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BECOMING AN EGYPTIAN ARTIST

“Freethinking” in the Mainstream

Education opened the door for many things. Education is like an old man. His son cannot reach the handle of the door. So the old man opens the door for his son and lets him go. In this way, the college I went to opened the door for me, and I just ran through it.

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NEARLY EVERY DAY, with a bag full of books and art supplies slung over her shoulder, Manal Amin walked to the subway station from her family’s brick and cement apartment building in a crowded Cairo neighborhood. After a twenty-minute trip and another ride on a packed microbus, she arrived at her arts college in Zamalek—an elite neighborhood in the center of the city dominated by neoclassical Italian and French architecture. At the college, she often met with her many friends. Like her, they were graduates of the college later appointed as teaching assistants while working on their Ph.D.’s. In the faculty room and out in the courtyard, they laughed, gossiped, and had heated debates over cups of tea. Someone often made a run for fava bean or falafel sandwiches to feed the crowd.

Manal’s day did not end after classes. She regularly criss-crossed Liberation Square, the center of downtown Cairo, for various meetings, events, or errands related to her career as an artist. Sometimes she had appointments with reporters or gallery owners. If she was not giving an interview, dropping off pictures, picking up her cut of a sale, or arranging a date for her next gallery show, one might find Manal running to drop off a piece of art for a government exhibition deadline or picking up an application to enter a state-run competition. She also made trips to the big market in ‘Ataba, where an artist could get just about any supplies needed. If there were no evening roundtables on art being held at the galleries, or no opening receptions, she might head back to

the coffee shops near galleries downtown, or to the studio of a friend. Again, with a tea and a few laughs, they would catch up on the latest news. I often rode home with Manal on the subway after these long days. Glancing at her watch frequently, she would often joke that she was going to get in trouble because she was expected home by ten. My stop was just before hers. As we kissed each other's cheeks to say goodbye, I would worry that she would have to deal with her brother's rebuke when she stepped in the door—envious as he was of her education and success. But I would also be completely amazed at her energy. For I knew that she was also going home to help out with the household chores, and then she would stay up late into the night doing her art—only to wake up the next morning and run from place to place with her heavy bag again.

To be an artist in Egypt was not just to make art. It was, fundamentally, to be part of different sets of social relations. It was to discuss with friends matters such as the best way to glue paper to wood, who received the latest government prize, who was selling work to foreigners and rich Egyptians, and what made some art “Egyptian” and some art not. It was also to spend significant time meeting with critics and curators, documenting one's work and buying supplies for it, preparing for shows and entering competitions, and teaching and studying. And it was to be a contributing member of a family whose members often knew very little about the visual arts.

How did someone like Manal Amin become an artist? She comes from a family of laborers and craftspeople, who possess vocational degrees at most. Her father makes decent money, and they live well enough, but they are not rich, and she was not brought up with knowledge of the art world. She grew up in a “popular” (*sha'bi*) neighborhood of petty traders, mechanics, drivers, and the unemployed. When I met her, most young Egyptian women her age were already married with children.

Like Manal, the vast majority of practicing artists in Egypt at the time of my fieldwork came from modest backgrounds in which they had little or no exposure to modern art. Egypt's population was nearly seventy million. Of that number, a mere 5,000 were members of the Syndicate of Plastic Artists, and there were a small number of artists who were not members. How, then, did one come to such a unique career in a place like Egypt, and from backgrounds like these? How did an individual find out about the arts, and then decide to pursue art as a career, amidst a population primarily preoccupied with making ends meet? And how did one learn what it means to be an artist in such a place?

