

# **Egyptian Surrealism and Degenerate Art' in 1939**

Don LaCoss

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“A group of artists that has been formed in Egypt which calls itself the ‘Degenerate Art Group’ is now in the process of breaking up,” began a report by ‘Aziz Ahmad Fahmi in Cairo’s al-Risala in early July 1939. “It has failed to find the support it had hoped for among artists, the media, and the general public. Not one writer, journalist, or other visitor has called at its headquarters in the Shari‘ al-Madbagh building to hear what its members have to say.”

Fahmi, an arts critic on al-Risala’s editorial board, went on to explain why he felt that, fundamentally and conceptually, this had been a doomed project from the start. He wrote that the kind of degenerate art that this group was calling for was not possible because the term itself is oxymoronic: True art could never be degenerate, since, by definition, art is the supreme expression of the human spirit, and as such it is “honest,” “elevated,” and “high-minded” — it could never be “degraded” or “corrupt” in the way that degenerate things are. The value of artistic work is assessed on the artist’s heartfelt commitment to beauty and craft rather than the work’s style or subject matter; texts, images, or objects routinely turned out by disinterested hacks for reasons other than deeply held personal vision or expression are either “tomfoolery” or “merchandise” and so do not qualify as “art.” The idea of “degenerate art,” then, was a wrongheaded contradiction in terms.

Fahmi explained that the painter who “marvels at the beauty of the bodies he paints even when they are in poses which would be seen as conventionally ugly or against the social norm” will nonetheless succeed in creating art so long as he sincerely derives aesthetic pleasure from “things traditionally regarded as ugly and he expresses this pleasure truthfully.” But “the painter who moves away from his personal taste and, for some reason, produces something he neither likes nor believes in [is] a liar and hypocrite” — in this case, his creative work “will truly be degenerate,” but it will not be art. This point is lost on the Degenerate Art Group, he said. If these painters were merely inept daubers producing images on canvases to which they have no personal, spiritual aesthetic connection, then their paintings were (in his words) “fake” and had nothing to do with art. But, he warned, if these group members were indeed “individuals who are [as] honest in their feelings and expression” as they professed to be, then they must stop falsely claiming that theirs was a degenerate art. Fahmi asserted that the danger was that the Degenerate Art Group’s continuous false representation of its work as being of vastly inferior quality betrayed art’s true role as genuine spiritual expression, and so this fabrication of “artificiality” risked genuinely demeaning artwork as trash, thereby negating the artists’ claims to honest artistic expression.

Fahmi’s short article touched off a lively back-and-forth discussion in al-Risala that went on almost weekly for the next three months. The social context of art

and the political responsibility of artists were just two of the themes that structured a debate that touched upon some of the cultural issues surrounding visual art in Egypt, the Middle East, and the world; in a small way, it is one index of how Egypt grappled with cosmopolitan ideas of modernity and modernism on the eve of World War II. As explored below, the debates also helped to forge a foundational moment for the influential but understudied Egyptian surrealist group.

## Art and Liberty

What Fahmi initially identified as the “Degenerate Art Group” was actually called the Art and Liberty Group, an organization founded in Cairo by a handful of Egyptian writers and artists in the late 1930s. Surrealism prevailed among the founders of Art and Liberty, but it was not the only style of image making and image interpreting that was practiced among those who became affiliated with this association, from its founding in 1939 to its dissolution in 1945. Art and Liberty was an eclectic cluster of some of the most important creative forces in Egypt; though its cultural impact has been downplayed or overlooked in much of the scholarship, it is difficult to deny that the organization has had an afterlife that continues to the present day, particularly as it concerns the continued interest in some of the ways in which surrealism interrogated methods of representation in the arts. Although some studies of the history of surrealism in Egypt and of Art and Liberty have emerged in the last few decades, it is a chapter in the story of modern Egyptian art and politics that remains largely untold.

A key instigator of the emergence of a surrealist group in Egypt was the poet Georges Henein. He was involved in the early 1930s with a Francophone debating and study group called *Les Essayistes* (“The Attempters”), and he wrote articles and reviews for its newspaper *Un Effort* on matters literary, artistic, and political. Deeply moved by the suicide of the surrealist poet René Crevel in the summer of 1935, Henein carried on a correspondence with surrealist poet André Breton in Paris and grappled with questions of how to fuse revolutionary Marxism with surrealism. He began to lay the foundations for an Egyptian surrealist group in 1936, which he inaugurated with a series of meetings in February 1937; his first major talk on surrealism was broadcast over the radio in Cairo and Alexandria in March and later transcribed for publication.

In this opening lecture, Henein’s explanations of surrealism are conventional and centered around the theory and development of the movement in Paris, mostly in the realm of poetry — he begins with nineteenth-century writers of the surrealist anti-canon (Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Jarry), mentions the impact of Dada, and provides an overview of the centrality of Freud’s theory of the unconscious

and its relation to surrealist experiments in automatic writing (interestingly, there is no mention of Hegel or Marx). Quoting from Breton's *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), Henein tries to explain the objectives of surrealism succinctly as the liberation that can be achieved in the quest to find the point of breakdown for all the repressive regimes of binary segregation upon which the everyday tyrannies of the "real" world are built: mind from body, thought from action, consciousness from the unconscious, perception from representation, work from play, humans from nature, male from female, child from adult, time from space, psychic life from social life, popular from elite, dream from waking life, and so on. The dialectical overcoming of these apartheid systems was the objective for all surrealist intervention in the fields of art and thought. Henein ended his presentation with a look into why surrealism differs from the Cubist and Futurist avant-garde, the latter of which he understood as an exclusively "Italian commodity," as compared to surrealism that, though headquartered in some ways in Paris, was transnational and boasted multiple centers of activity, such as those in Belgrade, Brussels, Bucharest, Prague, London, and Tokyo.

In this talk, Henein did not explain why surrealism was relevant for Egypt, but there were some in that country who made those connections for themselves. Joining Henein in his endeavor was the former Essayiste painter and writer Kamil el-Telmissany and the brothers Anwar and Fu'ad Kamil, who were regular fixtures at the spirited discussions on culture and politics held at Cairo's Nawras café. Ramsis Yunan, a secondary-school art teacher with an active interest in contemporary art, cultural theory, and Freudian psychology, co-founded the group with Henein and continued to identify himself as a surrealist into the 1950s. Iqbal el-Ailly was another notable early surrealist; the daughter of devout and well-regarded moderate Muslim community leaders and the granddaughter of Egypt's "prince of poets," Ahmad Shawqi, she joined the group in 1939 and was Henein's closest companion and comrade until his death in 1973.

A powerful catalyst in defining the surrealist group's purposes and direction in Egypt came in late March 1938 at a salon organized by the Essayistes in honor of the Futurist poetry of the Alexandria-born F. T. Marinetti. Henein spearheaded a disruption of the proceedings, protesting angrily that the event was a sick celebration of fascist imperialism since Marinetti had been a loud supporter of Mussolini's aggression. The surrealists believed that those living in North Africa should be much more upset with the brutal fascist Italian colonial war on the Libyan resistance movement (1928–1934) and Italy's 1935 invasion and occupation of Ethiopia.

