

Tea with Nefertiti at Mathaf

Notes on a visit to the exhibition in Doha, including more than 100 works from ca. 1800 B.C. to the present, and photo tour.

By Pat Binder & Gerhard Haupt | Dec 2012 © All rights reserved



When the Mathaf museum was inaugurated in Doha at the end of 2010, Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath curated one of the three opening exhibitions: *Told / Untold / Retold* [1]. These "stories of journeys through time and place" were a collection of newly commissioned, respectively autonomous works and projects by 23 contemporary artists with roots in the Arab world.

With their second large exhibition in Doha, *Tea with Nefertiti: The making of the artwork by the artist, the museum and the public*, which opened on November 16, 2012 in Mathaf together with *Forever Now* [2],

the two curators are now greatly expanding their reach, in terms of both time and content. Spanning "continents and millennia", they want to offer a critical perspective on "how artworks have been used to create images and perceptions of cultural otherness". Fitting for the 100th anniversary of the discovery (and appropriation) of the bust of Nefertiti, they take the Ancient Egyptian collections assembled by European museums in the 19th century as the starting point for their delving into museology, the staging of artworks, traditional art historiography, and the "employment of mechanisms of visual and literary display as a means of forming, informing and framing cultural otherness". (More on this in the press release farther below.)

The showing's conceptual ambition is extremely great – at any rate, much greater than one might expect from the cutesy alliteration of the title, which aims at drawing an audience. One would have required a rather large amount of time to deal adequately with the diverse constellations of works from modern and contemporary art, the staged relationships between items ranging from 1800 B.C.E. to the present, documentary references, historical digressions, wall texts, etc.

But, bafflingly, only a two-hour program was planned for the press invitation to the two exhibitions in Mathaf the reason for the journey. After a short briefing (with no opportunity to ask questions), one was guided at top speed through *Tea with Nefertiti* and *Forever Now*, hampered by a host of photographers and cameramen who incessantly took pictures of the curators and their listeners.

The opening could have offered an opportunity to meet the participating artists and take a wider look around. But participation was off limits to the representatives of the media who had been flown in especially for the two exhibitions. While the opening audience streamed into Mathaf, we "invited" journalists and art critics were shepherded to an isolated dinner in the city center, constantly "minded" by an almost equal number of PR

agents and "guests" [3]. The evening grew even more unpleasant when our response to the suggestive question about our impression of the great progress of art events in Qatar was not the hoped-for, unqualifiedly favorable answer and we were then massively propagandized by the head of one of the PR agencies, who had no specialized knowledge. To jump ship would hardly have been possible, by the way. Taxis do not just happen to come out to Mathaf, which is situated between construction sites far outside in Education City, so we were dependent on the officially organized transport. And as the experience of one participant in the press tour showed the next morning, the PR ladies energetically demanded strict adherence to the program. [4]

On the second and final day of the trip, we had to do without the barely two-hour "Symposium" to be able to visit the exhibitions again. After this "proper" tour through *Tea with Nefertiti*, questions about the curatorial concept arose but unfortunately could not be posed and discussed. For example, about the degree to which the two curators ended up themselves applying methods that they adamantly criticize. Do they really deconstruct exclusionary attributions of "cultural otherness" when they so explicitly underscore "Egyptianness"? Don't they themselves fall into the trap of the "ethnic curating" that they pillory? Are the constellations of exhibits (of which more than a few are astonishing and formally attractive) really developed out of the inherent substance of the works, or do they rather serve to illustrate preconceived curatorial assertions?

For these reasons, we have to forego an extensive critique that could do justice to the complexity of this exhibition. But we would at least like to give a hint at its conceptual approach on the basis of a few examples in a photo tour. Such visual information is appropriate also because even now (three weeks after the opening) Mathaf's website provides nothing more than an extremely terse note on *Tea with Nefertiti*.

(Translation from German: Mitch Cohen)

Tea with Nefertiti

(Press information)

Through revisiting the contested histories of how Egyptian collections have been amassed by numerous museums from the 19th century onwards, *Tea with Nefertiti* explores the mechanisms by which artworks come to acquire a range of meanings and functions that can embody a number of diverse, and at times conflicting narratives. The exhibition is concerned with the critique of museology, the staging of the artwork, the writing of art historical narratives and the employment of mechanisms of visual and literary display as a means of forming, informing and framing cultural otherness.