To begin answering these questions, I start this study with an analysis of how the categories of art and artist were constructed, legitimated, and reproduced in Egypt. As sociologists and anthropologists of art have long argued, becoming an artist anywhere, Egypt included, is not solely a matter of doing art (see, e.g., Firth 1951; Forge 1967; Myers 2002; Wolff 1981; Zolberg 1990). A person has to learn what art is and how to do it. What an artist makes has to be considered as art by a larger community of artists and critics, and the art and the artist usually have to be integrated into this community and credentialed by its institutions. Howard Becker (1982), drawing on Arthur Danto (1964), has described this constellation of groups and institutions as an art world and showed that it is the art world that classifies certain objects as “art” and certain persons as “artists.” Pierre Bourdieu (1993) also writes against the “transhistoric or ahistoric essence” that is often used to explain what art is or to assign it value. Instead, he argues that both art and artists are produced through a field of cultural production that strives towards autonomy (within the larger field of power), which emerged in late nineteenth-century France.¹

These insights into the production of the categories of art and artists can be applied to places other than those usually studied by such prominent theorists. In this book, for example, I find the concepts of the “art world” and the “field” extremely helpful for understanding how Egyptian art is made through constellations of social groups and institutions, and through the struggles and battles that characterize fields in the Bourdieuan sense (*le champ*). But the specific content of Euro-American-derived theories of art and artists—about how art worlds work, how artistic fields are constructed and reproduced, what counts as art, and who is considered an artist—does not always fit my material, because the historical development of artistic fields differs from place to place (even within the “West”), and, as studies in ethnoaesthetics have shown, cultural understandings of what constitutes art and artists also vary (see, e.g., Carpenter 1971; d’Azevedo 1973; Fernandez 1971). Although there were some similarities between certain Egyptian and Western ideologies of the artist, and between the field of artistic production in Egypt and that analyzed by Bourdieu in France, there were also key differences, which need to be explicated here so that the rest of this book makes sense. These differences raise serious questions about the imposition of Euro-American-derived concepts of art’s autonomy and related ideologies of the individual artist as genius and/or rebel. These questions are particularly important in contexts, like Egypt,

where the field of power has been permeated by colonial and feudal relations, patronage relations of a (quasi) socialist state, and struggles for advantage in the hybrid command–free market economy among military and bureaucratic elites, nouveaux riches, and the old aristocracy. At some level as well, the disjunctures between my analysis and those working on western European or American contexts should cause us to question how the concepts or mechanics of autonomy, as well as ideologies of the individual artist, come to be assumed to be true or universal in the first place, even in the “West.” To what extent are autonomy and the oppositional artist ideals in London or New York, for example, and just how much and when are these ideals realized?²

Partha Chatterjee (1995) and others writing about the formation of disciplines in colonized or formerly colonized places emphasizes the disjunctive processes in which certain concepts and practices (like modern art) were or are translated—through specific institutions—in ways that produce(d) “difference” and claims to difference. As I show in this chapter, the idea of the modern artist as translated in Egypt was one of a freethinking individual, but also a member of mainstream society—*not* an oppositional or critical malcontent. Thus, Egyptian artists have not emphasized the “rebel artist” strand in Euro-American ideologies of the artist, which is related to concepts of individualist personhood that are the hallmark of capitalist societies (see, e.g., Clark 1984; Guilbault 1983; Zolberg 1990). Artists in Egypt did cast themselves as especially inquisitive, cultured, and productive. For them, art was a means of individual expression, but it was also a way to become respectable elite members of their society and contributors to their nation. They have thus largely eschewed the idea that artists should adopt unorthodox lifestyles. Furthermore, they have not positioned art as totally divorced from utility or from the “praxis of life” (Bürger 1984), thus countering those Euro-American ideologies of art that depend heavily on Kantian formulations of an autonomous aesthetic characterized by disinterest. Finally, the process of becoming an artist in Egypt was also one of acquiring a middle-class subjectivity that embraced religion in private life, the acquisition of consumer goods, and a heterosexual, married lifestyle. In Europe, the rise of bourgeois society may have spurred artists’ public derision of such subjectivities and catalyzed the concept of autonomy in general (Bourdieu 1993; Bürger 1984; Eagleton 1990), but in Egypt—where capitalist relations have been differently intertwined with colonialism, socialism, and neoliberalism—there has been no such one-to-one correlation between the bourgeois and autonomy.

