



TEXTUAL ABSTRACTION WITHIN TRANSNATIONAL MODERNISM

ONLINE EVENT, ZOOM

6 & 13 NOVEMBER 2020, 17:30-19:00 (UTC)

Explore how artists experimented with script and letterforms in North Africa, West Asia and South Asia in the wake of independence movements.

This symposium will bring together scholars and researchers to explore an artistic current that transformed Arabic (including Persian and Urdu) letters and script into abstract visual forms across North Africa, West Asia and South Asia in the wake of independence movements and the rise of avant-garde groups and schools.

The discussions will take a comparative transnational approach to explore the ways in which artists engaged with the abstract and expressive possibilities of script either independently or through the formation of 'schools' (Khartoum school, Casablanca Art School) and movements (Lettrism, Hurufiyya, Saqqakhana) at critical moments of transformation throughout the 20th century, particularly against the socio-political context of decolonization. This framework will open up questions around the development of transnational aesthetics of decolonization, as well as how these practices gesture at broader networks and spheres of affiliation, beyond national frameworks.

PROGRAMME

Friday 6 November 2020, 17:30-19:00 (UTC)

17.30–17.35 Introduction by Professor Sussan Babaie, Professor in the Arts of Islam and Iran, The Courtauld

17.35–18.15 Presentations

Calligraphic Abstraction - Professor Iftikhar Dadi, Associate Professor, Cornell University

Calligraphic Abstraction refers to artistic practices that emerged in the Middle East, South Asia, South East Asia, and North Africa during the era of decolonization since the mid-twentieth century. The imbrication of modernist calligraphy with post-cubist art represents a broad artistic movement, which can be understood in a variety of ways: as renewing a traditionally revered artistic form under modernity, as individual and subjective expression, as enacting a dialogue with nationalism, and as a critical engagement with transnational modernism. Calligraphic Abstraction can be understood also as a modern transnational "Islamic" aesthetic form that draws new links among the shared conceptions of a vast region. It acknowledges the persistence of the textual past, but this is now abstracted, opened to a dialogue with metropolitan artistic languages and therefore is more global in scope. Its rapid emergence was a result of a complex play of forces that included new conceptions of modernist subjectivity, the need to reformulate national culture during decolonization, and a desire for equal participation in transnational modernism. By virtue of their mediation of classical "Islamic" artistic forms with modernity, artists have created new aesthetic and affective potentialities across the heroic age of decolonization into the present.



Script in its Plural Manifestations - Dr Fereshteh Daftari, Independent Curator and Scholar

Privileged from its birth for articulating Quranic verses, elegant script belongs to the high art of calligraphy (beautiful handwriting), to “khosh nevisi,” as it is known in Iran. This illustrious tradition has been safeguarded by modern calligraphers, just as drawing from classical statues continues in academic training. Mohammad Ehsaei, one of its prominent practitioners said, “I am a contemporary artist not a reactionary.” His experimentations led him to cross over from “Khosh nevisi” to “Naqashi khatt,” or calligraphic painting, and then to full abstraction. He was not alone. Another breed of artists, members of the Saqqakhaneh, also enlisted words and letters in their work. Defying the refined, the manicured, and the revered, they engaged in a plebeian treatment of script. They delved into the habitat of the working class, into a popular culture where they found sources never before looked at and words never penned down in art. Class conscious and anti-elitist, their diverse projects, however, fits uncomfortably into agendas such as Islamic, national, and cosmopolitan. In Post –Saqqakhaneh developments, however, not to be conflated with Saqqakhaneh proper, when textual abstraction flourished, the artists received international attention. The trajectory of alphabets, not always based on the Arabic script, will be the topic of this presentation.

