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Unified multiplicities : Arabic letters between modernity, identity, and abstraction

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UNIFIED MULTIPLICITIES

ARABIC LETTERS BETWEEN MODERNITY, IDENTITY, AND ABSTRACTION

PROEFSCHRIFT

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Bahia Shehab

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Table of Contents

Chapter I Introduction

Chapter II From Traditional Calligraphy to Calligraphic Abstraction

An Alternative Reading of Islamic Art: Lessons in Appreciating and Understanding Islamic Art

Islamic Art vs Modern Art: The Modern Arab Artist

Art as Identity: Artists of Letterist Abstraction

Chapter III Letterist Abstraction: A Critical Analysis

Current State of Letterist Abstraction Discourse

New Tools of Assessment: Handwriting, Calligraphy, Abstraction, Concept and Technique

Chapter IV Understanding Letterist Abstraction Artists

Common Threads

Arabic Letters: Legible and Illegible Quest for Identity Through Tradition

Artists as Intellectuals

Sufism

Combining Cultures

Key Differences

International Recognition Initiated by the West

Geography, Diaspora and Context

Visitors or Committed

Social Impact and Continuity

Chapter V Case Study: Samir Sayegh: A Master of Tradition and Abstraction

Philosophical Insight & Timid Experimentations

Arabic Letters Speak to an International Audience

The Spring of Creative Expression

Chapter VI Conclusion: Is Letterist Abstraction a Movement Informing a New Arab Identity?

Curriculum Vitae

Bahia Shehab is a multidisciplinary artist, designer and art historian. She is Professor of Design and founder of the graphic design program at The American University in Cairo where she has developed a full design curriculum mainly focused on the visual culture of the Arab world. She has taught over fourteen courses on the topic. She frequently lectures internationally on Arab visual culture and design education, peaceful protest, and Islamic cultural heritage.

Her work is concerned with identity and preserving cultural heritage. Through investigating Islamic art history she reinterprets contemporary Arab politics, feminist discourse and social issues. Her artwork has been on display in exhibitions, galleries and streets in Canada, China, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Morocco, Norway, Portugal, South Korea, Spain, Turkey, Tunisia, UAE, UK and the US (NY, Madison and Hawaii). The documentary *Nefertiti's Daughters* featuring her street artwork during the Egyptian uprising was released in 2015. Her work has received a number of international recognitions and awards; TED Fellowship (2012) and TED Senior Fellowship (2016), BBC 100 Women list (2013), The American University in Beirut distinguished alumna (2015), Shortlist for V&A's Jameel Prize 4 (2016), Prince Claus Award (2016) and a Skoll Fellowship (2018). She has been an artist in residence at the Shangri-La Museum of Islamic Art, Design and Culture in Hawaii-USA (2018) and at the Bellagio Centre-Italy (2019) among others. She is the first Arab woman to receive the UNESCO-Sharjah Prize for Arab Culture (2016). Her publications include "A Thousand Times NO: The Visual History of Lam-Alif" (Khatt, 2010), "At the Corner of a Dream: A Journey of Revolution & Resistance" (Gingko, 2019) and a co-authored volume "A History of Arab Graphic Design" (AUC Press, 2020).

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ABSTRACT

The art movement of Letterist Abstraction, also called *Hurufiyah,* Letterism, Calligraphism, or the Calligraphic School of Art, which started with the decolonization of the Arab world in the early 1940s, faces two forms of criticisms.[1] On the one hand, it is hailed as liberating Arabic calligraphy from its association with the sacred text. Its' artists are acknowledged as pioneers through their novel treatment of Arabic texts as manifestations of informing a new modernist experimentation, and new Arab identity on the global art arena. On the other hand, this same movement is perceived as a visual language lacking in imagination, serving conservative agendas by only utilizing the Arabic text and its archaic forms as a main vehicle to reinforce traditional views on modern art in and from the Arab and Islamic worlds. Even though the artistic style started almost seven decades ago, there has been no comprehensive study for a critical analysis of the artistic production or of the artists of this movement. By reviewing currently available research on the topic and by conducting field research I propose a new method for analysing and understanding paintings that use Arabic letters in their composition. The research starts by understanding the historical background that has lead to the emergence of this movement. Understanding and analysing the source, which is the calligraphic tradition in Islamic art, and how it was crucial to the process of understanding the movement. Social, economic and political contexts are also taken into consideration in the analysis. This yields a research tool by means of which Arabic letterist abstraction works of art can be understood in relationship to each other. A contextualization of artists and their background is also necessary for the understanding of the movement. Finally, a case study utilizing the artistic production of the artist Samir Sayegh will help in understanding the social and cultural dimensions of an artist from the letterist abstraction movement, one who has finally achieved global presence without leaving the geography of the Arab world.

[1] Wijdan Ali uses this term refusing the term *Hurufiyah* on the grounds that ''the term proves to be

Chapter I Introduction

The art movement of calligraphic abstraction, which started with the decolonization of the Arab world in the early 1940s, faces two forms of critical reception. On the one hand, it is hailed as liberating Arabic calligraphy from its association with the sacred text, and its artists are acknowledged as pioneers through their novel treatment of Arabic texts as manifestations of informing a new visual modernist experimentation and new Arab identity on the global art arena. This same movement is perceived as developing a visual language lacking in imagination, as serving conservative agendas by only utilizing the Arabic text and its archaic forms as a main vehicle to reinforce traditional views on modern art in and from the Arab or Islamic world.

The question then is the following: How can we understand an Arabic letterist abstraction work of art in the larger frame of the whole movement? What are the criteria to assess such a work in relationship to other works of art? How can we assess the work of calligraphic abstraction artists critically?

Due to the varying and extreme opinions regarding the movement I will devise a method for the critical understanding and assessment of the different works of art in and from the Arab world that feature the Arabic letter. This research does not concern the artistic production by artists from the larger Islamic world due to several reasons. The artistic production featuring Arabic letters from Iran have been very well documented and presented in many manuscripts till today, something that cannot be said about Arab letterist artists. On the other hand, after the 1928 Ataturk reform in Turkey and the abolishment of the Ottoman Caliphate, much less artists in Turkey utilized the Arabic letters in their artwork. Thus artists in and from the Arab world with works of art that utilize the Arabic letters are the major focus of this research. By showcasing the work of some of the major pioneering artists who played a role in this movement and using the work of one Lebanese intellectual, teacher and artist, Samir Sayegh as an example, I am aiming to prove that letterist abstraction (or as it is sometimes known as calligrahism, letterism, or *hurufiyya* in Arabic) is actually rooted in Arabic discursive traditions but should be understood

within a larger modernist quest for a new formalist visual language that emerged in the context of decolonization in the Arab world.

When Arab artists started using Arabic script in their paintings, there were two kinds of reactions. One group considered this a new form of Arab expression and another one saw it as a step backwards for Arab modernity. Arab art criticism is still an emerging field, and Arab art that utilizes Arabic script is usually either grouped with Islamic artefacts or considered a regressive interpretation of history. After the decolonization of the Arab world, a quest for the ingredients of a pan-Arab identity started in the Arab world where Arabic is considered to be the primary language through which several culturally unifying attributes are shared. One of the common shared cultural aspects is Islam. Islam is the dominant religion in the Arab region, but not the only one. Of all the shared cultural attributes Islam is probably the most complex to categorize and identify. It is difficult to generalize about Islamic history and Islam. The works of scholars like Albert Hourani and Edward Said have already illustrated the complexity of that task. [2] [3]Arnold Hottinger argues that it is not possible to speak about Islam using one uniform and global term. He adds that the desire to see in the diverse 'worlds of Islam' a consistent sphere called Islam is simply an abstract idea, which has its sole origin in the mind of the person who creates this concept or theory.[4] On the other hand the term "Islam", especially in the academic sphere, is used to encompass the entire cultural breadth of Muslim societies, rather than restricting itself to religious contexts.[5] Edward Said states that he has not been able to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about *outside* a framework created by passion, prejudice and political interests.[6]

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[2] Albert Hourani, "History." Leonard Binder, ed., *The Study of the Middles East: Research and Scholarship in the Humanities and the Social Sciences* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1976), 117.
[3] Edward Said, *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world.* (New York: Random House, 1981).
[4] Arnold Hottinger, *Die Länder des Islam. Geschichte, Traditionen und der Einbruch der Moderne*, (Zurich: NZZ, Verlag, 2008).
[5] Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 118;
Grabar, "Islamic Art: Art of a Culture or art of a Faith", *Art and Archaeology Research Papers 11* no. 1, (1978).
[6] Edward Said, *Islam Through Western Eyes,* (The Nation: 1980).
https://www.thenation.com/article/islam-through-western-eyes/

When it comes to Islamic art history, not only does the field suffer from generalizations, colonial perspectives, and association with religious text, it also does not stand as a relevant reference for the continuity of art practices in the modern Arab world. Most of the historians of Islamic art are actually Western scholars thus the knowledge they produce is highly influenced by their environment. Grabar discusses this problem apologetically in the preface of his work on the character of Islamic art: "[t]he views and opinions which are here expressed were developed as a Western observer sought to understand an art. They do not derive from a Muslim experience, and it is indeed a problem faced by nearly all scholars in the field."[7]

The lack of continuity and clarity on the discourse of Islamic art history, and its relevance to contemporary artists inhibiting the land where it was produced is one of the major problems that modern Arab art is facing. As will be illustrated here, it is impossible to discuss the movement of letterist abstraction without an understanding of Arabic calligraphy, one of the most common visual ingredients used in art produced in the lands of Islam.

Following the emergence of concepts related to Arab nationalism there was a clear struggle between the progressive thinkers who wanted to secure a secular society and release public life from religion, and the conformists who wanted to maintain their traditional practices. Language becomes the main battleground because it is the principal tool for human expression and also because visually, in its form, it can represent tradition or modernity. Here comes the difference between Arabic calligraphy and letterist abstraction. Arabic calligraphy is automatically linked to the fourteen hundred years of Islamic tradition that are rich with experimentation and visual expression and that span several dynasties across the globe. Letterist abstraction, the term will be discussed in detail later, is an understudied field of study of an art movement by artists from and within the Arab world; a movement that uses the Arabic script as an ingredient in their visual expression and thus falls into the trap of being directly associated with the traditionalists.

[7] Oleg Grabar, "What Makes Islamic Art Islamic?" *Islamic Art and Beyond 3: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006).

Some artists who create calligraphic compositions can be clearly linked to the traditional school because they use similar ingredients of religious phrases and classical script, but those who do not are our focus. My research will start by defining what is Islamic art since it is the main point of misinterpretation. I will propose a new reading of Islamic art, and I will then compare Islamic art to modern and contemporary art so that the transition of societies from producing Islamic art to ones producing modern and contemporary art can be understood. And finally, in the first chapter I will discuss how the different artists who used the Arabic script as a subject in their paintings dealt with issues of identity and modernity.

In the second part of the book I propose a critical understanding of letterist abstraction works of art. It has been a very complex and challenging task for the very few critics who have attempted to classify this movement. Since it is based on visualizing language, getting caught up in the literal meaning of the work rather than its level of abstraction has been a very common point of confusion for most critics. I have devised a tool that allows scholars to place a letterist work of art on a spectrum of abstraction in relationship to different elements in the painting. It is a way to understand the artworks and their artists in relationship to each other. Understanding letterists abstraction artists and the dynamics that dictated their work was essential for understanding the movement and its artistic production.

In the final chapter I have focused my research on the life and work of Samir Sayegh, relying primarily on testimonials by the artist himself and by his contemporaries. My subject is a multifaceted cultural figure who started his career as a poet and a journalist seeking a new modern means of Arab expression, eventually becoming interested in Arabic script as a means of representing, researching, and innovating a new Arab identity. I study his work in relationship to the totality of the movement. I also use the different phases of his work to see where it falls on the spectrum of abstraction in the different phases of his career, thus applying my new tool to the totality of the artistic production of one artist.

The Main Theses and Goals this dissertation attempts to develop is a critical understanding by which Arabic letterist abstraction works of art can be understood. It places the life and work of letterist abstraction artists in a wider artistic, social and political context, thus helping the reader form an understanding of the movement

from a broader perspective. By tracing all the threads for the assessment of letterist abstraction works of art and artists, I hope to encourage the emergence of more such scholarly and critical works, until we have a better critical understanding of the contemporary Arab art scene as a whole.

Art education and the understanding of the artistic and creative process has been mainly Eurocentric, or Western, in its pedagogy. The stories of modernist artists in and from the Arab world have yet to be told critically and analytically. There is no lack of stories from the region, as Iftikhar Dadi confirms, "A profound and intensive search for new artistic languages began at that time [1950s], that would seek to recover expressivity that had been repressed under colonialism but that would also actively produce a new modern culture. This growing awareness of national independence and sovereignty created a demand for a new aesthetic of decolonization, one that would remain in dialogue with metropolitan developments but would also account for regional and nationalist specificities."[8]

Dadi further states that by virtue of their mediation of Islamic discursive tradition and by refusing national Islamist politics, the "calligraphic modernist" artists from the Arab world and South Asia have relayed aesthetic and affective potentialities across what he calls a "heroic age of decolonization" into the present.

Art can cut across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers and enhance cultural appreciation and awareness of one's own identity, including how this identity relates to others globally. But for this heritage to be in the context of modernity there is a need for critical studies that contextualize Arab modernity and modernism in their historical contexts, practices and reception.

In his life and work, Samir Sayegh has called for an understanding and revival of the Arab heritage within a modernist practice. He has chosen to work with Arabic calligraphy as his means towards this end, with the ultimate goal of making this heritage relevant to the future. In an attempt to try and place Sayegh's work within the boarder calligraphic abstraction movement, I have devised a new set of criteria by which his work and the work of other artists can be assessed. No artist works in a

[8] Eftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim el-Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 109 no. 3 (2010): 555-576.

void, and understanding the conditions under which artists develop their work is important for understanding their over all production. The final chapter is a case study proposal for understanding works of letterist abstraction, in this case Samir Sayegh, based on a new set of criteria that have not been considered before by previous critics and historians of this movement.

Chapter II From Traditional Calligraphy to Calligraphic Abstraction

An Alternative Reading of Islamic Art: Lessons in Appreciating and Understanding Islamic Art

It is a challenging task for a scholar to study Islamic art since its creativity and artistic production have spanned such a wide and long history across several nations and continents. The length and diversity of Islamic history is just one of the problems. Many of the buildings that were built under Islamic patronage exist in politically unstable countries, exposing the monuments to sever damage and cultural loss. The artefacts on the other hand are dispersed in major museums around the world, making their study a laborious and expensive task. Academically speaking, Western scholars initiated the field of studying Islamic art. This adds to the above mentioned problems that Islamic art has been erroneous labelled as ''minor arts'' or ''decorative arts'' in most Art history surveys, only during the post-colonial era did scholars from the Arab world start specializing in and publishing on the topic. [9]

But what is Islamic Art? In the 1970s, Oleg Grabar asked the question, "What makes Islamic art Islamic?"[10] In another article he asked if Islamic Art is Art of a Culture or Art of a faith?[11] Several Islamic art scholars have recently debated the question and a special issue dedicated to understanding the field was published in the 2012 *Journal of Art Historiography* under the title "Islamic Art Historiography."[12] The prologue by Avinoam Shalem entitled, "What do we mean when we say "Islamic art"? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam", comes as a clear indication that practitioners in the field are aware that writing on Islamic art history and how it is categorized and studied still has some serious issues to be addressed. Almost forty years after Grabar asked his questions, one is still struggling for answers.

[9] Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art* (2007), 14.
[10] Grabar, "What makes Islamic art Islamic?", 1-3
[11] Grabar, "Islamic Art",1-6.
[12] "Islamic Art Historiography." *Journal of Art Historiography.* Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, eds. <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/> (last checked January 2016)

The idea that Islam can be grouped under one umbrella is one of the biggest challenges that Islamic art historians are still facing. Oleg Grabar cautioned that, "[…] it is foolish, illogical and historically incorrect to talk of a single Islamic artistic expression. A culture of thirteen centuries (now fourteen centuries) which extended from Spain to Indonesia, and is neither now nor in the past a monolith, and to every generalization there are dozens of exceptions."[13] Grabar classifies three major themes as distinct of Islamic art: its social meaning, its characteristic abstract ornaments, and the tension between unity and plurality. Salah Hassan states that Grabar's arguments are admirable but problematic because the conclusions he reached might have approximated certain aesthetic and artistic practices associated with Islamic art, but they go against Grabar's cautionary note regarding generalization about a highly complex region with centuries of diverse and complex artistic practices and philosophical orientations.[14]

There have been a number of publications on the subject that have demonstrated the difficulty in defining the meaning and restrictions of what the term "Islamic" art really presents.[15] Dadi argues that the term "Islamic art" remains highly challenging and conversational in art historical discourses.[16] As he sums up, "the study of Islamic art has historically been a Western scholars' and connoisseurs' endeavour, one that remains unable to situate a discursive ground in the Islamicate tradition."[17] This renders the field of Islamic art primarily an Orientalist construction. It is troubling that its scholars see Islamic art as having ended in the nineteenth century and all museum collections end around the same time. One attempt at highlighting and tackling this problem is the Jameel Prize launched in 2009 in collaboration with the Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK. The prize "is an

[13] Grabar, "What makes Islamic art Islamic?", 1-3.
[14] Salah Hassan, "Contemporary "Islamic" Art: Western Curatorial Politics of Representation in Post 9/11." *The Future of Tradition - The Tradition of Future: 100 Years after the Exhibition 'Masterpieces of Muhammadan Art' in Munich*, (Münich: Prestell and Haus de Kunst, 2010).
[15] Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, "The Mirage of Islamic Art: Reflections on an Unwieldy Field." *The Art Bulletin* 85 no. 1 (2003). Reproduced by permission of the authors and the College Art Association.
<http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/blairbloomdoc.pdf> 6-SSB/1 (last checked January 2016)
[16] Eftikhar Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
[17] Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 35.

international award for contemporary art and design inspired by Islamic tradition. Its aim is to explore the relationship between Islamic traditions of art, craft and design and contemporary work as part of a wider debate about Islamic culture and its role today."[18]

Islamic art is seen by scholars of its classical period as having ended by the beginning of the nineteenth century, which is as Dadi points out, "precisely the period that witnesses the rise of the Orientalist study of Islamic art, when Western society was undergoing the process of industrial modernization."[19] This has resulted in what Barry Flood has characterized as situating the "location of Islamic art in a valorised past from which 'living tradition' is excluded," which "amounts to denial of coevalness with the art of European modernity."[20] Hassan states that this is exemplary of the larger issue of the place of non-western art within the discourse of western art history where modernism and the modernity are relegated as derivative or secondary to the "Western" modern.[21]

To some extent, the origins of what evolved with Western scholarly circles as Islamic art can be found in the art of the Byzantine and Sassanian dynasties. Aspects like abstract geometry, ornamentation, script, decorating carpets, floors, and ceilings were applied consistently on the exteriors and interiors of buildings and art associated with both civilizations, which preceded Islam. Calligraphy is an element often incorporated into different compositions that can be either representational or abstract. During the nineth century, Kufic script on the Fatimid plates and monuments was very similar to that on buildings and objects that spanned the length of the Islamic empire. In these works the balance has generally shifted from readability to visibility, as the intention was to appreciate them more for their formal than for their semantic qualities.[22] Still, calligraphy was an integral ingredient for decoration in Islamic architecture and artefacts, both religious and secular. What

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[18] "Jameel Prize 4. The Shortlisted Artists and Designers." *V&A.* https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/jameel-prize-4/ (last checked January 2016)
[19] Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, 33
[20] Finbarr Barry Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art." Elizabeth Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions* (London: Routledge, 2007), 35.
[21] Salah Hassan, *Contemporary "Islamic" Art: Western Curatorial Politics of Representation in Post 9/11* (Münich: Prestell and Haus de Kunst, 2010).
[22] Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: 1998), 589.

differed was the content. Where buildings such as mosques and schools had verses from the Quran scribed and engraved on their facades and interiors; poetry, proverbs and sayings of the Prophet graced the walls of royal and domestic Islamic architecture. Grabar stated that the fundamental reason for Muslim artists' choice and preference of calligraphy as their central ''intermediary function'' for so many centuries is related to the notion of the ephemerality of life, and writing being its essential link to the true and only life.[23] Calligraphy enjoyed an official endorsement greater than all the other arts because it was used to scribe the Quran, and the belief in the sacred essence of Arabic as the language through which it is believed the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

Being ''the language of the hand, the idiom of the mind, the ambassador of intellect, and the trustee of thought, the weapon of knowledge and the companion of brethren in the time of separation.''[24] Abstract or nonfigurative art also generally enjoyed a higher position in Islam than in Byzantine and Christian art. Decoration in mosques, including calligraphy, was an end in itself, representing independent structures and symbolizing internal meaning. Taking the difference in content, context and function of Islamic art compared to the art of the West and consequently art in the modern world, it is important to understand how to look at and appreciate Islamic art.

Samir Sayegh, whose artwork is discussed in this dissertation, sets four rules for the viewer to be ready to appreciate and re-look at Islamic art. The first one is *how* to see, not *what* to see.[25] And by seeing he does not mean simply using the physical eye, but actually involving the human totality, in mind and imagination and sensibility. The second point of readiness is in unifying Islamic art in all of its forms, architecture, calligraphy, drawing, engraving, carpets and textiles, ceramics, glass, wood, silver, brass, gold, in the mosque and in the house.[26] He calls for this unification of vision so the viewer can read all of these "*tajaliyat*" as one. He elaborates by stating that this unity is not only the most effective way for us to read

[23] Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art.*
[24] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 66.
[25] Sayegh, *Qir 'a T'amuliyah fi Falsafatihi wa Khasaisihi al-Jamaliyah* (Islamic Art: A Contemplative Reading on its Philosophy and Esthetics). (Beirut: Dar al-Ma`arifa, 1988), 55.
[26] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 57.

this art form, but it is also the aim, or the statement of Islamic art. This similarity in style, in spite of the vast differences in time and place, is what implies unity. He attributes this unity in expression in Islamic art to the fact that it did not deal with the actions of individuals in a place or time, but rather dealt with the understanding of humanity of itself and of the world, as a total understanding derived from one religion.[27]

The third point for appreciating Islamic art is unifying art and religion. Sayegh does not consider Islamic art to have taken the role of preaching or advertising or explaining the Islamic religion, as art in Christianity did for example, meaning it did not serve religion by representing its ideology, in spite of the fact that it could not be separated from religion.[28] And this point becomes part of the dilemma for Arab modernity. How do you separate the elements that represent religion and are an integral part of it, thus an integral part of your identity from the everyday life? This art was the everyday life, it was woven into it, but it also represented the religious philosophy behind it. Thus the religious philosophy of looking at things becomes one with its cultural by-products, whether art or architecture.

The fourth and final point for understanding is learning to listen, in which Sayegh calls for a revival of the art of discernment that is the vehicle for man to read what is behind the letters, what is behind the obvious, when the viewer becomes a contemplator of the artwork unveiling its hidden treasures. The Sufi philosopher and poet, Jalal al-Dine al-Rumi is also cited as confirming that the contemplator of Islamic art needs "*basirah*" [vision] to understand and appreciate this art, he states: "The *zahir* [exterior] image is for you to understand; the *batin* [ulterior] image is formed for the perception of another *batin* image to be formed, based on your ability to see and comprehend."[29] This can only come with education and training, and if people inhabiting the Arab world are constantly placed in situations of political instability, art and its appreciation will always be at the bottom of the social priority list. Survival comes before culture.

[27] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 62.
[28] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 63.
[29] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 67.

Learning how to see beyond the exterior of things, unifying the vision for Islamic art, reinterpreting the religious philosophy behind Islamic art to fit our modern way of life, and learning to meditate internally and externally are all key elements to reading and understanding Islamic art.

Art before Islam, whether Pharonic or Assyrian, was not about representing a visible reality. It may portray a war, but it is not really a war, it is not a battle. If the topic discussed is surrender and coronation, this is not represented realistically, but in mode of depiction. Because it is not reality that is an issue for these art forms, the issues of Islamic art are larger than reality, it is not required that history be exactly copied because the art acts as a witness to the unity of this universe or to the unity of the unknown or Allah, that everything will disappear: *"kul shay zaeil".* According to traditional conceptions, the artist working with the parameters of what is called "Islamic Art" is one with nature, standing *with* nature and not in front of it to draw it. The artist is standing with it and is witnessing its changes. The common traditional perception was that Islam created ornament because the artists could not draw, even though they drew everything, but they did not depict reality like the Greeks. However, if we take these drawings and look at their aesthetic, we discover aesthetic principles in the colouring, in the techniques, and in the geometric virtuosity.[30] Within what is known as Islamic art, the idea is that artists were not concerned with depicting reality, but rather they translated reality into a visual philosophy of abstraction.

Islam's major text and sources did not necessarily forbid iconography, it rather presented a new vision, and as such it abandoned the representation of reality because of this alternative point of view. The Quran placed the concept of *tahrim* [prohibition] on images associated with so-called "pagan" rituals [non-Islamic and non-monotheistic religions], but it was addressing the matter from a functional perspective, as a practice that had a specific role in non-Muslim life and rituals. As for the Prophet's tradition, they were addressed to the non-believers, as well as aimed at distancing Islam from the representation of the creator.[31] Many scholars have cited passages from the Quran, Prophet Mohammad's *hadith* [sayings] and

[30] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[31] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 130.

other references to prove that Islam did not forbid iconography. Instead it had an alternative philosophy with regards to representation. It is sufficient to look at the paintings of Qusayr 'Amra from the 8th century CE or the hundreds of examples of zoomorphic illustrations on different materials and artefacts scattered in collections around the world or even the volumes of illustrated miniature art from the Safavid, Moughal and Ottoman empires, to realize that iconography historically has not been a taboo in Islam. Sayegh argues that whether Islam permitted iconography or not, this has never been a major issue historically, certainly not if compared to the Iconoclast Wars of the early Christian faith's period that ended in 869 CE and that resulted in what is known as the Byzantine style of drawing.

There is no clear text in the Quran like the one in the Jewish Ten Commandments that clearly states, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them."[32]

The agreement was that "shapes and colours are like words in the *Bible*; they can express the holy or the sacred." These shapes and colours, and the depiction of Christ, are representations of the holy, but they had to be two-dimensional, flat, without the illusion of depth created by linear perspective. The idea behind icons is that they do not represent what is seen but rather what cannot be seen. Sayegh states that Islamic art realized the essence of this theory, and that Byzantine art did not. [33] His argument is that if we examine surviving early manuscripts in Islamic art and study the illustrations in *Maqamat* al-Hariri by Yahya ibn Mahmud al-Wasiti, who was a 13th-century Iraqi-Arab painter and calligrapher, we discover that the style by which he illustrates the clothes is very close to the clothes that are found in Byzantine's Christian icons. And this flatness and these faces do not look like anyone, meaning they are not real depictions of an existing human in reality. He finds that the main principles that the art of drawing miniatures follows is very close to Byzantine art, because also, this art does not depict reality, not out of short-sightedness or because it is forbidden, but because the visible reality was considered

[32] Exodus 20:4 KJV.
[33] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

to be irrelevant. Some scholars argue that the rise of Islam must have created a new environment in which images were seen as being at the heart of the Christian iconoclasm's intellectual questions and debates, but there is no proof that Islamic iconoclasm had any direct role in the development of the Byzantine image debate. The Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE was held and its proceedings restored the drawing of icons and holy images, which had been suppressed at the Council of Hieria in 754 CE, which ended the debate about iconoclasm. What Sayegh is suggesting is that Islam adopted concepts that Byzantine iconoclastic tradition could not adopt. This remains a theory that is yet to be proven.

Several scholars denoting the unity of Islam identify how this idea at times merges perfectly with the concept of *tawhid* or the Oneness of Allah in Islam. But in Islamic art the purported unity appears as a projection a "strongly felt universal aspect", as Ettinghausen suggests. Shalem affirms that Islamic art is rather a mixture of different cultures and the adaptation of different styles and aesthetic notions with no thoughts of a unified formation. He wonders if one should simply argue for diversity? And not diversity in unity.[34]

But in its essence, Islamic art is an art that does not struggle or confront, but complements. Allah is one, thus the art is one and the earth is one. It is not about the individual artist. The philosophical understanding of modern abstract art is that it freed the artwork from the subject, whether this subject was marginal or central to humankind. Modern art balanced between the elements of the artwork as independent entities, thus the artwork in itself becomes an independent language. That same logic was utilized in what is perceived as Islamic art, which freed art from its subject more than ten centuries ago. It grew to be prominent as a balance between subject and form, and between images and meaning.[35]

Within what is known as Islamic art, the artist is perceived to have no special presence in the artwork from an individual perspective. The work of artists is a witness to taste and technique, to skill and mind, and to ability as general human attributes. In other words, the "I" of the artist does not represent his emotions,

[34] Avinoam Shalem, "What do we mean when we say "Islamic art"? A plea for a critical rewriting of the history of the arts of Islam" <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/shalem.pdf> 6-AS/1 (last checked January 2016)
[35] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 78.

mood, suffering or individual traits.[36] According to prevalent notions of Islamic art, the relationship between the artist and himself or the world is not based on conflict. It is a relationship that equates the outside world, as one in nature and topic.[37] It leads either to the *shahadah* [testimony] on the unity of existence and the *ghaib* [absent], and knowledge as a way to reach that unknown.[38] The relationships between the human and himself/herself, between the absolute "I", and the essence "I" do not aim at the conquest of one over the other or the cancelling of one by the other.[39]

As a result it is impossible to read the history of Islamic art through its artists the way you can with Western art starting from Da Vinci up to Picasso. The concept of the individual "star" artist was virtually absent in tradition related to the classical canons of art, aside from rare instances like the Ottoman architect Koca Mi'mâr Sinân Âğâ or the Safavid painter Kamāl ud-Dīn Behzād . But there is no documented history of artists within the mostly western discourses of Islamic art history. The reasons for that might be the way in which Islamic art was produced; it was the work of a collective of artisans not an individual. The carpet, the chair, the manuscripts all involved a team, thus it is not an individual who can be credited. But it also could be that – as in the case of non-Western art historical discourses in the Western academy – the way history of Islamic art has been written, the individual artist's role, or their biographies are written out and remain anonymous. Shalem confirms that "[...] in claiming modernity as a Western phenomenon, art histories have defined Islamic art in the twentieth century as traditional, folklorist, religious and even as an art that no longer exists. Islamic art was set back in time. Any continuity was regarded as an adherence to tradition and no space was given for other, modified versions of modernity."[40]

Within the parameters of classical Islamic art, works of art are not a documentation of accomplishments by the Islamic rulers or their armies as it was with the case of Ancient Egyptian or Roman art. It is a translation of a philosophy and

[36] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 126.
[37] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 266.
[38] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 268.
[39] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 267.
[40] Shalem, "What do we mean when we say "Islamic art"?", 17.

not a documentation of historic events. It was concerned with eternity and the afterlife, not with a realistic depiction of reality.

In summary, Islam presented a vision for humanity and the world, and its artistic tradition embodies such a vision.[41] What makes classical Islamic artistic tradition specific is that it translated the religious language into an artistic one. Classical Islamic art witnessed the message of unity in its vision to how the part can become the whole and the whole is part of a bigger whole. Art was part of the bigger vision, it is grander than artistic power, because it is based on a vision. The fact that there was a product of a diversity of people producing artwork across a long historical period does not undermine the line of continuity that was evident in the art produced under different dynasties in different contexts.

Islamic Art vs. Modern Art: The Modern Arab Artist

In order to understand the modernist experience in Arab art we need to analyse the two sources that are credited for its foundation: classical Islamic art and Western modern art movements. The preconceived idea is that Arab modernist art movements are simply an imitation of modern Western art since many of its artists had studied in Western capitals or were exposed to Western schools of thought in their own countries due to colonization. The second idea is that it is a continuation of Islamic aesthetics modified to fit the modern age. Shabout criticizes both claims by stating that the problem emerges from the implication that the visual language of the modern Arab world relates neither to the idea of art as expression, nor as reflection of its realities or its cultures.[42] The last one hundred years can be considered a time of creative stagnation in the eyes of some modernist Arab artists, while the West and its civilization, and its art represented modernity and advancement. The dilemma in the Arab art world started with the realization that the West not only stands for modernity, but it also stands for the colonizer. This became the impasse that artists during the early phases of Arab modernism had to

[41] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 139.
[40] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 3.

struggle with: how to detach modernity from the colonizer without a regressive interpretation of the past?

Many have argued that art in previously colonized countries became an essential tool in the search for, and creation and maintenance of national consciousness and identity. Another obstacle faced by Arab art was related to the nation state and the political realities, which require artists to become subordinate and sometimes serve in political positions in the government. Arab governments would send their most prominent student artists on scholarships to Europe, Russia and other parts of the world. Upon their return many of them would serve in governmental institutions. This happed to artists and intellectuals especially in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and other Arab countries. Ibrahim Salahi went on a scholarship to Slade School of Fine arts in the UK from 1954-1957. He later received several other scholarships to continue his education in the US. He eventually served in Sudan as Director of Culture then Undersecretary in the Ministry of Culture and Information until September 1975, when he was imprisoned for being accused of participating in an anti-government coup under Jaafar Nimeiri's regime. Abudulkader Arnaout went to Rome and France to study in the 1960s and 70s. Subsequently, he held positions in the Syrian Ministry of Culture and the School of Fine Arts in Damascus. Artists thus become tools that are used by the state to serve its agenda. They serve in the machine as cultural operators or practicing artists. They translate the losses and victories of their governments, sometimes as public artworks that document accomplishments and defeats.[43] A great example is the Iraqi artist Jawad Saleem's Nasb al-Hurriyah (Monument of Freedom) in Baghdad's Liberation Square commemorating the 1958 revolution that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy.