The source of the outrage felt by Henein and others at the Essayistes' Futurist salon found further articulation a few months later with the appearance of "For An Independent Revolutionary Art," a manifesto penned by French surrealist poet

Breton and the exiled ex-Bolshevik revolutionary Leon Trotsky in mid-July 1938 at the Mexican home of the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.

“For an Independent Revolutionary Art” is a response to the yoking of artists, artistic production, and art itself to the commands of the state. Government regulation of creative and cultural activities was most evident at the time in those nations that suffered under authoritarian rule — in places like Hitlerian Germany, Stalinist Russia, Mussolini’s Italy, and Franquist Spain, the arts were pressed into duty as sordid propaganda, and as such were required to be simplistic, realistic, and patriotic enough for even a bureaucrat or a secret policeman to understand. But this mediocritization was not just a product of dictatorships; in the New Deal-era United States, for example, tepid art styles like neo-classicism held sway just as they did in totalitarian cultures, and a conservative critical approach to modernist experiments was evident among arts writers and the public. Those artists who did not comply with the officially sanctioned recipes for form and content were stifled, whether through neglect, ignorance, or active suppression.

“For an Independent Revolutionary Art” was written as a call of resistance to the reactionary cultural politics of state-regulated art and the censorship of dissenting visions. The manifesto explicitly blasted Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union for their bloody wars against creativity and the imagination (“Any progressive current in art is branded by fascism as ‘degenerate’; any free creation is labeled ‘fascist’ by Stalinists”) and proposed a rallying of cultural forces in defense of an “independent art.” Though no political platform was expressly elucidated in the declaration, there was no mistaking the deeper radical ramifications of independent art: True art — art that does not merely produce variations on ready-made models but strives to express the inner needs of man and of mankind as they are today — cannot be anything other than revolutionary: It must aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society, if only to free intellectual creation from the chains that bind it and to allow all mankind to climb those heights that only isolated geniuses have reached in the past.... Artistic opposition is right now one of the forces that can effectively help to discredit and overthrow the regimes that are stifling the right of the exploited class to aspire to a better world along with all sense of human greatness or even dignity.

Breton and Trotsky’s proposed solution was an International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (abbreviated as FIARI in French), a global front of intellectuals and creative workers “of fairly divergent aesthetic, philosophical, and political orientations.” Membership in FIARI would be open to all so long as there was a complete commitment to the radical “free expression of the human genius in all its manifestations,” specifically in the culture wars against the repulsive racist Nazi styles and the Third International’s insipid socialist realism, but also more generally against any policing of free creativity everywhere. “Independent revolu-

tionary art must gather its forces to fight against reactionary persecution and to assert out loud its right to exist,” Breton and Trotsky claimed. Their statement concluded with a dialectical couplet succinctly calling for “the independence of art for the sake of the revolution” and for “the revolution for the sake of art’s liberation.”

Throughout the last half of 1938 and into 1939, the “For An Independent Revolutionary Art” manifesto was circulated in pamphlet form and reprinted in various independent left-wing (that is to say, anti-Stalinist) periodicals; small (mainly surrealist) groups in New York, London, Brussels, Paris, Fort-de-France (Martinique), Santiago (Chile), and elsewhere openly aligned themselves with FIARI by creating cultural coalitions devoted to free, independent creative expression. Henein and the other surrealists in Cairo joined forces with Georges Santini and an assortment of libertarian Marxists and anarchists to create a French- and Arabic-language FIARI cell that they called Art and Liberty on 19 January 1939. The group’s charter stated its simple core ideals: the unequivocal affirmation of cultural and artistic liberty; a pledge to focus on the works, people, and ideas “essential to understanding the present time”; and “a commitment to maintaining a close contact between the youth of Egypt and the current literary, artistic, and social developments in the world.”

In retrospect, the timing of the FIARI’s internationalist venture could not have been worse: Nazi Germany invaded Poland in September 1939 and triggered the start of World War II, Trotsky was murdered by Stalinist assassins in August 1940, and the Trotskyite Fourth International splintered into dozens of “tendencies” starting in the late 1940s. Despite the disintegration of FIARI, however, the surrealist-organized Art and Liberty project in Egypt remained steadfast in its mission and was arguably the most fully realized of FIARI’s undertakings worldwide. Art and Liberty mounted five controversial annual “Independent Art Expositions” between 1940 and 1945 in Cairo and produced at least three different periodicals during that same period. Individual members of the Art and Liberty coalition were involved in solo art exhibitions in Cairo and Alexandria, published their own books and pamphlets, and participated in radical social, educational, and political activities that included lectures, film screenings, affordable translations of classic Marxist-Leninist texts, and a variety of agitational activities stressing anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, educational reform, women’s rights, poverty relief, and the freedom of expression and desire.

It bears repeating here that Art and Liberty was not a surrealist group. Rather, it was a broad-based, non-sectarian alliance of left-wing, modern-minded writers, artists, and radical activists who had been brought together and animated by a cadre of Egyptian surrealists in support of the FIARI platform as concocted by Breton and Trotsky. The Egyptian surrealists recognized that surrealism would find little appeal in that country; they felt that the surrealists’ advocacy for open

creative expression and more personal and political liberties would find wide purchase, however. Although surrealist presences and affinities were unmistakably at work, Art and Liberty's activities were never exclusively or expressly designated as surrealist endeavors. As an example of this, it was not unusual to find them promoting non-surrealist writers like Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Aldous Huxley through Arabic translations. A work by First Generation Egyptian painter Mahmud Sa'id called *Girl with Golden Curls* (1933) was used almost iconically by Art and Liberty as a modern and original example of art freed from the prohibitions of the society where it was produced, but it was never designated as a surrealist work. Further, most of the participants in the Art and Liberty group never fully adopted surrealist positions in their work, such as portrait photographer Ida Kar, architectural photographer Hassia, painters Inji Aflatun (later a leading feminist human rights activist in Egypt), Amy Nimr, Ezekiel Barukh, Husayn Yusuf Amin, Suzy Green-Viterbo, graphic artist Abu Khalil Lutfi, and the writer Albert Cossery. In a few of his essays on Art and Liberty from the 1990s, Iraqi poet and journalist 'Abd al-Qadir al-Janabi emphasizes the collective style of the group as "social expressionism," a label that I find particularly useful in distinguishing between the Egyptian surrealists' creative works and those of their FIARI-inspired organization. In short, Art and Liberty was not an overseas franchise of the Paris surrealist group — though it had been activated by artists and writers who had adapted some of international surrealism's principles for use in Egypt, Art and Liberty was an organization committed to ushering in modern, radical change from any number of ideas and influences from multiple cultures.

## Long Live Degenerate Art!

Although, strictly speaking, the Art and Liberty project officially began in mid-January 1939, the first initiative of this surrealist-led FIARI group was a pronouncement issued in Arabic and French the month before, entitled "Long Live Degenerate Art!"

It was the notoriety of this first proclamation that led some in Cairo (including, as cited above, 'Aziz Ahmad Fahmi in *al-Risala*) to mistakenly refer to the surrealists' Art and Liberty organization as the "Degenerate Art Group." Although the "Long Live Degenerate Art!" statement (dated 22 December 1938) does not overtly mention "For an Independent Revolutionary Art" or FIARI, the connection is unmistakable: Free art has met with the most abject aggression and is now termed "Degenerate Art" by uniformed ignoramuses.... Work that is a product of modern artistic genius — with its sense of freedom, energy, and humanity — has been abused and trampled underfoot.... We believe that the fanatical racialist, religious,

and nationalistic path that certain individuals wish modern art to follow is simply contemptible and ridiculous. We think that these reactionary myths only serve to imprison thought. Art is, by its nature, a constant intellectual and emotional exchange in which humankind as a whole participates and which cannot therefore accept artificial limitations.

