A group of men sit in a darkened cafe in Amman, Jordan. As they drink and talk, a woman appears on the television mounted to the wall. Dressed in a plain shirt with her hair uncovered, she begins to deliver a speech. The motives behind this address are unclear, as are its style and content. The speaker begins by invoking the United Arab Republic (UAR), a federation between Egypt and Syria that existed only between 1958 and 1961. While her diction is formal and lofty, the speech is oddly repetitive, almost seeming to double back on itself; she invokes terms such as ‘unity’, ‘freedom’, ‘solidarity’, ‘duty’, ‘struggle’ and ‘brotherhood’ as if they were interchangeable, to the point that they begin to erode in meaning. If the cafe’s patrons are paying any attention to this broadcast, and there is no guarantee they are, they are likely wondering why this woman is carrying on in such an anachronistic way about ‘the call of Arab Nationalism’.

This scene describes one presentation of the public performance project Where are the Arabs?, which was staged by the artist Samah Hijawi in 2009 in Jordan and occupied Palestine at various locations, including cafes, public markets and city streets. Hijawi’s address was compiled from speeches by Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who helped orchestrate the founding of the UAR and served as its only premier. Recombining select phrases, Hijawi composed a meta-text, the origins, meaning and function of which would likely have been obscure to her listeners, most of whom were from non-art audiences. Given this uncertainty, the question posed by the work’s title would have generated others (even for those who may have recognised Hijawi’s references): Who are ‘the Arabs’? Why are you asking us, and why now? Who are you to ask?

At first glance, we might take Hijawi’s performance as an example of a steadily increasing interest in the complex history of pan-Arabism. (I use this term to refer both to a political ideology premised on Arab ethnic and cultural unity and to a transnational concatenation that comprised regional alliances, anti-colonial liberation struggles and the tricontinental socialism of the Non-Aligned Movement.) Rejecting the received wisdom of the Western political establishment, which left pan-Arabism for dead decades ago, artists have joined leftist activists and political commentators in returning to these histories, particularly in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. 2

To the extent that this history is known at all outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it is mainly through the figure of Nasser, who helped secure Egypt’s independence and sought to build a regional coalition outside the bipolar system of Cold War geo-politics. 3 Though its roots date back to the early twentieth century, modern pan-Arabism coalesced during a brief period during the 1950s and 60s. Its ascendancy was marked by the 1952 Egyptian Revolution, then the Bandung Conference in 1955 and the Suez Crisis the following year; its crisis was evidenced in the breakup of the UAR and, most symbolically, the widely perceived humiliation of the Six-Day War in 1967.

Andrew Stefan Weiner looks to recent artistic practices as a way to navigate the complex histories of pan-Arabism. for dead decades ago, artists have joined leftist activists and political commentators in returning to these histories, particularly in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring. 2

1 This description is based on project documentation and on correspondence with the artist, beginning in June 2013.
2 As some critics have noted, the idea of an ‘Arab Spring’ displays certain liabilities. Not only was the term inapplicable to related contemporaneous uprisings in non-Arab Middle Eastern countries like Iran and Turkey, it projected a sense of unity and progress onto highly diverse and contested developments, many of which have since devolved into stasis or repression.
Despite its compressed history, pan-Arabism powerfully affected the subsequent development of much of the MENA region. These changes encompassed economic organisation, gender relations, technical media and knowledge production; they also extended to the visual, performing and literary arts, in both their formal and institutional dimensions. While certain strains of pan-Arabism affiliated themselves with the revolutionary tricontinentalism of Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral, others adopted the more nationalist, statist agenda of Ba’athism, which later congealed into the authoritarian despotism of the Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein regimes in Syria and Iraq respectively. Still others sought to combat the secularist, modernising and democratising tendencies of Nasserism, combining fundamentalist theology and oil-export profit in the service of ‘petro-Islam’. Given the vast differences between these models, which made them incompatible in practice and incommensurable in theory, one might question whether it even makes sense to speak of pan-Arabism as a unified, stable entity.

