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Sensitive Threads

A Claim against the Othering of Craft

"There is nothing inevitable about becoming skilled, just as there is nothing mindlessly mechanical about technique itself."[1] In these opening words of *The Craftsman*, the sociologist and cultural theorist Richard Sennett summed up our complex relationship to material culture and the multiple dimensions of skill and craftsmanship. Indeed, craft has always been a contested notion with shifting meanings and values over time, from ancient civilizations to the Industrial Revolution and the mechanization of labor. But despite the fluidity of the concept of craft and its multilayered significations and changing statuses across time and place, it has constantly referred to forms of doing and making that require the artisan's hand. In that regard, craft involves skillfulness, a form of know-how applied by what Hannah Arendt and Max Scheler articulated as the *Homo faber* to his/her direct environment. Craft, therefore, entails a form of control, of human mastery, which is inherently opposed to mechanical production. It can be considered, in Sennett's words, as "an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake,"[2] thus also involving a form of satisfaction and pleasure in the process.

This inevitable link to the corporeal essence of craft is implied in the term itself in several languages, as in the German word *Handwerk* or in the Arabic *shughl yadawi*, meaning literally "a work made by hand." Hence, the physical act of creating an object is interconnected with intellect and imagination, which are repeatedly guided by the material qualities of the object, its constraints, as well the "mistakes" that become an integral part of the aesthetic result. As once expressed by the weaver, printmaker, and writer Anni Albers about tapestry: "It is artwork, and, as in other plastic arts, it demands the most direct—that is, the least impeded—response of material and technique to the hand of the maker, the one who here transforms matter into meaning."[3] While the weaver's loom functions as an extension of the body, the craft calls upon both physical and intellectual capacities in response to technique and the structure of the material.

However, this bodily character of craft has played an important part in strengthening the hierarchies between mechanical reproduction and creative imagination in Western discourses of modernism, which have had an equivocal attitude toward the reconciliation of intellect with the physical character of craft. Indeed, modernism in the West has been more

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inclined toward the radical erasing of the hand in favor of the mind and, subsequently, has valued deskilling, defined by Benjamin Buchloh as the "persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation."[4]

Thus, the inextricable interrelations between skill, technique, and art have forged Western art-historical narratives, while craft has paradoxically remained both at its center and its margins. "High" art, indeed, needed "low" art to define itself. In this sense, one could claim that craft acted as Western modernism's Other. But what does craft signify for artists working outside of the West? How does its legacy and reception differ in other contexts, and what does this mean for contemporary artistic production?

Scholarship has recently reconsidered the notion of craft in contemporary art and design. Many artists combine handwork (wood carving, glassblowing, textile weaving, ceramics, etc.) with conceptual approaches and embrace multiple forms of making related to knowledge. These include industrial arts, amateur activity, *bricolage*, digital arts, or "craftivism" and address questions of authorship, labor, and censorship. Interestingly, these approaches are often exhibited in connection with decolonial or feminist matters and address minority, race, and gender-related issues.[5] From this perspective, one is entitled to ask why craft should insistently speak for the Other or the oppressed.

While it is not my aim here to address the current revival of craft in Western contemporary art production, which is being widely debated,[6] I do intend to question the enduring relationship between craft and Primitivism as intersecting paradigms.[7] More specifically, I want to reflect on their interconnection in Western art discourses and their long-lasting effect on the exclusion of other stories of art. In this regard, I will begin by underlining the fact that this relationship has persisted far beyond its anthropologic origins, developed notably by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *La pensée sauvage* (The Savage Mind) through the figure of the *bricoleur*,[8] up to the recent historicizing of so-called global art. Then, I will examine the historical genealogies of the dialectic between craftsmanship and Primitivism, in order to underline one of its crucial consequences: the othering of craft. Indeed, I argue that the association between craft and the representation of otherness in past and present exhibition practices serves to maintain hegemonic discourses under the banner of the alleged inclusivity and diversity of global art. These frameworks, in reality, tend to minimize—or even erase—the artists' negotiation of the underlying and disputed politics of craft and lead to what bell hooks has termed the "commodification of otherness."[9] Finally, I will look at the historical genealogies of craft in the Middle East and listen to the voices of contemporary artists from the region and its diaspora who engage with both craft and conceptualism. Through these examinations, I wish to highlight craft's powerful potential to refute its association with otherness and to reconcile itself with its historical and political roots, as well as with its emotional dimension outside of the West.

1. The Skilled Other

Craft and Primitivism have been two highly disputed concepts. Their central commonality is their attempt to navigate the boundaries between so-called "high" and "low" or "modern" and "premodern" art. While craft embraces multiple forms of making related to skill, materiality, and knowledge, the notion of Primitivism is intimately linked to artisanal activity and its colonial past. However, these two paradigms have mostly been analyzed separately rather than in their intersectionality: craft, as an activity or trade involving skill and experience in making things by hand, and Primitivism, as an art term that refers to the fascination of the early European avant-garde with so-called "primitive art" and, consequently, to the collection of objects mostly acquired or stolen in colonial contexts. My aim here is not so much to offer a critical viewpoint on Primitivism but rather to claim that craft has constituted its backbone and that their interconnection may still function as an essentializing criterion in the reception and exhibition of contemporary art production from the non-West. Indeed, though modern artists from outside the West have reclaimed their own narrative of the "primitive" since the early twentieth century, its canonic definition appears to remain profoundly entrenched in current contemporary art criticism and curatorial practices.

