



Sam Bardaouil. *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group.* London: I. B. Tauris, 2017. Illustrations. 320 pp. \$38.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78453-651-0.

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Few modernist cultural movements spread and were adopted as widely during the first half of the twentieth century as surrealism. Initially launched in Paris following the end of the First World War, it began as a group of a few young male authors who turned to the writings of Sigmund Freud and his conceptualization of the unconscious to challenge the prevailing European epistemological orders of rationalism and positivism that they believed hindered their creative output. It quickly grew into a small but transformative cultural phenomenon that attracted a number of writers as well as visual artists in cities all over the world. Previous accounts of surrealism have largely framed it as a French invention with an eventual global distribution through francophone publication networks and beyond. What happens when, instead of retracing the one-way, hegemonic vectors of transmission from Paris to the rest of the world, we consider the development of and contributions to surrealism that occurred in places outside of Paris, London, and New York? The innovations and advancements made by writers and artists in these lesser-studied locales pluralized surrealism and, much to the discomfort of André Breton, that most protective and obtuse leader of the Parisian brand of “original” surrealism, pushed the movement in new and exciting directions.

This is the underlying premise of Sam Bardaouil’s volume, *Surrealism in Egypt: Modernism and the Art and Liberty Group*. Representing the first major monograph on the subject, Bardaouil’s work focuses on the group of intellectuals, writers, and artists in Egypt that came together under the banner of Art and Liberty and their deep engagement with surrealism. To be clear, this is a story not of Egyptian surrealism but of surrealism in Egypt, a major point of distinction that serves as a leitmotif throughout the book. Art and Liberty was officially founded on December 22, 1938, on the eve of World War II; its members “came together based on shared intellectual affinities, rather than nationality” in pursuit of “the disentanglement of art from the confines of ‘Egyptian-ness’” (p. 28). In keeping with a core tenet developed by the founders of surrealism, Art and Liberty members sought to blur the lines between art and politics, not through the aestheticization of politics, which Walter Benjamin argued leads art to work in service of fascism, but rather by way of the *politicization of aesthetics*, which Benjamin maintained could unlock art’s revolutionary capacity in the struggle for liberation.[1] In so doing, Art and Liberty members opened up a surrealist discursive space within Egypt from which they could create works of art and literature that directly responded to contemporaneous social, cul-

tural, economic, and political issues both within and outside of Egypt, including nationalism, authoritarianism, fascism, colonialism, communism, and rationalism, as well as the Second World War more broadly.

The introduction begins here, with an undoing of the binary between the local and the global as understood by Art and Liberty, when “writers and artists in far-flung cities from across the globe were simultaneously re-envisioning Surrealism through the dual lens of literary and artistic innovation and political action.” We are introduced to the main figures of Art and Liberty, including Kamel el-Telmisany, Ramses Younane, Fouad Kamel, Amy Nimr, Angelo de Riz, Jean Moscatelli, Inji Efflatoun, Étienne Sved, Nata Lovet-Turner, Albert Cossery, Idabel, and the group’s de facto leader Georges Henein, who was in close contact with Breton and served as the main link connecting the surrealists in Egypt to surrealists in other parts of the world. Bardaouil points out that Art and Liberty did not see surrealism and local aesthetics as contradictory, and that “as Surrealism in 1938 was in flux,” Art and Liberty members “felt as entitled to participate as any other Surrealists in the world” (p. 14). Over the course of the next eight chapters and a conclusion, Bardaouil explores Art and Liberty’s many entanglements with surrealism both domestically and internationally, all the while complicating our understanding of surrealism and pushing us to expand our definitions of the movement.

The first chapter tracks some of the historical developments that preceded the formation of Art and Liberty in Egypt, particularly the emergence and growing influence of world/universal exhibitions and how they were imbricated in the colonial aspirations of several Western European empires beginning in the nineteenth century. Drawing on some of the work of Timothy Mitchell,^[2] Bardaouil argues that the visual ordering of the world and the exoticization of the Other on display at these universal expositions—what

Mitchell refers to as the staging of the world as exhibition—were eventually appropriated and flipped around in Egypt to establish a locally specific hierarchy of power. Rather than allowing foreign, colonial powers alone to represent Egypt, there was a growing desire within Egypt to move beyond the pharaonic past that it was known for to become visible as a player on the modern Euro-Mediterranean stage. This led to the creation, for example, in 1908 of the first European-style fine arts school in Egypt, the Egyptian School of Fine Arts, under the auspices of Prince Youssouf Kamal, so as to visually codify and disseminate the preferred ideologies of the ruling class and eventually the nation.

