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The Arabic Connection in Articulating North African Modernity in Art

Modernism in the Arab world has been dominated throughout most of the twentieth century by the discourse of identity—religious (Islamic), political-cultural (Arab), and regional (country). The different identities have always been present, but their priorities have shifted, based on politics and historical events. Arab countries of the Maghreb have had a fourth layer of identity to grapple with: geographical (continental). At the height of Arabism, with Egypt in the lead and at the center of the discourse, the African identity has gained importance as a new political bloc.[1]

Artists, in particular, have grappled with deciphering and expressing the polyvalence of these identities and shifts. Their work has examined and challenged preconceived notions as formulated by both "East" and "West." This essay focuses on the visual expression of identity in North African art of the mid-twentieth century as inclusive of an Arab cultural element, despite the current prevailing rhetoric to the contrary. The appearance and visual negotiation of Arabic letters in North African modern art were more than an acknowledgment of an Islamic past; rather, they were an understanding of a new political

South Atlantic Quarterly 109:3, Summer 2010
DOI 10.1215/00382876-2010-004

and cultural necessity. Arabic letters became a point of intersection and connection with the Mashriq on the basis of cultural unity, not on racial or even ethnic reduction. Arabism is understood here as a broad cultural unifier, allowing for difference and accepting ethnic multiplicities.

Despite the influence of Western modernism during the mid-twentieth century and although political Arabism called for a form of centrality, modern art as negotiated in the Arab world has veered away from the exclusivity and binarism created by Western modernism. Modernism in the Arab world has not denied the past but, rather, has endeavored to reconnect with its wide and varied history. It was conceived within a global vision of inclusiveness.

Modernism in North Africa

Modern art in Africa started in Egypt early in the twentieth century, following the efforts of Prince Yusuf Kamal and the establishment of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1908. Only after World War II did the rest of Africa accept modern art.[2] Nevertheless and in comparison to the Mashriq, North Africa was exposed earlier to modern European art through Orientalist artists and later the establishment of affiliated institutions. For example, a Société des Beaux-Arts was founded in Algiers in 1851, although membership was restricted to artists of French origin. Museums exhibiting Orientalists' art and Écoles des Beaux Arts catering to the colonialists' children and preparing them for the École des Beaux Arts in Paris followed and excluded local artists from admission. Thus most first-generation artists in North Africa were self-taught, influenced by the Orientalists in style and content.

Soon after, however, many of the local artists abandoned all references to the Orientalists' stereotypes in favor of forging a national style that would parallel their countries' nationalist struggles.[3] At the same time, local artists attempted to counter the work of the Orientalists as well as to contextualize recent innovations within an art tradition that included Islamic art and other local traditions. Some of these efforts materialized as Koranic illuminations and miniature revivals transformed into aisle painting,[4] while others converted folk stories and legends into fantasy imagery. The latter trend was specifically encouraged by art critics who considered this "naive" painting a natural stylistic development for an underdeveloped people with no imagination and creativity.

While the work of some artists defied such rhetoric, references to it persisted. Acclaimed by French surrealist André Breton, Algerian Baya Mahieddine (1931–) was a self-taught artist who formed images in painting and clay based on dreams and imagination, expressed in surrealistic forms. Her imagery adapted and synthesized aspects from the Arabo-Berber-Andalusian culture. Breton notes: "In a period as the one we are living in, when the Islamic world is scandalously subjected and colonized, Baya's endeavor is significant. Fairy tales are the very heart of a people, and she is a seer, she 'sees,' and she looks to the sky. But she also loves the earth. Flower among flowers, she asks her flowers to nurture those she loves."[5] Clearly, Breton did not escape the prevailing Orientalist seduction and thus added, "And here, profiled on the fabric threads of the future's virgin, the hieratic figure of Baya, lifting a corner of the veil, revealing what the young united, harmonious, and loving world could be . . . It is undeniable that her gear of wonders, . . . secretly takes part in extracts of perfumes from Thousand and One Nights . . . Baya, whose mission is to recharge with meaning the beautiful nostalgic words: The Happy Arabia."[6]

Modern art did not reach most of the Arab world until the 1950s and mainly flourished in the postcolonial era of independence. Modern art took on a nationalist role and became grounded in nation building. The new generation of established artists perceived art as part of the whole notion of knowledge. They changed the course of the aesthetic debate, which had been concerned with the interpretation of content only, to a concern with the connection between content and form, with styles evolving from sociocultural realities. The Arabization of modern art became for all Arab artists an essential part of the search for national visual identities.

