

**CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST ART AT  
VENICE BIENNALE:  
A STUDY OF A POSTCOLONIAL  
CURATORIAL STRATEGY  
(2011-2019)**

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by

**SEYEDEHSAMANEH FATEMI**

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**This thesis is dedicated to all brave Iranian women who fight for freedom**

**“WOMAN, LIFE, FREEDOM”**

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**SENI SEZAMAN TIMUR TENGAH DI VENICE BIENNALE: SATU KAJIAN  
STRATEGI KURATORIAL PASCAKOLONIAL (2011-2019)**

**ABSTRAK**

Kemunculan seni Timur Tengah di arena antarabangsa telah meningkat dalam beberapa dekad kebelakangan ini. Peningkatan ini telah menarik perhatian para pengkritik, cendekiawan, dan kurator kepada seni Timur Tengah lebih daripada sebelumnya. Walaupun terdapat penyelidikan yang dilakukan dalam bidang seni Timur Tengah kontemporari, seni rantau ini agak baharu dan belum ditemukan dalam sejarah seni. Penyelidikan ini ingin memahami seni kontemporari Timur Tengah dengan lebih baik khususnya di arena antarabangsa. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, penyelidikan ini memfokuskan kepada seni Timur Tengah di Venice Biennale sepanjang tahun 2011 hingga 2019. Penyelidikan ini menggunakan analisis tematik dan wacana pascakolonial untuk mengkaji karya seni Timur Tengah di Venice Biennale. Penyelidikan ini mengkaji tema-tema semasa karya seni Timur Tengah dan mengkaji tema tersebut dari perspektif pascakolonial. Berikutan itu, strategi kuratorial Venice Biennale dari 2011 hingga 2019 telah diselidiki. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun terdapat sekatan politik yang dialami oleh Venice Biennale, tema yang dominan bagi karya seni Timur Tengah di Venice Biennale adalah tema sosial dan politik. Selain itu, wacana pascakolonial dan tema karya seni mempunyai konsep yang sama.

**CONTEMPORARY MIDDLE EAST ART AT VENICE BIENNALE:  
A STUDY OF A POSTCOLONIAL CURATORIAL STRATEGY (2011-2019)**

**ABSTRACT**

The presence of Middle East art in the international arena has increased in recent decades. This increase has attracted the attention of critics, intellectuals, and curators to Middle East art more than ever. Despite the research that has been done in the field of contemporary Middle East art, the art of this region is relatively new and undiscovered in art history. This research aims to better understand the contemporary art of the Middle East specifically in the international arena. To do so this research has focused on Middle East art at the Venice Biennale during the years 2011 to 2019. This research uses thematic analysis and postcolonial discourses to study Middle East artworks at the Venice Biennale. This research investigated the prevailing themes of Middle East artworks and examined them from a postcolonial perspective. Then, the curatorial strategy of the Venice Biennale from 2011 to 2019 had been examined. The findings have shown that despite the political restrictions that the Venice Biennale follows, the dominant theme of Middle East artworks at Venice Biennale is the social and political theme. As well, postcolonial discourses and themes of artworks have common concepts.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

In the contemporary era, large-scale exhibitions and art auctions play a remarkable role in the formation of contemporary art.<sup>1</sup> In these artistic events, contemporary artists are introduced to the art world, their artworks are seen, are priced and critics and intellectuals write about them. These kinds of artistic events become more valuable when they are performed in an international context since the artworks have a wider audience and are examined from various points of view. In this case, the subject goes beyond the purely artistic field, and other topics such as geography, culture, nationality, religion, language, and even political and social issues are involved. One of the most well-known of this kind of mega exhibitions that are always involved in these topics is the biennales.

Biennales are one of the most salient events in contemporary art. These mega-exhibitions emerged in different historical periods. Lokhandwala has categorized the cause of the emergence of biennales into three categories: The first reason is the result of private support such as the *Venice Biennale*, *Carnegie International*, and *Sao Paulo*.<sup>2</sup> The second reason is related to the political situation that has always been involved with art. As an instance, *Africus* was inaugurated to commemorate the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1995 and in the same year, *Gwangju Biennale* commemorated the 1976 killings of over 200 students in South Korea. As well, *Documenta* was founded in 1955 in the aftermath of World War II and *Manifesta* was

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<sup>1</sup> Gardner, Anthony, and Charles Green. *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

founded in 1994 in Europe as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc in 1989.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, some biennales were aimed at decentralizing the art of developed countries and the West. As an example, the *Biennale of Sydney* in 1973 and the *Indian Triennale* in 1968 sought to highlight the art of Asia and the Pacific. In this regard, biennales in Havana, Cairo, Istanbul, and Dakar expanded the geographic focus on Third World art. Moreover, the third reason is the growing economies of countries where art and economy support each other such as the *Shanghai Biennale* in 2000, the *Yokohama Triennale* in Japan in 2001, the *Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art* in 2005, the *Singapore Biennale* in 2006, and *Sharjah* (United Arab Emirates) in 1993.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, Ferguson, Greenberg, and Nairine emphasize the importance of place in such exhibitions. They argue that location is one of the most significant variables in exhibition policies since the various factors, such as the exhibition's name, the time frame, curators, and the artists, are all determined by the geography of the place.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, as it is clear these mega exhibitions have been involved with political, economic, social, cultural, and geographical issues since their inception.

