



Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art

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maintain, Beuys's ideas are not central to their works as their practice intentionally develops without a linear genealogy associated with any specific artists or art concepts.¹¹

It is strangely unclear from the exhibition, how did/does Beuys impact the Mongolian artists and those shown in the exhibition? While a deeper understanding of Mongolian art is not among the goals of the exhibition, it appears here to only corroborate Beuys's ideas and such linear vision counteracts Jansen's otherwise positive ambition to give voice to these understudied Mongolian artists in the first place.¹² By placing a scarcely known art of Mongolia in a direct dialogue with German artists, the exhibition triggers a probing into another acute problem of today, which is a rapidly growing call for, and effort of, decolonizing the arts and humanities. Precisely because these nineteen artists in the *Healing the Earth* are addressing issues of global concern, an introduction to the dynamics of Mongolian art scene is certainly missing as it would have been important for a German viewer to better understand Mongolian artists and their connection to Beuys, which is limited.¹³ This is particularly true as Beuys is known only to a handful of people in Mongolia. Those Mongolian artists who matured with a direct understanding and impact of Beuys in Mongolia are not featured in this exhibition and the instances of Mongolian limited, yet important engagement with Beuys—such as Beuys Club in 1995 in Ulaanbaatar—are not even mentioned. But these are perhaps taken by the organizers as peripheral to the central mission of the exhibition, which is to commemorate the two countries' half-century of diplomatic relations. The exhibition is breathing with Beuys's ideas, and it is certainly a unique homage to a German interest in Mongolia, which Beuys was among the first artists to explore in art in the past century.

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1. Gregor Jansen, exhibition introduction, *Healing the Earth: 50 Years of German-Mongolian Friendship*. Emphasis is mine.

2. Ibid.

3. Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002) is one of the critical publications that theorize the participatory forms of art practices. About the 15th Gwangju Biennale,

see more at <https://www.gwangjubiennale.org/en/exhibition/biennale/mainexhibition.do>.

4. See artists' statement at <https://slavsandtatars.com/about>.

5. See more in Uranchimeg Tsultem, "Nam June Paik's Eurasia and Art as Communication," lecture, International Cultural Center, Incheon, South Korea, 2018; forthcoming in *Journal of Asian Studies*. See also Chris Thompson, *Felt: Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, and the Dalai Lama* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

6. See the works at https://www.kunststhalldueseldorf.de/en/exhibitions/heilung_der_erde_en/.

7. Jansen, "Introduction."

8. Carmen Schaich, "Life and Work." Artist's statement and portfolio, September 2024.

9. Interview with Mann, recording, September 2024.

10. The concept "natureculture" was first introduced by Donna Haraway and is widely used in the growing literature on the Anthropocene across sciences, arts and humanities. See, for instance, Donna Haraway *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Elaine Gan, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), among others.

11. Author interview with Payam, Slavs and Tatars, September 2024.

12. See also Uranchimeg Tsultem, "'Healing the Earth'" in the Wake of Joseph Beuys," *New Art Examiner*, September 2024, <https://newartexaminer.net/healing-the-earth-in-the-wake-of-joseph-beuys/>.

13. This reviewer's book, *20th-century Western Art* (Ulaanbaatar: Art and Design Publishing, 2002) remains the only publication to introduce Joseph Beuys to Mongolian public at the turn of this century.

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Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art

Andrew Gayed. Series edited by Laura Kina. *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. 324 pp.; 48 ill., 21 in color; \$35 paper

Andrew Gayed's *Queer World Making: Contemporary Middle Eastern Diasporic Art* is the scholarly book I have been waiting to read. Gayed weaves a narrative and argument that understands the heaviness of diasporic life, the mutability of queerness and perhaps most importantly, the dissonance of both combined.

Middle Eastern diasporic art and queerness often sit on the margins of dominant discourses—both in art and in queer studies. And when visible, they can appear dressed up for Western contexts and judged by Western values. But Gayed's text makes no such compromises. It spoke to me, a Lebanese Australian artist, with an intimacy that felt raw, urgent, and thoughtful.

