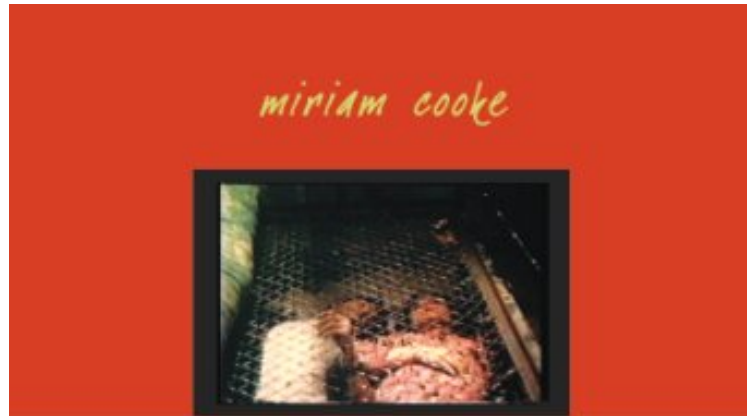


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Dissident Syria: Making Oppositional Arts Official

miriam cooke

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* DISSIDENT SYRIA *



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From 1970 until his death in 2000, Hafiz Asad ruled Syria with an iron fist. His regime controlled every aspect of daily life. Seeking to preempt popular unrest, Asad sometimes facilitated the expression of anti-government sentiment by appropriating the work of artists and writers, turning works of protest into official agitprop. Syrian dissidents were forced to negotiate between the desire to genuinely criticize the authoritarian regime, the risk to their own safety and

security that such criticism would invite, and the fear that their work would be co-opted as government propaganda, as what miriam cooke calls "commissioned criticism." In this intimate account of dissidence in Assad's Syria, cooke describes how intellectuals attempted to navigate between charges of complicity with the state and treason against it. A renowned scholar of Arab cultures, cooke spent six months in Syria during the mid-1990s familiarizing herself with the country's literary scene, particularly its women writers. While she was in Damascus, dissidents told her that to really understand life under Hafiz Asad, she had to speak with playwrights, filmmakers, and, above all, the authors of "prison literature." She shares what she learned in *Dissident Syria*. She describes touring a sculptor's studio, looking at the artist's subversive work as well as at pieces commissioned by the government. She relates a playwright's view that theater is unique in its ability to stage protest through innuendo and gesture. Turning to film, she shares filmmakers' experiences of making movies that are praised abroad but rarely if ever screened at home. Filled with the voices of writers and artists, *Dissident Syria* reveals a community of conscience within Syria to those beyond its borders.

"*Dissident Syria* is an important and urgent book. In her fascinating account of Syrian cultural productions during the 1990s, miriam cooke documents the abyss between Syrian lived experiences and the rhetoric of the state. She extols the creative minds whose works exemplify the power of art." —Susan Slyomovics, author of *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco*