

Regards

32 | 2024

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

Syrian Art Post-2011: Cause and Aesthetics

Nour ASALIA

Edition électronique

URL : <https://journals.usj.edu.lb/Regards/article/view/1212>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1212>

ISSN : 2791-285X

Editeur

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

Référence électronique

ASALIA, N. (2020). Syrian Art Post-2011: Cause and Aesthetics. *Regards*, (32), 245-278.

<https://doi.org/10.70898/Regards.voi32.1212>

DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

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

SYRIAN ART POST-2011: CAUSE AND AESTHETICS

Nour Asalia

Résumé | Cette recherche se spécialise dans l'art plastique syrien après 2011 et étudie la dualité du (conflit et l'esthétique), en la supposant en tant que dualité de valeur dialectique dans le contexte syrien. Cette recherche examine le phénomène de l'engagement, ses motivations et ses manifestations formelles et morales dans la production artistique syrienne. La recherche surligne des diverses représentations de l'expression d'un message politique ou humanitaire. La deuxième partie de la recherche explore les formes esthétiques qui se sont révélées au cours de la période étudiée, qui s'étend sur près d'une décennie et aborde brièvement la question de la distinction entre l'art professionnel et l'art populaire dans la scène artistique syrienne d'aujourd'hui. En conclusion, la recherche montre comment l'engagement a conduit de nombreux artistes à suivre une approche documentaire visant à faire face à la destruction et à la disparition.

Mots-clés | Artiste syrienne, 2011, esthétique, art engagé, art et politique.

Abstract | This research specializes in Syrian plastic art after 2011 and study duality of (the conflict and the aesthetics), it as a dialectical value duality in the Syrian context. This research examines the phenomenon of engagement, its motives, and its formal and moral manifestations in Syrian artistic production.

The research sheds light on various representations of expressing a political or humanitarian message. The second part of the research delves into the aesthetic forms that were revealed during the studied period, which extended over nearly a decade, and briefly approaches the issue of the distinction between professional art and popular art in today's Syrian art scene. In conclusion, the research shows how the engagement has led many artists to follow a documentary approach that aims to confront destruction and disappearance.

Keywords | Syrian artist, 2011, aesthetic, Engaged art, Art and Politics.

Introduction

The eruption of the revolutionary movement in Syria in 2011 has led to an unprecedented creative outpouring in the history of plastic arts on many levels. New works, techniques, and themes have revealed Syrian artists' intentional or spontaneous commitment to the cause. This commitment manifested itself through various aesthetic representations, some of which belonged to professional art and others to popular art applications. These two fields were linked by the desire of their practitioners, both specialized artists and non-specialized individuals, to express individual or collective realities, or to protest against violence. In this context, art has been used as a means of documentation; many professional or popular practices have followed the events and utilized the vocabulary of the war to create ways of expression, some of which have prioritized the cause over aesthetic creation. Thus, Syrian art has taken a new direction as a tool of influence both internally and externally.

On a global scale, commitment has often appeared in art, during various historical periods. Popular uprisings or activist causes have always prompted artists to turn to commitment. For example, in 1814, Spanish artist Francisco de Goya painted *El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid* (The Third of May 1808 in Madrid), depicting the executions that were carried out by Napoleon's troops against Spaniards on their own soil following their uprising against him. This commitment is also apparent in the work of French artists such as Honoré Daumier, who started criticizing socio-political life in France in his engravings in 1828, and in Eugène Delacroix's famous 1830 painting, *La Liberté guidant le peuple* (Liberty Leading the People), which symbolizes the French Revolution against King Charles X. World War I was undoubtedly the most significant event in contemporary history that reinforced commitment as a phenomenon in art. Artists delved into the horrors of the war and into the socio-political realities in its aftermath. Then, during the late first half of the 20th century, intellectual reflections emerged, and these reflections analyze the conflict between art and anthropological and sociological questions. Committed art is defined as art that is employed for the benefit of a cause, or that expresses the artist's stance towards a cause. This kind of art is similar to what the socialist realist artists came up with in the early 1930s in the Soviet Union. However, since the emergence of the Socialist Realism movement, some concepts have been mixed up, as committed art has intersected with propaganda art and activist art. In her article entitled *Art militant, art engagé, art de propagande Un même combat ?* (Activist Art, Committed Art and Propaganda Art: The Same Fight?), French scholar Laure Gillot explains the characteristics of each of them. She defines committed art as being emotionally attached to a cause and engaged in defending it, but, as opposed to activist art, the committed artist does not limit their artistic self to the said cause throughout their life. "Activist art, committed art and propaganda art - these terms also refer to distinct, and even contradictory, issues and functions... As for committed

1- GILLOT-ASSAYAG Laure, « Art militant, art engagé, art de propagande Un même combat ? » *Implications philosophiques* [en ligne], Septembre 2016, [consulté Juillet 2022]. Disponible sur : <https://www.implications-philosophiques.org/art-militant-art-engage-art-de-propagande-un-meme-combat/>

art, it can be an intermittent art: the emotional attachment to the cause is less strong than in the case of activist art and does not require artistic continuity².” Moreover, propaganda art has a purpose that precedes the aesthetic one, depending on the mindset of the audience it is addressed to.

In fact, the contemporary epistemological issues surrounding art production today, which debate the role of art, lead us to wonder if there is any art that is not committed nowadays, or if art must have sources of inspiration that are inevitably linked to a cause. This question somehow results in a perspective where art is viewed as a cultural product that cannot create profound change on its own, i.e.: It cannot target a group without intersecting with it, or building on it, in such a way that the condition of having a specific ideology becomes inherent to the aesthetic condition. This is where the lasting role of art as a tool of communication, political or social change may distance art from its aesthetic purposes; The role of the artist comes into play here, as they are the conscious self which possesses an objective, controversial, emotional and rational structure at the same time. This self is the main driver of artistic production, if we can consider artistic production as a system that possesses foundations and addresses an audience. Therefore, the judgment of artistic works (as a system that seeks change) separately from the artist’s intentions may be incomplete or may deviate from its supposed paths.

The present research 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. At the same time, and based on the same motive, which is the desire to reflect reality, many non-artists worked on applied art products that presented art as a revolutionary tool. In the last decade, Syria has witnessed an unprecedented openness to plastic arts by audiences and producers of different backgrounds who have developed an interest in art. Hence, the question of commitment led us to wonder about what is considered popular and what is considered elitist in the field of art and how to define them in the case of Syria, about the possibility of critically categorizing the productions, and about the difficulties that stand in the way of the critical process. The present study defines “popular art” as that which addresses a large

2- « Art militant, art engagé et art de propagande ces termes renvoient aussi à des enjeux et à des fonctions distinctes, voire contradictoires... L’art engagé quant à lui peut être un art intermittent : l’attachement émotionnel à la cause est moins fort que dans l’art militant, et ne requiert pas de continuité artistique » (GILLOT-ASSAYAG Laure, *op. cit.*).

segment of the population through easily recognizable vocabulary. Popular art is divided into two categories: art produced by amateurs and art produced by professionals³.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is worth noting that the experience of commitment as an artistic approach and intellectual model among Syrian artists is still taking shape and needs more systematic documentation. Furthermore, in Syria, there is no collection in the National Museum that serves as a basis for cataloging and documenting modern and contemporary plastic art productions and serves as a reference for research, which makes it difficult to form a comprehensive view. It is also difficult to capture all the post-2011 Syrian art productions in the field of plastic arts, first of all due to the dispersion of Syrian artists in the last ten years, and second of all, due to the large number of works produced by Syrian artists. For this reason, the study focuses on indicative examples of the production of Syrian artists.

The present paper is of critical nature, deals with aesthetic issues and looks at how these issues relate to the political and social factors during wartime. It is primarily based on the study of the phenomenon through the presentation and description of facts, events, and artworks produced in the last ten years by Syrian artists and producers. It mainly relies on induction, analyzing data in order to reach a conclusion indicating what this phenomenon has led to and its impact on the aesthetic aspect. It attempts to answer the following questions: How has the adoption of causes in Syrian plastic arts affected the aesthetic content? Can an artist's humanitarian stance be seen as an aesthetic stance? What artistic dimensions have emerged as a result of the tendency to commit to a cause?

