

## PORTRAYING SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS THROUGH CREATIVE MEDIA AND POST-FEMINIST AESTHETICS

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**Abstract.** The study focuses on the impact of visual arts on raising aesthetic and social awareness toward others in society. Purposely, the research explores the oeuvre of two North African female artists who participated in the 15th edition of the Istanbul Biennale from 16 September to 12 November 2017. This edition featured the theme "*a good neighbor*" to emphasize the connections between good art and good community in the city of Istanbul. Accordingly, the study identifies the artists' engagement as immigrant women making art and emphasizes post-feminist aesthetics in the diaspora. They negotiated the biennale's theme of utopian societies and urban neighborhoods through the intertwining concepts of diaspora, women's art, and socio-politics. This critique utilized a discourse of the Qualitative Content Analysis Method and the theory of Iconology and Iconography to analyze the artworks' social symbolism. It exposed the social influences on the contemporary practices of the two artists, who represented different memories from their social realities in the international biennale. From social perspectives, these post-feminist practices significantly impacted visual perception and aesthetics while emphasizing the city's identity in current human cultures in social, political, and cultural interactions.

**Keywords:** *Creative media, visual arts, visual culture, art sociology, post-feminism, practice-led research.*

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### 1. Introduction

From a non-binary perspective, mapping geography, gender, and art undergird more profound viewpoints towards women within immigrant societies. Those creative women had an innovative point of view that defined their anxieties on multicultural extents. The present research paper aims to identify the significance of contemporary arts emerging from displaced societies. This practice-led investigation presents a novel critique of the current expressions of identity and individual memories in collective art spaces, adding new critical insights to the historical or theoretical approaches of the established Arab or Middle Eastern arts literature. A contemporaneous understanding of social reality is fundamental in defining women-made art into post-feminist creativity paradigms.

The critical point is to frame the significance of women's arts emerging from the displaced societies. Therefore, this research is aesthetical in the first place, which focuses on the artists' response to social issues through their artworks. It discusses the impact of representing creative individualities on the levels of aesthetical appreciation

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among the community, manifesting the quality of social interaction among common aesthetical spaces. The current paper investigates Visual Arts and artists during their interaction across innovations and individualisms spaces by focusing on a qualitative approach in visual critique instead of a quantitative method in statistical analysis.

People educate themselves about cultural differences during interaction with visual arts and individual creativities from social perspectives. Visual Arts reflect the artists' practices when expressing their self-identities in communal spaces. This modern phenomenon of expressing identities in art promotes harmony among people in society because they develop their understanding of each other's individualities (Hetrick, 2018). The power of arts manifests when ordinary people transform into art viewers who understand artists' individualities. This kind of communal aesthetic appreciation is a further step beyond the multicultural understanding in the community, which became achievable in numerous efforts driven by the educational and cultural state institutions in any country.

The current study emphasizes the art's function in the community as a communication mechanism with educational values. That presents the significant operations artists can do in society's multiculturalities. Artists portray their memories and present them in collective exhibitions to explore the associations of self-identity from the perspectives of artists, audiences, and curators. The current paper located the artworks of artists living in displacement who participated in the 15<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennale, a collective art exhibition. Into which they conveyed political and social messages. Manifestations of individual creative memories express artistic narratives to the multicultural audience. In other words, the research aims to render individual memories into multicultural perceptions for the global audience. Such arts representing women and their belongings portray feminine/feminist/post-feminist aesthetics and connect art practices with social contexts in international art events (Hetrick, 2018; Millner *et al.*, 2015).

The audience's aesthetic response to appreciate artists' individualities as they portray their memories and narratives in collective art exhibitions is a contemporary trend in visual arts. Today, this phenomenon communicates the social anxieties of many people undergoing un-imaginable situations of emigration and forced displacement caused by the ongoing political conflicts resulting from the absent democracy, equality, and tolerance. The current global situation of turbulent people leaving their home countries occurred many times during human history; diaspora is not new (Keshmirshakan, 2015). Nevertheless, this case is different because the developments in communication media visualized the images of displacement effectively, creating a significant impact on the popular culture of the ordinary people of the second decade of the 21 century.

