
Reviewed by Lovisa Berg

With the escalation of violence in Syria the number of books on the country has escalated too. What makes *Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Front Line* stand out is the focus on culture and contemporary art as a means of dealing with the ongoing conflict. Disregarding the tragic cause for the interest in Syria, it is indeed time that the country’s rich cultural life is given media coverage in the rest of the world. However, filling this vacuum carries with it a huge responsibility as history and context become very important. Having few other sources, the reader of *Syria Speaks* is likely to believe that the ongoing conflict is the cause of any cultural activity in present day Syria, which negates the country’s literary and artistic history. This is emphasized by statements like the “forty year long history of silence” in the introduction (viii), which completely ignores the pre-2011 art and literature including that of some of the participants in this anthology, texts that in many ways are more daring in their discussion of sectarianism and class divisions than the texts chosen for this collection. The only reference made to previous cultural activity is that of prison literature – an important genre but far from being the only cultural expression pre-2011. A short historical introduction would have both credited the artists and writers whose tradition the contributors to this anthology are bravely continuing and placed the participants in their context in a country in which artists, writers, poets and actors in different ways have challenged the censors and taboos (political, religious and social) for decades. This artistic tradition, with its strength, skill and political awareness is evident in many of the short stories, cartoons, photographs, paintings and posters in the works of the over fifty contributors included in the anthology.

The number of contributors and their different backgrounds and artistic techniques make the anthology an interesting contribution to the main media coverage of the tragic conflict in Syria as well as providing an insight into contemporary Syrian art. Editors Malu Halasa, Zaher Omareen and Nawara Mahfoud have made a wide selection of artists, writers, and scholars. Some of the material has previously been included in two art exhibitions touring Europe and most of the written material has been published before in different versions. I would, however, have welcomed a discussion of the criteria on the basis of which the selection of contributors was made. Considering that the title says “Syria Speaks” a comment on the choice of who speaks for the whole country would have strengthened the anthology. Now the reader is left to wonder whether these contributors are the most famous, or the loudest, or the ones with western connections, or the only cultural producers present in Syria?

The anthology starts with an introduction by Halasa and Omareen in which they discuss the various contributions; this is followed by short stories, art, articles and photography in no discernable order. Among the contributing artists is Sulafa Hijazi who both presents and reflects on a number of her digital prints. Khalil Younes is another artist who participates with expressive drawings using ink on paper in a style mixing surrealism and realism. The group *Art and Freedom* (initially a virtual gallery on Facebook for Syrian artists documenting the events) is also represented in a chapter by Amer Matar. Youssef Abdelke, who started *Art and Freedom*, contributes to the work through a series of photographs of himself and his very detailed charcoal paintings taken by Nassouh Zaghliouleh. Another collaboration included is the one between Mohamad Omran and Golan Haji who through texts and ink drawings create symbiotic artworks.

In addition to paintings, photography and video art form an important part of the art from the frontline. Both as a way of documenting the events and as making art, as described by the collective *Lens Young* who have contributed with photographic artwork from all over Syria. One case of video art that has become famous outside Syria too is the series *Top Goon: Diaries of a Little Dictator* by the group *Masasit Mati*. In the anthology the group is presented both through an article and through the script to one of the episodes of the series.
The anthology also includes two cartoons as well as an interview with the well-known cartoonist Ali Ferzat who has published highly satirical political comments through cartoons and caricatures in Syria for many decades. Other cartoonists in the anthology are the two groups Comic4Syria and Syrian Revolution-Kafranbel. Whereas the Kafranbel group decides collectively on themes and motives for their cartoons which can best be described as political commentaries Comic4Syria’s members work individually and their contribution is a Manga style story about friendship over the sectarian borders.

Graffiti and posters have also been included in the anthology. Charlotte Bank discusses the art of persuasion illustrated with examples from the collective Alshaab alsori aref tarekh (The Syrian People Knows its Way, written as it appears in the anthology), which has published numerous posters with political slogans in paper-form and on the Internet. There is also a section on the group Freedom Week Graffiti Syria and their stencils used for mass-producing graffiti.

In addition to the visual arts, literary texts are also included in the anthology. Anne-Marie McManus and Ghias Aljundi translated an excerpt from Khaled Khalifa’s novel There are no Knives in the Kitchens of this City. Samar Yazbek provides a journalistic essay on a trip through northern Syria and the people she encounters there (translated by Emilie Danby). Ossama Mohammed’s contribution is a short story on growing up, which is translated by Alice Guthrie. Khalil Younes also contributes a diary-like short story about two young men who find themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.

The anthology also includes essays and interviews. Yassin al-Haj Saleh is interviewed on the topic "the intellectual and the revolution" and Assaad al-Achi, a representative of a Local Coordinating Committee, is interviewed on ways of smuggling equipment such as phones and cameras into Syria. Robin Yassin-Kassab participates with an essay called Literature of the Syrian Uprising wherein he mainly discusses two works by Yazbek and Khalifa. Two other essays are by Hassan Abbas and Zaher Omareen. Abbas discusses sectarianism and citizenship in Syria and Omareen is concerned with symbols in Syria.

The essays and interviews just mentioned are the weakest part of the anthology. Their modes of expression fall in an indefinite sphere between academic standards and popular culture and the content is not always clearly connected to the theme of the anthology. On the other hand the individual artists and writers included demonstrate some of the versatility in modern Syrian art and culture. They are also a testimony to how art, even in the ugliest of times, can be not only a way of relief and reflection but a way of taking action. Placed in its proper context Syria Speaks: Art and Culture from the Front Line reveals both the creativity of Syrian culture and some of the ways in which its artists and writers have used art (and most likely will continue to use it) to convey strong political messages.

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1 See for example Yazbek’s novels and documentaries, unfortunately none of them included in the notes on the contributors.