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'Naked Aliaa: the agency of art through new media
and its new impact on the Middle Eastern public sphere'

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Naked Aliaa: the agency of art through new media
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'Le corps découvert' asserts 'La représentation du corps dans les arts visuels arabes constitue une matière jusqu'ici ignorée, une sorte de terra incognita pour le moins inexplorée. On aurait ainsi pu s'attendre à ce que ces représentations n'existent pratiquement pas dans la peinture arabe ; or, à travers le corps, c'est tout un pan méconnu d'une riche iconographie qui vient à se découvrir'

IMA exhibition statement- 2012

When on the 23rd of October 2011 Aliaa Al Mahdy posted on her blog a *Rebeldiary*, a photo of a naked self-portrait, she clearly contextualized it as an art work basically meant to assert her ‘freedom of ‘expression’ in Egypt. Her work entitled ‘فن عاري’ Nude Art’ has actually been received as such by the international artistic community. To show their solidarity no less than 33 artists -from the Lebanese painter Maher Malaan to Ziad Marakchi or Tony Marc- produced works (displayed on her blog under the title ‘Nude Art Awards’) all inspired by her self-portrait. This use of ‘remix’, a new artistic genre that is finding its more innovative expressions today in the Middle East¹, contributed in underlining the artistic aspect of her provocative gesture.

Yet, the scandal and heated debates that followed this posting went far beyond the artistic milieu and placed artistic expressions at the hearth of Egyptian political debate and the more extended public sphere.

Essentialist stances consider naked art alien to Arab and Muslim cultures alike, yet, inasmuch as Manet’s Olympia did not become the biggest scandal in art history because it was the first nude of Western art, my paper builds upon the assertion that nude representation is, starting from the Venus of Willendorf onward, as old as art, and that the Middle East is no exception to this.

The works of Khalil Saleeby, Gazbia Sirry, Al Gazzar or more recently the works of Asaad Arabi² or Leila Nseir all display nudes, so why did Aliaa’s picture lead to such a scandal? What paradigms

¹ See paper CORNET ‘The democratization of art through social networks in the Middle East after 9/11’ (presented to EUI MedMeeting, March 2012)

² Works by Asaad Arabi http://www.ayyamgallery.com/artists/asaad-arabi/#/publications/asaad-arabi_1/ showed naked body in 2009, showing in exhibition, no scandal. Leila nseir, <http://www.ayyamgallery.com/artists/asaad-arabi/#/publications/leila-nseir/> etc..etc...

and cultural groups has she been threatening? Why did the Liberals in particular attack her so fiercely? What does that say about the new cultural norms in contemporary Egypt?

Following a rather anthropological definition of an art work³, my paper considers the Nude art self portrait from the artistic point of view and from here inquires into the new revealing role of art in Middle Eastern society. It shall also underline the ‘artistic democratization’ brought about by new media, entering at large into the debate between art, secularism and mainstream Islam. Through the study of the cultural reactions to the self –portrait, it seeks to contribute in the building up of the new field of Middle Eastern cultural studies (Sabry, 2011) to better assess the new agency (Gell, 1998) of art, and innovative cultural expressions in particular, on the Arab public sphere.

I - Contextualizing Aliaa Statement: From the Venus of Willendorf, the representation of naked body is as old as art

While in presence of Middle Eastern artistic expressions inspired by Nudes, prejudices and ignorance of art history are mainstream. The narratives are twofold: one school of thought argues that there’s never been a Nude Middle Eastern tradition except for un-authentic works of arts⁴ or ‘Westernized’ expressions; the second narrative is keen to recall the Islamic tradition that forbids human representation *tout court*, let imagine naked bodies (Barry Flood, 2002).

A short overview of the artistic corpus of visual arts in the Middle East in the last century will allow to deconstruct both narratives.

³ Art objects have three diagnostic features. They are usually made so as to be seen (24). Secondly, art objects are indexes of social agency. (...). Art objects are further distinguished by being both difficult and captivating: ‘they are difficult to make, difficult to “think”, difficult to transact. They fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator’ GELL, A. 1998. *Art and agency, an Anthropological Theory*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

⁴ For debates around cultural claims of ‘Authenticity’ in the Middle East, see KASSAB, E. S. 2010. *Contemporary Arab Thought: cultural critique in comparative perspective*, New York, Columbia University Press.

