

Calligraphic Animation: Documenting the Invisible

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Abstract

Calligraphic animation shifts the locus of documentation from representation to performance, from index to moving trace. Animation is an ideal playing field for the transformative and performative qualities that Arabic writing, especially in the context of Islamic art, has explored for centuries. In Islamic traditions, writing sometimes appears as a document or a manifestation of the invisible. Philosophical and theological implications of text and writing in various Islamic traditions, including mystic sciences of letters, the concept of latency associated with Shi'a thought, and the performative or talismanic quality of writing, come to inform contemporary artworks. A historical detour shows that Arabic animation arose not directly from Islamic art but from Western-style art education and the privileging of text in Western modern art – which itself was inspired by Islamic art. A number of artists from the Muslim and Arab world, such as Mounir Fatmi (Morocco/France), Kutlug Ataman (Turkey), and Paula Abood (Australia) bring writing across the boundary from religious to secular conceptions of the invisible. Moreover, the rich Arabic and Islamic tradition of text-based art is relevant for all who practice and study text-based animation.

Keywords

animation, calligraphy, colonialism, documentary, Islamic art, modernism, Mounir Fatmi, mysticism, performativity, text-based art

A number of artists in the Muslim and Arab world produce films and videos that animate the written word: works we can call *calligraphic animation*. These films and videos take up Arabic written words or single letters and, drawing on Arabic and Islamic practices, bring out their tendency to transform, morph into figurative forms and out again, and become. Animation is an ideal playing field for the transformative and performative qualities of writing that Arabic writing has explored in dazzling variety for centuries. These works also perform as documents when we see them in the light of Islamic traditions, in which writing and the word can be thought of as a document or manifestation of the invisible. In turn, the philosophical and theological implications of text and

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writing in various Islamic traditions come to inform contemporary artists, who bring writing across the boundary from religious to secular conceptions of the invisible. These experiments that draw on rich Arabic and Islamic histories of text-based art should be of interest not only to people from those backgrounds but to all who practice and study text-based animation (Marks, 2010a).

Calligraphy makes some of its most wittiest performances, and reveals some of its deepest implications, in the work of Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi. Fatmi's video *L'alphabet rouge* (1994) animates painterly letters so that they become like swooping, dancing creatures, seeming to call on the Islamic mystical tradition of *'ilm al-huruf*, according to which every letter contains latent capacities (Figure 1). His *Face, the 99 Names of God* (1999) silently displays the 'beautiful names of God' sequentially in elegant calligraphy, with translation into French. The names of God comprise a vast field of differences: God is *al-Tawwab* (the Relenting) and also *al-Nutqam* (the Avenger); *al-Ba'ith* (the Resurrector) and also *al-Mumeet* (the One who brings death); *al-Zâhir* (the Manifest) and also *al-Bâtin* (the Hidden). While the words are not animated, the video suggests the most fundamental of all transformations, that from individual entities to a single Source. To gaze upon all these names together is to gradually look into the infinite, impossible thing, the face of God. Thus Fatmi's works immediately pose the question, what is the source of life; what gives rise to and *animates* forms?

Writing as document: from index to capture

In order to consider calligraphic animation as a form of documentary, we need to ask how writing can be a document. This in turn shifts the question from what documentary represents to what

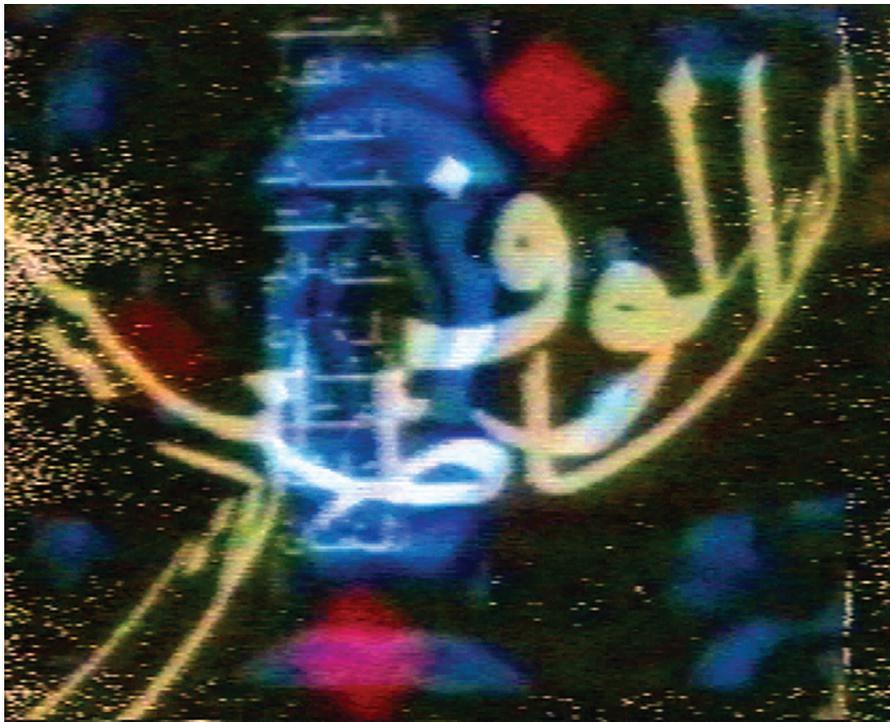


Figure 1. Mounir Fatmi, still from *L'Alphabet rouge* (1994). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

documentary does. Animation's signal quality is the uncanny aliveness of its forms, regardless of what they depict: animation abounds with non-organic life. Animated texts, words, and letters take this quality of uncanny liveliness even further, for they can behave like figures one moment, then collapse into the most self-effacing of symbols the next. Calligraphic animation shows that documentary need not be confined to the perceptible surface of things; documentary can record the very event of coming into being.

