
SOCIAL THOUGHT & COMMENTARY

The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror

Jessica Winegar
Temple University

Abstract

This essay examines the connections between art and politics in Middle East arts events in the U.S. since 9/11/2001. It critiques the universalist assumptions about humanity and the agentive capacity of art to build bridges of understanding in contexts of so-called civilizational conflict—assumptions that have strong roots in anthropology. By juxtaposing evidence of how the notion of “humanity” is deployed in exhibitions of Palestinian art with an analysis of the three more predominant types of arts events (historical Islamic art, Sufi arts, and contemporary art by Muslim women), the essay demonstrates how American secular elite discourse on Middle Eastern art corresponds to that of the “War on Terror.” [Keywords: art, Islam, Middle East, U.S. nationalism, humanism]

...the notion that art is a panhuman universal is a pernicious idea, which has on balance done more harm than good.

— Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress*

The attacks of September 11, 2001 presented a dilemma for liberal American cultural elites. Many were horrified by the events of that day and expressed concern over the growth of radical Islamic movements. Yet they were also uncomfortable with the increase in negative stereotypes of Muslims and Middle Easterners, and with the growing discursive division of the world into civilized “us” and barbaric “them.” The challenge came in reconciling the view that the attacks reflected the dangers of Middle Eastern Islam with the liberal belief in the values of cosmopolitan diversity and shared humanity. Art, it seems, has proven a compelling solution to this dilemma. Through the selection, marketing, and consumption of particular kinds of art from the Middle East, American cultural elites have sought to create and sustain another image of the region than that emanating from conservative talk radio. Motivated by the rationale of building what is often referred to as a “bridge of understanding,” arts professionals have organized special arts events and attracted new audiences, who come eager to see “another side” of the Middle East.¹

These events are structured around two related assumptions: that art is a uniquely valuable and uncompromised agent of cross-cultural understanding; and that art constitutes the supreme evidence of a people’s humanity, thereby bringing us all together. Such universalist assumptions about art conceal the ways in which these events advance a particular political understanding of Middle Eastern history, culture, and religion, and wish specific futures upon Middle Easterners and, by extension, upon all Muslims. The visions of the Middle East and prescriptions for its future propagated in these events are not necessarily at odds with the clash of civilizations rhetoric and negative stereotypes, as they are intended to be. If we look more closely at how organizers and audiences construct the category of art, at what they include in the category and how they evaluate it, a convergence emerges between the interest in such art and the discourses of the so-called War on Terror.

The selection, evaluation, and translation of the meaning of art works is never a neutral process governed by universal aesthetic principles; rather, it is deeply political. This process is shaped by particular tastes, evaluative frameworks, and institutional demands that, despite the intentions of many of those involved, reproduce the terms of conflict, and more particularly its religious dimensions. The unusually high interest in art from the Middle East is set in a context of widely held erroneous assumptions that Muslims reject image-making and have anxieties about

art in general. Not only is iconoclasm poorly understood and greatly overestimated, it is also frequently viewed with suspicion, and sometimes as proof of Muslim provinciality or even backwardness (Flood 2002). Ironically, as I will show, the secularist impulse in the desire to find art that shows the historical artistic achievements and modernity of Middle Eastern Muslims, along with the encouragement of certain kinds of art-making among them, actually ends up reproducing a religious framework such that their work is often interpreted with reference to Islam, whether or not there even exists a religious connection. In the process, the association of Islam with the Middle East is cemented, despite the range of religious faiths and attachments in the region, and despite the existence of millions of Muslims who are not Middle Eastern. Thus, the claims about art, humanity, and religion governing these arts events actually operate in the same discursive universe of the conflict (which often frames problems in religious terms) and thus may act to reproduce it. When art is used to show Middle Easterners' humanity or to advance certain views of Islam, a very particular and politicized "bridge of understanding" is created that obfuscates, and perhaps refuses, other understandings which might be less comfortable to America's secular cultural elites.

Selective Service

After Al-Qaeda attacked the U.S. on September 11, 2001, many local and national arts institutions, universities, and grassroots organizations launched Middle East or Islam-related arts events for the first time, while others scrambled to feature relevant parts of their permanent collections.² Funds flowed from many agencies and foundations, including Ford, Doris Duke, Soros, Rockefeller, Mellon, and the Flora Family Foundation. Examples of the range and size of these new activities include: an exhibition of art made by young Iranians at the Meridian International Center in Washington; a display of calligraphic art at the University of Michigan Museum of Art; an exhibition of Sufi artists at a gallery in the Hamptons; a show featuring contemporary Palestinian art at Houston's Station Museum, which later traveled to San Francisco, Vermont, and New York. In Los Angeles, the Islamic Center of Southern California and St. James Church co-hosted an arts and music festival. Alwan, based in New York City, has organized a smorgasbord of music and dance performances, art exhibits, poetry readings, and film screenings (including one on Islam to

address post 9/11 fears). ArteEast is another New York-based arts organization, founded in 2003, that brings Middle Eastern film and visual arts to audiences in the city and elsewhere through travelling film programs and its website, which features an arts magazine and a virtual gallery. A similar range of activities has been produced by Zawaya, an Arab arts organization founded in the Bay Area after 9/11. Major corporate and government institutions sponsored events as well. In 2006, the Museum of Modern Art in New York mounted the show *Without Boundary*, billed as featuring contemporary artists from the “Islamic world.” Meanwhile, Islamic art from London’s Victoria and Albert Museum was featured at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and later at the Kimbell Art Museum in Forth Worth. And the first Arab pavilion in the entire 40-year history of the Smithsonian Folklife Festival opened in 2005, featuring Omani musicians, dancers, and craftspeople.

Having conducted previous research on Egyptian visual arts (Winegar 2006), I have been struck by the sheer difference between the kinds of arts that are featured at various venues in Egypt and those featured at the institutions I have just mentioned. Scores of visual artists, and major trends in painting and sculpture existing in the Middle East, are regularly disregarded by American curators and arts organizers, and forms of cultural production that some Egyptians would classify as art (such as pop films and music) are not deemed art enough (or art at all) for many events in the United States. Much of the work shown in the U.S. is made by people from the region living at least part if not full-time in the U.S. The focus on particular kinds of artists, themes, and aesthetics at the expense of others may be due to several factors: many artists in the region do not speak languages (verbal, aesthetic, and otherwise) that are easily translatable in the American context; many focus on themes important only in their local contexts; and many do not possess the cultural, economic, or educational capital to make their voices heard overseas (see Winegar 2006). Also, if we consider the example of the Latin American art boom, which ignored U.S.-born Latinos because they were seen as “minorities” and thus not representative of exotic Latin American “difference” (Davila 1999), then the contrasting preference for artists born in the Middle East but working in the U.S. might reflect an insistence on ultimate otherness, a refusal to incorporate Middle Easterners as “minorities” in the American nation, or to valorize them as “exotics” living elsewhere (despite the problems of these two terms). Furthermore, we are dealing with a market, not

a transcendental universal set of values given to art. Middle Eastern arts constitute a niche market, and therefore the selection of work must fit with the tastes and other ideological demands of that niche's funders, audiences, and organizers. These demands are shaped by the national space in which they are articulated, a space in which (as most polls show) the majority hold negative opinions of the Middle East and of Muslims.