Nevertheless, in addition to being associated with a variety of issues, biennales, and mega exhibitions play an essential role in the field of contemporary art in other ways. Biennales can respond to contemporary issues faster than other exhibitions such as museums, so they are also active and dynamic exhibitions in this field. Their

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<sup>3</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, Bruce W., Reesa Greenberg, and Sandy Nairne. "Mapping international exhibitions." *Art & Design* 52 (1997): 30-37.

dynamic is due to the fact that their regulations are more flexible, and they are more risk-taking.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the gathering of contemporary artists from all over the world together is another factor that has made biennales important in contemporary art. In this vein, Francesco Bonami, the director of the *Venice Biennale* in 2003, in the catalogue of this exhibition, emphasizes that in a world where the confrontation of globalization is faced with the romantic dreams of a new modernity, in these mega exhibitions in the 21st century, multiplicity, diversity, and contrast should be seen in the structure of an exhibition.<sup>7</sup>

This gathering of artists in a specific time and place subconsciously makes comparing artworks from different content and technical aspects. Meanwhile, for the reason that these exhibitions are held internationally, they create a kind of atmosphere of dialogue and exchange. As a result, intellectuals believe that making the combination of artists from all around the world to this extent causes basic intercultural dialogues.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein, Lokhandwala argues:

“Of the various kinds of exhibitions including large-scale exhibitions, blockbusters, which are popular museum shows, the biennale has hence emerged as one of the most important exhibition models that represent the globalization of art.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

<sup>7</sup> Bonami, Francesco, and Maria Luisa Frisa, eds. *Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer: La Biennale Di Venezia: 50th International Art Exhibition*. Skira, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Gardner, Anthony, and Charles Green. *Biennials, Triennials, and Documenta: The Exhibitions that Created Contemporary Art*. John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

Furthermore, biennales hold a particular place for art historians. The intermittent holding of biennales every two years allows art historians to study contemporary art from a historical perspective. This historical study can include a historical study of the art of different areas and their presence in the international community, or in general, a qualitative study of the biennale process itself. Likewise, the biennales, as a recurring exhibition, show the place at a particular point in history. The repetition and flexibility of a biennale allow it to reinvent itself.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it can be claimed that biennales are a striking part of the contemporary art of the world and a qualified source for studying contemporary art.

In the contemporary era, a wide range of biennales, triennials, and quinquennials from regional to international, are held around the world and each of them is trying to have something new to the art world. As Walter Mignolo maintains today's concern is to be innovative and not to stay behind.<sup>11</sup>

In this sense, curators, and exhibitors endeavour to draw the attention of more audiences and critics. For instance, *Documenta 11* was a striking exhibition that attracted the attention of many critics and intellectuals. *Documenta 11* held in 2001, is considered the first postcolonial exhibition in the world to critique Western law, emphasizing the absence of non-Westren law in the mainstream discourse of art.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, Dabashi claims that the *Sharjah Biennale 11* it makes us reconsider the concept of “what is the Biennale” and “what is the art” by turning away from the

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<sup>10</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

<sup>11</sup> Mignolo, Walter D. “Re:Emerging, Decentring And Delinking Shifting the Geographies of Sensing, Believing and Knowing.” Ibraaz. 8 May 2013. <https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/59/>.

<sup>12</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

prevailing intellectual fashions.<sup>13</sup> As it turns out, the exhibitions are trying to discuss new issues in contemporary art. As mentioned before, this contributes to the dynamics of the exhibitions.

Among the many biennales in different parts of the world, this research has chosen the *Venice Biennale*. One of the most crucial reasons for this choice is that this study is intended to analyse Middle East artworks in a global context outside of their region. Several biennales, such as the *Istanbul Biennale* (Turkey), *Sharjah Biennale* (United Arab Emirates), and *Cairo Biennale* (Egypt), etc are hosted in the Middle East region, which attracts an international audience. However, how Middle East artworks are chosen, exhibited, and received by the audience and critics outside their area is investigated in this research.