Colonialism and the instabilities of the post colonial state, in addition to subsequent wars and their consequences in the Arab world, have caused many artefacts to be transported from the region, ending up in European private or public collections and museums in the West. It became easier for a scholar of Islamic art to study Islamic artefacts in the Western metropolises than it was to study it in their home country. Because of colonization, constant invasions, wars and revolutions,

[43] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.

there has been no continuity for the arts in the Arab region. Islamic art was not taught in schools, but was rather erased from the collective memory of the people inhabiting the lands where it originated. Flood states that since the inception of Islamic art and architecture as a sub-field of art history in the West, it has not been properly located within its mater narrative.[44] He goes on to criticize the representation of Islamic art in major Western references on art history. Starting with Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture* published in 1896, up until Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* published in 2001, Flood illustrates how in the span of a century, Islamic art still has not been properly represented in text books on art history produced in the West. He criticizes the term "Islamic art" as caught between a religious identity and cultural identification. He then elaborates on the books, on the topic of Islamic art published in Europe and the US between 1991-2001 as providing "a representative impression of the field as currently constituted, over a century after its emergence at the intersection of text-based Oriental studies, archaeology, connoisseurship, and museology."[45] He elaborates saying how these references contain illustrations of artefacts only present in Western collections, meaning "[…] works illustrated are those most readily accessible to European and American scholars." To Flood what is most striking is how all of these references unanimously exclude any art produced in Islamic lands after 1800. Nasser Rabat states that Western textbooks on Islamic art history "begin with the building of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina around 620AD, and inexplicably fizzle out with the dawn of the colonial age in the late eighteenth century."[46]

The troubled historiography of Islamic art is an important ingredient for understanding the history of calligraphic abstraction, since the act of calligraphy is central to Islamic art. Islamic art is one of the sources that the calligraphic abstraction movement found useful. Since Sayegh is one of those concerned with calligraphic history and abstraction and since he is also a historian and a critic, it is essential to highlight that aspect of his work within this larger discussion. What has been happening in recent decades is a process of re-learning. In the case of Sayegh

[44] Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 31.
[45] Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism?", 33.
[46] Nasser Rabat, "Islamic Architecture as a Field of Historical Enquiry." *Architectural Design 74* no. 6 (2004), 19.

and a few others, it has been a process of re-learning and educating a new generation of designers and artists who are now trying to create a new visual language for the region.

Western artists ran most art schools in the Arab world, specifically the last wave of orientalists that were present during the late nineteenth century. Through these schools new and more successful approaches to education were followed in the colonized countries. Colonial administrations started teaching artists of the Arab world history, tradition and approaches to Western art education, and their artistic values.[47] This was clear in the work of the early modern artists in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Algeria and Iraq. After the mid-twentieth century, not only did the West become the model for culture, but its capitals also became the Promised Land, providing the hand that blesses and witnesses the second birth of those who come from the Arab world seeking Western knowledge, art and science.[48] Both the Ottoman Sultans and Mohammed Ali of Egypt had European artists flocking to their courts to paint their portraits. The patrons also commissioned architects and designers to build and decorate their new palaces and public parks in Baroque and Rococo styles. The Dolmabahçe palace is a great example of this transformation in the Islamic patron's tastes. Till today, wealthy Islamic and Arab patrons commission Western architects to design their major projects.

In 1891, Egypt's Ruler, Khedive Ismail, patronized the first modern art exhibition of orientalist painters in Egypt and Arab world .[49] The exhibition was attended by a number of dignitaries who, along with the Khedive, purchased several works. Many Islamic masterpieces were also transferred to European museums and became inaccessible to Arab artists. Newer generations of artists consequently did not have the opportunity to connect with their artistic heritage.[50] Islamic artefacts are stocked in different collections around the world and curators have been working with the question of how to display these collections for the past one hundred years. The concept of displaying Islamic art is a contradiction in itself since Islamic art is an art of practice and not display. In reality, what we know as Islamic

[47] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 18.
[48] Sayegh*, Islamic Art*, 25.
[49] Khedive Ismail ruled Egypt between 1863-1879.
[50] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 16.

art objects is that they are art objects of everyday life; in the house, on the plate, on the carpet, on the door, on textiles, in the city, in the mosque, and in the book. To put all that in a museum, one must fence around this life and give it a door.

Islamic art has become a part of history, and for it to come back to life it has to be reformulated. Thus, Islamic art needs a new curatorial formula to be displayed, not necessarily in the Western style of displaying art, which is either by historic progression, or by movements or by artists. These curatorial concepts do not work for Islamic art because the ingredients of Islamic art and its philosophy are very different from Western art. To start with, all of the artists and artisans during what is known as the Islamic civilization periods till today are not researched. And the different elements used in the artworks do not necessarily reflect their patron solely. For example, the Kufic script does not reflect the Umayyads or the Fatimids, or the rulers of Nishapur or Cordoba. The Cordoba Kufic decoration gave a specific aesthetic to Cordoba on certain material but it remained Kufic. There are aspects that are specific to certain periods like the Mamluk Thuluth script, but still it should be labelled as Islamic art in the Mamluk period, not Mamluk art because the same elements were being utilized by other contemporary Islamic dynasties.

Sayegh proposes a possible solution to the problem of displaying Islamic art. He does not think most museum collections have solved the problem of reading and understanding Islamic art, either by placing the objects in chronological order nor simply by grouping together artefacts of the different mediums, like wood, glass, marble, etc. because the way it is displayed does not reflect its essence and its philosophy. He is concerned with the representation of Islamic art as a tool for education and knowledge; ultimately this is what museums are for. And if these tools still have no understanding of the philosophy of the art, how can they reflect its true essence and thus display it in such a way that the world can study and understand it. He expresses his dissatisfaction with the way museums are displaying Islamic art, saying:

> It [Islamic art] is a unifying abstraction that equates all forms of existence; to make them one in the face of the unknown, if *al-ghaib* [the absent or hidden]

is one, then the present should be one too. If we are to unify the present we have to look at its soul and not at its image.[51]

A solution could be to bring the classical tradition of Islamic art back into the public space. Sayegh proposes the mosque as a museum, because, as a religious symbol and building, it contains all the types of styles and techniques that Islamic art has known since its inception.[52] Thus a revival in the use of these already-existing buildings for display of the arts is called for. This is also a call to bring the art closer to the people, to make it present and available even if that means in a religious setting. The virtual world, with its online museums, has brought Sayegh's wish closer to life. He summarizes his philosophy by saying, "The real museum for Islamic art is life itself."[53] Sayegh calls for a look at Islamic art not merely as a religious by-product but as the summary of the philosophy of a civilization. With all the economic and social difficulties that face it, the Arab world still has a long way to go before it can build sustainable cultural spaces that can cater to the four hundred and twenty million people inhabiting it.

But even in the digital spheres Islamic art history is still not well represented if compared to other Western historic disciplines in spite of a number of commendable efforts.[54] Hussein Keshani suggests that future Islamic art historians are less well positioned than scholars of European, American and East Asian art to benefit from the developments taking place in digital technological advances. He clarifies that "the efforts of Islamic art historians and the broader field of Islamic studies to date pale in comparison with other fields in terms of the scale of the efforts, the use of computational analytics, the deployment of the most advanced

[51] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 413.
[52] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 407.
[53] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 414.
[54] Examples of Islamic art online platforms are Archnet, the Shahnama project, the Prince Sultan Ibn Salman Islamic Architectural Heritage Database of the Research Centre for Islamic History, Art and Culture (IRCICA), the Chester Beatty Library Seals Project, segments of the ARTstor database, and the Discover Islamic Art database of the collective enterprise Museum With No Frontiers, as well as the efforts of various museums and national libraries in Europe and North America

technologies, and the digital infrastructures being built."[55] He concludes that the historiographical challenge that Islamic art historians face is not simply to consider and employ new theoretical structures, but to analyse and participate in the design and development of scholarly digital infrastructures, databases and analytical instruments specifically geared to the interests of Islamic art historians, while confronting the field's archival legacies.

The Arab world has long suffered from scarcity of critical and theoretical publications about the subject matter of the arts of the region. This is owing to many factors, beginning with the fact that creativity and art education were never given priority in elementary and secondary schools, while universities lack programs that teach art theory. The result is a scarcity of publications and well-trained curators who can document and analyse the work produced by artists. The other problem is the limited number of professional spaces that can host art and artists such as galleries, exhibitions or museums. The latter problem has seen a slight improvement in the past ten years, but without the proper human resources, such spaces will remain empty buildings unable to attract audiences. Solid institutions that can foster culture and cultural activities are much needed all over the Arab world.

Museums should be playing a more robust role in collaboration with educational institutions to foster arts education and creativity in Arab societies. Unfortunately, these same museums suffer from a lack of funding, sometimes because they exist in impoverished societies with no resources to support the arts. The hope falls on the new, emerging Arab economies that are promising to support the arts in the region. The biggest challenge they will face is preparing and showcasing talent that is relevant to their societies and that engages audiences in a quest towards a contemporary Arab identity. Students should be exposed at an early age to creative thinking and the appreciation of culture so they will become the generation that will grow-up to change society's perception of cultural identity. Without an audience for the arts there will be no art; there will only be an art market.

[55] Hussein Keshani, "Towards digital Islamic art history." *Art Historiography Blog*. <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/keshani.pdf> 6-HK/1, (last checked January 2016).

Since the West became the main reference for the arts it is understandable that artists would flock to study there. But even with these waves of knowledge seekers who studied in the West, Arab artists always came back with out-of-context artistic influences. The schools where these students were studying were not a reflection of the conceptual struggles that their societies were facing. They were possibly avant-garde and possibly speaking an international language that these students' societies were not ready for. In her article on the topic of *The Hurufiyah Art Movement in Middle Eastern Art* Nadia Mavrakis draws parallels between the calligraphic abstraction work produced by modern Arab artists like Madiha Omar, Shakir Hassan Al-Said, and their Western counterparts like Cubist painter Georges Braque, Piet Mondrian, Max Ernst, Joan Miró, Bruce Nauman, and Paul Klee.[56] But she also states that though Western art is often credited for the *Hurufiyah* abstraction, it was also just a further abstraction of traditional Arabic calligraphy. She settles that as countries in the Arab world "gained independence from colonial rule in the early to mid twentieth century, they faced a growing tension: the need to understand and express their cultural identity while at the same time reconcile Western values and norms that had been imposed upon them. In the visual arts, the *Hurufiyah* movement resolved this tension by incorporating Arabic text into art pieces while still retaining many of the Western art forms that had been learned."[57] Other than coming back home with modern ideas on art, some might argue that Arab artists accepted modern Western aesthetics in a creative manner only after it turned its back on naturalism and the realistic approach to art; in other words, that it was acceptable because it did not conflict with an attitude ingrained in the Arab/Muslim consciousness. Shabout states that this was not the case. The artistic experience of the first half of the twentieth century had altered the initial public refusal of naturalistic art into a tradition where – similar to the European experience – modern non-representational art trends were now rejected by the public and denounced as meaningless, static, and devoid of talent. This attitude was

[56] Nadia Mavrakis, "The Hurufiyah Art Movement in the Middle East." *McGill Journal of Middle East Studies Blog*. https://mjmes.wordpress.com/2013/03/08/article-5/ (last checked January 2016).
[57] Mavrakis, "The Hurufiyah Art Movement in the Middle East".

encouraged by the bourgeois ruling classes, which made the Arab artists' transition to abstract art more difficult.[58]

To some historians the steps that abstract modern Arab art took to join the international art circles was by copying the arts of the "Renaissance" in the nineteenth century. They assume that it was an attempt to "open up to the West" and regain their modern Arab identity. This is repeated in the mid-twentieth century, when Arab modern art movements tried to develop their expression of the modern art world from the viewpoint of independence. Thus the criticism is that the development of the modern art movement was not a natural artistic growth, meaning it did not spring from the problems of its locality. That is why some consider that the modern Arab art movement, in the past one hundred years, could not find a visual language that expanded to become popular. It also failed to create a language that allows communication between the artist and his audience or between the artwork and the encounter with that work. Thereby it is argued that the role of the artist as agent of change and influence in their society was and still is non-existent.[59] You just need to look at the crowds that flock to the opening of major art exhibitions in the West and draw comparisons with any art opening in the Arab world and how society relates to it. Art in the Arab world never became mainstream because it sometimes did not spring from its locality; it also never had the infrastructure that art enjoys in Western society. It was sometimes imported in its expression and thus alien to the society. The people in the Arab world could not relate to it because it did not reflect their identity.

We can argue that modern Arab artists were actually in a direct conversation with global trends, a testament to that are the two exhibitions on the Egyptian Surrealist movement in 2016 in Cairo and Paris respectively.[60] What these exhibitions proved is that artists in the Arab world were at par in conversation with their international contemporaries and not mere copies of Western discourses. As

[58] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 37.
[59] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 31.
[60] 'When Arts Become Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)', held at Cairo's Palace of Arts in 10-2016 and organized by Sharjah Art Foundation, focused on "The evolution of the Egyptian Surrealist group," and documented "modernism in Egypt from the late 1930s to the early 1960s." The second, 'Art et Liberté: Rupture, War and Surrealism in Egypt (1938-1948)', at the Centre Pompidou in Paris.

historians and curators in the Arab world are still re-writing art history in the region, it is becoming clearer that conversations on the contextualization of the work produced by artists of Arab modernity needs to be revisited. The course of modern art history is being redirected and decentralized from its current European and Western stand. And this is not only happening with Arab art, but also for art in Africa, and other previously colonized cultures.

Shabout confirms that the rise of modern Arab art is not a continuation of Islamic art or cultural heritage because Arab artists have been disconnected from their past due to colonization. Artists studied art techniques of the West under European teachers, not under guild masters that were practicing Islamic art previously in the region. This pushed artists to start thinking about their art practices as forms of expression and to develop new forms of expression to represent their identity by utilizing modern means of expression. Thus Arab artistic expressions become the result of local creativity, which is subject to its own conditioning and values.[61] Still, there has been an essential change in attitude toward the arts. The attitude held during the Islamic period is no longer viable. It is the difference between the art produced by an intellectually rich and thriving society and that of a colonized mentality struggling to exist. Whether this was the result of an intellectual need or was imposed by western influences is a matter of debate. Islamic aesthetics responded to an Islamic religious philosophy while modern Arab aesthetics responded to Arab national secularized ideas. Many of the artistic experiments and artists were actually trying to breakaway from religion and tradition in an attempt to create a new modern Arab identity. Thus Arab artists created a new visual language as an expression of their ideas, emotions, and visions that were generated by contemporary Arab cultures. After interviewing several artists on their work during this period, it is clear that there is an overall sense of loss.[62] It is evident that the hopes they had for the creation of this new identity were not successful for all of them. This is understandable since the artists in Syria are currently facing the horrors

[61] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 10.

[62] I interviewed several artists in the past year about their careers these include: Mouneer Elshaarani, Youssef Abdelke, Nja Mahdaoui, May Muzaffar (wife of the late Rafa al-Nasiri), Shalabiya Ibrahim (wife of the late Nazir Nabaa).

of war and displacement, a situation that Palestinians, Lebanese, and Iraqi artist have experienced before them. Before the recent political turmoil, the region had never witnessed a peaceful existence since colonization. In the post-colonial Arab world there has always been a region with political instability for one reason or another till today. This is the main reason why modern and contemporary Arab art is not a continuation of Islamic art traditions, but an interpretation of a newfound reality.

Still, one could argue, even though these artists are trying to reflect their immediate reality and human experience in their artistic expression, they are still disconnected from their history also because of the lack of written sources or documentation of any artistic processes. They are indeed still receiving their recognition by and from the West. Thus they are largely isolated from their social context, and consequently their future. Fine arts still belong to the elite, which considers the West as the centre of creativity and innovation, while the masses decorate their houses with cheap reproductions of Islamic artefacts, which have now become part of folk tradition. In this way, Islamic art becomes associated with the lower classes and kitsch, while modern art is associated with the Western educated select. The public expects art to resemble its needs, not to surpass reality and traditional norms. Translation and modernization of tradition and the collective self should stem from its locality but when its artists are educated by the West and their experiments are based on Western discourse of art, the locality is only represented by an archaic translation manifested by a society that has been disconnected from its past and the result is considered either folkloric or kitsch. Thus, Arabs do not always perceive Arab modern art as a reflection of culture but rather a ''counterculture.''[63]

But the divide is not merely the one that manifests itself through this social schism. There resides a philosophical and intrinsic difference between Islamic art and that of the West. The source for early major traditions in Western art, whether Greek, Roman or during the Renaissance is realism, tangible and visible, while the source for abstraction in Islamic art is abstract, unrelated to reality and invisible.

[63] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 46.

Modern abstraction in the form of Abstract Expressionism still confirms the "I" of the artist. The difference is that modern artists reached these ideas after personal endeavours while Islamic art was a representation of a philosophy. Thus modern art abstraction is in close proximity to tangible reality even if it was not copying that reality and abstraction in modern art is an abstraction of reality, unlike Islamic abstraction, which is a representation of the philosophy of the unseen and useable. The creativity in Islamic art reaches its truths regarding the laws and orders of the universe through an order that is applied by the artist, and not by copying nature with its leaves and flowers and trees.[64]

Abstraction in Islamic art is abstract in its essence, because it is a subject derived from purely philosophical and intellectual subjects, or geometry, and it joins, in its logic, the hidden laws of the universe. A concept that modern artists caught on to and developed further to become an international language relevant to humanity at large, because they maintained pure geometry in cases like Mondrian. When leaves and trees are depicted in Islamic art, we are confronted with an inspiration of the pure movement of nature, uninspired by the reality. Islamic ornamentation stands against nature to follow its hidden order and absolute laws in shape and colour and growth and order. Thus the law of nature is the subject, not nature itself in its different forms.

But there are also parallels between Islamic art and specifically abstract modern art. Sayegh compared theories by Kandinsky such as "art is an internal necessity, but for the outside world for the artists it turns into an 'impression' then becomes intuitive and voluntary expression to express this impression," and he parallels this statement with a statement on Islamic art from *Fihrist ibn al-Nadim*, "calligraphy is spiritual engineering even if expressed with material 'bodily/human mechanism' or 'al-khatt aseel fi al-rouh' or 'al-khatt lisan al-yad wa matiyyat al-'akl'". He also compares Paul Klee, "[Klee] hears what cannot be heard by any ear, and sees what cannot be seen by any eye, and feels the growth of plants, and understands the ripples of water," with al-Ghazali's statement in "*Ihya 'loum al-din*":

[64] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 177.

> Beauty is divided into beauty of the image that is obvious to the mind's eye and the internal beauty that is perceived in the heart's eye and the enlightened vision. Boys and animals realize the first, and the second is only perceived by '*arbab al-quloub'*, and those who only know the surface of life do not share that. To the one who sees the beauty of engraving and building, its internal beauty is revealed that leads the seer to knowledge and ability.[65]

Toni Maraini argues that while modern art found its beginnings in the West, it is not uniquely Western. Maraini's argument highlights the fact that the rise of modern art was influenced by other artistic traditions that predicted, the progress of its forms, including that of Islamic art, without which it would not have found its direction. Many European artists - Monet, Degas, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, and Klee - have discovered and adopted techniques from other cultures like African masks, Chinese calligraphy, Japanese prints, Arabesques and other motifs - without losing their Western natures. Thus those who accuse Arab art of being a by-product of Western art share the Western conception of an unchanging tradition and primitive purity.[66]

A growing number of Arab art historians and artists are stressing the influence of Islamic art on modern Western art. Syrian art historian Afif Bahnassi has stated that modern abstract art of the twentieth century, ''is not the art of Europe, but the art of the European crisis." He cites numerous examples to demonstrate the influence of Islamic art on modern Western movement, such as the spirituality of Islamic art and Sufism on Matisse, who admitted that ''inspiration always came to me from the East.'' Or Picasso, who was born in Spanish Malaga, which was under Islamic rule for eight centuries. According to Bahnassi, Matisse's arabesque-inspired work announced the return of Islamic art; his art should serve as the model for Arab artists who desire to renew and authenticate their art in the twentieth century.[67]

The influence Islamic art had on Modern art is clear in the work of the above mentioned artists but Sayegh argues that to compare modern abstract art and

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[65] Sayegh, *Islamic Art,* 120.
[66] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 43.
[67] Bahnasi, *The Avant-Garde Artists of Modern Art*, 50.

Islamic art is in itself a superficial endeavour. Even if we compare the aesthetics of traditional art and that of modern art we discover that similarities are only in the broad headlines –there being a wide and significant contrast between the two aesthetics in their targets, philosophy and logic. The first difference is in regards to the philosophy of colour. While modern painting considers colour an independent expressive entity, in traditional Islamic art colour remains a tool that the artist uses as one of the expressive elements, not being independent as a language or emotion or idea.[68] Secondly, modern abstract art was not able to create one existence out of two, the image of the self and reality, while Islamic art was able to do this, because when it eliminated the concept of the other it also eliminated itself. Islamic art is a witness to the greatness of the creator, thus artists are able to combine two existences in one; Sayegh wonders if it is not better to call Islamic art "unifying art" (*"fann tawhid"*), rather than abstract.

In Islam, the art of calligraphy first arose in the Quran and on religious buildings, after which the practice of worship and laws of ablution and prayer pushed the roles of Islamic art to appear on carpets, *minbars, mihrabs, minarets, mishqats*, candlesticks, Quran holders, and astrolabes pointing to the direction of Mecca. At the same time, the design of these tools did not stop at their utility, but quickly and from the beginning, turned into an art form through calligraphy and ornamentation.[69] Islamic art was intertwined with everyday life in its most basic necessities and rituals. Islamic abstraction is a cultural, intellectual, and communal expression of faith, its main goal being to reflect Islamic philosophy. However, this does not mean that there were no representational art forms created at the time, as many historical examples testify.[70]

Abstract Islamic art does not describe and does not tell; it does not rally nor condone; it does not flatter and does not document.[71] It is an art that does not get angry, nor fight nor express. It is an art of declaration not an art of expression; it does not ask questions—it is the answer not the question. It does not suffer and does not seek, being an art of principle not of the individual. It is an art that

[68] Sayegh, *Islamic Art,* 122.
[69] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 84.
[70] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 14.
[71] This does not include miniature manuscripts that are narrative and descriptive in their nature.

surpasses the "I" of the individual, and the "I" of the artist to raise the truth, to place the maker at the centre of the universe and the unknown as the point of departure, around which is the circulation and the return.

The main difference between Islamic art and Western art lies in its vision of ways to understand the meaning of art and the role of the artist, as well as in its philosophy about the meaning of the Human and existence. Islamic art is communal and utilitarian while Western art is individual and expressive. So Western philosophy sees the universe in an individual while Islamic philosophy sees the individual as a cell in the universe. One considers art as an expression and documentation of human struggle with nature, with life and death, with the other, and with the self, while the other considers it a testament to the unity of humanity and nature, of life and death, between the self and the other, perceived as multiple manifestations of one truth and one order.[72]

Modern Arab art clearly has partial roots in Western artistic traditions. Arabs' modern, secularized conception of the world caused a further estrangement in the process of artistic creativity, which prompted a change in aesthetics from Islamic to Arabic. But modern Arab artists have been colonized and were consumed with a feeling of inferiority, unlike their ancestors a few centuries ago who were in a position of power and only accepted what was in harmony with their way of life. Thus, modern Arab artists did not have the luxury of being selective, particularly since they were beginning the process of shaping their own identity following liberation, a time of uncertainty and reassessment of culture, history, and tradition. It has been argued that learning and imitating Western art was a necessary step to compensate for the lack of artistic creativity Arab artists faced and a means of liberating themselves from a restrictive, stagnant tradition.[73] According to Liliane Karnouk, Western aesthetics helped Arab artists bypass their ethnicity, particularly after embracing the idea of nationality.[74] Once Arab artists had accomplished a certain degree of comfort with respect to the new media and language of Western

[72] Walid Mohsen, "Al- fann roiya moutakamila lil woujoud" *Sabah alKheir* edition 810. (Syria: 16/11/1991). http://maaber-new.com/nineth_issue/art_3.htm (last checked July 2014)
[73] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.
[74] Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910-2003.* Rev. ed. (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press), 2005.

art and had attained a sense of individual freedom, they started realizing the shortcomings of their own artistic expression and attempted to search for an art that could better represent their postcolonial reality. This realization "led them to modern art which, in turn, forced them to recognize their own artistic inheritance offering them a modern model of nonrepresentational art by means of which they might reconcile their present with their past."[75]

Cultures always build on the ones present around them or the ones that have preceded them, and just as the early Muslim artists were inspired by the art of the Byzantine and the Sassanian, modern Arab artists appropriated the forms and techniques of the West and freely adopted what they needed to suit their lives that had changed from religious to secular. They embraced what they needed to suit their new vision of the world without any restrictions from ancient pre-Islamic civilizations and Islamic art as from Western art.[76] Arabic calligraphy was just another one of the elements and the visual vocabulary that modern Arab artists adapted, but because of its strong link to tradition and religious discourse, it became a very controversial one.

Art as Identity: Artists of Letterist Abstraction

In the context of decolonization, identity became central to Arab artists in their quest for modernism that is authentic but also global. Two issues stand out in such a quest for identity. The first was to define a national (local or regional) artistic identity through style and content to affect an authentically Arab modernity and artistic modernism. The second was to create a visual vocabulary that is global or universal, but rooted in their own tradition and cultural heritage.[77] This is the crisis between modernity or "*Hadatha"* and tradition or *"asala."* In the Arab world, historically there has been what Halim Barakat identified in his important work, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and the State,* as "the constant struggle in Arab culture between creativity and conformity, modernity and tradition—what Taha Hussein has called the battle of the old and the new." As Barakat explains:

[75] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 35.
[76] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 36.
[77] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 25.

> These two opposed currents manifest themselves in much of Arab life, from the religious to the political, from the ideological to the literary aspects of Arab culture. In every period of Arab history, there has been a modernist trend that rejected prevailing traditions and static values. This creative trend aspired to change the world and to create a new mode of thinking as well as new forms of literary expression.[78]

Hassan states that this continuous struggle, and internal process of self-critique, has been largely ignored by mainstream Western scholarship.[79] The focus, as Barakat highlights has been the conventional side of Arab society. The emphasis, as he argued, "has been on conformity rather than creativity, or and on *naql* (traditional-authoritative transmission) rather than *'aql* (reasoning)." Barakat shows how "cultural struggle [has been] an integral part of a larger struggle between the dominant order, which represents the interests and values of affluent classes and groups, and countercultural or revolutionary movements motivated by alternative visions," a perspective that has been variously advanced by other Arab thinkers such as Adonis [Ali Ahmad Said], Mahmoud Amin Al 'Alim, and Constantin Zureiq. Adonis, the ardent modernist philosopher and poet, similarly insists that modernity is born out of the struggle between *Al Thabit* (the static salafiyya-or religious based order) and *Al Mutahawil* (the dynamic or changing) that he identifies as the desire to transform the static order. [80] [81] [82] Hassan argues that Arab modernity was not simply imposed externally (although outside vectors are certainly salient), but also emerged historically out of the interactions between these two trends.[83] Such tensions have been the mainspring in all aspects of creativity in the Arab and Islamic cultural production of the last two centuries. They have been at the heart of many modernist

[78] Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and the State*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 197.
[79] Hassan, "Contemporary "Islamic" Art."
[80] Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said), al-Thabit wal-Mutahawwil: Bahth fi al-ittiba 'wa-al-ibda' 'ind al-'arab [The Permanent and the Changing: A Study of Arab Conformity and Creativity, 3 Volumes]. (Beirut: Dar al-'Awda, 1977).
[81] Mahmoud Amin Al 'Alim, *Consciousness and False Consciousness in the Arabs' Way of Thought Today*. (Cairo: Dar ath-thaqafa al-Gadida, 1988).
[82] Constantine Zurayk, "Cultural Change and the Transformation of Arab Society." Michael C. Hudson, ed., *The Arab Future: Critical Issues*. (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1979).
[83] Hassan, "Contemporary "Islamic" Art."

movements in literature and in the visual arts (although such tensions, as Iftikhar Dadi (2010, pp. 33-34) has argued, are relatively better theorized in literature – poetry included–than in the visual arts).[84]

As a result of the political and sociocultural changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Arabic script lost its sacredness. In the early decades of the twentieth century the vocabulary and styles of western modern art were the main focus of study by Arab artists, with the Arabic script limited to the realm of traditional craft. Around the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Arabic letter reappeared in Arab art. Shabout argues that it reappearance was purely the result of nationalistic concerns.[85] Blair confirms that in addition to its semantic and aesthetic goals of conveying meaning and form, artists started using calligraphy for socio-political ends.[86] Calligraphic abstraction presented a good solution, allowing reconciliation with a forgotten past. Thus, through modernity the Arab artist started seeking to create a connection between him and the past, especially the artists' past, which slowly began to represent a major symbol of the originality of motivations and ambitions.[87] The main issue now was neither the artistic value of the work nor the tradition of art, but became, instead, "identity," with the past as the source of that identity.[88] That is when artists started using Arabic letters in their paintings.

The "one dimension" group in Iraq was one of the earliest groups to present a bold discourse in terms of addressing the artistic problems in a calligraphic abstraction style. Their name "one dimension" reflects an attribute of traditional arts because it stops trying to represent nature with its various dimensions. All of the artistic experiments that raised the slogan of tradition were responding to political expectations, not artistic ones. Going back to tradition and identity is a political ambition that passed through the Arab world towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, opening up to the victorious West should be done in such a way that it does not become also subjection to it, but merely justifying separation from the ailing Ottoman Empire. Sudanese artist Osman Wagialla states that, "The idea of

[84] Dadi, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*.
[85] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 70.
[86] Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 590.
[87] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 372.
[88] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 30.

moving the art of calligraphy out of the confines of a merely Turkish craftwork to the wide horizon of artistic freedom is something I have fantasized about and [...] have been arguing for from the beginning of the 1940s."[89]

This situation came to the forefront again after the First and Second World Wars, as the contradictions of colonization and progressive thought were made visible. Thus the European civilization could not be both progressive and a colonizer of the Arab countries. The different political, social and national movements that were sweeping the Arab world were actively pursuing characteristics that would ultimately achieve independence. If we look at what was proposed by thinkers, intellectuals and political parties in the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties, we will find the same sentiments and ideas echoed in art and culture in general. [90]

While searching for local and national art styles inspired by tradition, the Arabic letter became the means for connecting the present with the past, a way of Arabizing or localizing Western modern art, as well as a key element in the reinvention of tradition.[91] But, in modern Arab or Western painting that was inspired by the arts of Islam, it is rare to find an artist who was inspired directly by the logic of Arabic calligraphic order, scribed through the letters. What they were inspired by was the Arabic letters, even if these letters formed the painting through the values of colour and space and void that was called for by the modern painting. Arabic letters, or the artists' elements inspired by tradition, were elements connoting identity more than the aesthetic qualities that these elements carried in the traditional arts. Arabic words and letters became elements that differentiated Arabic painting from Western, but the painting in terms of role, message and presence was still modernist in essence. Modern Arab artists made a distinction between calligraphy as an abstracted art form, and calligraphy as an artistic tool that has a basic utility in delivering a meaningful language. Thus Arabic letters in modern painting do not connect to form words or meaningful sentences; they meet and distribute as letters that are just forms or lines or spaces or colours or sizes, elements that modern painting has labelled as the synonyms of a new artistic

[89] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 30.
[90] Mohsen, "Al- fann roiya moutakamila lil woujoud."
[91] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 75.

language.[92] For the calligraphic abstraction artists, the Arabic letter gave an identity to their paintings. But in Sayegh's view this was a bad marriage because it contained entities that were in contrast with one other. The Arabic script is a freestanding art form in itself. It is based on length and curves that unite and create a visual language that is filled with symbols; it should not be used as an element or other value reporting to the laws of modern abstraction because its laws are intrinsically different. [93] In the larger group of artists, it cannot be denied that many of them used letterist abstraction as a reflection of their identity. Whether their work was based on Arabic calligraphy or Arabic writing, they used the Arabic letter as a main ingredient in their artwork.

There is no consensus on what to call artists who utilize the Arabic script as a dynamic element in their compositions. We have opted in this research to adopt the expression letterist abstraction. Dadi and Hassan's use the term calligraphic abstraction to comprehend the complex dimension of Calligraphism as a movement. According to Hassan, in the search for a better label to historicize the experiments using the Arabic script in modernism, "calligraphic abstraction" proves to be a far more appropriate designation. As a term, the "juxtaposition of calligraphy and abstraction proves to be much more encompassing of such a diverse and multifaceted movement, and its multifarious intersections with western and transnational modernism."[94] But calligraphic abstraction does not include the script that is not calligraphed, thus letterist abstraction is more encompassing. We have to discuss the history of critics who had previously attempted to label this movement so that we can justify this choice.