These complications should caution us against reflexively proclaiming the contemporary relevance of pan-Arabism. Such snap judgments have been rife in the wake of the popular uprisings of 2011, as many commentators have hailed the reincarnation of pan-Arabism in the new alliances of the Arab Spring, even while the contradictions and unfulfilled potential of these movements remain largely underanalysed. A parallel dynamic has been evident in contemporary art, where artists from the region have felt pressured to align their work with current developments, thereby guaranteeing its contemporaneity, along with its putatively local, ‘critical’ or authentic character. As several critics have argued, such expectations not only reward a superficially political aesthetics and reify or essentialise ‘the Middle East’, they also serve the interests of the market for global contemporary art, which so efficiently transforms topicality into other forms of currency.

So instead of celebrating the relevance of Hijawi’s project, given its prescient anticipation of subsequent events, we might do better to contemplate its more inquisitive or circumspect tendencies. Where are the Arabs? was not only framed as a question, it also functioned like one, problematising the definition and contemporary relevance of pan-Arabism, along with the relation of aesthetics and politics in the current conjuncture. In surveying a group of practices, all of which bear connections to the heterogeneous histories of pan-Arabism, I will argue that one of their most generative features is their unwillingness to simplify their own relation to the past and present. Rather than seek to totalise or romanticise this complex legacy — whether through nostalgia, left melancholy or some sort of neo-nationalist or cosmopolitan revivalism — these artists address its failures, compromises and contradictions, refusing to isolate its potential from its problems. As this essay seeks to show, such practices don’t presume authority over their own historicity, but rather position themselves as situated, contingent and, to some extent, heteronomous, or open to external determination. Although this approach is not in itself unique, and neither are the formal strategies adopted by these artists, what results is a body of work in which seemingly familiar tropes enable distinctive,
generative modes of inquiry. If such ventures demand our attention today, it is not because they are 'contemporary' but precisely because they resist such automatic, instrumental designations; their urgency cannot be translated into a slogan or a sales pitch.

Projects like Where are the Arabs? might initially read like analogies to the better-known work of Western artists like Sharon Hayes, or as localised examples of a more global interest in re-enactment. However, to view Hijawi's work in these terms would miss its most crucial element, namely, its engagement with the politics of what might be called the post-pan-Arab public sphere. Urban spaces like the ones in which Hijawi intervened, which became crucial sites of struggle during the occupations of the Arab Spring, are traversed by historically and culturally distinct determinants. These include Islamic doxa governing decorum and representation, along with the use of mosques as collective spaces; the legacy of colonial powers, which often used urban planning as a technology of control; the accelerated modernisation of the post-War era; the restrictions on speech and assembly imposed by authoritarian regimes; and the neoliberal tendencies toward privatisation and speculative development.9

Within this context, Hijawi's reanimation of Nasser's rhetoric would have meant something quite different than it did as a video screened in contemporary art spaces, its other incarnation.10 By invoking a moment when pan-Arab power was ascendant, her address established an awkward contrast to the widespread anomie and discontent that preceded the 2011 uprisings.11 This tension was amplified by her choice of title: a phrase typically associated with the perceived hopelessness of the Palestinian cause, and commonly uttered by commentators on satellite TV networks such as Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya. Yet however unsettling such effects may have been — and no matter how

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10 Video documentation of the piece has been shown in venues including Abu Dhabi Art and MoMA PS1 in New York.
11 The reference to Nasser would have also invoked his role as a privileged object of popular veneration. For discussion of Egyptian nationalism and vernacular memory, see Mériam Belli, An Incurable Past: Nasser’s Egypt Then and Now, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2013.
much they would have been amplified by the sight of a young woman in modern dress speaking for Arabs as an outdated or fictitious nation — their ultimate goal was neither agitational nor utopian.

