsarnaev were American citizens originally from Chechnya. The Tsarnaev brothers claimed that they were motivated by extremist Islamist beliefs and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but they were unconnected to any outside terrorist groups.[72] As a result of these repeated Islamist attacks, which are collaborated with or executed by diasporic members of

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[68]Jacques Ranciere, *Moments Politiques*, trans. Mary Foster (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2014), 32.
[69]Ibid., 33–34.
[70]Ibid., 34.
[71]Ibid.
[72]Michael Cooper Michael S. Schmidt and Eric Schmitt, "Bombing Suspect Cites Islamic Extremist Beliefs as Motive," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2013, sec. U.S., http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/24/us/boston-marathon-bombing-developments.html.

Muslim majority countries, not only have "Muslim majority countries" or the "Middle East" come under suspicion, but also the "Middle East in the West", namely the diaspora from the "Middle East". From this angle, diaspora bring the Middle East to the West: the chaos, the death, violence, horror and the sufferance, the traits of Middle Eastern geography. Thus the boundaries of Middle East change continuously according to the spread of terror. Countries, communities and the landscape included under the title of the Middle East vary through the contamination of socio-political-economic failure or more accurately the sickness of "disaster". The way that socio-political-economic problems are envisioned does not follow a controllable variable.

Inevitably, there exists an intrinsic relation between these two layers of human-made sublimity that constitute the age of terror. Global capitalism is terrifying in its vastness, the injustices and exploitation that it causes are considered without remedy and the perpetrators do not have an identifiable face in this discourse. That is why the question becomes one of the containment of disease in its place. Consequently, although the Democrats criticized Republican leadership candidate Donald Trump for being racist in his "anti-Muslim" campaign, they endorsed and passed legislation on December 8th (407 to 19) in response to the recent attacks in Paris from ISIS operatives, as well as the shooting in California by a couple that expressed support for the terror group on social media[73]. This legislation would overhaul the federal visa waiver program and bar those from Iraq, Syria, Iran and the Sudan, or those who have visited those countries in the last five years, from traveling to the United States without a visa[74]. House Democrat, Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, stated that the visa waiver bill was a measure that is "reasonable" and a

[73]Deirdre Walsh, "House Passes Visa Waiver Overhaul - CNNPolitics.com," *CNN*, December 9, 2015, http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/08/politics/visa-waiver-program-house/index.html.
[74]Ibid.

"measured" plan in contrast to Trump's call for a ban on all Muslims from entering the US[75]. As Rancière points out, the law is used to reduce the other to mere otherness, it ratifies a category of problem people:

> It is said that the law allows a distinction to be made between good foreigners and undesirables, and thus that it fights a racism based on lumping the two together. Exactly the opposite is true… Foreigner and suspect are identified with each other, reducing all otherness to the figure of guilty illegality. The law objectivizes a diffuse feeling of insecurity and converts a multitude of cases and groups into a single object of fear. From there, the law constructs a figure that society must cast out in order to be rid of its problems[76].

As a matter of fact, the primary relief in today's discourse of terror is its signaling that civilization, science, and their primary motivator, the reason of the Enlightenment are still the best chance for humanity because the alternative is pure human-made savagery which is worse than human-made civilization. Thus, the relief offered in today's sublime in the age of terror is that it offers solace in the genie of a human-made techne that has been broken in the post-Enlightenment era. In this schema, although barbarism poses a structural and inherent principle of culture and the speciality of modern European culture as Adorno and Horkheimer have stated, the "West" needs to stick to its old ideals for relief as Simon Jenkins argues[77]:

> Today's French terrorists want a similarly hysterical response. They want another twist in the thumbscrew of the surveillance state. They want the media to be told to back off. They want new laws, new controls, new additions to the agenda of illiberalism. They know that in most western nations, including Britain, there exists a burgeoning industry of illiberal bureaucrats with empires to build. This industry may be careful of public safety, but it is careless of the comfort and standing it offers the terrorist. There will now be cries from the security services and parliament for more powers and more surveillance.

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[75]Ibid.
[76]Ranciere, *Moments Politiques*, 28.
[77]Simons Jenkins, "Charlie Hebdo: Now Is the Time to Uphold Freedoms and Not Give in to Fear," *The Guardian*, January 7, 2015, sec. Opinion, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/07/charlie-hebdo-freedom-fear-terrorists-massacre-war.

In this equation, relief comes where the "West" distinguishes itself from "terrorists", otherwise terror is contagious in both conservative and liberal discourses which differ in their means of relief. While the latter calls us to, "not overreact, … It is to treat each event as a passing accident of horror, and leave the perpetrator devoid of further satisfaction[78]" in order to defeat terrorism, the former wages war against enemies outside and inside of the 'West'. Thus, "Donald Trump, the leading contender to become the Republican party's nominee for US presidential candidate, has called for a 'total and complete shutdown' of the country's borders to Muslims in the wake of the San Bernardino terrorist attack[79]" and has stated that:

> Until we are able to determine and understand this problem and the dangerous threat it poses, our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in Jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life.

To be sure, there is relief when these scenes of terror and sublimity acquire a name designated to the Other. That is because it gives the feeling that it can eventually be contained. Such a diagram of the world of terror provides assurance that although human civilization has proved to be more harmful than the natural disasters emphasized by the Kantian "sublime", and although human subjectivity is powerless against human-made evil, any relief available in postponing the inevitable self-loss is happy and to be embraced in the age of terror.

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[78]Ibid.

[79]Ed Pilkington, "Donald Trump: Ban All Muslims Entering US," *The Guardian*, December 8, 2015, sec. US news, http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/07/donald-trump-ban-all-muslims-entering-us-san-bernardino-shooting.

Before engaging with Middle Eastern marked contemporary art in the diaspora, I would like to examine what local informant art means and how the popularity of ethnically, racially and culturally marked diasporic artists and art events has emerged in the following section. In the first section "The Sublime of Contemporary Art", I analyzed the theoretical and political paradigm under the reign of contemporary art and how in this formulation, the Other as an ungraspable term of sublimity has become the primary subject matter of the current art scene since the rise of the post-Enlightenment period. In the second section, "Sublimity of Middle Eastern Subjectivity", I studied the Otherization of Middle Easterness through the sublime elements of the current dominant imagination of world politics. Viewed through the lens of these earlier sections in this chapter, the subject matter of Middle Easterness arises as a prominent candidate for exhibition in the contemporary art scene. To provide a better understanding of Middle Eastern marked contemporary art, I will explore the relation of identity politics and contemporary art and how the democracy of contemporary art has been envisaged in the following section before moving on to an in-depth analysis of contemporary art connotative of Middle Easterness in the diaspora and its artistic themes. In doing so, I aim to analyze the ongoing discussions, comments and critiques from theorists, artists and reviewers on the thematization of democracy in the contemporary art scene.

The "New" in Contemporary Art: On the Emergence of Local Informant Art and the Popularity of Ethnically, Racially and Culturally Marked Diasporic Artists

What is "new" in contemporary art? And how can one aesthetic style or type of narration be "alternative" anyway? Contemporary art is often said to equalize non-aesthetic objects with aesthetic ones. A prominent example is Andy Warhol's automatous replication icon of Marilyn Monroe in 1964. In this piece, the profane icon of popular culture becomes a piece of art through cheap serial re-production. Thereby, contemporary art seems to designate a democratization in the sense that it breaks the logic of separation between the cultural and the profane realms. In other words, it rejects the hierarchy between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects. In this chapter, I will critically examine the terms of this democratization, and in doing so, analyze the emergence of what I call "local informant art." This local informant art engages "non-white" or "non-western" subjects and subjectivities through personal experience, creating ethnically, racially and culturally marked artistic performances. I will explore the impact of this artwork in the contemporary art scene, as well as how these art practices correlate with an understanding of democratization in contemporary art. In the world of contemporary art, the ideal of multicultural discourse presupposes a certain aesthetic narrative from diasporic artists in North America who exhibit their assumed determinant qualifications of ethnic-cultural-racial subjectivities to mark or circulate their art in the global art scene. Furthermore, a diasporic artist's art can only be ethnically, racially and culturally marked in this way within the multicultural imagination.

One way of conceptualizing "art" is as a binary embodiment in the sense of being set apart from non-aesthetic objects. Groys asserts that the innovative value of art always comes from the tension that it provokes between the cultural and profane realms of the current societal value regime. To secure a permanent place in the museum, to achieve historical recognition, an aesthetic style must show, "a choice based on the principle of aesthetic contrast, foreignness, exoticism, or

difference[80]". In this sense, contemporary art is not exceptional in the history of aesthetic progress. What distinguishes contemporary art from previous aesthetic movements is that it seems to declare the "end of art". In other words, the declared postmodern end of legitimate antagonism has generated the impossibility of meaningful choices within the pluralistic mass of existing differences. The idea of art as the separation of non-aesthetic and aesthetic objects is void in contemporary art. This seemingly democratized attitude in the contemporary art scene can be detected in the current expansion of "culture" which has put an end to the isolation of "primitive" or non-European cultures, in a world where it appears as though there is no longer anything outside of valorized culture[81]. Thus, local informant art is based upon the celebration of the oppressed non-western/ non-white identity and its embodiment of difference against the prior assumption of western cultural superiority. The current artistic appreciation for local informant art, art reflecting "non-white" or "non-western" connotations, in the global art scene also follows this trend which expands the cultural realm by stamping out the previously assumed profane realm.

However, Groys argues that the seemingly democratic landscape of contemporary art still holds the antagonistic boundary between the cultural and profane realms because aesthetic value is still derived from the indication of tension between them. In other words, although the boundaries between the valuable and valueless appear to be disappeared in the embodiment of the artwork, aesthetic innovation still stems from this tension and hence this very discernibility. Art audiences must perceive this contrast and appreciate the irony involved in order to recognize the "newness" in the contemporary artwork exhibited. The irony works as long as local informant art differs from

[80]Boris Groys, *On the New*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (Verso, 2014), 102.
[81]Ibid., 113.

the valuable cultural realm: Therefore, the artwork does not provoke transcendence or removal of the antagonism.

Yet, the epoch of contemporary art distinguishes itself from earlier periods by making the claim that there no longer exists a Kantian subjective universality or a hidden truth to be revealed within the artistic stance or the artwork itself. The idea of the artist who sets themself apart from society and pushes ahead of cultural norms has subsided with the impossibility of disinterestedness in the postmodern era. In her book "Seeing Differently," Amelia Jones also draws attention to the trend of including in exhibitions works by artists formerly excluded from mainstream art venues. In these cases, the shows function as a multicultural biennial, reflecting generous, "diversity by including large numbers of non-white artists whose work is openly gay or significantly woman[82]". Jones argues that the role of identity in the making and interpretation of visual arts has been recognized in the art world and that this exposes the contingency of value which reveals the unavoidable ideological bias in art, art criticism, art curating and so forth.

If contemporary art is "politically correct" in its discourse, this derives from the fact that it prioritizes local informant art, firsthand experience to reflect its distinctness, as in the case of depictions of ethnic-cultural-racial subjectivities. It is assumed that local informant artists can escape old orientalist depictions through authentic artworks. (That is, if they do not fall a prey to self-orientalization). The legitimacy of the old assumption, that of an advanced European special ability to understand the distance needed to create and interpret works of art, is no longer valid. William Pietz noted in his work on the Problem of Fetishism II: "'western' people could transcend the overly attachment to objects while African societies are increasingly viewed as fetish-worship

[82]Amelia Jones, *Seeing Differently: A History and Theory of Identification and the Visual Arts* (Abingdon, Oxon England ; New York: Routledge, 2012), 123.

societies organized by an irrational and arbitrary fancy of imagination conjoined with desire[83]". Here, the non-western imagination cannot distinguish between aesthetic and non-aesthetic objects. For instance, in the case of Middle Eastern or Muslim related art, what was assumed to be aesthetically valuable by "western" civilization was artworks that dated from the "glorified" past of "Middle Eastern" communities before their socio-political and economic collapse in the worldwide ranking. Ali Behdad analyzes the logic of early Orientalist photography of the Middle East by "western" artists which presents a close-up of an archeological site in decay, where there are neither people nor traces of life except for the remains of a glorious past[84]. Behdad quotes Gustave Flaubert to explain the nostalgia expressed in relation to Middle Eastern creative ability in these early orientalist photos: "It is time to hurry. Before very long the Orient will no longer exist. We are the last of its contemplators." Thereby, the habitants of "middle east" are assumed to not understand the value of aesthetic objects even those deriving from their own glorious past cultural production. On the other hand, there was also an orientalist consideration of the current (at the time) artworks of the so-called Middle East as mere copies of "Western" art or as cultural artifacts but never art in and of itself, as a creative production. Esra Akcan, in her article on panaromic city albums of Istanbul, mentions photos by Abdullah Freres' taken both for Sultan Abdulhamid albums. She states that these panaromic city photographs were considered as lacking compositional tools and visual traditions, and were conceptualized as what Wendy Shaw calls, "documents without style" or "informative but compositionally unmeaningful" attempts at art.. Thereby, Akcan concludes that Shaw's judgement of Abdullah Freres' photos in fact illustrates "the hierarchical division between a self-contained 'West' in opposition to self-contained 'Orient',

[83]William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, II: The Origin of the Fetish," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 1987, 42 – 43.
[84]Ali Behdad, "The Orientalist Photograph," in *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation (Issues & Debates) by Ali Behdad, Luke Gartlan (2013) Paperback* (Getty Publications, 1000), 24.

[where] the former materialized as the possessor of a tradition of representation in contrast to the latter's putative lack of such conventions[85]". Jones explains that what is assumed to be primitive or non-civilized in the Enlightenment period follows this logic: the other cannot engage in artistic practices, whether in art production or appreciation. Jones argues that if some museums today do not own works by say women or Chicano artists, under the pretext that there are simply not any that are good enough[86], this can no longer be deemed acceptable. This is because none of the artists whether western or non-western, nor art audiences can escape the current envisioned impossibility of disinterestedness in art appreciation and production.

Indeed, the dominant contemporary art regime within the global public sphere broke this hierarchical understanding of art practices favoring 'western' practitioners or output. The only universal thing remaining in the imagination of the contemporary art scene is the impossibility of disinterestedness in art. Thereby the multiculturalist relativism of criteria valorizes art practices of contingent narrations manifesting differences based on identity, such as, cultured or gendered stand points, that the artist experiences personally in daily life. Hence, the diasporic artist is conceptualized as the local informant. This multicultural trend has also provided visibility to diasporic narratives in the art scene. This is derived from the idea that universal aesthetic values were in fact attenuated versions of masculinist, European colonialist values. These past universal claims in art have now become profane in contemporary art. In this vein, Hal Foster defines the art scene in the postmodern era as the epoch where the art historian becomes an "anthropologist" and the artist turns into "ethnographer". There is no more disinterested object within the value system of the contemporary art period. Thereby, a diasporic artist becomes an ethnographer

[85]Esra Akcan, "Off the Frame: The Panaromic City Albums of Istanbul," in *Photography's Orientalism: New Essays on Colonial Representation*, Ali Behdad and Luke Gartlan (Los Angeles: the Getty Research Institute, 2013), 101.
[86]Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 122.

acknowledging the local narratives of his/her homeland. This diasporic artist is considered to be the best at articulating/ exhibiting their own ethnic, racial and cultural particularities within the immigrated country where he/she is a perpetual "new comer".

Critiquing Ethnically, Culturally and Racially Marked Art

The popularity of identity-based informant art in the contemporary art scene has given rise to two major critiques, mainly from activist environments. One is based on the idea that a multiculturalist aesthetic taste pacifies the representation of ongoing struggles for equality. For example, Coco Fusco argues that current identity-based art normalizes diversity, while at the same time eviscerating any criticality in order to gain acceptance. Fusco claims that the art market equates aesthetic pleasure and success with a silence about the politics that are productive of subaltern images. This occurs at a time when multinational corporations enrich themselves by marketing a grotesquely stereotyped blackness to black and white audiences and is thus nothing short of disingenuous[87]. Thus, visibility in the multicultural paradigm does not necessarily mean having a political voice in the system. In this context, the "emotional cultural striptease" which is highly demanded and valorized in the contemporary art scene obscures ever-present white supremacy and discursively compensates both past and present inequalities. Furthermore, multiculturalist attitudes often condescendingly praise the visual difference between people without appreciating their struggles and the racism that they have experienced. To demonstrate this point, Jones mentions her dialogue with a Toronto based queer collective "Still Fierce, Still

[87]Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001), 16.

Strugglin'" and how it became necessary to rewrite her paragraph about them when the collective criticized her replication of multiculturalist rhetoric by labelling the collective as "a fantastic range of colors, genders, sexualities, and identifications"[88].

In addition to this, a multiculturalist aesthetic taste can enforce a value scheme where an artist can only be valorized for her works when these works centre on her own personal history or life

Figure 1-5. "Still Fierce, Still Strugglin". Image taken from http://www.thegridto.com/city/sexuality/dawn-of-a-new-gay-the-response/

experiences, which assumingly differ culturally from others. In other words, the position of the local informant artist is imposed upon the diasporic artist of non-western background in the

[88]Jones, *Seeing Differently*, 169.

contemporary art scene. Olu Oguibe interprets this as "the culture game" where non-western artists have to "prove" and represent their cultural background so that they can be considered good "Lebanese", "Arab" or "Muslim" artists, but never just "good artists"[89]. Oguibe elaborates on this, stating that in this context, "otherness" becomes a preferred commodity on the global culture market; so that artistic individuality is of less interest than otherness in postcolonial art: the artist has no choice but to play "the other"[90]. It is this system of value that dictates who, and in what way, can make art, although the contemporary art scene promises to be democratic. On the other hand, "western" or "white" thematic and local informant art practices are still considered "universal". The ethnic, cultural, or racial identity of the artist is not necessarily pronounced for a "Western" artist. This derives from the fact that the "Western" artist and his/her artworks are assumed to reflect the center of the world's culture, and hence, the dominant origin of global aesthetic values. The particularity of what is assumed to be "Western" art still designates the primary reference for the comparison to which other particularities are positioned. Consequently, the impossibility of universality does not prevail for supposedly "Western" "host" citizens of North America.

However, this culture game is not always absolutely imposed from the outside upon artists of color and diasporic artists. In fact, artists can sometimes intentionally draw upon this culture game in order to attract attention and to achieve visibility in the contemporary art scene. Similarly, one major critique to Edward Said's contextualization of Orientalism is that Orientalism should not only be conceptualized as something imposed by the "West" onto the "East" since the "East" is not passive in its own reflection and can indeed reproduce Orientalism. Following the same

[89]Olu Oguibe, *Culture Game*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004).
[90]Ibid., 21.

logic, “local informant art” as a practice cannot necessarily be considered as a label imposed from outside since artists can and do make conscious decisions about which subjects they represent or depict in their art. For instance, the Turkish author and Nobel prize winner, Orhan Pamuk’s famous books focus entirely on local informant art: *My Name is Red* (1998) is about a miniaturist artist during the Ottoman Empire, while *Snow* (2002) tells a story about political, religious, and social tensions incontemporaryEastern Turkey, particularly focusing upon the clash between secularism and strongly held religious beliefs. Finally, *Istanbul* (2006): *Memories and the City* encapsulates the city of Istanbul, the iconic city of oriental lands, where Pamuk situates his personal memoir recounting his childhood and early years within a portrait of the city of Istanbul It is not likely that Orhan Pamuk would write a book on New York, from the perspective of New Yorker although he is a visiting scholar at Columbia University. It is much more likely that he would write a story about a Turkish man in New York since his otherness must always be manifest in order to gain immediate attention. Consequently, the trend of diasporic art can in fact be advantageous for artists since it can offer an easy way to achieve recognition. As long as “non-western or non-white” artworks reflect the appetite of the western gaze, in the sense of stereotyping, stereo-locating, or easy referencing, there is a high chance of being noticed in the jungle of the art sphere, especially if advertisement and curating also successfully focus on these traits. On the other hand, if the diasporic artist engages in commentary about or criticizes the country of immigration, Canada or USA, it is considered nonsensical or clumsy since the diasporic artist is still considered as an “outsider” and “ignorant” about North America. Worse yet, her work can be regarded as a sort of “terrorist act” since any diasporic citizen can be easily converted to non-citizen and to “inhuman” if they criticize the wrong camp. For instance, Oscar nominated Muslim movie Timbuktu of the director Abderrahmane Sissako has been banned in Villiers-sur-

Marne (Paris suburb) by the town's mayor with the pretext that the movie can spread apology for terrorism at the aftermath of Charli Hebdo massacre while movie is reported to portray fundamentalist militants as brutal enemies of Malian tradition and culture hence Muslims[91].

In my interview with New York-based photographer and video artist Aymann Ismail who works for the Animal New York website of alternative city art, we spoke about the issue of local informant criteria in the art scene:

> Aymann: I was the only Muslim in art school. I was the only Muslim man that all these people knew…I was doing street stuff, portraits of young people, I love portraits…listen they say, this is not expected from you especially after September 11th. You should work with this…try language coming from your culture… I am from New Jersey. When you are in Egypt, they say you are American. Your English accent is coming out…up until that point I always thought to myself: I am an American, who is Muslim…whose family came from Egypt. But then in senior years, I should have embraced that I cannot be both American and Muslim… When that happens, I said that I had to produce art that is not expected so that they can see why it is different…what Muslims are more about…

In another interview, Ali Mustafa[92], mentioned how his name and skin color change the way that the audience interprets his photographs or how publishers think of his work:

> Ali: There is always a worry when its somebody like me working in the [Middle East] region. Being accused of some bias…Even when I am coming home to Canada, it's a difficult process…because I know how I will be heavily questioned about that…It is not like anybody going to Syria to do work, but somebody named Ali Mustafa. Brown skin and believed to be Muslim and fighting for something…Even for the people in the region, they ask if I work for mujahideens. No I said, no I am just a journalist.

[91]"Mayor Bans Oscar-Nominated Muslim Film in Paris," *World Bulletin*, accessed January 23, 2015, http://www.worldbulletin.net/asia-pasific/153252/mayor-bans-oscar-nominated-muslim-film-in-paris.
[92] Canadian photojournalist of Portuguese and Egyptian descent

Alia Toor, a Canadian mixed-media artist and scholar at Sheridan College, originally from Pakistan, also put emphasis on the local informant artist criteria when I mentioned that her name was listed in an article published in the Globe and Mail featuring Canadian Muslim artists[93]:

> Balca: so you think that the article is not presenting your view?"
>
> Alia: I just would not…I think journalism tries to show multi- kinds of views and I was there… having multiple identities…having identities with multi-layers…they come and go… Sometimes some parts are more important than others…I am not disciplined in that way. In general, the art community in Toronto is all about – diversity celebration…more artists doing un-white shows… they ask why you are not doing Islamic artworks? I said 'ahh' I should look at that…why you are looking to Japanese art for inspiration?[94] This is the question of expectation…one image over and over again…when I am doing my artwork; I want to do it…By the way, do you want to get together for a Pakistani-Turkish work? I am not joking (laughs)"

In yet another example, 2FIK, Montreal-based visual artist of Moroccan and French background explained to me why he thinks that his next project on "business life and working places" will not attract as much attention as his previous work:

> 2FIK: "I do not think that the next series will attract as much as the others. That is ok. I do not mind. I do not create in this way. The most successful one is the Gay against Musulmans obviously. The best one is maybe Fatima in the bikini… I have to admit that the 9/11 piece also was successful. I am glad to see that I have success from totally different works."
>
> Balca: "Your new work focuses on business life – there was a character of a jobless guy as the start of your next project I think on your website. Why do you feel that your new work is not going to be as popular as your former work on muslimness…?"

[93]Kate Taylor, "Rap It or Paint It, Muslim Artists Tackle Identity - The Globe and Mail," *The Globe and Mail*, July 4, 2011, http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/time-to-lead/rap-it-or-paint-it-muslim-artists-tackle-identity/article585557/.

[94]Here, Alia is referring to me and the apparent contrast in my own artwork. I am from Turkey but I am designing Manga-inspired illustrations as a visual artist.

2FIK: “Black ties, suits…every time, everywhere….no accessories, no characters... It is tricky in a way. You have only situations not characters. I would get the same scene in Montreal, Paris and in the mountains of Morocco- I will be comparing the same situation in 3 places in different lifestyles. For example, getting on the bus, eating your soup, and loneliness, things like that. These are things that touch all of us in a certain way. I will not have a luxury of having your prejudices this time. I have to make myself eager. I am scared too, but it is interesting. It is the game and it is exciting.

Figure 1-6: Fagger Rangers versus Musulmen. Artwork by 2FIK. 2010. Retrieved from http://www.2fikornot2fik.com/

Together, these artists’ statements on the demand for local informant art or the dominant interpretations of their art through ethnic-cultural or racial terms demonstrate that any aesthetic reflection that they put forward is considered to be always partial and only related to a faraway homeland’s issues. This blocks “non-white” or originally “non-western” artists’ works from reflecting on and criticizing “western” communities even though they have, in some cases, been raised and have grown up in North America, they might not practice Islam, and they may not work on Middle-East related subjects. Thus, local informant art practices exercised by diasporic artists can reach and even be valorized by “western” audiences or North American art spheres, but their

meanings are always encapsulated within ethnic-cultural-racial or local differences through multiculturalist aesthetic connotations. This means that they become voiceless when seek to comment on the broader world or on so-called 'western' communities since their artistic reflections are assumed to deal with contingent narratives only.

This reveals the inherent problematic of ethnically, culturally and racially marked informant art exhibited in the North American art scene: It considers as valueless any attempt at aestheticizing the so-called outsider's perspective; thus, giving away any hope for genuine discussion among people of different backgrounds. This is true not only because the other is assumed to be different in perspective, but also since any critique of the other cannot be value free. More importantly, this criteria for outsider art is racist since it judges one's output according to a deterministic understanding of one's origin and by stereotyping ways of envisioning the other. In other words, an artist who is originally from anywhere outside of Canada or the USA can only be considered an "outsider" or a "guest". Unfortunately, this is the case even when the artist is born and raised in North America because of the reference to skin color.

This eloquently demonstrates in Azhar Usman's stand-up comedy show at the Inner-City of Muslim Action Network (IMAN) festival (June 2013) "Takin' It to the Streets."[95]I was a participat-observer in Marquette Park, Chicago, where Usman[96] articulated the issue with this joke below:

> He asked me, 'where are you from', I said I am from Chicago. He repeated his question again, 'where you are from', and even spelled this sentence to me, I said 'Chicago, Chicago'. He said 'I mean, where you are from really?' I said 'I got you - you are racist - in fact do you mean this or not?

[95] "Taking' It To The Streets, a festival of artistic performances & community forums, has been organized by IMAN Network in Chicago since 1997. It is considered to be a unique outdoor gathering of Muslim communities of different backgrounds. For more information: http://www.imancentral.org/arts-culture/takin-it-to-streets/
[96] Azhar Usman was born and raised in Chicago. His parents immigrated to the USA in the 1970's from India.

Figure 1-7. Image taken by me from IMAN Fest – Taking' It To The Streets – Urban International Festival in Chicago, June 2013

The popularity of ethnic-cultural-racial informant art does not offer an equal opportunity to engage in the public sphere. It can also limit the artist's freedom of self-articulation. Finally, since only the aesthetic narratives of the imagined homeland are valorized in the art scene, it can provoke a false appearance that the diasporic artist does not feel the need to reflect on or criticize the immigrated community or country. Indeed, the USA and Canada are assumed to be lands that are already freed or saved from trouble and undemocratic procedures in comparison to the homelands of these diasporic artists. Many of these artists (or their parental generation) have quit their originary homelands for political-social-economic reasons. This eventually encloses the legitimate possibility of critique from immigrant communities through art regarding the land they have immigrated to. The originary homelands of these artists are represented in the mainstream news media as being subject to the atrocities of civil wars, maybe occupied by ISIS, facing extreme

economic problems, or ruled by authoritarian regimes. Consequently, these immigrants are assumed to be only grateful to the country and state of immigration. They themselves often feel that they can only be grateful and not critical. This derives from the fact that they can only ever be "guests" but never "hosts" in this migratory context. Artists interviewed frequently asked me to refrain from recording or to delete sections of our conversation where they criticized their country of immigration because they do not feel comfortable or even safe expressing these feelings. Thereby, "otherness" does not renounce itself when it becomes valuable.

The valorization of ethnically, racially and culturally marked diasporic art in the contemporary art scene does not dissolve the boundary between the profane and the cultural realm. As Boris Groys emphasizes, the apparent democratization process in the contemporary art world still retrieves its aesthetic value from the very tension between the profane and the cultural realm in today's value regime. If local informant art is valorized in the cultural realm, this means that there is a contrast or irony involved in this display that the interpreter can remark for this art. This balance of equilibrium embodied in the artwork which makes claims about what is assumed as non-aesthetic, does not destruct the regime of valorization simply because it sets profane objects in determinate contrastive relation to valorized tradition:

> "This gives rise to the experience of being outside time of ecstatic delight over a realized utopia, of freedom and magic omnipotence, which accompanies the successful, that is, radically innovative cultural act…The profane is not wholly overcome as a result of its integration into the valorized tradition: at any moment, the urinal[97] can be turned right-side up again, removed from the art exhibit, and used as it was originally meant to be. The real, indestructible synthesis of the valorized and the profane does not come about; the principle of comparison does not manifest itself in artist's creativity, and there exists, consequently, no universal guarantee of equality.[98]"

[97] Groys references here to Marcel Duchamp's artwork of Fountain (1917) in which Duchamp posits a male urinal turned right-side up in the art scene as artwork

[98] Groys, *On the New*, 103 – 104.

Thus, according to Groys, emancipatory art that overcomes all value boundaries does not realize itself in the seemingly democratic realm of contemporary art. In the case of local informant art, the valorization of the previously non-aesthetic or non-valorized ethnic-cultural-racial connotative aesthetic practices does not form the point of departure for an emancipatory realm. This is because these aesthetic practices get their aesthetic value from the existence of the boundary and the boundary's very discernibility. Consequently, multiculturalist popularity in the art scene does not equalize relations in the public sphere but rather aestheticizes and valorizes distinctions without annulling their presence

Local Informant Artists and the Case of "Middle Eastern" or "Muslim" Connotative Art

The popularization of local informant art featuring Middle Eastern subjectivities achieves aesthetic value from the dominant way of partitioning the sensible, the potent consensual order of the contemporary global public sphere. Jacques Rancière defines this current consensual order of post-September 11 attacks as failure to generate a rupture in the symbolic order, since discourse on September 11th fortified the hegemonic modes of symbolization, the togetherness of communities, and the conflicts facing these communities: "it accepted to characterize the conflict in religious and ethnic terms as a combat between good and evil[99]". Thereby, politics was transformed into policing, the act of consensus (the politics of policing), where communities can be symbolized exclusively as the composition of specific interest groups and points of struggle. Rancière argues that consensus consists in the reduction of politics to the police, which therefore

[99]Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, Tra edition (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 101.

reduces people to the sum parts of the social body, and the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts[100]. In this context, local informant art related to the "Middle East" is in fact part of a lingering set of binaries constructed in this consensual regime. This consensual regime equalizes terror with art, or inhumanity with humanity. Local informant art related Middle East possesses an advantageous position from which to attract art audiences who interpret the artwork in the realm of the discourse of the war on terror. This is valid even in cases where the interpreter is dissident or disagrees with these kinds of policing politics since even the oppositional view posits itself in this consensual regime. Still, there is something more specific about the popularity of "Middle Eastern" or "Muslim" connotative local informant art in today's contemporary art scene: It reflects a particular tension in its embodiment. This figure of the artist embodies the very discernibility between the cultural realm and the profane realm that today's dominant societal value regime cannot transcend. The local informant artist and her art reflect this popular contrast.

The question to consider here is whether local informant art related to the "Middle East" can generate change in this consensual system, a "dissensus", while containing the very discernibility of the consensual regime. Here, Rancière's term of dissensus signifies a form outside of the "consensual landscape of the visible, the sayable and doable[101]". Consensus frames among sensory data and hence indicates what to be discussed as an issue of politics. This policing activity of consensus allows or does not allow specific subjects to speak about these data chosen to appear in the public sphere. Dissensual art does not in fact aim to reveal the forms of domination, but instead it seeks to disrupt the roles and subjects prioritized in the system of consensus. Here, it can be

[100]Ibid., 41.
[101]Ibid., 149.

argued that potential "dissensual" art must not be dedicated to revealing a secret by revealing the contrast between appearances and reality in the dominance of the consensual regime. To do so would be to adhere to the old logic of critical activist intervention based on deciphering the symptoms of the consensual regime and its power dynamics. This old logic lacks any impact and cannot surpass the consensual regime because it does not provoke a surplus in the partition of the sensible that would disturb the order of things. Instead, it re-legitimizes consensus through using the same methods of policing. For example, art that indicates, "not every muslim is terrorist" in order to resist the discourse of the war on terror can be understood as oppositional but not as a dissensual break. This is because the partition of the sensible, the camps and groups of interests that are contributing to the very construction of consensus, such as Muslims against non-Muslims or terrorists against civilization, still govern as terms here in this proposition. Any artistic deconstruction which references the consensual regime of the war on terror faces the danger of reproducing the same criteria for the partition of the sensible. Hence, the liberal tolerance or leftist romanticism for what is considered to be the "oppressed other" of absolute difference does not change the game of culture.

In an interview with Nav Haq by Stephanie Bailey discussing the exhibition "Don't You Know Who I Am? Art After Identity Politics"[102], organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Haq emphasizes that modes of art production that deal with or challenge ideas of identity, particularly in the 80's and 90's, had led to the ghettoization of culture through an insistence on visibility. Haq states:

[102]"Art After Identity Politics," *Ibraaz*, accessed December 20, 2014, http://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/150.

> "…there is again a kind of flattening out effect based on face values and reductive notion of otherness. It is too much celebrating perceived differences, and expecting artists to perform to pre-prescribed ideas of who they are[103]".

In addition to this, Haq also accentuates the risk that any alternative labelling against existing categorizations often recreates these same categorizations:

> "When you try to suggest that something is after something, you create a sort of umbilical cord from that thing that you're trying to get away from. There was a similar situation when curator Thelma Goldman in the USA, tried to describe a certain practice as being 'post-Black, but what she actually ended up doing was just creating another criteria or even stereotype for Black Art[104]"

Accordingly, "Middle Eastern" local informant art that works towards transcending the marginalization of camps can inadvertently reproduce certain hierarchies. This is because of a focus on consensual actors, subjectivities and politics that are already determined through the process of policing. To illustrate this point, Haq mentions "not making the artist visible" as a method to surpass ghettoization for "non-white" or "non-western" artists. This practice of non-autobiographic art can highlight the global nature of even localized production rather than being subject to the consensual terms of multiculturalism and otherness.

The popularization of local informant artists valorizes an aesthetic value that has been derived from the contemporary consensual realm and enforces the essentializing of the artists and their art as regional cultural representatives. As Groys inserts on the fake democratic aspect of contemporary art:

> "No innovation which aims to put the valorized tradition and the profane realm on an equal footing, re-value values, and liberalize and democratize between the levels of the cultural and the profane realm; rather it draws it still more sharply, for it rejects, without exception, all of the profane's demands for exclusivity, universality, and power – the demands constituting its profaneness. The temptation inherent in the profane cannot, of course, be eliminated once and for all by any sort of cultural

[103]Ibid.
[104]Ibid.

> domestication. Every profane element incorporated into culture reminds us of its wild, profane, free past, when boundless, absolute, intolerant, destructive, all-embracing claims could still be made without embarrassment. No ultimate cultural synthesis can absorb this profane reminder, which can consequently be re-activated at any moment[105]"

Consequently, following Groy's argument, if Middle-Eastern local informant art gains value, the border between art and terror, human versus inhuman in the sense of the valorized and the profane always subsists and is incarnated within these ethnic-cultural antagonisms.

Although informant art does not annul this otherness, it can still be dissident and hence useful to counterbalance the abundant portrayals of Middle Eastern subjects and subjectivities as the other due to the fact that the discourse on terror reflects the dominant antagonism of the current consensual realm. Furthermore, the impact of the contemporary art scene on the broader cultural realm in comparison to mainstream media is still insufficient to reach mass audiences. That being said, contemporary art does circulate in the online public sphere through social media, blogs and websites. Hence, the special position of Muslim or Middle-Eastern local informant art practices demands an accentuation of different circumstances.

Throughout this chapter, I have explored the central terms and the theoretical expansion of these terms surrounding the major polemics and discussions on the subject matter of the sublime figurations in contemporary art and politics to provide the key points on the importance of Middle Eastern marked art and diasporic artistic engagements with the trend of Middle Easterness. I have argued that Middle Easterness as subject matter constitutes the primary intersection of

[105]Groys, *On the New*, 121 – 122.

contemporary art and politics in the collective imagination because it embodies explicitly the sublime aesthetics in both of the domains. Accordingly, Middle Eastern connotative art as a part of local informant art in diasporic artistic practices has become popular. In the following chapter, I will focus on the revival of interest in diasporic art connotative of Middle Easterness and art practices in the diaspora that exhibit the Middle Easterness. Through engaging with the primary critiques on the subject matter of identity politics in contemporary art, I have demonstrated the main challenges and problematics that diasporic artists and artistic practices in the diaspora encounter in dealing with their othernatization and the theme of Middle Easterness. In the following chapters, I will focus on how artists borrow and reproduce this othernization, generate the sublime theme of contemporary art and politics, and invent new artistic strategies in seeking an oppositional stance.

2. EXHIBITING THE MIDDLE EAST IN NORTH AMERICA

The Revival of Interest in "Middle Eastern" Art

At an exhibition entitled "Here and Elsewhere" (2014, New Museum at New York City), bringing together more than forty-five artists who live and work internationally, artwork from Arab majority countries was exhibited. The experimental video art [106] of 1983 Kuwait-born visual artist Basma Alsharif shown at this exhibition begins with the following voiceover in Arabic with English subtitles:

> "On a day as any other day, all of our memories would become significant only in retrospect – our first memory was marked by the day setting off to a start with the worst of all evils…BOREDOM so we invented a game of measurements"

When do the memories of "Middle East" become significant for a global audience and when does the art depicting these memories become spectacular? This statement above indicates the recent enthusiastic engagement with contemporary art from Muslim majority countries with global audiences through major museum exhibitions, local art spaces with international reach, as well as through the global art market. Questions that I will explore here include: What kinds of dominant themes are present in the exhibition of art from Muslim majority countries? What kind of aesthetic value do these artworks refer to? How do they engage with the aesthetics of sublime in the contemporary art scene? My aim here in this chapter is to study the prominent artistic aspects of exhibiting Middle East in North America and how these practices can be interpreted in terms of offering an alternative imagery on consensual system.

In the current post-September-11th era following the recent upheavals in the Middle East known as the Arab Springs, the North American art scene witnessed an increasing revival of

[106]Basma Alsharif, *We Began by Measuring Distance (excerpt)*, 2009, http://vimeo.com/39825624.

interest in Islam and Middle Eastern art. In North America exhibitions of artwork from Muslim majority countries are used as a medium of consciousness-raising, a tool to promote awareness about the socio-political situation of the region or to discuss social justice-oriented issues related to human rights, freedom of expression, and economic decolonization. Several well-known galleries and museums have hosted major exhibitions on this theme, such as: “Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking” (Feb - May 2006) at MoMA (New York), “Tarjama/ Translation” (Sept 2009) at the Queens Museum of Art (Queens, New York), “Here and Elsewhere” (August - Sept 2014) at the New Museum (New York), and many other alternative art channels have displayed art from Muslim majority countries. Literally, hundreds of exhibitions, events, and screenings have been mounted in Canada and the US as well as in Europe on the contemporary art of Muslim majority countries with special emphasis on “the Middle East”. Many journalistic articles were written and catalogs published about these exhibitions and artworks. Contemporary art from Muslim majority countries has become a sociocultural phenomenon with significant weight, popularized by a complex set of institutions and practices.

This trend focusing on the artistic productions of the so-called “Middle East" or “Muslim majority countries” includes a wide variety of historical, cultural, and ethnic sources, while placing emphasis on a few particular terms such as war, oppression, violence and the general ways of living in troubled lands. While the Arab Spring, revolutions, bloody protests and riots were seen on TV, the increasing body of art emphasizing the region also regenerated this mainstream media focus on the Middle East, Arab lands, and the “Muslim landscape". This trend also plays on the slippage between what is labelled under the “Middle East” and “Islam” in North America and in the dominant discourse. As one of my informants, the stand-up artist Azhar Usman remarked to me during an interview in Chicago in June 2013:

> "In America, the term Muslim gained political currency under an inclusive and paradoxically exclusive sense. It does not include Caucasian Muslims, Bosnians. It does not include Indonesians…or black people, [...] – it includes Indian people who are not Muslims. A whole category – stupid in so many levels…"

On the one hand, art from Muslim majority countries reflects some kind of a mixed identity with racial and regional connotations enclosed in the informal definition of the term of "Muslim" in North America. On the other hand, it also encloses a comparatively limited content, focusing on "war" and "atrocities," for such a large area of artistic productions. In fact, the term "Middle East" does not define any specific place or any particular countries, precise histories, or even a defined religion, because the discursive construction of the so-called Middle East's borders is a never-ending process. What is included under the term the "Middle East" or "Muslim" countries changes according to where there is "war". "Atrocities" and "oppression" are therefore a dominant trend in defining the landscape and the related subjectivities of this landscape. For instance, while Turkey was considered a so-called bridge between "the "East" and "the West" before the 2000's, the display of state violence and riots across the country beginning in 2013 by the Western mainstream media has shifted Turkey's place on the world map to the area called the "Middle East". Thus, geography is concerned more about projection rather than physical place. Accordingly, the terms "Middle East" or "Muslim" have come to mean the reign of war, chaos, suffering, failure and the reign of terror, while these traits cannot totally characterize the region nor are they exclusive to the region. Thus, the terms "Middle East" and "Muslim" are already Orientalist definitions and classifications.

The contemporary art regime does not prioritize especially Western art forms and productions because of its own assumed founding principle of democracy. Any aesthetic artwork and its value are considered as equal to the "random object", hence the contemporary art regime does not differentiate "art" from the "common reality". As a result, contemporary art from or

related to the “Middle East” is considered as equal in aesthetic value to art from any other background. Consequently, these works of art are not merely craft products, traditional ethnic artifacts unique to a community, but the products of individual artists. Yet, the tendency of naming artists’ works with the artists’ origins or emphasizing a landscape/region instead of a theme, genre, or source of inspiration calls into question the trend of exhibiting artwork that focuses on “the Middle East”. Presenting works from Muslim majority countries as “Islamic art" or “Middle Eastern art" homogenizes the region, cultures, histories and reproduces the classic binary opposition between “the West” and “the East”. Shirin Neshat and Emily Jacir criticized precisely this framing in their show entitled “Without Boundary” (2006) at MoMA. When the show was labelled under the heading of art from Muslim world [107], they spoke out about how this title reduced the art to an apolitical discussion and analysis within an Orientalist categorization of a polarized East and West. Neshat stated that:

> One of the biggest challenges in organizing such an exhibition is how to avoid generalization of Islam. Most Westerners wrongly view the Muslim world, as one nation, where in fact Islam has been interpreted and is practiced differently in each country; according to its own unique traditional history. Therefore, the question that can be raised about such an exhibition is precisely what do these artists have in common? Why should their work be presented together? [108]

Jacir claims that:

> I think it is funny in the same way that having an exhibition of artists from the ‘Christian world’, and then including artists from America, Chile, Mexico, Australia, the Philippines, France, England, Mexico, Russia and Poland would be [109]

[107]Tyler Green, “More on Without Boundary,” *ArtInfo*, March 2006, http://blogs.artinfo.com/modernartnotes/2006/03/more-on-without-boundary/.
[108]Ibid.
[109]Ibid.

These artworks entitled “Islamic”, “Muslim” and/or “Arab” cannot escape Orientalist frameworks when being presented in major art scenes [110]. This derives from the fact that the primary source for interpreting the meanings of these art productions is indicated as their projected geographic location already defined by an Orientalist discourse. These socio-historical definitions used by academia, art institutions, and galleries reflect cultural and social hierarchies that have developed alongside with colonial and imperial geopolitical policies[111]. The easy labelling of their themes as “Muslim”, “Islamic”, “Middle Eastern” captures the audience’s interest by drawing on dominant recognizable terms while reproducing the stereotypes concerning the imagination of the region. Kirsten Scheid (2012) underscores the revival of Orientalist paintings in Iraq after 1991 for a new souvenir market that catered to diplomatic and humanitarian delegates who desired Orientalist artwork to bring home with them, while at the same time the free art schools and professional opportunities for Iraqi artists were massacred. Thus, the art trend focusing on Muslim majority countries has been shaped by the North American viewers' gaze.

The principal critique of the recent revival of art from “the Middle East” is that this interest in the supposed “other” is apolitical and ignores the complex history of interaction between the so-called “East” and “West”. Timothy Mitchell refers to the old Western exhibition tradition depicting the Orient: “Unaware that the Orient has not been arranged as an exhibition, the visitor nevertheless attempts to carry out the characteristic cognitive manoeuvre of the modem subject, separating himself from an object-world and observing it from a position that is invisible and set apart.[112]” For Mitchell, the problem of the Western tradition of exhibition is that it creates distance

[110]Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 651–81.
[111]Maymanah Farhat, “Contemporary ‘Islamic’ Art in Context,” *Counterpunch*, March 2006, http://www.counterpunch.org/2006/03/25/contemporary-quot-islamic-quot-art-in-context/.
[112] Timothy Mitchell, “The World as Exhibition,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989): 217–36.

between oneself and the world, in other words, to constitute "the Middle East" as something picture-like or as an object for exhibit. In this process, the so-called West is put in a position over and apart from the rest of the world as an objective outsider. The art trend focusing on "the Middle East" similarly works to separate politics and economics from the work of arts, and in the process the realm of art is considered to be value-free, an objective space. Farhat (2006) argues that such exhibitions do not allow the audience to acknowledge that the interests in the Middle East are intimately tied to the American military and economic dominance. Therefore, these special art events are seen as the exposure of "another side of the Middle East" [113], an art-friendly, and hence, more human side in contrast to the dominant political representations of Muslims as "terrorists" or people from the "violent, uncivilized East". According to Scheid, the art productions that came to dominate international attention during the Arab spring produced a problematic narrative about how victimized people can participate in global politics, minimizing their influence to that of a subject of humanitarian intervention[114]. Here, artists and artistic productions become the agents of awareness reflecting back to the rest of "the Middle Eastern" habitants their lives as proper citizens [115]. In this case, the image of the artist is contrasted with the figure of the suicide bomber because art and culture are seen as the indicators of civilization and advancement and assumed to be completely isolated from political and economic realms. These artists, whose artworks are presented in these highly influenced art scenes, are assumed to have "liberated" themselves from certain oppressive relations inherent in the region called "the Middle East"[116]. They are therefore seen as belonging to humanity [117]. Consequently, these art events conveniently regenerate the

[113]Winegar, "The Humanity Game."
[114] Kirsten Scheid, "On Arabs and the Art Awakening: Warnings from a Narcoleptic Population," August 2012, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/7149/on-arabs-and-the-art-awakening_warnings-from-a-nar.
[115]Ibid.
[116]Winegar, "The Humanity Game."
[117]Scheid, "On Arabs and the Art Awakening."

discourse of the "War on Terror" since they legitimize Western involvement in the region. Under this schema, artists from "Middle East" are imagined as witnessing the reign of chaos in their "homelands" while enjoying the space of freedom in exhibiting their works in North America. Winegar also puts emphasis on how most Middle East related art events in the US fortify the discourse that, "America is still a beacon of freedom and civilization despite the facts of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo"[118]. Whereas the possibility of exhibiting art from "Middle East" or Muslim majority countries in North America reproduces the assumption of the democratic character of aesthetic taste in North America, it omits the present and past destructive effects of American imperialism on the region at the same time.

I want to suggest a slightly different approach focusing on aesthetic valuation regarding this question of the revival of artistic interest in the "Middle East". I want to reframe the question in the following sections in the sense that I do not wish to ask, what motivates this trend through an analysis of hegemony, but rather to analyze how this art trend claims to be artistically valuable. While the above mentioned insights critically enlighten us about the reasons for and the outcomes behind the popularization of artistic productions referring to Muslim majority countries, they do not touch upon the artistic component of the "Middle Easterner". I aim to contribute to this body of study in analyzing the artistic themes of these artworks instead of focusing on the marketing titles and strategies of this art revival. From this standpoint, my interest is in how this trend aims to reach its audience as well as what kind of artistic desires it evokes. To be sure, one must consider the artistic appreciation or recognition not as a universal value-free qualification but as something constructed in particular historical and social conjunctures. However, I argue that explorations of how these artistic productions are viewed can provide a better understanding of what kinds of life-

[118]Winegar, "The Humanity Game."

fabric are constructed through this art and the ways in which the terms of societal consensus have become legitimized through artistic appreciation in everyday life. For this purpose, I will elaborate on what is selected for exhibition in these art scenes, what is made visible, and what is not.

Exhibiting The "Middle East" in North America

The artistic depiction of the Middle Eastern disaster is a project of witness-creation. In this sense, the artist becomes a lawyer who translates the Middle Eastern cry into a request for recognition of pain, for memorialization in history, and for help and solidarity in the international tribunal of common sense. This cry is addressed to the global public, who are expected to behave as the judge. Art audiences then, consist of witnesses who become informed about the socio-political situation in the Middle East through art performances. On one hand, the Middle Eastern plaintiff is speechless, his voice cannot be heard in the global public arena, even while the socio-political disaster of the Middle East dominates daily, mainstream news coverage. On the other hand, these artistic performances attempt to overturn the object position of the Middle Eastern cry and the simple pornographic appreciation in which the victim, the subject of depiction, possesses no agency to communicate with the viewer. Thus, Middle Eastern victimhood acquires a subject position through art. Art is a cognizable form of communication that permits the transmission of the firsthand expressions of the Middle Eastern habitant and her experience of sufferance. Jean-François Lyotard defines the terms of victimhood in *The Differend*[119]:

> It is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong. A plaintiff is someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it. One becomes victim if one loses these means. One loses them, for example, if the author of the damages turns out directly or indirectly to be one's judge. The latter has the authority to reject one's testimony as false or the ability to impede its publication. But this is only a

[119]Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (U of Minnesota Press, 1988), 8.

> particular case. In general, the plaintiff becomes a victim when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered. Reciprocally, the perfect crime does not consist in killing the victim or the witnesses, but rather in obtaining the silence of the witnesses, the deafness of the judges, and the inconsistency of the testimony…He or she becomes a victim

Art attempts to find artistic referents in order for the wrong to be expressed and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim.

*Figure 2-1. One of the representative pıctures accompanying the news on "*A Saudi Arabian rape victim sentenced to 200 lashes ". 2007. For more info about the news: http://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-rape-victim-gets-200-lashes/

There is a slippage between popular conceptions of "the Muslim world" and "the Middle East" within the dominant discourse although their meanings do not converge for many of the habitants in these regions. The borders of the Middle East can be enlarged to other parts of the world to include Muslim majority countries in Asia. However, the geography of the Middle East varies according to the spread of socio-political disaster. I would argue that there is a high correlation between these socio-political disasters and Muslimhood in the general outlook of geography. These socio-political disasters range from totalitarian governance, a generalized lack

of order, of a judicial system and justice, harsh socio-economic hierarchies, a lack of tolerance for diversity, and sovereign violence, civil wars, chaos and brutal death.

