ABSTRACT STATES

MODERNISM IN LEBANON, SYRIA, AND TURKEY

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Zeina Maasri. *Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

Anneka Lenssen. *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2020.

Sarah-Neel Smith. *Metrics of Modernity: Art and Development in Postwar Turkey*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2022.

Theorizing the state, as historian and political theorist Timothy Mitchell has argued, cannot be a project of defining totality where there is none.[1] Rather, recognizing that state coherence is an illusion produced by the state to hide its own inchoate and dispersed structure must be the first step in understanding the state's practices of power. Scholarly work on the state has too often mis-stepped, Mitchell argues, by reproducing "in its own analytical tidiness" the illusion of state coherence:

> The network of institutional arrangement and political practice that forms the material substance of the state is diffuse and ambiguously defined at its edges, whereas the public imaginary of the state as an ideological construct is more coherent. The scholarly analysis of the

1 Timothy Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn*, ed. George Steinmetz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76–97.

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> state is liable to reproduce in its own analytical tidiness this imaginary coherence and misrepresent the incoherence of state practice.[2]

I am not sure that the same critique can be made for art history, where a false "analytical tidiness" is usurped by coy neglect and meaningful discussions of the state slip into the background (or under the rug), in favor of weakly psychologized theories of the nation as "imagined community."[3] Such neglect is no surprise, given the discipline's mistrust of institutions and continued attachment to Cold War binaries of freedom versus cooption, abstraction versus realism, and so forth, that, despite the work of recent scholars, remain stubbornly persistent as historical context and even as current theory.[4] Yet art history is paradoxically well situated to pursue the scholarly task that Mitchell demands. That is, to think historically about how the state appears at certain times and to recognize that the state, like the "imagined community" of the nation, is also, "an abstraction in relation to the concreteness of the social, a sphere of representation in relation to the reality of the economic, and a subjective ideality in relation to the objectness of the material world."[5] Recent scholarship on modernism in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey suggests that a more courageous narration of modern art's cognizance of the nation-state's uncertain contours and febrile operations of power is belatedly coming to the fore within postcolonial art history. Books by Zeina Maasri on print culture in 1960s Beirut, Anneka Lenssen on imaginative agitation in Syria, and Sarah-Neel Smith on art and development in 1950s Turkey provide refreshingly deliberative analyses of paradoxes in state formation and cultural belonging.

Cosmopolitan Radicalism: The Visual Politics of Beirut's Global Sixties (2020) by Zeina Maasri provides a crucial reconstruction of Beirut's visual cultures amid Arab decolonization, the Cold War, and the escalation of Israeli aggression in Palestine over the "long" 1960s. Treating

2 Ibid., 76.

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London: Verso, 1998). Insights for this review were also helped by conversations with the pandemic reading group "New Readings in Global Modernism," which I co-ran with Chelsea Haines and Chaeeun Lee. (Chapters from both Lenssen's and Smith's books were read by the group.)

4 See, for example, David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020). For work trying to disaggregate these binaries, see, for example, Bojana Videkanic, *Nonaligned Modernism: Socialist Postcolonial Aesthetics in Yugoslavia, 1945–1985* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 26–27.

5 Mitchell, "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," 95.

Beirut as a transnational "node" in these arrangements, Maasri argues for the city as a political crucible with a regional influence enabled through its dynamic cultures of print. As a book about printed matter, this is also a book about institutions that charts, for example, how a newly established National Tourism Council of Lebanon (NCTL) strained to distinguish Lebanon from the Arab region by promoting Beirut's Mediterranean location and the city as both "Paris of the East" and an exotic Riviera. While this first chapter of *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* looks askance at the NCTL's constrictive efforts, it restores agency to individual players, including the artists who provided imagery for tourist promotions and NCTL's in-house graphic designer, Mouna Bassili Sehnaoui. Maasri reconstructs Sehnaoui's movement from fine artist to US-trained graphic designer and her investment in celebrating Beirut's cosmopolitan stripes while also forging new ones. These "were [Beirut's] Mary Quant years," as Sehnaoui notes.[6]