The event instead sought to exemplify what Hijawi calls ‘critical citizenship’: aesthetico-political activities that test the boundaries of acceptable conduct. In Jordan, this meant acquiring permits for a non-existent film project so as to subvert the restrictions on public assembly enforced by the state security apparatus, bans that originated with the Jordanian monarchy’s efforts to sideline Palestinian activists. In suspending her performance amidst art, ‘film’ and non-art, and by experimenting with different presentation strategies — the artist delivered her address solemnly on some occasions and ironically on others, and also invited audience members to perform the speech themselves — Hijawi reactivated public space as a forum for alternative modes of collective appearance, political intelligibility and dissensus.

This intensive, quasi-structural engagement with the intersection between politics and aesthetics connects Hijawi’s interventions with the massive popular uprisings that began in Tunisia not long thereafter. As various theorists have argued, the demonstrations of the Arab Spring refused the perceptual norms of politics as usual. Instead they staged the demand of a broad coalition of disempowered groups to appear in public and as the public. Part of what made this demand revolutionary was that it altered the very conditions under which politics could happen: everything from signs, slogans and spokespeople to the spatio-temporal coordinates of public appearance or the meaning of bodily vulnerability. (Such a politics was by no means limited to leftist or secularist factions, as was made painfully clear in August 2014 in the Egyptian military’s brutal crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood encampments in Cairo, during which thousands were killed.)


13 Ibid.

Unfortunately, if not surprisingly, many commentators have neglected the problematic aspects of this transformation in order to herald the emancipatory powers of new technologies. In its most simplified ideological version, the story of the Facebook and/or Twitter Revolution, such discussion combines technological determinism with a willful ignorance of the pivotal role played by trade unions, student organisers and political Islam. Even more nuanced accounts tend to overlook the ways in which the archival dimension of technical media occasions an altered relation to history and to the experience of temporality. As the artists Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme have argued, these changes introduce a decisive contradiction: even as new technologies have had radically democratising effects — most paradigmatically through mobile phone documentation and ‘citizen journalism’ — they have so increased the scale of archival production as to produce a kind of collective amnesia.

Within such a conjuncture, artists have been able to find new pertinence in the tropes of archival research. Although such ‘exhibitions of research’ may seem to tap into a conventionalised and generically international post-conceptualism, on closer inspection they reveal a very contemporary urge to gain a historical perspective in the midst of incessant crises. One example is Céline Condorelli’s 2012 installation White Gold, the title of which refers to its subject, the Egyptian cotton industry, the ups and downs of which track the vicissitudes of independent Egypt and of Nasserist pan-Arabism more broadly. As the political economist Samir Amin has demonstrated, the cotton industry, which was once the basis for Egypt’s dependent role in the system of colonial capitalism, was nationalised and industrialised in the 1950s; it was then touted as a kind of showcase for the virtues of planned economies in the non-aligned South. According to Amin, the gradual and much-lamented decline of Egyptian cotton was brought about by the dictates of global institutions like the International Monetary
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Fund and the World Trade Organization, which made assistance contingent upon the privatisation of agriculture. Elsewhere, and in much the same fashion, the popular-socialist economic reforms that were so essential to the Bandung project have been unwound in a process of *re-compradorisation* that enriches local elites while exacerbating North-South inequalities.

For her installation, Condorelli exhibited objects pertaining to this history in purpose-built display modules, which were partially concealed behind a theatrical curtain printed with a composite image of Egyptian cotton fields circa 1930, itself made of Egyptian cotton. At a moment of widespread optimism following the events of the Arab Spring, Condorelli’s installation not only gestured toward the crisis of Nasserism, it also positioned itself directly within this history. If this move suggested that art can only operate from within a position of historical determination, the semi-opaque, scrim-like appearance of the curtain made clear that such a relation has to be understood in terms of incomplete access and partial knowledge.

