

## Canonical Enfleshment and Enmeshment:

Approaching art history's as a toolkit for processes of becoming<sup>1</sup>

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In January 2013, a Beirut-based newspaper reported that restoration was to begin on one of the Louvre Museum's "most iconic works," the *Victory of Samothrace*.<sup>2</sup> The report was, in fact, more than half a century late. Already in 1954 artist Moustapha Farrouk<sup>3</sup> had restored it, not in the Louvre, but in an autobiographical novella published in Beirut and titled, *Story of a Person from Lebanon*. Before discussing the restoration, I want to consider why Farrouk labored so generously for this icon, and why I ungenerously took no photograph of his handiwork to prove his gift. This discussion interests me because I teach and write from Beirut, where most of my students graduate into the global precariate. Their lives, like their livelihoods-to-be, exist in "the constantly emergent state of being uncertain in an ambiguous and sometimes volatile social [...] world" wherein dependencies and obligations bind them to people they have little chance of knowing personally or impacting reciprocally.<sup>4</sup> Precariousness encompassed Lebanon most famously in the civil war but also still in the incessant expectation of its return.<sup>5</sup> Recently art organizer Christine Tohme told a *New York Times* reporter, "In Beirut, precariousness is a form of identity," and explained that "Nothing works here," whether political movements or professional projects.<sup>6</sup>

We produce art pedagogy in and towards this precarious context. Specifically, much Lebanese art historiography arises from a belief in the universal possibility for all humans to make capital-A art. Consequently, it undertakes documenting local production that, while found "here," is on par with "there." Yet by always taking its authority from external comparisons, it inevitably makes the art described seem derivative and inferior. In as much as the art becomes recognizable for meeting some universal standard, it must also be described as "influenced" or "tardy." In as much as it becomes recognizable for meeting a local standard, it becomes "limited" and "insufficient." Neither model offers a sense of the art's motive, impact, or meaning apart from how it resembles an extent externality or locality. In addition to this epistemological cost, the models charge an ontological cost: this type of art history encourages the sense that investment in this art is money better spent elsewhere. In other words, it feeds into precariousness by parlaying (a lack of) conceptual resources into (a lack of) material resources.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay builds on a longer piece that appeared in *Museum Anthropology* in 2010 as "Missing Nike."

<sup>2</sup> The Daily Star, "Louvre work 'Winged Victory' to be restored," 1/23/13. Accessed at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Art/2013/Jan-23/203387-louvre-work-winged-victory-to-be-restored.ashx#axzz2lt9qRHIt>

<sup>3</sup> The Arabic transliteration following the IJMES policy is Mustafa Farrukh. I follow here the artist's preferred signature.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Dolson, "Trauma, Workfare, and the Social Contingency of Precarity and Its Sufferings: The Story of Marius, a Street-Youth," *Culture, Medicine, Society*, Vol. 39, Issue 1 (2015), pp. 134-161. P.138.

<sup>5</sup> Sami Hermez, *War Is Coming: Between Past and Future Violence in Lebanon*, (Philadelphia, PN: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Michael Specter, "The Eternal Magic of Beirut," *The New York Times*, Style Magazine, May 2, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/t-magazine/travel-beirut-architecture-art-design.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/02/t-magazine/travel-beirut-architecture-art-design.html?_r=0)

In contemplating the ethical obligations precarity imposes on writing and research, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls for, “stepping outside the cold comfort zone of recognizing only self-identical objects.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Tohme’s taking precarity as an identity misses exactly this absence of any essential stability. Precariousness cannot clear a ground from which to battle for identity. Yet precariousness can remind us that even hegemonic forces do not contain their final meaning.<sup>8</sup> Every essence is an assertion, and it is one that involves the labor of the precariate as much as the hegemonic. To understand precarity, in this sense of living amidst without being totally determined by it, requires attending to what anthropologist Karen Hébert in her study of a sometimes-capitalist Alaskan salmon fishery calls, “the less-conflictual interplays of different spatial and temporal orders.”<sup>9</sup> I return now to Farrouk’s engagement with the *Victory of Samothrace* to learn from it a new way of learning from art about life in a decentering world.

