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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

ter verkrijging van
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door

Bahia Shehab

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Promotores

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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