The issue at stake here is to recognize that the Middle East with the different waves of cultural globalization has been taking part actively –with difference of intensity depending on periods- in artistic modernity. And artistic modernity in the visual arts, from the 19th century onwards is largely defined by the central role of nude depiction. It is actually a pending question for feminist art historians, since *'Anyone who examines the history of art must be struck by the prevalence of female body. More than any other subject, the female nude connotes 'Art' (Nead, 1992)* it is, as the simplest artistic expression, often considered as the breaking point to decide whether an artistic trend has entered modernity or not (Wollen, 1980)⁵, depending on whether the body is depicted for itself and not to serve historical, religious and mythological references.

With her red flower, and enhanced red shoes and her pose in a 'bourgeois' setting Aliaa's picture reminds a lot of Manet's Olympia. If the comparison cannot be verified (Aliaa does not accept interviews) the comparison is anyway relevant for what art critic says of Olympia in 1865:

'for the critics of 1865, sexual identity was precisely what Olympia did not possess. She failed to occupy a place in the discourse on Woman, and specifically she was neither a nude, nor a prostitute: by that I mean she was not a modification of the nude in ways which made it clear that what was being shown was sexuality on the point of escaping from the constraints of decorum — sexuality proffered and scandalous'. (Clark, 1980)

If the genealogy to other Renaissance (Clark, 1980) works like the Titian paintings is now attested in the case of Olympia, it nevertheless became one of the biggest scandal of art history because the public of the time did not see or accept this genealogy. The real amnesia displayed in the public

⁵ *la sensualité du Baroque fait suite un XIXe siècle bourgeois, à la morale puritaine et au regard prude. L'art s'en ressent. Toute représentation du corps doit être justifiée par des références historiques, religieuses ou mythologiques. Un contre-courant se met en place, qui peut être considéré comme la naissance de l'art moderne – en matière de nu aussi. En effet, pour la première fois, des artistes montrent le corps humain dénudé sans référence aucune à des sujets bibliques ou mythologiques. Un tableau de Manet, « Olympia », montré pour la première fois en 1863 au Salon de Paris, provoque l'un des plus grands scandales de l'histoire de l'art. Certes, le motif évoque les représentations des Vénus baroques mais là est le hic : ce n'est pas le regard d'une déesse qui se plante dans l'œil de l'observateur mais bien celui d'une prostituée attendant son client – ce qu'attestent de nombreux détails de la composition..*

sphere concerning precedent or even contemporary Middle Eastern artistic works to compare with explains, in part, the particular uproar created by Aliaa's picture. The genealogy with the global visual arts tradition is obvious and the inherited tradition from the Middle East is at least one century old.

As the Institut du Monde Arabe exhibition statement for the *Corps découvert* 2012 explains⁶ the representation of the body in Arab visual arts constitutes, until now, a kind of '*inexplored 'terra incognita'*'. Curators were expecting a difficult task in retrieving significant art works, but they, on the contrary, discovered, through the body lens '*a whole and abundant iconography which is completely unknown (...) Indeed, Arab artists, as Chinese or Indian artists, did not wait to mastering Painting as it is understood in Europe to create, they all have behind them centuries of practice in that field, from architecture to music, from sculpture to poetry*'.⁷

Curators have noted a more puzzling phenomenon altogether: there's been an increased use of Nudes in Middle Eastern visual arts during the last thirty years⁸ much more important than, for instance, Chinese, Indian or Belgians and this, as the artistic scene goes more globalised.

When Aliaa exhorts as a subtitle of her nude self portrait '*Put on trial the artists' models who posed nude for art schools until the early 70s, hide the art books*' (Al Mahdi, 2011) she inscribes herself

⁶ IMA 2012. *Le Corps découvert*. Paris: IMA.

⁷ '*Il y a un siècle, peu de créateurs arabes faisaient choix de placer la représentation du corps dénudé au centre de leur oeuvre, on constate en revanche, depuis quelque vingt ou trente ans, depuis que la scène artistique internationale s'est mondialisée, une propension des créateurs arabes à s'emparer du sujet-corps bien plus forte qu'elle n'existe, par exemple, chez les peintres chinois, indiens ou belges, pris dans leur ensemble. Ce simple constat suffirait en lui-même à justifier la tenue d'une exposition dont la seule ambition est de dégager les contours, s'ils existent, d'une vision ou d'une appréhension arabe du corps. Ibid.*

⁸ '*Si, il y a un siècle, peu de créateurs arabes faisaient choix de placer la représentation du corps dénudé au centre de leur oeuvre, on constate en revanche, depuis quelque vingt ou trente ans, depuis que la scène artistique internationale s'est mondialisée, une propension des créateurs arabes à s'emparer du sujet-corps bien plus forte qu'elle n'existe, par exemple, chez les peintres chinois, indiens ou belges, pris dans leur ensemble. Ce simple constat suffirait en lui-même à justifier la tenue d'une exposition dont la seule ambition est de dégager les contours, s'ils existent, d'une vision ou d'une appréhension arabe du corps. Ibid.*

within the tradition of Fine Arts Academies in Egypt, and evokes this tradition that is more inclined to nude depiction than in other places of the globalised art scene.

