

Representing ‘the Middle East Women’: The Limits of Veil, War, and Violence¹

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The overdetermining signifiers ‘veil’, ‘war’ and ‘violence’ have been among the main markers of difference within the dominant discourses of knowledge production about ‘the Middle East.’² In this commentary, I discuss how these markers are mobilized to represent ‘the Middle East women’ in an artistic initiative: *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*. *The Fertile Crescent* positions itself as a “global feminist” project and was organized by Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art (IRW). It took place between August 2012 and January 2013 across various locations in Central and Northern New Jersey, USA. In this analysis I approach the project via two investigative lines of thinking: the artworks as informative objects of knowledge production and the global networks of their circulation.

IRW defines *the Fertile Crescent* as “a project focusing on contemporary women artists, writers, filmmakers, composers, and performers from the Middle East and Middle East diaspora, who explore matters of gender, homeland, geopolitics, theology, the environment, and transnationalism.”³ The project, directed by Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, consisted of twelve exhibition sites and over 50 programs including symposia, lectures, film screenings, musical and literary events by contemporary ‘Middle East women’ artists, scholars, filmmakers, composers, performers, and writers. The directors define the focus of the project as “illustrating the heterogeneity of countries, cultures, and individualities” and as against “orientalist stereotypes” and “colonialist associations.” Their goal was to create an environment in which women are not essentialized, and in which diversity and individuality of cultures are not subsumed under a single umbrella.⁴

I became interested in this particular project when I first moved to the U.S. I realized that whenever I mention that I was born and raised in Turkey, the immediate comments, were almost always about “difficulties and horrors of being a woman *down there*” and the importance of “women’s issues” for *those* women. Once an acquaintance curiously inquired: “I heard about the war, it sounded pretty violent where you’re from.” When I asked him to clarify which war he was talking about, his response was anything but clear: “no, not anything specific but you know, there is war all over the Middle East.”

¹ An earlier version of this piece was presented at the Tenth Nordic Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, Odense, 23 September 2016.

² I use the term ‘the Middle East’ in single quotation marks throughout the paper to emphasize its social constructedness and to address it as a geopolitical concept instead of a self-evident *natural* geographical entity.

³ <https://www.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/content/docs/events/FertileCrescentPressRelease.pdf>

⁴ <http://fertile-crescent.org>

After I while, I started to question the ways in which such vague ideas of “women’s issues” or war and violence become the first order associations, or in other words, primary referents for understanding and knowing ‘the Middle East’ and ‘the Middle East women.’ By now we already have an idea and a long historical scholarly debate about the production and reproduction of dominant Western⁵ discourses of Orientalism, but how such vague ideas and representations are reproduced and circulated today in multiple sites of knowledge production got my attention. Even though it is almost impossible to find a critical work on ‘the Middle East’ without a reference to Edward Said, I was very surprised to see how such representations are persistent, especially on a cognitive level.

The Fertile Crescent project provides a significant amount of empirical material to engage with my questions: There is the 256-page exhibition catalogue *The Fertile Crescent Gender, Art and Society*⁶, which was published in November 2012 as part of the project. It consists of essays, biographies and statements of artists along with the illustrations of their works. The web page of the project is a comprehensive compilation of the background story of the project, the organization with lists of participants, funding sources, artists and institutional affiliations. It also includes detailed information about the accompanying programs such as talks, conferences, film screenings, discussions, and educational workshops. The list of the media coverage of the project is also accessible publicly through the webpage, which consists of more than forty articles in newspapers and journals such as Ahram Online⁷ and New York Times⁸. As part of my research, I also decided to conduct interviews with organizers and participants, through which I managed to gain access to a catalogue of audience responses.

The picture on the cover page of the exhibition catalogue for *The Fertile Crescent Project*, catches the audience with a winking erotic visual play: black clothing of the ‘veil’ interrupted in the middle by the erotically charged “unveiled skin of the woman’s fingers” as the artist describes her work (Forouhar in *The Fertile Crescent*, p.65). The ‘veil’ captures the attention of the audience immediately, as the master signifier of everything ‘Middle East’, and gets to be on the cover page of the major publication of this feminist art project, *The Fertile Crescent*, which explicitly aims to challenge essentialist Western stereotypes of orientalism and colonialism. (Figure 1)

⁵ I find it significant to emphasize that ‘West’ is used here as a dynamic category that is not geographically fixed but simultaneously produced and reproduced through discursive and material relations of power on multiple levels.

⁶ Brodsky, Judith K., and Ferris Olin. *The Fertile Crescent: Gender, Art, and Society*. Rutgers University Institute for Women and Art, 2012.

⁷ Ahram Online “The Fertile Crescent: Female artists from the Middle East take on New Jersey.” 3 September 2012.

⁸ La Gorce, Tammy. “From the Middle East, a Rarely Heard Chorus.” New York Times 31 August 2012.

From *Islamic* symbols to military uniforms and grenades *the Fertile Crescent* provides abundance of similar images as geographical markers of ‘the Middle East’. While providing potential subversive spaces in relation to its feminist agenda, the weight of the categorical imposition that is ‘the Middle East women’, makes it difficult to escape the reproduction of such dominant representations of ‘the Middle East’ referencing to religion, war and violence.

I visited *the Fertile Crescent* exhibition for the first time in September 2012 in New Brunswick, NJ. It caught my interest immediately since the whole project was a product of inspiration when Ferris Olin was visiting the Istanbul Biennial 2007. This was the very same biennial I was working on for my MA thesis at Sabanci University in Istanbul. I was looking into why only certain artworks by artists from Turkey circulate transnationally and others do not. Also the ambitious promise of the project that it is against “the Orientalist stereotypes and the colonial gaze” was attractive enough in itself.



Figure 1: The catalogue cover from Parastou Forouhar’s work, *Freitag* (Friday), 2003.

Yet from immediate signifiers of Islam, such as ‘the veil,’ Arabic calligraphy, and miniature style ornaments, to the images of military uniforms, tanks and grenades, those art works throughout the exhibition resonated with the popular representations and the markers of alterity pertaining to ‘the Middle East.’ Whenever I was pointing this out, I heard colleagues reacting and saying “yes but we learned a great deal about the region.” So I started to question what gets to be represented as ‘the Middle East women’ and what makes up the imagination, which asymmetrically moves through transnational networks.

In line with my previous work and with my analysis of *the Fertile Crescent*, my argument is as follows: The hypervisibility of veil, war and violence and the overdetermining signification of religion render these artworks legible to the Western audience and reproduce the dominant discourses about ‘the Middle East women’. The rendering of the images that are identifiable as ‘Middle Eastern’ to the audience, like *kefiyyeh*, veil and calligraphy of Arabic letters, marks these works as the direct representations of ‘the Middle East’. It therefore facilitates a particular form of viewing that is framed with an imagined geographical location.

These representations of ‘the Middle East women’ erase the otherwise complex subjectivities and fixing them as ‘the others’ once and for all. They also enable a particular transnational circulation of images, ideas and conceptions regarding this imagined geographical location. In return the reception of and the discussions around these art works are confined within the narrative of ‘learning’ about ‘the Middle East’ and “how interesting, how surprising it is” to see “Middle Eastern women artists.”

Consequently artists are marked with a timeless locality, as opposed to an underlying assumption of Western universality. Such markers of this geographical fixation delineate who belongs where and identify ‘us’ versus ‘them’. Especially within a project like *the Fertile Crescent*, the abundance of such images one after another makes it even more difficult to step back and expect anything more complex than this geographical frame allows. However, I am not suggesting an authentic form of belonging as an alternative. But the visibility of the names and birthplaces of those artists as well as the alterity markers in their works which I identified above, lump them in one category that it is “Middle Eastern.” The inclusionary politics of representation make them visible, yet within only firm categories that Western audience can recognize.