This declaration by the Egyptians (it was probably written by Henein) draws a tighter connection between the points raised by Breton and Trotsky and one of the most infamous manifestations of totalitarian culture, the Degenerate “Art” (Entartete “Kunst”) exhibition that opened in Munich in July 1937 and travelled to thirteen other German and Austrian cities over the next four years, attracting around three and a quarter million visitors.

The Degenerate “Art” show — the work of the Third Reich’s Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda’s Chamber of Fine Arts — was one of the numerous efforts of the Nazi state to purify Germany of any remnants of modernist Weimar culture by mockingly displaying more than seven hundred modern paintings, prints, drawings, and sculpture as a freak show of dangerous ideas and images. The organizers designed the didactic exhibition to illustrate the pathological links between modernism, mental illness, and biological imperfection; sneering propagandistic wall texts and object labels festooned the halls and relentlessly accused the work of artists Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Kurt Schwitters, Otto Dix, Lyonel Feininger, Max Ernst, Marc Chagall, Raoul Hausmann, Max Beckmann, and many others as crimes against culture, race, capitalism, sanity, and homeland security. In case anyone missed the point, docents well-versed in Nazi doctrine were on hand to police visitors’ opinions; professional actors who had been carefully rehearsed by the government went undercover among the crowds to play the role of ordinary citizens who would suddenly explode into furious indignation while looking at the works by these traitors to bourgeois German respectability and morality.

The German title of the exhibition (Entartete “Kunst”) warrants closer examination for the discussion that follows. Entartete was the term specifically used by the exhibition’s organizers in order to attach their cultural program to the Nazis’ obsession with racial hygiene, since the word is loaded with biomedical connotations commonly associated with organisms whose characteristics or structures have become so degraded or otherwise altered that the specimen has been pushed to the far margins of what defines its species. The Nazis’ use of scare quotes around kunst is meant to indicate that this is not art in any meaningful or accepted use of the term, but is instead a pathetic and shoddy effort to imitate the lofty category of high aesthetic expression. To underscore the message that the paintings, sculptures, and books created by these Expressionists, Cubists, and Dadaists were nothing more than sick scribbles and smears made by subhuman throwbacks (Jews, communists, perverts, and mental defectives), the Entartete “Kunst” show opened

in Munich's Institute of Archaeology, a venue where one usually found the crude works of the long-dead or stagnant societies of non-Aryan primitives.

Here, then, was an immediate and well-reported case of what Breton and Trotsky had identified in "For an Independent Revolutionary Art" as the "reactionary persecution" of free thought and expression. The Nazis had institutionalized their violence against the modernist imagination with the Degenerate "Art" exposition and linked it to their systematic assaults on beings that they considered to be sub-standard life-forms. Bureaucratically determined definitions of biological, political, and moral inferiority were used to measure the worth of ideas, images, and art, and this was precisely the sort of censorship and cultural conformity that the Breton-Trotsky statement had denounced. This is why the Egyptian "Long Live Degenerate Art!" pronouncement of December 1938 is a key precursor to the organized Art and Liberty activities formally launched by the Cairo surrealists a month later.

"In Vienna, which has now been abandoned to these barbarians, a painting by Renoir has been torn into pieces and books by Freud have been burnt in the public squares," declares the statement. "Works by great German artists...have been confiscated and replaced by worthless National Socialist art," while "in Rome, a committee recently has been formed 'for the purification of literature.' It has taken up its duties and has decided to withdraw everything that is anti-Italian, anti-racialist, immoral, and depressing." The Egyptian manifesto goes on to assert that it is impossible for creativity to exist when it is forced to serve the coercive, politically-correct "artificial limitations" stipulated by party ideologues and other state watchdogs of moral decency. The proclamation concludes: "We must stand in solidarity in the ranks of Degenerate Art, for it is our only hope for the future. Let us work to support Degenerate Art so that it will prevail against those trying to resurrect a new Middle Ages within the heart of the West." More than forty signatures closed out the statement, including those of surrealists (Henein, el-Telmissany, the Kamil brothers), future Art and Liberty partisans (Scalet, Kamil Walim, Marcelle Biagini, Albert Cossery, Aristomenis Angelopoulos, Angelo de Riz, Hassia, Laurent Marcel Salinas, Seif Wanly), journalists, and a number of lawyers from Cairo and Alexandria. In its original published format, the declaration was illustrated with a black-and-white reproduction of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), an astonishing painted account of a Nazi-engineered atrocity in the Spanish Civil War.

The "Long Live Degenerate Art!" pronouncement sparked controversy. The day after it appeared, Henein wrote that it was "quite a firecracker" that "managed to shake up some people a little." For the most part, the Egyptian press pointedly ignored the manifesto. "As we have predicted, our December 1938 manifesto 'Long Live Degenerate Art!' was carefully banned from most newspapers," an unidentified reporter explained in the first mimeographed issue of the internally circulated *Art et Liberté / al-Fann wa al-Hurriyya Bulletin*. This report goes on to men-

tion some of the periodicals in Cairo and Alexandria that either summarized the manifesto or published the entire document, including the Francophone *La Bourse Égyptienne*, *Journal d’Égypte*, *La Revue de France*, the mildly leftist-reformist Arabic weekly *al-Majalla al-Jadida*, and the progressive Cairene Greek-language daily *Kiryx*. Other newspapers disregarded the manifesto entirely, or mentioned it in the context of reprimands of the signatories’ interference in the cultural affairs of other nations, the group’s uncritical embrace of European modern art, and its careless use of confrontational, inflammatory rhetoric. As we shall see below, much of the tone and content of these commentaries anticipates the debates over surrealism that appeared in the pages of *al-Risala* between July and October 1939.

## “Purely Egyptian” Surrealism

With this background in place, we can return now to ‘Aziz Ahmad Fahmi’s notice on the supposed breakup of the so-called Degenerate Art Group that appeared in the 10 July 1939 issue of *al-Risala*. Though he was aware of what had been said in the “Long Live Degenerate Art!” declaration and with the Art and Liberty project, Fahmy refers to neither the Nazi Entartete “Kunst” exposition nor to FIARI’s proposed revolutionary response. Instead, he pushes the discussion from one of international cultural politics to a more removed and philosophical meditation on art. “Long Live Degenerate Art!” had called for a reclamation of the Nazi term of contempt as a badge of honor, hailing that which the Nazis deemed “Degenerate ‘Art’” as “our only hope for the future” because it was a defiant celebration of everything that fascism was horrified by: open imagination, experimentation, ambiguity of meanings, free expression, and the anarchic power of the unconscious. Pointedly mentioning the names of artists targeted by the Nazis in their anti-modern art campaigns, the Egyptian group wrote that “those who foolishly criticize the paintings of Renoir or Kokoschka are not only attacking a style of painting but also a way of understanding and perceiving life,” the group would later explain. “So long as the dream empowers the artist to dispose of the reality where living conditions deteriorate, no individual will have the right to dream.... From Chagall to Salvador Dalí, the fate of the dream in modern art has been condemned to death.”

