Edited by
Richard Jacquemond & Felix Lang

I.B.TAURIS

CULTURE

& CRISIS

in the

ARAB

WORLD

**ART, PRACTICE and PRODUCTION
in SPACES OF CONFLICT**

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Arab World

ii

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in Spaces of Conflict*

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Laurent Damesin is a doctoral student in Social Anthropology and Ethnology at the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, affiliated with the Interdisciplinary Research Institute for Social Issues (IRIS), and is an associate researcher with the French Institute for the Near East (IFPO) in Beirut. His dissertation, under the supervision of Franck Mermier, deals primarily with the Yemeni literary scene. However, his extensive fieldwork (Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and the UAE) on transnationalism in the Arab literary field, and as part of a comparativist

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Richard Jacquemond is Professor of Modern Arabic language and literature at the Aix-Marseille Université, affiliated as a researcher with IREMAM. A graduate in Law and Arabic studies, he lived in Cairo for some fifteen years, working as a programme officer at the French cultural mission in Egypt before writing his PhD thesis on the Egyptian literary field from the 1960s to the 1990s, which he later published as a book (English translation: *Conscience of the Nation. Writers, State and Society in Modern Egypt*, 2008). A member of the editorial board of *Alif, Journal of Comparative Poetics*, *The Translator* and *Arabica*, he has published extensively in French, English and Arabic, on modern Arabic literature and on translational exchanges between Arabic and the main European languages. As a literary translator, he has also published to date twenty French translations of works by modern Arab authors, among them eight novels by leading Egyptian writer Sonallah Ibrahim.

Felix Lang is a postdoctoral research fellow in the department of Arabic Literature and Culture at the University of Marburg and coordinator of the 'Figures of Thought | Turning Points' research group (DFG-Leibniz). He studied Arabic and Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews and completed a PhD in Arabic Literature and Culture at the University of Marburg with a thesis which has recently been published as *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma, and Capital* (2016). Currently, he is working on a postdoctoral project on the MENA cultural field as a networked space and the role of public diplomacy organizations in cultural production in the Arab world.

Tristan Leperlier obtained his PhD in sociology and literature at the EHESS (Paris). His thesis on the Algerian literary field during the civil war was recently published at CNRS Editions under the title *Algérie, Les écrivains dans la décennie noire* [Algeria, The Writers During the Black Decade]. His main

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Marion Slitine holds a PhD in anthropology and is a lecturer and researcher at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales-EHESS (Paris), where she holds a seminar on Middle Eastern contemporary art since the 'Arab revolutions'. A graduate from Sciences Po Paris, with a Bachelor's in Arabic from the INALCO and a Master's in Contemporary History from the University Paris I-Panthéon, Marion Slitine wrote a PhD thesis called 'Palestine through creations. The fabrication of contemporary Palestinian art, from the occupied territories to the globalized scenes'. Her research focuses on contemporary art in Palestine and its political and transnational dynamics, through an ethnographic study of the new generation of artists in the OPT and in the diaspora. She has been awarded scholarships from the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), the Institut Français du Proche-Orient (Palestinian Territories), and she benefitted from a research residency at the Mucem (Marseille) and the Camargo Foundation. Besides her research, Marion Slitine is a cultural programmer specialized in the Middle East. She has worked in Syria, Palestine and Morocco and is currently based in France, where she works for various contemporary art events.