It is important that the different formulations of autonomy and the artist in Egypt need not necessarily be read as a kind of incomplete modernization, contradictory modernity, or as evidence that Egyptians are working towards notions of complete autonomy and the oppositional artist in the first place (cf. Canclini 1995).³ Indeed, the categories of art and artists were not subject to wholesale transference from Europe to Egypt, and European-derived notions of the progress to autonomy were not the only ones available. Rather, in both locations, they have been the result of ongoing processes of translation, in which arts interlocutors reckon with locally and globally circulating genealogies of the “modern artist” and “modern art.”

This chapter examines the various ways in which certain Egyptians, like Manal Amin, came to practice art in this culturally specific way. It analyzes how they became functioning, productive members of a society in which little was known about their careers, and in which there were certain expectations of them as adult men and women. I focus on art education because art colleges were the most common contexts in which the categories of art and artist were produced and learned.⁴ I consider a number of educational themes, including the history of higher education in Egypt; entrance to art school; peer activities; curricula and pedagogy; student aspirations; and relations between students and teachers. Each of these aspects reveals a crucial part of how one became an artist, as well as an Egyptian, in the latter half of the twentieth century, and my analysis of them thus lays the groundwork for understanding the major dynamics in Egyptian artistic life that I discuss throughout the rest of the book. This chapter also introduces the reader to remarkable men and women who devoted themselves to the visual arts and intellectual life, despite its virtual promise of continued economic struggle and social invisibility, after starting out as the sons and daughters of homemakers, factory workers, craftspeople, minor civil servants, small shopkeepers, schoolteachers, or even farmers.

By taking the reader through the trajectory of how a person becomes an Egyptian artist, I hope to convey a sense of these artists’ social lives and the kinds of things that were important to them as artists in a particular place and time. For example, becoming an artist was inseparable from becoming an adult middle-class member of Egyptian society and a good Muslim or Christian, yet one who did not advocate religious bases for politics. Similarly, being an artist meant recognizing the national space and place of Egypt as a source of artistic inquiry, and individual and cultural authenticity as a framework

for evaluating art. Ultimately, I suggest that art-making in Egypt contributed to the creation of secular-oriented national subjects.

Being both an artist and an adult member of Egyptian society were not always easily reconcilable. To be an Egyptian artist was to manage a set of values (and tensions) produced through the history of colonialism and nationalism. Most artists wanted to be true to themselves and to their cultural background while pursuing a career in a field that was widely recognized to be a foreign import. They also wanted to be useful members of a society in which technology and science were valued over art. And many artists wanted to be connected to or participate in everyday life, while pursuing a career with elitist associations. The effects of these tensions, and how artists tried to resolve them in a post-Cold War world of neoliberal “reforms,” are the subject of this book. Here, I examine how these dominant values that structured artistic practice were developed and inculcated, and how models for resolving specific postcolonial intellectual dilemmas were imparted to young men and women as they learned to become Egyptian artists.

BEFORE ART SCHOOL: THE ARTS IN EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

I began my first interview with Manal Amin with a question that I asked many artists when the tape started rolling: “So how did you become an artist?” Like many others, Amin began by telling me about her studies in art school: “I am a graduate of the college, and now I am a teaching assistant there, in the painting department. This gave me a chance to be directly in the art field.” The focus on state higher education in these interview responses signals its centrality to artists’ presentation of themselves, and to the process of becoming an artist in Egypt. That state higher education was the main avenue by which most Egyptians became artists was likely due to the fact that, outside of school, there was very little exposure to the visual arts in Egyptian society.⁵ Indeed, nearly half of the artists I knew said that they had not known what the visual arts were until they attended art school. If one did not have a parent who was an artist or taught art, there were limited opportunities for exposure to or training in the arts. Indeed, many Egyptians gained their primary, if not sole, exposure to modern art through their enrollment in a state-run art college. This enrollment was determined by a tracking system, as described below.

