

Zeina Maasri: *Cosmopolitan Radicalism. The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020. ISBN: 978-1-108-48771-9; 342

Rezensiert von: Nadia von Maltzahn, Orient-Institut Beirut, Max Weber Stiftung

At a moment when Lebanon is once again finding itself in deep crisis, maybe its most existential yet, it is easy to fall into the trap of nostalgia and romanticize the past, as it is often done for the period preceding its civil war (1975-1990). Beirut's long 1960s are often remembered as the „Golden Age“ in the city's history. In *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*, Zeina Maasri shows the fragility of the image constructed around mid-twentieth century Beirut as a city of leisure and consumption as it was drawn deeper into conflicting transnational circuits. Aiming to look beyond a national framework, the focus is on the city of Beirut along three main axes: the city as a Mediterranean site of tourism and leisure, the rise of the city as a node of pan-Arab publishing, and the city as part of a transnational discourse of revolutionary anti-imperialism following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Each axis is situated within the global economy and foregrounds the visual politics and aesthetic discourses of the time. This makes Maasri's monograph an original contribution to the growing literature on mid- to late-twentieth century Beirut as a nodal city, such as Rogers' *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut* or Albers forthcoming volume on Beirut and the magazine *Mawaqif*, that respectively interrogate the entangled histories of modern art and international politics and Arab intellectual history through the biography of a magazine.¹ With a recent exhibition at the Gropius Bau in Berlin dedicated to the same time period and displaying some of the artists featured in Maasri's work², *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* is a timely account of the power of images and the actors behind them.

The first chapter convincingly argues the transformation of an image of Lebanon as a regional mountain summer resort to one synonymous with a modern city on the Mediterranean, celebrating consumption and beach

culture as a symbol of modernity. Maasri underlines the force of the visual in this conscious endeavour driven by the newly-founded National Council of Tourism in Lebanon, spearheaded by its in-house graphic designer Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui. The role of artists-cum-graphic designers is a recurring theme within the *translocal visuality* Maasri uses as a theoretical framework „to capture the visual dimension of printed matter in transnational circuits of modernism and thus to account for: the movement of printed image-objects; artists, intellectuals and designers; and discourses about art and the realm of the visual, in its aesthetic dimension, as a force-field entangled with politics“ (p. 16).

The entanglement with international politics comes out clearly in Chapter Two, which looks at Beirut-based literary journals during the cultural cold war. A special focus is on the journal *Hiwar* (1962-1966), founded by Palestinian-Syrian poet Tawfiq Sayigh and funded by the Congress of Cultural Freedom which was exposed in 1966 as a covert operation of the CIA. Situating *Hiwar* within the aesthetic discourses and political debates of Arab intellectuals based in Beirut, Maasri shows how the city at the time was aesthetically divided between politically committed art (as represented by the journal *al-Adab*) and a liberal modernist project (as represented by the journals *Shi'r* and *Hiwar*). One of the book's particular strengths lies in its emphasis on the links between the visual arts and the literary spheres, and in showcasing the trajectories of its actors that weave through the narrative. Thus, the figures of poet Yusuf al-Khal and graphic designer Wad-dah Faris, for instance, feature prominently in this chapter and the next, dedicated to the visual economy of „precious books“. Chapter Three links book-making as an aesthetic prac-

¹ Yvonne Albers, *Beirut und die Zeitschrift Mawaqif. Eine arabische Intellektuellengeschichte, 1968-1994*, forthcoming; Sarah Rogers, *Modern Art in Cold War Beirut. Drawing Alliances*, New York 2021.