The Egyptian Experience

Prince Yusuf Kamal's initiative to establish the art school in Cairo followed nationalist thinking, which emphasized the need for education. Despite having the first national art institution in the Arab world and Africa and going against the wishes of the British to establish such a school there, Cairo was not outside the European influence. The School of Fine Arts' first director was French sculptor Guillaume Laplagne, and a number of European artists lived in Cairo, on al-Kharanfash Street. The school, however, recruited students from outside the upper classes. Offering free education and courses in modern art, it immediately gained popularity and attracted

a large number of students. It reached beyond Egypt to the rest of the Arab world, as it was accessible to all Arabs.

Mahmoud Mukhtar (1891–1934), Egypt's father of modern Arab sculpture, was one of the first students at the institution. Following his graduation and subsequent scholarship to the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, Mukhtar's neo-pharaonic style articulated Egypt's popular nationalistic trait, especially its emphasis on its pharaonic past. Mukhtar's ideas were revealed through one of his most famous public monuments, the *Egyptian Awakening* (1919–28).

Pioneers in their acceptance of modern art, Egyptian artists embraced similar politics to many of their European contemporaries. The new leftist Egyptian Art and Freedom group, formed by the poet and polemicist Georges Hinayn in 1938, reacted to World War II and the internal political consequences.[7] In addition to the confusion and insecurity felt by European artists during both the interwar period and World War II, artists in Egypt and the Arab world in general had to contend with and react to the emergence of the Palestinian crisis and the increasing tension between the Muslim Brotherhood and the intellectual Left. Steeped in the politics of opposition to the British and Egyptian government, Hinayn joined a group of French intellectuals residing in Cairo in expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo.[8] Art and Freedom later developed an alliance with Breton and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera, adopting surrealism as a style.

The Rise of Arabism

Unlike the dominant art movement in Egypt, most North African artists were developing without a connection to Europe. For example, the Rencontre Internationale des Artistes (International Meeting of Artists), held in Rabat in December 1963 and January 1964, allowed for the initiation of a dialogue between Moroccan and European artists. Established artists such as Farid Belkahia (1934–) and Ahmed Cherkaoui (1934–67) were exposed to European art through their earlier training in Paris but were nevertheless excluded from the international art scene.

Artists and movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the Arab world were mostly localized and isolated. As pan-Arabism swept the region and peaked, however, their work became more interactive. The 1970s was a decade of combined efforts and shared goals through cultural meetings and joint

exhibits. Collectively various artists explored spaces for defining the role of the arts in constructing a unified Arab culture based on perceived commonalities. The Union of Arab Plastic Artists was established following the first meeting held for Arab artists in Damascus in 1971. The union organized its first conference in 1973 in Baghdad, and the first Arab Biennale was held in Baghdad in 1974 and the second in Rabat in 1976.

Further contact between Arab artists was arranged through various workshops, art exhibitions, and festivals in different Arab cities, such as Al-Wassity Festival in Baghdad in 1972 and the annual Cultural Musim Asilah inaugurated in Rabat in 1978. The latter is a seasonal monthlong program of intellectual and artistic activities that promotes interregional and international interactions among artists, poets, journalists, and politicians.

Modernizing the Local

European modernism was not only what artists of the Arab world were studying in the art academies, but it was also promoted through colonialism. Rather than copying it, though, artists looked to their local traditions and systems of signs and symbols as ways to evoke collective memories and, consequently, to combat colonial policies.

Moroccan artist Cherkaoui was one of the first to study native motifs, including those in Berber tattoos, rugs, and jewelry. He explored these motifs as signs and abstract shapes in bright and contrasting colors, juxtaposed at times in accordance to traditional Islamic techniques.

Similar attention was paid to local art by Belkahia. After the Rencontre Internationale des Artistes and as director of the École des Beaux Arts in Casablanca (1962–74), Belkahia initiated a program of localizing art studies by introducing students to the local heritage. He replaced the old models of Greek statues and still-life paintings with Moroccan artifacts and added Arabic and Islamic calligraphy to the school's curriculum.