At the same time, Beirut's cosmopolitan leisure ambitions were beset with internationalist interventions, from the US Marine ground assault in 1958 (notably, onto one of Beirut's beaches) to Israeli military incursions and the exodus of Palestinian refugees and activists onto Lebanese soil in the latter half of the 1960s. Maasri teases out the contrast between publicity photographs of bikini-clad beauties on Beirut's beaches and images of the Palestinian *fida'i* (guerilla freedom fighter) circulating in the global press during the 1960s—notably, Leyla Khaled's iconic "photogenic image."[7] To fully realize such contrasts, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* rewards complete reading. The book unfolds much like its own archive: as a series of divergent, recursive journeys between Beirut's tourist publicity (chapter 1), literary journals (chapter 2), deluxe and artist books (chapter 3), popular books (chapter 4), activist printscapes (chapter 5), and children's books (chapter 6). When the reader gets to chapter 5, on activist publishing after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, for example, Beirut's importance as a refuge and node for regional publishing has been established in the preceding chapter that catalogs the arrival in Beirut of illustrators and designers from Cairo after Nasser's 1962–63 nationalist takeover of the print industry. In chapter 2, Maasri reconstructs the fallout from revelations that the Beirut-based literary journal

6 Maasri, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*, 43.

7 Ibid., 62. Admirably, (aside from two citations from other authors) Maasri does not use the word "terrorist" once in *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*.

Hiwar (1962–96) was a front for CIA funding by way of its sponsor, the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Rather than revel in conspiracy and (rightful) indignation, Maasri situates *Hiwar* within existing debates over literatures of social "commitment," *iltizam*, versus modernist experimentation, represented by the journals *Al Adab* (1953–present) and *Shi'r* (1957–70), respectively. Maasri outlines how *Hiwar* did not so much introduce a new set of debates into the cultural landscape as stir the pot, bringing visual form into literary debates for the first time and in deeply influential ways. As the pot gets overturned in chapter 5, on the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Maasri outlines how polite debates over commitment were replaced by more radical, public, and left-oriented forms of art-making that forged a new vocabulary of Arab and Palestinian belonging. The constructive assimilation of art into literary politics embodied by *Hiwar* continued through this moment as artists and writers came together to express their fury at Israeli military aggression in Palestine and across the region. Beirut's importance as a political and artistic center is summed up by an anecdote contrasting Beirut's transformation into a veritable exhibition space for activist imagery with other cities in the Arab world, where posters "hung after midnight would be taken off the wall by sunrise."[8]

Through such insights, Maasri untethers Beirut from its national context, arguing for the city's interstitial, discursive role in Arab decolonization and social struggle, and the constitutive role of print within this struggle. Maasri's focus on printed matter as a vehicle for art's production and distribution rather than art per se smooths the way for *Cosmopolitan Radicalism*'s dispensation of valorized concepts like autonomy, freedom, and artistic individuality. In a footnote on the Iraqi artist Dia al-Azzawi, Maasri likewise assails art history's attachment to individual artistic itineraries and national histories that delimit a true accounting of art and politics. Artists "were far more mobile in their political engagements than art historians are often willing to acknowledge."[9] While *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* presents a convincing argument for the utility of print cultures to expanding art history's remit and pursuing a more interdisciplinary account of postcolonial modernism, there is something to be said for how disciplinary scaffolds encourage thick, prolonged readings of individual objects, terminologies, and

8 Ibid., 180.

9 Ibid., 207.

arguments—something that *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* might have benefited from as it moves at speed through its dense, yet dispersed, archive. There is also something to be said for how disciplinary inheritances force sustained models of theorization, versus sampling from multiple disciplines to make passing intramural arguments. Maasri's leading formulation, "translocal visuality," is a productive nomenclature but hardly unfamiliar, at core, to art historians or visual theorists. "Visuality" is here taken to mean a sensorial and affective dispersion of images constituted by and within the social and producing a vexed "site of struggle."[10] "Translocal" marks the inherent spatiality and mobility of this struggle, "produced in and through the mobility of particular sets of images."[11] A more sustained interdisciplinarity would have attended to oft-noted "intertextuality" of Maasri's materials, lingering further over this productive concept as a complement or even substructure for the book's masterful interweaving of literary and artistic modes and its productive characterization of how the visual and textural are dispersed and reconstituted through the social via print.[12] Either way, *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* offers an insightful point of departure for such analysis in the future. In the present, it provides a compelling answer to global modernism's perennial struggle with trails of influence by situating artworks within, and even as a minor component of, print's proliferative terrain.

