

# Trans-Modern Nations/Utopian Identities: Arab Women-Art in Gwangju Biennale

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**Abstract-** This research used the lens of Art to explore feminist issues in contemporary human culture. It focused on the narrative symbolisms of two artworks made by two female artists. Who re-created found archival materials to illustrate the feminist contributions in building different modernisms in Kuwait and Baghdad cities. They represented feminine narratives by moving the symbolic focal point from male to female perspective. Both artworks critiqued the inconsistent process of building national landmarks during the post-independence era, due to global and local factors such as Gulf Wars, the 9/11 attacks, and Arab Spring's aftermaths. The methodology employed the *Qualitative Content Analysis* tool within the theories of *Iconography* and *Social Reality*, to investigate the visual manifestations of the trans-modern narratives. This study is significant because it examined the ambiguous feminisms through transitional temporalities, and negotiated the diversities of collective memories and cultural identities in both cities. The Impact of trans-modern thoughts appeared in this context as a self-critique, where the artworks investigated the contemporary feminine/feminist issue in the frames of modern Arab cultures. The methodology aimed to develop art practices on individual, social and institutional levels, where artists, art scholars as well as art audiences engage in the process of understanding, making and knowing art. This practice-led research aims to manifest the qualitative reality of women's contribution to modern and contemporary Arab art. It conveys further art research towards the global visual culture.

**Keywords –** Contemporary Arab Art, Visual Culture, Architectural and Urban Narratives, Feminist Criticism, Practice-Based and Practice-Led Methodology, Trans-Modernity, Crisis of Identity.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This study focused on the social issues expressed by two female artists in their artistic practice. It investigated the layers of sociopolitical issues to reveal the relations between being a woman, being an artist, and being an Arab. The significance of this research appeared through the collectivity of the international art event for presenting artists who express feminine/feminist and sociopolitical issues in their visual artworks. The subjects, themes and cultures that represent women and their belongings present feminine/feminist aesthetics through contemporary art practices in international art events (Millner, Moore and Cole, 2015). Approaching the concept of utopian identities in international art exhibitions is a contemporary trend. In the present paper, the visual critique focuses on analyzing the feminist issues expressed through feminine visual aesthetics.

### 1.1 The Artwork is the Unit of Analysis-

The artworks deliver political, social and cultural messages and represent symbols, images, texts, sounds, actual spaces, objects, and shapes. The virtual catalog of Gwangju Biennale, which is presented on the biennale's website, is utilized as a document of the event. This virtual source provides the details of artworks as well as the artists' statements, which will indicate the issues that link to the artist's artistic practice.

**Table 1:** Details of the Artworks

Artist's Name	The Country of Origin	The Artwork's Title
1. Alaa Younis	Jordan	<i>Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad</i>
2. Alia Farid	Kuwait	<i>Between Dig and Display</i>

### 1.2 *The Questions of the study-*

This study is exploring the following questions:

1. How did the artworks reflect the feminine/feminist and social issues within the theme of Gwangju Biennale 12?
2. What makes the contemporary artworks in this biennale represent or reflect modern or trans-modern narratives?
3. How did the artworks construct a significant relationship between the concept of Women-made Art and the social issues of the contemporary crisis of identity in Gwangju Biennale?
4. How did Gwangju Biennale introduce a significant recreation of feminine exhibitions into global art platforms?

### 1.3 *The Significance of Studying Arab Women Art in the Asian Context-*

The concept of this article is significant because it explores the reality of female artists, who live in Arab communities and show art in non-Arab contexts. This condition evokes the dynamics of such reality, and reasons as well as the responses to the aesthetics of women's art in Gwangju Biennale. Therefore, this study investigates the methods of identifying feminine/feminist exhibitions through the statistics of female artists or through the concepts that focus on the feminine issues in visual arts. Such as the symbols that suggest feminine connotations, reflecting fashion elements or tools and objects that women use in their daily life in domestic and public spaces which re-create the relationship between the private, public and personal identity.

Feminine aesthetics in art present cross-cultural values and establish more relationships between the literature of local and global arts. In the international biennales, female artists create contact points of cultural global exchanges. The feminine image itself represents the symbolic female identity or parts of its objective or subjective conception that may be latent or manifest. Regarding the pictorial composition of the artwork, this level of investigation will analyze the physical/spiritual elements of the female identity as well as her utopian narratives. The synthesis of cultures (Broadbeck, 2002) illustrates the contributions that every culture made to add symbols and belongings to the global mosaic of cultures. This globality would characterize the contemporary artworks in this study. Such elements are formal as well as symbolic that female artists use to advocate cultural manifestations through their artistic experience. The feminine aesthetics establish new symbols behind these feminine icons as the mosaic of women's identity in contemporary art is composed through different layers of cultural meanings.

## II. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The current study investigated two installational artworks exhibited in the 12th Gwangju Biennale (from 7 September to 11 November 2018). Each artwork recreated archival footage, which documented the inconsistent creation of urban centers and national landmarks. This creation's process progressed into different intrusions during the second half of the 20th century in Baghdad and Kuwait cities. On which, the artworks illustrated a visual inquiry conducted by the two different artists. Who re-created, re-cited and re-articulated archival narratives into their art to establish a contemporary feminine critique. The artworks' narratives progress into un-layering the influences of trans-national and spiritual ideologies. (Brito, 2018; Elwakil, 2018; "2018 Gwangju Biennale," n.d.;). Their art connected the contemporary temporalities of today's social reality with the unfeminine modernity of the post-independence era in Baghdad and Kuwait cities.