Calligraphism or calligraphic abstractions must be understood within a larger modernist search for a new visual language that emerged in the context of decolonization in the Arab world, rooted in Islamic discursive traditions. Decolonization helped the development of a distinct postcolonial modernism in the post–World War II era, which resulted in changes in forms of visual artistic expressions. Such "new" art forms were certainly the result of a process of

[92] Sayegh, *Islamic Art*, 375-6.
[93] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo, January 2014.
[94] Hassan, "When Identity Becomes Form" *in Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, 2016, 221-225.

hybridization that shaped them in terms of media and material, technique, personal, and cultural identity.[95] To Hassan, since the early part of 20th century numerous African and Arab modernist artists have already crossed geographic and cultural boundaries and moved beyond national identities to express themselves in a more transnational visual language integrating a diverse range of motifs, images and objects. Although nationalism remains fundamental to any analysis of post-war art in the context of decolonization in North Africa and the Arab world, the presence of Arabic literacy, in addition to a developed body of art and literary criticism, facilitated forms of Pan-Arabism and Pan Islamism in the modern visual arts. According to Hassan, in North Africa and the larger Arab world, this has been strengthened by the occurrence of a "diglossia" specific to Arabic language, namely the co-existence of two forms; the standardized "high" version known as Modern Arabic which is used across the Arab world in education, mass media and press, and the various vernaculars specific to regions and countries. Consequently, Modern Standard Arabic further helped the transmission of artistic and literary ideas across the Arabic and Islamic worlds in North Africa and the Middle East. In a visual sense, Hassan's idea of Arabic "diglossia" in language can also be seen in the written words. Just as there is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) there is calligraphy, and similarly just as there is different dialects there is handwriting. Both MSA and calligraphy follow set rules and are considered formal forms of communication. In the same sense regional dialects are just as expressive as personal handwriting. The Arabic language used in the Quran is considered sacred, but it was also used in poetry on walls of palaces and everyday items. This is why calligraphic abstraction does not fully represent the movement; letterist abstraction is more encompassing of the different styles developed.

As the vehicle of the Quran, the Arabic language is viewed as sacred, but considering the fundamental role calligraphy has played in the aesthetic and style of classic "Islamic" art such as non-religious poetic verses on the walls of palaces and

[95] A. Alexander, and M. Sharma, "(Pre)determined Occupations: The Post-Colonial Hybridizing of Identity and Art Forms in Third World Spaces." *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education 33*. 2013, 86-104.

on everyday items not intended for sacral use, this tradition did not necessarily predict modernist experimentation with the Arabic letter.

In the context of the Arab and larger Islamic world (North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia) letterist abstraction has evolved into a complex set of artistic practices especially during the mid to late 20th century.[96] Artists such as Ibrahim El Salahi, Ahmed Shibrain, and Osman Wagialla in Sudan, like their pioneering counterparts elsewhere such as Shakir Hassan Al Sa'id in Iraq, and Nja Mahdaoui in Tunisia, Pervez Tanavoli in Iran, Sadequain in Pakistan, all have reworked Arabic calligraphic motifs in modernist forms that "defied any literal meaning or simple interpretation." Such experimentation continues among contemporary artists such as the Algerian Rachid Koraichi, the Iraqi Dia Al Azzawi, and the Lebanese Samir Sayegh who have developed a more conceptual approach to letterist abstraction.

As Iftikhar Dadi argued in the context of Muslim South Asia, the imbrication of modernist calligraphy with post-cubist art represents a broad artistic movement, which can be understood in a variety of ways.[97] In the work of the above-mentioned artists, such abstraction and figuration could be interpreted as renewal of a traditional artistic form in a modernist fashion. It could also be seen as a vehicle of individual expression and a new subjectivity, as the fostering of a renewed sense of nationalist pride, or as in the case of El Salahi, and Shibrain, as a critical engagement with Western modernism.

By way of concluding, there is no doubt that letterist abstraction was intricately linked to the Western avant-garde tradition, which was significant in the revival of calligraphy in the context of a postcolonial modernism. Western avant-garde modernists movements such as cubism, surrealism, European letterism and Art Brut among others have proven to be more engaging for non-Western artist in the context of mid 20th century than older realist and academic schools of painting in Europe. However, this does not make letterist abstraction as pursued in the context of decolonization in the Arab and Islamic world merely a derivative of the Western notion of being modern. Decolonization presented a challenge for Arab modernists,

[96] Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Postwar Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*. Prestel, 2016.
[97] Dadi, Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia.
Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi: Calligraphic Modernism in Comparative Perspectives.".555.

and hence, the urgent task of engaging in a process of recovery and revival of expressive visual practices suppressed under and/or interrupted by colonization was necessary.

Consequently, nationalism has offered one crucial avenue in the practice of letterist abstraction as a form. Letterist abstraction is also a transnational aesthetic form that has been shared across the region. This becomes acutely important when we consider the fact of diaspora and mobility in the life and work of artists such as Madiha Omar, Shakir Hassan AlSaid, Dia Azzawi, El Salahi, Shibrain, Wagiallah and others, whose Western education and the experience of living in the West in the early 1950s challenged them to create a new "transnational modernism, in which forms developed from experiments with calligraphic modes has become fundamental."[98] In spite of many exhibitions held on the topic in the region and other parts of the world, the single critical and analytical source of study for these movements and their major players remains Charbel Dagher's *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity* that was published in 1990 and translated and republished recently by Barjeel foundation in 2016. The translation lacks the work of many artists who have contributed to the field in the past two decades.

Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti by Merrell Publishers, also published 2016 is an attempt at updating the data and presenting a new vision for understanding calligraphic abstraction artists. It is more curatorial than scholarly in its endeavours and thus does not provide a solution to our dilemma at hand. A better understanding of this form of expression is needed. What exists now also are separate attempts by individual artists who have documented their work in publications such as the volumes about artists Nja Mahdaoui, Rachid Koraïchi and Hassan Massoudy, among others. A general reading of the various movements that started in the mid-1940s and influenced artists during the 1960s and 70s, such as Shakir Hassan al-Said with the *One Dimension* school in Iraq or artists of the Khartoum school in Sudan, is yet to be written. New terminology needs to be invented and a proper analysis is yet to take place. In the next chapter, I will try to suggest a new way to categorize and understand letterist abstraction works. I am

[98] Hassan, "When Identity Becomes Form" in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965*, 2016, 221-225.

hoping to present a solution to this two-decade long problem that has been tackled by several critics and historians but that has been never fully resolved. It will place artists' work within the larger frame of the calligraphic abstraction movement and its attempt at creating an alternative modernist representation of Arab identity. My analysis is by no means comprehensive but it will provide an outline that can be followed to categorize any work of calligraphic abstraction based on a new formula that I have devised.

Chapter III Letterist Abstraction: A Critical Analysis

Current State of the Discourse on Calligraphic Abstraction

Hurufiyah, Letterism, Calligraphism, Calligraphic School of Art and Calligraphic Abstraction are all terms attempting to label and understand an artistic movement that started in the late 1940's in and beyond the Arab world. [99] We are using the term calligraphic abstraction in this book to link the movement to other global abstraction movements.[100] We are also using it to cover the spectrum of abstraction in paintings that use the written Arabic script, and that has been so elusive and so difficult for so many scholars to analyze and explain. The research on the topic of calligraphic abstraction is still ongoing. The book *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity* by Charbel Dagher, first published in Arabic in 1990, was translated to English and republished in 2016.[101] It remains the only extensive reference on the topic even though the text was not updated to include the developments that have taken place in the field for almost 25 years, since the book was published. *Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti* is another book on calligraphic abstraction that was published in 2016.[102] Both books are a testament to the recent growing interest in and demand for understanding the Arabic calligraphic abstraction movement. The symposium *al muta`aliq bayna al-khatar wal fanan, waqaai` al-nadwa al-fanniyya al-tadawouliyya*, (The Interlocutor Between the Calligrapher and the Artist: Proceedings of the Deliberation Symposium) was held in Sharjah in 2007 and published its' proceedings in a small book. It contains fifteen articles by different Arab scholars commenting on Arabic calligraphy, Islamic art and modern painting. And finally Houriyya al-Zul published her book *Tajaliya al-Harf al-Arabi fi al-Fann al-Mouaser,* (The Manifestations of Arabic Calligraphy in Contemporary Art) in 2014. These references are some of the few available ones that discuss extensively

[99] Wijdan Ali uses this term refusing the term *Hurufiyah* on the grounds that ''the term proves to be both inadequate and inelegant, for it is literally translated as 'school of Letterism'."

[100] The term was first introduced to the researcher by the scholar Salah Hassan who later published it in Hassan, Salah M., "When Identity becomes "Form": Calligraphic Abstraction and Sudanese Modernism." Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965. Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, Ulrich Wilmes, eds. London: Prestel, 2016, 221-225.

[101] Daghir, Sharbel, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity.* Milano: Skira, 2016.

[102] Issa, Rose, Cestar, Juliet, and Porter, Venetia, *Signs of Our Times: From Calligraphy to Calligraffiti*. London - New York: Merrell Publishers, 2016.

calligraphic abstraction works, in addition to the different artists' monographs that are published about the work of individual artists.[103] None of these books offer a clear and critical discourse for us to read or understand calligraphic abstraction works of art.

The first two books, Charbel Dagher's and Rose Issa's, are nicely printed and produced. Dagher's highlights some of the artists and works owned by Barjeel art foundation, which supported the translation and re-print of the book.[104] While the second book features the artists that Issa could access to include in it. So the artwork selection in one book is from the perspective of the author and the collector and in the second, is from the point of view of the curator. A lot has been done to describe the work of different artists who use the Arabic letter in their artwork, and both books attempt to categorize the movement without much success. Dagher's is a three-decades-old translation, thus it does not bring anything new to a very active scene. There is a disconnection between the text that is from 1990 and the artwork in the collection, as some artists' work is featured but are not mentioned in the text like Samir Sayegh, for example. This is again because the artwork featured is the one owned by the Barjeel foundation while only some of the images were submitted by the author himself.

Signs of Our Times covers six decades of art from the Arab world and Iran featuring artists who have been "creatively influenced by the morphology of letters."[105] The book clearly states that it is not about Arabic calligraphy, since only three of the fifty artist listed consider themselves calligraphers. "The fifty artists in this curated selection represent three generations, from important pioneers who developed a new aesthetic language after their countries established independence, to contemporary artists who reside internationally."[106] It divides artists into three

[103] These are the books dedicated to the topic, there are other books and published articles that discuss it and some unpublished references like Mohammad, `Abd al-Sabour `Abd al-Qadir, *al hourufiyya kaharaka tashkiliyya min khlilal fonoun al-graphic al-`arabi al-mu`asir* (Calligraphy as a Modern Plastic Movement through Contemporary Arabic Graphic Art). Cairo: Helwan University, 1998. Unpublished PhD thesis.

[104] An independent, United Arab Emirates-based initiative established to manage, preserve and exhibit the personal art collection of Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi.

[105] Issa, Signs of Our Times.

[106] Issa, Signs of Our Times.

categories: innovation, exploration and circumnavigation. Issa explained that her division in the book was based on the artists' generations and quality of work.[107] The first generation, which she labels "innovators", is compromised of pioneers who created a new aesthetic language following decolonization. She has key Iranian artists in this list in addition to Nja Madaoui, Rachid Koraichi, Samir Sayegh and others. In the second category are artists who mostly live in exile but reference their culture and language in their work. Of these, Hassan Massoudy, and Hassan Fathy are mentioned with several other artists. It is worth mentioning here that some of the innovation artists she listed were also living in the diaspora and some of them were not old enough to be working in the direct period of decolonization. In the third generation, Issa lists contemporary artists "who have absorbed international aesthetics, concepts and languages", and who occasionally use the Arabic script in their work. Again some of the artists listed in the "innovation" category have also only occasionally used the Arabic script in their work, like Etel Adnan and Kamal Boullata.

It is important to note that the division is not really by generations because some of the artists mentioned in the second group are actually similar in age to some of those mentioned in the first group. And some of the artists mentioned in the "innovation" section, like Samir Sayegh, are actually second-generation calligraphic abstraction artist. So it does not seem like the curator has categorized artists according to their generation in as much as her own vision and assessment of their creative output. The groupings seem to be done based on personal taste rather than a detailed and reasoned approach. Issa does mention that this is her view and others are free to comment and develop their own conclusions.[108] The monograph is beautifully illustrated and printed but as Rosa Issa mentioned to me, she is only starting the conversation, she expects other people to take what she has published and build on it.[109] The book does have a very well documented timeline from 1908 to 2015, highlighting important historic and cultural events in Iran and the Arab world, complied by Juliet Cestar. It should be credited for attempting to place the artists

[107] Rose Issa. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.
[108] Rose Issa. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.
[109] Rose Issa. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.

and their work within a larger framework of historical, political and social events taking place where and when the work was produced. It is one of the few references that tries to place artists and artworks in context.

There has been several attempts by researchers and critics like Imran al-Qaysi, Nada Shabout, Wijdan Ali, Houriyya Al-Zul and Charbel Dagher to try and understand and classify the work of calligraphic abstraction produced by the hundreds of artists since the early 1940's. They all remain unclear and confusing to follow. I will try to explain why each of their categorizations is flawed and will proceed to suggest a new and straightforward way to categorize and understand calligraphic abstraction works of art.

Tunisian author Muhammad Aziza in 1977 suggests three categories of calligraphic abstraction works.[110] A group where the letter is sacred and it preserves its meaning and legibility, another group that has greater freedom and changes the shape of the letter without changing its structure, focusing on the letter's symbolic meaning. And a third group where the letter loses its structure and becomes a compositional element achieving full artistic autonomy. Dagher criticizes this analysis as lacking in "stylistic classification."[111] But what Aziza is lacking also is consistency. He is categorizing the work in the first group based on the meaning of the words used, in the second group based on the structure of the letter, and in the third group on a mixture between structure and meaning. So his categorization is lacking in uniformity and not only in stylistic classification.

Imran al-Qaysi in *al-Riwaq* magazine in 1980 categorizes the *hurufiyya* art into five types. [112] The "Contemplative" are artists who explore contemplation through art, like Shakir Hassan al-Said. The second group is the "Fragmenters" who use the letter to fragment abstract geometric forms and make the coloured surfaces more contrasted and colourful like Rafa al-Nassiri, Farid Belkahia, Mohammad Malihi, Nja Mahdaoui. Here the letter becomes a symbol, a shape or a sign with no necessary meaning. The third group is the "Geometers" who work with geometric letters like Kamal Boullata. The fourth group is the "Textualists" who take the word as the

[110] Aziza, Muhammad ed., Patrinoine culturel et creation contemporaine en Afrique et dans le monde arabe. Dakar: les nouvelles editions africaines, 1977, p.83.
[111] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 59.
[112] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity, 45*-59.

subject matter like Rachid Koraichi and Etel Adnan. The fifth group is the "Pattern" group, which relies on the marriage of the letter as movement and the pattern as a dynamic flourish.

Dagher finds that the main problem with al-Qaysi's classification is that they "avoid stylistic definition."[113] But more than just lacking in stylistic definition, the different groups are again inconsistent, mixing the conceptual with the technical, and treating the letters in the paintings as words that are supposed to deliver meaning or lack it. Al-Qaysi revises his classification in 2007 in an article entitled, "The New Hurrufiyya as Tradition."[114] This time he divided the movement into six branches. The first is based on inspiration, conceptual and structural aspects, which he calls the "letter inspired". The second is textual based on the calligraphic script, the third is refractive based on geometry, the fourth is arabesque based on patterns while the fifth is letterist, working on the structure of the letter and the sixth is the rebellious *hurrufiyya* not based on any rules. Al-Qaysi here is clearly trying to address his previous lack of stylistic definition of the work but he falls into the pit of assuming that the work done by an artist who is using geometry or basing their work on classical calligraphy is not conceptual in nature, which is an erroneous premise. There is also no differentiation between the works of artists who are contributing with new visuals and ideas and those who are merely copying a style. In that sense, Issa is to be credited for bringing the idea forward. Critics must state if a work is new in its offerings. The works of Shakir Hassan al-Said and Etel Adnan are constantly cited by different authors, but the novelty of their contribution is never analysed or understood in reference to the greater letterist abstraction movement.

Khatibi and Sijelmassi in their book *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy* use four general classifications for calligraphic abstraction: "A geometric treatment of letters, a process of abstraction of the painted letter, an emblematic use of lettering, in which the painting is saturated with signs that assume a mystical quality as talismans, and a decorative treatment of lettering."[115] It seems that every attempt at

[113] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 59.
[114] Al-Qaysi, The New Hurrufiyya as Tradition in *The Interlocutor Between the Calligrapher and the Artist,* 193-196.
[115] Abdel Kebir Khatibi, Mohammed Sijelmassi. *The Splendor of Islamic Calligraphy*. (London: Thames and Hudson,1995).

categorization falls into the same confusion: the meaning of the letters versus their form. It is not easy to disconnect the shape of language from its meaning. All authors who have attempted to work on calligraphic abstraction have fallen into this trap. Another example of such confusion is Saleh Barakat who states that it would be more useful to focus on the various ways artists have used Arabic script than to merely group them as a single form of expression.[116] Then he moves on to mention four main different directions: the first is calligraphic, where the meaning of the words is central to the work; the second is mathematical, based on geometry; the third is abstraction as a form, unattached to any narrative; and, finally, the fourth is the free style where the Arabic script's role is similar to that of ornament, meaning the letters are not central but rather take part in a larger visual vocabulary.[117] It is the common mistake between letterform and function.

Houriyya Al-Zul published her book *The Manifestations of Arabic Calligraphy in Contemporary Art* in 2014. [118] She tries to simplify the categorization of artists by dividing them into two groups: abstract artists and artists that use geometry in their paintings. Her book is a descriptive categorization that falls short of mentioning a large number of artists. It also lacks referencing the breadth of the movement's creative dynamic. The same problem appears in the proceeding of the conference titled "The Interlocutor Between the Calligrapher and the Artist." The authors all comment briefly on small ideas and there is no suggestion of an overall understanding of the movement. Someone might argue that that is not the role of a conference, but it stands that the only paper suggesting a new understanding of the movement was al-Qaysi's, which has been discussed earlier.

Charbel Dagher's book remains the most extensive in its pursuit at understanding this movement. His book *Arabic Hurufism* is considered by Rose Issa to be a major reference book used by scholars and art collectors.[119] While art historian Nada Shabout considers "Dagher's seminal book on Hurufiyah, as a modern phenomenon and its connection to identity, explained an alternative way of

[116] Barakat, Pictorial Enchantment Beyond Words in *Word*, 14
[117] Barakat, Pictorial Enchantment Beyond Words in *Word*, 15
[118] Al-Zul, Houriyya. *Tajaliya al-Harf al-Arabi fi al-Fann al-Mouaser* (The Manifestations of Arabic Calligraphy in Contemporary Art). Sharjah: Dairat al-Thaqafa wal I'lam, 2014.
[119] Issa, Signs of Our Times

understanding the Arabic letter in 20th century art in the Arab world." She adds that the book, "attempted a systematic classifications of what had become a very popular trend in Arab art."[120] I would like to argue that Dagher's classification has several problems.

Dagher divides the artists into two types, compositional calligraphers and *hurufi* artists proper. Compositional calligraphers are artists who combine Arabic calligraphy and modern painting and use Quranic verses, proverbs or popular slogans in their artwork.[121] He uses AbdelGhani al-Aani as an example. The work of al-Aani and other classical calligraphers should not be a point of discussion because as Dagher criticizes them stating that they are artists who take calligraphy as their starting point "without being able to renew its styles." I agree that there are thousands of calligraphers throughout the Arab world and globally who are simply repeating ancient traditions in their compositions. We have discussed extensively in the first chapter the role of calligraphy in the history of Islam. There is no point in mentioning their work in our context. But what we need to point to is that some calligraphic abstraction artists start from a calligraphic background and some of them do use Quranic verses and proverbs like Ahmad Mustafa. Nja Mahdaoui's work starts from calligraphic strokes but has no words. What Dagher is pointing to here is the meaning of the words and not only their shape. I will explain later why is it important for us to be able to categorize letterist abstraction works, we should remove the meaning of the words and judge the style, layout, structure, brush stroke and composition first.

Dagher digresses to discuss the state of schools of calligraphy and calligraphers in the Arab world, which is in no way relevant to the topic that he was discussing. He confuses between calligraphy that is utilized for legibility, which is now replaced by typography, and calligraphy that is expressive and whose aim is not to communicate on the language level. He does not discuss the work of major contributors in detail and has obvious personal preferences for certain artists that are not justified theoretically in his book.

[120] Issa, Signs of Our Times
[121] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 68.

Dagher attempts to classify the *hurufi* artists "proper" into the following categories: "The Painting-Letter", these are artists who use a single letter for the subject of their paintings. He cites Shakir Hassan al-Said as an example. He states that al-Said, "combined the practice of art with theorizing about art."[122] He could have simply stated that al-Said is also a conceptual artist. Dagher mentions Madiha Omar and Mona Saudi and forgets many artists who have followed the same technique of using one letter, like Ali Hassan, Samir Sayegh and many others. The main problem here is that we cannot always categorize certain artists into a single category. This is another dilemma for historians of letterist abstraction. They categorize artists even though many of the letterist abstraction artists were visitors to the style and not producing work on calligraphic abstraction for the length of their careers. Wajdan Ali states that artists usually "move freely between different calligraphic styles and branches of the same style."[123] When sighting a style we should reference a period or a certain painting by an artist and not their whole body of work, unless their whole career spanned working with the same visual problem, which is very rarely the case. Dia Azzawi produced most of his calligraphic abstraction work in the 1980's and then broke away from the style.

The second category that Dagher lists is the "Painting Expression". These are artists who use literary texts in their artwork, while the "Painting Writing" are artists who use Arabic forms without meaning. He cites Nja Mahdaoui whose work is very calligraphic in style but breaks away to create his own expressions. But Dagher states that Mahdoui "calligraphs" and this makes me wonder why he is listed under painting writing? [124] He also lists Mahjoub ben Bella in this category. While Mahjoub ben Bella also writes without meaning in his paintings, his style is also actually calligraphic and very similar to scripts on ancient Islamic textile from Tulunid and Fatimid eras in Egypt and North Africa. Dagher assumes that this is just ben Bella's handwriting.

In both the second and the third categories, Dagher is using the content of the word and not its style to categorize it. His fourth category is the "Painting Text",

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[122] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 90.
[123] Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*, 179.
[124] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 104.

where the Arabic letter is one of the elements of the composition. And finally he lists "Geometric Hurufiyya" where artists use Kufic geometric text as their point of departure. In these last two categories Dagher is sighting the style and not the meaning. Similar to the previous critics, Dagher's categorization is inconsistent, sometimes describing what the words used in the artwork stand for and other times describing the stylistic content of the painting in terms of language, but not the style.

Wajdan Ali divides the "Calligraphic School" into religious and secular themes.[125] Again, the problem is clear from the beginning; the work is categorized on the basis of the meaning of the words and not their shape. In a painting, priority is for the visual; meaning what the viewer grasps even if he/she cannot read the language, abstraction transcends language. She then moves on to stylistic categorization of "Pure Calligraphy," which has four categories: Neo Classical Style, Modern Classical Style, Calligraffiti, and Free Form Calligraphy. Her second major style is "Abstract Calligraphy" with two subcategories: Legible Script and Pseudo-script. Here again she starts with categorizing the style and then sub categorizes it into the linguistic connotations. Ali's third style is "Calligraphic Combinations" with two categories: Central Calligraphy and Marginal Calligraphy, which is a stylistic categorization. And finally the fourth category she labels as "Unconscious Calligraphy." Ali is struggling, like all other critics, to find a way to read this movement and categorize it.

Shabout concludes in her book *Modern Arab Art* that it is rather simplistic to group the different experiments involving the Arabic letter in art under one label, be it *Hurufiyah* or "Calligraphic School of Art," or to try to fit them neatly within the different branches.[126] She suggests dividing the work into two categories, one where the letter is merely one component of the work and the second where the letter is the work. Unfortunately this suggestion is a rather basic way to comprehend the movement by narrowing it down to two compositional categories. It is our responsibility to develop a model by which we can understand the visual production of this movement. It is easy to say that the work cannot be grouped under one label.

[125] Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*, 160.
[126] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 95-96.

But it can be categorized, even if historians still cannot agree on a term to name the movement, we should be able to categorize the work.

Several important factors are not taken into consideration when calligraphic abstraction works are studied. The first is differentiating the artists from their work. The second is removing language from the formula and replacing it with the level of abstraction. The third is the level of innovation that the artist is bringing to the conversation, meaning the quality of their compositions in comparison to the work by those who have preceded them. The fourth is the totality of the artist's body of work. Some artists are repeatedly discussed as a "hurufiyyin" or calligraphic abstraction artists even though if we take the totality of their body of work throughout their career we find that their letterist work is very minimal. The fifth is the context of artists, which is a very important factor in evaluating the totality of an artist's creative output, as in their access to certain aspects in their creative career like other cultures, curators, institutions that support their work, etc. The sixth is the conceptual dimension of the work, whether the artist is simply experimenting with form and technique on a canvas or if there is a research and thinking process behind their creative out put. Finally, the placement of the artists work on the spectrum of abstraction, implicating how far the artist got to breaking away from the original shape of the letter. These issues involve calligraphic abstraction works and artists. I will proceed to suggest a new way to read calligraphic abstraction work and then provide an alternative way to categorize and understand calligraphic abstraction artists.

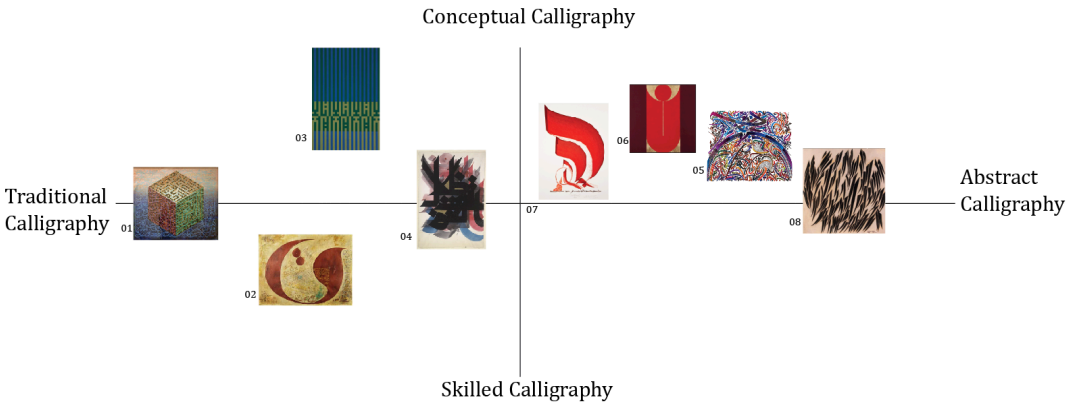
New Tools of Assessment: Handwriting, Calligraphy, Abstraction, Concept and Technique

If we are to analyse a calligraphic abstraction work there are two simple stylistic criteria for us to start from. Whether the artwork is calligraphic or hand script based. In the history of Arabic calligraphy and since the early days of Islam, there were two main styles, the formal administrative scripts and the everyday hand written scribing. If we look at any work of calligraphic abstraction it falls in one of these basic visual criteria, and this is where we start to categorize a work of art. The key idea that all critics missed is that it is not a process of fitting artworks in boxes based on

meaning, but rather placing them in their right place on a spectrum of abstraction. But how stylistically abstract is not the only criteria; the other two are how conceptual the work is versus the skill of its production. I have created two charts to simplify the idea of how to place artworks on a spectrum of abstraction, one for calligraphic artworks and another for script based artworks. On the charts, an artwork moves closer on the scale from clear calligraphy or hand written work up towards abstraction. Thus works that spring from a calligraphic hand, they are either closer on the scale to classical calligraphic style, which means they are clear and legible or they move further away from it towards abstraction. The work on both charts will move up the scale vertically on the same line towards conceptual or down the scale also vertically towards the technical skill, all while maintaining its same place on the horizontal abstraction spectrum.

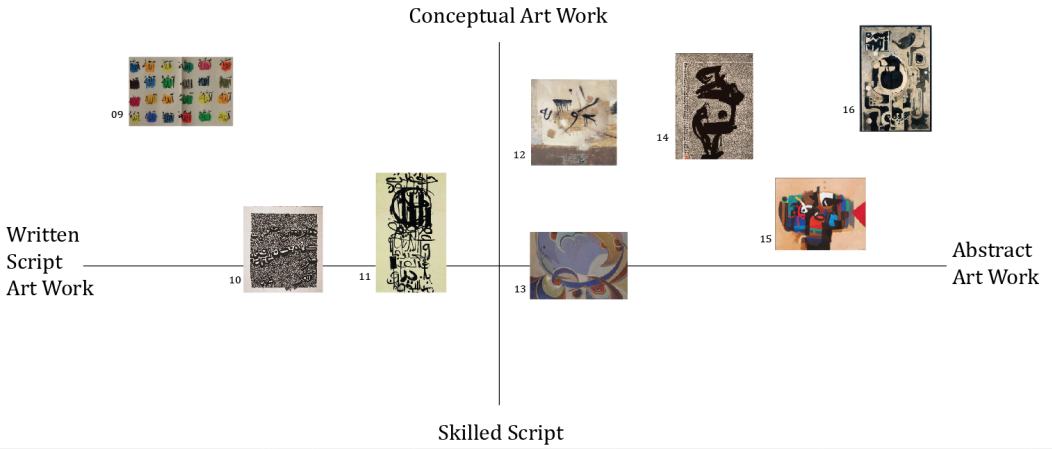
The reason I have devised these charts is because I always noticed that some artists and their work are more popular with scholars and collectors than others. I wanted to understand what dictates the taste of these very diverse groups of people. A scholar is possibly interested in the novelty of the idea or style that an artist is brining to the conversation. While an art collector has her/his personal taste and the market dynamics to guide her or him. I think by always keeping in mind style of abstraction, conceptual dimension and technical skill and virtuosity, it becomes clearer to also track market tastes versus artistic and conceptual contributions. It is important to understand the different contributors to the movement also in context, which is why I will later discuss in detail how to understand and categorize the different artists.

Chart 1: Assessing Arabic Calligraphy based Works of Art



1 Ahmed Moustafa (Egypt, b.1943) Al Bayt al Ma'muur 2006
2 Ali Omar Ermes (Libya, b.1945) Qaf, "Al Alsmaie Tales" 1983
3 Kamal Boullata (Palestine, 1942) There is No I but I, 1983
4 Osman Waqialla (Sudan, 1925-2007) Kufic, 1991
5 Nja Mahdaoui (Tunisa, b.1937) Walegh II, 2011
6 Samir Sayegh (Lebanon, b.1943) Nun, 2009
7 Hassan Massoudy (Iraq, b.1944) All Beauty is Permanent Joy, 2005
8 Omar El Nagdi (Iraq, 1924-2003) Untitled, 1970

Chart 2: Assessing Arabic Script based Works of Art



9 Etel Adnan (Lebanon, b.1925) Zikr 1998
10 Fathi Hassan (Egypt, b. 1957) Samira's Story, 1995
11 Ahmed Shibrain (Sudan, b. 1931) Untitled, 1963
12 Shakir Hassan Al Said (Iraq, 1925-2004) Lines on a Wall, 1978
13 Madiha Omar (Iraq, 1908-2005) Letters 1978
14 Rachid Koraishi (Algeria, 1947) A Nation in Exile, 1997
15 Dia Azzawi (Iraq, b.1939) Untitled, 1981
16 Ibrahim el-Salahi (Sudan, b. 1930) The Embryo, the Child, and the Bird, 1964

I will now cite the works of several artists and how they are located on the scale. I will start with the work of Etel Adnan (Lebanon, b.1925) *Zikr* (1998) (Fig. 9 on chart 2).[127] Adnan starts clearly from a handwritten style that is very legible. So the legibility of her work is part of her concept. She is writing with very clear words that

[127] The numbers listed here should be referenced on the scale chart presented with this research.

spell the word “Allah” and colouring the background in different colours. Stylistically, the work is legible and clearly hand written, but at the same time it is very conceptual. Labelling the name Allah with the different colours is reminiscent of the 99 different names of Allah in Islam, but Adnan is playing on the colours and not the words. It is a very subtle and intelligent play on word and visual. Thus Adnan’s *Zikr* art book would fall in the written word far from the visually abstract script category, but higher than other artworks towards the conceptual scale.

If we are moving horizontally forward along the line of the written script (Chart 2) we can place the painting *Samira's Story* (1995) (Fig. 10) by Fathi Hassan (Egypt, b. 1957). The text is still legible, also starting from a handwritten style, but conceptually and stylistically it breaks no new boundaries like Adnan’s work does. And here is a place where other historians and critics can argue on where to place a work of art. The aim is that the artworks should be viewed in relationship to each other and not as boxed entities. It is a spectrum on a grid rather than boxes of categorizations. Further up the line (Chart 2) we can place the *Untitled* (1963) (Fig. 11) by Ahmed Shibrain (Sudan, b. 1931). The painting is starting to lose its legibility, a few letters are recognizable but it is difficult to read the overall writing. There is energy in the script and a composition reminiscent of Far-Eastern scrolls.

Moving further up the abstraction line is the work *Lines on a Wall* (1978) (Fig. 12) by Shakir Hassan Al Said (Iraq, 2004-1925). Al-Said was an Iraqi artist, intellectual and the founder of the One Dimension group. The name of the group stands for their favouring the single inner dimension over the second and third dimensions. Sufi thought influenced their approach. The group called for the return to the understanding and re-discovery of Islamic art as a means of inspiration for modern artists, specifically through Arabic calligraphy. In his book *The One Dimension,* al-Said highlights calligraphy as an artistic practice that leads to spiritual salvation.[128] With all this in mind, this specific painting is a major jump forward on the abstraction and conceptual scales compared to the other works. Still there are a few recognizable letters and words. The letter ‘*waw’* that is central in the painting and the word Allah to the left side. The painting mimics a layered city wall with random graffiti.

[128] Shakir Hassan Al-Said, *al-Usul al-Hadariya wa al-Jamaliya lil Khat al-Arabi*. (Baghdad: 1988).