“It is against this conflation of art with national sentiment,” writes Bardaouil, “that Art and Liberty would rebel, for to cite the words of Kamel el-Telmisany, “there is no crime bigger in the world of art than for an artist to limit his art within a specific piece of land” (p. 47). With some of this prehistory addressed, the second chapter goes on to offer a critical revision to the more dogmatic interpretations of Art and Liberty’s founding manifesto titled “Long Live Degenerate Art.” In this chapter Bardaouil rejects the conventional understanding of Art and Liberty as an Arab or Egyptian cell of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (FIARI), an international organization established by Breton and Diego Rivera together with Leon Trotsky in Mexico City in 1938 immediately following the publication of their “Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art.” He instead attempts to read Art and Liberty in its local context, one not really connected to FIARI because of the former’s lack of allegiance to Trotskyism, which was at odds with Art and Liberty’s embrace of all forms of communism, intended to bring together a larger group of surrealists in Egypt. By turning to the heretofore unpublished archives of the Egyptian-born Italian Futurist author Nelson Morpurgo related to the visits of F. T. Marinetti to Egypt, Bardaouil argues that rather than reading Art and Liberty as a local

node of an international network, “it is more compelling to believe that Art and Liberty’s attack on Fascism and solidarity with freedom was meant as a denunciation of a local Fascist sentiment that, on the eve of the Second World War seemed to be swirling out of control” (p. 69).

In the third chapter, Bardaouil focuses on the interconnectedness of Art and Liberty’s writers and its visual artists, set against the backdrop of World War II and the violence and poverty it caused in Egypt. This chapter offers close readings of literary texts by Henein and Cossery and the visual works that they inspired as well as the texts that were then written in response to the visual works. The fourth chapter—one of the richest of the whole book—takes up the problematic of the relationship between Art and Liberty and surrealism and reveals the group’s contributions to surrealism. Bardaouil argues that the larger mission of Art and Liberty was the “total liberation of the human condition by way of emancipating the individual” (p. 121), an idea that was both reminiscent of but also divergent from surrealism’s French iteration. The two are aligned, according to Bardaouil, in their dismissal of the bourgeois concept of art for art’s sake as well as the imperative to separate art from political propaganda. Similar to the Parisian based surrealists, Art and Liberty also had an interest in the dialectics of both G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, but whereas the group in Paris never quite managed to resolve the absolute idealism of Hegel with the historical materialism of Marx, Bardaouil writes that “Art and Liberty managed to engineer a form of Surrealism that was able to evade this contradiction vis-à-vis the reconciliation of empirical matter, on the one hand, and abstract thought, on the other, acknowledging at once the tangible world of objects and the abstract world of ideas” (p. 139). The result of this synthetic intervention is what el-Telmisany called “free” art and what Younane termed “subjective realism,” both of which represented major breakthroughs in surrealist epistemology and subjectivity that integrated the spiri-

tual (Hegel), psychological (Freud), and physical (Marx) dimensions of existence in ways that surrealists elsewhere had not managed to do. Despite these significant advances, their insights were largely dismissed by Breton himself because of his refusal to relinquish his perceived authority of the movement. Bardaouil closes this chapter with a pointed indictment of Breton, claiming that his possessiveness of surrealism caused him to largely dismiss Art and Liberty’s role in exercising “an active and equal role in shaping the course and tools of the movement” (p. 153).

Chapter 5 explores the deep connections between Art and Liberty and particular artists engaged with the surrealist movement in England. Bardaouil reveals how certain formulations of surrealism developed by Art and Liberty echoed those of some British artists and writers, many of whom were a part of the Villa Seurat Circle in Paris. This British cadre was critical of surrealism as it emerged in Paris and instead advocated for a more anarchist approach to achieve the revolution that surrealism called for. Bardouil analyzes the link between some of these British post-surrealists and Art and Liberty through following an intellectual chain linking Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, and Amy Nimr that allowed for the multilateral diffusion of art and literature across international Anglophone publishing networks. In chapter 6, Bardaouil moves beyond the theoretical interventions into surrealism made by Art and Liberty and looks at the group’s exhibition histories as a form of praxis. Like surrealists elsewhere, Art and Liberty staged exhibitions that subverted and challenged conventional modes of display. In so doing, Art and Liberty “succeeded in creating a model of dissent that conceded the ‘form of the exhibition’ as a tool for protest, a measure that was unavoidable and that had to be taken in order to break down the nationalist, bourgeois and academic dictates that controlled almost every aspect of the artistic sphere in Egypt at the time” (p. 175). In addition to the works installed on the walls and other exhibition design

features, Art and Liberty organized performances in the galleries to be core components of their exhibitions—what could be called precursors to performance art. They believed these performances would help to unlock the unconscious, sometimes drawing on the Sufi mystic traditions of whirling and of *dhikr* to induce a state of trance, not unlike what Breton and his circle did in the early 1920s when they held séances with mediums and practiced techniques of automatic writing and drawing.