Already in 1928, the poet, novelist, and leading figure of Brazilian modernism Oswald de Andrade, in his famous "Manifesto Antropófago" (Anthropophagic Manifesto) published in the *Revista de Antropofagia* and illustrated with a work by his wife, the painter Tarsila do Amaral, had called for the end of Western rationalism in favor of the creative power of the "primitive" or the "prelogical." In this decolonial celebration of the nonobjective and communion with nature, which makes use of the subversive strategy of playful Dadaist and Surrealist writing, de Andrade refers directly to the theories of the French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl about the "primitive mind":

> It was because we never had grammars, nor collections of old plants. And we never knew what urban, suburban, frontier and continental were. Lazy in the *mapamundi* of Brazil. A participatory consciousness, a religious rhythmics. Down with all the importers of canned consciousness. The palpable existence of life. And the pre-logical mentality of Mr. Lévy Bruhl to study.[10]

De Andrade's strategy of anthropophagy refers to the ritualistic practice of eating one's enemy and ingesting his/her virtues, and therefore serves to deconstruct the colonial discourse of Primitivism by outlining artistic creation as an act of endless transfiguration and hybridization.

More than half a century after de Andrade signed his "Anthropophagic Manifesto," artists Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña presented their performance *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* in several cities in the United States and Europe. Conceived as a satirical comment about the Western desire for othering the "primitive" and exhibitions of human beings in colonial "world fairs," the artists presented themselves in a golden cage as undiscovered

Amerindians from a fictional island in the Gulf of Mexico called Guatinau. In her account of the reception of this performance, Fusco recalls that a large part of the audience unexpectedly believed that the artists' fictional identities were real. Consequently, the moral implications, critical approach, and historical references of the performance were substituted by a part of the audience's literal interpretation, and the debate shifted toward the ethical issues related to exhibiting two persons from elsewhere in a cage.[11] According to Fusco, another part of the audience criticized the inauthenticity of the two protagonists with regard to their clothing, attributes (which included computers and sunglasses), and dances. In that sense, the work did not respond to the West's desire for "cultural differences that only a 'pure' non-West can offer."[12] Thus, the crucial implication of the literal reception of this performance is that it was misunderstood.

Milestone exhibitions from the mid-1980s up to the late 1990s have similarly strengthened the otherness of craft, notably by relating it with Primitivism but also by emphasizing the discrepancy between two notions that emerged quasi-simultaneously: the "global" and the "digital." Although transnational art and new media culture have been widely debated separately, again, their interdependence in exhibition histories has not yet received the attention it deserves. It nevertheless owes much to the persistent distinction between the global South, associated with craft and Primitivism, and the First World, connected to conceptualism and technology.

The coexistence of Edouard Glissant's idea of *mondialité* and Peter Weibel's "wired world" was reflected in two exhibitions—*Les Immatériaux* (The Immaterial Ones, 1985) and *Magiciens de la terre* (Magicians of the Earth, 1989)—that laid the groundwork of the cohabitation of globalization and technologization. While both exhibits represented a crucial shift toward connecting transnational art and immaterial/digital culture, they were linked to similar ideals of diversification, democratization, and connectivity. However, despite these common aspirations, these shows have stressed the enduring partition between the idea of the handcrafted South and the technological West.[13]

This distinction had already been emphasized with the notion of "affinity" formulated by the curators of the exhibition *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* held at the MoMA in New York (1984–85),[14] which aimed to underline what the curators defined as the "basic shared characteristics" or "common denominators" between the "modern" and the "tribal," another word for the "primitive." Avant-garde Western paintings and sculptures, created mainly in Paris from 1905 onward by a rather small group of male artists including Picasso, Giacometti, Brancusi, and others, were displayed in juxtaposition with objects (masks, totems, and other cultural objects) from Africa, South America, or Polynesia. This comparison of crafted objects, long considered ethnographic specimens, with the *greatness* of Western modernists who rediscovered them in an invented kinship, was formulated through the problematic and universalizing term of "affinity."[15]

In an attempt to address—or rather to avoid—the polemical notion of "affinity" between the modern West and the crafted South of the *"Primitivism"* show and its hegemonic

perspective, the curator Jean-Hubert Martin conceived *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande Halle de la Villette in 1989. The choice was to abandon some key modernist terminologies primarily by replacing the word "artist" with the word "magician."[16] The show thus claimed to consider all artists as agents on an equal level in the exhibition display. However, the reframing of the idea of the "artist" as the "magician," while it was supposed to—again—give the act of creation a universal value distinct from cultural and historical indexes, recalled the fascination for magical and ritual power attributed by the European avant-garde to colonial objects.

In fact, many contemporary artists from the non-West had been excluded from the exhibition specifically because their work was not dealing with traditional craft and therefore did not comply with the show's expectations from artists coming from the global South. In other words, the Other was expected to be skilled and was denied the right to deskilling. Thus, despite its aim to be the first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art, difference, rather than similarities, became the focus of the show. Several artists from the global margins, including from the Middle East and Turkey, had expressed their disapproval and claimed their right to brand themselves as conceptual artists rather than craftsmen/women.[17] Hence, this association of craft with otherness forged by the global art discourse not only posited the definition of what non-Western artist should produce, but also omitted entire stories of the historical and political roots of craft in the geographic contexts from which these artists came from.

2. Woven Resilience

To grasp the reconciliation of craft and conceptualism in the works of contemporary artists from the Middle East, and to understand in what terms it contests and breaks away from the abovementioned association between craft and otherness, it seems important to adumbrate certain historical aspects of artisanal practices in the region. Because the hierarchization between craft and fine arts was defined both by colonial presence and as a part of movements for independence, artists' relationship to craft took a different path than in the West. Artisanal production played an instrumental role in legitimizing European presence in the region, with the preservation of craft and "authentic" traditions being an integral part of the colonial political agenda. Art historian Jessica Gerschultz has shown how in Tunisia, under the protectorate, "both the 'indigenous' populations and their artistic practices were feminized and infantilized, regarded as craftwork in need of European salvage and protection."[18] In that context, the endeavor to revive artisanal practices also led to the strengthening of the canonic hierarchization between craft and the fine arts.

However, during the mid-twentieth century, the revival of crafts found itself at the center of decolonial movements and nation-building in the region, where the refusal to consider practices of weaving, pottery, ceramics, and woodwork, as a part of an ensemble of so-called "minor" arts, was not only a reaction to colonial occupation but a reaction to the

1 Ramses Wissa Wassef, Art Centre, Harrania, Egypt, 1952–74. Wool yarns colored with natural vegetable dyes

European training in newly established schools and art institutions. As shown by art historian Nadine Atallah, in modern art discourses, the Western criteria of "greatness" was substituted by the notion of "authenticity" (*asala*),[19] and therefore, avant-garde groups were often involved in the revival of craftsmanship.

Among the projects for the revitalization of artisanal creation was the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre, conceived by the Egyptian architect and pedagogue Ramses Wissa Wassef (1911–1974), who established a weaving and pottery school in the early 1950s in a small rural village called Harrania located south of Cairo. Inspired by local constructive methods and traditional architecture, he conceived what one may call today an "eco-project" built with mud bricks to host the workshops (fig. 1).[20] The school trained young villagers in the traditional techniques of weaving and pottery, designated as "artistic craft"—*fann al-zakhrafa* in Arabic and *artisanat d'art* in French.[21] The endeavor of the school was to elevate both the status of craftsmanship and the social conditions of the artisan. As Wissa Wassef stated in an article entitled "Protégeons l'artisanat" (Let's Protect Crafts), published in 1945:

> Egypt needs a new spirit, regenerated through the contact with Western culture but fundamentally attached to its soil, its traditions and searching for its own solutions. . . . The artisan can only evolve in healthy social conditions and can therefore not be consistent with the state of indigence and poverty in which the vast majority of the nation finds itself.[22]

2 Etel Adnan, *Marée basse*, 1967–73/2015. Low warp tapestry, wool, 200 × 160 cm

While this excerpt illustrates the social ground on which the revival of crafts was conceived, Wissa Wassef also had a specific pedagogical approach, infused by the ideas of British art education, and in particular Herbert Read's theories,[23] that the tapestries should be produced without preparatory models, "no external aesthetic influences," "no criticism or interference from adults," and only by using natural material and dying techniques.[24]

In his account of the establishment of the Harrania artisanal project, Wissa Wassef explained: "I had this vague conviction that every human being was born an artist. But that his gifts could be brought out only if artistic creation were encouraged by the practicing of a craft from early childhood."[25] Besides the pedagogic endeavor of such projects, their underlying politics played a major part in defining other spaces of creation and counternarratives to colonial art institutions and by positing that artistry and craftsmanship were part of the same activity and on the same level.

Artisanal projects like the Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre have had a significant effect on contemporary artists, such as, for instance, the Lebanese-American abstract artist, poet, and essayist Etel Adnan (1925–2021). She had visited the Centre in 1966 and had been touched by Wissa Wassef's approach to weaving. Most renowned for her written and painted oeuvre, she also produced a number of tapestries, which used bright and vibrant colors in abstract compositions (fig. 2). She designed many of these tapestries between the end of the 1960s and the 1970s, but most of them were handwoven almost half a century later, in collaboration with the Manufacture Pinton in France, a project which she appreciated for its collaborative aspect and in which the persons who wove the tapestries chose their titles.[26] Speaking of the importance of craft in her artistic approach, she explained:

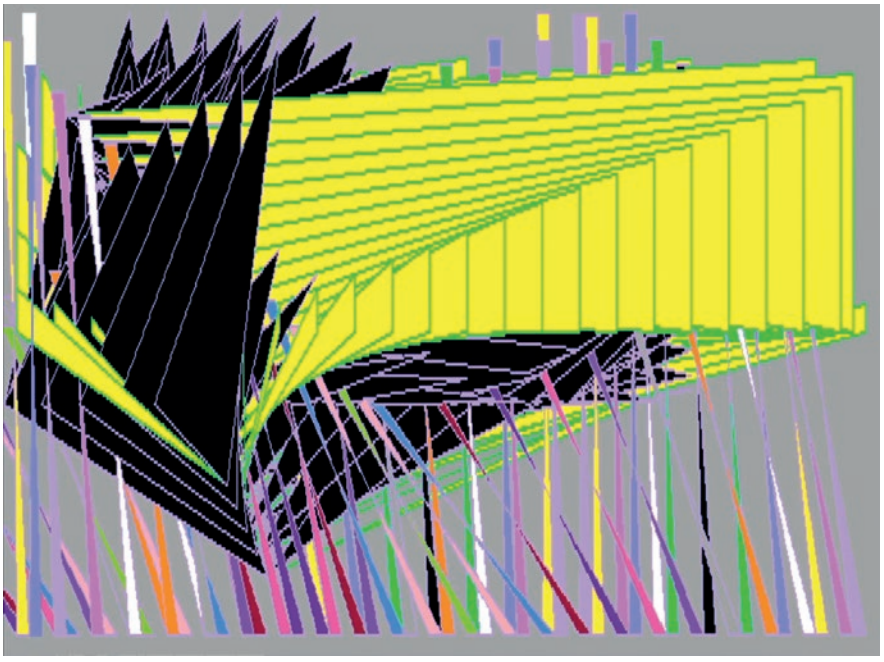
> Because tapestry is handmade, it is not considered as high art but even a painting is done by hand. I love tapestries because they bring a road, they are more domestic art, more ancient art, but that doesn't mean they are not fully art, they are another branch of art. They used to be made by women weavers and therefore were considered less important than other traditional arts made by men. The loom is inviting, I draw special tapestries for the loom. It's another feeling than painting, it's soft.[27]

While Adnan underlines the gendered aspect of craft, she also effects a distancing from the traditional aesthetics of Western abstraction. As the weaving imitates brushstrokes, it references the act of painting. It thereby moves away from the Greenbergian doctrine of painting's self-referentiality and transfers it into another space, that of artistic craft. In this regard, Adnan's tapestries call for a broadening and rethinking of both the definitions of craft and abstraction.