18.15–18.35 Panel discussion moderated by Professor Sussan Babaie, Professor in the Arts of Islam and Iran, The Courtauld

18.35–19.00 Q&A from the audience

Friday 13 November – Part Two

17.30–17.35 Introduction by Nabila Abdel Nabi, Curator, International Art, Tate

17.35–18.15 Presentations

Calligraphic Abstraction in Context: Sudanese Modernism - Professor Salah M. Hassan, Goldwin Smith Professor, Cornell University, and Director, The Africa Institute, Sharjah, UAE

In the Arab and Islamic worlds, the rich tradition of the Arabic letter form was available to modernist artists in search of a new visual vocabulary in post World War II and the early era of decolonization. The written language and its diverse calligraphic styles generated complex and diverse forms of abstraction and figuration. Such movement has been referred in recent art historical texts by different terms, including Hurufiyyah (literally, “letterism”) and “calligraphism.” This paper argues that “Calligraphic abstraction” seems to be a more appropriate designation, as it encompasses the juxtaposition of calligraphy and abstraction of this diverse, multifaceted movement, as well as its multifarious intersections with Western and transnational modernism. The paper will focus on the manifestation of such a movement in the context of modernist experience in Sudan and its intersections with Pan-Arabism and Pan-Africanism and their global inter-connectedness.



Al Harf: A Performative Site of Becoming in Iraqi Art – Professor Nada Shabout, Professor, University of North Texas

The prominence of the Arabic letter in modern Iraqi art during the mid-twentieth century has been discussed within what has been dubbed *Huroufiyah* in relationship to the larger Arab region. This presentation explores the Arabic letter as a site of performance within a more specific aesthetic negotiation by modern Iraqi artists. Through a number of examples of work by Madiha Umar, Jamil Hamoudi, Shakir Hassan Al Said, Dia Azzawi among others, the evolution of the letter through individual and group experiments will be examined as part of the larger act of *istilham* as performed in modern Iraq.

18.15–18.35 Panel discussion moderated by Nabila Abdel Nabi, Curator, International Art, Tate

18.35–19.00 Q&A from the audience

Biographies

Iftikhar Dadi is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of History of Art and Director of the South Asia Program at Cornell University. He researches modern and contemporary art from a global and transnational perspective, with emphasis on questions of methodology and intellectual history. His writings have focused on modernism and contemporary practice of Asia, the Middle East and their diasporas. Another research interest examines the film, media, and popular cultures of South Asia, seeking to understand how emergent publics forge new avenues for civic participation. Publications include *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010), the edited monograph *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (2015), the co-edited catalog *Lines of Control* (2012), and the co-edited reader *Unpacking Europe* (2001). Dadi serves on the editorial and advisory boards of *Archives of Asian Art* and *Bio-Scope: South Asian Screen Studies*, and was member of the editorial board of *Art Journal* (2007-11). He is an advisor to Asia Art Archive. As an artist, Iftikhar Dadi works collaboratively with Elizabeth Dadi. Their practice investigates memory, borders, and identity in contemporary globalization, the productive capacities of urban informalities in the Global South, and the mass culture of postindustrial societies. They have exhibited widely internationally.

Fereshteh Dafatari, curator and scholar, received her Ph.D. in Art History from Columbia University (1988). Her dissertation, *The Influence of Persian Art on Gauguin, Matisse and Kandinsky*, was published in 1991. During her tenure at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1988 - 2009), she curated a number of international exhibitions including *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (2006). Her curatorial work in the field of Iranian modernism includes *Between Word and Image* at New York University's Grey Art Gallery in 2002, and *Iran Modern* at the Asia Society Museum in New York in 2013. She has also focused on contemporary art. *Action Now*, the first exhibition of contemporary Iranian performance art, was held in Paris (2012); *Safar/Voyage: Contemporary Works by Arab, Iranian, and Turkish Artists* at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver (2013); and *Rebel, Jester, Mystic, Poet: Contemporary Persians* at the Aga Khan Museum in Toronto (2017). It then traveled to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston and in 2021 it will go to the Asia Society Museum in New York. Dafatari has published widely and her most recent book is titled *Persia Reframed: Iranian Visions of Modern and Contemporary Art* (London: I.B. Tauris/Bloomsbury, 2019).