The imagery of the Middle East constitutes a kind of aporia, whether it is in an activist booklet or a part of Fox News. There is a long tradition of presenting social and political landscapes of Middle East as a sort of horror-land. This presentation however, reflects a banal horror since the Middle East is already assumed to be habituated to pain and suffering. The Middle Eastern landscape of chaos represents the failure of humanity to overcome the human desire for power after so many years of war, chaos, and bloody histories of dictatorships. A Time magazine special issue on ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria) from 9 March 2015 describes the situation in the "Middle East" as:

> Always troubled, the Middle East faces crisis on all fronts: the Arab Spring in tatters, conflict boiling between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, millions of refugees stranded by the Syrian civil war, Yemen and Libya leaderless, the Sinai breaking from Egyptian control, Iran racked by economic sanctions yet driving a wedge between the U.S and Israel. ISIS has tentacles in all these troubles. It won't be easy to pry those tentacles loose without making everything worse. Which is exactly what ISIS wants: to make matters worse.[120]

Things can "only get worse" since the situation is deemed as one that was already bad before. There is a lack of surprise but rather a continuity of victimhood and horror in what is assumed to be the "Middle East" or Muslim majority countries. Some headlines and vocabulary from the same special issue of Time[121]: "A Feeling of Déjà Vu", the bleeding Middle East… civil society is collapsing in the large parts of North Africa and the Middle East, especially after the Arab Spring that has turned into a long Arab winter… the absence of competent government creates mass unemployment, resentment, suspicion, desperation and sense of victimhood." This

[120]"TIME," 2015, 27.
[121]Ibid., 31.

dominant mainstream discourse does not refer to everyday struggles in the Middle East because it does not give a subject position to the people living there. Furthermore, this discourse does not confer the importance of the sufferance in the Middle East because the Middle Eastern socio-political disaster is considered as the natural consequences of the inabilities of governance. Because Middle Easterners are victims, no presentation of the wrong they suffered is available in the historical memory of the dominant discourse. Thus, the complete crime consists in obtaining the silence of the global witnesses of Middle Eastern wars, the deafness of judges to articulate recognition of their pain and the cacophonic and hence inconsistent testimony from Middle Eastern victims who do not possess a subject role in their own depictions.

Is it possible to create art following the socio-political disasters in the Middle East?

The question now becomes: whether or not it is possible to create art after the Middle Eastern socio-political collapse. "After Auschwitz" wrote Adorno, "to write a poem is barbaric". This means that the art of the Holocaust is impossible since, "the Holocaust often reveals the helplessness of the mind before an evil that cannot quite be imagined or the helplessness of the imagination before an evil that cannot quite be understood."[122] That is why the disaster of the Jews is often considered to be the disaster of the entire civilized world: the universal collapse of dialectic progress and human agency. According to Adorno, art that represents the Holocaust converts the unimaginable ordeal to something of some ulterior purpose since it is stripped of some of its horror in the artistic perception. The Holocaust, however, was not an anomaly in the history of Western civilization and therefore acknowledging the Holocaust as an occurrence outside of history is an act of barbarism: "it tacitly absolves human agents of responsibility"[123]. As Elaine Martin

[122]Irving Howe, *Selected Writings: 1950-1990* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1990), 430.
[123]Ibid., 424–425.

demonstrates through her readings of Adorno, the annihilation of the very concept of the individual is central to Adorno's line of thought: "In the concentration camps human life had been rendered indifferent and by extension expendable. This freedom of individual expression is thus but a façade.[124]" However, in conceptualizing it in this way, the victims of European colonization and the pain of non-white communities were not recognized by Adorno in order to refute the idea of Enlightenment's drive of progress. That is because they are the Other, not included in the major history of the world that the West is eligible to write.

However, in the case of Middle-Eastern victimhood, we do not experience the same references to universal collapse since Middle East is already assumed to be outside of the borders of humanity. The Middle Eastern disaster is not unimaginable. The triumph of human agency and the laws of progressive history were already considered as invalid in this landscape long before the Second World War. As Edward Said's critique of Orientalist thought argues, the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison to non-European peoples and cultures has made European culture hegemonic both inside and outside of Europe. The Middle East and Muslim majority countries are considered to be outside the diagram of Western civilization, at best they can be good copy-cats. Consequently, Western scholarship often positions the Holocaust as the sole instance in human history to question the idea of human progress: the Nazi idea dehumanized systematically both guards and prisoners, torturers and tortured to create a realm of subjugation no longer responsive to the common norms of human society in the sense that Jews as well as Nazis were not human anymore in the death camps.

[124]Elaine Martin, "Re-Reading Adorno: The 'after-Auschwitz'aporia," in *Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*, vol. 2, 2006, 3, http://www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/02/elaine-martin.

In the context of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism, following the attacks of September 11th, Middle Eastern subjectivities have never reached such a high moment of human potentiality. There is an apparent continuity between the terms of Orientalism and neo-Orientalism, although they signify slightly different representations/formations of the East within Western discourse. Whereas the former mostly distinguishes the Oriental subject as "backward" and in need of Western guidance, the latter labels the Oriental subject as the "terrorist", a mere "zoe" life which can be killed but not sacrificed, "a terrorist" can only be destroyed[125]. While the destruction of Europe's Jews cannot be logically deduced from any system of presuppositions in this regard, Middle Eastern victimhood becomes unsurprising. The bleeding Middle East does not break with, but in fact fits within the continuum of the universal disaster of humanity. The Middle Eastern cry is understood as a natural occurrence for history. That is why, "the lurid butchers of ISIS" as they are described in Time magazine, dictators, torturers, characters of lynching incidences, rapists, and American soldiers abusing Iraqi prisoners are not considered to be within the same category as civilized Germans listening Bach in the morning and then going to work as Nazi SS officers. Middle Eastern Victims have always lived under inhuman conditions and consequently their object position is not a new occurrence. Achille Mbembe undertakes the definition of war in the colonies within the dominant language:

> "… colonies are similar to the frontiers. They are inhabited by 'savages.' The colonies are not organized in a state form and have not created a human world. Their armies do not form a distinct entity, and their wars are not wars between regular armies. They do not imply the mobilization of sovereign subjects (citizens) who respect each other as

[125]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998).

enemies. They do not establish a distinction between combatants and noncombatants, or

Figure 2-2. Time Magazine Cover - March 2015

> again between an 'enemy' and a 'criminal.' It is thus impossible to conclude peace with them. In sum, colonies are zones in which war and disorder, internal and external figures of the political, stand side by side or alternate with each other. As such, the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization.'[126]"

Thus, the horror is already habitual and hence a banal event in non-Western landscape. Consequently, the status of art after the "Middle-Eastern" socio-political disaster is not considered barbaric, but rather uninteresting because of the heavy exposure of Western audiences to this disastrous scene and the inhuman experiences of the 'Middle East' that have existed for so long.

If art attempts to depict the unimaginable fate of the victims, it in fact diminishes the horror of the event through aesthetic stylization. Art as an autonomous form of action cannot represent inhumanity because we lack the adequate categories for comprehending how such horrible events could occur. However, for those who are supposedly already outside the realm of civilization, such a pain can be perfectly articulated. The deference owed to the victims has been violated because they are the Other, non-white communities. Art depicts horror, and thus, art reproduces the cultural values of the very society that provokes these extreme sufferings and inhumane conditions without questioning art's own traditional form of representation. In the same sense, Jews who suffered the Holocaust become non-white which was exactly what the Nazi extermination claimed them to be.

Yet, it is not too much exposure to misery, but rather the logic of speaking on behalf of the victims that is banalizing horror according to Jacques Rancière's perspective. Rancière claims that the objectification of naked bodies, lying down, who cannot turn their gaze back to the viewer throws into question the depiction of victimhood in art and its aesthetic appreciation.[127] Rancière

[126]J.-A. Mbembe and Libby Meintjes, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40.
[127]Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Reprint edition (London: Verso, 2011).

agrees that there is a specific kind of horror-depicting art that does validate the culture that generates this horror. However, not every artwork depicting horror re-victimize the victims in his opinion:

> The issue is not whether it is necessary to show the horrors suffered by the victims of some particular violence. It revolves around the construction of the victim as an element in a certain distribution of the visible. An image never stands alone. It belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit. The issue is knowing the kind of attention prompted by some particular system.[128]

The victims are the, "object of speech without themselves having a chance to speak.[129]" Thus, the image of horror cannot exchange the gaze, the subject of the image is reduced to object. Yet, Rancière signals other ways of obeying the artist's duty, figurative or otherwise, prescribed for artwork once artwork has stopped being subject to the norms of representation: the task of art is showing what cannot be seen[130]. The storytelling of the Middle Eastern disaster focuses on victimization as an 'object matter'. It is a banal fact not because there are too many representations but because they demand the same logic of play between the work of art and the spectator. Middle Easterners do not possess a gaze to look back at the audience. Thus, these representations do not give rise to any typical ethical problems in Western discourse, they have never been considered as anything more than an object. According to the artists who state that there is a need for divergent artistic representations of the Middle Eastern story, audiences have become cynic witnesses or even indifferent and insensitive to Middle Eastern suffering. Here, the intervention of a divergent genre to depict what is assumed to be the "Middle East" and its misery can obstruct this social reproduction since it puts in question the usual exchange of gaze as what Rancière defines as,

[128]Ibid., 99.
[129]Ibid., 97.
[130]Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, Tra edition (Polity, 2014), 72.

"…where the eye does not know in advance what it sees and thought does not know what it should make of it.[131]"

How then can we manage to create a different exchange of the gaze? Which is the appropriate art or genre to depict horror in the first place? Irving Howe tells us that the "tragic" is particularly inappropriate for representations of the Holocaust since "choice" is not available for victims in the death camps. The basic premise upon which tragedy rests, that is, human agency, individual motivation, and the choice of one course of action over another, cannot be met in victimhood: victims are not individual characters free to choose, to opt for various courses of action in their story. As Howe writes, in classical tragedy man is defeated, in the Holocaust man is destroyed. In tragedy this defeat is usually associated with a certain sense of grandeur, but the victim's story does not exist hence his defeat is deprived of grandeur[132]. Thus, a specific style and form are suited to a given subject: tragedy for nobles, epic for kings, and comedy for little people, while victims cannot express their story at all. In the case of Middle Eastern socio-political disaster, the victims have always been deprived of grandeur, hence tragedy as a genre has never been suited for their sufferings. Yet, Rancière describes the practice of artistic compositions of history free from representation in the nineteenth century after the Second World War: This is the multiplication of figurative possibilities and thus, "the age of anti-representation is not the age of the unrepresentable but the age of high realism."[133] Consequently, the failed encounter of representation and the Idea does not provoke an impossibility of art. Rancière contends that there are ways in which the art of the twentieth century was able to face up history.[134]

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[131]Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*.
[132]Howe, *Selected Writings*, 436–339.
[133]Rancière, *Figures of History*, 81.
[134]Ibid., 89.

Experimenting with "new" patterns of narration can produce disruptive influence through denying the spectator's order of storytelling on the Middle East. Thus, changes in the artistic setting of depiction are used to remedy the indifference, tiredness, lack of interest or empathy in an audience already cynical from the intensive bombardment of news related to the Middle East in the diaspora. The alteration of artistic genre or changing the subject of victimhood, as well as redefining the relation between the victim and the witness of spectacle aim to provide a fresh look at the Middle East. This also means necessitating a self-questioning look at the spectacle by the Middle Easterners themselves. As Peggy Phelan proposes, "until the image of the other can be other-than a cipher for a looking self, calling greater visibility of the under-represented will do nothing to improve the quality of our political or psychic imaginations."[135] In other words, an alternative artistic depiction of the Middle East must provide a different exchange of gazes between the artwork and the spectator. By doing so, it can remedy the victimhood and indifference through changing power dynamics and re-distributing the roles in this exchange of gazes. Therefore, the change of genre to depict Middle Eastern lives can change the game in the sense that the socio-political disaster of the Middle East can become a tragedy. The characters of this tragedy can be tragic heroes, not just objects ready to be contemplated as spectacles, but as subjects themselves. As such the traditional use of tragedy as a form misrepresenting the categorization of the Middle-Eastern socio-political disaster can be turned into a strategy to disrupt the spectacle's expectancies of the subject.

[135]Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 26.

The Birth of Hyper-Realist Tragedy

Here, the hyper-realist tragedy combined with low subjects, contents or different genres of narration form a professionalized weak art and coincides with the rule of contemporary art's weak universalism. While Groys interprets this as the restaged gap between the idea and the medium, Rancière defines this age of anti-representation as hyper-realist because it multiplies the relationships between the subject, its form, and its material[136]. It presents today's tragedy: "humanity realistically represented is a humanity that has withdrawn."

Hyper-realist tragedy as a mode combines classic tragedy with the traditional genres of "bad taste". In the classic hierarchy of genre legitimacy, there are several bottom types, for example horror, pornography, science-fiction, fantasy and documentary. "Good taste" is defined as the act of rejecting what produces corporeal sensations of disgust. As Pierre Bourdieu demonstrates in Distinction, the old "good taste" refers to moral excellence and a measure of capacity for sublimation. Yet, the aesthetics of the after resumes these old "old low subjects and topics" and "low genres" in a new fashion. Hence, the hyper-realist tragedy as an updated genre of tragedy combines the old highest genre of tragedy with old low terms of subject matter and other genres.

High art in the contemporary art scene is weak art. Its universality can only derive from its denouncement of a progressive claim following the "aesthetics of the after" that Adorno designates for art after Auschwitz. Boris Groys defines contemporary art as, professional as non-professionalism, where knowledge and mastery are still needed in order to de-professionalize art[137]. For Groys, since change is permanent in the contemporary world, there is no chance to build

[136]Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, Tra edition (Polity, 2014), 74.
[137]Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin; New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 106.

a new and stable world of the future. Consequently, to resist permanent change, art has become self-erasable through producing the weakest images possible[138] since the lifespan of any strong image is necessarily short. The truth claim is ephemeral. Contemporary art must permanently repeat artistic reduction in order to maintain the distance between the transcendental and the empirical. The elitist fashion of originality signals weak art in today's world of contemporary art. Consequently, tragic, heroic, didactic types of story-telling are outdated, and banal in the sense that they do not belong to today's contemporary art scene. Here, the definition of the strong image refers to utopic imagery as an upcoming emancipatory future: The form encountering the Idea. Although change is eternally persisting in our daily lives, it does not promise progress. Lawrence O'Toole accentuates on the logic of terror in today's cinema:

> To where does the terror trade point? Apocalypse, soon, it would seem to say. There is too much cynicism around to allow good to triumph over evil, now it's often the reverse, and if good triumphs it is increasingly marginal, increasingly temporary. Will Sigourney Weaver of Alien make it back to earth? Will the woman in Prophecy give birth to a mangled fetus? Will the surviving couple at the end of Dawn of the Dead make it to Canada in their helicopter? When horror shows don't end in destruction, they whimper away into a big question mark of a sunset. Someone's always left alone, in the dark. 'Lady' said the bum in Hitchcock's The Birds, 'it's the end of the world'. Lady, it just might be the beginning of the end[139]

Consequently, to make claims of high art means to perform professionalized weak art in the contemporary scene. The hyper-realist tragedy, which combines the classic high art genre of tragedy with the old low subjects and genres aims to produce these weak images.

A hero cannot inspire fear or pity in the Aristotelian sense within the contemporary art scene, because the audience of contemporary high art cannot identify with a hero. Aristotle defines tragedy as aiming at representing men as better than in actual life[140]. In the Aristotelian perspective,

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[138]Ibid., 109–112.
[139]Lawrence O'Toole, "The Cult of Horror," in *The Cult Film Reader* (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 262.
[140]Nahm, *Aristotle on Poetry and Music*, 5.

the tragic hero is highly renowned and prosperous, a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. Still, Aristotle's tragic hero is not eminently good and just, yet his misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. Aristotle explains that, "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."[141] Today's tragedy, the tragedy of the after, is coming to terms with and mourning for the loss of tragedy rather than the tragedy of loss. As Aristotle articulates, the best plot of tragedy follows the reversal of fortune from good to bad. However, we now begin with bad fortune in the aesthetics of the after as an artifact of the current human condition. This is why tragedy in contemporary times has been be updated to hyper-realism for its rebirth. In other words, while dialectics have been defeated, the terms of dialectics are still haunting us. Nietzsche's tragic hero cannot emerge in the aftermath of Second World War, because the traumatic experience of the failure of dialectics looks paralyzing to the will to live.

According to Friedrich Nietzsche[142], Enlightenment thought following the Socratic virtue of dialectic knowledge already condemns imagination even before Adorno's argument of the possibility of art after the Holocaust. Nietzsche refutes Socratic maxims that state that virtue is knowledge; that all sins arise from ignorance; or that only the virtuous are happy; and he concludes that these optimistic Socratic formulations already spelled the death of tragedy. From Nietzsche's perspective, this is because the Socratic virtuous hero and then the hero of the Enlightenment is condemned to be a dialectician where virtue and knowledge, belief and ethics, are necessarily and demonstrably connected[143]. Plato's Socrates bans tragedy in Kallipolis stating that:

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[141]Ibid., 16.

[142] Friedrich Nietzsche and Francis Golffing, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, Anchor Books ed edition (New York: Anchor, 1956).

[143]Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, sec. xiii.

> …saying that a god, who is himself a good is the cause of evils, we will fight that in every way. We won't allow anyone to say it in his own city, if it is to be well-governed…This, then, will be the one of the laws or patterns relating to gods that speakers and poets will have to follow: that gods are not the cause of all things but only of good ones[144]

Hence, the ban on tragedy signals the start of the antagonism in dialectics while tragedy glorifies an agonistic approach. Evil can perfectly come from Good. Idea and form do not need to be separated in tragedy. In Nietzsche's understanding, tragedy, in other words Dionysiac art, makes us realize that everything that is generated must be prepared to face its painful dissolution, but it forces us to gaze into the horror of individual existence[145]:

> This is the recognition I find expressed in the terrible triad of Oedipean fates: the same man who solved the riddle of nature (the ambiguous Sphinx) must also, as murderer of his father and husband of his mother, break the consecrated tables of the natural order. It is as though the myth whispered to us that wisdom, and especially Dionysiac wisdom, is unnatural crime, and that whoever, in pride of knowledge, hurls nature into the abyss of destruction, must himself experience nature's disintegration. 'The edge of wisdom is turned against the wise man; wisdom is a crime committed on nature'

Thereby, Nietzsche's reading of tragic art supports the possibility of a short but happy encounter with what is deemed "unrepresentable" through the engine of human will. This encounter does not end in resignation. In short, "for Nietzsche tragedy is not a pessimistic world-resignation, but rather a triumphant affirmation of life despite and in the midst of sufferings. It is this triumphant affirmation of existence that Nietzsche discovers in the tragic myth[146]". However, since the emergence of Enlightenment there is no tragedy because of the legitimization of antagonistic view according to Nietzsche and afterwards with the decline of Enlightenment, because there are no longer any attempts to look into the abyss through tragedy because humanity mourns for the fall of modernist human agency and its promise of transcendence in post-Enlightenment. In that sense,

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[144]Plato, Reeve, and Reeve, *Republic*, v. 380b – c.
[145]Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, 102.
[146]Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God*, 144.

dialectical way of looking to the human condition and its capacities that Nietzsche accentuated on has not been withered away in postmodern era after the demise of modernism and Socratic thought. In this light, human is the victim and not the hero in contemporary world.

That is how and why hyper-realist tragedy emerges as attempts to compensate for the lack of heroic plot and hero-figure and to narrate today's tragedy on human condition. Hyper-realism here is freed from representation while it is concerned about the actual horror spread by the present human condition. After Second World War and the official collapse of the Enlightenment, in Adorno's thought, reason as much as art is helpless to represent the "Idea". The subjugation of art under reason was lifted after following the Second World War, and art no longer engages in encountering form with Idea: this is the theme of contemporary art as aesthetics after Auschwitz. It reflects the dissolution of the boundaries between reality and fiction, and correspondingly the disinterest of contemporary art in encountering the Idea in the era of the postmodern sublime. Such kind of endeavour ends up necessitating the disruption of story line through incompatible genres or through unmatched subject matters with the term of tragedy. In that sense, hyper-realist tragedy displays professionalization of amateurish artistic act.

The Practice of Hyper-Realist Tragedy to Depict the Middle East

The necessity of testimony is haunting artists whose works depict the Middle East, compelling them to focus on victimhood and providing them with a means for the visibility of their sufferance. At the same time, it is impossible to testify to victimhood through representation in the high scene of the contemporary art realm. Different subject matters or alternative narrations as genres such as fantasy, science-fiction, and the erotic often seem to be inappropriate or a mere

luxury in the depiction of the Middle East, while victimhood is assumed to possess the leading role in the Middle Eastern story.

Israeli film maker Udi Aloni, in discussing his film *Art / Violence*[147] at The Toronto Palestinian Film Festival, explains how the Freedom Theatre in the Jenin Refugee Camp in the occupied West Bank differentiates:

> The Muslim theatre students are trying to put the art in the front. Art/Violence is not about misery but the film is about art in the real in the refugee camp. It is about the Red Queen of Alice in Wonderland in the Refugee Camp. We felt that creating a culture which deals with art in theater is the best way to fight against the construction of Palestinians' identity by the Israelis. I think Israel is pushing Palestinians back into the Stone Age. We have to stand up to our feet…Not just the representation of the oppression where I can depict my guilt in it, but the true resistance is high art. Not the theater of the oppressed. This is a totally different concept, this is Juliano[148]'s concept…Everyone knows about the occupation, being there already shows solidarity. Your stories are stolen from you every day...We need to put situation behind the art…Alice in Wonderland, Antigone, Waiting for Godot…Art is itself the story and the power.

Figure 2-3. Poster of Art/Violence. It shows Red Queen of Alice in Wonderland performing in Jenin Refugee Camp

[147] Udi Aloni and Omar R. Hamilton. "Art of Revolution". TPFF(Toronto Palestine Film Festival) Talks, Beit Zatoun. Toronto. September,29, 2013

[148] Juliano Mer Khamis. The founder of Freedom Theater. Israeli Jewish/Palestinian Arab actor, director, filmmaker, and political activist of Jewish and native Palestinian Greek Orthodox Christian parentage. On 4 April 2011, he was assassinated by a masked gunman in the Palestinian city of Jenin. For more information: http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n22/adam-shatz/the-life-and-death-of-juliano-mer-khamis

Picasso in Palestine[149], another documentary screened at the Toronto Palestine Film Festival(2013), depicts the hardship of borrowing and exhibiting Picasso's "Buste de Femme" (1943), the iconic expressionistic response to the Spanish Civil War, in Palestine."Buste de Femme" became the first original Picasso artwork ever to be displayed in Palestine during June 2011. In one of the scenes of the documentary, a mourning Palestinian mother questions the importance of Picasso's exhibition in Palestine while they are dealing with more important issues in the demonstrations that they have organized on the street. The "state of emergency" defines life as the contrary to death in Palestine, and hence, other matters of life are considered to be secondary.

However, Udi Aloni accentuates that in fact only Alice in Wonderland performed in Jenin Refugee camp can truly show what Palestinian drama is, in contrast to the full didactic realist "political" artwork showing naked misery. In his words, this is because, "drama as a concept is not attached to a specific place". Aloni also emphasizes that the art of the oppressed must claim to be high art instead of bare representation to assist in testimony. Thus, art that depicts the Middle Eastern socio-political misery must first be universal and then high art to build opposition not only to occupation of Palestine but to the occupation of life and to articulate the meaning of life in Palestine. Thus, Palestine can only escape the death-world realm through universal, high artistic practices. Following the same precept, the opening documentary movie of the first Syrian Film Festival (November 13-15 of 2015) was the director Yasmin Fedda's[150] *Queens of Syria* (2014) which depict Syrian women living in exile in Jordan and who come together to create and perform their own version of Euripides' Ancient Greek drama "The Trojan Women"[151]. To expose the

[149] Picasso in Palestine. 20111. Khaled Hourani is the initiator of the project.

[150] Fedda won the prize of best director from the Arab world with this documentary at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival.

[151] "Syria Film Festival," accessed December 9, 2015, http://syff.ca/.

potential parallels between the Ancient Greek and real-life modern tragedies, Syrian theatre director Omar Abu Saada, as well as Nanda Mohammad, a soap star familiar to the amateur cast, work with a voluntary group of Syrian women refugees[152]. Fedda stated that "It was important to me to show they are just normal people," as well as "It's important to show the lightness in the darkness."[153] But more importantly, they are more than normal people because they still perform art while they do not have a "good life" to make them flourish their abilities in Aristotelian sense. Thus, they are real Greek heroes of ancient drama: They play being the artists instead of victims and their art is not mere cry but a classic piece of high art from assumed universal literature.

Figure 2-4. Figure. Image taken from the documentary, Queens of Syria(2014) by Yasmin Fedda. Syrian women exiles perform on the scene the play of "The Trojan Women"

[152] Holly Williams, "Exploring the Modern Retelling of The Trojan Woman Centred on the Syrian Civil War," *The Independent*, July 11, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/features/queens-of-syria-exploring-a-modern-retelling-of-euripides-s-the-trojan-women-by-female-victims-of-10378170.html.
[153] Ibid.

When Aloni states that Alice in Wonderland in the Refugee Camp is more political than didactic political documentary, he points to re-gaining life experiences as taking back stories stolen from the victim through traditional high art. More importantly, this type of art is more realist because it is hyper-realist in the sense that it unites the classic high art of tragedy with the subject matter of victims and transforms them into heroes. The victims presented are always already considered victims because they are from the Middle East. They are not the nobles in the traditional understanding of history. Consequently, the dominant subject matter of misery in the Middle East satisfies contemporary art's rule of uniting contrasts to escape representation. Furthermore, the loss of tragedy that is faced through Middle Eastern subjectivities encompasses the audience's life-time experience of the contemporary world at a universal level.

Hyper-Tragic Image from the "Middle East"

Emerging artistic engagements from the "Middle East" present the aesthetics of collateral damage and the everyday experiences of the victims in this troubled landscape. Knowledge of the current Middle East is based on the knowledge of war as represented through the visual frames seen in the mass media and alternatively in the artistic performances of the Middle East in North America. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the statement note for Palestinian artist Suleiman Mansour's work in the exhibition of "Made in Palestine" (SomArts Cultural Center, San Francisco 2005), showcasing a collection of contemporary art made by 23 Palestinian artists and refugees, emphasizes that Mansour's works are the reflection of, "dispersion, waste, pain and death with dry, cracked and distorted"[154]. The artwork of the region is multiplying in the art scene as the

[154]Alison Bing, "Made in Palestine," *Bidoun*, accessed December 12, 2015, http://bidoun.org/articles/made-in-palestine.

emblem of decay. However, the characters attached to the Middle Eastern "landscape of chaos" in the art works are not only vulnerable or powerless even though their failure is inescapable in their desire to change the flow of history. For the most part, they are not depicted as bodies in pain or as a pieces of meat which cannot be discriminated from the animal corpse, but rather they seem to invoke the miracle of survival amongst the complete terror reigning in the lands of the Middle East. Habitants of the "Middle East" are virtuous, their tragedy comes from receiving the undeserved misfortune of the socio-political collapse in Middle East. However, in Aristotle's account, misfortune comes to the tragic hero, not through vice or depravity but by some error of judgment.[155] In the case of Middle Eastern hyper-realist tragedy, this misfortune comes from the inescapable error of humanity's judgment in development and progress. Hence, the Middle Eastern tragic hero reflects the human misery of the post-Enlightenment period. That is why, it can evoke pity and fear in the audience, as Aristotle states, the misfortune needs to befall a man like the audience in the tragedy. The hero of hyper-realist tragedy is the victim who discovers the tragic hero in itself in vain.

Photos of socio-political collapse in the 'Middle East' embodying 'the sense of decay'" are considered artistically valuable. What is artistic here in these artworks is the powerful contrast of the already-dead surroundings with the lively humanity of the habitants of the region. Hence, they follow a contemporary version of the "Still-Life" tradition of artistic expression. The contrast of

[155]Aristotle, *Poetics*, 20–24.

Figure 2-5. "Girl walks in the destroyed northern Gaza neighborhood during the truce". Retrieved from the Twitter account of Electronic Intifada. It was tweeted on September 5th of 2014

the traditional artistic value of "Still-Life" derives from the rhetorical force of the juxtaposition of form and content, in the sense that Still-Life captures the "heroic beauty" of the unheroic domestic materials of everyday life. This is the replication of the heroic depiction of the transient object, such as the fruit or flower or even the rotten fruit or wilted flowers, to expose life in death and death in life. Here, "Middle Easterners" are not the objects of the traditional Still Life aesthetics, but models of faith and fortitude. This type of aesthetic can be characterized by the scene in Steven Spielberg's black & white movie "Schindler's List": The red coat of the little Jewish girl walking amongst the ruins of Holocaust's inhumanity is the only colored object in the scene and in the movie. The red colored coat here represents the beauty that remains even in the face of immense cruelty. Walter Liedtke (2003) states that many of the objects depicted in the early works of the Still-Life tradition are symbolic of religious figures, for example the lily standing in for purity, while other objects may remind the audience of an edifying concept such as vanity or temperance

Figure 2-6. "Father and Child", by Tawfik Gebreel, 2014. Retrieved from Pinterest, a content sharing website. The picture is originally uploaded to Ibraaz, a critical online forum on visual culture in North Africa and the Middle East, http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/99/ on September 2014.

through an object similar to a mirror. Following the same aesthetic line of the traditional Still-Life genre, contemporary images from the "Middle East" exhibit similarly this piece of "life" still continuing to manifest in the midst of the apocalyptic landscape of the "Middle East". Life and death chase each other in these artworks, the very contradiction of these two forces in the same canvas is embodied in this aesthetic. For instance, Tawfik Gebreel's work of "Father and Child"[156] depicting the recent bombardment of Palestine by Israel became extremely popular in social media. It portrays parental love standing still against the powers of hatred and destruction. In this sense, the photo[157] depicting the little girl with pink bear walking through the middle of warfare in Gaza in the figure above illustrates this appearance of the divine innocence embodied in the little girl and especially in the pink bear against in the monstrous ruin of cruelty.

[156] Figure 2
[157] Figure 3

Figure 2-7. Photo from the exhibition of "Lenses of Freedom" on Syrian civil war. Beit Zatoun, Palestinian Art Center in Toronto. 7-12 December 2012

Another example for this is Imran Qureshi's miniature inspired paintings which are made dominantly with red acrylic as a blood reference. Qureshi, a Pakistani artist based in Lahore, transforms these blood-referenced figures into thickets of ornamental leaves with foliate patterns that evoke the luxuriant walled gardens of the Mughals, a ubiquitous subject in historic miniatures. In this installation, contradictory forces operate symbolically both in the object depicted, "bloody ornamental leaves" and through the contradiction with the background, here the New York city sky line, with the subject/object, bloody leaves, at the center of the composition as in the earlier examples such as "Lenses of Freedom"[158] above from Syrian civil war. Qureshi states that his artworks are, "mingled with the color of blood, but, at the same time, this is where a dialogue with

[158] Figure 5

life, with new beginnings and fresh hope starts.[159]" His installation on the Roof Garden of Metropolitan Museum in New York City between the dates of July 29, 2013 and February 2, 2014 is said to reflect Qureshi's response to brutal bombings in Lahore and to the overall theme of terror:

> While many of the world's citizens have become accustomed to almost daily attacks on their streets, such cruelty striking so close to home provoked a deep response in his work… Given the devastating recent events in Boston, Qureshi's theme of tragedy giving rise to a blossoming of new growth is all the more poignant as a message of recovery and regeneration.[160]

Figure 2-8. Image from The Roof Garden Commission" by Imran Quereshi in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 2013. Retrieved from http://store.metmuseum.org/met-publications/the-roof-garden-commission-imran-qureshi/invt/80020938

[159]"The Roof Garden Commission: Imran Qureshi | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed December 9, 2015, http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2013/imran-qureshi.
[160]Ibid.

> Blood-red spatter drifts across vast golden ovals like the floating lilies in Monet's ponds, evanescent and diffuse, brimming with life (and with death). Blood-red paint spills down a canvas that, upended, becomes a tall conifer, its branches like radiating arteries; a tree of life.[161]

Thus, in Qureshi's installations and the theme of tragedy, spread death and life at the same time. As Nietzsche explains, tragedy's affect brings affirmative yet discordant note:

> We feel the furious prodding of this travail in the very moment in which we become one with the immense lust for life and are made aware of the eternity and indestructibility of that lust. Pity and terror notwithstanding, we realize our great good fortune in having life – not as individuals, but as part of the life force with whose procreative lust we have become one.[162]

In spite of terrifying chaotic powers, the Greek tragedy affirms that nevertheless existence was good in Nietzsche's account[163]. Following the same logic, the tragedy of the "Middle Eastern" hero reflects the will to live. Such tragic setting reduces the burden of ethical witnessing for the "Middle Eastern" Other in the artistic excellence of the spectacle. Here, the beautiful does not derive from the political correctness of the image. The artistic component derives from the techne that transforms the profane image of socio-political collapse in the "Middle East" or "Muslim majority countries" to a part of a universal tragedy in the high cultural field.

In my interview with Robert Massoud, the founder of the Palestinian Art and Community Center Beit Zatoun in downtown Toronto, I asked to him about Beit Zatoun's recent online Facebook post of Paul Hansen's 2012 World Press award winning picture depicting the funeral of

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[161]Laura Cumming, "Imran Qureshi Review – a Hauntingly Beautiful Show at the Ikon Gallery," *The Guardian*, November 23, 2014, sec. Art and design, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/nov/23/imran-qureshi-ikon-gallery-birmingham-review-hauntingly-beautiful.

[162]Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, Mass Paperback Edition edition (Doubleday & Co., 1956), 103.

[163]Robert R. Williams, *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford University Press, 2012), http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199656059.001.0001/acprof-9780199656059.

two Palestinian children. Robert, who comes from a Christian Palestinian family, has run Beit Zatoun which operates as a cultural centre, gallery, and community meeting space since 2010, and hosts panels, lectures and artwork addressing a diverse activist agenda in Toronto, not only to raising awareness of Palestinian society but also of any justice-related subjects:

> It's horrific... The reason why we put it up was because it was granted. It was aesthetically different. People are killed and it must be shown. But we need to be attentive, it can be misused. For instance, nobody loves dictators, but these realities are used for military intervention, it is not going to save the Syrian people. You can also say we manipulate art as Beit Zatoun but for principled way not a manipulative way.

Figure 2-9. *"Gaza Burial", World Press Photo of the Year 2012 by Paul Hansen. The picture was taken on 20 November 2012 in Gaza City, Palestinian Territories*

To be sure, the public directed towards the political situation in Palestine demands this aesthetic intervention. This is one way that the problems and the injustices dominating the Middle East can become visible in the global public sphere. The coverage itself is already an expression of political support for those who suffer from the conditions that the photo-journalism exposes to the public. Consequently, what Robert inserts here indicates the necessity of the artistic component of these art products as an attempt to break the diversion of mass media and to encourage the public's ever-

shorter attention span to look at and care about the people of the Middle East. The consequence of this fortified visibility of under-represented people, of Middle Eastern sorrow and their memories through art also provokes another kind of aesthetic value, political engagement and meaning. For instance, Mayu Mohanna, a jury member from Peru, states that the strength of Paul Hansen's winning picture lies in the way it contrasts the anger and sorrow of the adults with the innocence of the children which is why it is unforgettable picture[164]. Santiago Lyon, vice president and director of photography at the Associated Press also spoke of the prize winning photos as those photos that can reach whoever looks at them, in the sense that it is not the political content but the universality of aesthetic quality that they focus on in choosing the winners.

Liam Maloney's work "Texting Syria (2013)"[165] which was displayed during "Nuit Blanche[166]" of 2014 in Toronto's Trinity-Bellwoods Park also illustrates this kind of aesthetic contrast. In this installation, Torontonians entered into a prefabricated small house with Syrian refugees' photos hung on the walls. In the photos, Syrian refugees were texting their families and friends under siege for news from home and their SMS messages were translated into English so that Torontonians could receive them when they moved through the installation. The prefabricated house created the sense that the viewers were with them in the disused slaughterhouse where tents were erected for refugees. The following is an example of one SMS:

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[164]Critical Mass 2008 Winners. (n.d.). Retrieved September 3, 2014, from http://www.photolucida.org/cm_winners.php?aID=574&CMYear=2008&event_id=9

[165]Maloney, L. (n.d.). Liam Maloney Photography http://liammaloney.photoshelter.com/#!/index/G0000OHlvt5dAl6o/I0000yjPMlMWGWkE. Retrieved October 19, 2014, from http://liammaloney.photoshelter.com/#!/index

[166] Nuit Blanche Toronto is a free open-air art event in the streets downtown Toronto celebrating one night of contemporary art open to the public every year on the first Saturday of October. It is modeled after the original Nuit Blanche in Paris. For more information : "Scotiabank Nuit Blanche," accessed October 19, 2014, http://www.scotiabanknuitblanche.ca/.

- Hello, what news of the village?
-Yes, now things are good. The bombing has stopped. I am on Kherbe Road.
-May God protect you.

Figure 2-10. "Texting Syria",installation by Liam Maloney. Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2014. Toronto Downtown. Photos of the performancewere taken by me on October 3rd of 2014 in Toronto

The artist wrote in his statement that the artwork focused on the idea of home and what it meant to be displaced. Thereby, the purpose of this installation was to make Torontonians experience what Syrian refugees felt: insecurity, shortage and homesickness, but also love, belief, and tenderness at the same time. Following this context, "Texting Syria" not only provides the experience of refugee life for Torontonians from a remote distance but it also manifests the beauty of naked human emotions which stand for the embodiment of purity at the heart of the human destructive forces' playground.

Figure 2-11. Photo from the series of "Battle of Tahrir Square", by Ali Mustafa. The picture was made during Egyptian Revolution on November 2011. Retrieved from http://alimustafa84.wordpress.com/battle-of-tahrir-square-november-19-25-2011/

As I spoke to artists, I asserted my belief that the artist's motivation comes mostly from the desire to reflect this powerful embodiment unique to the region for the primary emotive expressions such as anger, sorrow or love, as in the case of Hansen's winning photo, instead of the desire to transmit a political project about the region. Ali Mustafa[167] also put emphasis on this exceptional quality of the Arab Springs for capturing these human expressions. Months after our interview, in March of 2014, Ali was killed by a barrel bomb dropped by the Syrian Army that also killed 7 other people in Syria while he was covering Syrian civil war. At York University and in Dundas Square in Toronto, several memorials took place and the supporters of the Free Syrian Army also participated to some of these memorials to honour his sacrifice for the Syrian people.

[167] Canadian photographer of half-Egyptian and half-Portuguese descent

He not only photographed the Syrian civil war but also the Egyptian Revolution, as well as the Occupy Movement. In my interview Ali, he denied any affiliation to the regions' politics but admitted that he has some common traits with people of the region as he had always felt ignored in Canada. He associated this feeling with the feelings that the people of Middle East feel because of their invisibility in the global public sphere. I asked him about his photos picturing children smiling in destroyed buildings and people fighting for freedom and how he chose his frames to depict the Middle East:

> I believe photography as a medium captures the historical significance of these events of Arab uprisings in the region –They are representing the power of rare emotions in single frame… I tried to establish my photography in times of celebration, sadness, sorrow, outrage, all of them present in Egypt during the time of revolutıon, Syria or in Israel and Palestine. A full spectrum of human emotions captured in a snapshot of history. They are the key to defıne the moments of our era. Photography convenes this experience through a single frame. It says a lot with so little… A picture is a thousand words in the Middle East… Because they are so important.

Aymann Ismail, a New Yorker photographer originally from Egypt, agreed in a way with Ali Mustafa. Aymann mentioned in our interview that what is exciting about photographing Egypt's revolution was the opportunity to capture the everyday democracy of life in the streets of Egypt. Ayman's family came to New York City in the early 50's. He works for Animal New York[168], an alternative website on "daily source of art", reporting mostly from the streets of New York. Aymann touched upon his previous jobs in the mainstream media that did not satisfy him at all whereas he feels that he is the author of his art in Animal New York photographing the graffiti artists of New York. He mentioned his next project on Egypt in our interview in May 2013. His

[168]ANIMAL - Art, New York City, Culture, Politics, and Opinion. (n.d.). Retrieved October 19, 2014, from http://animalnewyork.com

prospective documentary on the Egyptian Revolution would be derived from his records of the first Tahrir Square meetings of the people:

> It is a documentary on Egypt. The photographer is usually expecting Muslims to go crazy, free of law, screaming, what's going on. And you have your cool camera, you are from New York and so on… My project is about the first time democracy. Everybody has a voice. Hopefully, I will capture how Egyptians see other Egyptians and get all the transformation recorded. This project hopefully can go around. This is the only film that talks about my family, it talks about people in the streets, that's what democracy is. We realize the similarities about what we are arguing. We have the courage.

Both Aymann Ismail and Ali Mustafa referred to the special position of the Middle East to reflect on political change, human power to change history and the rare moments of bare human expression.

But does the Arab Spring make the "Muslim" or the Middle Easterner a revolutionary? The second stage of the Arab Spring and primarily the second revolution and military coup in Egypt after the Islamist rule of the Muslim Brotherhood proved this sentiment to be wrong and fortified the discourse that change in "Muslim lands" is condemned and destined to draw back the social and political climate of the region. Yet, the depicted strength of the troubled Middle East's habitants is still aesthetic even though it does not promise "progress" in the sense of "becoming like the Western people" in a Western-centric understanding of universal history or as becoming a vehicle of change in history for all humanity. This is because the continual and perpetual effort of Middle Eastern subjects and their desire for good and their endless historical failure for progress is artistically valuable.

For instance, Rania Matar, a photographer who lived both in Lebanon and in the US, states that her work "Ordinary Lives"[169] focuses on the refugee camps and the suburbs of Beirut in Lebanon. She defines herself as both an insider and an outsider in Lebanon because she can recognize how what is going on there can be extreme but interesting for the Western gaze while it can be unnoticed by the locals of the troubled region. Matar states that she aimed to portray people

Figure 2-12. *"Girl and Rocket Hole", photo by Rania Matar. The picture was taken in Aita El Chaab, Lebanon, 2006. Retrieved from http://raniamatar.com/portfolio/middle-east/ordinary-lives.php*

[169]"Critical Mass 2008 Winners," *Rania Matar*, accessed September 3, 2014, http://www.photolucida.org/cm_winners.php?aID=574&CMYear=2008&event_id=9.

who did not lose their humanity, dignity or resilience despite what they have been through and are still going through in their everyday lives. According to Matar, these people, in their challenging life conditions, display an extraordinary strength and individuality and are therefore beautiful in depiction:

> *"I try to portray them as the beautiful individuals they are instead of part of such and such religious or political group. In the hope of emphasizing the essence of their humanity, I prefer to set my focus on the impressive ability of their spirit and determination to continue with the simple and mundane tasks of daily life no matter what one's circumstances are: on lives that are ordinary in a surrounding and a political climate that are anything but ordinary. I chose to start with Rocket Hole as it sets the stage, providing a backdrop for the other images in which we see people going about their lives in orderly ways, at times amidst great disorder.*

Mustafa also spoke in our interview that about the universality of the human condition in either his pictures of the Middle East or the Occupy Movement to resist the marginalization of the under-represented or neglected people:

> There is a moment, moving you and takes this shot which touches on a human level. It is not geographic. There is something about it that speaks to you. It is relating one human being to the other.

Following the same framework, *Flight Series*, the joint project of photographer Tamara Abdul Hadi and her illustrator sister Sundus Abdul Hadi, includes a series of digital collages in which the figures of several Arab men's flying figures jumping into the sea are copy-pasted on various city landscapes such as Beirut of Lebanon, Bagdad of Iraq, Golan of Syria. Sundus

Figure 2-13. Majbooreen bil Amal (Forced Towards Hope) by Sundus Abdul Hadi and Tamara Abdul Hadi. 2010

explains in her website that *Flight Series* depicts the particular context of the recent wave of uprisings and the call for change in the Middle East in light of the obstacles that the youth encounter to shape a brighter future:

> Human flight, in particular, exists only in the realm of the impossible and is brought to life through youthful imagination. This transformational act is reflective of my own desire to transform my artistic patterns and acts as a mirror to my personal process of creation which is to shift from a focus on violence, politics, and war, to imagination, hope, and peace. The "Flight" series is an attempt to touch on issues that relate to the abnormal circumstances surrounding violence and survival, mobility and identity.[170]

Considering all the artists' statements above, including the statement on *Flight Series*, the primary notion emphasized in these works of art is the quality of common humanity that can also be deducted from the Middle Eastern subject. To present this element of commonality, the kind of humanity that anybody can sympathize with, artists aim to deconstruct the dominant stereotypes regarding the so-called "peoples of the Orient", to stress the individuality of the Middle Eastern

[170]"Flight Series," *Sundus Abdul Hadi*, accessed December 13, 2015, http://sundusah.tumblr.com/flight.

person in contrast to the neo-Orientalist associations of them with violence, submission, religious authoritarian minds and non-civilization.

More importantly, the art works in the genre of photojournalism are a testament to a "still humanity" present in a landscape in the middle of war. In this landscape, poor conditions of living are not favorable to provide opportunities for satisfying basic human needs or to practicing higher human capacities for demanding social relations such as hospitality, friendship or tolerance, and finally for intellectual flourishing. That is because what separates the human from animals is not only their capacity for reason, but as Plato claims in the Republic, basic needs must be satisfied, so that people can enjoy intellectuality in the luxurious city of *Kallipolis*[171]. As Aristotle states in the Ethics, to engage in the virtuous act, one has to possess some facilitating tools such as some material facilities, good fortune, health so that he can enjoy his capacity for self-flourishing[172]. According to this assumption, *eudemonia* is not naturally accessible to every human being but only to the few lucky regions of the world that provide the necessary life components to assist in

Figure 2-14. Photo by Fouad Elkoury. This picture was displayed in the exhibition of "Here and Elsewhere". New Museum in New York. August- September 2014

[171]Plato, C. D. C. Reeve, and C. D. C. Reeve, *Republic*, 3rd edition (Hackett Publishing Co., 2004).
[172]Aristotle and Terence Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, 2 edition (Hackett Publishing Co., 2011).

the flourishing of virtuous acts[173]. Yet, these aforementioned artworks depicting the Middle Eastern way of life seem to declare that people in the Middle East are still human and indeed even more human because they do not need favorable conditions to exhibit humanity and to achieve self-flourishing. Thereby, "Middle Easterners" are beautiful just standing there against the powers of destruction that surround them.

This contemporary re-imagining of Still-Life aesthetics in the hyper-realist tragedy genre is not unique to depictions of the "Middle East" or of Muslim majority countries since what is projected to be "Middle Eastern" also runs through the heart of North American culture. Once mighty places of the industrial age now left to decay, such as the industrial cities of Detroit and Philadelphia, or the racially segregated areas of New York such as the Bronx, are also displayed in photos to assist this aesthetics of Still-Life. They portray the collapse of the American hegemony, to glorify and embrace civilization, as well as the disappointment of the American dream to offer freedom and equal opportunity for a high standard of life for everyone regardless of their identity, skin color, and ethnicity and so on. In his article of "Decay and Resurrection" in *Image*, Paul Dannels states that Detroit buildings, left unattended, would yield to nature, "the conquest of well-designed buildings in the blink of an eye…Trees sprout on rooftops in just a few years, their seeds carried there by wind and birds"[174]. The Still-Life element of these decaying buildings manifests itself as a final cry for civilization, just as the rotten flower portrays a final reflection of beauty. The human-made civilization left to decay in Detroit, in the face of nature's own destruction, seems to warn against human vanity, humanity's endless material desires and the failures of playing God in the civilization game. In this context, civilization is ephemeral and its promise of providing human happiness fades.

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[173] Ibid., v. I 8 1099a 31–b 8.

[174]Paul Dannels, "Rejecting 'Ruin Porn,'" Summer 2013, http://wilsonquarterly.com/stories/rejecting-ruin-porn/.

Even though these contemporary Still-Life depictions seem to reflect a moralizing meaning also present in traditional Still-Life, Melanie Joy McNaughton contends that the artistic fascination with the city of Detroit's decaying buildings exemplifies the notion of "ruin porn"[175]. The term of "ruin porn" is credited to James Griffioen, a writer and photographer for "Sweet Juniper", a Detroit-based blog. Griffioen critiqued journalists who used shots of Detroit's crumbling infrastructure in a detached and exploitive way to satisfy an aesthetic desire without acknowledging the long history and politics behind most of the deterioration. McNaughton, quoting the term of "ruin porn" asserts that, "pornography is not meant to be challenging or forceful or a way to encounter the other: Pornography is a means to an end: not entry into relationship, but opportunity for egocentric pleasure"[176]. Consequently, these photos of Detroit's decay engage in neither causation nor solution seeking about Detroit's situation. Hence, ruin pornography is born in the depiction of the unstoppable forces of progress and its subjugation by the passive and natural power of destruction. In these depictions, the human spirit and its creative ability are destined to be a failure: This is the incorrigible human condition. Thus, the sublime of post-Enlightenment (the postmodern sublime), is a regression to pessimism and resignation. In the Kantian sublime of the Enlightenment, "the fact that the overwhelmingly vast or powerful object can be comprehended in rational thought, we feel ourselves, accordingly, as transcending the limitations imposed by our embodied existence"[177]: negative moments give way to positive ones as in Nietzsche's account of tragedy as an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain. Yet, the postmodern sublime, as Jean-Francois Lyotard argues, includes the gratification of effort even if

[175]Melanie Joy McNaughton, "Reimagining What Images Can Achieve," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 28, no. 2 (2013): 140–42.
[176]Ibid.
[177]Crowther, "The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde, and the Postmodern," 68.

it fails[178]. In Lyotard's account, even though the art of the postmodern sublime working on the truth of the ungraspable does not aim to attain some knowledge about reality, what it does do is allow for feeling to be felt.[179] Hence it liberates us from forms of psychical numbing shaped by ordinary connections in the sensible realm. Meanwhile, it sustains the same suffering in a repetitive way in its deduction of transcendentalism to only exist in the human failure of subjectivity.

Following this analysis of contemporary Still-Life aesthetics, one can conclude that there is no solution for the question of Detroit, of Bronx, or for all the segregated populations in such places, nor for the people of the Middle East since the failure in civilization is the destiny of humanity. Thereby, the actors or the agencies that play a role in the collapse of the Middle East do not matter, because the human capacity for violence can escape any rational control. The long-time vulnerability to chaos in the 'Middle East' cannot be prevented by human agency, the same outcome of human failure is here waiting for all of us. Any redemptive narrative of progress is futile. Hence, the aesthetics of sublime reincarnated in the contemporary Still-Life genre express a catastrophe without calling for a future redemption.