## **2. The significance of the study**

A clash between scientific objectivity and aesthetic subjectivity manifests in the fields of Fine Arts Studies once research-oriented artists aim to investigate the new areas of Art. This clash may appear if the sampling process depends on aesthetic judgment instead of hypothetical bases. Thus, the possibilities of locating an examination community for any new research in Art may depend on the aesthetical drives, which may place the art researcher in an accusation from the perspective of objective scientific evaluation.

This paper employs aesthetical judgment to locate the study's scope as an alternative to any hypothetical objectification. Therefore, it is significant because it examines the works of art that portray the social memories of female artists who lived and displayed their artistic practices in the diaspora. It is significant to appreciate such creative individualities of women's arts to educate the aesthetical perception of cultural differences in society; such perception of female artist's identity reflected the image of standing as an immigrant woman of North African origin and as an artist. Accordingly, the study concentrated on the qualitative nature of subjective oeuvre that illustrated post-feminist symbolism in visual arts. Those symbolisms in the artworks reflected fashion elements, tools, and belongings, evaluating the temporalities that wrapped women's arts across day-to-day life in the household and collective spaces. The current critique mapped the private, public, and personal identities of immigrant feminist individualism, creating a contemporary expulsion of socio-politics and arts.

From a general perspective, the term "Post-feminism" appreciates feminine and feminist aesthetics to undergird multicultural as well as unitary values in society, particularly in Fine Arts Studies, where divergent aesthetics establish correspondences between the art practices and criticism (Jones, 2008; Hetrick, 2018). Socially, they created educational values of visual cultures in global and multicultural communication. Such aesthetics illustrated a figurative spirituality for the authentic portrayal of culture beyond politically constructed stereotypes and clichés. Concerning the artworks' compositions from formal, content signification, and contextual signification, this investigation analyzes the female creative identity as a subject of aesthetic response.

Women-made artworks stand as a subject of aesthetic appreciation. Female artists used visual and symbolic components to communicate sociopolitical critiques in their manifest and latent compositions. In this progressive context, the feminine/ feminist/ post-feminist narratives established new symbolism beyond social iconographies as the mosaic of women's identity in contemporary art rendered through different layers of cultural meanings.

### **3. The visual question**

Gendering art is the critical question of this study, which is deeply aesthetical. What drives the collective space of an art exhibition to be or not to be feminine, feminist, or post-feminist, and is it scholastic in this context to critique or analyze such subjects within a genderized framework. On the other hand, is the act of "gendering" this area of research significant, and does it depend on a quantitative or qualitative approach in research. Do the artists' numbers from different genders, or do the feminine/masculine themes manifestations in the collective space of the exhibition count into aesthetical judgments.

The previous points in this subsection briefly construct a triangular three-cornered shape that starts from a women-centered concept (feminine, feminist, post-feminist). Then, the concept broadens to engage with society's gender frameworks, dynamics, and reflections on social research. The third corner extends to the collective space of the exhibition and negotiates the aesthetical impacts of this hyper individual art on society from communicational and educational perspectives. All these divergent points lead into the study's critical focal point, which focuses on the geo-cultural, ecocultural and sociopolitical narratives that undergird the arts of representing self-identity that are endlessly paradoxical and questionable.

#### 4. The critical methodology

The present research integrated the Qualitative Content Analysis method with the theory of 'Iconography and iconology' to establish a methodological framework, making a constructive assemblage to articulate the artworks' critical analysis of visual characteristics. The current critique dragged the theory of 'Iconography and iconology' from the classical literary contexts to the artistic visual contexts focusing on the artwork itself (Rose, 2001; Tanner, 2003). Such methodology aims to visualize the interpretation of social and political issues, which the art portrays—taking into this stage that the contemporary iconographic/visual research is not exclusive to the literary preferences in conventional texts. This intercourse advances the classic criticism to cover further graphic possibilities in social-oriented visual arts.

