

**Patrick Kane on Susan Noyes Platt, *Art and Politics Now: Cultural Activism in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2010). 310 pages.**

The Arab Spring of 2011 confirmed the commitment of artists throughout the Arab countries to democratic and social reform. The specific condition of artistic agency and socially committed political activism has varied according to the space of agency accorded and created by artists against authoritarian regimes and structures. The form of art in such an engagement had to be carefully coordinated with other groups, including human rights activists and lawyers.

For example, the response of *Kefaya*, (*Enough*) the reformist Egyptian art group in rallying attention over the past decade to expose authoritarianism's flaws and weakness, must be seen in the growing coordination and conscious organization of widespread mass resistance to the Mubarak regime that preceded the Arab Spring. It was *Kefaya* that helped draw attention to the textile workers' protests in September of 2007 at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company complex at Mahalla al-Kubra in the Nile Delta. Long before the Arab Spring of 2011, the integration of social media with art and labor allowed workers to post blogs that cross-referenced the more better known 3Arabawy blog by Hossam el-Hamalawy.<sup>1</sup>

Susan Platt's *Art and Politics Now* presents a survey of contemporary social activism in the arts by cataloguing the range of opposition movements around the globe, beginning in the 1970s, but with emphasis on the past decade. Platt has been a professor of art history at various colleges and is a self-described activist based in Seattle. Organized into ten chapters, the book represents a range of artistic responses to authoritarian and institutionalized racism in the era of late globalism and neo-liberalism. Selected chapters on "Women, War and Imperialism," and "Exposing Racism," offer critiques of the intersecting conflict between feminism and an expansive state led militarism. Lila Abdul's performance *White House* (2006), for the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition "Global Feminism," is denoted as an attempt to subvert the representation of American power with a portrayal by the artist of scenes of destruction in Kabul. In the interest of space, I shall confine my review to a discussion of those chapters that analyze contemporary art of the Middle East, although there are brief but useful treatments in Chapter One of American grassroots opposition to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and in Chapter Two of photographic exhibits protesting the abuses by American forces at Abu Ghraib. Chapter Three, "Resisting Police States" compares the individual resistance of Antoni Tàpies in post-Francoist Spain to Latin American artists' responses to a reordering of society in the wake of post-regime politics in the 1970s in Spain, Argentina, and Chile. A discussion of the works by Turkish artists Erdağ Aksel and Hale Tenger offers a further comparison with the position of intellectuals active in Chile or Argentina at around the same time. The sculptural projects of Aksel in the 1980s were directly aimed at

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See Joel Beinin, "The Militancy of Mahalla al-Kubra," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, September 29, 2007. Web. May 8, 2011.

mimicking the instrumentality of state torture. Tenger's multimedia installations made in the 1990s allowed a feminist critique of the patriarchal relations of state and gendered repression. This chapter concludes with a reflection on Fernando Botero's series of paintings on Abu Ghraib that offered a retrospective on the painter's own experience and artistic commentary on repression and conditions in his native Columbia. Further, Platt shows how the Philadelphia-based artist, Daniel Heyman, and the photographer Trevor Paglen, critically reevaluated the use of Abu Ghraib or Black Sites for detention, torture and interrogation by US security forces. In Heyman's choice to humanize the victims of torture, and in Paglen's project of revealing the space of detention, each unveils deep contradictions within state sanctioned operations in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. In contrast to the critical theorization of the use of torture by democratic states that others have begun to postulate, Platt's discussion is too brief.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter Six, "Political Interventions at the International Exhibitions," discusses the politics of the Istanbul Biennials from the 1990s to 2007. Platt suggests a critical series of reflections and participatory engagement allowed the participants in the Istanbul Biennial to reframe a curatorial approach. A discourse through contemporary art emerged in the recent evolution of the Istanbul Biennial that overturned the Orientalist assumptions about the West and East, modern and traditional forms or exclusion of Turkish and other regional artists. However, the actual role of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and the Arts (IKSV) in the planning of these curatorial decisions is not mentioned or developed. Platt discusses how the Istanbul Biennial had formerly been dominated by a nationalist paradigm through the mid-1990s, but increasingly sought a more international and presumably cosmopolitan direction by offering the curatorship to non-Turks. The results were to promote a series of Istanbul Biennials at a crossroads for the arts that bore parallels with Turkey's rising secular middle class and its own campaign for EU recognition. For the 10<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennial of 2007, Chinese curator, Hou Hanru, selected a wide array of artistic contributions that reflected upon globalization, urban migration, and the contrasts and potential of modern Turkish experience.