The *Venice Biennale* is the first and oldest biennale which was first held in 1895 (Figure 1.1). From the very beginning, the main goal of the biennale was to bring different countries together in a competitive atmosphere in modern art. However, after World War II, the competition was limited to a few European countries, the United States, and a few non-Arab countries. Since 1948, during a period of reconstruction and reconciliation, the biennale has gradually opened the door to multicultural representation. So that the number of countries that participated doubled between 1948 and 1964.<sup>14</sup> As the number of countries participating in the *Venice Biennale* grew, the quality of how to participate in this field became more crucial.

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<sup>13</sup> Dabashi, Hamid. "Trauma, Memory, and History." *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* 18 (2015): 17.

<sup>14</sup> Gathered from: *La Biennale di Venezia* (catalogo), vols. 25–33, (Venice: La Biennale di Venezia, 1950–1966).



Figure 1.1 First Biennale in Venice, central exhibition building, 1895, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history>.

The first participation of Middle Eastern artists at the *Venice Biennale* was in 1938 when Egyptian artists were present. Whereas until 2011, when the *Venice Biennale* had the biggest participation of Middle East artworks, the presence of Middle Eastern artists in this biennale was limited to only two or three countries per year. In recent years, the increased presence of Middle Eastern artists in the worldwide arena, on both a qualitative and quantitative level, has attracted the attention of critics and intellectuals. This has resulted in the publication of a few academic resources on contemporary Middle East art. However, this topic is still new and there is not enough research to understand contemporary Middle East art and there is a lack of academic documents on this subject.

The presence of non-Western artists in the international arena is a challenging debate linked to the concept of postcolonialism. In general terms, in the pre-1989 period, exhibitions and biennales around the world attracted the attention of a small number of non-Western artists from the postcolonial world, a small number of whom instead of engaging in their discourse or politics, only reflected the West's attitude

towards the term other.<sup>15</sup> The term other is one of the main concepts in postcolonial discourses. Postcolonial intellectuals have dealt with this issue extensively. In this context, Ashcroft describes the term other:

“In order to maintain authority over the Other in a colonial situation, imperial discourse strives to delineate the Other as radically different from the self, yet at the same time, it must maintain sufficient identity with the Other to valorise control over it. The Other can, of course, only be constructed out of the archive of ‘the self’, yet the self must also articulate the Other as inescapably different.”<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, there are important and different concepts like the term other in postcolonial discourses, which can be examined with the presence of non-western artists in international forums, that this research deals with them. Furthermore, with the introduction of concepts such as postcolonialism, globalization, imperialism, multiculturalism, etc. the ground was prepared for a critique of this kind of Western view of non-Western art. Thus, this research uses postcolonial theory to better understand contemporary Middle East art and a better understanding of how the presence of Middle East art in international arenas.

This research addresses the Middle East artworks at the *Venice Biennale* and the selection of the *Venice Biennale* was based on the fact that, among other mega exhibitions, Middle East artworks were more noticeable there. In this respect, this study examines Middle East artworks in two forms national pavilion and artists present at the *Venice Biennale* from 2011 until 2019.

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<sup>15</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales And Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge, 2003.

## 1.2 Problem Statement

As mentioned in the introduction section, the presence of Middle Eastern artists in the international arena has increased in recent decades. This increase in the presence of Middle East artworks in both international and regional exhibitions has attracted the attention of critics, intellectuals, and curators to the region's art more than ever. The involvement of political and economic phenomenon in the attention of critics and curators cannot be denied, phenomenon such as 11 September of 2001, the Arab Spring, and wars and protests that take place in the region.

In this regard, dealing with Middle East art is controversial due to the region's specific geographical location. Among the few researches that have been done on the art of this region, there are some notable examples. In this context, the book entitled *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab World and Iran* paid more attention to the works of artists among other researches. More than 200 artworks of contemporary Middle Eastern artists from Iran, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar along with artistic activities related to each region are included in this book, which can provide researchers with an appropriate understanding of contemporary Middle East art.<sup>17</sup>

Fereshteh Daftraï is another scholar in the field of contemporary Middle East art. Daftari takes a critical look at the term Middle Eastern art and examines the exhibition *Without Boundary*, an exhibition of contemporary Middle Eastern artists at *MoMA*. Daftari challenges the dividing line between us and others and attempts to keep the formal aspect away from all the common stereotypes labelled Islamic art. Daftari

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<sup>17</sup> Eigner, Saeb, Isabelle Caussé, and Christopher Masters. *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. London: Merrell, 2010.

believes that the works of Middle Eastern artists should be studied away from common stereotypes such as calligraphy, miniature painting, and carpet design.<sup>18</sup>

Another research in the field of Middle East art, especially in the field of the exhibitions of this region is a book titled *Tarjama/Translation: Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Its Diasporas*. In the book Ahmedy, Dadi, and Fadda by emphasizing the growing presence of Middle Eastern artists in major art institutions, biennales, and other key venues, address the *Tarjama/Translation* exhibition which its purpose is to emphasize the role of art in bridges of understanding and increasing cultural understanding between the United States and the Islamic world.<sup>19</sup>

