

# There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata

Finbarr Barry Flood, ed. *There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata* Munich: Hirmer, 2019. 488 pp.; 224 color ill. Cloth \$39.95 (9783777432434)

*There Where You Are Not: Selected Writings of Kamal Boullata* brings together an impressive collection of texts by Palestinian artist, critic, theorist, poet, and writer Kamal Boullata (1942–2019). Born in Jerusalem, Boullata was first trained by icon painter Khalil Halabi before graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome and the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, DC. Though Boullata is known in the international art scene for his colorful, geometric abstract paintings and silkscreens inspired by Arab calligraphy and traditional Palestinian textiles, his many other facets, such as his theoretical legacy and broad scholarly interests, are revealed in this anthology. Through English translations of a selection of his essays, this book makes Boullata's written oeuvre, originally in Arabic and in most cases previously unpublished, accessible to a wider audience. It remains relatively rare in Western academia to dedicate such an imposing volume to the scholarship of an artist and intellectual who originates from the so-called global margins.

Elegantly introduced by Finbarr Barry Flood, the volume is the fruit of a collaboration between Flood and Boullata nurtured by friendship, intellectual exchange, and mutual interests spanning the fields of Islamic and contemporary art. The book's division into thematic chapters facilitates reading the essays, which encompass autobiography, criticism, theory, history, and poetry. In addition to reproducing a large number of the artist's silkscreens, paintings, and sketches, this richly illustrated publication includes examples of decorative elements from iconic monuments, including the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, and the Alhambra palace in Granada, as well as a number of works by contemporary artists from the Arab world. Each of these images was carefully selected by Boullata to illustrate his reflections on art and politics, Arab modernism and aesthetics, Islamic art and abstraction, Orientalism, belonging, and globalization.

Published in the year of Boullata's passing, this collection is an homage not only to his role as an artist but also to his importance as a theoretician. By focusing on his writings, this book constitutes a pendant to another volume (*Uninterrupted Fugue*, ed. Burcu Dogramaci, Hirmer, 2019) centered on the artist's visual legacy through a series of critical essays about Boullata's art by scholars and critics. Although he did not have the chance to see the final version in print, Boullata's contribution to the aesthetic choices in *There Where You Are Not* almost

qualifies it as an example of his book art.

While the book's title refers to one of Boullata's final essays, which appears in this volume and was written during his tenure as an Institute for Advanced Study Fellow in Berlin in 2014 (48–59), *There Where You Are Not* also points to the author's experience of exile, embodying the realities of displacement, loss, and remembrance. In June 1967, after the Six-Day War (between Israel and the bordering states of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt), Boullata, residing in Beirut at the time, was denied the right to return to his birth city. A year later he left for the United States, after having lived in Morocco, France, and Germany. Written over the course of almost half a century during his multiple journeys, this book's essays express the constant shifts and dislocations between the self and the other and the necessities of resistance. In his essay "The View from No-Man's Land" (1992), he describes the rupture following the loss of his homeland: "I had been declared an 'outsider' in my place of birth and was identified as 'other' in my place of residence" (28).

From critical theory, to cultural and historical studies, to poetic and philosophical essays, this collection of Boullata's work constantly navigates between art and autobiography, which are intertwined with the author's practice, as reflected in the first chapter. The texts convey the ambiguities of his struggle with belonging by operating, on the one hand, as all-encompassing

transhistoric and transregional readings of culture, while, on the other hand, constantly searching for the roots of "Arabness" or the essence of "Palestinian" or "Semitic" identities against the backdrop of colonial projects.

Although some of the author's discussions regarding questions of Arabness deserve critical reappraisal in light of today's debates on identity politics, Boullata's timely claim for art as a possible means for revolution and for a reterritorialization of cultural memory resonates with our current context.

