

frieze

NOISE

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GALERIE SFEIR-SEMLER, BEIRUT, LEBANON



Discussions about the making, showing and selling of art from the Middle East have been echoing around contemporary art circles for a few years, raising several questions and problems about the current art-market obsession with Arab art. But the question of whether galleries, artists and institutions can themselves challenge or undo the now-fashionable hype around art from ‘the region’ – and are not, in fact, its accomplices – remains unanswered.



Enter 'NOISE', a group show curated by *Bidoun* magazine editorial and creative duo Negar Azimi and Babak Radboy. The show's mission statement affirms that it would like to do two things: engage the notion of regional survey exhibitions by closing its eyes and tuning its ears to the white noise of the white cube; and take that space itself as a point of departure, while inevitably having to surrender to the conceits of those very same decontextualized galleries. But can a white-cube model articulate anything outside the parameters of its own agenda of exhibiting, selling and commodifying art? However lithe and clever a show is, can it ever produce liberating or critical moments while existing within the confines of the established gallery space it is trying to critique?



Through 'NOISE' one would expect the grain of the gallery to be exposed, turned upside down or inside out like a glove. Despite the curators' desire to inscribe the gallery's name onto the building's windows and roof – with Vartan Avakian's neon 'Sfeir-Semler' sign rewritten in Devanagari and Arabic script, and a calligraphic Lawrence Weiner piece pasted on the gallery's glass windows – this effect only happens explicitly in one room.



For a small, untitled 'storage room' gallery, Azimi and Radboy asked gallerist Andrée Sfeir to bring out her storeroom stock of unsold works. They proceeded to create a homely, horseshoe corridor within the gallery, hanging the pieces tightly and haphazardly with some paintings and photos still in their plastic and others leaning on the gallery floor. The reason the space is able to shake the habitual (and often predictable) experience of walking through a gallery is precisely because it is disorienting, with no title wall or explanatory blurb. One suddenly finds oneself inside the gallery but also outside it, snooping around someone's house, forced to make a new effort to look and to comprehend.



In the hope of achieving this intercepting effect, though less successfully, the curators chose to disperse Haris Epaminonda's prints of Polaroid photos throughout the gallery separated from one another in different rooms, as well as a looped video projection of an obscure bird. The gesture raises the question of whether a curatorial idea itself suffices to produce the desired effect of undermining rehearsed notions of authorship and exposition.

Radboy is also an artist, and his own intervention teeters on the edge of appropriation. It signals a certain withdrawal in that the installation is in effect a play on an image of an image of a removed bit of wall from the Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York, along with photos of the corresponding hole left in the wall. Two unframed, floor-level photographs of laptops showing the 'NOISE' press release sit beneath a clock indicating the present time, completing this set of concentric referrals.

Two other referential, reflexive works include Steven Baldi's untitled piece in which he sealed off part of the gallery with a glass wall, forcing viewers to retrace their steps within the space of the gallery, and another in which he presents four juxtaposed, photo realist paintings of the MoMA 'Modern Architecture: International Exhibition' catalogue (1932), superimposed

with invitations to the galleries where the works were originally shown. Alessandro Balteo Yazbek and Media Farzin's *Didactic Panel and Model of Alexander Calder's*

Verticle Constellation with Bomb (2009), in creating a fragile model of Calder's original sculpture along with a wall text implicating the shah of Iran, Churchill and Roosevelt in Cold War strategizing, traces a historical line (perhaps too obviously) between oil, atomic conspiratorial politics and Modernist abstraction.



It has become a common component of Walead Beshty's work to register and record its travels before it arrives in the gallery space, playing on temporality and mediation as constitutive of art work. FedEx boxes and unopened rolls of film are sent through airport X-ray machines, resulting in an installation of sculpture-like copper boxes and Minimalist painting-style photographs (taken from damaged negatives). It is as though Beshty was creating a Richter scale-like machine with its own set of random rules, thereby emphasizing trace and process as art work.

Whether the works presented in 'NOISE' collectively challenge the platonic, allegedly insular Galerie Sfeir-Semler in relation to its context or the overall (a)politics of exhibiting remains unanswered. It leaves one unsure whether curatorial design is sufficient to record or produce a seismic effect within the numbing world of mass art consumption and exhibition. Though some individual works demonstrate a desire to confront traditions of exhibition and exhibiting, it's unclear whether the show, following Giorgio Agamben on the conditions of being contemporary, engages the darkness of our times by remaining detached, out phase and anachronous, and thus poses the reverse question: has art ever been contemporary?

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