The prologue begins in a house filled with holy water, priests, and panic. The author is a young, queer Egyptian Canadian who holds a secret in a family that doesn't want to know. Then they do know. A confrontation erupts amid references to holy texts, shouting, and exile. He escapes his family, shoeless, and travels by bus to Ottawa, where his chosen queer family is waiting with open arms. From his Egyptian family, the message is clear: there is no space for queerness in Egyptian identity. To his queer community, the message is the opposite: here, queerness is welcome, but the author's Arabness is misunderstood, simplified, and sometimes erased. It is from this lived experience that the book embarks on a rigorous academic quest to make sense of the contradictions that infect and deflect a queer diasporic existence. Gayed asks, what does it mean to write from within? To acknowledge bias, to make subjectivity a strength? The author finds no answers but instead offers a practice—a blending of autobiography and critical thought that transforms personal pain into a scholarly inquiry and positions art practice as a way to imagine a different world.

The introduction is precise. Queerness

is not universal, and art is a way to resist, decolonize and negotiate in-betweenness. He begins by explaining what identity is not—it is not fixed, whole, or outside representation. He follows by tracing the problem of Western models of homosexuality being exported to the Middle East and erasing what already existed. This problem is central to the book.

Gayed traces a history of practices and desires, not sexual identities. He argues that in the diaspora, queerness is shaped by colonial histories and, simultaneously, by the West's demand for visibility. For those in the Middle East, queerness is lived in tension with religious, social, and political codes reshaped by imperialism. Art, Gayed says, is where these tensions meet. He turns to artists—diasporic, Middle Eastern, queer—to see how their work connects these histories and breaks from them. One of the book's strengths is that it celebrates and makes known these practices and applies intimate scholarly attention to reading art from the inside.

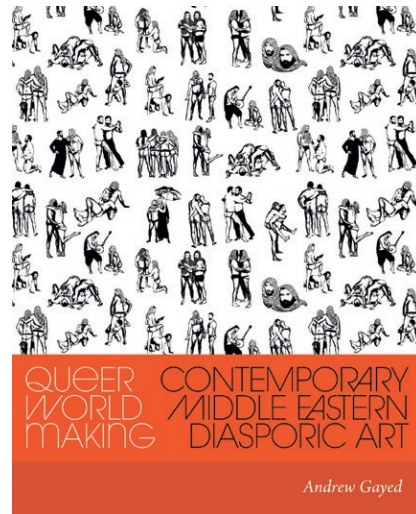
Artists, including Jamil Hellu, confront the friction between Arab ethnicity and American gay identity. Ebrin Bagheri recovers premodern same-sex desires in Persian culture through intricate drawings. Laurence Rasti's brilliant photographs capture queer Iranian refugees playing hiding games with the camera. And Nilbar Güreş exposes the violence and trauma of queerness in exile. Through them, Gayed insists on a different story: local histories, entangled geographies, queer futures that are not the West's.

There are more questions than answers in this book. Can we queer the local without being trapped by the nation? Can art decolonize without becoming an archive of injury? Can the diaspora connect rather than separate? Gayed does not say, but he writes as though believing that asking is already an act of repair. While there are no solutions the study gestures toward a future that is not easily achievable or tidy.

From the outset, the book offers an ambitious critique of art history's reliance on Eurocentric narratives and the vertical hierarchies of Western modernity. Gayed positions the "horizontal method" as a way of decentering Western canons and recasting the relationships among marginalized cultures. The goal is not merely to decolonize but also to "deimperialize," shifting the burden of critique onto the colonizers them-

selves while creating space for diasporic and local narratives to engage each other on equal terms (13).

Gayed untangles the complex relationship between colonialism and imperialism, grounding the discussion in Walter Dignolo's notion of the colonial matrix of power. This



sets the stage for a broader critique of how art history has excluded non-Western traditions or treated them as derivative. By proposing horizontal frameworks, Gayed suggests that connections among marginalized cultures—what Piotr Piotrowski calls "horizontal art histories"—can destabilize the binaries of center and periphery (77–78). The chapter is dense with theoretical interventions, drawing on scholars like Kuan-Hsing Chen to advocate for "deimperialization" as a method distinct from decolonization (15). In this framework, queer diasporic artists emerge as agents of decolonial praxis, their work engaging both local histories and global discourses in ways that resist Western universalism (28–34).

