

Translating Destruction

Contemporary Art & War in the Middle East

A symposium organized by Nasser Rabbat, Aga Khan Professor, and Suheyla Takesh, graduate student, and sponsored by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT

FRIDAY **APRIL 27, 2018** AND SATURDAY **APRIL 28, 2018** IN MIT ROOM 6-120



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War ravages countries, cities, communities, and individuals. Its destructive effects linger in the collective consciousness for generations. Artists have been at the vanguard of societal responses to war and violence, recording and reflecting on its causes, impacts, meanings, and traumatic consequences and exploring means to deal with them.

This symposium will probe the different ways in which contemporary artists are engaging the wars and upheavals afflicting the Middle East today and explore the formal, conceptual, and theoretical dimensions that underpin their work.



Program

FRIDAY, APRIL 27, PANEL 1, 2:00 PM - 5:30 PM. ROOM 6-120.

INTRODUCTION AND PANEL 1

2:00 INTRODUCTION
Nasser Rabbat & Suheyyla Takesh

CHAIR: Lauren Jacobi, MIT

2:30 *Horace Vernet and the Pitfalls of Painting Empire*
Katie Hornstein
Dartmouth College

The Afterlife of Destruction: A Case of Resilience in Art Making

Ginane Makki Bacho
Artist, Beirut, Lebanon

3:30 Discussion

3:45 Coffee

4:15 *Drawing on Erasure*
Issam Kourbaj
Artist, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Activating the Past & Acting on the Present: Art in the Age of Perpetual Warfare

Pamela Karimi
University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth

5:15 Discussion

Program

SATURDAY, APRIL 28, PANEL 2, 9:30 AM - 12:15 PM & PANEL 3, 2:00 PM - 5:15 PM. MIT ROOM 6-120.

PANEL 2

CHAIR: Kristel Smentek, MIT

9:30 *Wild Relatives*
Jumana Manna
Artist, Berlin, Germany

Border Crossings: Artistic Response to the War on Immigrants

Shiva Balaghi
Berggruen Institute

10:30 Discussion

10:45 Coffee

11:00 *The Making of Disruptive Images*
Abed Al-Kadiri
Artist, Beirut, Lebanon

Sharing Wounds: Reconfiguring Trauma through Dissent

Jessica Winegar
Northwestern University

12:00 Discussion

12:15 LUNCH

PANEL 3 AND CONCLUSION

CHAIR: Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, Northeastern Univ.

2:00 *Antiquities with Agency: Gods and Kings in Recent Arab Cartoons*
Jonathan Guyer
Harvard University

Contemporary Art, Cultural Destruction and the Perils of 'Cyber Archaeology'

Chad Elias
Dartmouth College

3:00 Discussion

3:15 Coffee

3:45 *This Botany of Death is What We Call Culture*
Hannah Feldman
Northwestern University

Dynamic Preservation: Music, Art, and the Maintenance of Living Meaning

Wendy Shaw
Free University of Berlin

4:45 Discussion

5:00 CONCLUSION
Nasser Rabbat & Suheyyla Takesh

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Abed Al-Kadiri
Artist, Beirut, Lebanon

The Making of Disruptive Images

Abstract

How can painting address complex socio-political and historical issues, and does it have the ability to challenge the viewer intellectually and emotionally? This presentation will highlight my practice as a painter, and my engagement with socio-political events in the contemporary moment in the Middle East, as well as the role of mass media imagery, on television and social media, that have normalized and neutralized the violent acts they depict.

Three major projects will illustrate these ideas and my continuing focus on topics such as imprisonment, freedom, war, destruction of cultural heritage, and migration. These include *Abu Ghraib (2005-2006)*, a reaction against the widespread circulation of horrific images of acts of torture and the dehumanization of the Other; *Al-Maqama 2014 (2014-2015)*, a deep immersion into the impact of the destruction of artifacts in Iraq and Syria by ISIL; and *Ashes to the Sea (2015-2017)*, which deals with the migration of peoples across the Mediterranean Sea.