Many of these new arts events present the work they showcase as representative of a region, culture, and history defined as Middle Eastern, and/or a religion defined as Islamic. By selecting particular forms of cultural production from a larger and extremely diverse field, and labeling them "Middle Eastern art" or "Islamic art," this representational exercise reproduces, as Orientalist representations do, a one-to-one homogenizing correlation between region, culture, history, and religion. Although most event organizers try to avoid such generalizing and want to fight the stereotypes that motivate and are produced by generalizations, they cannot escape the dominant frameworks for presenting such works in the U.S. Their funders want evidence that the art forms presented are actually "Middle Eastern" or "Islamic," and it is easiest to capture audience interest by providing a cultural/regional/religious framework for viewing artworks. What is lost in this process of selecting certain things and presenting them as Middle Eastern is the vast variety of forms of cultural production by people from/of the region known as the Middle East. Furthermore, when art from the Middle East is labeled as "Islamic," religion becomes the primary (or sole) framework for interpreting the meanings, formal properties, and makers of the art, crowding out other perspectives. Creating the categories of Middle Eastern art or Islamic art from the Middle East, then, involves a process of selecting forms of cultural production from a larger arena, naming them not only "art" but also "good art," and then leaving aside the rest as art that is subpar, or not even worthy of the category itself.

Furthermore, when we take into account how the bridges narrative dominates U.S. cultural diplomacy initiatives in majority-Muslim countries (in the Middle East and South/Southeast Asia), and the fact that there is such an overlap between the kinds of art selected by private and public institutions, we must then consider the connection between these arts events and the political agenda of the U.S. government. The Department of State's Cultural Diplomacy program aims to persuade Muslims, through exposure to American arts and culture, that America is still a beacon of freedom and civilization despite Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. Support of specific kinds of

art is intended to send the message that Americans appreciate Islamic heritage. The so-called bridge of understanding that is to be built through what is termed “exchange” will, it is hoped, encourage Muslims—especially the young—to have a positive view of the United States, and hence to take up new creative projects rather than arms.³ Former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes has stated that “civilized peoples” value art, whereas “violent extremists” do not.⁴ Here, art is linked to the discourse of freedom in an incredibly unliberating moment, much as abstract expressionism and jazz music became emblematic of “freedom” in the U.S. propaganda machinery of the Cold War (see Guilbault 1983, Von Eschen 2005). It is no accident that First Lady Laura Bush and other government officials positively refer to cultural diplomacy during that period when they discuss current initiatives.⁵

As an academic who writes about artists from the Middle East, I am often called on to translate their art to U.S. audiences, and so I pay attention to the discourses that I use in my own (albeit small) role as a culture broker. In public forums, I have found it extremely difficult to escape the “art as evidence of advancement and humanity” discourse that dominates U.S. cultural policy and most Middle East-related arts events in the U.S., because it seems to quickly break a stereotype by drawing on powerful, historically constituted understandings of art. In American elite circles, from the U.S. government to universities and arts organizations, there is no greater contrast to the image of a suicide bomber than the image of an artist. In 2005, during my fellowship tenure at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, I was interviewed by the staff for a feature about my work on the School’s website. The School has an interest in making anthropological research accessible to the broader public, and so the interviewer asked me to describe my book project on the contemporary Egyptian visual art world in so-called layperson’s terms. She said, “If you had to communicate the most important thing about your work to a broader audience, what would you say?” I immediately replied, “Social life in the Middle East is not reducible to the veil and terrorism. Through its art, we can see Arabs and Muslims as people living everyday lives and doing creative things.”⁶ I was trying to combat Western fixations on veiling and terrorism, but ended up unintentionally implying that these things cannot be considered creative acts, and that they are actually the conceptual opposites of creativity and of art. By using Egyptian art to encourage the School’s audience to see Arabs and Muslims as human beings like them, engaged (as so many Santa Fe res-

idents are) in creative arts activities, I ended up attaching (gendered) religiosity and violence to the Middle East in the process.

Especially in the context of the Middle East, the intertwined discourses of humanity, creativity, and understanding depend on, and in large measure are enabled by, abiding notions of barbarism, violence, and ignorance. Even if one refuses this teleological dichotomy intellectually, as I and so many other event organizers do, it still imposes itself on our framing of art in part because it constitutes a compelling way to receive funds and attract audiences. As the Bush Administration, media pundits, and academics like Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis had discovered, this dichotomy can easily render “clear” a messy situation. It is recognizable and has resonance for organizers, funders, and audience members not only because of its ubiquity in political discourse, but also because of its deep history in Western philosophy, art theory, and engagements with objects and art of cultural others.

Art as That Which Distinguishes Us from Animals

The “art as evidence of humanity” theory in Western thought is of course traceable to Kant, who argued that the aesthetic experience of beauty takes us beyond the “purposive striving of nature” and is part of “the cultivation of our higher destiny” and the “development of our humanity” (Kant 1951 [1790]:283). Already in this early formulation, we see how the pairing of art with notions of humanity is based on the ideology of unilinear social evolution. The evolutionary underpinning of art/humanity discourses became more pronounced in the 19th century, particularly with the development of disciplines like anthropology, the spread of colonialism, and the rise of the Industrial Revolution and World’s Fairs. During this period, material culture gradually became the “supreme signifier of universal progress and modernity” (Buchli 2002:4), with nations or cultures being ranked according to their advancement in the realm of material culture (including the arts), and with Western Europe and the U.S. at the pinnacle.

The emerging discipline of anthropology was very much focused on material culture as the visible instantiation of cultural others, and Victorian anthropologists often used differences in material culture as proof for theories of cultural evolution that brought so-called primitive peoples into the human fold, but at a lower level. In his book *Primitive Culture* (1871), Edward Tylor positioned “the arts” (broadly defined) as an

index and component of human culture, which distinguishes humans from animals. For him, changes in verbal or material culture indicated civilizational development towards greater complexity. Likewise, in *Ancient Society* (1877), Lewis Henry Morgan made material culture the determinant and evidence of human progress from savagery to barbarism to civilization. The new ethnographic museums, and especially the increasingly popular World's Fairs, were promoting the same ideas beyond intellectual circles, in the exhibits of objects from around the world, some of which were categorized as art. The gathering of objects from diverse cultures together in one fair emphasized the notion of a shared humanity, but like the anthropological notion of humanity at the time, it was divided into a racial-cultural hierarchy. Objects acquired (often through the colonial enterprise) served both as proof of common humanity, and of Western superiority.⁷