Arab nationalism played a transformational factor in the cultural, social and political change in the newly independent nations (Elouardaoui, 2013). The arts of Alaa Younis and Alia Farid corresponded to the symbolic feminine identity, which was stereotyped during the process of establishing the Arab Modernity (Gruber and Haugbolle, 2013). The new emerging Arab nations intended to symbolize nationalist advocacies by building museums, stadiums, and national landmarks. Those were interrupted, leaving several archives that documented the inconsistent process of building national modernity (Exell, 2016).

The present study critiqued the crisis of identity in the Arab modernism, through digging into the symbolism of the two artworks from inter-subjective perspectives. It negotiated the concept of ambiguous femininity, as the narratives of Arab Art illustrated uncertain definitions of identities upon social and political turbulences (Rogers and Van Der Vlist, 2013). The unfinished/unfeminine Arab modernity created the symbolic

narratives for the artworks investigated in this study. Those narratives extracted feminine iconographies from the archives and projected them in a contemporary dialogue re-interpreting their symbolism.

The drive of such modernity was motivated by divergent political ideologies articulating Arab identity with North African or West Asian cultural commonalities at one point. And on the other point, shaping it with religious or secular paradigms (Elouardaoui, 2013; Naef, 2003; Oguibe, 1993). Such a fast-changing geopolitical landscape created unsustainable cultural plans during the sociopolitical progress of most of the emerging Arab states in the late 20th century. Therefore, the two artworks, investigated in this study, critiqued the dynamics of the visual culture inherited from the Arab Modernity. That was generally masculine, while re-identifying cultural identities into new feminine sociopolitical frameworks.

Those trans-modern artworks established a contemporaneous critique. On which the present study will progress a qualitative methodology (rather than historical methodology). Ala'a Younis and Alia Farid cast aspirations on the Arab popular culture. That influenced many artists to use historical, folkloric, political motifs to associate the definitions of Arab cultural identity. Modern Arab art reproduced the symbolism of Arab nationalism as a form of cultural resistance that advocated sovereignty during several significant political events (LeVine, 2015). On the other hand, this concept was reconsidered or criticized by the contemporary artists to individualize the mainstream representations of popular cultures, from which, the two female artists extracted the narratives of the feminine identities.

### III. THE DILEMMA OF TRANS-MODERNITY

Illustrating the trans-national aesthetics of women's contributions in contemporary Arab culture. The current research used art as a qualitative tool to render significant social issues and phenomena, while the quantitative tools are inadequate to reflect a clear image of feminism in culture. Quantitative tools are abstract and yet based on the numbers yielded from society, industry and government sectors. Leaving a gap between reality and what is projected into the feminine representations on differing cognitive spaces. Since the utopian Arab modernity advocated fragile feminism as submissive to national and religious ideologies. It excluded the qualitative understanding of diverse, multicultural and global feminine identity. This study aims to render the social, political and cultural contexts of the artworks. On which the artists dragged diverse narratives from the archives to the contemporary art practice.

Critical narratives are significant to re-evaluate trans-modern issues in media, pop-culture, and art. This critique focused on feminine identity outside the virtual reality of museums' chambers, which represented restricted imaginations of national identities (Brito, 2018; Elwakil, 2018; Exell, 2016). Therefore, this study is significant because it does not parallel social reality with the fashionable phenomena of establishing museums, art galleries, and art institutions. Though the interaction with museums takes different shapes in eastern versus western communities, which affects the collective perception of cultural identities. (Assmann and Czaplicka, 1995). The two artworks represent the similarities and differences throughout the collective memories of the two cities. Baghdad and Kuwait had different modernisms that negotiated different realities between capitalist and socialist political systems.

The research's significant perspective of cultural hybridity is based on the fact that both cities have different collective memories as well as cultural identities. Constructed within the aftermaths of a number of massive political clashes on local and global levels such as the Gulf War, 9/11 attacks and Arab Spring aftermaths. Such political waves affected the cities' modernities to construct fragile feminist identities. This study elaborated on the concept of "gendering the Arab modernity" by re-evaluating the archival narratives into contemporary research.

This study is significant because it investigated narrative artworks that manifested the latent feminisms in Arab modernity, and critiqued its unfeminine orientations beyond the mere western definitions of feminism, post-colonialism, and orientalism. The present critique analyzed the intersections of feminism, Arab trans-nationalism and trans-modernity as a contemporary issue. It investigated the trans-aesthetics of women-made artworks, which evaluated the feminine fallouts of modernity from feminist perspectives. This research focused (on the contemporary arts) while the artists' research constructed a contemporaneous/narrative critique on trans-modernism. It indicated the progressive shift in rearticulating the focus from the modernity, trans-modernity to the contemporary.

The delimitations in this study are two. The first is the unit of analysis, which consists of two different artworks. And the second is the event of the 12th Gwangju Biennale. In the context of this study, the main critical concept is Trans-modernity. According to Baudrillard, "Trans-modern", "Postmodern", "Contemporary" and "Trans-aesthetic" are critical terminologies that correspond with modernity's aftermath and describe transformational temporalities across geopolitical and socio-cultural paradigms (Smith and Clarke, 2015). In the same context of identifying such terminologies, Dussel (2012) attributed modernity to the western culture and described other cultures as not modern and not post-modern.

They are simultaneously pre-modern (older than modernity), contemporary to Modernity, and soon, trans-modern as well. Post-modernism is a final stage in modern European/North American culture...Trans-modernity points toward all of those aspects that are situated "beyond" (and also "prior to") the structures valorized by modern European/North American culture, and which are present in the great non-European cultures and have begun to move toward a pluriversal utopia." (Dussel, 2012, p. 42-43).