Many abstract artists from the Middle East repeatedly refer to the ornament in Islamic art and architecture in their practice. However, there is a deep—though not initially discernible—connection between the ornament and craft as disputed heritages that are being renegotiated. Indeed, while Western discourses of the Islamic ornament have participated in its homogenization and taxonomy since the nineteenth century, notably through the circulation of ornamental grammars, contemporary artists have reactivated its potential to convey agential counternarratives to this dominant discourse of abstraction.[28]

This is the case, for instance, with the Palestinian New York–based artist Samia Halaby (b. 1936), who refers to craft and ornament in her practice, even though this may not necessarily be apparent in her works.[29] She started to experiment with computer art and the possibilities of this new medium in the late 1980s by programming an Amiga 2000 to create animated images accompanied by sound directly from program commands in the keyboard.[30] This took the form of performances, with Halaby using the keyboard as an "abstract piano," producing kinetic images projected onto a cinema screen. These performances were often accompanied by the musicians Kevin Nathaniel and Hassan Bakr, with whom Halaby formed the Kinetic Painting Group (figs. 3a, 3b).[31] Halaby's computer art reflects the reconciliation

3a Samia Halaby, Studio kinetic performance for Bill Winters, 2018



3b Samia Halaby, *Bird Dog*, 1988. Still from kinetic computer art produced on Amiga 2000

4 Nada Elkalaawy, *A Foot in Both Camps*, 2018. Hand-embroidered tapestry, 41 × 45 cm

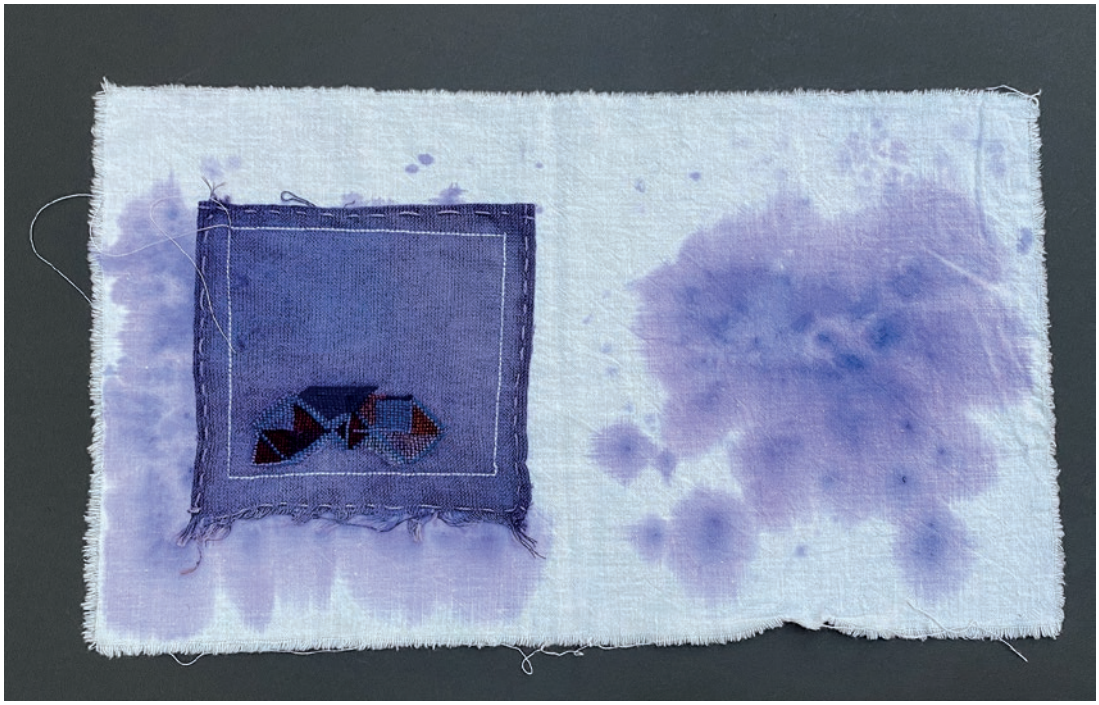
between conceptual art and craft in its experimental dimension, with the prominence of the artist's hand behind the computer keyboard. This aspect goes beyond her kinetic work, as she usually wore traditional Palestinian embroidered dresses for these performances. These have a particular signification for the diaspora as a traditional craft sustained by women after their displacement; indeed, it is considered a powerful symbol of belonging. Halaby referred to these embroidered dresses when describing the importance of craft in her practice:

> In general, I try to wipe away the idea of fine art. There are pictures. And the picture could be embroidered on a dress. Embroidery to me is so beautiful and such a fine art, it is the product of a collective mind. Every village is a little different and some differences are huge. Every village has developed its embroidery over centuries and many young women guided by elder women contributed to this beauty. They all use the same pattern, but they all compete to make it beautiful. It arrives to such an attractive collective expression that I, as a painter, could never attain in my life. I never saw any item that is as special as a collective art. I don't call it craft.[32]

