Unified multiplicities : Arabic letters between modernity, identity, and abstraction
Shehab, B.

Citation

Shehab, B. (2019, October 24). *Unified multiplicities : Arabic letters between modernity, identity, and abstraction*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/79902

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/79902 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

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]

---

[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.