He finally advocated a multicultural discourse that believed in the symmetry between global and local cultures based on the "critical, intercultural dialogue with respect to trans-modernity" (Dussel, 2012, p.43) building mutual exchange of complementary cultures beyond the mere stereotyping of the west being against the east.

#### IV. CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

It is an inter-subjective concept to re-create the feminine narratives of Arab modernity into contemporary art practices. At different stages of the late half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popular Arab culture reproduced sociopolitical symbols to shape the Arab nationalism. Which integrated western aesthetics to break with the pre-independence multicultural history, or in other words, to break with the multicultural colonial heritage of French, British and Ottoman influences (Elouardaoui, 2013; Gruber and Haugbolle, 2013; Naef, 2003; Oguibe, 1993). Some researchers critiqued the Arab modernity's westernized approach. That was conducted to signify progress and development while reproducing the Islamic, indigenous and the local cultural symbols in arts to force a sense of originality (Exell, 2016; Naef, 2003; 2016). Possibly, to arabize modern art as Arab artist compromised their visual heritage in western art forms to follow the modern trends in the postcolonial era.

The phenomenon of Arab modernity requires trans-modern/trans-aesthetic critique to identify the constructions of its various identities. To sort the confusion in defining the identity of modern Arab culture rather than frame it into conflicting western versus eastern paradigms. Such confusion emerged when national protagonists replaced the oriental image of the Arab, with a western image that re-produced European modernity but with a local geopolitical accent. They constructed a divergent image of the orient but not to the western-centric world (Naef, 2016). Such aesthetical clash emerged among the studies of multicultural Arab narratives, which examined monographic examples of Arab popular culture.

At this point, one cannot extract western influences from Arab modernity nor can draw a clear line between them. The identity of Arab modernity always had western features since the archives of that era proved this reality (Gruber and Haugbolle, 2013; Naef, 2016). The dilemma of global modernism was represented by contemporary Arab artists among other artists from other cultures in the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale. The total number of the artists was 164 from 43 countries grouped across 7 different venues managed by 11 curators. The artists represented social issues, politics, and migration crisis within the biennale's multicultural platform ("2018 Gwangju Biennale," n.d.).

Arab modernity influenced popular culture on different levels. It reflected a manifest image of Arab masculinity against the latent representation of Arab exotic femininity (Al-Ali, 2012). It left a heritage of established masculine role in the collective Arab identity and dependent feminine individuality. Such modernity recreated symbols of male protagonists representing an imagined identity that did not reflect the social reality of that time. Such representations appeared to meet the expectations of the audience, who used to indulge the heroic male representations besides the sexiest female stereotypes on Arab TV channels, newspapers and mass media (Elouardaoui, 2013; Obeidat, 2002). As a result of this Arab modernity, one can detect to some extent the "mismatch" between the social representations on media against social, political and cultural realities in the archives that documented that phenomenon (Al-Abbas, 2016).

Archival narratives critique the trans-aesthetics between illusion and existential phenomenon. This would be significant towards understanding the real Arab modernity that existed in the aftermath of Arab independence. Narratives are more authentic than media in reflecting the actual image of society "artists strive to link aesthetic and poetic developments with a broadly conceived politics...we increasingly see an analysis of belonging, identity, nationalism, diasporas, borders, land/geographies and narratives of conflicts by artists" (Fadda, R. 2009, P. 16). Social reality is constructed by a combination of relationships between the artist and social environment, where the culture is the context of artist's cognition "Sometimes it's called socio-cultural cognition whereby reality is a social structure...cognition is a mental and physical activity that takes place within a socio-cultural contexts" (Sullivan, 2005, p.128).

The unfinished representations of the past turned to be a subject of critique by today's contemporary art. Taking under examination different layers of multicultural and political histories, where people re-produce different narratives into their popular culture, and yet reflect them into sorts of crafts and arts. Therefore, the monographic

tradition of studying visual arts needs to be more inter-subjective because contemporary art is not classified in museums' chambers anymore (Preziosi, 2009). The concepts of art today are global and multicultural, as artists discovered the significance of socially engaged art they make it trans-modern, trans-aesthetical and trans-lingual (Smith and Clarke, 2015).

History is being examined and questioned, and thus re-produced and re-created. The international political scene faced a number of massive breaks in the national identities across the world (Nanjo, 2006). The accounts of the political turbulence between the socialist and capitalist powers demonstrated multicultural chaos, making a significant influence on the Arab countries. The aftermath of such trans-political turbulence was a cultural tsunami on the national foundations of the Arab modernity (Cohen, 2008), which shifted from secular nationalism to more religious oriented and conservative modernity. Such unstable cultural reality inspired Huntington to critique the conflict of modernity. He divided the world according to belief, culture, and social identities, suggesting that the conflict between them will be the greatest international problem that we live today (Nanjo, 2006).

The terminology of Arab modernity is a geopolitical result of independence's aftermath. Yet, when the global and local elements construct a trans-national combination, global art makes each culture significant by its own (Al-Abbas, 2016). The artwork is the context that represents the artist's own human reality, which reflects expressions in visual representations. Hans Belting (2009) discussed the transformations of aesthetics and art criticisms through global art:

Global art may be critical in political terms, but it is also critical in terms of art categories defined by inclusion or exclusion. New art often blurs any kinds of borders between mainstream art, on the one side, and popular art, on the other, and thus abolishes the old dualism between western art and ethnographic practice by using indigenous traditions as a reference, as Justo Pastor Mellado has shown for Chile and Paraguay. Seen from western point of view, global art represents a geopolitical or even "geo-aesthetic" brand, as Joaquin Barriendos explains in his contributions to his volume. It is symbolic capital whose value changes from one place to other, even if western revisionism tries to control its currency with its own exchange rates, difference, with the label of foreign culture, has become marketable and thus an entrance ticket for newcomers on the art market." (Belting, 2009, p.3).

