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

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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 Houriiya 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 Dagher, Charbel, *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 khilal 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 comprised 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, compiled by Juliet Cestar. It should be credited for attempting to place the artists

¹⁰⁷ Rose Issa. Interview by Bahya Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.

¹⁰⁸ Rose Issa. Interview by Bahya Shehab. Personal interview. Cairo-London via phone, January 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Rose Issa. Interview by Bahya 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., *Patrimoine culturel et création contemporaine en Afrique et dans le monde arabe*. Dakar: les nouvelles éditions 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 Hurrufiyya: 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 l'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”,

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 output. 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.

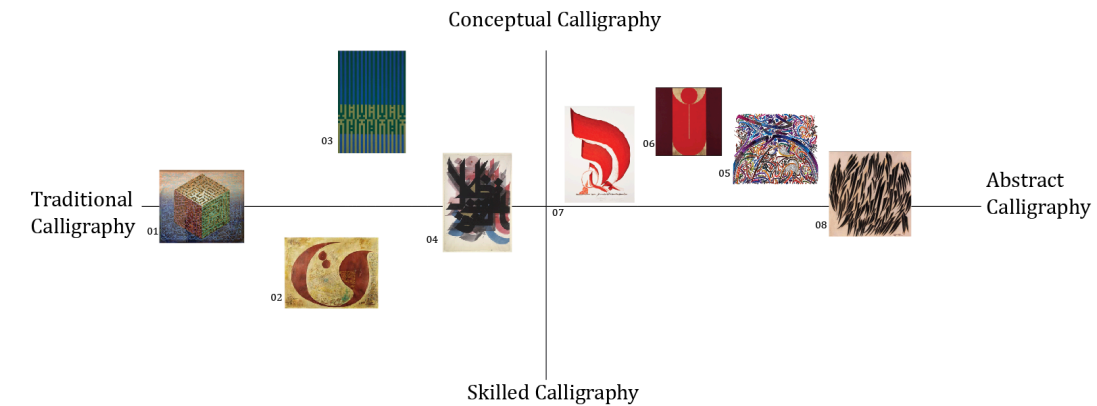
New Tools of Assessment: Handwriting, Calligraphy, Abstraction, Concept and Technique

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.

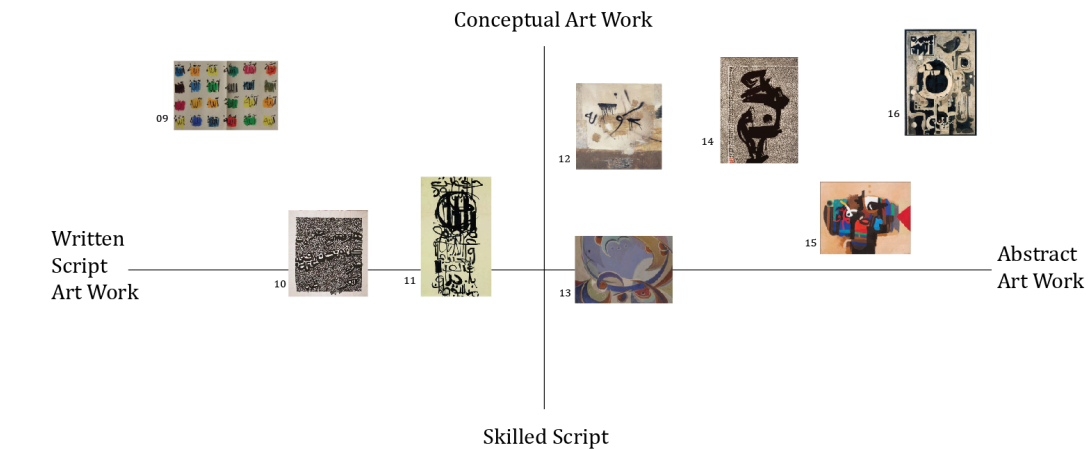
The reason I have devised these charts is because I always noticed that some artists and their work are more popular with scholars and collectors than others. I wanted to understand what dictates the taste of these very diverse groups of people. A scholar is possibly interested in the novelty of the idea or style that an artist is bringing 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 | 5 Nja Mahdaoui (Tunisa, b.1937)
Walegh II, 2011 |
| 2 Ali Omar Ermes (Libya, b.1945)
Qaf, 'Al Alsmale Tales' 1983 | 6 Samir Sayegh (Lebanon, b.1943)
Nun, 2009 |
| 3 Kamal Boullata (Palestine, 1942)
There is No I but I, 1983 | 7 Hassan Massoudy (Iraq, b.1944)
All Beauty is Permanent Joy, 2005 |
| 4 Osman Waqilala (Sudan, 1925-2007)
Kufic, 1991 | 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 | 13 Madiha Omar (Iraq, 1908-2005)
Letters 1978 |
| 10 Fathi Hassan (Egypt, b. 1957)
Samira's Story, 1995 | 14 Rachid Koraishi (Algeria, 1947)
A Nation in Exile, 1997 |
| 11 Ahmed Shibrain (Sudan, b. 1931)
Untitled, 1963 | 15 Dia Azzawi (Iraq, b.1939)
Untitled, 1981 |
| 12 Shakir Hassan Al Said (Iraq, 1925-2004)
Lines on a Wall, 1978 | 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 than 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, Salahy 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-Qaysi 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 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. Dagher 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 discussed 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 were 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 inhabited 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 Kamal 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.