Fahmi overlooked that context of freedom entirely, however, preferring instead to see the group’s objective simply as *épater la bourgeoisie*, an attempt to create art that deliberately threatens conservative tastes with imagery calculated to shock and upset. When he writes that “it is impossible for art to be art and degenerate at the same time unless it is a fake” and “nothing can corrupt or degrade art unless it is artificial and bogus, and then it is not art but tomfoolery and merchandise,”

Fahmi ignores that the group was concerned about political, social, and intellectual matters that fell outside the bounds of the plastic arts.

This is the point that is raised by surrealist Anwar Kamil (“on behalf of the Permanent Committee for Art and Liberty”) in his reply to Fahmi in *al-Risala* a week later. “The letter [that appeared in the last issue] stated that if the Degenerate Art Group was made of individuals who were honest in their feelings and expressions, then their art would undoubtedly be elevated and high-minded... but if they fabricated this inferiority then their art would be truly degenerate because of its artificiality,” Kamil summarized. He continued: Everything the article says is certainly true, not only from the point of view of its writer [Fahmi] but in our view as well. We do not believe that a group could possibly be formed calling itself “Degenerate Art” which would urge people to support a degenerate art. Our group, which we have called “Art and Liberty,” aims to defend the freedom of art and culture, to put out modern publications, to give lectures, and to set up exhibitions for the public, and at the same time to work to introduce Egyptian youth to international literature and social movements.... But to write and criticize a group, whose name and true aims the writer [Fahmi] doesn’t even know, preferring instead to depend upon the views of gossips and scandalmongers, is a mistake we had hoped that a writer for *al-Risala* would not make.

In the 24 July issue of *al-Risala*, Nasri ‘Atallah Susa answered Kamil with a very short letter called “Degenerate Art, Nevertheless” that mostly defends Fahmi’s view of things and raises the stakes in the argument. Susa wrote that he had collected all the materials that Art and Liberty had made available to the public and given them to Fahmi with a request that he speak out against the group in *al-Risala*. “I have had the opportunity to learn about what has been written and painted by some members of this group,” Susa wrote. “I am telling this Master [Anwar Kamil] that the art he is preaching and propagating is a degenerate art no matter what is said about it. The so-called Art and Liberty group perceives liberty only as chaos that fits in with neither norm nor law. Moreover, complying with Western art and its latest blunders is not considered liberty at all — it is, in fact, a blind enslavement. And this is what the Art and Liberty group does!”

In reconstructing the Degenerate Art debates, we shall see that Susa’s belief that the Egyptian surrealists of the Art and Liberty group were “blindly enslaved” to “Western art and its latest blunders” (which is to say, European modernism) is at the heart of much of *al-Risala*’s criticisms. Such remarks point to the growing nationalist concern among the Egyptian liberal intellectual elites that cosmopolitanism in arts and ideas was a form of European cultural imperialism and dependence. The *al-Risala* writers who spoke out against Art and Liberty regarded it as a mouthpiece for “foreign” ideas that would interfere with the development of an independent “Egyptian for Egypt’s sake” national style of art. What is inter-

esting to note, though, is how the liberal-nationalist attitudes at al-Risala closely paralleled those of anti-surrealist critics in other nations. Surrealists' valorization of incomprehensibility, uncertainty, irrationality, and desire (as well as their repugnance for civilization's coercive objective conventions for determining what is "real") drew contempt from all corners throughout the 1930s. They were denounced as Germanophiles, Bolsheviks, bourgeois snobs, and social-fascists by a variety of commentators in France; in the US, they were mocked as silly, trendy foreign aesthetes whose theories were suitable only for high fashion and department store advertising (and, later in the 1940s, for FBI surveillance); in Yugoslavia, Romania, and Peru, surrealists were thrown into forced labor camps; in Denmark, they were vilified by the press as pornographers and jailed for morals offenses; and the Soviets condemned them as "anti-proletarian" for their criticism of socialist realism. The Japanese Imperial Higher Special Police monitored and arrested them and forced them to recant their deviant views; they were persecuted in Salazar's Portugal, Franco's Spain, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany; and they were forced into clandestine activity by constant threats of arrest and execution in Greece and Czechoslovakia. In response to a 1938 exhibition in London of Belgian surrealist René Magritte's work, one newspaper critic reported himself "almost persuaded to be a Nazi," since "Goebbels, at any rate, will not tolerate such stuff." In this sense, at least, the anti-surrealist writers at al-Risala were themselves more cosmopolitan than they liked to believe.

Kamil's defensive letter to the editor a week later was addressed to al-Risala's founder Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, and it objected to the newspaper's swipes at Art and Liberty by those who seemed not to fully grasp the issues under consideration. Kamil said that Fahmi and Susa were repeating the ill-informed representations and malicious distortions made about the group by those who are "major beneficiaries in a material way" of the continued observance of conservative "tradition and morals" and the systems of "the contemporary social order." Instead of listening to the opinions of such confused critics and of self-serving liars, Kamil wrote, journalists at the paper need only to visit with the Art and Liberty group and see for themselves the artwork in order to make a more informed assessment. "Art and Liberty is as much a social movement as it is an artistic movement working for art for art's sake," Kamil explained. "The various aspects of human thought and emotion that even include the highest forms of philosophy arising out of the struggle of social organization movements do not, in our view, fall outside the limits of expression." As to Susa's comment that Art and Liberty is a servile agent of Europe's "latest blunders" in art, Kamil made it clear that there was a fully Egyptian set of concerns that motivated the founding of the organization. Art and Liberty members are not as concerned about Europe as they are about Egypt, Kamil said,

since Egypt was a “society that is at this moment sick and failing; it has not only lost its moral compass but it is also in a dire social and economic situation.”

Kamil’s published remarks do not elaborate on what he specifically means here, but a look at his and his comrades’ writings during the late 1930s and early 1940s spells out these concerns in more detail in terms related to contemporary political, social, and cultural debates in Egypt. Obviously, the continued presence of British political and military forces in Egypt despite a 1936 independence treaty (the seventh such treaty in fourteen years) was a disturbing reminder of the imperialist domination begun in the summer of 1882. But *Art and Liberty*’s writers were more outspoken in their outrage over social and economic inequities, such as the terrible poverty in Egypt that they believed could only be corrected with an anti-Stalinist Marxist restructuring of society: upper-class landowners enjoyed an almost feudal control over the lives of fallahin, while in the cities, workers in small artisanal workshops, factories, and the transportation and service sectors struggled to organize trade unions that would ensure decent wages and job security. Malnutrition and disease afflicted the majority of those living in the overcrowded slum neighborhoods, and both criminals and police preyed upon the lower strata of the population. The oppressed status of Egyptian women was also a recurring theme in *Art and Liberty* publications, particularly as it related to education and economics; prostitution was identified by the *Art and Liberty* group in their newspaper *al-Tatawwur* in the early 1940s as a desperate response to poverty and indicative of the confines of women’s lives. Kemal writes: In such a society, writers and thinkers must be completely free to disseminate their ideas so that others can benefit from the solutions that they are offering to its many problems.... The *Art and Liberty* Group is made up of young people who have become concerned with what they regard as the decay and impotence in Egypt, and as a result, they have dedicated themselves to looking at the reasons behind this decay and to finding solutions that they think could benefit the country as a whole. It is not influenced by any foreign movement but is purely Egyptian.