This critical discourse aims to equip the methodology to render visual and textual significances from the current social ecologies. Some conservative iconographies lack visual significance because they drew meanings and interpretations from textual references (Purgar, 2017). This methodology is aesthetically progressing into the visual-oriented content analysis to analyze the artworks according to the expressive narratives that represent the diversities of socio-political issues and people's collective memories. The current visual critique renders culturally constructed meanings that generate different interpretations according to different societies.

By focusing on the artwork in the context of the city's biennale, the methodology analyzes the social iconographies in the artworks, where the references of meanings stand on two main concepts. The first is the visually oriented iconographical analysis, and the second is social analysis, which stands on the social contents. Accordingly, the iconographical analysis investigates the symbolic qualities manifested from the artwork (D'Alleva, 2006) as it identifies the symbolic identities or implications. Such aesthetic research practices resembled social, economic, and cultural influences, uncovering the relationship between the artwork and its social environment. Iconography aims to integrate social and cultural narratives into aesthetic research in the current creative media. In contemporary art research, Iconology rendered originality from the current visual culture (Purgar, 2017; Savin-Badin & Wimpenny, 2014).

The methodology progressed into aesthetical interpretation, which critiques the forms and contents in the artworks. It investigates the symbolic and pictorial significances in artistic compositions. As a critical tool, the qualitative content analysis rendered the artwork to advance deeper and negotiate social and political issues while connecting narratives and individual memories. Then, the analysis progressed to identify the cultural contents, which explains the differences and similarities among the connotations and denotations from multicultural perspectives. The deepest layer in this analysis drove the interpretation from the social collective memory to the individual cultural identity. It exposed the significance of being displaced and replaced, as the expressive elaboration of visual meanings reflected the artist's individuality. This layer located the symbols synchronously and concluded the narrative, conceptual, and material status of symbolic thoughts through the accounts of political and social contexts.

The discourse of the methodology in this paper responds to the urgent hyper-individual, critical and creative necessities. Consequently, artist-researchers located and investigated collective/mainstream versus individual concepts within the global artistic

phenomenon. They debated the values of formal and intrinsic aspects, which artists began to ignore in the current global art era.

#### ***4.1. The aesthetic limitations and the unit of analysis***

The process of selecting samples in this paper is purposive and based on the critical and aesthetic evaluation of two artworks, which correspond to the author's aim to focus on the theme of Good Neighbor in the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of Istanbul Biennale and North African contribution within the international contemporary art scene. In utilizing visual arts, the two artworks convey human manifestations through audio and visual communications. One of the artworks manifests figurative expressions that represent the human form as a central element in the pictorial composition. Moreover, the second one represents the human sound synchronized with textual subtitles that translate the content of a verbal dialogue into the English language.

The study's main limitations are three; the first is the theme of the 15<sup>th</sup> edition of the Istanbul Biennale itself, between 16 September 2017 and 12 November 2017. The second limitation is the cultural origins of the artists from North African countries. The third limitation is the creative medium/media form and figurative content of the artwork, which represents human expressions through different media of painting, installation art, photography, cinematic soundtrack, video art, and textual subtitles. The unit of analysis in this study is the artworks made by the addressed North African artists.

The artworks delivered political messages through different media representing symbols, images, texts, sounds, physical or site-specific spaces, objects, and site-specific installations. The catalog of Istanbul Biennale 15, which documented the event, provided the details of artworks and the artists' statements. It indicated the narratives and issues that link to the artist's social reality and social memory. The artworks' narratives represented three concepts; the Woman-made Art, the post-feminist contents, and the current political and social manifestations of a particular geo-culture in the diaspora. This study considered the artwork as a meeting point of being a woman artist of specific folkloric heritage exhibiting art in the Istanbul Biennale. The symbolic elements of the artwork are iconographically significant because they represent latent and manifest meanings of social issues.

