

## Editorial

### *An Anthropological Look at Art in the Middle East*

---

This is a very particular issue, and its topic – art in the Middle East – is new. All of the writers seem deeply involved in their subject and present their research in a fresh and spirited way.

Danila Mayer brings biennials of contemporary art into view, placing these huge annual events within an urban, globalised context. The history of the biennial in Istanbul – a city between East and West, North and South – at a particular juncture in the development of the country, with curators coming every year from different regions of the world and from different intellectual backgrounds, has made this event particularly important for anthropological study. There is so much sensitivity, criticism and counter-criticism associated with these functions that one can read page upon page of mind-bending analyses, the result of intense deliberations of highly aesthetic minds from around the world. The flow of money is not neglected, as such happenings take place in an urban context and involve a great deal of spending. But deep contradictions are also being faced.

The article on music by Soheila Shahshahani shows the struggle of musicians in Tehran within the fluid world of law and regulations. It takes the different musical tendencies within the city into account and illustrates how each group – be they traditional musicians or pop singers – works in a world where the rules of the game are not clear, yet the public demand for music and the necessity of music for the state have kept this art very vibrant. Musicians' contact with the world of music and the ease of access to all music brought about by globalisation have made this auditory domain highly active.

Artists in the diaspora have their particular difficulties: their relationship to the homeland and their place within the global world of their art create meaningful grounds for negotiation. Roxanne Varzi concentrates on several artists and their search for their own identity while, at the same time, responding to and being sought after by the global market. Her context is the theoretical



material to which she refers and not the origin of the artists or their place of residence. The becoming of an artist is a central issue to her in terms of the diaspora and the reality of the world of fame and market.

Inherited ethnic jewellery, which can appear repetitive, comes to life through the erudite knowledge of Anie Montigny, who is very familiar with this field. The forms and patterns of jewellery within the Islamic tradition, the relationship between the clients and the jewellery maker, the occasion and the person for whom it is made – all these make each piece unique, along with the ephemeral quality that derives when a piece of jewellery is melted upon the death of the bearer. Although one might consider the person who makes such a piece to be an artisan, in view of the knowledge and vision that are necessary for creating such jewellery, the artisan becomes an artist, thus making the artwork he creates and the identity of the bearer unique.

A different topic altogether is explored by Craig Crossen as the author describes the contexts in which archaeological work and the marketing of antique valuables were entwined at the end of the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Who financed excavations in ancient Assyrian cities, who is entitled to the finds, and where and how are they entered into global trade?

Gerald A. P.-Fromm and Bariaa Mourad propose philosophical, psychological and bio-anthropological theories as a basis to contest ‘mythical misconceptions’ about human rights, ethics and authoritarianism. They advocate including such thinking in the perception of critical contemporary art from the Middle East and how it is connected to promoting human rights.

Mehmet Kerem Özel takes up the challenge to explore a war memorial in Northern Cyprus in the context of war memorials in the Republic of Turkey. The site he has chosen, which is dedicated to the Turkish war dead of the 1974 Cyprus crisis, brings forward a way of remembering that departs from other such places in several ways. The memorial becomes a lofty space devoted to transcendent thoughts as well as a place to hold the kinds of ceremonies usually associated with such memorials. Özel provides material that fosters a meditative approach toward a space where children come to play and where the natural environment (stones, plants, the Mediterranean Sea) allows for a unique experience of the transience of life.

Artists have always depended upon an elite who could afford to spend on aesthetic production. They have lived and worked on the border of the deepest human feelings and with the barest necessities of life. They have been producing art for thousands of years in the Middle East, and, at present, their expertise is on a global scale. Today, their current place of residence might differ from their place of origin, and the intellectual aesthetic world for which they are creating might be unlike the one with which they are most familiar. Artists might be responding to today’s deep human problems, anguishes and transcendences faster than the ordinary person, but their efforts might be errant. No one knows whether it is the market or erudition that will decide if artists are heading in the

right direction. On the one hand, they are producing art in an area where there has been a deep tradition regarding the ethical sense of good and bad; on the other hand, the Middle East is an 'emerging market' in the global, highly profitable trade of art. It is high time that anthropologists paid more attention to the world of art in this area, which boasts the most exquisite artistic pieces of world museums and art forms that are unique and profound.

– *Danila Mayer and Soheila Shahshahani*