Calligraphic animation provokes contemplation of the relationship between animation and documentary, not because it disputes the truth function of photographic images (as figurative animation also does) but insofar as it shifts the locus of documentation from representation to performance. Calligraphic animation documents the process of inscription more than it does any pro-filmic event. In this way it is like structural films that document the process of their own production. However, because of the nature of words and writing, the process documented can be extremely concentrated, talismanic, almost magical, certainly performative. Arabic animation is the subject of this article, and I will suggest that Arabic animation offers useful ideas for text-based animation in general, because of the strong tradition of text-based art that informs it. My findings should be useful for text-based animation in any linguistic tradition. Given that fluid text-image morphs are now easily produced by computer-based media, it stimulates thought to consider the deep antecedents for this practice.

Animated writing poses the question: Is the word transparent to its signified meaning, or opaque, an object in itself? Is writing a physical object to be documented, an abstraction, or a process? Usually it is all three, as a quick perusal of some terms from CS Peirce's semiosis, other than *index*, indicates. As documentable objects, written words fall into CS Peirce's categories of *symbol*, *replica* and *sinsign*: As stand-ins for the word they designate, written words are replicas. But each individual occurrence of the word is a sinsign: 'an actual existent thing which is a sign' (Peirce, 1994: para 246). Thus the word 'animation' is a symbol; the written word 'animation' is a replica; and any group of letters on this page that spells 'animation' is a sinsign. Writing tends to twist free of its subservience to the word and exhibit its individuality: to cease to be a replica and become a sinsign. And the sinsign in turn becomes an *icon*, a sign that indicates its object through resemblance – but by now it resembles not the word it came from, but something else.

Generally, experimental films constitute documentary forms insofar as they document the process of their own production. David James (1999: 5), writing of the films of Morgan Fisher, remarks that they fulfill structural film's 'deepest aspiration ... [to be] about nothing but the conditions of its own manufacture'. Experimental films document not the pro-filmic event but the film's own coming into existence. Similarly, calligraphic animation indexes a process, which it reproduces in real time. Documenting the process of inscription more than it does any pro-filmic event, it is like structural films that document the process of their own production. Animation indexes the hand that made it, the labor and time that went into it.

Does it matter if the animation is computer-based, and thus does not index the hand? I say no. Computer-based animation indexes the software and hardware on which it was produced. Braxton Soderman (2007) argues that digital images are not just symbols but indexes, for they translate the 'existential bond' of the index into the law of computational execution. The computer *must* enact the algorithm: 'the program forces the result'. Furthermore, Soderman argues, interactive artworks can emphasize the present activity of algorithm. Liveness or performative activity characterizes algorithmic artworks. Algorithms are created by humans, he emphasizes. I would add, relying on the concept of *logical depth*, that algorithms index the activity of the people who made them. A term from mathematics, logical depth signifies the number of calculations that have been discarded in order to come up with an equation or algorithm. Computer scientist Charles Bennett (1988)

defines logical depth as the amount of calculating time embedded in a message: 'The value of a message is the amount of mathematical or other work plausibly done by its originator, which its receiver is saved from having to repeat.'¹ Thus a computer-based artwork indexes not only the work of its maker, but that of all the people who wrote the programs on which this particular artwork relies. It indexes their mistakes too.

In short, calligraphic animations, whether analog or digital, index a history of human activity.

We are beginning to see that, in animation, the document as realist copy of a pro-filmic event gives way to the document as indexical connection to the real. As Mary Ann Doane (2007: 128–152) writes:

While realism claims to build a mimetic copy, an illusion of an inhabitable world, the index only purports to point, to connect, to touch, to make language and representation adhere to the world as tangent – to reference a real without realism.²

No doubt there is documentation going on in these works, but they are not documentaries in the usual sense.

Indexicality is not calligraphic animation's only claim to documentary status. Tom Gunning (2007: 44–45) evocatively broadens the indexical capacities of animation by shifting the focus from index as photographic trace to index as movement. In so doing, he emphasizes how animation can be performative and even world-making. Motion, Gunning writes, 'invokes possibility and a future'. He refers to Sergei Eisenstein's enthusiastic writings on Disney: the 'plasmaticness' of the animated line, Eisenstein wrote, restores to us a feeling of transformation, fluidity. Gunning points out that, according to Henri Bergson, to perceive motion one must participate in it. Thus the spectator of animation necessarily embodies its movement. Watching calligraphic animation, we feel empathy with the letters as they swoop free of their symbolic constraints and become animated, take on (non-organic) life.

Empathizing with a line: this notion arose in the early 20th-century perceptual writings of Theodor Lipps. Writing in 1903, Lipps extended Heinrich Wölfflin's concept of bodily empathy to non-figurative forms. He suggested that people 'empathize' with abstract forms insofar as those forms undergo experiences that we too might undergo (see Morgan, 1996).

Gunning's future-oriented optimism for the embodied becoming of animation echoes that of Sean Cubitt. Looking at Émile Cohl's animations from around 1908, Cubitt (2004: 73–80) appreciates how Cohl's line refused to be subservient to any form, designing a flower that becomes a bottle, an elephant that turns into a house. Cubitt calls this line that is always remaking its content, a *vector*. In vector graphics, still used in oscilloscope and radar but mostly surpassed by the pixel-based screen, the line emanating from the center of the monitor is actually a moving point that leaves behind it a trail of light as it connects one point to another. Cubitt privileges vector graphics because they are, in principle, always in the process of becoming. Similarly, calligraphic animation, when its letters break their bounds and become figures and motions, sometimes to modestly revert to letters again, allows the viewer to empathize with their transformations and orient the viewer forward in time.