Biography

Born in Beirut, Abed Al Kadiri double majored in Arabic Literature and Fine Arts at the Lebanese University. His work focuses on the deprivation of freedom in society through an analysis of contemporary issues of violence, cultural heritage, migration and belonging. Between 2006 and 2015, Al Kadiri contributed to the Kuwaiti contemporary art scene as an art critic, before establishing the FA Gallery in 2010. Between 2012 and 2015, he was the Director of Contemporary Art Platform (CAP) Kuwait, a leading non-profit arts institution in the Middle East. He is currently residing in Beirut, working as a full-time artist, and completing his Master's Degree in Painting. Al Kadiri has had solo exhibitions in Beirut, Kuwait and Bahrain. He has also participated in group exhibitions in Istanbul, Paris, Basel, Cambridge, Budapest, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Qatar, and Beirut. His work can be found in private and public collections in the Middle East.



Shiva Balaghi
Berggruen Institute

Border Crossings: Artistic Response to the War on Immigrants

Abstract

Crafted by Stephen Miller and Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's war on immigration is a cornerstone of his presidency. Trump's proposal to build a wall and his attempts to implement a "Muslim Ban" have galvanized American public opinion around the question of immigrants. The art world has been quick to respond, with public letters, street protests, and special exhibitions. A new culture war has emerged, one that is largely being played out through the politics of representation. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai noted, the global movement of immigrants entails "the work of the imagination." In my presentation, I trace the ways leading American artists, immigrants from Muslim majority countries, have reimagined this contentious politics through their art.

Biography

Shiva Balaghi is Program Director at the Berggruen Institute. For nearly two decades, she taught at NYU and Brown University, helping to introduce the subject of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art to the US academy. Her curatorial projects include co-curating a retrospective of Iran's leading sculptor Parviz Tanavoli at Wellesley's Davis Museum, and curating Ghada Amer's first exhibit in the Arab World in two decades at Dubai's Al-Serkal Avenue. She has published *Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution* and written widely on visual culture for museums, such as the Guggenheim, San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Andy Warhol Museum, and for publications like *Artforum*, *Ibraaz*, and *Hyperallergic*. She received her PhD in cultural history from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.



Chad Elias
Dartmouth College

*Contemporary Art, Cultural Destruction
and the Perils of ‘Cyber Archaeology’*

Abstract

Project Mosul, an EU-funded initiative to “preserve the memory of lost cultural heritage through the means of digital restoration,” makes use of photographs and videos that are crowdsourced on the Internet. Undertakings of this type suggest that digital technologies like 3D printing can offer a technological solution to the purposeful erasure of cultural heritage. Yet, what is largely missing from ‘cyber archaeology’ is a theoretical discussion of how contemporary methods of reproduction serve to alter notions of medium-and site-specificity and the symbolic value that is traditionally assigned to original artifacts. In her project *Material Speculation: ISIS* (2015-16), the artist Moreshin Allahyari uses 3D modeling and printing technologies to create digital replicas of ancient statues that were destroyed by the Islamic State. Modeled from dozens of photographs sourced through digital networks, Allahyari’s copies are dispersed on the Internet as computer files which can be freely modified and printed out by members of the public. In this paper, I will explore how artistic appropriations of 3D printing tools serve to challenge both the fetish value assigned to cultural artifacts by the museum, and the attendant commercial value that these objects acquire in the art market. Indeed, as digital recreations of destroyed ancient artifacts proliferate in the political sphere and increasingly become the subject of proprietorial claims, Allahyari’s work raises critical questions about what it means for museums or corporations to take custody and commercial ownership of digital replicas of destroyed or imperiled cultural heritage.

Biography

Chad Elias is an Assistant Professor in the Art History Department at Dartmouth College. A graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program and Northwestern University, his writings have appeared in such journals as *Artforum*, *Film Quarterly*, *photographies* and *Tate Papers*. His book, *Posthumous Images: Contemporary Art and Memory Politics in Post-civil War Lebanon*, will be published in 2018 by Duke University Press.



Hannah Feldman
Northwestern University

This Botany of Death is What We Call Culture

Abstract

Borrowing its title and provocation from the opening voiceover of Chris Marker and Alain Resnais’ 1953 *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, this talk considers what our conference conveners refer to as the “ethics of intervention” in relationship to “conflict-driven artistic work” by focusing on the risk that culture takes in making of death and violence a science and, conversely, that art takes in making of violence a cultural—although not necessarily consumer—product, as per the focus of Marker and Resnais’s seminal film essay. To do so, the talk focuses specifically on the mechanisms of exposition that are mobilized to link the event of violence to the communicative event that is responsible for its translation and further dissemination as (a potential) truth. Principle amongst these are voice, speech, and narrated testimony, all three of which are here studied in Lawrence Abu-Hamdan’s multi-media, sonic “investigations” of torture, imposed religious conversion as a consequence of military occupation, and the policing of border control. While the artist advocates a politics of listening in an “all-seeing” world, consideration is here given to the specific resistances that silence and other non-verifiable data might afford.