Introduction

Richard Jacquemond and Felix Lang

From the moment they started unfolding, the events that have been taking place in a number of countries across the Arab world following the uprisings of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011 have occupied and continue to occupy a central space in research on contemporary Arab societies. And whatever their outcome, the magnitude of these events has been such that they have had an impact on every aspect of social life in the countries concerned, and even, to some extent at least, in neighbouring countries. However, not all of these aspects have received the attention they deserve. Following the demand for expertise from the political sphere and the media, and also reflecting the power relations within the academic field, such research has tended to focus on political and social transformations, while the cultural dimensions of the changes taking place have received much less attention.[1] Yet, the specialists in this field have identified the crucial importance of cultural production and cultural practices for understanding not only these political mobilizations but also the deep transformations Arab societies are currently undergoing (see, for example, Cooke 2016; Gandolfi 2013). Actually, while it would be preposterous to pretend that various evolutions in these productions and practices prior to 2011 foreshadowed the coming upheavals, it cannot be denied that the transformations that the cultural scene in Tunisia, Egypt or Syria witnessed in the decade before 2011 were, in a way similar to the social unrest and other social transformations that took place at that time (Bayat 2010), pointing towards the forthcoming changes that the stagnation prevailing in the political sphere concealed.

On the other hand, the revolutionary moment of 2011–12 deeply affected the Arab cultural scene in many ways. It led to an outburst of artistic production at the hands of newcomers as well as more established ones, taking advantage both of the new media available to them and of the unprecedented level of freedom available on the old ones. This wave of 'revolutionary art', which reached unprecedentedly large audiences within Arab countries and in some cases even in the outside world, has probably been till now the best documented and the most extensively studied part of this cultural transformation (see, for instance, Hamdy and Karl 2014; Halasa et al. 2014). But, just as this cultural production was very much involved in the ongoing events and in bearing testimony to them, researchers have dealt with it in a similar way. That is to say that, writing about Tunisian rap, Cairene street art or Syrian protest songs was (is) also very much, for the researchers who engaged with it, a way of expressing support with, of paying tribute to the artists they talk about and helping disseminate their production. Within cultural studies, there is no absolute border between scholarship and criticism – a fact rarely acknowledged, let alone taken into account and analysed by academics (for a counterexample, see Frishkopf 2010) – and this is even truer in contexts such as the ones we are dealing with here, where the course of events becomes suddenly so overwhelming that it affects everyone, local actors and foreign observers alike.[2]

This is one of the reasons why we have chosen, in this book, to put the post-2011 moment in a larger perspective and engage in a wider reflection on the relation between political crises and cultural production in the Arab region. Of the ten contributions that make its chapters, five deal with the post-2011 moment in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, while four others deal with other contexts and one encompasses the whole region. The common feature of these contexts is that they are characterized by a high level of conflictuality, in which actors in the cultural fields are, in a way similar to other social actors, forced to redefine their relations with the field of power. This covers situations of a revolutionary type (Tunisia, Egypt) as well as civil war situations (Lebanon), others where these two types are connected (as in the transition from a revolution to civil war in Algeria at the turn of the 1990s, or Syria and Yemen after 2011), but also contexts where the conflicts are produced by invasion and foreign occupation (Palestine). The word 'crisis' chosen for the title of this

book is meant to cover this broad spectrum and to convey two meanings: by cultural fields in crises, we mean both how culture is affected by external crises and how it becomes itself a subject of crisis, either because of these external factors or because of internal ones. We are well aware that in the way we use the term crisis in this book, we are treading a fine line between a pragmatic use of language and the time-honoured (orientalist) trope of the Arab world in a state of (moral) decline. And while it remains that 'crisis is not a condition to be observed [...] [but] an observation that produces meaning' (Roitman 2014: 39), as Roitman has pointed out, we believe that it can still function as a blanket term for the types of conflicts referred to above. The contributions in this volume focus on different aspects of political crises in various segments of the cultural field. In some instances, crisis appears as catalyst that intensifies tendencies and developments that were already present in the field before the onset of the crisis – such as the bipolarization of the Algerian literary field (Leperlier) or the growing importance of funding from NGOs and foreign cultural organizations in the case of Syria (Dubois). Other contributors focus on the moment of crisis as a site of creativity (Slitine on visual arts in Gaza; Firat on the art of the Syrian revolution) or as a moment of wide-ranging structural changes such as the growing importance of research centres with a clear political affiliation for careers in the academic field during the Lebanese Civil War (Raymond) or the breakdown of Yemen's local publishing system in the wake of the Arab Spring protests in the country (Damesin). On a wider, regional level, recurring crises are considered as a central element in constituting the Arab cultural field as a transnational, multipolar and decentralized social space (Lang).