Ilona Hongisto (2011) proposes an innovative Deleuzian aesthetics for documentary cinema, namely the 'aesthetics of the frame'. This denotes the way a film captures and expresses the real in its process of actualization. While representational theories of documentary consider the subject to be already constituted, the aesthetics of the frame emphasize the emergence of powers to come. Framing captures an event as it comes into being. We can think of calligraphic animation as such an act of framing, capturing, and expressing something as it comes into being, namely the ever-changing word.

In all these ways, calligraphic animation shifts the locus of documentation from representation to performance, from trace of the past to promise of a future.

Writing's magical performativity

Let us contemplate a kind of art in which, although it is not time-based, text seems to morph into figure and morph back again: namely, ornamental writing in Islamic art, such as the beautiful inscriptions on mosque walls and ceramic bowls. These inscriptions are either Qur'anic or generally pious. The beholder can usually figure out what they mean from a few cues without reading the whole text. Sometimes ornamental writing is practically illegible, or only looks like words, as in the bloopy birdlike or leaflike forms that look a bit like the word *baraka*, blessing, painted on lovely bowls from Nishapur, Iran (Marks, 2010a, 2010b). On some of these lovely dishes, the transformation is complete: the replica *baraka* has morphed into the sign 'baraka,' the individual painted word, which in turn has become the icon of a bird (Figure 2). Although the words were illegible, I imagine that people in 10th-century Nishapur would have felt somewhat blessed when they used these bowls. The art historian Oleg Grabar (1992: 103, *passim*) writes that ornament, the



Figure 2. Slip-painted bowl, Eastern Iran, Iran or Uzbekistan, 10th century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photograph by Laura Marks.

kind of sign that seems to mean nothing in itself, is an *intermediary*; it marks the entry to a different space, for example the ritual space of the mosque. Ornament has a performative function in that it tells the beholder: 'This is important.' Illegible ornamental writing mediates between the Nishapur bowl and its user, creating a sense of well-being, even if its words cannot be read. Thus the writing indexes its content of blessedness not by signifying the word *baraka* but by evoking a feeling of blessedness.

Now, because calligraphic animation applies animation's mercurial shape-shifting to letters and words, it might seem appropriate to discuss it in terms of the concept of the figural. Jean-François Lyotard's figural (quite different from that of Deleuze, 2002, which I will not go into here) is a flow of desiring energy that refuses to be shaped by discourse, and struggles within discursive, clichéd, pre-shaped forms (Elkins, 1998: 107; Rodowick, 2001: 9–12).³ Neither figurative nor textual, the figural deforms both figurative image and text. Several scholars have brought Lyotard's concept of the figural to digital media and animation, arguing that animation, in troubling the difference between text and image, performs the figural (Gehman and Reinke, 2005, 3–27; Rodowick, 2001).

I choose to bypass the agonistic discourse of the figural. Although it works between figuration and text, Lyotard's figural is conceived in tension with figuration. The notion that the figural is transgressive makes sense in the context of the Greek and Christian heritage of Western art. But it is not so relevant in the (later) development of aniconic Islamic art, the source of the animations I discuss here. Nor is it so relevant to algorithmic media, which, while they oscillate promiscuously between image, text, and non-figurative forms, are fundamentally textual media.

I would rather bring to you some concepts from Islamic thought that illuminate on the performative, transformative power of text itself. As I argue in *Enfoldment and Infinity* (Marks, 2010a), these concepts shed light on contemporary media art far better than many of the ideas developed in the context of the Western figurative tradition. It is generally recognized that most religious Islamic art is aniconic, i.e. it avoids figurative representation. This avoidance liberates massive amounts of energy. Free from the necessity to depict, form takes on a life of its own. Forms that proliferate while refusing to depict anything are alive in themselves, with a non-organic life. As Deleuze (1989: 214) observed of the camera-less animations of Norman MacLaren:

Line and point are freed from the figure, at the same time as life is freed from the axes of organic representation: power has passed into a non-organic life, which sometimes traces a continuous arabesque directly onto the film.

What is remarkable about the tradition of Arabic calligraphy is that it too frees line and point from depiction, while also liberating them from language's role of transparent signifier. Calligraphic artworks are animated in a strong sense of the word: they do not depict living forms but instead embody the movement of life itself. Although they do not move, the letters of calligraphy are already alive: they constitute a proto-animation.

Some words on the difference between Arabic writing and Islamic writing are in order. The Arabic language precedes Islam and is spoken by non-Muslims: it corresponds to regions and cultures. And Muslims in non-Arabic-speaking lands know Arabic only in its religious context: for them the Qur'anic and secular languages do not mingle. In countries that use Arabic letters to write other languages, such as Iran and (before Atatürk decided that Turkish should be written in Latin letters) Turkey, artists also partake in the aesthetics of Arabic writing. Yet, in terms of writing, Arabic and Islamic are not extricable. Creative treatment of Arabic writing was certainly stimulated by the Islamic avoidance of figurative images in religious art; but all Arabic-speaking society participated and participates in it. Much of the power surging through Arabic writing

derives from the theological weight given to language in Islam. Many verses of the Qur'an emphasize that God's word is durable, complete, and perfect in its truth (Qur'an 2005, 6: 114). Yet the Qur'an also emphasizes that the words that appear in the sacred book are only a drop compared to the infinite words of God. Twice in the Qur'an this striking metaphor occurs: 'Say [Prophet], If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted – even if we were to add another ocean to it' (Qur'an 2005, 18: 109). The speech of God is more infinite than the capacity of writing; it seems to generate writing and to animate it.

