

**“Passages Between Cultures”: Exhibition Rhetoric, Cultural Transmission and
Contemporaneity in Two Exhibitions of Contemporary Middle Eastern Art**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis discusses two exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art held in 2006: *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (Museum of Modern Art, New York) and *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (British Museum, London) in the context of postcolonial theory, contemporaneity and exhibition rhetoric. Using this interdisciplinary model, I analyze the curatorial practice of these two exhibitions. Interspersed between my discussions of the exhibitions are close readings of works of four artists represented: Shirin Neshat, Laila Shawa, Emily Jacir and Shahzia Sikander. These works are read through the three theoretical models applied to the thesis as a whole. My treatment of these works and exhibitions addresses legacies of Orientalism in the reception of contemporary Middle Eastern art, the shifting landscape of contemporary art to include ‘non-Western’ works and how the ideological rhetoric of art institutions manifests itself in exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, two major Western cultural institutions held extensive exhibitions of contemporary “Middle Eastern” art. The British Museum held an exhibition entitled *Word Into Art: New Art from the Middle East*, which examined the interaction between writing, text and contemporary Middle Eastern art. The second exhibition, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, ran at the Museum of Modern Art, New York and addressed issues of transnational art practice and personal identity. These exhibitions demonstrate the increased demand for contemporary Middle Eastern art in both the institution and the art market, an exponential rise paralleled by the ideological and military conflicts between political entities in the ‘West’ and the ‘Middle East’ since September 11, 2001. Focusing primarily on artists who are culturally influenced by Islam, the exhibitions are representative of current curatorial approaches to contemporary art of the Middle East, highlighting works created in the last decade by artists such as Shirin Neshat and Hassan Massoudy. Many of the displayed works are highly political, directly addressing the consequences of the ongoing conflicts that have plagued the region and growing antagonism between the West and the Middle East and Islamic communities worldwide over the last decade. Paradoxically, the curatorial approaches of these exhibitions de-emphasize the political content of the artwork. By promoting contemporary art as a universal medium of expression, art institutions in the western world are questioning stereotypical constructions of the Middle East, challenging museology steeped in Orientalist discourse and attempting to battle political tensions.

Yet, although the exhibitions ostensibly concentrate on the global, ‘borderless’ characteristics of contemporary Middle Eastern art, attention is continuously called to the geographic origins of the artists. This focus on nationality implies a commonality that is

misleading and homogenising. Despite the best intentions of the institutions, they may be, through curatorial practice, reinforcing power relations steeped in colonial history and shaped by the political present. By selecting works with certain characteristics for exhibition and foregrounding select aspects of art practice, Western curators are participating in the canonization of Middle Eastern art and are shaping the discourse of global contemporary art.

This thesis examines *Word into Art* and *Without Boundary* from a perspective grounded in theories of post-colonialism and contemporary art. Also engaging with new or critical museology, which addresses issues of globalization and identity, my study investigates how art and exhibitions negotiate tensions between the West and the Middle East owing to contemporary social and political realities that, implicitly or explicitly, affect exhibitionary practice. By focusing on exhibitions held in Britain, the foremost imperial power in the Middle East and in the United States, arguably the most influential Western power in the region since 1945, my study explores these issues on a transnational level.

Utilizing an interdisciplinary framework, this thesis argues that contemporary art institutions, well aware of the discourses surrounding Orientalism, are seeking to combat strained relations between the “Middle East” and the “West” by challenging traditional and stereotypical perceptions of the Middle East. However, the two institutions addressed here work towards this goal in different ways, arguably with varying success. *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* are characterized by seemingly contradictory curatorial approaches. *Without Boundary* focuses on the universalizing visions of the role of contemporary art, downplaying Islamic identity. In *Word Into Art*, the curatorial focus is on cultural specificity, examining how Middle Eastern, diasporic and transnational religious, social and political identities are reflected in artistic production. My study analyzes these two strategies in order to examine how they construct the discourse of

contemporary Middle Eastern art while complicating Western-based definitions of contemporary art and contemporaneity.

The “Middle East” and the “Islamic World”

The broad term “Middle Eastern” potentially essentializes a wide range of cultures and experiences. The geographic definition of ‘Middle East’ is contentious and by turns narrow and expansive, in some definitions extending from Egypt to Afghanistan and Pakistan. As used in the exhibitions studied here, “Middle East” refers to a large geographic entity, showcasing art created in diverse states including Iran, Egypt, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates as well as by artists who have immigrated to Western countries. In some cases, North African nations are also encapsulated under this umbrella. This indicates the slippage between the notion of the “Middle East” and the “Islamic world,” a term also utilized by the exhibitions. There are, of course, many religions represented in the geographic Middle East (indeed, criticisms of *Word Into Art* pointed out the perceived underrepresentation of Jewish Israeli artists in the exhibition) and the influence of Islam, both religiously and culturally, extends far out of those geographic constraints. Additionally, as Nada Shabout points out in her article for *Nafas*, “Are Images Global?” both terms are also discursively problematic: “The geopolitical term ‘Middle East’ is of course epistemologically misleading, located as it is within the constructed oppositional binary of East and West,” while “the term ‘Islamic art’ is generally rejected because of its pre-modern connotations.”¹ In consideration of these debates, I have made an attempt in this thesis to use the terms “Middle East” and “Islamic world” in the manner in which the exhibitions first bring them forth, while recognizing the problems associated with this broad application.

¹ Nada Shabout, “Are Images Global?,” *Nafas Art Magazine*, August 2009, 1-2.
http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2009/nada_shabout

The Art Market and Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

In 2001, Sotheby's, the auction house, held a sale of "Arts of the Islamic World" in London. This edition of the sale, which occurs biannually at Sotheby's London, was remarkable because it was the first with a section "devoted exclusively to 20th century Middle Eastern painting."² Auction houses realized the appeal of contemporary Middle Eastern art to collectors and investors, and increasingly featured it in sales of Islamic art over the next five years. Of the major auction houses, Christie's was the first to recognize the commercial potential of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Opening its first representative auction house in the Middle East in Dubai in 2005, which made it "the first international auction house to have a base in the region,"³ Christie's in 2006 dedicated an auction in Dubai to "International Modern and Contemporary Art." This sale was unexpectedly successful, generating almost US\$ 8.5 million in returns for Christie's.⁴ Sotheby's and Bonham's soon followed suit, holding auctions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in both London and Dubai. Christie's second auction of contemporary art in Dubai in 2007 "exceeded its presale expectations,"⁵ drawing almost US\$ 9.5 million in returns. Auctions of contemporary Middle Eastern art have grown increasingly more popular, and Christie's latest sale earned US\$ 14 million.⁶ Investors have taken notice of the growing value of contemporary Middle Eastern art. A report on the HSBC Private Bank

² "Sotheby's Sale of Arts of the Islamic World Puts 20th Century Middle Eastern Paintings in the Spotlight," Sotheby's Press Release, March 20, 2001, accessed February 11, 2011.

<http://investor.shareholder.com/bid/releases.cfm?Year=&ReleasesType=&PageNum=294>

³ "Christie's second auction of contemporary Arab, Iranian, Indian and Western art in the Gulf totals \$9,417,560/AED 34,562,445," *Zawya*, November 3, 2010, accessed February 20, 2011.

<http://zawya.com/printstory.cfm?storyid=zawya20070203064326>

⁴ "Auction Results," Christie's, May 24, 2006, accessed February 11, 2011.

<http://www.christies.com/Results/PrintAuctionResults.aspx?saleid=20775>

⁵ "Christie's second auction of contemporary Arab, Iranian, Indian and Western art."

⁶ "Christie's Dubai sales of contemporary Middle Eastern art soar," *Business Intelligence*, October 27, 2010, accessed February 11, 2011.

http://www.bi-me.com/doc_print.php?id=49191

Investment website gives an overview of the Middle East art market, suggesting that the growing popularity of contemporary Middle Eastern art is due to the “entrance of international auction houses in the region,” as they have established a “forum to establish new prices and records for artists and auctions to dominate in the area ”⁷ The investment report implies that the success of contemporary Middle Eastern art is due in part to the wealth and power of Gulf states, as “many of the art initiatives in place to showcase the region’s artists has the direct backing of the government or its royal families ”⁸ Indeed, despite economic recession, the art market in Dubai continues to flourish, with new commercial galleries opening on a regular basis ⁹ As the market for works of contemporary Middle Eastern art grew, initially stimulated by Middle Eastern collectors and buyers, museums and galleries in the West gained receptive audiences for exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art In a 2008 interview with London newspaper *The Telegraph*, independent curator Rose Issa argued that “the art market had created a certain curiosity”¹⁰ in exhibitions of Arab and Iranian art, which previously could not gain adequate exposure of funding In this respect, Issa stated, “the market has been very healthy for artists ”¹¹

In a 2004 interview, Issa outlines what she sees as the positive results of these auctions and the growing market for contemporary Middle Eastern art She argues that, “for decades, the world media, under the dictate of governments and market monopolies, silenced and ignored the plight of many intellectuals and artists from the Islamic world ”¹² She implies that the growth of

⁷ “The Middle East art market overview,” HSBC Private Bank, accessed February 20, 2011

<http://www.hsbcprivatebank.com/perspective/the-middle-east-art-market-overview.html>

⁸ “The Middle East art market overview ”

⁹ Oliver Good, “The Art of the Deal,” *The National* December 4, 2008, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/the-art-of-the-deal>

¹⁰ Colin Gleadell, “Art Sales Art Blossoms in the Desert,” *The Telegraph*, October 7, 2008, accessed February 20, 2011

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/artsales/3561776/Art-sales-art-blossoms-in-the-desert.html>

¹¹ Gleadell, “Art Sales ”

¹² Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, “Rose Issa – Interview,” *Nafas Art Magazine* March 2004, accessed February 13, 2011

http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2004/issa_interview

the market since 2001 is due to “growing dissatisfaction with the misrepresentation of the Islamic world” since September 11th.¹³ While remaining slightly skeptical, Issa is generally positive about the interest the market has generated in contemporary Middle Eastern art, stating that because of these forces, “some artists will be given a chance to produce and realize works that could not have been produced without support and funding from the outside.”¹⁴

In her 2006 article entitled “Depoliticizing Modern and Contemporary Arab Art: Christie’s and the Rush to “Discover” the Arab World,” Maymanah Farhat offers a darker view of the impact of the auctions. She suggests that the emerging popularity of auctions and exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art reveal an “underlying need to co-opt contemporary Arab visual culture in order to censor and further repress the Arab voice.”¹⁵ Farhat argues that, “[t]he opening of Christie’s Dubai demonstrates current efforts to pacify the revolutionary aspects of Arab art in several ways. Initially, it is to gain control of the international market for Arab art so that only a specific demographic has access to the work of its influential artists.”¹⁶ She goes on to suggest that through auctions and Western interest, “a hierarchy is formed among all artists, one that will eventually enable the controlling of the art scene.”¹⁷ Farhat believes that, through commercial and institutional interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art, the Western-based art world indirectly espouses political agendas that have the effect of “depoliticizing [the art’s] revolutionary nature.”¹⁸

These divergent commentaries on the benefit of auctions dedicated to modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art reflect the contentious issues surrounding the absorption of

¹³ “Rose Issa – Interview.”

¹⁴ “Rose Issa – Interview ”

¹⁵ Maymanah Farhat, “Depoliticizing Modern and Contemporary Arab Art Christie’s and the Rush to “Discover” the Arab World,” *ArteEast Quarterly*, November 1, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011 <http://arteeast.org/pages/artenews/article/12/>

¹⁶ Farhat, “Depoliticizing Modern and Contemporary Arab Art ”

¹⁷ Farhat, “Depoliticizing Modern and Contemporary Arab Art ”

¹⁸ Farhat, “Depoliticizing Modern and Contemporary Arab Art ”

these artists and works into the global art market and discourses surrounding transnational art. To varying degrees, both Issa and Farhat express skepticism of the market and its institutional and scholarly repercussions. Yet, while Farhat believes that the commercialism of the art market will have a negative impact on the integrity of artistic production in the region, Issa suggests that it will open up avenues otherwise closed to artists and scholars from the Middle East.

Recent Exhibitions of Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

The presence of auction houses in Dubai and surrounding states has made the Gulf a centre of the contemporary Middle Eastern art world, and has been a catalyst for growing interest in this field among Western collectors, scholars and institutions. A full overview of these exhibitions is beyond the scope of a thesis, however, in this section I will examine what I argue are five main trends in exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Rather than focus on a chronological breakdown of the exhibitions, or attempt to identify similarities in curatorial practice or works presented, this section instead aims to identify types of organizations or individuals most involved with the creation of these exhibitions. Types of exhibitions of Middle Eastern art include exhibitions arranged by artists' associations to foster awareness of works produced by particular regions, of particular types or by specific diasporic communities, such as the group *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art*. This group, founded in 1995 in the United Kingdom, was intended to be a "groundbreaking project dedicated to bringing together Iraq's scattered 'talents in the wind' and communicating the positive and creative energies of Iraqi artists world-wide, past and present"¹⁹ In 2000, the group put together an exhibition series that premiered in London in that year, going on to tour throughout the UK in 2001 and the United

¹⁹ "About Us," International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists, accessed February 13, 2011
<http://www.incia.co.uk/4556.html>

States in 2002 and 2003.²⁰ These efforts grew into the International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists (iNCia), which outlines its mission statement as follows: “iNCia is an independent, non-political, non-profit, voluntary organization dedicated to advancing Iraqi art and the education of the public in Iraqi art as an integral part of world art, in particular, through the provision and assistance in the provision of exhibitions, literature, workshops, website and advocacy.”²¹ Exhibitions such as these seek to promote groups of artists, divided mostly by nationality. Through artwork, cultural understanding is encouraged. This has become especially important to groups such as iNCia in recent years, as political events in Iraq have led to greater worldwide attention to the country, both on a political and cultural scale. iNCia writes that, “[We] do believe it is ever so important, now more than ever before, to safe guard this valuable artistic heritage and ongoing creativity, particularly in light of recent events in Iraq.”²² In a sense, these exhibitions are a form of cultural activism, preserving and drawing attention to artistic traditions that have previously been overlooked.

Exhibitions funded by various agencies and put on by independent curators or scholars of Middle Eastern art are also important, especially in continental Europe and the United Kingdom. Important curators and authors in the field such as Rose Issa and Catherine David have participated in long-term projects of this sort. David worked with the Witte de With Institute in the Netherlands to create an exhibition series *Contemporary Arab Representations*. Begun in 2002, this series was intended as the early manifestation of a long-term project, later traveling to Sweden, Venice and Barcelona. *Contemporary Arab Representations* included “seminars, publications, performances and presentations of works by different authors - visual artists,

²⁰ “Exhibition Tour,” International Network for Contemporary Iraqi Artists, accessed February 13, 2011. <http://www.incia.co.uk/4613.html>

²¹ “About Us.”

²² “About Us.”

architects, writers and poets - with the aim of encouraging production, circulation and exchange between the different cultural centers of the Arab world and the rest of the world ”²³ Again, this project, which shows the work of seventeen participants, is primarily concerned in raising awareness Through its curatorial strategy, which brings together diverse artists working in a broad range of media, the exhibition “aims to tackle heterogeneous situations and contexts which may sometimes be antagonistic or conflictive, and thus to acquire more specific knowledge about what is currently going on in certain parts of the Arab world, to look at the complex dimensions of aesthetics in relation to social and political situations, and to encourage people to think more deeply about the role played today by cultural practices in our own countries ”²⁴ Exhibitions such as David’s underline the notion that intercultural dialogue can be achieved through the discourse of contemporary art

Rose Issa has long been involved in bringing contemporary Middle Eastern art to a Western (again, primarily European) audience Issa has curated a large number of exhibitions on subjects as diverse as contemporary Iranian art, harem fantasies and Islamic calligraphy Issa, who has been working in the field for nearly thirty years, has been a key mediating figure for artists looking to break into the British market Issa does not only put on exhibitions through her own group, Rose Issa Projects She has also been asked to curate for both private and public spaces, ranging from the ING Financial Group to the European Parliament ²⁵ In addition, she advises large public institutions ranging from the British Museum to the Smithsonian Institution on their acquisitions of contemporary art from the Middle East ²⁶ Issa, whose exhibitions represent a broad range of contemporary Middle Eastern artists, demonstrates the power of the

²³ “Contemporary Arab Representations,” Witte de With, accessed February 13, 2011
<http://www.wdw.nl/project.php?id=11>

²⁴ Contemporary Arab Representations

²⁵ “About ” Rose Issa Projects, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.roseissa.com/about.html>

²⁶ “About ”

curator in shaping reception to previously overlooked art production. As market interest in works from the Middle East increased (and continues to increase), curators with established expertise are called upon to define the field.

In addition, increasing market interest is accompanied by a rise in exhibitions in commercial galleries as well as galleries which show private collections. A key example of this trend is Charles Saatchi's 2009 London exhibition, *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*. Twenty-one artists from the Middle East were featured in this exhibition, and their works ranged from textile pieces, to paintings and photographs to large installations. The content of the exhibition was determined by Saatchi's recent acquisitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art, making one person or one collective the arbitrator of contemporary Middle Eastern art for this particular viewing audience. This show, like most exhibitions put on by the Saatchi Gallery, received mixed reviews and managed to generate controversy. Many of the artists, although of Middle Eastern origin, work in Europe or the United States. Artists from Iran were particularly well represented in the exhibition and it is around their work that much of the debate centered. The catalogue, as described by *The Telegraph*, "dismisses European perceptions of the Middle East as a place synonymous with political oppression, religious intolerance, and terrorism as unthinking 'clichés.'" ²⁷ However, press reviews challenge this notion, reading in works such as Kader Attia's installation *Ghost*, in which the artist formed female figures out of aluminium [sic], as a commentary on "fundamentalist Islam's treatment of women." ²⁸ The reviews acknowledge that there "is no simple message" in the exhibition, yet they assume that the works of artists such

²⁷ Richard Dorment, "Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East at the Saatchi Gallery," *The Telegraph*, January 26, 2009, accessed February 13, 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturecritics/richarddorment/4346252/Unveiled-New-Art-from-the-Middle-East-at-the-Saatchi-Gallery.html>

²⁸ Dorment, "Unveiled."

as Tala Madani, are “fuelled [sic] by anger and [drip] with hatred”²⁹ Yet, the artists themselves, in the statements provided to the Gallery, contradict these assumptions For example, in her *Everyday* series, Iranian artist Shadi Ghadirian, who lives and works in Tehran, creates figures of chador-clad women, but instead of a face, the center of the garment is covered with a kitchen implement, ranging from rubber gloves to cleavers However, rather than a condemnation of Iran’s (and implicitly, Islam’s) treatment of women, which is how the images were read in the press, Ghadirian states that her work describes “positive and holistic female identity, humorously taking issue with the traditional roles by which women – both in the Middle East and universally – have been defined”³⁰ The reviews from both *The Independent* and *The Telegraph* had a difficult time reconciling what they saw as repressive societies with the fact that many of these artists still freely work in the Middle East *The Telegraph* states that the “very fact that [Shirin Fakhim, who makes mixed media sculptures of Tehran’s prostitutes] is free to make such outspoken work makes you realize that Iranian society is more complicated than we are often led to believe”³¹ The responses to this exhibition, which, unlike many of the other types discussed here, does not explicitly indicate that it seeks cultural dialogue, show that reactions to Middle Eastern art are deeply intertwined with responses to traditional and media stereotypes of the region Although artists and curators challenge essentialist definitions of the Middle East, press reaction to shows of collections such as Charles Saatchi’s, which are presented without extensive commentary, appears to be somewhat mixed - perhaps a reflection of the uncertain political climate in which these exhibitions are developed

²⁹ Michael Glover, “Unveiled New art from the Middle East,” *The Independent*, February 2, 2009, accessed February 11, 2011

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/reviews/unveiled-new-art-from-the-middle-east-1522818.html>

³⁰ “Shadi Ghadirian,” The Saatchi Gallery, accessed February 20, 2011

http://www.saatchi-gallery.co.uk/artists/shadi_ghadirian.htm?section_name=unveiled

³¹ Dormant, “Unveiled”

Finally, government-sponsored organizations dedicated to improving intercultural communication and integration also involve themselves in the development of exhibitions. In 2003, Germany's Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations) developed an exhibition series entitled *Islamische Welten* (Worlds of Islam), which culminated with a 2006 exhibition, *Nafas: Aktuelle Kunst aus der islamisch geprägten Welt* (Contemporary Art from the Islamic World). IFA states that their goal is "to stimulate the cultural dialogue between Europe and the Islamic countries to inform, to promote mutual understanding and tolerance."³² According to the catalogue, the main goal of *Nafas* was to "offer artists from the Islamic world a platform, and to question established images by means of art, photography, architecture and design, to remove prejudices and to intensify the constructive inter-cultural dialogue."³³ This particular exhibition featured nine artists from the Middle East and Asia; it attempted to use the cultural signifiers "Islamic world" and "Muslim world" to "address and contradict the way the terms are widely understood today."³⁴ The works in the exhibition range from video pieces, such as Lida Abdul's work *White House*, in which the artist paints the walls of ruins in her hometown of Kabul, to UAE artist Ebtisam Abdul Aziz's installation *Numbers and Lifetime*, which documents 2000 hands, photographed and installed in archival style.³⁵ The goals of the exhibition were closely intertwined with that of IFA, who receives sponsorship from the German government in the form of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes as well as the Federal Foreign Office's Cultural Department. IFA indicates that this sponsorship allows them to "work in the

³² Barbara Barsch and Ev Fisher, "Foreword," in *Nafas Aktuelle Kunst aus der islamisch geprägten Welt* (Berlin Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2006), 2

³³ Barsch and Fisher, 2

³⁴ Gerard Haupt, "Nafas Positions of Contemporary Art from the Islamic World," in *Nafas Aktuelle Kunst aus der islamisch geprägten Welt* (Berlin Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2006), 3

³⁵ Lida Abdul, "Artist Statement," in *Nafas Aktuelle Kunst aus der islamisch geprägten Welt* (Berlin Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen, 2006), 30

field of foreign cultural politics and the European-Islamic cultural dialogue.”³⁶ This exhibition, shown in Berlin and Stuttgart, was accompanied by the integration of an online magazine also entitled *Nafas*. Through computer terminals installed in the galleries, visitors could access the magazine in order to gain insight into the works of the artists as well as gain information about other artists from the region working with similar concerns. In this way, exhibitions like *Nafas* work towards stated governmental goals of dialogue and understanding as European relations with the Middle East and Islamic immigrant populations face new challenges.

Of course, exhibitions by large public institutions such as the British Museum and the Museum of Modern Art are also an important category explored throughout this thesis. A brief discussion of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s 2001 exhibition *The Lands Within Me: Expressions by Canadian Artists of Arab Origin*, serves to demonstrate the controversy that occasionally plagues exhibitions by large public institutions.³⁷ *The Lands Within Me* had been in the planning stages since 1996, and was scheduled to open on October 19, 2001.³⁸ The exhibition featured fifty pieces of contemporary art by twenty-six Canadian artists of Arab origin from around the Middle East.³⁹ The CMC requested works that surveyed “topics associated with immigration, movement and belonging.”⁴⁰ The mandate of the Canadian Museum of Civilization states that the institution is “a national institution responsible for preserving and promoting the heritage of Canada, and contributing to the collective memory and sense of identity of all Canadians.”⁴¹ However, contemporary art is not usually a focus of the CMC’s exhibition

³⁶ Barsch and Fisher, 2

³⁷ As *The Lands Within Me* was intended to be an exhibition of Canadian art, albeit of artists of Arab origin, it does not fit clearly within the scope of this thesis. However, this brief discussion of the exhibition is intended to show how closely the political and cultural are tied in discussions relating to the Middle East.

³⁸ Elayne Oliphant, “Il n’y a pas de ‘potentially hot issues?’ Paradoxes of displaying Arab-Canadian Art within the Canadian Museum of Civilization” (MA thesis, Carleton University, 2005), 5

³⁹ Oliphant, 19.

⁴⁰ Oliphant, 32.

⁴¹ “Guiding Principles,” Canadian Museum of Civilization, accessed February 13, 2011

program Elayne Oliphant argues that “the Museum of Civilization has been closely associated with the Canadian government and, subsequently, Canadian national narratives, particularly those connected to multiculturalism”⁴² *The Lands Within Me* was likely intended to bolster multicultural conceptions of Canada by showing how artists of Arab origin negotiate between their cultural heritage and lived experiences as Canadians

However, the temporal moment of the exhibition led to a decision by museum officials that brought to the forefront brewing issues of cultural tension and engendered larger debates about the limits of multiculturalism in Canada. The events of September 11, 2001 led the administration of the CMC to announce a postponement of the exhibition, ostensibly until March of the next year. Public and political outcry led them to reconsider, and the exhibition opened on October 19 as originally intended. However, as Katie Cholette points out in her article “The Limits on Cultural Expression at Canada’s National Cultural Institutions,” the exhibition “became the focus of intense debates over intolerance, cultural freedom of expression and the relationship of politics and art”⁴³. The CMC’s decision to postpone the exhibition arose from an assumption that the public would misread the works presented. Cholette argues that this choice had “unwanted consequences: instead of mitigating any potential problems, it actually focused attention on the political content of the works and the common ancestry of the artists. [the] museum’s precipitous actions highlighted the very thing that it wished to downplay and indelibly conditioned the public’s reactions to the exhibition”⁴⁴. The artists vehemently protested the CMC’s decision, with Jayce Salloum commenting that the CMC’s plan had the opposite of its intended effect, “inflaming the sensitive content of the works and bringing the issues into a

<http://www.civilization.ca/cmcc/about-the-corporation/guiding-principles>

⁴² Oliphant, 63

⁴³ Katie Cholette, “The Limits of Cultural Expression at Canada’s National Cultural Institutions,” *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 31 (2005): 58

⁴⁴ Cholette, 65

context of sensationalism, hysteria and managerial hubris.”⁴⁵ Cholette focuses a large part of her analysis on London, Ontario artist Jamelie Hassan, who, in the same year that she was included in *The Lands Within Me*, was awarded a Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts. While she was lauded by one federal institution for her individual work, when “considered part of a group of Arab-Canadian artists, she and her work became problematic: her “Canadian” identity was believed in some way compromised by a collective Arab identity.”⁴⁶ The controversy surrounding the CMC’s decision to postpone the exhibit underlines how intertwined political realities are with public cultural institutions, especially in the case of sensitive issues such as relations between the West and the Middle East. As Cholette remarks, the “museum’s history and position as a national cultural institution places a considerable ideological burden on any of its exhibitions,”⁴⁷ and results in exhibitionary practice which demonstrates larger ideological constraints and assumptions.

Literature Review

The development of the “new museology” in the 1980s and 1990s was closely informed by larger trends in art historical and theoretical discourse. By the 1990s, “social” art history was firmly established as the new standard discursive framework. This, combined with the increasing importance of feminist and postcolonialist critiques, led scholars engaging with museum theory to examine cultural representation in the art institution as ideological. Influential early texts such as Tony Bennett’s *Birth of the Museum* and Carol Duncan’s *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* re-conceptualize the museum as a political space, examining the imperialist and ideological tendencies of cultural institutions. The ramifications of these arguments continue to

⁴⁵ Cholette, 66.

⁴⁶ Cholette, 69.