Among Middle East art research, Eigner, Caussé, and Masters have taken a broader and more comprehensive look at Middle East art. They also point to the flourishing of the visual arts in the Middle East and emphasize the significant role of museums and art exhibitions in this flourishing. Their research, in addition to the visual arts, has examined the wider field of Middle Eastern art by dealing with the music literature of cinema and calligraphy in the region.<sup>20</sup>

One of the notable examples in the field of contemporary Middle East art is a book titled *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: regional interactions with global art discourses*. In the book, Hamid Keshmirshekan collected several discussions by a range of theorists and scholars from all around the world in terms of contemporary Middle East art. In the introduction of the book Keshmirshekan maintains that despite the several gathering and summits on the art of the Middle East inside and outside the

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<sup>18</sup> Daftari, Fereshteh, Homi K. Bhabha, and Orhan Pamuk. *Without boundary: seventeen ways of looking*. The Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmedy, Leeza, Iftikhar Dadi, and Reem Fadda. "Tarjama/Translation: Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Its Diasporas." (2009).

<sup>20</sup> Eigner, Saeb, Isabelle Caussé, and Christopher Masters. *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. Merrell, 2010.

area and the attention of the global art community to Middle East art, still there is a lack of comprehensive academic publication addressing contemporary art from the Middle East. Likewise, Keshmirshekan states that the history and theory of the region's contemporary art have not yet received the same level of analysis.<sup>21</sup>

In the same context, Nada Shabout declares that the limited documents about contemporary Middle East art are challenging for both teachers and researchers.<sup>22</sup> Since the history of art is often written by Western historians and their point of view,<sup>23</sup> there is a lack of academic resources and insufficient information about Middle East art and the documents that exist are either very limited or have been dealt with from the stereotyped perspective of Westerners. In the same vein, Shabout by mentioning that colonial history plays a principal role in the lack of resources for modern and contemporary Middle East history, argues:

“A consistent problem faced by all who teach twentieth and twenty-first-century art of and from the region is the lack of trusted resources to use in classrooms. It is quite an arduous task to generate a syllabus of interest to students or one that even remotely reflects the interests of the teacher, based on available publications.”<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, studying contemporary Middle East art from a postcolonial perspective helps to understand the art of the Middle East, away from colonial views. In other words, studying the contemporary art of the Middle East from a postcolonial

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<sup>21</sup> Keshmirshekan, Hamid, ed. *Contemporary art from the Middle East: regional interactions with global art discourses*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Shabout, Nada. "Framing the discipline of contemporary art of the Arab world through the press." *Contemporary art from the Middle East: Regional interactions with global art discourses* 18 (2015): 51.

<sup>23</sup> Ramadan, Khaled D., ed. *Peripheral insider: perspectives on contemporary internationalism in visual culture*. Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*,1.

point of view leads to a better and more accurate understanding of the art of this region. In this respect, this research attempts to fill the gap of lack of academic research and documents on contemporary Middle East art by addressing Middle East artworks that participated in the *Venice Biennale* from a postcolonial point of view to better understand contemporary Middle East art. Since previous research on specific region art at mega exhibitions has only examined one era,<sup>25</sup> this study will investigate five consecutive periods of the *Venice Biennale* to gain a better and deeper understanding of contemporary Middle East art from the years 2011 to 2019.

### 1.3 Research Objectives

In order to inquire about the contemporary art of the Middle East at the *Venice Biennale*, this research has investigated three objectives. The objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To identify the prevailing theme of Middle East art at the *Venice Biennale* from the year 2011 to 2019.
2. To examine the relationships between postcolonial discourses with the themes of Middle East art at the Biennale.
3. To investigate the curatorial strategies in emerging the prevailing themes of Middle East art at the *Venice Biennale*.

Due to a better understanding of the contemporary art of the Middle East, the first aim of this study is to focus on the artworks of these artists in terms of the theme from 2011 to 2019. When an artist from a region with various political and social

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<sup>25</sup> Vetrocq, Marcia E. "The Venice Biennale, all'americana." *Art in America* 95, no. 8 (2007): 136-148. Moreno, Valentine. "Venice Biennale and the Canada Pavilion: Politics of representation in the Gardens of Art." (2010).

Hassan, Salah M., and Olu Oguibe. " 'Authentic/Ex-Centric' at the Venice Biennale: African conceptualism in global contexts." *African Arts* 34, no. 4 (2001): 64.

events such as the Middle East participates in a mega international exhibition, the importance of how the artist is present becomes more significant, especially in the case of national pavilions.