These art trends reveal the framework of the contemporary Still-Life aesthetics which tend to glorify 'Middle Eastern' subjects standing against the decay. From this standpoint, the term of 'decay' manifests an unstoppable force operating through the postmodern 'sublime'. To be sure, the topic of war and the endurance of human characteristics observed in the troubled landscape and represented in these artworks indicate that the people of 'Middle East' are in some sense strong and still human in contrast to the dominant barbarian 'Muslim terrorist' stereotype. People in the 'Middle East' are even super-human because they can still smile in the middle of an

[178]Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Presenting the Unrepresentable: The Sublime," *Artforum*, April 1982, 67.
[179]Slade, *Lyotard, Beckett, Duras, and the Postmodern Sublime*, 44.

apocalyptic destroyed field of buildings. When they express anger, this means that they still want to change and that their anger is for real. Yet, the human efforts to defeat the loss of subjectivity in the post-Enlightenment era are always in vain although this does not mean that such revolts are not admirable. Here, the artistic gesture in contemporary Still-Life of the Middle East does not reside in its capacity to bring about a revolutionary reconfiguration or deconstruction of the symbolic order but exploiting the same image to survive traumatic sublime through tragic setting of a glorious part of common human history.

Middle Eastern Cinema of the Hyper-Tragedy Era

In the following sections, I will touch upon several examples of the Middle Eastern cinema that have been screened in high-rated cultural festivals and special screenings in North America or that have won international nominations and acclaim. Hyper-realist tragedy in the Middle East takes place in two types of film. The first follows the plot line of the classic tragedy while contrasting the subject matter of the Middle East for the tragic hero. The reason behind this is the inherent paradox of Middle Eastern subjectivities in claiming the "hero role". This situation derives from the past dominant understanding of history as progressive, and the Middle Eastern subject orientalised as backward because s/he lacks human agency. Consequently, the subject matter is already assumed to be beyond time and hence appropriate for contemporary art. The second type of hyper-realist tragedy in the Middle East follows contemporary art's precepts in form as it cancels the subject matter through form. It delivers the tragic story without representing it. It embodies the integration of contrast through the insertion of a mixed genre. These forms of story-telling on the Middle East are to be distinguished from the generic representations of Middle East.

a) Classical Hyper-Realist Tragedy

The tagline of *The Square*, the 2013 Egyptian-American documentary is, "we go to the Square to discover that we love life outside it, and to discover that our love for life is resistance[180]". Jehane Noujaim's *The Square* depicts the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 in Cairo's Tahrir Square. It tells the story of the uprising through the eyes of six revolutionaries who lived in Tahrir Square during those historic weeks. Due to new developments in the Egyptian Revolution, Noujaim updated the ending of the film over the summer of 2013. It features Mubarak's ouster, clashes with the military, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the return to the streets to demand the deposal of the Muslim Brotherhood's President Mohammed Morsi, and the sit-ins that followed Morsi's overthrow by the army. *The Square* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature at the 86th Academy Awards, three Emmy Awards at the 66th Primetime Creative Arts Emmy Awards[181] and many other nominations including the People's Choice Award in the documentary category at the 2013 Toronto International Film Festival. The movie's website states:

> While our characters put their lives on the line to battle the largest standing army in the Middle East with nothing but stones, we as filmmakers were right behind them with our cameras. By living with our characters for nearly three years, we were also able to capture the personal sacrifices behind the headlines[182]

The Washington Post reviews the documentary as:

[180]"The Square | ABOUT," *The Square*, accessed March 24, 2015, http://thesquarefilm.com/about.
[181]Jehane Noujaim, *The Square*, Documentary, Drama, History, (2014). Retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2486682/awards?ref_=tt_awd
[182]"The Square | ABOUT."

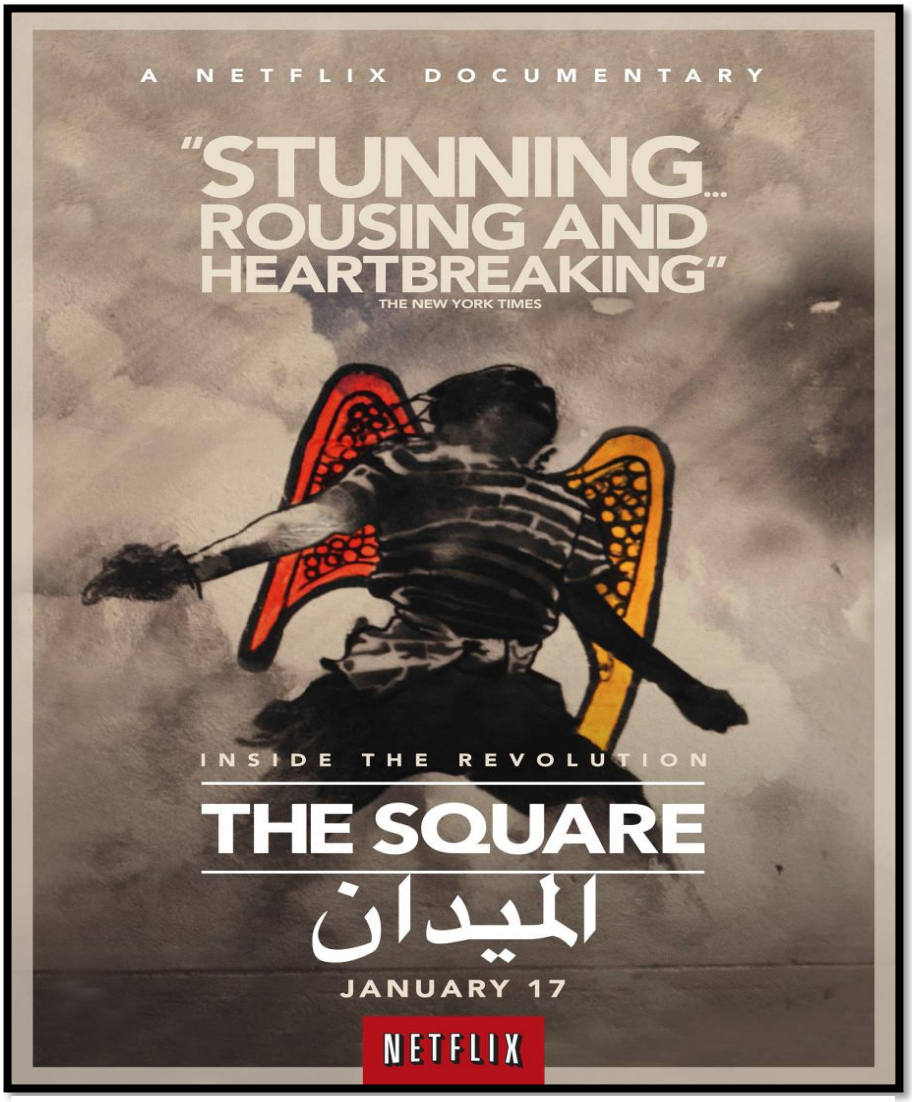

Figure 2-15. The Square, movie poster. 2013

> The Square is an immersive experience, transporting the viewer deeply into the intense emotional drama and personal stories behind the news. It is the inspirational story of young people claiming their rights, struggling through multiple forces, in the fight to create a society of conscience.[183]

One blogpost on the Square listed in the movie's website states that:

> …this is a riveting, poignant film. The epic sadness of watching the (so-far?) failed attempt to achieve true democracy is only tempered by the inspiring realization that *The Square* gives them the voice that they otherwise would not have…

[183]Monique El-faizy | Religion News Service, "REVIEW: 'The Square' Sheds Light on Egypt's Religious and Political Divisions," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/review-the-square-sheds-light-on-egypts-religious-and-political-divisions/2014/02/10/52cf8426-929d-11e3-b3f7-f5107432ca45_story.html.

Figure 2-16. Image from The Square. Ahmed Hassan, one of the six characters that the documentary focuses, celebrating in Tahrir Square

On the one hand, The Square demands equal partnership in the love of freedom throughout the history of the world. It tells the story of heroes fighting for freedom. On the other hand, the statement of a "society of conscience" that documentary assists as the goal of the Egyptian uprising evokes the struggle of westernization. The supposed Western emphatic spectator of the Middle Eastern freedom fighter can feel nostalgia for the heroic struggles of freedom. The reign of the Muslim Brotherhood after the first round of the Tahrir Square protests and the violent military coup of the second round, along with Muslim extremist Syrian rebels have destroyed the emphatic aura around the Arab Springs and fortified again the aesthetic of terror and misery in the Middle East. In this case, the Middle Eastern subject is assumed to be within an early stage of freedom and thus creativity. The Middle Eastern freedom fighter can be assumed to be engaged in a struggle of expression and individuality only if *The Square* does not provide a critique on the Western implementation of individuality or if it does not deconstruct the theme of freedom as such.

However, *The Square* also depicts the universal tragic downfall of the revolutionaries that it chose to focus on: the uncontrollable betrayal in the friendship of the protesters. Two of the most captivating characters, despite their differing backgrounds and perspectives, Ahmed Hassan, a young street revolutionary, and Magdy Ashour, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood become close friends in the first run of the uprising. But when Morsi grabbed more power than Mubarak's rule, the revolutionaries became disillusioned by Morsi's autocratic maneuvers and by the new constitution that the Islamist-dominated parliament drafted. The first betrayal of friendship happens when the Muslim Brotherhood does not consider the ideals that the other protesters had fought for. Ashour finds himself increasingly at odds with Hassan and his other friends from the square. Ashour says: "If there were an alternative, I wouldn't want Morsi[184]". In one scene of the movie, British-Egyptian actor Khalid Abdalla shows Ashour and his son the record of Muslim Brotherhood members attacking protesters outside the presidential palace, some of the very same people who had been in Tahrir with Ashour. In the end, the audience witnesses a second betrayal of friendship in the second run of the uprising when the military attacks the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the after-screening talk following *The Square* at the New York Film Festival[185], one viewer asked the documentary's crew, "what happened to the Muslim Brotherhood guy?" I felt that the question aimed to reduce the meaning of the tragedy portrayed in the documentary and to attack in some sense specific undemocratic Middle Eastern attitudes instead of the universality of the tragic components of a revolution. For instance, what was most touching in the documentary for all the audience is the recognition of the Aristotelian tragic plot: It is pitiful and terrible because the tragic incident happens between those who are dear, and this misfortune

[184]Ibid.
[185]"The 51st New York Film Festival | Film Society of Lincoln Center," accessed March 24, 2015, http://www.filmlinc.com/nyff2013/films/the-square.

happens not by vice but by error. In other words, these two betrayals of friendship do not derive from a specifically Middle Eastern lack of virtue because they are still considered to be the heroes of "the Square".

One of the emphasized points in the Middle-Eastern tragedy is the sexual act, whether it is animalistic or underdone without accomplishing pleasurable togetherness, as a sign of fatal disgrace in the conditions of 'Middle East". The work of George Bataille establishes a relation between death, sovereignty, and sexuality. Sexuality is linked to violence and to the dissolution of the boundaries of the body and self[186]. An emphasis on sexuality in the Middle Eastern plot coincides in this understanding of the experience of the loss of the boundaries separating reality, events, and fantasized objects. Sexuality is always already hyper-realist. As Mbembe reads Bataille and Hegel together, Bataille anchors death in the realm of absolute expenditure without reserve (irreversible and radical), whereas Hegel attempts to keep death within the economy of absolute knowledge and meaning[187]. Death, and by extension sexuality, is not meaningful but "excessive", corresponding to the logic of Bataille's term, in the Middle East, in contrast to the Hegelian death of absolute meaning. In the film *Rosewater* (2014) directed by Jon Stewart, Iranian-Canadian Bahari maintains his hope and sanity throughout the story by turning to the memories of his family, recollections of the Western music he loves, and thoughts of his wife and unborn child during his imprisonment in Iran due to his footage reporting on the Green Movement. In the end, Bahari succeeds in returning to his loving wife and healthy life in Canada thanks to a successful rescue campaign led by US Secretary Hilary Clinton. Although the movie presents a nuanced

[186]Georges Bataille, *Visions Of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1985), 94 – 95.
[187]Mbembe and Meintjes, "Necropolitics," 15.

image of young and educated Iranians, the camp of Green Movement (2009) who supported the presidential candidacy of Hossein Mousavi against Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, these characters do not have access to the peace of mind that Bahari possesses in Canada. The only moment that Interrogator[188]and Bahari succeed in communicating with each other is when Bahari fabricates

Figure 2-17. Image from the movie Rosewater(2014) by Jon Steward. In the image, Rosewater interrogates Bahari

sexual fantasies for him about surreal Western massage therapies through which Interrogator becomes sexually excited. Bahari says:

> You know what happens in New Jersey?' It is a massage playground. For massages from all over the world. I have heard of people dying of pleasure.[189]

[188]Interrogator's nickname is Rosewater because of his heavy cologne in Bahari's memoirs

[189]Barbara Slavin, "Jon Stewart: My Film Not Meant to Demonize Iran - Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East," *Al-Monitor*, November 10, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/jon-stewart-rosewater-not-demonize-iran.html.

Figure 2-18. Image from the movie "Incendies". Nawai and Nawai's daughter are in the community pool, in Canada. Nawai recognizes that her lost son that she met in the pool had been her rapist in prison.

The interrogator, an agent of the ruling party in Iran, cannot realize his fantasies and thinks that the West is the place where desires are satisfied. Such a plot does not exactly fit in the tragic setting, but is instead a feel-good movie where the hero experienced a type of bad dream. The happy ending and the beginning of the story are the same, with the image of peace of mind in

Figure 2-19. One of the posters of the Rhino Season. Old Sahel is driving the car while young Sahel, Mina (Monica Bellucci) and Akbar sit in the back

Canada. The suffering of the hero does not show an antagonistic feature where the good and the bad become confused. The government in Canada is assumed good and in Iran bad in a dichotomous way. Yet, tragic heroes' individuation is both the source of their suffering and the relief in the setting of tragedy.

In another example, the best foreign language film of the 2011 Academy Awards, Canadian film *Incendies*[190] (2010) by Denis Villeneuve, the female protagonist Nawal Marwan, an immigrant from an un-named country with similarities to Lebanon[191] can finally swim peacefully in a community pool in Canada with her long lost son. However, in the Middle East, her same long lost son raped her while she was in prison without knowing that she was his mother. Nawal later gave birth to twins, his half-siblings and at the same time his children, in the prison. Similarly, the film, *Rhino Season* (2012) by exiled Kurdish-Iranian director Bahman Ghobadi, is based on the true story of an Iranian Kurdish poet known by the pseudonym Sadegh Kamangar. The male protagonist Sahel (Sadegh Kamangar) is a poet released after twenty years of prison in Iran. Sahel begins to search for his wife, Mina, and arrives in Istanbul, Turkey. There, he barely escapes the fate of sleeping with Mina's daughter, a young sex worker, when he notices his own poems tattooed on the girl's body by her mother. The possible incest, though unintended, is not realized at this point. In fact, although Mina's daughter explains that poems inscribed in her tattoos belong to her own father, the real father is Mina's rapist, Akbar. Mina's old driver, Akbar, takes the advantage of 1979's Islamist Revolution and becomes a powerful man. He replaces Sahel in the prison when the two lovers meet with eyes tied by the order of the prison's authority.

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[190] Adaptation of the play *Incendies*(2003) by Wajdi Mouawad(Canadian Lebanese actor, author and director)
[191]A Civil war between Christian and Muslim groups suggests the movie is set in Lebanon portraying the movie portrays Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). Reviews on the movie(such as in IMDb, Wikipedia, Electronic Intifada Guardian and etc) agree that the movie passes in Lebanon.

The social and political climate prevents people from engaging in wishful love making, sexual incidences become an irredeemable mistake and a crime as an outcome of the socio-political dimension of Middle East. It was Oedipus' fate to have sex with his mother despite all efforts to overturn this fate. Both Nawal and Sahel have to separate the love of their life and their child-to-be, from the life they deserved. While Nawal can only interact with her son in an appropriate way in a Canadian community pool, Sahel escaped from the incestuous sexual act thanks to his poems tattooed on his would-be daughter. Thus, *Rhino Season* invites remedy to the victims of Middle Eastern tragedy with art. Art as a will to life cannot be taken away from them. In *Incendies* Nawal only recognizes her son by the tattoos placed on his foot at birth and revealed in Canada's community swimming pool where he goes barefoot, and at that same moment tragically recognizes his face as that of her rapist. It is too late for her to be mother to him, and he is too late for him to be a son for Nawal, but in some sense, the peaceful life setting only possible in Canada, where they are permitted to finally to discover the truth.

Hence, the Aristotelian tragic elements are fully present in these two high-rated movies, *Incendies* and *Rhino Season*. Aristotle explains that the tragic hero committing an irreparable deed (*hamartia* ~ error), an act of horror, through ignorance makes the discovery of it before or after the error is done[192]. According to Aristotle, this recognition (*anagnorisis*) as an act of disclosing either a close relationship or enmity that marks the change from ignorance to knowledge. Recognition in tragedy resides in the fact that our interactions are shaped by what we know, or what we think we know, about who we and others are. It is the knowledge of the self and the other. It indicates that one knows one's own location in the social and historical context. Both Nawal and

[192]In Aristotelian terms, plot as the imitation of action consists of reversal of situation from good to bad, recognition by surprise and third part as the scene of sufferings such as death on stage, bodily agony, wounds and etc.

Sahel are two strong active heroes attempting to combat their rivals and the poor conditions for self-realization in which they live. Their will to life rejoices in a Nietzschean joyous fatalism. In the post-screening talk following *Rhino Season* at the Toronto International Film Festival (September 2012), one viewer asked the director:

> "Why didn't you describe Iran as more evil? The movie looks like does not assist well the reality of evil there…"

Another viewer said:

> "How could you describe Iran so badly in the worldwide scene?"

Ghobadi replied that Iran is not evil and that he loves Iran's poems although he cannot return to Iran right now because he would be arrested because of his art. He continued by stating that these two comments reflect what he does not want to say about Iran.

Yet, the plot's emphasis on the "Middle East", a part of the world outside of the scope of the "West", encourages in some sense an emotional distancing when it is viewed in the diaspora. However, the achievement of knowledge in the plot happens in Canada for *Incendies* and in Turkey for *Rhino Season* although the audience knows that Mina finally gets her passport to move to Europe from Turkey in order to start a new life. The audience for these movies primarily consists of the diasporic spectacle from the Middle East. Consequently, the diasporic audience was able to identify with the tragic characters in these movies and could engage in a cathartic appreciation due to likeness: They also left their countries in Middle East to settle down in the West due to the socio-political and economic factors in their homelands. Aristotle agrees that catharsis affects spectators by driving out fear and pity through identification with tragic heroes and results in the purification of emotions. He further affirms that virtue of character results from habit: "…so the virtues arise in us neither by nature nor against nature. Rather, we are by nature able to acquire

them, and we are completed through habit[193]". Thus, tragic performance provides a mimetic learning experience for Aristotle where the audience can engage in the virtuous act in their turn. For the non-diasporic audience present at the screenings in the West, the identification between heroes and the spectacle depends on the emphasis of the landscape's factors in the story line. If it is perceived as a uniquely Middle Eastern drama, the spectacle's act of engagement is limited. But the fact that human tragedy is told by "Middle Eastern" heroes instead of anonymous "Middle Eastern" victims with the focus on historical events in "Middle East" extends the scope of representation in these movies. In that sense, hyper-realist setting on classic tragedy employs what is considered to be in the profane realm as the case of Middle Eastern stories and transfer them to cultural field.

A hyper-realist tragedy of the Middle Eastern socio-political collapse can reflect/be reflected through any place, time or characters. Consequently, this genre does not form a sense of burden or an irreconcilable problem for the viewers but invites the spectator to their own individual journey which has the same undertone with the tragedy depicted through "Middle Eastern" setting. Rancière touches upon the documentary Fortini[194] (1976, Italy) of two Marxist directors, Jean-Marie Straub and Daniele Huillet:

> Franco Fortini: Basically, there is only one harsh and cruel breaking story: you are not where what decides your fate happens. You have no fate. You do not have and you do not exist. In exchange for reality, you have been given a perfect outer show, a good semblance of a life.[195]

[193]Aristotle and Irwin, *Nicomachean Ethics*, v. 1103a20.
[194] Fortini is based on Franco Fortini's book 'I Cani del Sinai'. Foritini, an Italian Jew, reads excerpts from the book about his alienation from Judaism and from the social relations around him, the rise of Fascism in Italy, the anti-Arab attitude of European culture. Retrieved from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0074543/combined
[195]Rancière, *Figures of History*, 33–34.

Rancière asserts that not only victims of the Nazi massacres, but all the people who have endured a life decided by others, are dispossessed of making history. That is to say that hyper-tragedy genre diminishes the ethical tone. Dave Hickey[196] stated that Robert Mapplethorpe's artworks made gay subcultural practices appear beautiful in the sense that they somehow were good to behold because they were aestheticized. This follows that Hickey suggests a universally understood value linking the good to the beautiful[197], which is inherent in the viewer's apprehension of the work in the art of post-Enlightenment era. Thus as long as the artwork does not call for a politics of conscience and represent a community/ story from "Middle East" to help viewers make sense of what has been going on in "Middle East" and what is the relation/ role of "West" in this tragedy, the artistic excellence is not enclosed in political-social agenda of bearing witness to the Other. While *Incendies, Square* and *Rhino Season* mostly follow the precepts of the classic tragedy of universal claims, the heroes of tragedy are animated by the old victims of history, namely "Middle Eastern" subjectivities. This reflects the contrast that forms the artistic component in the movies. They are not victims to be represented because they are voiceless and beg for being recognized but they are heroes that the audience can empathize towards for their effort of resistance and journey of self-recognition. From this angle, they share the same misery with other parts of the world, the helplessness of human subjectivity against the ungraspable forces of human-made evil namely postmodern sublime.

[196] Dave Hickey, *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Distributed Art Pub Inc, 1994), 22–23.
[197] Hinderliter, Kaizen, and Maimon, *Communities of Sense*, 4.

b) Hyper-Realist Tragedy of Mixed Genre

Red Rose, a film by Sepideh Farsi, an exiled director living in France[198], carries the mark of the aesthetics of the after. This film combines traditional high art of tragedy with the erotic genre. While the love affair constitutes the primary emphasis of the film, cellphone low-quality footage of the streets during the demonstrations and social media texts streaming the Green Revolution (Iran, 2009) run throughout the movie. *Red Rose* tells the love story between Sarah, a young demonstrator with Ali, an old activist who has now withdrawn into his home and become indifferent to the Green Revolution. Ali no longer believes in the possibility of change in Iran and is ready to move to Canada, while Sarah is excited about any opportunity to revolt. They first

Figure 2-20. Image from Red Rose. 2014. Sarah and Ali enjoying smoking in bed together

encounter each other when Sarah and her fellow protesters seek refuge in Ali's apartment to escape from the police. Later, Sarah continues to visit Ali in order to use his internet and to charge her smartphone during the ongoing protests. In the meantime, Ali postpones his departure for Canada,

[198]"Toronto International Film Festival: A Cinematic Carnival," *The Express Tribune*, accessed February 2, 2015, http://tribune.com.pk/story/769751/toronto-international-film-festival-a-cinematic-carnival/.

intending never to return to Iran. While their relationship grows tender, their generational and political separations reflect in their sexual interactions. Sarah's leading role in sex also comes from her active political life in comparison to Ali. Hence, the movie's tragic element resides in the loss of belief in change in Ali, but not in the loss of human agency or female victimhood in Iran. Sex scenes between Sarah and Ali distinguish themselves from the prior filmic examples with erotic undertones and wishful partners. Their nakedness is not concealed under shadows. The full exposure of inactive genitals after intercourse is the mark of the divergent representation in the Middle East. Their sexuality is not a mistake but a testimony that people can still live sexuality and in a tender way, even under harsh conditions. Sarah is not a victim of rape, nor is she a mere submissive counterpart to his male sexuality without getting any satisfaction for herself. In fact, she initiates the sexual relationship with Ali. The scene of her shouting "Allahuekner" naked at the open window is a rejection of her victimhood under Islamist authoritarianism and the proof that she still manages to live her life despite all of the socio-political hardships.

After the movie's premiere screening at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2014, *Red Rose's* crew met with the audience. Mina Kavani (Sarah in the movie) declared crying that she knew she would never return Iran after her role in this movie. However, her willingness to shoot this movie was stronger. Mina, as an actor, also resists her own victimhood. In the end of *Red Rose*, Ali is captured by the Iranian authorities before his leaving for Canada. His investigator tortures him to get information about Sarah and the Green Revolution. The investigator wants Ali to admit verbally that "he fucked Sarah" in the sense that their relation was just dirty, animalistic, gruesome, and finally sinful. Ali is tortured until the very end when he admits "he just fucked her". But the audience knows that this was not the case. Ali and Sarah managed to create love in the middle of socio-political disaster, they were not victims but heroes. While his longer stay in Iran

results in Ali's being tortured, the reason for his pain comes from his happiness with Sarah, his momentary belief in change and in the will to live. Ali's situation in fact resumes the tragedy of the contemporary world based on the loss of belief in human agency and progress. Therefore, Ali does not only signify a local character specific to the region but a universal being representing today's loss of tragedy.

In another example, Larissa Sansour works through science-fiction to depict the Palestinian struggle. Sansour is a mixed-media visual artist living in the UK. Originally from Palestine, she studied art in Copenhagen, London and New York. She works through science-fiction to depict the Palestinian struggle. In her short movie *A Space Exodus* (2009), Sansour posits the idea of the first Palestinian into space. She defines her short movie as an adaptation of Stanley Kubrick's Space *Odyssey* in a Middle Eastern political context with an arabesque soundtrack instead of Kubrick's usual choice of Western classical music for movie themes. *A Space Exodus* refers to Armstrong's moon landing, which she interprets as a theoretical gesture, "a small step for a

Figure 2-21. Snapshot from "A Space Exodus"(2009) by Larissa Sansour. Image is retrieved from http://www.larissasansour.com/exodus.html

Palestinian, a giant leap for mankind". Sansour's website describes *A Space Exodus* as "a naively hopeful and optimistic vision for a Palestinian future contrasting sharply with all the elements that are currently eating away at the very idea of a viable Palestinian state". In *A Space Exodus*, Sansour finally reaches the moon, although her contact with Palestine's capital is cut off[199]. In another example, her short film, *Nation Estate* (2012), was screened during the Toronto Palestine Film Festival of 2013 on October 1st. *Nation Estate* is a sci-fi exploration of a vertical solution to Palestinian statehood, wherein Palestinians have a state in the form of a single skyscraper: the "Nation Estate". Each Palestinian city has its own floor: Jerusalem on the 13th floor, Ramallah on the 14th, Sansour's native Bethlehem on the 21st and so on: "Intercity trips previously marred by checkpoints are now made by elevator. Aiming for a sense of belonging, the lobby of each floor re-enacts iconic squares and landmarks[200]". The story follows the female antagonist, played by Sansour herself, in a futuristic folklore suit returning home from a trip abroad, passing through the security checks. She takes the elevator to the floor for Bethlehem and crosses Manger Square and Church of the Nativity on her way to her apartment where she eventually prepares a plate of sci-fi tabouleh. Sansour describes her decision to implement science-fiction as narrative tool to depict the Palestinian struggle in her art:

> We do not usually associate Sci-Fi with the Middle East. For me it opens the window for engagement with the audience who are already tired of either Palestinian tragedy or Arabic news in general coming from Middle East. Sci-fi is perfect medium when I talk about Palestine.[201]

Sansour claims that her choice of science-fiction does not relegate the political situation in Palestine to the background. In fact, this change in genre offers an alternative way of talking about

[199]Larissa Sansour, "A Space Exodus," 2009, http://www.larissasansour.com/exodus.html.
[200]Larissa Sansour, "Nation Estate," 2012, http://www.larissasansour.com/nation_estate.html.
[201]"ArabLondon: Interview with Larissa Sansour. - YouTube," April 12, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5MGmFLIao78.

Figure 2-22. "Olive Tree". Nation Estate Phot Series by Larissa Sansour.2012

what is happening in Palestine. Sansour also adds that science-fiction as a genre is specifically suited to the subject in focus: "Because there are lots of things happening in Palestine so surreal it already reached apocalyptic scenarios that we always imagine in Sci-Fi.[202]"In fact, during late 2011, three early photo sketches of The *Nation Estate* originally developed for the Lacoste Elysée Prize ended up at the center of a censorship controversy when the prize sponsor, French fashion giant Lacoste, decided to ban the photos from the competition, labelling them as "too pro-Palestinian" for the brand to support[203].

The fact that science-fiction as a genre is not used to depict Middle-East related subjects becomes a tactical pattern used to trouble the spectator's secure sense of what can be known about Middle East. Hence, science-fiction provokes a disturbance and encourages the viewer to examine his/her own implications within the Middle Eastern political construction. This is a hyper-realist approach merging tragedy with a profane type of art such as science fiction. Science fiction is

[202]Ibid.
[203]Sansour, "Nation Estate."

never be part of the high art as genre in the first place. She merges science-fiction with tragic subject matter in the exhibition space which is typically reserved for high art.

Besides this, science-fiction is already a contradictory pattern to Middle-Eastern story-telling. This is because science-fiction is an imagination about the future and it predominantly involves technological advancement or recession coordinated with the time dimension. However, the traditional, Orientalist depictions of the Middle East are fundamentally associated with the past or a timeless presence that relies upon the unpreventable failure of humanity for social, political, cultural progress and of the project of modernity. For instance, the struggle between Israel and Palestine beginning in 1947 is often represented as holding on for eternity without any future projection of resolution. Therefore, science-fiction posits a contrast to disrupt this usual setting to understanding the artwork and remedies the spectator's lack of attention for the globally known fixed struggle of Israel and Palestine. Sansour both plays with and reverses the game of culture and orientalism to reach the audience once again and to gain visibility for the Palestinian issue.

In another contemporary film, Ana Lily Amirpour's Iranian vampire "spaghetti" Western *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night*, follows "contemporary art's rule of de-professionalism". Amirpour's black and white feature premiered in the Next section of the 2014 Sundance Film Festival and was the opening night selection at the New Directors and New Films Festival at the MoMA in New York. *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* is presented as an Iranian Vampire Western:

> In a ghost-town called BAD CITY, a place that reeks of death and loneliness, the depraved towns people are unaware they are being stalked by a lonesome vampire. Here, a girl wearing a jet black chador is the protagonist playing female vampire feasting on blood, skateboarding and dancing alone to American pop music.[204]

Bad City is an Iranian town but it does not exist in the real world. Still, all of the stars of the movie are from the Iranian diaspora living in the US. Amirpour mentions the casting selection in her New York Times' interview[205] with Ito Robert: "All the Iranian actors came out of the woodwork when they heard about that script," and "all these people came into my orbit, because

Figure 2-23. Image from "A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night". 2014

they want to do stuff that's not like 'Terrorist 1' and 'Terrorist 2' on '24' (American TV Show, from 2001 to 2010, on Counter-Terrorist Unit for Fox network)". As Amirpour emphasizes Middle Eastern stereotyping and the routine of storyline of the Middle East in the West offers a scarce set of artistic productions for the Middle Eastern diaspora. *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* disrupts the usual storytelling about Iran, largely because the feature's female protagonist is a vampire

[204]"Ana Lily Amirpour," *Ana Lily Amirpour*, accessed January 20, 2015, http://www.analilyamirpour.com/.
[205]Robert Ito, "Ana Lily Amirpour's World: 'A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night,'" *The New York Times*, November 12, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/movies/ana-lily-amirpours-world-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-night.html.

wearing a chador (The Girl) in Iran: A woman wearing a chador in Iran can never be a vampire because of the specific qualifications of their identities. As Barry K. Grant underscores:

> Common enough in genre movies generally, in the cult film, the Other becomes a caricature that makes what it represents less threatening to the viewer. As in classic genre films, the viewer ultimately gains the double satisfaction of both rejecting dominant cultural values and remaining safely inscribed within them[206]

Hence, *A Girl Walk Alone Home at Night*, as a candidate for cult film, encourages viewers not to take seriously the theme of the Other. It seeks taboos and boundaries out and exploits them. Although the main character is a Middle Eastern monster, she is likable and justified. The Other exposed does not lead to stereotypical ideas. This is possible because of the film's juxtaposing of several visual stereotypes and archetypical situations assumed as not meant to be together. It represents a sort of review of archetypes and organizes them in multileveled oppositions. The modern vampire legend designates both a charismatic and sophisticated fictitious hypersexual entity, the undead who feeds on life essences. While belief in vampires is common in many cultures and geographies, the dominant and popular artistic depictions of vampires belong to Christian legends since the sacred items of Christianity became fetishized in vampire tales: vampires are known to be afraid of the cross, although in the most recent vampires' stories vampires cannot be harmed by garlic, sunlight and even crosses, as in the Twilight Series (Stephenie Meyer, 2005-2008). Therefore a woman in a chador cannot be a vampire, since a religious Muslim woman is assumed to be submissive and oppressed, and hence, not charismatic or sexual at all. Consequently, *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* sits upon this very contrast. It deconstructs popular stereotypes of Middle Eastern victimhood.

Representations of sexual relationships between Middle Eastern characters and of sexuality in the Middle East often follow a specific pattern. Muslim women are presumed not to be subjects but objects of sexuality as is dictated in Islam dominant Middle Eastern culture. A vampire in a chador does not sit well since vampires are hyper-sexual. Starting with Dracula, Vampirism is embedded with allegory connecting blood with sex, including the sexual implications of the blood exchange between the vampire and the victim. The act of vampirism involves intimate acts with erotic undertones such as biting, sucking and liquid exchange. Thus, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* reverses this stereotyping in the sense that a Middle Eastern woman in a chador, The Girl, is a vampire. In one scene, the Girl convinces Saeed, the drug dealer of Bad City, to invite her to his house for one-night stand. At the end of their intimate night, the victim is not the Girl, as could be assumed in the stereotypes of the Middle Eastern sexual relationship, but Saeed, because The Girl has sucked his life from him. The Girl breaks taboos and experiments with sexual rituals. This is because the assumed Muslim Iranian woman in the chador is not a victim and in fact not even religious. In another scene, The Prostitute who The Girl follows throughout the movie asks her if she is following her because of her sins and whether she is seeking religious revenge against her. The Girl says "No" to such stereotyping claims about her. The Girl is a vampire stalking her

Figure 2-24. Image from 'A Girl Walks Alone at Night". 2014

victims in the streets of Bad City and the reason why she follows The Prostitute is that she feels close to her, because they are two lonely women standing in the middle of the horrors of Bad City. Elijah Wood, an executive producer of the film through his production company SpectreVision states that *A Girl Walks Alone at Night* violates the rules in place to be a candidate for a successful popular movie in the US:

> 'It's black and white, it's in Farsi, it's set in Iran, it's a genre movie without really resting on its horror elements,' he said. 'But I think it's literally all those things that made it really exciting for us.[207]'

In contrast, in the film *Rosewater* (2014), the story of Iranian-Canadian journalist Maziar Bahari detained because of his news coverage of the protests of Green Revolution, with the exception of two supporting roles, the rest of the cast including the director are not from Iranian diaspora. Furthermore, Bahari's role is played by an actor of Mexican origin. Stewart defends the inauthenticity of the movie by saying that, if it were in Farsi and with a completely Persian cast,

Figure 2-25. On the left, the cover of comic book released based on the movie "A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night". Art by Jan Conrad. On the right, skateboard design by Michael Deweese for the movie.

[207]Ito, "Ana Lily Amirpour's World."

the movie could have been unpopular[208]. One can conclude that this is a completely different artistic strategy that Stewart uses in comparison to Amirpour's choice of cult movie aesthetics in addressing a specific audience, though Amirpour's movie is also inauthentic by purpose. In some sense, *A Girl Walks Alone at Night* is not an example of "local informant artwork" depicting Iran, but instead depicts the Iranian diaspora's imagining of Iran. Hence, Amirpour's artwork disrupts the gaze structure because the artist is not the translator of the Middle Eastern social and political structure to the "Western" spectator and to wider public. *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* is a candidate to be considered as a cult movie for cinéphile taste. It addresses a specific spectacle to build an audience in the sense of community. For instance, the soundtrack emphasis of the movie aims to build specific audience that can communicate through familiarity to the songs with each other. A skateboard and comic book inspired by the film emerged after the abundance of reviews about the movie. Drawing from Bourdieu's conclusions on taste and class, Jeffrey Sconce claims that cult activity in cinephilia is ultimately an act of resistance where reading groups use high cultural capital to read low texts with sophistication[209]. For Umberto Eco, cult artwork provides a completely furnished world so that its fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan's private sectarian world[210]. Amirpour selects her own spectacle since it follows cult movie fandom, catering to selective film markets that are defined by a sense of distinction from 'mainstream, commercial cinema'. In that sense, the movie eventually does not aim depict the victims of Iranian state, to cause the viewer to feel an appropriate emotion about the Iranian

[208]Marni Weisz, "Stewart Talks Rosewater," *Cineplex*, November 2014.
[209]Jeffrey Sconce, "Trashing the Academy: Taste, Excess and an Emerging Politics of Cinematic Style," *Screen* 36, no. 4 (1995): 371–93.
[210]Umberto Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage," in *The Cult Film Reader* (Open University Press, 2008), 68.

experience. That is why, its artistic excellence does not derive from an ethical responsibility to be carried by the artist or the viewers. Rob Hunter reviewing the movie describes Bad City as:

> People are living in the Iranian town of Bad City, but there is very little life. A dry riverbed is home to an ever-growing pile of dead bodies that no one seems to notice or care about, the streets are mostly empty of people but saturated in their despair and the only constant is the hum of oil well machinery pulling the earth's black life-blood from beneath the surface.[211]

Everything in Bad City already looks as out of control as the events happening in the broader world. It is easier to revel rather than worry for Iran through the depiction of Bad City as a normality. In a sense, the state of emergency required to fight for better conditions does not exist, but there is a freedom "to do" that exists when one has already lost everything.

The director, Amourpour, has been touted by critics as the next Tarantino[212] since the film links various forms of the visual – cinematographic, photographic, pictorial genres. Her feature quotes other well-known worldwide cult movies. Eco suggests that cult movies engage in collage work, because in order to transform a work of art into a cult object, one must able to break, dislocate, and unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole.[213] So, cult movies do not possess genre unity or coherent narration. As Eco states, cult film, "works are created by works, texts are created by texts, all together they speak to each other independently of the intention of their authors". He goes on to argue that, "a cult movie is the proof that as literature comes from literature and cinema comes from cinema." No idea to depict to exist in it, art is alienated from the meaning to represent or reflect in a

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[211] Rob Hunter, "21 New Movies to Watch at Home This Week Including A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night," *Film School Rejects*, April 21, 2015, http://filmschoolrejects.com/features/new-movies-to-watch-at-home-april-21st-2015.php.

[212]"Ana Lily Amirpour Is the Raddest Filmmaker Working Right Now," *Indiewire*, accessed January 27, 2015, http://www.indiewire.com/article/ana-lily-amirpour-is-the-raddest-filmmaker-working-right-now-20141120.

[213]Eco, "Casablanca: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage."

consistent way. Frames, that Eco calls as magic frames, which can be separated from the whole, appear continually in the feature. *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* is constantly interrupted by songs, unrelated acts, photographic images and scenes. The film does not affirm a reliable or consistent ethnic-cultural-racial difference to contemplate, while the movie poster shows a woman in chador directly referring to the imagination of Middle Eastern woman in the mainstream public opinion. Eco resumes that, "just as the extreme of pain meets sensual pleasure, and the extreme of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the extreme of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the Sublime," because, "two clichés make us laugh but hundred clichés move us because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion[214]". The spectacle is not bound to the casual structure of the narrative while the narrative is arbitrary rather than logical. This is a freedom from meaning in the virtue of excess. Marx Jancovich asserts excess is therefore a quality of text which provides freedom by requiring a fresh and slightly defamiliarized

Figure 2-26. Image from "A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night". Arash and the Girl with the cat in runaway from the Bad City at the end of the movie

[214]Ibid., 74.

perspective[215]. Cult films are already standing apart in their own environments, they are not representatives of their culture, at least not the mainstream. For instance, the male protagonist, Arash, is the James Dean of Iran, his cat is a replication of the cat figure in Breakfast in Tiffany's (1961)[216]. *A Girl Walks Alone Home at Night* is not an artistic depiction intended to bear witness to the Middle East, it does not focus on Middle Eastern horror or victimhood, because there is no focus, and no intention or concrete narrative in the feature. The film does not witness Middle Eastern horror but instead witnesses the usual play of witnessing Middle Eastern horror.

Conclusion

The above-mentioned examples of contemporary renowned movies on the different parts of "Middle East" illustrate the interaction of the aesthetics of the after with the genre of tragedy. The current rebirth of the tragedy as hyper-realism delivers Middle Eastern misery as a universal subject matter in contemporary high art. This genre does not engage in progressive time and dialectical history. At the time when the progressive account of freedom is outdated, Middle Eastern hyper-realist tragedy shares the same time interval of beyond time with the "Western" intelligentsia. Hyper-realism abolishes orientalism, because hyper-realism disrupts the integrity of the narration line through endless defocusing. The hyper-realist Middle Eastern tragedy does not attempt to reach recognition in the audience or to justify a cause. This is because the state of emergency in "Middle East" is both the source of misery and the sign of freedom that can be experienced after all is lost in the dominant theme of belief in human's ability for progress in the post-Enlightenment era. As my interviewees of Toronto Palestinian Film Festival (TPFF)'s

[215]Mark Jancovich, "Cult Fictions," in *The Cult Film Reader* (New York: Open University Press, 2008), 153.
[216] Breakfast at Tiffany's. Movie by Blake Edwards, based on story by Truman Capote with co-stars Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard.

committee members of selection, Dania, Tamara and Shirin, stated in 2013 what is to be exhibited in Toronto must distinguish from the ordinary depiction of sufferance:

> Lots of films are selected because they tell the stories that people do not expect from Palestinians. One of the examples we show film named *(No) Laughing Matter* (2010)[217]- telling jokes in west bank. Film maker goes to different cities and asks people to tell jokes. Even it was not a closing or opening film, smaller movie during the week, that was the one that got most of the coverage because people shocked that Palestinians could laugh and have a sense of humour. Wow, Palestinians can laugh. We supposed to be victims and to be running from bombs it did not fit what the portrayal of Palestinians were. Something as simple as laughing and telling jokes, this made them notice that hey Palestinians laugh, something that they did not expect. In the program of festival, we picked in the past movies that do not necessarily confirm with the western image of Palestinians. We have movie on Palestinian Olympic team, going to Beijing Olympic and female soccer team. Things that sort of challenge and counter the image usually put by the west.

It may seem that there is an artistic tendency to find artistic referents in order for the wrong to find an expression without representing victimhood.

The differentiation between the two types of hyper-realism in the tragic movie plots that I focus on resides in the emphasis on content versus on form. The classic hyper-realist tragedy of "Middle East" takes a break in its local informant mission and prefers to emphasize the universalist theme of Greek tragedy. Here, the integration of contrasts occurs in the subject matter. What is considered in profane realm engages with the cultural field through the adaptation of tragic plot of old high art to the representation of suffering in different parts of "Middle East". Such an adaptation replaces the ethical responsibility of spectacle to bear witness to the victim with appreciation of universal tragic plot on human in vain effort to encounter the postmodern sublime in contemporary era. The hyper-realist tragedy of mixed genre, the second version of tragic adaptation of "Middle Eastern" plot, embodies inconsistency in its form of genre. It produces

[217] Documentary comedy by the director Vanessa Rousselot

intentionally weak images of low contemplative potentiality to the front of the tragic plot flowing at the background. For this, it composes a narration type which combines genres of the old low art such as documentary, erotic, science-fiction and fantastic with the old high art of tragedy of universal claim. Here, the victimhood acquires artistic component not through the edge of representation of suffering on "Middle-Eastern" socio-political collapse but through the artistic genie of technique for producing alternative images. Here the "new" in artistic technique is to translating the ethical subject of bearing witness to the old low genres which do not permit mourning. Such an artistic technique deconstructs ordinary connections, sensibilities and understanding on "Middle Eastern" plot. Thus artistic excellence comes from eliminating contemplative affections to make sense of the wrong, mourning for the victims, witnessing again the common human evil reigning and its unstoppable power against it.

While both of the types, classic hyper-realist tragedy and that of the mixed genre disrupt the usual storyline of Middle Eastern misery and the narration of victimhood, their engagement with the postmodern sublime diverge. Classic hyper-realist tragedy still produces images of "high" signs in Groy's[218] vocabulary despite the fact that the only transcendentalism it offers is the lack of subject. Although it does not demand a special ethical responsibility for "Middle East", it seeks the immemorial law of alienation in humanity in the artworks. In that sense, there is no transcendence to offer redemption or emancipation but instead there is an universal lack of redemption and emancipation. In Rancière's reading of Lyotard, this corresponds to the disaster of the sublime as "recognition of the immemorial dependence of the human mind on the immemorial law of the Other inside it" to alert the "greater disaster of the promise of self-

[218] Boris Groys, "The Weak Universalism | E-Flux," *E-Flux*, 2010, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-weak-universalism/.

emancipation and its completion in either the overt barbarity of Nazi or Soviet totalitarianism or in the soft totalitarianism, the anaesthesia, of commodity culture"[219]. Therefore, classic hyper-realist tragedy still reflects images of high signs because it bears witness to the victimization of humanity as a transcendental rule while it does not prioritize "Middle Eastern" case.

Yet, the hyper-realist tragedy of mixed genre that I mentioned above encounters with the postmodern sublime through producing images of "weak" sign. Groys declares that contemporary art of late avant-garde tradition represents "the secular messianic knowledge that the world in which we live is a transitory world, subject to permanent change, and that the lifespan of any strong image is necessarily short"[220]. Following this, contemporary art reproduces the low visibility of everyday life which survives historical breaks and shifts, precisely because of its weakness and low visibility[221]. In that sense, hyper-realist tragedy of mixed genre combining the duty of witnessing victimhood with weak representation survives postmodern sublime not through mourning but through mocking the nostalgia for emancipation.

In this chapter, I have illustrated through my content analysis and ethnographic study the ways in which informant artistic practices on the Middle East in North America borrow, generates, repeat, oppose or redefine the sublime of contemporary politics. In brief mapping of the dominant

[219] Jacques Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller," *Radical Philosophy*, August 2004, 14–15.
[220] Groys, "The Weak Universalism | E-Flux."
[221] Ibid.

narratives of sublime in Middle East's image in photography, illustrations and cinema, I argued that artists adapt several ways to escape the banalization of suffering in "exhibiting Middle East" and that these artistic tactics diverge as well as converge with the thematic of postmodern sublime. In the following chapter, I will focus on the selfie art of diasporic artists and how they reflect their own subjectivity through self-image making in the contemporary art scene. That is because Middle Easterness is subscribed through the stereotyping of physical traits, religious connotations or narrations and terms of one's memory and not only through the location of homeland.

3. SUBLIME IN SELFIE ART OF MIDDLE EASTERN DIASPORA

While "Middle Eastern" subjectivity is reduced here to a shape through mainstream discourse, the Middle Eastern diasporic artistic reaction works to deconstruct and reproduce these mainstream Middle Eastern stereotypes and imaginaries to claim for or to search for their own understanding of the self. In the following chapters, I will examine the art of the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America in order to explore how the conceptualization of "homeland", identity and diasporic status interacts within and through their self-representation. For sure, their aesthetic stances and art subjects are not expressed and cannot be interpreted as only reactionary to the negative perceptions of Middle Eastern subjectivities. However, the contemporary art regime resides in the peculiar shift from generic history to discourse and personal narrative. In this sense, their self-representation is reflected in what I would call 'selfie" making art where the artist's own subjectivity becomes the primary term to be exposed. Consequently, artists from the Middle Eastern diaspora living in Canada and the US inevitably respond to this view of the Middle East and the image of the frightening Muslim an-iconicity in their artworks. To better understand the self-image making art or what I call selfie art, I will divide the aesthetic self-articulation of the Middle Eastern diaspora in North America into several themes, such as, art of Self-Body, Self-Memory and Self-Identified Muslim, accordingly the focusing concept of selfie making in their art.

Selfie Art: Artistic Performances of Self-Image Making

a) The Relation amongst the Artist, the Artist's Artwork and the Spectator in Contemporary Art and Its Sublimity

Art's current responsibility of social integration, or what Rancière called co-presence affirmation, reflects what Groys puts forward: "the political dimension of art thus precedes its production" because artwork, "has to do with certain technical and political decisions for which their subject can be made ethically and politically responsible.[222]" Such an artistic gesture in the case of selfie art reflects the act for putting invisible material of the self such as "memory", "belief", "stance" and so forth back into motion on visual display and thereby make it available for discourse in the art scene. Self-design represents what Gene Ray defines as the aesthetics of the after engaging with the sublime. Ray states:

> Truth can never be merely a positivist correspondence between claims or description and a factual world. …The image ban on this utopia acknowledges that it cannot be imagined truly from within a still too-distorted subjectivity…The need to let suffering be voiced is the condition of all truth.

Thus sublimity of selfie art in the contemporary art scene derives from its aim of astonishing or disturbing the viewers with their self-representation for which the biographical and art historical explanations cannot account. Rancière maintains that both the modern and the postmodern link the specificity of art to a certain way of being, of community. The post-utopic staging of art in the postmodern era cannot be judged through aesthetics but other regimes of art namely ethical, focusing on "what ought to be"[223]. That is also why Groys claims that contemporary art should be analyzed not in terms of aesthetics but rather in terms of a poetics which prioritizes production and art producer rather than perception and perceiving subject. Following Groy's line of argument, the

[222]Boris Groys, *Going Public* (Berlin; New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 15.
[223]Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Polity Press, 2009), 22.

artist becoming part of the artwork in today's art scene, autopoetics as the production of one's own public self becomes the focus point of contemporary art.

The artist's body was largely veiled or repressed within modernism as the inferior component of the body-mind dialectics. Amelia Jones claims that contemporary art places 'primitive' or 'feminine' subjects as tied to the weighty flesh of their 'interested' and socially embedded bodies in the cultural realm, as a critique of the modern artist who was expected to activate a Kantian 'disinterested' disembodied subjectivity in art's appreciation. Juliane Rebentisch states that the ideal artist according to aesthetic modernism is "one who brings out an aspect within the work that both frees it from the artist's individuality and defies the logic of subjective command over the material[224]." Likewise, in Theodor Adorno's ideal aesthetic experience, the work of art is not assimilated to the experiencing subject; rather the latter assimilates itself to the work[225]. As Rebentisch puts forward this idea implies that participation in art must be conceptualized as partaking in this universality: "The beholder, listener, spectator, or reader, by relating to the work, likewise is to overcome her own empirical situatedness.[226]"

However, for contemporary art, the artist is highly attached, personal, sentimental, romantic and emotional to her/his artwork as it is a form of selfie creation. This selfie art is also more than personal, it embraces individuality because it has to do with character, environment, cultural background, talents and desires. Els Van Der Plas mentions that internalization of art prioritizes individuality which goes further than originality and offers more than just the translation and analysis of everyday, mundane affairs but the work's singularity comes from the reasons for

[224]Juliane Rebentisch, "Paricipation in Art: 10 Theses," in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, trans. Gerrit Jackson (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 265.
[225]Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, New edition edition (London ; New York: Continuum, 2005), 33.
[226]Rebentisch, "Participation in Art: 10 Theses."

the choice of subject that make the work individual[227]. Barthes maintains that, "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing[228]" because discovering the Author or its hypostases such as society, history, psyche, liberty beneath the work, the text is 'explained'. Therefore, Barthes claims that an activity that is truly revolutionary is to refuse to fix meaning by refusing to assign a secret, an ultimate meaning to the text[229]. However, contemporary self-image art does not possess an Author as Barthes recalls before but an artist who is both the creation and creator.

In the absence of the fixed transcendental signification and contents of modernist age, Groys argues that the design and the self-design of the body presents the ethical, the social and the political dimension of the subject in the contemporary world and in contemporary art[230]. That is why Groys calls the current visual community a giant scene full of artists without an audience[231]. Martin Hand explains the digitalization of image production and hence the change in the understanding of the representation of private sphere such as family albums[232]. Hand:

> The notion of banality - Whole albums were never explicitly intended to be publicly viewed. In other words, private images of this kind are not so easily subject to aesthetic criticism or empirical analysis. This is changing as a result of digitalization, where ordinary practices of image-making have become pervasive and available. As we have seen, those who use digital cameras often speak anecdotally about the sheer volume of images they have stored, usually on their hard drive, as a consequence of the routine presence of cameras and the cultural expectations of immediate image production[233].

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[227]Der Plas, "Internalization and Art: Re-Evaluating the Concepts of Beauty and Individuality in the Interntional Context," in *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora*, ed. Fran Lloyd and Sajid Rizvi (London: Saffron Books, 2000), 29.
[228]Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1978), 147.
[229]Ibid.
[230]Groys, *Going Public*.
[231]Ibid.
[232] Martin Hand, *Ubiquitous Photography* (Polity, 2012), 152–154.
[233] Ibid., 153–154.

Thus, everyone taking and posting their selfie is artist and art at the same time: "Today more people are interested in image production than image contemplation"[234]. That said, today's artwork can no longer be the work of the unconscious, quasi-natural forces of Kantian genius artist but "the individualized public persona[235]" in the contemporary art regime. In other words, selfie art works on a banal subject as regular as selfie production and engages with its mass appreciation. That is because modernist universalism has turned out to be an illusion, to be a particularity of the Eurocentric Enlightenment's in the contemporary era. Contemporary art, by contrast, opposes the modernist ideal of art with the utopian project of anticipating the upcoming subject of an upcoming ideal society. As Andrea Guinta asserts, today's linkage of art to politics represents, "more than a radical transformation of the entire world, what artistic activism seeks is to continually renovate the formats that permit different types of power to be debated, along with strategies for counter-power.[236]" Here, selfie art acquires its artistic value hence political stance through expressing the instability of identification within the discourses of history and culture. While this play of difference in selfie art does not promote an idea of utopic future, it seeks to set up a disturbance in settled relation of understanding and imagination to bear witness to the irreducible difference between these faculties. This dispute between the faculties of understanding and imagination used to end up in an idea of totality for Kant and hence articulates sublime of enlightenment with the promise of transcendence.

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[234]Groys, *Going Public*, 15.
[235]Ibid., 14.
[236]Andrea Giunta, "Activism," in *Contemporary Art 1989 to the Present*, ed. Alexander Dumbadze and Suzanne Hudson, trans. Tamara Stuby, 2013. P242

b) Self-Image Making of the Middle Eastern Diaspora

Middle Eastern subjectivity is not a religious identity – ethnicity – homeland referring to one's beliefs, practices, but an image. In the age of visual community and surveillance everyone is an image and everyone is responsible for self-image and accomplishes the performance of the self-as-image[237]. As Sara Ahmed emphasizes the very encounters that take place between others involve the forming of both cultural and spatial boundaries through (mis)recognition of others as strangers[238]. The system of "neighbourhood watch[239]" proceeds through the recognition of stranger through her/his image. Consequently, contemporary art is not a practice only produced by artists, workers of art, but anybody who has an interest in how her/his body appears to her/his social surroundings. Yet, according to Groys, contemporary artists project their personas into the imaginary world of the yet unborn through educative purposes. Groys states that artistic metanoia leads, "the artist from an interest in the external world to the autopoetic construction of his or her own self[240]".

In today's world of visual abundance in the social sphere, everyone is an artist because citizens of the contemporary world are responsible for their self-images. Groys accentuates this process of necessary self-image building to confront the image of the self; to correct, to change, to adapt, to contradict this image for anybody who comes to be covered by the mass media, the social media, the surveillance system, cameras[241]. That is why "self-design is a practice that unites artist and audience alike in the most radical way- not everyone produces artwork, everyone is artwork.

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[237] Boris Groys, *Boris Groys: Going Public* (Berlin; New York: Sternberg Press, 2011).
[238]Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2013), 32.
[239]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.
[240]Groys, *Going Public*, 17.
[241]Groys, *Going Public*.

At the same time, everyone is expected to be his own author[242]". Following the same line, a diasporic figure from Middle East has to design one self and must create an individualized public persona in the context of visual society. The September 11 attacks and aftermath, the legalization and normalization of the suspension of due legal processes and the constitutional rule of law, the institutionalization of torture, the withdrawal of civil rights, the use of mass surveillance and the routine collection of information on innocent citizens, and arbitrary detention without trial have forced a primarily Middle Eastern diaspora to reflect a public self to secure themselves from institutional and social stigma. Thus, diasporic artists from Middle East not only produce artworks but became artworks in their self-design.

Here, the dominant subject of artistic study is the popular association of the brown body to Muslimhood and thus the negative perceptions of Middle Eastern diaspora in Canada and the USA. As Roland Barthes contends, to speak in stereotypes is to side with the power of language, and hence setting the stereotype at a distance aims to call language into crisis[243]. Juliane Rebentisch[244]explains how contemporary art situates aesthetic experience as a way of opening up and an alternative way of relating:

> The experience of such works opens the subjects to themselves by virtue of a figure of reflective self-estrangement. The subjects of this experience are referred back to themselves to the degree to which they cannot simply situate themselves vis-à-vis the objects in an identificatory fashion. – to the degree to which their won conditioning confronts them as alien in the mode of aesthetic semblance. If art can effect a change in consciousness that may spill over into political attitudes, it does so not because aesthetics of experience breaks with our finite worlds from the supercilious position of an elevated star but because in the semblance of art we encounter these same worlds in a different way.

[242] Groy, Boris. Going Public.
[243]Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 199.
[244]Rebentisch, "Paricipation in Art: 10 Theses," 272.

Aesthetic experience here does not expect the artist or the spectacle to transcend their own empirical conditions but rather reflects on them in a specific fashion. That said, the selfie art of the Middle Eastern diaspora exposes a different identity set to re-orient imaginaries. It attempts to capture the lack of consistent and repeatable meanings in self-definition.

c) The Stranger Status of the Middle Eastern Diaspora

Edward Said's definition of the Occident comes into being through the creation of an ontological distinction between the Occident and the Orient. The production of the nation requires somebody from somewhere to not-be in order for it to be. Following this precept, Middle Eastern diaspora in North America, the Orient in the Occident accentuates the fetishization of the migrant character. This results in the fetishization of the birth place, the mother tongue, skin color, and the assumed homeland's political history in the self-definition of diasporic subjectivities. Etienne Balibar contends that the racist complex combines a "will to know," a violent desire for immediate "knowledge" of social relations, and an articulation of visible facts to hidden causes[245]: the activity of categorization is a knowledge activity and is pregnant with oppression. As Sara Ahmed notes, recognition operates as a visual economy: it involves ways of seeing the difference between familiar and strange others as they are represented to the subject[246]. She argues that, "The definition and enforcement of the good 'we' operates through the recognition of others as strangers: by seeing those who do not belong…the stranger as the one who is out of place." Hence, some-bodies are more recognizable as out of place, and thus, "already read and valued in the demarcation of social

[245]Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, 2nd edition (London; New York: Verso, 2011), 19.
[246]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 24.

spaces[247]." The seemingly innocent question of "where are you from originally" can perfectly conceal and reveal the terms of social inclusion and exclusion.

The discourse of war on terror following the September 11th era and the more recent intensification of civil wars in the Middle East, have become the dominant resources to create the terms of strangeness in the case of the Middle Eastern diaspora. The Middle Eastern diasporic subject is assumed to be connected if not contested otherwise to the assumed cultural habits and life styles of the Middle Eastern geography. Here, the mainstream understanding of Middle Eastern geography varies according to the spread of socio-political disaster. These socio-political disasters range from totalitarian governance, a generalized lack of order or of a judicial system and justice, harsh socio-economic hierarchies, a lack of tolerance for diversity, and sovereign violence, civil wars, chaos and brutal death. Following this claim, the diaspora from Middle East is assumed to be a carrier of these traits of disaster, terror and horror through its body in the name of the geopolitical concern of security against terror. Here, "Middle Easterness" is assumed as the result of the subject's belonging to historical cultures instead of to genes or blood-lines, while Middle Eastern culture has been equated with the permanent experience of "disaster". As Balibar accentuates on racism based on culture; "what we see here is that biological or genetic naturalism is not the only means of naturalizing human behaviour and social affinities… Culture can also function like a nature[248]". The Middle Eastern strange body in this sense becomes a fetish to bring to the fore the host body's reliance in Western liberal democracies on strangers to secure his being and his terror-free place/geographical traits in the world. Todd Green wrote[249]:

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[247]Ibid., 30.
[248]Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 22.
[249]Todd Green, "Is America Becoming More Islamophobic?," *The Huffington Post*, June 26, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/todd-green-phd/is-america-becoming-more-_b_7658942.html.

> According to FBI reports, anti-Muslim hate crimes are five times more common today than before 9/11, and the average number of hate crimes per year since 2010 has been higher than in the three years preceding the Park51 controversy[250]. This data does not even include some of the horrific violence witnessed in the past year, such as the execution-style murders of three Muslims in Chapel Hill, NC. It is also worth noting that non-Muslims have also been victimized by anti-Muslim hate crimes. For example, Wade Michael Page likely mistook Sikhs for Muslims as he gunned down six Sikhs at a Milwaukee temple in 2012.

Balibar defines this kind of racism as a racism without races because its dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences: "…a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but only the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions[251]." Therefore, what is assumed to be the "Middle Eastern culture" can lock individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy: genes carrying terror, disaster and victimhood: "a spiritual inheritance[252]." That is why there is a slippage and systematic confusion amongst the terms of Middle East, Islam, Arabness and "brown" skin.

To be sure, the Middle Eastern diaspora differs considerably within themselves in numerous cultural traits, in their identification and identifications through ethnicity, religion, nation, history and their communal practices in the 'host' country. Despite such diversity, the mainstream perception of the Middle Eastern diaspora in liberal democracies splits up as "secular", hence "good Muslims" and "religious", hence "bad Muslims" who cannot fully engage in the host country's ideals of liberty, freedom of thought and individual ability for agency. While this popular antagonistic categorization among the Middle Eastern diaspora reduces various subjectivities and

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[250] Park51 or "Ground Zero mosque," a structure housing an Islamic community center just two blocks from the site of the September 11, 2001, attacks: The location of the so-called "Ground Zero mosque" spurred months of protests, with opponents saying it was disrespectful to the nearly 3,000 people killed when two airliners hijacked by extremists destroyed two Manhattan skyscrapers.
[251]Balibar and Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class*, 21.
[252]Ibid., 24.

political differentiation, it also conceals the terms of social discrimination against the Middle Eastern diaspora. The fact that one is assumed non-religious and yet only originally from the Middle-East does not mean that s/he can escapes stereotypes based on the multicultural glorification of cultural differences and hence stranger status. This is because the Middle Eastern Diaspora in North America reflects some kind of a mixed identity with racial and regional connotations enclosed within the informal definition of the term. What is attached to the "Middle Eastern" is the skin color, name, familial origin and so forth, hence more than the Muslim or religious connotation of identity. Mehdi Semati argues that "brown, once the signifier of an exoticism, has come to embody the menacing Other in the today's geopolitical imagination"[253] and the expansion of the security state. In this context, not Islamophobia but Middle Eastern-phobia posits Muslims, non-Muslims, secular, non-religious, veiled and non-veiled subjects as carriers of alterity, because it redefines culture as the carrier of Middle Eastern spiritual inheritance codified in some instances on "brown" skin or in others in a Middle Eastern name or nativity as a signifier of potential terror. This seems to originate from the scene in the movie "Battle of Algiers," based on the Algerian war for independence[254] (1966) against French colonialism in the 1950's: Algerian female fighters dye their hair blond to easily pass through French security checkpoints and reach French cafes to place their bombs in. Homi Bhabha draws here a line of mimicry and inauthenticity as "a sudden awareness of inauthenticity, of authority's constructed and assumed guise, is the menace of mimicry"[255]. As Achille Mbembe notes in his discussion of the suicide-bomber: "To kill, one has to come as close as possible to the body of the enemy. To detonate the bomb necessitates resolving the question of distance, through the work of proximity and

[253]Mehdi Semati, "Islamophobia, Culture and Race in the Age of Empire," *Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (March 2010): 256–75, doi:10.1080/09502380903541696.
[254]Gillo Pontecorvo, *The Battle of Algiers*, Drama, History, War, (1967).
[255]Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2004), 130.

concealment[256]". This results in the necessity of proof for Middle Eastern diaspora that s/he is not one of the terrorists while any disguise can be expected. The subjectivity of the Middle Eastern diaspora, as a cultural handicap, presents an alien status.

The Self-Body Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora

a) Brown Body Playing with the Difference

Middle Eastern artists tend to mention their own stories through their artworks as a means of self-exposure. The self as "brown" body in artwork combines irregular imaginaries or mainstream contrasting traits together in the form of patchwork for aesthetic contemplation. Some diasporic artists can openly claim that their story is a way to resist negative perceptions of their Middle Eastern origin and the brown body's strangeness through this de-construction of the fixed identity claim while others can simply maintain that this is their story short without any further political aim. Here, the artist's body part or central part of the artwork becomes a site of identity which is something always changing. Tracey Warr states that artists making performative work through their body[257]:

> …have sought to demonstrate that the represented body has a language and that this language of the body, like other semantic systems, is unstable. Compared to verbal language or visual symbolism, the parts of speech of corporeal language are relatively imprecise. The body as a language is at once inflexible and too flexible. Much can be expressed, whether deliberately or not, through the body's behaviour. Use of the body is often ritualized in an effort to contextualize and more precisely fix its meaning...The way in which we dress or the hairstyle we adopt can reflect the controlling social norms and expectations. Artists have used their bodies to dismantle the parameters of these norms and disrupt accepted signifiers of identity. It questions the notion of a stable identity and sense of self.

[256]Mbembe and Meintjes, "Necropolitics," 37.
[257]Tracey Warr, "Preface," in *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr (London ; New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2012), 13.

Amelia Jones also emphasizes that self-body artworks are considered as a strategic self-fetishization and obsessive self-imagining that mimics the processes of stereotyping: "There's no real self there - Impossibility of confirming some essential self through the mechanics of simulation" hence identity is no longer authentic or mine but fully social[258]." Diasporic artists 'display of the absurdity in their own self-image is a way to oppose their usual imagination in North America. The self in these artworks is insistently objectified and fetishized such that this excess exposes the fiction of literal and allegorical meanings attached to their body-image. This documentation of the brown body in everyday life by means of photography, video, websites and so forth means exposing it not only to surveillance systems but also to expanding sphere of media coverage.

If we analyze the fluid identity mythos on the other part, Sara Ahmed puts emphasis on how contemporary Western culture is imbued with fantasies of becoming, in which the Western-self ceases to define itself against the bodies of strangers through consuming strangers' traits. Through the same fashion, the Western consumer is invited to "go ethnic" through what she or he might eat, drink or wear[259] as a gesture of intimidation with the strange. That is consumption not assimilation in the sense of losing one's essential self. In that case, Ahmed claims that becoming other as fantasy is increasingly offered to the Western subject and reconstitutes rather than transgresses the integrity of the Western subject who becomes. On the other hand, the Eastern subject who is becoming considered colonized, white-washed or simple copy of Western counterpart; hence the Eastern subject loses her/his essence rather than discovers himself in this becoming. The example of self-image art through the juxtaposition of Middle Eastern diaspora is

[258]Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*, ed. Tracey Warr (London ; New York, NY: Phaidon Press, 2012), 39–42.
[259]Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 116.

Figure 3-1. Changez Khan. Male Protagonist in the movie "Reluctant Fundamentalist"

not a case of hybridity which also intensifies notions of binaries and dichotomies. That is because hybridity stems from the assumption of the essential nature of identities. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha asserts the possibility of cultural hybridity as an in-between identity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy[260]. Hence, hybridity signifies having access to two or more ethnic identities, such as an upbringing in Muslim culture as well as identifying with Western Anglophone culture. For instance, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*[261](2012) tells the story of a young Pakistani man, Changez, who achieves corporate success on Wall Street. In the movie, Changez is pictured as facing an internal conflict between his American dream of capitalist success, while struggling with the enduring call of his family's poetic artistic tradition and his responsibility to the homeland in struggle with social and political crisis. In addition, Changez can only ever be the substitute for the lost real love of his American Caucasian girlfriend, Erica (Kate Hudson): that is why Changez had to convince Erica

[260]Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 4.
[261]Mira Nair, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Thriller, (2013).

to make love with him by encouraging her to think of her deceased ex-boyfriend. Changez cannot succeed in building a life in the USA because of social discrimination and heavy stereotyping of people from the Middle East or Muslim background that comes into play following September 11th. He finally decides to return home to his culture that he left for the capitalist American dream. In his home country he becomes a teacher to educate the young Pakistani generation. He begins lecturing at Lahore University where he voices his dissatisfaction with the US's interventions in Pakistan. What the movie attacks here is "Othering" and the absence of tolerance for difference and the Other's culture. To overcome this problem, the movie suggests that everybody has to work with his own community and to support the right for self-determination and independence. While *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* criticizes the discourse of the war on terror, it re-legitimizes understandings of fixed and pure identity based on culture: Changez can never be the real capitalist oppressor. This is an undesirable and unnatural aim for Changez and Erica could never love him because she considers him the exemplar of cultural traits, an object, rather than his personality. Changez's self-discovery resides in his surpassing of the Occidentalist attitude, it is better for him to stick to his assumed capitalism-free Pakistani culture.

However, in their self-image making, Middle Eastern diasporic artists often display the absurdity in their own self-image in order to oppose their usual imagination and fixed categories of the host and guest culture in North America. The self in these artworks is insistently objectified and fetishized such that this excess exposes the fiction of literal and allegorical meanings attached to their image. Consequently, it is not a hybrid or in-between position that they claim, but a delegitimized pure position of antagonistic categories. That means that neither North American culture nor Middle Eastern diasporic culture are pure. Therefore, not only the distinctive qualities of Western civilization are threatened, but also all parts of the antagonistic constructed categories

become null in their portraiture. Following this later context, I will discuss in the following paragraphs several artists and their artworks ranging from film, short videos, photographs, to comedy and stand-up shows focusing on the form and content of their self-body as an expression and topic in their art.

This game of dialectics in the sense of the use of assumed contrasted traits or signs without promising transcendence becomes the generic artistic tactic in self-image making art. One example of this type of artist is Aymann Ismail, an Egyptian American living in New York. I met with him in May 2013 for an interview in Union Square in New York City. Ismail is a photojournalist in the *Animal Journal New York* which is an online website of daily news of New York street life. One of title of his videos is "I am Muslim and I shot the World Trade Center (2012)[262]". The video shows a high-speed recording of usual daily New York scenery of World Trade Center from different parts of New York. The video does not show any distraction in the timeline of a New Yorker's everyday view. Aymann complemented his video with his artistic stance. Just below the video he wrote:

[262]Aymann Ismail, "I Am a Muslim and I Shot the World Trade Center - ANIMAL," accessed June 26, 2015, http://animalnewyork.com/2012/i-am-a-muslim-and-i-shot-the-world-trade-center/.

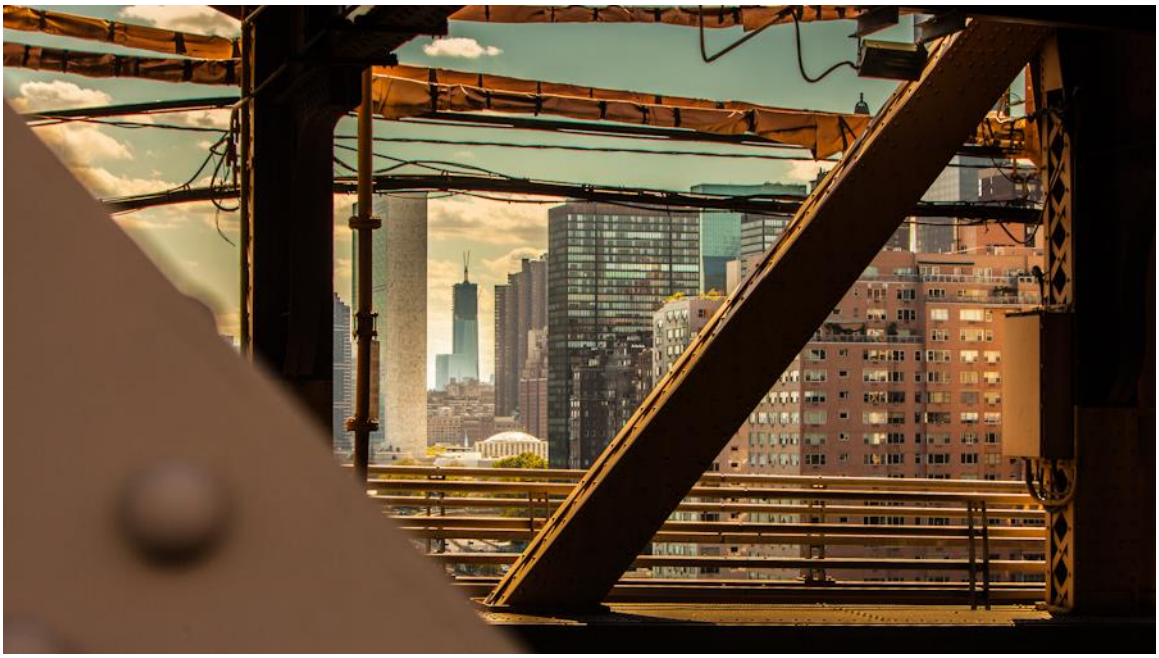

Figure 3-2. 59th Street Bridge by Aymann Ismail. Retrieved from http://animalnewyork.com/2012/i-am-a-muslim-and-i-shot-the-world-trade-center/

> As I was doing this, I was looking over my shoulder and dodging authority figures, out of habit. I am Arab and I look like it. Toting a camera around New York City landmarks made me nervous. I rarely have time to go to the mosque anymore, but over the years, I've become somewhat of an ambassador. I'm a typical 23-year-old dude who never leaves his home without headphones. I played bass in an indie hardcore band at Rutgers. I studied art. I listen to hip hop. I find myself having to explain to non-Muslims that no, Islam is not inherently violent. That no, my mother and sister do not wear the scarf because we would chop their heads off otherwise. It is one of the main principles of Islam.

Here, what gives this artwork's aesthetic value is the fact that the artist is from the Middle Eastern Diaspora in the USA. He says "I am Arab and I look like it" and he delivers his own experience of doing this artwork to the viewers. His body and accordingly his assumed identity reflect on this process of art-making. The full political dimension of the artwork is brought forward through the artist's declaration of identity in the sense of self-exposure. The title of the artwork shocks the viewers since the fact that the title is understood as a confirmation of Muslim crime associated with the World Trade Center attack. Thus it eventually reveals the scapegoating behaviour already present in the spectacle, otherwise the artwork is just a daily record. But "I am Muslim and I shot

the World Trade Center" is not simply a video but an articulation in relation to others in exchange of identifications. The artwork rearticulates and attempts to undo the connections between the signs of strangeness attached to brown skin and its sense in mainstream visual knowledge. It reclaims the celebration of sameness between the assumed contrasts instead of the difference. He is an American boy with a camera while he looks like and is an Arab originally from Egypt. This delivers a missing imagery of the Middle Eastern diaspora in the mainstream visual regime. Ana Lily Amirpour is an Iranian-American film director, screenwriter, producer and actor. She is most known for her feature film debut, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Watching the movie at its opening night on the 23rd January 2015 in Toronto[263], I became aware that the theatre was full with primarily Middle Eastern diaspora, as well as broader members of the Toronto activist and intellectual community. Friends engaging in Middle Eastern politics or from the Middle Eastern diaspora talked about the movie for some time. It was a real event, long hoped for, to see something "different" about Iran and also about the Middle Eastern subjectivities. Thus, a young member of the Middle Eastern diaspora, even one born and raised in North America, cannot see her reflection in the screen. Hence, the movie plays the role of selfie-taking for the Middle Eastern diaspora. Amirpour, the director, mentions her connection to Iran:

> *I did go to Iran, finally, but that's completely alien to me, It's weird, because Sheila* (artist playing the Girl in chador) *and I were talking about how, with this movie, we kind of made our own place that was as Iranian as we are, which is a mash-up of so many things*.[264]

[263] The movie's first screening was in Sundance Film Festival on March 2014 at MoMa (New York).
[264] Ito, "Ana Lily Amirpour's World."

That is why, in Amirpour's movie, *A Girl Walks Alone at Night*, Bad City is an Iranian city imagined by the Iranian diaspora rather than Western imagination of an Iranian city. It resists what looks like the "Middle East" or what the Iranian diaspora's homeland is in the mainstream imagery.

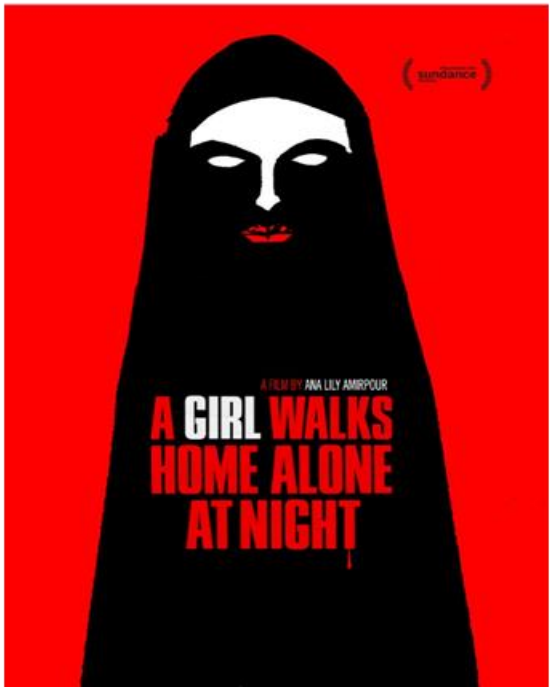

Figure 3-3. Arash Marandi and Lily Amirpour at Red Carpet Event of the 9th Rome Film Festival for the movie A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night(Film Poster above at right). 18 October 2014. Picture is retrieved from gettyimages website

Amirpour states that she created her own version of Iran in California to shoot the movie. Indeed, many artists that I interviewed, who are born in or have immigrated to North America at an early age, claimed that they do not feel that they should do art in their homeland instead of in North America.

2FIK is a Montreal based artist originally from Morocco. His artworks range from selfie-photos to short videos. In an interview over skype in July of 2014, he stated that his works deal with identity, gender and prejudice, and told me that he sees himself as a stateless person: "…involved in three different cultures (the Canadian, the French and the Moroccan) but even if those societies are dear to me, none of them sees me as fully of them (because of his accent, his

attitude, etc.)[265]". He uses his own body for his art and plays all of the characters in his short videos and photo stories. Hence he uses his art to questions his own personal identity. 2FIK explains the inspiration for his art to me:

> You need to handle and deal with the perceptions of yourself, you do not have a choice, they look at you and they think of it. The perception of Muslim people is so negative since 9/11. I totally assume this is how you can change perceptions. I am not Muslim anymore but I still look like one.

Figure 3-4. Identities by 2FIK/ 2010 - current

His serial artwork "Identities" is composed of various photos including these characters seen-above. 2FIK plays all these characters which look so different and even antagonistic to each other through stereotypic visual traits and signs that he manifests through his body. 2FIK asserts his presence in public space allowing people to see another side of the North African face. Still, when I asked him if he was inspired in one of his works from the Arab Spring he responded:

> I thought one moment that I can do something about it but then I realized I was not directly concerned about it. This was pretty shocking. The only thing that links me to the Arab spring is my origin. That is it. In Canada, I live here and I seek another turn. I do not know if the revolution can ever happen in Morocco, but I was not expecting it, it is a dull country politically speaking. The way it functions will not allow an Arab revolution; I don't think so. At the moment I saw it, I was torn with this excitement and at the same time it inspired me so that I realized how far I am from these countries. How occidentalised I am. It

[265]2FIK, "2FIK OR NOT 2FIK," accessed June 28, 2015, http://www.2fikornot2fik.com/.

> happened. My way of thinking changed a lot and right now I am an occidental dude. I still have the culture everything from Morocco – but I was looking to the Arab spring as an occidental dude.

While 2FIK, raised in France and living in Quebec, cannot feel belonging through his Arab origin to the Arab Springs, he offers his own version of identification with the Orient in his artworks. In the picture above, he is not Grande Odalisque of the Ottoman Sultan's Harem but 2FIK embracing his Oriental origin in a subversive way divergent from the Orientalist imagery. Ingres' 1814 *Grande Odalisque* is considered as one of the classic examples of western orientalist painting:

> *Grande Odalisque* depicts a concubine languidly lounging about, lightly dusting herself with feathers as she peers over her shoulder at the viewer with absent eyes. The notions of hedonistic and indulgent sex are bolstered by hints to opium-induced pleasure offered by the pipe in the bottom right corner. Images like these prompted viewers to imagine the Middle East as a distant region of sex, inebriants, and exciting exotic experiences[266]

[266]Adam Schwartz, "Orientalism and the Representation of Middle Eastern Women - Sociological Images," August 9, 2011, http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/08/09/orientalism-and-the-representation-of-middle-eastern-women/.

Figure 3-5. The reproduction of La Grande Odalisque of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres above by 2FIK (2013).

Yet, 2FIK's selfie artwork of the *Great Maiden*[267] peers over his shoulder at himself while an absurd setting of cleaning materials ornaments the background scene. The artwork becoming the Middle Eastern diasporic artist-author gets through the Orientalist objectification of the earlier version.

Negin Farsad is an American-born director, comedian and stand-up artist. She also calls herself a social justice comedian on her website. Farsad was recently named one of the 50 Funniest

[267]For more information about the artwork's exhibition http://montrealgazette.com/entertainment/montreal-artist-2fik-unveils-racy-exhibition-that-scandalized-new-york

Women by the Huffington Post[268]. Farsad's parents immigrated to the US from Iran. I asked to Farsad in our interview if she ever wanted to perform in Iran:

> I don't know very well enough about the daily life of Iran to perform there, I don't know…I can be colonialist for them... I don't know they need to have America ideals, kind of imposing your Western life styles…- I would never be able to do anything I can do here in Iran – I will be killed, alright (she laughs sarcastically). I need to change everything to perform there.. If I were white maybe but I am from the region... I wish the otherwise….

Figure 3-6. Negin Farsad in her stand up show in Urban Standard – Birmingham, Alabama / December 2011

Hence, the Middle Eastern second generation diaspora cannot associate itself with the homeland, and therefore they struggle for self-articulation in the community while there is no model to refer to them in the media except the images of the discourse of the war on terror and their iconography.

[268]"Negin Farsad - Writer, Comedian, Director and Actor - New York City," accessed June 27, 2015, http://www.neginfarsad.com/.

Farsad mentions how her brown body of Muslim connotation also influences the perception of her stand-up show:

> It's unusual when I talk about sex, dirty sexy package you can accept it with other people but with my package, it is another understanding…We are the migrants- stigma women. In the mind of the typical American, Islam is Saudi Arabia and women can't drive.

I asked her if she can reach mainstream audience or if she ever felt discriminated in art life:

> I was going to auditions…I was trying to be the women standing behind the main character…they call back and pick one person... I did not get so far…it's hard, they say that you are too ethnic for this role but if we go to ethnic stuff you are not ethnic enough…so I'm ambiguous…they say that I am not 'Indian dark'...you are not, but your brown eyes are…it's hard to be a brown person from Iran, Turkey, etc... There are too many gate keepers... so hard to pass so many gate keepers. It turns out independent films have few gate keepers…Luckily this film (The Muslims Are Coming! – a documentary movie) will be distributed, but it is hard. But in the internet age, you don't even need gate keepers. But for mainstream comedy, it is still very, very hard to get through…They need another decade…But in independent film is a solution...

Figure 3-7. Image from the documentary movie Muslims Are Coming!. Negin Farsad and Dean Obeidallah are seen in the image in their performance

Thus, "brown" skinned celebrities who are assumed to be from the Middle East, are not numerous in the mainstream media and popular culture. The success of an independent movie, which Farsad believes is the only loophole, such as *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night,* can provide visibility to alternative Middle Eastern subjectivities that the North American mainstream imagination is not accustomed to.

Some of the second generation diaspora from the Middle East seem to identify with "vampires wearing chadors", as in the feature, while the chador does not mean anything particular for them. The "Chador" does not prevent the female protagonist from enjoying skateboarding, sex and killing in the movie. However, this "chador" allegorically appears in people's mind each time that a woman from the Middle Eastern diaspora is envisioned in the North American imagination since it is considered to be the sign of Middle Eastern culture: it resembles her natural skin. The only things that signify that this movie is "Iranian" are: the chador, oil machinery running in the city's landscape, Arabic letters seen in tattoos and on car plates, a female character seen with a bandage on her nose indicating that she had a nose aesthetic operation (a largely stereotypical operation for Iranian women), and the embroidered bag of the Girl as her suitcase. These are ironic depictions of stereotypical objects of Iranian culture, but in fact, these are only decorative items and are not significant for the flow of the plot in the movie. Indeed, that is why at the end of the screening of *A Girl Walks Alone at Night* at TIFF, a Canadian Queer identified woman originally from Palestine explained to me why she liked the movie:

> *"Exactly! That is why I liked it. This is not what you expect from an Iranian movie. A vampire in a chador. It is so cool!"*

What is in fact "cool" is the method used for the aesthetic deconstruction of identity. The film transforms dialectics into a game instead of opposing stereotypes openly. It juxtaposes stereotypes against each other to dissolve them: the Middle Easterner versus Westerner, the Arab man versus

Gay man, the Girl in a chador versus the Girl on a skateboard. That said, contemporary art is not entirely the end of dialectics. However, contemporary art does not resist by resisting against, but by reproducing the symbols of oppression in excess. Craig Owens emphasizes that postmodern artwork speaks of itself: it no longer to proclaims its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence[269]. He writes, "It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred," against the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art. The self in these selfie artworks can be objectified and fetishized such that this excess exposes the fiction of literal and allegorical meanings attached to their image through nullifying the contrasts and antagonistic signs.

For instance, 2FIK embraces transvestism, both his gay identity and Muslim Arab origin in his selfie art. He maintains that his performances in the public sphere/ social media extends the public imagination of the Middle Eastern diaspora. In the first place, the "gay" identity contradicts the stereotypes of the Arab man with extreme masculinity and violence. 2FIK explains that his selfie art does not normalize it but it actually makes one exist; and being unexpected is good: "Wearing it (the skirt) in the club is alright but wearing it between club and my house is better."

> Sometimes I got dressed up, I got this short skirt and veil with my beard but obviously people are going to look at me. Some people laugh, some people want to stab me, I am totally conscious of that – we should not forget that our society is conservative in some sense it is not politically correct but socially correct…I am in peace with this.

[269]Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse," in *Art After Modernism*, ed. Brian Wallis, New edition edition (New York: David R. Godine, 2007).

Figure 3-8. "Sabrina tries to remember when she first knew she was gay". Sabrina Jalees in a stand-up show. Retrieved from http://www.liveapt.tv/lesbiansleepovers/

Another artist, born and raised in Canada, Sabrina Jalees describes herself as a comedian, actor, keynote speaker and writer based in Brooklyn. Sabrina Jalees also mentions intensively her gay identity and how this gay identity fits with her Muslim origin:

> It clicked for me that I had this opportunity to be proud of who I was and just by doing that I could educate people, I could change minds. So I decided I was going to start doing stand-up when I was 16 years old. I was making jokes from an honest place and because I was unique as I got older I had a new challenge. When I finish the sentence, I need you guys to gasp, alright? I learnt I was gay (Laughter). Lesbian, was like a weirdo for me – a crazy person, someone that has 25 cats (Laughter). That's a real story. Mine are in the box, backstage. My father is Muslim. Now he expects me to get like 10 wives… (Applause) I realized eventually was that the more confident and proud I was about this thing that made me different, the more game the audience was to come along with it. And eventually, on the same tour, I was killing using gay material - which is dangerous if there are conservatives here. Tomorrow's newspaper: 'Muslim comedian kills using mysterious gay material' (Laughter). My wife's family is republican, they are from the South, go to church every Sunday…But I know my father-in-law loves me because he took me hunting and he didn't shoot me. So the next step was that I wanted to come out to my extended Muslim family, but my dad was always like, 'shh, keep it a secret'-'secrets are cool, man.'(Laughter) And I was like: 'Dad, I'm married now, what's your 5-year plan with this secret?' I keep on showing up to family saying, 'my white best friend. She loves Ramadan' (Laughter).

Here, the contrasting features of the mainstream imagination, as gay identity and Muslim brown body, juxtaposed to reveal the otherwise and to form a surplus. Although the acceptable queer citizen is majorly depicted as a white, gay man, as Johannah May Black[270] emphasizes through her case study of the discourse of Pride Week in Toronto, the gay Arab man or gay Pakistani girl do not fit either into the mainstream discourse or the stereotyping of the Middle Eastern diaspora. While the primary aim is self-exposure and self-image making as artwork practice, the eventual message of artistic works is that they are not strangers although they possess a brown body or Middle Eastern origin. Here, the artist's self-body is the terrain where consensual identities become juxtaposed and revealed as an absurdity. Hence, brown body in excess and its absurdity makes reference to what Roland Barthes formulates as the obtuse meaning: An unwelcome supplement which shows through excess of the literal level of the image to be fiction, symbolic to be the fiction of the fiction. Barthes explains that, "the problem is not to reveal the (latent) meaning of an utterance, of a trait, of a narrative, but to fissure the very representation of meaning, is not to change or purify the symbols, but to challenge the symbolic itself[271]".

b) Perception of Middle Eastern Diasporic Self-Body Art

If the self-body art of the Middle Eastern diaspora deconstructs both antagonistic identities, what kind of audience are they attempting to address with their artwork and in their performances? What kinds of reactions do they get from the audience with the selfie-art that they are engaged in?

[270]Johannah May Black, "Citizenship Acts: Queer Migrants and the Negotiation of Identity and Belonging at Toronto Pride Week 2009" (Ryerson University, 2009).
[271]Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 167.

I asked Negin Farsad if she thinks that they can reach Islamophobic people with their documentary "The Muslims Are Coming!"

> That's all purpose of the movie… My goal is not to get rid of the stereotypes but to replace them with other stereotypes…Muslims are coming is a hilarious fucking funny popcorn movie. This whole thing must be fun… Can it make an impact? My next door neighbor was gay, that was the only thing I need was to get rid of my homophobic feeling... Some people are committed to hate it… We can change people in the middle. …I know people, they are persuadable…

Aymann Ismail too claimed that his art can only reach politically non-active audience on the subject of Middle Eastern subjectivity in the USA:

> *I hope to get to people who are mostly silent. In animal, as a photographer, I do not try to reach people who are already racist …*

The target audience is thought to be part of the non-antagonistic camp in the discussion of Middle Eastern subjectivity. Farsad mentions in our interview the usual tendency of Middle Eastern diasporic performances or artwork to be particularistic in the sense that they only aim to address to their own diasporic audience. According to Farsad, only reaching "universal appreciation" can allow the Middle Eastern diaspora to escape from stigmatization:

> Jews got in the mainstream. They can communicate with people. They are not only crazy fundamentalists… Jews but Woody Allen Jews…My generation can do that…. They can communicate with people… Jewish comedy is fucking deal… It became part of the natural story…Hopefully we can do the same… Just do comedy… Not Iranian but comedy…

For instance, Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Alone at Night* is a candidate for cult movie status for cine-phile spectators. The movie not only addresses more than the Iranian diaspora, although it still doesn't attempt to be a mainstream movie. The movie quotes well-known worldwide cult movies, hence the audience needs to acknowledge a specific cultural capital which is inaccessible/accessible to everyone.

Consequently, although artists' diasporic identities are reflected in selfie artwork, as long as the self reflects no belonging, it is expected to be 'universalistic' in this account. Thus, there is neither "host" nor "guest" culture in this understanding: Selfie art is primarily the artist's individual story. Although it can eventually appeal to a diasporic audience, it is not estimated to represent anybody, culture or community, therefore it is expected to reach anybody. Still, in the example of Woody Allen, although the spectacle knows he has a Jewish identity, his Jewishness does not constitute the primary subject matter in his art. In a similar case focusing on a Jewish subject, Jewish director Steven Spielberg made the movie *Schindler's List* (1993), where a Jewish story is presented as an issue that is not particular to the Jewish community, but as a human matter. Besides this, Spielberg's other famous movies do not particularly possess a Jewish identity to display to the audience. However, from Spielberg's autobiographic interviews, it is popularly known that he is a member of the Jewish community. For instance, Spielberg mentions how his Jewish identity affected his childhood[272]: "I was embarrassed, I was self-conscious, I was always aware I stood out because of my Jewishness," the director recalls, "In high school, I got smacked and kicked around."

However, in the case of contemporary art and the theme of self-image making, the author *is* the artwork. Consequently, disinterestedness does not constitute the act of art-making. That is why the ties between the author and the artwork are exposed instead of revealed as secret. Hence, the Jewish theme constitutes a human matter and part of the world's history because of the plausibility of the Jewish identity amongst others and the historical importance of the community's self-experience to illustrate the capacities and incapacities of humanity. The theme of universality here

[272]Bernard Weinraub, "Schindler's List: Steven Spielberg Faces the Holocaust," *The New York Times: Best Pictures*, December 12, 1993, http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/movies/bestpictures/schindler-ar1.html.

emerges from generality and does not represent all but a significant matter for humanity. In the case of selfie art in contemporary aesthetics, universality comes from the fluidarity of identities of all people: It is a display of non-belonging. Here, co-presence can be found through nonidentification by the use/narrative of excessive stereotyping or through catch-all identifications.

In her TED talk[273] "How living more honestly leads to a better life", Sabrina Jalees mentions her autobiographic story of how her half-brown identity affected her life and art. The explanation about this YouTube video states that "comedian Sabrina Jalees approaches topics like racism and sexuality as she tells a coming-of-age story laced with hilarity". In her talk, Jalees says:

> I'm half Pakistani, half Swiss, obviously (Laughter). I grew up in a really white neighborhood, and there were no brown role models growing up, so I was embarrassed about my ethnicity. There were no Mindy Kalings or Russell Peters there were just Apus from the Simpsons (Laughter). So I didn't tell people where I was from and my dad would blow my cover when he came to pick me up. That was devastating. He'd come in blaring the Bollywood top 40 (Laughter), windows down, just, "Hey, I'm your father!" – Car horn – hand wave: Sabrina, yo-hoo (Laughter). All my white friends would be like, "Dude, where is your dad from?" I'd be like, "pfew, my dad!" "He's black" (Laughter). It's a Jamaican accent. But that attitude changed after 9/11. There was this period, after the tragedy, where being racist was pretty much fair game. I taught tennis at this time and I remember this conversation between some of the kids..."Yeah, my mom told me it was the Pakis that did it"… I was like "wow, thank god I'm Puerto Rican (Laughter).

In Jalees' story, the incidence between father – daughter is typical in the sense that such an adolescent identity crisis happens with different circumstances and people. Hence, for the audience to understand the joke requires a similar experience of parent-child relations as well as a familiarity with the mainstream portraiture of Middle Eastern imagery and Middle Eastern stereotypes in popular media. The audience is also expected to know the Simpsons, the American iconic cartoon

[273]This talk was given at a local TEDx event, produced independently of the TED Conferences. TEDx Talks, *How Living More Honestly Leads to a Better Life | Sabrina Jalees | TEDxToronto*, 2014.

Figure 3-9. Being Half-Brown. Youtube video Snapshot Image. Sabrina Jalees and Meaghan Rath.

series, but a famous Pakistani song is not the central point of the joke. Jalees' show also referred to Bollywood cinema but it is from a mainstream view point because Jalees' knowledge of Bollywood is not authentic at all. In her Youtube video "Being Half-Brown"[274]with Meaghan Rath, Jalees tells what it is like to be like half-brown, she describes her mixed heritage through exaggeration of stereotypic signs:

> They call you mocha-frappuccino, chocolate milk, garbage face? You can make racist jokes – white people laugh but others hate it: "How do you dare you?"
>
> Being half-brown mean you reject your heritage when there is a terrorist attack but then you embrace it when somebody brings out "Slumdog Millionaire"[275] (2008)
>
> Every time you masturbate it is a metaphor for British colonizing people. Persian people love you. It means you month can get spicy food but your bowels still go "ahhh..."

[274]Sabrina Jalees and Meaghan Rath, *Being Half Brown*, 2012.

[275] Famous movie by directors Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan. Slumdog Millionaire won 8 Oscars in 2008. The story tells the adventure of A Mumbai teen who grew up in the slums and becomes a contestant on the Indian version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?"

> Half of you feels safe when Osama Bin Laden is killed and the other half knows he was hiding the whole time.
>
> We are half-brown people and half of us still needs to be recognized.

Here, the above-mentioned dialogue in Jalees' YouTube video displays the absurdity of fixed cultural identities based on origin. By doing this, it does not take a side in the discussion of Islamophobia or the War on Terror. The subject matter of her art is still based on discrimination specific to her Pakistani origin. However, she deals with this subject through American jargon and American mainstream story-telling. Thus, Jalees makes an individual claim without representing a specific community, and hence she un-does the construction of homogenous group identity for Middle Eastern diaspora, an exclusive or subset to the broader American community. In another example, Dean Obeidallah, the Arab-American comedian and co-worker of Negin Farsad in the documentary movie The *Muslims are Coming!*, mentions in his comedy stand-up show how he reacted to the negative profiling that he encountered after September 11:

> We are so racially profiled now as a group… I heard a correspondent on CNN not too long ago use the expression, 'Arabs are the new blacks...*When I heard that -- I'm going to be honest* -- I was excited. I'm like, 'Oh my God, we're cool.' Before you know it, hot Asian women will stop dating black guys and start dating Arabs. White kids in the suburbs, instead of acting and dressing black to be cool, will now start pretending to be Arab…. Arab, please![276]

Obeidallah attempts to relate brown imagery to other well-known racial profiles using American culture and male views in his structure of the joke that the audience can acknowledge or sympathize with to engage in laughter and the stand-up artist's viewpoint.

[276] Cheryl Morris. Stand Up for Peace. New Internationalist Magazine.2010, 27th May. http://newint.org/features/web-exclusive/2010/05/27/standing-up-for-peace/

However, this understanding of the Middle Eastern homeland, Muslim origin or brown body are not yet part of the dominant popular culture. Therefore, such artistic or performative juxtapositions of self-image making art by Middle Eastern diasporic artists could be considered particularistic and thus political. That is because their political or ethical message can be considered to override their artistic claim or entertainment purpose. For instance, in the case of the documentary *The Muslims Are Coming!* that Farsad and Obeidallah co-directed, the story features a tour of American-Muslim comedians performing free comedy shows across the heartland of America, "in the hopes of using comedy to foster understanding and dispel misconceptions about Muslims[277]." The documentary has an American pop music soundtrack from the 1960's in the generic start of the movie. The film also includes special guest interviews with various well known people including: "The Daily Show's" Jon Stewart, Assif Mandvi, Russell Simmons, Soledad O'Brien,Ali Velshi, MSNBC's Rachel Maddow, comedians Lewis Black, David Cross, Lizz Winstead and Colin Quinn as well as Congressman Keith Ellison. The film is widely available on Netfilx, iTunes and Amazon. Although the subject of the movie is about American Muslims, and it is hence minority oriented, the movie includes celebrities from all American communities. The documentary can be reached by everybody who is interested in it, it does not require community membership in the sense that the ads and announcement about the movie are not channelled through private community social media. The movie ads for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) used statements such as: "The Ugly Truth About Muslims: Muslims have great frittata recipes" and "Those Terrorists are All Nutjobs," with the word "nutjobs" substituted for the crossed-off "Muslim".

[277]Dean Obeidallah, "Deanofcomedy.com » About Dean," accessed June 27, 2015, http://deanofcomedy.com/?page_id=2.

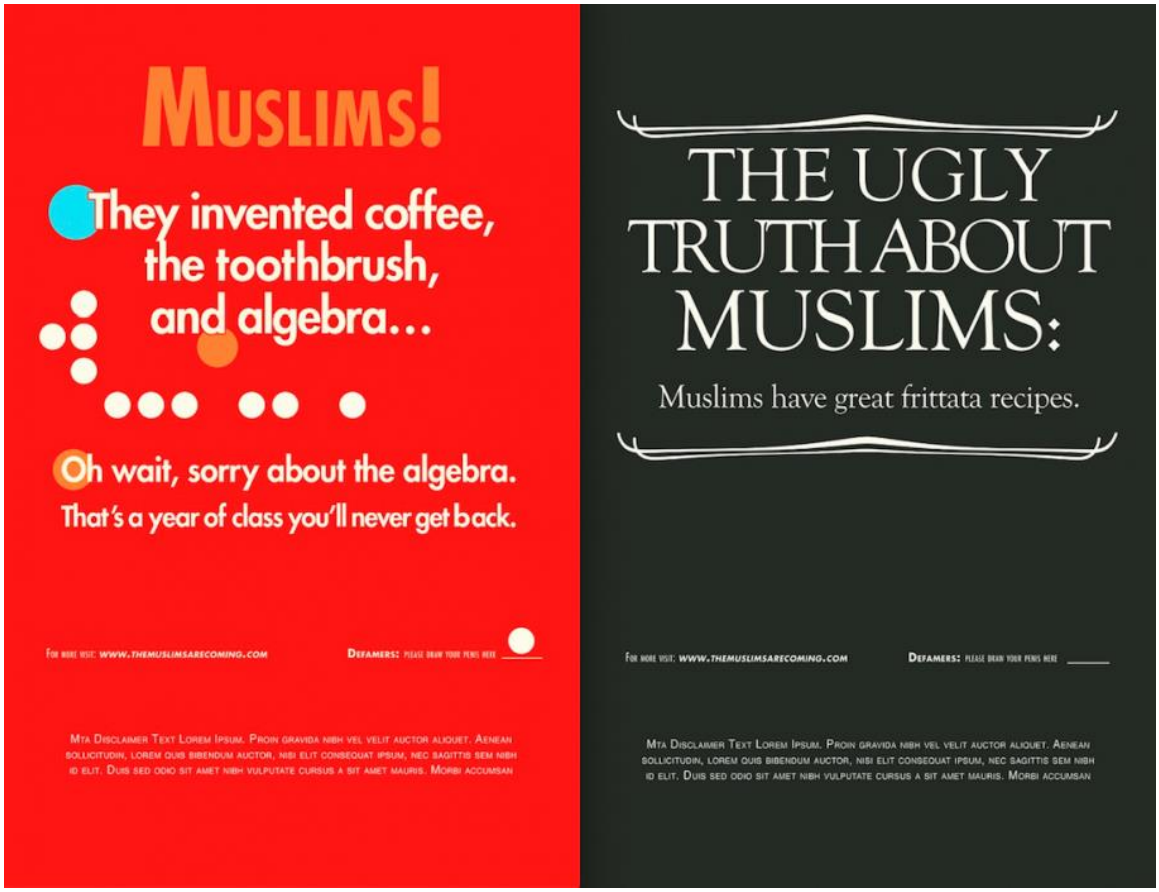

Figure 3-10. Poster works of ad campaign for "The Muslims Are Coming"

However, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority pulled the ad campaign for The *Muslims Are Coming!* because the transit agency claimed that the posters are political statements which are banned under a new policy[278].According to the studio, the film carries a message that, "American Muslims are ordinary people," and that the MTA had no compelling reason to ban it[279]. MTA real estate director Jeffrey Rosen said the documentary promos got spiked because they were a response to Pam Geller, one of the leaders of the Stop Islamization of America (SIOA) and American Freedom Defense Initiative (AFDI), Islamophobic ads. Obeidallah rejected that reason: "We didn't

[278]Dan Rivoli, "Comedians Suing MTA for Tanking Their Anti-Islamophobia Ads," *NY Daily News*, June 25, 2015, http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/comedians-suing-mta-tanking-anti-islamophobia-ads-article-1.2271769.
[279]Leonard Greene, "Filmmakers Sue MTA over Pulling Muslim Movie Poster," *New York Post*, June 26, 2015, http://nypost.com/2015/06/26/filmmakers-sue-mta-over-pulling-muslim-movie-poster/.

make the movie because of Pam Geller - We made the movie to tell our story[280].” In this sense, their self-image making art is not considered to be art but politics while the contemporary art that they engage in has already eliminated the boundary between the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, art and politics, in its practices.