Belkahia and a group of artists, including Mohammed Melehi and Cherkaoui, became known as the Casablanca school.[9] These artists wanted not only to break away from academic teaching and naive painting but also to eradicate the distinction between crafts and fine arts they had inherited from European academies. Thus, they taught their students the history of local crafts. They boycotted exhibition halls run by foreign embassies and instead exhibited their work in public squares, where crafts were on display and popular street performances took place.

In his own work, Belkahia replaced conventional materials with natural ones; he used brass, skin, henna, and saffron and painted on surfaces other than canvas, such as copper, pottery, wood, handmade paper, and lambskins.[10]

Letters as Signs

In the artists' efforts to localize the modern in their art, Arabic letters offered an obvious vehicle for mediation among their various concerns. For centuries, Arabic text and Islamic calligraphy had provided the means for political and visual unity, as well as mediation between the sacred and profane (between the desired afterlife and transient life), as did Arabic letters in the modern age. With its connection to Islam through the Koran, Arabic was above ethnicity and nationality. It remained so during the modern age despite its secularity, and it played a political and spiritual role. Thus, one of the most prominent constants connecting the past with the present and future, capable of bridging tradition and modernity, has been the Arabic language and, visually, Arabic text.

The beginnings of the modern use of Arabic letters in art lie in a few individual and isolated efforts. There seems to be a consensus among Arab artists, art historians, and critics that two Iraqi artists, Madiha Omar (1908–) and Jamil Hamoudi (1924–), were the first modern artists to use Arabic letters as design elements.[11] Other experiments with Arabic letters during the 1950s appeared around the Arab world, conveying various sources of inspiration and influence and multiple meanings; in all, however, was the notion of Arab cultural unity. The mid-twentieth-century work of Lebanese artist Wajih Nahle (1932–) exhibited an influence of classical calligraphy, particularly of Iranian traditions, while another Lebanese poet Said Akl (1926–) perceived the Arabic text in his work as mundane writing.

In North Africa, where Arabic had been forbidden during colonial occupation, Arabic texts carried an added significance. The Khartoum school, formed in the mid-1950s by a group of Sudanese painters and sculptors, wanted to consciously steer away from Western influences, concepts, and methods by looking into the artists' own heritage, which included African cultural traditions, Islamic visual tradition, and local customs.[12] These artists also explored forming modern indigenous concepts to represent their new constructions of heritage. Many of these artists, having taken calligraphy classes at the School of Design in Khartoum, saw possibilities in the

Figure 1. Farid Belkahia, Morocco, *Shadow*, no date. Etching, 55 by 55 centimeters. From the Permanent collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

Figure 2. Nja Mahdaoui, Tunisia, *Untitled*, 1990. Silkscreen, 57 by 38 centimeters. From the permanent collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