Television was one place where those with no other connection to the visual arts might learn something about them. There were two half-hour art

programs on the Cairo stations every week. But at the time of my fieldwork, one was on during the late afternoon, when people are usually having lunch or taking naps, and the other often aired at the same time as the extremely popular early evening soap operas. These soap operas and some films occasionally had artist characters,⁶ and artists sometimes appeared on talk shows. Arabic-language newspapers had arts pages or columns, but many Egyptians were illiterate or did not regularly read newspapers.

Outside of these occasional media appearances of art and artists, the main avenue for exposure to the visual arts was elementary and secondary school education. Sometimes students in Cairo or major provincial towns were taken on field trips to museums or cultural centers where there were paintings on the walls. But more often, exposure came in art class. Drawing was part of the national public school curriculum, and elementary children took it yearly either from a specialized art teacher or from an instructor of another subject who doubled as an art teacher. The classes focused on drawing techniques, and artists informed me that discussion of art as a career or of modern art as a movement was rare. Those children that made it to the eighth grade were tracked either into a three-year high school or into a vocational school, depending on their grades and interests. Those who attended industrial vocational schools were sometimes required to take drawing courses, particularly if they concentrated in mechanical drawing or in decoration (*zakhrufa*, e.g., decorative wood carving, calligraphy, Islamic designs). Alternatively, those who were tracked into high school were steered into either science (*ulum*) or the humanities (*adab*), with the science track requiring higher grades. Art classes continued only for those tracked into the humanities. Thus, after the eighth grade, the majority of the population (who had continued after elementary school) ceased to learn about art in any formal way. People who did continue on and became artists, then, were choosing an especially unusual career in their society. Manal Amin's words convey the distance that many people came to feel when they chose this career, little known to their families:

My family feels that art is something they cannot grasp. Now I am doing my Ph.D., and my relatives do not understand how I did not finish studying yet. They do not realize that this is my job. They cannot grasp the concept of a girl who is still studying and has not started a home and family yet, and who attends conferences and meetings until 10 at night. They ask why I can't do this in the morning. It is very hard to explain to them. When I try to explain modern art

to some people, they think that I should be drawing a portrait of them. All they think about is gardens, trees, or flowers. This is their way of thinking. You cannot explain everything to them.⁷

In a similar vein, her colleague Ahmad Mahmud said that his father had not understood his son's profession until he went to the latter's first exhibition. Seeing the crowds of people, cameras, and ribbon-cutting, he said to his son, "I had no idea that what you did was so important!"⁸

THE PATH TO ART SCHOOL:

MODERN EGYPTIAN EDUCATION AND THE CATEGORY OF THE ARTIST

Not only was the path to art school an unusual one, especially for Egyptians from families who were less formally educated. It was also highly regulated according to a centralized and ranked testing and college admittance system. This system also shows us the middling status accorded to the visual arts in Egyptian society at large. In the final year of high school, students across the country prepared for a comprehensive nationwide exam in either the sciences or humanities. Exam scores corresponded to a ranked list of colleges of different specialties (e.g., pharmacy, commerce, law) and largely determined the career that one would be trained for. In addition to preparing for the big exam, students could choose to take smaller skills tests that they might need to enter a particular college, such as a skills test in drawing that was needed for admission to the arts colleges. Artists told me that students often took as many of these skills tests as they could to maximize their college choices.

Ministry of Higher Education college rankings clearly suggest which professions carry the most social status and which are deemed most beneficial to the nation. Medical and engineering schools are ranked the highest overall, followed by other colleges related to science and technology.⁹ At the time of my fieldwork, art schools were ranked just below the national median and shared their rankings with other faculties. The College of Applied Arts in Cairo, with its focus on technology, required the highest score out of all of the art schools and was usually ranked near the levels of the schools of engineering. The colleges of fine arts (in Alexandria, Cairo, and Minya) were ranked behind applied arts and shared their rank with colleges of commerce. The College of Art Education was ranked just below the fine arts schools, at the same level as other faculties of education (*kuliat al-tarbiya*).