The book weaves together art history, queer theory, and critical race studies to examine how diasporic artists confront the intersections of identity, geography, and empire. The call for horizontal methods, while compelling, risks being more aspirational than practical, given the entrenched power dynamics of the disciplines it seeks to transform. Still, the chapter leaves the reader with a sense of urgency: How can we rethink art and art history as a truly global discipline? And what does it mean for diasporic and marginalized voices to be centered,

not to serve Western narratives but as equal participants in shaping knowledge? Gayed's chapter is an invitation to imagine new ways of thinking, creating, and seeing.

The critique of how expectations of war, trauma, and Orientalist stereotypes constrain Arab art and photography makes clear the argument that the "single-narrative biography" reduces complex experiences into simplified, marketable clichés (82). Arab artists, Gayed contends, are caught in a trap, expected to produce art and images of suffering that fit Western notions of the Middle East (63). At the same time, their work is rarely allowed to exist on its own terms, free of cultural, political, or ethnic markers. Hence, photography emerges as both a site of power and a tool of resistance (67–68). Its history in the Middle East is exposed—entangled in imperialist projects that rendered Arabs into objects of the Western gaze. Even now, Arab photographers contend with this legacy, their work often viewed through the framework of conflict and colonial trauma.

Gayed analyzes the aesthetics of contemporary Arab photography through examples like Wafaa Bilal's *3rdi* (2010), a project that blurs surveillance and self-expression, and Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate* (2012), which turns the Palestinian struggle into a futuristic allegory. Both works are read as refusals of the "phantom image"—a term from Ariella Azoulay to describe the mental pictures implanted by colonial narratives, media, and memory. These "phantoms" guide viewers, limiting their ability to interpret Arab art as anything beyond conflict and trauma. Strength lies in the refusal to dismiss biography outright while still critiquing its overuse. Gayed calls for a "horizontal art history" (76) that deconstructs the hierarchies of Western modernism and allows art to be understood in relation to the world—not merely the identity of its maker.

This approach suggests that Arab art, often framed as oppositional or reactive, could instead be seen as a complex negotiation of aesthetics, history, and politics. The critique of reductionism itself may unintentionally diminish its subjects, suggesting that no Arab artist can break free from Orientalism's grip or that mere critique can erase centuries of entrenched bias. Still, Gayed expands the conversation to let Arab art exist outside the burden of explaining the Arab world.

The Eurocentrism of traditional art history is challenged through the concept of the Islamicate as a framework to reimagine global art histories. This critique highlights how dominant narratives in art history marginalize non-Western contributions, often framing them as derivative or secondary. Gayed calls for integrating transnational and decolonial approaches to dismantle the center-periphery binary and foreground connections between regions historically shaped by Islamic cultural and social complexities.

As defined by historian Marshall G. S. Hodgson, the Islamicate extends beyond Islam as a religion to encompass the broader cultural, social, and historical traditions associated with Islamic societies, including non-Muslim contributions (87–88). Gayed applies this useful framework to art history and museum studies, arguing that it can create richer dialogues across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. This, he suggests, undoes the rigidity of museum taxonomies, revealing their deep entanglement with colonial logic and the exclusions these systems continue to reproduce. The Islamicate method emerges as both a critical framework and a curatorial strategy, offering pathways to more inclusive and interconnected art histories.

Colonial and postcolonial underpinnings of sexual discourse within Middle Eastern and Islamicate cultures is foregrounded, challenging Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. Gayed critiques Foucault's Eurocentric framing of sexuality, which assumes universal models rooted in Western epistemologies, erasing localized, nonbinary, and premodern configurations of same-sex desire (103–5).

Gayed navigates through historical silences imposed by colonialism, unpacking the Victorian construction of “modern” sexuality that simultaneously criminalized and exoticized Middle Eastern sexualities. Gayed traces these imperial legacies into the diasporic present, exploring how queer diasporic artists, like Jamil Hellu, confront and reclaim erased histories.

