Moroccan-French artist Mounir Fatmi has created many video works in which he utilizes an Islamic aesthetic known as aniconism in very thought-provoking and engaging ways. Fatmi comes into a discussion surrounding aniconism, the image, and text, all of which are significant ideas in and around his works. His videos *The Machinery* (2006), *Face: the 99 names of God* (1999), and *Arabesque: hommage à Jackson Pollock* (1997) all contain within them some way of affecting the viewer by using the potentiality of an aniconic image.

Aniconism is an aesthetic choice made by artists who want to signify, but do not want their signifiers resembling what is being signified. Other religions have used aniconism in their art as well, but we recognize it presently as a commonly recurring visual cue of Islamic art. The term aniconism usually refers to that which avoids representation of a divine figure, other respected religious entities, or any human and animal figure at all. Aniconism is typically associated with Islamic art, however it is important to recognize that aniconic imagery is an aesthetic on its own. Aniconism implies representation that does not bear any resemblance to that which it is referring, and aniconic imagery does not necessarily have any ties to religion.

In either case, the aniconic image and aniconism share between them a singular notion of potentiality; that is, they both allow room for greater discussion and openness for personal affects. Oleg Grabar was one of the first scholars to use the term in relation to Islamic aesthetics, which he later describes as a “world without images” (47). This of course is not meant in the literal sense, rather as a method of coming to terms with the religious ideals of Islam, and how they affect images. In Islam it is forbidden to create any representation of God; God is an affective force which each individual experiences, and therefore each individual should have their own mental image of Him. This is an example of aniconism that Fatmi will use
to create an aniconic image.

One of the disadvantageous traits of aniconism is its function within an image; an aniconic image is lacking something concrete that can signify within the image. The representational image moves away from being about what it 'is' and towards what it 'could be.' Thought around the image must become about the potentiality of the image to be what it is, to be what it is not, and/or to be somewhere in between the two. This potential becomes crucial, and yet that is where aniconism's dangers are most transparent. In order for an image to have such enormous potential, it must also allow for the potential of misinterpretation, or rather for seeing and understanding what is there, but ignoring it or putting it aside because it could be any number of possible things. Vidya Dehejia argues that while it may be difficult to put faith in aniconic images and aniconism in early religious art, there are a great number of examples of these in Buddhist art dating back to around the first millennium. Just as Islamic art—and Mounir Fatmi—do, the works she examines use text to point to a figure that is not being shown. Dehejia finds many examples of this kind of sign that help her prove that while the Buddha is never visualized as He is today, perhaps, He is still being represented in the images, and should be considered to be so (Dehejia 48-50). It is in this potential that His image is there, while not being truly there, that Dehejia's analysis informs Mounir Fatmi's discussion of image in his works. It is in this that the image, plainly visible, starts to vibrate and loses its solidity. This is an excellent example of why it is often disputed that aniconism existed in ancient religious art, for the evidence that supports such claims can also be simply dismissed; the fluidity of the images caused by aniconism condemns its own instigator in this way, to be misjudged, over-looked, or even under-looked. It is within this realm of imagining an image beyond what is being simply presented that the work of Mounir Fatmi begins to enter the conversation.

Mounir Fatmi's artistic practice, especially his filmic and video practices, have an engaging relationship to video itself. He is very dedicated to his medium, evidenced even in his
writing. In his article *My Father Has Lost His Teeth – Now I Can Bite Him*, written in response to the events of the Arab Spring, he organizes his historical analysis around images of a VCR, a video tape, and the banal functions of the VCR: pause, rewind, and fast-forward. This approach to thinking, to embody it in a medium he is so familiar with, allows him to push his argument through the mind and deep into the heart. The experience of reading his poignant, almost demanding words, written in the imperative for added effect, is incredibly visceral, in almost the exact same way it is to watch his videos. When he discusses the tragedies and injustices he and so many others have faced, it is clear that his works stem from the pain and frustration he feels. Being unable to forget any of the images he has seen, among them many scenes of war and destruction, causes Fatmi intense discomfort. Describing the Tunisian street vendor whose self-immolation started the anti-government uprising in his country, Fatmi writes that the inability to rid himself of these terrible images makes him wish that he could cut his eyeball out “*Chien Andalou* style” (Fatmi 19). Perhaps it is because he knows the pain of such trauma that his videos do not reach such a level of graphic imagery – at least in the sense that none of it lingers in the mind’s eye. Fatmi does attempt to cause a tamer level of discomfort, however, by using a combination of aniconic imagery and harsh, dissonant sounds.