A second model of archival engagement is Marwa Arsanios’s ongoing project concerning *Al-Hilal* (*The Crescent*), a prominent Egyptian cultural magazine closely linked to Nasserism. *Al-Hilal* was founded in 1892, during a period of cultural modernisation. Nationalised under Nasser, it became an important venue for debates among leftists over regional policy, religious reform and the role of intellectuals and artists. Its considerable influence as a forum for pan-Arabism stemmed in part from its connection to Cairo, which was by that point not only the centre for transnational alliances in the region, but also a hub connecting Middle Eastern nations with their pan-African counterparts and with the broader development of the Non-Aligned Movement.\(^{18}\) Arsanios has sought to counter the nostalgia that tends to inform memory of the publication’s 1960s heyday, instead scrutinising its contradictions through public programmes at independent art spaces such as 98 Weeks in Beirut and Contemporary Image Collective in Cairo. (Events have been devoted to discussion of the essentialist or xenophobic aspects of pan-Arabism, the movement’s expansionistic or even colonial tendencies, the modernisation of Islam and the patriarchal bias often operative within state-promoted ‘feminism’.\(^{19}\)) In a series of artworks across different media, Arsanios has developed this critique in aesthetic form by using back issues of *Al-Hilal* as plastic material, fashioning shredded pages into sculptural garments and constructing ‘re-edits’ of the magazine through collage.

In her most intriguing work to date, the video *Have You Ever Killed a Bear or Becoming Jamila* (2013–14), Arsanios creates a montage of shots of an *Al-Hilal* cover depicting an armed female soldier with a narrative involving a young actress auditioning to play the role of Jamila Bouhired, the Algerian militant who was sentenced to death for a bomb attack on French soldiers (an incident that was dramatised in Gilles Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*). Even as Bouhired’s image seems to conjure the possibility of a specifically feminist pan-Arabism, which largely failed to materialise in practice, it speaks from within a present split between the recuperative power of radical chic, the foreclosed aspirations of militant cinema and the troubling allure of political violence.

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\(^{18}\) Cairo’s importance is evident in a series of conferences it hosted during the Nasser era, including the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference (1957), the All-African People’s Conference (1961) and the Afro-Asian Women’s Conference (1961).

While a stylised ambivalence or opacity is a default mode for contemporary art, works like those discussed above force us to ask how such familiar forms of affect can mean or do something qualitatively different. Given the paradoxical situation in which artists may feel compelled — or are even expected — to represent a history that they did not themselves experience, it is perhaps not surprising that many have chosen a more oblique approach. One compelling example is Iman Issa’s series Material (2010–12), a group of ten displays that combine sculptural elements with looped video, sound and wall texts. The individual titles, each of which begins with the phrase Material for a sculpture..., distance the viewer from what she might assume she sees: despite their poised appearance, these are not finished sculptures or even maquettes but merely raw materials for a proposed work. This estranging effect extends to the works’ titles, which make distorted allusions to the rhetoric of national memory, for example Material for a sculpture representing a monument erected in the spirit of defiance of a larger power, or Material for a sculpture acting as a testament to a nation’s pioneering development and continuing decline.
This attenuated, provisional relation between the work and its subject derives from its method of production, which originated with Issa’s interest in monuments like those she knew growing up in Egypt. Many belonged to earlier eras and seemed not just outdated but artificial, examples of what she calls a ‘discarded language’. Withholding the actual identity of these monuments — some but not all of which pertain to modern pan-Arabism — Issa set out to decompose them. Transforming these components through associative processes, she then reassembled them into quasi-abstract, hybrid assemblages that read as transpositions or parodies of monumental aesthetics, evoking obelisks, classical statuary and international abstraction.

As a whole, Material is at once vivid, perplexing, meditative and sobering. In part this reflects Issa’s refined approach to facture and her poetic attention to the gnomic meanings generated by the juxtaposition of simple objects: scissors and dice, mirrors and thread. But it also pertains to the peculiar tensions mobilised by the displays, with their ambivalent appeals to obsolete, compromised or inaccessible histories. By concealing the information that would guarantee their presumed authenticity or recognisability, Issa seems to suggest that any engagement with history should begin with its alterity, whether to us or even to itself, and that a politics of memory must somehow balance imagination with restraint.