So in addition to the daily despotisms of imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchal rule, the group condemned the severe limits put on the freedom of expression in modern Egypt. *Art and Liberty* put the blame for the tight reins kept on speech, the press, and cultural production on factions spread across the political spectrum, from monarchists and the Wafd Party’s middle-class constituency to secular Enlightened intellectuals and Muslim nationalists. Where expression was censored—they believed—so was thought, and there could be no freedom for Egyptians so long as the impediments of economic, cultural, social, and religious conservatism remained in place.

Fahmi’s answer to Kamil in the next issue shows the great degree to which the editorial staff of *al-Risala* stubbornly refused to acknowledge the social and politi-

cal contexts for Art and Liberty's activities. Fahmi devoted the regularly featured "The Meaning of Art" section of the journal to the debate and wrote a lengthy piece entitled "Art and Liberty," though he never made an explicit mention of that group, of Anwar Kamil, or of degenerate art. Instead, Fahmi proclaimed that one can never hope to achieve either art or liberty without first giving oneself over to God.

All of human nature could be boiled down to the three core components of sense, intellect, and ethics, Fahmi said: "Human perfection can only be achieved through the ascension of the self in all aspects that will then form a harmonious blend." In order to achieve this "progress and advancement" toward perfect equilibrium, people sought certain paths — "sense's path is art, intellect's path is knowledge, and ethics' path is virtue." The diversity of human beings on this planet, then, could be explained by an always shifting inter-relationship of those three aspects in each of us and the nature of our own personal journeys along one or another of those paths in the quest for a tripartite balance. Given this schema, Fahmi decided that religion is the only means for finding the elusive equilibrium needed for human perfection: "We should empower Islam to govern all mankind's spiritual affairs: sensuous, intellectual, or ethical." He continued: The perfect art is the one that satisfies intellect and ethics along with sense; perfect knowledge is the one that satisfies sense and ethics along with intellect; perfect virtue is the one that satisfies intellect and sense besides ethics.... My ideal art is the picture that Muhammad has painted of life; knowledge for me is what fulfills this example, and ethics is all that complies with the spirit of Islam.

Without specifically mentioning surrealism's commitment to liberating the unconscious through the free expression of desire, Fahmi warned that preoccupation with "glorified natural instinct" was dangerous because it interfered with transcendence. To those who would say that human instinct sometimes drove people to unethical behavior and to then use art to illustrate that behavior despite religious prohibitions, Fahmi responded that the limits set by Islamic teachings were helpful guides toward perfection, not restrictive boundaries to be overcome in the name of freedom. "Islam is mankind's birthright; true and pure art is a natural instinct.... The tendency in art toward what ethics and intellect prohibit is not a natural tendency," but rather a projection of the "defects" within a creative person's personality. "We cannot deny that this form of art is indeed art. But it is a shy form of art where artists organize pieces with the seeds of their spirit that seek only self-satisfaction," rather than the progressive development of human nature. "Those who refuse transcendence shall remain wallowing in their arts, knowledge, and ethics with all the liberty of a lost, conceited being," he concluded.

There is no indication of how Art and Liberty responded to al-Risala's assertion that the only way to express oneself freely and to find liberation for one's

self and the world was to completely submit to the absolute authority of God and the Qur'an. Members of Art and Liberty came from diverse Muslim (Sunni and Shi'i), Jewish, and Christian (Coptic and Protestant) family backgrounds, but religion was a private matter that the group as a whole does not seem to have discussed (though some sternly worded criticisms of Islam's social prohibitions—especially as concerns women and sexual relations—did appear in the pages of its newspaper al-Tatawwur). Surrealism, however, regardless of where in the world it had taken root, shared with orthodox Marxism a long history of militant atheism and belligerent anti-clericalism. Thus, it is difficult to imagine Kamil or other members of the surrealist circle not strongly reacting to Fahmi's remarks about the folly of their thinking, particularly when his talk of how the artists' delusions, personality defects, and godlessness infected their works and threatened humanity could have been read easily as a position not so far removed from that held by those who had organized and supported the Degenerate Art exhibition in Nazi Germany as a defense against the contaminating effects of godless "cultural bolshevism."

### **"We Are Wrathful About Present Reality"**

But the next issue of al-Risala did not carry a rebuttal from anyone in Art and Liberty. Instead, it was another article from Nasri 'Atallah Susa that was cast as an attempt at the final word on the subject of degenerate art. Apparently speaking for the editors, Susa admits that al-Risala chose not to publish all of what Kamil wrote because the journal preferred to "omit what is uncomfortable for its elevated rules and high-class standards." Bowdlerization aside, Susa says that Kamil's message (in the 31 July issue) was garbled because "he is incapable of defending the art he is propagating; he cannot defend it either by convincing rational thinking nor does he make you believe by the eloquence stimulated by his feelings that explode directly from deep inside the recesses of his heart." Susa continues to say that, in general, "modern art is a labyrinth where many people are going astray. Discussing and studying modern art is the best way of filtering it and discovering its truth from its falsehood.... I apologize to the Master [Kamil] who became agitated just because I trusted him and invited him in an innocent way to talk about art."

Susa then declared: "I reiterate that I looked at some of the paintings drawn by some members of the [Art and Liberty] association, and I repeat with absolute firmness that it is a degenerate art. Their paintings originate from surrealism, which is a purely French ideology primarily motivated by Sigmund Freud's theories," adding that "I believe that artistic movements cannot travel with such ease from one country to another...nor can personality and inspiration."

For those readers unfamiliar with surrealism's supposed values, Susa provides a passage which he identifies as a direct quotation from André Breton: The flight of ideas in insane persons makes a definite appeal to certain instinctive postulates in me. The phenomenon of the automatic dictation may produce astonishing results.... We accept absolutely nothing. We believe that we are capable of reducing reason and the faux bon sens. We feel sympathetic toward revolutionary parties. We do not believe in human progress. We want to support all movements of opposition — violently, at the peril of our lives.... Time does not exist. I would rather destroy than construct. We insist on a complete revision of artistic values. We exclude all literary talent, and literary quality we consider of secondary importance. We are wrathful against present reality.

Because al-Risala had expurgated Kamil's previous letters, there is no way of knowing if he had mentioned surrealism before Susa did; what is clear, though, is that Susa's editorial is the first explicit mention of surrealism to see print so far in this debate. The month before, he had written that the work of Art and Liberty "is a degenerate art no matter what is said about it" because it confused an appetite for chaos as a love for liberty; this degeneracy is the result of its connections with surrealism, a "purely French ideology" which is grounded in Freudian theory.

Susa is stating his belief that there can be no such thing as Egyptian surrealism, only an infestation of modern Egyptian national culture by European surrealism. Again, as was similarly reflected in liberal democracies and police states of the West at the time, Susa equated surrealism with unhealthy perverse elements deemed harmful to the people and the nation. Susa specifically identified some of the nationalist underpinnings of his moral panic: Surrealism is "a purely French ideology" informed by the theories of modern psychoanalysis made famous by an Austrian Jew. For those worried that too many European contaminants were compromising the creation of a "purely Egyptian" national culture in late 1939 (a culture that Susa's colleague Fahmi apparently believed needed to be grounded in Islamic values), the invocation of the specters of France, Germany, and cosmopolitan European Jewish intellectuals was surely meant to be damning.