**Table 1.** Details of the artworks

Artist's Name	The Country	The Artwork
1. Latifa Echakhch	From El Khansa, Morocco, lives in Martigny, Switzerland	<i>Crowd Fade</i> , Painting installation, 2017
2. Heba A. Amin	From Cairo, Egypt, lives in Berlin, Germany	<i>As Birds Flying</i> , Video, 2016

#### ***4.2. Literature review***

Post-feminism is a highly contextual subject that relates directly to criticism and other human and social studies; this review discusses the aesthetic significance of such a subject's connections with the urban art scene in Istanbul. It does not intend to be a binary concept that stands on gender, political or social segregation, or categorization process; it instead stands as an aesthetical tool that gives significance to female



contributions within all these subjects. The urban identity of Istanbul city aesthetically constructed through the different public and private spaces across the metropolitan.

"*A good neighbor*" is the theme of the 15<sup>th</sup> Istanbul Biennale, which collected various metaphorical layers that varied from socio-political to personal, individual, subjective, and aesthetic conceptions within its collective art spaces. The neighbor may be an immigrant from a neighboring country who conveyed stories of shattered homes and unimaginable panic. This theme supported post-feminist aesthetics as one of the current necessities in the global art scene to emphasize the significance of women-made creativities.

In the context of artists and their representations of diaspora, the phenomenon of post-feminist aesthetics critiqued trans-cultural temporalities that constructed an intense association between the artist's cultural identity and social memory. As immigrants, the artists investigated the temporal societal realities by replacing, displacing, and decomposing the iconographies of their feminine/feminist culture into the other's culture. They confronted cultural, social, and political impacts that paralleled their integration and coexistence with new social contexts (Storey, 2009). The terminologies of immigration, feminism, and visual culture constructed a vibrant field for contemporary arts as long as it represented contemporaneous identity.

Curators rendered the theme of *'a good neighbor'* into the biennale's multicultural spaces and selected different artworks portraying *'a good neighbor'* as an immigrant, war victim, or someone with antisocial thoughts (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017). Those artworks elaborated on the convergent issues in feminist/ feminine/ post-feminist aesthetics criticizing political sectarianism, democracy, surveillance, economic turbulence, historical narratives, and civil wars from collective versus individual experience.

How the contemporary arts reflected the current moods of displaced societies is the dilemma of this study, which negotiated creativity beyond the colonial/post-colonial argumentations. Colonial history and the present social reality are two fundamental concepts that undergird North African and Middle Eastern arts and cultures. However, this study focused on the social dynamics that affected the current art practices in immigrant communities, which displace outside the homeland's aboriginal society. It might be terrifying that the vibrant intercourse of art and power in our globalized world created uneven classes of highly privileged and less privileged artists labeled and misidentified in the diaspora. Therefore, they endeavored to liberate themselves from the oppression of labels and clichés, which may prejudicially stereotype them according to ideologies, beliefs, and political opinions (Morató, 2014).

From a quantitative point of view, Istanbul Biennale 15 translated gender equality into numbers. Of which 23 participants out of 55 were women artists. However, numbers and abstract quantitative measurements are not the only standards of this equality. The biennale facilitated female/male artists to express themselves beyond their gender identity limits. The artists' creativity and freedom of expression were not exclusive to genderized backgrounds. Istanbul Biennale collected viewers from diverse cultures to manifest multicultural critiques on self-identity through creative and aesthetic perceptions (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017). Considering that feminism is not a label, it is a branch of aesthetics and a culture of practices that critique political and social references (Grosenick, 2005).

On the social level, Istanbul's geographic location is significant from a cultural perspective, which made the city construct different levels of cultural, social, ethnic,

artistic, and political narratives. These narratives stimulated the people living in this city to turn their memories into creative simulations into different visual creative media. Accordingly, the city's biennale became a cultural center that receives all these creativities and turns them into collective art exhibition that emphasizes the connection between good art and good society.