5 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Tadmur*, 2019. Embroidery

The dialectic between craft and digital media also characterizes the work of the Egyptian London-based artist Nada Elkalaawy (b. 1995).[33] Her tapestry *A Foot in Both Camps* (2018) (fig. 4) depicts a woman turning her back to the viewer and lying down in an interior setting that displays symbols of belonging, such as the pyramids or the Union Flag. She is watching a live performance by the iconic Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum on a 1960s television that mirrors a hanging poster of the Beatles. While Elkalaawy blends the materiality of traditional weaving processes with digital images in her works, she understands tapestry, carpets, and woven textiles as closely linked to Egyptian visual culture and as part of the domestic environment. Her work is informed by her personal history; she explains:

> I am interested in tapestries, carpets and woven textiles, as for an Egyptian they represent culture and tradition. I grew up seeing them in the interiors of houses whether being displayed on walls or in the Aubusson of chairs and furniture. I am attracted to the materiality and the complexity of the medium, particularly in a new age where the generation of the image and often the output too is digital. . . . It becomes through its own manufacture, an embodiment of time itself, whether the accelerated speed of industrial production or the deliberate pace of the handmade.[34]



6 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Muscle Memory*, 2022. Embroidery

7 Majd Abdel Hamid, *Muscle Memory*, 2022. Video still

Elkalaawy's remark on the slower pace of handmade objects underlines another crucial aspect of craft, which is time. Indeed, the resilience of making an object by hand, which sometimes entails repetitive technical gestures over time, can also be paralleled to forms of resilience. For instance, the embroideries of the visual artist Majd Abdel Hamid (b. 1988) may be interpreted as a means to overcome the trauma of loss in daily life:

> It has become an essential part of my daily habits, providing me with a safe space, like being in a state of light trance, where you can withdraw from the blackmail of images, news, statements, withdraw but without retreating to a sense of denial, a self-care ritual with a compulsive eagerness to be relevant. How can we distract ourselves while maintaining healthy proximity to society?[35]

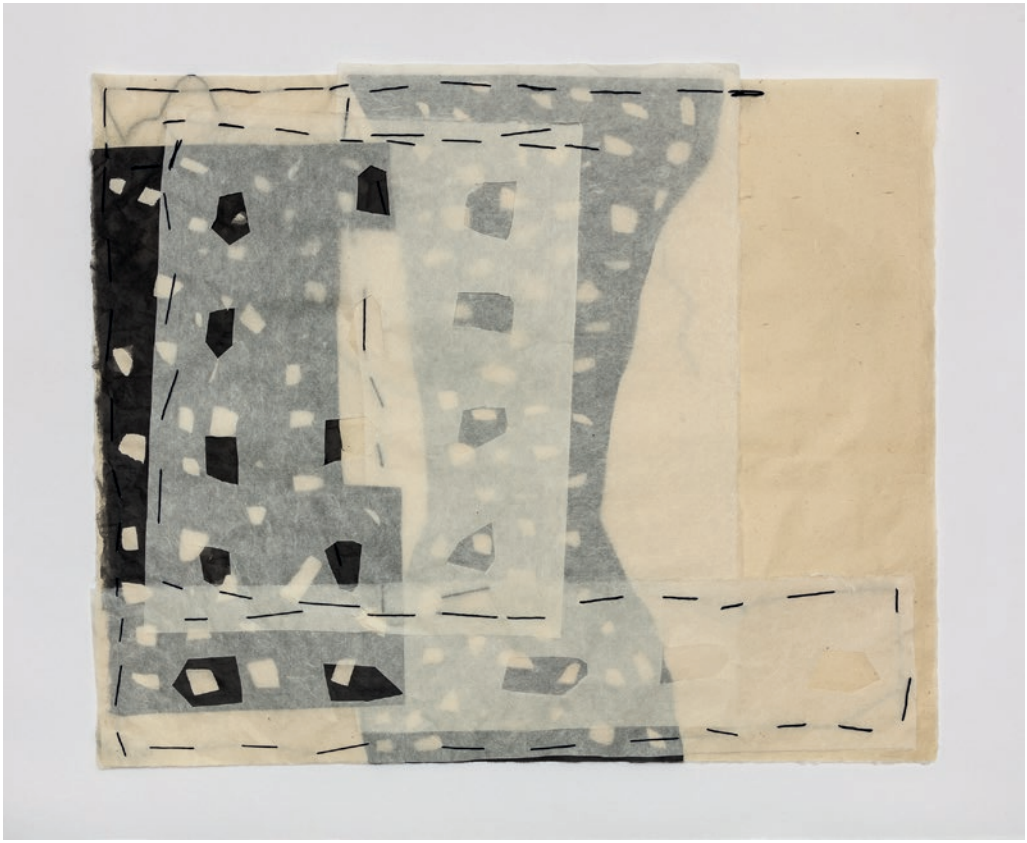
The Palestinian artist, born in Damascus and currently working between Beirut and Ramallah, uses embroidery as his main medium. As the craft has become part of his routine, the performative act of embroidering also has a deep-rooted signification of the diaspora as a sign of belonging.[36] His small-scale artisanal stitches embody forms of resilience, not only through the process of making, but also through the time devoted to this process. His abstract compositions often address the reality of conflict and war, such as in his *Tadmur* series (2019) (fig. 5), in which he embroidered the architectural plan of the Assad regime's prison. His embroideries from the series *Muscle Memory* (figs. 6, 7) were created in reaction to the explosion of large store of ammonium nitrate in Beirut's port district on August 4, 2020. The practice of needlework and delicately dyeing the cloth becomes a necessary process for recording the loss and the memory of the city:

> This work is an attempt at reclaiming a practice. I want to reconcile a relationship with a city and claim a small repair space: not as a reaction to disasters but as a continuum of interaction, openness, and reflection.[37]

While Abdel Hamid's work is inspired by the Palestinian tradition of embroidery produced by women, he subverts this gendered practice as a means for resistance.

3. Common Grids

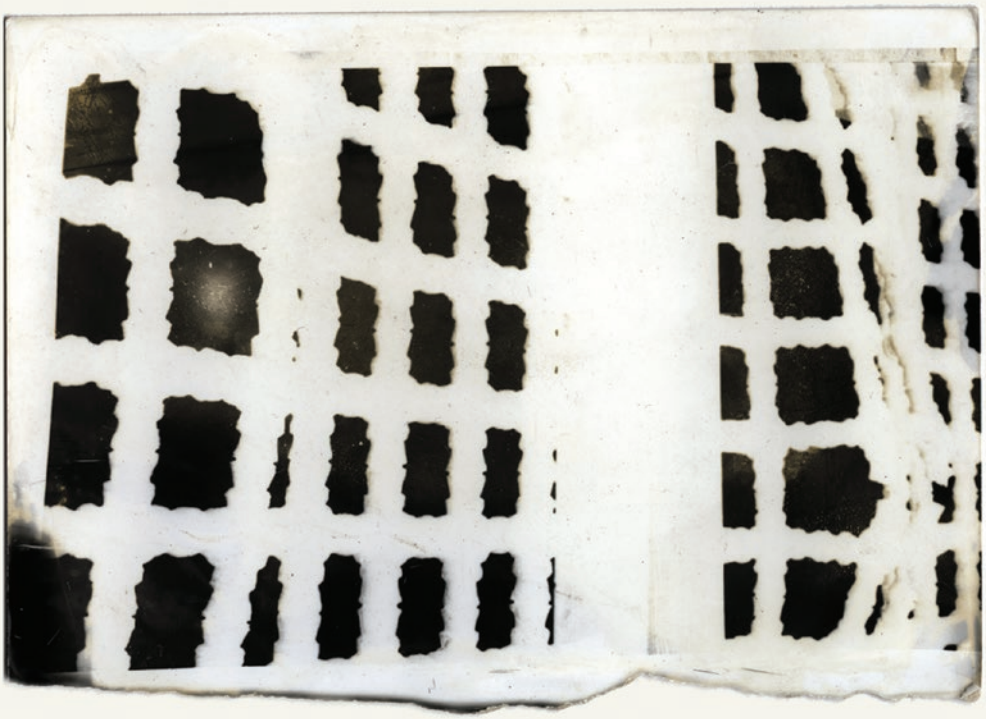
The work of multidisciplinary artist Susan Hefuna embodies the intertwinement of conceptual art and craft. Interested by the interconnectivity of things, the German-Egyptian artist, who grew up in Egypt before studying at Frankfurt am Main's Städelschule, and now works between Cairo, Düsseldorf, and New York, draws links in her work between DNA molecules, traditional palm wood crates, pieces of embroidery, or architectural city plans. The common notion underlying her drawings, installations, videos, and performances are connected



8 Susan Hefuna, *Cityscape*, 2019. Ink, thread, cut-outs on layered paper

structures within a grid. Hefuna constantly seeks out the crucial moment when lines intersect, whether in urban crossroads featured in her video art or handmade crafts evoked in her paintings and installations. Drawing as a medium is central to her approach, which she considers as "the best and the most direct way between thought, mind and hand. There is no filter, no intervention of intellect, it is the most direct way of thinking and making thoughts visible."[38] Her drawings are often layered and superimposed with embroidered stitches or felt patches (fig. 8), thus complementing the act of sewing with drawing. About her use of embroidery in her artworks, she says:

> I use strings (embroidery) in the drawings and works with felt since approximately 2007. For me it is not a "craft." Not in the Western sense. If I use strings in layers of tracing paper it is to stitch to bring sheets together. I do no presketch; I stitch words directly into paper or felt. Due to the resistance of the material the letters or patterns get their shape and form. It is like talking or handwriting through a resistance of material . . . . It is not perfect. Sometimes I can't write a correct letter, etc. . . . I cannot control the outcome.[39]



9 Susan Hefuna, *Cityscape Cairo*, 2000. C-print mounted behind plexiglas, 140 × 200 cm

Another crafted object central to Hefuna's work is the *mashrabiya*, a traditional wooden latticework screen, used as a window curtain in the traditional Islamic house (fig. 9).[40] Hefuna explains how these woodwork architectural elements had a long-lasting effect on her and how she "became increasingly absorbed with them on an abstract level."[41] A salient feature of traditional Middle Eastern domestic architecture, the *mashrabiya* allows a subdued light to penetrate the interior of the house through the wooden claustra of the screen and also makes it possible to see outside without being seen. In other words, it is a finely ornate screen that enacts a separation between public space and the intimacy of the family home.

And because the *mashrabiya* creates an imagined and physical screen between the gaze of the outsider and the interior of the household, it has long fueled the Orientalist imaginary and its visual representations in European nineteenth-century painting. It is thus also related to gender and the allegedly forbidden space of the fantasized and sexualized harem interior. As a transitional object between inside and outside, the intimate and the public, between the self and the other, the *mashrabiya* becomes a metaphor of the cultural projections that the artist seeks to question and deconstruct:

10 Susan Hefuna, *Another Place* (Afaz Drawing Palmwood), 2014. Installation view at *Susan Hefuna: Another Place*, Bait Al Serkal, Sharjah

> In my experience, most human beings are not able to see the world without a screen of social and cultural projections. The *mashrabiya* became for me a symbol that operates in two directions with the possibility for dialogue, rather than closure. Instead of seeing the world as either an *insider* or an *outsider*, I consider things in terms of connected and mutually interacting structures.[42]

The interplay between the material structure of the crafted object and the artist's concept also fluctuates depending on the audiences and the spaces in which she exhibits her art. The artist recalls that when she held her first solo show in Cairo in the early 1990s, one of her digital photographs of a *mashrabiya* was instantly perceived by the local audience as a familiar object, while other audiences had received it as abstract art executed in the Western tradition.[43] An interesting feature in her work is the resemblance between the grid of the handcrafted object and a city plan. In that sense, it navigates the familiar and the unfamiliar and points to the sociocultural constriction of these objects and their connected histories and geographies.