It has been roughly a decade since "global modernism" consolidated into a recognizable subfield of art history, represented by Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art* (2007), Iftikhar Dadi's *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010), Joan Kee's *Contemporary Korean Art* (2013), and Chika Okeke-Agulu's *Postcolonial Modernism* (2015), among others. Collectively, these volumes built on the momentum of contemporary art's global expansion to reveal prior experiments in modernism that had long been neglected by Western scholars. The disciplinary bur-

10 Ibid., 2.

11 Ibid., 16.

12 Here, Julia Kristeva's analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin's argument that "literary structure does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure . . . as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning)" is generative, but I am thinking more about the expanded field of intertextual study, or literary theory in general, as a sustained and formative engagement with an intertextual source. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice A. Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64–65. See, for example, Margarete Landwehr, "Introduction. Literature and the Visual Arts: Questions of Influence and Intertextuality," *College Literature* 29, no. 3 (2002): 1–16.

dens confronted by this first "wave" of scholarship were substantial—not least, the albatross and red herring of influence that has long been used as a cudgel against marginalized artists, who have been influenced either too much or not enough by canonical precedents, a condition that Partha Mitter has neatly dubbed the "Picasso manqué syndrome."[13] While *Cosmopolitan Radicalism* tackles anxieties of influence through the refractive category of print, Anneka Lenssen turns to one of art history's most contentious tools—formalism—to discern the agency and complexity of modern artists in decolonizing Syria in *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (2020). Over the period from the 1920s and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire to the Ba'th Party's transformation from underground solidarity movement to autocratic force in the 1960s, *Beautiful Agitation* tracks major events in Syria's politics both locally and from afar. The book moves from the intimate space of Damascus cafes to views of Syria from outside in the foreign press and through the eyes of Syrian artists abroad. Lenssen excavates these perspectives through generous archival evidence and close engagement with archaeological, ethnographic, philosophical, and literary historiographies, as well as Syrian political history proper. This deeply formalist book is also thick with close analysis of photographs, sketches, and other visual documents along with paintings. It is here that Lenssen's writing most excels and excites. Describing a painting by Fateh al-Moudarres, Lenssen evokes a dark tonality that "seems to suck all signs of life into its depths," while "blushing cheeks, ordinarily signifying liveliness, float here as gaudy spots of compensatory color," and extraneous dots of grime and debris on the surface are deliberately outlined, as if to tie them back "to the radiating life of the whole."[14] Such formalist acrobatics may seem indulgent, even excessive, against a backdrop of colonial suffering and decolonial uncertainty. Yet Lenssen shows that this formalist energy was thoroughly in line with political thought among Syria's intellectuals and nascent leaders, making a book-length case for formalism as politics and as art historical method.

Beautiful Agitation opens with a letter written by political intellectual Sidqi Ismail in a Damascus bar in 1947. "Imagination sums up everything in man," he writes, and "art is only a slender trace." Is there

13 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 534.

14 Lenssen, *Beautiful Agitation*, 195.

anything "more welcoming or far-reaching in our souls? Or more irruptive and creative than the imagination?"[15] In the visual work of Syrian-Lebanese writer Khalil Gibran, the subject of chapter 1, Lenssen traces a reorientation of fin de siècle Orientalism as a search for absorptive open-endedness and indeterminacy, rather than modern pictorial clarity. Through Gibran's eyes as he travels through Boston, New York, and Paris, we witness ruptures in Arab and Syrian identity from afar. In his painting and drawing, pieces of rock transform into bodies and back again. Portraits transform into bottomless chasms of emotional interiority as identity is likewise unmoored. The important second chapter of *Beautiful Agitation* expands on Gibran and Ismail's imaginative intellectual thinking by charting the vitalist and metaphysical lineages of Ba'thist political thought in French-Syrian intellectual exchange during the French Mandate period (1923–46). The chapter provides a hinge and a crux within the book, stepping bravely away from modernist art proper to mark the entwinement of political, philosophical, and visual praxis in the emergence of Ba'th activism. Opening with an analysis of French colonial efforts to forge a future Syrian nation-state through archaeology, Lenssen shows how photographic and painterly reproduction of archaeological excavation destabilized those efforts, inciting proliferative rather than exclusory forms of nationalist ideation. Meanwhile, Syrian intellectuals in Paris rallied around the ethnographic turn in French academia during the 1920s and the writing of Henri Bergson as a vibrant, vitalist lens for conceiving of identity beyond the colonial state.[16]