The biennale is an intercontinental cultural and social activity that connects the Middle Eastern art production to the European cultural space with all paradoxical interventions and foundations. Those geo-cultural connections made the city's biennale more accessible from the cultural sides of the multicultural societies. The city's geographical position furnished good landscapes for the biennale, illustrating a creative attribution to the world with its artistic components. The city's biennale portrayed the mixtures of Turkish culture, representing metropolitan dynamism in the city different from other cities because Istanbul combined Asian, Middle Eastern, and European cultures (Anderson & Anderson, 2010; Pappé, 2010).

Historically, Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Art managed the biennale in the Turkish cultural capital; it started the collective activity in 1987 and made 16 editions until 2022. It assembled a global network linking artists and audiences from various cultures; it is a hub zone for artists to meet curators and collectors every couple of years to exchange experiences and share other views on sociopolitical and economic issues. The biennale portrays Istanbul city's localism as different from other cities' localisms in the global art scene, which perceives Istanbul Biennale as a non-western-centric biennale standing on neo global set of aesthetics. Istanbul city utilized collaborative artistic environments to elevate the international arts, driving culture as a central factor of contemporary art (Filipovic *et al.*, 2010).

## 5. The visual critique

Investigating post-feminist creativity within the boundaries of displaced societies drove new interpretations of geopolitical issues in contemporary arts. The dynamics of power, politics, and gender undergird such artistic experiences where immigrant societies transfer to foreign or neighboring countries and encounter various cultures and realities. In this context, the artists who emigrated from North African and Middle Eastern countries confronted challenges across original and new communities. Such challenges are projected by sociopolitical powers, limiting the art practices from representing or criticizing social and political issues. Consequently, they encountered limited spaces to critique mainstream taboos related to people's arts of expressing their identities.

In this study, the artists reexamined the image of migration in society, pushing their artistic practices beyond the mainstream backdrops that appear on TV news, visual media, and public graphic materials circulated over urban spaces. In the artworks, the artists transformed the idea of migration into different metaphors, creating new insights to evoke the audience's imagination toward rethinking diaspora. They created new visual dialogues to invite people to imagine new memories and narratives of those displaced people. The artworks represented distinctive perspectives of diasporas, as visual compositions in the artworks are diverse, where the forms, shapes, and iconographies convey the immigrant message of displacement.

The artists represented their identities and corresponded to the narratives of displacement while deconstructing the traditional relationship between form and content

in the artworks they present. In the body of the artworks, the addressed immigrant artists visualized the memories of flying birds and shattering people crowds into visual media. This metamorphosis reflected post-feminist aesthetics from the Middle Eastern and North African migration dilemma. Such aggressive experimentation on women's identity as "*a good neighbor*" and immigrants conceptualized their contemporary artworks for Istanbul Biennale's theme. Furthermore, they reconstructed an evocative synthesis of ambiguous metaphors and romantic utopian symbolism to break with the stereotypical representations of immigration.

The aesthetic connections between migration and contemporary art revealed the rooted collective memories and the iconographies of artists' cultural identities. Consequently, this analysis is significant because it focuses on the contemporary arts made by women in the diaspora. In Istanbul Biennale, women artists corresponded to the theme and recreated trans-national narratives into their artworks. They investigated the idea of [*a good neighbor*] [s] and questioned its socio-political associations with past and present aesthetics. Furthermore, it reflected the temporalities of displacement and imagined trans-national identities beyond geographical boundaries.

In the artworks, the images of human bodies, birds, landscapes, unidentified textures, translated texts, and broken concrete masses exposed latent and manifest meanings from social happenings. Social memories directly impacted the constructions of those meanings which artists imagined. On the other hand, the artworks conveyed visual engagements with diasporic narratives. Thematically, they negotiated personal daily and self-thoughts and linked them to the symbolism that frequently appeared in visual temporalities across past and present narratives. The landscape of North African arts extended into trans-national and trans-modern geographies (Morato, 2014).