This system of centralized exams and ranked entrance into secondary

school and university is intertwined with the history of European colonialism and Egyptian nation-building. British and French test-driven and ranked educational systems were developed in the nineteenth century in large measure to feed the ranks of the civil service of the colonial government. It is not incidental, then, that this system “took root” in Egypt during the tenure of Lord Cromer, the British consul-general and agent in Egypt from 1883 to 1907 (Reid 1991:111). One of the explicit aims of the educational reforms of the British-controlled local government was to staff the local civil service (Starrett 1998:31).

The emphasis on techno-scientific education in the testing and ranking system is also part of the history of nation-building. In the mid nineteenth century, some forty years before the British cemented their occupation of Egypt, the Ottoman ruler Muhammad Ali opened many technical and scientific schools, including a school of arts and industry, which at various times taught draftsmanship, machinery, and instrument-making (Heyworth-Dunne 1938). His aim was to develop the Egyptian province by making it on par with Europe both militarily and industrially (see Hourani 1983; Starrett 1998:26–27). This educational emphasis on science and technology received another boost nearly one hundred years later, when Nasser sought to build an independent, modern state after the 1952 revolution. Professionals in these fields were in high demand as the government embarked on many technological projects (such as the Aswan High Dam) in order to “modernize” the nation. The Coordinating Office was set up to distribute students among various faculties according to their scores on the new national exam. Donald Reid’s history of Cairo University (1991) indicates what happened to the liberal arts in this period of technological development. The liberal arts ranked ninth in prestige out of twelve major fields in 1957 but had fallen to eleventh by 1976.¹⁰ The high social status given to doctors, scientists, and engineers, which translated into the high rankings of their colleges, thus went hand in hand with the techno-scientific nature of the state’s post-independence nation-building.

The prestige and government support accorded to techno-scientific fields throughout modern Egyptian history has not developed unopposed, however. Reid (1991) discusses the development of a major tension that has continued to dominate educational philosophy and policy. It is found in a set of debates among educational theorists over whether or not universities should produce technicians or liberal humanists. Well before the revolution, major thinkers such as Taha Husayn (at one point the minister of education) had argued for an emphasis on liberal humanism in education, and the first Egyptian uni-

versity was based on this philosophy. These thinkers were highly influenced by French liberal thought and by European high culture in general, and they were criticized after the revolution for belonging to the *ancien régime*. They countered by arguing that the Nasserist reforms, especially the emphasis on technical pedagogy, were throwbacks to the educational policies of the British. Despite the accusations that he was an elitist, Taha Husayn had long supported the establishment of free and open education in Egypt, and this idea was implemented by Nasser in 1962, when he declared university education “a right, not a privilege.”¹¹

The complex history of education that I have abridged here is reflected in the historical development of art colleges. Accounts of the beginning of modern art in Egypt often open with the founding of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908 by Prince Yusif Kamal, who was greatly impressed by the fine arts schools that he had visited in France and Italy and decided that Egypt also needed an art school in order to be a modern, civilized nation, according to ‘Asim al-Disuqi (1995). A French sculptor resident in Egypt is said to have persuaded him to open the school.¹² Prince Yusif paid for everything (including tuition) until 1927, when he turned the school over to a government ministry. This school eventually became Cairo’s College of Fine Arts, making it the oldest institution of its kind in the Arab Middle East. It was also very much ahead of its time, offering free higher education fifty-four years before the rest of the colleges in the country. The prince’s philosophy—that arts were necessary for a civilized society—was in accordance with the liberal humanism of the intellectuals I have discussed. Later, in the 1930s, colleges and institutes of applied arts and art education began to be formed, representing the techno-scientific emphasis of the growing nationalist movement.

While interaction with Europe influenced Egyptian art education, the colonial experience did not completely determine how the category of “the artist” would be constructed at the end of the twentieth century. The history and structure of education in modern Egypt helped shape this category in three main ways. First, choice played a limited role in determining which Egyptians went to art college. Experiences like that of the accomplished painter and installation artist Hanan ‘Atiyya, who had known very little about art until she placed into the rank of the art colleges, were quite common:

In all honesty, I didn’t know anything about the fine arts at all. I liked to draw in grade school [like everyone else]. But I wanted to go to the College of