⁴⁷ Cholette, 65.

be felt, as contemporary interrogations of art exhibitions are closely informed by this scholarship. Therefore, my analysis of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* necessarily considers the new museology as an effective methodological framework.

Many anthologies, including Steven Lavine and Irving Karp's *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (1991) and Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne's *Thinking About Exhibitions* (1994) address questions brought forth by the new museology. These anthologies provide essential theoretical grounding for my thesis, which will utilize principles and models set forth by current trends in museum studies to examine the socio-cultural context in which exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art arise. The Greenberg volume contains several essays key to my thesis, including Bruce W. Ferguson's "Exhibition Rhetorics." This text calls for studies of exhibitions and curatorial practice to be situated within larger discussions of representation and identity in theoretical and art historical discourse. Ferguson asserts that exhibitions should be characterized as a form of speech. My thesis makes use of Ferguson's discursive model, which seeks to interrogate who is speaking through exhibitions, an element I assert is especially important when discussing curatorial practice that purports to be 'global' in nature.

As my thesis addresses questions that arise with the exhibition and representation of non-Western art in major Western museums and galleries, it will be essential to engage with texts that analyze cultural spaces in this manner. Since the 1990s, discussions of cultural representation in the West have been shaped by sociopolitical realities such as postcolonialism and globalization. Olu Oguibe's important recent volume of essays epitomizes this trend. Collected under the title *The Culture Game* (2004), these critiques deal with how contemporary art production in Africa and by people of African descent is discussed and displayed in European and North American

contexts. By questioning traditional ideas of national identity, cultural boundaries and the role of the individual artist, Oguibe conducts a postmodernist interrogation of the idea of the “Other.” Oguibe asserts that the growing “demand for difference” in collecting and exhibitionary practices of Western institutions is inseparable from the “broad cultural dispositions” that shape them.⁴⁸ *The Culture Game* disassembles Western ideas of inclusivity in the art institution, arguing that ideas of universality and globalism are rather reflections of imperial histories and a preoccupation with exoticism. Despite the fact the essays take African and African-American art as their subject, the deconstructive, the postcolonial theoretical model proposed by Oguibe will be an important explanatory tool for my thesis.

To date there has been no published analysis of Middle Eastern art in the Western museum or gallery similar to Oguibe’s. As the amount of sales, exhibitions, and critical interest in contemporary Middle Eastern art grows exponentially each year in Europe and North America, this is an omission in art historical and museological discourse that requires attention. My thesis will take steps towards filling this gap, drawing on scholarship which comments on the cultural representation of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the last decade, as well as broader surveys of artistic practices in the region. *Different Sames: New Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art* (2009), edited by Hossein Amirsadeghi, gives an overview of contemporary trends in Iranian art. Although this work does not consider Western representation of Iranian art, it will be useful in establishing a general knowledge of cultural practices within Iran. *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* (2009), also edited by Amirsadeghi, deals with a broad swath of artists and artworks, engaging with artists still living in the Middle East as well as with diasporic communities. Diasporic and exiled identities are important to the work of many contemporary Middle Eastern artists, and my thesis will draw on scholarship in this field, such as

⁴⁸ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), xiv

a 2003 essay by TJ Demos, entitled “Desire in Diaspora: Emily Jacir.” This article discusses the relationship between art, homeland and exile in the work of Palestinian artist Emily Jacir, a model that will be useful in my own analyses of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

A 2009 publication, edited by Paul Sloman, provides a broad overview of contemporary Middle Eastern art practices. *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* is a survey featuring the work of forty-five artists from the region such as Shirin Neshat and Ghada Amer. Essays in the book examine influences on artistic production such as identity in diaspora and the documentary turn. By presenting the basic theoretical framework that surrounds discussions of the creative practice of these and many other artists, this volume challenges Western “cultural reductionism” and opens up the debate surrounding contemporary Middle Eastern art. It introduces, albeit briefly, most of the major trends in the discourse and will provide excellent reference material for my thesis, which will explore some of the issues mentioned in this book in greater depth.

Although *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* touches on many questions that shape current debates surrounding contemporary practices from the region, the volume does not provide close insight into issues of cultural representation in the West. However, other texts have begun to problematize Western curatorial practice and exhibition rhetoric. A good portion of the critical anthology, *Making Art History* (2007), edited by Elizabeth C. Mansfield, is dedicated to papers that address the relationship between art history, the canon, and pressing socio-political forces such as globalization and the “war on terror.” Of particular interest is Finbarr Barry Flood’s chapter, entitled “From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art.” Although Flood deals mainly with historical Islamic art, his explanatory framework relies on the idea that cultural histories are used in “the ideological struggles that have

gained in ferocity and pace since the atrocities of September 11, 2001.”⁴⁹ Importantly, he singles out the prevalent idea that museums and art institutions can help to “bridge the cultural divide” between the Islamic world and the West.⁵⁰ Despite Flood’s focus on historical art, his insight into how exhibitions of Islamic art are shaped by the “exigencies of contemporary global politics” will prove valuable to my thesis, as I argue that conceptualizing exhibitions in this manner is critical to comprehending their broader implications.

Sociocultural anthropologist Jessica Winegar has published several articles and one monograph dealing with contemporary art in the Middle East. In her book, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (2006), as well as previously published articles, Winegar analyzes conflicts between state supported art programs in Egypt and Western curators and galleries operating in the country. She suggests that Egyptians and the West hold different conceptions of the role of contemporary art. Winegar asserts that private sector art markets in Egypt inadvertently reproduce colonial logics, and will continue to do so as long as Western interests dominate them. Winegar’s book, like much scholarship on contemporary Middle Eastern culture, is closely informed by Edward Said’s landmark work *Orientalism* (which also will be methodologically significant to my thesis). Similarly, a later work of Winegar’s, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” (2008) suggests that the discourse surrounding contemporary Middle Eastern art is shaped by various erroneous assumptions. These suppositions reproduce a framework that inscribes a dominant Western narrative of art and creativity as universal human traits on the Middle East, excluding various forms of cultural production. Winegar argues that exhibitions that appear to encourage global exchange and reject

⁴⁹ Finbarr Barry Flood, “From the Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art,” in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (New York: Routledge, 2007), 38.

⁵⁰ Flood, 38.

Western cultural imperialism may in fact repeat binary oppositions between the West and the Middle East. As Winegar implicitly positions herself within a discourse shaped by Said's work, her article generates an interpretive model that I will apply to wider discussions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in my thesis.

To add to my contextual understanding, I consulted recent writing that addresses contemporary Arabic, Iranian and diasporic culture. *The Islamic World*, a 2008 anthology edited by Andrew Rippin includes essays on the geo-political Islamic world but also on cultural and social issues. Ira M. Lapidus' extensive monograph *A History of Islamic Societies* provides insight into the social and cultural histories of various Islamic communities world-wide. This body of scholarship will deepen my knowledge of Middle Eastern culture, furthering my analysis by affording me a better understanding of the cultural origins and significance of the artworks shown in the exhibitions.

A significant portion of my thesis will be dedicated to a close analysis of two recent exhibitions of contemporary art: *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2006) and *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* (British Museum, London, 2006). The catalogues accompanying these shows are vital sources of information on current curatorial practice and museological theories, and are representative of different trends in the representation of Middle Eastern art in Western institutions. In *Without Boundary*, discursive focus on Islamic identity and cultural influence is questioned. The catalogue positions contemporary art as a universalizing practice and rejects curatorial methods focusing solely on the political aspect of Middle Eastern art. The central question posed by Fereshteh Daftari, curator of the exhibition, "Islamic or not?" is characteristic of this line of thought. *Word Into Art*, alternatively, argues that strong cultural ties to Arabic and a rejection of

figurative image-making as informed by Islam are vitally important to the work of the artists and indeed, to understanding the region as a whole. This exhibition chooses to engage overtly with religion, politics and culture. These texts will be critical to my thesis, as I will analyze the sociopolitical causes and ramifications of these two diverging tendencies in the discourse of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

A review of scholarship pertaining to exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art reveals a lack of studies concentrated directly on the social context and global political implications of often varied curatorial practices. Although similar studies pertaining to art from other non-Western societies and historical Islamic art exist, contemporary Middle Eastern art has not been thoroughly considered. By applying an interdisciplinary model informed by social art history, the “new museology” and postcolonial models established over the last two decades, my thesis hopes to reframe discussions of exhibitions of Middle Eastern art in the West.

Methodology

As my investigation of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* seeks to explore how curatorial strategies impact the meaning and reception of contemporary Middle Eastern art Western institution, my research must consider the changing meaning of ‘contemporary art’ and, in particular, how Middle Eastern art has been subsumed into this category over the last decade. Therefore, my thesis project will be largely theoretical in nature, although archival research and interviews will be important in strengthening my analysis. My methodological approach will centre around three discrete but mutually complementary areas of discourse: postcolonial theory, particularly works which draw from Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), museum studies, and scholarship on contemporary art and the concept of contemporaneity.

Works of contemporary Middle Eastern art are continuously placed in a dialogue with postcolonial theory. Edward Said's writings on the cultural relationship between 'West' and 'East' remain highly influential and are often cited in discussions of contemporary Middle Eastern art. My thesis draws from my own readings of Said's work, especially *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, as well as recent and contemporary interpretations of these theoretical models such as those laid out in the 2009 book *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*. This volume includes an essay by Lindsey Moore entitled "Migration, Diaspora, Exile and Return in Women's Visual Media," which departs from traditional readings of *Orientalism* to apply Said's themes to contemporary art practice. Brian S. Turner's "Orientalism, Post-Modernism and Globalism," in *Orientalism: A Reader*, broadened my understanding of theoretical discourse surrounding contemporary applications of *Orientalism*. My methodological approach will also be oriented around recent writings by literary theorist Homi K. Bhabha. In his 2009 essay "On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission," Bhabha uses the work of contemporary Middle Eastern artists such as Shahzia Sikander as examples of cultural migration and transmission, concepts that will prove important to my analysis of the two exhibitions. I will use these models to locate the exhibitions within a broader postcolonial discourse.

A close analysis of the curatorial practices employed in *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* is critical to my thesis project. My methodological approach, therefore, also considers scholarship pertaining to the "new museology," which draws heavily from postcolonialism and other postmodernist discourses. In particular, I employ Bruce W. Ferguson's "Exhibition Rhetoric." This essay asserts that exhibitions are a form of speech, a framework that I utilize to investigate what 'voice' is speaking through the two exhibitions. From the same anthology, Mieke Bal's essay "The Discourse of the Museum," in which she discusses the cultural and

political imperialism inherent in the ‘grammar’ of art museums will provide further insight into why certain curatorial decisions were made by the institutions. I also draw from more recent theoretical models, such as that laid out by Olu Oguibe’s *The Culture Game*, which synthesizes postcolonial theory and analyses of exhibition practice. This body of scholarship lends my thesis a methodological framework through which I perform an analysis of these exhibitions from a perspective informed by recent developments in museum studies.

In addition to interrogating the curatorial practices of these specific exhibitions of Middle Eastern art, my thesis will also consider the question: How has contemporary art, as constructed by Western institutions and museums, shifted to incorporate “Middle Eastern” art over the last decade? To properly address this question, I explore recent scholarship that deals with nature of contemporary art and contemporaneity, primarily drawing on the theories of Terry Smith. Smith’s 2009 monograph, *What Is Contemporary Art?* collects his major scholarship on the subject and provides an excellent point of departure from which to build my argument. I investigate the application of this model to contemporary Middle Eastern art, focusing specifically on Smith’s ideas concerning cultural translation, which synthesize theories of contemporaneity and postcolonialism.

Although my project is primarily theoretical in nature, my discussion of the exhibitions was strengthened by archival research and interviews. Although I was unable to see the exhibitions personally, by examining archival files relating to the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the British Museum, I gained insight into how the institutions intended their exhibitions to be received. In a similar fashion, interviews with British Museum curator Venetia Porter and Director of Interpretation Stuart Frost also served to inform my

reading of *Word Into Art*. Press reviews, scholarly critiques and artists' comments allowed me to discern how the public interpreted the exhibitions.

Chapter Breakdown

My first chapter provides an overview of the theoretical models employed throughout my thesis. My project draws on three main areas of discourse: postcolonial studies, primarily responses to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the new museology, and theories of contemporary art, specifically Terry Smith's notion of contemporaneity. This chapter introduces these tools in order to establish an interdisciplinary methodological framework for my subsequent examination of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*. This interdisciplinary approach allows me to synthesize scholarship from the discourses of art history, cultural studies and political philosophy, affording my project a wider scope and lending a broad theoretical perspective to my subsequent analysis of exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

My second and third chapters engage directly with *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* respectively. These chapters begin by looking at the physical layout and design of the exhibitions, including didactic panels. Drawing from archival sources, planning documents and media releases, I explore the intentions of the curators and the institutions. An analysis of response to the exhibitions serves to establish their general reception among public visitors, the press, and artists. I conclude each chapter with an analysis of the exhibition, discussing them in terms of the discursive models described in my first chapter.

Interspersed with the chapters are three short "Interludes," a title borrowed from Jessica Winegar's *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. In between her larger chapters, Winegar intersperses concentrated discussions of particular artists

and their works in order to interact more closely with her primary material. Winegar selects artists based on personal preference as well as significance to her study, using these analyses as a way of helping “readers from other locations to engage more closely with individual artists and their works.”⁵¹ Working from Winegar’s model, I chose to include interludes in this thesis for multiple reasons. As this thesis is largely concerned with exhibitionary practice, I have incorporated the interludes as a curatorial exercise of sorts to help illuminate my analysis. In these short essays I discuss interpretation, artist’s intent and the implication of these on reading the work. To do so, I will use multiple theoretical perspectives, drawn from the models outlined in the first chapter.

By providing ‘deep readings’ of the work and reception of four prominent contemporary Middle Eastern artists, all featured in the two exhibitions that make up the main subject of this thesis, I hope to underline the sense of multivocality that, in my opinion, characterizes much contemporary Middle Eastern art. Like Winegar, my selections for the interludes are based partly on personal preference and engagement with the works. All of the artists I have selected are women, and their work speaks to a specific type of political engagement that responds to the politics of the everyday. However, these artists are also some of the most celebrated contemporary Middle Eastern artists. For better or worse, women artists have been held up as “poster girls” for contemporary Middle Eastern art, particularly that which deals with politics and religion. Indeed, some of the pieces I discuss are characteristic of the exhibitions in which they are displayed, and feature prominently in promotional material and catalogues.

The three interludes discuss the work of four artists: The first takes up photographic works from Shirin Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series (1993-1997). Neshat is one of the foremost

⁵¹ Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006), 36

artists gathered under the banner of contemporary Middle Eastern art, and, although she is now known in large part for her works in film, this photographic series confirmed her position as a key figure in contemporary Middle Eastern art.⁵² This interlude will discuss two of Neshat's works: *Speechless* (1996), which was central to the installation of *Without Boundary*, and *Offered Eyes* (1993), which was displayed as part of *Word Into Art*. I take these two works as points of departure for a discussion of two overarching trends in Western interpretations of Neshat's work: reading Neshat's work through binaries, and considering it in terms of contemporary concerns regarding cultural translation and diasporic identity.

Laila Shawa's *Children of War, Children of Peace* (1995) and Emily Jacir's *Ramallah/New York* (2004-05) are the focus of the second interlude. Shawa's work, featured in *Word Into Art*, addresses the "plight of Palestinian children,"⁵³ and refers back to earlier pieces that make explicit reference to life in Gaza under Israeli occupation. *Ramallah/New York*, less overtly political, is a potent comment on the lived experience of the Palestinian exile and immigrant populations in general. These two works approach the issue of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, which remains a central concern for artists of the region, differently reflecting the diversity of artistic interpretations generated by the ongoing discord in the region.

The final interlude looks at a work that reinterprets and contemporizes "traditional" forms of Middle Eastern art practice. Shahzia Sikander's *Perilous Order* (1997), which is featured on the cover of the *Without Boundary* catalogue, refers simultaneously to Mughal miniatures and Hindu/Muslim religious conflicts in Pakistan and India. Sikander's work raises questions of cultural transmission, exploring how art forms typically identified with a specific place or a

⁵² "Photography Fair in Paris," ArtMarketInsight, November 17, 2009, accessed February 13, 2011
<http://web.artprice.com/ami/ami.aspx?M=200911>

⁵³ Venetia Porter, *Word Into Art Artists of the Modern Middle East* (London: British Museum, 2006), 125

culture are incorporated into an international contemporary art practice which, while referring to these traditions, often works to deliberately challenge preconceptions and play with the medium.

CHAPTER ONE:

Theoretical Models

A confluence of myriad areas of theoretical discourse is implicitly and explicitly indicated in the curatorial strategies of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*. Of special importance to reading these exhibitions are three discrete but complementary areas of discourse: postcolonial theory, particularly the groundbreaking works of Edward Said and subsequent criticism and responses; Terry Smith's work on contemporary art and the concept of "contemporaneity"; and the "New Museology" - recent ideological critiques of the museum. As the "New Museology" draws heavily on postcolonialism and other postmodernist discourses, it provides a connecting thread between the other two seemingly disparate concerns. In particular, Bruce W. Ferguson's concept of "Exhibition Rhetoric," as described in an essay of the same name, asserts that exhibitions are a form of speech. When the exponential increase of exhibitions of Middle Eastern art in the Western art institution over the last decade is considered within this framework, questions of who is speaking through these exhibitions, and what are they saying about the place of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the global canon inevitably arise. Terry Smith's explorations of the nature of contemporary art, particularly his work surrounding cultural translation, serve to elucidate possible answers to these questions, as his work places contemporary Middle Eastern art within larger debates surrounding contemporary art and how it is represented in art institutions. Smith demonstrates how the awareness of postcolonial discourse informs contemporary art, a dialogue especially pertinent to contemporary Middle Eastern art. Indeed, Edward Said's writing on the cultural relationship between 'West' and 'East' remain highly influential and are often cited in discussions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

The confluence of these three discourses affects how exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in Western institutions are curated and received. The chapter provides the theoretical grounding for the thesis as a whole. In the following discussion, I analyze in depth the three areas of discourse outlined above, arguing that their imbrications provide a model for understanding the exhibition, and subsequent reception of contemporary “Middle Eastern” art in the Western institution. The three theoretical models are distinct but complementary: postcolonial studies have closely informed both contemporary art practice and museology, and, as exhibitions can be thought of as the staging ground for much contemporary art, the confluence of these three models signals the interdisciplinary and transcultural reach of contemporary non-Western art.

Orientalism and Its Aftermath

The publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978 was pivotal in the reassessment of Western contemporary and historical attitudes towards the “Orient,” and in particular the Middle East. Orientalism is primarily a work of literary criticism and theory. Throughout the work, Said engages with both fictional works, such as the writings of Gustave Flaubert, and with non-fictional scholarship and travel literature. In the words of Valerie Kennedy, Said “brought politics into literary studies by insisting that scholarly Orientalism need to be seen in the context of Western perceptions of the Orient dating back to Classical times”⁵⁴. Said sought to discover how the “Orient” functions in the Western imagination. The Orient, according to Said, is not an actual geographical or cultural entity. Rather, the “Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West”⁵⁵. However, the Orient is not just an idea. Orientalist thought has had a tangible effect on

⁵⁴ Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000), 14

⁵⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Random House, 1978), 5

Western relations with the largely Muslim Middle East, with tangible impact on the lives of the “Oriental.” Orientalism, whether it takes fictional or non-fictional form, “depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.”⁵⁶ Said was guided in the writing of *Orientalism* by three main principles.

The first of these key principles identified by Said is “the distinction between pure and political knowledge.”⁵⁷ This refers to Said’s belief that Orientalist writing was not created in a cultural vacuum. Rather, Orientalism, as a “cultural and political fact,”⁵⁸ is necessarily implicated in a wider discourse. Throughout *Orientalism*, Said argues that the works produced by his subjects of enquiry are the result of a “dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by three great empires - British, French, American - in whose intellectual and imaginative territory the writing was produced.”⁵⁹ The second concern that shapes *Orientalism* is “the methodological question.”⁶⁰ Rather than write a historical account of European and American Orientalism, Said chooses instead to conceptualize it as a far-reaching discourse, relying on a Foucauldian model. Said believes that the construct of Orientalism is an exercise of authority. His methodological devices for studying this authority

are what can be called strategic location, which is a way of describing the author’s position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about, and strategic formation, which is a way of analyzing the relationships between texts and the way in which groups of texts...acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

⁵⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 9.

⁵⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 13.

⁵⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 15.

⁶⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 15

⁶¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 20

The third and final guiding principle Said describes in his introduction is “the personal dimension.”⁶² Said attests that his interest in Orientalism was shaped by his own experience growing up as a Palestinian Arab in British colonies and later, in the West. Said writes that the “study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals.”⁶³ Influenced by his lived experience, Said directed his academic energies towards actual social experiences. *Orientalism* is a product of this conviction, as Said attests that, “too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent.”⁶⁴ In order to fully understand the ramifications of discourses such as Orientalism, “society and literary culture can only be understood and studied together,”⁶⁵ in order to create a “better understanding of the way cultural domination has operated.”⁶⁶ *Orientalism* is a polemic, a political statement by Said, engendered by his own experience and driven by a sense of social injustice.

An analysis of Said’s thesis, which has been widely debated and recontextualized, provides crucial insight into the exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art at the core of this study. Said’s short definition of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient,”⁶⁷ is certainly applicable to exhibitions, as they help promote a certain view of the region. For Said, the Orient is neither an imaginary creation nor an actual entity. Instead, he visualizes it as “ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (the Orient, the East, “them”).”⁶⁸ Said argues that this pervasive differentiation between the Orient

⁶² Said, *Orientalism*, 25

⁶³ Said, *Orientalism*, 25.

⁶⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 27

⁶⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 27

⁶⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 28.

⁶⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 3

⁶⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 43

and the Occident has ramifications discernible not only in the political sphere, but also in the cultural output of Western society. General societal attitudes can be read through the manner in which the Orient and the ‘Oriental’ are culturally represented.

Although written in the late 1970s, Said’s examination of the latest phase of representation of the Oriental, particularly ‘the Arab’, resonates today. Said points to popular images that invoke the “menace of jihad,”⁶⁹ socio-political stereotypes and assumptions surrounding oil supply, Islam and the Israel-Palestine conflict⁷⁰ and subsequent political policies of the West towards the Middle East. Many of the stereotypical and negative views of the ‘Oriental’ as described in *Orientalism*, are implicitly and explicitly challenged by contemporary Middle Eastern artists, including those exhibited in *Without Boundary* and *Word Into Art*.

Through such works and the decisions of the curators of these exhibitions to draw attention away from negative stereotypes, *Without Boundary* and *Word Into Art* challenge Orientalist thought, attempting to persuade audiences to rethink preconceptions of the Middle East. By providing a space where artists from the ‘Orient’ can speak out through their work about their own lived experience, the curators destabilize what Said calls “the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient.”⁷¹ Despite this, the very nature of the institutions ensures that they remain in a position of authority – they have “intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture.”⁷² The British and American audiences of these and other exhibitions are, in a way, in the same position as Said’s scholarly Orientalist, as “there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of [their] actuality: that [he/she] comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second ... It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that

⁶⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 287.

⁷⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, 286.

⁷¹ Said, *Orientalism*, 7.

⁷² Said, *Orientalism*, 19.

one belongs to a power with definite interest in the Orient.”⁷³ Indeed, the very act of promoting the exhibitions as showing contemporary art from the Islamic world or the Middle East is reminiscent of the categorizing that Said derides: “When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end point of analysis...the result is usually to polarize the distinction – the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western - and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions and societies.”⁷⁴ By bringing the Orient into Western institutions, which have extensive histories of Orientalist scholarship, it can be written about in what Said calls “a disciplined way.”⁷⁵ By positioning it within the framework of institutions which echo of Western intellectual authority, the Orient’s difference, its “foreignness can be translated, its meanings decoded, its hostility tamed.”⁷⁶

The theoretical and methodological approach assumed by Said in *Orientalism* has been broadly critiqued. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss these responses in depth, I will briefly introduce a few of the most debated areas of criticism.⁷⁷ In “Between Orientalism and Historicism,” the critic Aijaz Ahmad acknowledges Said’s intentions, but finds his interpretation of Foucault, as well as his overall theoretical program, problematic. According to Ahmad, Said, while arguing against monolithic and totalising European views of the Orient, speaks of the West “as a selfidentical, fixed being which has always possessed an essence and a project, an

⁷³ Said, *Orientalism*, 11

⁷⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, 45-6

⁷⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, 103

⁷⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, 103

⁷⁷ A contentious early response was offered by historian Bernard Lewis in his 1993 book, *Islam and the West*. Lewis derided Said’s decision to focus primarily on British and French Orientalism, and accused Said of displaying a “disquieting lack of knowledge of what scholars do and what scholarship is about” (258). Seeing within *Orientalism* a “profound hostility to the West but more particularly the liberal and democratic West,” and a “simplified version of a complex problem,” Lewis praises the scholarly achievements of European Orientalists and decries Said’s work as political and polemical (264). Lewis, embedded in a tradition of history which Said is speaking against, seems to disregard Said’s intentions to define Orientalism as a Foucaultian discourse.

imagination and a will, and of the Orient as its object”⁷⁸ With these statements, Ahmad suggests that Said is performing a type of ‘Orientalism-in-reverse’⁷⁹ In addition to this, Ahmad takes issue with Said’s interpretation of Foucault, stating that his work “resurfaces in a distorted form in Said’s thought”⁸⁰ Said “reduces Foucault to a terminology, i.e., discourse [but] refuses to accept the consequences of Foucault’s own mapping of history”⁸¹ In noting that Said’s concept of the Orientalist discourse spans from antiquity until the present day, Ahmad suggests that the very idea that “there could be a singular discourse traversing all history and all European textualities - are all ideas which are ahistorical not only in the ordinary sense but also specifically anti-Foucauldian in a methodological sense”⁸² Ahmad sees in Said’s definition of Orientalism a conflation of contradictory theoretical positions - on one hand he considers it “a system of mere representations in the post-modernist sense attached to it in the respective positions of Foucault and Derrida,”⁸³ and on other occasions he sees it as “a system of misrepresentations wilfully produced by the so-called ‘West’ in the pursuit of power and eventually colonial occupation”⁸⁴ This lack of clarity and apparent misreading of Foucault is cited by many scholars, including James Clifford, as a specific weakness of Said’s text

Clifford first addressed *Orientalism* in a 1980 review in the journal *History and Theory*⁸⁵ Clifford sees *Orientalism* as “a serious exercise in textual criticism, an idiosyncratic form of intellectual history, and most fundamentally a series of important, if tentative, epistemological

⁷⁸ Aijaz Ahmad, “Between Orientalism and Historicism,” in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander Macfie (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 289

⁷⁹ Ahmad, 289

⁸⁰ Ahmad, 290

⁸¹ Ahmad, 291

⁸² Ahmad, 291

⁸³ Ahmad, 292

⁸⁴ Ahmad, 292

⁸⁵ Clifford revisits the text in his 1988 book, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art*, in a chapter entitled “On Orientalism”

reflections on general styles and procedures of cultural discourse.”⁸⁶ However, Clifford takes issue with how Said defines “discourse,” suggesting that his understanding of the term “vacillates between, on the one hand, the status of an ideological distortion of lives and cultures which are never concretized, and, on the other, the condition of a persistent structure of signifiers which, like some extreme example of surrealist writing, refers solely and endlessly to itself.”⁸⁷ Although Clifford believes that, “Said’s humanist perspectives do not harmonize with his use of methods derived from Foucault, who is, of course, a radical critic of humanism,”⁸⁸ he nevertheless argues that “Said’s general attempt to extend Foucault’s conception of a discourse into the area of cultural constructions of the exotic is a promising one.”⁸⁹ However, Said’s focus on the agency of authorial subjects in creating the imaginary Orient stands counter to Foucault’s assertion that a discursive formation “is not produced by authorial subjects or even by a group of authors arranged as a “tradition.””⁹⁰ Clifford believes that Said’s mixing of the notion of discourse with the concept of authorial agency weakens both arguments.⁹¹ Clifford sees in *Orientalism* ambivalence and confusion wherein Said often contradicts and rewrites his own arguments. He states that:

Said’s methodological catholicity repeatedly blurs his analysis. If he is advancing anthropological arguments, *Orientalism* appears as the cultural quest for order. When he adopts the stance of a literary critic, it emerges as the processes of writing, textualizing, and interpreting. As an intellectual historian Said portrays *Orientalism* as a specific series of influences and schools of thought. For the psychohistorian *Orientalist* discourse becomes a representative series of personal/historical experiences.... *Orientalism* is also, at times, conflated with Western positivism; with general definitions of the Primitive, with evolutionism, with racism...Said’s discourse analysis does not, itself, escape the all-inclusive “Occidentalism” he specifically rejects as an alternative to *Orientalism*.⁹²

⁸⁶ James Clifford, “Review,” *History and Theory* 19 (1980), 206

⁸⁷ Clifford, “Review,” 209.