The first part of the present paper covers the history of the phenomenon of commitment and its motivations in Syrian art by examining examples that resulted from conscious choice and others that arose out of artistic spontaneity. As for the second part, it focuses on artistic contexts and aesthetic representations expressing commitment, whether through popular practices or artistic productions. In its conclusion, the study looks at how the principle of commitment is applied in the field of art, how it is employed to serve certain causes and how it is adopted as an act of resistance and as a means of communicating a voice and avoiding oblivion and extinction.

3- For example, in their *Poptalgie* series realized in autumn 2021, Boutros Al Maari and Khaled Takriti addressed Syrian popular memory by including the tarboosh, the narghile and other familiar elements. (AL MAARI Boutros, TAKRITI Khaled, [online], 2021, [Accessed August 2022]. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.>)

The Phenomenon of Commitment and its Motivations: Conscious Choice and Spontaneous Expression

“Painting is not made to decorate apartments. It’s an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy⁴.”

Pablo Picasso

Before 2011

Before delving into the time frame of the study (post-2011), a pivotal year in the history of Syrian art, it was necessary to briefly examine the concept and dimensions of commitment among Syrian artists prior to this period, as this phenomenon existed in a different form.

Upon referring to the Atassi Gallery’s archive, which includes records of exhibitions held from its opening in 1993 until its closure in 2010, one can immediately notice that plastic art activity in Syria is largely committed, both in terms of exhibitions and their associated seminars and publications, and in terms of the personal and artistic positions of the artists. The phenomenon of commitment can be divided into two types: The first is Arab nationalist commitment and the second is local cultural commitment.

Since the early 1950s, after the Palestinian Nakba, nationalist commitment has been prominent in the works of Syrian artists. We find it in the graphics of Burhan Karkutli (1932-2003), who devoted most of his work to depict the Palestinian cause and displacement, as well as in some of the works of Nazir Naba’a (1938-2016), who clearly expressed his unity with the Palestinian struggle, especially when he designed the logo and posters of the Fatah movement; Louay Kayali (1934-1978) was also influenced by the Palestinian alienation, as evidenced in his 1967 exhibition, which included his famous painting *Thumma Madha* (Then What?). However, this nationalist spirit was not limited to the connection to Palestine. It is reflected in the artistic issues that preoccupied the artists: For instance, throughout his career, Elias Zayat (1935-2022) drew from the “civilization of the face”, as he called it, artistic values that are linked to the cultural identity of the region “from Egypt to the Levant and Iraq⁵.” Zayat explains this in a video documenting the “Syrian Ateliers” exhibition.

In 1962, artists Mahmoud Daadouch (1934), Fateh Al-Moudarres (1922-1999) and Wadih Rahma, together with the critic Abdulaziz Alloun (1934-2011), discussed the organization of a general conference for Arab plastic artists. Among the main points of the discussion was the need to establish an anti-colonial artistic discourse committed to social, artistic, and nationalist issues, as we can read in Alloun’s book *Mun’ataf Al Settinat Fil Haraka Al Tashkiliya* (The Sixties: A Turn in

4- « La peinture n’est pas faite pour décorer les appartements. C’est un instrument de guerre offensive et défensive contre l’ennemi. » PICASSO Pablo, [online], [Accessed October 2024]. Available at: <https://passerelles.essentiels.bnf.fr/fr/image/275043b3-267b-4835-9cfd-9f0818f2e01a-guernica-pablo-picasso>

5- ZAYAT Elias, *Syrian Ateliers*. Modern Syrian Art Archive (Unpublished video), Atassi Gallery Archive Collection, 1999.

the History of the Fine and Contemporary Arts)⁶. In the book *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents*⁷ by Sarah Rogers, Nada Shabout and Aneka Lenssen, we can find statements and artistic texts by Syrian artists and writers that clearly affirm their orientation to a renaissance thought committed to the concerns of the public and the artists alike at the local level; among them is a text by Mahmoud Hammad (1923-1988) titled “Arab Art . . . and Its Position in Relation to the World’s Art⁸”, and another by Fateh Al-Moudarres on “The Arab Artist’s Rights and His Obligations⁹.”

Locally, there has been a tendency to link art with cultural activism and social concerns, a trend that was especially prevalent in the 1990s. For example, most of Atassi Gallery’s exhibitions featured panel discussions with artists and writers. In a meeting with sculptor and critic Mahmoud Shahin (1948) on the sidelines of one of his exhibitions in 1996, Fateh Al-Moudarres, known for his great influence on the artistic community, explained that “the artist chooses either to be a merchant, or to understand the moral, social, historical and activist composition of their people, becoming an activist themselves¹⁰.” Louay Kayali’s drawings also demonstrate his attachment to the concerns of the people, especially in his series of works depicting child street vendors. This association with local issues is sometimes indirectly apparent, like in the case of the dead fish paintings by Youssef Abdelke (1951), which express the stagnation of the living and their

6- Among the issues raised: “The issue of elaborating and standardizing artistic terminology (in Arabic), adopting the productions of Arab artists and exhibiting their works outside Arab countries after they are exhibited within them, organizing seasonal workshops and developing joint artistic programs adopted by the ministries of Education and Culture.” (ALLOUN Abdulaziz, *Mun’ataf Al Settinat Fee Tareekh Al Funun Al Jamila Al Muassira Fee Surya*. Damascus, Dar Daadouch, 2003, p. 90).

7- LENSSEN Aneka, ROGERS Sarah, SHABOUT Nada, *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents*. New York, MOMA, 2018.

8- “Contemporary plastic art is a nascent form art in Arab countries, and is no more than about half a century old. It is an art that our artists received from the Western arts. If we believe that Arab countries are undergoing a renaissance in this field, then this renaissance started with the return of the first group of Arab artists who were studying in Europe. They took from the West the conventions of the arts of painting, sculpture, and engraving. The generations that followed helped convey the different schools and trends to our countries, and are also to thank for spreading the concept of the plastic arts among the people, after centuries of its being forgotten. Today the artist plays a crucial role in the building of modern civilization. Despite attempts by intellectual artists to pay attention to heritage and environment, and despite their constant search for methods that accord with our lives, societies, and aspirations - which is an exhausting and burdensome task - the limited history of the modern art movement has not allowed Arab art to find a clear identity for itself. Furthermore, the shortcomings of politics - which over the course of decades have caused various types of rifts among these peoples, and thus among their artists - have also led to a scarcity of meetings together, and contributed to the lack of unity in thinking and goals.” (HAMMAD Mahmoud, « Arab Art . . . and Its Position in Relation to the World’s Art », in LENSSEN Aneka, ROGERS Sarah, SHABOUT Nada (eds.), *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents*, New York, MOMA, 2018, p. 339).

9- “Before the Arab artist has the right to be an Arab artist, he must learn the composition of his social ground, to commit himself to be subject to foundations that are the basis of his artistic work.” (AL-MOUDARRES Fateh, In LENSSEN Aneka, ROGERS Sarah, SHABOUT Nada (dir.), *Modern Art in the Arab World, Primary Documents*, op. cit., p. 342).

10- SHAHIN Mahmoud, Interview with Fateh Al-Moudarres, *Modern Syrian Art Archive*, Atassi Gallery Archive Collection [online], 1996, [Accessed August 2022]. Available at: <https://www.atassifoundation.com/masa-items/fateh-moudarres/images?view=slider#17>

alienation in their environment, a condition that the artist depicted using charcoal pencils. Youssef Abdelke's example is meaningful and relevant, as his history of activism is a testament to his identification with the liberation concern. This connection between art and cultural issues may not have previously had a profound effect on the creative process, but it has influenced the topics addressed and the perception of the artwork, as Professor Anneka Lenssen emphasizes: "Few Syrian artists ever accepted the autonomy of art. This put Syrian art history at meaningful odds with the foundational post-WWII liberal commitment to 'art for art's sake.' Even at the highpoint of Syrian abstract painting in the 1960s, which was accompanied by active and sophisticated discussions of artistic freedom, the resulting artworks drew interest not as things in themselves but rather as tools for honing the sensory capacities of Socialism's 'new men'".¹¹ What is implied here is that the pre-2011 dimensions of commitment rarely generated artistic trends or revolutionary ideas on the creative level, but artists were largely focused on the socio-cultural impact.