The work by Madiha Omar (Iraq, 2005-1908) *Untitled* (1978) (fig.13) is also more abstract than other works we have discussed. The letters are almost unrecognizable, mimicking forms in nature. The letters '*nun'* and '*baa'* are structurally there if you look for them but if there was no reference to the letters you would not link this painting to any Arabic writing. Similarly the work by Dia Azzawi (Iraq, b.1939) *Untitled* (1981) (fig.15), painted a few years after Omar's; a few letters are present in the composition but the structure and the style, choice of colours and integration of letters all call for a specific reading of the painting that is not necessarily only based on Arabic letter forms. The artwork titled, *A Nation in Exile* (1997) (fig. 14) by Rachid Koraishi (Algeria, 1947) is based on poetry by Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish. The energy of the brush strokes and the marriage of the Arabic script and the pseudo-Japanese writing cannot be missed. The whole background is composed of Arabic calligraphy but from a distance it feels like a texture that is supporting the bold brushstroke compositions in the foreground. The whole composition is reminiscent of a Zen garden but with a balanced and structured chaos. There is a lot to "read" in this work but nothing to literally read. The reading is more emotional that legible.

The last painting on the writing-abstraction scale is by the Sudanese master Ibrahim el-Salahi (Sudan, b. 1930), *The Embryo, the Child, and the Bird* (1964) (fig.16). There is so much to see compositionally and structurally. The two words present in the painting but barely legible are "*bism Allah*", which translates to "in the name of Allah." Muslims use this term when they are about to start almost anything; it is used as a blessing for the endeavour at hand. In this case, Salahi could be blessing a new life (embryo), an exciting one (child) and possibly freedom (bird). But these ideas are not figuratively spelled out. The structure of the compositional form springs from Arabic letters but there is no hint of literal words except for the two words in the upper left hand side of the painting. If you do not read Arabic, then they will be read as another compositional element that is supporting the overall structure of the painting. The contained black form in an irregular circle could be an embryo with an unformed head and two small legs surrounded by a white composition that could be a uterus. There are references to African masks and natural forms. The painting is very far from the first work that we discussed by Etel

Adnan, but they are both conceptually solid even if they are on both ends of the abstraction spectrum. Salahi in a way "returns calligraphy back to its original source as visual forms."[129]

I will now move on to discuss the work on the calligraphy-to-abstraction spectrum. *Al Bayt al Ma'muur* (2006) (Fig.1, chart 1) was painted by Ahmed Moustafa (Egypt, b.1943). It has clear Quranic versus overlapped on a cubical structure that mimics the shape of the *Kaa'ba* the holy structure that Muslims pray towards in Mecca. The title is one of the names of the *Kaa'ba*. This painting was sold for a relatively high price compared to other calligraphic abstraction paintings.[130] But the calligraphic style is very classical using square Kufic on the top of the cube and a classic thuluth style for the other sides and the surface layer of text. There is no innovation in the shape of the letters themselves and the theme is quite straightforward. A work like this would be closer to the legible side of the abstraction spectrum (Chart 1). It would also fall closer to the skilled calligraphic innovation than the conceptual one on the vertical spectrum.

Ali Omar Ermes (Libya, b.1945) painted *Qaf, Al Alsmaie Tales* (1983) (fig.2), it can be placed a bit further up the line of abstraction than Moustafa's painting. Several websites label this work as lyrical abstraction. The central focus of the painting is a clear letter *qaf* in a North African Kufic style. The letter *qaf* is surrounded by clear scribed notes that spell out "wise thought." The colours are earth tones with the main centre letter in a darker reddish-brown. The work is more abstract than the previous one mentioned, but again conceptually speaking it is copying existing ancient text in a rather straightforward way. On the other hand, a very visually stimulating work that utilizes a 13th century square Kufic style painted by Kamal Boullata (Palestine, 1942), *There is No I but I* (1983) (fig.3) plays on the Islamic declaration of faith that says there is "No God but Allah" and puts the I instead of Allah. Very modern structure and use of colour, conceptually strong, even though the script that is used is classical and legible to the trained eye, still the legible message is a new one. Both artworks were painted in the same year and both

[129] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 79.
[130] The painting sold on Christies for USD 180,000 http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/Lot/ahmed-moustafa-egypt-b-1943-4859585-details.aspx (Last Checked February 2018)

use ancient scripts but one brings novelty to the discourse and the other does not. Which makes it logical to place Boullata's work higher on the conceptual scale even if it is using an ancient script.

Osman Waqialla (Sudan, 1925-2007) is considered one of the earliest modern artists from the Arab world to start experimenting with Arabic script. His work Kufic, 1991 (fig.4) is inspired by early Quran Kufic style but the layering of the composition of the different letters pushes the work up the abstraction scale. Legibility is almost lost with one word *zilal* (shadows) slightly legible. The layering of the different colours in a lighter tone creates an interesting tension with the strong black composition created in the foreground. It is interesting to compare it to Nja Mahdaoui's (Tunisia, b.1937) *Walegh II* (2011) (fig.5), which was painted exactly twenty years later. Mahdaoui says about his work, "I write without writing."[131] Following the same style of illegibility, Mahdaoui's compositions are colourful and dynamic. At the first instance you are tempted to read what is written because it looks clearly like Arabic calligraphy. Upon closer examination you discover that there are no words. "Mahdaoui's work invites a sense of familiarity and closeness, but this is just an illusion. Each of his works is a unique expression or statement consisting of assembled elements that requires deconstruction."[132] Rose Issa comments on Mahdaoui's practice by confirming, "some have mistakenly suggested that he was trying to destroy the letter, he was actually trying to deconstruct it […] trying to deconstruct trends and concepts."[133] By writing nothing Mahdaoui has said everything. He has freed the form of the Arabic language from its meaning and has freed the Arabic letters from the burden of legibility.

Before Mahdaoui on the calligraphic abstraction scale would be the work *All Beauty is Permanent Joy* (2005) (fig.7) by Hassan Massoudy (Iraq, b.1944). Massoudy mixes the style of motion and internal calligraphy of the Far East with clear Arabic calligraphic strokes. He adds a small line of poetry and the name of the poet John Keats at the base of his painting in Kufic Arabic. You can vaguely read the word beauty in his thick brush strokes. Massoudy has created a visual language that is

[131] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 98.
[132] Dagher, Charbel, The Traveller with Pen in Hand: The Passion of the Alif in *Mahdaoui*, p260.
[133] Issa, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 8.

distinctly his own. The best way to describe it is through a passage of his own writing:

> Black calligraphy to intensify the white
> Coloured calligraphy to create warmth
> Bright calligraphy to dream
> Curved calligraphy for tenderness and grace
> Joyful calligraphy for life
> Pure calligraphy for beauty and love
> Free calligraphy for elevation
> Grave calligraphy for dignity
> Purified calligraphy for vigilance and ethics
> Straight and vigorous calligraphy to build a barrage against ignorance
> Dynamic calligraphy to oppose immobility
> Spatial calligraphy to escape into emptiness
> Defined calligraphy to dream about the infinite.[134]

The way he describes calligraphy, with feelings, shapes, colours and space is very much reflected in his work. But because it is not pure form and he is still clinging to the legible written poem, he is placed behind Mahdaoui on the abstraction scale.

The next work on the abstraction scale is by Samir Sayegh (Lebanon, b.1943), *Nun* (2009) (fig. 6). *Nun* was part of the exhibition "In Praise of letters" that we will discuss later. Sayegh initially wanted to call this exhibition "Holy Men and Saints." It is clear from the shape of this letter *nun* that is drawn like an icon. The composition is very modern with the dot of the *nun* almost resembling a human head. The composition could easily be Japanese due to its simplicity and elegance. The bright red on a golden background reminds us of Christian icons. The two brown strips on both sides of the letter create strong visual tension that keeps the eyes glued to the central form. If you cannot read Arabic or did not notice the title, it is quite difficult for you to discover that the composition is the letter *nun*. Comparing letters to icons

[134] http://hassan.massoudy.pagesperso-orange.fr/english.htm (Last checked January 2018)

and Saints is quite a novel concept thus the painting moves up the vertical line more towards conceptual abstraction.

The last painting I will discuss on the calligraphic abstraction scale is by Omar El Nagdi (Egypt, b. 1931), *Untitled* (1970) (fig.8). El Nagdy starts from a very simple form which is the number one that also resembles an *alif* in Arabic and builds very interesting rhythmic compositions, in this case a an irregular circular structure. It is important to note that Nagdy is also a philosopher and a musician. His calligraphic abstractions that are based on repetition were created in the 1960's and 70's. His work also has a Sufi dimension; it is minimal and multi-dimensional at the same time. Even though the strokes resemble classical numerical forms, but they could be the wind blowing blades of grass, or movements of a sword. The letter structure is there but it is not relevant anymore.

I tried to highlight elements that make a calligraphic abstraction work stand out as a step forward in the evolution of the art movement. Evolution here is to be defined as works that develop a new form of visual and conceptual language that has not been seen before. Whether with the awareness of creating a new modern Arab identity or not, the work should be analysed by the novelty that it brings to the conversation. The innovation can be evaluated on two levels: innovation in the structure and geometry of the Arabic letter itself, thus novelty in the skill and technique utilized to produce the artwork, and conceptual novelty. The examples we have discussed above are just a few samples on how to utilize the abstraction spectrum to help us understand different calligraphic abstraction works of art and put them in context. The spectrum uses handwriting or calligraphy as starting points taking letters from legible realism to abstraction. There are hundreds of calligraphic abstraction works that have been produced in the past seven decades. The above is a tool to assess creative work based on its level of abstraction, its conceptual contribution and its technical standards. In the following pages I will try to create a broader picture for understanding calligraphic abstraction artists. Key factors come at play when judging a work of art as we have illustrated before. To understand a movement it is important to understand what are the commonalities between the different artists and the major differences. It is important to understand the context of each of them so that we can eventually understand the movement.

Understanding Calligraphic Abstraction Artists

According to Dagher "Hurufiyya is a form of return of consciousness, or perhaps the birth of a new consciousness. It is an artistic search that is situated within the historical context of emerging Arab national identities."[135] But this artistic search did not stop in a post-colonial Arab world. Artists till today are creating artworks that contain the Arabic script. This makes it more important for us to understand the major artists of this movement and the dynamics that move them.

Charbel Dagher should be credited for his detective work in trying to find who were the pioneers of the calligraphic abstraction movement. He finds that two Iraqi artists, Youssif Ahmed and Madiha Omar, were both experimenting with letterist abstraction since the late 1940's. But he also discovers that there were several artists who started working with the Arabic letters in their paintings but in different countries and without the awareness of each other's work. In Lebanon artists like Said Ilyas Aql (1926) and Wajih Nahle (1932-2017) both claim that their work on Letterism started in the early 1950's. In Sudan Osman Waqialla (1925-2007), Ahmad Shibrain (1931), and Ibrahim El-Salahi (1930) also worked with the Arabic letters in their paintings extensively in the early 1950's. Iranian artists also credit themselves to the spread of the Hurufiyya school. Specifically Hossein Zenderoudi (1937) and his Hurufiyya school the Saqqah-khaneh in Iran.[136] There is no doubt that the work of Iranian artists was very influential and their contribution in not to be underestimated. Even though they have experimented with the same letters, this research is focused on the Arab calligraphic movement at the moment.

What is in common between these artists who started experimenting with the Arabic script is that they are all concerned with the development and presentation of the Arabic letter in their artwork. Artists from different geographic backgrounds from within the Arab world: Tunisia, Algeria, Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Sudan and Iraq have all risen to fame because they used the Arabic letter as a main ingredient in the development of their artwork. They chose to work with Arabic letters to reflect their identity. There are of course differences between them as we

[135] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 32.
[136] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 28.

will discuss, but there are also main commonalities. I will start by trying to find common threads between the different styles and the differences between each of them in terms of artistic endeavours and creative output.

Dagher states that Madiha Omar was actually the first to endeavour on such a journey. [137] Omar published an essay in English in 1949 entitled, "Arabic Calligraphy: Inspiring Element in Abstract Art" in which she called for the liberation of the Arabic letter from the captivity of calligraphy.[138] It is interesting to note that Omar speaks of the "design" of the letter and how each letter has a personality and curtails the freedom of expressing an abstract design. Letters have individual qualities according to Omar to "convey an idea, a thought or an event, be it historic or contemporary."[139] We will find this thought echoing in the work of many artists that will follow Omar. Mahdoui stopped using words and used only the form of the letters, Boullata modernized an ancient script with his treatment of colour and his message, and Adnan added colours to the word Allah and gave it a new meaning.

Different historians have missed what is in common between these different artists. But how can we understand a movement without understanding its artists? The commonalities can actually be traced. The first is their interest in the Arabic letter, whether legible or illegible. The second is their quest for finding a modern identity through understanding their tradition. The third idea is that a lot of them were intellectuals and active contributors as authors and thinkers for their generation. The fourth idea is Sufism; several artists of calligraphic abstraction have been influenced by Sufi thought. And the last idea is that some of them were melting pots of cultures. They combined the aesthetics of the East and the West while remaining true to their culture thus becoming international figures. I will proceed to discuss these ideas in detail.

Arabic Letters: Legible and Illegible

It is true that legibility was not the primary concern for some of the artists who were using the Arabic script in their artwork. As I will discuss later Sayegh's first exhibition

[137] Madiha Omar's exhibition was held in 1942 under the title "Arabic calligraphy: An Element of inspiration in Abstract Art"
[138] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 27.
[139] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 137.

was entitled, “What can be Written and not Said” (1983). The paintings were relatively small-scale experiments with letterforms that had no meaning. During that period he also produced similar work with legible words like Allah and for the remainder of his exhibitions he used clear legible words. It is only until his exhibition “Alif in many Letters” in 2014 that Sayegh returned to the experimental style of drawing letters that have no meaning. In all of Nja Mahdaoui’s artwork the Arabic letter is not saying anything, he is just using the shape of the letters to create compositions. Massoudy on the other hand builds his compositions on legibility, whether it is a poem or a proverb that he is writing. As we have traced on our spectrum of abstraction, some artists prefer to develop work that is clear and legible using the Arabic script while others play with the letters as compositional forms that support other elements. The level of abstraction of the work of art is what dictates the shape of the letters.

The novelty in using the Arabic script in their paintings for the first generation of calligraphic abstraction artists is that historically Islamic calligraphers were playing the role of designers and not artists. Their task was to generate and regenerate scripts for the purpose of legibility. Calligraphy was not mixed with painting; in Islamic art history the existence of the two forms was complementary and not overlapping. But there were instances in history where calligraphers did experiment artistically with calligraphy on walls. At the Bursa Grand Mosque or Ulu Cami Bursa (1396-1399 CE) in Turkey there are 192 monumental calligraphic compositions that are several meters in height. The compositions are in the famous mirrored Ottoman style where letters and words are reflected and superimposed to create beautiful compositions. The words remain legible but their elegance and the spirituality that they add to the space cannot be missed. Seeing them, the statement that, “museums are the new cathedrals” resonates in my mind. Calligraphic abstraction artists used the Arabic script, whether legible or illegible in their paintings. Why they used it is what we will discuss next.

Quest for Identity by Studying Tradition

The problem that artists in the Arab world were facing was that modernity was coming from a colonizing West, as we have discussed earlier. Many of them turned

to tradition for inspiration, some of them abandoning even the mediums of the West like oil painting and turning to natural ingredients around them. Farid Belkahia (Morocco, 1934-2014) adopted natural local materials like wood, leather, copper, saffron and henna, abandoning oil painting and the canvas. Other artists realized that the medium is simply an instrument. Hamid Abdallah (Egypt 1917-1985) states that a painting is merely a tool and it is important for artists to own it so that it becomes their mirror and not a mirror in which their images is reflected in a Western form.[140] We cannot ignore the Letterism movement that was founded by Isidore Isou in 1946, which considered that all fields of knowledge "aim to change society by a creative method."[141] It is interesting that this idea was present in Europe at the same time as Madiha Omar was in the US contemplating the role of the Arabic script in relation to identity in painting.

Still this struggle with finding a new voice is reflected in the history and the theory of the movement. Even the term calligraphy has been problematic for some to use. Wajdan Ali argues that calligraphic abstraction is a continuation of Islamic identity and she calls it the Calligraphic School of Art. Shabout argues that calligraphy is actually different from painting in its relationship to language.[142] I think we have solved this problem above by dividing the work of the different artists into written and calligraphic on a spectrum of abstraction. As we have argued and proved earlier, artists used handwriting and calligraphy as two starting points for their abstraction. The term calligraphy is from the Greek *kallos* meaning beauty, and *graphein,* to write, it also means an ornamental line in drawing or painting.[143] We are using the term calligraphic abstraction to mean hand written script or script that is based on proportions and geometry. Artists have used both in their paintings, what matters is how far away they broke from the original form in terms of concept and abstraction. Michel Tapié, the French art critic while commenting on Arab calligraphic abstraction saw "a contemporary calligraphic art that seamlessly and effectively created no break with the past while at the same time actively

[140] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 34.
[141] http://www.mauricelemaitre.org/~pfs/what-is-lettrism/ (Last checked January 2018)
[142] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 77.
[143] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/calligraphy (Last checked January 2018)

functioning within the medium of contemporary abstraction."[144]

Artists as Intellectuals

Many of the artists who practiced calligraphic abstraction have published their reflections either in books or by actively documenting their work. Shakir Hassan al-Said was a founder of movements and an influential writer and thinker. Kamal Boullata is a scholar and a historian, his publications include *Palestinian Art: From 1850 to the Present,* and *Belonging and Globalization: Critical Essays in Contemporary Art and Culture*. Sayegh was an art critic and he published a book on Islamic art, and till today he publishes poetry books to accompany some of his exhibitions. Hassan Massoudy has published and contributed to over 27 books, on his practice and on the history of Arabic calligraphy. His books have been translated into several languages. Mahdaoui and Koraichi have several published monographs on their work, Etel Adnan is a celebrated poet and an essayist also with work published in several languages. Jamil Hamoudi was an art critic and published extensively on art. The list is exhaustive. It is without doubt that artists from the calligraphic abstraction movement who have left a mark in the field are also intellectuals. They are aware of the importance of art in the shaping of a nation's identity. Their contribution was innovative because it was based on serious reflection. Innovation is the creative ingredient that we should consider when looking at the movement's creative output since without it, artists would be stagnating by repeating traditional work. With the markets in the Arabian Gulf being the primary target for buying these artworks, the prices of some artists, even though they do not present much creativity, have been blown out of proportion simply because there are buyers and dealers. As we have explained earlier, buying an abstract painting with Arabic calligraphy poses no dilemma for a patron who wants to stay true to his Islamic beliefs. It is safer to buy a work of art that does not have any figural representation, even though this does not oppose Islam, as we have discussed earlier. This situation turned the Gulf into a Mecca for dealers selling abstract and calligraphic abstraction artists. That is why the above assessment tool is

[144] Porter, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 14.

useful. It helps us differentiate between artists who are successful commercially and artists who have genuinely contributed intellectually to the movement. According to the charts an artist's intellectual contribution can be traced regardless of how much she/he are selling in the market. Thus the price of a painting will not be the only criteria to be considered when judging and valuing a work of letterist abstraction. How conceptual, new, abstract or Avant guard the work is can be added in addition to the market popularity of the work.

Sufism

Another common thread among some of our mentioned artists is their interest and engagement with Sufism. Historically, Sufi mystics were the rebellious intellectuals of Islam. They stood in conflict with scholars who presented themselves as cultural authorities. Ahmet Karamustafa claims that most strands of early Islamic mysticism also harboured potentially 'anarchist' tendencies that were critical of mainstream social life.[145]

Shakir Hassan Al-Said considered artistic expression as an act of sacred contemplation. Al-Said speaks of a "spiritual rebirth," his immersion in spiritual Sufi rituals opened up the possibilities of art.[146] Korichi's biography states that he comes from a Sufi family, while in an interview with Mahdaoui he clearly mentions that one of the thinkers that influenced him the most is Ibn Arabi.[147] Issa states that of the artistic influences that Mahdaoui mentioned to her was the independence of Tunisia from France in 1956, and Sufi mystics.[148] Sayegh on the other hand quotes the work of ibn Arabi in his writings and always mentions him as a main reference. Massoudy has also used the words of Sufi poets and authors in his own artwork. Based on an in-depth knowledge of the lives of the artists mentioned and on a historical assessment of their views and ideas, it seems that none of them are necessarily staunch in their beliefs, i.e., none are strictly devoted Muslim in the traditional sense. It seems that their interest in Sufism is a clear indication of their interest in challenging set tradition. Sufism goes against the grain of mainstream Islam in that it

[145] Karamustafa, *Sufism*, 176.
[146] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 87.
[147] Ayad, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 380.
[148] Issa, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 7.

promotes the spiritual as of equal if not greater importance than laws and doctrines. It advocates the belief that each individual's journey to a healthier spiritual state will eventually lead to a healthier Ummah, and thus a natural and loving adherence to laws and doctrines. So it comes as little surprise that all of these artists who are concerned with the letters and the power of letters would also be interested in the mystical meanings that these letters have according to Sufi thought. Omran al-Qaisi justifies this with the fact that because of the political disappointments after 1967 some artists turned to Sufism, like Shakir Hassan al-Said from Iraq, Ahmed Sihrin from Sudan and Said Akl from Lebanon.[149] There is no doubt that some of these artists were affected by the news of the defeat, Sayegh left his hometown in the mountains and moved to the city to be with people who understood his suffering. Sufism possibly represented a spiritual means to deal with the failings of their governments and their dissatisfaction with their reality.

Combining Cultures and Mediums

Again artists who have the most intellectual impact are those who have been clearly inspired by more than one culture in their work. Mahdoui was exposed to the work of Iranian and Japanese calligraphers in the 1960's by art critic, curator and collector Michel Tapié (France 1909-1987) who had a very good insight on the topic stating: "this connection that the countries with (a sometimes very long) tradition of calligraphic art are the only ones normally capable of connecting seamlessly with the most advanced sets of signs understood as abstract spaces imbued with artistic meaning, from Japan to the Islamic Mediterranean by way of China and the Middle East."[150] We will discuss later the impact that living in the diaspora has had on the different artists, but this idea of understanding signs as abstract spaces imbued with artistic meaning is very relevant to our discussion. Rachid Koraich mixes "language, scripture, signs, and the spiritual practice of Sufism… (he) has created a signature visual vocabulary of ideographic symbolism and contemplative forms that reference numerous calligraphic traditions and draw on a rich variety of influences from

[149] Al-Qaysi, The New Hurrufiyya as Tradition in *The Interlocutor Between the Calligrapher and the Artist,* 189.

[150] Michel Tapié "Les messages esthétique de Naj Mahdaoui" in Calligraphies Hommage à Naj Mahdaoui, monographie issue Le Droit à La Mémoire, year 14, no. 35-36 Toulouse, 1998.

Chinese ideograms to pre-Islamic Berber and Tuareg art forms."[151] But these artists do no not just reinterpret different cultures; they also intergrate calligraphy with other creative arts like literature, music and dance amongst others. It is their ability to reinterpret signs that makes them relevant to their time. As Corgnati describes Mahdaoui's work by saying, "it would be highly reductive to see his work solely within the context of calligraphy or indeed modern and contemporary Arab art."[152] His and his contemporaries' work from the calligraphic abstraction movement is described as a synthesis of different cultures. Due to their exposure to European art and thought, whether by living and studying abroad, or by the ideas conveyed through books, news and European creative events in their own countries. Influence did not only come from the West for these artists, it also came from Japanese and Chinese calligraphers. Their work combines the aesthetics of East and West. Daghir sees the movement as the "establishment of a new consciousness, as art of re-evaluation of self and other, of traditional Islamic art and Western art. *Hurufiyah* embodies several discourses related to art, including the identity of Arab art, its locality, and its universality."[153] Their work can be summarized as individual experiments in a variety of styles with a variety of influences.

Key Differences

After tracing the common point between some of the artists, it is important to discuss key differences that should be taken into consideration when evaluating the work of calligraphic abstraction artists. Four key ideas stand out. The first point that I will discuss is the question of whether international recognition of these artists' work was initiated in the West, which is important for understanding the dynamic of their success. Their geography is another important aspect, whether they were part of a diaspora, residents of their country of birth, or travellers moving from one country to another living the life of nomads. Where the artists lived is a reflection of the ideas they were being exposed to. It gives us an insight into the context of their work. It also helps us understand the languages that they spoke giving them access

[151] http://www.barjeelartfoundation.org/artist/algeria/rachid-koraichi/ (Last Checked January 2018)
[152] Corgnati, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 95.
[153] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 77.

to certain cultures. Another very important idea is whether these artists are visitors to the style of calligraphic abstraction or if they are committed practitioners. For some artists, calligraphic abstraction is a phase in their career, while for others it is their life long commitment. They might change mediums but they always use the script as their starting point. Finally, it is important to measure their social impact and continuity; this could be present in several spheres like the academic, and the economic (the dynamics of international museums' acquisition of their work). Also, the gallery spaces in which these artists' works are exhibited, and how they themselves navigate between the classical art scenes and the less classical one. Curators are important, were they trying to push boundaries and present something new or were they trying to just be part of an art market and sell. The idea I would like to explore most importantly is the artists' ability to inspire future generations. It is the way their ideas were transmitted to the next generation of artists and thinkers that will illustrate their true worth, how will the trail of their ideas and work live on after they leave?

International Recognition Initiated in the West?

The most successful artists of the movement all reached a level of creative output that was no longer limited to their locality or language. They started speaking at an international level artistically and humanly. Their work is relevant in that sense and they not only used the Arabic letters to express, but they were able to take the local, and the specific and turn it into a global visual language that can be comprehended at different levels and in different circles.

What they have in common is the Arabic script and its use in the form of an artwork to be displayed in galleries and other places. Each of them worked differently on spreading the concept of the Arabic script and identity. Their study of Islamic art and their understanding of their tradition were never through local channels, and it was mostly by coincidence. This highlights the lack of continuity in educational institution between the history of Islamic art and modern art practices. None of these artists call themselves calligraphers except for the very few that had the classical training on Arabic calligraphy. So the continuity with their cultural heritage or what they should have learned about from their part of the world was

not there, due to colonization, lack of archives, lack of resources and several of the ideas that we have discusses earlier. Some of the artists studied at institutions in Europe, but even the art educational institutions at home were very Eurocentric in their offering. This led the artists to develop their own unique style of representation because they, on one hand where rebelling against their tradition, and on the other hand were trying to create a new visual language that best represents their current or contemporary human condition. It is interesting to note that all of the calligraphic abstraction artists, who have succeeded commercially within and outside the Arab world, actually inhabited a Western city. Their validation as artists came from their Western education, and access to Western art networks, galleries, publishers and dealers. They had access to the creative economy and the ecosystem of advanced nations that their contemporaries in the Arab world did not have. This is a very important idea to keep in mind when studying artists: what kind of creative infrastructure did they have to develop their work?

Geography, Diaspora and Context

The background of each artist should always be taken into consideration when discussing his or her art. The languages they speak are an indication to the cultural access they have. It is also an indicator of their access to networks of galleries, dealers, and media exposure.[154] It demonstrates also the difference in the Arab world between those who leave and those who stay. Dagher argues that most *Hurufi* artists started their visual quests while in exile or upon their return from Western cities.[155] They embarked on their experimentations unaware of previous attempts by artist from their own country or by others from different parts of the Arab world. Nja Mahdaoui studied in Rome and in Paris and he currently lives between Tunisia and France. It was in the 1960s when he was moving constantly between Tunisia, France and Italy that he began to practice what Corgnati refers to as, "written painting albeit only an experimental tentative times and parallel to the abstract art that he continued to produce separately for a number of years."[156] This confirms Dagher's

[154] Rose Issa. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.
[155] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 31.
[156] Corgnati, Martina, Between East and West . Nja Mahdaoui in *Mahdaoui*, p99.

statement but it is not fully true as some artists never inhibited countries other than their own and still worked with the Arabic script, Sayegh being one example. But for certain we cannot write the history of calligraphic abstraction without including the artists of the diaspora.

The most prominent calligraphic abstraction artists are actually those who are outside of the Arab world. Of course artists in the Arab world are informed on major schools of thought in art and philosophy from different cultures, possibly in the form of translations. But it remains a fact that feeling at home in two cultures gives you an advantage over feeling at home only in one. It is also the privilege of access to different art networks and infrastructures that the artists living in the Arab world missed. Madiha Omar held an Iraqi passport but was born in Ottoman Aleppo and went on to live and exhibit in Washington in the 1940s. Rachid Koraichi lives between Algeria and France. Kamal Boullata studied in Rome and Washington and received a Fulbright Senior Scholar Fellowship to conduct research on Islamic art in Morocco. He currently lives in Germany and previously lived between the US and France and is originally from Palestine. Hassan Massoudy is from Iraq but he currently lives in France. Dia Azzawi currently lives in London and he is originally from Iraq. Due to constant political instability in the region, waves of Arab artists have been fleeing the region since the turn of the twentieth century. But in the context of post-decolonization in the Arab world, the quest for modernism was not limited to the artists in the diaspora; it was a shared sentiment by Arab artists in different parts of the world. This disconnected geography created a state of intermitted narratives. Nada Shabout states that most Arab artists and movements of the 1950s and 1960s operated on a local level and were isolated from one another. “What began as an isolated experiment during the mid-1940s and 1950s became a trend during the 1960s, attracting an increasing number of Arab artists, to the point where each Arab country had a group of artists who utilized the letter in their work.”[157] You can notice from the work of the different artists and the timing in which the work appeared that there is almost always a process of restarting without the knowledge of what was before or around them. It is by drawing the map of these

[157] Shabout, *Modern Arab Art*, 77.

disconnected narratives of both worlds that we will be able to understand the history of the movement.

Visitors or Committed

Geography and access to art networks are key differences to take into consideration when looking at the work of a calligraphic abstraction artist. Another point of consideration is if the artist is a visitor to the style or committed to it. Many of the calligraphic abstraction artists are just visitors to the style, it is usually a period where they feel like experimenting with the Arabic script, or one artwork or concept that they feel like expressing. The One Dimension group in Iraq included a sculptor, a ceramist and a calligrapher. Hassan argues that, "few among these artists had truly abandoned figural representation in favour of pure calligraphic forms as a result of this new alignment. However, it is important to emphasize that not all artists who work with calligraphy are necessarily abandoning figural representation for abstraction."[158] Dia Azzawi's calligraphic abstraction work was conceived in the 1980's and he went back to experimenting with different styles after that. Some artists just use the Arabic script as a communication element in their compositions and not the main theme. Several artists that Rose Issa lists in the book *Sign of Our Times* are artists who have used the Arabic script in such a manner. Starting with the innovation section, Etel Adnan and KamaI Boullata have both produced and contributed great conceptual work to the calligraphic abstraction movement, but can we list them as calligraphic abstraction artists? In the exploration segment of the book, Issa lists Shirin Neshat and Chant Avedissian. It is interesting to note them as explorers, because that is what they actually are. I do not think that these artists should go under the umbrella of calligraphic abstraction artists because they are using the script like they would use a symbol, only to communicate a message. They are not testing the plasticity of the letter forms, which would make it unfair to group them in the same group as Hassan Massoudy as Issa did. Massoudy is a calligrapher and has dedicated his whole life to the documentations, practices and experimentation with the Arabic script. He should not be placed in a category with

[158] Hassan, *When Identity Becomes Form*.

artists whose practice and careers are not as dedicated to the script as his is. This is the reason I have devised a spectrum to discuss works of arts and not artists in general. Rafa al-Nasiri used the Arabic letter in his compositions for over three decades. His compositions play with colour and form but not really the structure of the Arabic script. When we discuss a calligraphic abstraction work we need to understand if its artist is passing through the movement or a committed member. We need to consider looking at artworks while studying the relationship between calligraphy and other elements in the composition. How does it relate to the other figurative or abstract elements in the composition? Is it incorporated into them naturally? We need to remember that not all artists who use Arabic script in their work are calligraphic abstraction artist.

Social Impact and Continuity

There are several factors that dictate the life of an artwork and the impact of an artist. The first one is always political. Historically art has served as a tool for power to promote its agendas. The second is economical; countries with prospering economies most of the time evolve to develop and promote their culture. Art is the result of a society, it does not exist in vacuum. Art thrives in societies that nurture it and this only comes with political and economical stability. With these main foundation steps in mind, there are artworks and artists that contribute to the development of human consciousness. Thus they become relevant to humanity at large and not just to the nation they belong to or the place where their artwork was developed. It is very difficult for artists and their work to have an impact without the first two factors, which puts all artists in the Arab world at a very big disadvantage. How can an artist have impact if there are no museums to exhibit their work, schools to study it, archives to document it, historians to study it, curators to promote it and buyers to support it?

As we have mentioned earlier, some of the calligraphic abstraction artists were intellectuals and educators. They published their work and exhibited in different capitals around the world. They gave talks, collaborated with different institutions, engaged with the cultural life in different circles around the world, and have gained international recognition. Their work is owned by major collections and

is exhibited in major museums and galleries around the world. Corgnati states that Mahdaoui's work deserves to be known far better outside the Arab world and institutions in Europe and the global system of art because it also belongs to Europe and the world as a whole.[159] This is true of several calligraphic abstraction artists. Thus in spite of the lack of an art infrastructure in their countries, by existing in a flourishing environment some of these artists are able to leave their mark. How we measure this social impact is another story.

[159] Corgnati, Martina, Between East and West . Nja Mahdaoui in *Mahdaoui*, p95.