The second narrative that should be questioned is the essentialist assertion of an immutable Islamic iconoclasm that reduces Islamic art –ancient and contemporary alike- as in essence iconoclast during all times. This is, again, underlined by Aliaa in the third part of her exhortation, '*destroy the nude statues of antiquity*' (Al Mahdi, 2011). The opinions by founding fathers of Islamic art studies such as K.A.C Creswell have contributed a lot to this assertion, when he, for instance speaks of the '*inherent temperamental dislike of Semitic races for representational art*'.

This kind of opinion by one of the most prominent Islamic art scholar helps understanding the long lasting intellectual stance that gives a one-dimensional portrait of Muslim iconoclasm that '*does not acknowledge its subjects as actors in historical contexts*' (Ernst, 2000). The essentialist stance builds upon the belief that Muslim expressions are in priority coming from the Mediterranean ignoring the whole works and traditions produced in Eastern Asia and other Muslim areas, such as Pakistan or India. (Barry Flood, 2002).

In the photography scene - the artistic medium used by Aliaa- Art historians describe the same centrality of the nude in the last mid century in the Middle East⁹: one can quote the works of Lebanese photographer Ninar Esber whose pin-ups poses on her pictures are meant to evoke desires and fantasies, Moroccan artists Hicham Benohoud who shows a nude body, to denounce social malaise, Moroccan Carolle Benitah, that depicts the body while it is attacked by disease, or again Lalla Essaydi who revisits orientalist pictures to denounce the 'woman object' of Orientalist painting. '*To reveal intimacy, evoke sensuality, refuse the forbidden, question his-her position in society, explore one's identity in front of disease or death, speak one's frustration by unveiling the*

⁹ Prenant à rebours le conservatisme ambiant qui valorise voile et burqa, de nombreux photographes arabes, hommes comme femmes, ont placé le corps au cœur de leur travail. MIADI, F. 2011. Dans le plus simple appareil. Courrier de l'Atlas.

*body. The body becomes the vehicle of exploration and there are as much exploration than they are artists*¹⁰ In the majority of cases, compared to Global photography *'la sensualité est contournée. La volonté des photographes reste davantage dans le contournement des tabous que la recherche de la provocation'* (Moignard, 2010)

That's here that Aliaa, presents herself as a breakpoint in Middle Eastern art history. She is yet in continuity with precedent artistic debates launched in Egypt. The release in 2009 of the movie *Bil-alwân al-tabi'iyya (Couleurs naturelles)*¹¹ by brothers Osama et Hani Fawzi, for instance, tells the story of a young student of the Fine arts, Youssef, whose passion for drawing clashes with both his family and his own beliefs, and lead him to refuse the nude models sessions provokes a scandal. While nude models have disappeared since Sadate era, their depiction of an institution, cradle of mediocrity, corruption and religious hypocrisy (both Christian and Muslim) provoked heated debate and official artistic milieux expressed strongly their anger¹². Fine arts faculty students tried to have the film censored. They created a Facebook group to contest the film¹³

II– The reactions

I would divide the type reactions into three groups, the artistic community, the 'Islamic' reaction and the 'Liberal' reaction. However, it is in the overlapping of the three categories of reactions that the most interesting elements of explanation are to be found.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mzy-5sCJQYo>

¹² <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/1589>

¹³ <http://www.menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/7369-struggle-young-egyptian-artists-natural-colors>

In Egypt the most vehement groups have been liberals and Islamic oriented parties who've condemned her act on different grounds but with impressive wrath. The international community divides itself into a group of fearsome people, who care about her safety (Take care of yourself, young person, etc...) and the artistic community that have been completely supportive of her acts. If the international community is also worthwhile being studied, I would focus here on reactions within the MENA region, and Egypt in particular.