The significance of the presence of Middle Eastern artists in international forums can be examined from several points of view. The first aspect is the artist's point of view. Some artists are interested in praising the culture and traditions of their region in the art world, while others use this platform to acquaint the world with the concerns of their region. As Khaleed considers the artist as a free actor and at the same time a responsible person in society.<sup>26</sup> Other artists also address issues related to the global, human, or environmental. In a similar vein, examining the themes of Middle East artworks helps us to understand the main concerns of the artists of this region. From another angle, which messages are more than others transmitted by Middle Eastern artists to the whole world?

Likewise, identifying the prevailing theme of Middle East art helps us to determine whether Middle East artists are interested in focusing more on the issues of their region or exploring different issues such as human and global issues. All these investigations create a better and deep understanding of the contemporary art of the Middle East. Another aspect is from the point of view of the audience, critics, and intellectuals. This importance lies in the role of the audience and critics in conveying the message of these artists to the world. In this regard, these examinations help to understand the role of the audience in conveying the message of artists.

Since postcolonial discourses are studies that challenge the fixed and stereotyped views of the West towards the East, the presence of East artworks in

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<sup>26</sup> Ramadan, Khaled D., ed. *Peripheral insider: perspectives on contemporary internationalism in visual culture*. Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007.

Western international forums provides a suitable platform for postcolonial studies. Therefore, this research uses postcolonial discourses to examine the artworks to find out the relationships between postcolonial discourses and artworks of the Middle East.

In the same sense, after investigating the themes of Middle East artworks at the *Venice Biennale*, the relationships between postcolonial discourses and themes that came out of the artworks will be investigated. Examining the works of Middle Eastern artists from a postcolonial point of view aims to examine the common concepts between the ideas of Middle Eastern artists and postcolonial theorists. This examination determines how close the ideas of Middle Eastern artists in various themes are to postcolonial discourse. Then, the second objective of this research is to examine the relationship between postcolonial discourses with the themes of Middle East art at the *Venice Biennale*.

Curating is one of the notable sections of contemporary art and curators are one of the salient and influential factors in holding mega exhibitions like biennales. In fact, it is the curators who ultimately decide what kind of artworks and with what themes will be present in the mega exhibitions by following the policies of the exhibitions. In this vein, Greenberg, Ferguson, and Nairine state that the term "keeper," which has the same etymological roots as "curator" and is frequently used in museums, serves as a reminder that zoos and museums both developed simultaneously in the histories of imperialist countries as means of absorbing and categorising the "foreign" or "other." Both "curator" and "keeper" emphasise the roles and practises of collecting, not exhibiting, and the idea of possessions, not interpretations, because they are passive nouns. Until its more abrupt recent development as a wannabe verb or

transitive noun, the noun "curator" enjoyed a long and stable evolution from policing property in ancient Rome neighbourhoods to policing the soul in religion.<sup>27</sup>

Ramrez believes that curators are the main actor on the larger stage of international cultural politics because of how important their roles have become in recent years and argues that the role of curators in contemporary art has shifted from arbiter of taste and quality to a cultural broker. She underlines the importance of role shifts, particularly in non-Western art.<sup>28</sup>

In the same context, O'Neill argues that in the contemporary era, the important role of the curator has changed the position of the avant-garde artist. In this way, the artist is not the genius behind the exhibition anymore, but the creator of that exhibition is considered a genius. Not only is the artist no longer the genius of the exhibition, but his/her fate also depends on the curator. Since the curator has the authority to either make the artist a global star or eliminate them from important exhibitions.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, in the contemporary era, the curator is in the middle position. At the same time, the curator is the agent of the exhibition institutions, and by taking on the aspects of an author, she/he defends the works of art and gives credit to the artistic practice. In this situation, the relationship between the artist and the curator is constantly being renegotiated.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the curator is involved in the way of understanding the art objects and the viewer's experience in the exhibition process.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Greenberg, Reesa, Bruce W. Ferguson, and Sandy Nairne, eds. *Thinking about exhibitions*. London: Routledge, 1996, 135.

<sup>28</sup> Ramrez, Mari Carmen. "Brokering Identities." *Thinking About Exhibitions*, edited by.

<sup>29</sup> O'Neill, Paul. "The culture of curating and the curating of culture (s): the development of contemporary curatorial discourse in Europe and North America since 1987." PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Therefore, it can be argued that curators are an important part of the interpretation of contemporary art, in other words, contemporary art is presented to the art world from their point of view. Likewise, investigating a mega exhibition will not be complete without examining its curatorial strategies. In this sense, this research examines the curatorial strategies of the *Venice Biennale* between the years 2011 and 2019 and investigates the prevailing theme of Middle East artworks in each year as well as the curator's point of view. These examinations investigate the curatorial strategies at the *Venice Biennale* toward the presentation of contemporary Middle East art.