⁸⁸ Clifford, “Review,” 212.

⁸⁹ Clifford, “Review,” 213.

⁹⁰ Clifford, “Review,” 217.

⁹¹ Clifford, “Review,” 217.

⁹² Clifford, “Review,” 219.

Yet, Clifford sees much of value in Said's text, stating that it "succeeds in questioning a number of anthropological categories, most importantly, perhaps, the concept of culture"⁹³ His critique of Said's methodology nevertheless acknowledges the necessity of texts such as *Orientalism*, which are "symptomatic of the uncertainties generated by the new global situation"⁹⁴

Despite these critiques, *Orientalism* remains one of the foundational texts of post-colonial studies, particularly in the area of literary theory and criticism Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha both cite Said's writing as an influential point of departure for their own work I suggest that the work of these two writers in particular has had a discernible impact not only on postcolonial studies, broadly, and for the specific purposes of my study, on the work of artists represented in *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* Bhabha and Spivak employ the strategies of Derrida in their analyses, moving away from Said's dependence on Foucault's model Both Spivak and Bhabha focus on when and how 'Orient' speaks back to the West, and on the interplay and exchange between cultures, examining the instability of the central 'texts' of both colony and colonizer

Spivak, along with such scholars as Jane Miller, considers the "absence of women in [his] analysis of Orientalist discourse [a] glaring omission"⁹⁵ According to Spivak, Said's definitions of 'Orient' and 'Occident' are binary and monolithic, leaving no place for heterogeneity, and failing to acknowledge class and gender stratification Spivak agrees with Said that "the epistemic violence of imperialism has meant the transformation of the 'Third World' into a sign whose production has been obfuscated to the point that Western superiority and dominance are

⁹³ Clifford, "Review," 219

⁹⁴ Clifford, "Review," 205

⁹⁵ Stephen Morton, "The Unhappy Marriage of 'Third World' Women's Movements and Orientalism" in *After Orientalism: Critical Entanglements Productive Looks*, ed Inge E. Boer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 167

naturalized”⁹⁶ She sees this epistemic violence most clearly in the “remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other”⁹⁷ However, she is more concerned about how and when the ‘Third World’ speaks back to the West Through what Spivak calls the “violence of the imperial epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription”⁹⁸ the dominant discourse has silenced myriad voices of the subaltern However, the subaltern cannot speak To assign a collective identity, experience and voice to a subaltern group is to homogenize their experience and to perform, in the words of Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, “disguised acts of historical ventriloquism, since historians write from a field of power that is not that of subalterns”⁹⁹ Subaltern groups, which exist outside of the hegemonic power structure, cannot speak out and define a collective cultural identity without defining themselves in reductive, essentialist terms due to their heterogeneity ‘Third World’ women are, in effect, doubly subaltern, “both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant” Spivak, through her rejection of similarity, with its “potential for assimilation and the attendant risk of appropriation,”¹⁰⁰ attests that for the “‘true’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself”¹⁰¹ Instead, the dominant discourse must refrain from assigning a singular voice to subaltern groups, and instead make space for heterogeneity of expression and resistance

⁹⁶ Ilan Kapoor, “Hyper-self-reflexive Development? Spivak on Representing the Third World ‘Other,’” *Third World Quarterly* 25 (2004) 627

⁹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* ed Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London and New York Routledge, 1995) 25

⁹⁸ Spivak, 27

⁹⁹ Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, “Introduction Orientalism from Postcolonial Theory to World Theory,” in *Genealogies of Orientalism History Theory Politics*, ed Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska (Lincoln University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 29

¹⁰⁰ Burke and Prochaska, 29

¹⁰¹ Spivak, 27

While employing similar post-structuralist, deconstructivist strategies as Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha has nonetheless frequently cited Edward Said's work as an important foundation in his own thinking. However, he takes issue with what he sees as Said's overt politicism, specifically in regards to Palestine, and his reliance on binaries. In a 2004 article published in *Artforum*, Bhabha states that the "high Saidian style speaks with a moral passion that sometimes sacrifices analytic precision to polemical outrage."¹⁰² In the words of David Huddart, Bhabha states "Said minimizes spaces of resistance by producing a picture of the West endlessly and brutally subjugating the East."¹⁰³ Bhabha, in contrast, is interested in "moments when the colonized resisted the colonizer, despite structures of violence and domination."¹⁰⁴ Throughout his essays, the most influential of which are collected in 1994's *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduces many concepts useful in exploring the instances where gaps and instabilities in the colonial discourse can and are utilized by the colonized. While Bhabha's body of work as a whole has greatly influenced postcolonial discourse, I argue that the concepts most valuable to the interpretation of the works displayed in *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* are his notions of hybridity and the performative and pedagogical.

The concept of hybridity is, I argue, foundational to Bhabha's thought. It runs throughout all his work, but in order to define it I will refer primarily to the essay "Signs taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." In this essay, Bhabha employs the "emblem" of the English book - in particular, the Bible - as an example of "signs taken for wonders," an "insignia of colonial authority and a signifier of colonial desire and discipline."¹⁰⁵ As Bhabha states, the immediate effect of this signifier is that it sustains "a

¹⁰² Homi K. Bhabha, "Untimely Ends," *Artforum* (February 2004), 19

¹⁰³ David Huddart, *Homi K. Bhabha* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6

¹⁰⁴ Huddart, 6

¹⁰⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 102

tradition of English ‘cultural’ authority.”¹⁰⁶ However, Bhabha argues that, “[as] a signifier of authority, the English book acquires its meaning after the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity.”¹⁰⁷ However, this image is not original, “by virtue of the act of repetition that constructs it - nor ‘identical’ - by virtue of the difference that defines it.”¹⁰⁸ As a consequence of this, “the colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.”¹⁰⁹ Colonial authority, therefore, is mired in ambivalence. Through discriminatory practices that “map out subject populations,”¹¹⁰ colonial authority attempts to reinforce its power. However, among these subject populations, “what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different - a mutation, a hybrid.”¹¹¹ Bhabha explains how hybridity works within colonial authority as a destabilizing force:

Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting focuses and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the ‘pure and original identity of authority). Hybridity is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identification in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory - or, in my mixed metaphor, a negative transparency.¹¹²

Hybridity *always already* exists and therefore is an effective strategy for destabilizing colonial power because it reveals the insecurity of authority. In Bhabha’s words, “[hybridity] intervenes in the exercise of authority not merely to indicate the impossibility of its identity but to represent

¹⁰⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 107.

¹⁰⁸ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 107.

¹⁰⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 107.

¹¹⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 111.

¹¹¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 111.

¹¹² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 112.

the unpredictability of its presence.”¹¹³ This intervention plays a role in the identity formation not only of the colonized, but also of the imperial authority, whose teleological narratives and ideological founding myths are unsettled through this process. I suggest that many contemporary Middle Eastern artists work within a paradigm informed by Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, using it as a discursive tool to explore liminal identity and cultural transmission and translation.

Bhabha uses the foundational theory of hybridity to address the idea of national identity and the nation-state in the essay “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation.” The concepts of the performative and the pedagogical are particularly important in this essay, as Bhabha’s understanding of the interrelationship between these two terms helps explain his assertion that universalizing, essentialist constructions of national identity break down in what Bhabha calls “the margins of the modern nation.” In the “narrated nation,” which refers to the representation of national belonging, the split in the cultural signification is “between the continuous, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative.”¹¹⁴ Yet, this split does not entail a binary opposition between pedagogy and performance. Rather, the two apparent opposites are mutually dependent and inseparable components of the modern nation.

David Huddart describes the “pedagogical” in Bhabha’s thought as a matter of essentializing.¹¹⁵ Linked back to what Bhabha calls natural time, the pedagogical works to form the teleological narrative of the nation. This metaphorical nation is dependent on a sense of progressive time, adapted from concepts outlined by Benedict Anderson, and attempts to “hark back to a true national past.”¹¹⁶ The pedagogical finds its narrative authority in a “tradition of the

¹¹³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 114

¹¹⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 297

¹¹⁵ Huddart, 132

¹¹⁶ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 303

people a moment of becoming designated by itself, encapsulated in a succession of historical moments that represent an eternity produced by self-generation”¹¹⁷ The nation, therefore, does not exist as a separate, self-sustaining entity. Rather, it is metaphorical, based on a series of myths that make use of teleological constructions of history. The term “pedagogy” refers to the daily act of learning these national myths, which in turn work to sustain the nation’s existence, a process that Bhabha relates to the “will to be a nation”¹¹⁸ Pedagogy naturalizes these myths, asserting, “that the nation and the people are what they are”¹¹⁹

However, the “doubled” nature of the people and the nation assures that the pedagogical does not go uncontested. Through the performative, counter-narratives of the nation destabilize opportunities for creating “totalizing boundaries” that lead to essentialist constructions of identity.¹²⁰ Huddart describes the performative as a matter of practice,¹²¹ which performs an intervention in the “sovereignty of the nation’s *self-generation* by casting a shadow between the people as image”¹²² Existing outside of the borders of natural time, the performative threatens binary divisions. It problematizes processes of ‘Othering’ that reduce and essentialize ‘outside’ peoples, nations and groups by speaking against the accepted truths of the nation from within its (constructed) boundaries. However, the performative speaks from a liminal space. Composed of dissident voices that interrogate the pedagogical from the margin, the performative is as key to the formation of nationhood as the pedagogical. Bhabha sees minority discourse as a primary example of the performative, as it “acknowledges the status of national culture - and the people -

¹¹⁷ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 296

¹¹⁸ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 310

¹¹⁹ Huddart, 109

¹²⁰ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 300

¹²¹ Huddart, 132

¹²² Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 295

as a contentious, performative space of the perplexity of the living in the midst of the pedagogical representation of the fullness of life.”¹²³

Together, the pedagogical and the performative create and challenge the nation. At the same time that the metaphorical, teleological narrative of nationhood employs the people as historical objects, marginal voices split this seemingly fixed identity by subjectively reinventing and questioning it. As with Freud’s uncanny double, the coexistence of the pedagogical and performative introduces doubt as to the certainty of the self (or nation). Yet, this disjuncture is ultimately productive. The polarity of pedagogical and performative is never assured, “so that the pedagogical is never as stable as it wants to be, and the performative itself becomes pedagogically important.”¹²⁴ The marginal voices of the performative act on the nation over time, destabilizing essentialist narratives and constantly reshaping and complicating constructions of national identity. In Bhabha’s own words, “the demand for a holistic representative version of society could only be represented in a discourse that was *at the same time* obsessively fixed upon, and uncertain of, the foundations of society, and the margins of the text.”¹²⁵ This constant intervention into the pedagogical by the performative is essential in creating a whole self for the nation, even if it generates an identity that is double and in constant flux. I argue that contemporary Middle Eastern artists play a performative role in Western society. Through their work, which is often expressly political, these artists intervene into the teleological narrative presented by Western nations. Their presence in such traditionally “pedagogical” institutions as the British Museum and the Museum of Modern Art signifies the incorporation of minority discourse into the wider cultural narrative.

¹²³ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 307.

¹²⁴ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 109.

¹²⁵ Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 296.

In addition to his works of literary criticism, Bhabha has recently written on contemporary Middle Eastern artists, contributing an essay to the *Without Boundary* catalogue and engaging with the work of Shahzia Sikander, Shirin Neshat and others in a 2009 conference paper entitled “On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission.” Throughout this recent essay, which expands on ideas brought forth in the catalogue, Bhabha discusses how artists cross cultures, “marking the traces and trysts of migration.”¹²⁶ Art, as defined by Bhabha is both “an object in the world and a mode of address that makes up the world.”¹²⁷ Artists, especially those who travel between cultures, have a “complex and displaced relation to territoriality”¹²⁸ which is visible in their work. Bhabha believes it is important to engage with contemporary art, and is particularly interested in questions such as:

How do artistic traditions endure the process of displacement while maintaining some of the contours of cultural continuity? What transformative possibilities exist within practices that appear to the traditional and timeworn?... Are these the very qualities of marginal diversity that make the most sought after global commodities?¹²⁹

“On Global Memory” demonstrates how readily Bhabha’s postcolonial theories can be applied to examinations of contemporary Middle Eastern art, and indicates how postcolonial theory and the discourse surrounding contemporary art are mutually complementary. In Bhabha’s discussions of contemporary art, he often cites the work of Terry Smith, particularly his writings on contemporaneity and what Smith calls the postcolonial turn in contemporary art.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Homi K Bhabha, “On Global Memory Reflections on Barbaric Transmission” in *Crossing Cultures Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, ed Jaymie Anderson (Melbourne Miegunyah Press, 2009), 50

¹²⁷ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 51

¹²⁸ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 52

¹²⁹ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 51-52

¹³⁰ Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 151

Contemporaneity

One of Smith's most important contributions to art historical discourse is his notion of "contemporaneity." As defined in the 2003 article, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," contemporaneity is the current state of the world, after modernity. It

consists precisely in the constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.¹³¹

This fragmented, diverse present is characterized by multiplicity and interconnectivity. Smith sees four themes running through this heterogeneity, which is "natural to contemporaneity": "(alter)temporality, (dis)location, transformativity within the hyperreal, and the altercation of affect/effectivity."¹³² Artists have reacted to this state of being in a variety of ways, resulting in a "larger network of widely dispersed and variously connected sources of creative coping."¹³³ Smith describes some of these methods of "creative coping" throughout the article. He cites two particular trends within contemporary art, the first of which is "contemporary as the new modern."¹³⁴ Smith suggests that this trend in the works of artists such as Matthew Barney and Richard Serra, arguing that, in the hands of these artists, "contemporary art, as a movement, has become the new modern, or what amounts to the same thing, the old modern in new clothes."¹³⁵

The second, and for the purposes of this thesis, more important, tendency in contemporary art identified by Smith is art which embodies what Smith calls "passages between cultures."¹³⁶ Identifying Shirin Neshat, Ghazel and Ayanah Moor as artists who work within this framework, Smith argues that these works emerge "from within the conditions of

¹³¹ Terry Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2006), 703.

¹³² Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 700

¹³³ Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 700

¹³⁴ Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 684

¹³⁵ Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 688

¹³⁶ Smith, "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," 690

contemporaneity, including the remnants of the cultures of modernity and postmodernity, but which projects itself through and around these, as an art of that which actually *is* in the world, of what it is to *be* in the world, and of that which is to come.”¹³⁷ Art that emerges from this tendency is characterized by dichotomies and paradoxes - it is “inclusive yet oppositional and anti-institutional, concrete but also various.”¹³⁸ In a 2005 article entitled “World Picturing in Contemporary Art: The Iconogeographic Turn,” Smith suggests that three forces help shape the condition of contemporaneity from which the works of these artists emerge:

First, there is globalisation’s thirst for hegemony in the face of increasing cultural differentiation (multeity freed by decolonisation) and for control of time in the face of the proliferation of asynchronous temporalities. Second, there is the accelerating inequity between peoples, classes and individuals that threatens persistent dreams of liberation. Third, there is an infosphere shaped by the uneasy coexistence of highly specialist, closed knowledge communities and the potentially instant yet always thoroughly mediated communication of all information and any image anywhere.¹³⁹

In the 2009 monograph *What Is Contemporary Art?*, which collects many of Smith’s major writings, he argues that, “the ideological grinding between globalization and decolonization that characterizes contemporaneity is seen to be reflected in the most contemporary art, precisely because it is at once *of* and *out of* its time in ways that seem unique to these times.”¹⁴⁰ Contemporary art, according to Smith, plays the important role of redrawing “connections that make up the world picture,”¹⁴¹ which were destroyed by the world-dividing impulses of imperialism and colonialism.¹⁴² Smith emphasizes that this is not an “art movement” in the traditional sense. Rather, “the postcolonial turn has generated a plethora of art shaped by local,

¹³⁷ Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 692

¹³⁸ Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 692

¹³⁹ Terry Smith, “World Picturing in Contemporary Art. The Iconogeographic Turn,” *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 6 (2005), 34

¹⁴⁰ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 140

¹⁴¹ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 152

¹⁴² In a 2010 *Art Bulletin* article entitled “The State of Art History Contemporary Art,” Smith identifies this trend in contemporary art as “art consequent on the transnational turn in world affairs (their geopolitical contemporaneity)”

national, anticolonial, independent values (diversity, identity, critique).”¹⁴³ Smith underlines the importance of exhibitions in critically ordering these trends in postcolonial art: “The exhibition as a diagnostic toolbox actively seeks to stage the relationships, conjunctions, and disjunctions between different realities...between identity and subjectification.”¹⁴⁴ Through exhibitions, curators and critics stage debates about the nature of contemporary art.

Contemporary Art and Globalization

Smith’s 2009 monograph, *What Is Contemporary Art?* seeks to proffer a solution to the question posed in its title and to address the broader question, “What is it to exist in the conditions of contemporaneity?”¹⁴⁵ Smith devotes space to the museum, contemporary sculpture and architecture, the marketplace, contemporaneity and what he calls “Countercurrents: South/North,” a section which examines the “iconogeographic turning precipitated by decolonization and postcolonialism,” an important concept for this thesis.¹⁴⁶

Discussing the effects of globalization on the contemporary art market, Smith argues that, “[g]lobalization emphasizes the high premium of the present, the value of seizing opportunities offered by both scope and diversity - in art as in any other kind of business.”¹⁴⁷ He goes on to argue that globalization is one of the driving forces of contemporary art production worldwide, as “the ideological grinding between globalization and decolonization that characterizes contemporaneity is seen to be reflected in the most contemporary art, precisely because it is at once *of* and *out of* its time in ways that seem unique to these times.”¹⁴⁸ Identifying 2002’s Documenta 11, curated by Okwui Enwezor, as the space where global contemporary art made its

¹⁴³ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 266.

¹⁴⁴ Smith, “Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity,” 694.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 10.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 10.

¹⁴⁷ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 125.

¹⁴⁸ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 125-6.

largest impact on the consciousness on the Western curatorial and commercial public, Smith titles this trend the “postcolonial turn.”¹⁴⁹ The postcolonial turn is characterized by impulses which “are locally specific yet worldly in implication, inclusive yet oppositional and anti-institutional, concrete but also various, mobile, and open-ended.”¹⁵⁰ Artists working within the postcolonial turn do not have a “shared pattern, but all have been touched by aspects of the twentieth-century legacy of closely contested nationalisms, civil war, ethnic cleansing, foreign interventions, and displacement due to economic necessity.”¹⁵¹ The postcolonial turn as described by Smith is a productive way of describing the proliferation of “global” contemporary art over the last decade, a trend with which contemporary Middle Eastern art is closely associated.

Smith argues that there are three major currents in contemporary art, the first of which “amounts to the aesthetic of globalization.”¹⁵² The second current “emerges from the processes of decolonization within what were the second, third, and fourth worlds, including its impacts in what was the first world.” He goes on to state that the postcolonial turn is representative of “a paradigm shift in slow motion that matches the changing world geopolitical and economic order. From this perspective, contemporary art today is the art of the global south.”¹⁵³ The third current Smith identifies is the outcome of “a generational change and the sheer quantity of young people attracted to active participation in the image economy.”¹⁵⁴ Smith believes that the nature of contemporary art at this time is contradictory and ever-changing. He contends that, “the three currents...outlined are the *actual* kinds of art that these conditions have generated. The currents are tied to each other, uncomfortably but of necessity. They are changeable contraries that are

¹⁴⁹ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 151

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 151

¹⁵¹ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 166

¹⁵² Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 265

¹⁵³ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 267

¹⁵⁴ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?*, 267

only partially synthesizable into each other, contradictions that are highly generative but only as supplements of their mismatching”¹⁵⁵ The postcolonial turn, according to Smith is a vital trend in contemporary art arising from the impulses of artists to respond to their lived experience and the world order, and the art market’s growing interest in works created outside of traditional “Western” paradigms

In “Art and Globalization Then and Now,” a 2007 article published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, philosopher of art Noel Carroll explores the notion of global art, stating that, “the impression that the arts have gone utterly global is hard to resist”¹⁵⁶ However, he believes that the term “transnational” better embodies the reality of the global art world today, as globalization implies an unrealized parity while transnational suggests that, “there are many different, often very unlike, kinds of transnational relations, and that these do not add up to a cohesive global network”¹⁵⁷ In the context of art production, Carroll argues, globalization can be better understood “in terms of the increase of the available modes of organization for the transnational construction of new versions of the kinds of cultural structures that previously discharged their social functions more locally”¹⁵⁸ Carroll believes that what is particularly unprecedented about the current global distribution of contemporary art is

something like a single, integrated, cosmopolitan institution of art, organized transnationally in such a way that the participants, from wherever they hail, share converging or overlapping traditions and practices at the same time that they exhibit and distribute their art in internationally coordinated venues¹⁵⁹

It is the process of artistic exchange that has been revolutionized by market globalization and communication media Like Smith, Carroll pinpoints biennales and the Documenta exhibition

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art* ? 269

¹⁵⁶ Noel Carroll, “Art and Globalization Then and Now,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007), 134

¹⁵⁷ Carroll, 135

¹⁵⁸ Carroll, 136

¹⁵⁹ Carroll, 136

series as the space in which artists from disparate parts of the world can showcase their work for consumption by the “global” market.¹⁶⁰ He sees these events as a new “transnational institution of art.”¹⁶¹ Carroll pinpoints certain “preoccupations” which, to him, are especially visible in contemporary global art: “articles of progressive politics, such as postcolonialism, feminism, gay liberation, globalization and global inequality, the suppression of free expression and other human rights, identity politics, and the politics of representation, as well as a generic anti-establishmentarianism.”¹⁶² This implied shared discourse of the artists, which “also involves assumptions on the part of the audience about what the artist might be up to,”¹⁶³ reflects Smith’s notion of the postcolonial turn, wherein the work of ‘global’ artists reflects certain reoccurring political concerns.

In 1998, *Art Journal* published “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” featuring six curators, artists and scholars discussing the interplay between contemporary art production and globalization. Mónica Amor, in the section entitled “Whose World? A Note on the Paradoxes of Global Aesthetics,” emphasizes the role that globalization plays in the distribution of contemporary art from the non-Western world. She defines globalization as “a field of economic, social and cultural forces intimately related to the economic structures embodied by corporate capitalism that can illuminate - or obfuscate - our understanding of contemporary artistic practices.”¹⁶⁴ She underlines the need for critical consideration of the role of globalization, stating that when the term is “explored as a matrix of forces informing the production, circulation, and reception of specific works of art, it can help us to further understand

¹⁶⁰ Carroll, 138.

¹⁶¹ Carroll, 140.

¹⁶² Carroll, 140.

¹⁶³ Carroll, 140.

¹⁶⁴ Mónica Amor, “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” *Art Journal* 57 (1998), 30.

the discursive dimension within which artistic practices are immersed”¹⁶⁵ In his piece, “Intermezzo Worlds,” Kobena Mercer adds that the “overall picture of today’s global art system is fascinatingly complex and contradictory”¹⁶⁶ He believes that the “international art world is witnessing a cognate process [he calls] multicultural normalization”¹⁶⁷ Irit Rogoff concludes the piece with the following comment

In the wake of this work we are no longer positioned within the suffocating binarism of First World/Third World cultural relations We no longer maintain the illusion that there is an authentic inside from which we can view an outside that imposes alien concepts And most certainly, we no longer need the wholesale importation of unreflected cultural models with their nostalgic hankerings for the “Family of Man” Instead, by putting the desires for such on display as the emergent subject of our work, we may be able to elicit an alternative set of ideas about what constitutes cultural gratification¹⁶⁸

Rogoff underlines the importance of postcolonial theory and alternative models of contemporary art to artists and curators working after the postcolonial turn, a concept further explored in the writings of scholars such as Okwui Enwezor, Olu Oguibe and Chin-Tao Wu

The Postcolonial Turn and the ‘Global’ Artist

In the 2007 *Third Text* article “Worlds Apart Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art,” Chin-Tao Wu considers the ramifications of global art distribution in terms of how artists’ works are read, received and described worldwide Like Carroll, she has reservations about applying the economic definition of globalization to artworks as “the way in which contemporary art, even in its globalised form, is consumed is very different from that of an ordinary consumer object”¹⁶⁹ However, the notion of a globalized art world continues to be widely promoted, and this “raises our expectations that everything is exportable, and that patterns of cultural consumption can be

¹⁶⁵ Amor, 30

¹⁶⁶ Kobena Mercer, “Liminalities Discussions on the Global and the Local,” *Art Journal* 57 (1998), 43

¹⁶⁷ Mercer, 45

¹⁶⁸ Irit Rogoff, “Liminalities Discussions on the Global and the Local,” *Art Journal* 57 (1998), 49

¹⁶⁹ Chin Tao Wu, “Worlds Apart Problems of Interpreting Globalised Art,” *Third Text* 21 (2007), 720

homogenous in each of the four corners of the world.”¹⁷⁰ Wu sees a response to this in the recent curatorial strategies of biennales, which she believes have decided “to focus on a deliberately constructed diversity of artists’ backgrounds. If the artists happen to come from locations where current political correctness can apply, that is all the better,” an assertion which lends perspective on the two exhibitions discussed in this thesis.¹⁷¹ If exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art are staged in part because of the connection to Western involvement in the Middle East, then the way the curators engage with political statements made by the artists becomes more important.

To demonstrate this, Wu focuses specifically on the works and careers of artists Shirin Neshat (from Iran), Doris Salcedo (from Colombia) and Mona Hatoum (a Palestinian). These artists have all achieved worldwide commercial success. Wu believes that a commodity has been created out of their work, which is then evaluated “in terms of notions of authenticity.”¹⁷² The places from which these three artists originate are often featured in Western popular media, which has “come to create some of the most deeply rooted and durable stereotypes that Westerners have of these countries.”¹⁷³ Readings of the works of these artists, Wu argues, are largely dependent on biography and assume “unproblematic positions according to which the political and social histories of the locations from which the artists originate are readily readable by virtue of their being somehow inscribed in the works themselves.”¹⁷⁴ However, Wu points out that “[the] historical and social contexts to which their work specifically refer are not always immediately understandable to a public not already familiar with the cultures in question.”¹⁷⁵

This is particularly relevant to the interpretation of contemporary Middle Eastern art. As Edward

¹⁷⁰ Wu, 720.