The Artistic community

Assad Arabi, an important name of the Syrian avant garde affirms that '*in this climate of intellectual and artistic decadence, drawing a nude can be compared to an adventure, and even a mistake that could ruin an artistic reputation within hypocritical and aesthetics milieux*'¹⁴ He also explains in his last book how (أسعد and Urābī, 2009) what complicated relationship exists between Arab art and the concept of Modernity, which, as previously noted, can pass through the mastering of the '*purest drawing of all*' the texture of the skin and the proportions of the body. The same opinion is shared by Ali Maher, former director of Jordan's premier art institution, *Darat al Funun*, who explains that many Middle Eastern artists are painting nudes and erotic art in the region even if much of their work is displayed in private galleries for small audiences: '*the pieces are bought and sold directly between the artists or their agents*'.¹⁵

In this context, extremely significant is the piece of work by Lebanese painter Jamil Moallem –who has produced dozens of paintings including naked bodies - that has transformed Aliaa's picture in a large (177 X 80 cm) painting where he contextualized her naked body within a Fine arts room. Behind her are standing different easels and paintings and Jamil Moallem, not without irony, has

¹⁴ In the Press do.ssier of Al-Ayyam Gallery in Damascus Damas

¹⁵ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/09/03/nude-art-mag-riles-middle-eaast.html>

explained that his first feeling when looking at Aliaa's picture was reminding him of *'the years (I) was teaching drawings in Academia like New York, Paris, Algiers and Beirut'*. To him Aliaa has offered a *'technical service to the Painters who are missing badly nude models today'* while, the painting of the naked body was and remains *'the basis of plastic arts, whereby the other becomes a mirror of oneself'*. Going back to the roots of arts and human representation he –as Aliaa does in her statement where she asks to *'hide the art books and destroy the nude statues of antiquity'* – insists on the fact that *'drawing the human body, of a woman, a man or a child is the pillar of knowledge, engineering, aesthetics and of the history of image painting since Sumerians and Pharaohs'*¹⁶.

Islamic condemnation

The 'Islamic' condemnation takes stock from the fear of 'youth corruption' more than a real iconoclast debate. The Coalition of Islamic law graduates coordinator, Ahmed Yehia, who has actually filed a case against Aliaa and her boyfriend, famous blogger, Kareem Amer, accusing them of *'violating morals, inciting indecency and insulting Islam'* explains that *'it is an insult to the revolution as these two persons who pretend to be one of the revolutionists and asking for sexual freedoms, they are giving the uprising a bad name'*¹⁷. The bad timing for such an action that could distract from 'revolutionary purposes' is underlined to show how Islamic oriented organization parties are eager to speak for and on behalf of Muslim mainstreams: *'It is our duty to fight corruption and this is a corruption case, we people who are trying to corrupt society with foregoing and unacceptable customs like the sexual freedom they ask for'* continues Yehia. The report, which was submitted to the general prosecutor¹⁸, states that the activist published a nude picture of herself

¹⁶ <http://www.skoun.net/index.php/2011-08-14-14-52-08/280-2012-01-16-22-04-22>

¹⁷ <http://www.arabstand.com/2011/12/8099/#.Tx28D6Wmgsl>

¹⁸ <http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=537617>
<http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=535239>

'trying to spread her obscene ideology through the nude pictures'. The report was published in full on the coalition's Facebook page, calling for Mahdy and Amer to be punished according to Islamic law. *'The old constitution and the new declarations of the new one says Islamic law is the source of governing, therefore we asked for Islamic law penalties to be executed on the two bloggers'*.¹⁹

Liberal condemnation

Liberals did not usually condemn Aliaa's action as such, they rather feared that her action could be, at best 'counter-productive' at worst, 'a disaster'. Here the artistic aspect of the 'Nude art', interestingly is completely left aside. The freedom of expression that is usually associated with artistic expressions is ignored and Aliaa is always described as an activist, and her relationship with blogger Kareem Amer is more often quoted. Comments are also very patronizing when they lament that she 'has 'ruined' her life, that she is *'young and doesn't know what she has done'*. *'Many movements in Egypt, particularly Islamist movements, are trying to benefit, they say, we have to protect our society from things like this, and if the liberals win then this woman will become a model for all Egyptian women'*²⁰ said Emad Gad, a parliamentary candidate from the left-leaning Egyptian Social Democratic Party. After reports indicated that Ms. Elmahdy was a member of the April 6th Youth Movement, its spokesman, Tarek al-Kholi, told *Al Arabiya Tv channel* that *'the movement does not have any members who engage in such behavior. We are conservative youths, and we always encourage our members to be role models as far as ethics are concerned'*. The campaigning atmosphere takes over all other points of view, the important message to carry is a reassuring one *'How can we have accepted the membership of a girl who behaves like this?'*²¹ The 'artistic stance' used by Aliaa and her reference to freedom of expression are not envisioned at all

¹⁹ <http://www.arabstand.com/2011/12/8099/#.Tx28D6WmgsI>

²⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/world/middleeast/aliaa-magda-elmahdy-egypts-nude-blogger-stirs-partisan-waters.html>

²¹ Aliaa also confirmed in a Twitter posting that she did not belong to the group.