Chapter IV Samir Sayegh: A Master of Tradition and Abstraction

Philosophical Insight and Timid Experimentations

Throughout his life, Sayegh was an aspiring poet, journalist, art critic, Islamic art enthusiast, university instructor, calligrapher, Arabic type designer, artist and Sufi.[160] There are several reasons why I have decided to write about Samir Sayegh's work as a case study. The first is because his art is unique in that it has managed to carve its way into the larger frame of calligraphic abstraction with originality. Also, there is a conceptual dimension to his work and a serious reflection process. When he produces paintings they are sometimes accompanied by texts reflecting on his experience. I am interested to look at his artwork within the largest modernist trajectory. He can be called a latecomer to the art scene and a second-generation letterist. His work starts from classical aspects of calligraphy, but breaks away from them to create a new visual language of his own. The most important aspect for me was his ability to reach a global audience without a solid infrastructure for the arts in his country. And the final reason for my choice is his impact as an educator and a mentor to a new generation of leading Arab designers.

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[160] To capture all facets of his journey, interviews with very different individuals from his close circle of people were conducted. The interviews ranged widely, including conversations with journalists, educators, critics, Sufi poets, designers, art dealers, print-shop owners, calligraphers and students. Each of these testimonials helped me weave a more intricate presentation of Sayegh's attitudes towards his work at various points of his artistic development. The research with the artist was conducted over the course of four major interviews, one in Cairo in January of 2014 and three in Beirut in April, June and October of the same year. Interviews with contemporaries also took place during these periods, although some were conducted over Skype because the subjects lived in different parts of the world. Being a writer himself, Sayegh's journalistic, academic and poetic writings were also used as primary sources of information and analysis. His first poetry book, *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* (1980), and his two later books published as part of two different exhibitions, *Muthakarat al-Huruf* (2003) and *Alif bihourouf kathira* (2014), were analysed to gain insight into the artist's creative process and output. His publication *Islamic Art - A Reading into its Philosophy & Aesthetic Characteristics* (1988) was used as a source for understanding how his research on Islamic art influenced his creativity. Finally, the artist's paintings, book designs, typographic experiments and students' work were all used as primary sources to outline Samir Sayegh's artistic and visual concerns, as well as their development throughout his career.

Before we discuss his career as an artist and his first exhibition, it is important to highlight that throughout his life Sayegh was traveling between mediums. He was seeking a means of expression, which intensified his questions because he carried these same issues into every genre he worked with. In poetry, journalism, art, calligraphy, teaching and philosophy, Sayegh was seeking answers. Thus he took his first steps in art as a seeker and not under the pretense of being a master; he came as a thinker expecting dialogue.

It is significant to note that this major step took place in a phase of Sayegh's life where he was still trying to find a new voice and a new mode of expression. Three years earlier (1980) he had published his first collection of poems in *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm*. This collection was originally published in *Mawaqif* magazine, which was his patron Adonis's second periodical publication after *Majallat Shi'r,* both of which Sayegh was a contributor to as a journalist. *Mawaqif* was close to the concept of going back to tradition and spirituality, and it was very much influenced by Sufi thought.[161] Sayegh's writings reflected the philosophy of the publication that featured his work. But after *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* he did not publish another independent poetry book until twenty years later when he published a book alongside *"Muzakarat al hurouf",* an exhibition which I will discuss in detail in the coming pages. So *Maqam al-qaws* can be considered Sayegh's only independent poetry collection.

But why did Sayegh stop writing poetry, and what drove him to calligraphy? And why did he choose it as a medium of visual expression and not take the path towards realism or abstraction or even photography? When confronted with the decision of starting a new career pathway and a new visual and social expression, the art critic and disappointed poet chose to work with the Arabic letter. It is not that Sayegh was unsuccessful as an art critic; he had established himself as a valuable reference on the arts in the Arab world. Sayegh was an influential critic in the artistic and intellectual circles of Beirut in the sixties and seventies as he practiced criticism in Lebanese journals. Before the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) Beirut was attracting different intellectual conglomerations from all

[161] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

over the Arab and non-Arab countries, they came to Beirut looking for a podium for their opinions and for modern arts at the time.

Sayegh's time as a journalist eventually eliminated his quest to be a poet.[162] He had moved in his early adulthood to the capital Beirut from Mashgarah, his home village in the mountains of Lebanon, for two reasons: modernity and the Palestinian cause.[163] He started his career in the early 1970's in Beirut, which was, at the time, the cultural laboratory of the Arab world. Talent fled to it seeking inspiration and a platform for expression after the defeat of 1967. Sayegh described the atmosphere at the time as follows: "Beirut was the center of Arab modernity, the capital of Arab revolution; intellectuals gathered around the cause of Palestinian resistance. It was also the capital of self-criticism and re-thinking history, religious affiliation, and political rule."[164] The talent pool varied among the professions, but they came from different parts of the Arab world and lived in Beirut for a period or regularly traveled to and from the city. The list included artists, journalists, art critics, musicians, poets, performers, writers, academics, and publishers. Beirut was the Mecca of Arab culture and a big center for Arab publishing, so it served as the pulpit from which all new ideas from the region were emerging. Whether progressive ideas in support of modernity or ideas about Arab nationalism, communism, the Palestinian cause, breaking with tradition, or any idea that was gripping the world at the time, as in any cosmopolitan city, Beirut was center stage.

Artists who experimented with letterist abstraction like Dia al-Azzawi and Shakir Hassan al-Sa'id from Iraq, Ahmed Shirbini from Sudan, Hamid Abdallah from Egypt, Mohammad Malihi and Farid Belkahia from Morocco, and many others, were either living or exhibiting in Beirut. In addition to the presence of different Arab modern artists, exhibitions of Western art movements and artists were also present, including an exhibition of Henri Moore's work, a display of Salvador Dali's books, and copies of the lithographic works by Picasso and Miro. Big names in world music, and dance also came to perform at Lebanese music festivals, such as Ravi Shankar, Martha Graham, Elvin Ailey and others. Beirut was a lively, important cultural

[162] *Ibid*.
[163] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[164] *Ibid.*

center. In this atmosphere, Sayegh was practicing art criticism by writing for the various newspapers he worked for.

Sayegh remembers how he cried while listening to Egyptian President Abdel-Nasser's resignation speech, though the people sitting with him met his sorrow with indifference. [165] [166] In his *naksah* (defeat) speech, Abdel-Nasser stated: "The hope of Arab unity started before Abel-Nasser and it will remain after Abdel-Nasser," an idea many Arab intellectuals at the time held to be true. Sayegh, throughout his career as a young journalist and poet, sought individuals and institutions that shared his beliefs and views of an Arab unity separate from religious affiliations. Thus he left his village to obtain the company of people who shared his Arab nationalism and who believed in building Arab nations that were not based on tribal and religious affiliations, but on modern national institutions devoid of the clan and tribal favoritism.[167] Through these creative friends, a clearer vision of art, philosophy, and identity was formed. Clearer ideas crystalized on the meaning of modernity, or artistic modernity, which was exchanging the family for the institution, opening up to outsiders, considering all humankind as one, considering all art as one. When a person believes in these ideas and the ability to create, he or she has to have a vision; this new vision of man and the universe is the reason why a person can feel the urge to express him/herself creatively thus becoming an artist or a poet or an architect.

The defeat was what pushed Sayegh into Arab nationalism, more than the Arab political parties present in Lebanon at the time. He confirms that throughout his life, he never belonged to any political party. The defeat of June 1967, made him feel that he is an Arab at heart, so he began meeting with Arab nationalist figures and people who were Leftists and moderate Rightists, all of whom supported the Palestinian cause in the beginning. Eventually, however, they began moving apart as they returned to their original political affiliations. This relationship with and sympathy towards the Palestinian cause is what brought him closer to intellectuals

[165] Mohamed EL Masry, "Khitab tanahi al-rais Abdelnasse ba'd al-naksah." (Resignation Speech by President Abdelnasser). Filmed [June 9th, 1967]. *Youtube* video, 1:38. Posted [Mar 1, 2011]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=43AUQ8u2y00. Date accessed November 2014.
[166] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[167] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

at the time that shared his same sentiment and paved the way for his career in journalism. He maintained the sensitivity of a poet even when he was not utilizing that form of expression anymore. He was seeking a new philosophy, and that led lead him to Sufism. After writing his diwan *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm*, he felt that writing poetry has reached a stage where it failed him as a tool of expression, and he felt that the "poet" was no longer the prototype, providing an ideal example for society. After the *Naksah* many poets in the Arab world committed suicide, some due to depression and for personal reasons but many for political ones.[168] [169] These suicides are a statement on the state of Arab poetry and society's appreciation of it. Art cannot live without an audience. It is not that surprising that Sayegh felt that poetry was no longer a valid or expressive art form. He confesses that he stopped writing because modernity failed, and poetry did not have an audience anymore. He used a very local Lebanese term to describe its state, "mallasit," meaning the screw is not hanging on to its anchor because they are both so worn out. The people, which poetry was supposed to address, and society, in general, were surrounded by wars, and thus poets and poetry both became obsolete and irrelevant. In Sayegh's times of political unrest, unfortunately, the sword was mightier than the pen.

So this explains why Sayegh chose to stop writing poetry but why did he decide to express himself utilizing a very traditional art form like Arabic calligraphy? Sayegh credits the years that he spent at the *al-Anwar* newspaper for the formation of his ideas and reservations on modernity and tradition. In his view, being progressive did not mean opening up to Western cultures anymore because that meant complying with the concept of colonialism. To him, it did not make sense that

[168] *Naksah* is what Arabs refer to the 7th of June, 1967, as. It marks the battle for Jerusalem in which the Israeli army defeated an Arab coalition army.. That event drove Sayegh to start writing political articles about Jerusalem and the loss out of his village Mashgarah. He sent the articles to *Lissan el Hal,* a newspaper founded by Khalil Sarkis in 1877 (out of circulation in 1959). So even though the *Naksah* was the cause of the death of some poets in the Arab world, it was the birth of the poet and journalist in Samir Sayegh.

[169] The most famous examples are the Lebanese poets Khalil Hawi (1919-1982) who committed suicide during the Israeli invasion of Beirut, Antoine Mashhour (1936-1975), the Jordanian Taysir Sepol (1939-1973), the Sudanese Abdul Rahim Abu Zikra (1943-1989), the Iraqi poets Ibrahim Zaaier (1944-1972) and Qassim Jabbarah (1955-1987), the Algerian Abdullah Bukhalifa (1964-1988), and finally the Egyptian Salah Jaheen (1930-1985), who suffered from severe depression.

a person could be progressive and still comfortable with the idea of colonization.[170] At the same time, the need for a unique cultural identity labeled as traditional was evident, but there was also a necessity for modernity that was in keeping with the times and current events, having historical relevance to the time and place to where a person lived. Cultural identity represented itself in the arts and in going back to the arts of tradition that were divided between the arts of the distant past, whether in the Assyrian or Pharaonic culture and Islamic art in its different aspects, whether building, ornamentation, calligraphy, music or folklore. That is why his responsibility as an art critic was to look for how these positions stood out in the arts or how they were represented in the slogans and headlines that he witnessed emerging from the artistic life in Cairo, Baghdad, Khartoum, Beirut, Damascus, Marrakesh and other Arab cities.

It is worth noting here how Sayegh in his career as a journalist, was very familiar with the cultural atmosphere in the region. At the various newspapers he worked for between 1969-1985, Sayegh interviewed most of the important contributors to Arab culture around the Arab world.[171] Any artist who exhibited in Lebanon between the late 1960s till the early 1990s, Sayegh interviewed and wrote about their work.[172] So he was quite well informed on what was going on in the cultural arena at the time. By interviewing all of these cultural figures he must have been looking for answers on Arab culture, on Arab identity, on what it means to be an Arab intellectual at the time.

Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, Sayegh looked for modernity and authenticity as an art critic, he published his thoughts in newspapers in Lebanon, like *al-Balad* and *Beirut el-massa*, along with others mentioned earlier. By traveling to art shows in Damascus, Baghdad, Casablanca and Cairo, or by seeing the work of artists

[170] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.
[171] Sayegh started with interviewing Helen el-Khal who was the founder gallery One, and the wife of Youssif el-Khal the co-founder of Majalit Sh'ir. He then interviewed cultural figures like Naguib Mahfouz, Paul Guiragossian, Youdssif Idriss, Tajamou' el-Fanaini al-Sharquiyyin, Michel Basbous, Jean Khalifa, Rafiq Sharaf, Moussa Tiba, Hassan Joune, Evette Ashkar, Hussien Madi, Stelio Skamanga, Munir Najim, Saloua Raouda Choukair, Aref el-Rayyes, Shafiq Abboud, Amin el-Basha, Halim Jurdak, and Mohammad el-Rawas, amongst many others.
[172] Sayegh worked as an art critic at several newspapers during his career. This is a list of some of the newspapers he worked at: *Lissan Al-Hal* newspaper (1968-1970), *Al-Anwar* newspaper (1970-1980), *Fonoun Arabia* magazine-London (1978-1982), *Mawakif* magazine (1969-1985), *Al-Kifah Al-Arabi* magazine (1982-1990), *Fann* magazine (1989-1991)

visiting Beirut, he formulated a complete vision of the art scene of the Arab world at the time. His key insights were that there was absolutely no representation of Arabic calligraphers or ornamentation artists within these circles of modern art.[173] Abstract artists had a strong view on modernity, and they were looking for cultural identity and language, but they rarely had any knowledge of the art of Arabic calligraphy or ornamentation. The reason for this state was the lack of references, museums and books on the topic. He noted that access to more knowledge on the history of Islamic art for these artists might have possibly sparked richer and deeper ideas and insights in their artistic expression and made it more culturally relevant.[174]

In his quest for a unique Arab identity Sayegh became an artist acutely aware that in his locality, post-war Lebanon, there was no place for culture. The country needed rebuilding and, with a focus on getting Lebanon to function again, culture's days were yet to come. He researched Islamic art, in an attempt to solve the problem of Arab cosmopolitanism and modernity. Sayegh held his first exhibition during the war in 1983 in Hamra, one of the very few areas in Lebanon that did not suffer from sectarian division; Muslims, Christians, and Jews were still living together in spite of the dangers that the war brought. In the beginning his solution was to be an art critic on all art forms, learning more about the current situation of the arts. Being a journalist allowed him to interact with various artists and cultural figures, but in parallel, he wrote, and when the poetry stopped for him he practiced calligraphy and painted. In his view, Arabic calligraphy was the solution to the problem of Arab identity, and he set out to learn more about it. He had been interested in calligraphy since childhood.

Sayegh confesses that, "With the codification of the script and the Ottoman Empire playing the role of a computer that wants to create 'fonts' and official documents, not scripts, calligraphers became like computers, repeating the same exact text over and over again. All creativity was lost."[175] He attributes the loss of creativity also to the absence of the meaning of a master or a *"mo'alem"* the traditional teacher of the craft. The job of a teacher, Sayegh insists, is to instill

[173] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo, January 2014.
[174] *Ibid*.
[175] *Ibid*.

creativity in the repetition, citing the example of Arabesque, and how it is impossible to ignore the quantity and creativity of the variations on the same motif. He will illustrate this idea extensively in his work when he starts developing his own style of Arabesque utilizing calligraphy as the main module. To him, Arabesque is order and precision, an abstraction created from the lines without any perception of its content. Thus the job of a master Islamic artist was to maintain the plurality of a concept: he considers that Western historians of Islamic art had misunderstood Arabesque as an art of repetition when to him it was the ultimate mastery of the plurality of a concept.[176] Sayegh concludes that Islamic art is a *"fan motashabih"* not *"motmathil,"* being similar but not repetitive. To him, Islamic art entails a way of translating the oneness of everything in the universe, expressed in the visual, design-based language of the calligrapher. His affinity with this philosophical perspective on Islamic art can be understood since his childhood was very engrossed in nature, the seasons and the natural cycles of the universe. To him, the artist is the witness to the hidden secrets of the universe, just like a tree that blooms and then yields fruits and then blooms again and yields more fruit. This vision lay at the heart of Islamic art when it was an all-encompassing, alive language. And that art started losing its focus when this vision of the arts changed during the end of the Ottoman period.

Sayegh's insight that Islamic art was the underdog in the international study of art history at art schools around the world thus developed in this period. Through his interest in modernity he discovered that knowledge on Islamic art was almost non-existent. He noticed how books about the history of art would reach the Byzantine period and then jump to the Renaissance, skipping nearly 1,000 years of Islamic culture. Thus he started his personal explorations into the history of Islamic art. His real beginning with Islamic art as a research interest started at *Al-Kifah al-Arabi* magazine between 1982-1990. He developed a series of long articles on the topic, and his ideas crystallized in Istanbul after visiting the exhibition "Islamic Arts Exhibition Commemorating the 15th Centennial of Heigra" in 1983. These articles eventually developed into his book on Islamic art that was published in 1988. In parallel, and through his contact with the different artists and calligraphers, he

[176] Sayegh cites Ibn al-Nadim's *Fihrist*, which mentions many Kufic scripts, but never provided any visual references to what the author meant or what the different Kufic scripts actually looked like.

formulated the idea that calligraphy should be recognized as an independent art form. He confesses that he became an artist because he did not feel that calligraphers could translate the right vision of what had to be done.[177]

Sayegh considers Arabic calligraphy an art that needs space, a flourishing society and patrons to nurture it. Its purpose is to create and organize life around the individual living in his or her environment, when the belief in this conviction is gone the vision of the art stops. To him, the Ottoman Empire felt its arts to be inferior to the arts of Europe; they copied its form without understanding its philosophy, and in the process, they forgot their own.

After exploring and learning the state of Arab art and calligraphy first-hand through his work as an art critic, and his research on Islamic art history, Sayegh felt the urge to express his new understandings visually because poetry was not delivering the message he wanted to communicate. Being, however, unable to abandon the poetic side of his personality, his solution to this dilemma was to combine the two art forms, to write about what he is exhibiting and, when he could, publish a book of poetry. Sayegh's exhibitions produce a total cultural experience that feeds the mind and the eye.

Sayegh entered the art world hesitantly. His artwork was his first step in an attempt at trying to find a solution to Arabic modernity, which he thought should be explored through a re-representation of Arabic script. That is why his work was concerned only with the exploration of the aesthetic qualities and possibilities of the visual representation of Arabic. In bringing Arabic calligraphy into the modern art world, Sayegh was not experimenting with a new formula. It had been explored and confirmed as successful. He was tapping into and reflecting the identity issues among artists of the region dating as late back as the 1940s. His addition to this equation was in studying the exact forms of Arabic letters, and studying them in

[177] As a journalist, Sayegh witnessed the work done by the newspaper's calligraphers. Every day they drew and engraved the headlines of the day in linoleum. He admired their craft and remembers having long conversations with them about calligraphy as an important art form that needed to be cared for when he first started his quest for modernism and tradition. It was by contemplating their work that his own ideas on calligraphic modernism gradually evolved. Later in his life, when he interacted with calligraphers, asking them to develop the traditions they were working with and to move beyond simply designing headlines and titles for books, magazines and newspapers and classical calligraphic painting, he found that their imaginations were dry. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014

their totality, not just as language, but by also studying their history and philosophy. Arabic letters became Sayegh's world, and his journey of exploration attracted a large group of followers and admirers. He stands at the center of Sufism, calligraphy, and poetry as a triangle that has made Sayegh's work stand out in a society pressured to deliver answers on the future of its identity.

In an interview with Saleh Barakat in October of 2009, Samir Sayegh clearly states the reasons why he joined the art world:

> It commenced as a comeback to calligraphy from the perspective of Arab modernism, as I was searching for a deeper conviction about the issue of authenticity and modernity, and looking for a personal artistic identity, the ultimate objective of modernism.[178]

It is 1983, Lebanon has suffered from the Israeli invasion a year earlier and is struggling with an aggressive civil war. Sayegh realizes that there is a desperate need in the Arab world for a unique cultural identity and that calligraphy is the right visual appearance for the representation of this new Arab visual and cultural identity. He also concluded that modern Arab artists did not have access to their visual heritage specifically the Islamic one, and traditional calligraphers were stuck in their old ways and did not have access to concepts of modernity. Sayegh must have realized that there is a need for a bridge between these two schools of thought, the modern and progressive one associated with the West and the traditional and local one related to Islam and the Arab world as a whole. He exhibited *"Ma la youktab wa ma la youqal"* at Galerie Elissar in Beirut, which was the official launch of his career as an artist.

I will proceed to examine his creative output based on the criteria I have devised for the assessment of letterist abstraction work. Sayegh's artworks start most of the time on the calligraphic style not the written script. In his early exhibitions his work is closer to the traditional side of the spectrum, and then he slowly starts breaking away moving more towards the abstract and the conceptual.

[178] Saleh Barakat, "Encountering Samir Sayegh." *Muraqqa*. Accessed January 2016. http://www.muraqqa.com/samir-sayegh.html.

"What Cannot be Written or Said" (1983) "Ma la youktab wa ma la youqal"- Galerie Elissar, Beirut.

When studying the few examples that are still owned by the artist from that period, it is clear that he used a mixture of the Naskh style and the Diwani Jali style of clear letters surrounded by diacritic marks to fill in the negative spaces around the letters. But whereas the Diwani Jali – used in the royal Islamic courts (diwans) – always communicated a message, here the letters are random compositions that are trying to create new forms. The letters are individually legible, like a *mim*, or a *ha*, but they do not communicate any words. They are just letters surrounded by many diacritics marks.

This first experiment seems like a very timid one for the artist. But years later and in spite of many exhibitions to his name, Sayegh still does not label himself an abstract artist, but rather an innovating calligrapher trying to create "illegible scripts." Sayegh believes that his first exhibition, "What Cannot be Written or Said," should have been his last. It summarized the main idea that emerged from his study of the issues and problems of Arab identity, which resulted in his understanding that there are things that can be said outside of language and writing in this line or this mark that we call script. The main aim of this exhibition was to start a dialogue. His show in 2014 was entitled *"Alif bihourouf kathira"* (Alif in Many Letters). After thirty years since his first exhibition, we notice that he has come full circle and is still asking the same questions he posed in this first exhibition.

1. *What Cannot be Written or Said composition, Samir Sayegh, 1985*

> On his first exhibition, Sayegh states:
>
> My first experience revolved around what cannot be written and what cannot be said. I wanted to liberate calligraphy from language and meaning of words, and go back to the first moment of its birth, to the universe of signs and symbols, when the letters were hanging between mud and water. It was imperative to separate between calligraphy's role as a medium of communication and its other mission, that of aesthetic beauty. To distinguish between the two parts is a necessity to understand the polarity of calligraphy and therefore to try to deal with it, because if you look at calligraphy in order to read, you don't see the calligraphy. And when you let yourself immerse in the meanders of calligraphic beauty, reading becomes secondary.[179]

[179] *Ibid.*

In spite of his intentions for the exhibition, these concepts could be a later reflection by the artist on his work. The early works fall on the traditional side of the spectrum. Sayegh used classical calligraphic styles that were easily recognizable while adding the layer of illegibility, which was a concept already highly experimented with by many previous letterist artists around the world.

"Repeating Unity" (1987) "Al wahid al moutaadid" - Kulturzentrum, Kaslik
In *"Al-wahid al moutaadid"* the challenge that Sayegh was exploring was the possibility of using just one word "Allah" to create an exhibition. This word, in a sense, was the beginning of everything and he wanted to study it to start from the beginning; this was the way he began turning from the beginning of the cycle of learning and exploring the Arabic script with its first word that starts with the first letter of the alphabet. He wanted to learn how to draw the *alif*, and he was repeating it in different ways; this word, at times, became a line, and, at others, three dashes. He wanted a word that could be read but also looked at and contemplated. Thus he started scribbling and drawing dots, which provided the insight that he understood later when he read Ibn Arabi, who wrote that *"al-tajreed howa al–tawhid,"* a clear statement and comparison between modern abstraction and Islamic abstraction, a theme Sayegh explored extensively in his book on Islamic art.

But before analyzing the work, it is worth noting that the venue of this exhibition was in Kaslik, Lebanon, during the civil war in 1988 after the division of East Beirut and West Beirut took place. Society had been segregated into Christians inhibiting the East side of the town, and Muslims living in West Beirut, and not interacting with each other. The religions aligned the factions who were fighting on the streets. At the time militias would check a person's passport and based on their religious affiliations would let them pass or would stop them, interrogate them or possibly kill them. With that political atmosphere in mind, Sayegh decided to exhibit the word "Allah" utilizing Islamic art logic and composition in Kaslik, part of the Christian part of town. His book on Islamic art was published in the same year, both the exhibition and the book were acts of defiance and asserting cultural unity over

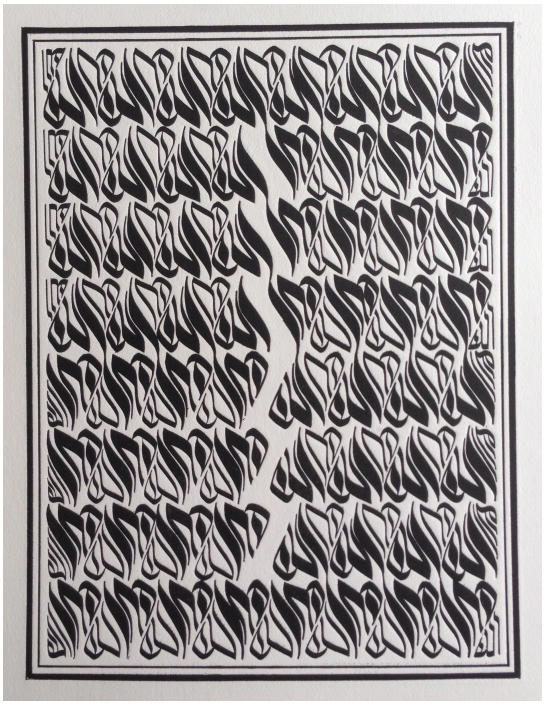
religious divisions. They were attempts at looking beyond the immediate reality and proposing a different one. Till today, getting into a taxi in Beirut some of the older drivers would refuse to drive to the other side of town because in their mind it has been ingrained that the other side, which is only a few kilometers away, is far and is hostile.

2. 2 *Allah compositions , Samir Sayegh, 1987*

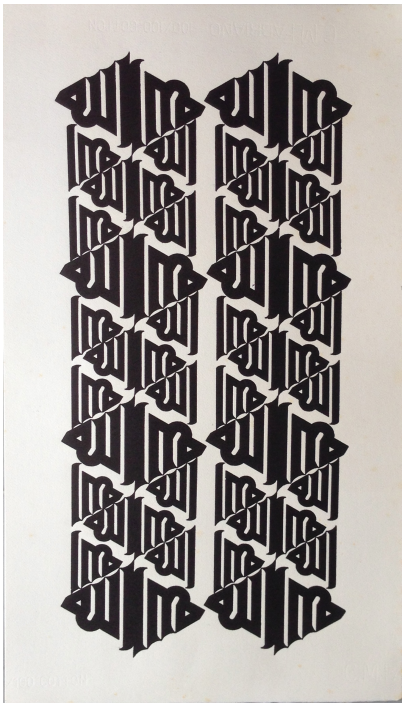
Visually the works are an interesting experiment and study in repetition that we will see Sayegh applying extensively in several other works in the future. The exhibition did contain some new visual experiments but the black on white compositions and the quality of the lines are reminiscent of the work done by Hussain Madi (1940-) who was a contemporary of Sayegh and the work of Omar al-Nagdy (1931-) from Egypt. But Sayegh's compositions only borrow some of the quality of line from the work of Madi, whose work is not necessarily legible, and moves on to create more organized pieces inspired by Islamic art logic and arrangements found on many monuments around the world, the main feature of which is organized repetition.

Other artists have explored the theme he used of the repetition of *"lafz al-jalala"* ("the utterance of Allah") in his artwork. Egyptian artist Nagwa Abdelgawad (1948-1987) who passed away the same year that Sayegh's second exhibition

opened used to print very similar “Allah” compositions to work developed by Sayegh with black and white or by utilizing gold and silver leaf. In this exhibition, Sayegh was apparently inspired by the work of his contemporaries, whether he was conscious of that or not, but what is certain is his awareness of applying Islamic art logic to the modern art painting.



3. Allah*, Samir Sayegh, 1987*



4. Allah, *Samir Sayegh, 1987*

Again, the works are traditional in their experimentations and similar to experiments already taking place in Lebanon and Egypt at the time. There are no major creative breakthroughs here. Sayegh based his designs for these works on classical calligraphic styles staying on the predictable and legible side of the scale, as explained earlier. On the topic of the audience of “Repeating Unity” and most of Sayegh’s artwork, he advises that his work should be read through the lines in their naked simplicity. Meaning: in the straight and cursive lines, in the vertical and the horizontal, in the long and the short, in the thick and the thin, in the sharp and the relaxed, in the attached and the detached, in the closed and the open, in the ascending and the descending, and in the reclined and the flat. He thinks that the early Kufic script of the Quran in the first 300 years of Islam was a fabulous example

of the evolution, maturity, and depth of this new language of forms and their capacity to express and communicate. A contemplation of the letter *alif*, for instance, unveiled to him the stunning multiplicity of the possibilities derived from the straight line, especially when this straightness goes astray. “With some imagination, this *alif* starts to move and dance, paving the way to various interpretations, as many as the eye can foresee. No wonder one can perceive the *alif* as falling rain, a staggering stallion, a fruit-bearing branch or a razor-sharp sword. Also, one can see the same *alif* as a shy inclination, acting as a cautious standing, a perfect stature, a sudden turn, a lonely *“aparté,”* a deep meditation or as an abundance gone overboard.”[180] *Alif* to Sayegh is not only a representation of all letters, but also a symbol of the unity of existence. While these ideas were formed by artists in later years, his earlier work does not necessarily reflect abstraction just yet, and it could be because he was still experimenting and discovering in these early stages. It was still legible and quite similar to visual experiments taking place in his proximity.

[180] Barakat, “Encountering Samir Sayegh.”

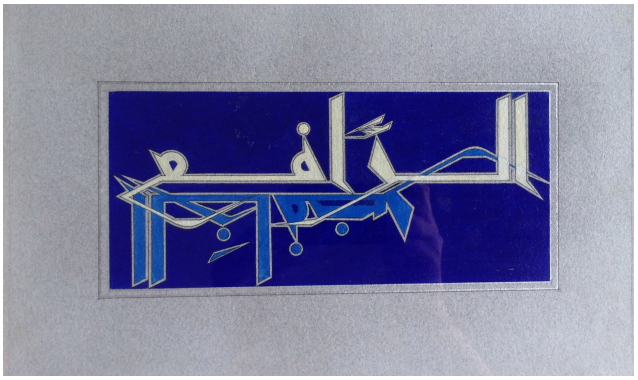
5. Allah, *Samir Sayegh, 1987*

“Similar but not Identical” (1992) “Moushtabih ghair moutashabih,” Galerie 50 x 70, Beirut.

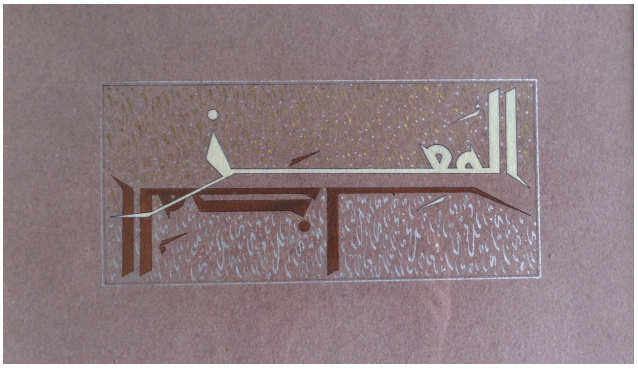
With the end of the civil war in Lebanon in 1992 *“Moushtabih ghair moutashabih”* was exhibited as Sayegh’s third visual experiment. The exhibition had two parts, one where the ninety-nine names of Allah were painted in an elegant Kufic style but with each two opposing meanings on top of each other and one with repeating words printed in black on white. In the first part*, al-khafid/al-rafi’* (The Abaser/ The Exalter), *Al-muh’iyi/al-mumeet* (The Giver of Life/The Taker of Life) and *al-m’uizz/al-muzil* (The Bestower of Honors/ The Humiliator), some of the ninety-nine names, are

placed in a mirror image composition on top of each other. Even though they are all names of Allah, they mean two opposing things. The definite meaning is painted in white, and the negative one is painted in a solid color like blue, black or brown. The words are painted on light-colored paper with different shades for each one like a light blue or a light brown. The name of the show, “Similar but not Identical”, hints also to the names of Allah that are supposed to be the same but they are not identical.

6. *al-muh’iyi/al-mumeet* (The Giver of Life/The Taker of Life), *Samir Sayegh, 1992*



7. *al-khafid/al-rafi’* (The Abaser/ The Exalter), *Samir Sayegh, 1992*



8. *al-m’uizz/al-muzil* (The Bestower of Honors/ The Humiliator), *Samir Sayegh, 1992*

In *“Moshtabah”,* Sayegh started experimenting with the geometry and Kufic of the Quran, and his big surprise was in realizing that the most productive

experiments with Arabic script came in the first 300 years of its inception with a form of Kufic that is called *kufi al masahif al oula.* The Kufic script provided the foundation for the art of Arabic calligraphy, but also was a vision. Kufic appeared during a time when Arabs had an oral tradition, and the script was utilized to scribe the words of Allah in the Quran. Experiments involved many materials, like ceramics and wood, but mainly it was the DNA of the Islamic holy book. The early manuscripts did not have the names of their calligraphers; the aim was to celebrate the word of *wahi*, the name of Allah, or to create a form, a shape for this word, which is why Sayegh believes that the Kufic script is a foundation and vision. But as we have stated earlier, it could also be that the names of these calligraphers have not been researched properly for different reasons. Sayegh noticed how for 300 years, the Kufic to the unknowing eye might have looked similar in all the early books. But he emphasized that each *mushaf* was different. This fact pushed him to try and find the laws of this script, from which Sayegh created the Kufic that he used to write the 99 names of Allah and that later became his signature style. He tried to unite calligraphy and ornamentation, seeking to make calligraphy become ornamentation by transforming the letter, or the word, into a "written" module. At the same time, he attempted to make repetition become reproduction, to make it absolute and not patterned, by regenerating itself all the time.[181] Kufic is like people: it is similar to race, but it is different as individuals when we have a closer look.