Biography

Hannah Feldman is associate professor of art history at Northwestern University, where she is also a core faculty in the Program of Middle Eastern and North African Studies and the Program of Comparative Literary Studies, as well as affiliate faculty in the Department of Art Theory and Practice. The author of *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962*, she was an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation New Directions Fellow for the years 2015-2017, and is currently working on a new manuscript about temporality and historiography in and about art from the Levantine Middle East. Her work on aesthetics and geopolitical conflict has appeared in numerous edited volumes, journals, art critical magazines, and exhibition catalogues published both nationally and internationally.



Jonathan Guyer
Harvard University

Antiquities with Agency: Gods and Kings in Recent Arab Cartoons

Abstract

In recent political cartoons and graphic narratives, ancient characters have been brought to life to critique present-day actors. This presentation will consider contemporary Arab cartoonists' interventions about antiquity and its neglect and destruction in the Middle East, focusing on works from Iraq and Egypt. The Iraqi cartoonist Abdel Raheem Yassir has chronicled ISIS's rise and devastation of heritage sites in Iraq and Syria in his lyrical line drawings for the daily Al-Sabah newspaper. Noteworthy are cartoons about Nineveh's destruction in 2015, in which a lamassu battles ISIS. This tactic of bringing to life ancient figures for political ends has taken on a different form in Egypt. Several Egyptian cartoonists drawing for the Al-Masry Al-Youm newspaper have illustrated pharaohs to criticize authorities and their neglect of antiquities. In particular, I will look at how cartoonists addressed the King Tut fake beard incident in 2015 and the discovery of a colossal in Matariya in 2017. In a close reading of cartoons of gods and kings, this paper will consider the representation of identity, power, and politics, and how cartoonists use humor to reflect on the ruination of ancient artifacts and the built environment.

Biography

Jonathan Guyer is currently a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and a contributing editor of the Cairo Review of Global Affairs. He has written for the Art Newspaper, Guernica, Harper's, Los Angeles Review of Books, Modern Painters, Le Monde diplomatique, New Yorker, New York Review Daily, New York Times, Paris Review, and Rolling Stone, among others. His research has been supported by fellowships from Fulbright (2012–2013) and the Institute of Current World Affairs (2015–2017).



Katie Hornstein
Dartmouth College

Horace Vernet and the Pitfalls of Painting Empire

Abstract

Over the course of the 1830s and 1840s, Horace Vernet (1789-1863) produced a series of monumental battle paintings that represented the French army's progressively bloody campaign to colonize Algeria. Works such as the Siege of Constantine (1839), the Capture of the Smalah (1845), and the Battle of Isly (1846) were commissioned by the French government and were produced in the hopes of valorizing a contemporary colonial war for the express political benefit of the reigning monarch, King Louis-Philippe, who was a close friend of Vernet's and had been one of his earliest and most prolific patrons. This paper will read Vernet's battle paintings against the grain: while not taking for granted that these pictures were intended as propaganda and anchored their visual language in standard orientalist tropes, I will argue that these monumental canvases also disclosed the uncertainties, contingencies, and pitfalls of France's conquest of Algeria. My analysis will primarily concern Vernet's final canvas, The Battle of Isly, which was widely criticized in the press for its lack of a coherent center of action and its overreliance on seemingly insignificant details and episodes.

Biography

Professor Hornstein is a specialist of nineteenth-century French art and visual culture. Her teaching and research interests include the history of war imagery, nineteenth-century technologies of visual reproduction (print media and photography) and their interaction with more established media, such as painting, the rise of early mass culture, reception theory and history, nineteenth-century material culture, and most recently, the representation of animals. Professor Hornstein's current book project, *Leonine Encounters in Nineteenth-Century France*, examines how visual representations of lions provided the basis for approaching a very human set of questions, including most notably issues related to sovereignty, empire and spectacle. Her book *Picturing War in France, 1792-1856*, came out from Yale University Press in early 2018.