Hefuna also incorporated traditional crates (*afaz*) made of palmwood in her work. These are part of the urban and rural environment in Egypt and are used for many different purposes by street vendors to transport or display goods. The decontextualization of these crafted palm

structures from the streets of Cairo to the Sharjah Biennale in 2014 and their piling up so as to recall the high-rise buildings of the United Arab Emirates enact an estrangement of the familiar (fig. 10). The structure of the grid remains present whether in the *mashrabiyya* or in the *afaz*, to the extent that they suggest a different take on the notion of the grid, central to discourses of Western modernism. Indeed, while Rosalind Krauss has affirmed, in her seminal article about grids published in 1979, that for Western art history, the grid announces "modern art's will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse,"[44] one may consider that it may have taken another stance through the usage of craft, by reconciling the grid with narrative content.

During a three-month residency in Stein am Rhein in Switzerland, Hefuna immersed herself in the urban pattern and social structures of this picturesque and highly touristic town, located in the canton of Schaffhausen. For her project *Mapping Stein*, she studied the façades of the typical Swiss timber-framed houses. The carpentry elements, which emphasize the light on the wooden textures, is reminiscent, in a sense, of the *mashrabiya* structure. Through her black-and-white photographs of the timber frames, she transformed these structures familiar to the European tourist into something unknown and exotic. In that context, the grid serves to exoticize a local craft and reverses the standpoints of the notions of craft and Primitivism. This inversion brings to the fore the subjectivity and agency of craft, and its potential to subvert and suggest new narratives.

The abovementioned artists challenge the distinction between the art, craft and conceptualism that has been salient in Western art discourses. While the engagement with craft and its practices is linked to its specific legacies and underlying politics, it has too often been associated simply to otherness, an attitude that echoes the historical construct of the interrelationship between craft and the global South, rooted in colonialism, and the denial by the West of its contemporaneity.

Notes

1 Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 9.

2 Ibid.

3 Anni Albers, *On Weaving: New Expanded Edition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 48.

4 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Deskilling," in *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Hal Foster et al., 3rd ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2016), p. 607. On the notions of skill and deskilling in modernism, see also John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Ready-Made* (London: Verso, 2007).

5 For instance, the exhibitions *What Is So Terrible about Craft?* by Andrea Büttner, Kunstverein München 2019 or *Criminal Ornamentation* curated by Yinka Shonibare in 2018 for the Arts Council Collection that toured the United Kingdom. See the catalogue Yinka Shonibare et al., *Criminal Ornamentation*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2018).

6 Maria Elena Buszek, ed., *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2013); Tanya Harrod, ed., *Craft*: *Documents of Contemporary Art Series* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018); Burcu Dogramaci and Kerstin Pinther, eds., *Design Dispersed: Forms of Migration and Flight* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019).

7 This reflection was initiated by a course taught at the Institute of Art History at the University of Bern in Spring 2020 together with my colleague Peter Schneemann, whom I thank here for the stimulating exchange on this topic.

8 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), pp. 28–33.

9 bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 21.

10 Oswald de Andrade, "Manifesto Antropófago," trans. Leslie Barry, *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (July–December 1991): 39. Here, de Andrade refers to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's *La mentalité primitive* (The Primitive Mentality), published in 1922, which would have a durable influence on anthropologists, sociologists, and philosophers. In this text, Lévy-Bruhl posited his theory about the two basic mindsets of mankind divided between the "primitive" mind, which did not differentiate the supernatural from reality, and the "modern" mind, which used reflection and logic. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, "Introduction," *La mentalité primitive* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1925).

11 Coco Fusco, "The Other History of Intercultural Performance," *TDR: The Drama Review* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 143–67.

12 Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Responding from the Margins," in *Is Art History Global?*, ed. James Elkins (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 357.

13 This reflection about the "global" and the "digital" in exhibition history is indebted to my colleague Yvonne Schweizer and the numerous stimulating discussions we had on this topic.

14 The show was curated by William Rubin, who was then the director of the painting and sculpture department at the MoMA, and Kirk Varnedoe, art historian and professor at Princeton and NYU, who would later become the head of that same department. For a critical appraisal of the show, see James Clifford, "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (1985): 45–70.

15 Among the vehement critics of the show was the critic and writer Thomas McEvilley who claimed that through the notion of "affinity," the curators had confused the modern artists' perspective with the perspective of those who made the objects. Thomas McEvilley, "Doctor, Lawyer, Indian Chief: 'Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art' at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (November 1984): 54–61.

16 About the critical reception of the "Magiciens" show, see Lucy Steeds et al., *Making Art Global (Part 2), "Magiciens de la terre" 1989* (London: Afterall, 2013); Jean-Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la terre : retour sur une exposition légendaire*, *1989–2014* (Paris: Xavier Barral, 2014).