22. For Sayyed el-Qimni, a prominent self-described secular figure added *'this hurts the entire secular current in front of those calling themselves the people of virtue'*. *It's is a double disaster. Because I am liberal and I believe in the right of personal freedom, I can't interfere*, on one of Egypt's popular TV political talk shows, *90 Minutes*. *'Personally, I totally respect the demarche and do not see this as a provocation, but one should admit that it is very chocking for the large majority of Egyptians'*, concludes finally Shahinaz Abdel Salam, Egyptian blogger and author of the book *Egypte, les débuts de la liberté* where she evokes women status in Egyptian society ²³

In support: against hypocrisy

'So when Mahdy removed her clothes, she undressed the liberals and their calls for freedom. Obviously, in their mind, she made a mistake. She was wrong. Nudity has no place in Egypt. But for the millions of women, who on a daily basis face sexual harassment, assault and categorical oppression from all sides, she did what no activist has been able to do. She won. She told the world that her body is owned by nobody other than herself'

The small group of supporters is therefore been reduced to the artistic community, the international community (which I would not evoke here even if instrumentalisation of the case on international affairs was also very interesting) and other liberals. This comment by Editorialist of *Al Masry al Youm* continues saying that one can disagree with the tactic but should nevertheless *'espouse the idea of freedom of expression (and) support her in her cause'*. ²⁴ Another article believes that the liberals are falling into the holistic trap like this tweet speaking about steps *'Sorry but Egypt is not*

²² http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/18/world/middleeast/aliaa-magda-elmahdy-egypts-nude-blogger-stirs-partisan-waters.html?_r=2&ref=todayspaper

²³ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2011/11/14/01003-20111114ARTFIG00556-une-blogueuse-nue-defie-les-conservateurs-egyptiens.php>

²⁴ <http://www.arabstand.com/2011/12/8099/#.Tx28D6WmgsI>

ready for your step': *'By criticizing Aliaa's nude photo on the ground of unsound "priorities," the liberals are espousing the same holistic discourse they are fighting, according to which freedom should be limited by an intellectual judgment of what is in the interest — and the good timing — of a fixed society whose course they are nevertheless seeking to affect, gradually and without any confrontations'.*

III – The naked blogger case: the new agency of art vis-à-vis religion

Given this short contextualization of Aliaa statement within Middle Eastern visual arts debates and Egyptian political climate around the 26th of October 2011, the 'artistic picture' that Aliaa, published on her blog that day was not such a big rupture after all. So why did it create such an uproar? What does that say of the impact of artistic expressions on the Egyptian public sphere? My study does not focus on the political or sociological reactions to the heated debate but rather seek elements of explanation regarding the new role taken over by arts in the political field, used as ultimate *rampart* against religion and or becoming its antithesis. The 'naked blogger case' shows blatantly the new democratization and instrumentalization of arts in the Middle East as if cultural expressions were, by essence and definition, secular and liberal. This very heavy role played by arts also stems from the particular use of new media and social networks for the dissemination of innovative cultural expressions.

On the one hand, the dissemination of artistic products through new media has recently led to a 'democratization' of artistic expressions. On the second hand, art has become a strong revealer of 'social hypocrisy' and a tool of confrontation against religious mainstream and-or fundamentalisms. A first element of explanation of the uproar is, I would argue, the way Aliaa's picture has been disseminated.

Woman blogging

Unveiling hypocrisy is largely understood as the role of artists in society which are considered in a way 'above' or 'outside' society. Aliaa's act is yet not considered acceptable because it was disseminated through social media: the first tweet by colleague blogger said :

'A feminist #Jan25 revolutionary posted her nude photo on the internet to express her freedom. I'm totally taken back by her bravery!!' Ahmad Awadalla who salutes this act is a human rights activist.

Then, under the hashtag #nuderevolutionary starts a big following on twitter relayed then by facebook accounts. In the first week following to the 26th of October the rebel's diary blog gets 2.1 million page views in a week.

