The launch day of an exhibit in a busy, heavily-travelled street in New York City would likely draw many visitors, whether of the art-fanatic type or passersby who simply can’t help but be drawn to a big crowd in the iconic city. From May until July, a white, open space offered by Apex Art gallery to works from 14 artists based in or from the Middle East, was filled with myriad pieces, cycling one another, in complementality rather than in competition, attracting visitors who flooded through the doors throughout the night. But of all the people present at the exhibit that day, none of them were the artists whose work was displayed.

“There is no possibility of mobility, or seamless mobility, is just like a black cloud over everything.”

There are, of course, situations where artists cannot attend exhibitions due to some extraneous circumstance, but to have 14 different artists from 6 different countries in the Middle East in the Occupational Hazards exhibition, or “Art in Custody,” as was its provisional title, none of whom could be present, one would have to think, as the organizer and curator of this exhibition Alexandra Stock put very starkly, that perhaps this is not an exception at all, but a rule.

“I decided to censor my work myself as an act of protest to the limitations of my country.”

Such, however, is the “occupational hazard” of Arab artists - one of many. While the one that stood out to me is the shocking fact of the artists’ absence - which can be due to the high risk factor of visa rejections, financial burdens, and endless authorization procedures and interviews that make it incredibly difficult for artists to travel - the main focus of this exhibit was on another, lesser known hazard: the impossibility, not just of moving themselves from one place to another, but of moving their artwork - mere objects - safely and in one piece from, to, and around the Middle East.

Between the accidental loss or damage of works, and the purposeful censorship or destruction of them, the end result for many artists is that their pieces are effectively gone. It’s not a dig against shippers or customs agents,” Stock laments, “but it’s a regional issue, for whatever reason.” The reasons are many, but Stock mentions some of the most common issues that face artists in the Middle East: “It’s a problem anywhere—it’s not a big mystery if and why this happens, but that’s a regional thing and you have to respect that.” Stock’s intention for the exhibition, however, is not to point out an issue and treat it as problematic; rather, the exhibition served the purpose of showing the ways artists have attempted to deal with a reality that is very difficult to predict and navigate.

“The visa rejections, the endless paperwork, the degrading interviews— it’s, I think, an issue that is probably a lot bigger than what this exhibition does.”

Having the culmination of two decades of artwork lost in the matter of a day, an incident that occurred to exhibiting Kuwait-based Artist and Lecturer William Anderson on the brink of his artistic career with a solo retrospective installation gathering almost all of his life’s work while en route from China to Kuwait, is one terrifying reminder of what can happen to one’s livelihood and the product of a lifetime of efforts and work when it is thrust into the realm of imminence and nothingness that is the airspace of the Middle East. “All of a sudden you have an artist who’s been working for well over two decades who just doesn’t have any artwork anymore,” Stock laments.

But the initial inspiration for this exhibition was actually the destruction of a piece of artwork by Egyptian customs. The piece, created by Egyptian designer Ahmad Hammoud, very much resembles a real functional passport, but upon closer inspection, with symbols including flies and broken handcuffs scattered across its pages, is clearly not.

It was designed as a model for those who have no citizenship, or the “stateless,” declaring its holders free citizens who have their own values, rights and being far away from the states that have marginalized them, with the aforementioned symbols reflecting the principle of freedom as one of said core values. On its way back from a show in Dubai, Egyptian customs tore it up and drew deep red lines across its 32 pages.
Art as Subject, Object, and Weapon

The exhibition showed works that have been subject to damage, works that purposefully evade that fate, and works that use the knowledge that something will happen to them en route, bringing the handlers of artwork—be they shippers, set handlers, or custom agents—into the process of creating the artwork, recognizing and including them before they inevitably do so on their own.

Iranian artist Amir Farhad, created ALFIE and ENALIE, a series of erotic drawings seven years ago, which he took to Switzerland for an art show. After deciding to return them to Iran, he discovered what an impossible task that was. No one was willing to risk getting caught by customs with the drawings. His work remained abroad for three years until he himself travelled and took them back home.

“So as not to confront the mailing problems once again I decided to censor my work myself as an act of protest to the limitations of my country,” in spite of his act of protest, which Farhad made knowingly and deliberately, he spoke to me of his pessimism when it comes to art’s potential in challenging and subverting violent and unjust politics. He recalled the abnormally long process of getting his work to New York, even after he had censored them: “I still could not mail them. Their journey started from Karaj where I live. This time I was lucky enough to find a friend to give the works to, who took them to Shiraz by bus where another friend took them to Dubai, then another friend of mine accepted to take them to California where my works could finally be mailed to New York to be hung on the walls of the exhibition.”

Artwork by Amir Farhad

Even this insane scenario is a happy one. Farhad was “lucky,” and he was meticulous—he took every action with deliberation and anticipation of what he knew was to come. Other artists, however, have had their works taken from them, and it was beyond their control. Shurouq Harbi, a visual artist based in Ramallah, had created The Keeper (2015), a video artwork inspired by and based on a young entrepreneur who printed thousands of images: he found online to sell in the streets of Ramallah, taking it on these photographs which had later been confiscated by Jordanian Intelligence for the political nature of some of the photos. The agents interrogated Harbi and later released the boxes in damaged form.