The idea that it is art that evidences a people's humanity continued into 20th century anthropology and Western modernist art theory. Although the teleological underpinnings of the idea became less explicit (particularly in anthropology), they nonetheless remain implicit in the very construction of art/humanity discourse. In *Primitive Art* (1927), Franz Boas used art to argue for the humanity of so-called primitive peoples. He wrote, "Even the poorest tribes have produced work that gives to them esthetic pleasure....In one way or another esthetic pleasure is felt by all members of mankind" (1955 [1927]:9). Like today's arts organizers, Boas used art to combat widespread assumptions that non-Western peoples were inferior or sub-human. He argued that they possessed mental powers to develop design rationally with masterful techniques but also with individual creativity. By showing that primitive artists were not "slaves to tradition" (1927:156), Boas was also drawing on Western modernist ideologies of the artist as creative individual, which were recognizable to Western readers and therefore could have an additional humanizing effect (see Marcus and Myers 1995:12). Later anthropologists such as Benedict, Geertz, and d'Azevedo likewise attributed aesthetic styles and artistic categories to non-Western cultures, partly as a way of valorizing them and rendering their strangeness more familiar. Indeed, the general humanizing project of the discipline of anthropology, the discipline which sets out to create cross-cultural understanding, has often been articulated through reference to art. My own anthropological work on Egyptian art is part of that story (Winegar 2006). But even though anthro-

pologists from Boas onwards have discarded social evolutionism, there is still an impulse to humanize cultural others by drawing on a supposedly universally accepted notion that art represents the most refined activity or body of objects. Yet this framing inevitably sets up other activities (or other objects) as less refined and perhaps less human. And as anthropologists are well aware, the attempt to create cross-cultural understanding through anthropological humanism has traditionally suffered from glaring omissions of power relations (see Clifford 1988).

The same assumptions about art and humanity abound in the field of modern art. Marcus and Myers have noted that anthropology's theories of art and culture "have their roots in the very matrix of aesthetics and Romanticism from which modern art sprang," (1995:11), and so it is no surprise that ideologies of modern art, like those of anthropology, often emphasized this link between art and humanity without much attention to social power. In one pertinent example, many American abstract expressionists believed that art should express human absolutes and should "aim to reach universal man." As Serge Guilbault argues, appeals to universality among this "avant-garde" were framed apolitically (as universalist art discourses usually are)—despite the fact that these artists were using so-called primitive art as inspiration for their projects, and despite the fact that their work became part of the government's cultural diplomacy efforts during the Cold War (Guilbault 1983:119).

Post-9/11 Middle Eastern arts events must be seen in the context of Western elite consumption of non-Western arts, which in the 20th century has typically reproduced primitivist stereotypes and social evolutionist ideology even as it traffics in universalist assumptions about shared humanity (Clifford 1988, Errington 1998, Price 1989, Taylor 1997). Indeed, the desire to unify through art has often involved the adoption (conscious or otherwise) of a less progressive politics. The case I examine here is also not the first of American elite interest in the art of cultural others with whom relations are strained, who are the victims of disagreeable U.S. government policies, or towards whom there is substantial guilt. For example, white collectors of Southwest Native American art in the first half of the 20th century promoted art as part of a liberal political agenda that sought to ameliorate the "ravages of colonialism," while simultaneously laying claim to the art as a source of a unique American national tradition (Mullin 2001:86). The Latin American art "boom" in the U.S., beginning in the late 1970s and reaching a peak in the 1980s, was partly the result of

American liberal criticism of Reagan's disastrous policies in Central America *and* of the U.S. government's attempts to, first, woo the Mexican government into an oil deal beneficial to the U.S. in the wake of the OPEC crisis, and later, to enhance cultural exchange with Latin America using discourses of cultural understanding (Goldman 1994). Also in that era, the thousands of Americans who admired the objects from King Tut's tomb, touring the U.S. with significant government financial and discursive support, were, at the same time, participating in the creation of a set of what McAlister identified as "implicit connections" between "Tut's wealth and the new and conspicuous wealth of Arab oil producers; and between Tut's gold and the 'black gold' of Middle Eastern oil" (McAlister 2001:139). These connections reproduced stereotypes of greedy Arab sheiks, and contributed to notions of U.S. "imperial stewardship" towards both art and oil that drew on the idea of universal heritage (2001:129).

The rise of multiculturalism during the 1980s also provoked certain segments of the liberal American elite to valorize U.S. minorities through art and, often, the art of their origins (e.g., so-called primitive art from Africa for African-Americans, Latin American art for U.S. Latinos). Yet the project of multiculturalism also involved reinscribing dominant national narratives, valuing only certain elements of other people's "culture" as "good," eliding power relations within and between groups, and furthering capitalist markets which thrive on difference (Davila 1999; Segal and Handler 1995). It was in this context that consumers of the new marketing category of "world music" imagined and celebrated a democratic global commons, but through primitivizing discourses that masked both the creation of new social hierarchies (especially between Western producers or musical collaborators and the musicians with whom they worked), and, one could argue, the increasing U.S. complicity in the economic and political strangulation of the musicians' societies (Feld 2000, Taylor 1997).⁸

Clearly, American elites have turned to the art of others over the course of the 20th century in times when those others have taken on a particular political and social importance, and the tensions inherent in the process of creating universals through difference (and vice-versa) continue to characterize contemporary engagements with art from the Middle East. But what is unique today is the overriding emphasis on art as a means for Middle Easterners to critique their contemporary gender relations and religion (seen as related), and to liberate themselves from certain, presumably oppressive, aspects of both. Moreover, there is an

unprecedented concentration on religion (Islam) as a problematic site in need of either erasure or significant civilizing.⁹

The ideological connection between art and freedom here has roots in Western philosophy. The Kantian idea of art as a sphere of activity autonomous from utilitarian interest was harnessed in certain modernisms and avant-gardisms to promote a critique of society through art. The assumption that art should be kept separate from religious and political interests continues to enable this valorization of critique. Today, many American arts organizers and audience members draw on these ideas when they advance the view that art can, and in fact should, challenge or critique Middle Eastern gender relations and Islam, and that art is a primary medium and barometer of social progress. Support for artistic freedom in the Middle East is often based on this view. It is important to emphasize the specificity of these formulations; in my ethnography of Egyptian artists (2006), I found that the idea of art's autonomy was not always relevant, and was often understood in ways that did not privilege critique or rebellion against gender or religious norms.

My purpose in calling attention to the histories of the frameworks used in the selection, marketing, and reception of Middle East art after 9/11/01 is to emphasize that they are as objective or disinterested as they claim to be. Rather, they originated within the context of ascendant Western European and U.S. global dominance and thus bring with them a certain politics, which are then conveniently regenerated for a post-9/11 era. Earlier civilizing discourses have gained new explanatory power. When they appear in the context of American institutions featuring Middle Eastern art, the discourses of art as an expression of humanity, and of art as an effective medium for achieving secular freedom, align with certain national interests, which include the extension of U.S. economic and political influence in (or occupation of) the region, and the creation of particular Muslim subjects.