**Figure 1.** Latifa Echakhch, 2017, *Crowd Fade*, painting installation



The first artwork in this critique is a painting installation made directly on the interior walls of a site-specific space, which was constructed inside the public area of the exhibition. The interior space resembles a long corridor that allows the audience to pass through and view the painting on the interior walls, which are extended parallel partitions at the exhibition space at Istanbul Biennale. Latifa Echakhch is a Moroccan artist living in Switzerland. She constructed an extended corridor that resembled a long room with four walls, two of which were 20 meters long. The other two short walls are almost 3.50 meters, with a door each to allow the audience to pass through the painting installation (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017). On these walls, inside the extended corridor, the artist painted with an expressive style crumpling people with forceful movements trying to escape their daily tragedy. The artist also created small cracks and scratches on the surface of the mural painting, letting small pieces of concrete drop off the painting's surface to the ground to visualize the sense of tragedy and make the audience more engaged with the artwork.



**Figure 2.** Latifa Echakhch, 2017, *Crowd Fade*, painting installation

The title of this artwork referred to the forceful displacement of people as a political and social exclusion. In the contemporary world, the antonym word for a citizen is refugee, which implies several levels of meanings that refer to cultural, economic, or political differences. Citizens/refugees refer to those who can/not express themselves because they have/do not have citizenship rights. The title indicated the culture of origin and evoked the aesthetical conception of exile and immigration into social memory. The artwork evoked the contradictories of citizenship and represented concepts of displacement, border crossing dangers, diaspora, and homeland aesthetics.

Latifa used this method to convey a clear message of fragility and loss. The process of painting on the wall and then scratching or breaking the painting's surface itself is expressive and dynamic, which creates a sense of wonder on the walls of the monumental painting composition. The artwork is not a portable canvas; it is an architectural structure with interior space. It allowed the audience to flow and move from one corner to another. Latifa created an interactive space inside the painting to trap the audience and make them engage with the images of the suffering people she painted

on the scratched mural walls. She is trying to represent the political and economic turbulence while humanity is falling, fading, and losing values of charity, tolerance, and honesty, leaving people uncertain of their future (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017).

This artwork portrayed the experience of crossing international borders by refugees or displaced people. It symbolizes the life of the anonymous humans as fragile, homeless, and helpless. The painting installation exposed the images of the displaced people while fading off the crowds, depicting the mystery of a human tragedy. A tragedy that the international community cast into ignorance. Latifa represented the mortal narrative of this chaos, while immigration narratives entangled different diasporas. The concept of the fading crowds drew the images of the extended lines of people waiting to transborder for a safer place on the painting wall. Those people expanded to cover the empty area of the painting and fell through the installation interior to the extended floor.



**Figure 3.** Latifa Echakhch, 2017, *Crowd Fade*, painting installation

The painting evokes a sense of fragility while receiving the audience into the artwork's interior space to make them feel the tragedy of being fragile as they walk on the crumbled pieces of the painting, which the artist scratched out of the original painting's surface. The artwork represents the collective narratives of the global exodus taking place worldwide. The dynamics of such exodus are the loss of democracy, the collapse of social security, terrorism, and conflicts. The artwork investigates the emerging concept of Nations of Entropy (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017) and its impact on the representations of the past and future in a visual dialogue that alerts people to the present failure of humanity.

The artist depicted the immigrants' imaginations of life and death by painting scattered strokes of dark and blue colors on the cracked walls that rest in broken pieces on the ground. Latifa built layers of turbulent floating people. This pictorial composition suggested different interpretation levels, which portrayed the displaced people's narratives across different geographies. Immigrants on the international waters face threats of sudden death when they transborder. This artwork, entitled *Crowd Fade*, criticized directly the political contexts of the bloody conflicts that drove people out of

their homelands. The sad narratives of those conflicts evoked ethnic and political backdrops as the conflicting powers engaged in their murderous wars. The fallen pieces of fragile humanity were on the ground underneath this artwork. This installational artwork symbolized the conflict caused by the despotic powers and reflected two players, the anonymous victim and the masked criminal.



