

Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)Musée national d'art moderne- curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath Centre Pompidou, Paris October 19, 2016–January 16, 2017

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Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)
curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath
Musée national d'art moderne—Centre Pompidou, Paris
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reviewed by Nadine Atallah

Catherine David, head of the Research and Globalization Department at the Centre Pompidou, is a fervent advocate of redefining artistic modernity as a transcultural phenomenon (see David 2016). In such a critical framework, she invited Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, cofounders of the curatorial platform Art Reoriented,[1] to conceive the exhibition "Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)" stemming from Bardaouil's PhD on the topic (Bardaouil 2016). Intended to tour in several European institutions, the exhibition gathered archives and about 130 artworks mainly unseen in Europe and coming from private collections worldwide, including that of H.E. Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani, one of the exhibition's main sponsors. Some of the loans were facilitated by a restoration program initiated by the Centre Pompidou.[2]

Art et Liberté (Art and Liberty) refers to a group of artists and intellectuals who identified themselves with Surrealism, one of the most international artistic movements of the first half of the twentieth century. Though their name was originally coined in French, formerly the language of the Egyptian elite, Art et Liberté gathered men and women from various social and national origins, all living in Cairo. This cosmopolitan group shared communist convictions and believed that art—Surrealism in particular—could be a means to resist the fascism and nationalism rising in Egypt and worldwide in the 1930s. Thus, far from reproducing external definitions of Surrealism, Art et Liberté developed its own expression and vision of it, calling for a "permanent revolution"[3] in politics as well as in the arts. The exhibition, organized thematically, highlights the original inputs of Art et Liberté to Surrealism while emphasizing its contribution to Egyptian modernism.

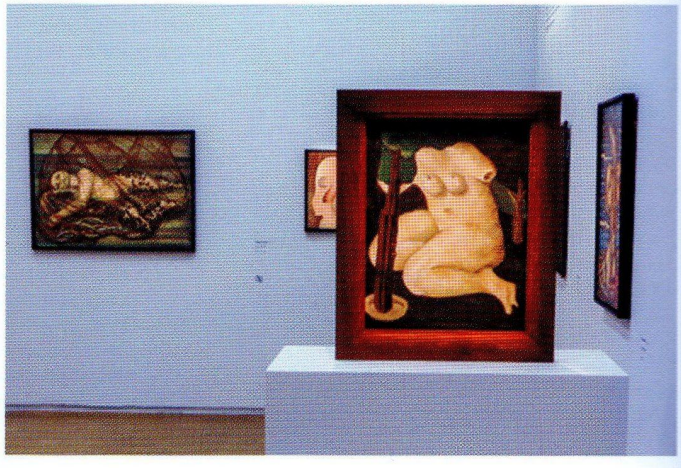
A white wall, on which the title featured large, indicated the entrance of the exhibition, located on the same level as the contemporary collections of the Centre

1 Members of Art et Liberté during the 1941 exhibition of independent art. In front (left–right): Jean Moscatelli, Kamel el-Telmisany, Angelo de Riz, Ramses Younan, Fouad Kamel. In back (left–right): Albert Cossery, undidentified, Georges Henein, Maurice Fahmy, Raoul Curiel. Unknown photographer, gelatin silver print
Photo: © collection of Sylvie and Sonia Younan, Paris

2 Installation view of the section "The Voice of Canons." In front: Samir Rafi, *Nus* (1945), oil on canvas, 177 cm x 163 cm, © collection of H.E. Sheikh Hassan bin Mohamed bin Ali Al Thani, Doha.
Photo: Centre Pompidou

3 Installation view of the section "Fragmented Bodies." In front: Hassan Al-Telmissany, *Untitled* (c. 1940), oil on double-sided canvas, 50 cm x 39 cm, © collection of the Al-Telmissany family, Cairo.
Photo: Centre Pompidou







4 Inji Efflatoun
Surrealist Composition (1942)
Oil on canvas; 71 cm x 60,5 cm
Photo: courtesy private collection

5 Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar
Mahasseb Al-Sayyidah (1953)
Oil on board, 60.5 cm x 92 cm
Collection Yasser Zaki Hashem, Cairo
Photo: Centre Pompidou

Pompidou, yet away from the main galleries. Behind it, a wall-size photograph of members of Art et Liberté mischievously faced an official picture of an opening reception of the conservative and state-endorsed Salon du Caire (Fig. 1). The smiling faces of Georges Henein, Kamel Al-Telmissany, Ramses Younan, and Albert Cossery, among others, were captured during the 1941 exhibition of independent art organized by Art et Liberté. Pondering the power of display, a selection of archival documents showed how, in order to oppose the nationalist imperative prevailing in the Egyptian cultural scene at the beginning of the twentieth century, Art et Liberté's exhibitions stressed the creativity and personalities of the artists, as can be seen in one of the catalogs, open to the biographies page. It might be to pursue this idea that Bardaouil and Fellrath decided to start the exhibition with a portrait of the artists, while pointing with humor that the empty chair at the forefront invited visitors to sit and get acquainted with Art et Liberté.[4]

Videos, newspapers, and caricatures illustrated the atmosphere of Cairo in the 1930s and 1940s, a reminder that Egypt was fully involved in World War II while struggling for its national independence. By depicting the political and historical backgrounds from and within which Art et Liberté emerged, Bardaouil and Fellrath intended to defend a contextual understanding of Egyptian modernism. At first sight, the extreme violence of the exhibited paintings was striking. Samir Rafi's *Nus* (1945), painted following the 1941 bombings of Alexandria (Fig. 2), Inji Efflatoun's series *Girl and Monster* (1941–1942), and the paintings by Amy Nimr, whose son was killed during the war, are haunted by dead bodies and monstrous creatures. Anxiety fueled these representations and gave rise to a complex and sombre iconography emphasized by dark palettes.