² „Beirut and the Golden Sixties: A Manifesto of Fragility“ curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fell-rath (25 March - 12 June 2022), https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/berliner-festspiele/programm/bfs-gesamtprogramm/programmdetail_366448.html.

tice to the economy of publishing. It presents the „Series of Precious Books“, *Silsilat al-Nafa'is*, published by the newly established publishing house, Dar an-Nahar (connected to the daily newspaper an-Nahar, who hired Yusuf al-Khal as its editor-in-chief. The six books published in this series are introduced in terms of their visuals as well as contextualized within a modernist project as building a „narrative of civilizational genealogy that can be attributed to the Levant and nevertheless hold world-heritage value“ (p. 118). Coming out of collaborations with some of the leading artists of the time, such as the Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi and Lebanese artist Shafic Abboud, these art books build on the collaborative aesthetic model established in the literary journals.

While the precious book series commodified art as books, the fourth chapter shows efforts to popularize artworks by making them accessible beyond exhibitions and decolonizing aesthetics through graphic design. In a fascinating account, Maasri draws out the transfer of publishing and graphic design expertise from Cairo to Beirut, in particular following Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat's purge of leftist intellectuals and visual artists in the early 1970s. Emblematic of this Cairo-Beirut connection is the graphic designer Helmi el-Touni, whose work this chapter focuses on by highlighting his designs for the Beirut Arabic Book Fair and the Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, which Maasri argues was „symptomatic of the new role Beirut acquired in the 1970s as a political node in transnational Arab publishing“ (p. 154). While some publishers had already left Egypt in the 1960s to escape nationalization under Nasser, after the 1967 War, the rise of the Palestinian Resistance and the relocation of the PLO to Beirut in 1970 the city was further reconfigured as a „radical intellectual and literary node“ (p. 133). This node is at the centre of Chapters Five and Six. Showing to what extent the Palestinian Revolution played out aesthetically in Beirut post-1967, the fifth chapter analyses the printscapes that marked Beirut's public culture and street life. It underlines how print media – primarily posters but also mail art including postage stamps, greeting cards and postcards – became the

main form of solidarity campaigns and to express global protest, with the *fida'i* („freedom fighter“) thematically symbolizing the Palestinian revolutionary struggle. Maasri traces the graphic emergence of the figure of the *fida'i*, which has become such a powerful visual symbol. Other than the aesthetic encapsulation of the *fida'i*, „Arab artists have given visual form to a whole repertoire of shared symbols drawn from post-1967 poetry, literature and song“ (p. 191), some examples of which are presented in the book.

The final chapter looks at radical children's books through the case of the publishing house Dar al-Fata as one node in which Arab networks of solidarity converged. It follows on from the aesthetic intellectual networks between Cairo and Beirut outlined in Chapter Four, and the transnational network of solidarity and the rise of a globalized New Left that had been introduced in Chapter Five. A fascinating project which aimed to „decolonize children's literature in terms of knowledge aesthetics and imagination and to instil a revolutionary consciousness along a pan-Arab subjectivity“ (p. 227), Dar al-Fata worked together with a number of Arab artists such as Youssef Abdelke, Kamal Boullata, Burhan Karkutli and Mohieddine Ellabad, who was its artistic director. Parts of this chapter are repetitive – for instance quoting the historian Fawwaz Traboulsi for using what he coined „Arab Hanoi“ (p. 224), after much of Chapter Five extensively discussed the concept. This leads me to one point of criticism, which is that the re-introduction and repetition of some of the characters and concepts in each chapter makes one wonder if each chapter was conceived as stand-alone, which slightly disrupts the reading flow when reading it as a whole.

All in all, however, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* is a captivating and beautiful read, richly illustrated through both black and white figures throughout the text and colour plates at the centre of the book. The text is interspersed with short vignettes showing the transregional and international trajectories of artists involved in the visual politics of the time, thus bringing to life the regional connections of what made Beirut a cultural and intellectual hub in the long 1960s. It offers a good start-

ing point to dive deeper into these trajectories and look at each of the actors involved – be it people, objects or institutions – in further detail.

Nadia von Maltzahn über Zeina Maasri: *Cosmopolitan Radicalism. The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. Cambridge 2020, in: H-Soz-Kult 29.07.2022.