These U.S. national interests become apparent when we consider that there are three kinds of cultural production most frequently selected as good art in these venues, and that these forms are presented in very particular ways. Historical Middle Eastern Islamic art and art from ancient Middle Eastern civilizations is frequently featured as indicating past glory and achievement. Music, especially that categorized as "Sufi," becomes evidence of a peaceful Islam, or its Muslim connections are erased entirely. Other selected music is framed as resisting Islam. And third, visual art

made by Middle Eastern Muslim women remains a perennial favorite, and is frequently interpreted as critiquing “bad” Islam. My analysis of each of these reveals the assumptions and limitations of the art/humanity framework. I then discuss the controversies surrounding contemporary Palestinian art events to reveal more fully the political underpinnings of the framework’s seemingly disinterested humanism.

Islam’s Past Glory

In the press release for a 2005 performance by the Silk Road Dance Company in Maryland (a performance that was part of a special series called “Dancing in Islamic Lands”), head choreographer Laurel Gray is quoted thus:

As one familiar with the culture and history of both East and West, I feel it is imperative to use art to build a bridge of understanding between Americans and the Islamic world. Instead of falling prey to a false notion of a “clash of civilizations,” we need to remember that East and West have interacted for millennia, often crossing cultures with positive results.¹⁰

Such appeals to the centuries-long interaction between “Islam” and the “West” often assert that consumption of art will necessarily improve contemporary cross-cultural relations because art itself bears the evidence of past interaction between the West and the Islamic world. Notably the “Islamic world” presented in such exhibitions is usually defined through objects which originated in countries that are part of what is today called the Middle East, thereby creating a slippage between the “Middle East” and “Islam” similar to that which exists in the popular media.

When the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC hosted the traveling exhibition of Islamic art treasures from the Victoria and Albert collection in 2004, it did a special section and programming around the theme of artistic exchange between Europe and the Islamic world from the 14th to 17th centuries. Objects from the permanent collection which showed the influence of Islamic art were featured (e.g., appropriation of Islamic designs or depiction of Middle Eastern objects in late-Medieval or Renaissance paintings). In the exhibition press release, then-Saudi Ambassador Prince Bandar lauded the event by saying, “Now, more than ever, we need to work to build bridges of understanding between our

societies and cultures.”¹¹ In this exhibition particularly, we can see how art objects are positioned as both symbols of East/West relations, and as agents which are to effect those relations (cf., Gell 1998).

The version of the bridges of understanding narrative which is built on assertions about prior rich artistic interaction between Islam and the West generally emphasizes only one side of the interaction: what Islam once contributed to Western civilization. The laudable goal, of course, is to educate Americans about Muslim achievements and to emphasize interconnections rather than clashes. However, in doing so this narrative runs the risk of providing an anemic “understanding” of so-called Islamic cultural objects, because often the emphasis is still, actually, on understanding the history of Western Europe. For example, Holland Cotter argued that the exhibition “Venice and the Islamic World, 828-1797” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2007 was “a European, not an Islamic, show. Despite the Islamic material included we learn little about Islam or about the Islamic meaning of objects or, even in a general way, about Islamic views of the West” (Cotter 2007).

The bridges of understanding narrative also uses the aesthetic to anesthetize the complex history of interaction between the so-called East and West, and especially any negative aspects of that interaction (for example, the conquering of Al-Andalus, the Crusades, or colonialism). Too often, these arts events communicate the idea of a past utopia of cross-cultural understanding that can be regained through art appreciation, as if art ever existed in a world devoid of military conquest and economic inequalities. Indeed, the exhibition strategy of celebrating past glories and utopias is favored over other strategies which might take a critical view of how objects from the Middle East were “acquired,” of how politics and economics can drive artistic creation, and, more generally, of the connection between art and hostilities defined as civilizational.

The anesthetized narrative of past Muslim contributions to Western civilization occurs within a common art historical and museological framework which defines “Islamic art” as that which was produced prior to European colonialism.¹² Despite the good intentions of curators and their success in putting together displays of visually compelling objects, the insistent historical framework of the vast majority of exhibitions of Islamic art or art of ancient Middle Eastern civilizations effectively locks Middle Eastern/Muslim cultural production and artistic appreciation in the past. Given the fact that historical exhibitions very rarely include some contemporary component,¹³

viewers can come away with the impression that good Islamic art (or even Muslim artists) are things that existed only in the past, despite the fact that there are many contemporary artists from the Middle East who describe their work as “Islamic” and perceive it as part of that tradition.¹⁴ There have been shows featuring the work of contemporary artists who identify as Muslim, but these have not been held in the same prestigious venues hosting the magnificent displays of historical Islamic art. As in Native American museum representations, there is also a “significant silence” regarding tourist art (Phillips 1995), and contemporary Islamic crafts.

This silence, along with the contextual separation of historical and contemporary, and the significantly greater resources poured into the former, allows for the notion of Islam’s past glory to persist. In this regard, such exhibition patterns are related to the classic primitivist paradigm in which authenticity is found only in a pre-capitalist, pre-colonial past when the so-called natives were not imitators or “commercial hacks” (Errington 1998:71; see also Phillips and Steiner 1999). Such a framing could create an “imperialist nostalgia,” a “mourning for what one has destroyed” (Rosaldo 1989).

Indeed, this pattern of exhibitions not only denies Middle Eastern Muslims modernity, but also creates and traffics in broader discourses of past Islamic glory and current decline. In a New York Times article entitled “Islamic Art as a Mediator for Cultures in Confrontation,” a curator from the Victoria and Albert put it this way: “People say at this moment it is more important to recognize that the Middle East and the Islamic world was *in its day* as advanced culturally, as well as economically and militarily, as any country or empire in the world” (Riding 2004, emphasis added). Of course this statement directly implies that the Middle East and the so-called Islamic world are not currently as culturally advanced as they once were. Such exhibitions are created, marketed, and viewed in a context where Muslim civilizational decline is often evidenced through reference to Muslim engagements with art. For example, the protests against the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad are widely condemned as representative of antiquated understandings of the image and as uncivilized responses to the modern value of freedom of expression. American commentators, in response to the Taliban’s destruction of the Bamyān Buddhas in 2001, reprimanded contemporary Muslims for lacking artistic appreciation and propagated the problematic view that Islamic art never developed out of iconoclasm (see Flood 2002). The link between nation-

al(ist) political agendas and the idea of civilizational decline as evidenced by art becomes especially clear in government and media discourses concerning the looting of objects in the Iraqi National Museum, in which Iraqi looters are often portrayed as animalistic, and lacking the refinement to even appreciate their own heritage (Scheid 2006).

The liberal impulse among museum curators, art critics, and museum-goers to use historical Islamic artistic achievements to counter the negative stereotyping of Muslims after 9/11 is, in fact, part of what Flood calls an “emergent...exhibitionary regime that not only aims to project a model of peaceful coexistence but to locate and provide an appropriate model of Islam itself” (2007:43). Drawing on Preziosi, Flood argues that such exhibitions constitute a performative use of objects to create “object-lessons” for prescribing “models for the ideal Muslim citizen” and ideal social relations (Flood 2007:43-44.) Such object-lessons of historical Islamic art exhibitions, then, seek to create a very particular definition of humanity—one that is contained within, and only finds expression through, certain nation-state projects to create a modern citizenry (cf., Asad 2003). Furthermore, much like earlier articulations of the concept of humanity as it relates to art, these also depend upon a conceptual opposite—barbarism—to which only Muslims (particularly Middle Eastern ones) belong.