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

As mentioned in the introduction section, the presence of Middle East artworks in the international arena is increasing. Here, the question arises in addition to the growing quantity of artists, what is the quality and manner of the artworks in this kind of mega exhibition? To answer this question and to understand the contemporary Middle East art at the *Venice Biennale* this research concentrates on the following questions:

1. What is the prevailing theme of Middle East art at the *Venice Biennale* from the year 2011 to 2019?
2. How are the postcolonial discourses related to the theme of Middle East art at the biennale?
3. What are the curatorial strategies in emerging the prevailing theme at the *Venice Biennale*?

To better understand the concerns of Middle East artists, it is required to examine the themes of artists' works. Indeed, identifying the dominant theme in artists' works answers these questions: What is the main concern of Middle Eastern artists in mega exhibitions? Middle Eastern artists are more interested in what topics and issues to share with the world in international forums. Moreover, considering the significant role of the audience in these exhibitions, these questions are raised: what is the role of the audience in conveying the artist's message in the mega exhibition? In other words, what roles do Middle Eastern artists consider for the audience to convey their message?

The presence of East artworks in Western international forums provides a platform for postcolonial studies. Since postcolonial discourses are studies that challenge the fixed and stereotyped views of the West toward the East. Accordingly, this research examines the works of Middle East artworks from a postcolonial perspective. In a similar vein, the dominant and determined themes of these artists in the *Venice Biennale* examines with the views of postcolonial theorists in order to answer the following questions: What concepts of postcolonial discourses are emphasized more in the works of contemporary art of the Middle East? How do postcolonial discourses appear in the works of contemporary artists of the Middle East?

As mentioned in the previous section, curators play a remarkable role in selecting artists and the themes of their artworks. Curators choose artists and their works of art for display, taking into account exhibition policies and current situations in the contemporary art world. The role of the curator in contemporary art has changed from a behind-the-scenes judge of aesthetics to a major player in the global cultural

politics scene.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the character of the curator has changed from a collection guard and organizer, and arbiter of taste to an expert with independent motivation and a focused position in the world of contemporary art.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the key role of curators in these mega exhibitions is undeniable. On the other hand, art and politics have always been intertwined, especially in more professional fields. Since, in terms of biennales subjects such as geography, culture, nationality, religion, language, and even political and social issues are always involved. In this respect, Lokhandwala argues that Large-scale exhibitions allow one to view particular discourses from a small scale, allowing for an in-depth analysis of the context, whereas biennales could be claimed to present the politics of the world on a macro level.<sup>34</sup>

Therefore, various social and political factors are involved in holding the mega exhibitions. Considering the challenging geographical conditions of the Middle East, these questions arise: What is the relationship between the political, social, and economic conditions of the Middle East and the themes of artists' works in the same period? How are the relationships between power and contemporary art defined in the postcolonial era? Hence, this study examines the curatorial strategies of the *Venice Biennale* in emerging the prevailing themes of Middle East artwork during the year 2011 to 2019.

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<sup>32</sup> Ramírez, Mari Carmen. "Brokering identities: art curators and the politics of cultural representation." *Thinking about exhibitions* (1996): 21-38.

<sup>33</sup> O'Neill, Paul. "The culture of curating and the curating of culture (s): the development of contemporary curatorial discourse in Europe and North America since 1987." PhD diss., Middlesex University, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> Lokhandwala, Arshiya. "Postcolonial Palimpsests: Historicizing Biennales and Large-Scale Exhibitions In A Global Age." (2012), 5.

## 1.5 Significance of Research

Since the presence of Middle East art in major art institutions, biennales, and other key venues has been growing<sup>35</sup> and the role of museums and large exhibitions such as biennials is inevitable<sup>36</sup>, there are very limited academic resources in this field. Within this context, Shabout maintains:

“A consistent problem faced by all who teach twentieth and twenty-first-century art of and from the region is the lack of trusted resources to use in classrooms ... Given the colonial history of the majority of Middle Eastern countries, it is not surprising that, as colonised regions, they were essentially removed from history and excluded from modernity and contemporaneity.”<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, the documents of mega exhibitions such as the *Venice Biennale* are often scattered on websites and catalogues. Therefore, one of the significances of this research is to gather the documents of contemporary Middle East art in the five periods of the *Venice Biennale* from 2011 until 2019. In other words, this research by examining the Middle East artworks at the *Venice Biennale* completely and comprehensively and with reference to academic and reliable sources can be a significant academic source for future researchers in the field of contemporary art of the Middle East.

Moreover, considering that the art of the Middle East examines in this research during five *Venice Biennale* periods and nine years, this research will be significant for art historians for the historical survey of Middle East art during these nine years.