Curated by Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath of Art Reoriented, *Tea with Nefertiti* is organized along three thematic chapters that reflect on the process of appropriation, de-contextualization and re-semanticisation that an artwork undergoes as it travels through time and place. In doing so, it unpacks the complex relationships that exist between such artworks, the artists who first made them, and the institutions that exhibited them. In the **Artist** section, the focus is on the artist's formalistic departures and contributions as evidenced through the artworks on display. The curatorial narrative is primarily informed by the specificity of the time and location in which the artist functioned. It elaborates on the individual process of exploration and negotiation that an artist undergoes, in search of their preferred mode of expression.

In the **Museum** section, the emphasis shifts to the context in which an artwork is presented. Both visual and written modes of presentation are deconstructed in attempts to uncover how institutions appropriate the work of art - bestowing on it new meanings and functions not necessarily intended by the artist.

In the **Public** section, the viewer is presented with a number of incidents where artworks have expanded, both physically and ideologically, beyond

the artist's studio and the walls of the museum into the public arena. These historical and current moments are mapped out to better understand how the artwork can acquire yet another semantic and agency when coerced into the writing of problematic meta-narratives.

Tea with Nefertiti is constructed around a series of juxtapositions and groupings of historic, modern and mainly contemporary artworks and documents. This is intended as a gesture towards breaking away from more familiar museum classifications that have been conventionally based on geography, periods and/or styles. Through adopting this model, the exhibition attempts to put forward a notion of art history informed by a network of complex nodes, both historical and current, rather than the reductive and binary notions largely adopted in the construction of the art historical canon, specifically from the modernist period onwards.

Tea with Nefertiti is a reflection of a curatorial desire to challenge the mechanisms of display through which the artwork is conventionally presented. It invites people to become more critical of how they look at exhibitions in general. It also seeks to propose alternative paradigms for art historical construction that transcend the confines of geo-temporal linearity. These constructs are conceived as pointers to an ongoing process of cultural transfer, of appropriation and negotiation that exists beyond the parameters of a much-contested historiography.

A book under the same title has been published in November 2012 in conjunction with the exhibition, authored by Sam Bardaouil and edited by Till Fellrath.

Tea with Nefertiti comprises of more than 100 artworks dating from ca. 1800 B.C. to the present ranging from painting, sculpture and photography to video and mixed-media installation. It also includes a newly commissioned site-specific intervention by Bassem Yousri. Along with these ancient, modern and contemporary works, around 50 archival documents are on view including a number of first-to-be-exhibited

materials.

Artists featured in the exhibition:

Ai Weiwei

Ghada Amer

Armand (b. Armenak Arzrouni)

Mohamad-Said Baalbaki

Taha Belal

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin

Honoré Daumier

Thomas Demand

Maurice Denis

Rudolf Ernst

Mamduh Muhamad Fathallah

Francis Frith

Georg Frey

Alberto Giacometti

Gilbert & George

Georges Henein

Candida Höfer

Iman Issa

J & K (Janne Schäfer & Kristine Agergaard)

Emily Jacir

Ida Kar

William Kentridge

Paul Klee

Susanne Kriemann

Little Warsaw (Bálint Havas and András Gálik)

Maha Maamoun

Luigi Mayer

Lee Miller

Amedeo Modigliani

Mahmoud Moukhtar
Vik Muniz
Youssef Nabil
Xenia Nikolskaya
Amy Nimr
Lorraine O'Grady
Grayson Perry
David Roberts
Georges Hanna Sabbagh
Nida Sinnokrot
Thomas Struth
David G. Tretyakoff
Kees van Dongen
Van Leo (b. Alexander Boyadjian)
Ramses Younan
Ala Younis
Bassem Yousri

The exhibition also includes a number of artworks that are conventionally labeled as Pharaonic, Coptic and Islamic by artists whose names are now unknown.

Notes:

1. [Told / Untold / Retold](#). 23 Stories of Journeys Through Time and Place. 30 December 2010 - 28 May 2011, Al-Riwaq Art Space, Doha. Curators: Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath. Information and photo tour, Nafas Art Magazine, 2011.
2. [Forever Now](#). Five anecdotes from the permanent collection. 17 November 2012 - 1 June 2013, Mathaf, Doha. Information and photos, Nafas Art Magazine, 2012.
3. We counted 9 PR agents and staff members of 3 foreign agencies (Polskin Arts & Communications Counselors, Bolton & Quinn, Roya Nasser Associates), and of the Qatar Museums Authority - for just 13

"guest".

4. See the article by Ana Teixeira Pinto in art agenda, 25 November 2012.

Pat Binder & Gerhard Haupt

Publishers of Universes in Universe - Worlds of Art and of Nafas Art Magazine. Based in Berlin, Germany.