

Regards

32 | 2024

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility:

An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

Dossier thématique : "Knowledge Production in Times of
Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last
Decade" – Introduction

Abdullah ALKAFRI

Edition électronique

URL : <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/Regards/article/view/1207>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1207>

ISSN : 2791-285X

Editeur

Editions de l'USJ, Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth

Référence électronique

ALKAFRI, A. (2025). Dossier thématique : "Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade" – Introduction. *Regards*, (32), 15-21. <https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1207>

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Knowledge Production in Times of Fragility: An Overview of Syrian Art Production over the Last Decade

INTRODUCTION

Abdullah Alkafri

Saint-Joseph University of Beirut,
Executive Director of Ettijahat - Independent Culture

Speaking of Pierre Bourdieu, John Lechte says, “Given the complexity that characterizes Bourdieu’s work, there is always a risk of misunderstanding him. It is therefore necessary to read his complete works with care - the same care that he himself took with his writings”¹.

We begin with this quote to emphasize that the foundations of knowledge production, when approached from a sociological perspective, require studying complex conditions and determinants. These are a prerequisite for learning, recognition and research. Without them, learning can be misunderstood or misinterpreted, especially as knowledge production always takes place in a complex and complicated world that takes into account the “dominant context”, or even the dominant contexts. Although Lechte is referring to individual works in this sentence, he highlights the necessity of starting from the product itself as the basis for knowledge production, an approach that has always been essential to avoid the imposition of an analysis or an intrusive approach.

1- LECHTE John, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers: From Structuralism to Postmodernity*, Routledge, 2003.

In collaboration with



المجلس العربي
للعلوم الاجتماعية
Arab Council
for the Social Sciences
Conseil Arabe
pour les Sciences Sociales

This issue is also published in Arabic by Ettijahat and Mamdouh Adwan Publishing House. It is available on the following link:
https://addar.mamdouhadwan.net/research/A_decade_of_arts_Volume_3.pdf

When studying the situation in the Arab region and the conditions for knowledge production, including artistic knowledge, we need to consider several caveats: The limitations and constraints of the environment of artistic and knowledge production, the shifts in the places and forms of knowledge production, the old and renewed relationship with colonial structures, the urgent need to think about the future despite the heavy legacy of reality and its challenges, and finally, the way this part of the world is seen and the way it questions, with its artists, thinkers and researchers, the writing of history and its representation in the world.

In this complex context, the present issue of *Regard* seeks to address questions relating to knowledge production, the state of the arts in Syria over the past twelve years, and Syria's ambiguous position in both the Arab region and the broader global landscape. Over the past decade, interest in creative practices has increased significantly in Syria. The creators of these practices sought to address the major issues facing Syria and the Arab region. Their intellectual and creative ventures helped them discover what is 'new' on the artistic scene and reflect on certain aspects of the overarching change that is taking place. Their work also enabled them to accompany the course of the revolutions and uprisings in Syria and the Arab region.

Artworks produced during this period have deconstructed and rebuilt language and have positioned politics and public affairs at the heart of their subject matter. They sought to liberate speech and question rules, norms, and the structure of power and its strengths. As these artworks questioned what is considered sacred and absolute, they redefined our perception of public and private, reshaped geography and reconsidered its dimensions, especially in light of the reality of living abroad and the conceptual notion of exile. These artworks were an assault on public decency; they stirred debate about public issues, expanded the margins of expression and allowed for instantaneous reactions to changes around the world.

These artworks were not the product of a single generation's work. Their production coincided with a widespread interest in liberating digital narration from its old framework and its coupling with social, economic, and humanitarian themes. The result was artworks that spark debate on public liberties, social freedom and queer issues, and that introduce us to productions that redefine literature and decency.

Year after year throughout this decade, with the accumulation of challenges, arts and creative productions were present in the public debate about the most important entitlements with the return of dictatorships, the increase in areas of oppression, and the attempt of security forces to seize the public space. These artistic productions looked at the phenomena of increased violence, the failure of safety narratives, the weight of lockdowns, the collapse of psychological,

health and economic safety organizations, the attempts to seize the revolutions and the paths of the uprisings fraught with fragility and the magnitude of losses.

Today, when we look at artistic production during this decade, we realize that this creative momentum deserves research accompaniment and critical reviews to contemplate some of its conclusions in order to ensure its development and incite the question of “what next?”

As we look back at 2011 one decade later, we believe that this rich artistic production merits a critical review and a reflection on its dimensions as a first step towards developing it. This issue therefore seeks to answer the question: what is being produced in the Arab region during a decade of change, and for whom?

This issue is published in collaboration with Ettijahat - Independent Culture and falls within the framework of its periodic research program, “Research: To Strengthen the Culture of Knowledge”. Through this program, the organization seeks to support a generation of researchers capable of contributing to the identification of the most important changes that have taken place in art production at the present time, and who understand how cultural and artistic production is taking place in such a complex moment.

The six papers presented herein were written in Arabic by six researchers from Syria, Lebanon, and Poland between 2021 and 2022, and were revised and edited before being translated and reissued in English. They attempt to explore the various forms of transformation and the characteristics of artistic production in terms of genre and content, and also address questions relating to production, reception, and the production of meaning.

Mona Merhi’s research, titled *The Homecoming: Readings on Theater in Syria (2011-2021)*, examines theatrical practices in Syria in the ten years since the start of the Syrian revolution (2011-2021). Merhi attempted to delve into the aesthetics of theatrical performance through some remarkable experiences. She also tried to understand the characteristics of everyday life in Syria and their impact on “Syrian theatrical performance” as a viral component that reflects the present moment just as much as its aesthetics are affected by it.

This study is of great importance because it is one of the few produced in recent years that attempts to question the assumption that theater inside Syria has become limited after most artists left the country. The study also addresses the inevitable link between theater and the pro-regime narrative, which distances theater from the major events unfolding in the country in light of the global spread of Syrian arts.

The research focuses on the aesthetics of the post-2011 performances and examines the aesthetic changes that occurred and how they were influenced by the current situation. The research draws on the concept of “multiple allegiances and the strategy of doubling and staying the same” used epistemologically in the field of performance studies. This term, coined by academic Diana Taylor, describes the way in which indigenous performative rituals are transmitted and reproduced within the colonizing regime that is in control and represses these practices.

The second research paper is by Eylaf Bader Eddin. It is titled *Sijnyya: New Prison Songs in Sednaya*.

In his research, Bader Eddin explores the existence of a prison cultural field inside the prison that is linked to what is outside. He asks the following questions: If such a field exists, is it limited only to prison literature, as Syrian literature generally describes it, or are there other prison cultural practices that have not been highlighted? If prison songs exist, why are they absent from the Syrian cultural scene? How do prison songs and musical practices relate to the mutual knowledge between those who are imprisoned and the ones who have never been arrested in the public Syrian space? How do the technologies of power dominate or impact on the recognition of these practices?

In addition to these questions, the study attempts to understand the relation between the prison song, its genre and the way it spreads. It seeks to delve deeper into the testimonies of the participants, with the aim of establishing frameworks to define the prison song or *Sijniyyāt*: plural of *Sijniyya*². This research also seeks to address many of these questions but hesitates to answer some of them due to the difficulty of navigating this complex space for a variety of reasons. One of these reasons is the dependency, partly or entirely, on the interviews of participants from these detention centers. Another is the responsibility of writing in their voices to tell the story of something Bader Eddin did not experience and to describe a political scene he had only read about, which is different from the current political scene, as well as the political detention scene, in Syria. This research paper focuses exclusively on the experience of Sednaya’s former political prisoners, whose conditions worsened after 2011.

The third research paper in this issue, *The Use of Dignity* by Stefan Tarnowski, examines the concept of dignity in relation to the image in the context of Syrian documentary cinema after 2011.

2- The term *Sijniyya* comes from the Arabic word *Sijn* (prison). In Arabic, in order to form a feminine adjective, we add the suffix “-iyya”. Here, *Sijniyya* is an adjective describing the word *Ughniya* (song). However, the word *Ughniya* is omitted.

This paper is based on an article titled “Respectons le droit à l’image”, which was first published in January 2013 in the French newspaper *Libération*.

The aim of this study is neither to derive a Syrian version with its own local history or with local knowledge that can justify this version based on this conception of dignity, nor is it to harmonize the Syrian definition of dignity with its conception in Enlightenment literature. Rather, it seeks to consider different methodological and theoretical lines of thought. In other words, it is less about defining the concept of dignity and more about analyzing the uses of this term in different backgrounds and by different actors.

In this study, the researcher asks the following question: How are concepts approached in ethnography? This question has long preoccupied anthropologists and has sometimes been reduced to a methodological aspect: One can simply follow an inductive approach after collecting enough relevant data based on participant observation. The concept of dignity is then introduced into the discussion.

In the fourth research paper, *Zero Degree Cinema: Documenting the Syrian Uprising, and the Utopia of Cinema*, Zaher Omareen looks at the phenomenon of videos taken by activists and citizen journalists, mainly in the early years of the Syrian revolution. These videos, which went viral on YouTube and many social media platforms at the time, contributed, according to Omareen, to the creation of an aesthetic current that has its own audiovisual aesthetics, distinct from previous artistic currents and practices. These aesthetics stem from the new relationship that the grave event forged with sound and image. Omareen borrows from Roland Barthes the concept of “Writing Degree Zero” (1977) to reach a specific definition of what he will call “Zero Degree Cinema”, based on examples of videos from the Syrian revolution. The research examines and analyzes these examples through four main axes: low-resolution image, body language, external and internal sound, and digital aesthetics. Finally, it addresses the concepts of death and fear as the main factors driving all the previously mentioned aesthetics.

In the fifth research paper, artist and researcher Nour Asalia delves into the relationship between cause and aesthetics in Syrian art post-2011. The paper attempts to study the phenomenon of commitment in the post-2011 Syrian plastic art scene, and to analyze the roles that art has played and the roles that the artist has engaged in. It mainly seeks to examine the manifestations of the phenomenon of commitment in Syrian art by reviewing and analyzing the themes and aesthetic vocabulary through which it appeared, and the artistic forms and expressions that led to this phenomenon, assuming that the violence of the war has prompted many professional artists to commit, to depict reality and to speak for those affected, especially those who have lost their homes, members of their families, their ateliers, or those who were detained or experienced living

as refugees; The study also assumes that violence has come to dominate Syrian production on multiple levels, especially as a visual language present in various forms of expression.

Lastly, Ammar al-Mamoun analyzes the transformations of silence in the space of protest in Syria, focusing on the performative and political impact of silence in the space of protest under the politics of annihilation, in his research paper titled *Moments of “Silence” in Syria: Place and Self in the State of Exception*.

This research looks into the various definitions of the concept of silence with the aim of studying some of its features in Syria. It explores how silence is politically employed by the regime in public spaces and within daily life as a method of discipline in the public space and a technique of symbolic domination. In fact, silence is a “sign” that is materialized, a sign with a performative effect. After the revolution in Syria, it acquired political meanings that divided the protesters in the street into “silent obedient citizen/viewer” and “loud protesting enemy/performer.” This division is evident through the materialization of silence, which we observe in the footage we have of the protest in Syria (photos, recordings, testimonies, etc.).

These research papers are particularly interesting given their frameworks and the areas they address, as well as the diversity of their authors’ backgrounds, most of whom have experienced art production in addition to pursuing an academic path. These studies raise important questions about the status of knowledge production in the Arab region and stimulate discussion about the role of the recipient in this process. We hope that they will help you understand some of the entitlements of art production with regard to the roles of arts in writing history outside the frameworks of official and dominant narratives, the interference of arts with public space questions, and the concepts of newness and change in artistic and creative productions in the Syrian context, which constitute the main axes on which the researchers based their works.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank all the researchers for their articles, the editorial and production team from the Institute of Scenic, Audiovisual, and Cinematic Studies (IESAV) of Saint-Joseph University of Beirut (USJ), as well as the translation team, Cecilia El Hajj and Sarah Medlej, from USJ/ETIB - Beirut.

I would also like to thank Hanan Qassab Hassan, Farouk Mardam-Bey, Toufic El-Khoury, and Marianne Noujaim for supervising the production of these papers, and I thank Bassel Nwelaty and Darine Abou Saad for accompanying the researchers during the production process.

Finally, I would like to thank the Arab Council for the Social Sciences, the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture - AFAC, Mamdouh Adwan Publishing House, and Mimeta Foundation for collaborating with Ettijahat to support, produce, and publish the Arabic version of these research papers in *A Decade of Arts*, within the “Research: To Strengthen the Culture of Knowledge” program.

"The Arabic versions of the Decade of Arts research papers can be accessed via the following links: Book I, Book II, Book III."

Additionally, could you please hyperlink the book titles in this sentence for easy access? I've included the links for all three books below.

Book I: [\[link\]](#)

Book II: [\[link\]](#)

Book III: [\[link\]](#)

Abdullah Alkafri is a playwright, professor, theatre maker and cultural manager working in the field of cultural planning in the Arab region and abroad. He has contributed to cultural committees and projects over the past decade, including as a member of the selection committee for “Dramaturgy of Contemporary Arab Theatrical Text” to select an ontology of Arab theatre, implemented by IEVP and hosted by Festival d’Avignon 2012. In 2019, he was a member of the steering committee of the 8th World Summit on Arts and Culture in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Between 2020 and 2022, he was a judge in the small research grants programme of the Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Alkafri has been a lecturer at the Institute of Theatre, Audiovisual and Cinematic Studies at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, Lebanon since 2015. The courses he offers include performing arts and sociology of cultural production, in addition to following up and crystallising several student projects in the performing arts field.

He is a regular contributor to regional and international conferences, with his contributions focused on arts, social practices and political transformations. He has published and directed several theatrical works. In 2023, he launched a project, “Reinventing the Margin”. He is the Executive Director of Ettijahat – Independent Culture, a position he has held since April 2014. He holds a PhD from Saint Joseph University in Beirut on the history of independent performing arts in Syria, Lebanon and Egypt, and previously obtained a Master’s degree with distinction in Theatre from Saint Joseph University in Beirut.