After 2011

It is now evident that 2011 is a milestone in the history of contemporary Syrian art in all its disciplines, especially plastic arts. While the arts of cinema, theater, literature, and even music have significantly changed in terms of aesthetics, plastic arts have entered an unprecedented context in Syria: their use as an instrument of change and opposition to the street; This trend was more evident in other forms of art, such as theater, with Saadallah Wannous (1941-1997), who demonstrated a sense of opposition to moral corruption and nationalist concerns in his 1969 play titled *Haflat Somr Min Ajel 5 Hzayran* (An Evening Party for the Fifth of June). It was also evident in the fields of cinema, particularly in the 2003 film, *Toofan Fi Balad Al Baath* (Flood in Baath Land) by Omar Amirallay (1944-2011), and music, especially in the works of Samih Choukeir (1957) that dealt with national or activist causes, such as the song *Ya Sajjani* (O, My Jailer). The examples mentioned above are not exhaustive, but rather indicative of the various issues at stake. It is important to note that this late development of plastic arts is not due to the late development of artists, but rather to factors surrounding the nature of plastic arts and the new belief regarding their role in Syria on both the public and popular levels; Before the widespread use of social media, the exhibition spaces for plastic arts in Syria were limited to galleries and artists' studios, most of which were concentrated in the capital Damascus and

11- Few Syrian artists ever accepted the autonomy of art. This put Syrian art history at meaningful odds with the foundational post-WWII liberal commitment to "art for art's sake." Even at the highpoint of Syrian abstract painting in the 1960s, which was accompanied by active and sophisticated discussions of artistic freedom, the resulting artworks drew interest not as things in themselves but rather as tools for honing the sensory capacities of Socialism's "new men." (LENSEN, Anneka, Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria, *Jadaliyya*, [online], October 2021, [Accessed July 2022]. Available at: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/43430/Anneka-Lenssen-Beautiful-Agitation-Modern-Painting-and-Politics-in-Syria-New-Texts-Out-Now>).

other the major cities, like Aleppo and Homs, resulting in a limited audience for plastic arts until the year 2000¹².

In addition to the role of plastic arts as an instrument of change, directly addressing the political question is also new in Syrian plastic arts. This openness, which has created new paths in terms of content, as it is emotionally and intellectually stimulating, has also led to a desire to change the means of expression and artistic practices, particularly in countries where artists have relocated due to deteriorating human and political conditions in Syria. The desire to address new societies has prompted artists to engage with their visual cultures. Several Syrian artists have incorporated elements from famous international paintings in their works. Among these artists are Tammam Azzam (1980) who reproduced, in his *Syrian Museum* digital photomontage series, subjects from paintings by Henri Matisse, Francesco Goya, Gustav Klimt, and others on scenes from the Syrian war, and Amjad Wardeh who depicted, in his film *War on Famous Canvas*, war machines destroying paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and Salvador Dali. These two examples shall be discussed in greater detail later on. For other artists, the revolutionary spirit incited a desire to experiment with new materials, overturning the familiar forms and uses in the contemporary Syrian plastic art scene, especially in sculpture, which was subject to normative constraints related to sustainability and solidity. This emancipation can be found, for example, in the widespread use of structures and installations, such as the 2017 work of Hiba Alansari (1983), titled *The Math Book*. In the next section, we will look at examples of works by Syrian artists in which the political question appears as a key element of the work, both in terms of ideas and aesthetic representation.

Art as a Political Message?

In the last decade, Syrian artists have had multiple motivations that have led them to engage with the political question. When the revolution broke out in 2011, and as the specter of a wider and more violent war loomed, Syrian artists, like other Syrians, saw their identity and national belonging endangered by internal and external migration, and the violence they experienced shook their consciences and impacted their careers. Some works expressed the artists' identification with the suffering of individuals living inside the country, trapped in war, while others were used as a means of making the voices of these individuals heard and shedding light on the events, especially in diaspora countries. It is worth noting here that both cases immediately presuppose that the artworks have a recipient, i.e.: Most of the Syrian artists' works relating to the war falls under "art for an audience" current rather than the "art for art's sake" current (two currents that have been repeatedly discussed in depth since Plato's first theorizations of art in his questioning of the values of truth, goodness, and

¹² Prior to this date, the internet was not available to individuals, and its introduction had a significant impact on the art movement and art culture.

beauty). It is thus difficult, in the Syrian context, to separate production and reception, or to study one without taking the other into account. The recipient (whom the artist is supposed to reach), the aesthetic system¹³ (the artwork as a whole), and the creative medium (the vector or carrier of the idea), are three elements that constitute the basic structure on which we build our analysis of artworks as messages, or as carriers of messages with a political dimension in a direct or indirect sense.

Since its beginning, the war is represented in Syrian art in different ways, both on the level of form and subject matter, and the artworks clearly displayed the phenomenon of visual violence, which we have studied in previous articles¹⁴. In fact, whether we interpret the violence in the works of Syrian artists as a reproduction of reality for a purely artistic purpose, as a mechanism of emotional discharge, or as a sign of protest in order to express an opinion about the cause, this visual violence in the works of Syrians comes down to the fact that it is used as a means to convey a message. A large number of works, especially between 2011 and 2014 (the early years of the revolution, when the trauma of the violence was still intense) were produced in the form of paintings, digital paintings, posters, and mainly photomontages, for a variety of reasons: First, the fast-paced and daily occurrences and events created a need for immediate expression. These means of expression (painting, digital illustration, and digital photomontages) allow for direct communication because they can be realized in a short time compared to sculpture, installation, video, and engraving, which require multiple steps before reaching the desired form. Another significant factor that promoted these uses was the dispersion of artists, the loss of their ateliers and working tools, and their preoccupation with new life issues in the new cities (in the case of internal migrations) and countries (in the case of external migrations) to which they moved, which led many of them to turn to new and more viable genres.

Explicit Expression

In this section, we present examples of works in which a political dimension can be identified and explicitly expressed. Most of the examples, despite their clear artistic intent, are characterized by complex artistic and conceptual structures that are inseparable from the complexity of the creative process. In 2014, Abdulkarim Majdal Al-Beik (1973) held an exhibition called “Postponed Democracy”, in which he presented a series of installations, sculptures, paintings, and photographs. These works feature fingers and fingerprints, which are used

13- We borrow the term “aesthetic system” from philosopher Jacques Rancière, who suggested that art can be categorized according to three systems: The ethical system, the aesthetic system, and the representational system. We mention Rancière because he is one of the most prominent contemporary theorists of the art-politics dichotomy.