How their self-image making can art be considered politics and interest-based while contemporary art has already lifted these kinds of categories in the postmodern era? One of the reasons behind this is the place of their specific identity claim in the mainstream discussion of the discourse of the war on terror and the popularity of this subject in the current consensual system. Their artistic stance of fluid identity through the use of both their origin and American mainstream culture is not supported by radicals on both sides. While these diasporic artists claim that they deconstruct Islamophobic stereotypes, they can actually be criticized by members of Muslim communities. The primary reason behind this is that the self-image art they are making deconstructs both Islamophobic stereotypes and also the stereotypes of the ideal Muslim for several conservative groups and individuals. I asked to 2FIK about comments from other members of the Muslim community. He told of an incidence in one of his exhibitions:

> One time she asks me, ‘Could you tell me why you are portraying the veiled woman like that?’ I asked her, ‘Do you think that you are just your veil?’ she said, ‘No’ and I said, ‘Thank you, this is what I was trying to say’

For instance, the comments on Sabrina Jalees’ Youtube video “Being Half Brown[281]” also attack her statement of being both gay and Muslim. That is why she can be considered as a “fake Muslim” by other Muslims. I also asked Negin Farsad about the comments from members of

[280]Rivoli, “Comedians Suing MTA for Tanking Their Anti-Islamophobia Ads.”
[281]Sabrina Jalees, “Being Half Brown - YouTube,” accessed August 19, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtxoUfG4xcs.

diasporic Muslim communities to her shows and to the documentary movie The *Muslims Are Coming!*

> We went cities like Binghamton. We don't have many Muslims in the audience. But we did have 20 per cent one time and during the stage, when I was telling jokes many hijabi ladies left…I know that they don't like what I'm doing… It's funny because what I'm trying to make it easier for them, too. I can say I'm Mexican but I say no…I am not trying to represent them but just offer another angle from immigrants in America. I'm like, I can't un-see that…Muslim audiences do come and sometimes they hate it and sometimes really appreciate it…

Thus, selfie art exposing fluid identities is assumed to be representative of the mentioned cultural communities or antagonistic groups although self-image making encompasses expressively an individuality and an individual story through personal experience of the mentioned communities' histories, cultures and many other things which affect them in their own life. This is an "I" which does not attempt to represent Middle Eastern communities or Muslim per se. However, such an understanding of identity as a fluid composite does not coincide with the boundary-securing regime of community culture and community life where the individual has to accomplish some steps and follow some criteria to be part of a group. Following this context, some of the Muslim or Middle Eastern community seek to preserve their considered distinctive qualifications and customs from what are the assumed generative effects of the western host culture although they criticize the Islamophobic discourse of the War on Terror. In this sense can be considered to possess deviant life styles and can be labelled as outcasts of the diasporic community. Here, selfie art prioritizing individuality and personal narrative of cultural experience is not recognized.

Secondly, the accusation of carrying political value instead of aesthetic desire in the case of selfie-art also coincides with Rancière's claim that today's art displays ethical or representational drive because it proposes its own politics through rearrangements of space. Oliver Davis has

commented on Rancière's thinking about the egalitarian promise of artwork in the contemporary art scene[282]:

> Rancière thinks that this disposition of the spectator is invariably under threat from artists and curators who aspire to teach their audience a particular political message or intervene in the world directly to reconfigure social relations. He suggests that many artists and exhibitions curators who aspire to be political have an understanding of the artwork which owes more to the ethical or representational regimes than aesthetic.

Davis relates Rancière's understanding of aesthetics with Rancière's term of politics: "politics does not take place when people are manipulated or organized whether by those who govern them or by artists.[283]" Aesthetic education in postmodern political art coincides with, "the process that transforms the solitude of free appearance into a lived reality and changes aesthetic idleness into the action of a living community[284]". Hence, the statue carries political promise because it is the expression of a specific distribution of the sensible. Thus, postmodern art in relational logic is art for us because "it was not art for its author, because in sculpting it, this author was not making an artwork but translating into stone the shared belief of a community, identical with its very way of being[285]". Nicolas Bourriaud argues that relational art segment of contemporary art, "creates free spaces and time spans whose rhythm contrasts with those structuring everyday life, and it encourages an inter-human commerce that differs from the communication zones that are imposed upon us[286]". As T.J Demos notes, while this goal is worthy, it risks relying on a notion of community defined as social fusion where convivial agreement drives out the antagonism that is, for others, the very basis of democratic process[287].

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[282]Oliver Davis, *Jacques Ranciere* (Polity Press, 2010), 154.
[283]Ibid., 157.
[284]Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 35.
[285]Ibid.
[286]Nicolas Bourriaud, *Nicolas Bourriaud: Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses Du Reel, 2002), 16.
[287]T.J. Demos, "Dada's Event," in *Communities of Sense: Rethinking Aesthetics and Politics*, 2009, 145.

The Self-Memory Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora in North America

In this section, I will consider selected artists' self-memory art in the diaspora. This examination outlines the self-image making art focusing on memory as the building term for artists to experiment with their own subjectivity and expose this self-memory of diasporic experience in the contemporary art scene of the US and Canada. As Downey underscores: "the will to remember and negotiate the past is the expression of a collective will not only to refuse forgetfulness but also to question official accounts of history… As we have seen elsewhere, the involvement of art practices in the examination of history directly challenges what may be seen, said and indeed understood.[288]" Here, the artists attempt to offer an alternative imagining of their homelands and a history differing from mainstream news media through their own individual memories. They also focus on their own memory of diasporic life while they are misrepresented, not represented, or overly generalized in the host country's socio-political and cultural scene. As Fran Lloyd claims, "memory, far from dealing with the past, is a living thing, part of the dynamics of perception, of multiple points of identification and the on-going process of making meaning"[289]. Many diasporic artists from the Middle East explore the workings of memory through their diasporic experience while they examine both the dimensions of war in the homeland as well as the stranger status in the host country. I take up the subject of "self-memory art" in this chapter of selfie making. That is because self-memory art is also concerned about self-representation. In this chapter, the self-body art (previous section) and self-identified Muslim art (next section) mostly focus on the alternative combinations of stereotyped physical attributes of body or religiosity design connotative of Middle Easterness while self-memory art seeks to deal with what is assumed of

[288]Anthony Downey, *Art and Politics Now* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2014), 156.
[289]Fran Lloyd and Sajid Rizvi, eds., *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora* (London: Saffron Books, 2000), 140.

Middle Easterner's memory and it pursues to describe an individualized history of Middle East and a self in parallel with it.

a) Diasporic Self and "Middle Eastern" Memory in Diaspora

The individual memory of the homeland as a faraway land left behind is one of the primary subject matters for diasporic artists from Middle East. Gerardo Mosquera emphasized that, "the diasporean or immigrant was the figure of postmodernity with its decentered and deterritorialised subject.[290]" Similarly, Edward Said in *Reflections on Exile* states that:

> Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions…where expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occurs against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.

To be sure, there are different ways of immigration and each of them necessitates different undertakes and hence affective engagements. Not all members of diaspora are exiles, as Edward Said, who expulsed from his native land by official decree. Migrants who are recognized by homeland's and host land's state with official permission of entry and visas possess the official liberty of moving to cross borders. Yet, visas are often unavailable to refugees and asylum seekers who seek to enter a country for protection to escape danger (war, armed conflict, human rights abuse or other violence in their home country) or persecution, many are forced to attempt entry without proper documentation:

> Thousands and thousands of refugees and asylum seekers are detained in the following places: removal centres; privately and publicly-run immigration detention facilities; jails; prisons; police stations; airports; hotels; ships; shipping

[290]Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher, *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture* (New York, N.Y.; Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007).

> containers; and, closed refugee camps. They are being held upon arrival in a country, pending a final immigration decision, or while awaiting removal from the country… Stateless persons and others without documentation who are unable to be removed from a country may face being detained indefinitely. [291]

Hence, diaspora and diasporic experience as well as memory of immigration and homeland differ from each other because migrants are not equal too in legal socio-political and economic status.

Yet, all members of diaspora acknowledge the experience of border-crossing and dislocation. T. J. Demos undertakes Paul Gilroy'a term of *Double Consciousness*[292] borrowed from W.E.B du Bois as the "bicultural knowledge produced by living in a foreign environment, generating in its positive expression a sensitivity toward difference (that of cultures, places, and communities), and a newfound appreciation of the cultural character of one's origins when looking back from the migrant's awry vantage[293]". Therefore, being in the diaspora means engaging in multiple locations and aura although the immigrant, the exile, the refugee, or the expatriate is physically present in one place. Although new communication and transportation technologies allow everyone to access everywhere anytime, the experience of socialization and adaptation through diasporic living still allows for the development of another type of consciousness. Following this line, diasporic artists from Middle East can appropriate the theme of memory as the personal experience of history to expose this *double consciousness* in the art scene.

As Jacques Rancière accentuates in his essay *The Nameless War*, "ethnic purification, the dissuasive war and humanitarian assistance all share a common logic of massification". The

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[291] "Detention of Refugees | Rights in Exile Programme," accessed September 13, 2015, http://www.refugeelegalaidinformation.org/detention-refugees-0.

[292]Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*, Reissue edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[293]T. J. Demos, *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

defeated peoples, the individuals denied – all are treated by the humanitarian regime as singular, and as different from one another as we claim to be, are the participants of an intellectual and artistic life capable of just as much sophistication as ours, and are the actors of a public life marked by as many antagonisms, but the humanitarian regime is not bothered about this one bit[294]. Consciousness belongs to the individuals and humanity of individuals, yet, migrants from Middle East are often constructed as masses without personality. In the case of Middle Eastern diaspora, US Migration Policy Source reports that, "political unrest and violent conflict have displaced millions in Syria and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since late 2010, generating significant international interest in immigrants and refugees from the region[295]". Thus, the example of Syria is used to generalize and homologize a large territory as well as the habitants in it. Here, their description of the MENA region includes or excludes some of the following territories Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Turkey, the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and Arab North Africa:

> In the United States, the September 11, 2001 attacks and subsequent military intervention in Iraq in 2003 also drew heightened — and sometimes unwanted — attention to the highly diverse MENA immigrant populations in the country, many of whom are Muslim. Yet immigrants from the MENA region have a long history in the United States. As early as 1920, the country was home to at least 50,000 immigrants from the region, primarily from what was then Palestine and Syria, including present-day Lebanon. Their numbers have steadily grown over the past few decades, and in 2012, about 961,000 immigrants from the region resided in the United States, representing just above 2 percent of the nation's 40.8 million immigrants. Iraqis are the largest single-country immigrant population from this region, followed closely by Egyptians. The number of immigrants from Saudi Arabia and Yemen has also grown rapidly over the past decade. There was no noticeable increase in the number of Syrians entering the United States as refugees between 2011 and 2012 as the Syrian civil war intensified, most likely due to the

[294]Jacques Ranciere and Steven Corcoran, *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 46.

[295]Gregory Auclair and Jeanne Batalova, "Middle Eastern and North African Immigrants in the United States," *Migrationpolicy.org*, accessed July 27, 2015, http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/middle-eastern-and-north-african-immigrants-united-states-0.

> lag in time between application and approval for resettlement. However, there was a marked upturn in Syrians granted asylum (365 in 2012, up from 60 in 2011). In 2012, a larger share of Syrian immigrants (70 percent) were naturalized U.S. citizens compared to MENA immigrants overall (58 percent) and the overall foreign-born population (45 percent)

The Canadian Immigration Survey also reports that, "during the recent five-year period (Statistics Canada based on a National Household Survey it conducted in 2011), the largest share of immigrants to Canada (56.9 per cent) came from Asia and the Middle East[296]".

Although migrants are not equal in their legal status and they differ from each other in terms of their reasons to emigrate from the "Middle East", Middle Eastern migrants are never considered to be/ named as expats who voluntarily live in a foreign country, but are most likely assumed as people who had to immigrate because of better economic opportunities and probably due to the political or social and cultural restraints. Thus the voluntary immigration from Middle East does not exist in the mainstream discourse. This mainstream assumption can be explained through Giorgio Agamben's argument on the fundamental pair of Western politics as bare life versus political existence[297]. State of exception, in Agamben's terms, is the space where constitutional rights of the political being can be diminished, superseded or rejected by the sovereign power[298] which also defines what or who is to be considered in the political body and what is conceived outside of the political being, as bare life. Agamben explains the term of bare life in the state of exception through the example of the concentration camp:

> Precisely because they were lacking almost all the rights and expectations that we customarily attribute to human existence, and yet were still biologically alive, they

[296]Mark Kennedy, "Statistics Canada Survey Highlights Immigration and Religion Shift," *Canada.com*, May 7, 2013, http://www.canada.com/life/Statistics+Canada+survey+highlights+immigration+religion+shift/8354086/story.html .

[297] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 12.

[298] Ibid., 13–17.

> came to be situated in a limit zone between life and death, inside and outside, in which they were no longer anything but bare life.[299]

That is said, the bare life must also be transformed into "good life" through politicization by the sovereign power[300]. In his reading of Aristotle, Agamben concludes that in Western metaphysics there is politics because man is the living being who, in language, separates and opposes himself to his own bare life and, at the same time, maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion[301]. Therefore, in a more general sense, migrants from Middle East are considered to be part of a mass, deprived of resources for proper human flourishing and thereby came to "Western" countries to escape from the continual state of exception in the "Middle East". This assumption derives from the fact that the practice of logos, language, as the means of participation in politics, is suspended under the dominance of totalitarian states or state of nature in "Middle East", namely, the continual state of exception. But in fact, on one hand, some of the migrants can possess higher economic power and social status in their homeland while they cannot eligible to vote or to be elected in their host country of residence. On the other hand, some of the migrants possesses/experienced physiological life/bare life[302] without any political significance or representation before the law in both host and home country.

It is reported that the UNHCR calculates that some 205,000 Europe-bound refugees have entered Greece, mostly via its outlying Aegean isles, this year alone and that the vast majority are Syrians (69%), Afghans (18 %), Iraqis, and Somalis fleeing conflict in their countries[303]. To be sure, people trying to emigrate from the "Middle East", defined as a landscape ruled by terror

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[299]Ibid., 91.
[300] Ibid., 12.
[301] Ibid.
[302]Ibid., 71 – 73.
[303]Helena Smith, "Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees," *The Guardian*, September 2, 2015, sec. World news, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/02/shocking-image-of-drowned-syrian-boy-shows-tragic-plight-of-refugees.

(without casual problematization, hence assumed as through natural flow), taking enormous risks to reach the West in "search of better life[304]". Moreover, the host "Western" sovereign state under the mainstream discourse of security supremacy can increasingly promulgate 'states of exception' through the theme of terrorist danger, this legitimizes ushering in laws to curtail, contain in and monitor migrants from the Middle East, considered extra-legal space, as well as its own citizens.

b) The Practice of Self-Memory Art

Memory works without the barrier of distance or time difference, while the agent's individuality and environmental stimulus affect its processing. How memory activates illustrates the theme of dislocation and instant time travel between the visions of past, present, and future at the very moment that the personal story achieves its own part through the artwork. As Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Michael Nijhawan develop further on Jacques Rancière's term of "distribution of the sensible"[305]:

> This distribution does not refer so much to social positions (e.g. social classes) but to ways of thinking or rendering things visible or invisible. 'Sensible" means mapping a world whose materiality is based on the ways in which people, through their bodies' positioning, experiences, and time/space frame offered by an artwork, define their relationships (or "identifications") to the various worlds to which they belong.

Yet, Rancière also asserts that art cannot be political because the artist decides so or the context makes it political[306] as long as educational mission re-proceeds the split of who leads an intellectual life and who has no time for thought, such as the worker[307]. Hence, the worker remains speechless:

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[304]Ibid.
[305]Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Michael Nijhawan, eds., *Suffering, Art, and Aesthetics* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[306]Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator*.
[307]Lawrence Liang, "Interview with Jacques Ranciere," *Kafila*, February 12, 2009, http://kafila.org/2009/02/12/interview-with-jacques-ranciere/.

"Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity[308]", while art necessitates that works of art are judged through their effect on the ethos of individuals and communities so that the educational mission does not promise autonomous experience that the aesthetic regime of art put forward[309]. However, self-memory art with its intention of exposing the procedure of memory working prospects a dissensual approach to the present distribution of the sensible through displaying identity and belonging with the intensification of time and space confusion. Thus, the diasporic artist from 'Middle East' is considered from the envisioned humanity of mobs and a landscape of victims, and settled down in the humanity of individuals as the survivor. Such a mainstream consideration of agent and role distribution signifies the negation of politics in Rancière's mind because in fact the principle behind ethnic purification and humanitarian war are the same – it consists in distributing the sensible according to the consensual order and deactivating politics which can mark a disruption on it:

> Ethnicism revokes the very space of politics in identifying the people with the race and the territory of exercise of citizenship with the ancestral soil. Ethnic purification does not simply consist in driving an undesirable ethnicity from a territory. It consists in constituting it as undifferentiated herd, simultaneously denying the collective reality of people endowed with public life and the singularity of the individuals comprising it[310]

In that sense, self-memory art has a potentiality of disrupting the usual way of role distribution through geopolitics through displaying the individuality of the artist to reframe history as long as

[308]Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," *New Left Review*, no. 14 (April 2002): 151.
[309]Ibid., 135.
[310]Ranciere and Corcoran, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, 45–46.

it does not sign out for an educational mission or it is not viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community[311].

Figure 3-11. Mine Kafon in MoMA. The picture is taken by me in November 2013

Massoud Hassani's work of *Mine Kafon* (2011) has been a part of MoMA[312]'s design section in New York since 2012. The work includes Mine Kafon, a wind-powered detector of land mines designed and built by hand, photos and a short documentary movie about how this Mine Kafon works to detect land mines in Afghanistan, Hassani's homeland. The museum bulb mentions that Hassani drew his inspiration from his childhood in Kabul where he used to play with his younger brother with their homemade, wind powered toys. The website on Mine Kafon (minekafon.org)

[311] footnote Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," 135.
[312] The Museum of Modern Art

asserts that "Massoud Hassani was born in Afghanistan in 1983 and moved to Holland in 1998 in search of a new life":

> As a child in Kabul, he would make all kinds of toys, sculptures and paintings…so you can imagine it was an enlightening moment when he arrived in the Netherlands and discovered that there was a profession called "product designer"…He enrolled to study at the Design Academy Eindhoven. Having adopted a new lifestyle and cultural habits. He focused his study to research building a bridge between those two cultures"

Ardent Film produced the short movie under the directorship of Callum Cooper. The aim of the project is, "to create more attention for this worldwide problem and help along the production of

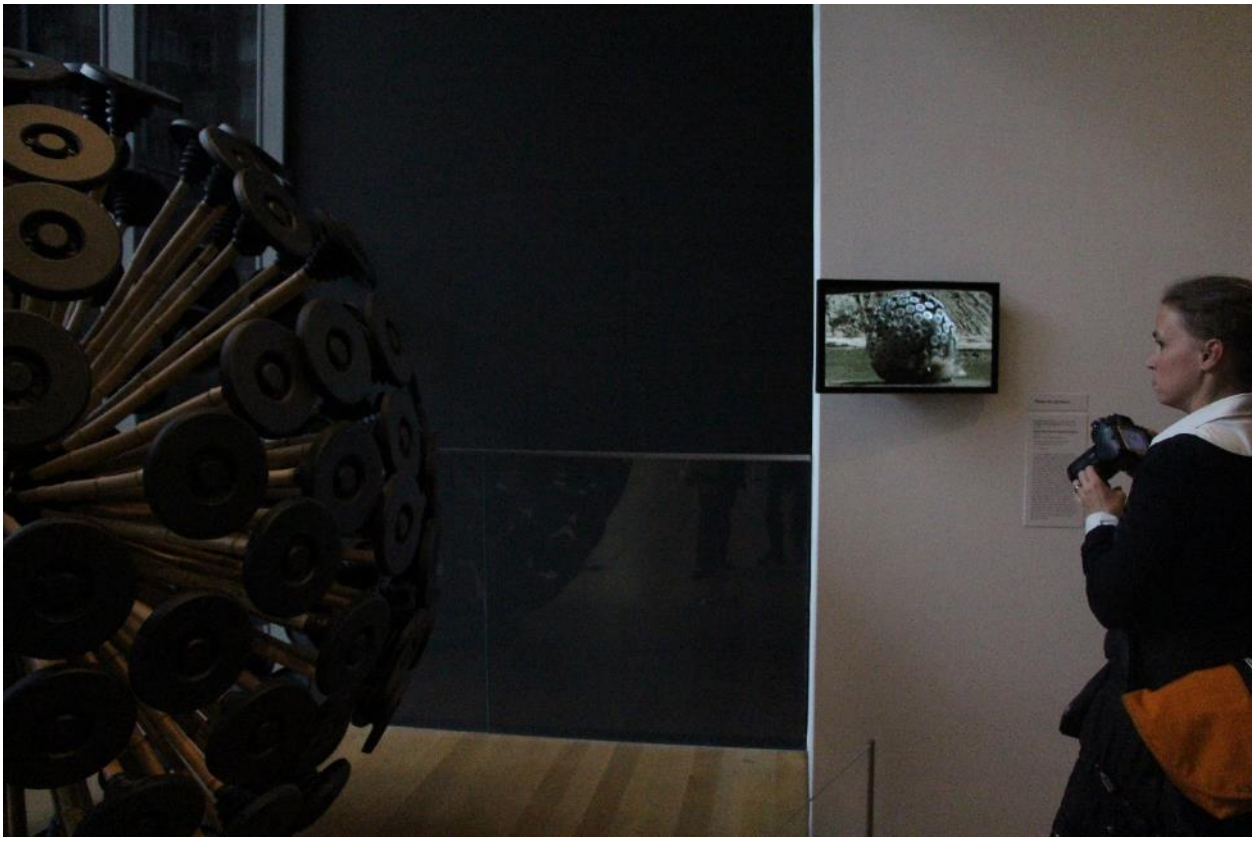

Figure 3-12. Mine Kafon in MoMA. The artwork also includes the documentary on how Mine Kafon works in a short video screening. The picture is taken by me in November 2013

the Mine Kafon as well". The short film shows the personal portrait of the designer Massoud Hassani who has created a low cost solution to landmine clearance. The art project announces that during the shooting of the film it was proven that the Hassani's prototypes works, now they hope

to find collaborative partners – technical companies, funding and governments to start to produce these lifesaving de-miners that can actually be used.

Here, the self-memory artwork is pronounced to also possess a public goodness, a humanitarian goal to achieve results that go beyond the expression of the artist's individual story. Mine Kafon is an artwork because it expresses a humanitarian cause and it affirms a moral virtue as it assists the responsibility of the artist for his homeland and the victims left behind. Hassani in this sense accomplishes an ethical mission now that he enjoys Holland's war-free zone, the opportunities of education there, and the chance of exhibiting in MOMA, the famous museum of New York City to raise awareness, and hence, funding for humanitarian causes in Afghanistan and beyond. Yet, the artwork does not concern the connection of land mines with the US's and Canada's war raging within Afghanistan. Fuyuki Kurasawa mentions the visual economy of distant suffering and argues that the sociopolitical effectiveness of a photograph lies in its ability of capturing a powerful iconographic microcosm of the North-South divide[313]. Kurasawa undertakes the visual theme of humanitarian rescue through a common three figures schema: as two black men of bare life waiting for help from the white woman:

> In both literal and metaphorical terms, the three figures embody the hierarchies that define such a divide and the relations of inequality that derive from it. The woman, as an emblem of whiteness, youthful beauty, and leisurely comfort with which most Euro-American viewers can identify, is a social agent who possesses the capacity to rescue her counterparts and transform their immediate circumstances; conversely, as figures of blackness, bare life – that is to say the reduction of human beings to their biological state of basic existence (Agamben 1998, 10) – and alterity for these same viewers, the two men cannot but be passive recipients of emergency aid whose survival is placed in the hands of others.

[313]Fuyuki Kurasawa, *Suffering, Art, and Aesthetics*, ed. Ratiba Hadj-Moussa and Michael Nijhawan (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), http://www.palgrave.com%2Fpage%2Fdetail%2F%3Fk%3D9781137426079.

Hassani from Afghanistan and now a resident of the "Western" world, undertakes the humanitarian cause through his self-memory art, but does not expose a theme of dislocation or loss of time perception in exposing his diasporic experience. Locations and time intervals are constituted in strict hierarchy in a way that it displays the North-South divide. Here, the artwork focuses on the "bare life (people)" and does not engage with the political existence (People)[314]". Here, the artist's and the institutions' responsibility for the Afghan people, people who are only able to live if they do not die under the continual state of terror, assert the value of their political existence. Thus, the people of bare life, hence a humanity of masses, can never participate in the world of thought and of culture, but the people of political existence, a humanity of individuals, do this for them.

I/ Witness' Testimony for the Remnant: Subjectification through Desubjectification in Agamben

For Agamben, testimony arises in the intimate non-coincidence of the human and inhuman, or the speaking being and the living being, the subject and non-subject[315]. Agamben, focusing on Primo Levi's memory-writing on Auschwitz, emphasizes that the survivor's vocation is to remember; he cannot but remember[316]. Levi mentions that he is at peace with himself because he has born witness[317] however he admits that, "survivors are not the true witnesses…we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom":

[314]Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 100.
[315]Catherine Mills, "B O R D E R L a N D S E-Journal," 2003, http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol2no1_2003/mills_agamben.html.
[316]Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (Zone Books, 1999), 26.
[317] Levi, Primo, Conversazioni e interviste. 1997

> Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance[318].

Here, the Muselmann (Muslim) signifies a threshold state between life and death, in the jargon of the concentration camps according to memoires: "they have no story, no face, and even less do they have thought" (Levi, 1986). Here, what is used in the jargon for the ones those who "touched bottom", Muslims, are not for sure today's Muslims although it borrows from the imagination of Muslim faith from an outsider view at that time:

> The one who submits unconditionally to the will of God. It is this meaning that lies at the origin of the legends concerning Islam's supposed fatalism, legends which are found in European culture starting with the Middle Ages…But while the Muslim's resignation consists in the conviction that the will of Allah is at work every moment…, the Muselmann of Auschwitz is instead defined by a loss of all will and consciousness. [319]

The status of the Muselmann is understood as limit-figure of the human and inhuman[320]. Agamben states that in the *Remnants of Auschwitz*:

> But not even the survivor can bear witness completely, can speak his own lacuna. This means that testimony is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means language to be witness, in order to be witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness. The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance – that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. To bear witness, it is therefore not enough to bring language to its own non-sense….It is necessary that this senseless sound be, in turn, the voice of something or someone that, for entirely other reasons, cannot bear witness.[321]

Mills explains Agamben's conceptualization of the Muselmann as where Agambenian ethics begins because the testimony of the witness for the Muselmann disrupts the distinction between humanity and non-humanity is brought into crisis and as such, calls into question the moral

[318]Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 33.
[319]Ibid., 45.
[320]Ibid., 55.
[321]Ibid., 39.

categories that attend the distinction[322] as dignity and respect[323] required to make claims of socio-political status. Thus, the dilemma is unsolvable in the realm of biopolitics where the speaking being is reduced to the living being: to remain human, the survivor has to speak and bear witness to the inhuman but the real witness, the Muselmann, cannot speak. Here, what Agamben proposes is that the value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its centre it contains something that cannot be borne witness to, and hence, it discharges the survivors of authority[324]. This is because the subjectivity in its possibility of speech bears witness to an impossibility of speech[325] in testimony; hence it means "to be subject to desubjectification[326]". This is where the distinction of zoe(living being/ bodies – bare life) and bios(speaking being–political being/ citizen – qualified life) collapses: "…the atrocious news that the survivors carry from the camp to the land of human beings is precisely that it is possible to lose dignity and decency beyond imagination, that there is still life in the most extreme degradation[327]": "That is because the human being is the inhuman, the identity between human and inhuman is never perfect and it is not truly possible to destroy the human, that something always remains. The witness is this remnant.[328]"

In the discourse of humanitarian aid, there is a clear split between what is assumed to be the humanity of masses and the humanity of individuals in Rancière's terms. The imagination of humanity of masses in the "Middle East" follows Agamben's precept of biopolitics in the sense that the non-speaking part of the world with non-qualified life are assumed to be situated in the "Middle East". Thus, such a travel between the past and the present and loss of time perception as

[322]Mills, "An Ethics of Bare Life: Agamben on Witnessing."
[323]Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 69.
[324]Ibid., 52.
[325] Ibid., 146.
[326] Ibid., 151.
[327]Ibid., 69.
[328] Ibid., 133–134.

well as dislocation connect what is assumed the humanity of individuals, in other words bios, and humanity of masses, in other words zoé. Therefore, the aesthetic experience of diasporic self-memory art from the Middle East works on the subject of distinction between human and inhuman.

II/ Bare Life in Memoirs

The experience of bare life that these diasporic artists encounter in their "Middle Eastern" homeland or in the "Western" host land because of their origins, differentiate from each other in every aspect. In first place, lots of diasporic artists whose artworks are displayed in the current art scene emigrated from the "Middle East" at an early age, or in fact their parents immigrated and they are born in the host land. Consequently, their memories of origin and painful immigration experience can be passed down to them by their family or family photos and etc. That is known as trauma inheritance. Possessing a "Western" passport indeed changes one's relation to the assumed host country and creates belonging. To be sure, what somebody with Western passport experiences when s/he is taken into interrogation at the airport because of her/his Middle Eastern name or "brownish" skin color is not equivalent of what one experiences in terms of bare life when s/he is at the mercy of bombs crashing on one's home town. The examples that I am analyzing below are different in terms of their bare life experience while all of them focus on this subject in their own way of self-memory.

Figure 3-13. Poster for Iraqi Odyssey, documentary movie by Samir

Iraqi Odyssey is a documentary by the director Samir. The documentary is, "designed to capture the vicissitudes of Iraq's troubled history via one clan's personal take on the last century[329]". *Iraqi Odyssey* has been shown in various film festivals, such as Toronto International Film Festival - TIFF (World Premiere) and the Rio de Janeiro Film Festival. Samir, the director, uses members of his own extended family as archetypes of the Iraqi diaspora. Samir's family, aunts, uncles and cousins – teachers, lawyers, doctors and even a nuclear physicist had to flee into exile to Moscow and Paris, New York and New Zealand and lead their lives far away from their families and homeland, while Samir has lived in Switzerland since he was a child. Several members of Samir's family were activists in Iraq's Communist party, which was dismantled during Saddam Hussein's rule. Now, when they visit Iraq, they find their homeland foreign to them. Samir's uncle, Sabah, interprets this through the theme of the Odyssey: "It's sad to come home and find your wife Penelope in bed with someone else." In fact, the story of Samir's family illustrates the diasporic experience of many people from the Middle East and beyond. Samir pays homage to the democratic ambition in Iraq's history and how this ambition has been successively

[329]"'Iraqi Odyssey' Review: Samir's Overlong But Engrossing Doc | Variety," accessed July 31, 2015, http://variety.com/2014/film/festivals/film-review-iraqi-odyssey-1201367364/.

plagued by dictatorship, war, and foreign occupation from the struggle against British colonialism, to the chaotic aftermath of the US invasion, through the dispersal of his own extended family. Jay Weissberg claims that *Iraqi Odyssey* shows the steps of, "revolutionary hope, coups and counter-coups, then exile" which, "is the distressingly common pattern for millions of middle-class Arabs from the mid-20th century until now"[330]. The documentary's website suggests that the visitors also upload their own diasporic stories to create a different history and consists of individual memories:

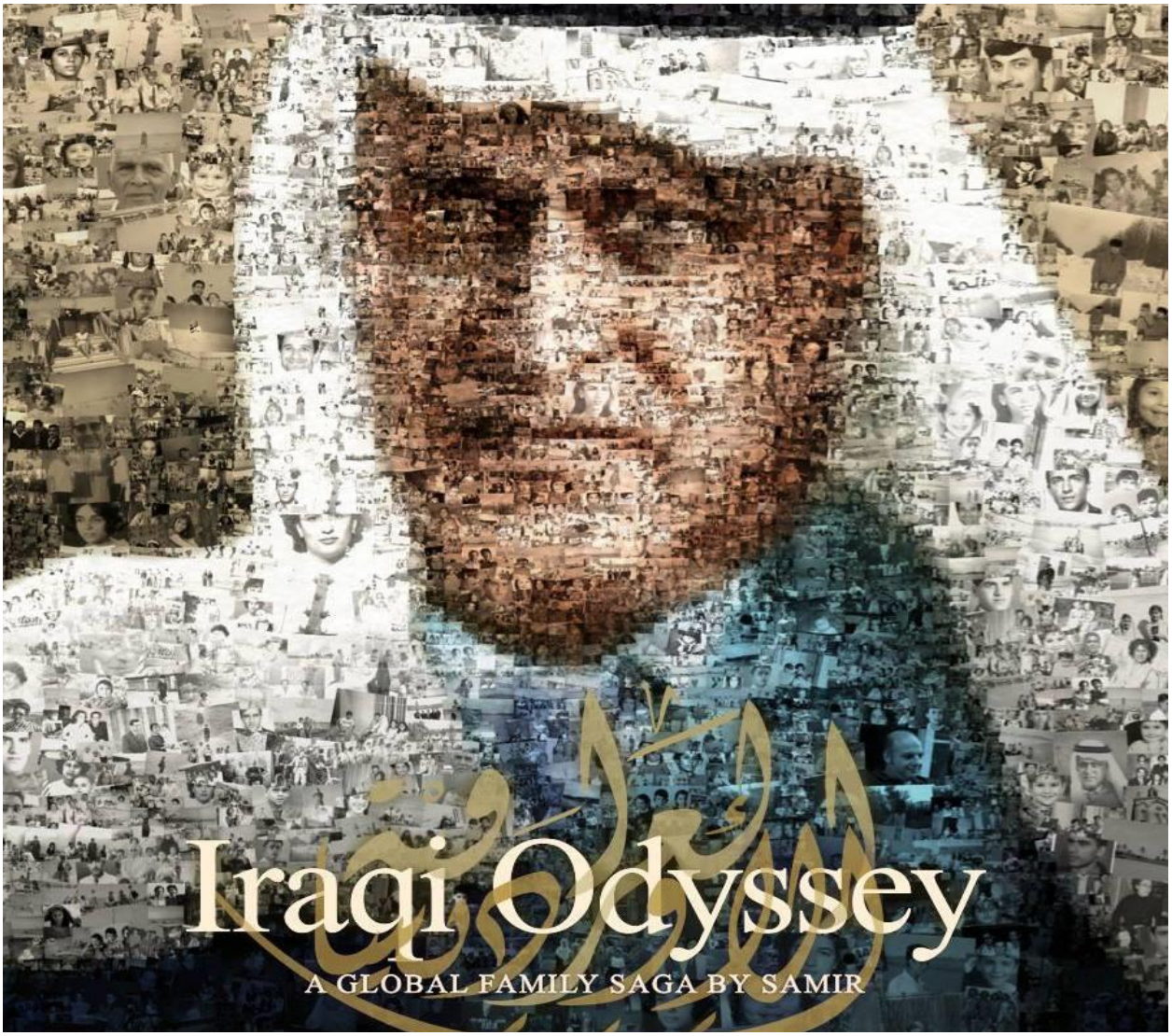

Figure 3-14. Iraqi Odyssey by Samir. Movie Poster

[330]Ibid.

> Baghdad was once a modern city, a city of awakening with red double-decker busses on its streets, light-hearted music, Egyptian comedies in the cinemas and exquisitely dressed women studying at the universities.
>
> And then along came... a forty-year dictatorship, war, oil production and civil unrest; horrific scenes, ruined buildings, bombed and burned out archives.
>
> Is Iraq in danger of becoming a country without a memory?
>
> Today over four million Iraqi's are living in the diaspora – dispersed across the globe, integrating in new environments, learning new languages. A new generation of Iraqi's is growing up, one that is learning less and less about the history of its country.
>
> Our interactive web project IRAQI ODYSSEY elaborates on something Iraqi-Swiss filmmaker Samir began by documenting the stories of his own diasporic family and thereby reassembling a piece of Iraqi history.
>
> History is a collection of many small stories. We want to provide a platform for this multitude of histories. For all your personal experiences put together create a rich history. A private, subjective history of Iraq, a multi-medial melting pot of texts, photos, music, private film and sound recordings. A collection that presents a different Iraq, an Iraq that has been lost during years of western reporting. A history of individuals rather than news-items. A history of humans for humans.[331]

Thus, Iraqi Odyssey, as an artwork of self-memory resists the mainstream understanding of Iraq and Iraqi people's history while individual memories express a different perspective. Such a practice also has a nostalgic connotation in the sense of an imaginary ideal Iraq which could have been once. That is, the Iraqi people's story is not any more a humanity of masses but a humanity of individuals who write their own history through their individual stories in this account. In that sense, such exposure of individuality resists the massification which considers the lives of Middle Eastern people as just bare life, deprived of flourishing abilities. That said, Iraqi people not only lose their lives, but also their chances for a good life during these years of struggle, while the memory of expectations testifies to the existence of valuable life beyond the need for humanitarian help to rescue bare life.

[331]"Iraqi Odyssey - Our Mission," accessed August 1, 2015, http://www.iraqiodyssey.ch/en/our-mission/.

Bangladesh born video artist Hasan Elahi works on surveillance systems with an emphasis on media technologies through his art. He is an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland,

Figure 3-16 Thousand Little Brothers of the figure below(Figure 3-16) in detail

Figure 3-15. Thousand Little Brothers. The original one pigment print on canvas, 27.5 feet x 16 feet, 838 cm x 487 cm as installed at Open Society Foundations. New York, New York. 2014

in the US. His work has been presented in numerous exhibitions at venues such as SITE Santa Fe, the Sundance Film Festival, The Hermitage, and at the Venice Biennale[332]. Elahi got his inspiration for his artwork *Thousand Little Brothers* (2014) from his FBI interrogation in 2002 at the Detroit airport because his name appeared on a terrorism watchlist[333]. For *Thousand Little Brothers*, Elahi has photographed over 70,000 mundane details from his daily life since 2002, and has sent these images to the FBI[334]. Elahi explains in the brochure of Open Society Foundations[335]' exhibition of *Moving Walls 22: Watching You, Watching Me* (New York, 4 November 2014– 11 September 2015):

> By disclosing mundane details about my daily life, I am simultaneously telling everything and nothing about my life," he writes in the exhibit brochure. "I am flooding the market with banal information, and questioning its inherent meaning and value for intelligence purposes.[336]

Here, as it is accentuated by the artist, *Thousand Little Brothers* exposes the traits of meaningful self-memory in contrast to what can be analyzed by the surveillance recording. The artwork achieves its artistic value through the artist's memory of strangerness and the danger of his inclusion in the state of exception without any legal status as a terrorist. Elahi, one-time citizen, encounters the danger of being reduced to the bare life in the Detroit airport as his name is seen on the FBI watchlist. The artwork represents the status of anonymity at the hands of the FBI, the American state's police, through artist's individual experience.

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[332]"Hasan Elahi," accessed August 20, 2015, http://elahi.umd.edu/bio.php.
[333]Peter Maass, "Art in a Time of Surveillance," *The Intercept*, November 13, 2014, http://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/11/13/art-surveillance-explored-artists/.
[334]"Moving Walls 22," *Open Society Foundations*, accessed August 20, 2015, http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/moving-walls/22.
[335]The Open Society Foundations(1979) fund a range of programs around the world, from public health to education to business development. For more information: https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/about
[336]"Moving Walls 22."

Wafaa Bilal, an Iraqi-born artist and an Associate Arts Professor at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, examines modern warfare and his own memory of a war zone through his art. Although Bilal possesses an artist's status and in addition is a professor at a well-known

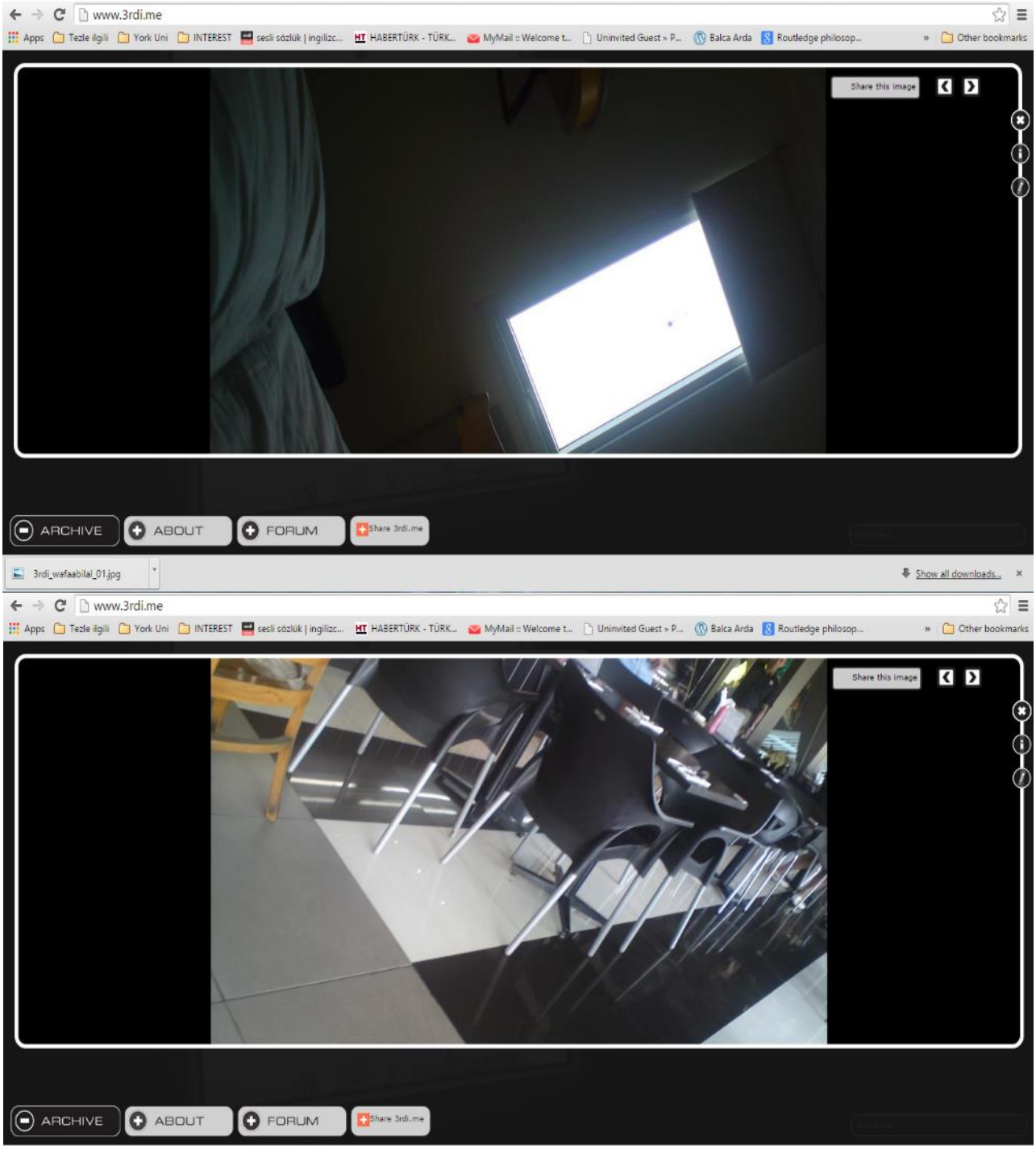

Figure 3-17 Snapshots from 3rd I project of Wafaa Bilal. These pictures are taken by me through screenshots

American university, NYU, his art processes his bare life as part of his individuality. In other words, bare life is not past or a mistaken assumption about him as it is expressed in his art. This probably derives from the fact that Bilal arrived to the US as a refugee in his adulthood. In comparison to the previous experiences articulated in artworks analyzed here, there is a concrete back and forth circular movement in the artistic expression of Bilal's bare life experience.

In one of his famous self-memory artworks, *The 3rd I*, Bilal has a digital camera surgically attached to the back of his head in order to stream live images to a global audience via a dedicated website:

> Deeply affected by the conflict in Iraq and his subsequent time spent in refugee camps, the artist goes forwards and backwards at the same time, his present stuck between the comfort zone of his current life and the conflict zones of the past. The camera attached to the back of his head records all that lies in his wake.[337]

Hence, Bilal's *The 3rd I*, questions the status of the refugee position and the working of memory in the diaspora as the experience of living multiple lives where the past becomes confused to the present. Bilal explains his inspiration for *The 3rd I*:

> During my journey from Iraq to Saudi Arabia, on to Kuwait and then the U.S., I left many people and places behind. The images I have of this journey are inevitably ephemeral, held as they are in my own memory. Many times while I was in transit and chaos the images failed to fully register, I did not have the time to absorb them. Now, in hindsight, I wish I could have recorded these images so that I could look back on them, to have them serve as a reminder and record of all the places I was forced to leave behind and may never see again.[338]

Another artwork by Bilal that is more well-known is Domestic Tension (2007) in which the artist lived in FlatFile Galleries in Chicago for 31 days in front of a live webcam recording his daily routine under the menace of web-controlled paintball machine. Domestic Tension was inspired by

[337]Downey, *Art and Politics Now*.
[338]"3rdi « Wafaa Bilal," accessed August 18, 2015, http://wafaabilal.com/thirdi/.

Figure 3-18. Image from Domestic Tension by Wafaa Bilal

a 2007 news segment on an American soldier who operated Predator drones from a command centre in Colorado[339] "Bilal had lost his younger brother just three years prior to the same type of unmanned weaponry in an aerial attack that was directed towards a location in central Iraq." In this interactive installation, the spectacle can communicate with the artist through the artwork's website and the spectacle can shoot at him with this paintball machine through online activation. Downey write that, "responses from viewers were mixed, ranging from empathetic acts of kindness to violent, racist outbursts". For *Domestic Tension:* That said, the artwork exposes the process of othering as well as empathy and remedy disconnection rising through high technological weaponry activated through new media. Bilal notes on his chat room with viewers:

> Hope….
> "I hope it hits you in the head'
> "I hope you die in the next 9/11, you deserve it"
> "I hope you never sleep again"

[339]Downey, *Art and Politics Now*, 193.

> "Hope you're recycling"
> "Wafaa, hope your dick is forever green"
> "I hope someone is there that will give you a hug!"
> "Hey, I hope I don't hurt you"
> "Please don't lose hope Wafaa. You've got a lot of supporters here :)"

That is why Bilal resumes that he aimed to "shed light on the destruction and violence of warfare in a language that I hope people who have never experienced conflict can understand and to create dialogue and build bridges, human being to human being"[340] and "to give a voice to my Iraqi brothers and sisters, all those cyber interactions- negative and positive- created bonds between me and participants across the globe[341]". In other words, *Domestic Tension* attempts to activate humanity through the exercise of the artwork, and hence, possesses a humanitarian goal while it exposes the camps of power at the same time.

More importantly, as Downey states, this installation allows the collapse of the zone of anonymity that has emerged with the high-tech military-themed media in 21st century warfare[342]. Thus, the art project also shows the experience of living with precariousness through articulating the civilian perspective of war. Bilal notes in the book *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance under the Gun* on the artwork *Domestic Tension*:

> This project has allowed me to deal with things I had avoided for a long time; the loss of my brother, my family. I miss them terribly. I miss home[343].
>
> Bang Bang Bang. I stare at the ceiling, immobilized as if in a straitjacket by the paintballs slamming into the wall above me. I close my eyes, though I know sleep won't come again, nor would I want it to, lest I end up face to face with Saddam

[340]Wafaa Bilal and Kari Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi: Art, Life and Resistance Under the Gun*, First Edition edition (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2008), 5.
[341]Ibid., 176.
[342]Downey, *Art and Politics Now*, 193.
[343]Bilal and Lydersen, *Shoot an Iraqi*, xx.

> again. Disjointed memories flit through my brain like an experimental movie: …the warmth of my grandmother's embrace, the excitement of my first solo art show at the University of Baghdad, …the feel of damp adobe between my fingers in the refugee camp in Saudi Arabia; the bustle of JFK airport as I first set foot in the United States, … the taste of a steaming Maxwell Street Polish sausage loaded with onions on a snowy Chicago Sunday, …the numb train ride to my brother Alaa's house in Detroit after I learned of our brother Haji's death. All the moments that brought me here to this stifling one-room Hell.[344]

In fact, anonymity collapses also through the expression of individuality in the self-memory art making in the sense that the artwork not only expresses Iraqi civilian's perspective but also Bilal's life experience and how he engages with his self-memory in this art project.

III/ Diasporic Logos

Instead of bare life experience, the theme of dislocation and loss of time perception in the diaspora can become the focus point of diasporic artists in their self-memory art to accentuate their distinguishing experience of self-consciousness that they share in the "host" country's art scene. Most of them, or their parents, have had to leave the homeland because they wanted to benefit from the higher standards of living conditions and socio-political rights that the host country was believed to offer to them. It is probable that they do not have the opportunity of displaying the same artworks in their origin country due to the continual state of exception in the origin war-torn country. Some of my interviewees also stated that their art cannot be displayed in their origin country because of totalitarian regulations of the art sphere if they are critical of the regime. Yet, what they specifically take as subject in their art is that double perspective that I call diasporic logos that they possess while such knowledge is also accessible by the art spectacle.

[344]Ibid., 5.

One of my interviewees from Toronto, Taimaz Moslemian, originally from Iran, explains that cropping and isolating sections out of personal archives is a means to retell history. I met with Taimaz, recent graduate of OCAD University, in July 2014 for an interview. In answering my question, Taimaz states:

Figure 3-19. Picture of Men by Taimaz Moslemian

> It is a good question, 'Who are you?' I am Iranian. And I do work on religion. I think there is a background, because I have Muslim origin. I was born as a Muslim, you don't have a choice for some of the things. I don't know. Because Islam is just one part, I have a Muslim origin but I also speak about Christianity. I have references to Judaism. I feel disconnected to religion. That's my concern with religion.

Taimaz explains the artwork series titled *Picture of Men* (2009) to me:

> I think there was a time that I wore this mullah dressing, I was sarcastic. I was expecting something with this outfit and I looked to myself as how this figure in my culture became such an important shape. Reduced to a shape. Few pieces of big things on the murals of Tehran. I felt the power. I thought I can see myself, the other me who is the mullah. It was very tough moment. If there is an issue of men and masculinity coming with religion, it is.