In the second part of the exhibition, Sayegh's experimentation with repetition and words developed further with words like Allah, *Baraka* (prosperity), *Salam* (peace) and *Ne'ma* (blessing) printed on (50x70cm) white sheets in black. The artist realized that the Sufi ideas that were formulating for him were a shared element between writing and calligraphy. His work was based on ornamentation, or what some scholars call arabesque. But, out of fear of falling victim to misconception he replaced the geometric and the vegetal forms with letters. He worked on having these letters treated with the same geometric logic of rotation and parallelism,

[181] *Ibid.*

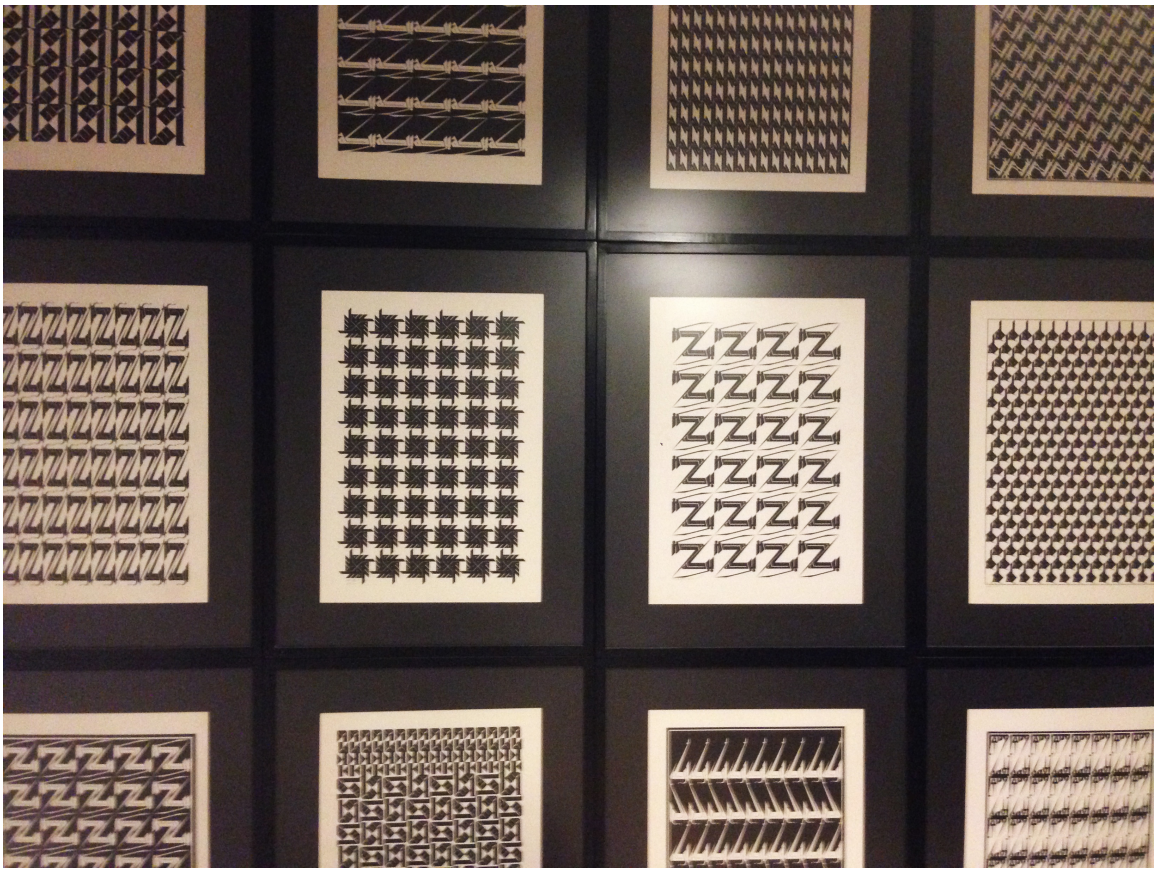
utilizing all types of geometry that the dictionary might imply about the formation of this letter. These letters were the backbone of the exhibition.[182]

9. *Barakah, Samir Sayegh, 1992-1994*

10. *Barakah, Samir Sayegh, 1992-1994*

Sayegh considers ornamentation, whether geometric or vegetal, an integral representation of the concept of abstraction in Islamic art. The laws of mathematics and geometry that are represented by Islamic ornamentation are for him the secret order of the universe. These universal secret laws are absolute, and the philosophical appearance of Islamic art is the representation of what cannot be seen, the perfect image, in contrast to the abstraction that the West understands as the ramifications of what can be seen. Ornamentation has been misunderstood because it was perceived as merely a decorative feature, based on repetition. This perception is at the core of Islamic art philosophy because there is a difference between repetition or rebirth and the re-partition of the ONE.

[182] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.



11. 12 different compositions: *Barakah, Allah, Ne'ma, Samir Sayegh, 1992-1994*

The central principle in Islamic art is based on the ability to always find a new manifestation of a single principle. This exhibition was a significant accomplishment for the understanding of this basic idea. Sayegh felt that ornamentation from the Western point of view — the viewpoint on which the history books and scholarly work on the subject over the previous 200 years had been based — unfortunately, did not have an accurate understanding of the philosophy of this tradition.[183] He saw geometry as providing universal rules that were perceived by others as drowning in primary forms like the square, triangle, hexagon, etc. On the other hand, vegetal ornamentation held the secret laws of nature that should be followed. The blowing of the wind has musical sounds that seem in the beginning to be free, but are closed like the transformation of light and sea waves, being linked to the bigger picture of the universal ocean of a geometric universe like the triangle, square and the corner, etc. There is a balance that is robust and vigorous like there is a balance

[183] *Ibid.*

at the edge of the abyss. He worked on balance and parallelism; he did not work on broken ornamentation. Even in the Kufic of the early manuscripts that inspired him and that seems as if it is breaking the rules, there is, in fact, a very meticulous order.

In this show, Sayegh starts to develop a clear independent artistic voice. The repetition, which began with just the word Allah in the "Repeating Unity" show five years ago is now maturing into a new visual system based on words repeated in grids. Sayegh will start using these patterns and his elegant Kufic style in mainstream design applications, as we will see in later pages. But all of these experiments could be seen as legible and skillfully traditional, what was new was his development of the Kufic script as a style, with the words still legible and religious in their meaning. But in terms of our analytical chart of letterist abstraction styles, and in relation to the trajectory of other artists, Sayegh was still very classical in his visual representation basing his work on legibility and minor visual breakthroughs.

"Love" (1996) "Eshq," Galerie 50 x 70, Beirut.

The formation of Sayegh's free script was born with this exhibiton. *Eshq* was freedom. The freedom of stepping out of the geometry of Kufic was in reality at the same time validating the geometry for the artist. What this means in relation to our analytical chart is that Sayegh moved from being on the calligraphic spectrum to being on the script spectrum of the chart. In the beginning, he was confident that when order is established in the form and when form stands strongly, the result was a joy; the same joy a person feels when he sees a blossoming tree or a field of flowers. For Sayegh, pleasure came from lines that were parallel and organized, but the free script made him reach the same pleasure, only through freedom. "*Eshq* was the freedom of the hand running over the pages, the same way a lover runs, and his happiness, his running before the meeting or after meeting the beloved."[184] But in a later interview, he comments on this freedom by asking:

[184] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

12. Eshq exhibition invitation*, Samir Sayegh, 1996*

Is my hand free while it draws the letters fluidly at its ease, reducing and adding, flowing and stopping, going straight or astray, twisting and twirling at its convenience without restrictions or limits? Maybe. However, I am not entirely confident because I am attracted to a similar freedom in geometry. Mathematical systems built in ornamentation bring me satisfaction, joy, and exaltation very close to freedom. Ornamentation is one of the attributes of Islamic art, amalgamating in its diverse manifestations the characteristics of this art and its aesthetic philosophy. It does not mimic nature in its visible

> images, nor does it aim at that. It has always aspired to replicate the hidden systems behind nature, systems of evolution and maturity, systems of reproduction, and the systems of similarities. Since the beginning, it united with geometrical systems as an entire structure of strict calculations to replicate a core module, which, in its various intersections, creates the final scene. Ornamentation is proof that all hidden systems are one in principle. However and unfortunately, it faces a lot of denigration, probably because of ignorance in the Western canons of its actual aesthetic value.[185]

The words used in his paintings are sometimes simple and sometimes illegible. The compositions are fluid, but it is also apparent from Sayegh's compositions that even though the script and arrangements seem fluid, they were still contained within a frame with a sort of a grid in the background. Eshq is also an experiment with color for Sayegh where he starts using gold and silver in his compositions with bright colors like magenta and bright green and blue. He does move on to explore geometry and ornamentation in his future exhibitions, creating in the process some of his most iconic work, but he also maintains the freedom and fluidity that he acquired in Eshq to develop more signature styles.

13. Haa*, Samir Sayegh, 1996*

14. Untitled*, Samir Sayegh, 1996*

[185] Barakat, "Encountering Samir Sayegh."

These four early exhibitions were timid beginnings towards experimenting and exploring Arabic calligraphy. The first one, "What Cannot be Written or Said" (*"Ma la youktab wa la youqal")* was a statement on the fact that Arabic calligraphy should be appreciated for its beauty and not only for its ability to illustrate language and transmit knowledge. It came after Sayegh contemplated the state of art in the Arab world and suggested the Arabic script as a solution for the projection and visual representation of Arab identity.

"Multiplying Unity" (*"Al wahid al muta'did"),* was a visual experiment with the concept of repetition, which is one integral aspect of Islamic art that is again a call for unity, illustrating how one can be different but similar at the same time. Humans themselves are like a pattern of an arabesque, we might all rotate in a different direction, but at the end, the same fabric unites us. He used the word Allah, us being a reflection of the divine. In "Similar but not Identical" ("*Moushtabih ghair moutashabih"),* the same idea of arabesque is explored with more words, and Sayegh was exploring more visual techniques in printing while still working on an organized grid. Freedom comes with "Love" (*"Eshq")* when the civil war has officially ended and where the artist breaks away from the grid of the Kufic script and the repetition of arabesque to create free flowing forms to express love in the Sufi sense, love to the other, love for humankind and everything around us.

An idea to be kept in mind is that the first four exhibitions took place during and slightly after the Lebanese civil war. During this time people on the street were struggling with life and death on a daily basis, people woke up in the morning not certain whether they would come back home alive or on a stretcher that night. That certainly created an existential dilemma and a need for intellectuals to express their human condition. Under such conditions three kinds of artists arise, the type who decides to pursue his/her artistic expression in spite of what is going on, creating an alternative reality and choosing to invest time in their practice and in creating new forms of expression. The second type is the revolutionary kind who is concerned with current events and who stands at the forefront of expressing political opinions publically, whether for or against a regime. Finally, the third kind is the philosopher who sees the aftermath of the current situation and suggests a way forward. Sayegh falls in this third category, he lived through the civil war but decided to rise above it

and try to find an existential solution to the immediate problem at hand. Arab modernity had failed for different reasons, the ideas that were formulating during his youth on Arab nationalism and unity were all destroyed right before him, and an apocalyptic scenario was unfolding right outside his door. He thought his way through it and tried to find a medium where he can express his reflections on his immediate human condition.

The summary for this first phase was a statement in the artist's choice of medium for expression, which is to use the Arabic script and to highlight its role as an integral part of our identity. Another important idea is that Islamic art to Sayegh is at par with any other art in the world in spite of the facts that it is underrepresented. Sayegh used its elements in his artwork even though he grew up in a Christian convent and lived in a society where segregation between different religious sects became the norm during the civil war. The artworks have letters that are legible but not necessarily words. Sayegh's early experiments were timid, and even though to his mind he thinks they were novel, the visual output was quite traditional. After his "*Eshq"* exhibition, Sayegh stopped exhibiting artwork for seven years, but his next creative output would be more of a whole expression in becoming at peace with his poetic aspirations and presenting a total intellectual experience in his work by exhibiting artwork and producing a poetry book for the same show. This will be a formula he will follow in the years to come.

Arabic Letters Speak to an International Audience

When Sayegh eventually recovered and started writing poetry again, he decided to make it part of his artwork, using it to launch his books at the gallery where he exhibited. He will do this in three of his exhibitions*, "Muthakarat al-huruf"* (2003), "*Fi madeeh al-hourouf"* (2009) and with his latest "*Alif bihourouf kathira"* (2014). According to his readers at the time, he was a pure voice compared to his contemporaries in his first poetry book *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* (published in 1980),.[186] Mahmoud Zebawi, an artist and historian was very close to Sayegh in his transitional period from poetry to art. Zebawi labels Sayegh's poetry as

[186] Mahmoud Zeibawi. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

very spiritual, citing the poem "*Seman al-'amoudi*" (Saint Simeon Stylites) as one of the poems that actually reflected Sayegh's saintly aspirations, which had developed while studying at the convent during his childhood. [187] Unlike his contemporaries who were mostly revolutionaries, Zebawi appreciated Sayegh because he was not political, nor historical, nor social in his themes; his work transcended time and was relevant to humanity at large. Sayegh was not religious, but a "*poète d'inspiration religieuse*."

In his youth, Sayegh was familiar with the magazine *Majalit Shi'r*, which was a platform that gave poets the role of visionaries and liberated poetry from restrictions, thereby empowering a whole generation of poets who grew under this premise. [188] These inclinations towards modern poetry in S*hir* magazine and its poets later dispersed over different political and ideological parties. Some of these poets were inclined towards Arab socialism, nationalism and liberal thought. By being exposed to these poets and their parties, Sayegh came into contact with modernity in form while getting inspired by the Sufi atmosphere in the writings of Gibran and the Islamic Sufi tradition. In 1969 Sayegh worked with the poet Adonis on founding *Mawaqif* magazine as an editorial board member. *Mawaqif* was where his first poems were published and that eventually culminated in his first book of poetry, which was issued under the title *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm* in 1980. To him, the new source for modern poetry was Sufism, it came in at the same time as modernity, and sufisum was not something he had explored before.[189]

Huda No'mani thinks that the post-seventies era in the Arab world also witnessed the death of poets like al-Mutannabi, al-Neffari, and IbnArabi, who all fell

[187] Seman al-'amoudi, *Maqam al-qaws wa ahwal al-sahm*. Beirut, 61.

[188] *Sh'ir* magazine was something of a cultural revolutionary movement founded by Yousif el-Khal, featuring poetry by Adonis, Khalida Said, Nazir el-Azim, Mohamad Maghout, and Fouad Rifqah from Syria, who were joined by Shouki AbuShakra, Onsi el-Haj and Essam Mahfouz from Lebanon. The rest were famous names during the same period like the early Iraqi poets Badr Shakir al-Sayyab, Bouland el-Haidari, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Nazik al-Malaika, and Fadouwa Touqan from Palestine . The Karkouk group that was formed in Iraq in 1958 included Sarkon Boulus, Jean Demo and Fadel Azzawi. It was another revolutionary movement that was most active between 1964-68. Some of its artists moved in and out of Beirut and were aware of their contemporaries throughout the Levant. Both of these groups were new and revolutionary in their style and content, while Sayegh was aware of their work having published in the same magazine, he belonged to a narrower group of poets who had been influenced by Sufism.

[189] Without forming a school, the most famous poets with Sufi influence were Adonis, Adeeb Saab, Fouad Rifqah, Huda No'mani, Mohamad Ali Shams elDine.

out of the public discourse.[190] Their words were no longer relevant to the Arab present. She believes that as a civilization Arabs have regressed with what she calls, "the death of words and the death of poets." A wall of depression rose in the imagination of every Arab especially poets who, "carry hearts that are fragile and transparent as water." [191]

When asked about her opinion on Sayegh's calligraphic work, she clearly stated that Sayegh, in her view, would always be a poet. For No'mani, the title of Sayegh's latest book *Alif bihourof kathira*, even if its purpose was to parallel an art exhibition, is already a poem; in her view, calligraphy in Islam was a form of piety and to some extent a form of Sufism. In a Sufi like Sayegh, she finds a thirst for the truth, and the meaning in his poetry does not spring from solitude like hermits, Sufis, and saints, but rather from an internal energy that runs in his heart and his soul.

Even though Sayegh stopped writing poetry for a very long time, in No'main's view and many others he remained a true poet, which is a statement to the quality of his work. The poetry came back to Sayegh in 2003 with his "Diary of Letters" exhibition.

"Diary of Letters" (2003) "Mouzakarat alhourouf," Galerie Agial, Beirut.

For Saleh Barakat, the gallery owner of Agial, the biggest challenge was to get Sayegh to develop artwork after seven years of abstaining. He was able to achieve that, considering the outcome a great success for himself as a dealer when art buyer Remon Audi, from Audi Banks, became interested on the opening night of the exhibit in acquiring the thirty-nine paintings that were on display.[192] *"Mouzakarat alhourouf"* proved to be a great success and the beginning of a long, fruitful

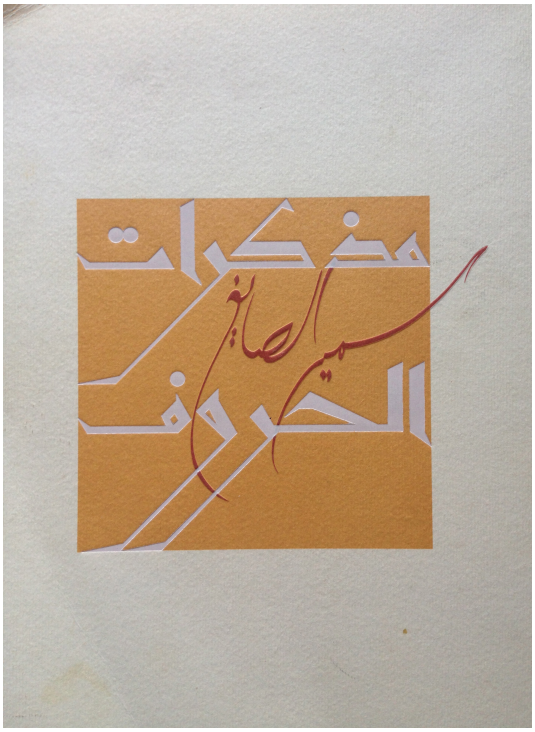
[190] Huda No'mani is a Lebanese poet born in 1930 in Syria who published her first poetry book *Elika*, in 1970. In the seventies when No'mani returned to Beirut from Cairo after living there for seventeen years, she confessed that she came back for the poetry. When she wrote her first book, *Elika*, she placed in it her Sufi experience in its totality after which she met Sayegh. No'mani confesses that throughout her life she had met a very few people who were truly connected to the holy and she considers Sayegh to be one of them and with the most optimistic views on life. She used the Sufi word "sirran" which literally means secret but as with many Sufi words, holds dual meanings, it also means knowledge of the unseen and the unknown, a person with "baseera".

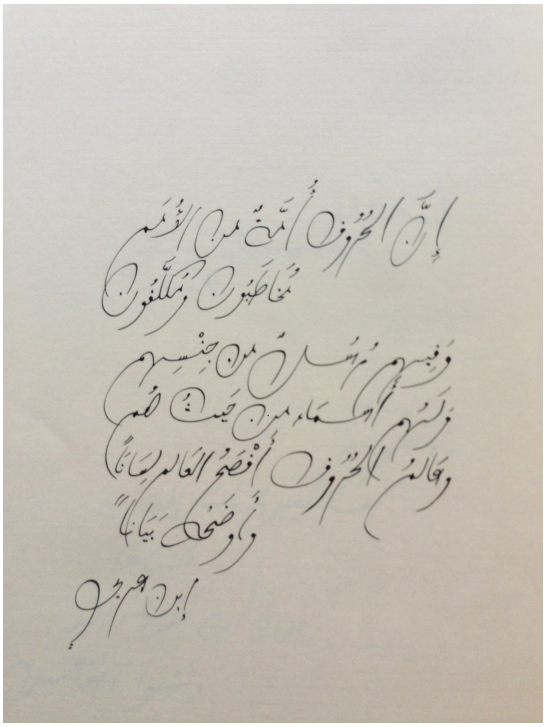
[191] Huda No'mani. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, August 2014.

[192] Saleh Barakat. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

collaboration and friendship between the young and ambitious art dealer Saleh Barakat and the artist Samir Sayegh.

The exhibition's accompanying book is a relatively small (17x20cm) artist's diary composed of 160 pages, with poems and confessions written between 2001 and 2003, printed on high-quality off-white paper all scribed using Sayegh's handwriting.[193] The diary of letters brings the Arabic alphabet to life, opening with a quote from Ibn Arabi on letters and continuing with, "questions to reach the letter *ba*." That is followed by five abstract visual compositions of letters and a section entitled "*dairat al-alif*" (the circle of *alif)*. In this section, the first entry is the "Diaries of the letter *alif* 1", followed by the "Diaries of *lam* on *alif*," then a letter from "*lam* to *alif*" and another from "*yaa* to *alif*" followed by "Diaries of the letter *alif* 2" and a long conversation with the letter *alif*. This section ends with four abstract artworks. Sayegh brought the letters to life and had them converse with each other through poetic correspondence.



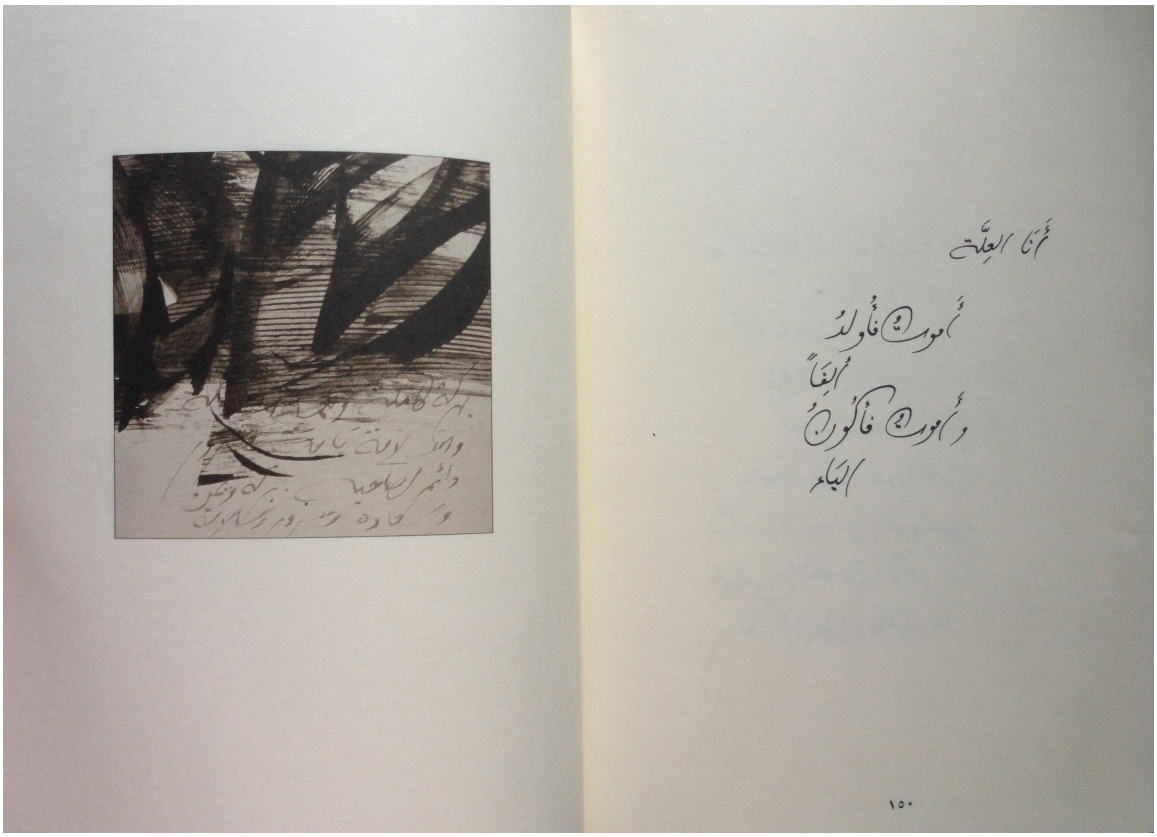


15. *Diary of Letters book cover, Samir Sayegh, 2003* 16. *Diary of Letters page, Samir Sayegh, 2003*

[193] Samir Sayegh, *Muzakarat al-hourouf* (The Diaries of Letters). (Beirut: Calligraph Printing Press, 2003).

The section that followed was entitled "*rasail wa mouthakarat*," or "Letters and diaries". Those start with the diaries of "*hamza*", "*mim*", "*geem*", "*raa*", and include the journals of "*sad* on *seen*", "*seen* on *sad*", then a letter from "*raa* to *seen* and *sad*" and from "'*ain* to *raa*", from "*seen* to *ain*", from "*seen* to *sad*", from "*hamza* to *ain*", from "'*ain* to *hamza*", from "*kaf* to *seen* and *sad*", and a conversation with the letter *mim*. This section ends with six abstract calligraphic artworks signaling the beginning of another section entitled "*daeirat al-waw*" (the circle of the letter *waw*). It starts with the diary of the letter *waw* on the letter *ha*, followed by a conversation with the letter *waw* ending with a break of three abstract artworks followed by questions to the teacher and a final page with a calligraphic abstraction slide. Sayegh's own handwriting with a beautifully designed book that leaves a white page next to each visual composition is a calm and entertaining read.

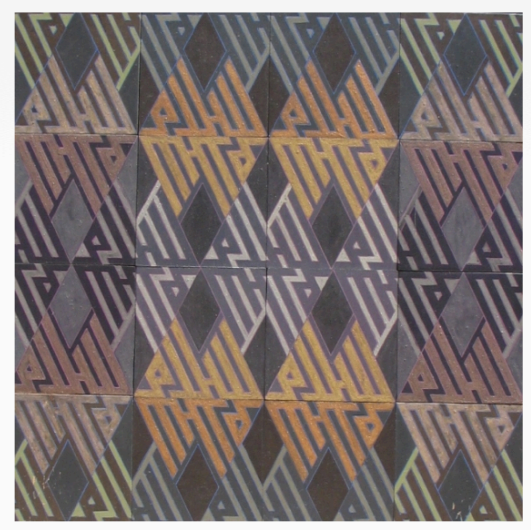
What Sayegh did in his diary was to create intimacy between the reader and the letters by bringing them to life, giving them memories and feelings, making them converse and write diaries and letters to each other. Through this very special tool of writing, Sayegh was able to communicate on the aesthetic qualities of each letter, discussing its history, its structure, its relationship to other letters in the alphabet and how various philosophers perceived it. The letters in *"Mouzakarat alhourouf"* get jealous, fall in love, dream, sing, mutate, remember, dance, win and lose, fly, sleep and die. The letters become human; they live life to the fullest with all of its sorrows and pleasures, and like any living thing, they eventually die. Sayegh's romantic style, if compared to his first *diwan* in 1980, reached in this work a rich maturity, successfully translating all of his historical and Sufi knowledge into a formula that could be comprehended by any layman. He deals with very profound and meaningful issues using very simple musical words that can be perceived according to the knowledge of their reader. In these diaries, Sayegh practiced what he preached and attained what he wished in his previous works, the accessibility of art to a broad audience.



17. *Diary of Letters page spread, Samir Sayegh, 2003*

In his artwork, he hand-painted on small squares modular words that appeared in his previous exhibitions, like peace, prosperity, blessings, etc. He assembled these in different arabesque patterns using a very austere color palette; like dark red and purple with a line of silver, or different shades of brown with some words painted in gold. He did not only break the modules in his compositions, but he also manipulated and broke the color pattern within his grid to give a whole new impression of the same module. Such logic of making and breaking the grid in an Islamic art project can be seen on the walls of mosques and Islamic schools around the world like the monument of Qalawun in Cairo, for example, or the Topkapi Saray in Istanbul amongst many others. Thus again his interventions might not be new in their concept but their novelty is in their coloring and their structure. The words are designed differently from historic examples, and they building modularity in relationship to each other was also different.

18. *Salam, Samir Sayegh, 2003*



19. *Salam, Samir Sayegh, 2003*

Even though 39 artworks were on display, the critics still felt that Sayegh presented himself more as a poet than as a visual artist.[194] The artist laughs loudly as he candidly confesses that "*Mouzakarat alhourouf"* was a declaration of his acceptance of the fact that he had to stop writing poetry, which was why he used his handwriting to scribe the script of the book and presented the book as part of the exhibition. He wrote without publishing or distributing the book commercially; he writes to display now, not to publish. This book was a manifesto for the artwork. It is amusing to discover that only when Sayegh came to terms with the idea that he would not write poetry again, was he abler to write one of his most influential and honest works. In this sense, he is different from other calligraphic abstraction artists because in addition to visually translating and updating a bank of historic Islamic art visual language through his artwork, he was reflecting poetically on that experience. While different artists were inserting the letters into their painting compositions, few were working on innovating the architecture of Arabic letters, Sayegh being one of them. Sayegh here is slowly moving on the spectrum from one point to another. This exhibition marks an important milestone for him as an artist in metamorphosis towards a new place on the spectrum of abstraction.

[194] "wa Samir al Sayegh fi "agyal" hurufeyat sha'er" *al-Mustaqbal.* http://www.almustaqbal.com/v4/Article.aspx?Type=np&Articleid=32993. (Last checked January 2016)

After this show, Sayegh would move on to develop work and exhibit work internationally. First starting with a Special Guest Exhibit at the First Sharjah Biennale for Calligraphy in 2004, then at the British Museum in the "Contemporary Arab Art" in 2006. An exciting exhibition on artist poets from the Arab world and that reunited him with his old friend the poet Adonis was at Galerie Atassi in Damascus *"Shou'ara tashkiliyoun"* in 2008.

"Word into Art" was an exhibition curated by Venetia Porter at the British Museum in London, and was composed of works from the museum's collection, along with some loaned objects. It included pieces by about eighty contemporary artists from the Middle East and North Africa, of which Samir Sayegh was one.[195] The work on display by Samir Sayegh was a black-and-white composition based on the word "Allah," which Sayegh turned into geometric shapes. In the central section, the two sides of the rectangles are the letter *alif* while inside are the two *lams* and *ha* making up the rest of the word. What was important in this contribution was finally placing Sayegh's work within the international arena, which gave audiences the ability to compare his style to that of other artists utilizing the Arabic script in their artwork.

For "*Shou'ara tashkiliyoun - tashkiliyoun shou'ara"*, ("Painting Poets, Poetic Painters"), Mouna Attasi invited four artists in 2008 who combine poetry and modern art to display their work at her gallery in Damascus.[196] She thinks that the relationship of various literary forms of expression to contemporary arts is one that intersects and integrates different aspects, whether apparent or hidden. The distinct issues become evident in the shape of the harmonious dialogue between two artists from different artistic domains, while the secret aspect works to camouflage an

[195] The exhibition was part of *Middle East Now*, a season of special events, which included lectures, films, poetry readings and music. The exhibition and the season were produced in partnership with Dubai Holding. The United Arab Emirates' government supported the exhibition, and the two first forwards in the catalogue were by H.E. Mohammad al-Gergawi, the executive chairman of Dubai Holding, and H.E. Dr. Anwar Gargash, UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs. Both letters expressed the idea that the Arab world was behind in the arts but that the UAE wanted to play an important role in the development and support of the arts in the region, which it has done since 2006. The show opened in London, then moved in 2008 to Dubai and was reported to have been a huge success.

[196] She states that she got the idea for the exhibition in 1998 after an extraordinary meeting that brought together the artists Fateh Mudarras and Adonis for a public debate at her gallery, at which the relationship between literature and illustration was discussed.
Painting Poets, Poetic Painters. (Damascus: Attasi gallery, 2009), 5. Exhibition catalogue.

obsession whose existence most great artists strive to acknowledge. She exhibited the work of Etel Adnan, Adonis, Fateh Mudarres and Samir Sayegh, considering these works to be more than simple attempts to draw pictures with words or to create verses using lines and colors, commenting that, "they are a harvest of lovers' strolls on the banks of creative art."[197]

In his forward to the exhibition catalog, Ziad Dalloul states that poetry and drawing are different in their techniques of creativity, in their tools of creation and means of expression. They are also different in their process of reach and access. While poetry requires an in-depth, practical understanding of the language of the poet, painting transcends geographical boundaries of language, visual awareness being its only gateway to being "read."[198] Among the four featured artists' works, Fateh Mudarres isolates his writings from his drawings while Adonis turns poetic texts and graphics into collages. Etel Adnan writes her verses, and those of other poets on paper and accordion-like books and Samir Sayegh's drawings entail abstractions of letters as free graphic forms. To Dalloul, Sayegh draws the details of letters and portions of words, not letters and words. This perhaps means that Sayegh has transcended the meaning of written words and the implication of language to arrive at the graphic essence of the message, and also to get at contemplation in its structural harmony. Sayegh's work invokes the asceticism and austerity of the philosophical rhetoric of the line, where writing and poetry become a single whole; the poet declares himself to be a Sufi, clad in the *abaya* of line and verse.[199]

Reviews of the exhibition placed Sayegh's work outside of the letterist group of artists and into the contemplative Sufi arena. His artwork is described as being obsessed with the musical dimension of the letter, and involving a philosophical aspect of Islamic art. He delves into the details of the letter to create, with great asceticism, a new meaning for the letter. Thus his letters become a musical composition that is based on deep historical research. Sayegh's work is like, "a

[197] *Ibid.*
[198] *Ibid,* 11.
[199] *Ibid,* 13.

building that derives its light from its core through philosophical debates because every letter has its majesty and visual pleasure."