¹⁷¹ Wu, 720.

¹⁷² Wu, 724.

¹⁷³ Wu, 724.

¹⁷⁴ Wu, 725.

¹⁷⁵ Wu, 719.

Said remarks in his 1981 book, *Covering Islam: How The Media and the Experts Determine How We See The Rest of The World*, news media representation of the Middle East is such that “Americans have scant opportunity to view the Islamic world *except* reductively [and] oppositionally,”¹⁷⁶ a contention which is arguably as applicable to contemporary representations as it was to those Said addressed in 1981. Despite the hurdles Western audiences face in the interpretation of works from other cultures, Wu believes that the globalization of contemporary art is a positive development, as it has the power to counter the Western hegemony induced by economic globalization. Wu believes that “[far] from making the local redundant, globalised artistic production has the potential to democratize hermeneutic power by devolving it away from the centre.”¹⁷⁷

Okwui Enwezor’s chapter “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in the edited volume *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, interrogates the place of art in contemporary culture from the perspective of a curator, investigating the ongoing negotiations between discourses of modernism and the contemporary, the postcolonial and imperial and the global and the local. Enwezor argues that “contemporary art today is refracted, not just from the specific site of culture and history but also - and in a more critical sense - from the standpoint of a complex geopolitical configuration that defines all systems of production and relations of exchange as a consequence of globalization after imperialism” - a situation that he identifies as the “postcolonial constellation.”¹⁷⁸ This is defined by Enwezor as “the site for the expansion of the definition of what constitutes contemporary culture and its affiliations in other domains of practice, it is the intersection of historical forces aligned against the hegemonic

¹⁷⁶ Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Random House, 1981), 55

¹⁷⁷ Wu, 731

¹⁷⁸ Okwui Enwezor, “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, ed. Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor and Terry Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 208

imperatives of imperial discourse.”¹⁷⁹ Enwezor believes that the postcolonial, in theory and practice, is the main driving force in contemporary culture, arising primarily from the productive tension between the remnants of imperialism and the global, postcolonial reality.¹⁸⁰ He discusses the legacy of Modernism in museum display and criticism, interrogating museums such as the Tate Modern and the Centre Georges Pompidou. Enwezor focuses on the display of African work, both contemporary and from the imperial era, as well as its interaction with notions of primitivism in art and society.¹⁸¹ Enwezor argues that:

the legacy of the Western historical avant-garde seems inadequate to the job of producing a unified theory of contemporary art. Because of its restless, unfixed boundaries, its multiplicities, and the state of “permanent transition” within which it is practiced and communicated, contemporary art tends to be much more resistant to global totalization.¹⁸²

Outlining the importance of postcolonial theory for the understanding of contemporary art, he states that “[it] has long been recognized that postcolonial processes have increasingly highlighted the problematics of Western judgment over vast cultural fields in the non-Western world.”¹⁸³ Artists and curators who work within this paradigm naturally interact with these discourses, and this interplay reveals the “importance of multicultural and identity-based practices”¹⁸⁴ in contemporary art. According to Enwezor:

In the context of decolonized representation, innovation is as much about the coming to being of new relations to cultures and histories, to rationalization and transformation, to transculturation and assimilation, and new practices and processes, new kinds of exchange and moments of multiple dwelling as it is about the ways artists are seen to be bound to their national and cultural traditions.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Enwezor, 232.

¹⁸⁰ Enwezor, 209.

¹⁸¹ Enwezor, 215.

¹⁸² Enwezor, 222.

¹⁸³ Enwezor, 223.

¹⁸⁴ Enwezor, 226.

¹⁸⁵ Enwezor, 225.

However, although globalization can be productive in creating new paradigms for interrogating the imperial order and Modernist conceptions of culture and society, it has its limits. As Enwezor points out, “[while] the compression of time and space is understood as one of the definitive aspects of the globalization of art and culture, the access of artists to its benefits is massively uneven.”¹⁸⁶ Enwezor believes that exhibitions of contemporary art, now situated in diverse venues such as the traditional institution, biennales and art fairs, are exemplary of the contemporary condition, where the “dispersed, fragmentary, and asymmetrical state of economic capitalization now endemic in all global systems has foreshortened the horizon of art.”¹⁸⁷ The global art world, according to Enwezor, is not a centralized one. Rather:

what is much in evidence today are networks and cross-hatched systems of production, distribution, transmission, reception, and institutionalization. The development of new multilateral networks of knowledge production - activities that place themselves strategically at the intersection of disciplines and transnational audiences- has obviated the traditional circuits of institutionalized production and reception.¹⁸⁸

Like Terry Smith’s notion of the postcolonial turn, the concept of the “postcolonial constellation,” with its focus on interrogation of traditional models of art historical discourse and display is productive for considering exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art, providing a framework for analysis.

In the prologue of his collection of thirteen essays of institutional critique, *The Culture Game*, Olu Oguibe investigates how realities of globalization affect the lived experience of the artist and the reception of their work. He believes that the reception of artists from non-Western countries is shaped by “broad, perennial social and cultural prejudices.”¹⁸⁹ As artists are absorbed into the “global contemporary art arena from backgrounds outside the West [they] discover that

¹⁸⁶ Enwezor, 227.

¹⁸⁷ Enwezor, 229.

¹⁸⁸ Enwezor, 228.

¹⁸⁹ Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), xi.

the most valued attribute required of them is their difference.”¹⁹⁰ Oguibe calls this process “the culture game,” believing that it operates on many levels throughout the contemporary art world. He suggests that this privileging of difference operates on the “systemic, structural level where it is methodically implemented and perpetuated by contemporary art institutions through acquisitions, programming, criticism, and general discourse.”¹⁹¹ The culture game affects everything from exhibitions to acquisition, as, “[rather] than be seen in their own right as individual artists worthy of acquisition, these artists are thought of as representative of their backgrounds or regions and acquired accordingly.”¹⁹² Through these methods, “the art establishment institutionally maintains the dominant constitution of the mainstream while appearing to dent or even rupture it.”¹⁹³ Oguibe argues that non-Western art which becomes popular in the West does so not because it is of a higher quality, but because it corresponds to Western assumptions and desires. He states that, “the nature or form of art being made on the outposts of the global culture mainstream is, therefore, of less consequence than the ideological and market factors that underlie Western disposition to cultural production from the outside.”¹⁹⁴ He believes that behind the functioning of the global contemporary art world “there lies a residual yet significant translucent layer of primitivism, behind which the possibility of parallels and similarities dissolves and difference remains an essence that neither reality nor the imagination seems able to dissolve.”¹⁹⁵ Oguibe states that “[the] global culture game is therefore a game of difference, and its economy of signs is structured around the principle of irreducible difference.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Oguibe, xii.

¹⁹¹ Oguibe, xii

¹⁹² Oguibe, xii

¹⁹³ Oguibe, xiii

¹⁹⁴ Oguibe, xiv

¹⁹⁵ Oguibe, xiv

¹⁹⁶ Oguibe, xiv

In the essay “Play Me the “Other”: Colonialist Determinism and the Postcolonial Predicament,” Oguibe discusses Togolese artist William Wilson, who creates art with a childlike, stereotypically “primitive” style. Oguibe believes that Wilson’s work has these formal characteristics because of the Western art world’s expectations of African art. He states that Wilson “is required to wear his difference and Otherness like a badge or run the risk of disregard, ignominy, and failure.”¹⁹⁷ In a statement that is equally applicable to artists from Middle Eastern backgrounds, Oguibe asserts that “[as] a perpetual outsider in the West, a postcolonial artist like Wilson is required by Western viewers and clientele to produce work that easily reminds them of the presumed facts of his origins, work that makes a neat and unsullied demarcation between him and the West.”¹⁹⁸ He expands, stating that “[for] the West, Wilson and his art must be seen to indicate that he is *not one of us*. And because his *difference* is more a construct than a truth, he is compelled to invent a myth of Otherness and adopt a corpus of signs to translate this Otherness.”¹⁹⁹ For artists of African origin such as Wilson, this often manifests itself in discussions of primitivism. Contemporary Middle Eastern art, however, is often couched in exoticizing terms, with a discursive language grounded much more firmly in Orientalism. Yet, the general framework of the culture game still applies. Oguibe goes on to investigate the effect that this has on the artistic practice of non-Western artists. He believes that they naturally respond to this market valuation, and having “determined that Otherness is a preferred commodity on the global cultural market, and that their individuality as artists is of less interest than their Otherness, they decide to *play the Other*.”²⁰⁰ Oguibe discusses in detail how the postcolonial artist comes to “play the Other” in order to facilitate absorption into the Western

¹⁹⁷ Oguibe, 19.

¹⁹⁸ Oguibe, 19.

¹⁹⁹ Oguibe, 20.

²⁰⁰ Oguibe, 21.

market. He argues that “[once] artists identify the specifics of Western expectations and realize how profitable it is to perform as required, there is a silent resolve to produce to those specifications, to satiate those desires.”²⁰¹ Through this process, the West not only reinforces its prejudicial images of the postcolonial artist, but also offsets the responsibility for those stereotypes onto the artist in what Oguibe describes as “a process of cultural laundering.”²⁰²

Again, Oguibe’s argument is centered on African artists and those of the African diaspora. He states that when curators and collectors approach African artists, “their intention is to find narratives and imagery that represent a specific construct and vision of postcolonial Africa- rife with crisis, corruption, and death- [and therefore] it is not long before the mission of discovery turns into one of complicity, with the client stipulating and specifying for artists what to produce or represent.”²⁰³ This statement is applicable to contemporary Middle Eastern art, as artists that appear to criticize the repressiveness of Islam or that engage with politics are highly promoted in the West, and subsequently taken as representative of artistic practice throughout the Middle East. Oguibe argues that this can be extrapolated to a larger socio-political statement, writing that: “Like the artist who progresses from being the object of exoticist projection to become truly exotic, the postcolony shifts from being the site of Western projections to reinvent itself in the image of those projections, at least in the eyes of the West.”²⁰⁴ He believes that, “playing the Other” has a cumulative negative effect on both the artist and their place of origin. Oguibe writes:

What is pertinent, however, is the extent to which outside expectations are invoked as paradigms of postcolonial cultural expression. Western insistence on a set vision of postcoloniality is nestled in an economy of meaning and praxis, a game of difference in which the postcolonial artists is precariously situated. By yielding to this economy of

²⁰¹ Oguibe, 23.

²⁰² Oguibe, 24.

²⁰³ Oguibe, 23.

²⁰⁴ Oguibe, 24.

Otherness, postcolonial culture jeopardizes the possibility of constructing autonomous subjectivities.²⁰⁵

The culture game, as described by Oguibe, must be negotiated by all postcolonial artists. Contemporary Middle Eastern artists are expected to produce work that corresponds to certain paradigms. Arguably, the artists who have become the most well-known in the West interact with a framework that subtly aligns with Orientalist notions of the Middle East.

Contemporary Middle Eastern Art

The reception of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the West is shaped by political and ideological factors. As Nada Shabout points out in her article for *Nafas*, “Are Images Global?”:

In western media the Middle East is often depicted as an unchanging monolith with its roots in the doctrines of an ‘aggressive’ Islam. Consequently, a positive review of an exhibition or cultural event will note something to the effect that ‘the Middle East is not only about terror and terrorism.’ Such a statement immediately locates the artworks and events within a non-aesthetic realm.²⁰⁶

Although she does not explicitly refer to Oguibe’s concept of the culture game, she sees a similar concept playing out in the reception of Middle Eastern art. The exponential rise in popularity of art from the region has had a disconcerting effect on the artists, as “[the] move from a period of invisibility through to one of celebration of everything related to the Middle East has fostered a sense of discontinuity, with contemporary production being seen as a new, detached phenomenon.”²⁰⁷ Because of this disconnection with local tradition, Shabout argues, “[this] situation...affects local perception and reception of contemporary visual production. If the meaning of works of art is constructed according to Euro-American methodologies,

²⁰⁵ Oguibe, 32.

²⁰⁶ Shabout, “Are Images Global?” 1.

²⁰⁷ Shabout, “Are Images Global?” 3.

terminologies, theories and rhetoric, how can it also negotiate the local realities of the Middle East?”²⁰⁸

The problematic notion of Western discourses shaping not only the reception but also the form of contemporary Middle Eastern art is taken up by anthropologist Jessica Winegar, who has written extensively on the subject. In her 2006 article, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” Winegar interrogates the implicit connection between exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art and politics in post-9/11 America. She argues that, as a remedy to the right-wing discourse surrounding the Middle East, “American cultural elites have sought to create and sustain another image of the region”²⁰⁹ and have used contemporary art as one way of doing so. The artworks shown “are positioned as both symbols of East/West relations, and as agents which are to effect those relations.”²¹⁰ However, Winegar argues that these discourses are not as oppositional as their proponents believe, and actually end up converging.²¹¹ She believes that the “unusually high interest in art from the Middle East is set in a context of widely held erroneous assumptions”²¹² which “actually ends up reproducing a religious framework such that their work is often interpreted with reference to Islam, whether or not there even exists a religious connection.”²¹³ As religion is a key point in the rhetoric of the ‘War on Terror’, this ends up reproducing the discursive terms of the conflict. Of course, there are a huge variety of forms of cultural production in the Middle East. However, Western exhibitions often select particular forms and “present the work they showcase as representative of a religion, culture and

²⁰⁸ Shabout, “Are Images Global?” 3.

²⁰⁹ Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81 (2008), 652.

²¹⁰ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 663.

²¹¹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 652.

²¹² Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 652.

²¹³ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 653.

history defined as Middle Eastern,”²¹⁴ which in turn reinforces particular political agendas. As an example, Winegar points out the preeminent status of artists who negotiate issues of gender and produce “work celebrating the sexuality of Middle Eastern Muslim women [which] is desirable because it is dependent upon the idea that Islam should be critiqued for oppressing women and denying them their “natural” sexual humanity.”²¹⁵ Women artists of Middle Eastern origin occupy an especially treacherous position in Western discourses of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Their work is often co-opted as commentary on the status of women in the region, and read in terms of ideas of the exotic, gender politics and sexuality. It is this notion of ‘humanity’ that most concerns Winegar. She believes that “[especially] in the context of the Middle East, the intertwined discourses of humanity, creativity, and understanding depend on, and in large measure are enabled by, abiding notions of barbarism, violence, and ignorance.”²¹⁶ Winegar argues that this binary “allows Middle Eastern Muslims to be human only in the past or only if they eschew political Islam or critique religion,”²¹⁷ and is apparent in exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

Winegar suggests that this relates directly back to the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of Western society, drawing a line from Kant into twentieth-century anthropology and Modernism, which theorizes that “it is art that evidences a people’s humanity.”²¹⁸ This framework of interpretation is not objective, and corresponds to liberal humanist ideologies. Winegar argues that “[post] 9/11 Middle Eastern art events must be seen in the context of Western elite consumption of non-Western arts, which in the 20th century has typically reproduced primitivist stereotypes and social evolutionist ideology even as it traffics in

²¹⁴ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 655.

²¹⁵ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 671.

²¹⁶ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 657.

²¹⁷ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 671.

²¹⁸ Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 658.

universalist assumptions about shared humanity.”²¹⁹ Discourse surrounding contemporary Middle Eastern art is riddled with slippages between Middle Eastern and Islamic, and there is an “overriding emphasis on art as a means for Middle Easterners to critique their contemporary gender relations and religion (seen as related) and to liberate themselves from certain, presumably oppressive, aspects of both.”²²⁰ The legacy of Orientalism is clear, Winegar asserts, as exhibitions place Islam within a historicizing perspective, speaking of its “past glory” and employing rhetoric that “denies Middle Eastern Muslims modernity, but also creates and traffics in broader discourses of past Islamic glory and current decline.”²²¹

For the artists, the ramifications of this binary discourse with its apparent Orientalist influences, affect the reception of their work in the West. Winegar states:

What gets included in the category of good Middle Eastern art, and how it gets framed, is crucial to the reproduction of dichotomies between humanity/creativity/culture on the one hand, and fundamentalism/terrorism/inhumanity/not-creativity/not-culture on the other. Thus these events may end up reproducing “clash of civilizations”-type dichotomies rather than working against them.²²²

She refers to Oguibe, positing that Middle Eastern artists enter into what Oguibe terms “culture game”, and since 9/11 and the War on terror, also need to enter into a parallel “humanity game,” “always reminding Westerners that they are “humans.””²²³ However, playing this game merely underlines the dichotomy between humanity and barbarity, embodied in this case by Middle Eastern Muslims. Winegar concludes by questioning if the “emphasis on art as evidence of humanity really erase stereotypes of Middle Eastern Muslims as un-human destructive terrorists, or does this framing depend on these stereotypes for its own definition and execution?”²²⁴ Her analysis helps illuminate the pitfalls facing exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the

²¹⁹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 659

²²⁰ Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 660

²²¹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 664

²²² Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 674

²²³ Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 675

²²⁴ Winegar, “The Humanity Game Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” 677

West, as the struggle against reverting to stereotypes can lead to the formation of an equally unsuitable binary.

Winegar further explores these issues in a 2009 monograph entitled *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. This book, one of the few comprehensive studies of a contemporary Middle Eastern art scene, focuses on Egyptian artists, cultural policies, and how they interact with the global art market. She focuses on the particular cultural and societal circumstances of post-socialist Egypt, investigating the workings of cultural politics with regards to contemporary art, and how Egyptian artists negotiate this.²²⁵ Rather than analyzing artworks, Winegar concentrates on what she calls “arts interlocutors”: “Artists, critics, curators, collectors, arts professors, and administrators.”²²⁶ Winegar frames her work anthropologically, conducting extensive fieldwork in order to interrogate the concept of the primitive which runs through the anthropology of non-Western societies. Her primary method for doing so is “participant-observation in the major sites of artistic production and consumption.”²²⁷ The shift between socialism and neoliberal capitalism is one still resonating in Egypt today, and Winegar sets out to show “the historically constructed ideologies of artistic production and consumption that preceded and were coterminous with the shift, and how artists, critics, curators, and collectors drew on these ideologies as frameworks to understand the transformation.”²²⁸ She believes that “[every] act of producing, purchasing or interacting with modern art in Egypt therefore constitutes a reckoning with the processes of capitalist modernity, as experienced by those elites designated as its “local” cultural emissaries, while also suffering its “international”

²²⁵ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 3

²²⁶ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 9

²²⁷ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 27

²²⁸ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 2

discriminations.”²²⁹ Winegar notes the difficulties that Egyptian artists have in negotiating global discourses of contemporary art. State curators and government sponsorships continue to play a large and valued role in the development of an Egyptian artist. However, this is seen by some Western interlocutors as restrictive on creative “freedom.” In this way, Egyptian, and subsequently Middle Eastern art “becomes not just a space for the elaboration of utopian visions of autonomy. It also becomes the locus of West/East difference, the site of ultimate Eastern backwardness: even their artists do not know what freedom is.”²³⁰ Winegar’s intention is to “show how different groups of artists, critics, curators, and collectors reckoned with historically constituted genealogies of the modern in Egypt,” which she does through chapters on “art education, art evaluation, state cultural policy, public art projects, art collecting and display, and private sector internationalization of Egyptian art.”²³¹ For the purposes of this thesis, the most relevant discussion takes place in Chapter Six, entitled “Art and Culture Between Empire and Sovereignty.”

This chapter, in Winegar’s words, “investigates the growth in European and American interest in contemporary Egyptian art, concurrent with the influx of capital accompanying the Murabak government’s liberalization program.”²³² She discusses the 2000 incarnation of the Al-Nitaq Festival in Cairo, which exposed contemporary Egyptian art to a new market of foreign collectors and curators. She argues that artists’ responses to the festival “suggest how artists living and working in the postcolony perceived the breakdown of the socialist state and the influx of foreign capital as both liberating and predatory –particularly in the Middle East, where

²²⁹ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 1.

²³⁰ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 4.

²³¹ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 32.

²³² Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 34.

memory of past imperialisms loomed large over current events.”²³³ Correspondingly, they reveal something about Western curatorial approaches “towards postcolonial artists in the metropole, despite having been critiqued thoughtfully and effectively, were being rearticulated in the ex-colonies with arguably even greater hubris.”²³⁴ As in her earlier article cited above, Winegar believes that these attitudes persist because “international political discourse treated the Middle East as an especially problematic premodern, violent, undemocratic space in need of Western salvation, and because Egyptians resented that categorization.”²³⁵ For curators coming into Egypt, encounters with artworks are mediated by their background – the discursive paradigm in which they have been trained. Through her fieldwork Winegar identifies a trend in which these “curators were struggling to manage their own postmodern art sensibilities and left-of-center politics (cultivated at home) with the easy neocolonial frameworks they found themselves adopting when faced with art from elsewhere.”²³⁶ The market promises greater success to artists, but only if they fit within a paradigm that corresponds to Western discourses of what is valued in contemporary art. Artists in Egypt felt that:

the new market did not represent the kind of equitable multicultural global private sector that Egyptian artists desired, and as a result there were serious concerns that market values would negate their existing apparatus of evaluation. The majority of artists argued that while the new private sector had the potential to counteract the stagnancy of the government, it was anything but benign. Indeed, the growth of this new private sector both produced and reproduced certain hierarchical relations in the art world, even as it challenged others.²³⁷

Winegar argues that the process of representing Egyptian art abroad within the global market was “both enabled and fortified by the long-standing Euro-American dominance of the international art market and its structures of judgment. Such dominance still relies on neocolonial framings of

²³³ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 277

²³⁴ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 277

²³⁵ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 278

²³⁶ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 297

²³⁷ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 287.

non-Western art, despite the attempts made by some Westerners to challenge these.”²³⁸ An analysis of the global art market and how it has both created and responded to the demand for contemporary Middle Eastern art reveals some of the concerns which Winegar discusses.

The “New Museology”

The past two decades have seen a drastic shift in the discursive framework surrounding the field of museology. Closely informed by the preeminence of “social” art history and the increasing importance of postmodernist movements such as feminism and postcolonialism, scholars of the “new museology” engaged with museum theory to problematize cultural representation in the art institution. Mieke Bal contends that the museum is an appealing object of study for contemporary scholars because of three reasons: “it requires interdisciplinary analysis, it has the debate on aesthetics at its core, and it is essentially a social institution.”²³⁹ Influential early texts such as Tony Bennett’s *Birth of the Museum* (1994) and Carol Duncan’s *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (1995) re-conceptualize the museum as a political space, examining the imperialist and ideological tendencies of cultural institutions.

In *Civilizing Rituals*, Duncan contends that the art museum acts as a ritual site,²⁴⁰ in which it is visitors “who enact the ritual.”²⁴¹ The art museum offers a “ritual scenario” that offers a narrative structure which “stands as a frame and gives meaning to individual works.”²⁴² However, this narrative structure and ritual attention “could entail the negation or obscuring of other, older meanings.”²⁴³ Duncan argues that the ritual features of art museums are as follows:

²³⁸ Winegar, *Creative Reckonings*, 304

²³⁹ Mieke Bal, “The Discourse of the Museum,” in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London Routledge, 1996), 201.

²⁴⁰ Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals Inside Public Art Museums* (London Routledge, 1995), 7

²⁴¹ Duncan, 12

²⁴² Duncan, 12.

²⁴³ Duncan, 16.

[F]irst, the achievement of a marked-off, “liminal” zone of time and space in which visitors, removed from the concerns of their daily, practical lives, open themselves up to a different quality of experience; and second, the organization of the museum setting as a kind of script or scenario which visitors perform.²⁴⁴

In a later chapter, Duncan describes how this applies specifically to the modern art museum. Although “social art history” and the “New Museology” are well-established in an academic context, Duncan argues that “the new art histories have won very little ground in public art museums.”²⁴⁵ This is because “[museums] are expected to augment and reinforce the community’s collective knowledge about itself and its place in the world, and to preserve the memory of its most important and generally accepted values and beliefs.”²⁴⁶ Although they may be trained in an academic setting that emphasizes the “new” art history, curators are “constrained to program their galleries within a cultural construct - one that is never fully of their making but for which they will be held responsible.”²⁴⁷

Modern art museums, according to Duncan, “rarely if at all acknowledge a moral-political self.”²⁴⁸ Indeed, “even when “political” art is exhibited, the framing ambience of the museum insists on its meaning as “art,” often with such emphasis that other meanings fade.”²⁴⁹ Of course, the lessons of the New Museology are being applied within institutions, a necessary reflection of changing discourses, as “art museums are elements in a larger social and cultural world.”²⁵⁰ However, exhibitions, “as a form of public space [constitute] an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new

²⁴⁴ Duncan, 20.

²⁴⁵ Duncan, 103.

²⁴⁶ Duncan, 103.

²⁴⁷ Duncan, 107.

²⁴⁸ Duncan, 130.

²⁴⁹ Duncan, 130.

²⁵⁰ Duncan, 133.

ones”²⁵¹ It is through a recognition of the art museum as ritual space that traditional conceptions of art history and culture can be challenged

In the article “The Discourse of the Museum,” Mieke Bal argues that the “new museology” should be “an interdisciplinary study of the institution of the museum within the dual framework of critical anthropology and discursive analysis”²⁵² Bal contends that discourse, “most notably rhetoric imbricated with narrative,” is at the “core of the idea of exhibition”²⁵³ Viewing the museum through a discursive lens “deprives the museal practice of its innocence, and provides it with the accountability it and its users are entitled to”²⁵⁴ The idea of rhetoric in the institution is taken up by Bruce W Ferguson in his article “Exhibition Rhetorics Material speech and utter sense”

Ferguson describes exhibitions as “publicly-sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions which present them”²⁵⁵ Who ‘speaks’ through exhibitions “[constitutes] a highly observable politics”²⁵⁶ This political undercurrent can be seen through a close examination of the rhetoric of exhibitions Additionally, the study of exhibitions can serve to help contextualize contemporary art within social history, a practice usually confined to historical artwork²⁵⁷ Ferguson calls for more scholarly attention to be paid to “the work that exhibitions themselves do, on and through audiences”²⁵⁸ He argues that exhibitions are “an intrinsic and vital part of the “cultural industries,”” contemporary forms of rhetoric described

²⁵¹ Duncan, 133

²⁵² Bal, 205

²⁵³ Bal, 205

²⁵⁴ Bal, 214

²⁵⁵ Bruce W Ferguson, “Exhibition Rhetorics Material Speech and Utter Sense,” in *Thinking About Exhibitions*, ed Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London Routledge, 1996), 175

²⁵⁶ Ferguson, 176

²⁵⁷ Ferguson, 177

²⁵⁸ Ferguson, 178

as “a strategic system of representations.”²⁵⁹ Ferguson contends that these representations “formulate and uphold identities,” as the “will to influence is at the core of any exhibition.”²⁶⁰ Through an analysis of exhibition rhetorics, the “direct political tendencies ... on offer”²⁶¹ can be identified. Indeed, exhibitions and the procedures which make them up “emphasize, de-emphasize and re-emphasize braided narratives” and so are “contributive to the ways in which art is more or less understood.”²⁶² Exhibitions are never pure expressions of the museum or curator’s intentions. Rather, they are always the “result of mixed desires from within a network of interests.”²⁶³ Ferguson sees exhibitions as the “material speech of what is essentially a political institution.”²⁶⁴ Because of the political nature of art institutions, exhibitions are often used “to act out a normality, in spite of the desires of the works of art on view.”²⁶⁵ It is this tension between the voices of the artists and the material speech of the institutions that this thesis seeks to explore.

Ferguson contends that exhibitions “act as sustaining cultural narratives, as material talk from one individual and one region and one country to another.”²⁶⁶ In order to interrogate these narratives, the exhibition must be contextualized as “a kind of speech, as an utterance.”²⁶⁷ By analyzing both the institution and its exhibitions, one will be able to “respeak the institution from a grounded and connected historical site, not from an ideal, semi-autonomous place where art merely apes the rituals of contemplative religion with its misplaced social authority.”²⁶⁸ Employing this methodology to analyses of exhibitions such as *Word Into Art* and *Without*

²⁵⁹ Ferguson, 178.

²⁶⁰ Ferguson, 179.

²⁶¹ Ferguson, 180.

²⁶² Ferguson, 181.

²⁶³ Ferguson, 181.

²⁶⁴ Ferguson, 182.

²⁶⁵ Ferguson, 183.

²⁶⁶ Ferguson, 186.

²⁶⁷ Ferguson, 186-87.

²⁶⁸ Ferguson, 187.

Boundary will allow me to “begin to know who speaks to whom, why, where and when and under what conditions.”²⁶⁹

Conclusion

Throughout the latter years of his career, Edward Said returned many times to the debates surrounding *Orientalism* and the emergence of postcolonial theory. In the conclusion of a 1986 essay entitled “Orientalism Reconsidered,” Said warned of the fragmentation of academic disciplines and underlined the importance of interdisciplinary studies. Said saw “[a] need for greater crossing of boundaries, for greater interventionism in cross-disciplinary activity, a concentrated awareness of the situation - political, methodological, social, historical - in which intellectual and cultural work is carried out.”²⁷⁰ Informed by this perspective, this thesis uses an interdisciplinary paradigm to analyze the exhibitions *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*. Said’s *Orientalism*, a foundational text in postcolonial theory, continues to influence the work of both scholars and artists, including those featured in the two exhibitions. Postcolonial scholarship closely informed by Said, such as the work of Homi K. Bhabha, is also extremely useful in analyzing the interaction between the artists, their work, and the exhibitions. Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and the tension between the performative and pedagogical are of particular importance.

Throughout my discussion of the exhibitions at the core of this thesis, it will be necessary to place them in a context which recognizes that they are exhibitions of *contemporary* art. To this end, Terry Smith’s theories of contemporaneity and the postcolonial turn in contemporary art will be very important throughout my thesis, as they provide a link between postcolonial theory and the discourse surrounding contemporary art and cultural production. Terry Smith identifies

²⁶⁹ Ferguson, 188

²⁷⁰ Edward Said, “Orientalism Reconsidered,” in *Orientalism A Reader*, ed. Alexander Macfie (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 359

the “postcolonial turn” as one of the primary defining currents of contemporary art. This increasing interest in global art which speaks to issues raised by decolonization and political upheaval is represented in an increase of exhibitions, fairs, auctions and biennales dedicated to non-Western art. However, the relationship between global artists and the Western-dominated contemporary art world is complicated and often contentious. Although the global market increases exposure for the artists and enables them to interact with curators, scholars and other artists from disparate backgrounds, it can have negative impacts on their artistic practice. In *The Culture Game*, Olu Oguibe argues that, to be accepted into the global market, artists are expected to correspond to preordained ideas of regional content and style. In short, they enter into the “culture game” of the title, playing to stereotypes in order to generate successful careers, but over time, compromising their creative freedom. Jessica Winegar’s work on the reception of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the West and her in-depth analysis of the contemporary art world in Egypt shed light onto how artists of Middle Eastern origin are encouraged not only to play the culture game, but also entreated to prove the “humanity” of the Middle East through their artistic practice. This scholarship, along with Smith’s work also connects postcolonial theory to the “New Museology.” This reworking of the discipline of museum studies, which became the accepted standard for museological scholarship in the late 1980s and early 1990s, plays a key role in my analysis of the exhibitions. Bruce W. Ferguson’s concept of “exhibition rhetorics,” which calls for the examination of how an exhibition, as the main signifying ‘voice’ of an art institution implicitly and explicitly conveys messages, will allow me to interpret the wider significance of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*. In “The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a Permanent State of Transition,” Okwui Enwezor asserts that, “[t]he current history of Modern art ... sits at the intersection between imperial and postcolonial

discourses. Any critical interest in the exhibitions system of Modern or of contemporary art requires us to refer to the foundational base of modern art history: its roots in imperial discourse, on one hand, and, on the other, the pressures that postcolonial discourse exerts on its narrative today.”²⁷¹ I will approach these exhibitions in the spirit of Enwezor’s statement, utilizing the three discrete but mutually imbricated areas of theoretical discourse outlined in this chapter in order to engage with the complex issues surrounding exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art.

²⁷¹ Enwezor, 209.

INTERLUDE:

Shirin Neshat, *Speechless* (1996) and *Offered Eyes* (1993)

Shirin Neshat was born in Qazvin, Iran in 1957. Upon her family's insistence, she immigrated to America in 1974 to complete her education at the University of California at Berkeley. The Iranian Revolution of 1978 prevented her from returning to her home country until 1990. Neshat has stated that this first visit after the Revolution profoundly guided her artistic practice and led her to create the *Women of Allah* series between 1993 and 1997. Critics and curators have read this series in diverse ways. It has been interpreted as a post-colonial allegory (by Iftikhar Dadi), a commentary on the silence that binds women in the Islamic Republic of Iran (by press commentators, especially after September 11, 2001) or an engagement with the Persian Sufi tradition that fuses religion and sensuality (by Fereshteh Daftari). This "interlude," the first of three detailed discussions of artists featured in the exhibitions analysed here, considers the impossibility of securely locating Neshat's work - and specifically, the *Women of Allah* series - within the discourse of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Major exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art in the West continue to select Neshat's photographic works of the 1990s for exhibition today, seemingly taking them as representative of her work as a whole. Both of the exhibitions addressed in this thesis, *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*, approach Neshat's work in this manner. There appear to be two main ways in which Neshat's photographic work is interpreted in scholarly literature and exhibitions: one which reads it in terms of binaries and the other which takes up contemporary issues such as diasporic identity, cultural translation and hybridity.

In discussion with Scott MacDonald, Neshat remarks: “This series had an element of performance involved, as I posed for it myself. The photographs were quite minimal: a few elements repeated over and over again, including the female body, a very problematic topic in Islamic culture as it suggests ideas of shame, sin, sexuality, text; I inscribed calligraphy – poetry by Iranian women writers – directly on the photographs; weapons, obviously a symbol of violence and finally the veil, extremely controversial, which has been considered both a symbol of repression and a symbol of liberation – resistance against the Western influence.”²⁷² Throughout the series, Neshat also appears to be addressing the nature of the photographic medium. Problematizing notions of photographic objectivity and the documentary eye, Neshat’s photographs, in their directness and apparent objectivity, recall “ethnographic” Orientalist images of Middle Eastern women.

Speechless, an image dating from 1996, near the end of Neshat’s work on this series, crystallizes some of the key themes of the *Women of Allah* series. The image draws viewers in and then startles them, once they realize what it is they are looking at. The chador-clad woman gazes out as the viewer, her face inscribed with Farsi calligraphy. After a few seconds, what at first appears to be an “earring” becomes recognizable as the barrel of a gun pointing directly at the viewer. Initial reaction to this image is often informed by the viewer’s awareness of the contemporary socio-political situation in the wider Middle East. Indeed, in a 2001 *Art Journal* article, critic Igor Zabel relates his initial certainty that he was looking at an image of an Islamic terrorist - her face inscribed with the Holy Texts of martyrdom and prepared to use her body as weapon.²⁷³ Although, as Zabel explains, when familiarized with Neshat’s work, commentators no longer read it solely as an expression of fundamentalism, binary readings of these images still

²⁷² Shirin Neshat and Scott MacDonald, “Between Two Worlds: An Interview with Shirin Neshat,” *Feminist Studies* 30 (2004), 628.

²⁷³ Igor Zabel, “Women in Black,” *Art Journal* 60 (2001), 25.

remain quite prevalent Nathalie Leleu, writing in the now-defunct Montreal journal *Parachute*, places *Speechless* between essentializing polarities Leleu writes “Like a multifaceted mirror, Neshat’s work challenges Islam in the antagonistic iconographic tradition of incarnation specific to Christianity”²⁷⁴ Analyses that follow this model imply that Neshat’s images, such as *Speechless*, are primarily concerned with critiquing Islam, positioning any discussion of women’s lived experience within a construction of Middle Eastern society as intrinsically oppressive

In the essay, “Shirin Neshat Islamic Counterpoints,” Amei Wallach states that Neshat’s images and films are “iconic exploration[s] of the heart, mind, and psyche of Islam”²⁷⁵ Interpretations of Neshat’s work that correspond with Wallach’s analysis imply that Neshat’s works address the universal in the lived experience of the Islamic woman

Although neither of these readings may appear, at first glance, to be of a “binary and essentializing” nature, I argue that they are informed by Orientalist conceptions of Islam and the Middle East In Wallach’s comment about the “heart, mind and psyche” of Islam, Neshat’s particular cultural location as an Iranian exile is conflated with the experience of being an “Islamic woman” In this comment, ‘Islam’ is characterized as monolithic and the primary component of cultural identity in the Middle East As pointed out by Edward Said in *Covering Islam How The Media and The Experts Determine How We See The Rest of the World*, Said states that the Western construction of the “iconography of Islam [is] uniform, [is] uniformly ubiquitous, and [draws] its material from the same time-honored view of Islam”²⁷⁶ that has long informed Western perspectives of the Middle East (as Said himself thoroughly outlined in his

²⁷⁴ Nathalie Leleu, “Shirin Neshat The Image Dispute,” *Parachute Contemporary Art Magazine* 100 (2000), 77

²⁷⁵ Amei Wallach, “Shirin Neshat Islamic Counterpoints,” *Art In America* (October 2001), 136

²⁷⁶ Edward Said, *Covering Islam* 6

canonical study *Orientalism*.) In the words of Roksana Bahramitash, this results in a construction which asserts that “The Occident is progressive and the best place for women, while the Muslim Orient is backward, uncivilized, and the worst place for women. The second characteristic ... is that [this construction] regards Oriental women only as victims and not as agents of social transformation; thus it is blind to the ways in which women in the East resist and empower themselves.”²⁷⁷ I believe these binary readings of Neshat’s work arise because of her choice to represent her subjects clothed in a chador.

In the West, there is an implicit association of Islamic veiling practices with oppression. As stated by Norma Claire Moruzzi in her article, “A Problem With Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity,” “Islamic cultural constructions [are] equated with religious oppression and Western social practices [are] defined as the secular emancipatory norm.”²⁷⁸ The chador, a type of veil culturally specific to Iran,²⁷⁹ has had many meanings, two of which are directly relevant to Neshat. In the 1960s and 1970s, the chador was a “feminist declaration of emancipation from stereotypes of beauty.”²⁸⁰ However, since the founding of the Islamic Republic, it has come to be seen by many both in Iran and abroad as a visible marker of the Islamic Republic’s total and often repressive power. In her article, “Veiled Subjects: Shirin Neshat and Non-Liberatory Agency,” Adair Rounthwaite argues that it is this debate over the role of the chador that places Neshat’s work within what she calls the “freedom/oppression binary.”²⁸¹ Rounthwaite suggests that this binary is problematic precisely because it does what it implicitly condemns Islam for doing: it takes away the agency from the female subject of the

²⁷⁷ Roksana Bahramitash, “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers,” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14 (2005), 224

²⁷⁸ Norma Claire Moruzzi, “A Problem with Headscarves: Contemporary Complexities of Political and Social Identity,” *Political Theory* 22 (1994), 661

²⁷⁹ Moruzzi, 655

²⁸⁰ Wallach, “Shirin Neshat,” 138

²⁸¹ Adair Rounthwaite, “Veiled Subjects: Shirin Neshat and Non-Liberatory Agency,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, (2008), 172

image Rather than reading the cultural tradition of the chador in direct opposition to the idea of personal freedom, Rounthwaite argues that the forms of their culture may actually enable the agency of these photographic figures²⁸²

Following Rounthwaite's argument, images such as *Speechless* are best not interpreted within a binary, as they do not necessarily propose an opposition between oppression and freedom, or indicate a lack of agency The juxtapositions inherent in the image, between allusions to power that arise from the gun to the perhaps-oppressive chador and between the blank face and expressive poetry belie any such essentializing interpretation As Zabel states, Neshat seems to be exploring both polarities simultaneously, as well as the space in-between This "lack [of] a distinct "moral" stance,"²⁸³ as well as a focus on juxtaposition and a challenge to the Orientalist paradigm are important characteristics of Neshat's *Women of Allah* series

Within this context, Islamic women can be considered a doubly subaltern group As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes in the essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"²⁸⁴ Perhaps *Speechless* is a commentary on Spivak's assertion that subaltern groups, which exist outside of the hegemonic power structure, cannot speak out and define a collective cultural identity without defining themselves in reductive, essentialist terms due to their heterogeneity This reinforces their marginal and subordinate societal position As Spivak states, "For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself"²⁸⁵ In reference to these issues, Neshat herself has stated "There are very complex and contradictory reasons [for wearing the

²⁸² Rounthwaite, 178

²⁸³ Zabel, 22

²⁸⁴ Spivak, 28

²⁸⁵ Spivak, 27

chador] and there is no way that I could have presented this icon in a way that gave one particular reading...even to this day there are divisions between women. So it was not my idea or interest to say or express something like it is good or bad.”²⁸⁶ In an interview with Babak Ebrahimian, she expands: “I am not accepting or promoting any sense of repression or all the negative aspects of [Iranian] culture, but rather giving it a fair chance to speak of its very complex situation. And in that way, I think my work has all these elements of duality in it.”²⁸⁷

In the catalogue for *Without Boundary*, curator Fereshteh Daftari argues that “the contradictions implicit in [*Speechless*] show [Neshat] grappling with a revolution that has turned the familiar into the uncanny.”²⁸⁸ Neshat’s identity as an Iranian-American, existing in both the ‘Occident’ and the ‘Orient’, “capable of seeing each through the assumptions of the other,”²⁸⁹ is to the viewer, as Aphrodite Navab states, “a double reminder of [her] marginality...what [she creates] is always in critical dialogue with both Iran and the West.”²⁹⁰ In short, Neshat’s hybrid identity disrupts binary readings of her work. The East/West, Freedom/Oppression binary is negated by Neshat’s existence in-between, and I argue that her works directly address questions of cultural transmission, translation and hybrid identities, exemplified by another work, *Offered Eyes*.

Offered Eyes, featured in *Word Into Art* functions as an example of the difficulties inherent in the cultural translation of Neshat’s work. This photograph of a female eye inscribed with Farsi calligraphy, can be read, like *Speechless*, in multiple ways. As both Daftari and Zabel

²⁸⁶ Shirin Neshat and Marine Van Hoof, “Shirin Neshat Veils in the Wind,” *Art Press* 279 (2002), 37

²⁸⁷ Shirin Neshat and Babak Ebrahimian, “Passage to Iran,” *PAJ A Journal of Performance and Art* 24 (2002): 51-53

²⁸⁸ Fereshteh Daftari, *Without Boundary Seventeen Ways of Looking* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2006), 13

²⁸⁹ Ameri Wallach, “Missed Signals Nuance and the Reading of Immigrant Art,” *American Art* 20 (2006), 127

²⁹⁰ Aphrodite Navab, “Unsayings Life Stories The Self-Representational Art of Shirin Neshat and Ghazel,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 41 (2008), 51

point out, the initial assumption is usually that this calligraphy is Arabic and most likely, drawn from the Koran.²⁹¹ However, further research into *Offered Eyes* reveals that the inscription is actually of a poem by female Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad entitled “I Feel Sorry for the Garden.”²⁹² The poem as excerpted on this image reads: “No one is thinking about the flowers, No one’s thinking about the fish, No one wants to believe the garden’s dying, That its heart has grown swollen under the sun, That its mind is being drained of green memories, That its senses lie huddled and rotting in a corner.”²⁹³ Even when aware of the content of poem, the Western reader is still hard-pressed to understand Neshat’s reference. Does the garden refer to the woman? Is she speaking? What does it mean that this poem is inscribed on her eye – how is her gaze implicated?

Jasmine Darznik explains: “This is one of Farrokhzad’s best-known poems and one which has long been read for its political symbolism. In it a young girl observes the destruction of her family’s garden and the indifference of her family members to its ruin. Modern in form, the poem embeds several dominant tropes of classical Persian poetry, most significantly that of a paradisaal garden. The “garden” has been immensely significant in Persian and Islamic iconography and has been a prevalent motif in modern Iranian visual and literary culture (Hillmann 1986).”²⁹⁴ She elaborates that “I Feel Sorry For the Garden” was often chanted in anti-government protests in the early 1980s.²⁹⁵ However, this cultural information and background is unavailable to the Western audiences, who, ironically, constitute Neshat’s viewership. Her art is

²⁹¹ Daftari, *Without Boundary*, 13.

²⁹² Porter, *Word Into Art*, 46.

²⁹³ Jasmin Darznik, “Forough Goes West: The Legacy of Forough Farrokhzad in Iranian Diasporic Art and Literature,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6 (2010), 110-111.

²⁹⁴ Darznik, 110-111.

²⁹⁵ Darznik, 108.

not welcomed by the Iranian government, and therefore is not widely known in Neshat's home country.

How then, does Neshat intend these images to be read, and how *are* they read? In *Word Into Art*, the British Museum exhibited *Offered Eyes* under the heading "Literature into Art," utilizing the image to comment on the importance of poetry and allegory in Iranian culture. Transcribing "I Feel Sorry For The Garden," curator Venetia Porter asserts that through her work Neshat "questions stereotypes and passionately believes in women's emancipation, as did Forough Farrokzhad before her untimely death [by car accident] in 1967."²⁹⁶ I suggest that this explanation offers a superficial reading of *Offered Eyes*, failing to delve into the multiple layers of meaning of this image.

Offered Eyes is a work that portrays a female eye, and simultaneously deals with the concept of the Gaze. In her well-known essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey argues that "the determining male Gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly."²⁹⁷ Through the male Gaze, woman is constructed as an object of contemplation, and is denied agency. *Offered Eyes* speaks back to this dominant gaze not only through the poetic inscription, but also by looking back. Challenging the spectator's gaze, this image, to paraphrase Mulvey, denies the intrinsic force of the look of the audience.²⁹⁸

In a 2009 conference paper entitled "On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission," Homi K. Bhabha states that artists like Neshat endow the media in which they work with intention, an "architecture of agency."²⁹⁹ The artwork, with its juxtaposition of the

²⁹⁶ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 46.

²⁹⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 47.

²⁹⁸ Mulvey., 52.

²⁹⁹ Bhabha, "On Global Memory," 51.

mechanical process of analogue photography with the “slower tradition of manufacture”³⁰⁰ of calligraphy echoes Neshat’s “complex and displaced relation to territoriality.”³⁰¹ Works such as *Offered Eyes* depend on a “process of cultural transmission that passes through the mediating materials of language.”³⁰² The presence of the calligraphy indicates meaning to the viewer, but at the same time the lack of translation hides that meaning in language. The calligraphy, in the words of Iftikhar Dadi, “doubles as ornament ... but [also] works as undecipherable text, reiterating the cliché of oriental inscrutability.”³⁰³ When taken as a generic signifier of “Islamness,” the calligraphy is easily mis-read. However, when approached as a mediating factor that addresses questions of the irresolution and liminality of cultural translation³⁰⁴ (to paraphrase Homi Bhabha) the calligraphy in *Offered Eyes* becomes a signifier of broader issues within Neshat’s work.

Homi Bhabha’s concepts of “cultural liminality” and “hybridity” are useful in reading *Offered Eyes* and other images from the *Women of Allah* series. Neshat lives one of what Bhabha calls the “double-lives in the post-colonial world.”³⁰⁵ Arguably, her art is a way of addressing the global world, revealing one of the many “transcultural narratives”³⁰⁶ that define post-colonial existence. Bhabha argues that it is “the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence.”³⁰⁷ The juxtapositions, contrasts and disruptions of cultural constructions that I argue are present in images from the *Women of Allah* series arise because of Neshat’s own hybrid identity. As the 1997 catalogue for *Women of Allah* produced by

³⁰⁰ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 50.

³⁰¹ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 52.

³⁰² Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 51.

³⁰³ Iftikhar Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34 (2008), 142.

³⁰⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 224.

³⁰⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 213.

³⁰⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 215.

³⁰⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

the Artspeak Gallery in Vancouver argues, these images stage “the difficulty and contradictions within a very negotiated identity, a subjectivity that cannot be explained by cultural explanations.”³⁰⁸ In this way, Neshat’s photographs demonstrate not only hybridity, but also the problems inherent in cultural translation.

In “Worlds Apart: Problems of Interpreting Globalized Art”, Chin-Tao Wu suggests that, although globalization facilitates the international movement of both artists and their work, “the specificity of, and difficulties inherent in”³⁰⁹ works such as the *Women of Allah* series may not necessarily travel as easily. As Neshat herself states in an interview with Wu, “... either people think I really, really want to keep the conversation around Iran or Islam to make provocative work, or they do the opposite and they really put a huge responsibility on me and think that I am a speaker for that part of the world. They give the work so much credibility that I become a kind of slave to that. I, being the artist, keep saying: 'please, I am not a big ethnographic artist. A lot of this work is not even about society or about global politics. It is about me...”³¹⁰

I suggest that the most fruitful readings of Neshat’s work might be those that realize the impossibility of locating her work within any sort of simple binary. Rather, our understandings of these images can be deepened when Neshat’s images are viewed as products of her hybrid identity. At the same time that Neshat challenges Iranian fundamentalism, she exposes Western biases that still assume Orientalizing clichés of the female Muslim body and the Islamic body as weapon. The *Women of Allah* series transmits and mediates cultural forms through juxtaposition and destabilization of accepted polarities.

³⁰⁸ Jacqueline Larson, *Shirin Neshat: Women of Allah* (Vancouver: Artspeak Gallery, 1997), 24.

³⁰⁹ Wu, 726.

³¹⁰ Wu, 724.

CHAPTER TWO:

Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East

Introduction: The British Museum and the Department of the Middle East

The British Museum in London, England, considered one of the most venerable public institutions in the world, was first opened to the public in 1759. As it remains today, entry to the Museum was free and given, as the British Museum website describes, “to ‘all studious and curious Persons’ ”³¹¹ As described by Neil McGregor, current Director of the British Museum, in a 2009 Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art conference paper entitled “Global Collections for Global Cities,” the establishment of the British Museum created “the first national public museum in the world,”³¹² in contrast to other early European museums that were built primarily on the basis of royal collections. The website of the British Museum states that, “The Museum was based on the practical principle that the collection should be put to public use and be freely accessible. It was also grounded in the Enlightenment idea that human cultures can, despite their differences, understand one another through mutual engagement ”³¹³ The British Museum is generally considered an ‘ethnographic’ or history museum rather than an art museum, and describes itself as a Universal museum. Although the Museum does have many artworks, located not only in region-specific departments but also in the large Prints and Drawings Collection, both the collections in general and the manner in which they are displayed focus on presenting a study of human cultural history across the world through artefacts. The British Museum states that through these collections, which span both time and space, it “holds in trust for the nation and the

³¹¹“General History,” The British Museum, accessed February 28, 2011

http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/history_and_the_building/general_history.aspx

³¹² Neil McGregor, “Global Collections for Global Cities,” in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 65

³¹³ “About Us,” The British Museum, accessed February 28, 2011

http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/management_and_governance/about_us.aspx

world a collection of art and antiquities from ancient and living cultures”³¹⁴ McGregor argues that “[it] is the utility of its collections that is so important, because they were intended to have a civic outcome”³¹⁵ In statements regarding the Museum’s mandate into the twenty-first century, this civic engagement continues to be emphasized However, current discourse from the Museum also underlines the importance of an increasing global presence as well as an internationalization of exhibitions taking place in London McGregor, in his capacity as Director of the British Museum, states that “[it] is essential that the museum play this role as a forum for conversations not just about our own preoccupations but about the world of which we are all global citizens”³¹⁶ Drawing from museological theory, McGregor goes on to argue that, “Nations construct for themselves the stories they want at particular moments, and politicians choose the stories that they will sell to their public One of the jobs of those working in museums is to remind the public that there are many other histories, many other stories that could be chosen”³¹⁷ The current mission statement and overarching policies of the British Museum appear to be consistent with McGregor’s statements on globalizing the Museum’s collections and special exhibitions The most recent “Museum Review,” published on the British Museum’s website shows the diversity of the Museum’s activities from 2009-2010, demonstrating that in those two years alone, exhibitions with such varied subjects as *Kingdom of Ife Sculptures from West Africa*, *Montezuma Aztec Ruler* and *Gardens of India* appeared³¹⁸

The various departments of the British Museum are deeply involved with special exhibitions in their field *Word Into Art Artists of the Modern Middle East* was organized as a special exhibition by the Department of the Middle East Like many of the British Museum

³¹⁴“About Us,” The British Museum

³¹⁵ McGregor, 66

³¹⁶ McGregor, 67

³¹⁷ McGregor, 69

³¹⁸ “Annual Review 2009-2010,” The British Museum, accessed February 23, 2011
<http://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/annualreview0910.pdf>

collections, the initial holding amassed by the Department of the Middle East was focused primarily on ancient artefacts excavated by British archaeologists. In addition to maintaining the Museum's collection of artefacts from the ancient Near and Middle East, the Department also has a substantial collection of material from the medieval Middle East, as well as works on paper from Persian, Indian and Turkish courts.³¹⁹ These artefacts, collected under the broad rubric of "Islamic Art," are featured in a permanent gallery on the main floor of the Museum in the John Addis Gallery, under the title "The Islamic World." In addition to this historical material, the Museum has been collecting post-nineteenth century works on paper since the 1980s.³²⁰ Today, this collection is comprised of more than 150 works on paper, paintings and photographs from North Africa and the wider Middle East.³²¹ The decision to collect this material, according to curator Venetia Porter in an essay entitled "Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art at the British Museum" for the book *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*,³²² initiated the beginnings of an appreciation within the museum that the art of the modern and contemporary Middle East was worth serious consideration because it "demonstrated interesting and complex relationships with the region, its past histories and its arts."³²³ The first pieces acquired for the collection were based heavily in calligraphic traditions of the region, an important decision because this choice "opened up the discussion about where, in the framework of the existing pre-modern collections, modern works from the region would fit most appropriately."³²³ As Porter writes, "[for] museums with collections of 'Islamic' art, these modern and contemporary works from the same regions – in some cases demonstrating visible continuities, in others worlds apart

³¹⁹"Department of the Middle East," The British Museum, accessed February 28, 2011
http://www.britishmuseum.org/the_museum/departments/middle_east.aspx

³²⁰Venetia Porter, "Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art at the British Museum," in *New Vision Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, ed Hossein Amirsadeghi, Salwa Mikdad and Nada Shabout (London Thames & Hudson, 2009), 30

³²¹ Porter, "Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art," 31

³²² Porter, "Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art," 30

³²³ Porter, "Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art," 31

– not only complement and give the historic collections new life but also demonstrate a richness and depth that deserves greater recognition and support.”³²⁴ In an interview with me, Venetia Porter noted that the works selected for the collection must “loosely speak of their time or relate to the collection ... in order to come into our collection they need to have some other dimension to them [besides purely artistic value].”³²⁵ The modern and contemporary collections of the Department of the Middle East function not only as artworks, but also as “documents, evoking as they do the myriad conflicts in the Middle East of recent years or commenting on aspects of social history.”³²⁶ Because of this aspect of the collections, “the emphasis today continues to be on work on paper, although there are also a few works in other media.”³²⁷ Therefore, Porter states, the Museum does not necessarily collect abstract art or video art (in part because of restrictions on housing and showing films).³²⁸ Despite these limitations, the Museum continues to actively collect, with “the ultimate objective being to create a body of work that is representative, as far as possible, of the whole region.”³²⁹

Although founded in the 1980s, the Department of the Middle East’s modern and contemporary collections have been featured in few exhibitions. Modern works are generally incorporated into historical exhibitions, such as *Writing Arabic, Mightier than the Sword* and an upcoming exhibition on the Hajj, or are used as emphasis in the permanent “Islamic” gallery.³³⁰³³¹ However, in 2005, an exhibition of the collection within the British Museum was proposed, which in turn “led to a surge in acquisitions.”³³² At first Porter intended to create an exhibition in

³²⁴ Porter, “Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art,” 34

³²⁵ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³²⁶ Porter, “Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art,” 33

³²⁷ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 14

³²⁸ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³²⁹ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 14.