Music and the Pacification, or Erasure, of Islam

Just as exhibitions of historical Islamic art eschew politics, and contribute to a palatable framing of Islam as having a golden age long past, music events also tend to frame Islam in ways comfortable to American cultural elites. The plethora of performances of Middle Eastern Sufi music in recent years is a case in point. Sufi music concerts have been held at the new Arab arts organization spaces, at civic centers and museums, at concert clubs, at government venues such as the Kennedy Center and the U.S. Embassy in India, and at many universities. The preference for Sufi music among the different musics produced by Muslims predates 9/11, to be sure,¹⁵ but in this particular context the selection and presentation of Sufi music as a bridge of understanding advocates a peaceful, apolitical Islam as an explicit counter to radical Islamism.

For example, The Philadelphia Society of Art, Literature, and Music has created a Sufi-focused “Full Circle Project” which is to serve as “a bridge of bilateral understanding and peace between what has been called

'Islam' and 'The West.'" The project kick-off included a concert of Sufi music, a music-accompanied reading of poetry by Rumi, and the screening of a documentary on Sufism with a title derived from a Rumi poem. PSALM's literature on the project makes use of the dichotomous framework discussed thus far. It states, "*Although* he was a devout Muslim, Rumi became a 'Sufi'" and "...*although* he was a devout Muslim, [Rumi] embraced all people without distinction" (emphasis added). About the documentary, PSALM relates that it "makes plain the tragic irony that while Islam is now seen by many as the enemy of Western Civilization (and vice-versa), there exists an alternative to be found in Rumi's peaceful path called 'Sufism,' within Islam, whose message may prove to be an elegant solution to the a-priori problems of a dangerous and unstable co-existence that people of *all* nations now face" (emphasis in original).¹⁶

Sufi music, like many arts of cultural others, is thus portrayed as humanizing. Yet, as I noted was often the case with world music more generally, the humanist intention is de-politicized, as if political problems and humans could be separated. The artistic director of a music festival at Stanford University in 2006 which featured Sufi music relates, "When you focus on the politics of a region, you often see the problems and the conflicts....When you focus on culture, you see people."¹⁷ The leader of the group Shusmo (which plays jazz-oriented Middle Eastern-inflected music) recognizes the appeal of this logic, explaining that people who want to "get in touch" with Arabs can "see another side of the Middle East" through music, "because you are not talking politics, you are *just* listening to music" (emphasis added).¹⁸ Yet the desire to create a bridge of understanding through certain musics exists in a political context in which the U.S. government actively supports those people and regimes that it considers representative of moderate Islam. I am certainly not saying that arts organizers support the U.S. government's actions in the Middle East. In fact, nearly all that I know oppose the Iraq war. But their preference for certain musics that they understand as representing peaceful Islam, and/or their unlinking of politics and music through humanist discourse, corresponds to the government's paternalistic civilizing mission. It is no accident that the state's cultural arm also funds events of Sufi music, poetry, and other arts seen to embody religious moderation. As President Bush has said, "All civilized nations, especially those in the Muslim world, are bound together in this struggle between moderation and extremism. By working together...we will help the people of the Middle East reclaim their freedom."¹⁹ When UNESCO names 2007 the "Year of Rumi," it

is clear that art has become a popular means of promoting more palatable religious devotions on the world stage.

While sometimes music made by Muslims is celebrated for revealing a friendlier Islam, at other times mainstream Islam is conveniently erased in the effort to create a notion of universal humanity. Ted Swedenburg has examined the publicity around Arab musicians popular in the West, such as those playing North African Gnawa music or southern Egyptian folk songs, and finds that when marketed as part of the world music scene, they are portrayed as primordial or expressing “‘universal’ human experience,” and that this discourse “enables Western audiences to avoid the inconvenient fact of Islam, which is central to these traditional Arab musics” (Swedenburg 2001:39). The hype around these musicians erases their Islamic faith or generalizes it in the language of mysticism and spirituality such that listeners do not have to really engage with mainstream Islam.²⁰

A third framing of music promotes the view that it should critique “bad” Islam. Schade-Poulsen (1999), as well as Swedenburg (2001), discuss how Western media incorrectly portrays North African rai music as rebelling against Islamic extremism. The press release for the aforementioned music festival at Stanford tells us that there will be a screening of the film *The Rockstar and the Mullahs* which features a rock musician “interviewing orthodox Muslim clerics who believe music is forbidden in Islam.”²¹ Indeed there is such a desire to see artists as rebelling against Islam that sometimes it scarcely matters whether or not the artist is a practicing Muslim, and whether or not the artist intends for the art to criticize the religion. As Schade-Poulsen shows, most rai musicians do not critique Islam. Audience members at my talks on Egyptian artists sometimes express distress upon learning that most artists actually want to become better Muslims and do not find religious critique a worthy subject of art-making. Yet in the dominant framing of Middle Eastern arts in the U.S., Islam is seen as a stricture, something from which artists should undoubtedly want to free themselves, or at least find moderation within it. Art becomes a wholly secular tool of freedom from religious oppression—not, for example, from foreign domination. Generally, event organizers do not seek out artistic uses of religion to advocate for freedom from things like military occupation. Thus, cultural production shaped by mainstream Islam is denied inclusion in the category of art. The important goal remains to highlight, through art, artistic approaches to Islam that make for an acceptable bridge of cultural understanding.

Fetishizing Women and Critiquing Islam

It is in this matrix of hegemonic notions about art and freedom, and assumptions about Islam, that we also find the many events featuring female Middle Eastern visual artists and filmmakers whose work is presented and interpreted as showing, and therefore challenging, Middle Eastern gender inequalities seen as derived almost solely from Islam. These events often feature women born in the Middle East but who live in the West, and this latter fact is almost always viewed as a source of value in their work. As artists who have themselves embodied the ideal of the “bridge,” then, they are seen as the most free and able to comment on, or perhaps change, the lack of freedom in the Middle East. The discourses surrounding the work of Iranian-born Shirin Neshat are a case in point. She is the most popular and well-known Middle Eastern-born artist in the United States. Visitors to the 2006 Museum of Modern Art show *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* most frequently singled out her work for positive mention, and people tended to linger in front of it longer than in front of the other pieces in the show. The intention of *Without Boundary* was to question the category of “Islamic art” by featuring (mostly) artists from the “Islamic world” (a category that, with one exception, meant the “Middle East”) but who now live in the West. There were twice as many women than men in the show, and gender and sexuality were major themes throughout. In this show as in others, the staging of art as an avenue of Middle Eastern Muslim women’s expression of resistance to Islam is favored over discussion of American intervention in the U.S. In fact, the absence of commentary on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars in *Without Boundary* was extremely notable,²² leading us to question the ways in which the obsession over women artists supposedly critiquing Islam may at some level rationalize U.S. intervention, or at the very least prevent substantive criticism of it.