**Figure 4.** Heba Y. Amin, 2017, *As Birds Flying*, video art

*As Birds Flying*, 2016, is the second artwork to this analysis by the Egyptian artist Heba Y. Amin, who lives in Germany. This video projected sociopolitical contents that symbolized social narratives from Egyptian society. These narratives resembled the control of political powers, which created despotic surveillance of cultural and creative practices. Besides, such sociopolitical narratives negotiated the contradictory image of democracy within the authoritarian surveillance system in Egypt. This video art piece constructed three main elements; the first element was drone footage of a documentary film (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017). The second element was a soundtrack from a famous movie featured by well-known Egyptian comedian actor Adel Emam. Moreover, the third element was the text of the translation subtitles on the bottom of the video screen. The footage resembled the flying birds that travel over an open area of mountains and lakes, a rural scene that symbolized the aesthetics of being high above everything in the vast extended space in the video art.

The artwork drew symbolisms from the social backdrops of Egyptian society while responding to the central theme of Istanbul Biennale 15. Heba Amin composed the birds' footage with the second element, the soundtrack, to illuminate the distorted image of democracy in her country of origin. She reproduced the subject of social surveillance as a multilayered question of how belonging to the Egyptian cultural identity obligated certain mainstream behaviors. This artwork metaphorically assembled the "Flying Birds" images to articulate the eloquence of immigration. Such a concept manifested diverse narratives from her trans-cultural reality. Some of the traveling birds



may follow the swarm, knowing nothing about the reasons for their travel. Individual birds may fall victim to the group's departure. The culture of immigration mirrored the political turbulence of Egyptian/Arab/North African society, as the exclusionary political reality determined whom to stay, whom to leave and whom to return.



**Figure 5.** Heba Y. Amin, 2017, *As Birds Flying*, video art

As the second element, the soundtrack was more symbolic and evoked deeper connotations from the Egyptian social reality. It conveyed a conversation in the Arabic language between two actors, a woman, and a man. The man was Adel Emam, a leading and famous actor, while the actress was Yusra, the Egyptian Marilyn Monroe. They both established various iconic images in the popular visual culture in Egypt and the Arab region. Heba Y. Amin translated this conversation into English subtitles that appeared on the bottom of the screen to make the conversation more understandable for the international audience. She extracted this soundtrack from an Adel Emam movie, *The Birds of Darkness*, 1995, which critiqued the democratic reality in Egypt during that

time. The narratives of the movie focused on the ideological differences among politicians who advocate secularism against religious-political campaigns (Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2017). This film reflected the social temporality of the public perception of democracy.

The third element in the video artwork is the text. It translated the literal meaning of Adel and Yusra's conversation, while the cultural symbolism manifested through the tone of their voices beside the images of the flying birds. The conversation marked people's lives across different social classes, where gender, political and cultural roles in the community echoed through feminine and masculine sounds. Heba composed the images of the flying birds and the translated soundtrack with the immigrant identity narratives associated with the symbolism of the Egyptian social reality. Adel Emam's cinema movie *Birds of Darkness* constructed clichés of politicians and made such clichés popular in the community. The famous movie portrayed the corrupted politicians in Egyptian society and recreated the stereotypes of the secular politician in opposition to the religious politician. Therefore, the displaced soundtrack (from the movie into the video artwork) with the translated conversation is the symbolic focal point of Heba Amin's video artwork. The translated subtitles stated on the bottom of the screen:

Man: Seeing the country from above,  
differs from seeing it below.  
Woman: (laughing) which is better?  
From above? or below?  
Man: To see its beauty, it must always be seen from above.  
Woman: First time you live above?  
Man: Yes, it's my first time.  
But it won't be my last.  
Below it is suffocating?  
Overpopulation and poverty and polluted air.  
People are walking in the streets bumping into each other.  
Enough.  
We will never live below again.  
We'll always live above.  
(Sound of music coming from the background)