Taimaz says he does not reflect Iran from here and that the subjects that he chose to reflect on in his artworks can reflect anybody. This is how religion took him. That is his experience that can speak to anybody. Consequently, his artwork *Picture of Men* does not necessarily deal with the male position in Islam or in Iran, but his own experience of religion and understanding of masculinity exposes a common trait which does not need translation in the diaspora. Secondly, the

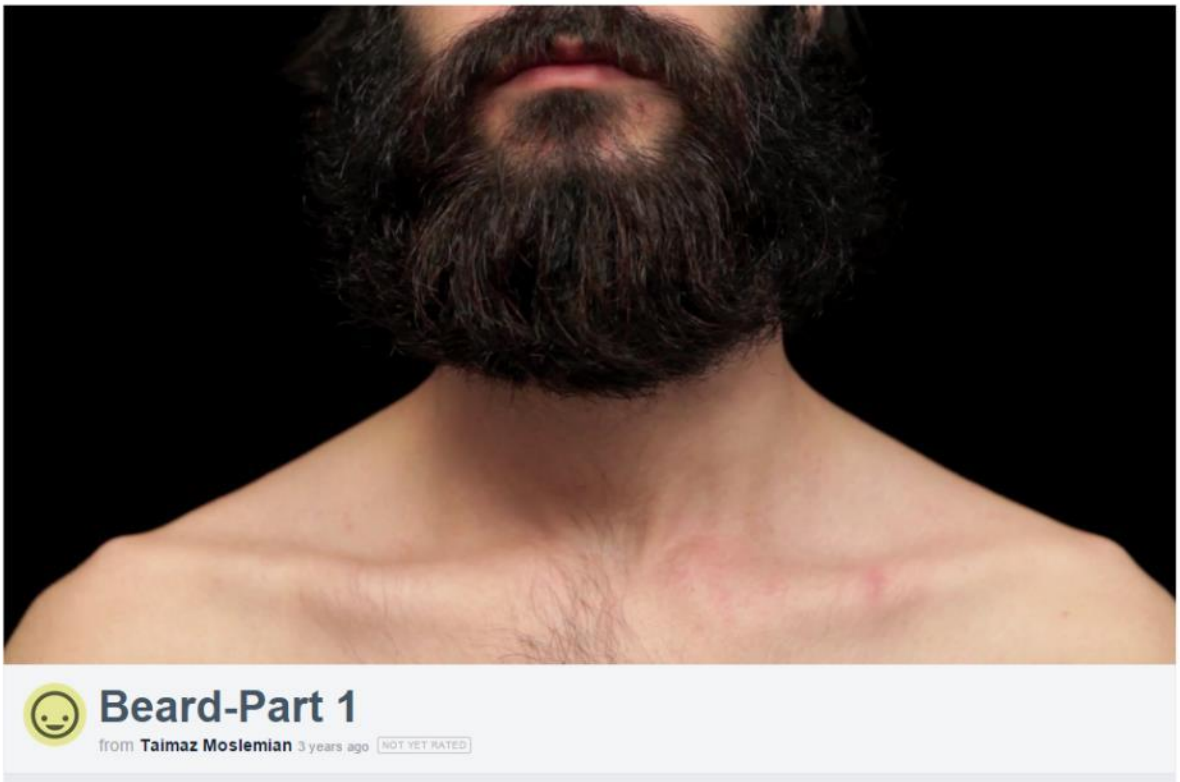

Figure 3-20. Beard – Part I by Taimaz Moslemian. 2012

“Mullah” icon is viewed through the self-memory of Taimaz caught up in it. What is concealed in the Mullah is Taimaz when the icon is stripped of its shape. Here, the use of individualized and personal narrative resists mainstream historical documentation and it connects to the larger interest beyond particular subject matter of cultural trait.

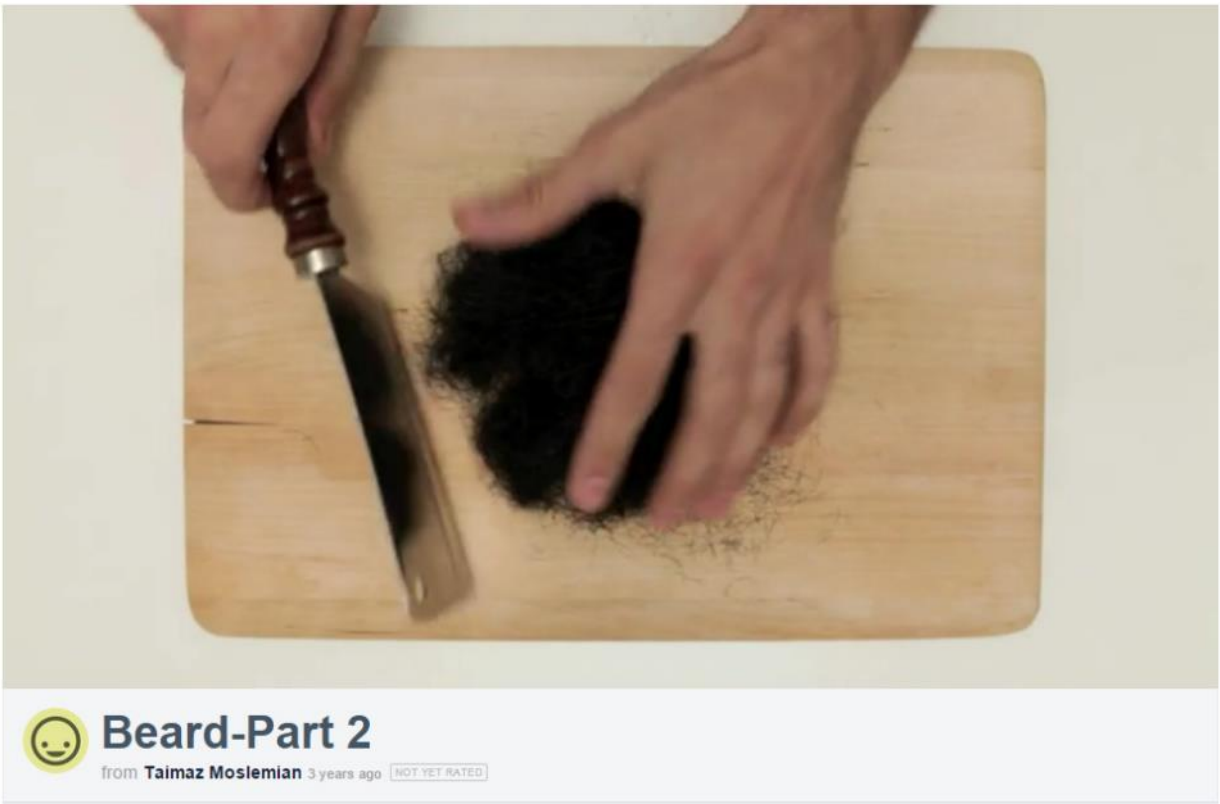

Figure 3-21. Beard – Part II by Taimaz Moslemian. 2012

Another of Taimaz’s artworks is *Beard* which is composed of two short videos. In *Beard Part 1*, Taimaz’s beard starts to be regularly attacked by regular razor blades which fall down from the top of the screen. In the second part, Taimaz’s beard is already cut off but this time the beard is butchered as it is a piece of meat until it is nonsense to chop it. As such, the discourse on the beard and its signification in the dominant discourses are told through Taimaz’s personal imagery of what he experiences of masculinity.

Another example, Alia Toor, is mixed-media artist and art educator in Toronto. Her work includes installation, photography and textiles. Having grown up in Canada, Toor stated that she does not consider herself Pakistani in our interview. Her artwork titled "99 Names of Aman", a textile based installation was shown at the exhibition *Magic Squares: The Patterned Imagination of Muslim Africa in the Contemporary Culture* at the Textile Museum[345] of Canada in Toronto between the dates of May 18 – November 20 of 2011. The museum blurb on "99 Names of Aman" states that:

Figure 3-22. 99 Names of Aman, artwork by Alia Toor. 2011

> Alia Toor integrates social understandings of beauty, language, and faith practices as they inform a sense of belonging and safety. 99 Names of Aman was created in the wake of the security panics that followed 9/11 in New York City and also as a response to the 2008 SARS epidemic in Toronto. Toor complicates the meaning of the 99 names/attributes of God by embroidering each one on a dust mask, layering traditional and contemporary strategies for, and attitudes to, ensuring protection from danger. The soft coloration and quiet but insistent repetition of the work produce a sense of

[345]"TMC Past Exhibitions," *Textile Museum of Canada*, accessed July 31, 2015, http://www.textilemuseum.ca/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/magic-squares-the-patterned-imagination-of-muslim.

> meditative calm which belies the prevailing atmosphere of fear and panic in 21st-century security threats[346].

I asked Toor if she had the intention to resist the dominant discourse of the War on Terror through this work. She replied that she did not have such an intention:

> I really want to think of religion as bringing false security... I remember my grandmother saying this …Naming their children according to these 99 names ...so I said why not doing something like that …for me it's more about language, and religion to be sense of false security…

Thus, what Toor reflects on this artwork both a story, a memory of her childhood and the mainstream culture of insecurity that people become affected by on a daily basis in the public sphere. By doing this, Toor does not take a side as a cultural spokesman but works through her own individuality and memory building. Consequently, her distinguishing historical culture as

Figure 3-23. Art project titled "Migration" in Gallery Propellar, Toronto. 2014

[346]"99 Names of Aman," *Ipernity*, accessed July 31, 2015, http://www.ipernity.com/doc/phyl/36541638?lg=en.

Pakistani origin vis others in Canada does not prevent her from creating something in common as the dominant feeling of insecurity in today's mainstream way of life.

Farnaz Mazidi was one of the artists who participated in the art project titled "Migration" of Gallery Propeller. Mazidi, graduated from OCAD University and is originally from Iran. Migration as subject was the Official Nuit Blanche[347] Project of Propeller Gallery in Queen West

Figure 3-24. In Search of Home by Farnaz Mazidi. 2013. Picture taken by me in the exhibition of Immigration in Gallery Propeller

Street of Toronto, starting from the 24th September to 5th October of 2014. Propeller Gallery states in its website that the art project is:

[347] La Nuit Blanche is Toronto's free, city-wide sunset-to-sunrise celebration of contemporary art. It takes place in the streets and the art galleries. La Nuit Blanche is celebrated in Montreal Canada as well.

> Celebrating Artists' stunningly varied experience and interpretations of migration: as family, as Torontonians, as lovers of birds, whales, caribou, butterflies, all NOW, in October, migrating. As we speak! On view Sept 25 - Oct 5, the exhibition will include an interactive Migration Mapping, installed in time for the opening but highlighted on the night of Nuit Blanche (Saturday Oct 4). Visitors will be invited to plot their journeys, and/or those of their families, to Toronto. An exciting mutual discovery of our origins. Great for family and friends. MIGRATION, reflecting our reality - through ART! - helps us find solidarity with the immigration experience of others.

Mazidi states in the gallery blurb attached to her *In Search of Home Series* of 2013:

> As an immigrant, these series of photographs are my attempts to rediscover the city as well as re-explore my feelings for the past few months. I am in search of home; looking for similarities, connections, patterns, forms, shapes or anything that could be a resemblance of my homeland here in Toronto.

Figure 3-25. In Search of Home by Farnaz Mazidi. The picture on the left in the image. Gallery Propeller. Oct 4, 2014 – La Nuit Blanche.

In this artwork, a series of several photographs taken at diverse points of Toronto, are compared to the aura-similar places in the homeland. The photographs shows a pink nailed hand holding the photo taken in the homeland, as such the viewer sees both the homeland and Toronto locations and the sense of their similarity.

Hence, memorial process becomes activated through the present daily life in the diaspora while the immigrated location has acquired different meanings and familiarity through memory working. Lloyd states "Of necessity, these memories will be partial, multi-sited and intricately linked to forgetting but what is important is what is retold or remembered at a given time and in specific context.[348]" That is because memories are not static things located in the past, but things that we discover and reproduce in current time. In other words, memory does not work through the antagonistic classification of the homeland and host country although there are borders to pass and passports with visa needed to be shown in the actual world for traveling from one country to the other. Such an experience does not end up in self-closure or complete strangerness that is why there is this connection between Toronto and her homeland in the artwork.

Figure 3-26. You Are Still Here by Mona Hatoum

Another parallel artwork, *You Are Still Here* by "Mona Hatoum who investigates home and displacement, closeness and distance, loss and separation, surveillance and regimentation…"[349].

[348]Lloyd and Rizvi, *Displacement and Difference*, 140.
[349]"Mona Hatoum: You Are Still Here. Nafas Art Magazine," accessed August 18, 2015, http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2012/mona_hatoum.

Mona Hatoum was born into a Palestinian family in Beirut, Lebanon in 1952 and now lives and works in London and Berlin[350]. The artwork was shown at the Home Ground exhibition (2015) of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, as well as in Istanbul at the Arter Gallery (2012)[351]. *You Are Still Here* dates back to 1994 and was translated in a second version into Arabic in 2006[352]. The work consists of a portrait wall mirror upon which "You Are Still Here" is written. As such, the viewer can see her/his reflection on it. The artist states that the artwork manages the conversation of the self with the self as a confirmation of existence and survival. The artwork's essential quality here is its focus on individuality in the sense that every viewer constructs another artwork through her/his own reflection. This also testifies to the existence of a common ground for individual self-research. Consequently, *You Are Still Here* does not primarily express a distinguishing diasporic or immigrant experience, but the theme of the human quest while it exposes individual trait.

Figure 3-27. Image from You Never Left (2010) by Youssef Nabil

In another case, Youssef Nabil is an Egyptian artist settling in New York. Nabil's work has been presented at numerous solo and group exhibitions at venues including the British Museum, London; Centro de la Imagen, Mexico City; North Carolina Museum of Art, North Carolina;

[350]"Artist | White Cube," accessed August 20, 2015, http://whitecube.com/artists/mona_hatoum/.
[351]"Mona Hatoum: You Are Still Here. Nafas Art Magazine."
[352]Ibid.

BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Newcastle. His short video *You Never Left* (2010) with Fanny Ardant and Tahar Rahim was shown at the Home Ground exhibition (2015) of the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto. His website states that Nabil's artistically old-styled photographs, photo-series and videos evoke a sense of longing and nostalgia: "His artworks are self-portraits that reflect his dislocated life away from Egypt"[353]. *You Never Left*, his short movie of 8 minutes, represents a parallelism between exile and death, while it creates the artist's self-portrait in the meantime. The coloring of the movie illustrates the old photographic aesthetic that the artist also uses for his series of photographs. Here, the artwork testifies again to the immigrant's experience

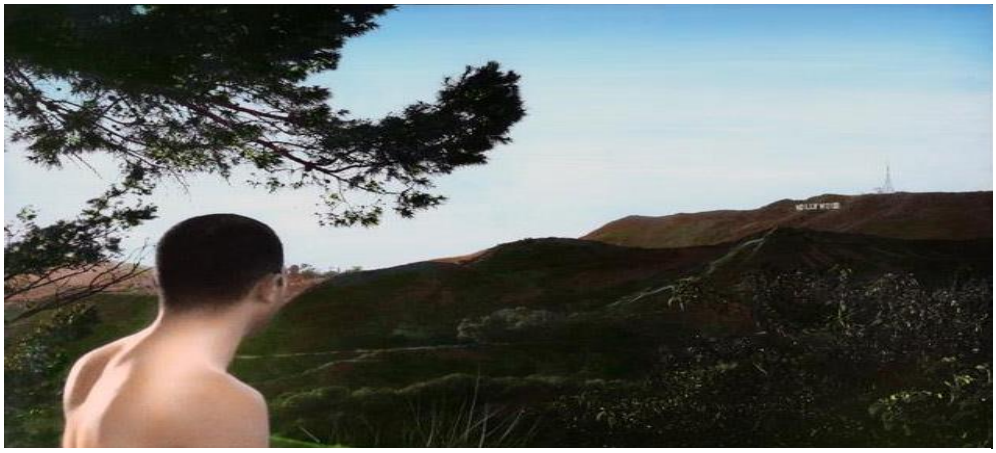

Figure 3-29. Self-portrait, Hollywood by Youssef Nabil - 2008

Figure 3-28. Self-portrait at night, Paris by Youssef Nabil- 2010

[353]"Youssef Nabil," accessed August 11, 2015, http://www.youssefnabil.com/info/biography.

of being in multiple places in one setting and describes how such an experience can affect the individuality of the artist protagonist. Such a depiction of diasporic life through self-experience distinguishes the mainstream conceptualization of being immigrant from what is assumed to be the story of the masses but not individuals. Hence, the experience of immigration in Nabil's art becomes a means for self-discovery not a memory of total destruction, although death and exile are connected in the movie. That is because exile allows the necessary loneliness and contemplative power for Nabil, the immigrant, to explore his subjectivity through the experience of dislocation. Following the same precept, in his artistically old-styled photo-series taken since 2003, Nabil is seen from behind or in profile, and either naked or in a djellaba, always alone in front of a scene of city or neighborhood he visited during his exile from Egypt: "these scenes portray a combination of worldly realities and serene dreams, loneliness, and fame, eroticism, and death[354].

The above-mentioned artworks of self-memory art manifest the experience of the immigrant-self allows the artist to discover her own individuality through the excessive comtemplative ability charged in diaspora. But such discovery of self through diasporic memory does not reflect an specific ethnic-cultural particularity but universally-sharable experience with the viewers in art scene.

[354]"Photography Book Review: Youssef Nabil, with Text by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Marina Abramovic," *The Independent*, September 22, 2013, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/photography-book-review-youssef-nabil-with-text-by-hans-ulrich-obrist-and-marina-abramovic-8829944.html.

<u>Individuality in Self-Memory Art:</u> The Artist Philosopher from Middle Eastern Diaspora

Memory is always imagination as well as a patchwork as a dream-like production, hence, the memory work allows an alternative setting to the artist and to the art spectacle through the artist's artwork. Such an exposure of memory work can provoke a self-discovery for the artist as a way of the flourishing of the artist's individuality while this discovery also informs an alternative registry of history to be shared with the spectacle in the art scene. Alternatively, this self-memory artwork can aim to proceed a humanitarian mission through enlightening and acknowledging the spectacle about the socio-political situation of the theme and exposing the potential relationship of all subjects to modern forms of power. Here, both artistic stances derive from the artist's diasporic consciousness of double perspectives which allows a higher understanding or better sharing capacities among members of the human community.

If we return to our primary question whether the self-memory art of the Middle Eastern diaspora, as the testimony of the survivor about his/her own memory, really cancels such geographic borders of the West and the Middle East, assumed bios and zoe realms, one should also consider Agamben's critical gaze on the notion of conscience in Western metaphysics in *Language and Death* (1982) by the mythologeme of the silent Voice. Mika Ojakangas rephrases this mythologeme as the point of articulation for the distinction of nature and culture, between animal voice (phoné) and human speech (logos)[355]: the silent "Voice stands simultaneously for the gesture of negation and for the possibility of affirmation, removing the animal voice (phoné) so that human speech (logos) and meaning can emerge". However testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation, in the non-place of the Voice[356].

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[355]M. Ojakangas, "Conscience, the Remnant and the Witness: Genealogical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben's Ethics," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 6 (July 1, 2010): 700, doi:10.1177/0191453710366217.
[356] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 130.

Agamben states that "the human experience of language – that is the experience of human as both living and speaking, a natural being and logical being- has appeared in the tragic spectacle divided by the unresolvable conflict[357]. According to Agamben, the tragic wisdom is always this separation (the Voice) which can only take place in death[358]. However, testimony takes place, where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak, and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech in which it is impossible to establish the position of subject and to identify the imagined substance of the "I": the true witness situates in the zone of indistinction between the silent and the speaking[359]. Rather than positive reconciliation as it is in testimony, the reconciliation between the voice of man and his language only consists in silence in the tragic wisdom in Agamben's account[360]: "As a living being who has language, man is subjected to double destiny. He cannot know all that he says and if he will to know, he is subjected to the possibility of error and hubris.[361]" That said, only not being born, not having nature, can overcome language and permit man to free himself. Agamben connects this desire of freedom in the tradition of Western metaphysics to searching for another death through philosophy. Here, "philosophy is this voyage, the human word's return from itself to itself[362]:

> … (philosophy) abandoning its own habitual dwelling place in the voice, opens itself to the terror of nothingness and at the same time, to the marvel of being; and after becoming meaningful discourse, it returns in the end, as absolute wisdom, to the Voice Only in this way can thought finally be at home and absolved of the scission that threatened it from there where it always already was. Only in the Absolute can the word, which experienced "homesickness" (heimweh) and 'pain of return" (nost-algia), which experienced the negative always already in its habitual dwelling place, now truly reach its own beginning in the Voice

[357]Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2006), 88.
[358]Ibid., 96.
[359] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 120.
[360]Agamben, *Language and Death*, 89.
[361]Ibid.
[362]Ibid., 93.

That is why consciousness (knowing-with-oneself) necessarily appears mute as terrible silence and only the Voice with its marvelous muteness shows its inaccessible place through philosophy with which we think the Absolute. Agamben resumes that if the Absolute is the supreme idea of philosophy, then this philosophy is truly nostalgia, which is the desire to be at home everywhere and to recognize oneself in being-other.

The self-memory art practices of the Middle Eastern diaspora examined in this chapter, can re-frame this philosophical voyage from the past to the present. The individuality that they accentuate in their self-consciousness, especially the examples stated in the second category titled "Diasporic Logos" in this section, is nostalgic while they search for the self in the middle of dislocation and time loss. In this sense, the artist from the Middle Eastern diaspora is supposed to possess an extra ability for this philosophic inquiry because the artist witnessed self-loss in diasporic life through dislocation and traumatic experience of immigration. They express this experience of "de-subjectification", while at the same time, this experience in fact testifies to their "individuality" through their art, expressing self-consciousness and ending up in "logos". Following this approach, Alia Toor's work and Taimaz Moslemian's artworks of diasporic logos bear witness to the Other in their own diasporic memory through dislocation and loss of time perception: Diaspora is an opportunity of consciousness for the self through losing the self to the Other in travel. Here, the Other left phoné that the artist revisits is a part of memory which cannot connect with the artist-self unless diasporic experience intervenes. As Andreea Deciu Ritivoi explains the positive connotation of nostalgia emerged in romanticism:

> Released from the negative connotations of irrevocable loss or separation, nostalgia can be defined as an effort to discover meaning in one's life, to understand oneself better by making comparisons between the past and the present, and thus integrating experiences into a larger schema of meaning. We are so engrossed in the present experience that it is difficult to have the detachment

> necessary for a valid appraisal of it. The past, however, is a reified object of analysis and interpretation. Nostalgia, therefore, can be a reflexive stance, a vantage point from which we make sense of our experience and identity.[363]

The pain of homesickness results in recognizing the self in the other through the artistic opening to the spectacle who can also join to this philosophic inquiry. In other words, here, in the experience of bare life / the voice becomes dignified as an intellectual potentiality. In that sense, the self-loss quits the profane realm and enters in the cultural level through self-memory art practices. It ends up in being the philosopher, not anymore phoné through reaching the consciousness of "I".

But such kind of philosophic inquiry and term of metaphysics does not lift the distinction between phoné and logos in Agamben's mind: the reconciliation is negative always already in its habitual dwelling place, now truly reach its own beginning in the Voice, in the distinction. They are nostalgic. According to Agamben, the tragic wisdom is always this separation (the Voice) which can only take place in death[364]. That is because their art emerges at the survival of logos at the expense of bare life in their diasporic memory. In that sense, diasporic logos of the artist displayed in the self-memory art does not overthrow the normal regime of the sensible, the role distribution in the consensual system in Rancière's understanding, because the artist is the intellectual fully capable of self-consciousness, the voice does not take part in "I". Furthermore, if we undertake the aesthetic experience of such diasporic logos in art display in "Western" countries, the self-memory art can itself be considered Orientalist. That is because the individuality is gained at the end of diasporic travel for the artist from Middle East.

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[363] Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Yesterday's Self: Nostalgia and the Immigrant Identity* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 29.
[364]Agamben, *Language and Death*, 96.

In Nabil's *You Never Left*, the artist's self-discovery derives from his exile that allows him the contemplative ability of philosopher. Exile is the death in this artwork and the artist finds himself alone in front of many cities standing as a silhouette just like he is beyond and above time, and hence, separated from his living body now in the diaspora. Hatoum's *You Are Still Here* testifies to this discovered logos in the still recognizable yet blurry reflection on a mirror, yet separated now of its zoé being crashed of dislocation. Thus in fact, what allows Mazidi in *Search of Home* to share her images of a homeland with similar locations in Toronto is the freedom from location and body capacities: This coincides with "this ability of "removing the voice and the appearance, in its place, of another Voice (presented in grammatical thought as gramma, in Hegel as the Voice of death, in Heidegger as the Voice of conscience and the Voice of conscience and the Voice of being, and in linguistics as a phomene), which constitutes the originary negative foundation of the human word[365]" as in the case of Socrates' *daimonion*. Socrates revealed that in all previous times his daimonion, a warning voice, opposed him whenever he was about to do something wrong: "However, the daimonion did not stop him from leaving home that morning, coming to the court, or speaking to the jurors[366]". He asks:

> What do I think is the reason for this? I will tell you. What has happened to me may well be a good thing, and those of us who believe death to be an evil are certainly mistaken. I have convincing proof of this, for it is impossible that my familiar sign did not oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.[367]

Socrates' wisdom comes from his being a tragic hero as such language and death are interdependent. Socrates has to die so that he can be the philosopher. His daimonion left him

[365]Ibid., 86.
[366]D. Philip Kenny, "Socratic Knowledge and the Daimonion," *Aporia* 13, no. 1–2003 (2003), http://aporia.byu.edu/pdfs/kenny-socratic_knowledge_and_the_daimonion.pdf.
[367]Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, 3rd edition (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2000), para. 40 b–c.

to speak at the Athenian court. Following the same fashion, *In Search of Home*, Mazidi finds herself in the middle of dislocation and in Hatoum's *You Are Still Here*, you can realize yourself there in the blurred reflection unrestricted of bodily contours. In other words, logos emerges at the expense of organic life.

If we focus on our first category "Bare Life in Memoires" in this section of Self-Memory Art, the example of *Iraqi Odyssey*, memories become art when logos is testified through the individual histories of progressive democratizing efforts. Therefore, the resistance against the distinction between the humanity of individuals and the humanity of masses proceeds through the testimony of logos' presence in what is assumed as bare life but not in the disruption of the distinction between logos and zoé. In Elahi's *Thousand Little Brothers*, the pictures expose the non-parallelism of Elahi's real life with bare life. It was the FBI which reduces Elahi to bare existence in the airport. However, the FBI, American state's police force, can only acknowledge the details of his organic life through security systems. Elahi's art witness the presence of logos in Elahi's real life, which involves more than the requirements of his survival as organic life. In that sense, Elahi the artist bears witness to the bare life, the impossibility of speaking. Elahi the artist is the witness and remnant of this experience following the same fashion that Levi's paradox: "I, who speak, was a Muselmann, that is, the one who cannot in any sense speak". Thus, Elahi's testimony refutes precisely the isolation of survival from life.

Still, in Wafaa Bilal's self-memory art, the memory proceeds in circular motion, interrupts and collects without asking being closed at the meaningful opening of logos in the artistic gesture. For instance, the idea of situating a camera through surgical procedure in his artwork *3rd I* was a

source of fun in the YouTube website[368] because one can still take shots from back with just putting a camera on his hat/headband without the necessity of such a dangerous operation. His artwork representing bare life under the attacks of the paintball gun in the example of *Domestic Tension* is itself artwork without aiming at the absolute separation of voice and logos. Thus, Bilal's daimonion seems never leave him in his art: Bilal is both the remnant and the witness of Iraq's state of exception. In this context, Bilal's self-memory art stands out from the biopower separating the political being and the bare life in the human body in Agamben's definition[369].

However, Bilal the artist as well as commenters on his art firstly focus on the would-be sociopolitical effects such as the ability of construction of human ties through his self-memory work. In that sense, the representation of bare life is artistic because it can develop an intellectual capacity in the spectacle. Such kind of political aim and educational purpose does not exist in diasporic logos art practices of self-memory that are stated in previous part such as Moslemian's *Pictures of Men*, Nabil's *You Never Left* or Mazidi's *In Search of Home*, because they are reflections of self-discovery and they aim individual sharing instead of communal goodness with the spectacle. In this context, Bilal's art is not aesthetic in Rancière's terms but ethical because it promises a political accomplishment that it can satisfy in its statement while aesthetic regime thrives on ambiguity. Here, Rancière borrows from Friedrich Von Schiller (Letters upon the Aesthetic Education of Man, 1794) to resume that "the autonomy is the autonomy of the experience, not of the work of art[370]" in aesthetic regime of art. Consequently, "the object of that experience is aesthetic as so far as it is not or at least not only art"[371]. However, most of Bilal's

[368]DailySourceX, *Nut With Bolts Man,Wafaa Bilal Has Camera Surgically Implanted Into The Back Of His Head*, accessed September 11, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsVc5xrRVOE.
[369] Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*, 156.
[370] Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy," 136.
[371] Ibid., 135.

artworks are interactive, hence they tend to contribute to the enjoyment of a place of sociability that Kant defines for aesthetic apprehension and Rancière emphasizes on as the theme of aesthetic experience. Groys touches upon the ethical responsibility of the artist after the secularization of art: "… modern artists have tried to regain common ground with their audiences by enticing viewers out of their passive roles, by bridging the comfortable aesthetic distance that allows uninvolved viewers to judge an artwork impartially from a secure, external perspective.[372]" Groys states that the majority of these attempts have involved political or ideological engagement of one sort or another: Consequently, "shared political convictions thus render aesthetical judgement partially or completely irrelevant, as was the case with sacral art in the past"[373]. Thus, although Bilal includes the reactions of antagonistic viewers of his art in his own artwork as in the case of *Domestic Tension*, art critics evaluate his art through his socio-political intention of bringing together these opposing views for better shared capacity in public sphere. For Rancière, such an artistic appreciation of the artwork is a substitutive political action hence it can be content with parodying political spaces[374]: contemporary political art firstly works like a mini-demonstration of testimony for democracy or co-presence to repair the lost social bonds of the consensus but does not form a dissensus necessitating the reconfiguration of social roles namely partition of sensible and settled relations of subject and action.

As such, what is expected from a refugee artist just like Bilal is to express in his artworks the Inhuman under the skin of traumatic experience and activate democracy through staging the invisible and the phoné. Although Rancière defines dissensus in art as the disruption to engage with what is un-sayable, un-doable, un-seen; in the case of the art appreciation on Bilal's self-

[372] Groys, *Going Public*, 49.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Jacques Ranciere, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Polity, 2009), 60.

memory artwork, the partition of sensible does not dissolve. Firstly, that is because of the role of the identity politics in artistic appreciation regarding the expression of Inhuman in Bilal's artworks. Rancière resumes that identity politics stabilizes social roles and subjects to play these roles namely the end of politics:

> What makes me shy away from notions of identity and culture is that people are only allowed to speak in the name of an identity they must act out. But acting as a citizen is not about defending one's culture or one's group. In fact, culture is always a form of dis-identification, the possibility of speaking a language other than the language of one's ancestors, one's social group, or one's interest group. A public space is precisely one capable of freeing us from these attachments. The political begins when one is no longer the representative of a particular local, religious, or social community. The political begins when one finally achieves an identification with anonymity.[375]

Although Bilal identifies with this universal traumatic experience of Inhuman and bear witness to the Other in his self-memory artworks, his art still ethnically and culturally marked as "Middle Eastern". That is because the refugee experience of traumatic past and self-loss are considered to be part of Middle Eastern identity and Bilal too expresses that his own memory has inspired his art drive. In this sense, the political engagement of his self-memory artwork as selfie creation follows what is assumed to be the artistic act of Middle Eastern subjectivity.

More importantly, Rancière defines Agamben's analysis itself as the ethical turn defining "what ought to be" which "is not a simple appeasement of the various types of dissensus between politics and art in a consensual order but it appears rather to be the ultimate form of the will to absolutize this dissensus. As Hal Foster notes on the aesthetics of the after specially on avant-garde

[375] Rancière, *Moments Politiques*, 73.

movement, "trauma was treated as an event that guarantees the subject and in this register the subject, however disturbed, rushed back as survivor, witness, testifier"[376]:

> …the imperative of deconstructive analyses on the one hand, and the imperative of multicultural histories on the other; the imperative to acknowledge the distrupted subjectivity that comes of a broken society on the one hand, and the imperative to affirm identity at all costs on the other…[377]

That is why Bilal's self-memory art is not only ethical for its political intention but also because in its embodiment of Agamben's ideal of testimony. Art as the reflection of this thought becomes radicalized as the endless work of mourning. That is because ethics leaves no alternative and equates to the simple constraint of an order of things[378]. Here, in such an endeavour for testimony, art is reduced to the ethical witnessing of unrepresentable catastrophe in Rancière's understanding. The ambition of sublime in the aesthetics of after through mourning for the other affirms art in the highest terms and implies its disappearance because art and politics vanish through their union in ethics[379]: what results from this is not liberation, but "a humanity referred to the vanity of any fraternal dream[380]".

[376] Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (London ; New York: Verso, 2015), 28.
[377] Ibid.
[378] Ranciere, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 110.
[379] Zepke, "Contemporary Art - Beautiful or Sublime?"
[380] Rancière, *Dissensus*, 183.

The Self-Identified Muslim Art

This section will trace the manifestation of "Muslimhood" in the performing arts through the identification of the artist with his/her artwork. These artworks do not precisely manifest Islam and hence these artworks are not Islamic, but self-identified Muslim art displays "ways-of-being-Muslim" in its various forms through the artist's self-involvement in his/her artwork.

While there are many diasporic artists from the "Middle East" dealing with issues of Islamic art using religious concepts and signs, or focusing on/drawing inspiration from the social, political and religious background of the world, these particular artists are not doing "Islamic art". Islamic art is created especially for the service of the Muslim faith or Islamic rule. Thus, every artwork produced by Muslim artists are not part of Islamic art or every artwork including Islamic concepts and terms are not Islamic. While such a distinction is already well-defined for artists of non-Islamic religions, Muslim artist is popularly considered as practitioner of Islamic art which owns strict religious guidelines and hence not autonomous. Metropolitan Museum website defines Islamic art:

> The term Islamic art not only describes the art created specifically in the service of the Muslim faith (for example, a mosque and its furnishings) but also characterizes the art and architecture historically produced in the lands ruled by Muslims, produced for Muslim patrons, or created by Muslim artists. As it is not only a religion but a way of life, Islam fostered the development of a distinctive culture with its own unique artistic language that is reflected in art and architecture throughout the Muslim world.[381]

Here, in this definition, there can be no split for a Muslim between the religious sphere and the non-religious sphere if the Muslim is truly the Muslim.

[381] "The Nature of Islamic Art | Thematic Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," Text, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed November 22, 2015, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/orna/hd_orna.htm.

Diasporic artists from countries that are predominantly Muslim can draw upon the syntax of contemporary art to create very different kinds of meaning for what are assumed to be signifiers of Islamic culture, Islam and Muslimhood, however their artworks are largely not considered as pious art practices following the guide of Qur'an according to Muslims scholars, Muslim communities and other self-identified Muslim artists and audiences. The artists that I focus on in this section define or present themselves as Muslim, but they can often be defined and presented as non- Muslim in the local or mainstream media, by Muslim scholars, or Muslim community members, or according to mainstream popular discourse. My approach here as a researcher is to work with the individual artist's affirmation and expression of his/her identity and belief. What I am analyzing in this section are diasporic Muslim-identified artists who engage in Muslim pious or non-pious art for or through Muslim diasporic communities and then the larger North American society. Thus, this section will foreground different sects, movements, ideas from amongst the Muslim diaspora in Canada and US and the ways that Muslim artists engage with art and popular culture as potential sites to manifest their self through their religio-ethical normative ideas and projects reflected on their own self- design as Muslim identified artists.

a) On the relationship of Muslims with Art

The relationship between Islam and the performing arts has become an arena of contest of great relevance to many actors. As Van Nieuwkerk states, "in Muslim-minority countries, any manifestation of Islamism, especially in regard to art and expressive freedom, is carefully watched and interpreted as a sign of (lack of) integration and citizenship and hence 'a discourse on the incompatibility of values between 'us' and 'them' has gained strong ground in many European countries'". In Muslim- majority countries as well as in the diaspora and beyond, the cultural field

is assumed to be one of the last bastions of secularized elites. The artist and the terrorist hold completely contrasting meanings within the dominant language while the former creates (gives life) and the latter destroys (kills).

Accordingly, the general discourse with regard to freedom of speech and expression, or artistic creativity, is that these freedoms are incompatible with Islam and that, "the lack of creative freedom marks the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims[382]". Recent years have witnessed many infamous incidences that are claimed to support this mainstream idea: for example, the murdering of Theo Van Gogh, a Dutch film director, by an Islamist because of his short film "Submission" (2004) which is promoted as criticizing Islam's oppressive treatment of Muslim women. Similarly, the Danish cartoon affair in 2006 which escalated after the publishing of 12 editorial cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Jyllands-Posten newspaper which resulted in international demonstrations and sometimes violent riots in several Muslim majority countries. In another case, an Anti-Islamic and exceptionally amateurish movie, Innocence of Muslims (2012) with disjointed dialogue and editing also caused international anti-US demonstrations in several Muslim majority countries and Muslim minority countries such as the UK and France. US embassies are attacked in Tunisia, Sudan, and four Americans including a US ambassador were killed in Sudan. Most recently the event of the Charlie Hebdo Massacre (7 January 2015) at Charlie Hebdo, a weekly satirical French newspaper, offices in Paris. Here, twelve people including caricaturists, editors and policemen were killed by the members of the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda. While Charlie Hebdo regularly focused on political or religious figures including Islamist, Islamic and Muslim figures and subjects, the most recent tweet of a Charlie Hebdo official

[382]Karin van Nieuwkerk, ed., *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World* (University of Texas Press, 2011), pt. Introduction.

account with a caricature picturing ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, preaching by saying his new years' wishes for everyone's best health is said to have triggered the massacre[383]. More importantly, Charlie Hebdo provoked a counter movement "Je Suis Charlie (I am Charlie)" which started on Twitter with the hashtag #jesuischarlie (tweeted more than 162,000 times, according to analytics website Topsy[384]). While the reasons why people joined the "Je suis Charlie" movement can differ, it is most commonly understood as a way of expressing solidarity against the attacks or to the ideal of "freedom of expression". In the offline sphere, "from Brussels to Montreal and from London to Washington people have turned out in their thousands to join solidarity rallies to honour the victims of the Paris attacks[385]". Furthermore, "in Istanbul, some demonstrators marched holding tribute issues of the Leman newspaper, the country's own satirical weekly[386]" because Leman caricaturists had also received threats from Muslim radicals and the AKP government's supporters in Turkey for their solidarity against Charlie Hebdo massacre. In addition to these Islamist attacks against artistic creations, the news on the destruction of many art pieces in museums and archeological sites in Iraq and in Syria by ISIS has become heard around the globe. As a result, the repeated Islamist attacks against both western or non-western critical artistic practices, with the pretext of responding to the offense against Muslim religious rules/sensibilities has been put Islam and Muslims in a negative light in regard to artistic expression and creative abilities.

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[383]Vinograd et al., "Charlie Hebdo Shooting."
[384]Ibid.
[385]"'Je Suis Charlie' Resonates around the Globe in Demonstrations of Solidarity," *Euronews*, accessed September 29, 2015, http://www.euronews.com/2015/01/12/je-suis-charlie-resonates-around-the-globe-in-demonstrations-of-solidarity/.
[386]Ibid.

While the aesthetic value of the artworks can be criticized here and the question whether or not they constitute hate-speech or a genuine critique can also be discussed, the fact that the dominant Muslim reaction seen in the mainstream media against these representations is not critical creative works but sheer destructive violence has fortified the dominant idea that Islam does not favour art and that Muslims cannot express their critiques through other expressive means equivalent to what they criticize. US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton described the anti-Islam film "Innocence of Muslims"(2012) as, "disgusting and reprehensible" but she continued that this cannot alleviate the crimes of violent protests against US embassies in several Muslim majority countries:

> 'It appears to have a deeply cynical purpose, to denigrate a great religion and to provoke rage,' she said. But there was 'no justification, none at all' for responding to the video with violence. 'We condemn the violence that has resulted in the strongest terms and we greatly appreciate that many Muslims in the United States and around the world have spoken out on this issue'.[387]

Thus, not only Islam or Islamists but Muslims who easily follow the destructive ways of reaction do not poses the abilities to engage in genuine discussion and creation. Muslims are seen as a homogenous community and diasporic Muslims or assumed members of the Muslim diaspora are always expected to declare their disapproval of the atrocities on the other side of the world in their assumed countries of origin. In this sense, diasporic Muslims are not considered to be individuals but instead as masses not capable of individualized thinking and acting. Therefore, the split between Islamists and Muslims is mostly superfluous in the mainstream discourse.

Among politics and in the politically correct sphere of academic jargon, there is the dominant use of the term "Islamism" that monopolizes the debate on the Islamic movement through framing

[387]"Hillary Clinton: Anti-Islam Film 'Disgusting and Reprehensible,'" September 13, 2012, sec. World, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/9541823/Hillary-Clinton-anti-Islam-film-disgusting-and-reprehensible.html.

it outside of the context of Islam after the consideration of the term "fundamentalism" to be ethnocentric. Here, the politically correct discourse supported is that Muslims and Islamists are different signifiers although Islamophobia derives from the blurred line in the popular culture and mainstream discourse between these categories. But as Fadwa El Guindi states, "the revival movements in the Islamic world do not constitute a phenomenon external to Islam – they are legitimately Islamic[388]". What is essential here is to acknowledge that Islam is not a unified religion as it is imagined to be in the West and as it is claimed to be in the political Islamist movements searching for a unified ummah[389]. As Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema and Mark Goodman put forward, "Islam contrary to simplistic views in the West – views shared, ironically, by the Muslim orthodoxy – is not a monolithic religion" and that heresiographers have identified over seventy-two sects within the religion, each considering itself the 'saved sect' and the others as misguided[390]:

> The inhabitants of Muslim majority countries and diasporic populations originating from them, like other populations, include orthodox believers, practicing individuals, non-practicing sceptics, secular and laic members, and atheists. Among practicing Muslims there are radical Islamists (who constitute a very small minority) and a vast majority of peaceful and moderate adherents. This diversity is usually ignored, and in particular, the existence of a large number of secular and laic persons of Muslim cultural background is completely overlooked. These secular Muslims, identified on the basis of cultural origin, are recognized neither by devout Muslims nor by average citizens or mainstream media in the West…Diversity within communities of Muslim origin is not limited to differing religious interpretations. They are also differentiated internally by diverse ethnicities and cultures of origin as well as by class differences. In a sense, Muslims in diaspora have at least triple identities (Rahnema, 2006:32-3). Apart from the religious and sectarian identities mentioned above, they are distinct in terms of ethnic and national groupings and many of them identify themselves first as Iranians, Arabs, Pakistanis for example then as Muslims. In fact, the national and ethnic divisions are often so strong that, other than occasional individual friendships or business dealings, there are no regular social

[388]Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance (Dress, Body, Culture) by El Guindi, Fadwa (2003) Paperback* (Berg 3PL, 2003), XIX.
[389] 'Ummah" means the supposed supranational community based on the belief in Islam
[390]W. Montgomery (William Montgomery) Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1998), 3.

> relations and interactions among the various Muslim groups. They speak different languages, dance to different tunes, and have distinctively different cultures and tastes…[391]

When it comes to the diaspora from Muslim majority countries in North America, the same diversity exists. Based on data from the Pew Research survey[392], in combination with U.S. Census data, Pew Research Center demographers, foreign-born Muslim Americans are very diverse in their origins: "They have come from at least 77 different countries, with no single country accounting for more than one-in-six Muslim immigrants. Pakistan is the largest country of origin, accounting for 14% of first-generation immigrants, or 9% of all U.S. Muslims. In terms of regional origins, however, the largest group is from Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa, representing 41% of foreign-born U.S. Muslims, or 26% of all Muslim Americans.[393]" In Canada, South Asians are, the largest single group, accounting for more than a third (36%) of all Muslims[394]. Here, Pakistanis and Indians dominate this group while only a quarter of Canadian Muslims have an Arab ethnicity and West Asians, including Iranians, Afghans and the people from states of the former Soviet Union (13%)[395].

According to Salima Bhimani, such ignorance about the various interpretations of Islam is also a problem within the ummah[396]: Thus, Sunni as the dominant group in Islam both in number and representation becomes the group that is most often heard while smaller groups such as

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[391]Haideh Moghissi, Saeed Rahnema, and Mark Goodman, *Diaspora by Design: Muslim Immigrants in Canada and Beyond*, 1st edition (Toronto ; Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, Scholarly Publishing Division, 2009), 8–9.
[392] "Section 1: A Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans," *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press*, 2011, http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-1-a-demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/.
[393]Ibid.
[394]Daood Hamdani, "Canadian Muslims: A Statistical Review" (The Canadian Dawn Foundation, 2015), http://youthblast.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Canadian-Muslims-A-Statistical-Review-Final.pdf.
[395]Ibid.
[396]Salima Bhimani, *Majalis Al-Ilm: Reclaiming and Representing the Lives of Muslim Women* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2003), 14.

Ismailis, Ithnasharis and Ahmadis have been marginalized, their histories obscured or destroyed. As Moghissi, Rahnema and Goodman presume, the persistence of dominant stereotypes about Muslims imagined as an essentially different, unified, and devout religious group has turned an imagined attribute into a social reality after the tragedy of 11 September 2001, the subsequent U.S-led invasion of Afghanistan, and the total devastation of Iraq after a similar U.S-led invasion of that country. In this sense, if there is an existence of a unified Islam despite of the marked national and ethnic diversity of these groups along with their distinct political histories, cultures, and languages, this derives from a commonality in the sense of being deported to the culture of non-belonging, of becoming a permanent target for stereotyping and bigotry and not because of nostalgia for a homeland, real or imaginary, nor the sudden discovery of Islam's moral and ethical values that supposedly motivates these populations to join together. Michael Frishkopt emphasizes this fact through the example of the Canadian Muslim community, that there is a trend of homogenization via an appeal to originary models as a means of unifying the Umma in practice through compatible strategies of the Muslim reformers of past centuries. Here the differentiation of the Islamic religion from Muslim cultures becomes one of the primary emphasis of homogenization trend. For instance, Frishkopf argues that the ban on art, such as the ban on music in Canadian Muslim communities, aims to state a distinct difference in the larger society of the host country. "Proclaiming 'music is forbidden' becomes a means of expressing Muslim identity within Canadian society and a force for unification by denying intrareligious cultural difference through multiculturalist mechanism of Canada:

> Canada boasts an open immigrant society, multicultural, pluralistic, and theoretically tolerant. Ironically, however, the cultural politics of Canadian multiculturalism pushes minority groups toward closure, stifling internal diversity as a means of translating "minority capital" into political capital. Subgroups strive

> for internal unity in order to empower themselves within the broader multicultural social environment. [397]

Various types of artistic practices are said to be banned in Islam due to the horror of idolatry and many Muslim authorities and communities in Muslim majority countries and in the diaspora support this ban on types of art even though they can condemn these above- mentioned radical Islamist attacks against artistic representations of Islam and Muslims. Asef Bayat[398] explains and conceptualizes this censorship in relation to fun, amusement and entertainment and how this ban is associated with artistic practices and audience:

> Fun disturbs exclusivist doctrinal authority because, as a source of instantaneous fulfillment, it represents a powerful rival archetype, one that stands against discipline, rigid structures, single discourse, and monopoly of truth. It subsists on spontaneity and breathes in the air of flexibility, openness and critique – the very ethics that clash with the rigid one-dimensional discourse of doctrinal authority.[399]

Hence, following the argument mentioned-above, there is the idea that art becomes "haram" because it can influence your emotional state of mind and consequently can affect your behavior and could make you lose your inhibitions. Miriam Gazzah states that devout believers have always been looking for ethically legitimate forms of leisure[400] and that most of these rulings as limitation to enjoyment and indirectly to art are based on verses in the Qur'an or in the Hadith or Sunna. For example, in discussing the case of ban on music, Gazzah postulates that music's ambiguous position is mainly caused by a strong emphasis on Islamic values and norms regarding gender-mixing – especially in public spaces – the prevention of illicit sexual relationships between men

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[397] Michael Frishkopf, in *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World*, ed. Karin Nieuwkerk (University of Texas Press, 2011), 134.
[398]A. Bayat, "Islamism and the Politics of Fun," *Public Culture* 19, no. 3 (October 1, 2007): 433–59, doi:10.1215/08992363-2007-004.
[399]Ibid., 457.
[400]Miriam Gazzah, "Fun and Faith, Music and Muslimness: Dynamics of Identity of Duthch-Moroccan Youth," in *Muslim Rap, Halal Soaps, and Revolutionary Theater: Artistic Developments in the Muslim World* (University of Texas Press, 2011), 187.

and women, and the taboo on alcohol use[401]. One of my interviewees, Talha from York University's Muslim Student Association (MSA) explained to me why he quit being a graffiti artist after joining the York MSA:

> Talha:
>
> -My family prays … But they do not know how to do it. They don't wear hijab…But after learning it, they decided to put on. If a rap singer is not drinking alcohol, could you enjoy it? Nobody is perfect. We are humans… I am stricter when it comes to the Islamic concept of music. I don't mind poetry and spoken word, but not rap… It is not permissible…heavy metal. That's because it is violent. No I don't agree with the usage of certain instruments…I follow the Islamic position. There are other ways. Hamza Yusuf[402] has a good message I know. He is good but I don't invite him to York to give a lecture. I am not comfortable with his promotion of some things… I cannot sacrifice my beliefs for the greater good... I am not Machiavellian… I think that means and goals must be compatible
>
> Balca: -But you were a graffiti artist….
>
> Talha: -I used to do Graffiti…but not anymore…because I don't know whether or not it is permissible…In high school, it was a way of expressing my dissatisfaction with the status quo… I was painting politically on subway walls…I love Islam more than my own desires. I saw a graffiti on the Israeli wall…I can show you, it is on my phone. It shows blood covering the Israeli flag…It is so interesting.

Talha is from the York University Muslim Student Association, which represents 'Sunni mainstream' Islam in his definition, and he does not practice graffiti anymore because he thinks that Islam does not permit such art practice. Furthermore, he claimed that the second reason of quitting graffiti it that graffiti without permission is also banned in Canadian law and he wanted to be a good Canadian citizen. However, he approves the use of graffiti for giving a voice to the oppressed peoples and in the fight against injustice, as in the case of the graffiti that he showed me on his phone against the Israeli state.

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[401]Ibid., 189.