Without Boundary featured two works from Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series (1996), including one called *Speechless* where a barrel of a gun stands in as a woman’s earring. Discussing this image on the free audio tour, Neshat says, “In my view this image at first communicates this extreme sense of submission and betrayal of this woman to religion. Maybe this person is willingly doing what she’s doing or in fact maybe she’s a victim. But somehow her faith, her religion, her weapon empowers her in a way that nothing else does.” But do audience viewers take from this image the idea of empowerment along with submission? The exhibition curator, Fereshteh Daftari, writes in the catalogue, “Americans and Europeans have mistaken



Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*. Gelatin silver print & ink, 14"x11", 1996.

COURTESY OF GLADSTONE GALLERY, NEW YORK.

Neshat's work for documentation of the oppressed condition of women in Islamic societies..." (Daftari 2006:20). Although she and the artist try to head off this interpretation, my discussions with viewers indicated that they generally saw the submission of Muslim women, of Middle Eastern women, in this work and others.

It is no accident, I think, that many audience members I spoke with singled out Neshat's work as their favorite in the show. They interpreted her

art as showing and challenging women's oppression in the Middle East and the inequality between men and women. In just one example, a tourist from Dallas told me that of all the works in the show, the works of Neshat stood out, as did two photographs by Iraqi/Irish artist Jananne Al-Ani of members of her family in various stages of head and body cover. She said the work spoke to her of Middle Eastern women "seeking freedom and liberty." Two security guards commented that these works show how "sad" Muslim women are, implying that their situation was difficult.

These viewers may perhaps be forgiven for not recognizing the admittedly small aspect of Neshat's work that shows some positive aspects to contemporary Muslim practice, or the play on the veil and critique of Orientalism intended by Al-Ani, given the fact that these art works cannot quite escape the system of Orientalist media images of unnamed Muslim women in veils. At times, Neshat herself traffics in Orientalism, for example when she tells the audience on the audio tour that Muslim women are "the sexiest women on the planet" because their veils are seductive and mysterious. This kind of framing of art and Islam that involves a critique of Muslim gender relations along with a promotion of Islam's non-threatening side (e.g. the perceived heightened sexuality of Muslim women) is particularly effective if one judges from Neshat's massive art sales and the ubiquity of this framing in many arts events around the country.

To relativize these frameworks of presentation and interpretation, it might be helpful to consider the perspective of one set of visitors who did not use them. One Friday night at MOMA, a group of fifteen male Muslim professionals from the New York area visited the exhibition as part of their weekly Friday study group (*halaqa*). The leader of the group toured the exhibition jotting ideas in his small notebook for discussion, and particularly noted some of the wall text accompanying the works. Later, he said that while he appreciated what the exhibition was trying to do and thought some of the art works were "really great," he was left with some serious questions. He glanced through his notebook and gave me some words from the wall texts which indicated the framing of the exhibition which he found problematic—words like "defying" and "hybrid" and "secular." He wondered if this framing of so-called Islamic art was the only way to make it "palatable." "Is it not legitimate to draw on one's faith," he asked me, "without adopting this language, this secularist defiant stance?"

Indeed, only certain works celebrating Islam can be shown within the dominant U.S. frameworks of selection and reception. There is no prob-

lem showing Islamic art which is safely within the bounds of history and therefore can be understood as a past achievement. Sufi music is acceptable because it represents a benign and spiritually enlightened Islam; rai music is valued because of its supposed resistance to Islam. And work celebrating the sexuality of Middle Eastern Muslim women is desirable because it is dependent upon the idea that Islam should be critiqued for oppressing women and denying them their “natural” sexual humanity.

Dichotomies and Exclusions

The yoking of art to ideologies of humanity underlies this process of selecting works and creating from them a category of “good Middle Eastern art”—a category that emphasizes past Islamic achievements, benign religiosity, and critique of contemporary Islam. The bridges of understanding narrative rests on the idea that art is prime evidence or a suitable bearer of Middle Easterners’ humanity, but it is a very particular definition of humanity that is advanced under the guise of a universal humanism. It is one that allows Middle Eastern Muslims to be human only in the past or only if they eschew political Islam or critique religion. Through the selection of certain kinds of cultural production from the Middle East, and by the process of naming these good art, certain Middle Easterners are allowed into the fold of humankind, but, importantly, others are not. For the art/humanity linkage has always depended on its opposite for its definition. The framing of art as evidence of humanity, or even as creating humanity, calls forth the historically constituted set of oppositions between human and animal, and between civilization and barbarism, that I discussed as part of Enlightenment philosophy, the anthropological tradition, Western colonialism, and modern art theory. In a context of renewed imperialism and attendant public discourse about a clash of civilizations, this set of oppositions finds fertile ground for rearticulation when it comes to Middle Eastern art.

We see the reproduction of this dichotomy in the arts press all the time. For example, a University of Michigan professor interviewed by the *Detroit News* about a series of Middle Eastern film, theater, music, and art shows said: “Since September 11, there has been so much attention to the Middle East. Almost all of it has been unhappy; politics, violence, religious extremism. There are many other things that happen there in everyday life. The Western audience is missing out on all the other rich life culture that occurs there” (Guthrie 2005). Likewise, in a Manhattan

newspaper, the organizers of the Alwan Cultural Center are described as trying to “highlight the diversity of Arab culture, showing New Yorkers that it is more than just the destructive force we witnessed [on 9/11]. It can also be extraordinarily creative.” Countering stereotypes through art, they “[want] to show that the Arab world is made up of more than just Islamic fundamentalists” (Beckerman 2005). Similarly, the dance choreographer mentioned earlier said, “the exquisite beauty of the dance, poetry and music of the Islamic world reveals a different face from the austere fundamentalism known to most Americans.”²³

In these historically constituted framings, art is assumed to be more inherently “human,” than “anti-human” things like religious fundamentalism or terrorism. It is figured as the supreme expression of creativity which counters acts of “anti-creativity” or “destruction.” Middle Easterners’ expression of humanity through art, the logic goes, links us to them in a bridge of understanding, because we are also human producers of art. However, this articulation of the art/humanity nexus necessarily excludes the idea that Americans might also be outside of the category of the human, and engaged in anti-creative destruction. Indeed the idea that a bridge of understanding could be built by recognizing shared acts of destruction is unimaginable in this framework. It is Middle Eastern Muslims who must be artistic in order to become human.