14- Cf. ASALIA Nour, Al ‘Onf Al Bassari Fil Fann, Qira’a Fil Mashhad Al Tashkili Al Sury Al Muasser, *Kalamoon Journal* [online], June 2020, Issue 12, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://syrian-sfss.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/العنف-الvisuri-في-الفن.pdf> and ASALIA, Nour, Artistes syriens, du militantisme à la désespérance, *Orient XXI* [en ligne], 2019, [Consulté en March 2022]. Disponible sur : <https://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/artistes-syriens-du-militantisme-a-la-desesperance,2872>.

to vote in elections and referendums in Syria. *Al Khuruj Ila Al Daw'* (Exit to Light) is an installation in which the artist fixed 365 pieces of resin representing hands and fingers in a row. These hands form a three-meter diameter spiral which consists of small red thumbs whose number gradually decreases as they move toward the center until the hand is free and fully revealed. The different colors symbolize national and political pluralism, and the fingers pointing up indicate a tendency toward liberation. The shape of the installation is visually reminiscent of the architectural design of the Mesopotamian Ziggurat. In a video interview about his exhibition, Majdal Al-Beik said, "Throughout my life I have never experienced democracy in a neutral and free way, and most of our problems have political causes. This artwork calls for a rise to democracy through the finger we dip in the ink to vote¹⁵." In another work, the artist placed several colored fingers in a sealed transparent box. The artist tells the story of how he came up with the idea for the box, "Once, in a government institution, I saw a complaint box which was tightly sealed, except for a narrow opening to submit complaints. I realized that this scene was some sort of black comedy! This box whose content cannot be revealed reflects how Syrians are denied their basic rights; they can file complaints, but these complaints will never be examined¹⁶." Similarly to this sealed box, the fingers featured in the artwork are crammed inside a box with no hope of achieving their purpose. What is notable in these two works is that the painter Majdal Al-Beik has moved on to new means of expression, which indicates his own liberation from his educational background (he specialized in painting). These vividly colorful works serve as a political protest message against the falsity of democracy in Syria.

The question of democracy and anti-dictatorship has also appeared in the work of artist Monif Ajaj (1968). In 2009, Ajaj held the "Moments Before the Tragedy" exhibition. His representations of figures from the Syrian army were often satirical. Through the convergence of realism and expressionism, the artist showed the aggressiveness and brutality of these men by exaggerating the anatomy of certain parts of the body, or by exaggerating movements or gestures. In his painting titled *Arba'at Dakatira* (Four Doctors), alluding to the word "dictator", the artist drew four Arab dictators who were ousted by their people: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak and Ali Abdullah Saleh. This sense of satire, similar to French artist Honoré Daumier's (1808-1879) scathing critique of political society, is an intellectual, yet peaceful, revenge against the dictators' tyranny. There is no doubt that the word "Doctors" refers to the doctor who is next in line: Bashar Al-Assad. In other paintings, Ajaj portrayed Bashar Al-Assad as a monster, suggesting his full responsibility for the brutal and mass murder of the Syrian people. Ajaj also criticized the army's support of Bashar Al-Assad and its mindless and violent allegiance to him in the same satirical way, portraying

15- MAJDAL AL-BEIK Abdulkarim, Postponed Democracy: Exhibition at Ayyam Gallery (Project Beirut), *Future TV* [online], 2015, [Accessed May 2022]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VaZuSzRxkA&ab_channel=abdulkarimmajdalbeik

16- ASALIA Nour, *Artistes syriens, du militantisme à la désespérance*, op. cit.

their provocative smiles in times of death. Through this artistic approach that combines heartbreaking content with formal exaggeration, Ajaj achieved an explicit political critique. Similarly, in his 2013 etching, titled *Al General Yudakhen* (The General Smoking), Yasser Safi (1976) depicts an officer smoking a cigar with disregard for the severed heads that surround him. Furthermore, Mohamed Omran (1979), in his “A World of Men” series, shows intelligence agents of all ages and ranks crowding the canvas. These bodies, drawn with sharp lines that intersect and overlap in a blur of identity, represent intelligence agents that any Syrian can immediately recognize by their dark glasses, which they used to wear to disguise themselves until they eventually became identifiable. The crouching figures that have long monitored Syrians’ movements in public spaces are here rendered emaciated and powerless. In the three previous examples, the bodies of the jailers, who serve as a tool for the regime, represented as themselves or in a metaphorical way, are altered, the artists choosing to draw them as obese in order to reflect their greed and their disregard for the horrors of war.

In another example, artist Ala’ Hamameh (1984) presents a succession of scenes taken from the reality of war in a short film titled *A Suitcase Memory*. The artist uses audio clips of political speeches by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad and Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, followed by images of blood, destruction, sinking boats, displacement tents, and coffins, declaring his stance against the policies that have caused the tragedy and holding them directly responsible for the devastation. Interestingly, Ala’ Hamameh has a background in art, having specialized in advertising design, but since the beginning of the events, he has been working on a series of paintings with the same title, *A Suitcase Memory*, inspired by his migration as part of the mass exodus.

Refusing Politicization

As opposed to the previous artistic stances, other artists, who did not hesitate to express and advocate for the cause through their art, argued that art, even if it carries a political message, cannot be politicized at all. Since the early days of the revolution, artist Tammam Azzam has shown through his art a peaceful act of protest. For him, “art can carry a political idea, while the opposite is often not possible¹⁷.” With this in mind, Azzam produced digital photomontage series, such as *Syrian Revolution Places* in 2012 and *Syrian Museum* in 2013. In each of the works in his latest collection, the artist has incorporated elements from works of art that are considered international masterpieces, including Vincent Van Gogh’s *The Starry Night*, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*. One of his most relevant works is the one that borrows the scene from Francisco de Goya’s *Tres de Mayo*, which represents the execution of Spanish rebels on May 3, 1808, the day the Spanish people began their uprising against Napoleon Bonaparte’s occupation. In another photomontage in the *Syrian Museum* series, the women from Paul Gauguin’s *Tahitian Women on the Beach* can be seen

¹⁷- *Ibid.*

superimposed on an image of a refugee camp. The ground is painted in a bright pink color, which is shocking compared given the context of the subject matter. In the background, we can see a detail found in real refugee camps: A tent with the logo of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Because of its expressive power and the important message it carries, Azzam's *Syrian Museum* series has been featured in many international art magazines and websites, and has been shared thousands of times on social media.

However, in a 2019 interview titled "A Kiss is Just a Kiss", in reference to his work featured in prominent international exhibition spaces, an image of Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss*, superimposed on the facade of destroyed building from the city of Homs, artist Tammam Azzam refused to be labeled as a political artist. "When Gustav Klimt's *The Kiss* (Freedom Graffiti) from the *Syrian Museum* series took off the way it did, I felt there was a risk of being reduced to a label – a political artist, or a graphic artist, for example. Of course, a work of art reflects its social and political backgrounds, but it does so in an artistic way. That is why I focus first and foremost on the artistic construction of the work. Subsequent classifications are another issue altogether, which I feel are very far from the basic essence of art. The media can really put an artist in a box and it's a bit of a double-edged sword: We all hope to convey a part of the disaster in Syria, but as an artist, I don't want to be defined by those works only¹⁸," he explains. Azzam's stance indicates his desire to belong to art above all else, but he cannot eliminate the different interpretations that arise from the context in which his work is produced. Many of his works have been reposted on social media tens of thousands of times by Syrians and non-Syrians because of their strong message, their relevance, and their timeliness.

Expressing the Issue Indirectly, Suspension of Exhibitions or Production

Although commitment in Syrian art post-2011 has manifested in direct ways on a large scale through various themes (death, destruction, violence, dictatorship...), formal elements (knives, chemical weapons sign, army uniforms, tank wheels...), and visual elements (visual violence, provocative colors, barbed wires...), it has also appeared in other ways. Several factors kept some Syrian artists away from direct expression, especially the inability of artists living in Syria to openly express themselves because addressing political questions may expose them to security risks. In addition, some artists also felt powerless in the face of the horror of the massacres and questioned the meaning of art in those terrible moments (especially in 2013 after the Damascus Ghouta chemical attack). As a result, some artists stopped producing for a few months or even years, while others continued to work but stayed away from exhibition spaces. Finally, for

18- AZZAM Tammam, A Kiss is Just a Kiss, Interview by Anna Wallace-Thompson, *Atassi Foundation Journal* [online], 2019, [Accessed January 2022]. Available at: <https://www.atassifoundation.com/features/a-kiss-is-just-a-kiss>

purely aesthetic reasons, the war does not appear clearly in the works of certain artists, as the explicit vocabulary did not infiltrate the creative ideas of all artists, but the impact of the war on them can be seen through a variety of forms and words, such as suitcases, self-portraits, displaced people, and passports. For philosopher Stamatios Tzitzis, “The notion of aesthetics does not only imply feelings of beauty, morality and humanity. It also refers to the moral suffering and bodily wounds that reveal the presence of the excessive and violent manifestations of aesthetics in nature and culture¹⁹.” Thus, the terrible moments that Syrian artists have experienced in recent years have led to an overflow of creative expression.