Mystical performativity: some concepts from Islamic thought

I propose to adopt a few concepts from the history of Islamic thought in order to think about performative text, and ultimately about animation. It is necessary to insert a stern caveat that these concepts are historical, not universal, and not necessarily accessible or of interest to Muslims today, let alone to Muslim artists. My purpose really is not to use them to talk about contemporary art in the Muslim world but to introduce them into Western discourse. Here goes:

An important pair of concepts for thinking about animation is *zâhir* and *bâtin*, or manifest and latent. *Zâhir* implies a state of completion, a finished surface, not requiring interpretation. *Bâtin*, by contrast, signifies the potential that deeper, implicit meanings may be explicated. Sunni Islam was consolidated early on (at least by the 9th century) by the argument that there is no need to interpret the Qur'an, and that what matters is that the manifest, or *zâhir*, meanings of the text are equally available to all. The reasoning is that one should not question the Qur'an but peaceably accept; in the words of 9th-century jurist Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, *bila' kayfa* ('don't ask how'). In the art associated with Sunni Islam, this often gave rise to a sort of WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) aesthetic: visible forms corresponded exactly to religious meanings. Sunni calligraphy, supremely legible, asserts the inviolability of the letter. When an animated-text work insists on the fixity of its words, we may look for this kind of orthodoxy that tries to minimize the 'wobble room' in which words and letters might take on other meanings.

Yet, in popular and mystical contexts, those individual letters (*huruf*; singular, *harf*) refuse to stay still; they tremble with significance. Several suras of the Qur'an begin with isolated letters, whose meaning has long been debated but which are thought to have healing powers. Letters tend to become figurative, as when a lovely face might be said to have a letter *nun* for each eye and eyebrow, an *'ayn* for a nose, and a *mim* for a mouth, so that the face was a whole spelled *na'am*, 'yes' (Grabar, 1992: 87). The Hurufi Sufi movement, which originated in Iran in the 14th century and became popular in Anatolia, elaborated a mysticism of letters, *'ilm al-huruf*, that assigned numbers (similar to those of Cabbalistic thought) and Aristotelian elements to each letter, and ascribed symbolism to the letters. Fire letters were thought to intensify the effects of war, for example, while water letters could cool fever (Khan, 2001: 67). Such beliefs gave rise to pictorial writing, popular in Sufi groups in Ottoman Turkey, and in Shi'a Iran. In Ottoman pictorial writing, the letters of a phrase, a poem or a blessing, are drawn in such a way as to make a bird, an animal, a face, or a dervish's conical hat. These written-pictures were often used as talismans (Blair, 2006: 449–450). Yet *'ilm al-huruf* was far from orthodox, and its founder, Fazlallah Astarabadi, was executed for his beliefs.

In 19th-century Iran, faces formed of letters spelling sacred names comprised amulets: carrying one would be like invoking the protection of God, Mohammed, 'Ali (the first imam, according to Shi'a Muslims), and Hassan ('Ali's martyred son); or of the Shi'a holy five: Mohammed, 'Ali, Fatima ('Ali's wife), Hassan, and Hossein (Hassan's brother, also martyred). The faces are *zâhir* or

manifest, the names are *bâtin* or latent. So these amulets both invoked holy names and operated a proto-animation unfolding and enfolding, faces unfolding from names, names enfolding faces. Pictorial writing condensed the power of words as though to extract magic from them – anticipating animation’s capacity to turn forms inside out.

These terms indicate a third idea from Islamic tradition that informs animated text, namely the tension between manifest and latent meaning. Unlike mainstream Sunni Islam, Shi’i Islam and Sufism emphasize interpretation, considering that there exist both exoteric (*zâhir*) meanings of the Qur’an, available to all people of faith, and esoteric (*bâtin*) meanings to be pursued by a (very) few. Shi’i Islam, expounded in the Fatimid caliphate in Cairo in the 10th century, held that certain individuals are qualified to interpret the Qur’an, by drawing the latent meaning out of its letters. Exemplary of the potential for interpretation is the script called foliated Kufic, which is almost impossible to read. Although it does not move (indeed it is often carved in stone), foliated Kufic seems to have an internal life force. Its letters sprout leaves, buds, and vines. Other writing on secular objects, especially from 12th-century Afghanistan, grows human heads! This sense that letters have an interior potential, which can unfold and spring into life, is also proto-animation (Figure 3).

You will surely observe that these qualities of Arabic calligraphy – having an outside and an inside, tending to oscillate between writing and figurative image, functioning as a talisman – all emphasize that writing is not static but performative. Even in conservative traditions where it is supposed to stay still, writing is under great pressure *from inside* to turn into something else.

These religious and mystical tendencies of Arabic calligraphy, especially in the Islamic context, suggest another answer to the question, What does writing document? Calligraphy in Sufi and



Figure 3. Pen box with human-headed letters, signed by Shazi, from Iran or Afghanistan, 1210–1211. Freer Museum, Washington DC. Photograph by Laura Marks.

Shi'a mystical traditions suggests that a complete reversal is possible between word and thing, as the finite word opens onto the infinite. In mysticism, words and letters are not symbolic but mimetic. They contain latent meanings that can be activated. They may have protective or magical powers. (I should note again, however, that more orthodox traditions in Islam frown deeply on any practice that attributes power to something else besides God, even if it is an object that invokes God's name.)