Salah M. Hassan is the Director of The Africa Institute and the Goldwin Smith Professor of African and African Diaspora Art History and Visual Culture in the Department of Africana Studies and Research Center, as well as in the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies, and also serves as Director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities. Hassan is an editor and co-founder of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Duke University Press). He currently serves as a member of the editorial advisory board of *Atlantica*, *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and *international Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, and served as consulting editor for *African Arts*. Hassan has contributed numerous essays to journals, anthologies, and exhibition catalogues of contemporary art, and has guest edited a special issue of *SAQ: South Atlantic Quarterly*, entitled *African Modernism* (2010). He has authored, edited, and co-edited several books, including *Ibrahim El Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (2013); *Darfur and the Crisis of Governance: A Critical Reader* (2009); *Diaspora, Memory, Place* (2008); and *Unpacking Europe* (2001); *Authentic/Ex-Centric* (2001) among others. Most recently, Hassan edited and introduced *Ibrahim El-Salahi: Prison Notebook* (MoMA and Sharjah Art Foundation Publications, 2018), and the forthcoming *Ahmed Morsi: A Dialogic Imagination* (Sharjah Art Foundation, 2020). Hassan has curated international exhibitions and Biennials including *Authentic/Ex-Centric* (49th Venice Biennale, 2001), *Unpacking Europe* (Rotterdam, 2001-02), and *3x3: Three Artists/Three: David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Pamela Z* (Dak'Art, 2004), among others. He curated *Ibrahim El Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* was published in 2012 held at The Tate Modern in London (2013) after premiering at the Sharjah Art Museum in Sharjah, UAE (2013). In addition, he also co-curated *The Khartoum School: The Making of the Modern Art Movement in Sudan, 1945-2016* (2016-2017) and *When Art Becomes Liberty: The Egyptian Surrealists (1938-1965)* (2016) funded by the Sharjah Art Foundation.

He is the recipient of fellowships including the J. Paul Getty Postdoctoral Fellowship as well as major grants from Sharjah Art Foundation, Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Afrique en Creations, Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the Prince Claus Fund.

Nada Shabout is a Professor of Art History and the Coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas. She is the founding president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran and Turkey (AMCA). She is the author of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, University of Florida Press, 2007; co-editor of *New Vision: Arab Art in the 21st Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2009; and co-editor of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018. She is also founding Director of Modern Art Iraq Archive. Notable among exhibitions she has curated: *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art*, 2010; traveling exhibition, *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, 2005-2009; and co-curator, *Modernism and Iraq*, 2009. Major awards of her research include: Getty Foundation 2019; Writers Grant, Andy Warhol Foundation 2018; The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq (TAARII) fellow 2006, 2007, Fulbright Senior Scholar Program, 2008. She is currently working on a new book project, *Demarcating Modernism in Iraqi Art: The Dialectics of the Decorative, 1951-1979*, under contract with the American University in Cairo Press.

Sussan Babaie teaches at The Courtauld. Her research has been supported by The Getty, The Fulbright and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She began her research (PhD 1994, Institute of Fine Arts, NYU), on the early modern period especially the Persianate-Islamicate world and has expanded its range to include a variety of topics including: on architecture, urbanism and urbanity (*Isfahan and its Palaces*, 2008, paperback 2018; and *Persian Kingship and Architecture*, 2015); on transcultural conditions of artistic production (*The Mercantile Effect: On Art and Exchange in the Islamicate World*, 2017; and 'The Delhi Loot and the Exotics of Empire', 2018);



and most recently on the transmission of sensory experiences between the visual and the gustatory ('Cookery and urbanity in early modern Isfahan', 2018). She comes from a graphic design background (BA 1979, University of Tehran) and is interested in exploring the interdependence between deep history of art and contemporary artistic practices of Iran and the Middle East. This research includes 'Voices of Authority: Locating the 'modern' in 'Islamic' Arts', *Getty Research Journal* (2011); *Shirin Neshat* (2013); *Honar: The Afkhami Collection of Modern and Contemporary Iranian Art* (2017); and in *Slavs and Tatars* (2017).

Nabila Abdel Nabi is currently Curator, International Art at Tate Modern, working closely with the Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational. Previously she worked as Associate Curator at The Power Plant, Toronto, and prior to this as Gallery Manager at The Third Line, Dubai. Nabila has worked on solo exhibitions and facilitated new commissions by artists including Abbas Akhavan, Kader Attia, Omar Ba, Yto Barrada, Karla Black, Kapwani Kiwanga, Amalia Pica and Vivian Suter among others. She recently curated the exhibition *Hold Everything Dear* with Hajra Waheed at The Power Plant, Toronto and was previously Art Editor at literary magazine *The Point*. Nabila holds degrees from The Courtauld Institute of Art and University of Chicago.