In his posthumously published autobiography, *My Road to Art*, Farrouk describes his first visit to the Louvre in 1926.<sup>10</sup> Having completed training in Rome’s Royal School of Art, he eagerly headed for the sculpture gallery and first encountered the *Venus de Milo*. Seeing the sculpture “encircled by an aura of artistic majesty and Greek glory,” Farrouk reports he was born anew: “Verily, I felt at once a rapture and a bliss like nothing else in this world. I felt that I was alive and revived and renewed, and that I was created anew, a new creature, that I was living among the thought and art of the Greeks and Romans and the sons of the Renaissance, and so on.”<sup>11</sup> Following his rebirth, Farrouk set about systematically sketching the Louvre’s collection, to better grasp each school displayed.<sup>12</sup> This is probably when he made his charcoal version of the *Victory*.

While conducting my PhD fieldwork between Beirut and Paris, I saw Farrouk’s charcoal sketch of the *Victory* and marvelled at its captivating verisimilitude. I did not, however, photograph it. I took for granted that the *Victory* exists securely atop the Daru Staircase, and that I could look there if I want to get a good image of it. Accordingly, I declined a chance to study the sculpture’s permeability and connectedness. Reading Farrouk’s novella gave me a second chance, for here not only is the sculpture the origin of new birth but she is restored, or, we could better say, revived. A shadow of Farrouk’s sketch appears as an illustration of the career of Salim, an art student modelled loosely on Farrouk’s own life. [FIG. 1] Salim has arrived, like Farrouk, at the early morning opening of the Louvre, and he and his companion are the first people in line. The *Victory* greets their entrance.<sup>13</sup> The illustration documents the ascent of a man and a woman up the Daru Staircase, right legs bending to ground their forward step, propelling left legs extended behind, arms draping their sides gracefully, chests forward, necks erect, chins raised, eyes locked on the status guiding their advance. Their bodies mirror the position the *Victory* but

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<sup>7</sup> Kathleen Stewart, “Precarity’s Forms,” *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 27, Issue 3 (2012), pp. 518–525. P. 518.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Jackson, *Existential Anthropology: Events, Exigencies, and Effects* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005) p.XX-XXII.

<sup>9</sup> Karen Hébert, “Enduring Capitalism: Instability, Precariousness, and Cycles of Change in an Alaskan Salmon Fishery,” *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 117, Issue 1 (2015), pp.32-46. P.36.

<sup>10</sup> The date published in the text is 1927, but Beirut newspapers confirm Farrouk had already returned to Beirut in late 1926. Therefore, I treat this as a typographic error.

<sup>11</sup> Moustapha Farrouk, *Tariqi ila al-Fann (My Road to Art)*, (Beirut: Dar al-`Ilm lil-Milya`in, 1986), p.128.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p.132.

<sup>13</sup> Moustapha Farrouk, *Qussa Insan min Lubnan (The Story of a Person from Lebanon)*, (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma`arif, 1954), p.47-48.

also flesh it out by demonstrating how she would look today had Time not taken her arms and head.

How do we understand the agency and meaning of Farrouk's sketches in 1926 and again in 1954, both periods when the political fate of Farrouk's compatriots was hotly contested?<sup>14</sup> How do we understand the meaning the *Victory* had for a young, Muslim man who had voyaged from Beirut to study in the "cradle of art" and the "city of light"? Does Farrouk's rebirth testify to the universal value of canonical Greco-Roman art? It is one thing to declare art to have universal value; it is yet another thing altogether to explain that value while attending to actual human actions. The illustration testifies to Farrouk's concern for making art based on the human form in a metropole-codified pedigree, or what he undertook to teach his Arabic-speaking peers to call "global art (*al-fann al-'alami*)."<sup>15</sup> For Farrouk, thinking in terms of global art involved learning to think institutionally, from waiting in line to get tickets, to orienting one's body towards public space, to contributing to formalized places for developing national educations and economies. In other words, global art could help organize people logistically and explain organization conceptually. Both Farrouk's autobiography, *My Road to Art*, and his novella, *Story of a Person from Lebanon*, explain at length how to live by art.