The surrealists and Art and Liberty artists who had signed the "Long Live Degenerate Art!" manifesto had adopted "Degenerate 'Art'" as a defiant, anti-fascist identity in solidarity with those modernist artists persecuted by state terrorism, but Susa hurled that label back at them with all of the negative connotations that had been originally assigned to it by the Nazis. Compared to Fahmi's more circumspect observations on what it means for art to be called "degenerate," Susa seems more extreme in his views.

I am uncomfortable arguing that Susa shares the exact same attitudes about surrealism in 1939 as Hitler and Goebbels, but his comments about surrealism as a degenerate art do share at least a superficial commonality with Nazi rhetoric

about art and culture. Susa's suggestion that Kamil is inarticulate, vulgar, easily excitable, and lost in a "labyrinth" of modern art's "falsehoods" stops short of medically pathologizing modern artists as atavistic mutants, but the decontextualized quotes from Breton are reminiscent of the placards printed with statements by Expressionist Ludwig Meidner and Dadaist George Grosz that were hung by Nazi curators on the exhibition gallery walls as "proof" of degeneracy in the artists' own words.

Susa concluded his "About Degenerate Art: A Last Word" article with a promise that al-Risala would soon deliver to readers a series of essays on (presumably non-surrealist) art better suited to serve the needs of Egyptians. In the next issue of the paper, Fahmy supplied what we can assume was the first installment of that series in an article called "Art as Spiritual Production," which, again, sounded more like Kant than Kandinsky. Fahmy's idealism stressed the importance of transcendent beauty and emotional authenticity at the heart of all human creative activity, and he generously identified cases of contemporary artistic failure in the fields of Egyptian literature, music, and theater; one example of a visual artist unable to produce a spiritual art was Muhammad Nagi, a painter of Egypt's First Generation who Fahmy described as being more accomplished "in explaining his pictures and in convincing viewers to buy them" than he was in creating them.

A week later, surrealist Kamil el-Telmissany took up the cudgels in what has turned out to be a key text on Egyptian surrealism. El-Telmissany objected strongly to Susa's characterizations of his comrade Anwar Kamil, as well as Susa's attempts to explain surrealism to al-Risala's readers. Whereas Susa presented surrealism simply as "an art that is far removed from apparent reality," el-Telmissany countered that it was actually a "contemporary international movement that has given expression to the highest and most noble of human sentiments and to a highly sophisticated artistic culture (both in poetry and modern painting), thereby creating the basis for a modern school of free verse and visual art built around poetical thought and modern psychoanalysis."

El-Telmissany pointed to Susa's use of British journalist Sisley Huddleston's chatty ten-year-old memoir *Bohemian, Literary, and Social Life in Paris* as a mistake, saying that Susa would be less hostile if he had more accurate information about surrealism. Huddleston's book provides an incorrect understanding of the movement, el-Telmissany said, and by relying on it for information in his article, Susa failed in his duty to serve readers who depend on al-Risala (a journal he said "has an influence and distribution well beyond Egypt, extending all across the Arab East") for intelligent discourse on the world of ideas. El-Telmissany provides alternatives to Huddleston and urges that Susa look at them "so that you may quietly find out for yourself that you have much to understand about this school of art."

Surrealism is not “a purely French movement,” as the distinguished writer [Susa] states; in fact, one of its most distinctive features is the internationalist character of its ideas and pursuits — it is not nationalist or local in any way at all and so it is obvious that the distinguished writer [Susa] has allowed himself to make a monstrous error in his writing.... I should tell him that there is not a single French painter among the movement’s leading exponents [who in 1939 are de Chirico, Dalí, Picasso, Klee, Ernst, Penrose, Delvaux, and Chagall, according to el-Telmissany ].

... Art does not belong to a particular country, my friend. You were wrong when you said in your article: “I believe that artistic movements cannot travel with such ease from one country to another... nor can personality and inspiration.” There are similar [surrealist] movements in England, Mexico, Belgium, the United States, the Netherlands, etc. Do you think that it is wrong, sir, for Egyptian paintings to be based on or influenced by the ideas of such a school? We want a culture that is in concert with the rest of the world.

El-Telmissany then moves to connect the global with the local by pointing out aspects of Egyptian culture that share affinities with surrealist thought and practice.

Sir, have you not seen the *mulid* sugar dolls with their four hands? Have you seen the little *qaragoz* puppets? Have you ever listened to the stories of Umm al-Shu‘ur and Clever Hasan and their like from popular folklore? All these, sir, are examples of surrealism.

Have you been to the Egyptian museum? Many of the Pharaonic sculptures from ancient Egypt are surrealist. Have you been to the Coptic museum? Much Coptic art is surrealist.

Far from aping a foreign artistic movement, we are creating art that has its origins in the brown soil of our country and which has run through our blood ever since we have lived in freedom and up until now, my friend.

Pressing his point about local vernacular connections to this international movement, el-Telmissany mentioned that “Egypt’s leading critic” Ahmad Bey Rasim had written supportively of the works created by three members of the Art and Liberty Group (Kamil Walim, Fathi al-Bakri, and el-Telmissany himself). He then discussed how the artwork of Abu Khalil Lutfi and Husayn Yusuf Amin “might have nothing to do with surrealism,” but as members of Art and Liberty, their work demonstrates a unique individual expression and imagination in bold, exciting ways that is absolutely congruent with surrealist objectives. To illustrate, he recounts an anecdote when a critic confronted his former teacher Yusuf ‘Afifi over the effect of European

surrealism in his work, and the painter shot back that “surrealism is nothing but a contemporary scientific term for what we call imagination, freedom of expression, and freedom of style, all of which can be found in the East.”

Continuing in this line, el-Telmissany argues that the surrealists’ curiosity about the latest theories in depth psychology can also find correspondence in Egyptian cultural life. “The paintings of Mahmud Sa’id, the greatest of all painters, are all Freudian, as are most of the writings of Mahmud Taymur and Tawfiq al-Hakim,” el-Telmissany asserted. But more importantly, he says, the freedom to explore any theories, even those on the human unconscious that have been formulated by an Austrian Jew, should be a basic right in any open society.

You say, sir, that this so-called French movement, as you put it, “was primarily instigated by the theories of the scientist Sigmund Freud.” This is talk which aims to extract unfair applause from the public — if they are ignorant.... Freud is valued by the surrealists as he is any place in the world that is free, democratic, and honest in its opinions and its ways of thinking. Is it a crime, sir, for Freudian analysis to enter into the painting or literature or poetry of our free and democratic country? Egypt is not yet part of Germany, nor has it been so colonized by Italy that the writings of Freud may be burned in its public squares to the accompaniment of barbaric shrieks of joy! No, sir, Egypt is still democratic, and your view of art is influenced by fascist and Nazi ideas.

It is also worth noting that, though el-Telmissany at no point mentions Degenerate Art, his article is given the title “Hawla al-Fann Manhut.” Was this then el-Telmissany’s choice of a title, or that of al-Risala’s editors?