The final two chapters return to monographic studies. Chapter 3 situates the paintings of Adham Ismail (brother of Sidqi Ismail) amid a political and intellectual marshaling of the "plentitude of Arabism" against bureaucratized frameworks of identity in the new Syrian state. Lenssen reads Adham's cursive "arabesques" and recursive forms of automatism within this push for combinatory forms of identity that cross time and produce wholeness out of sinuous fragments. In Adham's understanding, "a truly restorative Arab art could not be unidimensional."[17] *Beautiful Agitation* ends on an appropriately ominous note in its fourth chapter, on al-Moudarres, who transfigured Syrian "heritage" from a fount of nationalist pride to a well of darkness

15 Ibid., 1.
16 Ibid., 94–96.
17 Ibid., 134.

and death. As Lenssen puts it, al-Moudarres was interested in "Syria," in terms of "sins, profane impulses, squandered sacrifice, and other elements belonging to a kind of underworld below the horizon of awareness."[18]

From Gibran's flurried watercolors to al-Moudarres's ominous visions, *Beautiful Agitation* convincingly charts a series of imaginative, procreative, and aleatory tendencies among Syria's cultural luminaries over the country's long period of decolonization. The resulting signs of procreative agitation appear at multiple sites—in artworks, intellectual debates, shifts in the political establishment, and the landscape and contours of Syria itself. Yet they do not always occur at once, or even in correspondence with one another. Despite Lenssen's impressive efforts, they remain resistant to theoretical resolution. *Beautiful Agitation* occasionally stumbles in its attempts to capture this inchoate set of agitated tendencies in prose. The recurring metaphor of the *reservoir*—occasionally deployed by Lenssen's interlocutors, but more often as an interpolation by the author—strains to encapsulate the febrile expansiveness of Lenssen's material and method, its locational fixity opposing the more kinetic energies described elsewhere, including, most notably, when *Beautiful Agitation* engages with the subject of land and geography. Importantly, *Beautiful Agitation* describes a moment of historic subject formation in which the landscape is *equally* as precarious as the subject, marking a powerful contrast with the archetypal European subject of terrestrial authority that reaches transcendence by mapping, reproducing, or comprehending a landscape's contours. What Lenssen detects in decolonizing Syria is an altogether different relationship: one in which intellectual resolution is made impossible by the fact that the landscape is also in a constant process of becoming. Intellectual and indeed painterly resolution are rendered impossible as landscape and subject, figure and ground, collapse into one another. (A stationary reservoir this is not.) In one passage that parses al-Moudarres's use of sand and paint, for example, Lenssen describes the structure and motility of desert sand, which because of its constant movement is round and smooth rather than sharp and faceted. Wind-blown, it "moves by bouncing off the ground, or creeping in the shape of a dune," in turn presenting "a meditation on the fleetingness of contemporary constructions."[19]

18 Ibid., 176.

19 Ibid., 194.

Reading this, I am struck by the ecological timeliness of *Beautiful Agitation*. Amid the ecological shocks of 2023, Gibran's, Adham's, and al-Moudarres's grappling with terrestrial instability cannot be overlooked as marginal or belated additions to the canon, but rather, stand out as startlingly relevant and even prophetic to the experience of living in the world today.

Lenssen avoids such presentism, however—indeed, does not have space for it—allowing only brief mention of Syria's current political crisis in the pages of *Beautiful Agitation*. Sarah-Neel Smith is equally wary of hindsight in *Metrics of Modernity: Art and Development in Postwar Turkey* (2022), focusing on development in 1950s Turkey. Although the book opens with the shock of 9/11 and closes with a consideration of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's speech at the opening of the Istanbul Modern in 2004, it is careful not to impose retrospective judgment on its principal thematic. "Development," as Smith argues, was an operative term in Turkish modernism during 1950s, when Turkey itself became a testing ground for (and model patient of) internationalist theories of modernization, promoted most notably by the United States and institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Though interventionalist "developmentalism" picked up across the third world during the 1960s and 1970s, Smith provides a chronology for Turkey's embrace of developmental ideas before the 1950s in an extended introduction that covers the *tanzimat* (military reorganization) reforms of the 19th century to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's reforms during the 1920s and 1930s. As Smith outlines, artists were earnest participants in these earlier phases of reform, striving to instantiate a national identity in ascendant flux. By the 1950s, and the book's four main chapters, this period of uncertain aspiration had become more assured and rigorous, as Turkey settled into a brief period of democracy and national confidence. The paradox of this period and of Smith's book is how much this internal confidence hinged on external economic interventions, starting with the Marshall Plan in 1948 and continuing through development interventions promoted by first world experts, organizations, and neoliberal restructuring aimed at integrating the Turkish economy into international markets during the 1950s. Smith depicts these macroeconomic shifts with local, granular insights and trenchant vignettes: former State Department advisor and oil executive Max Weston Thornburg bouncing around Turkey in a jeep preaching the American spirit of "initiative" and private capital in 1947, for example, or glamorous gallerist, actress and