Among the most recurrent motifs and concerns of Art et Liberté, surrealist representations of the body point up the issue of poverty and the fragmentation of society into disparate social classes. Human figures, indeed, are fragmented, emaciated, and dismembered, as in Hassan Al-Telmissany's double-sided untitled painting (c. 1940) of a mutilated female body whose breast and stomach shape a face (Fig. 3), reminiscent of Magritte's *Le Viol*.[5] Her head seems to dissolve into the foliage above, echoing Efflatoun's anthropomorphic trees[6] (Fig. 4) and even, amusingly, Abdel Hadi Al-Gazzar's *Green Fool* (1951) which hung further away. These visual correspondences contributed to creating connections between the exhibition's various sections, such as "Fragmented Bodies" or "Subjective Realism." Although they helped characterizing Art et Liberté's own type of Surrealism, stemming from social concern and fed by symbolic references, the topics identified in the sections intermingled in the whole exhibition, which rather brought out the consistency of Art et Liberté's aesthetic project. However, a section titled "The Woman of the City"[7] was problematic: While attempting to evidence the group's feminist commitment, it only included one artwork by a female, Inji Efflatoun's *Surrealist Composition* (1942) (Fig. 4), failing to demonstrate the role of women as acting subjects—artists or patrons. Rather, it focused on women as objects of representation, through depictions of prostitutes particularly prevalent in Kamel Al-Telmissany, Fouad Kamel, and Ramses Younan's paintings.

Another section was dedicated to the Contemporary Art Group cofounded by Samir Rafi, Hamed Nada, and Al-Gazzar. These dissident members of Art et Liberté contributed to the development of an art defined as authentically Egyptian while staying in line with notions of the Surrealist pictorial language, as can be seen in Al-Gazzar's *Mahasseb Al-Sayyidah* (1953), evoking, through an elaborate use of symbols and colors, the Free Officer's coup of 1952 which laid the foundation of the republic (Fig. 5). Serving as a counterpoint for the nationalist commitment of the Contemporary Art Group, Art et Liberté's photographic work was mainly outlined by its criticism of





6 Ida Kar
Still Life (c.1940)
Bromide on paper print, 23.4 cm x 22.8 cm
Photo: courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London

7 Installation view of the section "Georges Henein." Map of Georges Henein's connections and correspondences with Surrealists around the world.
Photo: Centre Pompidou

nationalist iconography, as can be seen in Ida Kar's photographs which facetiously mix Pharaonic imagery with everyday objects and rubbish (Fig. 6). Another important distinctive feature of Art et Liberté is the correlation between literature and visual arts: Many paintings in the exhibition were indeed inspired by novels and poems; painters and writers also pooled their skills and inspiration to create illustrated books and journals. Georges Henein, who played a key role in the introduction of Surrealism in Egypt and in the founding of Art et Liberté, was in fact a poet and a writer. Conceived as a tribute to him, a map centered on Cairo broke with the usual center-periphery ambivalence in the understanding and the writing of art histories (Fig. 7). It illustrated Henein's many connections with Surrealists from Buenos Aires to Tokyo by way of Algiers and Moscow, and made visible the exchanges between them until the dissolution of Art et Liberté, formalized in a letter by Henein to André Breton dated 1948, exposing irreconcilable disagreements.

The exhibition's scenography, conceived as a loop, led the visitors back to the first section, in front of Art et Liberté's group portrait. By this time, the empty chair no longer looked like an invitation, but rather materialized an absence: that of the many members of the group who were imprisoned because of their political activities, or driven into exile by the Nasserist government. Yet the loop also evoked the permanent revolution Art et Liberté yearned for and questioned the persistence of their concepts of art and exhibition practices. Almost seventy years later, in a world struck by the rise in power of nationalisms, could their revolutionary dreams and capacities be revived by an exhibition? However, by shifting the focus from canons to contexts, "Art et Liberté: Rupture, War, and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)" had a part in a small revolution in curatorial and academic approaches to Egyptian modernism. The international seminar "Art et Liberté (1938–1948) and Modernity in Egypt: Beyond the Post-colonial Discourse" held within the exhibition's framework confirmed that this necessary change of paradigm is already in progress, and that art history can indeed become more inclusive.

After its appearance at Musée national d'art moderne—Centre Pompidou, the exhibition traveled to Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (February 14–June 11, 2017); Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen K21, Düsseldorf (July 15–October 15, 2017); and Tate Liverpool, Liverpool (November 13, 2017–March 4, 2018). A catalog is available in English, Arabic, French, German, and Spanish: Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath (eds.), *Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938–1948)* (Milan: Skira Editore, 2016).

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Notes

1 artreoriented.com

2 This important program of restoration was led by the Arcanes studio on artworks of various techniques. A conference held at the Centre Pompidou on December 16, 2016 discussed these restorations.

3 "The Permanent Revolution" is the title of the exhibition's first section.

4 Guided tour of the exhibition with Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, November 24, 2016.

5 The comparison between Hassan Al-Telmissany and René Magritte's artworks is made possible by the fact that *Le Viol* is reproduced in Art et Liberté's journal *Don Quichotte* (1940), on display in the exhibition.

6 See these two paintings by Inji Efflatoun: *Surrealist Composition* (1942) and *Untitled* (1942).

7 This section is titled after a poem by Georges Henein, *St. Louis Blues* (1938), in which he uses the phrase "woman of the city" to refer to prostitutes.

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