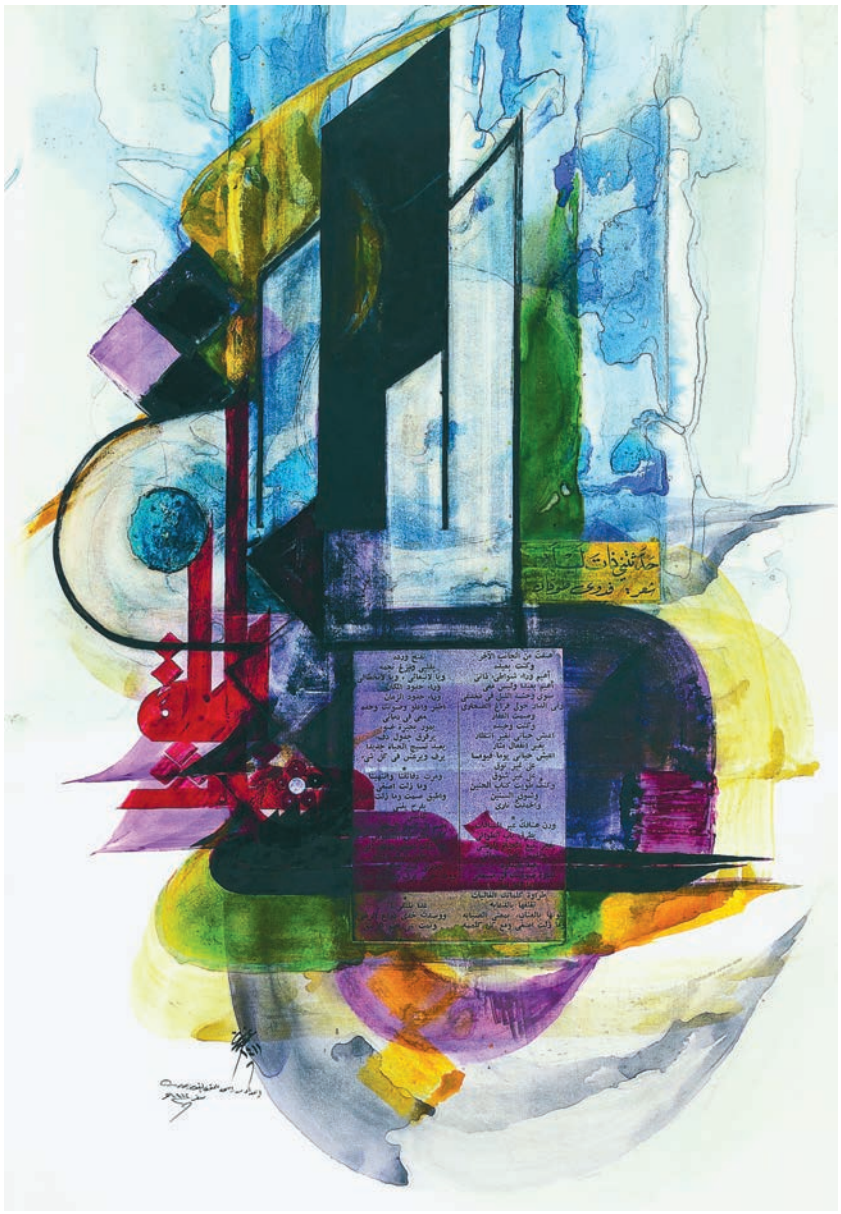

Figure 3. Osman Waqialla, Sudan, *Untitled*, 1991. Collage and watercolors, 58 by 41 centimeters. From the permanent collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

Figure 4. Rachid Koraïchi, Algeria, *Tell al-Zaʿatar*, 1979. Etching, 48 by 35 centimeters. From the permanent collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

Figure 5. Ahmed Moustafa, Egypt, *Frolicking Horses*, 1994. Original silkscreen 122/200, 172.5 by 139.5 centimeters. From the permanent collection of the Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

graphic values of Arabic calligraphy. Osman Waqialla (1925–2007) formulated new visual dimensions for "calligraphy" through his articulation of the letters in space as living entities.

By the 1960s, the individual experiments of the 1940s and 1950s had morphed into a trend. The use of Arabic letters in modern art gave artists comfort and confidence due to the immediate perception of the work's marked cultural (and at times political) identity. Using Arabic letters thus attracted an increasing number of artists around the Arab world. Most turned to Arabic letters during their study at European universities and art academies, where they were sent due to the lack of local art institutions. Formally manipulating Arabic letters as an art element was a direct mediation between modern art and national identity and heritage.

This trend gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s and turned into a phenomenon in which almost every Arab artist experimented with Arabic text.[13] Despite the efforts of some, it never became a unified movement or school of style. Instead, the trend was known as *hurufiyah* (lettrism). The term, itself contested by some historians, was originally used by newspaper critics to describe the work of artists who used Arabic letters in their work. It does, however, allow for a differentiation between calligraphy as a specific style of art with its own rules and traditions and the abstract ways Arabic text is deconstructed in modern art.[14] This distinction is significant in constructing spaces of knowledge and meaning carried by these works. It also differentiates between a modern calligrapher and a painter, the former being someone who manipulates the text within an established tradition of calligraphy that should be allowed to continue in innovative ways and not be folded within the Western notion of modern art. Modern calligraphers reference the tradition of calligraphy at least on the visual level if not following the specific rules.[15] The work of Egyptian *sani* (craftsperson-artist) Ahmed Moustafa (1943–) is a perfect example. Many of Moustafa's works present Koranic verses in three-dimensional forms, and at times he juxtaposes two different traditional scripts—in *Still Life of Quranic Solids*, he uses geometric Kufic for the background and cursive Thuluth for the three-dimensional shapes.

Not all modern calligraphic formulations are easily categorized in accordance with established scripts. The work of Libyan artist Ali Omar Ermes (1945–) exhibits freedom while still adhering to certain traditional expressions. Ermes's work can be divided into two groups: in one group, one letter is the focus of the painting, surrounded by poems and nonreligious quo-

tations; in the other, a single letter is repeated or multiple letters fill the entire space of the painting, as seen in traditional calligraphic exercises.