gossip columnist Adalet Cimcoz ministering to a crowd in a photograph taken at her influential Gallery Maya in 1953.[20]

As in Lenssen's book, Smith's main archive is newspaper and magazine articles that are used to reconstruct key events and institutional histories, and as rhetorical evidence for how the language of development filtered into the artistic ecology of 1950s Turkey. Cimcoz's gossip columns, published under the pen name Fitne Fücur (Mischief Maker), provide a dazzling archival source to chart the ups and downs of Gallery Maya, the subject of chapter 1, along with Cimcoz's multipronged efforts to induct the Turkish public into understanding and purchasing modern art—in the process, habituating itself to the modernizing ethos of the Kemalist state. Strikingly, Cimcoz's efforts even extended to selling artworks on installment, "just like one would a radio or washing machine."[21] While Smith emphasizes female intellectual agency as essential to the gallery's importance and success, she refuses to romanticize Gallery Maya as a radical alternative to the regime. A standout moment in the chapter arrives when Smith contrasts the "choreographed viewership" and traditional aesthetics of state exhibitions with Gallery Maya's "private" display of modern art, situating the gallery as a non-state challenge to the former while acknowledging the inherent paradox of this challenge. At the core of the chapter is a study of how Gallery Maya's very promotion of individualism, modernity, and private initiative precisely befit the state's own goals pursuit of modernization and private capitalist enterprise.

Chapter 2 delves further into the mutual incorporation of modernism and national development in Turkey, via art critic, gallerist, and future Turkish prime minister Bülent Ecevit's writing, travels, and organizing. Whereas Gallery Maya transmitted a logic of private enterprise and accumulation, Ecevit's Ankara-based Helikon Gallery promoted modernism and modernist abstraction's role in the cultivation of *democracy*. "Learning to appreciate abstraction," as Smith notes, "was part and parcel of citizens' collective obligation to continue cultivating the modern habits they had adopted over the past thirty years of national development."[22] Turkey's "visual markers of modernity were shifting . . . and Turkish citizens needed to adjust accordingly."[23] Once again, Smith mobilizes Ecevit's

20 Smith, *Metrics of Modernity*, 6, 44.
21 Ibid., 48.
22 Ibid., 57.
23 Ibid., 57.

writings in the popular press as a vital source to excavate his defense of abstraction as a vehicle for inculcating subject-citizens with the principles of democracy—with thinking freely while navigating difference and difficulty. He encouraged patrons to take a "closer look," pay attention, and "use your head a little."[24] Struggles to do just that form the basis of Smith's next chapter, on the aftermath of modernist painter Aliye Berger's winning a first prize for painting at the 1954 Developing Turkey exhibition, a project organized by the national Yapı Kredi bank to celebrate a meeting of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) in Istanbul. How, railed Berger's critics, could a female artist from an elite class understand such a weighty subject as national development? How could her swooping vortex of impasto color (versus more figurative treatments of "development") merit this high award? Through close reading of Berger's prints and experiments with "inchoate line," Smith accounts for Berger's sympathetic inquiry into social flux and alienation as components of modernization: "Her short, hand-drawn strokes de-individuate the figures, communicating instead a sense of collectivity rooted in a shared state of disenfranchisement."[25] Berger rendered this flux in bewilderingly abstract etchings of subjects, including the Bosporus docks and construction workers, that attest to the longstanding social cognizance of her work and prizewinning painting.

