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The Scrim, the Pistol, and the Lectern: Dis-situating the Global Contemporary

In recent years the “global contemporary” has emerged as a popular, influential rubric for the exhibition and reception of new art. This term has been the subject of numerous scholarly conferences and publications; it has also been the theme of many biennials, whether implicitly or explicitly. Broadly speaking we might even say that the global contemporary is the frame of reference from which much current art derives its significance. At first glance this development might seem beneficial, if not surprising, given the way it has brought together the well-established academic discourse of globalization with more recent critical and art-historical discussions of contemporaneity. Some might even claim that the global contemporary occupies a privileged position of criticality, given its proximity to the transnational protest movements that have forced their way on to the world stage in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.

However, this paper takes a different point of departure — namely, that the global contemporary can’t neatly be extracted from the hegemony of advanced neoliberal capitalism. As scholars like Dipesh Chakrabarty and David Harvey have argued, the global is often as much ideologeme as it is concept, a false universal that conjures away political antagonisms while masking the function of international divisions of labor. And while much of the art world views contemporaneity as a self-evident good or an end in itself, few seem to register the ways in which the exchange of art effectively converts different forms of “nowness” into surplus value, or the role that critics and art historians play in this process. Against these tendencies, this paper engages the following questions: In what ways can we understand the global contemporary as something like the “cultural logic” of neoliberal hegemony, to use Fredric Jameson’s formulation? What type of artistic, critical, and curatorial practices might best oppose this instrumentality? And what sort of political and theoretical implications emerge from this shift in viewpoint?

The paper argues that the history of the Non-Aligned Movement is one important site from which we might begin to work through such questions. It examines three examples in which contemporary art has been situated in relation to this alternative, oppositional mode of globality, focusing on cases that address the history of pan-Arab socialism: a photo-installation by Celine Condorelli which analyzes the nationalization of the Egyptian cotton industry under Gamal Nasser; a video essay by Marwa Asanios which draws on the socialist magazine *Al Hilal*; and a performance by Samah Hijawi that restages modified versions of Nasser’s speeches in public spaces in Jordan, the U.A.E., and occupied Palestine. The paper closes by examining the recent exhibition *Meeting Points 7*, in which the curatorial collective What, How, and For Whom? sought to position the history of regional socialisms as a critical counterweight to symptomatic idealizations of the global contemporary.

Situating Global Art

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