The hypervisibility of these symbols is certainly not limited to this particular project or artistic field per se. ‘The Middle East’ as a geopolitical and geographical category has its own socially constructed origins with various criteria applied over time to its definition. As a geopolitical concept, it has been defined and redefined over time. The meanings attributed to it are produced, contested and reproduced both materially and discursively within social relations. These constructions influence geopolitical and institutional dynamics and shape the identity formations, actions and subjectivities of the represented people. Yet these meanings and representations are usually taken for granted and used as umbrella terms for diverse groups of people, histories, politics, cultures and languages. So in a way, the representations of ‘the Middle East women’ around the symbols of veil, war and violence are parallel to the mainstream constructions of what, where and who ‘the Middle East’ is.

This is very well demonstrated by the commentaries of art critics. For example, Karen Rosenberg recommends *The Fertile Crescent: Gender Art and Society* book in the New York Times’ annual “Book for Art Lovers Holiday Gift Guide”⁹ and notes:

You can’t blame Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, ... for tackling their big, unwieldy topic — **art being made by women all across the Middle East** — with a certain wariness...The book accompanies a full slate of exhibitions and symposiums being presented at universities and museums across New Jersey this fall and winter, and its academic verbiage might be a tad dry for the lay reader. Nevertheless, it should make a valuable resource for any curator interested in recent **art from the region** — or, for that matter, anyone curious to know how artists are responding to the instability of the past couple of years. [emphasis added]

Here she relocates the artists by grouping them as “women all across the Middle East.” The artworks become imprisoned as “the art from the region.” This perception clearly marks these works with a distant geographical location, not belonging to US art market. It therefore excludes them from any relevant discussions about their content or the semiotic complexity of their aesthetic language.

⁹ Rosenberg, Karen. “Books for Art Lovers” The New York Times 20 November 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/23/books/books-for-art-lovers.html>

It is an ambitious endeavor to initiate, curate, and carry out a project with these goals. The organizers are aware of that and published multiple essays on the complexities of representing 'the Middle East'. However, on the reception side, comments from the art critiques demonstrate how difficult it is to accomplish these ambitious goals and how easy it is to fall into the narrative of 'suffering women of the Middle East' or the vague idea of 'women's issues'.

Eleanor Heartney's comments in the prestigious journal *Art in America*¹⁰ exemplifies this:

While the show presented women working in all contemporary mediums, one of the most interesting threads involved the use of film, video and photography to explore how Middle Eastern women navigate a world where tradition and modernity often collide. The strength of this work may derive in part from its distance from the region's traditional art forms, which frees artist from the sometimes inhibiting shadow of history. (p.74)

Once again tradition comes as an oppositional force to modernity; and 'the Middle East' is where, according to Heartney, these contradictory forces meet. It is very interesting, or maybe even unexpected, for her that "Middle Eastern women" use video as a medium when they are expected to use "the region's traditional forms".

These kinds of imaginations that do not fit the dominant idea of 'the Middle East women' surprise the audience and become "interesting" to learn as part of the experience:

"A revelation of the diverse artistic talent among women in the Middle East"

"My busy schedule prevents me from following what is happening in Syria so that was an informative way for me to catch up"

"I learned about issues of art, made by other communities in a 'non-native' context."

"I wanted to be exposed to the perspectives of Middle Eastern women. I learned that a great deal of what is going on in the Middle East which feels like a world away from me. I never would have imagined these things were happening."

"I was surprised by the freedom to express somewhat "radical" concepts freely."

"I am interested in world news and it seemed interesting to hear this from someone who was actually there."

Representing 'the Middle East women' with the dominant alterity markers of 'the Middle East' reaffirms the *unmarked* dominant group as the 'norm', the regularity, and unnamed,

¹⁰ Heartney, Eleanor. "Crescent Women." *Art in America* 101.2 (Feb 2013) 74.

unidentified normalcy. The *marked* category of ‘the Middle East women’ defined by the dominant group, sticks out of this background inescapably marked with colorful, stereotypical images. While subjecthood of the marked category is overdetermined with markers, the unmarked group can be anything or anyone unquestionably; and this way of marking simultaneously reinforces the global epistemological hierarchies.