A second example of this more indirect approach is Abbas and Abou-Rahme’s ongoing project The Incidental Insurgents (2012–present), a multi-format inquiry into the history of fringe radicalism in France, Mexico and Palestine. The various components of the piece outline an elliptical narrative that comprises four subjects: a circle of anarchists in early twentieth-century Paris; the Palestinian outlaw Abu Jilideh, who was hanged in 1934 for crimes against the British Mandate regime; the semi-fictional avant-garde of ‘Visceral Realist’ writers described in Roberto Bolaño’s 1998 novel The Savage Detectives; and two unnamed men who travel through contemporary occupied Palestine.

My account of Issa’s process is derived from email correspondence and personal conversations with the artist in June 2015.


Abbas and Abou-Rahme have explained that the impulse behind the project stemmed from their experience of the 2011 uprisings as 'a moment of simultaneous hope and despair'. Motivated by the conviction that existing leftist narratives were untenable, the pair started researching instances of what they called a 'different political imaginary': threshold moments in which hegemonic conditions of appearance and action could be contested by marginal actors. As the work’s title suggests somewhat enigmatically, such action is in a crucial sense incidental: it happens through action but away from recognised centres and with a degree of chance. Figures like the Bonnot Gang, Abu Jildeh and the Visceral Realists all occupy a shadowy territory that mixes aesthetics, politics and legend. They were all to varying degrees cult figures as outlaws; they are also, crucially, in some sense emblems of failure (whether tragic or not is open to interpretation).

What distinguishes The Incidental Insurgents is the way it mobilises romantic figures and narratives — the desperado, the martyr, the doomed revolution — only to deploy them toward critical ends. These materials are useful not just as object lessons in the failures of left struggles, but as examples of the biased ways in which these movements narrate their own histories. In the case of Abu Jildeh, Abbas and Abou-Rahme began by identifying a discrepancy between his status as a folk hero, whether in the British Mandate era or on the Palestinian communist left in the 1970s, and his absence from more recent accounts. Working across both official and informal archives and conducting interviews with Palestinian villagers, including Abu Jildeh’s grandson, the artists frame the outlaw as a cipher for class tensions within the Palestinian people. By doing so they mean not just to complicate popular memory, in which Palestinians are often cast as heroes or martyrs for the pan-Arab cause; they also mean to implicate the past and present elites, many of them affiliated with the Palestinian Authority, who have stood to benefit from Israeli settler colonialism. Even as Insurgents exemplifies a kind of archival activism in recovering a marginalised history, the project scrutinises the cultural politics — born in the Nasser era but still influential — that seeks to further private interests while claiming the Palestinian problem as the moral responsibility of the international Arab community.

Against this often-cynical universalism, which would seem to merely invert the sort of utopian cosmopolitanism of the revolutionary outlaw, Insurgents develops a model of transversal, non-identitarian solidarity. This stance is realised in the project’s references; it alludes, for example, to cooperation between the Palestinian Communist Party and the revolutionary anti-Zionist Israeli collective Matzpen. It is further elaborated in the work’s form, which uses unsourced citations and associative montage to address its audience from a position that is mobile, deterritorialised and untethered to the essentialist foundationalism of identity politics. The unexplained restlessness of the present-day protagonists suggests a confrontation with the impossible injunction to acknowledge the determinations of the past. Ultimately, it is as if this condition itself were the law that the work’s protagonists have rebelled against. Rather than glorifying this rejection, Abbas and Abou-Rahme propose to critically rethink it, and to do so in a way that asks us to reconsider our roles as historical and political subjects.

Where we might desire a confirmation of our beliefs or the fulfilment of our political fantasies, instead we find obligations, questions and unexpected forms of pathos. In this sense, we might say that Insurgents speaks for the larger field of practices surveyed above, all of which refuse to be content with facile declarations of contemporaneity. Instead, such works insist that art must not only think critically about the claims of the past upon its present; it must also strive to grasp its own heteronomy: its constitution through forces that depart from art’s idealised image of its own liberal, secular, cosmopolitan freedom. It is only through committing itself to such critique that art can preserve the possibility of new forms of solidarity, rising towards a future that remains only partially determined.

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