The focus of the works of Moustafa and Ermes is certainly the letter, which is mostly legible. More importantly, such a focus adds a spiritual dimension, connecting the modern work to works from the Islamic age, the time of the Islamic dynasties. In some works, the letter is no longer recognizable, and reading the text and understanding the message are no longer the point. The spirituality is still present in the decorative pattern of the letters.

An example of this style is the work of Tunisian Nja Mahdaoui (1937–). Mahdaoui's poetic constructions, which he calls *calligrams* (beautiful writing), fluctuate between text and pattern. His explorations of signs are manifest in his transformations of script into abstract but intricate characters and forms. The rhythm of the design is what dictates the transformation and choreography of letters into signs. Order, harmony, and balance necessarily reflect the aesthetics of contemplation and spirituality within its geometrical or organic compositions.

A Discourse of Signs

The work of Algerian Rachid Koraïchi (1947–) presents a more complex example of cultural synthesis. Koraïchi draws on his personal understanding of the Sufism he experienced in his family, the local ancient Berber heritage, the Islamic past, and modern Arab history and political struggles. While exiled due to persecution in his native Algeria, Koraïchi transformed the various elements from his culture into symbols of protest and contestation. His forms conjure up their aesthetic qualities and mystical properties but create new meaning through this juxtaposition of old and new. At times, Koraïchi invokes color symbolism as an element of connection and continuity; he uses indigo to refer to the plant's significance and value to cultures across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, where it was traded along the Silk Road.

While the Arabic text is not necessarily prominent in Koraïchi's work, the text or fragments of it are central to his visual constructions. Moreover, his references to Arab poets and poetry certainly evoke a pan-Arab sentiment. In *Tell al-Zaʿtar* (1979), Koraïchi directly refers to the massacre of Palestinians during the civil war in Lebanon. The work's background is formed by a barely legible script and is superimposed with distorted figures and the Arabic word *tell al-zaʿtar*.

In *Ummah fi al-Manfa* (*A Nation in Exile*), Koraïchi produced twenty prints inspired by the work of the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish.[16] The prints later became part of a larger collaborative project combining the work of a poet, a painter, and a calligrapher, which resulted in a book of the same title.[17] In this book, Koraïchi's prints are displayed next to the text of Darwish's poems, rendered in Kufic script by the Iraqi calligrapher Hassan Massoudy. The visual dialectic initiated among text, forms, and signs challenges notions of the visible and poses a fundamental question about representing a nation in exile.

Koraïchi's whole series is linked by a monogram that fluctuates between a Chinese and a Japanese ideogram. Koraïchi attributes this resemblance to the verticality of his symbols. His imaginary Chinese and Japanese ideograms, he asserts, are a creative modification of ancient characters found in the caves of Algeria.[18] In fact Koraïchi's script embodies his culture's collective history: Islamic calligraphic styles, Berber and Tuareg Tifinagh characters, magical squares, and talismanic numbers. These imaginary ideograms create a visual dialogue between Arabic writing and the visual arts of ancient, Western, and Eastern traditions and thus in a sense facilitate an intercultural encounter, or as scholar Abdelkebir Khatibi puts it, "an intersemiotic encounter."[19]

Koraïchi introduces this monogram as a pictograph form that converts the question of Palestine into a gestural movement capable of expressing the Palestinian tragedy through modern universal terminology. It is a sign that evokes images of suffering, survival, and death. The absence of color allows for the dramatic and dynamic contrast of black and white to heighten the emotional dimension of the work. The notion of gestural movement is further enhanced by the density of the letters, the energy of the script, and the script's manipulation into various abstract folkloric and mythological forms of ancient or modern roots: magical geometry, talismans, and tattoos. Koraïchi's prints have no beginning or end, nor are they bound by a frame; they are a continuous movement of signs.

Signs of Unity

The articulation of the Arabic letter in modern art of North Africa served twentieth-century artists on two levels. On the one hand, it became part of a more complex discourse of signs that drew on a collective and historical memory of difference, which often disrupted and subverted the rhetoric of separation. On the other hand, its prominence in this imaginative and con-

structed discourse alluded to an emphasis on cultural overlaps, intersections, connections, and continuity between the Mashriq and the Maghreb.