On the other hand, Reem Fadda constructed an argument between trans-aesthetics, politics and trans-modernity by means of "un/layering cultural intentions through art" she stated that the world needs more translation and less didactics. Translation is the process of giving meanings of things, didactic is the behavior of teaching (Fadda, 2009). This was her initiative introduction on the need of explaining and translating concepts not teaching them. Such trans-modern thoughts try to transform Arab modernity from the masculine monograph to the inter-subjective feminine dialogue. Contemporary feminisms in the Arab culture re-write modern history and unveil the hidden contributions of women in making social realities.

One of the major concerns of the present art inquiry is the contemporary reflections of social realities across cultures. These realities appear in thematic representations in global art, since Feminism created its own transformations to the domain of contemporary art as a spontaneous reflection of the current life situations. It is more associated with the representations of social realities rather than historical studies.

## V. CREATIVE AND INTER-SUBJECTIVE METHODOLOGY

### 5.1. *Critical Background-*

Methodologies of the visual art research in the fields of Art History and Aesthetics attempt to transform visual arts into a textual experience that reflect a collective phenomenon of ethics or socio-politics on certain place and time (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2002). The practice of iconography, which is a language-based method, depends on rendering the image into the text to expose the hidden meanings and symbolic interpretations in the artwork for readers rather than viewers and practitioners. Therefore, this study integrated Iconography with the method of qualitative content analysis to keep it more visual.

The combination of iconography and content analysis will explain the artwork by focusing on the images inside the artwork. Those images inside the artwork relate the artwork to the social sphere. At this point, content analysis bridges iconography with the social constructions of visual symbols to analyze the artwork visually. Therefore, the artwork is a result of two major drives, the artist's practice, and society. These social constructions create symbols, meanings, contexts that motivate artistic practice.

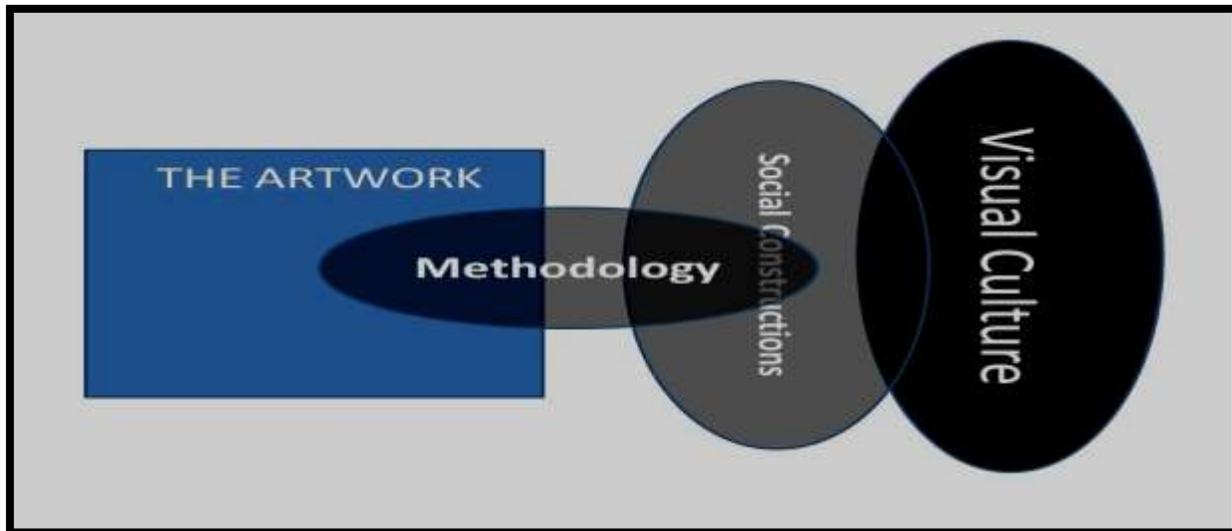
In the context of archival research, iconography appeared in the first place for literature and art history intercourses; nevertheless, the present study reconstructed this methodological interpretative process into a higher level of visual capacity. The process of connecting iconographic interpretation into visual orientations makes the archival research more appropriate for the fields of Fine Arts Study. Such a method of investigation led the archival research into extending textual citations and classical writings to describe visual arts (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2002). This assembled a connection within the artwork's visual presence into its textual citations that address the intersubjectivity of archival histories, visual arts, and social systems. The qualitative orientation of the present methodology focuses on the artist as a life maker that turns textual citations into visual artworks.

The purpose of the methodology, in this visual context, is to advance studies on creativity, where professionals, instructors, and viewers involve in the manner of recognition, delivering and identifying contemporary art practices. In this paper, the methodology depends on the critique of the artwork's visual composition, which relates the symbolism of its iconographies to the social constructions of visual culture. Therefore, methodologies are vital engines created to precede into the interconnected knowledge fields to generate art research while exploring collective memories and individual identities that beat the popular visual culture (Mitchell, 2002; Preziosi, 2009; Purgar, 2017; Savin-Badin and Wimpenny, 2014). The present study translates the visual artworks into a critical discourse through methodological tools, where the cultural connections articulated social and political narratives into re-creative modernity.

Classical iconography detached the creative practice from the authentic societal phenomenological intercourses. However, this methodological system refers to the visual culture to explore the artwork, unlike the conventional iconography, which relates to textual citations to translate visual creativities. In this investigation, iconography renders the artwork into a visual subject rather than textual intercourse that presents un-visual and image-less significance. This study depends on the visual orientation of the qualitative analysis because it is proper for the aesthetic research, and it is competent to define the research issues by rendering the visual creativity. This visual critique focuses on the visual interpretation of the artwork's intrinsic and extrinsic values, through connecting its cultural and aesthetic purposes. This generates a significant interpretation for socio/visual cultural knowledge and develops the connections among the artwork and its visual circumstances in methodical and structural procedures (Rose, 2001; Leeuwena and Jewitt, 2001).

Archival narratives define cultural identities by constructing textual and visual iconographies. Despite the inter-subjectivity between high and popular culture, as well as the intersecting debates of practitioners and theoreticians on the motivations of Art making. Such critical consciousness integrates layers of investigation. Iconography at the beginning reviews the common visuals in the artwork and defines them, merging into the iconographical structure to explain the symbolic connotations that transfer to visual culture. Then, the terminal layer of this methodological interpretation delivers the artwork into rendering cultural, social, visual and political manifestations. Each critique reflects the contemporary practices of each artist in reproducing sociopolitical issues. This critical contextualization constructed a visual mechanism to initiate the study from a focused point through the visual symbols in the artwork and their iconographical significances.

The society is the environment where popular culture grows on the people's narratives when they encounter the diverse portraits of politics. John Rogers Searle (1995) employs the expression of social reality to represent specific social aspects that are not material and not synthetic. He seeks to explain the means of any social phenomenon. This approach, in this study, connects the explanation of visual artworks to their symbolic social meanings that were produced by societies. At the same time, it gives a guideline to analyze social interactions and how the meanings change from one condition to another. The displaced meanings into the social significances indicate an individual or common routine. This is the invisible structure of social reality while justifying the existence of meanings and symbolism through social purposes. From a phenomenological point of view, this explains the constructions of social reality, especially when those social narratives shape individual creativity and its contexts.



**Figure 1:** The function of methodology in connecting the current artistic practice through social constructions and visual culture.

The archival footage of cultural identities reflected and expressed the place and time of certain works of art and literature, along with politics, religion, and social structures. In other words, the visual documents such as photographs, short documentary movies, and any visual material that represents the popular cultural do indicate the significant temporalities of the lost parts of the puzzle. The popular culture of any society illustrates the common thoughts of people, and the culture is a distinctive feature that helps us to identify intellectual works from a certain place and era (Groat and Wang, 2013).

From critical perspectives, the references that documented the narratives of Arab modernity were more textual rather than visual. They focused on the political histories of the emerging national movements while representing the homogeneous side of the Arab identity, which was intended to advocate the concept of Arab unity against political opponents (Gruber and Haugbolle, 2013). As an after-effect of the textual history, which was unfeminine also, contemporary historians tended to visualize this period of time to shed light on the ambiguous visual culture that was not clearly illustrated by the modern Arab narratives. Re-making Arab modernity in a visual context and representing social issues such as gender roles, sexualities, as well as feminine belongings within the frames of visual cultures. These new trends in visualizing modernity explored the images of gender discourses in visual culture, revealing the image of women in all aspects of social life.

Within the frames of social constructions of Arab modernity, this mismatch appears when one compares the visual representations of society in media against the authentic image of the real society on the ground. Such false representations labeled the popular culture and created a stereotypical image of the Arab society, which was shaped by different dynamics, among the most influential of which is political media which might be directed by political or anti-political bodies (Elouardaoui, 2013). However, Arab popular culture would yield genuine representations if compared to the social reality of the real situation on the ground. The authentic narratives of Arab modernity could be found in the archives of a social environment where everyday people interact.

Amidst the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale, the main theme was Imagined Borders. It negotiated the dilemma of global modernism into the imaginations of the artists' pictorial manifestations. The artists dragged narratives from their realities to reproduce contemporary critique of the past. They investigated the intersection between modernism, gender representations, displacement, immigration, and nostalgia. As well as representations of urban spaces, propaganda, and cultural identities. They practiced trans-aesthetics in their artworks to deliver contemporary reflections on their local/past modernisms.

### 5.2 Critical Conclusion-

Art researchers integrated new concepts into the traditional visual methodologies in order to have the capacity to explain art from a contemporary point of view. The human culture today is becoming more visual and rapidly concerned in transferring the textual narratives into visual narratives to follow the temporality of the present. Furthermore, contemporary art is more social today (brown, 2014), artists created big scale paintings to cover big walls inside and outside the public building such as hospitals, banks, and shopping malls. Furthermore,

contemporary Arab artists represented people's public cultures outside galleries and museums and integrated art with people's social life by painting on the walls they pass by on the way to work or home.

The traditional categories of visual arts are being questioned because the latest changes in information and communication technologies are creating a significant impact on the artists' awareness. Local cultures are more exposed to global replication through mass communication and social media. This provided artists diverse inspirations to reconsider the visual stimulations of everyday life. Furthermore, the cross-cultural practices in societies where people from different social backgrounds meet in schools, hospitals, malls, and airports cross-fertilize visual cultures (Boliwski, 2011) to create new motivations for artists to blend their motives with other themes and subjects from foreign lands to hybridize themes and techniques in new artworks.

In such a social context, the artist reflects himself by representing society being a human processor of all these data received from surrounding space. Besides, the artist constructs identity by interacting with the social environment; by gaining experience from others who share the same cultural identity, observing the similarities and differences with others. The artist develops cognition according to the social and cultural daily codes, reflecting theoretical and practical experience, which depends on social-cultural knowledge. Furthermore, the artist reflects the society's contemporary culture; and takes part in representing cultural identity. Depicting values and integrates these values with contemporary cultural concepts, as they integrate also with another factor that affects the cultural identity like politics, socioeconomics, and religion.