Pamela Karimi

University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth

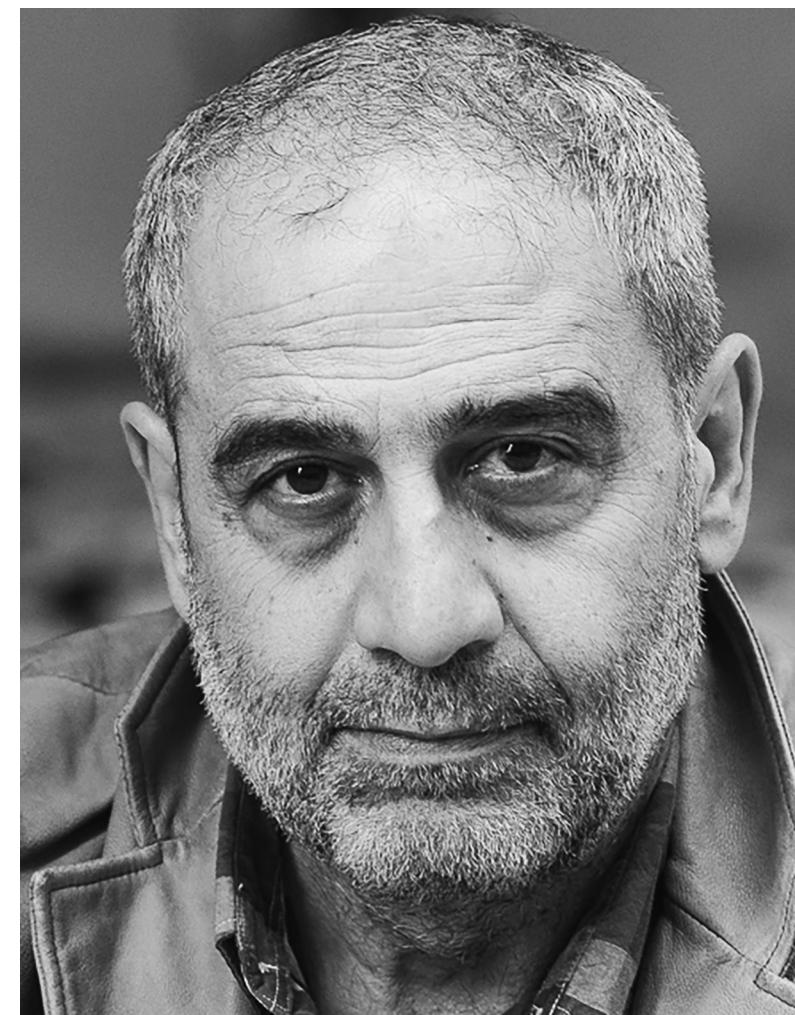
*Activating the Past & Acting on the Present:
Art in the Age of Perpetual Warfare*

Abstract

This presentation focuses on the work of a select number of contemporary Iranian artists who have responded to the recent conflicts in the Middle East. I show how these artists appropriate images and memories from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) to reconstruct the horrible realities of today's refugees, and the destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS. Merging personal experiences of a previous war with today's conflicts, these artists encourage their viewers to contemplate the devastating effects of perpetual warfare in the region.

Biography

Pamela Karimi is an Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Massachusetts. She has received her PhD from MIT in 2009. Her primary field of specialization is art, architecture, and visual culture of the modern Middle East. Her second area of research is design and sustainability in North America. She is the author of *Domesticity and Consumer Culture in Iran: Interior Revolutions of the Modern Era* and co-editor of *Images of the Child and Childhood in Modern Muslim Contexts*; *Reinventing the American Post-Industrial City*; and *The Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the Middle East: From Napoleon to ISIS*. She has published numerous essays and reviews and lectured widely about the modern and contemporary art of the Middle East. Her major curatorial projects include *Urban Renewal and Creative Economy*, *Stateless: Artists Respond to the Refugee Crisis*, and *Black Spaces Matter: Exploring the Aesthetics and Architectonics of an Abolitionist Neighborhood*. Co-founder of *Aggregate Architectural History Collaborative*, Karimi also serves on the board of the *Association of Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey*.