This lays the foundation for examining photography's role in queering archives that link colonial history to the diaspora today. By focusing on the intricate drawings of Iranian-Canadian artist Ebrin Bagheri's work, the entwined histories of colonial photography, same-sex desire, and contemporary queer diasporic art are investigated as a case

study. The chapter views photography as a tool of imperial power, showing how colonial visual archives shaped and silenced local sexual scripts in the Middle East. Gayed sets Bagheri's detailed drawings into this context as if they unintentionally echo colonial photographs, creating an unconscious thread between premodern sexualities and the experience of diaspora (130). He examines the photographic archive carefully, tracking how it has shaped both the stories we tell about history and the identities formed in its wake. His reading of Bagheri's art underscores the colonial wounds in diasporic consciousness, exposing modernity's imposition of heterosexual norms. Yet the chapter does not settle in critique alone; it edges toward repair, framing Bagheri's practice as “decolonial aesthesis” (148)—a reclamation of sexual and cultural narratives that colonial histories sought to erase.

A role is created for Middle Eastern diasporic art that challenges Western interpretations of modernity and queerness. Anchored in the humorous art of 2Fik's multimedia practice, Gayed unravels how colonial histories shaped—and continue to haunt—sexual and cultural identities in the Middle East and its diasporas. Through his photographic and performative characters, 2Fik embodies the tensions of tradition, modernity, and diaspora, queering notions of kinship and identity while confronting imperial narratives of progress.

Gayed introduces 2Fik's concept of “coming out à l'orientale” as a localized, culturally resonant approach to queerness and as a counter to the hegemonic visibility politics of the global north (163). In works like *Arabesque* (2006) and *La Grande Intendante* (2012), 2Fik reimagines colonial and Orientalist visual tropes, transforming them into sites of humor, resistance and queer futurity. This situates queer diasporic art as a decolonizing practice. It is not merely an escape from history but an active rewriting of it.

Homophobia, Homocolonialism and Homonationalism are unpacked as layered intersections of imperialism, queer identity, and displacement within the context of Middle Eastern diasporic art (194–5). Gayed critiques how colonial histories of sexual regulation—transplanted through laws and social norms—perpetuate violence against queer communities both in the Middle East and the diaspora, while also examining how

these histories continue to shape racialized queer identities in the global north (200–1).

Artists creating visual counter-narratives that challenge the binary of the “oppressive East” versus “liberated West” interrogate the cultural, political, and racial violence embedded in these frameworks. At the same time, they resist reductive labels that oversimplify the complex realities of queer Middle Eastern lives. Gayed emphasizes that the Middle Eastern diaspora often experiences “queer hospitality” (206) as conditional, shaped by Western queer norms that exclude or fetishize racialized queer bodies. The chapter urges a decolonized approach to queer rights, recognizing how Western imperialist legacies have disrupted local sexual and gender fluidities. By historicizing homophobia and foregrounding the art of the queer diaspora, Gayed advocates for a nuanced understanding of queer world-making—one that is attentive to hybrid identities, alternative affiliations, and the enduring effects of colonial trauma.

Queer World Making synthesizes the threads of Middle Eastern diasporic art, colonial history, and queer identity into a critique of modernity's imperialist underpinnings. He frames the queer diaspora as a site of creative resistance, where artists confront the imposed binaries of tradition and modernity, home and host-land, belonging and alienation. The book explores how visual art embodies “diaspora consciousness,” a way of holding past colonial traumas while imagining alternative futures (209–10).

Gayed highlights how artists like 2Fik, Jamil Hellu, and Rah Eleh reject Western notions of visibility as liberation, offering instead a model of “letting in” or “coming in,” which prioritizes selective, culturally nuanced self-expression over the universalized ideal of public coming out. Through art that blends humor, performance, and historical pastiche, these creators interrogate the colonial legacies embedded in both Middle Eastern and Western queer identities. Gayed's conclusion underscores how queer diasporic art destabilizes dominant discourses, creating space for identities that resist simplification and binaries, ultimately advocating for a postcolonial and antiracist rethinking of queer belonging and futurity.

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