³³⁰ Porter “Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art,” 32

³³¹ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³³² Porter, “Collecting and Exhibiting Arab Art,” 32

one of the Museum's smaller spaces. However, a sponsorship agreement with Dubai Holding, an investment group belonging to the Government of Dubai, allowed her to plan a much larger show as well as acquire additional works.³³³ Through this process, *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* became one of the British Museum's special exhibitions for 2006.

Word Into Art: General Information

Word Into Art was, according to scholar Saeb Eigner, "the UK's first major institutional entry into the field of modern Middle Eastern art."³³⁴ Held from May 18th until September 23rd, 2006, in Gallery 35 of the Museum, the exhibition had over 100 000 visitors.³³⁵ Stuart Frost, Director of Interpretation of the British Museum, described the general objectives of the exhibition in an interview with me as guided by a desire "to promote public understanding of cultures of the Middle East by focusing on three themes: diversity, complexity, and the dynamic relationship between history/tradition and modernity."³³⁶ Within this larger scheme, the Exhibition Review as described to me by Frost outlines key points, the most important of which for my thesis are as follows: to promote the collection of contemporary art, to "challenge and engage" new and existing audiences, to create and sustain international partnerships and institutional dialogues, to explore the relationship between script, both traditional and modern, and art in the Middle East, and to "raise awareness of the Museum's engagement with the modern in the Middle East, and use this as an instrument for promoting public understanding of the region."³³⁷ In order to meet these goals, Porter used work from the collection and new acquisitions, focusing on making the work meaningful through interpretations that responded not

³³³ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³³⁴ Saeb Eigner, "Introduction," in *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, ed Saeb Eigner (London: Merrell, 2010), 8

³³⁵ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³³⁶ Interview, Stuart Frost to Erin Macnab, October 15 2010

³³⁷ Interview, Stuart Frost to Erin Macnab, October 15 2010

only to the pieces themselves, but also to the larger themes of the exhibition and the Museum's mandate³³⁸ In the introduction to the exhibition catalogue Porter writes that the curatorial framework selected by the Museum, which focuses on "works that use script in the broadest sense,"³³⁹ was chosen because it allows insight into "different aspects of the rich literary and artistic cultures of this region, as well as into the ways in which artists are affected by history and by the politics of the world today"³⁴⁰ This statement makes explicit the British Museum's intent to broach the issue of representing Middle Eastern art in the "Western" art institution by addressing questions of cultural context and lived experience The exhibition was organized into four main thematic sections "A Sacred Script," which explores the connection between calligraphic traditions and Islam, "Literature and Art," an examination of how literary traditions of the region echo in contemporary artistic practice, "Deconstructing the Word," which focuses "on the use of script in Middle Eastern abstract art from the mid-twentieth century to the present day,"³⁴¹ and last, "Identity, History and Politics," a section intended to explore the effects of and reactions to historical and contemporary political situations in the Middle East As Porter explained to me, the exhibition, rather than being a show about art or about history, was actually about the relationship between the two³⁴²

The artists exhibited in *Word Into Art* come from diverse ethnic and geographic backgrounds The work of Iraqi artist Hassan Massoudy, who now lives in Paris, features prominently in the promotional material for the exhibition as well as the catalogue His calligraphic works, typically untitled, draw from religious and literary sources and were displayed in the "Literature and Art" section, along with the work of Shirin Neshat as discussed

³³⁸ Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

³³⁹ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 14

³⁴⁰ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 14

³⁴¹ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 14

³⁴² Interview, Venetia Porter to Erin Macnab, October 14 2010

in the previous interlude. “A Sacred Script” featured both more traditional calligraphy as well as reinterpretations of the form such as Samir al-Sayegh’s *Allah* (1996), wherein the word ‘Allah’ is reconstituted into multiple geometric shapes. Abstraction is more fully explored by the artists in the “Deconstructing the Word” section. Here, sculptural works such as renowned Iranian artist Parviz Tanavoli’s *Heech in a Cage* (2005), a bronze representation of the Persian word for ‘nothing’ half-trapped in a cage were shown alongside painted pieces such as calligraphic abstractions of Jordanian artist Widjan. The works in “Identity and Politics” were of various media, ranging from the photographic works of Shadi Ghadirian to Laila Shawa’s silkscreen *Children of War, Children of Peace* (1995), discussed in depth in the next interlude.

Word Into Art: Layout and Events

Word Into Art was held in Gallery 35 of the British Museum. This gallery space is located on the upper floor of the Museum, adjacent to the Great Court and the Ancient Middle East Galleries. Generally, this space is used for special exhibitions. In most cases, the Museum charges admission for exhibitions held in this room, in contrast to the free general admission policy of the Museum as a whole. However, in this case, the exhibition did not have an admission fee, which likely allowed for a larger audience of more casual interest, rather than one with initially high motivation to see the exhibition.³⁴³ Even before visitors make the decision to enter *Word Into Art*, large sculptures of Arabic letters greet them in the Great Court of the British Museum (Fig. 1). The exhibition begins with *Blessed Tigris* (2006), a large sculpture specially designed by Dia Al-Azzawi for the exhibition, which was located outside of the gallery space. The floor plan of the exhibition indicates that it made full use of Gallery 35, leading the visitor in a course which takes them first through the Introduction area, then through the sections as

³⁴³ Email from Stuart Frost to Erin Macnab, Jan 24, 2010.

follows: “Sacred Script”, “Literature and Art”, “Deconstructing the Word” and “Identity, History and Politics,” ending with the exit into the gift shop.³⁴⁴ The installation of the exhibition was overseen by the Department of Exhibitions at the Museum. The installation shows a focus on the artists, as the opening panel of the exhibition has small photographs of all of the featured artists. An introductory panel marked each section of the exhibition in a distinctive colour, while the works themselves were displayed on white walls (Fig. 2). As most of the works in the exhibition are on paper or canvas, the majority of the pieces were installed directly onto the wall, although the centre of the exhibition space was dedicated to glass cases housing works of various media.

In keeping with the mandate of the British Museum, the wall labels and introductory panels of the exhibition were highly detailed, providing information similar to that in the catalogue. For example, the didactic panel introducing the third section of the exhibition, “Deconstructing the Word,” was three paragraphs in length and expounds on the history of calligraphic abstraction, mentioning important artists in the movement and providing a quote from Hassan Massoudy concerning his art. Wall labels throughout the exhibition were similarly descriptive, containing not only basic information such as the artist’s name, title, year, and medium of the work, but also providing a cursory description of the work’s content or meaning and a short artist’s biography (Fig. 3). This focus on ease of interpretation is reinforced by the British Museum’s publication of a cost-free, extremely thorough pamphlet available for visitors to pick up in order to guide them through the exhibition and keep as take-home information.³⁴⁵ The guide breaks down the layout of the exhibition, providing information on each section additional to what is already provided on the didactic panels. It also provides background and historical information, with a section on “Arabic scripts in the exhibition” (complete with

³⁴⁴ Unpublished floor plan courtesy of the Department of Exhibitions at the British Museum

³⁴⁵ According to Stuart Frost of the British Museum, it was once practice to create pamphlets such as these for most special exhibitions. However, cost-cutting measures have rendered their production impossible in recent years

reproductions of related artworks that utilize each script) and “Poetry in the exhibition,” where the guide breaks down some of the poetry which is utilized by artists in the exhibition or which has inspired their work.³⁴⁶

The exhibition, presented in partnership with Dubai Holding, was part of a larger season of events called *Middle East Now*, which included the sculptures in the Great Court as well as an exhibition on the ancient Middle East entitled *The Royal Game of Ur*. The season also included talks related to the exhibition, to the historical Middle East and to contemporary issues. Panel discussions on topics as diverse as “Faith in the Middle East,” “Literature and the Conflict in the Middle East,” and “Orientalism Now: The Legacy of Edward Said” ran throughout the duration of the exhibition, and provided interested visitors with additional contextual and scholarly information on the topics of the exhibition.³⁴⁷ *Word Into Art* also has an extensive online component, in part because the exhibition subsequently travelled to Dubai. The website provides detailed artist’s biographies, interview clips and information on the genesis of the show. In addition, the Museum created an extensive online version of the exhibition in conjunction with Birzeit University in Palestine. On this website, the works from the exhibition are digitized and described in correspondence with the wall labels in the installed exhibition.³⁴⁸

Word Into Art: Reception

As is common for most large exhibitions put on by the British Museum, *Word Into Art* was profiled and reviewed by London and the United Kingdom’s biggest media outlets. The reviews were highly positive for the most part. Tim Adams, writing for *The Observer* on May 21

³⁴⁶ Guide provided courtesy of Stuart Frost, Director of Interpretation at the British Museum.

³⁴⁷ “Middle East Now,” The British Museum, accessed March 1, 2011
http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/wordintoart/bm_middleeastnow.xml

³⁴⁸ “*Word Into Art* – Online Exhibition 2006,” The British Museum, accessed March 1, 2011
<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/wordintoart/word-into-art/exhibition.html>

2006 argued that through this exhibition, the British Museum proved itself to be a “spectacular positive force for international relations”³⁴⁹ Adams remarks on how the work subverts Western conceptions of the contemporary Middle East, writing that “it is hard to imagine a more elegant and timely response to those who might believe that the Middle Eastern art world begins and ends with bigotry and censorship”³⁵⁰ *The Financial Times* review by Robert Irwin is equally glowing, commenting that “*Word into Art* is the finest and most interesting exhibition of modern Middle Eastern art to be held in Britain in living memory”³⁵¹ The review goes on to explicate some of the difficulties non-specialist viewers might have with the exhibition, Irwin, familiar with Arabic script, notes that, “Taken as a whole, the deployment of the Arabic alphabet to achieve aesthetic effects may appear to the outsider as a special case of abstract art,” while for the viewer fluent in the written language the words will recall everything from childhood memories to religious experiences.³⁵² Finally, the BBC also reviewed the exhibition, giving it similar accolades to those delivered by *The Observer* and *The Financial Times* The article is highly descriptive, breaking down the exhibition for viewers and providing small snapshots of the work of certain artists such as Hassan Massoudy and Laila Shawa³⁵³ The BBC review briefly mentions the possible political aspects of the exhibition, stating, “With relations between the Islamic world and the West now such a focus of attention some will see the mere act of staging *Word into Art* as a political statement”³⁵⁴ However, it counters this with a quote from

³⁴⁹ Tim Adams, “The Art of Subtle Diplomacy,” *The Guardian*, May 21, 2006, accessed February 23, 2011
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2006/may/21/art?INTCMP=SRCH>

³⁵⁰ Adams, “The Art of Subtle Diplomacy”

³⁵¹ Robert Irwin, “The Writing on the Wall is Part of the Picture,” *Financial Times*, May 24, 2006, accessed February 23, 2011

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/f1f1789a-eb41-11da-823e-0000779e2340.html#axzz1CkmXsL4Q>

³⁵² Irwin, “The Writing on the Wall is Part of the Picture”

³⁵³ Vincent Dowd, “The Word in Contemporary Islamic Art,” *BBC News*, May 17, 2006, accessed February 23, 2011

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4987284.stm>

³⁵⁴ Dowd, “The Word in Contemporary Islamic Art”

curator Isabelle Caussé, who states that “though many of the artists have been deeply influenced by the politics of the Middle East the Museum's aim was simply to show to the world developments in modern art in a huge region whose culture remains unfamiliar to most people outside its borders.”³⁵⁵

Arts writers such as Susan Platt for *ArteEast* also praised the British Museum’s curatorial approach to the material in *Word Into Art*. Platt, in her July 2006 review, wrote that the exhibition was “an invaluable intervention in the usual clichés and stereotypes that dominate Western understanding of the Arab and Persian world,” working against stereotypical media images of the Middle East.³⁵⁶ Platt acknowledges the British Museum’s imperialist roots, stating that “[although] the British Museum has always defined colonialism in art, with its massive collections of sculptures and other art forms removed from countries all over the world, in this case its historical collections provide a deep resonance for the contemporary art works.”³⁵⁷ A less positive review was published in *Nafas*, an online magazine dedicated to art of the region. Dustin Eriksen praises the Museum’s intentions, but writes “the exhibit posits the primacy of artists whose production is centered on millennia-old traditions with minimal shift in meaning through content or materiality from their source, then relies on supplemental art to provide a contemporary context.”³⁵⁸ He argues that the curatorial focus on calligraphy reveals a reductive view of Middle Eastern culture which implicitly denies the value of new media works and works informed by other styles coming out of the region, concluding that “[a] constricted collection and

³⁵⁵ Dowd, “The Word in Contemporary Islamic Art ”

³⁵⁶ Susan Platt, “Art Exhibition Review Word Into Art,” *ArteEast News*, July 2006, accessed February 23, 2011 <http://www.arteeast.org/artenews/artenews-articles2006/word-into-art/artenews-platt.html>

³⁵⁷ Platt, “Art Exhibition Review Word Into Art ”

³⁵⁸ Dustin Eriksen, “Word Into Art Artists of the Modern Middle East,” *Nafas Art Magazine*, August 2006, accessed February 23, 2011

[http //universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2006/word_into_art](http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2006/word_into_art)

exhibition does a disservice to both the artists of the region and the appreciation of the wider audience.”³⁵⁹

For many major exhibitions, the British Museum prepares reports measuring visitor interest and response, using measuring techniques such as exit surveys, observation studies and focus groups. In the report for *Word Into Art*, several trends about visitor reception were noted.³⁶⁰ The exhibition as a whole attracted a younger profile than most British Museum shows, with large learning outcomes, as it “surprised visitors with its emotional impact, challenging perceptions of the art of the Middle East and of the Middle East as a region.”³⁶¹ The report details how the British Museum’s approach to providing information to visitors was received: “In terms of interpretation, many people needed literal translations, cultural and political context and explanations of the images in order to make meaning from the exhibits,” an approach which the Museum measured 81% of visitors appreciating.³⁶² Visitors were grateful that the Museum presented a “wide range of ways to engage” with the works on display, from aesthetic to contextual and historical.³⁶³ According to the report, the general conclusion among visitors surveyed was that “the exhibition provided a fascinating overview and introduction; a springboard from which visitors could pursue their areas of further interest.”³⁶⁴ Indeed, if there were any complaints, it was that not enough information was provided once initial interest was piqued. In particular, visitors sought more information on the contemporary Middle East itself and on the lived experiences of those artists still residing in the region.³⁶⁵ The results of the report demonstrate “that the exhibition exceeded visitors’ minimum requirements and was

³⁵⁹Ericksen, “Word Into Art ”

³⁶⁰ As-yet-unpublished *Visitor Response Report* provided courtesy of Stuart Frost, Director of Interpretation at the British Museum for the purposes of this thesis only.

³⁶¹ *Visitor Response Report*, 3

³⁶² *Visitor Response Report*, 16

³⁶³ *Visitor Response Report*, 17

³⁶⁴ *Visitor Response Report*, 18

³⁶⁵ *Visitor Response Report*, 3

successful in delivering a far more emotional experience than visitors were expecting from their visit.”³⁶⁶ Overall, the exhibition appears to have been highly successful with visitors both intellectually and emotionally:

It is clear that the exhibition had a significant emotional impact for attendees with many incidental, social and intellectually-driven visitors experiencing unexpected emotional and spiritual impact. The exhibition achieved significant learning outcomes: it surprised visitors with modern content; altered perceptions of the Museum; challenged perceptions of the art of the Middle East and of the Middle East as a region. It sparked further interest and gave creative inspiration to many, and really encouraged visitors to make lateral connections between different religions and cultures.³⁶⁷

Word Into Art was generally very positively received, both in the press and by attending visitors. The contextual and historical information provided by the Museum, while blurring the traditional boundaries between art and ethnographic exhibition, nonetheless was warmly received as a way of providing deeper insight into artworks and artists from the Middle East in order to differentiate from negative and stereotypical media and political messages around the time of the exhibition.

Word Into Art: Analysis

An integral part of the Museum’s curatorial strategy in *Word Into Art* is the idea of allowing artists to “speak for themselves.” The wall labels consistently utilize artist’s statements as well as quoting directly from source material such as poetry and literature. In addition, they provide contextual information on the lived experiences of the artists, especially in the “Identity, History and Politics” section. An analysis of the curatorial practices employed in *Word Into Art*, using Bruce W. Ferguson’s concept of “exhibition rhetorics,” reveals how the curators strove to explicate the artists’ own voices and intentions for their work. Owing to the British Museum’s lineage as a historical/ethnographic institution, the exhibition was highly contextual and referred

³⁶⁶Visitor Response Report, 27.

³⁶⁷Visitor Response Report, 35.

particularly back to artists' own analyses of their practice. Ferguson suggests that conflicting messages arise in exhibitions when the "voices" of the artists contrast with the material speech of the exhibition, with the underlying 'normalizing' rhetoric of the institution. *Word Into Art* is largely able to avoid this consequence due to the curatorial choice to have artist's statements and contextual information make up the largest portion of the didactic panels, wall labels and catalogue information.

An application of Ferguson's notion of exhibition rhetoric to *Word Into Art* also reveals political undercurrents through the 'speech' of the exhibition. Ferguson argues that exhibitions function as "publicly sanctioned representations of identity"³⁶⁸ of the institution; through them one can read the politics of the institution, which could be considered a pedagogical agent of society as a whole. Even when exhibitions present work outside of the societal norm, they work through rhetoric to "normalize" the displayed objects and cultures. *Word Into Art* negotiates this dichotomy in several ways. Through the previously mentioned curatorial techniques, the exhibition allows artists whose work is political in nature to overtly state their interpretations. In addition, rather than acting as a cultural narrative which continuously refers back to Western presence in the region and Western artistic influence, the exhibition instead maintains a focus on the history of the calligraphic tradition, literary and religious influences and modern interpretations thereof while also discussing current practices and lived experiences. In this way, the exhibition strives to disrupt the teleological narrative of Western imperialism that the British Museum has been accused of representing in the past.

Of course, the museum is still 'speaking' through the exhibition. Although the artists' voices are extremely well-represented throughout the exhibition, there remains an overall political message to the exhibition, one particularly informed by what Jessica Winegar calls "the

³⁶⁸ Ferguson, 175.

liberal belief in the values of cosmopolitan diversity and shared humanity.”³⁶⁹ The exhibition strove to provide an alternative view of Middle Eastern culture to that represented in popular and news media. Opening five years after September 11, 2001, and one year after the London bombings of July 7, 2005, *Word Into Art* appears to have been in part designed to diffuse the extreme tension by showing a “different side” of the region. By exploring how modern and contemporary artistic production from the region negotiates with literary tradition, religion, politics and everyday life, the exhibition demonstrates the richness of Middle Eastern visual culture and precludes reductive assumptions. In addition, the Museum’s decision to showcase the artists’ voices and original intentions for their works can also be read as exhibition rhetoric. Through this description, the Museum may hinder viewers from exploring their own interpretations of the works and reaching their own conclusions, a strategy often endorsed by contemporary art curators and institutions. *Word Into Art*’s descriptive style not only reinforces the British Museum’s mandate as a historical museum, but also guides the viewer into certain interpretations that underline the political messages of diversity and cultural understanding that the exhibition puts forth.

This message of diversity reflects what Terry Smith describes as the art of a globalized community, a key feature of contemporary art. The works displayed in *Word Into Art* embrace the dichotomies Smith sees as characteristic of art in the age of contemporaneity. Exhibited works, like Shirazeh Houshiary’s abstraction of Rumi’s poetry, *Round Dance* (1992), simultaneously explore tradition, both in content and formal characteristics while forging new artistic ground. Individual works in the exhibition are in turn extremely political, decidedly unpolitical, spiritual and worldly, while some works, such as *Offered Eyes* by Shirin Neshat, play with two or more of these elements concurrently. This diversity is, according to Smith,

³⁶⁹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 652.

paramount in contemporary art. The various concerns shaping the works of the artists selected for *Word Into Art* are indicative of Smith's notion of the "postcolonial turn," which has created art shaped by postcolonial politics and the experiences underwent by artists living and practicing art both in the Middle East and in diaspora. Of course, each artist has a different experience of postcolonial reality, which is evidenced by the myriad forms of expression visible in *Word Into Art*. The postcolonial turn, apparent throughout the exhibition, arises from the artists' responses to not only their own history and culture, but also to the changing state of the world as a whole. Motivation for staging exhibitions such as *Word Into Art* is also partially explained by the concept, as market and institutional interest in works that do not fit into "Western" frameworks continues to grow.

Like all major Western institutions, the British Museum faces inherent difficulties in exhibiting "global" contemporary art and artists. As explicated by Jessica Winegar and Olu Oguibe, the curatorial strategies of Western institutions often inadvertently replicate older models of display, which are tangled up in the remnants of colonialism and imperialism. In *Creative Reckonings*, Winegar discusses how curators of Western origin and training must challenge their discursive bias in order to fairly represent non-Western artists in the institution. The British Museum attempts to side-step accusations of Western bias through, again, the extensive use of the artist's voice and contextual information in the display. Rather than fit the artists into Western frameworks privileging certain types of contemporary art, the Museum sought to display works with strong connections to history and culture of the Middle East.

Despite the fact that this curatorial approach reduces the appearance of institutional bias, it has the side effect of playing into what Olu Oguibe has termed "the culture game."³⁷⁰ As described above, the British Museum has many practical reasons for exhibiting works that

³⁷⁰ Oguibe, xii.

revolve primarily around the practice of calligraphy, a traditional art form in the region, such as the concept of using contemporary works to forge a connection with the historical material in the collections, as well as the space/technology restrictions which prevent the Museum from displaying new media works and generally limit them to the display of works on flat surfaces. Therefore, the Museum selected artists for the exhibition and for the collection who reinforce the idea that calligraphy and the written word occupy a space of primacy in the visual culture of the Middle East. This serves to emphasize the idea that contemporary and modern art in the Middle East are essentially “different” from that in the West. However, the exhibition is conscientious about tracing the art historical development of the calligraphic form. Yet, this could be read as an example of what Oguibe calls the ‘systemic’ implication of ‘difference’ as a standard of assessment for non-Western art in Western institutions.³⁷¹ This systemic valuation of difference as the premier standard of assessment for non-Western art arises in part from colonial constructions of the rest of the world.

As described by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, these imperialist constructions are especially pervasive in Western conceptions of the Middle East. All exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art, especially those held in institutions as traditionally associated with the Enlightenment and imperialism as the British Museum, must negotiate the discourse of Orientalism. The British Museum is one of the most archetypal of “imperialist museums.” The institution has long collected art objects and artefacts from all over the world, with the intention of creating a museum of ‘world history.’ Yet, early collections were determined by British colonial activities and values, and by their very presence implicated the objects and cultures they represented in a teleological narrative of Western dominance and cultural superiority. However, *Word Into Art* and many other recent exhibitions work towards shifting this perception of the

³⁷¹ Oguibe, xii.

British Museum, exploring new ways of representing other cultures within the institution. These new strategies emphasize the diversity of global cultural production while avoiding traditional imperialist tropes that would place it in opposition to or subjugated by the West.

Word Into Art actively seeks to refute what Said identifies as the main notions of Orientalist discourse. The exhibition challenges notions that culture in the Middle East is oppressed and stilted, disputing assertions that Islamic culture has not evolved and stands as a counterpoint to the progressive West. The vibrancy and diversity of contemporary and modern art presented by the Museum shows that, while the artists of course continue to reference and engage with tradition and religion, contemporary references are also embraced. The curators also challenge political views of the Middle East and Islam. Many of the works, especially in the section entitled “Identity, History and Politics,” show that women freely make critical work with deep intellectual grounding. The artists challenge their own cultures, not merely condemning the West. Religious works displayed in the exhibition are both aesthetically beautiful and thoughtful. Accompanied by careful explanations, these religious views offer a counterpoint to contemporary media representations of Islam as a barbaric religion, positioned against the Enlightenment values of the West. As a whole, the exhibition is largely successful in avoiding Orientalist assumptions about the Middle East. The depth of information provided, combined with the underlying goals of the exhibition to promote learning and cultural understanding, assist the Museum in achieving this. The exhibition provides a visual break from older “imperialist” collections in the Museum, rendering its staging in the British Museum particularly useful. Mounting an exhibition such as *Word Into Art* at the British Museum, with the accompanying values traditionally associated with such an institution, shows a deliberate and considered

intention to break with curatorial and interpretive strategies that may view the Middle East reductively.

Indeed, an institution like the British Museum is deeply invested in the narration of national identity, as described by Homi Bhabha. The pedagogical nature of the museum is indicated by its early history, when one of the primary roles of the public history and ethnographic museum was public education. To use Bhabha's terminology, there are performative aspects to the staging of an exhibition such as *Word Into Art*. Through the exhibition, the voices of the artists act on the institution and introduce new paradigms, not only of contemporary art but also of Middle Eastern visual culture in general – which performs a larger role of societal commentary. A pedagogical institution such as the British Museum is vastly influential in society, as it sets forth what is culturally valuable and worthy of measured consideration. The performative actions of artists and curators work to shift the national narrative embodied by the British Museum away from negative conceptions of the Middle East. Rather, these performative voices are incorporated into a pedagogy that reflects greater diversity, destabilizing the teleological narrative in order to complicate understandings of both British identity and the wider world.

Conclusion

The British Museum, one of the oldest and most influential public history museums in the world, chose to mount the exhibition like *Word Into Art* for myriad reasons. The curators sought not only to connect their historical Islamic art collection with the contemporary, but also address the British Museum's growing concern regarding civic and social engagement. The exhibition played the role of promoting cross-cultural understanding through the display of art objects.