[402]Hamza Yusuf is a contemporary famous Muslim scholar. He says some of the musical instruments can be "halal" outside string instruments which have strong influential affective power. For more info: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruxatH5tBgs

b) Art as a Tool of both Differentiation and Standardization for Diasporic Muslimhood

To emphasize one's identity, specifically a Muslim identity, Muslimhood must be performed to generate a productive marker of difference. Frishkopf claims that Canadian Muslims have marked themselves off from the broader society as those who fast in Ramadan, eat no pork, drink no alcohol, pray, and perhaps especially for women, those who dress in a particular way. This said, veiling in the Diaspora is not a phenomenon isolated from economic and cultural developments in the Muslim world, extending from Morocco to the Bay of Bengal, from Algeria to the Somalia[403]:

> While Saudi Arabia, the only 'fundamentalist' Muslim state, had long ago taken it upon itself to enforce the veiling and segregation of women through its 'morality police', it was not until shortly after 1973 that the modern veiling movement, as a political statement among the urban middle classes in Egypt, first caught the attention of social scientists (El-Guindi 1981; Hoodfar 1991; Zuhur 1992)… However, it was not until the success of Iranian revolution in 1979 and the imposition of dress codes for women (and men) that veiling emerged as a preoccupation of Muslim as well as Western societies. Added to this complex backdrop was the American humiliation by the hostage-taking in Iran and the end of the Cold War. The tendency of Western media and political leaders to reduce legitimate grievances in Muslim nations to religious fervour and to associate Islam with terrorism (Said 2001) aggravated the situation… When a community or a society feels under threat, any dissent is viewed as betrayal… All of this discouraged a quest for more open discussion of Islam and modernity, particularly the question of veiling (Halliday 1999; Said 1997)

There is a tendency of the Muslim mosaic to become a Muslim melting pot in the diaspora and beyond. Thus, "women of vastly different cultural and ethnic backgrounds are opting for a standardized 'Islamic' mode of dress as opposed to traditional costumes, which are often just as modes[404]". Correspondingly, specific bans on art or alternative art performances become strategies

[403]Sultana Alvi, Sajida, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough, eds., *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates* (Women's Press, 2003), xiv.
[404]Reem Meshal, "Banners of Faith and Identities in Construct: The Hijab in Canada," in *The Muslim Veil in North America* (Women's Press, 2003), 76.

for defining difference as a means of identity maintenance while it remains difficult for anyone to claim to be an authentic Muslim without 'performing differences' in public.

Yet, there are many self-identified Muslim artists as well as Sunni claimed art performers who have gradually practiced more contemporary art techniques and practices rather than art forms that are known as traditional dominant Islamic art such as poetry, calligraphy or marbling (ebru) or alternatively they reform these traditional Islamic art forms. Referring to Amel Boubekeur, Van Nieuwkerk emphasized that how to develop pleasant forms of pious arts that combine morals, messages, and merriment has become a major challenge for political Islam:

> Instead of leaving art to the secular cultural field and closing their eyes to "immoral" or "lowbrow" productions, Islamists feel the need to produce alternatives. These alternatives have to be in accordance with the religious sensibilities of pious audiences and spectators and be religiously "correct" … Islamists have started to use art as a source for mobilization of youth (Boubekeur 2007)

Not only Islamists but Muslims too engage in art to display self-reflection and to accommodate the Muslim ascendant youth of the diaspora for engaging in a unified Islam. These artworks are mostly promoted online or are only screened in gatherings of Muslim communities. Here, the aim is using/creating a selfie projection in order to declare visibility rather than self-critique in the diaspora. Young supporters of this unified Islam in the diaspora manifest their solutions to problems faced by different Muslims of various backgrounds in their documentary works and panels following screenings mostly in Muslim Student Associations or other community centers. Rather than the display self-reflection, these works also aim to project a self-critique in the ways of regulating, recruiting members and accommodating all Muslims of diverse backgrounds and hence focus on the hardship of dealing with varied needs and aspirations. In their documentaries, they display problems, suggest solutions and share it with other young Muslims at colleges. The reforms that they demand are for the maintenance of their identities as Muslim in the diaspora in

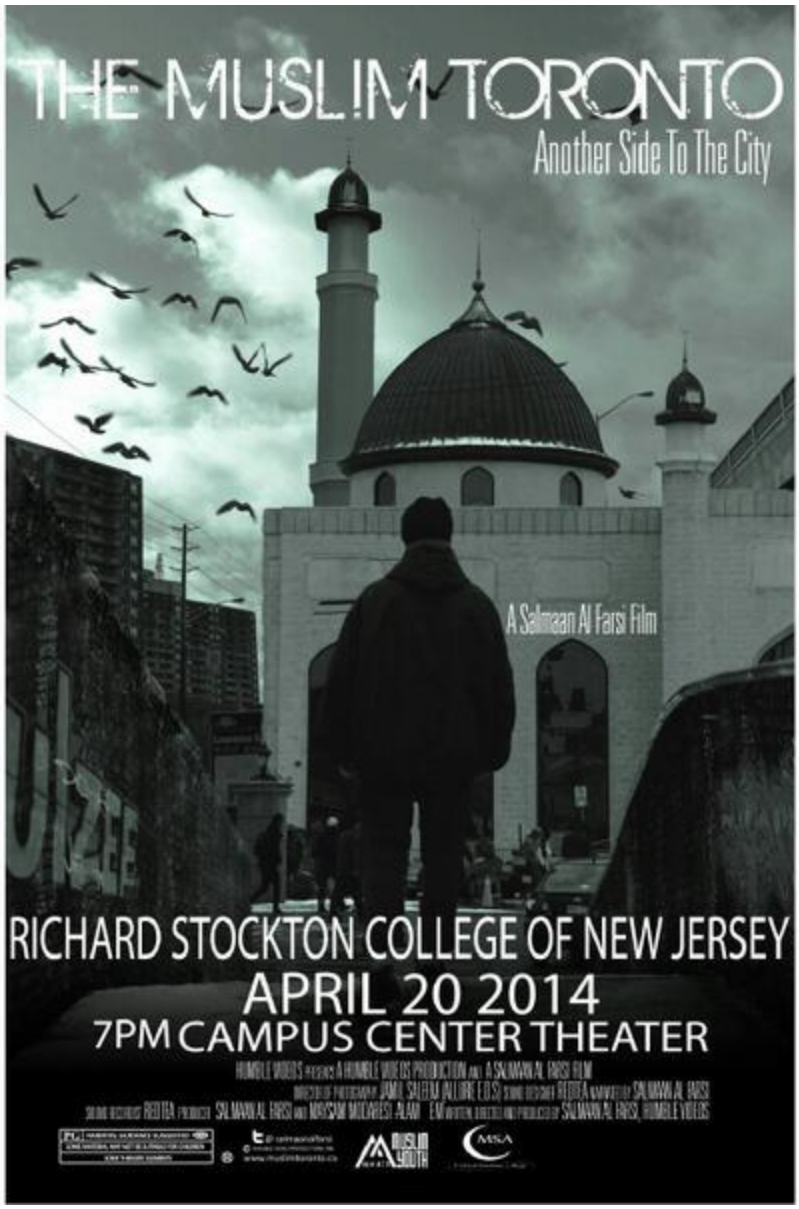

Figure 3-30. "Muslim Toronto" poster for one of the screenings

order to prevent the alienation of youth from Islam, Muslim communities and unions. For instance, "Muslim Toronto" (2012) by Salmaan Al Farsi gives voice to several views of Muslim scholars and young Muslims of different cultures living in Toronto. Although the director accepted my meeting request with him via email, he changed his mind later when he did not believe my claim that I do not represent any Muslim group or organization. Thus, there is a strong sense of insecurity

among some Muslim artists. On this issue, I spoke with Talha, my interviewee from the York University MSA, on "Muslim Toronto":

> I saw it at Ryerson University. The documentary mentions issue of Muslim youth dealing with drugs, games, un-Islamic life styles…not only poor Muslims, rich too. We don't have a community center that the Muslim community needs- We have mosques but racism works. Turkish, Bosnian, and Somali mosques. You can understand the reason. Trying to preserve your culture is understandable but with nostalgia we are bound – and when it becomes a dividing line between us, it is an issue.
>
> Islam does not allow pre-marital sex – it makes life easier – it's better if it is forbidden and there is goodness behind it if marriage is good in Islam. But it is not easy to become married right now, it was easier in Mohammed's time. Committing adultery was more difficult than being married. Here it is easy for me to engage in pre-marital sex but…What you need for marriage is high. You need to have a degree, money…You make something good so difficult for the youth, high school or university students, we don't talk about it…Our system is wrong and the movie is talking about it. At Ryerson, people speaking on issues the movie brought about problems with the institution of marriage. It is easier to talk about it when there is TV show you have this commonality. It creates an opening. Muslim Toronto is good – ok but I am critical about the movie. It did not bring female perspective

As Talha mentions, the documentary brings forward the problem of cultural differences among Muslim communities and it advocates that, "*Islam can delete barriers between ethnicities but culture speaks more than Islam in the diaspora*". One of the speakers states in the documentary that, "*certain mosques are full of specific groups and it is not good for Islam*": "*We are born and raised here. Some people can only speak English*". Another scholar given voice in the documentary mentions that parents must support marriage among different cultures and ethnicities and also permit marriage before educational and financial requirements to prevent their children from engaging in pre-marrital sex. Thus Muslim youth, as Islam is affirmed in the documentary as a specific 'natural belonging' and not as a belief acquired, become alienated from religious identity because they do not know who they are: "*They are born in Muslim families and go to societies then they take out their kufi and hijab to blend with the society. We have our own specific society*!"

Hence, the documentary works as a call for unified Islam for Muslim communities. It propagates for the abolishing of cultural differences amongst Muslim communities to achieve a unified Muslim diaspora with clear set of identity manifestations.

Another example is Mooz-lum(2010) a film by the director Qasim Basir. It was one of the movies shown at Muslim Fest 2013 in Canada. The marketing of the movie was conducted through

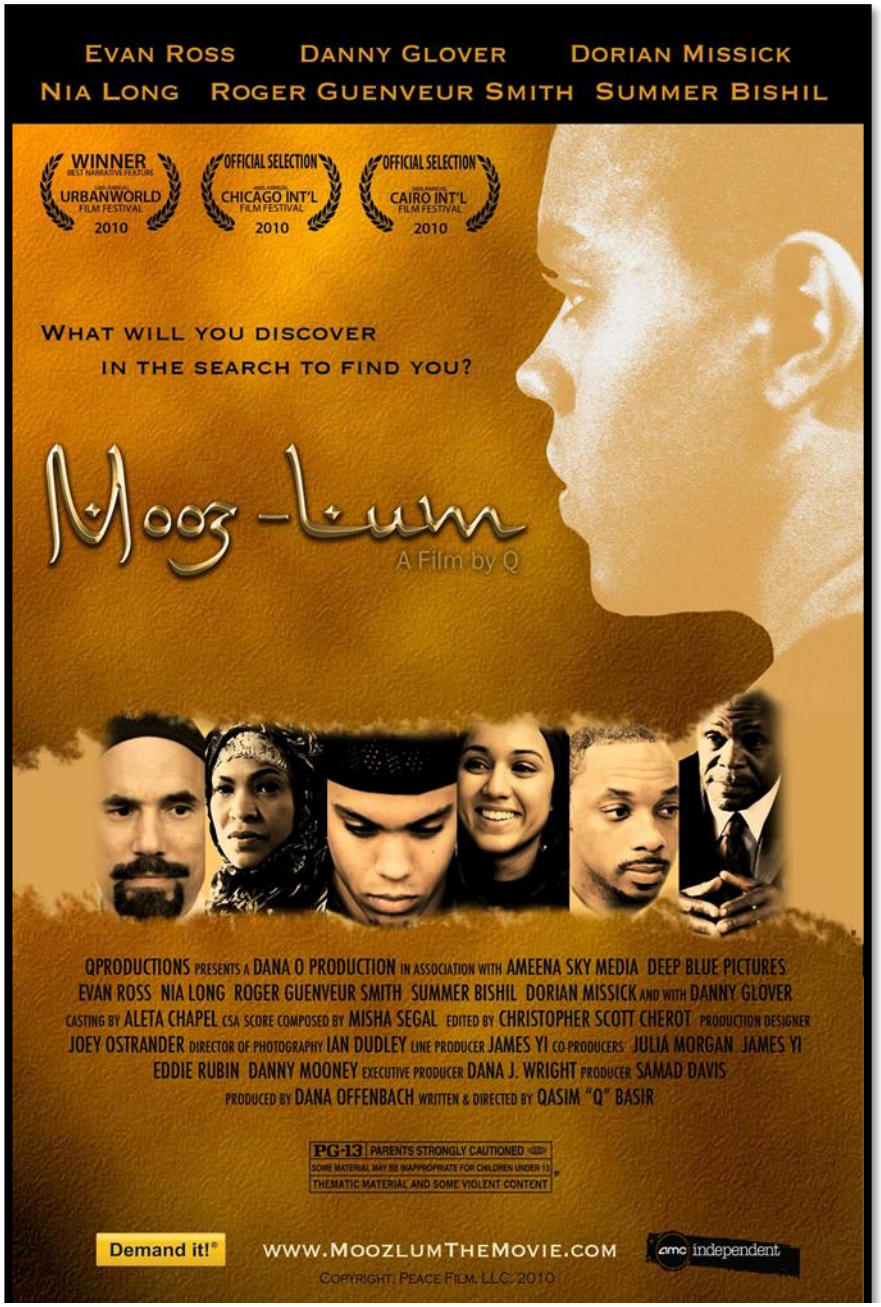

Figure 3-31. Movie poster of "Moozlum"

social media: “People went on Facebook and were told if they want to see the movie in their city, they had to click in and demand it. The cities with the most ‘demands’ are hosting the film's opening nights this weekend. As of Wednesday, there were more than 55,000 requests on Facebook to have the movie shown in various cities[405]”. Mooz-lum follows the story of Tareq, a youth alienated from his Muslim family because of the bad treatment he received when he was a child in a Muslim education school that his father sent him to. Tareq’s mother chose to be separated from his father at that time because Tareq’s father wanted their children embrace their Muslim identity in the diaspora with several strict regulations such as wearing the kufi and hijab to school. Tareq’s mother did not agree with this as she thought that this made her children easily stigmatized at school. These challenges intensify further when Tareq and his family have to deal with the hostility related to the 9/11 at college. At one point, Tareq’s sister and her friend in the hijab are attacked by an angry group. At the end, Tareq embraces his religion and his family while he starts following his college’s Muslim Student Association (MSA). Thus, the idea behind the film is that Tareq finds his ultimate Muslim identity that he already inherited through his family. While the movie criticizes Islamophobia and discrimination against Muslims in the USA, the authoritarian understanding of Islam is not shown as a structural problem of Muslim communities. Hence, Tareq does not confront his father’s authoritarian understanding of Islam. The problem with Muslim communal regulations are considered to be rare individual incidences throughout the movie while the familial rule of order and roles suppressing individual autonomy are not questioned. The director Qasim Basir stated that for this movie, he wanted to remedy the lack of cinematic depictions of Muslim Americans: “I’m hoping to give Muslim-Americans a film that reflects them. I want it to be something the audience can look at and say, ‘This represents me,’”. Basir also said

[405]Diana Dillaber Murray, “‘MOOZ-Lum’ Arrives in Theaters,” accessed November 7, 2015, http://www.macombdaily.com/article/MD/20110210/ENTERTAINMENT01/302109944.

that, “I hope people can walk out of the theatre thinking more and trying to understand what we’re facing here,” and he added that the movie’s portrayal of discrimination mirrored his own Muslim-American experience. Therefore, Mooz-lum presents a selfie artwork primarily aimed to reflect the assumed theme of diasporic life. At the same time, criticizing inter-communal ways of living appear to be considered as a luxury in the age of Islamophobia in North America.

While the above- mentioned examples of artistic depictions and the exploration of unified Islam do not express a self-critique but are defensive against internal and external objections to self-containment, Boubekeur claims that the young Muslim generation in France and beyond are searching for a “cool Islam”[406], expressed in different art forms, as a way to fight public discourses that stigmatize Islam or present it as an archaic religion. However, they also want to disembody the radical Islamist rhetorics of the old generation of political mobilizers. In a parallel fashion in North America, the artistic practices of Muslim artists could intend to promote assumed Islamic messages and lifestyles, while some of them also criticize their own communities and Islamic ethics and practices. Still, they can be defensive and react against the negative portrayal of Islam or Islamophobia in the “West” while projecting an alternative representation of their own Muslim communities and the Muslim-self.

c) The Contemporary Muslim Institutional Display of Art and Muslimhood in the Diaspora

The mainstream media continuously reduces Muslim identity to the specific religious anti-art practices of Islam as in the case of aniconism or to the attacks of radical Islam on art such as

[406]Amel Boubekeur, “Post-Islamist Culture: A New Form of Mobilization?,” *History of Religions* 47, no. 1 (August 2007): 75–94, doi:10.1086/522854.

the assassination of Theo Van Gogh for his movie “Submission”, the Charlie Hebdo attacks or ISIS’ destruction of cultural sites. As a reaction, many works of art and the curative display of these artworks have been inspired to break with the imagination of Muslims as passive, submissive to cultural and religious coercion. Furthermore, they have challenged the consideration that Islamic culture is against creativity and scientific thought, not akin to freedom of expression and progress in knowledge. In the following subtitles, I am differentiating these reactive artistic activities as inner and outer addressed events of Muslim institutions.

I/ The Artistic Activities of Inner-Muslim Communities

There are focused art performances that react to the negative stereotyping of Muslims such as the documentary movie on Prophet Mohammad by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community responding to the infamous anti-Islam amateur movie, “Innocence of Muslims” which provoked violent protests against US embassies in various Muslim majority countries and beyond. Ahmadiyya Muslims have been themselves the target of persecution because their spiritual leader is believed to be the religion’s latest caliphate, whereas the dominant Sunni sect does not recognize the assumed divinely ordained succession of Prophet Mohammed. The Ahmadiyya Muslim Community’s spiritual leader, Mirza Masroor Ahmad, declared at the Bait-ul Futuh mosque in London Road on September 21, 2012 that, "The way these Muslims are protesting is not the right way" and “the violent protestors were not following the true teachings of Islam and lacked leadership[407]”:

[407]“Ahmadiyya Muslims Response To Blasphemous Film ‘Innocence of Muslims,’” *Examiner.com*, November 1, 2012, http://www.examiner.com/article/ahmadiyya-muslims-response-to-blasphemous-film-innocence-of-muslims.

A huge campaign is currently underway by all chapters of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community worldwide – now established in over 200 countries – to present to the world the true image of the Holy Prophet and Islam in a peaceful, rational and loving manner through exhibitions, conferences, flyer distribution, lectures, dissemination of literature interfaith peace seminars and through demonstrating the Islamic teachings in practice. The Ahmadiyya Community has always undertaken such endeavours since its inception. However, these efforts have now intensified in the aftermath of the release of Innocence of Muslims. Over the next

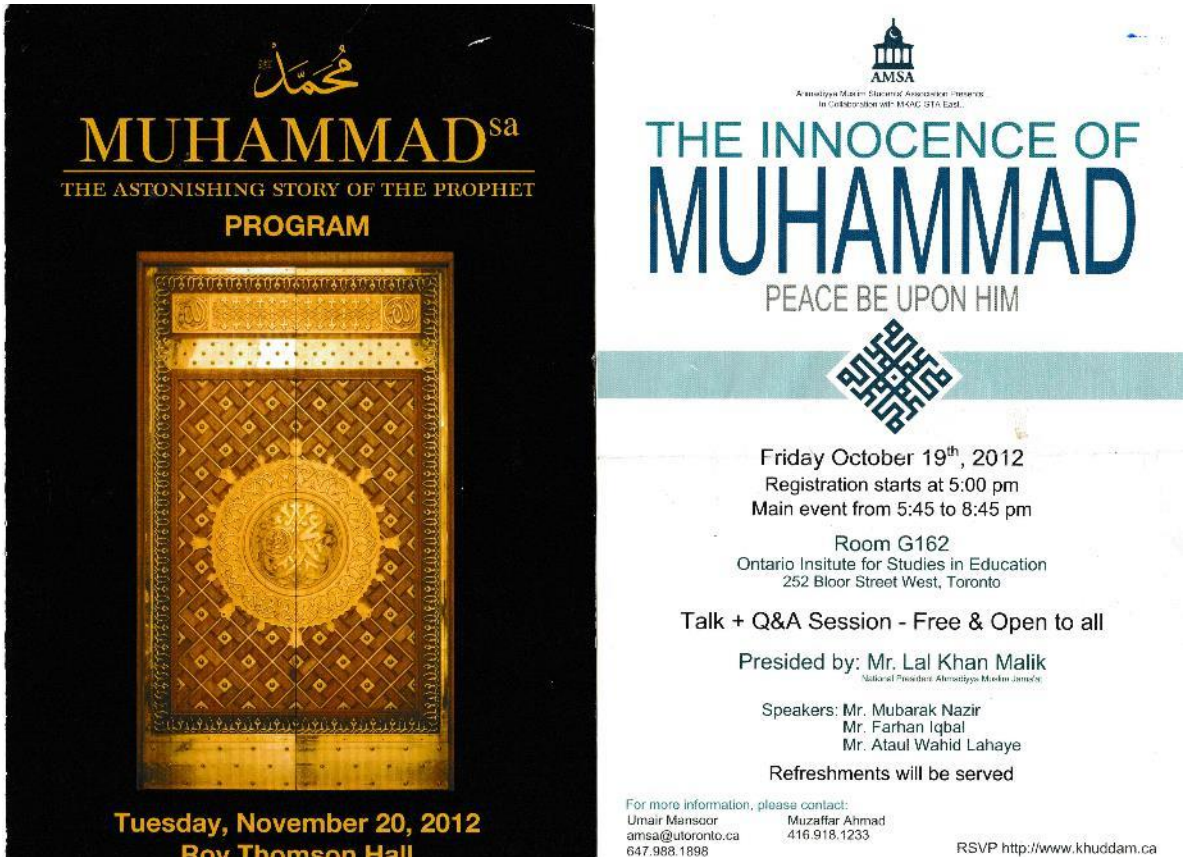

Figure 3-32. Booklet and brochure Flyers distributed in Toronto downtown for the screening of documentary

few pages we will depict just some of the efforts the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community has carried out since the release of the anti-Islamic film, and will display how true Muslims react in such situations.[408]

[408]"The Worldwide Practical Response of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community - The Review of Religions," accessed October 15, 2015, http://reviewofreligions.org/8294/the-worldwide-practical-response-of-the-ahmadiyya-muslim-community/.

The documentary movie that they screened in Roy Thomson Hall was composed of several abstract clips on Prophet Mohammed, the film clips of nature and universe with the addition of special effects in post-production. The documentary itself was not a new movie production and it has been shown only in community gatherings while there is no online access to buy or see the movie. The documentary was made to display and to inform how the Prophet Mohammed must be represented. It was also presented as proof that the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community criticizes the

Figure 3-33 Astonishing Story of Prophet Muhammed screening in Roy Thomson Hall in Toronto downtown by Ahmeddiya Muslim Community. The picture is taken by me

anti-Islamic "Innocence of Muslims" through creative ways and not by violence. The speeches conducted before and after the screenings were based on the friendship of all Prophets and religions and how the Qur'an respects the previous Abrahamic religions, namely Christianity and Judaism. During both of the performances, in Roy Thomson Hall and at OISE of the University of Toronto,

there was an introduction and gathering with Islamic prayer together with the audience. Consequently, people who are non-Muslim or not religious at all and who joined the event became outsiders during this introductory act whereas the event was promoted as open to all. Therefore, it can be considered as an inner-Muslim event rather than a public demonstration aimed at the larger society in Canada. Again, I asked to Talha, member of the York University Muslim Association if they are thinking of doing joint events against Islamophobia:

> We are the mainstream Muslim position linked to Islamic belief…We have the charitable aspect in the sense of giving back to the world and the universal brotherhood for helping people in Gaza. Ahmadiyya is not representing the entire Islam. From what I read of their books, it is our way or you are not believer. I believe in the Sunna, I do not believe multiple prophets after Mohammed. Nothing concrete about this statement. Excuse of freedom of expression but there are limits, Innocence of Muslims is hate-speech…Hate-speech is not only covering skin color but religious values. Against Islamophobia, you cannot combat evil with another evil. I don't say Bush is Ahmaddiya but…We can't work with them.

Thus there is no unified Islam and no open-to-all community of Muslims. There are necessarily different approaches to representing Islam and Islamic Art in the diaspora to break from the dominant negative stereotyping of Muslims. For instance, Talha from the York University MSA states that their approach to combat Islamophobia is not through informing non-Muslims but by educating Muslims: "we are non-educated about our religion. People accuse Islam, you guys do this, the best way to combat islamophobia is by educating Muslims."

II/ Outer-Addressed Artistic Activities of Muslim Communities

The Aga Khan Museum, an Ismaeli organization representing another group within the Shi'a sect of Islam, recently established in 2015 in Toronto defines this endeavour of informing the public about Islamic civilization in its statement on the museum website:

> The Aga Khan Museum in Toronto, Canada offers visitors a window into worlds unknown or unfamiliar: the artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritage of Muslim civilizations across the centuries from the Iberian Peninsula to China. Its mission is to foster a greater understanding and appreciation of the contribution that Muslim civilizations have made to world heritage. Through education, research, and collaboration, the Museum will foster dialogue and promote tolerance and mutual understanding among people.[409]

Aga Khan Museum is founded by Ismailis, one part Shia sect of Islam, their spiritual leader Karim Aga Khan IV is believed to be the latest holy imam by Ismaelis while Muslims of the dominant Sunni sect do not recognize this Muslim sect as legitimate. The Aga Khan Museum is designed by Fumihiko Maki, winner of the Pritzker Architecture Prize and the five granite-lined pools of the formal gardens were designed by landscape architect Vladimir Djurovic: "Within an unmistakably contemporary design, Maki incorporates historical elements originating in Islamic cultures, building bridges between eras as well as civilizations."[410] The postmodern architectural design and

Figure 3-34. Building of Aga Khan Museum in Toronto

[409]"About," *Aga Khan Museum*, accessed October 13, 2015, https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about.
[410]"The Museum and Site," *Aga Khan Museum*, accessed October 13, 2015, https://www.agakhanmuseum.org/about/museum-and-site.Aga

landscape of Aga Khan Museum testifies to for the contemporaneity of the museum's art approach as opposed to the mainstream display of Islamic art existing in history. At the center of the Aga Khan Museum's Permanent Collection, there are several illustrative works which were designed to describe human anatomy or biology. The collection also contains art portraits of Iranian princes

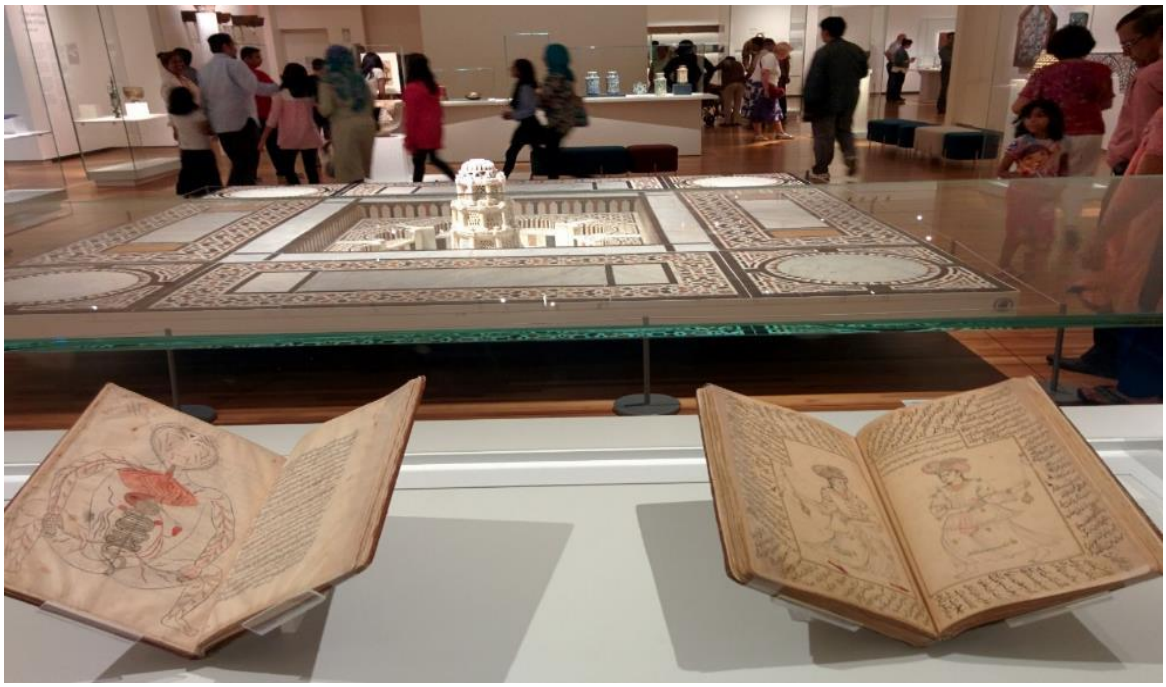

Figure 3-35. Above 1st figure: Aga Khan Museum Permanent Collection. Manuscript of Tashrih-e Mansuri (Mansur's Anatomy) by Mansur, Iran, mid-17th century. Ink and opaque watercolour on paper

Above second figure: Aga Khan Museum Permannet Collection. Portrait of a young princess in court attire. Iran, early 18th century. Oil on canvas

and princesses, which are installed at the center of the exit room. These curative choices of

installment in the part of permanent collection suggest that Islamic culture and Islam itself are not strangers to scientific inquiry. These Iranian portraits of dynasty verify that there is not a unified Islamic approach to art and human representations in contrast to the dominant idea about Islamic cultures and Muslim art history. As the website of Metropolitan Museum of Art states, human representations are rare in what is known as 'Islamic Art':

> The Islamic resistance to the representation of living beings ultimately stems from the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to God, and it is for this reason that the role of images and image makers has been controversial. The strongest statements on the subject of figural depiction are made in the Hadith (Traditions of the Prophet), where painters are challenged to "breathe life" into their creations and threatened with punishment on the Day of Judgment. The Qur'an is less specific but condemns idolatry and uses the Arabic term musawwir ("maker of forms," or artist) as an epithet for God. Partially as a result of this religious sentiment, figures in painting were often stylized and, in some cases, the destruction of figurative artworks occurred. Iconoclasm was previously known in the Byzantine period and aniconicism was a feature of the Judaic world, thus placing the Islamic objection to figurative representations within a larger context.

Thus, the Newsweek Culture announced the Aga Khan Museum opening with the title of "Enlightened Islam Fights Back Against Jihadist Brutality":

> At a time when the worldwide media image of Islam is dominated by nihilistic merchants of extreme violence, and just as the world wearily mobilises to meet this savage threat, something calmly encouraging happens in Toronto, Canada, to help redress the balance…It is a cultural complex that celebrates the other Islam: the artistic, intellectual and scientific achievements of Muslim societies from ancient times to the present.[411]

[411]Hugh Pearman, "Aga Khan Museum: Enlightened Islam Fights Back Against Jihadist Brutality," *Newsweek*, September 24, 2014, http://www.newsweek.com/2014/10/03/enlightened-islam-fights-back-against-jihadist-brutality-272650.html.

Figure 3-36. New York Turkish Street Fest, September 2011

There is also a tendency to reflect the artistic value of 'cultural difference' in contrast to the emphasis on similarities between different religions and 'civilization' through the lens of the ideal of multiculturalism in North America. To prove this point, the displays of so-called classical oriental practices in festivals and cultural gatherings organized by the Turkish Cultural Center in New York of Gulen Movement consists of Sufi music, Whirling Derwish shows, performances of ebru and calligraphic art to exhibit the argument that Muslim culture is capable of high and original 'beautiful' art. The Gulen Movement[412] is a Turkish Sunni Collaboration under the spiritual leadership of Fethullah Gulen who is in exile in in Pennsylvania, USA since 1997 "when secularist authorities raised accusations of Islamist activity against him"[413].Right now, Gulen is accused of engineering a police graft investigation against Turkey's President, Tayyip Erdogan. The movement has built up a network of some 800 schools around the world, teaching a full curriculum

[412] Gulen Movement is also known as Hizmet Movement. "Hizmet" means "service" in Turkish.
[413] "Extradite Exiled Cleric Fethullah Gulen to Turkey, Erdogan Says - NBC News," *NBC News*, April 29, 2014, http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/extradite-exiled-cleric-fethullah-gulen-turkey-erdogan-says-n92226.

focusing on science and technology.[414]" These contemporary cultural performances of classic Islam such as those organized by the Gulen Movement are now something that are shared with the North American public as everyday art, reducing its cultural value to a common practice in some level. For instance, the whirling dervish practice of Sama ceremonies[415] in the Sufi Islamic tradition demands high concentration on the part of the practitioner and it is a form of communal prayer. Yet, the ones exhibited on the streets of New York are not inner-community practices or gatherings in the sense that they aim to reach a mainstream American population in the public sphere through the cultural performance of Islamic difference.

Similarly, Unity Productions Foundation (UPF), founded in 1999 as a non-profit organization in the USA, states that its aim consists of promoting peace through media especially among Muslims and other faiths[416]. Most UPF movies deal with Islam and Muslim communities. UPF states that it produces documentary films for television broadcast, online viewing, and theatrical release to nourish pluralism in America and around the world[417]. Michael Wolfe, an American author and producer who converted to Islam, works as the execute producer and the president of UPF. One of UPF's documentary, "Islamic Art: Mirror of the Invisible World" with the voiceover of Susan Sarandon, an American celebrity, stimulates orientalist aesthetic desires and can claim to be "high" beautiful which affirms both difference and expertise. However, this artistic cultural production about Islam does not totally coincide with contemporary art's rule of

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[414] Alexandra Hudson, "Turkish Islamic Preacher - Threat or Benefactor?," *Reuters UK*, accessed November 22, 2015, http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/05/14/uk-turkey-religion-idUKL0939033920080514.

[415] The practice of Sama is related to the dervishes of the Mevlevi order. The sama' has roots in Persian and Turkish culture. Sufi whirling represents a mystical journey of man to perfection through turning towards the love of Allah, the Truth while the sufi deserts his ego. For more info: http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/39eur_uk.htm

[416]"About UPF & Contact Us - UPF (Unity Productions Foundation)," *Unity Productions Foundation*, accessed October 16, 2015, http://www.upf.tv/about-upf/.

[417]Ibid.

de-professionalism even though it offers a weak representation of meaning except its aestheticized cloak. This is because even though its practice becomes common gesture of everyday life, it still demands professionalism and knowledge. In contradistinction, in contemporary art, knowledge and mastery reside in the ability of de-professionalizing art piece[418].

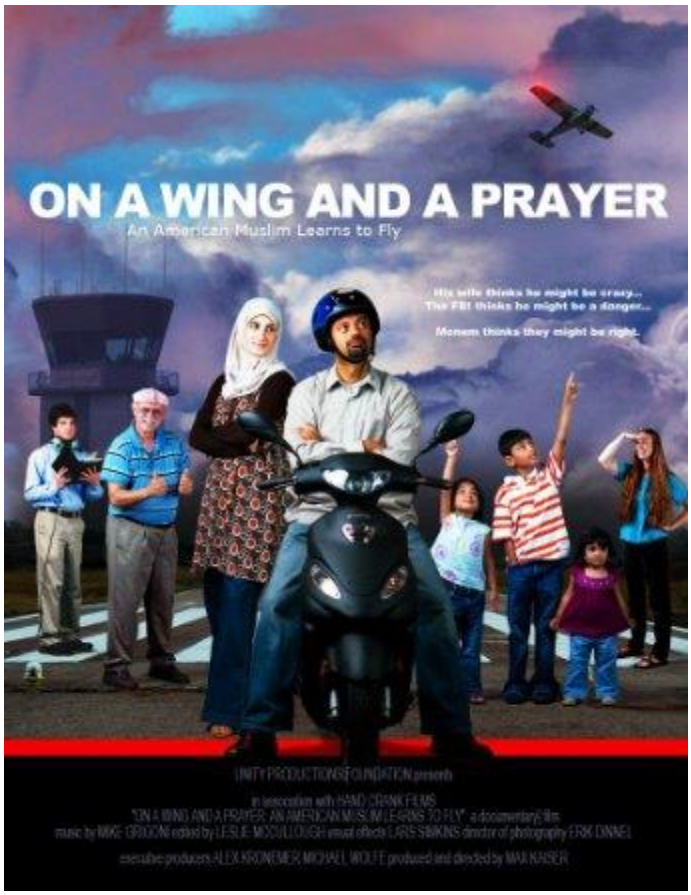

Figure 3-37. Poster of movie "On a Wing and a Prayer. 2007

Another one of UPF's movies, "On a Wing and a Prayer" (2007)[419] tells the documentary story of an American Muslim, Monem Salam, who learns to pilot airplanes. It follows that Monem soon draws the attention of the FBI, which confirms his family's fears. His wife Iman's family is Palestinian and although initially dubious about the cultural differences before marriage, they now

[418]Groys, *Going Public*.
[419]Max Kaiser, *On a Wing and a Prayer*, Documentary, (2008).

accept the cultural differences amongst Muslims. The couple's story testifies that these Muslims are nothing but "modern-day Americans cast off stereotypes and refuse to succumb to victim-hood despite being denied privileges afforded most other Americans."[420] Except their being Muslim, their family share typical American family values and way of life. They are not the Other, the woman in hijab is a wife and mother who loves her family similar to other Americans. Thus this

Figure 3-38. Banner Image of "Little Mosque", TV Series, on its website

documentary movie's artistic value comes from the mission of peace building in the community.

The most famous example of this genre is "Little Mosque on the Prairie", the sitcom created by Zarqa Nawaz and released by WestWind Pictures on CBC Television between the years of 2007-2012. Zarqa Nawaz, a Canadian Muslim of Pakistani origin is a writer, filmmaker and journalist. Her "Little Mosque on the Prairie" is about Muslims and Christians attempting to live in harmony with each other in the fictional small town of Mercy and the challenges that they face while sharing the Mercy Anglican Church. The portrayal of Muslim characters on the show again testifies to the fact that Muslims are not the Other, they are ordinary human beings, families with

[420]Ibid.

the usual joy of life, with problems and worries. However, as John Doyle states in his commentary on "Little Mosque on the Prairie's" final show, the sitcom could not reach its aim of peace building because of its artistic inefficiency:

> With all due respect to the show's ability to diminish anti-Muslim suspicions and conjure gentle comedy from Muslims and Christians closely co-existing, it was never quite funny enough, or even memorably entertaining, to matter. No matter what happens tonight, it never surprised. It was a very old-school Canadian show. A great idea at the beginning. Then, over the seasons, a nice idea. Pity it all got a bit dreary.

That said, these kinds of artworks follow an ethical approach rather than being an aesthetic endeavour in the first place although this can be considered as pretty common trait for the other Canadian CBC television productions as well.

The decline of the principle of disinterestedness with Kantian aesthetics in the contemporary art scene favors the display of pious art, message driven art, community-gathering art, at that art is expected to possess an ethical core or deliver a statement. The ideal of aesthetic artistic value comes from the assumed autonomous force of creativity that Kant conceptualized in the sense that the artwork ideally is appreciated for its own sake in a disinterested manner by the spectator/audience independent of any other use value that the artwork might possess. Thus the aesthetic experience of the pre-contemporary art regime had accrued value to works of art for their own sake in concept independent of any other ends, whether those ends are construed as useful, utilitarian, cognitive, social, or moral. If the artwork is appreciated for the meaning or idea that it claims to encompass, its value derives from the foregrounding ethical regime. Rancière conceptualizes this ethical regime of art as similar to what Plato designates in the Republic where art is only used for educational purposes. Art is banned if it does not follow or can in any way make the audience not follow the system's ideals or if it disturbs the order. The utilitarian goal of

these artistic practices does not nullify their artistic value as part of contemporary art. However, it does not reflect aesthetics in Rancière's account.

Besides its ethical mission of repairing societal discrimination, the display of old Islamic art whether in the museum or in public festivals is still amateurish in its way of idealizing professionalism. The contemporary art regime valorizes such ethical endeavours because what is artistically valuable is constructing ways of being together while manifesting difference. However, the contemporary art regime also condemns any attempt of reaching the Kantian aesthetic of impartiality or the emancipation plan for humanity. Therefore, the display of traditional Islamic art and culture belongs to an old mode of artistic production where artworks follow an elitist fashion of originality. In other words, the appreciation of Islam's traditional art and culture in this aesthetic fashion means it is a manifestation of weak art in contemporary terms. That is because it attempts to be defined as high art. On the other hand, contemporary art must permanently repeat the artistic reduction in the sense of contemplative potential in the artwork to keep the distance between the transcendental and the empirical visible.

d) Muslim Artist as Artwork

The transcendental and the empirical become alienated in the practice of contemporary art when the artist becomes the artwork. Thus the individuality of the artist becomes explicit in artmaking. The production of one's own public self has already emerged as the common practice of the 'high-technological' art. As Boris Groys states, "visual media that, throughout the twentieth century, transformed a vast number of people into objects of surveillance, attention, and

contemplation"[421]. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, Muslim communities and individuals identified with Islam have become the primary objects of surveillance due to the prevalence of Muslim stereotypes with the imagination of the terrorist and resulting in the larger spread of Islamophobia in the 'West'. "Everyone becomes an artist-designer who has ethical, political, and aesthetic responsibility for his or her environment"[422], and this is why the design has such political power as in the case of the debate over headscarves or of why the long beard of a brown man is envisioned as a sign of threat. Hence, Muslim artists work on the political design of Muslim-self's appearance.

Political Islam is performative and based on self-design of identity. "Bodies classified as Muslim are based not on the agency of subjects but on appeals to Islam"[423]. David Tyrer claims that Muslims cannot be classified as purely religious or racial according to the terms of the Eurocentric grammar on which such categories are based and this places Muslims in a peculiar and indeterminate position[424]. Boris Groys accentuates the performative character of post-modernist religious radical movements as a result of the materialist view of the world and defines religious fundamentalism as religion after the death of the spirit, after the loss of spirituality[425]:

> A rupture with the external form of the ritual cannot be compensated by the inner, spiritual fidelity to religious truth. A material difference is now just a difference. There is no essence, no being, and no meaning underlying such a formal difference at a deeper level. In this sense, fundamentalist religious movements are religions after deconstruction. If meaning, sense and intention cannot be stabilized, the only possibility for authentic repetition is literal repetition, mechanical reproduction

[421]Groys, *Going Public*, 14.
[422]Ibid., 33.
[423]David Tyrer, "On Tattoos and Other Bodily Inscriptions," in *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe: Memory, Aesthetics, Art*, ed. Sarah Dornhof and Elena Arigita (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014), 150.
[424]Ibid.
[425]Groys, *Going Public*, 143.

> beyond any opinion, meaning, sense and intention. Islam would be an especially good case in point.[426]

While the pious performance through the means of self-design becomes a marker of religiosity, both Muslims and non-Muslims recognize "Muslims" through this self-design rather than principles or through specific agency in public sphere. Correspondingly, Muslim artists try to avoid common stereotypes about Islam and Muslim practice through different combinations of this self-design. Here, the transcendental quality of Islam becomes empirical in the self-designing practices of Muslims.

Representations of Muslims as active subjects rather than naturalized bodies or passive followers of a dogmatic religion constitute a response to the mainstream portraiture of Muslims in the public sphere. Muslim artists deconstruct and reconfigure the category of the Muslim in the diaspora and beyond. Here, Islam and Muslims are not simply a projection screen of dominant stereotypes seen in global popular culture. The practice of individual Muslim artist is distinguished from the Muslim institutional showings of art. That is because the direct display of the Muslim individualities' agency tends to reflect that Islam cannot necessarily be practiced as if it possesses an obvious and unchanging reality. This is true even for members of the same Muslim sect or community. Sarah Dornhof states that the representational tactic in this kind of artwork resides in the fact that Islam appears as a changeable construct. Muslims can no longer be seen as passive victims because Muslims must inevitably participate in the changes that occur in their religion and in other perspectives on Islam[427]: "*Whether the connotations are positive or negative (in these artworks and art practices), the imperative of seeing differently is linked to attributing*

[426]Ibid.

[427]Sarah Dornhof, "Seeing Difference, Seeing Differently," in *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe: Memory, Aesthetics, Art*, ed. Elena Arigita and Sarah Dornhof (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014), 176.

responsibility for manifestations of Islam to the decisions, ideas and actions of Muslims, and to the observation skills of every viewers."

Figure 3-39. Cover of Art News in November 2014

Accordingly, the new visibility of pious young Muslim women in the hijab contradicts the association of autonomy with unveiling through connecting other elements and signs of free choice

on the self-design of the Muslim subject. The cover image of Art News Magazine in the USA in its November 2014 issue portrays precisely such an image: the free hijab-wearing Arab-American woman. Interestingly, the subject of the cover image in the article by Lilly Wei mentions the increase of women artists in the Middle East and North Africa as well as the recent exhibition "Here and Elsewhere" at the New Museum in New York: "*We might wonder, for example: Does the presence of so many talented Arab women mean that the culture is changing in the Middle East?*" Thus, the selection of the cover image as the depiction an Arab woman in the American-flag hijab visualizes the imagination of these artists yet Muslim women as embracing an American freedom of expression as means of free choice and eventually creativity. Yet, the "Here and Elsewhere" exhibition was not displaying pious art examples or artworks of Muslim artists but the works of artists originally from Muslim majority countries. What should be underscored here, is that creativity combined with Muslimhood reflects an adaptation to the "American spirit" through visual signs of self-design. The pious Muslim display a very clear design of practices and tactics in the public sphere to display difference as well as unity with other members of Muslim communities. Accordingly, self-design as artwork through the assumed contrasting of ideas emerges as the eventual image of the Muslim who is not a terrorist but artist. This imagery of the Muslim artist as the representation of or the witness of shared capacity to live a meaningful life embodies this self-design tactic. In this way, the transcendental and absolute terms are kept at a distance in the production of artworks in contemporary art regime.

Medea Rasheed, one of my interviewees, is a young artist from Waterloo, Canada. Her Kurdish family immigrated to Canada from Baghdad. Her artistic expertise is in Arabic calligraphy

design. She was selected as one of the young talents across Canada for exhibiting her artwork in National Gallery in 2013[428]:

> Balca: -What did you feel when you were selected for Canadian national gallery?
>
> Medea: -It was very cool. I can tell people that don't judge me because of I have a hijab on. Look. You cannot know who I am (Medea laughed). You know, because I am wearing hijab, because you are Muslim, it does not mean that I can't. We have to have approval that we have good character…I really do not work with the non-Muslim community a lot right now. I need to work more to get there. The one that is selected for the contest of National Gallery was totally different than my other paintings. It is a skull. The one showed in the Canadian exhibition of young artists. I know that I can do other things than my Islamic works. I wanted to extend my art space for this competition. I was not really well at the time. They were not expecting this skull from me. They say "wow". As an artist, you need to express your emotions.

I agree that in Medea's case, there is the aesthetic play of contrasts: not a non-Muslim artist drawing a skull but a Muslim artist donned in hijab who drawing one is more appealing in the scene of contemporary art. Such a kind of selfie construction as the subjectivity of the Muslim diaspora in North America does not accord with the definite parts of the consensual system, dictating dichotomies of, Muslims and Westerners, us and them. Hence, it disqualifies the absolute genealogy that determines the empirical scene and it deconstructs in that sense the establishment of referencing between the sensible and the abstraction, hence signification.

Cyrus McGoldrick, The Raskol[429] Khan as his performance name, is an American Muslim of Iranian and Irish descent who used to work as civil rights manager at the New York chapter of CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations[430].Cyrus is a hip hop artist, poet and spoken

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[428]"So You Want To Be an Artist? The National Gallery of Canada Announces the Winners of Its Cross-Canada Art Contest for Teens | National Gallery of Canada," June 20, 2013, http://www.gallery.ca/en/about/1456.php.

[429] Raskol name comes from Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov.Character from Dostoyevsky's book of "Crime and Punishment". For more info about Cyrus Mcgoldrick: http://rue89.nouvelobs.com/2010/11/11/cyrus-le-rappeur-musulman-qui-dit-salam-alikoum-a-new-york-175075

[430] There are various accusations about CAIR for having ties with international terrorist groups. CAIR is announced as terrorist group by United Arab Emirates while it is not designated terror group by the U.S. government, which is

word artist and activist who graduated from Columbia University at the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies (MESAAS). He is a believer of Sunni Islam in contrast to his Shia Iranian origin. We met in Madison Square Park for our interview. Cyrus mentioned that he used to get lots of emails criticizing him for doing music because music is considered haram in Islam. He told me that he used to reply to them by stating that in the Qur'an, not music but some

Figure 3-40. Cyrus McGoldrick performing with the Freddy Fuego Sextet in 2010

musical instruments are banned because of the danger of getting into a haram situation. However, he stated that he no longer plays hip-hop music but he prefers playing reggae right now:

> When I am taking my Islam seriously, I'm more prone to listen reggae than hip-hop. Reggae music is particularly universal, evidently at least with me. Positive, but also reggae is like talking about real issues. Encouraging people to rise up also…I'm more inclined with that than the songs talking about parties and woman. Honestly, we start to internalize these messages, too, you start to manifest also…melodies of reggae

a major ally and trading partner of the U.A.E. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/17/why-the-u-a-e-is-calling-2-american-groups-terrorists

music has similarities with Iran or our tradition. Those melodies also speak to spirituality; I am trying to get all things together.

Cyrus also stated that he no longer performs in bars because the most diverse audience that he finds is in colleges: "*My half family is Irish. They drink a lot. It's part of the culture. I tried to appreciate it. Drinking alcohol does not make you non-Muslim, it makes you a bad Muslim. It's arguable. Lots of opinions are there*."

I asked him about his history of performing in bars as a Muslim rapper:

Balca:-Is it surprising to be both a rap musician and a Muslim for people?

Cyrus: -Before I was doing clubs and these kinds of stages with a kufi[431] and beard. What I am doing in a bar dressed like this was the confusing part. When I was singing of something, you know, people listening and were raising eye brows. It was a beautiful moment you got that you broke through whatever the prejudice is based on the appearance.

-What kind of art they are expecting from a Muslim?

-Most of the people don't think Muslims are doing music. In fact they are many people in music that are Muslim but people don't know they are Muslims. When I was playing with the gang, Islam is a part of the identity. Somehow political and five per cent ideology…weird to me but they embraced that there is connection between Malcolm X is the perfect intersection. They don't want to be politicized too much so they don't say it – They do party songs and so…They are worried if they are ostracized …I am approaching it differently. I am doing it consciously, I am a publicly practicing Muslim

-Otherwise do you become a moderate Muslim?

-Good. Well said. Exactly. I wanted to present an image for people to show that you don't need to compromise your Islam in order to fit into broader movement. I think I am successful. I did not become mainstream at all but I am glad to – I think I have an idea of it would be changed over time and what could be the compromises are actually… You know the business behind music. It requires some kinds of abuse in order to achieve. You can have the same kind of conversation in politics and so so…how far you need to moderate yourself or appear moderate to be accepted by mainstream as non-threatening. I was unwilling to do that. I think people should be threatening certain status-quo.

[431]Kufi: Hat known mostly worn by men of Islamic faith.

Thus, the self-design of Raskol Khan deconstructs the imagery of the political Islamist, the Muslim, the Muslim American and the musician all at once. Although Cyrus prefers several music types more akin to Islam in his understanding, he re-interprets the terminology that Muslim authorities and scholars define as absolute. Here, his combination of the so-called contrasting elements of ethical, political stances and attitudes through his self-design reflects a consensual proposition. This is a way of manifesting 'Muslim' difference in the public sphere while maintaining an identity of a musician. Indeed, Cyrus mentioned in another interview that he retains a very Islamic image so that American Islam can serve as role model outside of religious scholarship while many Muslims give up certain parts of their identity in order to succeed in other fields and to fit in the American mainstream.