Issam Kourbaj

Artist, Cambridge, United Kingdom

Drawing on Erasure

Abstract

Issam Kourbaj will give an illustrated talk about his life and recent body of work, created in response to the ongoing destruction of Syria. *Dark Water, Burning World*—on display at Rotch Library, MIT for the duration of the symposium—is both a response to the Syrian tragedy, and a reinterpretation of 5th Century BCE Syrian vessels at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. It touches on the visible and invisible scars of loss scorched onto many Syrians. The work was on view at the Jameel Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum, as part of Refugee Week in 2017.

Kourbaj's installations have been displayed in various museums and festivals globally, and are currently on display at the Penn Museum, USA as part of *Cultures in the Crossfire: Stories from Syria and Iraq*, at the British Museum, as part of *Living with Gods* and at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge part of *Actions*. The image of the world can be different.

Biography

Issam Kourbaj comes from a background of fine art, architecture and theatre design. He was born in Syria and trained at the Institute of Fine Arts in Damascus, the Repin Institute of Fine Arts & Architecture in Leningrad (St Petersburg), and at Wimbledon School of Art in London. Since 1990, he has lived and worked in Cambridge, eventually becoming an Artist in Residence at Christ's College and a Bye-Fellow (2007-2011), where he is now the Lector in Art. He is interested in bridging sciences and humanities, and has produced work using different forms of Camera Obscura, inspired by Ibn Al-Haytham's work on optics. His work has been widely exhibited and collected. Most recently, his work was featured in several museums around the world: Fitzwilliam Museum, Classical Archaeology Museum, Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, Penn Museum in Philadelphia, and British Museum and the V&A in London. Since 2011, his artwork has responded to the Syrian crisis and reflected on the suffering of the Syrian people and the destruction of their cultural heritage.



Ginane Makki Bacho

Artist, Beirut, Lebanon

The Afterlife of Destruction: A Case of Resilience in Art Making

Abstract

This paper will focus on my artistic journey over the last few decades, beginning with a shrapnel I found at my home in Beirut after intense bombing in 1982, and leading up to more recent work on ISIS. My work engages with themes of violence and trauma by making use of material that has been discarded. The series Civilization navigates the line between public and private acts of violence, whereby barbaric actions including the invasion of my home with a destructive shrapnel, are restaged using iron and metal scrap. I find the re-enactment of violent acts to be necessary in order to come to terms with a vicious reality, since ISIS often appears to be an abstract concept that is communicated to viewers through news channels and online platforms. My paper will argue that these re-enactments are forms of resilience and resistance against an abstract form of violence or an aggressor. Since the aggressor is often detached from our everyday experiences, I recreated an afterlife of destruction, using the process of welding to transform scrap or residual elements into sculptural works.

Biography

Born in Beirut, Ginane Makki Bacho is a multimedia artist whose work offers a unique perspective on the disruptive and brutal effects of the Lebanese civil war and ongoing wars in the contemporary world. Her attention to narrative detail is reflected in her collage paintings, which piece together personal experiences with broader socio-political events. Similarly, her steel sculptural works are highly biographical, being built from the collected twisted shrapnel that nearly destroyed her Beirut apartment in 1982. Her more recent work explores the violence afflicting the Middle East through her series of metal sculptures that demonstrate acts of resilience and resistance. Makki Bacho holds a BFA from the Lebanese American University, Beirut and an MFA in Printmaking and Painting from the Pratt Institute, New York. She has held numerous solo exhibitions in Beirut, and participated in group exhibitions in Lebanon, London, Kuwait and Egypt.



Jumana Manna

Artist, Berlin, Germany

Wild Relatives

Abstract

Manna's talk will focus on the questions and research around her latest film, *Wild Relatives*: Deep in the earth beneath Arctic permafrost, seeds from all over the world are stored in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to provide a backup should disaster strike. *WILD RELATIVES* starts from an event that has sparked media interest worldwide: an international agricultural research center was forced to relocate from Aleppo to Lebanon due to the Syrian Revolution turned war, and began a laborious process of planting their seed collection from the Svalbard back-ups. Following the path of this transaction of seeds between the Arctic and Lebanon, a series of encounters unfold a matrix of human and non-human lives. The film captures the articulation between this large-scale international initiative and its local implementation in the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, carried out primarily by young migrant women; teasing out tensions between state and individual, industrial and organic approaches to seed saving, climate change and biodiversity, witnessed through the journey of these seeds.