In that regard, notions such as cosmopolitanism, Orientalism, and globalization acquire renewed meaning and are redefined in the eighth chapter's collection of essays, "Belonging and Globalization." By mobilizing references as diverse as Ibn al-Abbas (ca. 619–687), Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, and Salman Rushdie in his reflections on Arab modernism, Boullata evidences his broad interests and expansive interdisciplinary knowledge. The inclusive aspect of this intellectual approach is also mirrored in the plurality of objects analyzed in the essays, which include traditional Palestinian crafts and embroideries, Christian icon paintings, Islamic illuminated manuscripts, drawings made by children in refugee camps, and art by key Arab artists, notably Jawad Salim, Adam Henein, Salwa Raouda Choucair, Hani Zurob, Dia Azzawi, Chafic Abboud, and Munira al-Qadi.

In the second chapter, "On Contemporaries," the author examines works by major modern Arab poets, such as Palestinian authors Rashid Hussein and Mahmoud Darwish, while assessing the art of contemporary artists like Lebanese Armenian Paul Guiragossian and the Berlin-based Marwan and Steve Sabella. These individuals' lives and work echo the author's own diasporic condition and led him to reflect on the role of art as a means of resistance. Collective memory and deterritorialization as shared experience are also addressed in the third chapter, "Art in Palestine," which focuses on Boullata's assessments of the Palestinian art scene. Here, the author locates artists that have traditionally been overlooked by Western art history as part of a narrative defined as Palestinian, Arab, or transnational. The fourth chapter, somewhat conventionally entitled "Feminism and Gender," includes essays on pioneering Palestinian women artists, such as Sophie Halabi, Juliana Seraphim, Mona Saudi, and Mona Hatoum, as well as Boullata's reflections on gender and Arab culture that bring to the fore the unsettled issues of feminism in the Arab world.

More intimately linked to Boullata's own artistic practice, and a central concern of his visual works, is the relationship between the written word and abstract art addressed by the essays in chapter 5, "Calligraphy and Abstraction." In this section, the condition of displacement and circulation lies at the heart of a reflection on abstract forms. Through his original and transversal approach to

art history, the author brings together objects that are traditionally studied separately in scholarship. This approach merges, for instance, the multiple heritages of abstraction and geometric decorative patterns in Islam and eastern Christianity—and their historical roots, from Bagdad to Córdoba—with Frank Stella’s color stripes of the *Moroccan* series (1964) and the work of the Color Field movement (277). The relationship between the Arab and Western worlds in the formation of artistic modernism is further explored in terms of encounters and cultural interactions in the sixth chapter, “Historical and Theoretical Perspectives,” in which the author draws links, for example, between a drawing by Pablo Picasso and a manuscript illustration by the thirteenth-century Iraqi painter Yahya Bin Mahmud al-Wasiti in an attempt to underline the “affinities” of Islamic art and European modernism.

Central to Boullata’s art and theory is the dialectic of meaning and vision generated through an overview of the Arabic letter, from the mosaic tiles of the Dome of the Rock to the stucco inscriptions of the Alhambra, as addressed in the essays of the seventh chapter, “Language and the Visual.” In these texts, the author suggests venues for understanding the entanglements of language and art by interrogating the interaction between Arabic letterforms and abstract geometrical shapes. An interesting aspect of this chapter is the translation and analysis of Arabic terminology pertaining to visual

expression. By foregrounding a semantic examination of historical terms describing elements such as *raqsh* (the Arabesque), Boullata provides new ways for readers to challenge Western art historical terms that are used to describe Islamic art and ornament.

The power of orality and the relationship between text and image in Arab culture are further reflected in the final chapter of this collection, "Poetry: The Last Frontier," and are also echoed in Boullata's work as an illustrator, a facet of his practice that is probably less familiar to audiences than his paintings. This relationship is particularly visible in Boullata's subtly crafted artist's books (*livres-objet*) focused on the verses of the Syrian poet Adonis, which reflect the artist's constant investigation of dialogue between visual and textual arts and between the materiality of the book and the intangibility of the spoken word.

Taken as a whole, this collection offers key documents for scholars interested in the study of visual arts and aesthetics in the Arab world. It provides a decolonial account of transregional modernism as experienced and analyzed from the margins, while opening many paths for reflecting on contemporary art and issues of belonging, resistance, and identity. More significantly, it offers a much-needed alternative account to traditional art historical narratives and theories of aesthetics by proposing original and decentered approaches to modernism, particularly abstraction.