Thorny plants, for example, occupy the paintings of artist Omran Younis, indirectly referring to the complete destruction of the cactus fields in the Mezzeh region by the Syrian regime in 2012. In these works, a violent visual language is used, expressing the devastation and gloomy atmosphere of the war through the cacti filling the canvas on the one hand, and the intertwining lines and the dominance of the color red on the other hand. Furthermore, by using cut-up kitchen utensils to create math equations like division, addition and subtraction, Hiba Alansari, in her installation *The Math Book*, tells the personal story of a child who was killed in a bombing. Through this story, she addresses the issue of school dropouts and the physical and moral collapse of educational institutions as a result of exile, bombing, and destruction. Journalist Hassan Sahili wrote about this installation in *Al-Modon* newspaper, “What inspired Hiba to create this installation was her visit to Kafr Nabl, where she found a math book (sixth grade, 2013-2014 edition) in one of its buildings that was destroyed ‘by a thermal rocket fired by a Syrian army MiG-21 on December 1, 2013.’ Al-Ansari later discovered from the name with childlike drawings on the label that it belonged to a girl named Noura Bazkadi, who was killed in a bombing.” Similarly, Akram Al-Halabi (1981) in his 2016 *Cheek* series, which is made up of digital photomontage works, adds intensity to the event by using images of poignant scenes from the Syrian war, and photos of martyrs, mostly children, and by adding indicative words and letters to them. For instance, on the picture of a hand, he writes the word “hand”. This method is driven by a desire not to forget, as the titles of some of the works in the series suggest, and by a desire to stress on the humanization of images of Syrians, who have become numbers in the international arena, given the high death toll. Other artists addressed concerns stemming from the calamities of war, namely migration and displacement, two themes that appear in the work of Adel Daoud and Anas Albraehe. In Daoud’s paintings, suitcases and their contents are scattered in unknown spaces, revealing the personal items of the suitcase owners and their own worlds. This reflects the fragmentation of memory and the lack of stability. As for Albraehe, he was strongly influenced by the idea

19- « L’esthétique n’implique pas seulement des sentiments de beauté, de moralité et d’humanité. Elle concerne en outre les souffrances morales, les blessures corporelles qui dévoilent la présence, dans la nature et dans la culture, de la démesure et de la violence de ses manifestations ». (TZITZIS Stamatios, *Esthétique de la violence*. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1997, p. 3-10).

of economic asylum. He painted workers and displaced people in a colorful, cheerful, and peaceful atmosphere, where surrendering to the horror of reality is not an option. Lately, however, he started drawing them sleeping in peaceful natural spaces. These themes and multiple forms of expression do not indicate direct political opinions or necessarily committed positions (in the sense of permanent commitment as we defined it in the introduction), but rather express a moral interaction with the event, while the artist might be focused on other artistic issues.

However, the indirect expression of commitment has extended to other aspects, as evidenced by the artists' stances. Shocked by death, a number of artists, perhaps many, went through phases of silence. Walid El Masri (1979) talks about his unfinished work *The Jasmine Tree*, saying "At the beginning of the events in 2011, after I came to France, I designed an installation that I didn't complete because I never had the chance to display it. I cut 2,700 jasmine flower petals out of plastic, each of which was supposed to bear a number representing the number of martyrs during that period. The petals were supposed to be hung on a tree in public parks, and the installation was meant to be moved around different cities, with the number of petals increasing as the number of martyrs increased. This design stems from my career as a mosaic artist, a profession I inherited from my father and practiced for years, and one of the professions that the Damascus Ghouta is famous for. *The Jasmine Tree* project did not see the light of day because I did not get official approval from the municipality of Paris, where I was hoping to display it. Not only that, but after several weeks, the death toll had doubled, making it impossible to follow their numbers and design enough petals²⁰." In a later project consisting of a series of paintings, Walid El Masri included portraits that featured the chemical weapons warning sign, following the 2013 Damascus Ghouta massacre. These works were exhibited at a protest that same year in Paris; they were not hung on the walls of a gallery but carried by each of the protesters.

In today's fast-paced world, associating art with peace may seem like a utopian approach that is difficult to implement, but artists have their own positions and a willingness to abreast of events. These positions have been expressed through the artistic or cultural activism of artists, whether individually or through associations. The Syrian Cultural Caravan²¹, for instance, was founded in 2014 on the initiative of Syrian filmmaker and photographer Mohammad Al-Roumi (1945). The caravan toured France and other European countries, with the main goal of making the voice of art louder than the voice of destruction and countering the image of the Islamic extremist tide.

For most artists, the visual memory of their past constitutes a reference that inspired their artworks. They recalled images of schools, streets, political

20- EL MASRI Walid, *Unpublished private interview*, 2022.

21- CARAVANE CULTURELLE SYRIENNE, A Cultural Political Association Launched in 2014 by Syrian Artists and Intellectuals to Support the Syrian People, [online], 2014. Available at: <https://caravaneculturellesyrienne.org/>.

speeches, as well as the violent of the state agencies, military personnel and intelligence agents. We can thus deduce a conclusion, confirmed by the peaceful presence of Syrian artists in general, that artistic activity has tended towards the demand for peace by targeting different audiences, whether through exhibitions in galleries or through political events, such as the “Syrie: L’art en armes” (Syria: Art in Arms) exhibition, curated by Delphine Leccas²², that took place in Paris in 2013 and the “Tourab” exhibition, curated by Alma Salem²³, that took place at the Ravenstein Gallery in Brussels in 2018. The latter coincided with The Second Brussels Conference on “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”, hosted by the European Union and co-chaired by the United Nations. These two exhibitions are mentioned as examples because they included a large number of Syrian artists.

Aesthetic Representations of Commitment: Popular Art and Elitist Art

“For Kant, the purpose of art is not to defend a cause outside itself. On the contrary, it has an end in itself and is free from all considerations of use or interest²⁴.”

Laure Gillot-Assayag.

Syrian Art as an Incubator for a Socio-Political System

The works of Syrian artists have thus emerged as a tool of political expression. Art itself has become a space for political expression by artists who were previously unable to freely articulate their political affiliations and aspirations, which are supposed to give rise to effective discourses. In an interview conducted by philosopher Jean-Marc Lachaud, theorist and philosopher Jacques Rancière, who has written extensively on the relationship between aesthetics and politics, explained that “Nowadays, there is a lack of political subjectivization and, as a result, a temptation to think of artistic practices as substitutes. In the 1960s, some sort of circulation was created between performance art practices and political action practices. Today, the arts are often trying to live on this legacy, but in a context where the great systems of explanation and unifying watchwords are failing²⁵.”

Considering this analysis, which can be applied to different arts in different

22- French curator and former exhibition manager at the French Cultural Center in Damascus.

23- Syrian curator, member of the British Council and former cultural resources manager at the Institut Français du Proche-Orient in Damascus.

24- « Pour Kant, l’art n’a pas pour but de défendre une cause extérieure à lui. Au contraire, il a sa fin en soi et il est libre de toute considération d’usage ou d’intérêt. » (GILLOT-ASSAYAG Laure, *op. cit.*).

25- « Aujourd’hui, il y a un déficit de subjectivation politique et, de ce fait, une tentation de penser les pratiques artistiques comme des formes substitutives. Dans les années 60, il s’est créé une forme de circulation entre les pratiques de la performance artistique et celles de l’action politique. Les arts, aujourd’hui, essaient souvent de vivre sur cet héritage, mais dans un contexte où s’affirme la défection des grands systèmes d’explication et des mots d’ordre fédérateurs. » (RANCIÈRE Jacques, « Politique et esthétique », *Actuel Marx*, 2006, vol. 39, no. 1, p. 193-202.)

countries, it is possible to view the clash of political factors and positions on the contemporary Syrian plastic art scene as a gateway to its engagement with the global scene and its concerns.