**Figure 6.** Heba Y. Amin, 2017, *As Birds Flying*, video art



The video artwork expressed the subject of displacement from less privileged social classes to more privileged social classes. The parallel opposition of the flying images and intimate sounds from Adel and Yusra articulated the paradoxical layers of this subject. Furthermore, the text triggered the symbolic meanings of this paradox between the *Flying Birds* and *Birds of Darkness*. This conversation evoked the social impacts of the *Birds of Darkness* movie on the popular image of politicians in the local social context. Emam's movie created stereotypes and represented politicians as a source of corruption, fundamentalism, and oppression. Heba Y. Amin's video represented the symbolism of Adel Emam's movie from different perspectives in an international biennale context. The video artwork *As Birds Flying* re-created the cultural connotations of *The Birds of Darkness*. In this video artwork, Heba Amin created an analogy of symbolism with Adel Emam's cinema movie, where they both critique the current relationship between individualism and mainstream ideologies.

## 6. Conclusion

The artworks negotiated the complex imaginations of a good neighbor's identity while the issue of immigration emerged as a global dilemma through the lens of the Istanbul Biennale. The creative works of those artists represented the narratives and symbolism of exodus across the transnational borders. Diasporic arts mirrored significant images to aid the audience in comprehending the experience of displacement. This experience of women as immigrants, artists, and North Africans echoed in the iconographies of the artwork. The *Flying Birds* symbolized an aesthetical point of view on leaving a less-privileged society and culture to belong to another more-privileged society and culture. While the *Fading Crowds* portrayed the iconic image of the escaping people and signified their fragility across the turbulent waters, they left their motherland and translated it into symbols wherever they went. They imagined their deserted houses, their friends and families, and trees, streets, and doorways. Immigrants may have belonged to their imaginary homelands rather than their real ones. These narratives evoked the paradoxical analogy between utopia and reality, which depicted displacement as bliss for some people or a curse for others. The artworks represented the immigrant's anxiety toward a romantic future that may be full of prosperity or homesickness and foreignness.

Immigration is a cultural phenomenon where many narratives and symbols portray in visual arts. It signified the displaced person as an object in the context of migration in various orders, while different social realities generated symbols by associating objects with certain subjects. In this context, the iconographies of the diaspora transformed into social constructions driven by individual and collective experiences in arts (Searle, 1995). The present-day social reality hybridized the diaspora, gender issues, political conflicts, and cultural identity subjects into the contemporary global culture. All those social issues and narratives became components of the hyper culture of the contemporary time; the dynamics of democracy, social communication, and free markets changed our traditional values (Giddens, 2000).

Today the world witnessed one of the utmost massive immigration, exiles, and conflicts in human history across the Mediterranean Sea. The global socio-political dynamics developed multiple cases of diasporas and cultural dilemmas within the cosmopolitan maps of the cities. Consequently, the social structures of communities worldwide faced new waves of people bringing their new cultures, fashions, and

languages. Therefore, the cultural hybridization revealed significant resolution in the global culture. People merged to establish sympathy toward integrating differences and similarities among emergent communities from different cultural origins (Cohen, 2008). As a trans-cultural case, the North African artists experienced multicultural narratives on different levels.

The focal point of this spontaneous cultural interaction is the artist's individuality while being *a good neighbor* is the biennale's theme. Such interactions between the artworks and the exhibiting space developed layers of meanings and interpretations. It proposed multicultural perspectives for mutual understanding, where the biennale theme redefined the concepts of the personal and public terms against the digital destruction of social media. The giant transnational communication agencies played a significant role in reshaping the people's perceptions around the world. In this context, Giddens (2000) emphasized the role of mass communications in destroying the human private and public spaces by intruding on the social and cultural dialogue with digital influences.

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