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ARH 6930

Reading Response 2

The art world of the Middle East is a vastly different place than the art world of the Americas or Europe. With the tension of war, shift in power from one political party to another, and the influence of the West, the art market in the Middle Eastern country of Egypt is caught in a battle of it's own between the state and private sector as it gains momentum in the global market. Winegar (2006) paints a picture of a developing Egyptian art scene that is caught in the middle of maintaining it's cultural sovereignty and using Western influence to gain headway in the global trade. In the days since September 11th, 2001, Middle Eastern trade has dramatically changed with no exception to the art market. Egyptians are looking to young artists practicing contemporary art to shed a favorable light on a country in turmoil. The struggle of these artists and curators to fight their own battles in this time of change is the focus of Winegar's article.

The influence of the West on the global art market is vast, which Winegar points out when she gives the example of the Nitaq Festival, in Cairo. The wildly successful festival that served as a showcase for an emerging contemporary art movement by young Egyptian artists was a place where a portion of the value from the work presented was dominated by Western influence. Modern art was introduced to Egyptians by the Europeans during the colonial era and artists during the Nitaq Festival tried to provide their diversified audience with Westernized modern art that had an Egyptian twist. By integrating traditional Egyptian iconography and imagery juxtaposed with European ideas of valuable art, the hierarchy of social classes is evident with the West rising to the top. The Nitaq Festival served as an open door for the Egyptian modern art movement to explode onto the global art market. With the world ahead of them, artists in the movement needed to navigate the territory between the largely different public and private sectors. Which sector is looking out for the best interests of Egyptian artists? Which sector allows contemporary artists to maintain their cultural identity while exploring global practices of modern art?

Prior to the 1990s, the Egyptian art world was limited to state run galleries, museums, and institutions where people were exposed to the work of mainly traditional Egyptian artists. In a post 1989 neoliberal Egyptian world, artists began to question the

role of the state and its ability to “produce a dynamic art scene” (p.178). It was clear that after the Nitaq Festival that Egyptian artists needed to get into the global market to broaden their horizons and to shed a positive light on Egyptian society. Both the private and the public sector recognized the significance of going global and looked to the nations young artists to take them there. While the influence of the West is evident in the work of young artists, as many of them have been educated in Western universities, they were caught between pleasing the state sectors such as the Egyptian Ministry of Culture and Western influences. The state was giving artists incentives to create work that mixed local elements with international media (p.182) while the West (mainly curators) were encouraging artists to create work that emphasized Western superiority.

The battle between tradition and Western influences was not the only hurdle young Egyptian artists had to endure. In addition, they felt the constant pull between the public sector (state run institutions) and the newly reborn private sector (private galleries). The rise of the private sector in Egypt in the last half of the 20th Century was made possible with the abolishment of the rent control law that kept elite tenants out of public buildings. As the private sector grew, the influence of the West gained steam as a significant amount of new curators were of European decent. Imposing the Western ideals of quality art, artists were influenced to modify their work to reflect European tastes. While the continual injection of Western values into Egyptian modern art remained an annoyance to the traditional state run sector, its ability to launch the Egyptian art scene into the global art market was undeniable. The Egyptian Ministry of Culture saw the art trade as a way to encourage investment from foreign entities and promote positive international relationships.

Through the introduction of modern Egyptian art into the global art world has been teeming with turmoil between the private and public sector, namely in determining who knows more about traditional Egyptian practices, overall it has been a positive journey. In an unstable part of the world, the practicing young artists of Egypt have been a beacon of light and the promise of good things to come.

References

Winegar, J. (2006) Cultural sovereignty in a global art economy: Egyptian cultural policy and the new western interest in art from the middle east. *Cultural Anthropology* (21)2, 173-204