## VI. THE ANALYSIS

### *6.1. The Trans-Modern Narratives and the Contemporary Crisis Of Identity-*

Art today re-creates narratives in different trends. An inter-subjective fashion locates time and re-constructs it to create transitions in texts, images, sounds, music and all the sociopolitical and cultural components from the past to the present. This study reconstructs the concepts of Arab modernity into the current artistic practices, as artists re-investigate modernity to represent its issues and symbols in their contemporary art. This trans-modern practice located the ambiguous role of women in the historical accounts of social, political, and cultural contexts. The feminist contribution in documenting the narratives of Arab modernity is the lost part of the puzzle, which is the subject of the current inquiry.

In the turbulent context of defining Arab Art, that reflected socio-political issues from a mainstream point of view as well as a hyper individual point of view. The current study encountered the "social reality representations in art" within the dynamics of Arab trans-modernity as a phenomenological result of the cultural, political and economic impacts on the Arab popular cultures.

Gwangju Biennale expressed the main theme of the exhibition by representing individual and social identities to investigate the narratives of urban spaces, which open for inter-subjective ideas and concepts to conduct further exploration of the social issues like political propaganda, and the issue of feminist identity while rendering the interaction between the artist and his environment. The 12th Gwangju Biennale highlighted the Social Reality issues by encouraging artists to express what is happening in their social environments, the exhibition clustered stories from each society. In each part of the exhibition, we see a personal point of view expressed by an artist from some country. This main approach of the biennale demonstrated global and local concerns of people living across Asia; also, it showed many topics that differed from one culture to another, leading into a wide range of diverse issues and subjects. However, the personal touch of each artist was obvious; still, we could see the influence of his or her society on the artwork

In the frames of modern popular cultures, finding independent characteristics of Arab art is quite problematic, as Arab modernity needs trans-aesthetics to evaluate the productions of high and popular arts that hybridized western and eastern symbolism and iconographies. Since artists critique the established concepts of the common visual culture by evoking new arguments between its conventional and unconventional contents. The definitions of contemporary art are miscellaneous due to the diverse narratives of its identities (Robertson and McDaniel, 2013) because artists represent countless themes negotiating inter-subjective levels of narratives and symbols. The accounts of the current Arab art identified unconventional practices such as performance art, video art, and installation art, while many Artists still practice painting, sculpture, photography as well as indigenous handcrafts while they blend all those practices in unpredictable renovations (Al-Abbas, 2016).

In the present analysis, two female artists in the 12th Gwangju Biennale critiqued the male-driven Arab modernity and re-created its missing femininity. They focused on transferring the focal point from its masculine to its feminine side. Each artist individually re-examined found archival materials, which included different kinds of documents such as photographs, slides, archeological illustrations, and architectural designs. Alaa Younis represented the sociopolitical contexts of a national gymnasium, which had been re-designed and re-morphed, unlike the original design due to the changing political powers in Baghdad. And Alia Farid represented the social and political realities that interrupted the construction process of a national museum in Kuwait city ("2018 Gwangju Biennale," n.d.).

*Imagined Borders* is the main theme of the 12th Gwangju Biennale divided into 7 subthemes where the 164 artists were distributed in relevant groups to represent each subtheme. The two artworks investigated in this analysis were among other artworks grouped in the context of one of the 7 subthemes, which was *Imagined Nations/Modern Utopias*. Both artworks illustrated the ambiguous narratives of landmarks by investigating abandoned archives. These archives represented obscure narratives of Baghdad and Kuwait cities because they depicted unfinished projects intended to symbolize national identity "to be constructed" during the period of nation-building in Iraq and Kuwait after independence in the second half of the 20th century.

### 6.2. *Between Dig and Display* by Alia Farid-

Negotiating, but not labeling, the local/Arab paradox of feminine identity between appearance and disappearance, this artwork installed several pictures on one continuous wall in the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale. Those pictures were re-produced from the Kuwait National Museum's archives, which was uncompleted imagination of Kuwait's cultural identity, nor an achievement during its modernity. As per the following artwork's curatorial statement:

...the Kuwait National Museum was designed by French architect Michel Ecochard in 1961, exemplifying the arrival and fallout with modernity in the Arab state of Kuwait. In this work, the artist presents a selection of documentation found in the storage basement of the never-completed museum. A mixture of ancient and recent artifacts, this disparate group of objects demonstrates a society's struggle to articulate its own history. Here, Farid enlarges pages from archaeological records of clay figurines, rose water dispensers and a Sumerian seal ("2018 Gwangju Biennale," n.d.).



**Figure 2:** Alia Farid, Installation view "*Between Dig and Display*", Gwangju Biennale 2018, *Imagined Borders*. Image courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

Farid's installation of archeological images constructed manifest and latent iconographies. The manifest iconography illustrated the existence of a prehistoric civilization, symbolizing national identity in the context of an anonymous museum. Into which, the scene of antiquated figurines was intended to represent a particular time in the very early being of a nation, constructing a monologue of a national history of an emerging modern state. This is a superficial implication of the artwork while the iconological meaning is rather more sociopolitical. The latent message critiqued

the fragile modernity which failed to complete a national museum. It was pseudo political representation of the national identity, which tried to dedicate this museum as a record of an exclusionary official history rather than a landmark of multicultural modernity (Al-Ragham, 2014). The museum projected trans-modern symbolism of political and cultural conflicts, signifying the inconsistent urbanization process which started with the Kuwaiti-Arab modernity around the 1960s passing through the dialectic issues of national identity to the destructive realities of the 1990 Gulf War.