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<sup>35</sup> Hassan, Salah, Leeza Ahmady, Iftikhar Dadi, and Reem Fadda. "Tarjama/Translation: Contemporary Art from the Middle East, Central Asia, and Its Diasporas." (2009), 5.

<sup>36</sup> Eigner, Saeb, Isabelle Caussé, and Christopher Masters. *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. London: Merrell, 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Shabout, Nada. "Framing the Discipline of Contemporary Art of the Arab World through the Press." *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* 18 (2015): 51-52.

As well, this research will help future researchers to better understand the ups and downs of the art of this region and its weaknesses and strengths during the period of 2011 to 2019.

Likewise, as colonial history is one of the reasons for the lack of resources and incomplete knowledge of the contemporary art of the Middle East,<sup>38</sup> this research by using postcolonial discourses attempts to overcome the colonial view to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary art of the Middle East. Since the Middle East artworks examine in the field of the *Venice Biennale*, this research is significant for studying the curatorial strategies of this mega exhibition and recognizing the curator's points of view and concerns of the *Venice Biennale* from 2011 until 2019.

## **1.6 Research Scope**

This research examines Middle East artworks presented at the *Venice Biennale* during the period spanning from 2011 until 2019. First and foremost, in terms of the geographical region of the Middle East should be mentioned that there are different opinions about the boundaries of the Middle East area, as an instance Seddon defines the Middle East region in this way:

“It is difficult to define precisely ‘the Middle East’: this foreword attempts to explain the reasoning behind my selection. For the purposes of this Dictionary, the region includes six countries and one disputed territory in North Africa (Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Western Sahara), eight countries in Western Asia (Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran), seven in Arabia (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain,

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<sup>38</sup> Shabout, Nada. "Framing the Discipline of Contemporary Art of the Arab World through the Press." *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses* 18 (2015): 51.

and Yemen), five newly independent states in southern Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) and Afghanistan. It also, somewhat controversially, includes the ‘Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus’. (A full treatment of Cyprus will appear in the companion volume *A Political and Economic Dictionary of Western Europe*.)<sup>39</sup>

In the same sense, Kahana and Suwaed believe that after the September 11 incident, Afghanistan and Pakistan are also considered part of the Middle East region. Nevertheless, traditionally, the Middle East region is a vast region including Arab countries and three non-Arab countries: Iran, Israel, and Turkey.<sup>40</sup>

In this regard, most researchers consider seventeen countries as the Middle East region.<sup>41</sup> Hence, this research also focuses on the seventeen countries to study the art of the Middle East including Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen (Figure 1.2).

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<sup>39</sup> Seddon, David, ed. *A political and economic dictionary of the Middle East*. Routledge, 2013,1.

<sup>40</sup> Kahana, Ephraim, and Muhammad Suwaed. *Historical dictionary of Middle Eastern intelligence*. Vol. 10. Scarecrow Press, 2009.

<sup>41</sup> Mansfield, Peter. *A history of the Middle East*. Penguin UK, 2019.

Kamrava, Mehran. "The Modern Middle East." In *The Modern Middle East*, Third Edition. University of California press, 2013.

Peretz, Don. *The Middle East Today*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994.

Eigner, Saeb, Isabelle Caussé, and Christopher Masters. *Art of the Middle East: modern and contemporary art of the Arab world and Iran*. London: Merrell, 2010.

Keshmirshakan, Hamid, ed. *Contemporary art from the Middle East: Regional interactions with global art discourses*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015.

Gruber, Christiane, and Sune Haugbolle, eds. *Visual culture in the modern Middle East*. Indiana University Press, 2013.



Figure 1.2 Map of the Middle East, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/which-are-the-middle-eastern-countries.html>

Furthermore, this research examines the Middle East artworks at the *Venice Biennale*. One of the selection criteria for the *Venice Biennale* in this research is that this biennale is the oldest and is considered one of the most prestigious and most viewed biennales in contemporary art, which has more participation in Middle East artworks than other biennales.

Moreover, the *Venice Biennale* is held every two years and is better suited for historical analysis than other large-scale exhibitions like *Documenta*, which are held every five years. Likewise, since this research uses postcolonial discourses to examine the works of artists, the selection of a biennale in the West and outside the Middle East region has been one of the other criteria for this selection.

As mentioned before, one of the salient characteristics of the *Venice Biennale* is the number of participants from the Middle East countries in this biennale compared to other biennales. For instance, in 2011, nine countries from the Middle East participated in the *Venice Biennale*<sup>42</sup>, while in 2010, only three countries from the Middle East participated in the *Sao Paulo Art Biennale*<sup>43</sup>, which is the second oldest biennale after the *Venice Biennale*. As well, in 2019, six countries from the Middle East participated in the *Venice Biennale*<sup>44</sup>, however, in 2018, only two countries from the Middle East participated in the *Sao Paulo Art Biennale*.<sup>45</sup>

Hence, this research has chosen the *Venice Biennale* to investigate the contemporary art of the Middle East in order to better understand the art of the Middle East. In this context, it is necessary to note that the works of Middle Eastern artists examine in all mediums of painting, photography, video, installation, etc.