Word Into Art was a hugely popular exhibition, with over 100 000 visitors. The exhibition was very well-received, both by critics and by museum visitors. Identified as one of the main reasons for this was the highly descriptive nature of the show, as the curators provided not only historical and social context for the works but also explicated literary and religious sources and, perhaps most vitally, utilized artists' statements to describe the original intentions and lived experiences that informed the works. While this was pointed out by some critics as reducing the possibility for personal interpretations of the art, it had mostly favourable consequences. By so prominently featuring the voices of the artists, the Museum worked against traditional discursive modes as Orientalism. The diversity of speech incorporated into *Word Into Art*, which was staged in a major pedagogical institution, allows the performative aspect of these works to shift the dominant paradigm of the Museum. Although the material speech of the institution, to reference Bruce Ferguson's conceptual model, is still visible in the underlying politics of the exhibition, as a whole, the curators successfully negotiated the boundaries between thoughtful cultural representation and falling into old tropes of Orientalism and the "culture game."

INTERLUDE:

Laila Shawa, *Children of war, children of peace* (1995) and Emily Jacir,

***Ramallah/New York* (2004-2005)**

The fourth section of the British Museum's *Word Into Art* is dedicated to the exploration of "Politics and Identity." Curator Venetia Porter writes,

Particularly striking among the work of artists of the Middle East is the way in which their history and the recent crises and wars that have so deeply affected the region are passionately felt and articulated. Using images and the language of the past, through photographs and books, this section has a very different mood, and the works and their words tell particular stories.³⁷²

One of the 'stories' frequently told through works exhibited both at the British Museum and at the Museum of Modern Art is that of the Palestinian experience. Indeed, as Maymanah Farhat states in her essay, "Imagining the Arab World: The Fashioning of the 'War on Terror' Through Art": "For decades, visual artists have greatly contributed to the documentation of the collective Palestinian experience."³⁷³ Artists Emily Jacir and Laila Shawa,³⁷⁴ both of Palestinian origin, engage with notions of exile, identity and lived experience under occupation, what Farhat calls "common experiences...that many identify with, resulting from their political history."³⁷⁵ While both artists make political statements through their work,³⁷⁶ their methods of critiquing Israeli involvement in the Palestinian Territories in the works selected for exhibition are markedly different. Although they approach their subject matter through different mediums and artistic perspectives, the works of both artists are, as Farhat says, "crucial to the articulation of the

³⁷² Porter, *Word Into Art*, 101

³⁷³ Maymanah Farhat, "Imagining the Arab World The Fashioning of the 'War on Terror' Through Art," *Callaloo* 32 (2009), 1230

³⁷⁴ Sometimes also known as Laila Al Shawa

³⁷⁵ Farhat, "Imagining the Arab World," 1230

³⁷⁶ Indeed, Jacir has been widely criticized for being 'too political'

Palestinian perspective, particularly in the West.”³⁷⁷ Shawa’s *Children of war, children of peace* (1995) is an explicit condemnation of the quality of children’s lives in the West Bank and Gaza, while Jacir’s video installation *Ramallah/New York* (2004-2005) is a conceptual exploration of the strange nature of exile and a response to negative media images of Palestinians in the West. Through participation in exhibitions such as *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary*, Shawa and Jacir intercede to create a space into which Palestinian voices can express perspectives on their lived experience in myriad ways. This interlude examines the work of two artists in order to interrogate how responses to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict manifest themselves artistically in different ways.

Laila Shawa was born in Gaza, Palestine in 1940. She studied art in Cairo at the Leonardo School of Art, and graduated from the Accademia de Belle Arti and Accademia St Giacomo, both in Rome. Studying with expressionist artists including Oskar Kokoschka, she eventually moved to London where she continues to live and work. Her artistic practice spans a variety of media and themes, including photographs, silkscreens, design work and painting. Shawa’s *Walls of Gaza* series documented Palestinian graffiti in Gaza in the early 1990s. As Venetia Porter describes, “[rival] groups would make their mark and the Israeli occupiers would spray purple paint to eradicate it.”³⁷⁸ The series used these walls, with their text rendered illegible by countless overpainting and reapplication, as backdrops to critique the disintegrating political situation and subsequent hardships suffered by Palestinian civilians. For example, the photographic work *20 Targets from Walls of Gaza Series II* (1994) shows a young boy, who stands against a graffitied wall in shorts and a t-shirt. The child has seemingly been ‘targeted,’ his head centered in crosshairs and surrounded by a red circle - the only note of colour in an otherwise black and

³⁷⁷ Farhat, “Imagining the Arab World,” 1230.

³⁷⁸ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 125.

white image. The image is repeated as in a contact sheet, twenty times. Shawa herself captured the photographic image.

It is this motif of childhood under occupation that Shawa revisits in *Children of war, children of peace*. Chosen as the frontispiece for the “Politics and Identity” section of the *Word Into Art* catalogue, this work thematically follows the *Walls of Gaza* series. The piece consists of two rectangular silkscreened canvases. A photograph of a young Palestinian boy playing with a stick, which bears an unmistakable resemblance to a rifle, is silkscreened nine times on each canvas. Mostly black and white, with only the boy’s sweater represented in a bright pink colour, the photograph on the top canvas shows the boy from a frontal angle, while the lower photograph shows the same child from a side angle, with his sweater tinted red. These repeating photographs contrast with the brightly-coloured backgrounds of the canvases. On the top panel of the work, traces of graffitied writing are inscribed in bright red on an orange wall, while the background of the bottom panel repeats this pattern in yellow and neon pink.

In the artist’s statement quoted by Venetia Porter in the *Word Into Art* catalogue, Shawa explains that this image was created in the aftermath of the Oslo Accord of 1993, whereafter she and other Palestinians were hopeful for improved conditions in the territory. Shawa writes: “Unfortunately there has been no change in these children’s lives and the trauma and dispossession has carried on. The only apparent difference in the streets of Gaza was the change in the colour of the graffiti, which became brighter. However the misery, poverty and the trauma of violence remained.”³⁷⁹ *Children of war, children of peace* exaggerates the colour of the graffiti, emphasizing the traces of writing left on the walls of Gaza. The contrast between this medium of expression for the Palestinian people and what Shawa sees as the ongoing repression and violence in the region is represented through the formal contrast between the bright, dynamic

³⁷⁹ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 125.

forms, now illegible abstractions of letters, and the grayscale photograph of the young boy. The repetition of the photograph of the boy, identified by Venetia Porter as a child from the “Sheikh Radwan refugee camp in Gaza,”³⁸⁰ underlines Shawa’s message of childhood oppression while also perhaps functioning as a commentary on how Western representations of Palestinians do not often stop to individualize them, while making formal allusions to artists such as Andy Warhol. It also alludes to traditions of representing conflict, as the use of children is a common trope in the media and in art, appealing to the sentimental in order to underscore the long-term effects of violence. In a 2002 interview with Lawrence Joffe in *The Middle East*, Shawa states that during this period:

I become much more involved with my work, and started photographing writing on the walls of Gaza. I then incorporated those photos into colour lithographs. Children would crowd around, bemused that I was shooting bare walls. Over time we developed an understanding, and they would insist on posing. Ironically, walls had become a method of communication for a traumatised society, one of the few forms of self-expression left to them.

The child’s sweater functions to offset the bright background, while drawing attention to the boy’s face and lower body – his shoeless foot a poignant reminder of the poverty of Palestinian refugees – and to the stick or bar with which he plays. The resemblance this object bears to a rifle is too close to be anything but deliberate. By choosing a photograph of a child bearing an object so similar in appearance to a gun, Shawa comments on the ongoing cycles of violence in the Palestinian Territories. On her website, Shawa indicates that her images are intended to “make the viewer confront the effects of conflict and violence on generations of children.”³⁸¹ In her interview with Joffe, the artist expands, arguing:

³⁸⁰ Porter, *Word Into Art*, 125.

³⁸¹ “Laila Shawa,” Laila Shawa, accessed February 25, 2011.
<http://www.lailashawa.com/>

War deprives children of their childhood Toys become arms The games they play are all war games They have no places to play and their psyches are all screwed up Often they grow up damaged, believing violence is the only way to resolve problems³⁸²

Shawa's work is expressly and deliberately political In an interview with Porter in 2003, quoted in Saeb Eigner's book *Art of the Middle East Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, Shawa states "I believe that one of the roles of contemporary artists is to record the signs of their times"³⁸³ Shawa indicates that, after the Arab-Israeli War of 1967, she "translated that sense of shock [at the loss of territory] into more overtly political work Her paintings now sought to reclaim, preserve and reinterpret a distinctively Palestinian identity They depicted new themes, like the inequities of occupation, and the injustice of the subservient role imposed on women"³⁸⁴ Her work continues to respond to the political situation in Gaza Indeed, in 2007's *Boy Soldiers*, Shawa revisits the photograph of the young boy that forms the centrepiece of *Children of war, children of peace* This time in full, original colour, the photograph is repeated in disjointed, overlapping rows over a photograph of a Gaza wall graffitied in red Featured in *Art of the Middle East*, this piece is a rearticulation of Shawa's 1995 concerns, as it "reflects Shawa's bitter disappointment following the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which, as she saw it, made no difference to the lives of the children in Gaza"³⁸⁵ Shawa's ongoing engagement with these issues reflects not only the continuing tension and conflict in the region but also confirms the role of the artist in bringing international attention to voices of the Palestinian people Shawa belongs to an older generation of Palestinian artists, but her focus on preserving Palestinian identity and fighting for a voice is reflected in the work of younger Palestinian artists, one of the most high-profile of whom is Emily Jacir

³⁸² Lawrence Joffe, "Laila Shawa Still Shaking People Up," *The Middle East* (February 2002), 2

³⁸³ Eigner, 140

³⁸⁴ Joffe, 1

³⁸⁵ Eigner, 140

Emily Jacir is a multimedia artist whose work includes installation, video, and photography. Born to Palestinian parents in Memphis, Tennessee, Jacir was educated in the United States and now divides her time between New York and Ramallah.³⁸⁶ In recent years, Jacir has become one of the most acclaimed contemporary artists of Middle Eastern origin, winning the Hugo Boss Prize from the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation in 2008, as well as the Golden Lion for Artists under Forty Award at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007.³⁸⁷ Thematically, her work covers many areas. As summarized by Sarah Rogers, some of these “[recurrent] themes in her practice include repressed historical narratives, resistance, political land divisions, movement (both forced and voluntary) and the logic of the archive.”³⁸⁸ In the 2002-2003 photographic installation *Where We Come From*, Jacir collected requests from Palestinians in exile and without the freedom of movement as answers to the question “If I could do anything for you, anywhere in Palestine, what would it be?” Owing to her American passport, Jacir could travel between different areas of the Palestinian Territories and fulfil most of the requests, a process she documented photographically. The photographs and texts of the requests were subsequently exhibited together, creating a movingly poignant documentation of the realities of exile and the ramifications the restrictions on Palestinian freedom of movement have had on ordinary families.³⁸⁹ Jacir’s project *Material for a Film*, ongoing since 2005, documents the Mossad

³⁸⁶ According to the biography supplied by the Museum of Modern Art. There is some debate about Jacir’s origins. In interviews, she often declines to confirm whether she was born in the United States or in the Palestinian Territories. As Sarah Rogers describes in her essay “Imagined Geographies: Diaspora and Contemporary Arab Art,” for the book *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, “Read less as an act of sensationalism, Jacir’s ‘no-comment’ emerges as a strategy for rerouting us back to the socio-political realities and artistic interventions at stake in the work itself. In doing so, Jacir enables the body of the diasporic artist to challenge both art history’s trusty analytical category of the nation state and the contemporary art world’s capitalist need to localize artists and their production.” (45)

³⁸⁷ Farhat, “Imagining the Arab World,” 1225.

³⁸⁸ Sarah Rogers, “Imagined Geographies: Diaspora and Contemporary Arab Art,” in *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi, Salwa Mikdadi and Nada Shabout (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 170

³⁸⁹ Emily Jacir, “Where We Come From,” *Grand Street* 72 (2003), 95-105

assassination of Palestinian intellectual Wael Zuaiter in 1972. Maymanah Farhat describes the piece:

In the first portion, the artist retraced Zuaiter's life and death in Rome through research she conducted and archival material gathered from his friends, family, and colleagues, installing the documents, photographs, and sound bites as an intimate and haunting portrait of one of several Palestinian cultural figures assassinated by the state of Israel. Jacir then built an imposing memorial to Zuaiter consisting of 1000 blank white books into which she had previously fired a single shot – a powerful metaphor for his literary life and sudden death.³⁹⁰

Jacir's body of work transcends simple polemic statements, instead infusing her political commentary with observations on history, place, and identity.

Ramallah/New York, the work chosen by MoMA curator Fereshteh Daftari to represent Jacir in *Without Boundary* explores many of the issues typically addressed by the artist. *Ramallah/New York* is a two-screen, two-channel video installation. Shot primarily in 2004, one screen shows footage from diasporic Palestinian communities in New York City, while the other likewise shows similar scenes filmed in the West Bank city of Ramallah. The screens are purposely not identified by city, and the footage from both locations is cuts between interior views of businesses and public locations such as travel agencies and salons. Jacir records people moving in and out of the footage, documenting the interactions that occur in everyday life in Palestinian communities in both cities. The camera in the scene is fixed, overlooking the rooms in which it is placed in a fashion reminiscent of surveillance cameras, a common feature of some of the locations in the film such as convenience stores. While alluding to Foucauldian notions of observation and self-surveillance, the higher vantage point of the camera also gives the impression of a 'neutral' observer who surveys the scene without revealing location or the progress of people's lives outside the confines of the selected room. According to her gallery, Alexander and Bonin (New York City), "In this work, Jacir documents a specific time which

³⁹⁰ Farhat, "Imagining the Arab World," 1225.

takes place in daily life as opposed to the official representations and narratives of history, CNN or Al-Jazeera.”³⁹¹ The work also addresses questions of exile and migration.

As Edward Said remarks in his 1981 book, *Covering Islam: How The Media and the Experts Determine How We See The Rest of The World*, news media representation of the Middle East, particularly Palestine, is such that “Americans have scant opportunity to view the Islamic world *except* reductively [and] oppositionally.”³⁹² In these constructions, Israel is presented as “a bastion of Western civilization hewn ... out of the Islamic wilderness.”³⁹³ The Western news media is in a position of great power - constant exposure to negative images of Palestine allows the control and filtering of information. According to Said, viewers are shown only what needs to be seen in order to serve the agendas of the ruling apparatus. By showing the day-to-day interactions of Palestinians in both New York and Ramallah, making the cities visually indistinguishable, Jacir documents “the lives of Palestinians whose relationships, life-styles, and above all their claim to an ordinary identity contradict the stereotypes propagated by the media.”³⁹⁴ As a contrast to images of the Palestinian Territories that present it as constantly war-torn and its people as terrorists, Jacir presents shots of a society which “seems no less open and contemporary than the other.”³⁹⁵ As Lindsey Moore describes in her essay “Minding the Gap: Migration, Diaspora, Exile and Return in Women’s Visual Media,” “[by] privileging quotidian scenes from culturally hybrid and to some extent interchangeable urban landscapes, Jacir challenges the disaster-zone imagery of the Palestinian territories that feature in the international

³⁹¹ “Accumulations,” Alexander and Bonin, accessed February 28, 2011
<http://www.alexanderandbonin.com/exhibitions/Jacir/2005/accumulations.html>

³⁹² Said, *Covering Islam*, 55

³⁹³ Said, *Covering Islam*, 34

³⁹⁴ Daftari, 21

³⁹⁵ Daftari, 21

media”³⁹⁶ By doing so, she is also able to call attention to some of the same issues that Shawa addresses. In his essay “Another Country,” for the *Without Boundary* catalogue, Homi K. Bhabha writes that the video gives the sense that “any moment on any day there could be a catastrophe that would forever maim the routine of civil society and the culture of community”³⁹⁷ While the ramifications of 9/11 resonate in New York, in Ramallah the subjects of the video live with the “everyday fear of violence and violation”³⁹⁸ Like Shawa, Jacir’s video installation comments on the instability of daily life in Palestine. As T J Demos writes in the essay “Poetry’s Beyond,” “It is the perversity of normality situated in the midst of war that Jacir’s video exposes, doing so with poignancy and without sentimentality”³⁹⁹

Much of Jacir’s work is also concerned with issues of transportation, migration, travel and exile. In an interview with Stella Rollig, quoted by Bhabha in “Another Country,” Jacir states that her work is about “passing through places about me wandering through space and time, and about borders and crossing, and exchanges”⁴⁰⁰ Lindsey Moore argues that these concepts are well-suited to dual-channel videos such as *Ramallah/New York*, which “lend themselves particularly well to a contrapuntal rendering of the psychological, emotional and physical space and time of migration, not least because they formally combine the static frame of the image with the narrative dynamics of film”⁴⁰¹ Bhabha, in the essay “On Global Memory Reflections on Barbaric Transmission,” writes of the film, “In these seemingly settled scenes of quotidian activity there is an unmistakable sense of disorientation and discontent once we realize that whether we are in Ramallah or in New York, we are dealing with the lives of

³⁹⁶ Lindsey Moore, “Minding the Gap Migration, Diaspora, Exile and Return in Women’s Visual Media” in *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, ed Paul Sloman (London Black Dog, 2009), 39

³⁹⁷ Bhabha, “Another Country,” 33

³⁹⁸ Bhabha, “Another Country,” 33

³⁹⁹ T J Demos, “Emily Jacir Poetry’s Beyond,” in *Hugo Boss Prize 2008* (New York Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 61

⁴⁰⁰ Bhabha, “Another Country,” 33

⁴⁰¹ Moore, 39

Palestinian exiles and refugees, of people who feel unhomed or not yet integrated into a national homeland”⁴⁰² While the subjects of the film in New York are indistinguishable from those in Ramallah, switching between Arabic and English and pursuing the same day-to-day activities, it is notable that the locations most documented are travel agencies, which, according to Daftari, “points to the importance of travel for Palestinians, a widely scattered people”⁴⁰³ The piece also functions as a commentary on how exiled peoples create communities in other societies, while these other societies are also absorbed into the ‘home’ community through travel and return. As Bhabha notes, “Our inability to distinguish between locations commits us to going back and forth, across both historical and political terrains. Through this diasporic movement we commit ourselves to a double duty: to affiliate with the global ethic of choosing to become involved with the historic fate of both societies”⁴⁰⁴ *Ramallah/New York* provides an eloquent examination of communities in Palestine and in diaspora, documenting the lived experience of both.

Nada Shabout, in her essay “Contemporaneity and the Arab World,” for the book *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* suggests that “War in the Middle East has been, without doubt, the foremost driver of world interest in modern and contemporary Arab art during the last two decades - particularly if these works fitted within the framework of globalization”⁴⁰⁵ Palestinian art has been absorbed into this model, while continuing to be a source of controversy owing to the continuing cycle of violence in the region. Artists like Laila Shawa and Emily Jacir, with their commitment to the Palestinian cause, have been both lauded and decried for their political statements and involvement. In the same book, Sarah Rogers argues in the essay “Imagined Geographies: Diaspora and Contemporary Arab Art” that artists

⁴⁰² Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 53

⁴⁰³ Daftari, 21

⁴⁰⁴ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 53

⁴⁰⁵ Nada Shabout, “Contemporaneity and the Arab World,” in *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century* ed. Hossein Amirsadeghi, Salwa Mikdadi and Nada Shabout (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), 20

dealing with issues of diaspora “assume a degree of responsibility for introducing international audiences to the socio-political realities of the Arab world from a perspective other than that seen on the television.”⁴⁰⁶ For Palestinian artists like Jacir and Shawa, this is of particular importance. In the West, media images of Palestine continue to propagate the stereotypes condemned by Edward Said in 1981. In response, these artists illuminate a Palestinian perspective. As Maymanah Farhat states, “While it can be argued that such work is subjective, it must first be acknowledged that these artists are presenting their work in an environment that is a virtual battleground of imagery, particularly when it comes to representations of the Middle East.”⁴⁰⁷ Although they adopt diverse strategies and address different issues, both Shawa and Jacir are committed to creating a space for subaltern voices that are continuously and consistently denied expression and validity in the Western media.

⁴⁰⁶ Rogers, 37.

⁴⁰⁷ Farhat, “Imagining the Arab World,” 1230.

CHAPTER THREE:

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking

Introduction: The Museum of Modern Art

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, New York, arguably the defining modernist art museum in the world, was opened to the public in 1929. The MoMA's initial collections featured major early modern artists such as Kandinsky and Picasso. Today, the collection is largely made up of canonical works of Western modernist painting and sculpture, with additional extensive collections in photography, film, architecture and design. The MoMA has inhabited a variety of spaces; in 2004, its building on West 53rd Street was opened following an extensive renovation by the architect Yoshio Taniguchi. In an essay published as a monograph entitled *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, Glenn D. Lowry, the museum's current director, outlines the history of the institution. He begins by describing the environment into which the founders of the MoMA stepped at the beginning of the twentieth century, where "European cities such as Paris and Berlin were the recognized centers of progressive artistic development, and modern art as...understood to be a movement with clearly defined parameters, even if they were occasionally contested by artists and critics."⁴⁰⁸ Lowry acknowledges that this is no longer a viable paradigm for collecting modern and contemporary art, as the framework of these movements has been increasingly complicated and diversified through postcolonialism and globalization. For the MoMA, Lowry argues that this discursive shift "has meant the need to reevaluate both its collecting priorities and its broader programs."⁴⁰⁹ The MoMA, according to Lowry, was founded as a "disruptive institution" – an enterprise that alters "established

⁴⁰⁸ Glenn D. Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 5.

⁴⁰⁹ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 8.

paradigms by pioneering new processes or reaching new audiences that are otherwise being ignored.”⁴¹⁰ He posits that the MoMA stands in direct opposition to universal museums such as the British Museum, describing the London institution as “the quintessential example” of a museum dedicated to “the Enlightenment commitment to the classification of knowledge”⁴¹¹ Institutions like the British Museum, he suggests, “endeavored to present a scientific approach to art, through the classification and organization of a vast array of material”⁴¹² The MoMA, on the other hand, is “still very much a work in progress, as each generation at the Museum has sought to alter and reshape the way it understands modern art”⁴¹³ Lowry argues that the MoMA must therefore “conceive of itself as self-renewing, with each exhibition and installation presenting an argument rather than a definitive statement about the history of modern art – in effect, in a perpetual state of disruption”⁴¹⁴ Lowry believes that the primary challenge facing the MoMA today is how to convey the history of Western modern art while still incorporating global artists and movements essential to a deeper understanding of art history and the contemporary art world

This approach has led to criticism of the MoMA, which Lowry responds to as follows “by pursuing a strategy that encourages change and disruption, the Museum exists in an almost constant yet perhaps vital state of tension between what it has achieved and what it wishes to continue exploring”⁴¹⁵ In order to navigate these tensions, the contemporary role of the MoMA is “to extend [the narrative of modern art] in new and unexpected directions, to embrace the complexity and diversity of a world where idea and images move almost instantaneously and where artists from all over the world are connected to each other”⁴¹⁶ It is into this paradigm that

⁴¹⁰ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 8

⁴¹¹ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 10

⁴¹² Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 11

⁴¹³ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 21

⁴¹⁴ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 24

⁴¹⁵ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 39

⁴¹⁶ Lowry, *The Museum of Modern Art in this Century*, 42

the exhibition *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* falls. However, none of the works selected for the show were in the collection of the MoMA at the time of the exhibition. Indeed, although the MoMA has in the past featured ‘non-Western’ works in exhibitions, they are usually displayed with reference to their main collection. The primary example of this is the much-debated 1984 exhibition, *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, which examined modernism and its interactions with African art. As described by James Clifford in his essay “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” this exhibition used African art to develop an “origin story of modernism.”⁴¹⁷ *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* focused largely on the formal characteristics of the “primitive” works, without much focus on the artists or originating culture. The universal qualities of art were championed in the exhibition, and, as Clifford describes, “the capacity of art to transcend its cultural and historical context [was] asserted repeatedly.”⁴¹⁸ This lack of collecting in non-Western art betrays a weakness in Lowry’s argument that the MoMA is committed to diversifying their collection. Rather, the discourse of the MoMA consistently underlines the institutional focus on modernist principles, normalizing them as the framework of interpretation for all art.

Without Boundary: General Information

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking was held from February 26 until May 22, 2006 at the main MoMA location on 53rd Street in Manhattan. Spanning multiple galleries, the exhibition featured the work of fifteen artists of ‘Islamic’ origin as well as two American artists influenced by traditions of Islamic art. Curated by Fereshteh Daftari, then-Assistant Curator in the MoMA’s Department of Painting and Sculpture, the exhibition was accompanied by a series

⁴¹⁷ James Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” in *The Anthropology of Art: A Reader*, ed Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 150

⁴¹⁸ Clifford, “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern,” 152

of panel talks as well as a catalogue featuring essays by Homi Bhabha and Turkish novelist and essayist Orhan Pamuk. As previously mentioned, every work in *Without Boundary* was borrowed from other institutions, galleries, artists or private collectors; none came from the MoMA's own collection.

According to Lowry, in an article written for *ArtNews* entitled "Gained in Translation," the exhibition was intended to navigate the "[tensions] between old and new, past and present,"⁴¹⁹ which arise for artists of Islamic origin, examining how these artists create contemporary art for audiences trained in primarily European methods of reception and interpretation. The exhibition questions to "what extent can – or should – [the work of the artists] be considered within the context of Islam and, more particularly, Islamic art?"⁴²⁰ Lowry argues that the works offer "us a unique way of looking at or thinking about Islam and the world through highly informed, deeply felt and visually moving works of art that are as provocative as they are engaging."⁴²¹

In her review of the exhibition for *ArtAsiaPacific Magazine*, Maymanah Farhat summarizes Daftari's intention for the show as such: "Daftari attempts to test the validity of the term "Islamic" and the shortcomings of such classifications by exhibiting and examining the work of artists considered at the forefront of contemporary art."⁴²² This is substantiated by Lowry's foreword in the *Without Boundary* catalogue, where he states:

Without Boundary sets out to look at the work of a number of contemporary artists who come from the Islamic world but live and work elsewhere...Taking note of a range of these artists' reactions to the legacy of Islamic art, as well as to issues of identity and

⁴¹⁹ Glenn D Lowry, "Gained in Translation," ARTNews, March 2006, accessed February 13, 2011
http://artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=2006

⁴²⁰ Lowry, "Gained in Translation "

⁴²¹ Lowry, "Gained in Translation "

⁴²² Maymanah Farhat, "Contemporary 'Islamic' Art in Context," *CounterPunch Magazine*, March 25, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011
<http://www.counterpunch.org/farhat03252006.html>

faith, the exhibition emphasizes the enormous diversity of the work that is emerging from what is simplistically viewed as a homogeneous culture⁴²³

According to Daftari, the exhibition approaches the works in three distinct ways. The first approach is formal. The exhibition looks at traditions of Islamic art and how they are reinterpreted and rejected by the exhibiting artists. In order to disrupt the assumptions made about traditional media and subject matter in Islamic art, “this exhibition and book examine their work in part by approaching it through just these taxonomic types”⁴²⁴. The second and third focuses are described by Daftari as follows: “the question of identity, whether secular or religious – a frequent issue in an exhibition of artists the majority of whom have experienced long-term dislocations across national borders. Finally, since the Western sense of Islamic art is tied deeply to religion, a third section of the exhibition explores questions of faith”⁴²⁵. To examine the works under these three divisions, the exhibition is divided into the following sections: “Text versus Calligraphy”, “Beyond Miniature Paintings” and “Looking Under the Carpet”, which explore formal characteristics and traditional media, as well as “Identity in Question” and “On Spirituality”. The works examined are of myriad media, including installation, video, photography, painting & drawing, sculpture, as well as textile and mixed media. Displayed alongside pieces by Shirin Neshat, Shahzia Sikander and Emily Jacir (as discussed in the interludes of this thesis) are the handknotted carpets of Shirana Shahbazi, Marjane Satrapi’s illustration of her graphic novel *Persepolis* and Kutlug Atam’s video installation *99 Names*, among others including Raqib Shaw, Walid Raad and Ghada Amer.