Methodologically and theoretically the present book is clearly situated within a sociology of culture informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The world's most quoted sociologist (Santoro 2008) has inspired and continues to inspire thousands of researchers, and this is also true for those who study modern Arab societies, especially in cultural studies. Quite naturally, French or France-based Arab world specialists have been the first and the most active in making extensive use of Bourdieu's rich conceptual toolbox (see, for example, Gonzalez-Quijano 1998, Jacquemond 2008 [2003], Leperlier 2018). Many others have now joined them, whether in Europe, North America (see, for example, Frishkopf 2008, Geer 2011, Lang 2016) or in the Arab world,

where Bourdieu's works have been extensively translated (see Jacquemond 2015). However, these contributions, while often referring to each other, remain dispersed in separate monographs and articles and have yet to be put in perspective.

Indeed, considering the empirical material which forms the base for Bourdieu's theoretical work, and the contexts in which it has been applied in the past, it is far from self-evident that this conceptual framework should be suited to investigate the questions set out above. Bourdieu's concept of the field of cultural production, developed in its most detailed form in *The Rules of Art* (1996 [1992]), is famously based on nineteenth-century France, a well-integrated and strongly institutionalized space of cultural production, lodged in a nation-state which – at least by comparison to the contemporary Arab world – enjoyed a considerable political stability. The case studies in this book, however, relate to postcolonial nation-states, frequently under authoritarian rule, characterized by cultural production subject to a large measure of state control, a literary language shared across the whole region and strong transnational ties.

While the authors in this volume share the view that a Bourdieusian perspective, foregrounding the processes of production and circulation, power dynamics and the distribution of resources for artistic creation addresses important issues in the world of art and culture, they might be more properly designated as post-Bourdieusian, in the sense that they seek to adapt the theoretical framework to the contexts at hand rather than following through a rigorously Bourdieusian research programme. Coming from a large variety of academic disciplines, including literary studies, anthropology and sociology, the contributors address theoretical and methodological questions raised by applying Bourdieu's sociology of culture to modern Arab societies.

Thus, Felix Lang's opening chapter emphasizes the transnational dimension of cultural production and cultural practices, an issue very much side lined in Bourdieu's own research.[3] The relations between national cultural fields and the regional cultural space or field have been a recurrent issue in the work on Arab cultural production which becomes particularly acute in these contexts of crisis. The quasi-simultaneous uprisings of 2011, the circulation not only of political slogans but also artistic forms of expression despite the fact that mobilization remained strictly national and activists circulated very little

from one country to the next (contrasting with the decidedly transnational character of jihadist mobilization) underlines the fundamental importance of the cultural field in creating a (pan)Arab public sphere, and the effect of local and regional crises in structuring the wider Arab cultural space. Setting the scene for the case studies that follow, Lang takes into view the transnational Arab cultural field as a networked, relational space from a macro perspective and puts forward the argument that, rather than being extraordinary moments of rupture, political crises play an eminent role in structuring the Arab cultural space on the level of institutions and individual actors as well as on the level of symbolic production.

The remainder of the volume is built around two central paradoxes which appear across all contributions and case studies and equally require the contributors to go beyond an orthodox Bourdieusian reading.