Chapter Seven, titled "The Middle East: Art Exhibitions and Cultural Activism 2002-2009," reviews art exhibitions from what Platt labels as the so-called "Axis of Evil." These exhibitions were organized in large part as a conscious effort to counter the prevailing ideology of American empire. Several dozen works by artists from Iraq and Palestine were included in the exhibition *Art Across the Borders* (2002-2004), organized at the Babylon Cultural Center in Minneapolis, and produced by peace activists opposed to the US invasion of Iraq. What is instructive about the discussion of this exhibition is the difficulty of locating space and support for such an exhibition in the years immediately following 9/11. Given the intransigence of the large cultural institutions and venues, it forced a reliance on a small number of individually committed citizens with limited resources. A survey of related and successive art exhibitions is presented, including a discussion of the *Made in Palestine* exhibition that showed in Houston, Texas from 2003-2006; *Three Cities against the Wall: Ramallah / Tel Aviv / New York*, on

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2 For a critical appraisal of the choice of states to use torture, see Darius M. Rejali, *Torture and Democracy*. (Princeton University Press, 2009).

display in New York in 2005; *Secrets*, a collaborative exhibition of video installations from Palestine that appeared at venues in Boulder, Chicago, and in partial form at six other U.S. venues from 2006-2008.<sup>3</sup> Several exhibitions by Lebanese artists are discussed including, *Contemporary Art from Lebanon*, an exhibition in Istanbul and *Laughter: London Theatre Enquiry*, an experimental theatre group that debuted in 2004. A short discussion of the *Dafatir* exhibition curated in 2005 by Professor Nada Shabout is to be noted. But the full range and importance of Nada Shabout's project of exposing the resulting destruction and disappearance of thousands of modern Iraqi art works in the wake of the US invasion is left under-explored in the brevity of Platt's account. Here, one will benefit more from consultation with the original catalogue.<sup>4</sup> There are slight editorial and Arabic issues that a more established publisher may have corrected. These are minor and the reader's patience will be rewarded by this comparative survey's breadth. As such Platt concentrates on individual exhibitions and their relations in a world simultaneously confronted by the positive potential of multicultural cosmopolitanism, as well as the dislocations and crises of neo-liberalism.

While Platt's book is of value in that it allows a collective comparison of artistic and activist agency, curatorship and the organization of exhibitions over the past decade, this book may be of greater benefit in directing the reader to catalogues and critical reviews of the exhibitions as they were presented. A great deal of work has yet to be done. The US or European emphasis evident in the selection of exhibitions discussed by Platt tends to divert the gaze of the reader to a Western-centric world of art. In the complexity of the post-modern world, must we really be reliant upon the fickle taste of the Western metropole to uncover and share in the fluid and changing dynamics of post-modern arts? The Arab Spring and the proliferation of art exhibitions, spaces and curatorship in the contemporary Arab and broader Middle East are proof of a widened horizon of the arts to which Platt's book provides a valuable introduction.

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<sup>3</sup> A more thorough treatment of Palestinian art and recent exhibitions is however to be found in the seminal work by Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art: 1850-2005*. (London: Saqi Books, 2009)

<sup>4</sup> Nada Shabout, *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*. (University of North Texas School of Visual Art, 2007)