I met Azhar Usman, a lawyer turned in comedian and stand-up artist, in *Takin'It to the Streets* Fest in June 2013. Azhar is, the co-founder of the international comedy showcase "Allah Made Me Funny–The Official Muslim Comedy Tour," that has toured over 20 countries, on five continents.[432] Allah Made Me Funny is a comedy band of three Muslim stand-up artists, Azhar Usman, Mo Amer and Preacher Moss as they state "1 African-American + 1 Indian-American + 1 Palestinian-American = ALLAH MADE ME FUNNY!"[433]. They focus on the incidences of being Muslim in the USA after September 11 and also the diasporic way of life and on being part of a Muslim family. One of Azhar's popular sketches from his performance "Allah Made Me Funny" is about his experience of air travel:

> Imagine how it feels like looking like me and walking to the airport. Heads turn simultaneously. Security guy says 'We got Mohammed at 5 o'clock right there. Excuse me sir can I see your ID?"'here…Imagine the moment that I

[432]"His comedy has been profiled/reviewed by over 100 major world media outlets including The New York Times, The Economist, BBC, The Guardian, NPR, TIME Magazine, Al-Jazeera, USA Today, and Fox News."BIO," *AZHAR USMAN*, accessed October 19, 2015, http://www.azhar.com/bio/.
[433]"AMMF | About AMMF," accessed October 19, 2015, http://www.allahmademefunny.com/about/index.html.

got on that plane. In the middle of conversation, people say 'so where are you from?' then 'oww, I am gonna die'… But everybody becomes nice to me when plane safely lands. Overly smiling to me. I was just waiting for an honest passenger to come to me and say, 'Excuse me sir, I thought you are gone kill us, heheh…Sorry about that… Remember when you were getting to the bathroom. I was gonna stab you, hehehe'[434]

Figure 3-41. Image showing Azhar Usman on stage

[434]Mahmood Amer, *Allah Made Me Funny - Azhar Usman Full*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGRtzqqTeZw.

Thus, Azhar Usman not only deconstructs Islamophobia but because he mostly performs for Muslim communities in his private shows or in Muslim cultural gatherings, he also Americanizes the feeling of Muslim isolation and stereotyping in his jokes. In fact, the way that he underscores Islamophobia does not reflect an image of conflict between 'them and us', the kind of antagonism that demands explicit reaction. Rather it demystifies the mainstream structure of camps, values and stories while both actors of Islamophobic experience are part of American daily life through the manifestation of American stand-up tradition.

In our meeting, Azhar told me that he participated to "Taking' it To the Streets" festival many times. "Takin' it To the Streets", defined as, *"international festival where artistic expression, spirituality and urban creativity inspire social change"* has been organized by the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN)[435] in Chicago since 1997. The festival defines its goal as, "bridging today's cultural divides by connecting diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities through a dynamic festival.[436]" The festival's website also states that *Takin' It to the Streets* is recognized throughout the city and country as a one-of-a-kind outdoor gathering of Muslims pro-actively engaging their society through artistic expression, community forums, a bazaar, and sports tournaments.[437] I asked to Azhar if IMAN's *Takin'It To the Street* is a successful festival:

> Azhar: -It becomes bigger and bigger. 2001, 2003, 2010, 2013…Sixth time for me to be included in IMAN's festival. Definitely what is great about it is that it is unique gathering that composed of Muslim activists who care about social justice, care about supporting art, inner city problems, and activism. The people organizing this festival, the whole point is the beautiful get together to support art and Muslims were behind it and supporting it, that is something to celebrate.

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[435]"HOME," *Inner-City Muslim Action Network*, accessed October 18, 2015, http://www.imancentral.org/.
[436]"Takin' It to the Streets," *Inner-City Muslim Action Network*, accessed October 18, 2015, http://www.imancentral.org/arts-culture/takin-it-to-streets/.
[437]Ibid.

> However the critic comes in. If you are doing music do your art…If you are doing business just be a business man. Just be you. You don't need this obsessing feeling to validate and to feel validated by religion. This tension with IMAN and people associated with IMAN for the festival itself. We need to have the blessing of ulema[438] of religion in order to have this festival validated. The simple thing you don't. Just

Figure 3-42. Photo taken by me in the Takin'It To the Street festival of IMAN in Chicago. 2013

> be Muslim, a believer of god and the prophet of God… Try to be good Muslim people and just do your music. When there is tension there, music is haram, down concern about women and men dancing on the stage. The problem becomes more rigid when you get in this discourse when you try to resolve. Self-delusion that we engage with ulema then if it is not permissible you can't. Just do it. Feel bad in your heart, be disobedient and you feel it. The growing tension for this need to feel that the festival is not valid or not whether it needs the blessing of somebody else.

When I attended the festival, there were an ethnically diverse crowd coming to listen to the music in the Marquette Park, the famous park that Martin Luther King marched through for the fair housing protest in August 1966. The participation from the Muslim African American audience

[438]Muslim theologians and scholars

was high. Thus, different kinds of culture and hence various understandings of art and Islam were practiced by the spectacle. While there were several calls for prayer on one side, at the other side of the park there was a graffiti artist's show. Both the members of the audience and the performers were gender-mixed. For instance, one of the performers, Brother Ali danced with burka-clad dancers on the stage. In contrast, during the MuslimFest in Mississauga of Canada, there was no dancing on stage and among the audience when I attended in 2014. Thus, the growing requests of the ulema on the festival could probably change the regulations of artistic practices in the upcoming years and can provoke a more unified way of doing art and hence eliminate this diversity of cultural adaptations of Islam and art culture.

Zain Ali Shamoon, is a Pakistani-American artist who is 25 years old. He is also a doctoral student in the Human Development and Family Studies at Michigan State University. He told me that media does not pay enough attention to this festival because this diversity of spectacle would contradict their discriminative imagery of Muslims:

> FOX news is afraid to coming to an event like that. It is the showcase of all the Muslims in America. If they were to allow people to observe how Muslims look, so much colors in this park… So much diversity, even in expression, age and if they expose that, people would not be afraid of Muslims as they are now… media are not coming here because there is an agenda to continue to make people scared. They want to make people afraid- they want to call us a foreign religion, this is ridiculous. This is the second biggest religion. They want to create another mentality like Muslims are weird people they don't want to see humanity.

I asked Zain if he gets harsh critiques from the radical Muslim camp:

> Zain: - What you wear is a question. You claim to be Muslim artist but for several views you can be considered not a good Muslim. If it becomes too imposing, it becomes a problem…Everyone has different journey…Different ways of teaching religion from countries and also secular history… It depends. I don't like the word radical. Harm and destruction they are not radical. People thinking outside the box must be considered radical…I don't expect Taliban to like my art ok...obviously…they don't want women

to go to school even…This is isolating things said in religion without context I think. But usually people want to heal whether I share a story with music or with my spoken word. Poetry is also a tradition in Islam. But if I got critiques not because of this, it's about topics… if I bring topics like issues like domestic violence or sexual assault people says don't talk about that. That's because they confuse privacy with ignoring reversible things happening in the community- They don't want to hear it because it is probably happening in their house- make them not comfortable that I bring them up – they say you make Muslims look bad but it's inverse. It makes people you care about are harmed by you by quote by quote…. My research about domestic violence and sexual violence in south Asian community- I interviewed south Asian women…my art is not

only about art but pushing buttons and change things. If we cultivate communities, we need to deal with issues by talking… We cannot be together if there is violence in families. We pretend that we have a different struggle than anybody else. Lots of the same stuff in our communities, that's worse because we hide it…that is different when it comes from people, media, there is often discrimination when it comes from media…media requires Muslims say we are not like that as you say. I am tired of talking about what we are not. That's their responsibility…media can google who Muslims are…I rather talk about who we are…it's annoying it's about only maintaining an image. It's our responsibility to say something. That's our connection. Just like the sunshine, you cannot hide it…in the same way, if we take care of ourselves and cultivate as community… We need to speak truth. People can lie there, that's why Malcolm X is killed, you cannot ignore him, and they had to kill him. Speak with honesty, love and people had to stand up. That's how one says water does not exist.

Figure 3-43. Zain performing in Takin'It To the Street. June 2013

Hence, these diaspora Muslim artists do not submit to the regulations of Muslim communities' authorities, scholars and more totalitarian ideas on how to do art. While they mostly perform for Muslim audiences, they still perform for a diverse community of different cultures with varied interpretations of Islam. Zain not only criticizes white supremacy in the US but focuses on injustice within Muslim communities as well. Such an attitude can be considered as treason while Muslim communities are defined as in danger by Islamophobic discrimination in the diaspora.

Azhar also emphasized the criticism that he receives because of his art performance:

- Balca: But did you get any harsh critique from the Islamophobic view?
- Azhar: Seriously no...I came to realize there are two kinds of Muslim haters – there are people who hate Muslims, they are Muslim haters, and there are people who are haters and they are Muslim. They are Muslim haters. I receive more from them. Not about my work. I don't receive too much negativity to my work, it's a blessing from God. But Muslim and haters don't have appreciation of God. No knowledge of Quran. No education in Quran and Sunnah…No knowledge of real scholars. They view the religion in their view of religion, my stand-up is not ethical to Islam. They don't know me…It is idiotic and it is just like why you are doing PhD while they don't know about academia, research is,how they can base their critique on it…..foolish. No serious critique that can have some substance that I should think …few times I have I'm taking seriously but it's unlikely that I don't think about a serious critic.

In contrast to Zain, Azhar has an Islamic image that he keeps on the stage. When I was on an airplane looking at my flyer of *Taking'It to the Streets* Festival, the person sitting next to me told me that the person (Azhar Usman) that I am going to do an interview with looks very frightening. To be honest, I was hesitant to shake his hand when we met each other because I know that devout Muslims do not shake women's hands from my local experiences in Turkey. I

was thinking of him to be probably a strict devout Muslim based on his self-design with easy-stereotyping of long Islamic beard:

> Balca: - When I was watching your videos it came to my mind with your Muslim kufi and with your wearing and long beard, people of this self-design don't shake women's hand in Turkey…I believe that the aim of your Muslim clothing is somehow to surprise. Maybe I am wrong.
>
> Azhar: -I got your point. That's a way of scripting meaning. Maybe you are right. Maybe it's just a cultural practice. Maybe he is imitating his grandfather he loves…Who knows? Script meaning to everything from things we know. Maybe you are right…But there is some margin of error…
>
> Balca: -Then what do you want to say to your audience with your long beard?
>
> Azhar:-I don't want to say anything…it's not about audience it's about me…I grew my beard after this poem of Sufi…The small thing I can do…It's about my relation with God…

Azhar repeatedly insisted that he does not carry any message through his art and what he wants to do is only art but not politics. To be sure, the imagery of the "Muslim" in the Western dominant discourse is that s/he is not capable of the artistic production since creativity is understood to require freedom and freedom of thought. Consequently, the self-design of Muslim artist as a part of his artwork displays the absurdity of Muslim stereotyping. Artist as "cool", "funny" or "protest" does not match with the manifestation of already-known dominant aesthetics features of Muslimness in the mainstream social sphere. However, this self-design also contradicts the imagery of unified Islam and ummah in the diaspora. It deconstructs designed camps of both assumed 'Westerness' versus Muslim identity. Yet, Azhar said that his only ambition is doing art and making people laugh, therefore, the mission of peace building between the communities does not attract him so much as a goal for art:

> The biggest thing to do to get in the next stage for my Muslimness to break this barrier of life being a frame which holds me back from being myself in the stage… I

> don't know… The more I do this, more I feel not comfortable. Too much, very grandiose type of thing. I can't represent anybody or Islam, I can represent me…What I can do is good art. Because I am Muslim and I am talking about Islam and things that I think...If anyway it effects incidentally to challenge Islamophobia it's good and beautiful but it's not my goal. My goal is to make people laugh and think. I only want to be me.

Azhar also stated he is in a transitional stage and that although he performs mostly for Muslim audiences, he intends to perform for a larger segment of the US spectacle. Yet, the fact that Azhar considers Islam as a matter for the private sphere and his disapproval of the correlation of Islam with politics, while his self-design accommodates the visual of "Islamist" stereotyping, not only

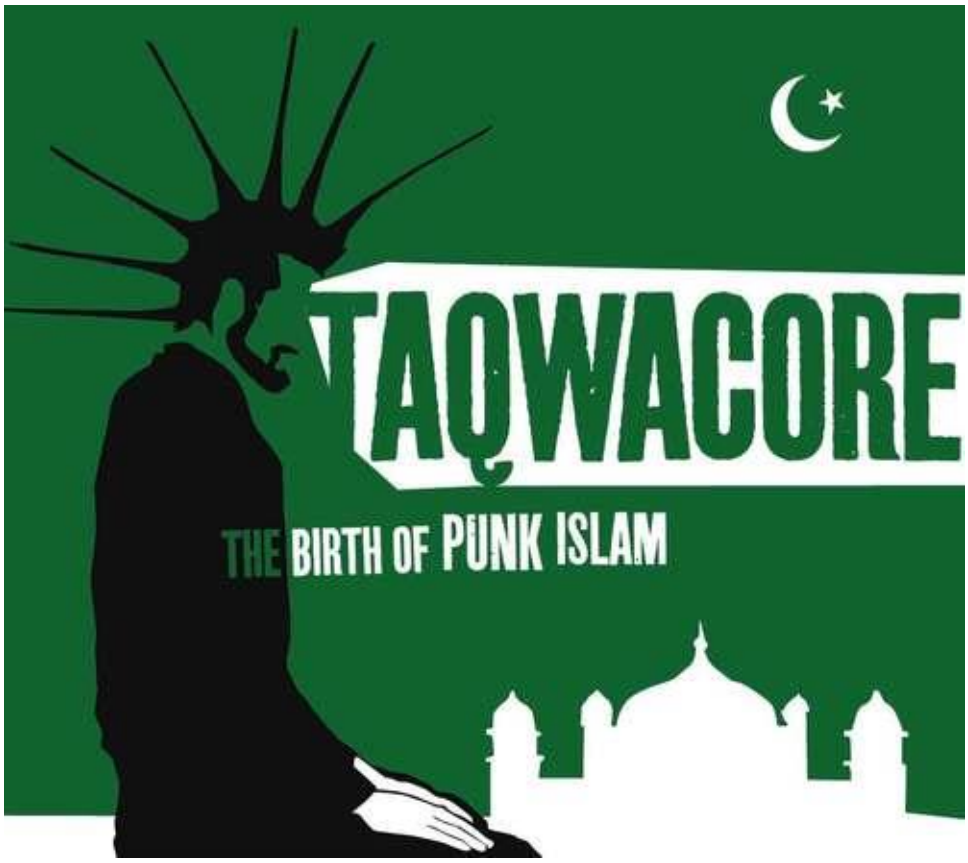

Figure 3-44. Taqwacore: Birth of Punk Islam, documentary movie poster. 2009

deconstructs Islamophobia but also the vision of unified Islam promoted by Muslim authorities and communities following the regulation dictated by the "ulema".

"Taqwacore: Birth of Punk Islam" (2009) is a documentary movie by Omar Majeed, Pakistani Canadian director and producer. The feature follows the progression of the Muslim Punk scene inspired by a novel written by Michael Muhammad Knight, an Irish-American convert to Islam, to a real-life scene of Muslim punk bands especially the band "The Kominas", a Pakistani American punk rock group of Boston, and their fans. Knight's novel, The Taqwacores (2003), is considered to be the Muslim Punk Manifesto against the demands of religious dogma. It imagines a fictional community of Muslim radicals such as "Mohawked Sufis", "riot girls in burqas with band patches" and "skinhead Shi'as". Thus the imagination of self-design for punk Muslims is a combination of creative contrasts and symbols derived from both Islam manifesting differences to the stereotyped religion and the punk tradition.

During their Taqwacore tour in the documentary, punk Muslim artists visit Chicago to see Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) Convention. When they start to play on stage, many of the younger audience were at first confused, but later cheered for the bands. However, when the all-girl band Secret Trial Five (ST5)[439] played on stage, security was called and the group was forced off stage due to the ISNA convention rules of "no-female singers". To protest this regulation, Taqwacores gathered outside of the building and broke a guitar on the pavement: "Music is haram in Islam!" Thus, as it is stated in the movie, Taqwacores maintain that there is no

[439] ST5 later denied to be part of Taqwacore although the band was filmed in the documentary. For more information, please see their published performance on youtube titled 'We're not Taqwacore: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMBUZDmyHJA

Figure 3-45. The Taqwacores movie by Eyad Zahra. 2010.

other authority that could come between God and the believer and there are no imams in Islam therefore these kinds of rule setting cannot be imposed. That is why punk and Islam are compatible because there is no structure and dictation in punk as well as in Islam: "Allah is so big. You can have your Islam". Still, Taqwacores insist that they are not good Western friendly Muslims because they rebel against a specific set of things in Islam and they also fight against the American hegemony. They state that: "*By stoking the revolution – against traditionalists in their own communities and against the clichés forced upon them from the outside* – "*we're giving the finger*

to both sides," says one Taqwacore. 'Fuck you and fuck you.'[440]". One part of the Kominas' song of "Shari'a Law in the USA" played in the movie is:

> I am an Islamist
> I am the Anti-Christ
> Most squares can't make a most wanted list
> But my-my
> How I stay in style
> Shari'a Law in the USA (refrain)

The documentary also shows Taqwacores doing their daily prayers in such a way that the fact that they resist against Islamic authority does not mean they are not practicing Muslims but they chose their own way of Islam. This approach I define as "individualized" Islam in contrast to collectivity boundary building aim of the unified Islam that is promoted against Islamophobia and American world's hegemony.

The fictional movie Taqwacores (2010), also based on Knight's novel by the director Eyad Zahra, traces the story of Yusef, a Pakistani natural science student who starts to live with a group of un-Orthodox punk Muslims in the same building in Buffalo, USA. Yusef discovers his Islam and revised his old teachings. IMDB website of the movie states that "The Taqwacores deals with the complexities of being young and Muslim in modern-day America.[441]" The movie's description in Sundance Film Festival's archive is the following:

> Oh, to be young, beautiful, Muslim—and punk rockers! Here's one story of disaffected American youth we haven't seen before.
>
> They may read the Koran and attend the mosque, but they also welcome an anarchic blend of sex, booze, and partying. As Yusef becomes more involved in Taqwacore, he

[440]"Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam » About," accessed October 20, 2015, http://www.taqwacore.com/?page_id=41.
[441]Eyad Zahra, *The Taqwacores*, Drama, Music, (2010).

> finds his faith and ideology challenged by both this new subculture and his charismatic new friends, who represent different ideas of the Islamic tradition.[442]

The movie displays an increasing contrast of dark and light color and there are scenes composed of separate photo shots as well as black and white independent scenes of each character listening to American News otherizing Muslims. Thus the virtual characteristics of the movie follows comics genre which adds a fantastic feature and experimental effect. In that sense, the movie attempts to reach beyond the activist-ethical movie but reflects aesthetic value. However, the storytelling focuses on the dialogues between the characters while some of scenes and dialogues look like intentionally placed to clarify how different interpretations of Islam can be possible and what kind of challenges Muslim diasporic young face when they try to be pious and yet remain as themselves. Thus the movie does not possess an event-based plot but a series of dialogues that display the change in Yousef. In other words, the message is directly transmitted without an alternative storyline cover and the movie becomes ethically charged to carry the burden of giving voice to a minority in the Muslim diaspora. The movie bears witness to the self-representation of a group and individuals that mainstream discourses ignore.

"A Sinner in Mecca" is a documentary movie telling the story of a gay Muslim director, Parvez Sharma's Hajj visit to accomplish his journey to Islam's most sacred sites. Its world

[442]"The Taqwacores," *Sundance Institute*, accessed October 21, 2015, https://www.sundance.org.

Figure 3-46. Footage from the movie 'A Sinner in Mecca"

premiere was in the Hot Docs Festival 2015 in Toronto on April 29, 2015. The director has received death threats after the screening of movie in several places in North America. While filming this movie, Sharma put his life at risk because homosexuality is punished severely in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, it is forbidden to capture long footage of the hajj except in Saudi government-sanctioned videos of the ritual. Therefore, Sharma filmed secretly through his iPhone and the documentary is autobiographic: It explores Sharma's life from his memory of his mother and their debates on his sexuality and his marriage in New York. For instance Sharma asks himself about his mother during the movie: "I always wonder 'Did the shame of my sexuality kill her? Am I the one who has sinned?" That is why after the first screening in Toronto, he said to the audience, "I feel naked right now" because he shared his life details with the audience. In one ritual of the hajj, Sharma kills a goat by slitting its throat: "By killing another living being, I have also killed part of myself. What is gone is the part of me that wondered if Islam would accept me... it is up to me, as

a gay Muslim, to accept Islam,"[443]. Parallel to punk Islam followers, Sharma as a gay Muslim director presents, through self-identified Muslim art, an example of individualized Islam specific to the believer instead of the Islamic unified code of laws and regulations of believers in Muslim communities.

On the other side of this reflection of individualized Islam by Muslim artists performing self-identified Muslim art that I mentioned above, there are also works which primarily designate for a unified Islam in diaspora while they reconfigure individuality with communal unity.They can

Figure 3-47. The screening of "Unmosqued' at University of Toronto

be distinguished from the art of individualized Islam in their evident manifestation of suggestions for their ambition of remedying internal communal problems in the Muslim Diaspora rather than

[443]Kieran Guilbert, "Gay Muslim Filmmaker Risks Death In Pilgrimage To Reconcile Faith And Sexuality," *The Huffington Post*, June 8, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/06/09/parvez-sharma-gay-muslim-_n_7535342.html.

Figure 3-48. Movie poster of "UnMosqued". 2014

the reflection or reclamation of their specific individuality in Islam. The pro-reform work, "UnMosqued", the documentary movie by Ahmed Eid in 2014, propagates for the individualization of Muslim identity to achieve unified Islam and to prevent alienation. The movie has been screened in Canada and the USA in several Islamic and Muslim centers. I attended the screening of this film at the University of Toronto by the Muslim Student Association (MSA).

According to the American-Mosque 2011 report study, in a little over 30 years, Muslims have established over 2,000 mosques all across the country, and today, only 10% of all Muslims in America attend these mosques[444]. The documentary focuses on the need for reform in many of American mosques to prevent alienation in the US and it follows the story of young pro-reform young people to get elected onto the leadership board. It addresses critically issues of women and youth participation in mosques, transparency of governance, and the hiring of imams who understand the North American context. The comments published on University of Toronto in ISNA Canada's website emphasized that the documentary brings important issues however it prioritizes critical views too:

> At times, I felt that the film was painting a biased and unfair picture…Omair Raza, an attendee, shares my concerns. "I would've appreciated some success stories of

Figure 3-49. Atif Mahmud with the audience after screening discussion. Photo was taken by me.

[444]"UnMosqued Film Stirs Debate among N.A. Muslims," *Iqra.ca*, accessed October 24, 2015, http://iqra.ca/2014/unmosqued-film-stirs-debate-among-n-a-muslims/.

communities that are offering services beyond prayer services, so that when other communities are trying to better their mosques, they have a model to go by instead of having to reinvent the wheel," he says. I also got the chance to speak to Amjad Tarsin, UofT's Muslim chaplain. "I thought that there were some strong points in the film and that it did bring to light a lot of issues that we need to address," says Amjad. "However, I'm not sure that the way it was presented and the way people will interpret it is going to be the catalyst to bring about the changes." One recurring theme of the film is the archaic vision and governance style employed by an older generation that runs our mosques. This is a valid point, but the film doesn't balance this by acknowledging the work done by these immigrant leaders, who put in precious time and resources into establishing our mosques. "I know some people that didn't come because the film was going to bash at uncles in the mosques and I felt it did do that at times," Omair says.[445]

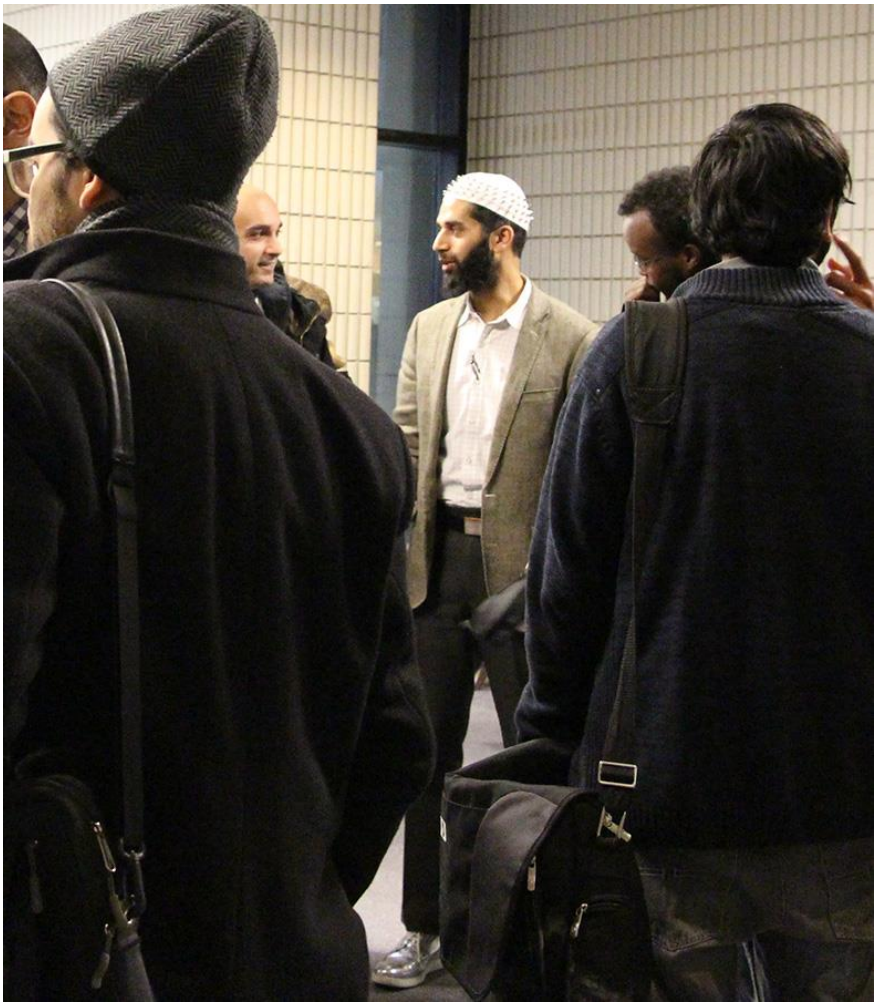

Figure 3-50. Atif Mahmud with the audience after screening discussion. Photo was taken by me.

[445]Shaheryar Gilani, "UnMosqued: The Toronto Premiere | Lanterns," *Isna Lanterns*, March 7, 2014, http://isnalanterns.com/2014/03/unmosqued-the-toronto-premiere/.

Ahmed Eid states in the discussion after the screening at University of Toronto: "*We have to respect the older generations and all the sacrifices that they made, we just can't ignore them*," but "*There is a place for everyone at all times*.[446]" In fact, both director and producer Ahmed Eid and other producer Atif Mahmud got a lot of attention from young audience during the discussion and after the discussion at University of Toronto (UofT) screening of the documentary.

Here, what I would like to focus on is not the content of the message for reform in unified Islam but how such message is delivered by the creators of the documentary. The self-design of Atif Mahmud for the UofT screening displayed the artistic component parallel to earlier mentioned examples of individualized Islam by other Muslim artists. After the screening and discussion, there were several people who wanted to have a selfie with Atif. His kufi with silver coloured details and matched sport shoes which were part of his costume indicated that there is a possibility for "cool" Islam matching the reality of younger generations. That is because the imaginary of unified Islam and the Muslim follower in both mainstream North American media and discourse as well as in the Muslim communities of diaspora do not accord with the self-acknowledgement of the young Muslim diaspora. Thus the idea is that not isolation from but adaptation to what is assumed "Western" can remedy the alienation of young Muslim generation in this understanding. As a result, Atif Mahmut, a Muslim producer of reformist documentary for Muslim diaspora, engage with both of the signifiers of antagonistic identities which do not conflict in his own embodiment of selfie creation.

The above mentioned artists and artworks display an individualized Islam through their own self-design of being Muslim. In doing so, they both criticize "Western" mainstream discourse

[446]"UnMosqued Film Stirs Debate among N.A. Muslims."

of discrimination against Muslims while they also rebel against the communal authority. While some of them insist that art and politics have to be separated and that they only aim to do art, others declared that art must engage in the issues of social justice and be the vehicle of change in both Muslim communities and the whole North American society. Their artist personality here encompasses several stereotyping qualifications of these societies that they criticize in their art whereas the contrasting points of this combined elements of self-design dissolve any strict understanding of artistic message transmission to the audience. In addition to this, they aim to reach a broader audience than the Muslim communities.

In sum, body is the soul and Muslim is only the Muslim body because the transcendental is only located on the sensible without the requirement of contemplation in the age of contemporary art: The identity is established here not at the level of essence, spirit of meaning but on the appearance. The artist Muslims' construction of public persona – the production of public self- rests in the hybrid formation of the Western yet Muslim self-image, but more exclusively terrorist yet artist, than it engages in deconstructing them in the sense their public persona does not have a meaning in the same consensual system. Here, the design of the public self is judged and analyzed through the sign system already defined in the consensual ground. Sarah Dornhof[447] contends in her article "Seeing Difference, Seeing Differently" that "in these depictions, the

[447] Sarah Dornhof, "Seeing Difference, Seeing Differently," in *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe: Memory, Aesthetics, Art*, ed. Elena Arigita and Sarah Dornhof (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2014).

continuity of themes such as the veil, family, sexuality and prayer occurs because the imperative of this other take implies a critical response to Orientalist and Islamophobic stereotypes":

> The other take can be seen here as a take which cannot be equated with a critical stance that exposes, unmasks, and produces true images. The other take does not necessarily reject clichés and stereotypes. It offers, rather, a private, subjective perspective on the ambivalences and the scope for agency that can be discerned in stereotyped images when they are not regarded as projections by a Western viewer but as images of talking, acting subjects. Images can return the gaze and tell their own private, ambivalent stories, even if they are simultaneously stereotyped projections, or hard to distinguish from them on first sight.

The same logic can be applied to the reformist representation of self-design amongst Muslim artists who firstly aim to address members of Muslim diaspora rather than the Western gaze of larger society. The use of several features of Muslim stereotyping imagery of identity with other contrasting virtual or gestural signs of mentality reflect their own individual and hence ambivalent self in comparison to what mainstream Muslimhood is defined by Muslim authorities or "common sense" of Muslims and the Muslim diaspora. Thus, there are not only orientalist or Islamophobic stereotypes but imaginative stereotyping for "good- bad and non-Muslim" also exist in the discourse of the mainstream Muslim diaspora.

The aesthetic nature of politics, according to Rancière, does not reflect a world of competing interests and values but a world of competing worlds in the sense of changing or de-connecting with the consensual sensory experience: "*There is politics when the boundary separating those who are born for politics from those who are born for the bare life of economics and social necessity is put in question"*. Hence, when Muslims, the ones that are not supposed to be able to engage in art, do art – and they become artists -is politics in the sense of dissensus. However, their assumed ethical mission of necessity, namely, remedying antagonistic conflicts of interests among the camps of the consensus, turns out to re-imply the divergence between the

regular Muslim demos and the artist Muslims and hence Muslims and Westerns. In Rancière's terms, such kinds of intentional deliberation on art for politics reside primarily in the ethical regime of art and hence are not part of aesthetic art. Rancière distinguishes the aesthetic from the typical agenda of critical art in which critical capacity consists in building awareness of the mechanisms of domination to turn the spectator into a conscious agent of world transformation. Here, promoting awareness of different kinds of Muslimhood rather than the terrorist Islamist type of Islam or submissive Muslim figure can be thought of the ethical responsibility of the Muslim artist in addition to the artistic endeavour of addressing the internal community of the Muslim diaspora and to reflect an alternative subjectivity to deconstruct who can be considered a "real" Muslim in the community.

On one hand, the public appearance of Muslim artists is individual not communal in the sense that they do not represent a community but they reflect an individualized version of their socializations. What Hal Fosters states on contemporary art is new in the sense that, "in its very heterogeneity, much present practice seems to float free of historical determination, conceptual definition, and critical judgment." Self-identified Muslim art resides in the contemporary art's break with transcendental and emptying out of the signs divine glory, of all our cultural signs and activities: As Boris Groys reads it as "turning them to zero sign". That is because their patchwork appearance of self-identified Muslim art does not reflect any referential logic. Therefore, the effect on the ethos of spectators is ambivalent because it consists in disidentification. On the other hand, these artworks or work of arts and performances mentioned above can be largely viewed as images or image carrier to be questioned for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community and hence judged through the terms of ethical regime of art while the reflected disidentification can smooth the lines of antagonistic conflicts. That is because disidentification reinstates a form

of transcendence according to Rancière[448] : This refers to the ethical absoluticization of the wrong as identification, grand narratives, and universalism in the contemporary critiques.

Conclusion: Sublimity in the Selfie Art of the Middle Eastern Diaspora

For the self-body art of those with brown skin, the self-memory art of immigrants as well as self-identified Muslim art as a whole, and the selfie art of diasporic subjectivities and imaginaries, subjectivity is troubled with the inclusion of different and mostly antagonistic assumed signs. This art is still self-assurant because of the fact that the collapse of meaning does not hurt the artist's artwork. The artist witnessing her own multi-layered subjectivity in selfie-art challenges the given strict orderings of subject and society alike. It proceeds through shortening or cancelling the link between the idea and form. As such the meaning and the image do not need a contemplative agency in the sense that "you are how you appear". Although self-memory art looks like an exception in the sense of affirming individual determination with experience, it bears witness to the other, to the victim phoné through the performance/display of immediate presence. In that sense, the act of self-memory art can exhibit both the Inhuman and Human without achieving logos. Thus, the sublimity of selfie art resumes from the complete convergence of the essence with the appearance. This art turns elements of image such as ethnicity, skin color, the Muslim veil to zero signs not referential to a transcendental potentiality in dialectical reading. It is sublime because it annuls any ground to claim an opening of the total idea in transcendence through settled dialectical components. In that sense, selfie art aims to contradict the imagery of high signs. Yet, it displays

[448]Jacques Rancière, "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics," in *Reading Ranciere: Critical Dissensus*, ed. Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 13.

a composite heterogeneity of the countable subjects of democratic imagination and the roles attached to them.

To be sure, self-image making art contributes to alternative imaginaries of the Middle Eastern diaspora in the contemporary art scene and can indeed provide more visibility to different subjectivities non-existent in the mainstream discourse. The discourse of the war on terror and the visual imagination of the antagonism between the good and bad Middle Easterner, as well as the idea of fixed identities based on cultural origin, can be deconstructed by the manifestation of visual complexity in selfie art. While these artistic performances and artworks possess a micro visibility in virtual space, the subject matter of Middle Eastern subjectivity is popular in the current consensual community. Consequently, the selfie-art that they are engaging in still possesses the power to be spread. The way that the political dimension of this art overshadows the aesthetic stance of the artwork, reflects the critique of contemporary art of post-utopic stages and the disidentification across the sublime feeling.

4. CONCLUSION

This study includes a constellation of practices under the umbrella of sublime imagery in contemporary art which coincides with Middle-Eastern self-image making and how such artistic practices of making, displaying and artistic appreciation of images of Middle Easterness are emerging vis-à-vis the current politics of the sublime focusing on terror. The artistic self-imagery that diasporic artists display in the art scene or that institutions on Middle Eastern diaspora share with art audiences constitute a part of communication and memory collecting in inner and larger audience. These diasporic artistic practices change what can be, and is, seen, recorded, discussed and remembered. I argued that there are two principal tendencies in these diasporic artistic practices, one is depicting and exhibiting the "homeland" or "Middle East" in the "West" and the other is depicting the diasporic self in the art scene of contemporary art. I suggested that the genre of hyper-realist tragedy accommodates the first type of subject matter as the narration of the Middle East. The second subject matter of contemporary art practices that I analyzed is the selfie art creation that mostly follows the present and obvious popularity of self-image display in broader visual culture. I study through this research how these artists and diasporic art practices invented and reconfigured current politics in their artistic strategies to intervene in and to employ the reign of the sublime. Here, if I return back to my principal question, can these diasporic artistic expressions of contemporary art contribute to positive change, social justice and equality, in a political context where emancipatory discourses have already been denied in the postmodern imagination? Has contemporary art's power of deconstruction withered away in its encounter with the contemporary politics of terror?

Both art and politics deny to passage of transcendental ideas in this perspective and seek to threaten the Other's subjectivity. In the ethical art regime, however, contemporary politics and

its image lead to the negative pleasure of relief in the face of the danger of self-loss at the end of the sublime sensation. In this paradigm, contemporary art and its democratic affect can be considered weak in the sense that the continual act of remembering the impossibility of transcendence and the obligation of bearing witness to the other as an expression of lack neither lead to positive pleasure (transcendence at the end of the sublime feeling) of the Kantian sublime or negative pleasure (temporary relief from the danger of self-loss) that one can experience in the contemporary politics of terror. The spectator of today is already used to the danger of self-loss both in contemporary politics and art tendency. The glorification of difference and bearing witness to the other, namely the politics of alterity, can push towards nihility through the repetition of the same sublime gesture in art. That is why, Hal Foster asks if the display of a broken society in deconstructive art tactics, is a refusal of power or its reinvention in a new guise or if it is somehow both at once[449]: "If there was a subject of history for the culture of abjection, it was not the worker, the woman, or the person of color, but the corpse[450]".

But neither the depictions of the hyper-realist tragedy of the Middle East nor the selfie art of diasporic Middle Eastern subjectivities represent a victim although they also refer to sublime aesthetics without a framework for future emancipation or without a certainty of knowledge at the end for the spectacle. The hyper-realist tragedy of the Middle East exhibited in the North American art scene and consequent media figurations describes people who display an extraordinary strength and individuality in their challenging life conditions. They are individuals not "corpses" and thereby they are depicted as tragic heroes who can still present "humanity" in the middle of war where the poor conditions of living are assumed not to be favorable in providing opportunities for

[449]Foster, *Bad New Days*, 27.
[450]Ibid.

practicing higher human capacities such as the arts would require. Thus people in different parts of Middle East can still dream, smile, love, build friendship, show hospitality and engage with the high art of tragedy. Although not all the artworks of the hyper-realist tragedy of the Middle East are constructed, produced or displayed by the same people who are depicted in these artworks but by others, namely artists (whether from the Middle Eastern diaspora or not), people as heroes are not objects or victims who cry for help or who desire that their sufferings be represented. Just as in the act of selfie making, the hyper-realist tragedy records daily life in different parts of the Middle East. Distinguishing daily life records in cameras and smart phones in the West, we can see that daily life in Middle East is not horrible but tragic and hence not a banal reflection. People routinely make and store thousands of digital photos recording the eventful mundane everyday in every part of the world. Following the same fashion, Middle Eastern daily encounter with the sublime is artistically depicted and shared for communication and alternative memory making. Thus hyper-realist dimension of tragedy derives from the return of tragedy to daily life and precisely to the daily life of the historically victimized/ criminalized part of the world although tragedy has been acknowledged as an impossible narration since the rise of Platonism in modernism according to Nietzsche. Alaa Abd El Fattah, Egyptian blogger, wrote with other writers from the region about the Arab Spring after five years in order to look back on what they experienced in "the guardian" news[451]:

> But one thing I do remember, one thing I know: the sense of possibility was real. It may have been naive to believe our dream could come true, but it was not foolish to believe that another world was possible. It really was. Or at least that's how I remember it[452].

[451]Alaa Abd El Fattah, "'I Was Terribly Wrong' - Writers Look Back at the Arab Spring Five Years on," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2016, sec. Books, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/23/arab-spring-five-years-on-writers-look-back.
[452]Ibid.

Such kind of tragic setting in depiction corresponds to Nietzsche's reading of tragic art which supports the possibility of a short but happy encounter with what is deemed "unrepresentable" through the engine of the human will even though the human will has always already broken in the current dominant imagination of the human condition. That is why the current tragedy is not a Greek tragedy of the heroes from glorious families and historicity. The human condition does not follow the story of a hero suddenly encountering with misfortune but rather a victim always already broken in life but who still tries to behave as a hero to encounter the sublime. While the settlement of tragic landscape in the Middle East cannot promise an escape for the Middle East's "fate" because of its daily portraying feature, it re-distributes the roles for the actors in the sense that hyper-realist tragedy makes victims heroes and makes them represent the victimhood of all humanity in the post-Enlightenment period. Consequently, it engages in the imagination of universality through the disidentification with the Middle East and the claim for human universal tragedy.

The hyper-realist tragedy of mixed genre differing from the classic hyper-realist depiction[453] converge in several points with each other in their artistic tactics with the selfie art of diasporic artists. Here, the glimpse of the sublime derives from the extreme of banality of the presence of multiple clichés or diverse references that are not appropriate to each other, the extreme of perversion of borders between genres, signs, and referring points, as well as arbitrary narration, illogical casual frames and story-telling. The hyper-realist tragedy of mixed genre accommodates contradictory or unconventional genres for the depiction of the Middle East. In my study, I observed several combinations of comedy, the erotic, science-fiction and fantasy as well as cult genre with the high art of tragedy in depicting the sublime experience in these artworks. Such a

[453]For more info, please refer to subchapter "Middle Eastern Cinema of the Hyper-Tragedy Era" in Chapter 2

juxtaposition can be considered as a freedom from meaning and the absence of a truth register in the virtue of reflecting ways of border-free Middle Eastern stories. But it is also a claim of universality through disidentification. This fluidity of excess is also present in the selfie art of the diaspora where the artists become artworks to express their own subjectivities. The game of dialectics in the sense of the use of assumed contrasted traits or signs without promising transcendence becomes the generic artistic tactic in self-image making. It juxtaposes stereotypical signs of identity to dissolve them to absurdity so that there is no more Middle Easterner versus Westerner, Arab man versus Gay man, the Girl in a chador versus the Girl on a skateboard. Such a tactic of excessive signs and this contradictory juxtaposition resist not by deconstruction, but by reproducing the symbols of oppression in excess. Their way of self-expression possesses an archival character on an individual basis, their selfies are individualized versions of memory for storage and communication. Hence selfie art has a tendency to diversify visuality and attachments to the visual imagery of roles and actors seen in the consensual system. In the same fashion, artists of selfie art are drawn to information lost or suppressed on diaspora and to a different understanding of Middle Eastern diasporic traits and "they seek to make it physically present once more[454]" in their own design. I already remarked that, as in the case of self-identified Muslim art practices, this selfie design can aim to reach inner diasporic communities and its circles or beyond. In either way, regardless of the target spectacle, selfie art terrorizes through threatening subjectivity's integrity of what is assumed of an identity in contemporary politics and imagery.

To be sure, the mimesis between contemporary arts and politics in their sublime register becomes mimicry as the artistic trends that I examined in this study reproduce the sublime through bearing witness to alterity in excess and even in absurdity or in showing the mundane beauty of

[454]Foster, *Bad New Days*, 32.

the daily encounter with sublime. Foster[455] states that in contemporary art, there is also a tendency to mimic the "terroristic politics around us" however, "this mimesis is heightened, even exacerbated, to the point of mimicry.[456]" Here, mimesis connotes a kind of mocking through miming so that the total work of art is turned from its initial ideal, a utopian reintegration of the human senses to a contemporary actuality, a dystopian confusion of spectacle and death[457]". That is why, for Foster, mimetic exacerbation is created through excess and not through withdrawal and this refers, "to survive civilization than to exult in its degradation[458]". This is staying alive and with pleasure in the middle of self-loss. In fact, such a stance across the sublime does not reflect a negative pleasure as in the case of contemporary of politics where the only pleasure is a temporary relief from the danger of self-loss. Here, self-loss refers to finding humanity again, discovering it through its very basic universal human traits. As Danto defines the immorality of the beautiful in the aesthetics of the after, "if there is to be art, it should not be beautiful, since the world as it is does not deserve beauty" and "beautifiers are, so to speak, collaborationists"[459]. Thus, these artistic gestures of the diaspora from the Middle East provoke an artistic pleasure of beauty that is assumed to be no longer morally acceptable in depicting the human condition. In the trends and examples that I study through the case of Middle Eastern diasporic art, survival requires pleasure in the sublime feeling. While such an artistic stance does not promote a futuristic emancipatory plan, it embraces transcendence from the very beginning in humanity not in the future to come. In this case, the encounter with the sublime can generate a brief but positive pleasure. Such an experience with the sublime is beautiful and universally sharable because it does not bear witness to difference

[455]Ibid., 2.
[456]Ibid., 78.
[457]Ibid.
[458]Ibid., 96.
[459]Arthur C. Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty: The Paul Carus Lectures 21*, 21st edition (Chicago, Ill: Open Court, 2003), 118.

but instead reflects commonality like the Kantian conception of the beautiful. This derives from the fact that the universality of the aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful in Kant forms a surplus in the current partition of the sensible, namely a Rancierian dissensus moment where not only the high class of intellectual capacity but the laboring classes too are assumed to be capable of enjoying the beautiful.

The political begins when one is no longer the representative of a particular local, religious, or social community. For Rancière, politics only exists for those who have the ability to fake one's own suffering, to make it into a mask, a fable that can be shared beyond fear and pity: "the person who suffers in truth undergoes a different suffering than we do not share his pain.[460]" In the current consensus, it follows that only intellectuals, artists or social workers are assumed to be political in the traditional sense because they can talk on behalf of the masses and are concerned with others' suffering: "the political, in this sense, is drawn from tragedy" and, "It is the capacity of anyone to concern himself with shared affairs and to put aside one's ordinary language and small sufferings, and to appropriate the language and suffering of others[461]." In the diasporic art of Middle Easterness in this study, the victim becomes the hero and the other becomes concerned about representing the universal instead of reclaiming only their own suffering. These artistic practices claim universality because of all human beings who inevitably encounter the sublime in the current acknowledgement of the human condition are beautiful.

There are two conditions for these artistic tactics that I study here to become ethical rather than political engagement: First, the artistic appreciation of the hyper-realist tragedy of the Middle East or the selfie art of diasporic Middle Easterness can be regarded as the act of bearing witness

[460]Ranciere, *Moments Politiques*, 32.
[461]Ibid., 50.

to the other, to the other's suffering in the reign of chaos far away from the West. Secondly, selfie art juxtaposes diverse contradictory framework of signs: both artist and artwork can be considered to reflect the consensual arrangement of identities, roles and role-players already distributed in the system to remedy the disputes and interest contestations between them. As Rancière emphasized, "acting as a citizen is not about defending one's culture or one's group but culture is always a form of dis-identification, the possibility of speaking a language other than the language of one's ancestors, one's social group, or one's interest group"[462]. In such cases of artistic appreciation on ethical grounds, diasporic art practices on Middle Easterness would only re-legitimize the current partition of the sensible and would not form a dissensus. In such case, artists are assumed only allowed to speak in the name of an identity that they must act out which is the position of the Other.

During my discussions with my interviewees, the intention of producing universally communicable art has been articulated several times. However, my interviewees also expressed the difficulty of achieving such an artistic intention under the banner of Middle Easterness. The difficulty stems from the fact that the subject matter already owns a referent system in the global imagery and these works of art re-cycle the dominant framework of signs present in contemporary politics. As such, some of interviewees pronounced their wish to shift the subject matter to "do art" because their diasporic or Middle Eastern identity is mostly acknowledged as the proof that they represent a specific group or community. They want to present themselves as individuals or as common humanity. Yet, the popularity of the Middle Eastern subject and Middle Eastern subjectivities provides a distinguishing visibility to the artistic practices on this issue. Therefore, while contemporary art is less effective in comparison to the mass media's capacity to spread

[462] Ibid., 73.

visual culture, any artwork on the Middle East or Middle Easterness can attract more attention to produce alternative registers.

In light of the study that I conducted on contemporary art through a case study of diasporic art and artists on Middle Easterness, I argue that today's contemporary art seeks to affirm more than a withdrawal from the representation of the ideal and the design of emancipation. When I return to the former question posed by Groys on the position of contemporary art via the politics of terror, if the images of terror which encompass the reflection of the high sign that the spectators miss after the decline of the truth register in the aesthetics of the after, I agree that contemporary art also re-designs its trajectory. In that sense, the ethical command of sublime in the present politics of terror designates a specific account of restriction on geographic borders, identities, interests and the danger of self-loss behind it, on the other side, contemporary art returns to the beautiful and its universal claim for appreciation. That is because my case study indicates to the argument that it is possible to do art after the fall of humanity in the sublime. As such, diasporic art practices on the Middle East and Middle Easterness tend to escape from the aesthetics of the postmodern sublime in order to explore the beautiful in humanity's encounter with the sublime. In order to revive the sublime, art revisits tragedy to pursue positive pleasure. Thus, the pleasure in tragedy, as Nietzsche glorified, comes from the realization of human beings' good fortune at being alive as a part of a universal life force and procreative lust. Nietzsche already refuted the Socratic maxims that state that virtue is knowledge; that all sins arise from ignorance; or that only the virtuous are happy; and he concluded that these optimistic Socratic formulations already spelled the death of tragedy in the modern era. Today the belief in human knowledge is known as a past event in the time of the post-Enlightenment. All that has been left to do is to not mourn anymore for it. Perhaps the re-birth of tragedy is what we have been waiting for in art…

While the re-birth of tragedy offers no punctual revolutionary event, it does, I argue, declares the end of postmodern sublime and hence the decline of postmodernism. Following the cue of diasporic art practices that address the subject matter of Middle Easterness around the contemporary politics in the age of terror, this research presents that the current contemporary art in its present stage identifies a mode of political becoming rather than an ethical call. Broadly speaking, the end of postmodern sublime has been notified by the desecration of the required openness to the Other with accompanying debts, responsibilities and solidarities. Here, the artistic conceptualization of commonality does not reside in togetherness of aliens on the basis of difference. It does not derive from the ideal of multiculturalism. It does not prioritize leading the sensibility regarding the non-subject, the bare life or the non-citizen. What this implies is that the artistic commitment with sublime encounter seeks positive pleasure at the end. That is why there is a passage from the sublime to the beautiful here in depicting the universality of human condition to embrace the sublime event. Everyone acknowledges today the global political reality of our time is terrible, it is not hidden fact to be revealed through deconstruction, consequently the negation of universals is not radical anymore. As a matter of fact, contemporary art connotative of Middle Easterness engages with universality again after the decline of modernism but this time it is through the very basic universal human traits of being part of a universal life force and procreative lust and not through the capacities for knowledge. In my view, the challenge to move away from the banal imagery of misery on Middle Easterness in this period of escalading humanitarian crises and xenophobic policies lays out a creative act of political becoming instead of ethical urgency in contemporary art.

Of course, this trend of re-birth of tragedy can be also detected in other current examples of art and popular culture that this research does not encompass. For sure, the end of postmodernism with the decline of postmodern sublime in contemporary art cannot ultimately be isolated from the related engagements in contemporary politics. Looking ahead, in the wake of this dissertation's completion, the need is especially acute in working on innovative approaches to artistic practices at this time in the age of terror. Art never really reaches any destination and never knows a dead end; art survives with pleasure.

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