The war in Syria has made art a safer virtual space for political expression than revolutionary activities on the ground, but many artists were harassed or detained, such as Najah Albukai, or died under torture, like cartoonist Akram Raslan in 2015, for simply being within the reach of the Syrian security forces and for standing up against violence.

Syrian artists' mobilizations, their affiliations, their political positions and even their humanitarian positions, have sparked numerous debates about the rightness and clarity of their approaches, and these debates stem from trials that might have been based on illegitimate arguments. Some of these debates occurred in the press²⁶ and others on social media²⁷, the role of which cannot be ignored, even if it is a random and culturally disorganized incubator. These judgments were often based on the personal and subjective references of individuals working in the cultural milieu or individuals who are not part of it. In fact, one of the reasons why these judgments are not valid is that they ignore the aesthetic purpose and focus on the moral and ethical framework, knowing that this framework is not unified among the Syrian people, as is the case in all nations. Adding to the complexity of this matter is the almost total lack of plastic arts criticism in Syria, which is due to the absence of a theoretical branch specializing in the history, philosophy, and criticism of art in the country.

This lack of criticism has affected the audience's judgment and allowed for the proliferation of artistic works, regardless of their creative value. In fact, priority was often given to the idea of the work and its easy access to the viewer's mind. In this regard, it is worth trying to analyze this phenomenon by asking the following question: Does art have to fit into a social system? Should it have goals with social dimensions?

In his article titled *Art as a Social System*, art historian Matthew Rampley cited British sociologist and theorist Zygmunt Bauman, who theorized about the "using up" of art, i.e. the end of the meaning of the image due to its commodification and over-consumption.

As Bauman states, "[B]y the 'using up' of the object of art in the process of its consumption I do not mean its destruction in the corporeal, physical sense—like in the case of the paperback bestseller bought in a railway newsstand at the beginning of the journey and thrown into the railway rubbish bin after its completion. What is at stake here is something else: the unavoidable fading of interest, loss of the 'entertaining value,' of the capacity to arouse desire and

26- For example, following the exhibition "Nudes" by Youssef Abdelke at Kamel Gallery in Damascus in 2017.

27- For example, cartoonist Ali Farzat's works were the subject of several debates between those who supported him and those who disapproved of his work because they considered it degrading to women's bodies.

pleasurable emotions²⁸.” In this case, consumption implies the excessive use of the image (the artwork) in an indiscriminate manner, causing it to lose its creativity and originality. As for the phenomenon we are studying, we can say that in the early years of the revolution, Syrian art drifted in one way or another in a consumerist direction due to the heavy use of certain terms (e.g.: Air force, tank tracks, map of Syria, suitcases, refugee boats...) and due to the common visual and artistic educational references. In fact, most Syrian artists of the same generation were trained by a specific group of teachers, who were largely classical in their approach, and had previously studied in the same public schools, which visually constitute a mental base in the childhood phase.

Artistic Applications at the Popular Level

The transformation of the post-2011 Syrian plastic art scene involves other complexities. Indeed, if we consider art in times of war as a phenomenon, we cannot ignore that it influences some anthropological factors and is influenced by others, such as the differentiation of social categories and the different cultural and visual references of the artists based on their social affiliations. The war prompted many amateurs or artisans to create meaningful activist products in the form of art. For instance, Akram Suweidan painted on the missile remnants left by the war in rural Aleppo, where he took refuge after the destruction of his city, Douma. “Although Suweidan believes that his art ‘will not change the course of the war,’ he maintains that it is meant to survive on ‘for history’ and ‘may contribute to explaining and clarifying what took place at this point.’ He also sees his art as a message of peace, adding that people receive his work positively, “both inside and outside of Syria” and that “There is a segment of societies outside Syria who still sympathize with us²⁹.” Suweidan created these pieces not drawing on artistic training but on his experience with glass painting. His works became widely popular and were used on social media as a metaphor for Syrians’ will to live and resist destruction. These products did not only impact the public, but they also caught the attention of two philosophical specialists, Nibras Chehayed and Guillaume de Vault, in their joint book *La destructivité en œuvres : Essai sur l’art syrien contemporain* (Destructiveness as Visual Art: Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary Syrian Art). They wrote about them in a chapter titled “Le chiffonnier de la destructivité” (The Ragman of Destructiveness). Although they refer to this art as “a different type of

28- Comme le dit Bauman « Lorsque je dis que l’objet d’art est “épuisé” par le processus de sa consommation, je ne parle pas de sa destruction au sens physique, corporel, comme il en est des romans que l’on achète à la gare avant le voyage et que l’on jette à la poubelle en sortant du train après les avoir lus. L’enjeu est ici différent : la baisse d’intérêt inévitable, la perte de cette capacité qu’a l’objet de divertir, la capacité de faire naître désir et plaisir » (RAMPLEY Matthew, « De l’art considéré comme système social. Observations sur la sociologie de Niklas Luhmann », *Sociologie de l’Art*, 2005, vol. ps7, no. 2., pp. 157-185).

29- NASSAR Alaa, Photo essay: Syrian artist challenges death with art, *Syria Direct* [online], 2020, [Accessed May 2022]. Available at: <https://syriadirect.org/photo-essay-syrian-artist-challenges-death-with-art/>

decorative art”, the two authors make the following consideration: “According to the Hegelian distinction, ornaments do not belong, as they usually do, to the order of controlled art, where they are employed to beautify food utensils, for example, but rather rise to the status of free art³⁰.” Moreover, Nizar Ali Badr, a self-taught sculptor who practiced sculpting in stone and wood, began making figurative sculptures with pebbles in 2017, and his work went viral despite its simplicity because, for many, it expressed the suffering of refugees and migrants. Both examples have in common a commitment to professional art. If, on the one hand, they suggest that public taste engages with the easily interpretable image, and, on the other hand, that the standards of professional taste have changed, these examples have been celebrated by cultural professionals, from curators to writers. In fact, the reason why recipients are interested in these examples, despite their different references, is the commitment purpose.

There is no doubt that this kind of practice leads to both positive and negative outcomes, and its artistic impact must be theoretically and hypothetically recognized. Popular practices are not occasional or incidental to art. Throughout the history of art, they have influenced liberating aspects such as new uses of unfamiliar materials and the transgression of boundaries between arts, so that these practices are unconcerned with imposed or historically contextualized intellectual frameworks and mental restraints. Popular practices may first be seen as micro-cultural changes, or as late applications of the professional art movement, but they may lead to the questioning, reinterpretation, and investigation of aesthetic roots, and may incite the consideration of the issues of professionally recognized artistic trends. The history of art and the philosophy of aesthetics has never ceased to be reinterpreted, and each current interpretation is a new version that that presents analyses from different contemporary perspectives. Despite this fact, and considering the two examples hereinabove (Akram Suweidan and Nizar Ali Badr) as models of applied art products, it is not possible to characterize the popular practices that emerged in recent years as guarantors of new and creative aesthetic elements.

Confronting Destruction: Places, Human and Memory

In addition to these popular practices, which, from a specialized point of view, involve non-professional spontaneity, creative contributions by professional artists have emerged, targeting the public with an evocative popular vocabulary. The term “popular” applies here to what addresses a large segment of viewers, regardless of their artistic culture, which may be required by some artistic trends³¹. In the case of Syria, we recall the *Poptalgie* series (2020), which is a

30- CHEHAYED Nibras, DE VAULX, Guillaume, *La destructivité en œuvres : Essai sur l'art syrien contemporain*. Beirut, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2021, p. 75.