For one, the contexts analysed in this book are marked by an overpolitization of the players and stakes in the cultural field due to the 'desectorisation' (Dobry 2009) that is characteristic of political crises. In such contexts, social sectors (Bourdieu would say 'fields') that are normally relatively partitioned and autonomous tend to reduce their autonomy, to meet with each other and to mobilize together. The context of crisis re-legitimized politically committed art and the figure of the politically committed artist, after they had lost their legitimacy at the autonomous pole of the field as they were instrumentalized by the field of power. The paradox lies in the fact that these moments of crisis are also times where the field of power loosens its control over the cultural field, resulting in a greater autonomy of the latter. This paradoxical double movement of overpolitization and autonomization of the cultural field can be found in different forms in Algeria in 1988–91 (see in this book Leperlier) as well as in Tunisia (Boissier and Guellouz), Egypt (Chiti, Eickhof), Syria (Dubois, Firat) and Yemen (Damesin) in 2011–12.

In their contribution which deals with contemporary visual arts and choreographic art in Tunisia Annabelle Boissier and Mariem Guellouz capture such a moment of transition when the practitioners of the two art forms, freed from the disregard and censorship of the Ben Ali era tap into the struggles taking place in the political field in the process of positioning themselves in the field of cultural production. Rumours, for instance, about a dancer's or artist's close relations to figures of the regime, become a weapon in the struggle

for recognition in the cultural field. In their piece, the two authors reflect in particular on the position of the researcher who becomes part of the struggle within the field as the interlocutor to whom rumours are related in order to establish the 'truth' about other players in the field.

Alexa Firat, in her contribution, shows how the Syrian uprising brought with it an explosion of creativity: In the wake of 2011, film-makers, intellectuals, artists and writers did not only make use of a wider space of possibles opening up as a result of a political situation in which the Assad regime struggled to retain its control over the Syrian population, but they also quickly found themselves invested in a struggle for symbolic capital to support the eminently political task of building a cultural memory and narrative of the Syrian Revolution.

Another case of the paradoxical movement of politicization and autonomization, this time in the field of academia is examined in Candice Raymond's study of the *Institute for Arab Development (IDA)* in Lebanon. Funded by the Libyan government and active from 1975 until 2000, the research institute was among the most dynamic of the numerous research institutions associated with different parties to the conflict that existed in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s. Focusing on the IDA research during its most productive phase in the 1970s, Raymond shows how the interplay between the political crisis in Lebanon, the crisis of established institutions of higher education and the growing importance of research institutions outside university funded by political players produced a paradoxical effect: while, on the one hand, the institutions' funders were driven by a political agenda, the situation also allowed for a considerable margin of autonomy, as researchers were seldom dependent on a single employer.

Elena Chiti's contribution on the uses of crisis as an institutional tool in the contemporary Egyptian cultural field elucidates another aspect of the paradox of overpolitization/autonomization, where artistic work is politicized as the result of a struggle of forces outside the field of cultural production: drawing on two recent controversies surrounding the publication of a chapter of a novel by Ahmed Naji in *Akhbār al-adab* and the release of Mohamed Diab's film *Eshtebak* (Clash); the chapter shows how the state, on the one side, enlists art and culture in its struggle with the forces of the religious field, while, on the other hand, cultural production is subject to severe censorship

in a process of setting up the state as legitimate guardian of morality. Thus, while the autonomy of art is represented as a bulwark against religious fundamentalism, works of art become highly politicized as instruments in a political struggle.

A second distinguishing feature of fields of cultural production at times of political crisis is a de-territorialization of the national cultural fields as a result of a number of factors: exile of actors of the cultural field, be it in neighbouring countries (from Syria to Lebanon and Turkey, for instance), major European cities and beyond; redistribution of resources (dwindling of local resources, compensated by the appearance of other resources, regional or international). The internationalization of national fields has paradoxical effects, being simultaneously a factor of autonomization (in particular where, as holds for most of the cases examined here, autonomy was significantly limited prior to the moment of crisis) and heteronomy (the constraints emerging from the local field of power are replaced by new constraints: the expectations of outside markets, the agendas of patrons and other regional and international funding bodies) as is well apparent in the contributions collected in this volume.