The final two chapters of the book and the conclusion consider the eventual demise of Art and Liberty and its legacy thereafter. Chapter 7 tracks the schism that occurred within the group beginning in 1942 over the question of *revolution* itself. This argument, both theoretical and practical, led to the creation of a new collective called Bread and Liberty, one that not only rejected nationalism but also opposed Stalinism (in favor of Trotskyism). Bread and Liberty participated in the waves of mass demonstrations across Egypt out of solidarity with the workers' struggle for better conditions that the group believed would lead to a more *concrete* form of revolution. The last chapter of the book examines Henein's falling out with Breton and the surrealist movement, choosing instead to continue unaffiliated, and the emergence of the Contemporary Art Group that would eventually supplant Art and Liberty. If Art and Liberty was more interested in transnational currents of surrealism, the Contemporary Art Group was far more locally minded in their quest to "make art Egyptian." According to Bardaouil, "the question was no longer about the role that art could play in constructing the Egyptian nation"—which is an idea that Art and Liberty had fought against—"but rather, how art itself could be Egyptian" (p. 231). Even though several members of the Contemporary Art Group were initially younger members of Art and Liberty, the distinctive direction that the Contemporary Art Group pursued caused Henein to refute the notion that the new group followed in the footsteps of Art and Liberty.

The conclusion of the book extols the imperative to "imagine anew the definition, expression and the canon of Surrealism" (p. 236), the lack of which, according to Bardaouil, has impeded and occluded all previous studies on Art and Liberty from grasping its larger significance as more than an iteration of surrealism outside of France.

One of the biggest contributions of this volume beyond challenging more conventional understandings of surrealism is its treasure trove of translated archival materials—many of which have never been published before, including key texts by Younane and el-Telmisany—which will surely be useful to those without relevant language training. The vast distances that the author had to travel across the globe to access these archives could not be a better example of just how embedded Art and Liberty was in the international networks of surrealism. *Surrealism in Egypt* offers a reparative reading of Art and Liberty by largely forgoing a Saidian or postcolonial argument about the effects of colonialism on Egypt; Bardaouil cites Younane to justify this approach for his "refusal to use the facile narrative by which the so-called periphery, in this case Egypt, is the victim of the so-called center, represented in his argument by Colonialism.... Instead, he and his fellow Art and Liberty artists and writers, have striven to articulate a notion of art history where multilateral exchanges assume primacy over identity-politics and contested geographic boundaries that are usually reflective of ongoing power struggles" (p. 240). The decision to focus on what the author calls "internationalism" over Orientalism is productive and allows him to move beyond some of the dichotomies and binaries that Orientalism reinforces. However, even though Art and Liberty artists and writers professed to care little about their nationalities and geographic location, they were, nonetheless, not participating on an even playing field. Indeed, Bardaouil cites the work of Lucia Re on Alexandria as an incubator of futurism to reinforce the fact that it was precisely Egypt's geospatial distance from Paris

that partly enabled Art and Liberty to move beyond Bretonian orthodoxy and push surrealism on to new heights.[3] But that said, Bardaouil's notion of "international contemporaneity," which he describes as being "in sync with the world" (p. 220), is a bit too positivistic and needs to be further refined, for while Henein and his group were participants of a transnational artistic and literary movement, each locale gave shape to a form of surrealism (in this case) that had its own idiosyncrasies and innovations. Reiko Tomii's more developed formulation of "international contemporaneity" would have suited Bardaouil well to describe what she would refer to as the "similar yet dissimilar" characteristics of global surrealisms. [4]

Bardaouil's volume fits well within a broader field of global modernisms, which already accounts for a number of monographs and edited volumes on surrealism in various decentering configurations. Literary studies has a leg up on art history in this field, including Franklin Rosemont and Robin Kelley's *Black, Brown, and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (2009) and Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson's *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (1996), but works like Dawn Ades, Rita Eder, and Graciela Speranza's *Surrealism in Latin America: Vivísimo Muerto* (2012) and Annette Leddy and Donna Conwell's *Farewell to Surrealism: The Dyn Circle in Mexico* (2012) address both literary and visual production, as does Bardaouil's monograph. More recent works like Abdul Kader Al Janabi's *Le désir libérrtaire: Le surréalisme arabe à Paris, 1973-1975* (2018), furthermore, take a more expansive view of surrealism in terms of time rather than space. While most of the publications on international surrealism are edited volumes, Bardaouil's is a monograph apropos of one specific group in one particular place and time as a node in a larger international network, allowing for a much deeper and sustained study of Art and Liberty. With the door now wide open for other scholars to work on this group,

some topics that did not make it into the already capacious scope of Bardaouil's project might now be able to be addressed, including questions of race, class, and gender and how they operated within Egypt and affected artistic production and reception both locally and abroad. Ultimately, this book not only shines a bright light on a key moment in the development of surrealism in Egypt but also makes room for new comparative studies using Art and Liberty as one substantial reference point to better comprehend the complexities of surrealism as a transnational movement.

Notes

[1]. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 241-242.

[2]. See Timothy Mitchell, "Orientalism and the Exhibitionary Order," in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 289-317.

[3]. Lucia Re, "Alexandria Revisited: Colonialism and the Egyptian Works of Enrico Pea and Giuseppe Ungaretti," in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 163-196.

[4]. Reiko Tomii, *Radicalism in the Wilderness: International Contemporaneity and 1960s Art in Japan* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 12.

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