

Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco.* Katarzyna Pieprzak. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. 223 pp.

Reviewed by Jessica Winegar

Much of the recent international interest in art from the Middle East and North Africa in the past decade, and especially since the beginning of the uprisings that swept the region in 2011, shows a notable lack of historical awareness of earlier artistic experiments and political struggles in which modern artists were engaged for at least a half-century. *Imagined Museums* is the most in-depth study of such experiments and struggles thus far, based in, but not limited to, particular moments in Morocco from the colonial period to the early 21st century. The book brings together a rich set of archival materials, interviews, visitor logs, blogs, and ethnographic insights to illuminate the historical trajectories of the different ways that artists tried to imagine, create, and engage different publics in varying political moments. The value of this text is in: (1) its grounded and detailed consideration of particular institutional projects in Morocco; (2) its theoretically sophisticated analysis of the rise and the failures of monumental national museums; and (3) of the emergence of more ephemeral museological practices that not only attempt to address these failures but question the very nature of the museum itself. *Imagined Museums* innovatively combines theories and methodologies from museum studies, art history, anthropology, comparative literary studies, and postcolonial studies. In particular, it is a landmark contribution to the fields of museum studies, art history, and Middle Eastern and North African studies.

The book sets out to explore a common conundrum in postcolonial art worlds: the experience of absences and failures. Why do artists bemoan an absence or disintegration of museums, a lack of publics, a failure to create publicly engaging art and institutions? Katarzyna Pieprzak argues that addressing this conundrum is critical to recognizing and charting new forms of museum practice that “destabilize the museum itself as a grammar of nationalism, analyze its limits, and examine how other museums have emerged in its failure” (xv). By taking narratives of decay, absence, and failure seriously, she is able to show how artists’ ideals concerning their society and their potential publics are formed and how they change in relationship to various political-economic configurations. More than that, this focus enables Pieprzak to recognize artists’ political agency: because these narratives, and their associated artistic practices, “have exposed the grammars and limits of modernity, modernization, and authenticity” (35), trafficked in by nation-states and by many Euro-American scholarly, curatorial, and journalistic engagements with art of the Middle East and North Africa. By tacking back and forth between historical and contemporary junctures throughout, the book achieves a rare non-teleological yet historically grounded analysis of the different strands of this political agency.

The book’s organization in this regard is genius. The first half is a fascinating analysis of decay in three different kinds of monumental national museums: colonial and post-independence state museums of art and material culture, a corporate modern-art museum, and a privately owned

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cabinet-of-curiosity museum. These chapters focus on themes of exclusion, distinction, and various hierarchies of nation, ethnicity, class, and gender as these are refracted through colonial power, through modern independent nation-state power, and through private/corporate capital. Cracks in the monumental projects are visible from the outset.

The second half of the book is a sensitive and very insightful analysis of what the author calls “discursive, ephemeral, and nomadic museums”—practices that disrupt the monumental and the universal and instead create a “potentially conversable civic space” (130) around art. What is really innovative about this section is the presentation and analysis of early interventions of this nature dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, thereby giving the lie to the many claims that art practices seeking to disrupt grand narratives or to engage broad publics appeared in the Middle East only after 1990s globalization or after the 2011 uprisings. A good example is the chapter on what the author terms “the discursive museum”—a series of writings by artists in literary journals over time that destabilize, critique, or refigure notions of the nation, the universal, the religious, and the authentic. Other chapters in this section explore: historical and contemporary experiments with taking art into the streets; and new curatorial attempts to create ephemeral art that travels, nomadically, across borders. Throughout this section, the author is careful not to uncritically celebrate most of these interventions into the monumental. Despite some of their elitist dimensions, they are, as the author amply shows, based on a practice of questioning rather than answering, and therein lies their truly radical potential.

Even though the author focuses mainly on discourse, it would have been beneficial to include more images of art and more concentrated analysis of them. More broadly, the book rarely addresses questions about the importance of text versus the visual (and perhaps other senses) in different artistic projects. Such a consideration would have greatly enriched the analysis.

Nonetheless, *Imagined Museums* is a significant achievement, a must-read for anyone interested in art and politics in the Middle East and North Africa, and in postcolonial museum practices more generally. It is also well-written, concise, and thought-provoking, making it quite suitable for course adoptions.

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