**Figure 3:** A destroyed part of the Kuwaiti National Museum after the 1990 Gulf War (Al-Ragham, 2014).



**Figure 4:** view of the Kuwaiti National Museum (Al-Ragham, 2014).

Re-making these archived documents into one installational artwork developed its narratives from symbolic modernity to critical reality. The artwork's context turned to be a critical instrument to re-evaluate number of issues, which are the incomplete museum, incomplete national/cultural identity along with the inconsistent modernity. This modernity left an abandoned archive instead of creating a national museum (Brito, 2018), reflecting a failure in representing diverse cultural identities, which were over simplified in the museum's context. The inter-subjective iconography of this artwork resisted the social constructions of the past (Al-Ragham, 2015), and connected the reality of the failed national museum with the reality of the failed modernity.



Figure 5: The frame on the right is the original detail drawn and enlarged from Frid's installation, and redesigned in the frame on the left.

"*Between Dig and Display*" suggested a paradox of two contrasting acts. "Digging" is the act of searching and finding hidden, abandoned and conceived objects, while "Displaying" is the act of showing objects and making them obvious, apparent and understandable. The previous illustration enlarged the text, and highlighted it in red, to show the paradox in the translated text from Arabic to English language, regardless to which text is the original. The Arabic text does not reflect the exact translation; it converted "mother goddess" to "motherhood" in order to make the text less provocative for conservative religious readers who are iconoclastic towards representing human figures as gods or idols. The popular culture in Kuwait, at some stage of its modernity (Hussain, 2012), did not tolerate spiritual differences, nor did tolerate nudity or any sexual representations in language or visual arts. In the exhibition's multicultural context, Farid projected "*Between Dig and Display*" to parallel Gwangju Biennale's global space with Kuwait National Museum's local space, while the iconographies of this artwork visualized the paradoxes among international versus national, global versus local, and contemporary versus modern. The dynamics of popular and social cultures in both spaces intersect with the nature and the content of the visual dialogue in the exhibition. The combination of Arabic and English texts in the artwork does not illustrate a language analysis, nevertheless dig deeper in the iconologies of the artwork to indicate the gap between the visual culture and the popular culture during the time when the national museum failed to exist (Al-Ragam, 2014; 2015). This artwork represented visual and textual iconoclasm, which have existed during the Arab modernity and also may have existed through different early and late histories of the Arab culture (McKenzie, 2013). As the phrase "lower chest" was not converted to Arabic because it suggests a sexual connotation of the female body, which should not be represented according to the common social culture at that time.

The photographic installation composed the feminine identity with the narratives of "Arab" iconoclasm, which had different waves of different religious and political orientations across the present and the past of the Arab region (McKenzie, 2013). The phrase "the breasts are missing" passes through booth languages indicating the harm on the small statue of the female body. A detail that shows a possibility of a deliberate iconoclastic act that symbolizes certain beliefs, cultures and temporalities. The pictorial nostalgia in this artwork critiqued the Kuwaiti modernity and interconnected it with the unfeminine past/unfeminine present (Al-Ragam, 2015). Such contemporary artistic practice investigated the historiographers' discourses with pop culture and media, and critiqued museums to be over simplified and exclusionary in representing the cultural identities. Furthermore, the politics of covering and uncovering the feminine identity are subject to change from time to time according to the dominant powers.

Farid did not only represent archaeological records. She created a paradox that showed cultural products labelled with words and texts that indicate divergent socio-politics. This metaphor conveyed latent symbolism into the image, which represented something while the text in the same artwork, represented something else. The texts and images, from inter-subjective point of view, have aboriginal cultural meanings. Femininity as word/icon represented motherhood, or goddess; it was a symbol of social relationships when people shared common collective beliefs. It supposed they were united, and gifted because they followed the same collective beliefs, cultures and

politics. The issue of nostalgia, identity as well as systems of how symbols and meanings were articulated are more significant than the mere pictorial properties of the artwork.

### 6.3. *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad* by Ala'a Younis-

In order to manifest the feminine narratives as a synonym to male narratives within Baghdad's modernity, this installational artwork represented feminine images into its various visual spaces. Those spaces are a one contentious wall of pictures, containing archived imagery. In front of which is a table-like-stage holding a white 3D model (maket) of a gymnasium architectural design. Younis explained the connection between those different elements, attributing Refaat Al-Chadirji's records on a number of Baghdad's landmarks he facilitated during his service in the public sector. The significant of those landmarks are the monumental relief sculpture made by Jawad Saleem entitled *the Freedom Monument*, and Le Corbusier's gymnasium designed for Baghdad's sport center around the 1960s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



**Figure 6:** Detail of *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad* showing different female images. The crouching women on the red background imitated the crouching mother appearing in Saleem's *Monument of Freedom* (A. Younis, personal communication, Jan 8, 2019).



**Figure 7:** Le Corbusier gymnasium, Baghdad.



**Figure 8:** Detail of *Monument of Freedom* by Jawad Saleem (1958), on the right appears the figure of the crouching mother over her son, which appeared also in Younis's artwork.

Younis artwork re-created the inter-subjectivity of Al-Chadirji's endeavor with Le Corbusier and Saleem by constructing a hybrid composition that collected feminine symbolisms from their sculptural, architectural and textual narratives. The artwork hybridized the diversities of the feminine image that appeared in different parts of Chadirji's narratives, explained by the following artwork's statement during the 12<sup>th</sup> Gwangju Biennale:

This work explores Baghdad during a period in the 1950s ... Inspired by a set of 35mm slides taken in 1982 by the influential Iraqi architect Rifat Chadirji, Younis's project follows the political, social and cultural forces surrounding the conceptualization and construction of a gymnasium, originally designed by Le Corbusier, but completed in 1980 during Saddam Hussein's reign. The gymnasium metamorphosed through a number of iterations over 25 years. The work creates an architectural narrative—through the female protagonists involved in its making—revealing as much about the architecture as it does the history of Baghdad during a turbulent period of time ("2018 Gwangju Biennale," n.d.).