“\[quote\]All of a sudden you have an artist who’s been working for well over two decades who just doesn’t have any artwork anymore.\[quote\]

Harbi’s video both explores the phenomenon of image distribution in the streets of Ramallah and the importance of the role of the “keeper” in reflecting the various political and social events happening in Palestine and around it. In Occupational Hazards, The Keeper was presented alongside a life-sized photo of the boxes of photographs after they had been damaged, scaled to reflect their actual size and, at the same time, through its digital form implicitly nodding at the impossibility of ever physically moving these boxes again. Harbi elaborates on this as particular of the region: “Any artist working in Europe or the United States will not think “how will I move this?” or “how will I smuggle it?” In his case, everything around him supports this and facilitates it.”
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The Collection by Shuqayd Habr is a collection of photographs gathered for an artistic project entitled “The Keeper” that was confiscated by authorities for having a “political” nature. Photo courtesy of Apex Art.

This opinion holds weight among artists and curators, not only in terms of the mobility of artwork but of artists themselves. “The impossibility of mobility, or seams mobility, is just like a black cloud over everything. The visa rejections, the endless paperwork, the degrading interviews—It’s time, an issue that is probably a lot bigger than what this exhibition does,”Stock explains. But the exhibition does take note of this issue: in a context where artworks defy restrictions, probe at them, and challenge them, the artists themselves had to remain outside of the picture due to the “black cloud” that is mobility, their spirits only carried through their art.

The (Arab) Artist is Not Dead

The continual erasure of Arab artists’ existence and work has been a recurrent phenomenon throughout history, and it seems, until the contemporary moment. In pre-19th century Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque art, orientalist art, or art depicting Islamic “moors,” “Turks” and “Harems” by Western artists, dominated Eurocentric depictions of the Middle East have since then been exacerbated with the onslaught of British and French imperialism in the 20th century. Orientalist depictions in art attempt to eradicate the art history of regions outside of the West and speak on their behalf, rendering them silent, or dead. But in the case of the artworlds in this exhibition, the artists are very much alive, reclaiming their own narratives and telling the stories of their experiences. Not only that, but their contexts and their Middle Eastern origins are entry points of the exhibition.

“We cannot sell our works outside the country. The law that aimed to protect our patrimony is penalizing artists”

The artist, then, is still alive. But what if their death is being forced upon them by the nations to which they belong? Tunisian Visual Artist Mohamed Ben Soltane alludes to this in his work, Contre L’Oubli (Hommage a El Mekkli) (2019), a three-piece mosaic work depicting the signature of prominent Tunisian Painter Harem El Mekkli (1916-2015) in three stages, one where it is starkly visible and clear, the next where it begins to fade away, and the last shows it entirely faded out that it is almost indiscernible. He shows that even the most prominent names in the art scene in Tunisia eventually meet a fate of erasure, a reflection of the contemporary moment for the art scene in Tunisia.

Mohamed Ben Soltane, Contre L’Oubli (Hommage a El Meekli) (2019), Installation view. Photo courtesy of Apex Art.

He refers specifically to the Copyright Law of 1914 which declares any form of “cultural expression,” including “all original literary, scientific or artistic works whatever its value, purpose, mode or form of expression” as part of the national heritage of Tunisia. They are placed under the protection of the state of Tunisia and treated as patrimony whose commercial exploitation and exploitation must be authorized by the Tunisian Body for the Protection of Authors’ Rights. This prevents any Tunisian artist from selling their art abroad unless authorized by the state.

With this law, Ben Soltane believes, the author’s rights are undermined and processes of authorization to transport and export art become long and tedious. “We cannot sell our works outside the country. The law that aimed to protect our patrimony is penalizing artists and the development of our art scene [...]. It is a very important law because we have at least three thousand years’ worth of art production. Unfortunately, all the production of art, even by contemporary artists, is considered patrimony. So, my paintings have the same status as a helmet or Phoenician sculpture. It is nonsense and we need to change that.”

"...when you have very explicit sexual or religious imagery, it’s not a big mystery if and why that happens, but that’s a regional thing and you have to respect that."

Marked Objects, Marked Bodies

The Occupational Hazards exhibition focuses on marked objects, yes, but what it also nods towards—in the absence of the artists, in its demonstrations of the arbitrariness and irony of the bureaucratic procedures and regulations that attempt to restrict the mobility of art—is the endless running of individuals that takes place on borders and even in their home countries. The exhibit shows that mobility, both of objects and the persons who carry or own them, becomes almost impossible in an increasingly mobile age.

It is quite a violent statement to make, and a sad reality to acknowledge, but marked artworks are reflections of much more violent and destructive markings of human bodies that have become an essential part of the bordering (and ordering) practices of nation-states. But there is also a glimmer of hope in the gesture of acknowledging these difficult, complex and ironic fates, and in showing that they also do not mark the end of a title: that the life of the artwork continues and transforms (in ways beyond authorities’ and perhaps also artists’ control) long after their mark had been left.


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