The Director of Houston’s Station Museum, which first hosted the traveling exhibition of contemporary Palestinian art called *Made in Palestine*, is quoted in a press release as saying, “It is our conviction that the American public deserves to be made aware of Palestinian art as a profound manifestation of the humanity of the Palestinian people.”²⁴ Visitors to the New York version of the *Made in Palestine* exhibition frequently used this language in their discussion of the exhibit, even though most of them had not read the exhibition literature or press materials when they did so. For example, one woman who worked as an architect in the same Chelsea building that housed the exhibition brought her partner to come see the show. Tired of the standard press coverage of the Middle East, they had come to see “another side of things.” The woman said that what she liked about the show was that it “humanizes the Palestinians” because in the U.S., “you just hear about bombers.” Note how the bombers are basically not included in the category of the human here. However, when I asked her if there were any works that humanize the Palestinians more than others, she chose the photographs of



Noel Jabbour, *Al-Azzami Family, Gaza*. C-print, 50"x40", 2000.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

Palestinian families who have lost loved ones, which are part of a series done by Noel Jabbour called *Vacant Seats*.

In these images, it is often unclear how the martyrs died. Interestingly, the possibility that Palestinians could mourn the death of loved ones who were suicide bombers was not considered by the couple.²⁵ The woman

said that the pictures show “there’s something universal that everyone can understand,” and her partner agreed, saying that they communicate the message that “Palestinians have families too.”

I do not think there is any doubt that images of bombers in their suicide mission gear, or images clearly marked “bombers’ families,” would be read by most American audiences as evidence not of Palestinian humanity, or as art, but rather as distasteful, as propaganda, as evidence of their backwardness or barbaric state. This is likely true of images of other Middle Eastern suicide bombers or militants, especially male ones. Positive artistic representations of Muslim men, and especially activist Muslim men, are exceptionally rare.²⁶ “Bad” Islam, then, is almost universally associated with the male gender, which likely explains why male Middle Eastern visual artists have been less sought after than women by American curators, though this preference appears to be changing.

Similarly, many other forms of Middle Eastern cultural production are regularly excluded from the category of art as constructed in these events, such as those forms that explicitly advocate resistance against any of the occupations, that celebrate contemporary, conventional Islam, or that to Western audiences contain no visual or aural signifiers of Islam or the Middle East at all. One thinks of abstract painting or sculpture that contain no designs derived from historical Islamic, Sumerian, or Pharaonic art, music that criticizes Israel or the U.S. or that celebrates Islam, political cartoons, political graffiti, illustrations or graphic art from Islamic publications, or martyr posters or videos, among other cultural practices that require considerable creativity for their production. It might be argued that American arts venues rarely feature contemporary Christian cultural production as art either. Indeed, such work is threatening to the secular elite’s category of art as well. However, it seems that Islam-inflected visual culture is subject to more intense scrutiny and dissection than the arts of religious traditions also perceived as “other,” which are valued with almost no reservation (e.g., Buddhist, Hindu, African and Native American religions).

What gets included in the category of good Middle Eastern art, and how it gets framed, is crucial to the reproduction of dichotomies between humanity/creativity/culture on the one hand, and fundamentalism/terrorism/inhumanity/not-creativity/not-culture on the other. Thus these events may end up reproducing “clash of civilizations”-type dichotomies rather than working against them, as so many curators and audiences want them to do. In positioning art as more valuable to under-

standing the Middle East than “veils or terrorism” in my online interview, I was not in any way challenging my audiences in Santa Fe, in the art community, or in academe. Rather, I was offering a much more comfortable “bridge of understanding” to walk across than that constructed from stories of violence.

The “art as evidence and bearer of humanity” narrative contains several assumptions worth thinking about: fundamentalism and terrorism are not “human,” and they are not “creative.” [Here I am thinking of the infamous statement by British artist Damien Hirst congratulating the 9/11 hijackers for producing a “visually stunning” work of art (Allison 2002)]. Another assumption (or implication, at the very least) is that Americans are already (or more) human and do not engage in things like fundamentalism and terrorism. Olu Oguibe (2004) has written eloquently of how non-Western artists must always play the “culture game”—proving and representing their cultural background such that they will always be seen as good “Egyptian,” “Lebanese,” “Arab,” or “Muslim” artists but never just “good artists.” I suggest that art and artists from the Middle East must also enter into what I would call the “humanity game,” always reminding Westerners that they are “humans”—something that Euro-American artists never have to do. Yet the “humanity game,” like the “culture game,” can never really be won. Using art to evidence humanity always creates the impression of a range of other activities that are not human, and that are engaged in only by certain groups. When the art/humanity nexus is articulated by reference to Islam, the “unhuman” group becomes Middle Eastern Muslims.

Palestine and the Limits of Humanity

While American elites are often quick to criticize artistic censorship in the Middle East, they are relatively silent about a certain homegrown form of censorship. Some recent arts events related to Palestine strikingly reveal the limitations and political underpinnings of the category of art being employed. Bringing the *Made in Palestine* show from the Station Museum in Texas to different venues around the country was a daunting task. The museum’s curator hit a brick wall wherever he tried to market the show. He said that his many contacts told him privately that “they would lose their museum funding if they were to hold an exhibit that was pro-Palestinian” (Haddad 2005). Through a major coordination of activist groups, the show was finally brought to SomArts in San Francisco in 2005, yet it met resistance

from critics who said that the exhibition glorified Palestinian terrorism and was anti-Israel and anti-American. Efforts to bring the show to Westchester, New York met with more protests from two county legislators and a New York State assemblyman, who said that the show “glorifies terrorism”²⁷ and is anti-American and anti-Israeli “propaganda...for assassins” (Eshelman 2005). The non-profit arts group Al-Jisser (notably, Arabic for “the bridge”) worked tirelessly for months holding fundraisers to bring the show to New York City. Co-organizer Samia Halaby said, “We knocked on the doors of every museum and every alternative space... When they finally all rejected us, the reason seemed mostly that the upper layers of their administrations, the directors and head curators, had all rejected the show.” She continued that some people were honest enough to tell her that “showing Palestinian art would likely mean an end to their gallery” (Kenazi 2006). So Al-Jisser rented its own space, in the heart of Chelsea, and opened *Made in Palestine* in the spring of 2006. There were 2000 people in attendance, mostly professionals of Middle Eastern descent or Palestine activists, and in this way it was a very different crowd than one usually sees at such openings. In discussions with me, visitors focused on their belief in the power of art to raise awareness of the Israeli occupation and of Palestinians’ humanity. The question is: did any of the more typical art-going audiences come to see the art and as a result allow Palestinians into the human fold? Though no fault of the organizers, it seems to me that the main effects of the show were to galvanize people who were already aware of the Palestinian struggle, and to make them aware of the importance of Palestinian art.

Meanwhile, another Palestine related art event meant to show humanity and create bridges of understanding also faced unusual troubles. The play *My Name is Rachel Corrie* tells the true story of a young American activist who was killed by an Israeli army bulldozer in 2003 while acting as a human shield to prevent a Palestinian home in Gaza from demolition. The play was scheduled to open in the spring of 2006 at the New York Theater Workshop but was cancelled and postponed indefinitely because of concerns that it might offend some groups of theater lovers. It eventually opened at New York’s Minetta Lane Theater in October 2006. But then another run was cancelled at CanStage, Canada’s largest non-profit theater, again out of fears that it would offend some audience members. In July 2007 a reading of the play took place at the Round House Theatre in Maryland, but it was announced privately through a network of friends to avoid media backlash.

Voices from Palestine, a show of artwork by Palestinian refugee teenagers held at Brandeis University in 2006, represents another example of censorship. The exhibition was organized by an Israeli student at Brandeis as part of a project for a course called “The Arts of Building Peace.” The student had contacted an arts center in a Bethlehem refugee camp and arranged for drawings to be sent and exhibited in the library. The drawings depicted life under occupation from the Palestinian youths’ point of view, such as images of Israel’s Wall and house demolitions. The organizer’s stated intent was to “humanize” the teenagers. But the Brandeis administration removed the exhibition because of what it called lack of context and imbalance, and because of reports that some students found the exhibit upsetting. Although the majority of the faculty opposed what they viewed as a case of censorship, and a special university ethics committee found that the administration had erred in removing the exhibit,²⁸ the episode still reveals the limits of the use of Middle Eastern art to humanize when the art does not fit within established frameworks.

The difficulties faced by those trying to show Palestinian humanity through art raise some provocative questions about the new interest in Middle Eastern and Islamic arts and about the ways in which they are presented to U.S. audiences. Gell has discussed how art objects are not passive results of humans’ expressive intentions, but rather agents which produce and mediate social relations (1998). In these cases of Middle East-related events in the U.S., art forms are attributed a certain agency to create bridges. But to what extent can this agency be realized within relations of power where other agents—such as government officials, money, and weapons—are also operative? It seems that the objects may in fact be agents that produce social relations of a less savory variety. Can the emphasis on art as evidence of humanity really erase stereotypes of Middle Eastern Muslims as un-human destructive terrorists, or does this framing depend on these stereotypes for its own definition and execution? Does the insistence on seeing rai musicians or Muslim women artists as critiquing Islam really advance Americans’ “understanding” of the Middle East, or does it merely confirm what they think they already know? Does the valorization of Sufi arts or historical Islamic art really aid understanding of the daily lives and concerns of the region’s Muslims? And finally, just whose “understanding” lies at the banks of the bridge that is reputedly being built?

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ENDNOTES

¹One anonymous reviewer suggested that such events also enable their audiences to feel self-satisfied that they can appreciate the arts of a much-maligned region. Indeed, both organizers and audiences may perform their elite status through these events, and construct elite identities alternative to those of conservative elites who, it is presumed, could not appreciate art from the Middle East. I do not have specific ethnographic data that confirms this interpretation, although the trope of “discovery” in these events would indicate that it is valid to some degree.

²As Flood (2007) notes, academic institutions have also created new faculty lines and courses in Islamic art in response to 9/11.

³See the 2005 Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy at www.state.gov/r/adcompd/rls/54256.htm. Accessed on October 11, 2007. That American liberal elites view art that critiques Middle Eastern society as a positive alternative to militancy against U.S./Israeli interests is perhaps best encapsulated by the thrust of a February 22, 2008 broadcast on NPR (the station of choice for that constituency). In “A Palestinian Intifada Icon Chooses Art over War,” Eric Westervelt reports on a former Al-Qsa Brigadesman from Jenin, Zakariya Zubeidi, who created a children’s theater. He tells listeners that Zubeidi critiques social problems “rarely discussed openly in Palestinian culture” and emphasizes (twice) the portion of the interview in which Zubeidi says that Palestinians are also culpable for the conflict and need to stop blaming Israel for everything. www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=19239928. Accessed on April 23, 2008.

⁴“State Department Launches Global Cultural Initiative,” September 25, 2006. www.usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2006&m=September&x=20060925152441jmnamdeirf0.3944361

⁵For example, see www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/09/20060925-2.html. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

⁶www.sarweb.org/scholars/scholars/individuals/scholar04-05/winegar05.htm. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

⁷See Rydell 1984, especially p. 64-68.

⁸Like many contemporary ideas related to the visual arts, those related to world music had their roots in the academy. Ethnomusicologists and others with “an academically liberal mission” began using the term partly for its “clear populist ring” (Feld 2000:146-7).

⁹Although there were slight blips of interest among certain groups in Middle Eastern arts after the first Gulf War and, earlier, in Vietnamese folk music and dance as a result of the war in Vietnam (Sophie Quinn-Judge, personal communication), it seems that this is the first “official” U.S. war that has instigated such widespread interest in the

arts of “the other side,” suggesting that a significant shift has occurred in how (mostly anti-war) elites deal with conflict.

¹⁰www.silkroaddance.com/uploads/HPPressRelease.pdf. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

¹¹www.nga.gov/press/2004/212/index.htm. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

¹²For a synopsis of this problem and how it has been addressed in art history, see Flood (2007).

¹³One exception is the exhibition “Glittering Gold: Illumination in Islamic Art” at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (2007-2008), which hosted a contemporary illuminator from Turkey.

¹⁴See for example Ali (1997) and Jiwa (2004).

¹⁵It would be interesting to research the possible connections between the emergence of the popularity of Sufi music and U.S. involvement in the Middle East.

¹⁶www.thepsalm.org. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

¹⁷Jindong Cai, quoted in the press release of the Pan-Asian Music Festival, www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/2006/pr-asian-020806.html. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

¹⁸Tareq Abboushi, quoted in Beckerman 2005.

¹⁹www.voanews.com/uspolicy/archive/2006-10/2006-10-02-voa4.cfm. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

²⁰Note that this is a pre-9/11 framing as well, but one that became particularly convenient afterwards.

²¹www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/2006/pr-asian-020806.html. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

²²For an excellent critique of this exhibition and its assumptions, see Farhat (2006).

²³www.silkroaddance.com/uploads/HPPressRelease.pdf. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

²⁴See press release re-posted at www.electronicintifada.net/v2/article3664.shtml. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

²⁵None of the photographs were of bombers’ families, but Palestinians generally attribute the term martyr to anyone who dies as a result of the Israeli occupation, including people caught in the crossfire, people who die because roadblocks prevent their arrival at a hospital, as well as bombers. The Azzami family shown here was grieving for their son Ahmed, who was shot at age 16 while standing outside of his home, witnessing a clash between the Israeli army and Palestinian stone-throwers during the first Intifada. Jabbour’s other photograph in the show depicted a family mourning the death of their mother, killed by an Israeli missile.

²⁶This is often the case in the visual culture of the American media as well. Images of crowds of nameless, Muslim men yelling with fists or guns raised in the air tend to dominate print and television media when the idea of Muslims or Islam as a threat is invoked.

²⁷Quoted in “County Legislators Condemn Palestinian Art Fundraiser.” *Westchester.com*, November 18, 2004. Available at: www.westchester.com/Westchester_NewsWestchester_Government_and_Politics/County_Legislators_Condemn_Palestinian_Art_Fundraiser_200411184496.html

²⁸For a full report, see www.brandeis.edu/ethics/news/2006/2006.Sept.25.html. Accessed on October 11, 2007.

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