Notes

1 The Arab *Maghreb* (west) and *Mashriq* (east) are terms that at once signify unity and diversity; both west—North Africa—and east are parts of the Arab world, thus united by Arabness, yet the segregation of east and west refers to pronounced geocultural differences and has created a binary that is often perceived to be in opposition.

2 Chika Okeke, "Modern African Art," in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 29–36.

3 Although each country tried to express specific national attributes, a collective pan-Arab (national) style could be argued.

4 I refer here to aisle painting, now on canvas, rather than the traditional manuscript format on paper.

5 André Breton quoted in Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, ed., *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Lafayette, CA: International Council of Women in the Arts, 1994), 13.

6 André Breton as quoted in Sanaʿ Makhoul, "Baya Mahieddine: An Arab Woman Artist," available at http://djamelmoktefi.blogspot.com/2007/09/baya.html (accessed January 30, 2010).

7 Liliane Karnouk, *Modern Egyptian Art: The Emergence of a National Style* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1988), 30.

8 Shehira Doss Davezac, "Women of the Arab World Turning the Tide," in *Forces of Change*, 46.

9 Wijdan Ali, *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 148–49.

10 Salwa Mikdadi, "The Magic of Signs and Patterns in North African Art," at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nasp/hd_nasp.htm (accessed January 7, 2010).

11 There is also consensus that Madiha Omar was in fact the first. Nevertheless, both Omar and Hamoudi experimented with such use within the same time period.

12 Sudan was not introduced to modern art until the 1950s.

13 Shirbal Daghir, *Al-Hurufiyah al-Arabiyah: Fann wa hawiyah* (*Arab Letterism: Art and Identity*) (Beirut: Sharikat al-Matbuʿat Lil Tawziʿ wa al-Nashir, 1990).

14 Daghir defines *Hurufiyah* as a term that "denotes works of art which dealt [deals] with the Arabic language, letters or text, as a visual element for composing." Ibid., 11. Wijdan Ali prefers the term *al-madrassa al-khattiya fil-fann* (calligraphic school of art), which she differentiates from *fann al-khatt al-Arabi* (the art of classical Arabic calligraphy). See Ali, *Modern Islamic Art*, 151.

15 Calligraphy as a well-developed and appeased art of classical Islam followed specific aesthetics and technical rules. Among others, Abu Hayan al-Tawhidi wrote an essay on penmanship during the eleventh century, which included a description of the different scripts, and technical descriptions of pens and how to use them, of ink and the proper way to store it, and of paper. See Afif Bahnassi, *Falsafat al-fan ind al-tawhidi* (*Al-Tawhidi's Philosophy of Art*) (Damascus, Syria: Dar al-Fikr, 1987), 105–11. For examples of

different styles, see Yasin Hamid Safadi, *Islamic Calligraphy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Annemarie Schimmel, "Islamic Calligraphy," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 50.1 (Summer 1992): 1–56; and Anthony Welch, *Calligraphy in the Arts of the Muslim World* (New York: The Asia Society, 1979).

16 Mahmoud Darwish (1941–2008) is regarded as one of Palestine's national poets. His poetry came to represent not only the Palestinian struggle and defiance but that of all oppressed humans.

17 The collection was exhibited from October 11 through December 31, 1997, at Darat al-Funun, Amman, Jordan. See Abdelkebir Khatibi, ed., *Ummah fi al-Manfa* (*A Nation in Exile*) (Amman, Jordan: Darat al-Funun, Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, 1997).

18 Abdul Hameed Shoman Foundation, "Interview with Rachid Koraïchi" (videotape, Darat al-Funun arts center, December 3, 1998, Amman, Jordan).

19 Khatibi, *Ummah fi al-Manfa*.

Abstract for Nada Shabout, The Arabic Connection in Articulating North African Modernity in Art (SAQ 109:3)

This essay explores the articulation of the Arabic letter and text in the modern art of North Africa as a liminal space of interaction. Arabic text in particular offered artists a space of intersection between the various layers of identities of North Africa (al Maghrib al-Arabi) and the Middle East (al-Mashraq al-Arabi), including the new Arab political and cultural formulations. Moreover, through the Arabic letter, North African artists, as all other Arab artists, found a solution to the modernist paradigm that demanded a severance with history and tradition. The Arabic letter served as a point of connection between their past and the present.