Smith follows another female artist in *Metrics of Modernity*'s final chapter, in an analysis of Füreya Koral's ceramic practice in the context of attempts to modernize Turkey's craft industries for export and Füreya's internationalist travels, notably on a Rockefeller Fellowship to the United States in 1957. Smith is brave to excavate Füreya's interface with such institutions with the level of detail and focus that she does. Given global modernism's past legitimacy battles, it is no surprise that the exposure of artists like Füreya to such politically dubious state and institutional agencies as the Rockefeller Foundation have been cautiously evaded within the field until very recently.[26] *Metrics of Modernity* suggests that we are moving past such diffidence and opting for a bolder approach to postcolonial art's institutional exposures. As *Metrics of Modernity* also outlines, such exposures provided not only the *context*

24 Ibid., 94.

25 Ibid., 122.

26 Chelsea Haines and I have pursued this disciplinary problem in a co-edited special issue of this journal: "Art, Institutions, and Internationalism, 1945–73," *ARTMargins* 8 no. 2 (2019). The issue was based on a conference in which Smith also presented.

in which artists worked but also the basis for their theorizations of modernism, in this case via the logic of "development."

Methodologically, the book finds companionship with Karin Zitzewitz's recent *Infrastructure and Form: The Global Networks of Indian Contemporary Art, 1991–2008* (2022), on infrastructure as an operative term in Indian art in the 1990s, and Ana María Reyes's *The Politics of Taste: Beatriz González and Cold War Aesthetics* (2019), on Colombian painter-sculptor Beatriz González's turn to popular and kitsch aesthetics against a Cold War aesthetics of modernization.[27] *Metrics of Modernity* likewise offers parallels with modernist art histories in Japan, which, like Turkey, struggled through an externally managed "economic miracle" in the postwar decades while grappling with traumatic postimperial legacies.[28] Yet any comparison with Japan also shows up a curious *lack* of anxiety among the subjects of *Metrics of Modernity* and the period it examines—a decade of almost phantasmic optimism and economic fiction-making built on past colonial hegemony, ongoing mechanisms of neo-imperialism, and ominous signs of future collapse. Was Turkey's postwar embrace of development a mark of postimperial weakness or postimperial arrogance? Were related expressions of artistic cosmopolitanism a sign of economic confidence or postcolonial exceptionalism? A more direct confrontation with the grim parameters of this history might have answered these questions more forcefully, along with directly tackling the impending 1960 military coup. While the coup is often invoked in *Metrics of Modernity*, it is not fully explained or narrated. This leaves us to wonder how the book's protagonists fared in its aftermath, or how their elite privilege and embrace of capitalist modernization helped precipitate the coup and its autocratic reverberations. The submergence of Turkey's imperial legacies within *Metrics of Modernity* also leaves productive questions unanswered, especially when the book is read alongside volumes on Lebanon and Syria, former Ottoman territories.

That any volume on "global modernism" will leave questions unanswered is a certainty. The three books reviewed here expand a recently

27 Karin Zitzewitz, *Infrastructure and Form: The Global Networks of Indian Contemporary Art, 1991–2008* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022); Ana María Reyes, *The Politics of Taste: Beatriz González and Cold War Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). Not yet published at the time of writing is Sean Nesselrode Moncada, *Refined Material: Petroculture and Modernity in Venezuela* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

28 See, for example, Namiko Kunimoto, *The Stakes of Exposure: Anxious Bodies in Postwar Japanese Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

established subfield but remain "first books" in their respective areas, tasked with locating and parsing new archives, reconstructing artistic biographies from scratch, and narrating historical context with a comprehensiveness that scholars of canonical modernism are seldom expected to provide. That these books provide such comprehensiveness without sacrificing formal analysis—indeed, while *foregrounding* formal methods—is to be especially celebrated. All three books take their lead from the objects in hand, resisting the twin lures of deracinated formalism or of resolution through context. Like Lenssen's shifting desert sand, the *granular* approach of these authors keeps the interplay of form and politics in productive motion. Maasri resists merely taxonomizing print itineraries in Beirut, instead choosing to follow objects and makers along the circuitous paths they tread. Lenssen's attention to painterly form imbricates high modernism within the developing social contract of decolonizing Syria, and Smith's deeply textual study reinstates the visual agency of Turkish modernism during a most contentious decade of development. These books on the contiguous nations of Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey thus accrue a startling distinctiveness. Monolithic conceptions of the region fragment along with zero-sum allegations of co-optation and assimilation that have been hitherto used to disqualify postcolonial art history from wider appreciation.

Given their solid foundations, these volumes could have been even more forthright about the paradoxes that, for Timothy Mitchell, are par for the course in any project dealing with slippages between economy and state, state and society. Nonetheless, they suggest that the field is moving in the right direction, and that bold new approaches to modernist history are finally able to find courage in company.