17 Among these artists was the Turkish conceptual artist Bedri Baykam (b. 1957) who started what he calls a "cultural guerrilla," which consisted in distributing a manifesto entitled "Les Saluts de la Turquie" in front of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris over the course of a month. The manifesto was published in a newspaper called *Cameleon Diabolicus* and signed by a group of Turkish artists who were part of the board of directors of the Turkish Plastic Arts Association. According to Baykam, none of them had been selected to partake in the show, although they had invited Jean-Hubert Martin during his tour in Turkey in search of potential participants. Martin stated that

the curators of *Magiciens* were not in search of artists who followed Western aesthetics but rather for artists who clearly expressed their work's non-Western origins. See Bedri Baykam, *Monkeys' Right to Paint: The Fight of a Cultural Guerrilla for the Rights of Non-Western Artists and the Empty World of the Neo-Ready-Mades* (Istanbul: Literatür, 1994), pp. 49–56.

18 Jessica Gerschultz, "Women's Tapestry and the Poetics of Renewal: Threading Mid-Century Practices," *The Journal of Modern Craft* 13, no. 1 (2020): 39. See also Jessica Gerschultz, *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender, and Power* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019). On the preservation of crafts in Morocco under the French protectorate, see Margaret S. Graves, "The Double Bind of Craft Fidelity: Moroccan Ceramics on the Eve of the French Protectorate," in *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean,* ed. Margaret S. Graves and Alex Dika Seggerman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2022).

19 Nadine Atallah, "Have There Really Been No Great Women Artists? Writing a Feminist Art History of Modern Egypt," in *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*, ed. Ceren Özpınar and Mary Kelly (Oxford: The British Academy; Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 14–15. About the concept of *asala* as a criterion of modern art, see Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 46–47.

20 About Ramses Wissa Wassef's architectural and educative projects, see Nadia Radwan, "The Arts and Craftsmanship," in Hassan Fathy: An Architectural Life, ed. Leïla el-Wakil (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2018).

21 Gerschultz, "Women's Tapestry and the Poetics of Renewal," p. 39.

22 Ramses Wissa Wassef, "Protégeons l'artisanat," *Images*, no. 844 (November 11, 1945): 10. Translation by the author.

23 This was the case, notably of the educator and artist Habib Gorgi (1892–1965), Wissa Wassef's father-in-law, who had been trained in England and had established a sculpture and modelling school in the neighborhood of Qubbah in Cairo, based on Carl Jung's ideas of spontaneous and innate creativity. See Nadia Radwan, *Les modernes d'Égypte : Une renaissance transnationale des Beaux-Arts et des Arts appliqués* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 126–33.

24 Ramses Wissa Wassef, *Woven by Hand* (Prague: Artia, 1972), p. 13. The Ramses Wissa Wassef Art Centre is still in activity today and is run by Susanne Wissa Wassef and her husband Ikram Nosshi. The Harrania tapestries are renowned and have been exhibited worldwide.

25 Wissa Wassef, *Woven by Hand*, p. 5.

26 Adnan compiled her thoughts about weaving in a book: Etel Adnan, *La vie est un tissage* (Paris: Galerie Lelong, 2016).

27 Nadia Radwan, conversation with Etel Adnan, Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, September 27, 2018.

28 I have more extensively addressed the question of the agency of the ornament in contemporary art from the Middle East in my habilitation thesis: Nadia Radwan, "Concealed Visibilities: Sensing the Aesthetics of Resilience in Global Modernism" (currently under review for publication), University of Bern, 2022. On this topic, see: Nadia Radwan, "Abstraction and the Concealed Rhetoric(s) of Resistance," in *NO Rhetoric(s). Versions and Subversions of Resistance in Contemporary Global Art*," ed. Sara Alonso Gómez, Isabel Piniella Grillet, Nadia Radwan, and Elena Rosauro (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2023).

29 Two retrospectives have recently been dedicated to Samia Halaby, one at the Sharjah Art Museum opened on 20 September 2023 and the other at the Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University. The latter was, however, abruptly canceled by Indiana University, which is also the artist's alma

mater, because she has been outspoken in her support of Palestinians during the Israel-Gaza war. *Lasting Impressions: Samia Halaby*, exh. cat. (Sharjah: Sharjah Art Museum, 2023).

30 These can be seen on the artist's website: http://samiahalaby.com/computer-art.html.

31 The Kinetic Painting Group reunited and performed on September 1, 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic and was performed via zoom at the Afro Roots Tuesdays of Goddard Riverside in New York.

32 Nadia Radwan, conversation with Samia Halaby, online, May 20, 2022.

33 See the artist's website: https://nadaelkalaawy.com/.

34 Nadia Radwan, conversation with Nada Elkalaawy, online, September 20, 2021.

35 See the artist's website: https://majdabdelhamid.com/.

36 Majd Abdel Hamid, "'I Have an Itch, I Have a Stitch': Embroidery Is a Necessity," *Jeu de Paume*, January 2021, https://jeudepaume.org/en/palm/i-have-an-itch-i-have-a-stitch/

37 On the *Muscle Memory* series, see the artist's website: https://majdabdelhamid.com/2023/02/04/muscle-memory-2022/

38 Nadia Radwan, conversation with Susan Hefuna, online, May 12, 2022.

39 Ibid.

40 On Hefuna's installations, including the *mashrabiyas*, see Hans Ulrich Obrist, ed., *Susan Hefuna: Pars Pro Toto* (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2008).

41 Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Interview with Susan Hefuna* (Cairo: Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art, 2007), n. p.

42 Nadia Radwan, conversation with Susan Hefuna, online, July 5, 2020.

43 Rose Issa, "In Conversation with Susan Hefuna," in *Xcultural Codes: Susan Hefuna*, ed. Hans Gercke and Ernest W. Utheman (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2000), p. 41.

44 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (1979): 50.

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