Biography

Jumana Manna is a Palestinian artist working primarily with film and sculpture. Her work explores how power is articulated through relationships, often focusing on the body and materiality in relation to narratives of state building, and histories of place. Manna received a BFA from the National Academy of Arts in Oslo and an MA in Aesthetics and Politics from California Institute of the Arts. She has participated in multiple festivals and exhibitions, including CPH:DOX, Rotterdam and Berlinale film festivals; Tate Modern, SculptureCenter NYC and the 57th Venice Biennale. Manna was awarded the A.M. Qattan Foundation's Young Palestinian Artist Award in 2012, the Ars Viva Prize for Visual Arts, and was nominated for the Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst in 2017.



Wendy Shaw
Free University of Berlin

Dynamic Preservation: Music, Art, and the Maintenance of Living Meaning

Abstract

In Phaedrus, Socrates expresses a distaste for static writing over living speech. Yet he knew that Plato was recording his dialogues. For him, the apparent permanence of text hid the potential loss of the ideas embedded in it. Similarly, Islamic commentators often understood permanence as residing not in material, but in the transfer of meaning. The more we focus on preservation only as the maintenance of objects, the less we tend to consider how the ideas they contain shift. The very same object comes to contain a multitude of ideas, prone to conflict. Yet over the course of time, no set of ideas giving an object meaning is likely to remain valid.

In contrast to art historical preservation, which focuses on the well-being of the object, musical history relies on performative recycling. While scores and instruments can be physically preserved, engagement with music requires enactment in the present tense. Likewise, artists who engage with historical works renew their meanings, recycling history and offering reflections of meaning onto the past. This presentation will use music as a model for the dynamic preservation produced through the dialogue of modern and contemporary arts with preserved objects. It proposes a model of preservation that values the intangible within the tangible as a movement that transcends physical bodies.

Biography

Wendy M. K. Shaw (PhD, UCLA, 1999) is Professor of the Art History of Islamic Cultures at the Free University of Berlin. She is the author of *Possessors and Possessed: Museums, Archaeology, and the Visualization of History in the Late Ottoman Empire* (University of California Press, 2003), *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (IB Tauris, 2012); and *What is "Islamic" Art: Between Religion and Perception* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Her articles explore the intersection between modernity, colonialism, postcoloniality, philosophy, and faith in the Islamic world through museums, art historiography, archaeology, religion, photography and art.



Jessica Winegar
Northwestern University

Sharing Wounds: Reconfiguring Trauma through Dissent

Abstract

This paper explores the art of Adham Hafez, an Egypt-based performer, choreographer, and music composer, in relationship to the political and social turmoil in Egypt that led up to and followed the 2011 uprising. Hafez's bodily practice highlights the multiple ways that the uprising was a rejection of various assaults on the body rendered by the Egyptian state, colonialism, and global capitalism. Through sound, costume, movement, light, and structure, he investigates (and thereby insists upon) the historical and global interconnections of various violent forces and how they work in and through bodies. This paper takes a capacious approach to Hafez's work, including attention to his social media postings and emails, to investigate how an artist experiences violence in its multiple (often less obvious) forms and transforms these experiences into grounds for transformative artistic practice. Through a focus on the ways that Hafez reconfigures the senses, and relations between the body and language, the paper suggests how performance—construed broadly beyond the spaces of Art—can be a site of dissensus that creates dynamic resonance between bodies—in Tahrir Square and beyond. But it also recognizes when dissensus is impossible, when assaults shut down the productive capacities of the body and of art itself.

Biography

Jessica Winegar is the Harold H. and Virginia Anderson Chair and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern. She is the author of numerous articles on arts and culture in/of the Middle East, with a number of recent writings on Egypt's uprising. Her book *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, 2006), won the Albert Hourani award for best book in Middle East studies, and the Arnold Rubin award for best book on African arts. She is also the co-author, with Lara Deeb, of *Anthropology's Politics: Discipline and Region through the Lens of the Middle East* (Stanford, 2015). She was the Virtual Gallery curator for ArteEast for five years, and is currently the Chair of the Editorial Committee of Middle East Report.



Metal artwork by Ginane Makki-Bacho