

Europe in the Middle East—The Middle East in Europe
Summer Academy for Doctoral and Postdoctoral Researchers
in Cairo, September 16—27, 2012

Aesthetics and Politics: Counter-Narratives, New Publics, and the Role of Dissent in the Arab World

Summary

The research project *Europe in the Middle East – The Middle East in Europe* (EUME) of the Berlin-based *Forum Transregionale Studien* and the *Center for Translation Studies* of the American University in Cairo hosted in cooperation with Cairo University and the *Center for Near and Middle East Studies* of Philipps-Universität Marburg an international Summer Academy from September 16 - 27, 2012 at the American University in Cairo on the theme: *Aesthetics and Politics: Counter-Narratives, New Publics, and the Role of Dissent in the Arab World*.

Chaired by a group of scholars that included Randa Aboubakr (Cairo University), Michael Allan (University of Oregon), Ayman El-Desouky (SOAS London), Elias Khoury (NYU/Beirut), Samia Mehrez (American University in Cairo), Rachid Ouassa (Philipps-University Marburg), Friederike Pannewick (Philipps-Universität Marburg) and Samah Selim (Rutgers University), 24 doctoral and postdoctoral scholars from both different countries and academic disciplines, as Comparative Literature, Cultural Anthropology, Political Science, Sociology and Media Studies were invited.

The main issues of the Summer Academy were clearly affected by the uprisings in the Arab world. How can the function of dissent and counter-narratives be understood? What impact do old and new media have? Considering their by in large absence during the revolutions, is there a new role for intellectuals? How have traditional paradigms of understanding politics and culture in the region been challenged and how should we grasp the significance of literature and the arts in this new context?



In order to promote fruitful debates and encourage new perspectives pertaining to these questions, the Summer Academy consisted of four content-related elements: presentations of individual research projects, thematic discussions, general lectures and panel discussions open to a wider public.

Out of the 24 participants three groups were composed and each was chaired by a three scholars mentioned initially. The groups' intention was that each presents her/his current research project whereupon - as the image above shows - also the others engaged in a critical and fruitful discussion.

Thematic discussions aimed at the introduction of themes by individual scholars. For example the question of the positionality of the researcher in Middle Eastern Studies or artistic expressions and



cultural policies in Egypt. Besides the discussions at campus the interdisciplinarity of these sessions reached also the urban space of Cairo. For instance we were guided through Down Town Cairo to see the wide-spread graffities and murals. As the image on the left shows we could see and perceive the social meaning and political significance of

this artistic practice as we could observe how many people were active in creating them, how many were watching and we could speak directly to the artists.

Another very insightful opportunity to sense the relationship between politics and the urban space was a walk through the city, guided by a Summer Academy participant who is studying architecture.

Central places as Mohammed Mahmud Street were intensive clashes between protesters and the police tool place, or as can be seen in the picture below Tahrir Square with the huge government building *Mugamma*, the Egyptian Museum, the American University in Cairo and the now burned down former headquarters of Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party, were pointed out.



Besides, general lectures which addressed various social and cultural – as on the new role of intellectuals in the Middle East or contemporary Art in Egypt - themes were given. For that purpose a number of scholars, writers, and artists were invited – such as the Lebanese writer Elias Khoury on the image right. The lectures were followed by discussions with the audience.



Last but not least, there were panel discussions, which involved all participants of the Summer Academy and invited speakers for an introduction into a specific topic and for initiating the subsequent discussion. A very innovative way to perform the discussion was done when addressing the social and political meaning of Hip-Hop in Egypt and the Arab world. Along Egyptian Hip-Hop artists who were present at the location of the panel discussion, a Skype-conference - as shown below - with other Egyptian and Palestinian artists was conducted.



In conclusion, the gathering of scholars from such a variety of academic disciplines, writers, and artists, has proven itself to be a very inspiring and enriching endeavor. It was fascinating in particular to observe how the region is increasingly understood, discussed and analyzed along congruent strands of new questions, approaches and concerns. This demand for the *new* is exemplified especially

by the longing for leaving behind modernist thinking which is based by and large on a logic of hierarchies and binarisms as Eurocentrism or a Global-Local hybridity. Instead new analytic and factual categories and terminologies displaying the network character of reality as a new interconnectedness between social and cultural studies and aesthetics articulations from below whose approaches must be derived from an interdisciplinary understanding of scholarship – as the Summer Academy successfully did – to understand the Middle East and North Africa in its entire breadth.