## **Bread and Poetry**

A week later, surrealist Ramsis Yunan followed el-Telmissany’s article with an essay on the surrealist movement. As with el-Telmissany’s article, Yunan’s said nothing about Degenerate Art and focused exclusively on surrealism.

Tellingly, Yunan’s article has as an epigraph a line from Trotsky: “Every man deserves to get his share of bread and his share of poetry.” Yunan goes on to dialectically explain surrealism as neither an art movement, nor a political movement, nor a mix of art and politics.

It is a social, artistic, political, philosophical, and psychological movement.... We should also add that it is a spiritual movement, for it draws inspiration from the poetry of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Lautréamont and has adopted their revolutionary and far-reaching love of the imagination. It also draws inspiration from Hegel’s philosophy and its belief in freedom, and it is indebted to Karl Marx’s materialist conception of history; it has also adopted Freud’s theories on the unconscious; ad-

ditionally, it has tried to use all these elements as the basis for a new collective myth which is to be equal to the mythologies created by the old religions.

Yunan explained that surrealism is concerned above all with liberty, a bold, unpredictable state of freedom that comes when the forces of personal liberation (which “cannot be achieved without eliminating the boundaries that separate the roiling elements of the unconscious”) are locked into a tango with those of social liberation (defined here as the economic equality that will follow revolutionary socialism’s victory over capitalism). “The acceptance of reality lies at the heart of conservatism and forms an insurmountable obstacle standing in the way of all renewal and reform. Belief that the social order needs to be changed has led the surrealists to declare war on the acceptance of the status quo.” He concluded with the disclaimer, that “even though surrealism relies on Marxism and the theories of Freud, it is still a distinctive and an independent [non-European and Egyptian-specific] movement,” though it may soon come to some shared conclusions with the socialists about “the necessity to orient all literary and artistic works for the sake of a direct political campaign,” as alluded to by the Trotsky quote at the start of his article.

In the course of this piece, Yunan discussed some of the ways that surrealists challenge the unquestioned acceptance of reality and encouraged intellectual and creative exercises meant to sabotage the accepted order of things, examples of which include the dislocation of objects from their familiar settings through surrealist collage and surrealist objects, as well as the automatic writing experiments that try to give voice to certain aspects of the unconscious mind. He further called attention to the surrealists’ dogged efforts to stimulate suppressed or repressed desires through their creative work, and the challenge that comes from attempting to fashion imagery representing those freed desires. Quoting Greek surrealist Nicolas Calas’s statement that “art must be explosive,” Yunan explained that art “must be a means for destroying our way of thinking and behaving.” It is significant that this demolition is not a vanguard position, but one that is open to all: “We all share the psychological struggle between dreams and reality; therefore, we can all share in the surrealists’ efforts since their promising aspiration is the spreading of ‘surrealism’ in life.”

Al-Risala’s last word on the subject appears to have been in October with a short letter to the editor by one Husayn ‘Abdallah Sayyid. “Those involved in literary and artistic affairs have followed with strong interest all that has been written about Art and Liberty in the esteemed magazine al-Risala,” Sayyid wrote. “Without a doubt, what has been written in al-Risala [by Kamil, el-Telmissany, and Yunan] about the group’s perspectives is superficial and lacks the necessary research.”

Specifically, Sayyid found fault with the surrealists’ attempts at explaining Art and Liberty’s “real objectives” and their ability “to clarify the works of its artists

and writers.” El-Telmissany name-checked some notable young Egyptian artists in his essay, Sayyid admitted, but “he did not succeed in explaining the real nature of their arts in a decisive and convincing manner.” And Yunan only presented surrealism in “a general, broad, and quick way” that failed to provide Sayyid with “any conclusive idea” about the Art and Liberty group. Kamil was likewise “ambiguous”: “Wouldn’t it be wiser for the Art and Liberty group to reveal its art and literature with absolute honesty and without deception or ambiguity?” he asked.

Members of this group include young Egyptian intellectuals full of hope and love for their beloved homeland.... I realize that the members of this association are flooded with fiery feelings for the need to create a new art and literature rooted in Egypt’s soil. But explanation and clarification are a must. Could the Art and Liberty Group come forward and clarify for us the substance of these new changes in art and specify for us its effects on the artistic, literary, and moral future of Egypt? This clarification must, however, be based on strong acknowledged scientific and artistic research.

Sayyid’s repeated insistence on more clarification is curious — one cannot help but wonder what “strong acknowledged scientific research” on surrealism would look like. It is not obvious whether Sayyid’s confusion is born of genuine incomprehension or willful ignorance of what the surrealists in Cairo had been talking about for two years. Or perhaps he is slyly hinting that there are things far more sinister about surrealism of which he is aware of but no one else is willing discuss. His frequent reiteration that surrealism’s “real objectives” and “real nature” have been cloaked by the “deception” and “ambiguity” in the articles by Kemal, el-Telmissany, and Yunan might be written with a knowing wink to other equally skeptical al-Risala readers who suspect that there must be something darker lurking within the surrealists’ efforts.

If the surrealists complied with Sayyid’s request for details on Art and Liberty’s “real objectives,” they do not appear to have been printed in al-Risala—perhaps the magazine’s “elevated rules and high-class standards” forced the editors to suppress it. But the surrealists did find a way to say more about themselves and their Art and Liberty venture within a few months of the al-Risala debates with their involvement in two other publications, *Don Quichotte* (seventeen weekly issues, 6 December 1939–29 March 1940) and *al-Tatawwur* (seven monthly issues, January–July 1940).

*Don Quichotte*, which was probably founded as a FIARI organ, was a newspaper whose contributors consisted primarily of Egyptian Marxists (Raymond Aghion, Lutfallah Sulayma, Albert Simon, the brothers Raoul and Henri Curiel) and a number of the Art and Liberty signatories of “Long Live Degenerate Art!” (Henein, Marcelle Biagini, Henri Dumani, Edouard Levy, Marcel Laurent Salinas, Sayf Wanli, Angelo de Riz). Maggy Axisa, an artist whose work was exhibited in the annual

Art and Liberty “Independent Art Exposition,” frequently provided illustrations for articles in the paper, as did Kamil el-Telmissany, who designed Don Quichotte’s section headers that appeared in every issue and who also wrote an occasional “The Art of Egypt” column showcasing the creative work of Art and Liberty members. Articles and reviews specifically about surrealism and surrealists (from Egypt and elsewhere) dominated the “Over the Windmills” literary and arts pages edited by Henein, but probably none of these would have helped explain the movement’s “real nature” to stubborn skeptics any more than those that had appeared in al-Risala – in the ninth issue of Don Quichotte, an open invitation was issued to all “anti-surrealist gentlemen” to visit Art and Liberty’s group show at the Nile Gallery in Sulayman Pasha (Tal‘at Harb) Square and to meet and discuss their concerns with members.