Thus, Tristan Leperlier in his contribution to this volume traces the changes in the Algerian publishing sector during the 'black decade' of Algerian Civil War (*c*. 1991–2002). On the basis of a database of 2000 titles published by Algerian writers between 1988 and 2004, he is able to show that for the duration of the conflict, the Algerian literary field was increasingly polarized between francophone and arabophone production. A higher demand for publication in France and difficulties to publish in the highly fraught political climate in Algeria itself led to a considerable increase of the proportion of works by Algerian writers being published in France and in French. This trend was only reversed after the end of the conflict by a political effort of the French and Algerian state to rebuild francophone publishing in Algeria.

While, as Leperlier claims, the civil war in Algeria only reinforced certain developments that were grounded in the structure of the field and the de-polarization following the end of the conflict establishes a continuity with the pre-war field of literary production, the changes occurring in the set-up of the Yemeni literary field since 2011 are likely to have more lasting consequences, as Laurent Damesin argues in this book. While the highly dynamic and original

work of artists, musicians and writers which accompanied the protests in the cultural space of Change Square in the capital Sanaa has left its mark on the cultural field and opened up avenues for new forms of cultural production and marginalized cultural producers, it has also led to the disbanding of the Yemeni Writers' Union and of Yemen's organic literary publishing system for those authors who could not afford to publish with Lebanese or Egyptian publishing houses. The greater autonomy from the state that characterized the cultural production on Change Square translates, for the writers at least, into a greater dependence of the regional book market.

A similar move from a politically dominated position in the national field to a politically and economically dominated position in a transnational field of cultural production is found in Simon Dubois's case study of three Syrian playwrights. All three began their careers at the Damascus Higher Institute for Dramatic Arts in the early 2000s and left for Lebanon as the Syrian uprising turned into a war in the course of 2011. Dubois shows how the playwrights' contact and collaboration with foreign cultural institutions, such as the British Council, and other NGOs while still in Syria stood them in good stead to hold their own in the post-2011 Syrian cultural field, where funding and support of Syrian artists in exile comes almost exclusively from European and American states and NGOs, bringing with it a certain autonomy, but also a new set of rules to abide to successfully secure funding.

Ilka Eickhof touches on related issues in her exploration of the role of Northern European funding institutions in the cultural scene of post-revolutionary Cairo. Throwing into question the political development narrative attached to the work of cultural and public diplomacy organizations in Egypt, she considers the relations between the donors and the recipients of funding and their divergent attitudes to this form of patronage. As many of the other authors in this volume, she draws the picture of a cultural field which, while it enjoys a certain degree of autonomy in relation to the state on the national level, finds itself subject to the political and ideological agendas of the Northern European donor countries and organizations. These institutions, Eickhof argues, end up restricting access to funding and support for artistic work to a small circle of socio-economically privileged individuals who can afford the investments of time and labour which are demanded by the organizational processes set in place by the institutions.

Marion Slitine, writing on the situation of the contemporary art scene in Gaza, explores a field of cultural production where the dominant political field makes itself felt not only through censorship laws, but by physically restricting the freedom of movement of artists and artworks alike. At the same time contemporary art from Palestine is in high demand in the commercial art market and enjoys much attention from foreign cultural and public diplomacy organizations whose presence in Gaza has dramatically increased between 2005 and 2011. While this increases the autonomy of artistic work with respect to the local, Israeli–Palestinian political field, many artists find themselves closer to the heteronomous pole by submitting to the interest of dominant players in the global economic field as well as the international field of politics.

We hope it has become clear from this brief overview that the aim of this book is twofold: it is not only a collection of new empirical studies on the relations between culture and politics in the contemporary Arab world, but it also aims to use these field studies as a starting point for a methodological and theoretical reflection on the conceptual tools with which we analyse these social spaces, and the political and scientific stakes involved in our positioning in relation to them.