The artworks presented at the *Venice Biennale* are generally presented in three sections: International Exhibition, National Participation, and Collateral Events. This research focuses on two sections: International Exhibition and National Participation.<sup>46</sup> From the reasons for focusing on these two sections, it should be noted that the Collateral Events section is provided independently by non-governmental and private institutions.

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<sup>42</sup> Universes in Universe. "54th Venice Biennale 2011." <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2011/pavilions>.

Universes in Universe. "List of Artists, ILLUMInazioni – ILLUMInations." <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2011/tour/illuminations/artists>.

<sup>43</sup> Leon de la Barra, Pablo. "29 Sao Paulo Bienal. Artist List." Centre For The Aesthetic Revolution. 1 JUNE 2010. <https://centrefortheaestheticrevolution.blogspot.com/2010/06/29-sao-paulo-bienal-artist-list.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Universes in Universe. "List of Artists," <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2019/artists>.

<sup>45</sup> Greenberger, Alex. "Here's the Partial Artist List for the 2018 Bienal de São Paulo [Updated]." April 26, 2018. <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/heres-artist-list-2018-bienal-de-sao-paulo-10209/>.

<sup>46</sup> La Biennale Di Venezia, "Biennale Arte 2022," <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/59th-exhibition>.

In this section, an artist, or a group of artists from different countries present their works to the curator of a person or a reputable art organization. In this case, artworks generally do not represent a specific country. Except for a very few exceptions, for instance, can mention the *Venice Biennale* in 2013, in which Palestinian artists presented their work in this section, in which they dealt with issues related to their region. The reason for the presence of Palestinian artists in this section was that countries that are not recognized by the Italian government are not allowed to participate in the section of national pavilions. Except for a few exceptions, most of the artworks in this section deal with global issues. Therefore, this research focuses on two sections, International Exhibition and National Participation.

The period considers for this research is between 2011 and 2019. During these years, five *Venice Biennales* have been held. One of the selection criteria for this period is that since 2011, the number of participants from Middle East countries has been growing. In this context, in 2007, three countries and in 2005, two countries from the Middle East participated in the *Venice Biennale*, while in 2011, the participants from this region were nine countries and fourteen artworks.<sup>47</sup>

One of the main reasons for this increase in the presence of Middle Eastern artists at the *Venice Biennale* is the international community's attention to the Middle East region after 2011. Undoubtedly, the Arab Spring is one of the main reasons for the world's attention to the Middle East region. The Arab Spring includes revolutions, uprisings, and protests in Southwest Asia and North Africa that began in 2010. For instance, in 2011, the rulers of Tunisia and Libya were overthrown, and in the same year, widespread popular uprisings erupted in Syria and Bahrain.<sup>48</sup> In a similar vein,

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<sup>47</sup> Universes in Universe. "List of Artists, ILLUMInazioni – ILLUMInations." <https://universes.art/en/venice-biennale/2011/tour/illuminations/artists>.

<sup>48</sup> Mansfield, Peter. *A history of the Middle East*. Penguin UK, 2019.

Tripp maintains that in many Middle Eastern nations in 2011 and 2012, the public sought to articulate its interests, form a group voice, and seek to have that voice heard as new political institutions were taking shape. In this process, artists have played significant roles, expressing their worries about the new power brokers, threats to free speech, and new conformism.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the political and social events in the Middle East after 2011 are one of the most significant reasons for the world's art to pay attention to this region, and for this reason, this research has chosen this period for investigation.

### **1.7 Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

The research method employed in this research is a qualitative analysis applied to the Middle East artworks that participated at the *Venice Biennale* from 2011 to 2019. The Middle East artworks were subjected to a qualitative analysis because this type of analysis allows for a more in-depth examination of the characters and issues within the artworks. The researcher can use qualitative analysis to examine the characters' responses to learn more about their cultures, behaviours, problems, and attitudes.<sup>50</sup>

This research collected primary data that are visual artworks. Moreover, this research collected secondary data that are textual data such as academic sources, journal articles, books, web pages. Textual data are based on library research, extraction from exhibition catalogues, statements of artworks, newspaper articles and magazine write-ups on the artworks and interviews that have already been done. The selection of artworks is unrestricted, and all artistic visual output, including painting, installation, photography, etc. are collected to be examined. Then, after collecting the

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<sup>49</sup> Tripp, Charles. "Art of the Uprisings in the Middle East." *Brown J. World Aff.* 19 (2012): 185,14.

<sup>50</sup> David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research* (3rd. edition) London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2010) 44.