"In Praise of Letters" (2009) "Fi madeeh al-hourouf," Galerie Agial, Beirut.
In 2006 Lebanon was invaded by Israel, and once again all cultural life came to a halt. Sayegh's 2009 "In Praise of Letters" exhibition production was proportional to the situation of the country where he lived at the time. Twenty-nine paintings in acrylic were on display, accompanied by a very thin, folded A4 booklet, hand bound with a thread by the award-winning designer, Sayegh's disciple Lara Aswad. The booklet contained no photos, but only text using a computer font, which contained Sayegh's thoughts with twenty-one entries.

20. *In Praise of Letters cover and page spread, Samir Sayegh, 2009*

It opens with "*Esm*" (Name), and Sayegh explains that he wanted to call his exhibition "*awliya wa qidiseen*", but did not do so for fear of religious connotations overshadowing the meaning of the letters. He declares in the second entry, "*hourouf jadida*", that he is seeking new letters and shapes of new letters, not for better legibility or more beautiful writing, but to attain letters that are illegible and unpronounceable, but that are there to be looked at and seen, letters to be contemplated by the eye and read by the imagination, to be filled with meaning and imagery so they can be reinterpreted, and thus become the body of a new text and a

new book. "*Altariq*" is a small story about how Sayegh was attracted to calligraphy in his childhood, and "*Mafaza*" explains simply how the letterist movement is a political one, describing the death of the script with the Ottoman Empire and the role modernity has yet to play for the advancement of the art of calligraphy. "*Al-akl*", (The Mind), describes the state of the modern Arab artist who has to be a witness and a fighter at the same time, continuing with an entry entitled "*Bayad*", which calls for advancement, even if there is not a rational way forward yet. Perhaps the eye, or the hand, or the dream, or the heart, or the ink, or the pen, or the paper, or the whiteness can give us the answers on how to progress. Sayegh started listening to the ink and surrendered to the reed. "*Taamoul*" explains two difficulties, the first being the importance of understanding the birth of Arabic calligraphy as an independent art form that is more than a thousand years old, and the second lying in our ability to understand and accept that this art form has declined and is almost non-existent.

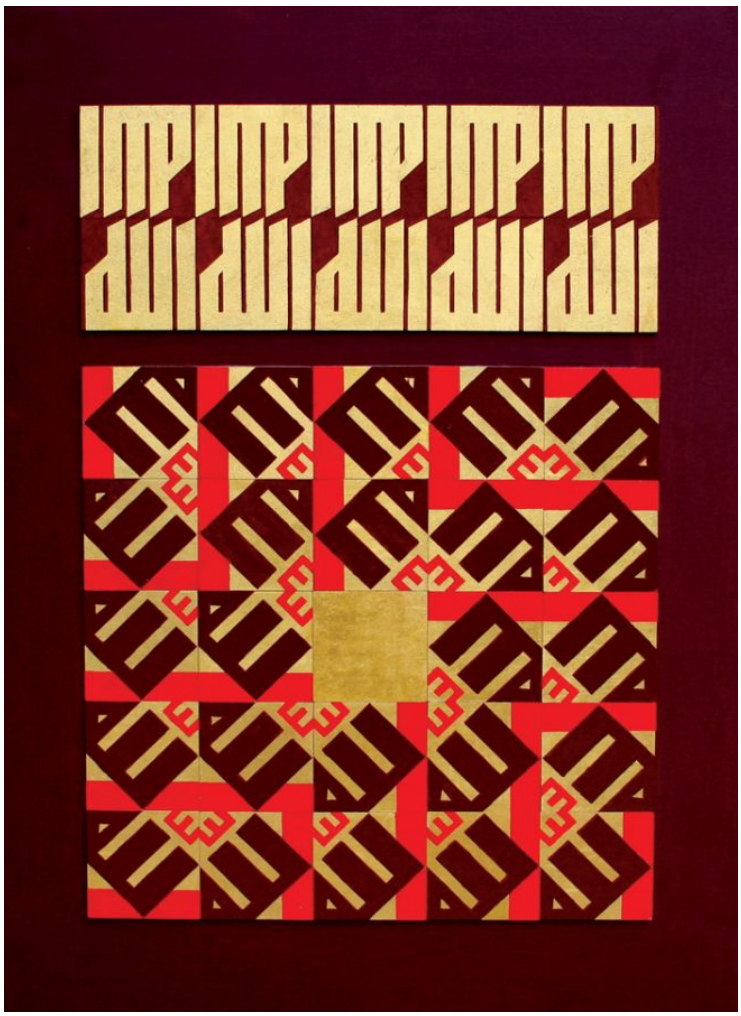
21. *Dad, Samir Sayegh, 2009*

"*Bayna al maa wal teen*" (Between Water and Mud), highlights the difference between calligraphic script and the script used for legibility as two separate entities. In "*Alam al-ashkal*", Sayegh explains that shapes are the new language of letters that the eye should be trained to read. "*Hadatha*" discusses the concepts of modernity in art and the 1968 student revolution in France. "*Fil shakl*" explains that in calligraphy the letter is stronger than a word, and the shape of the letter is stronger than the meaning of a word, also explaining that in calligraphy lies the spiritual ability of the letter and its form. "*Fil khatt*" Sayegh lists the descriptions of the script that is followed by "*Taamul*", in which he discusses the development of Arabic script from Kufic. "*Al khatt al arabi*" explains that Arabic script, which is not only relevant to people who speak the Arabic language, but also includes Persian and other languages that utilize the same letters. He believes that Arab national movements in the 1960s and 1970s gave a bad name to the letterist movement, in the same way that fundamental Islam is ruining the reputation of Arabic calligraphy by owning it and considering it an aspect of Islam. "*E'tiraf*" (confession), points to the importance of remembering that Arabic script is an independent art form and giving it a new life. "*Ezdiwajiyah*" discusses the duality between the shape of the text and its meaning, and "*Shahada*" explains the importance of geometry as the essence of the universe as represented in the Kufic script and Islamic geometric art. "*Alalwan*" explores the way color serves calligraphy in Sayegh's artwork and "*Horiyya*" investigates how Sayegh combines the writing with arabesque. "*Mousiqa*" is a comparison between Arabic calligraphy and music, as well as being a request to consider the script as a presence with the multiplicity of manifestations and a multitude of births. Sayegh closes with: "In calligraphy, the letters are like angels that descend to us from the sky; they whisper in our ears and hide in our dream. In calligraphy, the letters are angels that fall to take us and go back to the sky."
He elaborates on this exhibition, saying:

> How can a contemporary calligrapher be a witness and a fighter at the same time? How can they be present and absent simultaneously? How can they be the mirror and the face all at once? So my first reflection concentrated on researching the birth of Arabic calligraphy as a full-fledged art more than a

> thousand years ago and at a later stage trying to understand the regression of this art and its decline. I firmly believe there is always room for advancement and progression. So if reason cannot find a solution, maybe the hand can - perhaps the hand or the eye, the eye or the spirit, the spirit or the passion, the passion or the ink, the ink or the pen, the pen or the paper, the paper or its whiteness. This is how I started: I listened to my hand, to the call of the ink, and I surrendered to the reed.[200]

Sayegh summarized his experience as a historian and an artist in short quick notes, again addressing a wider audience by simplifying his views. They are not directly related except in that they discuss one or another aspect of Arabic calligraphy and his experience with it. For him, the text was a supplement to the paintings.



22. *Allah, Samir Sayegh, 2009*

[200] Barakat. "Encountering Samir Sayegh."

Regarding artwork and visual representation, the idea in this exhibition was not to turn one letter into an independent entity, but for the letter in itself to become a freestanding universe, thus ceasing to be merely a printed legible letter.[201] There were several artworks on display, Allah repeated in geometric compositions, the words *"howa"* (he) and *"heya"* (she) as large geometric Kufic compositions, and single letters of the alphabet as independent paintings.[202] What is significant in the He and She paintings is the retaliation that Sayegh had intended or not indented towards the work of the Egyptian giant Salah Taher (1911-2007) who spent the span of his career painting the word *howa*, or He (The Almighty), in various creative and colorful forms. Sayegh painted the He but added the feminine She the other part of the equation.

Sayegh's aim was to transform the Arabic letter from a line in a dictionary to become a dictionary in itself; in this way, the letter takes the whole space of the painting without losing the essential structure or image that make it a letter. That is why he tried to look at this letter as an icon and this is why in the accompanying book to the exhibition he called the letters "saints" and "holy figures." The work is to be understood not concerning the spiritual abilities of these letters or the spiritual outlook, but from a transfigurational point of view. He looked at this transfiguration as a universal independence, and existential presence at the same time. The letter itself becomes the content from an artistic point of view, and thus the audience will have to read it in the same manner that they read ornamentation, meaning they have to look for stability and softness and strength and tenderness, amongst other graphic qualities. They should read ultimate qualities in the letter, as it is transformed into a freestanding entity that represents in its formation the secret order of the universe.

Critics describe his work as open to imagination more than reality, even though it depicts a very concrete element, one Arabic letter, but letters that are like

[201] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.
[202] http://www.jehat.com/Jehaat/ar/Tashkeel/maqalat/12-11-093.htm

fleeting moments and that cannot be described concretely.[203] The exhibition brought a new form of modernity; geometric abstraction on the one hand filled with pop colors stands side-by-side with the gold leaf of Byzantine icons and Islamic ornamentation in an exotic mix of religions, woman and man, East and West and, containing an element of visual shock to its viewer. The critics placed the work in the post-painterly abstraction and minimalist schools found in work like Frank Stella's, this maybe so in some of Sayegh's geometric studies. [204] But if compared to other calligraphic abstraction artists he falls behind on the trajectory of abstraction that we have developed. His letters and words even if innovative in their structure and design are still legible. They do not stray far from the original letters, maybe conceptually speaking, but visually his letters can still be viewed as letters.

To Sayegh, it is a great cultural achievement that the "quadrangular Kufic" script managed to construct letters and words into a matrix based on the intersection of vertical and horizontal lines above a right angle. It is a summon of pure abstraction, based on a squared black point and a squared white point; two equal square points, a black one in ink forming the body of the letter, and a white one constituting the void between letters and words. Sayegh asks, what are these squares that alternate black and white, fullness and void, vertical and horizontal? Are they shadow and light? Body and soul? Day and night? Absence and presence, or other distinguishable polarities and dualities that can be associated with the script? Are they names of prophets and saints? Are they *surat* and verses? Are they signs? Challenges? Mysteries? They are all of the above, he believes. They revolve in this supreme sphere, therefore their universality. Mathematical systems, absolute values, and antagonistic pairs are the language of the human character, an inherent part of the essence of being.[205]

The further development of this exhibition came when it was selected to take part of the tenth Sharjah Biennial Commissions and Productions Program in

[203] Ismail Faqih, "Samir Sayegh..Yamdah al-huruf." Accessed January 28, 2017. http://www.alraimedia.com/Articles.aspx?id=156263
[204] Maha Sultan "Jamaliay al-huruf kama yamtadihuha Samir Sayegh." Accessed January 28, 2017. http://www.sauress.com/alhayat/80537.
[205] Barakat. "Encountering Samir Sayegh."

2011.[206] Sayegh re-created his comments in the small booklet he had produced in Beirut in 2006 as printed artworks scribed with his handwriting accompanied by small compositions for Sharjah in 2008. The series was composed of 17 framed elements of 50x70cm each, and 15 framed elements of 35x50cm each.[207] With this Biennial, Sayegh came to the eyes of the younger curators and dealers around him, becoming an official international player. His work was also exhibited in 2012 at Athr Gallery in Jeddah as part of the collective exhibition "Journey of a line."

Creative freedom and international fame are the key features of this period of Sayegh's artistic career. He was acquired by major collectors and introduced to the Arab modern art world from its widest doors. What helped is the international interest in Arab artists that was taking place during this period. With the launch of international auction houses like Christie's in Dubai in 2006 and Doha's Sotheby's in 2008, acquiring and selling art became a means for affluent residents of the Arabia Gulf to flaunt their fortunes as their countries compete to become new global cultural hubs. [208] [209] Sayegh's work before this time had been grouped with the artists working only on the traditional script; an example was his work being featured in the Special Guest Exhibit at the First Sharjah Biennale for Calligraphy in 2004. Fast forward seven years later, and Sayegh is part of the tenth Sharjah Biennial Commissions and Productions Program in 2011 with his work being featured next to the names of the biggest international players in the art scene around the world. It came as a clear outcome of his collaborations with Galerie Agial and its owner Saleh Barakat who understood Sayegh's creative production and its value and found the right platforms to exhibit him. Their collaboration would yield more interesting outcomes shortly.

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[206] http://www.sharjahart.org/projects/projects-by-date/2011/in-praise-of-letters-sayegh
Saleh Barakat considers this a breakthrough because he was able to bring Sayegh to what he calls a "cutting edge" platform. For him to be able to penetrate the Biennial with Sayegh's work was an achievement, and he gives a lot of the credit to Rasha Salti for her involvement as one of the curators. Saleh Barakat, Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

[207] This was produced with the help of yet another one of his students-turned-artist, Joumana Medlej, and printed in Lebanon by Interprint.

[208] Christie's Dubai Saleroom & Offices. *Christie's the Art People.* Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.christies.com/locations/salerooms/dubai/.

[209] "Doha." *Sotheyby's.* Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.sothebys.com/en/inside/locations-worldwide/doha/overview.html.

The Spring of Creative Expression

A series of exhibitions and collaborations follow the events of the 2011 Arab Spring for Sayegh. In 2012 *"Yawmiyat horriya"* (Diaries of Freedom), was exhibited at the Beiteddine Festivals in Baaklin, Lebanon. Here the artist experimented with many free forms of expression by repeatedly writing only one word: "Freedom". The following year he was part of a creative collaboration with the Chinese calligrapher Wang Dongling at Athr Gallery in Jeddah for the exhibition "Strokes In Dialogue". And in 2014, he exhibited "Alif bihourouf kathira" at Galerie Agial in Beirut. These three shows are each unique for a different reason. The first one because it is the first time that Sayegh comments on a political event, even if it was utilizing only one word, but he was moved by the hopes of change and this affected his work. The collaboration with Dongling must have been an eye opening experience, and Sayegh would use the learning from this collaboration to develop his artistic practice based on utilizing the whole body for the act of creation instead of using just his hands to draw. "Alif bihourouf kathira" was another intellectual product with a poetry book and paintings that surpass, in their minimalism and structural virtuosity, any work the artists has developed earlier.

"Diaries of Freedom" (2012) "Yawmiyat horriya," Beiteddine Festivals, Baaklin.

"Yawmiyat horriya", which was an intuitive reaction to the events of the Arab Spring, was on show at the Beiteddine Palace as part of the 27th Beiteddine Art Festival.[210] Sayegh's statement on the exhibition, entitled "Freedom Diary" begins with:

> This diary is a tribute to the rare historical moments that we witnessed last year; it was ignited by burning flames that later turned into soothing rain, then was followed by footsteps rushing into town squares, hands rising in the

[210] Beiteddine Art Festival is one of the most prestigious music and art festivals in the Middle East.

> air and voices mounting from streets and porches to fill the Arab sky with cries for freedom.[211]

Each day during the events of 2011 in the Arab world, Sayegh wrote the word *horriya* in different calligraphic scripts. As the artist emphasizes, his exhibition is also an outstanding tribute to Arabic calligraphy, being:

> […] a refined and fine art pursuing its path to liberation to become once again an art capable of seeing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, and saying the ineffable such that it may free itself from ages of oblivion and darkness, and relate to the heart, not to the past, to the eyes not to the rules and conventions, to the realm of imagination and dream, not to past achievements.[212]

The work, ink on paper, was not framed; instead, it was placed between two sheets of Plexiglas giving the impression that the sheets of paper are flying in mid-air. The works range from large sheets of paper covered with tiny sketches – simple studies in preparation for larger paintings – to colourful series of overlapping words, so layered in some cases that they become chaotic and nearly illegible. One critic, who thought that only a handful of the works appear to be finished pieces, with thicker, more deliberate-looking lines contrasted with a sketchier background.[213] Elias Khoury beautifully describes the artworks in this exhibition as showing people demonstrating, bending like martyrs, bursting like throats, rising like hands, softening like lovers, and lying like bodies torn by bullets.[214] But Sayegh states that the strongest impact the Arab Spring had on Arab nations was not merely the raising of hope but the initiation of thinking and questioning about things that had been

[211] www.vista.sahafi.jo/art.php?id=a2b1c127f017abb4b25aab03ce72e53fb8049174
[212] *Beiteddine Art Festival.* (Beirut: Calligraph, 2012). Festival catalogue.
[213] Lysandra Ohrstrom "Samir Sayegh's Typography Revolution." *The Daily Star Newspaper.* Accessed November 29, 2014. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Culture/Lifestyle/2013/Jun-14/220286-samir- sayeghs-typography-revolution.ashx#ixzz2pcJQUHuH.
[214] http://www.palestine-studies.org/files/pdf/mdf/11552.pdf

taken for granted, encouraging a new reading of the surroundings, renewing Arabs' confidence in themselves and recognizing the ability of humanity to rebuild itself.[215]

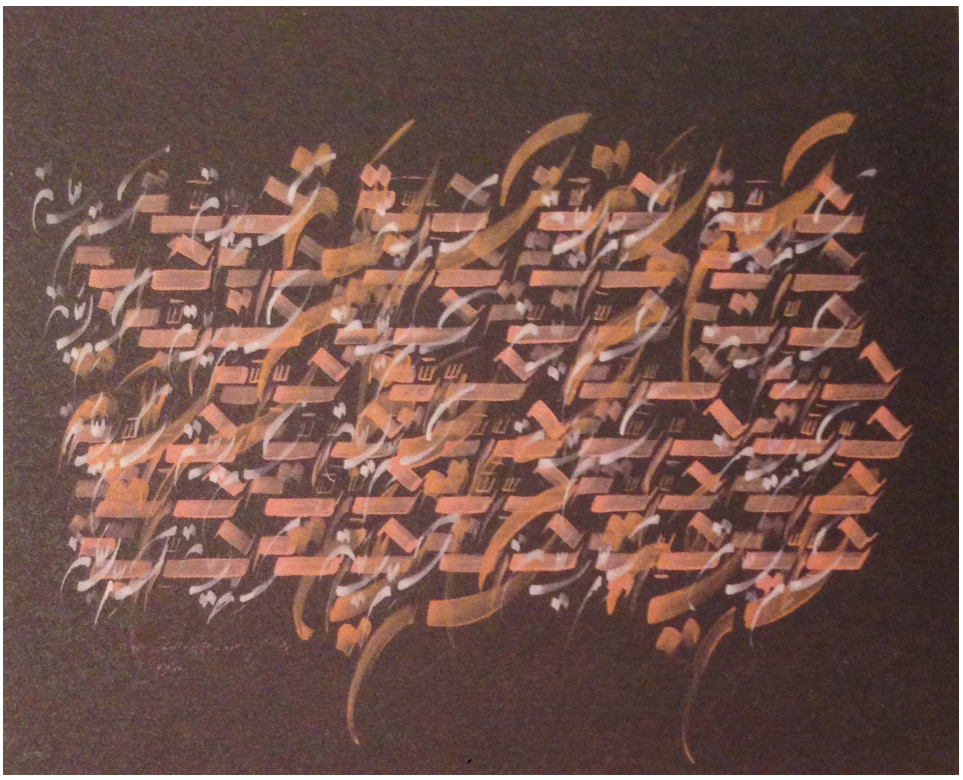
Sayegh insists that the experiment of Hurriya is a very personal one, and he feels the need to clarify that:

> I was never in poetry or writing or art, a political artist; I do not comment on the event; historically, I was not with the movements that represented politics in the painting. I did not comment on June 2006 and the Israeli invasion nor Palestinian issues or the wars of the Arab world. I never wrote a word on these matters. Suddenly I found myself confronted with an event that opened all of history to me; I was one of the people who had been plagued with deep depression and hopelessness about the possibility of change, and I was in that time raising the motto of 'losing hope and continuing to work.' I was that hopeless about change in the Arab world, especially culturally and then politically. From the moment of the Tunisian fire to Tahrir Square in Cairo, then to the raised hands in Yemen, I saw that my personal experiment was rapidly meeting the raised hands. [216] Hope started burning in the midst of this depression and my hand at that moment was seeking a way out of depression and politics to free Arabic script from its oppression. I was in my work seeking to write my experience of renewal because I got the confirmation on this from what had happened to Chinese scripts in the past centuries. I still insist that I am not on a political platform, but I had to represent my Arab nationalistic sentiment. For me, even if the experiment failed and we came to see that we would not see the new day we had hoped for, these moments can only stay like the crying voice in the garden, calling the calls of God.[217]

The designs were free form calligraphic texts that are legible and that represent a culmination of Sayegh's calligraphic experiments in the past two decades. Thus

[215] http://www.daralakhbar.com/news/2013/06/12/1016587/articles/3152017/
[216] In reference to Mohamad Bouaziz the Tunisian who set himself on fire and started the Jasmine revolution of Tunisia in 2011.
[217] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

creatively there were no visual breakthroughs, but a reflective culmination of previous experiments.



23. *Freedom, Samir Sayegh, 2012*

"Strokes In Dialogue" (2013) Athr Gallery, Jeddah. Collaboration with Chinese artist Wang Dongling.

Comparing between the Arabic script and its counterparts in the Far East has been a pressing subject for Sayegh. But Sayegh is not they only artist with such interest. Several calligraphic abstraction artists had already ventured on that journey of discovery. Nja Mahdaoui started that process of understanding and studying Far Eastern calligraphy in the late 1960's when he met the French art critic Michel Taipié who introduced him to the work of innovative Japanese and Iranian calligraphers in Italy.[218] Rafa Al Nasiri, who studied printmaking at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in the late 1950's, is clearly influenced by Chinese art and calligraphy in his work. Many of the calligraphic abstraction artists have been influenced by Japanese or Chinese calligraphy. It is understandable since calligraphy is a highly respected art

[218] Issa, *Nja Mahdaoui*, 7.

form in both the Arab world and the Far East. But there are some main differences between the art forms in the two civilizations. On one hand calligraphy in the Arab world historically has not been about personal expression. While Far Eastern calligraphy is about the individual style of the calligrapher.[219] The French artist Julien Breton demonstrates in his work the beautiful marriage between Far Eastern and Arab calligraphic styles. Before he paints his light paintings in Arabic, he poses and trains repeatedly creating gestures in the air. He contemplates, just like a Japanese calligrapher, before he performs his masterstroke. His final designs are very much influenced by the work of Hassan Massoudy in their structure and composition. But Breton's individuality is conveyed through his use of light sources in long exposure photographs with scenes of urban landscapes as backdrops for his medium instead of paint and canvas.

Sayegh witnessed the art of Chinese calligraphers on his visit to art and calligraphy museums in Shanghai, Beijing, and Xi'an in 2010, almost five decades after some of his contemporaries were exposed to it. The major insight from his China visit was the comparison he made between the Arabic script and its Chinese counterpart, which was constantly renewed by masters of calligraphy. This renewal of styles was to him similar in logic to the way Arabic has been renewed throughout history. He sites Nasta'liq script as an example of such renewal. On that trip, Sayegh confirmed what Ibn Khaldun had stated about the development of the script and how it is linked to the development of architecture and urban scape and how all the blossoming of script is related to the flourishing of the society that surrounds it. So like many art forms, a prosperous economy is key to the development of any civilization's script because the script becomes a reflection of social stability and development. The development in the *Diwan* that Sayegh witnessed with the Ottomans was similar to what the Chinese were renewing in their script, but because the Chinese were constantly refreshing their art and calligraphy and there were no restraining outside influences, their renewal continued. The case of Arabic was different; the development and regeneration were halted because of the decline and eventual defeat of the Ottoman Empire.

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[219] Sheila Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy*, 6.

One of the renewals in the script that he saw in China was called the "fast and concise," in which he found a lot of similarity with his free Italic script that is also fast. His insight, however, was that he needed to record what he wrote as an accomplishment; as Sayegh was recording it with the reed and writing it with speed, he arrived at a transparency, which he witnessed not only as a renewal of the shape but also as a renewal of the aesthetic content. It was not the language or meaning content, but the aesthetic content in the colour of the ink that became similar to the relationships between the structure and thickness or thinness of letters in a word and the way they relate to each other. He began studying the thin and the thick and the delicate in relation to colour. But regarding content, there was no change because he always felt that the real innovation in Islamic art is finding a new formula for the same principle, and science and nature both proved this possible. This experiment might have seemed new to Sayegh, but this notion had been experimented with extensively by other artists including Hassan Massoudy from Iraq and a large number of calligraphers in Iran.

Sayegh's insights from visiting China was that a natural development of the Arabic script was halted with the demise of the Ottoman Empire, and his discovery of the fast and concise style that reminded him of his experimentation. But the breakthrough exhibition that Sayegh witnessed was "*SHO1, 41 Maîtres calligraphes contemporains du Japon"* in Paris in 2012.[220] At that exhibition, he saw the logic he had applied almost thirty years before in his first art exhibition "What Cannot be Written or Said" in 1983 in Beirut.[221] The premise that the Japanese master calligraphers applied was to stop writing words. Unlike the work he had seen in China where the calligraphers were building on and reinventing and reinterpreting a tradition, the Japanese calligraphers had decided not to use the written letter for legibility but rather to use the forms of the letters to create a new visual language. These calligraphers did not feel the need to build forms or brush strokes that represented legible letters influenced by content, so they started writing poems. They began by listening to these poems and drawing them; the scripts of the poem did not translate the words of the poem nor did they contain the words of the

[220] At the Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, between March 14th and May 14th, 2012
[221] Samir Sayegh, Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

poems, but they documented, somehow, its meaning, or perhaps a relationship with its meaning or perhaps just the reaction of the calligrapher to the meaning of the words.

He describes how he was deeply affected by the work that he saw there. The beauty and virtuosity that impacted him the most was the large size of the artworks and the Japanese calligraphers' ability to create many colours (many shades of grey) in one stroke of black. That, to him, was fascinating. After that exhibition, he started noting the difference in body posture between Arabic calligraphers and those of China. How Arabic calligraphers mostly sit down at a desk for hours to scribe, while their Chinese counterparts meditate for some time and then with one steady stroke create significant works of art. He started working on big pieces of paper and painting with his hand off the table like the Chinese artists he admired. He also experimented with the technique of staying away from the table and maintaining the same consistent lines and proportions. Sayegh thus concluded that movement for these big works of art that these Eastern calligraphers were producing was internal, not external. To produce the big works of art in the air require that you create balance and have discipline, but the shape of the letter is not confined to a single symbol or meaning. The letter can express itself within itself without the burden of language, as a form or for the shape to move and become a language other than Arabic or its primary language. He considered this step crucial for opening a new door for this art. What he wants to build on is the fact that Arabic calligraphy has acquired the respect of people in different social circles and can be renewed and revived. He sees that the script does not come out by the practice the hand has had in making it; it should come out of the heart or the soul. The pen alone does not write. It needs ink, in the same way, the hand alone does not write. It also needs a heart, and energy to express. This line that writes, these shapes that are drawn on pages do not gain presence except from the heart, just like the words for this art should do not come from a teacher or a book.

Sayegh felt that he was with the Japanese on "the same page" and if he were in Japan, he would have joined them. What was peculiar is that this movement happened in Japan after their defeat in WWII, meaning at a time when they had insufficient words to express how they were feeling. Possibly this is why Sayegh felt

close to the human condition and expression that these calligraphers were experimenting because his exhibition in 1983 was held during the Lebanese civil war when the major ideas about Arab nationalism that he and his friends were working towards had failed. But calligraphic abstraction as a whole movement started with the decolonization of the Arab world. It was a reaction by artists and a statement of confirmation about their Arab identity. It could be that the manifestation of the script is a confirmation of identity in failures and successes for different artists at different times in history.

After these two trips to China and France, Sayegh's question became whether there was a chance for the Arabic script to learn from the Chinese experience and if he could apply that learning to his artwork. The opportunity arose when he was invited by Athr gallery in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to collaborate on creating artwork with the Chinese master calligrapher Wang Dongling. It was a vague idea because of the tremendous differences between Arabic and Chinese. Arabic is written on a table with a pen, while Chinese is written with a brush and could be free-standing. In Arabic, the enlargement of the script happened later and not directly, while the Chinese had worked on a large scale for a long time.[222] Sayegh's experiments with writing were always small, but they documented his freedom in style, like his work on Abjad Houaz and the ninety-nine names of Allah. The plan was for the artists to interact with one another in the gallery, and to produce a one-off artwork that blended Arabic and Chinese calligraphy in an attempt to create a contemporary expression of cross-cultural experimentation and visual forms.[223]

What controls the Arabic script is the reed that two parallel lines in a curve called a *kat*, which allows the two parallel lines that do not meet to meet at the end of the *alif* when it curves, or on the edges of the *seen*. It does not matter if the line is large or small, the shape of these two lines forces the form of the script, and that is the essence of the structure of Arabic calligraphy. Chinese script can use a free brush

[222] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.
[223] "'Strokes in Dialogue', A Joint Exhibition of Arabic and Chinese Calligraphy." *Islamic Arts.* (Accessed January 2017) http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/strokes_in_dialogue_a_joint_exhibition_of_arabic_and_chinese_calligraphy/

not limited by two parallel lines, which pushes calligraphers to work in new areas where this text appears in new forms.

Sayegh earlier had tried to enlarge his brush, his early attempts involving wrapping a sponge on wood or Plexi slab so the script would be bigger, and using 140x15 cm-sized paper, but he still had to work on the table. He confesses that he was nervous for not knowing what lay ahead and that his biggest challenge was the size. He knew that Chinese calligraphers worked in freely large scale because of the liberty that working while standing gave them, something he could not do with Arabic because of the working-on-a-table tradition. His worries were confirmed when Dongling started painting using a large brush, which he dipped in a bucket, on 3x3 meter-wide sheet of paper placed flat on the floor of the gallery in front of an audience and TV camera, having chosen the theme "the path." There was a language barrier between them. Thus communication was difficult, and Sayegh felt this delayed the development of a real collaboration. With the limited time frame they had, Sayegh decide to also work on "the path" or *al-tariq* and his first attempt was to write "the road is not one" in a composition. Dongling relaxed, and they decided to move forward and work on common words like beauty, peace, and *baraka* to justify the concept of unified work or collaboration.[224]

Dongling would start by writing the word in Chinese and Sayegh would write its equivalent in Arabic to complement the other's composition. Arabic and Chinese civilizations had been using the script as an art form for a long time, and their results are similar in philosophy to work done during the Renaissance in Europe. The dialogue was severed for the Arabs because of the loss of the Ottoman Empire and the colonization of the Arab world by European countries, while the tradition continued for the Eastern civilizations. Sayegh thinks that Arabs need to find a new *tajali* in the originality of the Arabic script, in its attempt to belong to an identity of the spirit, not in the details and the shape without activating the *ana* or the "I" of the calligrapher, meaning his feelings or his personal endeavours. The artist's skill should

[224] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.

be seen as an individual part of a larger whole, his belonging should be to the aesthetics and not to his ego.[225]

This collaboration and experiment might have been new to Sayegh but it has been experienced by various other calligraphers that were more exposed to the Eastern calligraphic traditions. A good example is Hassan Massoudy, whose work is very much inspired by the movement of the whole body and does not just entail scribing on a desk. Thus this experimental collaboration might have been a novelty for Sayegh but the results it yielded were no novelty.

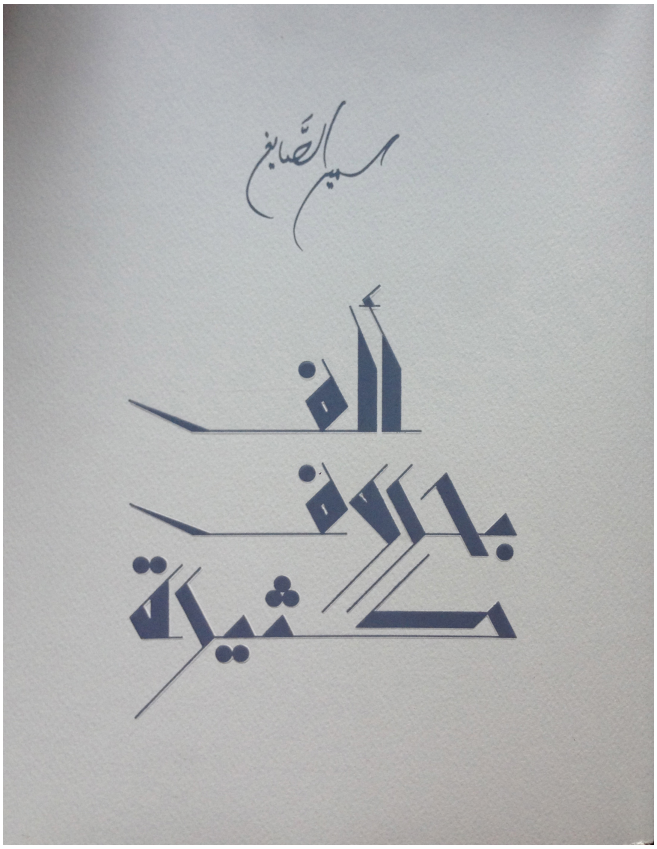
"Alif in Many Letters" (2014) "Alif bi hourouf kathira". Galerie Agial, Beirut.

