Writing a history of modern cultural production in the “Arab world,” a region whose modern dimensions have been defined by territorial disputes and militarized borders, often seems to require calling forth a dense history of treaties, wars, military coups, and political reversals. Of these historical markers, the 1967 Naksa— the swift defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of the Israeli Army, rhetorically termed a “setback” in the Arab press (purportedly it was the editor-in-chief of Egypt’s al-Ahram newspaper who devised this euphemism)— tends to figure as the most significant. As both artists and critics have related, the 1967 defeat, and with it the loss of Arab land, the creation of massive refugee groups, and the rapid unraveling of the project of Arab nationalism, altered the social and political landscape for a meaningful artistic practice completely.1 Some intellectuals who have reflected on the change have described how the shocking loss of life and territory rendered modernist aesthetics an illegitimate trifle.2 For this group, it

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1 See Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), for an excellent introduction to the turn toward “radical critique” after 1967.

2 This tendency often comes to the fore as one side of an ongoing debate pitting cultural authenticity (asala) against an imported modernity. A number of recent studies include surveys of the keyword asala and its implications for cultural criticism in the Arab world. See Kassab’s discussion of the 1971 Cairo conference, Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture, which was organized by ALECSO, in Contemporary Arab
became imperative for responsible intellectuals to mobilize their work within a larger oppositional cause so as to rise again against Western imperialism.³ Others suggest that the defeat prompted intellectuals to finally break with the party lines offered by their patron governments, opening to experimental aesthetics and avant-garde attitudes.⁴ Still others begin their narratives at a point between these poles, by discussing the loss of centralized patronage and the shifting terrain of the artistic livelihood in the post-Arabist decade of the 1970s.⁵ No matter the precise details or ideological stakes of each of these narratives, however, all recognize the comprehensiveness of the consequences of the defeat for subsequent artistic expression.

On the whole, the art historians who devote studies to modern and contemporary art in the Arab world have duly incorporated this narrative of rupture into their guiding periodizations, asserting that the magnitude of the Naksa radically altered the Arab aesthetic project, either pushing artists into a private world of abstract form (as has been chronicled in the case of Egypt) or forcing content back onto the canvases of nationally minded artists (as has been chronicled in the case of Syria).⁶ These studies follow both the testimony and the institutional initiatives of artists and intellectuals themselves, many of whom did take specific organizational action. After the 1967 defeat, artists

³ This conviction could often be realized through a turn to art activism, as in the career of Palestinian artist Ismail Shammout. For a quick overview, see Kamal Boullata, *Palestinian Art 1850–2005* (London: Saqi, 2009), particularly chapter 3, “Artists Re-Member Beirut.”


⁵ For the Egyptian national turn to introspection, see ‘Izz al-Din Naguib, *The Social Direction of the Contemporary Egyptian Artist* (Cairo: al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-A’ma lil-Kitab, 1997), and Liliane Karnouk, *Contemporary Egyptian Art* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995). For Syria, see Anæka Lenssen’s article in this issue.

launched numerous new groups and unions with tangential but not defining relationships to their states, citing the defeat as a motivation and announcing the desire to act constructively in the wake of loss. In one prominent example, Dia Azzawi and five other Iraqi artists formed the group New Vision in Baghdad in 1969, articulating a platform of perseverance and commitment to the progressive goals of Arab struggle. Apparently seeking to reclaim the power of pre-1967 hopes for a liberating revolution, their manifesto proclaimed, “We advance. We fall. But we will not retreat. Meanwhile, we present to the world our new vision.”

It is hardly surprising that scholars—and we include ourselves here—have ratified a periodization that posits the 1967 defeat as a point of abrupt discontinuity with the past, a rupture. Art history as a discipline has long situated its objects of study within established historical narratives, citing key political events as a means to correlate a series of breaks with the institution of “art” with a documented sequence of historical change. For example, to treat the “new vision” of Iraqi artists working in Baghdad in 1969 with disciplinary rigor, we would also need to assess the old vision, the one later rejected as undesirable and perhaps even untenable. And yet, in spite of the abundance of the periodizing moments available to the interested historian, the objects and reception histories of modern and contemporary art in Arab countries have only rarely been submitted to the empirical study necessary to yield evidence—procrustean or not—of distinct “before” and “after” periods. Indeed, we might not even have a consensus on the question of what it would take to make a vision “new.” For those of us involved in the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA), the absence of a shared grounds