Notes

1　Bibliographies of the Arab uprisings are saturated with references to political science. Outside the political, most references belong to urban studies, gender studies and anthropology (especially of youth). Very few deal with matters of cultural production. See, for example, https://pomeps.org/2012/09/04/arab-uprisings-bibliography/. For the Egyptian case, see https://connectedincairo.com/resources/bibliography-of-the-egyptian-uprisings/.

2　Of course, this fluidity between inside and outside talk, scholarly analysis and political comment is not confined to cultural studies. Rather, it permeates every field of scholarly research in social sciences and every sector of area studies, but as a general rule, it is seldom made explicit in the academic discourse, leaving the lay audience, when this discourse makes its way to the main media outlets, with the idea that this discourse is pure 'expert' talk, disconnected from its author's affects, interests or allegiances.

3　However, the question has been addressed by scholars such as Gisèle Sapiro (2013).

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Beauty, Goodness and Bombs: The Role of Political Crisis in Structuring the Arab Field(s) of Cultural Production

Felix Lang

At the time of writing (November 2018) Wikipedia lists over fifty conflicts which have taken place in the Middle East since 1948. Add to this the conflicts which have taken place in North Africa since the beginning of the twentieth century, and the list of coups, revolutions, anti-colonial rebellions, foreign invasions and prolonged civil wars extends to almost a hundred, leaving not one single year where peace would have reigned across the whole of the territory now covered by the nineteen states that form what is referred to as MENA region. Some of the most recent additions made to those lists – notably the events that have been unfolding in Egypt, Tunisia and Syria since 2011 – have drawn the attention of a wider public not only on account of the human suffering, (shattered) hopes or terrorist threat they entail, but also for the forms of cultural production developed in their wake. From film to theatre, literature and visual arts, scholars have pointed out formal and thematic innovations. Such developments inevitably raise questions as to the role of moments of political crisis for cultural production[1] in the Arab world.

This chapter advances one possible answer to these questions by moving away from an analysis largely anchored in the concept of the nation-state to a wider diachronic and transnational perspective. Given the manifest transnational dimensions of an Arab space of cultural production and the continuity of crisis in the region, I will argue that political crisis, rather than being the extraordinary moment of rupture as which it is often construed, is a structural feature of the regional field of cultural production. As such, it plays out on at least two levels:

(1) The level of social networks and institutions: political crises, and violent conflict in particular, affect the material infrastructure as well as mechanisms of control and regulation and frequently occasion a relocation of cultural producers and institutions. Taken together, these effects lead to a reconfiguration of social networks, including the subversions of established hierarchies.

(2) The level of symbolic production[2]: political crises structure the historical narratives of the field of cultural production and its various segments; crises structure artwork in content and form; and finally crises play an important role for reception in other spaces of cultural production.

Conceiving of crisis as a structural factor of the Arab field of cultural production addresses two problematic issues in academic research on the region's cultural production which have once more become conspicuous in recent publications on the Arab uprisings. For one, it questions a notion of political crisis as exceptional rupture which is derived from a very particular European and American historical experience and somewhat removed from lived reality in many other parts of the world. For many millions of people, from Palestine to Syria to Algeria, political crisis is not an '"event" that suspends "normal" social processes, but instead has become *the* normal […] context for the unfolding of social life' (Lubkeman 2008: 1) as the anthropologist Lubkeman put it with respect to the African continent (see also Slitine's contribution to this volume). In fact, and this is the second point, political crisis is not something extraneous to the field of cultural production which disrupts the normal flow of things, but is built deeply into the network of producers, institutions and works of art and becomes a generative rather than a disruptive principle. Thus, political crises often present windows of opportunity for the transformation of symbolic relations of force, or what Bourdieu has called 'symbolic revolutions' (Bourdieu 2006: 81).

In the following I will proceed by first defining the Arab field of cultural production as a social space in its national and transnational dimensions. In a second step I will sketch the concept of crisis as it is used in the context of this chapter. The second half of this chapter will be devoted to the different ways political crises come to bear on the field of cultural production, its institutions, actors and products.