While Le Corbusier's gymnasium represented a momentous part of Baghdad's political, social and cultural history, Younis's artwork re-created the same historical context and represented the city's feminine narratives articulating into the social spaces of this gymnasium (Elwakil, 2018). The story of documenting the narratives of this gymnasium started with Balkis Shararah who used to visit Rifaat Al-Chadirji, her husband, during his jail moments in Abu Ghraib prison. She passed the manuscripts Al-Chadirji authored, which later turned one of his books entitled *AL-Ukhaidir* and *the Crystal Palace*. This book documented a significant part of Baghdad's modernity during the process of nation building when number of public urban center were assigned to international architects such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright (Al-Chadirji, 2013). The artwork of *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad* emerged beyond the male driven modernity and highlighted the contributions of the female protagonists such as Balkis Shararah, who helped in saving a very latent part of Baghdad's sociopolitical narratives.



Figure 9: Illustration of the crouching women in Saleem's and Younis's artworks.



Figure 10: Ala'a Younis, Installation view of *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad*, Gwangju Biennale 2018, Imagined Borders. Image courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation.

The crouching mother holding her child in Saleem's artwork resembles the crouching woman in Younis's, who held a book or a small model of a building. In this context of dualism, feminine Baghdad manifested through number of symbols. Al-Chaderji's book was the connection between Younis's artwork and Baghdad's modernity. The artwork is crowded of symbols which are interconnected, where the female images appeared in different parts of the pictorial composition representing different chapters of Chadirji's book.

Neither Younis nor Le Corbusier lived in the modern Baghdad, But Al-Chadirji did. His archives inspired Younis and made her re-construct the city's narratives into her artwork, and thus created a spot of romantic connection rather than a realistic one. She did not witness Baghdad's modernity, though she imagined through Al-Chadirji's archives. The figures in the artwork suggested symbolic moments in Baghdad's modern history, which was affected directly by the political events that left clear impact on the society. Nevertheless, the artwork indirectly shed light on the current Iraqi social reality, representing the tough moments of those regular people who negotiate daily life issues with hardship and fear.

The impact of political aesthetics on the trans-modern and contemporary arts appeared in different negotiations between architecture, sculpture and archival photography in *Plan (fem.) for Greater Baghdad*. It was manifest in Baghdad and latent in other countries, as artists displace to other countries, where they re-create different narratives into different art scenes. Exoduses and cultural destructions threatened individual and collective identities within the global social context. The nostalgic themes influenced this artwork reflecting different temporalities with the past. The Baghdadi trans-modernity and its social constructions appeared in this artwork where Younis rendered feminism as a central topic, while depicting the social transformation of Baghdad in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in her contemporary artwork. She investigated a momentous period of narratives within a turbulent political reality, which made significant transformations in the social structure of contemporary Baghdad.

The big scale transformations re-created new issues of identity evoking artists to investigate new systems of expression and symbolism. The nationalist subject matter manifested the portrayal of social dynamics and the narratives of local people, when the utopian artwork inter-contextualized symbolisms of social layers connecting narratives, temporalities and geopolitics. This artwork investigated the metamorphosis of urban space and people's narratives, representing their identities in different compositions. It reconstructed the visual space, and composed symbols to narrate the story of feminine Baghdad.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Such state of affairs -of the unfeminine modernity- created the contexts of the installational artworks made by Alaa younis and Alia Farid. Each one of them assembled symbols, narratives and objects to represent the temporalities of two different cities. The artworks translated the man's political historiography to woman's social account. It reflected the popular culture of the post-independence era in the newly developing Arab cities, and social realities where society lived and exchanged daily situations. Each artwork focused on a public urban center, younis's represented a national gymnasium while Farid's represented a national museum. Those buildings were partially constructed or left unfinished symbolizing a narrative metamorphosis of the modernization process, which intended to construct national identities, at that time, and to be a sign of a modernized society. Such historic interruption created incomplete representations of social constructions or, in other words, incomplete constructions of social symbolisms.

The significant content of these artworks is the process of remaking history. The artworks are not finished in the conventional terms; they are not like a finished landscape painting where the details, shadows and linear perspective are fully rendered with highly finished oil paints. Yet, those artworks do evoke a dialogue with history to investigate the reality of the past; they illustrate the history with visual material. And invite the viewer to interact with them and enter the circulation of critiquing and analyzing the social realities of Arab modernity. The artworks focused on the process of constructing the Arab modernity's meanings, through investigating the spaces of the popular culture and revealing its ambiguous femininity (Groat and Wang, 2013).

The study represented sociopolitical narratives through inter-subjective layers, constructed by each artwork in re-making the archived documents. The layer of time, where the contemporary artworks investigate the narrative values, by juxtaposing the modern social realities of the previous century versus the contemporary social realities of today. And the layer of feminine perception conducted by the female artist, which reinterpreted symbolisms in the artworks.

The fragile Arab modernity is significant re-creational material, where the artists rearticulated its symbols through rendering the trans-modern narratives into contemporary feminine/feminist art practice. The dilemma of this study rendered the narratives in the artworks. Where the artists did not choose contemporary contexts, instead they selected historical context, and dragged it into their contemporary art practice. It articulated social symbolisms from past era into contemporary artworks. In other words, they dragged the historical narratives into contemporary art practice.

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