Surrealist Anwar Kamil edited the Art and Liberty newspaper *al-Tatawwur*, which was promoted at its launch as “the first avant-garde literary and artistic review for Arabic youth.” Whereas *Don Quichotte* offered weekly coverage of international and national affairs, the sciences, the arts, fashion, and sports, *al-Tatawwur* was more closely focused on critical ideas about culture, politics, and religion. The fights against poverty and fascism and the struggle for women’s rights were recurring topics in its pages, as was criticism of the Egyptian government (the newspaper was banned after seven issues and Kamil was later jailed for dissident activities). There was modern poetry, Arabic-language translations of Gorky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, and Maeterlinck, and short stories by Albert Cossery.

Surrealist content in *al-Tatawwur* was minimal, limited to a handful of essays and illustrations by Henein, el-Telmissany, Yunan, and Fu’ad Kamil. Once again, as with other FIARI projects, the effort was geared toward forming a more ecumenical progressive and radical cultural front rather than forging a strictly sectarian surrealist one. Art and Liberty’s intense interest in the freedom of expression – written, visual, social, and sexual – was an overriding theme in *al-Tatawwur*’s pages, particularly the idea of “free art”:

By “free art,” I [el-Telmissany] mean everything pertaining to culture and the literary-poetical nourishment that makes the individual distinct. Art, then, which is based on a solid framework of detailed knowledge about the psychological facts that shed light on how to understand the particular state of the individual, the problems he suffers from, and his desires, needs, and hopes for the future without flattery or dissimulation. By “free art” I mean the way we express our desires and rights through dreams and unrestrained, uncontrolled imagination, unfettered by time and place.... I mean that art which expresses the shades of misery and pain we see and the suffering that mankind endures and from which we all, in turn, suffer in this sick existence, a sick existence that continues despite the many medicines that exist which have in all senses become poison.

Art and Liberty's theories on "free art" — a concept first mentioned in "Long Live Degenerate Art!" — can be found scattered throughout the seven issues of the newspaper's abbreviated run, and these ideas were highlighted in the five annual Art and Liberty "Independent Art Expositions" held between 1940 and 1945. Art and Liberty's formulation of "free art" social expressionism (especially as they apply to their exhibitions) was derived in large part from the democratic, non-state-supported Symbolist and Post-Impressionist "Société des artistes indépendants" shows in Paris during the late nineteenth century, but links can be also made from "free art" to this quarrel in al-Risala and to the perceived need of art to serve a national culture.

## Creative and Defensive

In his announcement on the founding of Art and Liberty in *London Bulletin*, surrealist Roland Penrose wrote: "The 'victories' of Fascism do not fail to provoke reactions and awaken an activity which is creative as well as defensive" — defensively, the small Egyptian surrealist group openly criticized the Nazi Entartete "Kunst" show, and creatively counteracted it with Art and Liberty's initiative for free art in Egypt. But the implications of their defensive and creative activities for Egyptian visual arts and politics elicited suspicion and disdain from the press and the cultural intelligentsia, in addition to grabbing the attention of both Egyptian and British police.

It is difficult to determine whether al-Risala's claims of befuddlement with surrealism and Art and Liberty were made sincerely, or if they were, in fact, rooted in antagonistic bad faith. But as mentioned above, the scarcity of accurate studies of surrealism in Cairo and Alexandria made it difficult for even the most well-meaning commentator to provide a fair criticism of the emergence of Egyptian surrealism. It would be a mistake, though, to broadly characterize Art and Liberty's detractors in al-Risala simply as anti-modern obscurantists — Fahmi, for example, wrote an essay that made a positive mention of that quintessential modernist artist Charlie Chaplin and his comedy *Modern Times* (1936) the week after Yunan's "The Surrealist Movement" article appeared. In the late 1930s, al-Risala was geared to educated, reform-minded, nationalist middle-class Arab readers in Egypt and the Middle East who more than likely would identify themselves as liberal reformists of one kind or another. Maybe, like most of those liberals of the 1930s, al-Risala's editors would have preferred art that was fairly conventional and moderate; the only political or social context that they appeared comfortable with seeing in art was mild nationalism — perhaps al-Risala would have been more comfortable with

an Arabo-Islamic Egyptian equivalent to the *retour à l'ordre* modernism of Western Europe in the 1920s.

Judging from the comments threaded throughout this essay, the anti-Art and Liberty attitudes at *al-Risala* were fueled in large part by worries that surrealism was not “Egyptian” enough. Despite the recurring and explicit attacks on Western civilization (and European imperialism) that have been at the core of surrealist cultural politics since the movement’s creation in the crucible of World War I’s industrialized carnage, the modern nationalist liberal reformers writing for *al-Risala* in this debate apparently believed that a radical blend of Rimbaud, Marx, and Freud would compromise the creation of an independent Egyptian cultural identity by being too rooted in Franco-Germanic ideas. Repeated attempts by Kamil, el-Telmissany, and Yunan to underscore the idea that surrealist inquiries into human creativity and freedom transcended the borders of geographic and national identity were interpreted by Fahmi, Susa, and Sayyid as typical European decadent cosmopolitanism that had no place in the development of a national culture grounded in purely Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim elements. Ironically enough, condemnation of cosmopolitan intellectuals and transnational modernism was itself a global trend in the late 1930s; Fahmi’s avowal that the Egyptian surrealists promulgate a sub-spiritual artistic practice based on foreign ideology, Susa’s claim that they promote a “degenerate art” out of “blind enslavement” to the latest excesses of foreign art, and Sayyid’s dismissal of them as purveyors of “superficial” and “deceptive” ideas are actually completely consistent with a number of their international anti-surrealist contemporaries from across a wide political spectrum.

This brings me to a final point about this debate. *Al-Risala*’s hostilities toward Egyptian surrealism and Art and Liberty’s social expressionism are somewhat similar to the antagonisms between European Romanticism and capitalist-liberalism from a century or so earlier. In 1930’s “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” André Breton had admitted that surrealism was the tail end of the Romantic movement (“but then only as an amazingly prehensile tail”), and surrealists certainly made no efforts to disguise the deep unease they felt with industrial modernity and its Enlightened liberal champions. Liberal-bourgeois confidence in rationality and realism as a solid basis for authority in a modern political community (and, furthermore, modern civilization) has been challenged by Romantics since Novalis, and hostile liberal suspicion of exultant Romantic celebrations of passion, desire, dreams, ecstasy, the mysteriously unknowable, and the profound sublimity of the natural world are equally common. These debates between Art and Liberty and *al-Risala* echo much of these earlier cultural conflicts. Seeing them play out in colonial and post-colonial non-European settings open up new perspectives for a global investigation into the dynamics of modernity and national culture.

Whether we are looking at the Nazis' war on modernist culture, or the Stalinist government's policing of artists and writers in the Soviet Union, or the liberals' disputes with Art and Liberty in Egypt, a common theme is the lack of shared language needed to define art's function and responsibility in culture: Was it to be defense against or an agent for radical change? The ease with which Fahmi, Susa, and Sayyid blurred distinctions between Entartete "Kunst," Art and Liberty's social expressionism, and surrealism was a reaction not unusual in its time; battles over whether there was a political or social context to creative work, and how that content should be represented (if at all), were fought on many fronts in various regions around the globe on the eve of World War II. The fact that the terms of this argument over art was happening in Cairo is indicative of how, in the words of el-Telmissany in his article in the al-Risala edition of 28 August 1939, Egyptian culture was already "in concert with the rest of the world."

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Don LaCoss

Egyptian Surrealism and 'Degenerate Art' in 1939

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