The fact that Aliaa is part of the 25th January is later denied both by herself and the organization, what remains is that Aliaa is a female blogger. And, as Otterman puts it *'Egyptian women bloggers are breaking new ground, often by challenging cultural assumptions in Egypt that anything that goes against traditional social mores should be kept private. By making their personal thoughts public, they are adding complexity to the concept of femininity in Egypt'* (Otterman, 2007) being a woman blogger is still much stronger politically than being a male blogger. On the internet, some society blockages are just reproduced as such. There is indeed a huge difference between female bloggers who frame their posts in line with Islamic feminism and *'usually get positive responses by male bloggers'* whereas those who *'framed their post using discourse of third-wave feminim'* – which is roughly the case of Aliaa- have been more attacked by male bloggers' (Hossam Ismail, 2007) and by extension by society as a whole (from the 23rd of October to the 15th of November 2011 Aliaa gets 1298 comments on her blog). The passage from the 'cultural sphere' -where are collocated all artists that have showed nude representation in their works- and the 'social network-public sphere' constitutes the passage of the red line for the public sphere. The social network

sphere, even if does not represent at all the majority of Egyptians, has therefore become one of the symbolic ground of battles of society at large.

The second point, as underlined by Professor Khaled Fahmy in one of his column in *Akhbar al Adab* is that Aliaa has started a debate that was latent in post-revolutionary Egyptian society around the *'The pivotal role of women and the female body in this revolution'*. *'First came the photographs in the nude that Alia Mahdi posted of herself on her blog in a bold gesture to challenge existing taboos about the body and raise fundamental questions about who owns and controls it'* then came the video footage of the *'woman in blu bra girl'* who was stripped of veil and clothing, then another footage of Azza Helal who rushed to the defense of the *'woman in blue bra'* and then tens of thousands of women taking to the streets in a mass rally of protest against the army's brutality and its systematic violation of women's bodies. And finally Samira Ibrahim's lawsuit against the army for subjecting her and six other women in March 2011 to the *'virginity test'*. According to Fahmy, *'These events show that the female body is at the heart of this great revolution in which women have emerged as a driving and galvanizing force'*²⁵.

As I tried to briefly describe in this paper the agency of innovative cultural expression in the case of the Naked blogger case has been very strong: Aliaa, who is both a woman artist and an activist, has used the freedom of expression that is usually enclosed in the Artistic paradigm to fight her political enemy, that she defines as *'chauvinism'* ...etc...The use of social network -as in the case of her boy friend scandal that led to his 3 years imprisonment- has been, once again, crucial. New media and social networks in particular are perceived as very dangerous in Egyptian society today not because of their quite reduced number of users but because of their *'democratization'* effect on audiences and in the first place, the *'youth'*. The Coalition of Young Islamic scholars is not mistaken actually when they want to fight *'youth corruption'*. What Aliaa presupposes in the first place when

²⁵ <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/592711>

inscribing her provocative act within the realm of artistic expression, and what has been perceived later on shows how artistic expressions in the Middle East after 9/11 in particular have been instrumentalised politically, by foreign powers, governments and civil society alike. The fact that artistic expressions are secular and liberal by definition is the first paradigm built during these years and even more so during the revolutionary period. I would argue that the strong agency of arts is to be verified since they are the most effective 'non movements' (Bayat, 2009) expressions. No compact socio-economical categories are built around cultural expressions but a large part of youth and non movement actors can express their support from artistic thoughts to political statements.

Interestingly, the agency of art is very powerful within the public sphere, but through its over representation in social networks. It's power has indeed dramatically increased in the last decade, passing from products for 'elite' or 'minority' in the 'off-line world', to a large scale popular culture in the realm of social networks. More Arabic cultural studies in that field shall help us understand better social issues (Sabry, 2011), and overcome the disciplinary zoning (Lila AbuLughod) since the Arab world has not been the site of a long genealogy of Literature begetting new Arab art studies each generation. *'While the medieval Arab world is recognized as having been full of so-called 'ornamental' art and aesthetic flourishing the relevance of artistic production in Arab lands seems to have been elipsed, according to the standard Literature'* (Scheid, 2007). As the naked blogger case shows, there would be a great need to question the paradigm of art as defined by the secular and liberal exercise (Halagha, 2010) (Van Nieuwkerk, 2008).

Does society shape art, or does art shape society? Asks Kirsten Scheid provocatively in her questioning of the agency of art. The case of the naked blogger shows how much art has been powerful in moving the barriers of freedom of expression and creating a debate that 'ready or not' Egyptian post-revolutionary public sphere has taken over with passion.

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