The interactions of Farrouk, his Lebanese protagonists, and myself with the *Victory of Samothrace* can trigger a new way of thinking about precarious subjectivities. Farrouk's *Victory* suggests that art history can tell the story of en fleshment in place of the already fleshed out canon. We tend to let the objects stand for ideas, but we would do well to ask how objects appear as objects, how they belong to the sphere of appearances. How do sculptures like the *Victory* and other artworks gain and proffer tangibility to ways of being thought about? When the Louvre announced its reconstruction project, it highlighted the *Victory's* fragmented condition and constantly unfixed location. It mentioned that parts of the sculpture are still in Samothrace. While the *Victory* sculpture is ancient and Greek in origin—that is, when understood in terms of art historical discourse—she is also modern and French—to the extent that she can be accessed physically in a nationalist French monument—and finally, contemporary and Lebanese-Arab (to use Farrouk's ethno-nationalist term) to the extent that she finds physical completion and civic fruition in the bodies of the two "foreign" visitors (and later, the book's intended readership). Taking each instance for its intervention and presence, rather than its referentiality and self-sameness, means revamping the art historical task from finding objects to fit into the category of capital-A art, to reckoning with relationships that vivified or en fleshed that concept in material forms. Thus, more importantly, the illustration instantiates the compatibility of Farrouk's compatriots to that art historical pedigree; indeed, it makes them the contemporary embodiments of it. In contrast to the broken, headless and wingless

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<sup>14</sup>In 1926 France had acquired tutorial control of Grand Liban as a Mandate, which was met by protest movements and attempts to create a Lebanese republic and constitution. See Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and in Lebanon*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000.) In 1954, the 11 year-old republic of Lebanon struggled to cope with Israeli incursions, Palestinian refugee mobilizations, and a highly popular Arab Nationalist movement that called for regional integration. See Ziad Abu-Rish, *Conflict and Institution Building in Lebanon, 1946-1955*, PhD dissertation, UCLA, 2014.

sculpture found in Samothrace and still only partially in the Louvre, Farrouk's compatriots carry forth the *posture* and meaning of global art into the modern world.

The posture of the revived Victory brings us to a second process by which fragmentation and precariousness become canon-material in unexpected places. I turn now to a concept I call "enmeshment" to explain how enmeshed art enter social bonds, stick, grip, group, and extend? How does enmeshed art become enmeshed into social settings and gain audiences, adherents, and even lineages of influence? We learn this by looking at the careers of ambitious artists who did not accept their colonially-inscribed cultural boundaries as the horizons of their imagination but did believe in capital-A art as a category, symbol, and motive.

By way of example, consider again Moustapha Farroukh and his peers, who, upon learning in 1934 that a "Hungarian" painter received the commission for decorating "their" new Parliament Building's Chamber of Deputies, stormed the Office of Public Works and expressed their anger that the French-appointed "Lebanese government had commissioned a 'foreigner'."<sup>15</sup> An anxious Public Works officer convinced them that it was a private business deal, not a national betrayal, and the fault of the local contractor but, he also took the occasion to remind his superiors in motherland France that in order to meet France's civilizing mission, they *should be* solicitous of "Lebanese arts." He therefore hoped they would allocate a budget by which the Lebanese president could commission the angry artists to decorate Parliament's lobby.

A result of the meeting seems to be the establishment of The Friends of the Arts Association, a group of art-promoters that joined painters active in Beirut, upper-class clientele, with local representatives of the French Mandate. The Friends' membership card, penned doubtlessly by Farrouk, enunciates membership in a visual language that harmoniously blends scenes from the Lebanese coast, Rome, Libya, and an academic art atelier. [SLIDE 2] To the left, rise the mountains that ring Beirut from the north with a city-view replete with mosques, minarets, and public arcades. To the right, the scenes from Beirut's coast facing south. Between them, a palette and three pristine brushes ready to be dipped not in pigment but in the unceasing inspiration provided by an Aphrodite figure. The floating torso may be Farrouk's abbreviation of the recently discovered *Venus of Cyrene*, which Farrouk saw at the National Museum in Rome, when he studied art there between 1924 and 1926. Art historians at the time believed it to be an "exceptionally beautiful" example of a Venus Rising from the Sea and attributed it to an Alexandrian school of the second century BC.<sup>1</sup> In 1934 the same Venus graced a postage stamp the Italian Mandate government made for sending postcards from its Libyan colony.

Farrouk was a strong critic of the French Mandate government and of contemporary French art, and he may have enjoyed this opportunity to reassert a Greco-Roman lineage that lingered in Italian-Arab Libya. In any case, his composition suggests that capital-A art could be imported to create communities joined by sentiment, posture, and interest. By contrast, Art historiography has tended to distribute the traces left by colonial practices into neat categories—"western," "non-western," "metropolitan," and "marginal."

But *where* is the Friends of the Arts Association to which this card provides entry? It is in an expanded "West," a transforming "non-West," a marginalized metropole, a

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<sup>15</sup> See memo #1505 by M. Rendu, July 9, 1934, File #104, Instruction Publique, 2ème versement, Office des Affaires Etrangères, Nantes.

metropoloized margin: in short, a peculiar “polytopia.” By inscribing one’s name on the “M.” line one became a progenitor of art affiliation, and those whose names appeared on the “*delivrée à* (delivered to)” line became variants of a certain type of person, a “friend” and “member” of capital-A art, but with a particular perspective on this polytopia. Between those lines, artworks were enmeshed and their lives extended through space and time.

When confronted with Farrouk’s polytopic drawing of the polytopic *Victory*, I, like most art historians and anthropologists, initially abstained from examining its agency in creating that condition and assumed that it simply reflects it. Consequently, I couldn’t share the work with readers because I assumed it not to have much to say about Lebanese or French art worlds per se. However, rebirths and membership cards such as I describe here encourage studying the globalization of art history and accompanying power dynamics not by replacing the toolkit but by exploring its importation into sites of which it was apparently exclusive. The politics, aspirations, and affects by which Art was globalized logically form an important point from which to globally integrate our understanding of humans. Likewise, material forms with their connectedness, referentiality, and polylingualism, become first-hand documents of thought about precarious, ambiguous entities, such as citizenry and spatial belonging.



Fig. 1 Moustapha Farrouk, Salim and his companion at the Louvre, in *Qussat Insan min Lubnan* [The Story of a Person from Lebanon] (Beirut: Maktabat al-Ma’arif, 1954), p.47.

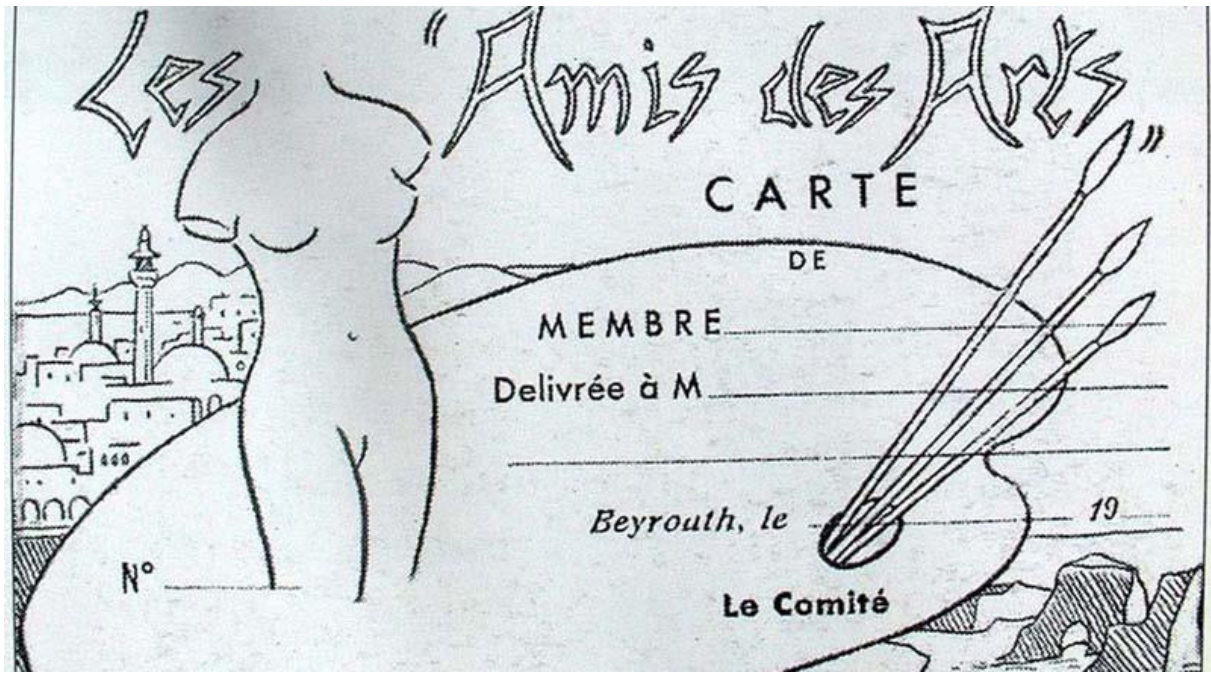


Fig. 2 Moustapha Farrouk, Société des Amis des Arts Membership Card, dated to 1934, Hani Farroukh Archives, Beirut, Lebanon