Animation similarly posits a fluid reversibility between word and thing, a mimetic, infectious quality whereby the word takes on the character of the things it spells (as in concrete poetry), the thing likes to disintegrate into its constitutive ciphers.

Computer-based media make this magical fluidity of text commonplace. Now, text's fluid way of becoming-abstract, becoming-figurative, and reverting to text is integral to the medium. Contemporary digital media seem to completely obviate the distinction between image and text in motion graphics, 'designed non-narrative, non-figurative visuals that change over time' (Max Frantz's definition, quoted in Manovich, 2006: 9). This is because, in most computer animation programs, both image and text are processed as images. And of course image and text are underwritten by text, the code that generates their activity. So we ought to look at the code, not the gyrations of the textual image, for the real performative activity of these animations.

However, I think that computer animation, rather than doing away with the magical quality of animated text, augments it with the performative 'magic' of the code. Florian Cramer (2005) argues that computer-based media have deep roots in performative texts of medieval and Renaissance times. Cramer's deep history demonstrates that 'executable statements' invoked magic, the capacity of the word to have real effects, long before computer code. In *Enfoldment and Infinity* (2010a), I extend his genealogy to include Arabic and Islamic performative texts, such as the magic squares developed by the Brethren of Purity, a neo-Pythagorean society in 10th-century Basra. One of Cramer's (2005: 40–41) examples is the 14th-century Majorcan monk Raimon Llull who developed a computational disk, the *Ars combinatoria*, which could be rotated to combine letters referring to attributes of God in a prototype of modern symbolic logic. As Cramer notes, Leibniz's symbolic logic was inspired in part by Llull's prototype.

Yet Llull, living in Spain at a time when Muslims had not yet been forced to convert or emigrate, had access to Islamic knowledge and apparently required his Muslim slave to share his knowledge (Vernet, 1992: 185).⁴ This may have been how Llull learned of the *zâ'irjah*, a device attributed to the 12th-century Moroccan Sufi Muhammad ibn Mas'ud abu al-'Abbâs al-Sabtî. The amazing *zâ'irjah* could offer an answer in rhyme to any question posed to it (Link, 2010: 215–266). It was one of many proto-computational devices invented in the Muslim world. This truncated but fascinating story indicates that Leibniz's computational logic, and the modern computing theory that Leibniz's innovation informed, draw upon deep sources in Islamic performative code.

Colonialism, nationalism, Orientalism: the slow route from calligraphy to animation

How did these calligraphic traditions enter contemporary animation? You might think that artists in the Arab and Muslim world discovered that animation is a logical extension of calligraphy in the earliest days of cinema. But in fact Arabic calligraphy took a most circuitous route to the movies.

The 'Islamic' qualities of writing appeared in Western modernism *before* they occurred in modern art in the Arab and Muslim world. For in a double movement of cultural exchange – across unequal power relations – artists in the Arab and Muslim world adopted Western-style

modernism in the 19th century at the same time that Islamic aesthetics transformed Western art. The abstract aesthetics of Islamic art inspired generations of Western modernists. In the 19th century, European artists traveled to the Arab and Muslim world on the wave of European colonial expansion, and they also learned from objects and documentation brought back from those countries. European artists applied the lessons of Islamic aesthetics to figurative representation in order to release abstraction, and (I have argued) to give rise to certain subjective states. Examples abound, from Eugène Delacroix to Paul Klee (Benjamin, 2003; Marks, 2010a, ch. 4). Islamic aesthetics passed into European art at a time when the latter had need of them – and the Muslim world no longer did.

This is because, during the same period, artists in the Arab and Muslim world were turning their attention to figurative art. Traditional crafts, including calligraphy, fell out of favor as the axis of power swung towards Europe and an uneven modernity swept the Arab and Muslim worlds. In the first decades of the 20th century, European-style fine-arts institutes were founded in Cairo, Istanbul, Beirut, and elsewhere, teaching mild versions of Impressionism and other figurative styles (Karnouk, 2005; Nashashibi, 1998: 168–170). It seems ironic, or a kind of cultural colonialism, that European academic styles were being adopted in the colonies just as they were losing their place to abstraction in Europe. As Wijdan Ali (1992: 187) points out, the rift between traditional craft and fine art that resulted from the importation of European styles created ‘a feeling of embarrassment among artists and other creative talents toward their own heritage, and they began to imitate the traditions of the colonizers’. But we can also consider that, in the Muslim world, realist figurative painting came to be the aesthetic ally of modern politics, an art practice that could respond to rising populism, nationalism, and anti-imperialism. So ironically, while Western artists were pursuing Islamic aesthetics, Muslim artists were not.⁵

In European and Russian art from the 1910s and later, letters and numbers began to form on top of the newly flattened canvas, as in the work of Paul Klee, Kasimir Malevich, the Cubists, and Kurt Schwitters’ Dada collages. Letters became abstract and quasi-performative entities in the visual poems of Filippo Marinetti, Guillaume Apollinaire, Augusto de Campos, and Mary Ellen Solt. While Latin letters do not have the capacity of Arabic letters to morph, concrete poetry is itself an ancient tradition, practiced in Greek poetry (a heritage shared by Islam) and Renaissance poetry. In the 20th century, as Western art began to seek alternatives to figurative imaging, concrete poetry experienced a resurgence and began to move in the animated texts of Saul Bass, among others (Bohn, 2001; Drucker, 1998; Higgins and Francke, 1987; Solt and Barnstone, 1968).

But only mid-century did some artists in the Arab and Muslim world begin to use Arabic text. The first Arab modernist painters to incorporate Arabic text in their art did so when they encountered Arabic calligraphy during sojourns in the West⁶ (Naef, 1992: 33–65; Shabout, 2007: 71). Shabout argues that by the 20th century, because of the rapid political and cultural changes in the Arab and Muslim world, ‘the Arabic script lost its sacredness’ (p. 70). Perhaps it is only because Arabic was deracinated from religion that modernist artists could feel free to take it up.

An animation by Mounir Fatmi brilliantly and on multiple levels encapsulates the irony of this situation. *Arabesque: hommage à Jackson Pollock* (1997) plays entirely on the debt of Western modernism to Islamic art, while rejecting Islamic aesthetics itself. It begins as a computer-generated scribble, which gradually gathers momentum as it fills the white screen. Despite the title, it is not the graceful abstract line of the arabesque, nor the lumpy, vigorous arcs of Pollock’s paintings, but the scrappy, hard-to-control line of a computer drawing program (Figure 4). Yet it evokes the influence of Islamic non-figurative, ornamental art on Western painters in the 19th and 20th centuries. It recalls the popularity of ‘Arabesque’ as a title for Western experiments with non-representational art, from poetry to music to painting. The Orientalist reference allowed Western artists to play with

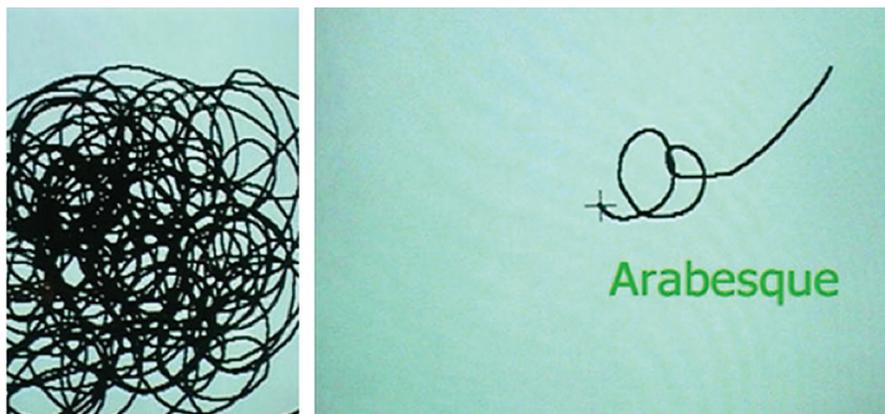


Figure 4. Mounir Fatmi, stills from *Arabesque: hommage à Jackson Pollock* (1997). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

ornamental effects while at the same time disavowing the frivolous associations of ornament. *Arabesque: hommage à Jackson Pollock* refers in particular to Pollock's own *Number 13a: Arabesque* (1948), a composition of blobby white, black, and gray drip-gestures on an oblong brown canvas. Fatmi's messy, expanding scribble even mimics the 'horror vacui' that some Western art historians xenophobically attributed to Islamic art. But Fatmi refuses to reproduce the elegant, curvilinear symmetries of traditional arabesque patterns. Indeed he also refuses to take the 'ornamental excuse' that Western artists did when they invoked the arabesque. Instead he grasps the new digital medium with its crude and hard-edged effects.

Scholars basically agree that modern artists' turn to Arabic writing involved a revival of cultural tradition: first in a nationalist assertion of Arab identity, later in an Islamic resurgence (Ali, 1989; Karnouk, 2007; Naef, 2003: 164–174; Shabout, 2007). The Arabic textual revival took off in earnest among Arab artists in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in Iran and Turkey. The 1970s witnessed a new debate over the relationship between modernism and Arabic textual aesthetics, with the first biennial exhibitions of Arab art in Baghdad in 1971 and in Rabat in 1975. Text-based art seemed the ideal negotiation between modernism and cultural tradition. In the 1970s '*Hurufiyya* ... was the solution to the problem of authenticity in modern art', writes Silvia Naef (2010: 33).

Writing about Egyptian art, Liliane Karnouk argues that the revival of Islamic aesthetics constituted an introspective return to identity politics. Egypt and its Arab allies had been humiliatingly defeated by Israel in the Six Days' War of 1967, and one recourse to this humiliation was a soul-searching return to Islamic values (Ali, 1992: 187; Karnouk, 2005: 141–143). In addition, traditional values affected the retreat from figurative representation in the early 1970s quite directly, too, since art schools in Egypt suspended instruction in anatomy and drawing live nudes, and artworks with nude figures were no longer shown in public. At the same time, Karnouk notes, a productive force drove the revival of Islamic aesthetics, namely oil. The newly rich and powerful Gulf states were beginning to sponsor architecture and art that celebrated Arab and Islamic identity, calligraphy among them. The worst of this Karnouk calls 'manneristic kitsch' (p. 143).

The revival of Muslim values led to another iteration of neo-textual art in the 1990s, more familiar to us now, which asserted that art that uses Arabic *is* modern Islamic art. This movement originated with Muslim artists and curators and was quickly taken up by Western curators (Naef, 2010: 33–34). Silvia Naef deplors the way these exhibitions, such as 'Word into Art' at the British

Museum in 2006 and echoed quickly by other museums, 'reinforced the existing stereotype that there is an art form which is specific to the Islamic world and that is based, without interruption, on the old traditions of the region' (p. 34).

The calligraphy revival tends to cater to Western desires for self-Orientalizing art from the Muslim world. The very popular 'Women of Allah' series of the late 1990s by Shirin Neshat, in which photographs of women in confrontational poses are covered with or surrounded by written texts in Farsi, exemplifies this tendency. The work's title invites a non-reader of Arabic letters (which are also used to write Farsi) to imagine that these are Qur'anic inscriptions. This gambit, taking advantage of the ignorance of Western viewers, increases the works' subversive appeal: they seem somehow to be criticizing Islam. The bilingual title 'Women of Allah' instead of 'Women of God' further compounds the series' exoticism, suggesting that Islam is so mysterious that the Arabic word for God does not even translate into English (and ignoring Arabic-speaking Christians who use the word Allah).

Artists in the Muslim world have to negotiate a fraught engagement with Western expectations and the global art market. On one hand, the international art circuit imposes a standard of international-style art with meaningful touches of local history, culture, and politics. Most contemporary artists in the Muslim world do *not* make art that draws from Islamic aesthetics, such as the use of calligraphy. Works in the Biennale-art vocabulary of conceptual art, relational art, installation, and the politics of representation are more common. It is flagrantly mistaken to call contemporary art from the Muslim world that is not made for a religious purpose 'Islamic' – as critics often do when writing of the art of Walid Ra'ad, Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and other heavyweights of contemporary art (e.g. Lowry, 2008).

On the other hand, a neo-Orientalist market is eager for new iterations of 'Islamic'-looking calligraphy, geometric and arabesque patterns, and miniature-style paintings with just a dash of irony or subversion. In this, Western collectors share a niche with the collectors of traditional-looking art in the Muslim world. The desire for Islamic aesthetics seems to deny that the colonial art education that apprenticed artists in the Muslim world to Western figurative styles ever took place. It ascribes continuity to artistic practice in the Arab and Muslim worlds instead of the wrenching passage through Western-style modernism that I wrote about earlier. Figurative art surges to popularity mainly through the endless iterations on the politics of the veil, of which Western exhibitors cannot seem to get enough.

Finally, text comes to life

This dyspeptic survey of the art market concluded, let me reassert that beautiful and provocative examples abound of modern and contemporary art from the Arab and Muslim worlds that creatively rediscover text. These works exploit the semiotic slipperiness, performativity, and deep philosophical heritage of Arabic writing and the Arabic alphabet. Some of the most exciting text-based artwork brings into painting letters' performative capacity and the subversive power of *hurufiyya*. To give a couple of examples of artists who began making text-based work for decades: Lebanese artist and writer Etel Adnan (b. 1925) combines watercolor with legible and illegible text, drawing on the energy of letters and of the writing gesture. The Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata (b. 1942) makes sharp-edged silk-screen compositions in square Kufic text, based on sacred and mystical texts. Optically insistent, yet difficult to decipher, they seem to play on the values of *zâhir* and *bâtin*, manifest and latent.

Like Arabic text in visual art, Arabic text shows up in animation in order to bring cultural tradition into a new medium, to assert religious values, and sometimes to critique. Despite the necessary

caveats about looking for traditional Islamic values in contemporary art from the Muslim world, calligraphic animation does often play cannily with traditional meanings of text in Islamic art.

In speaking of animation, I cannot neglect typographic design, an important design medium in the Arab and Muslim world, especially in Iran, and extremely sophisticated.⁷ Since most Arabic letters change shape according to what letters precede and follow them, typographic design has to devise ways for each letter to take its appropriate shape according to its context. Typing in Arabic, one witnesses a little animated movie in which the letters change shape according to what comes next. Some designers are specifically adapting Arabic writing for the live-action medium of the computer screen: Lebanese font designer Tarek Atrissi, for example, playfully animates the rules of proportioned calligraphic script (see www.arabictypography.com). Other designers are coming up with inventive ways to match Arabic and Latin fonts, as in a recent project of the Khatt Foundation in which the same font design can adapt itself to both alphabets.

Arabic writing lends itself to animation because the letters shift shape according to context. Animation, in both analog and digital forms, revels in the transformative and performative qualities of Arabic writing long explored by Islamic art. It can indeed play up mystical and devotional aspects of Islam: for example, the way the letters emerge from and revert to a single source can emphasize the relationship between the unity of God and the infinity of creation. Nowadays, animated Arabic calligraphy, usually of religious sayings, is a popular animated screensaver and website ornament. Animation can enhance the trancelike state a believer can attain through meditation, by making explicit the implicit movements of transformation and becoming that a person viewing still calligraphy can sense. For example, in graphic artist Ruh al-Alam's *Visual Dhikr* (2006), we fly over text spelling sacred phrases and the beautiful names of God such as *Huwa*, 'He'. A single point flies away to draw a field of flowerlike forms, suggesting that every point in the sacred text can be the basis of a new plane. The virtual camera zooms deep into the negative shape of a letter, suggesting that the sacred word contains the infinite (Figure 5). The video shows off al-Alam's innovative digital fonts, while also lingering on the hand of a master calligrapher working in ink and paper (see <http://www.visualdhikr.com/video/index.html>).

As well as the more commercial or religiously motivated calligraphic animations, there is also a critical revival of Islamic textual aesthetics among contemporary artists who bring writing across the boundary from religious to secular conceptions of the invisible. Contemporary artist Kutlug Ataman draws on the tradition of *'ilm al-huruf* when he animates the pictorial writing common in Ottoman Turkey, only to give rise to subversive meanings. In a series of videos of white text on black, calligraphic inscriptions rotate around an axis. At a certain point, in a kind of anamorphism, they briefly flash into pictures, then resolve back into text. When Ataman's *World (no. 1)* (2003) reaches a certain point in the rotation, its neatly executed text suddenly forms a symmetrical composition of erect penises rising from curly pubic hair. They disappear as quickly as they appeared.

In a recent experiment in community animation (in both senses), Australian artist and activist Paula Abood brought together a group of Muslim teenage women to collectively produce a short work, *Huriyya and Her Sisters* (2009) (Figure 6). Abood recognized that making an anti-racist live-action video requires the artists to pour their energy into fighting stereotypes, often giving rise to identity-politics clichés. Animation allowed them to make what Abood calls 'ambiguous allegories' that touch on their own dreams and spirituality. She organized workshops on the proto-animated qualities of Islamic calligraphy, Ottoman figurative and Fatimid foliated writing, inspiring the young women with ways to shift the focus from the body to the transforming word (Abood, 2008).

Mounir Fatmi deals skeptically with the user-friendly, *bila' kayfa* interface of Islamic inscriptions. His animation *The Machinery* (2007) fixes on a stately roundel inscribed with the hadith 'If



Figure 5. Ruh al-Alam, screen grab, *Visual Dhikr* (2006) (www.visualdhikr.com). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.



Figure 6. Bankstown Area Multicultural Network, publicity image for *Huriyya and Her Sisters* (2009). Reproduced courtesy of Paula Abood.

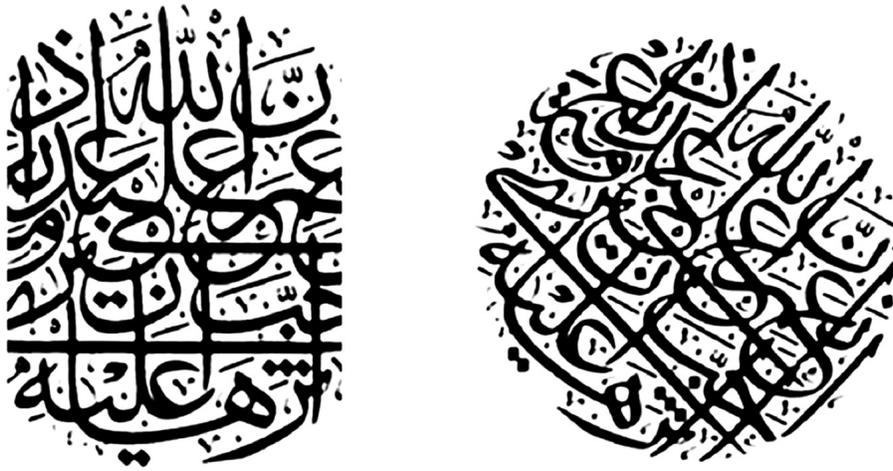


Figure 7. Mounir Fatmi, stills from *The Machinery* (2007). Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

God gives blessings to His servants, He likes to see their effects.’ Like the popular animated graphic, the disk begins to rotate, slowly and then at ever greater speed, and a heavy machine sound is heard. Watching it spin, I hallucinated faces arising from the words; the diacritical marks looked like eyes peering from a thicket (Figure 7). With the sound track of machine sounds, metal doors slamming, and water dripping, the work was quite menacing. (In fact, Fatmi has made sculptural works consisting of pious inscriptions printed on circular-saw blades.) The work suggests that pious statements accepted ‘without asking how’ become at best clichés, at worst weapons. I find this work frightening, especially as the sound track brings to mind the interior of a prison, with metal doors slamming and water slowly dripping. But recently I showed this animation to a group of Isma‘ili students – Isma‘ilism being a mystical and intellectual branch of Shi‘a Islam – and they found it meditative. The spinning verse reminded them of the whirling dance that leads to *dhikr* or remembrance of God; one woman said she focused on the center of the spinning disk and did not get dizzy, just as if a devotee focuses on God the One, she will not get distracted by the universe of illusion. Fatmi’s works draw from Islamic aesthetics not the visual forms of calligraphy as such but a more profound sense of how the invisible unfolds into the visible, or is held in a state of latency.

In sum, while there is a strong tide of quite conservative neo-textual art that appeals to both Muslim and Western collectors, many artists are bringing Islamic textual aesthetics to contemporary media art, and thus they are enriching this art’s qualities of latency, performativity, and transformation.

Let me return to the question of what animated writing documents, how calligraphic animation might be considered documentary. Letters and words oscillate between being transparent vehicles of meaning and opaque forms. They cannot be trusted to stay still, hinting that meaning is always coming into being – a notion influenced not so much by Derrida as by Isma‘ili theology. They suggest the visible skin of the world is always ready to turn inside out. Calligraphic animation, then, lets us glimpse ways that documentary captures not an indexical trace but a process of transformation.

Notes

1. See Marks (2010a: ch. 1) for more discussion of logical depth.
2. I am indebted in this section to Doane's (2007) stimulating edited volume of *Differences* on the index.
3. Deleuze's Figural is an image that directly addresses the nervous system, especially by appealing to perceptual rhythm. Certainly many animations can achieve this sensational address, and it is an interesting topic, but not my topic here.
4. Vernet does not offer a source to substantiate this assertion.
5. The preceding paragraph is from Marks (2010, ch. 4).
6. One of the earliest, the Iraqi painter Mahida Omar, who was encouraged to explore calligraphy by the historian of Islamic art Richard Ettinghausen, first exhibited her works in 1949 in Washington DC.
7. See, for example, the annual Iranian Typography Exhibition, whose catalogues are published by Yasavoli Publications, Tehran (www.5thcolor.com).

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