Sayegh witnessed the development of both Japanese and Chinese scripts when the calligraphers turned their craft into an art form. From that research and experience he decided that it was time for his Arabic calligraphic pen to become larger in size than the printed letters, and for this, he borrowed techniques from the Eastern schools of calligraphy. First, he had to change his movements, from one that is mainly based on the wrist, which is the case for Arabic calligraphy, to one that springs from the whole body because he began—like Eastern calligraphers—to do his work standing up. Previously, to create larger scripts, Sayegh had had to draw the outline and then fill it with colour. He had started using a much bigger pen by wrapping a 15-25 cm of Plexi with a cloth and dipping it in ink on a 150x150-cm paper; he worked standing up and not sitting at a table, thus for him, there was a fundamental change of time, space and place.

Ibn Muqla, when elaborating on the technique of the script, describes a good shape and a good placement, meaning where a calligrapher is supposed to place the text and its relationships, balancing between the different forms and elements of the body of the script. When the hand is on the script, the place changes, becoming air, and the hand, instead of putting itself in the air, puts itself on the head of the brush, meaning on the ink. When it bases itself in ink, it has to become a movement, and that will create the balance between the air and the ink. This is not true of the

[225] "'Strokes in Dialogue', A Joint Exhibition of Arabic and Chinese Calligraphy." *Islamic Arts.* (January 2016) http://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/strokes_in_dialogue_a_joint_exhibition_of_arabic_and_chinese_calligraphy/

movement of placing hand on paper—to put the hand in the air you must move the hand from the wrist to the shoulder. Sayegh does not think that this change challenged the concept of Islamic art, which, for him, involves creating a time with no time and a place with no borders, in essence representing the philosophy of Islamic art.



24. Alif in Many Letters book cover, Samir Sayegh, 2014

The second novelty that he discovered with this experiment is that the beauty of script was related to the speed of the hand, which should not be too fast so the ink does not spatter, and it should not be slow, so the ink does not burst. Based on *tawfiyya* and *itmam*, the ink should have the same thickness, in the beginning, the middle and at the edges. Sayegh overcame this concept of consistence with the new technique because when the body of the script became wider, it was important for the space to be coloured between the thick and the thin, between the black and the white, so that this space would again be expressed in multiple languages or multiple signs. He thinks that perhaps this technique is closer

to drawing and colouring than to calligraphy, but at the same time, it gave him the ability to express and place equal importance on letting go of the actual words and their meaning. Each letter is scribed using one kind of ink, thus the same colour, and so the words present their shape as the reading; Sayegh replaced colours with their ability to express. He considers himself a purist in the sense of going back to the basics, coming back to drawing with ink or going back to using only the black and white and to the possibility that once again, script can create a connection between itself and the Far Eastern styles, instead of with European art.[226]

25. Alif in Many Letters exhibition view, Samir Sayegh, 2014

The exhibition contained thirty-eight paintings of various sizes and it was accompanied by publication under the same title *Alif in Many Letters*.[227] The book is 144 pages and 30x24-cm, and it combines all of Sayegh's previous book layout styles. The text is set using a font while the titles are scribed in Sayegh's handwriting. All the text is accompanied by calligraphic abstractions on each page utilizing Sayegh's free style. The cover and the chapter headings are scribed in Sayegh's signature Kufic style with highly stylized letters with hair-thin horizontal parallel strokes. Similar to his In Praise of Letters, the style involves short notations on clear concepts, but this time Sayegh used the book as a platform to explain the summary of his accumulated

[226] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[227] Samir Sayegh, Alif bihourouf kathira (Alif in Many Letters). (Beirut: Calligraph Printing Press, 2014).

ideas on Arabic script, its past and his hope for its future evolution using his usual poetic prose style.

26. Alif in Many Letters exhibition view, Samir Sayegh, 2014

The first chapter is entitled "*Atabat*" (steps), with five entries: "*Fil lughah*", which discusses the limitations of language: "*Fil khatt 1*", which elaborates on the fact that it is not the job of the script to explain language all the time. "*Fil khatt 2*," confirms that the script has to betray language in a superficial form so that it is aligned with it in the "*batin*" (unseen), giving the language a voice; *khatt* has a colour, the ear is for language and the eye is for *khatt*, this is how real unity is achieved. "*Abjadya lithatiha*" insists on the importance of freeing the letter from its duty towards language because there is a lot that cannot be seen, heard, written, or said. "*Al'oudah ila almustaqbal*", (back to the future), illustrates the need to build on the past so we can advance to the future.

In the second chapter "*Simiya*" there are thirteen sections. "*Fil tariq*" is in eight small parts and it starts by describing the path or paths for calligraphers to take

and the challenges they will face while making them. This is followed by "*Wasl*", which is a conversation with the letter *mim*. "*Fil tariq*" is the following section on the difference between the road to language and the path towards *khatt*. "*Wasl*" follows with a conversation with the letter *baa*. " Fil tawazon" discusses the concept of balance and is followed by yet another "*Wasil*", a poem on the act of calligraphy, which is followed by another "*Fil tawazon*", which discusses the lack of balance. "*Fil tajawiz*" describes the beauty of the connection between certain letters in Arabic, ending with the line that reads: "in proximity, there is warmth, the cheeks of the letters blush, and the heads of the fingers are light". "*Harf al-khatt wa harf al-lugha*" describes the difference between the letter when used in calligraphy and when it is used in language. "*Wasl*" is a small poem on the letter sad. "*Harf al-lugha wa harf al-khatt*" builds more on the differences between language and calligraphy, separated by another "*Wasl*" poem on the letter *sheen*, which is followed by another "*Harf al-lugha wa harf*", which ends the second section in the book.

"*Ahwal*" is the title of the third chapter with twelve topics. "*Hiwar*" is the first, and it is a conversation between letters, followed by "*Ta sin mim*", a poem on the initial unexplained letters in the Quran, the title being one of them. "*Sad*" is a poem on the letter *sad*, which is followed by "'An al-yad", a series of questions and suggestions by a calligrapher on what should be done for his hand to deliver the beautiful script. "*Qaf*" is a Sufi poem playing on the letter *qaf*, followed by "*Fil jasad*", instructions from a master to his disciple on the preparations needed for calligraphers to be able to scribe. "*Taqoul li*" is poem building on a quote from the letters of Ibn al-Bawab, followed by "*Wasil*" on the letter *nun* and another "*Wasil*" on the letter *qaf*. "*Taqoul li*" is another entry on a quote from the notes of Ibn al-Bawab, followed by "*Harf al-lugha wa harf al-khatt*", which discusses marriages between letters. The chapter closes on a final "*Taqoul li*" that opens with advising the "seeker" to abandon everything before starting on the journey of *khatt*.

The fourth and last chapter is "*Rasael*", and it has four letters from "*sin to mim*" and from "*alif to al-Naffari*", from "*sad to Ibn-Arabi*" and from "*baa to al-Hallaj*". The last two-page spread in the book is "*Shahadat*" with short quotations from letters and calligraphy by Ibn Araby, al-Naffari, al-Hallaj, Haidar Amouli, Ibn Khaldoun, al-Soulmi, Ibn-Abbas, Mohamad Nassir 'Andalib, and Abdeulkarim al-Jili.

To Sayegh, calligraphy is founded on concepts and objectives different from those of writing. Writing is one thing, and calligraphy is another, even if they share the same letters and both belong to the same language. Writing is meant to be read; calligraphy is destined to be contemplated in a state of exaltation. Writing is mainly a means of comprehension and clarification, transmission and delivery. Calligraphy starts when it transcends itself as a tool to become a goal in and of its self, achieving a self-sufficient presence capable of initiating its own dialogue.[228] This idea finds resonance throughout the book.

The reviews of the exhibition varied from the appreciative and complimentary to the descriptive, and including some that lacked admiration or understanding of the works. Some found the work avant-garde and others felt that it was an experiment already explored by the Iranian School of calligraphic abstraction, depriving the fact that Sayegh had discovered it at this stage of any novelty. His lines were described as drawn by an angry and nervous hand, yet confident in its movement. His poetry was felt to be redundant, the second version of his previous book *In Praise of Letters*. His visuals, however, were conceived as more striking than his poetry this time. Sayegh replied, "Abstract calligraphy might not be new but in this exhibition and the previous one I am trying to catch the inner pulse of the letter and to use my research and experience in showing the letter in a form that reveals its beauty regardless of its content. In my work letters are not 'ingredients' for a word, not transmitters of an idea; the letter for me is the means and the end. It is what you see in front of you, disconnected from its utilitarian task in any script; it is the beginning and the end; it is the open world."[229]

The thirty-eight paintings that were on display varied in style, 27 were of the smaller free brushstroke compositions on a white background, utilizing the free brush technique with an illegible form of letters in different colours.[230] This is where Sayegh scores high on our previously devised scale of abstraction, pushing the script into new dimensions in form and content. Five paintings (150x75cm) were minimal geometric forms of the letters: *lam-alif, ha, waw, nun* and *qaf* painted with acrylic on

[228] Barakat. "Encountering Samir Sayegh."
[229] https://now.mmedia.me/lb/ar/
[230] Within the size of A4 but the compositions inside each painting varied.

canvas. But the letter design for each letter is so minimal and elegant that if compared to other letters these would emerge as royalty. Finally, only four paintings were in the new style of large sized brush strokes of ink on white paper, this is where Sayegh is trying to apply the Chinese lesson in calligraphy to his practice. Both of these trails bring a new visual experiment to the calligraphic abstraction global language. The new geometric solutions are elegant as new letter designs, and the brush strokes, even though they are not new in their style; the energy that they bring into Sayegh's work is one that was not seen before in his previous exhibitions.

Abdo Wazen considered Sayegh not far from the calligram art of Apollinaire: letters under Sayegh's brush become drawings, symbols, elements, icons, visual texts with musical dimensions, symbolic. He confirms that drawn poetry has had a fertile period of experimentation from the Frenchmen Stéphane Marlarmé, and Henry Michi and the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and the American Kaings, and mentions a French publishing house, Dante, which published an anthology with almost 400 visual poems. For Wazen, Sayegh could have easily been one of these artists presented in this book, adding his unique experience of combining calligraphic abstraction, poetry and Sufism. To him, Sayegh's experience is universal, the equal to any similar poetic abstraction expertise in the modern West.

"*Alif bi hourouf kathira*" is an experiment where Sayegh familiarized people with and removed reverence that had been bestowed on letters by al-Nafari and Hallaj and Ibn Arabi, so the letters, as he presents them, are happy, sad, and replete with other emotions. They love and feel pain – like the two crucified letters that are hanging on the wall, which are mentioned in his book. And this way, the extensions and roundness and *ersal, ehmal, khatf, mashq* and *eshba'* in Arabic calligraphy, as Sayegh talks about them, are characteristics of the human condition but bring a higher level to their understanding. Ali Shouraba considers the latest artistic experiments of Sayegh as a continuation of what he started in the 1980's.[231] After he worked on a Naskh script where he made it appear, at first glance, to be a derivative of the Moroccan script in *Qairawan*, but at the same time seemed closer to the

[231] Ali Shouraba. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

Gothic Latin font in which the Bible was written. Then Sayegh worked on a script that was similar to the Nishapouri, then the Shikasteh. To complete his vision of the globalization of Arabic script, he went to China to study works of calligraphy by the masters of this art, working with a swift and eye-catching speed to explore the missing link between Arabic and Chinese scripts and to present samples of their similarities. Shouraba summarizes Sayegh's artistic expression by stating that, "What Samir offers are intellectual insights and not just art exhibitions; the meaning in Sayegh's exhibitions is not seeing the painting, but seeing what is behind the painting. His painting can be seen from the front and read from the back and understood when the eye is closed. And the saying here goes: 'The exterior reflects the inside, they are two and they are one.'"

The world-renowned Lebanese artist Mohammad Rawwas respects the fact that Sayegh refuses to be labelled as an artist; he considers himself more a researcher in form and shape when it comes to Arabic calligraphy.[232] While Shouraba insists that Sayegh does not make art, and that he is a regional and international cultural figure because when Sayegh creates a letter he tackles two issues, the first is the art of Arabic calligraphy, and the other is Arabic language and culture, which are two separate things. Thus the artist takes his audience to the conventional "spring" of Arab culture, the spiritual one based on the long philosophical debate around Eastern religions, as he tries to combine their spirituality through the letter since artists were never able to combine them through physical realities. In that regard, his stand on religion is "*tawhidi"* in the spiritual sense, there being no difference in his mind between Mohammad or Christ or Lao Tzu.

Rawwas confesses that in his creation he does not relate in depth to what Sayegh's research is all about, but he can understand it, seeing it as involving purely visual artistic research. Tackling the movements of a line, of a brush stroke, texture and the visual dynamic, on their terms is only a part of visual arts as an intensive broad research, all of which are very present in Sayegh's work. In the exhibition "Alif" Rawwas thinks that Sayegh's work has approached the Minimalist school of art, utilizing the gestural style of painting. He had the strength and the insight to "go

[232] Mohammad Rawwas. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

big," using the shoulder as a pivoting point rather than the wrist, as is common for Arabic calligraphy, which is why Rawwas linked it to gestural painting. The challenge is "how to say more by saying less." Sayegh is aware of all the rules of visual composition, and he experiments through this channel. What Rawwas appreciates in Sayegh's artistic career and experiments is that he did not go to art school. His attitude is puritan, free from the dogma of art classes, which gives it a new flavour to his creation and makes it, in Rawwas's view, more true, more sincere and more personal.

Some critics felt that in Sayegh's latest exhibition he was adapting to the conditions of the market and becoming more commercial; they did not find the Sayegh they knew. They preferred his earlier period with the smaller works using engraving and gold leaf, claiming that galleries ask artists to make larger works of art and artists comply and that this had been the case for Sayegh. On the criticism that Sayegh received regarding his becoming commercial by working on larger-scale paintings, Rawwas clarifies that scale in art is a crucial issue. When artists work small, they work on an intimate entity that they dominate in reference to the range of human beings; when, however, they work big, the work dominates them, which is a major factor in determining the visual impact of any work of art. Rawwas favours large-scale experiments, regardless of the reasons for them, which, in his opinion are minor elements in that regard, whether commercial or not; what he cares about is the outcome, and Sayegh's work created a new power related to a larger size of his brush strokes. Rawwas comments on the exhibition, saying, "I liked the big scale he did, much more than any other works of him I had seen before."

Some people do not like the new work by Sayegh because they do not find in it the content that is emotional and that someone can find in the classical script. They would go back and tell him what they used to say about Hussein Madi, that he is stiff, that his work has no softness, but Tarrab thinks this is a matter of personal taste not a proper analysis of the work. He thinks that what happened is a critical development on the concept of the letters because Sayegh is working on the letters to give them a new place, a new *maqam*. He is experimenting in their conditions to reach this *maqam*. It is the same experience of distillation; Sayegh is distilling it from all of the imperfections that go into it. What pleases Tarrab is that Sayegh is working

on paper and canvas, because he used to work on wood and Tarrab was not a great fan of the wood period. There were many nice things, but he thinks that Sayegh was heading towards the artisanal. Here he surpassed the artisanal phase and is going back to the origin of the script. Tarrab was not convinced by Saygh's preceding compositions because the script is script and compositions are compositions, he felt that Sayegh had a lot of potential in experimenting with the text, but the experience helped him reach where he is now. All artist experiments are useful, and sometimes the benefit is unexpected because when they stop, it makes them miss the freedom and in Sayegh's case, miss writing the script directly and thinking of the shape as a shape. The shape as a shape of the writing gives meanings that are not shapes.

Sayegh says, "I was mesmerized by the positive '*eltibas*' that the Arabic letter carries; it is a symbol and a term and a shape and a possibility. And after that, it became a number and mystery and darkness. In the time when it was a tool for some, in reality, it was a representation of the *wahi.* This multiplicity amazed me."[233] Sayegh's curator and owner of Agial gallery where Sayegh's latest exhibition was on display, Barakat felt that it was the first time that the revolution was apparent to his eyes, being the first time Sayegh was radical and did not use comprehensible text within his artwork. While previously he would use recognizable words, like *Allah, hiya, hou, salam, baraka,* etc., this time there was no script and the letters were in a place where only their beauty was revealed in abstraction. He feels that it was a radical decision, and the first time the decision was taken to divide the text from its context clearly. Previously, beauty and elegance of Arabic script had been relevant only to religion, but in the last 100 years and with the development of concepts of Arab nationalism, any artist who placed Arabic letters in their painting felt that he could claim that it was "Arab." For Barakat, Sayegh today has released Arabic script from both concepts, religion and Arab nationalism. He thinks that if we are to pursue a truly universal Arabic script, then we should liberate it from it cloaks of religion, and this can place Arabic in a radical position today. He believes that Sayegh has started a revolution. All of his previous attempts were timid and were not getting his point across to the audience, but in this exhibition, they went very far, the furthest

[233] http://al-seyassah.com/

they have for the entirety of the artist's career.[234] In Sayegh's words: "The universe of forms is the new language that calligraphy should aim to reach to achieve human conveyance. All that is needed, then, to appreciate its beauty is to learn how to read this language and how to decipher it."[235]

Finding someone who understands and relates to Sayegh's artwork is a difficult task, confesses Saleh Barakat; they have to be transgressors of norms and relationships. This enlightened audience, Barakat says, must be*:"Ouroubi el hawa, ladiyhim elmam bil khatt wa ousoulouh, wa infitah lil qouboul bil thawra ala al takalid."* They have to love Arab culture, know about the Arabic script, and be open enough to accept revolt against tradition. There is however, only a handful of people who combine all of these traits. He believes they will never reach the lay audience; those want to buy what they recognize and what they already know.[236]

One of the problems with the public is that they look at Arabic as an art form that belongs to the past, while Barakat perceives Sayegh as progressive, and knowing how and where to frame this point of view has proven complicated. The Sharjah Biennale was a good start, but Barakat wanted to frame Sayegh's work in unexpected places, one example is exhibiting the work influenced by Psaltica at a show on art and music in Brussels in 2014. [237] [238] In his fifties, Sayegh became obsessed with writing shapes that looked like pseudo-Arabic. He realized that the shapes he was creating were based on the long, swooshing calligraphic lines and dots that he had been exposed to in the Psaltica classes at the convent in his youth, even though the artist had not particularly cared for the associated religious rituals. But he always saw a relationship, including the connections as well as the disconnections, between calligraphy and music. To Sayegh, disconnected, connected or expanded Arabic letters resemble music. He finds a similarity between listening to classical Western or Oriental music and Islamic ornamentation that builds on a sentence like music builds on a note. But his feeling was that music is one line in his mind, forming a unity when heard, but that on paper such a single track is not

[234] Saleh Barakat. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[235] Barakat, "Encountering Samir Sayegh."
[236] Saleh Barakat. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.
[237] Psaltica is a Byzantine musical system with its own peculiar music notes
[238] Saleh Barakat. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

attainable. Music is ultimately the hidden voice of humanity. He quotes a passage from the Psalms (*mazamir*): *"wa sabihouhou bil mizmar wal kina, sabihouhou bil qithara wal sounouj"*, you can praise the Lord with the flute and harp and other musical instruments.[239] Sayegh's understanding of this psalm is that music is, ultimately, a form of prayer. It is then not surprising that Barakat also sold some of Sayegh's work to Cleveland clinic in the Untied States; the buyers were curating and looking for work that can heal. The curator confesses that he is sure that the audience might not understand these works, but to him, it is all the more reason to get out of the places where artists like Sayegh are always placed. Sayegh, to his curator, is a person who looks toward the future and not the past. He is concerned with retaining the aesthetics of Arabic calligraphy without the burden of heritage, tradition, and religion. He has no canonic interest in the new culturally regressive interpretation of tradition like other artists; he works with ease and is interested in the technique of creating the artwork. But the most challenging aspect is the conceptual work; Sayegh is an intellectual and there is a reading that his audience has to go through. Regarding where he would place Sayegh's work internationally if he had the choice, Barakat would prefer to put it with the Minimalist school, next to artists like Ellsworth Kelly or with far-Eastern inspired artists from China and Japan.

To Sayegh, his exhibitions, in spite of the clarity of their descriptions, repeated questions and attempts, were experiments seeking to be reborn every time with a new name. The exhibitions did not go in either an upward or a linear progression, but rather in a circular line that tightens at times and then grows. That's why he felt as if he were going, in his last exhibition, "Alif in many letters," back to his first exhibition "What cannot be written and what cannot be said." He feels like the Arabic letter *nun* is seeking to go back to the beginning every time it is attempting to complete itself, but the minute it reaches the end it forgets whether it is beginning or ending, it like a natural cycle. In the "Diaries of letters," he asks, have you seen the end before the beginning? We have to see the beginning in the same

[239] The Bible. Psalm 150:4 KJV: 3.Praise Him with trumpet sound; Praise Him with harp and lyre. 4. Praise Him with timbrel and dancing; Praise Him with stringed instruments and pipe. 5.Praise Him with loud cymbals; Praise Him with resounding cymbals.

way we see the end so we can start. We have to keep contemplating the past so that we can discover how the future is hidden in it.[240]

In his artwork, he is always calling upon the Arabic script to abandon the Arabic language and to focus on its form. For him to keep writing poetry is a bit of contradiction, but he solves that problem by stating, "I created a problem between language and *khatt*, like the fight between a man and his lover; he cannot live with or without her." [241]

I hope that this book will place him and his work in a broader political and social context, illustrating and clarifying the questions he has raised during this very critical time of Arab modernity. For the past fifty years, Sayegh has carried with him the same question, wherever he went: how to create a unique, modern Arab identity that builds on the solutions of the past but remains true to the present and, most importantly, becomes valid for the future. He chose Arabic calligraphy, art criticism, poetry and education as the media through which he would manifest his ideas on revival, modernity, and identity. To him, Arabic calligraphy remains the essential medium, carrying the power to develop the modern Arab identity in a positive, dynamic manner. Even though in the beginning of his career he had no visual creative breakthrough with work, using more traditional scripts, and was strongly inspired by the work of other calligraphic abstraction artists. He eventually created a style that is characteristically his own and that is more on the conceptual and the abstract.

[240] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, April 2014.
[241] Samir Sayegh. Interview by Bahia Shehab. Personal interview. Beirut, June 2014.

Chapter V Conclusion: Is Calligraphic Abstraction a Movement Informing a New Arab Identity?

In this research I tried to understand the calligraphic abstraction movement by suggesting an alternative reading of Islamic art. I attempted to trace the continuity or lack of it between Islamic art, specifically calligraphy, and modern art. I also tried to highlight how art and identity are related and how calligraphic abstraction comes as a manifestation of that identity. The most significant contribution is the attempt at creating a system of placing letterist works of art in relationship to each other. The suggestion is a new formula for the understanding and contextualization of modern and contemporary calligraphic abstraction works of art and artists. It is a new way to understand artworks on a spectrum of abstraction so that we can understand them within their context. By comparing artists to their contemporaries who have worked on art and the Arabic letter, it makes it easier to look at the movement critically. More importantly, we were able to draw a structure of what these artists have in common and what the key differences between them are. By finding common grounds and patterns of commonality between their work as well as the major differences, we might be able to answer the questions of whether it is possible to call their combined body of work an influential movement. I hope that this tool will help historians, curators and collectors understand the dynamic of the Arabic letterist abstraction movement. Finally I discussed the work of Samir Sayegh as a case study, highlighting his creative contribution to the overall discourse on the topic.

This leaves us with one final question to answer, is calligraphic abstraction a movement informing a new Arab identity? Some scholars would argue that it is not a unified movement. Hassan states, "Despite several serious efforts, it never solidified into a unified movement or school."[242] But what is really the definition of a movement? The literal meaning of the word is a group of people working together to

[242] Hassan, *When Identity Becomes Form*.

advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas. It is also a group of people with a shared purpose who create change together. The key aims of an art movement are to change culture; it rejects a reality and proposes a new one. An art movement creates an art style with a specific common philosophy, or goal followed by a group of artists who share this philosophy. We have discussed the relevance of calligraphy and its use in artworks and painting in informing a new Arab cultural identity. Calligraphic abstraction artists have included calligraphy in the artwork with that awareness in mind. Of these artists we mention from Iraq: Madiha Omar (1908-2005), Shakir Hassan al Sa'id (1925-2004), Dia al Azzawi (1938-), Rafi' al-Nassiri (1940-2013), Hassan Massoudy (1940-). From Sudan: Osman Wagialla (1925-2007), Ahmed Shirbini (1931-), Ibrahim el Salahi (1930-). From Egypt Hamed Abdallah (1917-1985), Youssif Sida (1922-1994), Omar al Nagdy (1931-), Kamal Sarrag (1960's), Taha Hussien (1928-). From Palestine: Kamal Boullata (1942-) and Fateh Mudarris (1922-1999) From Morocco: Mehdi Qotbi (1951-), Mohammad Malihi (1931-) Farid Belkahia (1934-2014) and Ahmed Sherkawi (1934-1967) From Tunisia: Nja Mahdaoui (1937-) and Naguib Belkhouga (1960's). From Syria Muneer Shaarani (1945-), Naim Ismail (1939-1979), Adham Ismail (1922-1963), and AbdulKader Arnaaout (1936-1992) From Algeria: Rachid Koraichi (1947-), and Mahgoub Benbella (1946-) From Lebanon: Wajih Nahlé (1932 -), Said A. Akil (1926-), Hussain Madi (1938-) and Samir Sayegh (1945-).

Some historians would add or take out a few names. Some of these artists were innovators and some were visitors to the style. But it cannot be denied that from every single Arab country there are artists in the past seven decades who have experimented in one way or another with the Arabic script in their artwork. The One Dimension group in Iraq in essence was "art that was inspired by the letter" as suggested by the artist Jamil Hamoudi, it was about "unveiling the letter as a dimension."[243] Artist Ahmed Shibrain, Kamala Ishag and Ibrahim El-Salahi, founded the Khartoum School in the 1960's. They used Arabic calligraphy in their compositions converting it into abstract shapes. It does not matter that these artists and groups were never connected or that they did not have a shared vision for a

[243] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 37.

movement. This urge to use calligraphy and return to their cultural roots in search of a new identity, encouraged the calligraphic abstraction movement to spread and flourish all over the Arab world. “Painting with letters” became a dominant mode of expression in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and calligraphy was transformed from a circumscribed art form – one of great beauty, but with strict formal limitations – into a vital form of modern artistic expression.”[244]

It remains a fact that due to several factors, many of these artists were not aware of each other’s work. It could be due to the lack of communication or lack of an artist network and art institutions within a postcolonial Arab world. Calligraphic abstraction "did not emerge under the influence of one trailblazing leader.”[245] The artists had no connection to each other, but they had the same reactions and ideas at the same time. This can be compared to the reaction of street artists during the 2011 Egyptian uprising. They went down to the street to comment on similar events in their own voice. Some of them were relaying the same message, but the way they said it was in their own unique style. It is possible that the artists of calligraphic abstraction were reacting to a postcolonial condition in their respective countries and in their respective styles. It makes sense if we consider the timing. Dagher states that, “The region’s artistic lethargy of the first half of the twentieth century was shaken in the 1950’s when conflict with the West was at its peak. It is not a coincidence that, as these countries moved towards independence, this new spirit of freedom and possibility would be reflected in the art being produced. And it is no accident that calligraphy, a potent symbol of identity against the old colonial masters, should emerge within the new work being created.”[246]

Beginning in the early 1950s, artists in the Arab world took inspiration from their own cultures, even when they were exposed to international concepts and aesthetics. The result was an alternative and original approach to modernism and contemporary art.[247] They used the Arabic script as a manifestation of informing a new modernist experiment. By liberating Arabic calligraphy from its association with the sacred and classical texts through their artwork, they helped nurture new ideas

[244] Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.
[245] Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyya: Art & Identity,* 27.
[246] Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.
[247] Issa, *Signs of Our Times*, 19.

for a new generation of artists and individuals concerned with issues of Arab identity and its expression. They did so through artwork, intellectual endeavors and a rigorous process of informing a future generation of thinkers and creative producers on the concerns they have witnessed on topics related to Arab modernity during its formation. Their work is a bridge between the aspirations of unity that were formed in the post-colonial set up of the Arab world, and the future that is yet uninformed of its history due to wars and political and social instability. Calligraphic abstraction continues to inspire a new generation of artists using different mediums in the Arab world and beyond.

Summary

Following the emergence of concepts related to Arab nationalism there was a clear struggle between the progressive thinkers who wanted to secure a secular society and release public life from religion, and the conformists who wanted to maintain their traditional practices. My research starts by defining what is Islamic art since it is the main point of misinterpretation. I propose a new reading of Islamic art, and then compare Islamic art to modern and contemporary art so that the transition of societies from producing Islamic art to ones producing modern and contemporary art can be understood. And finally, in the first chapter I discuss how the different artists who used the Arabic script as a subject in their paintings dealt with issues of identity and modernity.

In the second chapter of the book I propose a critical understanding of letterist abstraction works of art. It has been a very complex and challenging task for the very few critics who have attempted to classify this movement. Since it is based on visualizing language, getting caught up in the literal meaning of the work rather than its level of abstraction has been a very common point of confusion for most critics. I have devised a tool that allows scholars to place a letterist work of art on a spectrum of abstraction in relationship to different elements in the painting. It is a way to understand the artworks and their artists in relationship to each other. Understanding letterists abstraction artists and the dynamics that dictated their work was essential for understanding the movement and its artistic production.

In the final chapter I have focused my research on the life and work of Samir Sayegh, relying primarily on testimonials by the artist himself and by his contemporaries. My subject is a multifaceted cultural figure who started his career as a poet and a journalist seeking a new modern means of Arab expression, eventually becoming interested in Arabic script as a means of representing, researching, and innovating a new Arab identity. I study his work in relationship to the totality of the movement. I also use the different phases of his work to see where it falls on the spectrum of abstraction in the different phases of his career, thus applying my new tool to the totality of the artistic production of one artist.

The Main Theses and Goals this dissertation attempts to develop is a critical understanding by which Arabic letterist abstraction works of art can be understood.

It places the life and work of letterist abstraction artists in a wider artistic, social and political context, thus helping the reader form an understanding of the movement from a broader perspective. By tracing all the threads for the assessment of letterist abstraction works of art and artists, I hope to encourage the emergence of more such scholarly and critical works, until we have a better critical understanding of the contemporary Arab art scene as a whole.

Samenvatting

Na de opkomst van concepten met betrekking tot het Arabische nationalisme was er een duidelijke strijd tussen de progressieve denkers die een seculiere maatschappij wilden veiligstellen en het openbare leven van religie wilden vrijwaren, en de conformisten die hun traditionele praktijken wilden behouden. Mijn onderzoek begint met het definiëren van wat islamitische kunst is, omdat dit het belangrijkste punt van misinterpretatie is. Ik stel een nieuwe lezing van islamitische kunst voor, en vergelijk dan islamitische kunst met moderne en hedendaagse kunst, zodat de overgang van samenlevingen van het produceren van islamitische kunst naar degenen die moderne en hedendaagse kunst produceren kan worden begrepen. En tot slot, in het eerste hoofdstuk zal ik bespreken hoe de verschillende kunstenaars die het Arabische schrift als een onderwerp in hun schilderijen gebruikten kwesties van identiteit en moderniteit behandelden.

In het tweede deel van het boek stel ik een kritisch begrip voor van letteristische abstractiewerken van kunst. Het was een zeer complexe en uitdagende taak voor de weinige critici die hebben geprobeerd deze beweging te classificeren. Omdat het gebaseerd is op het visualiseren van taal, is het voor de meeste critici een veel voorkomend punt van verwarring om verstrikt te raken in de letterlijke betekenis van het werk in plaats van het niveau van abstractie. Ik heb een hulpmiddel bedacht waarmee geleerden een letteristisch kunstwerk op een spectrum van abstractie kunnen plaatsen in relatie tot verschillende elementen in het schilderij. Het is een manier om de kunstwerken en hun artiesten in relatie tot elkaar te begrijpen. Het begrijpen van lettererist abstractie kunstenaars en van de dynamiek die hun werk dicteerde, was van ssentieel belang voor het begrijpen van de beweging en de artistieke productie ervan.

In het laatste hoofdstuk heb ik mijn onderzoek gericht op het leven en werk van Samir Sayegh, voornamelijk vertrouwend op getuigenissen van de kunstenaar zelf en van zijn tijdgenoten. Mijn onderwerp is een veelzijdige culturele figuur die zijn carrière begon als dichter en een journalist op zoek naar een nieuw modern middel voor Arabische expressie, dat uiteindelijk geïnteresseerd raakte in het

Arabische schrift als middel om een nieuwe Arabische identiteit te vertegenwoordigen, te onderzoeken en te innoveren. Ik bestudeer zijn werk in relatie tot de totaliteit van de beweging. Ik gebruik ook de verschillende fasen van zijn werk om te zien waar het valt in het spectrum van abstractie in de verschillende fasen van zijn carrière, waardoor mijn nieuwe instrument wordt toegepast op de totaliteit van de artistieke productie van één kunstenaar.

De hoofdtheses en -doelen die dit proefschrift tracht te ontwikkelen, is het ontwikkelen van een kritisch begrip waarmee Arabische letterkundige abstractie werkt of kunst kan worden begrepen. Het plaatst het leven en het werk van letteristische abstractie kunstenaars in een bredere artistieke, sociale en politieke context, en helpt de lezer zo de beweging vanuit een breder perspectief te begrijpen. Door alle draden te traceren voor de beoordeling van abstract letteristische kunstwerken en de kunstenaars ervan , hoop ik de opkomst van meer van dergelijke wetenschappelijke en kritische werken aan te moedigen, totdat we een beter kritisch begrip hebben van de hedendaagse Arabische kunstscène als geheel.

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6- SSB/1

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