31- For example: To enter the world of conceptual art, the viewer must have at least a rough idea of how this art addresses the audience, and may need to delve deeper into accompanying texts, or research the indirect connotations of the work.

collaborative experience between two artists: Boutros Al Maari and Khaled Takriti. The series of paintings features elements of popular memory and intangible heritage, such as the tarboosh, the clog, a famous dessert (*Biscuits and Raha* painting), or even the most popular cigarette brand among Syrians (Alhamra). In fact, the popular dimension here stems from knowledge and artistic intentions. In an article titled *Mafhum “Al Kateb Lil ‘Umum” Aw Me’na Al Naqed Fil Hayez Al Aam* (The Concept of ‘Writing for the Public’, or the Meaning of Criticism in the Public Sphere”, writer Mohammad Sami Al-Kayal argues, from a cultural critical perspective, that “Writing for the public does not determine the non-specialization, simplicity, or popularity of the works, whose producers could be important philosophers or recognized scholars in their field. However, what distinguishes these works is that they are not written in a purely specialized language, but in the ordinary, common, and shared language of all those who are part of the public sphere. Thus, philosophers such as Marx and Nietzsche can, to a great extent, be considered writers for the public, without this detracting from their importance. Indeed, many books that later became academic reference works were originally written for the general public, and examples of this are abundant in the modernist context³².” The importance of professional popular art and its role in changing, stabilizing, or reinforcing concepts and presenting them to the public therefore stems from this principle. If popular practices by individuals without artistic authority are considered a means of resistance, series such as the one by Al Maari and Takriti constitute the nucleus of a product that aims to prevent elements of popular heritage from being forgotten and protect them from extinction, especially among the younger generation who emigrated at an early age or were born abroad. “*Poptalgie* is the second album of our collaborative project. In this album, we, Khaled Takriti and Boutros Al Maari, painted a collection of images from our Syrian popular memory,” stated artist Boutros Al Maari when publishing this collection³³. It is also out of this intention to keep memories alive that sculptor Khaled Dawwa created *Here is My Heart* (2021). The artist did not present a new sculptural vision, but he reproduced from memory a neighborhood destroyed by the regime’s heavy bombardment of rebel-held neighborhoods, evoking several aspects of destruction: Death, rubble, fragmentation and extinction. This installation, similar to the massive scale models designed for monuments, is the artist’s testimony to the events he himself lived through. While architectural models replicate as close to perfection as possible an edifice, Khaled Dawwa’s installation embodies imperfection and

32- AL KAYAL Mohammad Sami, *Mafhum ‘Al Kateb Lil ‘Umum’ Aw Me’na Al Naqed Fil Hayez Al Aam*, *Alquds Alarabi* [online], 2021, [Accessed March 2022]. Available at: <https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D9%85%D9%81%D9%87%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%88%D9%85-%D8%A3%D9%88-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%82%D8%AF-%D9%81%D9%8A/>

33- This project was preceded by the *Portraits* project, about which the artist wrote on his Facebook account: “*Portraits* is a small duo project in which we draw the faces of some of the Levant’s most prominent figures. It is a fun activity that breaks the state of anxiety and anticipation imposed by the spread of the pandemic in our world. Our work is not aimed at documenting, but rather at preserving memory.”

loss and shows where material and memory loss happened.

The realization by Syrian artists of the disintegration of place as an image and as a concept has had a fundamental impact on their work. First, from an artistic point of view, it has impacted the way they represent the destruction of public and private landmarks and buildings, or the way they remember and visualize the place that is falling into oblivion. For example, Amjad Wardeh (1984), who left Syria in 2013 after participating in several peaceful protests in Damascus, directed in 2014 *War on Famous Canvas*³⁴, which combines reality and utopia and features well-known monuments and majestic paintings by great painters. In this two-minute film that blends reality and fiction, the artist uses five iconic paintings: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory*, Pieter Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, and Paul Gauguin's *Landscape*. At the end of the film, a real photo showing the bombing of Al-Madiq Fortress (located in northwestern Syria, in the Hama region) is followed by a digital drawing of the fortress produced by Wardeh. Throughout the film, we hear excerpts from videos of the revolution, mainly to point out dates, places, and the climate of fear. These excerpts mainly aim to recall dates and places and reflect the climate of fear. In each of the famous paintings, the artist adds a bombing or aerial attack through montage, emphasizing the idea of indiscriminate destruction. Such reproductions are not new in contemporary art, but what is special here, like in Tammam Azzam's *Syrian Museum* series, is the purpose of these reproductions. In fact, the use of world-famous paintings allows the viewer to imagine the destruction and suggests that this destruction metaphorically extends to the entire world.

The situation in Syria has only gotten worse, especially for the poorest Syrians, who have been suffering from inhumane conditions for years. Consequently, many contemporary Syrian artists have portrayed the suffering in the refugee camps, the drownings, the mass deaths of children, and death under the rubble. The profound effect of destruction has extended as philosophies in Syrian art, as the two scholars Nibras Chehayed and Guillaume de Vault have theorized in their book about "destructiveness". Of course, this destruction did not only affect places and buildings, but also caused great damage to human beings due to the collective fear of bombing, death, hunger, homelessness, but most of all the fear of being tortured before being killed. We have seen how artist Najah Albukai (1970) conveyed the horrors of the detention center in a large collection of drawings. He was detained and tortured for several periods in Syrian prisons between 2012 and 2015, during which time he witnessed humiliation and torture, both physically and visually, and saw the accumulation of bodies. In many of his works, the artist used the simplest sketching techniques with fountain pens, but the fact that the canvas was filled with bodies created a visually compelling complex space, expressive of the identity of the prison space. When researchers Nibras Chehayed and Guillaume de Vault, in their theory on destructiveness

³⁴- Produced individually by the artist without any financial support, the film was screened at several international short film festivals, including the 67th Cannes Film Festival in 2014.

in contemporary Syrian art, examined one of Albukai's works that represents a horizontal projection of an overcrowded cell, they evoked Jean Améry's approach to torture as "the degradation of beings into mortal bodies³⁵." This presentation of the body as doomed and mortal in a situation of torture is the greatest proof of destruction; the logic of the human understanding of the world, which according to the authors is a logic that is meant to preserve life, disintegrates and is replaced by the logic of annihilation in detention centers and death camps³⁶.

Commitment and Exhibition Opportunities

The destabilization of the country imposed itself as a reality that had to be lived with on two fronts: on the professional front and on the livelihood front, in addition to the creative dimension. Workplaces and exhibition spaces fell apart, and artists lost their ability to express themselves directly due to the numerous obstacles in the countries of asylum or in Syria. Therefore, many artists turned to virtual exhibitions and attempted spatial reconstructions, whether through social media, through online alternative spaces for exhibition and dissemination, or in new alternative physical spaces. Several art exhibitions and initiatives were organized, and they were as committed to the cause as the artworks themselves. Among these exhibitions and initiatives were many artists' individual exhibitions that served as platforms for expressing their views, and group exhibitions, such as "Syrie: L'art en armes" and "Tourab", which are mentioned in the present paper. Curator Alma Salem's virtual Freedom Museum project, which has never been completed, is probably one of the most important examples of alternatives. On the other hand, the new reality has provided new opportunities for Syrian artists, both positively and negatively. On the one hand, many of the experiences were viewed with a sympathetic eye, subjectively, and were not judged aesthetically.

On the other hand, the presence of many Syrian artists abroad has provided them with opportunities to display their works and express themselves through art, regardless of their artistic involvement in the political or humanitarian expression of the war. In fact, the conditions and exhibition opportunities for Syrian artists varied according to the different geographies of the diaspora. In fact, the conditions and exhibition opportunities for Syrian artists varied according to the countries in which they lived. The production cycle (realization, promotion, exhibition, economic returns) was subject to obstacles or administrative facilities depending on the country. Sometimes, the needs and tastes of the sponsors on the one hand, and the unjust economic conditions on the other hand, controlled the artist and their path, often depriving them of work essentials, including a workplace, tools and raw materials, forcing them to make choices they might not

35- AMÉRY Jean, *Par-Delà le crime et le châtement, Essai pour surmonter l'insurmontable*. Trad. François Wuilmart, Arles, Acte Sud, 2005.

36- CHEHAYED Nibras, DE VAULX, Guillaume, *op. cit.*

otherwise have made. Mona Atassi, founder of Atassi Gallery, which was active between 1993 and 2010, has hands-on knowledge and experience with Beirut's galleries and art market, wrote about this point in her article *Circumstances and Issues of Syrian Art in Lebanon*: "At the start of the Syrian tragedy in 2011, the road to Beirut was the shortest path for Syrian artists escaping from terror and death. They took refuge in their neighboring country, carrying nothing but their pencil and brush [...] Some of them had no choice but to remain in Beirut while those who were able to escape did just that. Unwanted artists were driven out and others used their skills to build up and stimulate public relations. Art galleries rushed to monopolise, some proudly claiming that they are supporting these youths, envisaging no risks – someone's business prospers and the sale wheel spins³⁷."

Atassi clearly points to an issue that requires its own research: the commercial value of the artwork, and the market's desire to keep up with and exploit major events by attracting artists whose artistic visions intentionally or unintentionally align with those events.

Conversely, many Syrian artists have been marginalized for focusing on the aesthetic aspect of their work instead of focusing on political commitment or the expression of war, especially those whose careers have been disrupted due to their migration and to the lack of means to start a career in their new countries of residence. Hence, in considering this point about exhibition opportunities, we are not deviating at all from the subject of the present study. In fact, some movements, such as the "Portes ouvertes sur l'art" (Open Doors to Art) initiative, tried to refer to Syrian art from the principle that exhibition opportunities should be available regardless of the label attached to the artists, whether they are labeled as refugees or committed artists. For example, in the exhibition "Où est la maison de mon ami ?" (Where is my friend's house?) which was held at the Malakoff Contemporary Art Center, curator and researcher Dunia Al Dahan was inspired by the desire to restore and document memory. Although the fact that some artists did not address the issue in their works was not an obstacle to their participation in the exhibition, the "Portes ouvertes" initiative later opened up to include a wide variety of identities, and was no longer specialized in Syrian art.

Emerging Issues and Extension of Commitment

Before moving on to the conclusion of this study, it is worth mentioning one of the most important aspects of the revolutionary changes that have emerged in the last decade and that have affected artistic expression, namely the serious and committed epistemological attention to socio-political issues other than war. Among these issues is the feminist cause, the status of women and their physical and intellectual relationship to art amidst events and demographic changes;

37- ATASSI Mona, *Circumstances and Issues of Syrian Art in Lebanon*, *Atassi Foundation Journal* [online], 2019, [Accessed May 2022]. Available at: <https://www.atassifoundation.com/features/circumstances-and-issues-of-syrian-art-in-lebanon>

Despite the clear struggles of Syrian female artists from previous generations, such as Hala Mahayni, Leila Nseir, Asma Fayoumi, and Laila Muraywid, to name a few, this cause has until recently remained difficult to navigate due to its political, religious, and societal complexities. In recent years, however, this cause has strongly resurfaced, and has in some instances been consolidated as a commitment. Activism has manifested itself on many levels, from the female artists' living and working conditions and the new representations of the female body in art, to the specificity of these artists' creative process and their figurative perspective on work materials. For example, in a project titled *I Once Entered a Garden*, Bissane Al Charif and fellow artist Chrystèle Khodr explored displaced women's memories of their sexual experiences during the war. Additionally, in a performative work called *My Little Voice Can't Lie*, Khadija Baker attached listening devices to locks of her hair, letting people listen to the stories of displaced women who have lost so much during the war. On an institutional level, the Atassi Foundation held an exhibition titled "Personal Revolutions" in 2019 in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue. This exhibition sought to bring to light the works of Syrian female artists that were produced over the course of a century, including works by pioneer artists, works by the younger generation of artists and a study by researcher and artist Nagham Hodaifa (1981), who is engaged in an intellectual feminist struggle that is reflected in her paintings. The expansion of protest frameworks in the last ten years has impacted feminist demands in direct and indirect ways. The relocation of many Syrian female artists to new communities with wider margins of emancipation, and more attention to art in general, may have enhanced their ability to express both gender and artistic concerns. This short summary does not, of course, define the uniqueness of the phenomenon, but we found it necessary to point out this new and renewed form of commitment born out of the major changes that have occurred in the Syrian art scene in the last decade.

Conclusion: Aesthetics in the Service of Causes, Artistic Expression in the Face of Oblivion and Extinction

In this conclusion, we summarize the main points that emerged from the analysis of the examples by examining the evolution of the phenomenon of commitment and the issue's connections to aesthetics in Syrian art during the last decade.

Representation and Revolutionary Role

In the last decade, the role of Syrian art and its ability to influence on several levels has become more significant. First, it represented the street, which resulted in the establishment of art as a tool allowing artists who live in Syria or abroad to communicate with people inside the country, and led to artists being attached to the country's problems. Second, Syrian art was a means of making voices heard and helped to gain global support at a speed that many political meetings and speeches were unable to achieve. With the exception of artists who continued drawing inspiration from their personal issues, post-revolutionary Syrian art tends to convey an idea, an event, or a stance that represents an act of resistance. In fact, given the prevailing violence in the country, the notion of "making art for art's sake" is noticeably less common. Henceforth, the role of art as a spokesperson for the people is evident, and the potential recipient of the work must be addressed in a different way. The question of the "recipient", which is similar in all creative processes, is no longer subject to the same criteria when it comes to war because not only does it concern the discipline of aesthetics, but it also concerns the socio-political and anthropological aspects. Therefore, it has become imperative to ask questions such as: "Who is the Syrian artist addressing in their work today? What is their ultimate message?"

Aesthetic Manifestations

In addition to vocabulary and visual language, the war has affected artistic manifestations and exhibitions, making them a means of protest or political expression. The artists' urge to express themselves and to keep up with the new Syrian spaces has led them to make extensive use of digital media such as digital art and installations (photomontage, digital illustration, video art, and an overlap of art forms in the context of the Syrian artistic experience). The introduction of these means of expression supported the fact that the majority of Syrian artists' works were considered a message, for they represented a desire to open up to the Syrian and international public at the same time. In order to do so, artists adopted a contemporary style and reacted quickly, without going through the processes that can slow down the emergence of the work, such as classical painting, sculpture, and engraving. Not to mention that one of the reasons why some Syrian artists resorted to new media is the loss of their workspace after being forced to leave the country to escape multiple dangers. However,

this acceleration of production often led to a tendency towards simple, direct expression, at the expense of artistic depth.

At the same time, other Syrian artists remained faithful to classical techniques. Some of them were stuck in an emotional state and felt unable to react, while others integrated the bloody events in their work, changing the subject matter without obvious changes in style or technique.

This is how violence was incorporated as a visual language, revealing new tools of expression that sometimes drove Syrian artists to create unprecedented works.

Art as a Record

Not only does the titling of artworks constitute the first step towards understanding the work and extrapolating its content and message, but it is also an essential part of the documentation process. In the examples we have mentioned and many others, the titles of the works emphasize the willingness of Syrian artists to refer to events or their repercussions. Indeed, the titles of many of the works refer to the event that is unfolding on the ground. In this manner, the artistic product takes on a documentary value, as the works preserve facts, realities, or names of individuals, cities, and villages. This is the case with Khalil Younes and Amjad Wardeh's *Hamza Bakkour*; Hamza is a Syrian child who died after being hit by a piece of shrapnel that ripped off the lower half of his face. Moreover, in his *Chemical* series, artist Walid El Masri illustrated the 2013 chemical weapons massacre in the Damascus Ghouta; many of the works thus serve as visual records with documentary value.

This study of Syrian art production in recent years does not purport to fully capture the “cause and aesthetics” duality. The artworks produced in the last decade, which are spatially dispersed across the various countries of residence of Syrians, are far too numerous to be included in a single study. We hope to complete the present study and develop it in the near future.

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