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7 For example, we may cite the post-1967 initiatives of the Casablanca Group in Morocco, including artists Mohamed Melehi, Farid Belkahia, Mohamed Chebaa, and others, particularly Melehi’s work editing the magazine *Integral* as well as the collective formation of the Moroccan Association of Plastic Arts in 1972. One can also point to the pan-Arab initiative of the General Union of Arab Artists, an umbrella organization conceived by a number of artists based in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon and intended to coordinate the activities of the national unions and associations of professional artists of Arab League member states. From 1971 to 1973, it was the Palestinian Liberation Organization that funded this union scheme and gave it communication support (subsequently Baghdad became the union’s permanent headquarters, and the Iraqi government its primary source of funding).

for recognizing change in the institution of art (as opposed to political institutions) often seemed to hamper our effort to build a scholarly community. At the same time, it clearly presented an opportunity to forge a more reflexive approach to writing the history of contemporary art practices. Eventually, we came to recognize that the protean nature of the field made it possible to identify a different set of coordinates altogether. It became necessary to ask whether the 1967 Naksa in fact generated a rupture in aesthetic sensibilities, subjectivities, and production, or if it was historical narration itself that produced that rupture.

As a way to pose this question to other scholars working in our nascent field, we decided to organize a conference we titled The Longevity of Rupture: 1967 in Art and Its Histories. Our call for papers asked colleagues to return to the epistemological question of how, exactly, we recognize a radical break: If we know that everything changed, how do we know it? Can we document it? See it? Track it? Diagnose it? Deny it? The resulting conference, held in collaboration with the Department of Fine Arts and Art History at the American University of Beirut on June 1 and 2, 2012, brought together scholars from a variety of disciplines and specializations. Presenters worked through specific case studies of an artist's oeuvre (as in Alexandra Seggerman's study of Egyptian artist Gazbia Sirry), examined a rhetorical model of historical or political motion (Angela Harutyunyan and Clare Davies organized a panel around the subject of "withdrawal"), or returned to the visual as the basis for recognizing artistic preoccupations (as in gallerist Saleh Barakat's rich survey of the dozens of individual artistic responses to the 1967 war).

The four articles that follow here represent an expansion of several lines of questioning presented in Beirut. Perhaps unsurprisingly, none recognizes the 1967 defeat as a point of complete discontinuity with the past. Rather, each examines a specific set of rhetorical acts that either asserted a break in spite of continuity or contested the significance of discontinuity altogether. In her article, “Arts Writing in 20th-Century Egypt: Methodology, Continuity, and Change,” Clare Davies details a post-1967 instantiation of an interpretive procedure in which the formal elements of a painting—color, line, shape—become signs of that work’s constitutive relation to a collective and unruptured base in authentic identity. Davies not only tracks the appearance of this dynamic in contemporaneous texts produced by Egyptian artist-critics.
but also critiques its persistent influence even on current scholarly writing about Egyptian art. Anneka Lenssen also adopts the primary source of art criticism as the basis for her article, “The Plasticity of the Syrian Avant-Garde, 1964–1970.” As her analysis of art writing in Damascus newspapers and exhibition catalogues reveals, the adoption of the all-new task of constructive form making that politically committed Syrian artists announced immediately after the defeat in fact retained and reconfigured the formalist values developed within the country’s “decadent” geometric abstractionist movement of the mid-1960s. Next, Saleem Al-Bahloly’s article, “The Persistence of the Image,” provides us with a case study of an artistic strategy for overcoming not only temporal but also geographic and even psychological discontinuity. In his reading of works by Azzawi dedicated to the suffering Palestinian, Al-Bahloly argues that the paintings’ adoption of the imagery of certain traditions of mourning the martyrdom of Husayn effectively reconfigures art into a site for mourning’s communicative transfer, converting parallel experience into shared experience. Finally, Tammer El-Sheikh’s article, “Six Characters and an Anthropologist: Form and Information in Three Works by Hassan Khan,” focuses on a much later suite of pieces: three contemporary, script-driven, and time-based artworks by contemporary Egyptian artist Hassan Khan. El-Sheikh identifies a number of oblique references to Arabist politics in these works, only to then bypass them to argue that the more lasting influence of the 1967 “break” may be the specific kind of cultural politics then emerging in the art world—cultural politics that Khan’s works short-circuit by turning language into merely formal structures of opposition and tentative resolution.

All together, these articles offer us an approach to the writing of the region’s contemporary art history in which the evidence for discontinuity necessarily resides less in the material evidence of new artistic styles than in the “fact” of a pattern of assertions and claims. In other words, the scholars who are represented here commence their studies with the supposition that historical narration produced and in fact reproduces the 1967 rupture. These studies thus deliver us to a new task: to position both our objects of study and our analysis beyond the model of the break.

9 Here, the emphasis on the discontinuous relations between discourses owes a great deal to Michel Foucault, particularly his 1969 study The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).