In Fatmi’s *The Machinery*, the audience is presented with an adorned, aniconic figure, that of a stylized calligraphic hadith, or saying of Muhammad, which translates to: "If God gives blessings to His servants, He likes to see their effects" (Marks 10). As the film plays on, the sounds of grinding machinery, dripping water and other jarring sounds fall in and out of harmony. This causes a similar reaction to that of reading Fatmi’s article, or perhaps even more so, a reaction akin to Fatmi’s when he writes about being unable to remove unpleasant images from his mind’s eye; it’s a reaction of unsettlement. These sounds, played over a calligraphic text-image, add to the aniconic form of the work. As calligraphy, the form is the signifier, the signified, and the sign; an image of words, a representation of words, but also words in
themselves. The calligraphy in itself in the first moments of the film, when this gear-like disk of text spins at its slowest, is beautiful, and has the presence of an image. As the film goes on, that beauty becomes lost in the speed and ferocity of a new view of this text-image. Not only does it lose its ground in language, as it becomes impossible to see the form as the statement it once was (even if the viewer did not understand the Arabic words) when it begins to spin at its fastest, but it also loses its ground in representation through imagery, as it no longer functions as a sign, merely as a violent, hypnotic, lifeless form. This is where Fatmi’s aniconic choices begin to appear more positively, as motivated by the affect of this choice, than negatively by any desire to avoid certain kinds of images.

This distinction is also important when looking his video *Face: the 99 names of God* (1999), as the film is once again built on a completely text-based image where Fatmi leaves room to be affected by the words. The Qur’an defines 99 unique, and in some cases even opposing names or identities of God, thus further allowing the individual a respectful openness to his or her own image of Him. In *Face*, the artist lists every name given, one after another, translating the Arabic script into French and also vocalizing it visually, rendering three separate signs all of which signify one idea, that of an aspect of God. Yet again Fatmi uses these aniconic images not for what they look like, but for how they feel to the audience. In this case the affect is one of freedom, openness, and perhaps even hope. As Laura Marks writes, his use of this Islamic aesthetic is a choice not based on the visual qualities it possesses, but based on the potentiality of an invisibility that the words have in the video (9). It is impossible to have a singular image of God, not simply because to create one is forbidden, rather because He is so many opposing forces – contradictions, even – as described in the Qur’an and again in this work, and in this facelessness are God’s power and the power of this video. Text is a vessel for Fatmi; his videos use it as a guiding light, leading them into the audience’s bodies, where it can then elicit a visceral response, and for Fatmi, the best way to ignite the flame that lights the way
is through aniconic images.

In what he calls an "homage to Jackson Pollock," Fatmi brings the abstract expressionist drip to the digital realm in his video Arabesque (1997). Looking at this work with a fair ignorance to the artist’s life draws out the beauty in the simple form and gesture presented. The audience’s gaze is held, much like it would be later in The Machinery among others, and a calm feeling imposes itself. There is not yet dissonant sound to affect us, no text to gain entry through. All there is in this video is one continuous black line drawn by the cursor in a simple paint program, spiraling gently and gracefully, yet also chaotically, until the frame is almost completely covered, leaving no discernible path, only the result of making the path itself. The most salient moment of the video, aside from the end when we become lost in the black entangled form, is a moment closer to the opening, when the cursor quickly decides that it would rather go counter-clockwise than clockwise, and then proceeds into the rest of the video never again switching direction. The immediate effect of this pushes the viewer back for a moment, leaving them to wonder why, and if it will happen again. As the video progresses, it leaves the question in the back of the mind: ‘why the switch?’ It is as though the video starts from one side of an argument, beginning to make its point through a demonstration, but then realizes quickly that the argument is wrong and quickly changes sides. It could be that the argument is in regard to the form itself, the initial argument being that this piece is to create an image that simply combines the true arabesque forms of Islamic art with the abstract expressionist drips. In this case, that heavy-handed directional switch is Pollock’s wrist snapping to splatter his paint, its purpose to break up the visual field and allow the eye yet another moment to linger. The aniconic figure then becomes about the viewer seeing it, just as it would later be in Face and The Machinery. It is a video in which the image is not about the image being there, but about how the image acts upon its viewer and elicits responses. In this way, it is clear that even at the beginning of his artistic career Fatmi is already putting the aniconic image
in place for affect, not for effect.

Whether it is the harsh sounds of grinding machine parts or the calming motion of a spiraling squiggle, or something in between, Mounir Fatmi’s films and videos all share a common theme of putting affect above the visual. His life, full of affective moments and events, is the ground from which the forms he creates are born. Forms like smoke, a signifier of fire, or a saw blade, a signifier of a violent machine, all appear in his work, and all are there to elicit a similar affect to the ones he has experienced. For Fatmi, aniconism and aniconic imagery are both tools he uses in the same way Jackson Pollock uses a brush or a paint bucket; they carry the medium and along with it the intended message. Neither considered any of their tools as anything but an extension of themselves which could act as a transmitter for their affective purposes.
Works Cited