Without Boundary: Layout and Events

⁴²³ Daftari, 7

⁴²⁴ Daftari, 10

⁴²⁵ Daftari, 10

Upon entering *Without Boundary*, the visitor first encountered an introductory panel accompanied by pamphlets, which gave an overview of the works in the exhibition⁴²⁶ The subsequent galleries were consistent with the standard of display at the MoMA, featuring a minimalist aesthetic achieved through stark white walls and light flooring The works themselves were accompanied by very short information panels, which amounted to the work title, a description of the medium, the date of production and the artist's name and birth date Descriptive panels regarding the artists' work put forth the interpretations of the pieces outlined in the catalogue Works such as Walid Raad/Atlas Group's *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves* (2003) that contain text as an essential element naturally had more extensive descriptors Yet, this differs greatly from the British Museum's installation of *Word Into Art*, where the wall panels were dedicated to imparting detailed contextual information Video works such as Emily Jacir's *Ramallah/New York* were screened in separate, darkened rooms, as is conventional in modern art galleries The MoMA set up stations with catalogues throughout the galleries, enabling interested visitors to closely engage with the material⁴²⁷ Throughout the catalogue, Daftari discusses how the artists in the exhibition reinterpret traditional Islamic art forms This is explored through thematic consistencies in the exhibition design Works are grouped by the 'traditional' media they appear to reference, resulting in a section of the exhibition featuring carpets, prayer mats and rugs (or reinterpretations thereof)⁴²⁸ Political issues are also referenced, albeit obliquely, in groupings of works of images of veiling, as well as Mona Hatoum's *Keffieh* (1993-99)⁴²⁹ In addition, the installation of the exhibition also maintains an aesthetic or formal consistency, privileging a formalist treatment of the works As

⁴²⁶ Installation Photograph, IN1966 01, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

⁴²⁷ Installation Photograph, IN1966 08, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

⁴²⁸ Installation Photograph, IN1966 25, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

⁴²⁹ Installation Photograph, IN1966 11, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

seen in Figure 4, black and white works are often grouped together, while in Figure 5, the visitor is led through a collection of figurative and portrait work.

Aside from the catalogues provided at waypoints during the exhibition, the main source of additional information for visitors was the audio guide. The guide featured ten entries, divided by work. However, some artists, such as Shirin Neshat, received more than one entry in the guide. In a manner similar to decisions made in the British Museum exhibition, the voices of the artists are incorporated into the exhibition through the guide, as they discuss their own works with occasional input from curator Fereshteh Daftari. Artists featured include Neshat, as mentioned above, Raqib Shaw, Shahzia Sikander, Shirazeh Houshiary, Walid Raad and Jananna Al-Ani. The curator and the artists talk about their interpretation of the work, their personal history and how the works came about. Through this audio guide, the MoMA introduces the voices of the artists into the rhetoric of the exhibition. However, in order to fit the standard of display of the museum, they leave these voices and contextual information to other media, which interested visitors must actively seek out.

The MoMA held panel discussions directly related to the exhibition. The first of these took place on March 8, 2006 and was entitled *Home and Away*. In this panel, chaired by Homi K. Bhabha, artists Shahzia Sikander and Shirazeh Houshiary discussed their work, commenting on what it means to be an expatriate artist. In his introduction to the panel, Glenn Lowry indicated that this conversation was especially applicable to *Without Boundary* as most of the artists involved were born outside their current country of residence.⁴³⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and featured Shirin Neshat and Walid Raad chaired the second panel, entitled *Meditation on Truths*. This discussion was intended to broach issues of authenticity within the exhibition. Raad's 'fake' archive of the *Atlas Group* was a key point of reference for the panel, while Neshat discusses

⁴³⁰ Sound Recordings of Museum-Related Events, 2006.35D, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

how she sees her works as creating fictions, not representing facts. As will be expanded upon below, Neshat was openly critical of the exhibition before this panel, and Lowry states in his introductory remarks that part of the reason for the discussion was the creation of “an opportunity to examine a number of issues within the practice of [the MoMA] as well as outside of it”⁴³¹

Without Boundary: Reception

In contrast to the largely positive reception of *Word Into Art*, reviews for *Without Boundary* were mixed. Unfortunately, the Museum of Modern Art was unable to provide me with statistical and qualitative information about visitor reception, as curatorial and registrar files at the MoMA are closed to the public for fifteen years. However, a discussion of press, critical and artist reception of the exhibition demonstrates what viewers saw as shortcomings of the exhibition.

In a review published in the February 26, 2006 edition of the *New York Times*, Holland Cotter expresses positive opinions regarding the work portrayed and Daftari’s stated intention for the exhibition. The work in the exhibition appears, to Cotter, to repudiate an Orientalist construction of Islamic art, which is widely “talked about in the way something called the “Islamic world” is talked about, as if it were unitary, unchanging, inscrutable and over there”⁴³². However, although Cotter appreciates Daftari’s “critical argument” that identity is not immutable, but rather in flux and subjective, he argues that “other exhibitions in the past year have successfully approached the subject of Islam in art more organically. They struck a better balance between the personalized approach of the work at the Modern and the images of

⁴³¹ Sound Recordings of Museum-Related Events, 2006 24, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

⁴³²Holland Cotter, “What Does Islam Look Like?” *The New York Times* February 26, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C01E3D6113EF935A15751C0A9609C8B63&pagewanted=all>

communal “Muslim fury” spilling from the media.”⁴³³ Lee Siegel, in a slide-show essay for *Slate Magazine* entitled “East Meets West: Why MoMA’s New Show Doesn’t Help Us Understand Islam,” posted March 15, 2006, expands on Cotter’s comments, writing that *Without Boundary* “could be the most frustrating exhibition [he has] ever seen.”⁴³⁴ While Siegel is greatly impressed by and supportive of the work that the artists are doing, he takes issue with the curatorial framework, writing that the exhibition “lacks the thoughtful complexity that would illuminate such tangled issues” as notions of identity, religion and politics.⁴³⁵ Spiegel argues that the show, rather than discussing the diversity and complexity of Islamic culture, “presents the distinctive vision of highly Westernized émigrés.”⁴³⁶ Discussing the wall panels and information provided by the curators, Siegel remarks that, “An unwittingly patronizing air hangs about this show. The wall texts sound defensive, protective, like a teacher who introduces a new student from a strange land by lauding his virtues and implicitly issuing a warning against mistreating him.”⁴³⁷ He points out errors in the exhibition, writing that Mona Hatoum, who was born in Lebanon, is in fact not “regularly described as ‘Islamic,’ as Daftari claims. Hatoum is in fact regularly described

⁴³³ Cotter, “What Does Islam Look Like?”

⁴³⁴ Lee Siegel, “East Meets West: Why MoMA’s New Show Doesn’t Help Us Understand Islam,” *Slate Magazine*, March 15, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011
<http://www.slate.com> “East Meets West ”

⁴³⁴ Siegel, “East Meets West ”

⁴³⁴ Siegel, “East Meets West ”

⁴³⁴ “Images of Islam Pushing the Boundaries of Muslim Identity,” *L Magazine*, March 15, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.themagazine.com/newyork/images-of-islam/Content?oid=1135794>

⁴³⁴ “Images of Islam ”

⁴³⁴ Roland Kapferer, “Without Boundaries Seventeen Ways of Looking,” *Frieze Magazine*, May 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/without_boundary_seventeen_ways_of_looking/

⁴³⁴ Kapferer, “Without Boundaries ”

⁴³⁴ P C Smith, “Looking for Islam,” *ArtNet Magazine*, March 15, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/smith/smith3-15-06.asp>

⁴³⁴ Smith, “Looking for Islam.”

⁴³⁴ Farhat, “Contemporary ‘Islamic’ Art in Context ”/id/2138103/

⁴³⁵ Siegel, “East Meets West ”

⁴³⁶ Siegel, “East Meets West ”

⁴³⁷ Siegel, “East Meets West ”

as the Christian that she is.” Siegel argues that, “All gifted artists both draw from their cultural origins and transcend them. What the show ends up doing is thrusting its cosmopolitan artists back into their original context in order to prove how far beyond it they've gone.” *L Magazine* had a more positive perspective on the exhibition. In their review of *Without Boundary*, the magazine found the lack of focus on the political an effective way of engaging audiences, writing that, “Many of the works in *Without Boundary* do engage with controversial or explicitly political themes — but often it’s an internal dialogue, forcing the viewer to come closer rather than remain at the comfortable distance afforded by broad political truisms.”⁴³⁸ The reviewer admires the challenges taken on by Daftari, remarking that, “*Without Boundary* may have set itself an impossible task — that of complicating and de-exoticizing the monolithic idea of Islam that is consistently deployed in the Western press, while trying to escape the confines of that very dialogue. But even where it fails, it asks an important question: is it ever fair to demand of art (or its makers) that it “educate” viewers, or that it speak for something as huge and complicated as a major world religion?”⁴³⁹

In a review article for *Frieze Magazine*, Roland Kapferer provides an analysis of the catalogue while commenting on discursive issues surrounding *Without Boundary* as an exhibition. Like many other critics, Kapferer is disturbed by the exhibition’s lack of focus on political implications in the works. As social and political context is not mentioned, the exhibition becomes universalizing. Kapferer writes, “What really gets me about *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* is its fundamental, almost willful, blindness to the conditions of its dated theoretical posturing – conditions that already threaten to overwhelm

⁴³⁸ “Images of Islam Pushing the Boundaries of Muslim Identity,” *L Magazine*, March 15, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.themagazine.com/newyork/images-of-islam/Content?oid=1135794>

⁴³⁹ “Images of Islam ”

it.”⁴⁴⁰ Kapferer vehemently disagrees with what he sees as the depoliticized presentation of the works by the MoMA, arguing that, “This is the kind of detached thinking that can only be produced at great distance from empirical reality. I write this review just after the al-Askryia Mosque in Iraq has been destroyed, while US marines pick about the ruins of that country and the great artistic heritage of Mesopotamia is either stolen or destroyed. Sectarian boundaries are springing up everywhere. While some may indeed be without boundary, many others are finding themselves increasingly hemmed in. This is not the time for old ideas.”⁴⁴¹

P.C. Smith, in an *ArtNet* article entitled “Looking for Islam,” agrees with Kapferer’s assertion. Smith sees the exhibition as confusing, questioning Daftari’s thematic organization, which appears to hem artists into certain categories while arguing for multiplicity. Despite the title of the exhibition, Smith argues that, “in “Without Boundary,” one feels the boundaries keenly -- and they circumscribe a contemporary Western art world with an experimental, new-media focus.”⁴⁴² Smith wonders why the curators chose only artists living primarily in the West to represent the Islamic world, rather than artists still living and working in the region. Again, the disjuncture between MoMA’s curatorial strategy and the works of the artists, with their often explicit focus on political engagement is pointed out. This issue is picked up on by Maymanah Farhat in her article, “MoMA’s *Without Boundary* Exhibit: Contemporary “Islamic” Art in Context” for *Counterpunch Magazine*. Farhat takes great issue with the curatorial choice to suppress political issues, arguing that, “Art in all societies is not produced under isolated circumstances...this connection is highly visible in the works of *Without Boundary*, which possess underlying themes of social commentary,” where the artists explicitly comment on social

⁴⁴⁰ Roland Kapferer, “Without Boundaries Seventeen Ways of Looking,” *Frieze Magazine*, May 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/without_boundary_seventeen_ways_of_looking/

⁴⁴¹ Kapferer, “Without Boundaries ”

⁴⁴² P C Smith, “Looking for Islam,” *ArtNet Magazine*, March 15, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011

<http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/smith/smith3-15-06.asp>

issues in the ‘Islamic’ world⁴⁴³ Farhat argues that the exhibition is influenced by Western-centric discourse as well as contemporary American politics “Unable to discard the influence of such [a] framework, *Without Boundary* and the discourse accompanying it, provide little evidence of having transcended preconceived notions of “Islamic” cultural homogeneity”⁴⁴⁴ She states that the publications generated by the exhibition such as the aforementioned essay by Glenn Lowry and the catalogue essay contributed by Homi K Bhabha make sweeping generalizations about life and artistic practice in the Middle East, even as the exhibition claims to disregard geographic origin Farhat writes that, “Through such characterization, the “multidimensional” nature of the art work in *Without Boundary* is then attributed to the mere fact that the artists have lived and worked in the United States and Europe, insinuating notions of Western cultural, academic, political and economic supremacy” She concludes in a passage that is indicative of the larger critical impulse surrounding the exhibition

Without Boundary and the discourse surrounding the exhibition demonstrate the desperate need for an extensive and critical examination of the mainstream art world Art historical definitions used by academia, institutions and galleries remain imbedded in the cultural and social hierarchies that have resulted from the colonial and imperial geopolitical politics and activities of Western nations in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Pacific Islands These policies have been primary factors in the denigrated classification, documentation and representation of art and visual culture created by non-Western populations The political, theological, ethnic and class biases of institutionalized art activity today must be held accountable for defining non-Western cultures as inferior⁴⁴⁵

Artists exhibiting in *Without Boundary* were also vocal on what they saw as issues with the curatorial strategies employed Two of the most outspoken critics are also two of the most well-known ‘Islamic’ artists working today – Shirin Neshat and Emily Jacir Both artists discussed their concerns with Tyler Green in an article for the *New York Observer*, published

⁴⁴³ Smith, “Looking for Islam”

⁴⁴⁴ Farhat, “Contemporary ‘Islamic’ Art in Context”

⁴⁴⁵ Farhat, “Contemporary ‘Islamic’ Art in Context”

April 2, 2006, in the midst of the exhibition's run. The primary issue for Jacir and Neshat was the downplaying of political and personal elements in their work. Jacir, in conversation with Green, alluded to larger reasons for this: "Given the conservative nature of the United States and the restrictive policies in American institutions, there is not the freedom to directly address certain sociopolitical situations like Iraq and Afghanistan."⁴⁴⁶ Jacir comments that her identity as a Palestinian may have something to do with the lack of political intent assigned to her work in *Without Boundary*, stating that "Historically, any Palestinian narrative is regularly censored in this country... it is clear why contextualizing the political situation some of us in the show are coming from would be whitewashed."⁴⁴⁷ Neshat offers many of the same critiques as Jacir, stating that: "My immediate reaction was, how could anyone today discuss art made by contemporary Muslim artists and not speak about the role the subjects of religion and contemporary politics play in the artists' minds?" Like Farhat, she takes issue with Lowry's essay on the exhibition, arguing that Lowry "managed to reduce his discussion and analysis of so-called 'contemporary Islamic art' to only those who avoided the subject of politics all together ... [my] conclusion was then that either Mr. Lowry had a distaste for political content in art, or that by avoiding discussion of political artists, he was avoiding political discussion altogether."⁴⁴⁸ Neshat also discusses these concerns in the panel *Meditations on Truths*. In this panel, she discussed her criticisms and expanded on her rationale for them. While expressing her admiration for Daftari, Neshat remarks that "the question of the relationship between Islamic culture and what the artists have to say becomes very critical" and points out the ever-more important need for discourse and debate, stating that it is this freedom of expression which has led to her choice

⁴⁴⁶Tyler Green, "MoMA Keeps the Walls Clean; Islamic Show Sans Politics," *The New York Observer*, April 2, 2006, accessed February 13, 2011.

<http://www.observer.com/node/38636>

⁴⁴⁷Green, "MoMA Keeps the Walls Clean."

⁴⁴⁸Green, "MoMA Keeps the Walls Clean."

to live in the United States.⁴⁴⁹ She encourages the MoMA to foster this type of debate, and raises an additional criticism, commenting on the exhibition's title. To Neshat, *Without Boundary* implies that artists and people coming from the "East" are desperately trying to cross into or blur boundaries with the West, rather than vice versa. Neshat feels that the title does not imply a fair cultural interchange. For Neshat, the notions of boundary and maintaining her identity are very important. She argues that differences should be celebrated, rather than subsumed under a false sense of hybridity wherein the West is eventually idealized. In this, Neshat observes the traditional Orientalist binary where the superiority of the West and the rational is implied, with the rest of the world playing the part of the barbaric Other.⁴⁵⁰

Analysis

Many of the critiques levelled against *Without Boundary* arose from what critics saw as shortcomings in the MoMA's curatorial strategy. As mentioned, many of the critics, reviewers and artists engaging with the exhibition were particularly disturbed by *Without Boundary*'s apparent suppression of political messages in the work and lack of discussion of the social and political context that influenced the artists. This exhibition functions as an example of the conflicts Bruce R. Ferguson discusses in "Exhibition Rhetorics." Many of the artists represented in *Without Boundary* felt that the messages and intention they were trying to convey through their works had been minimized. Rather, it was the MoMA's own rhetoric and material speech that dominated. Ferguson describes the entire make-up of an exhibition, from the wall colouring

⁴⁴⁹ SR, 2006.24, MoMA Archives, NY.

⁴⁵⁰ SR, 2006.24, MoMA Archives, NY.

to the didactic panels as a “strategic system of representations.”⁴⁵¹ In the case of *Without Boundary*, the silence in the didactic panels is, to paraphrase Ferguson, as important as what is stated. Ferguson argues that there is an ideological plan to all exhibitions, as the institution subtly tries to influence viewers to one perspective or another. It can be argued that *Without Boundary*, with its focus on the formal and its apparent diminishment and deflection of politics, tries to encourage a universalizing perspective of art in line with the Modernist ideals conventionally advanced by the MoMA. Ferguson’s theory attests to this, stating that exhibitions are an expression of the ideology and opinions of institutions, which subsequently contributes to how the artworks themselves are understood. *Without Boundary*, in Ferguson’s terms, is acting out a normality on the works represented in the exhibition, trying to fit them into an established socio-cultural context – in this case a Western framework of art history that privileges the formal in modern and contemporary art, while avoiding engagement with a sensitive political situation that may have real-world consequences for the institution, such as loss of funding. Following Ferguson, it is important to ask: To whom and for whom are they speaking?⁴⁵² As demonstrated by the critiques levelled at *Without Boundary* by prominent artists, the exhibition is not always speaking for them. As for whom it speaks to, the subsuming of politics and the emphasis on formal characteristics and traditional culture implies that *Without Boundary* is addressing the conventional MoMA audience.

In *Civilizing Rituals*, Carol Duncan addresses the lack of political engagement in many modern art museums, writing that they “rarely if at all acknowledge a moral-political self. Moreover, their programs aggressively devalue the objective world as a stage for significant or gratifying human effort. Even when “political” art is exhibited, the framing ambience of the

⁴⁵¹ Ferguson, 178.

⁴⁵² Ferguson, 183.

museum insists on its meaning as “art,” often with such emphasis that other meanings fade.”⁴⁵³ This is distinctly the case in *Without Boundary*. Daftari’s analyses in the catalogue, despite ostensibly addressing identity and religion as well as the formal, primarily discuss artist techniques and the aesthetic qualities of the work, focusing on iconography and tradition rather than political implication. Duncan relates curatorial choices such as these to what she believes are “conservative historical narratives”⁴⁵⁴ inherent in modern art museums, relating it to her main thesis concerning the museum as ritual space. Duncan argues that modern museums participate in “the construction of a ritual self that finds meaning and identity not in relation to history, community, or questions of morality but by renouncing such concerns and seeking after something or some place beyond – inner reaches of the irrational or mystical mind, fantasies of the primitive, or some other, “natural,” ahistorical realm that can be entered only individually.”⁴⁵⁵

However well this ritual construction may work for MoMA’s teleological narrative of Modernism, when contemporary postcolonial art is introduced into the institution, curatorial strategies must necessarily change to accommodate the realities of contemporaneity. Terry Smith argues that contemporary art under the postcolonial turn is art that exists in the world, implying an interaction between personal and political realities and artistic practice – key features in an age characterized by globalization and decolonization. Exhibitions are the medium in which this debate is staged and this productive tension explored. The characteristics of contemporaneity manifest in the works in *Without Boundary* – those working within Smith’s paradigm of ‘passages between cultures’ - are in conflict within the universalizing impulses of the curation of the exhibition. *Without Boundary* overtly rejects the notion of ‘difference’ between West and East as a framework for interpretation, a strategy underlined by the very title

⁴⁵³ Duncan, 130.

⁴⁵⁴ Duncan, 103.

⁴⁵⁵ Duncan, 130.

of the exhibition. However, I argue that paradoxically while the MoMA appears to focus on negating difference, the exhibition in effect underscores it. In short, the artists become trapped in Olu Oguibe's "Culture Game." The focus on 'traditions' of the Islamic world in the exhibition implicitly ties the very contemporary practices of the artists to older traditions. Although the "Islamic" artists within the exhibition no longer live in their countries of origin, *Without Boundary* connects their work primarily to those societies rather than the ones they are currently living in. The curatorial strategies of the exhibition place the artists into paradigms of art that reference their cultural origins, which has the effect of essentializing their artistic practice. Non-"Islamic" artists Bill Viola and Mike Kelley, included in the exhibition at the last minute, are likely represented in the exhibition in order to offset interpretations such as this.⁴⁵⁶ However, their inclusion reinforces notions that there is something essentially common to Islamic cultures, represented in the work of these artists by traditions of carpet-making and Sufi religious practices. Kelley and Viola reference Islamic traditions – obviously, there are indeed "boundaries" as to what sort of work was included in the exhibition, boundaries that imply that certain cultural references must be made by the artists.

In her article "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror," Jessica Winegar directly addresses what she sees as the shortcomings of *Without Boundary*. As referred to in the Introduction to this thesis, Winegar comments on what she sees as the fetishizing of female artists in the exhibition, which not only reinforces Orientalist notions of the Middle Eastern woman, but also implies a "critique of Muslim gender relations along with a promotion of Islam's non-threatening side."⁴⁵⁷ She argues that *Without Boundary* focuses on female artists and works that discuss gender because "work celebrating the sexuality of Middle Eastern Muslim

⁴⁵⁶ Interestingly, *Primitivism in Twentieth-Century Art* also featured several contemporary Western artists whose work had "primitive" aspects

⁴⁵⁷ Winegar, "The Humanity Game," 670

women is desirable because it is dependent on the idea that Islam should be critiqued for oppressing women and denying them their “natural” sexual humanity.”⁴⁵⁸ Winegar argues that *Without Boundary* positions contemporary Middle Eastern artists in the ‘Humanity Game,’ in which they must always demonstrate that they are “human” through artistic practice focusing on certain concerns. According to Winegar, Middle Eastern art judged “good,” and fit for exhibition in Western institutions, is that which “emphasizes past Islamic achievements, benign religiosity, and critique of contemporary Islam.”⁴⁵⁹ In keeping with this framework, *Without Boundary* suppresses work and interpretations thereof that might be outside of dominant societal paradigms and conceptions about the role of artists in the Middle East. Through the curatorial framework, the political statements of the artists are stripped of their power, either through a focus on certain “acceptable” politics (such as gender relations in the region) or by foregoing them altogether. In her article, Winegar describes a discussion she had with a group of male Muslim visitors to *Without Boundary*. The men expressed concerns similar to those outlined by Winegar, wondering if *Without Boundary*’s framing of contemporary Middle Eastern art in terms of non-political, secular hybridity was the only way to have it shown and appreciated by a Western audience.⁴⁶⁰ Winegar argues that this has an ideological basis: “the discourses of art as an expression of humanity, and of art as an effective medium for achieving secular freedom, align with certain national interests, which include the extension of U.S. economic and political influence in (or occupation of) the region, and the creation of particular Muslim subjects.”⁴⁶¹ As demonstrated in my analysis of *Word Into Art*, institutions can and do negotiate the “humanity game” by emphasizing the personal and acknowledging the political in the works of artists. In the case of

⁴⁵⁸ Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 671

⁴⁵⁹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 671

⁴⁶⁰ Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 670

⁴⁶¹ Winegar, “The Humanity Game,” 661

Without Boundary, however, I argue that this discourse of humanity reproduces conventional framings and stereotypes of the Middle East, which are only emphasized by the exclusions and submissions in exhibitions such as this.

Indeed, the MoMA's discourse surrounding the exhibition often inadvertently reveals the continuing influence of Orientalism, despite the exhibition's stated intention to disrupt boundaries and stereotypical constructions of identity.⁴⁶² In his description of the "conflict of values" faced by artists in the exhibition, Lowry writes: "Caught between the tensions of Islam and modernity, Europe and the Middle East, freedom of expression and communal values, faith and secularity, the artists in "Without Boundary" tend to be sceptical of religion, politics, and social mores."⁴⁶³ This statement betrays characteristics of Orientalist thought as described by Edward Said. By implying that Islam and modernity are in opposition, Lowry reinforces notions of the Middle East as a barbaric place, whose past glories are eclipsed by contemporary backwardness. By positioning Europe against the Middle East, Lowry invokes a clash-of-civilizations rhetoric that has permeated Western discussions of the region for centuries, while continuing these conflicts to the present day. Interestingly, even here Lowry does not mention American involvement in the region, which one could argue is a much more contemporary and fruitful field for artistic exploration. The rest of Lowry's statement similarly uses conventional binaries of 'East' and 'West,' implying that freedom of expression and secularism are characteristically Western (specifically post-Enlightenment) values, while communal values (a characterization which implicitly negates the preeminence of the individual, as touted by Enlightenment thinkers) and "faith," are implicitly Eastern and in opposition. Although Lowry

⁴⁶² In light of exhibitions such as *Without Boundary*, the MoMA's emphasis on "disruption" seems to be a reflection of modernism's focus on the "shock of the new," institutionalized and made historical through inclusion in the MoMA, rather than an intent to disrupt or challenge political perceptions or conceptions of art

⁴⁶³ Lowry, "Gained in Translation "

does not specify, his mention of ‘faith’ implies that Islam is a source of tension for the artists – a statement which may be true, but still relies on Orientalist constructions of the religion as suppressive and monolithic. As Winegar describes, *Without Boundary*’s suppression of politics and decision to fit the artists into paradigms which underline their essential ‘humanity’ (a characteristic which American artists are not called upon to prove) is partially based on Orientalist constructions of the Middle East. Taken together with the subtle invocation of stereotypes in the region in Lowry’s statement, *Without Boundary*, despite the intentions of the curator and institution, is revealed to be not quite freed from these conventions as it is presented to be.

Conclusion

The Museum of Modern Art in New York City, arguably the most influential collection of modern and contemporary art in the Western world, staged *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* as a loan show. The works chosen by curator Fereshteh Daftari were contemporary pieces of diverse media, and the artists were mostly émigrés from the so-called ‘Islamic’ world (in practice, largely the Middle East). The exhibition framed the work of these artists in terms of negotiating with artistic traditions of the Islamic world and disrupting boundaries of culture and identity. The reviews of the exhibition were highly mixed. While the works were roundly admired, criticism was levelled at the institution. The most frequent critique of *Without Boundary* was that it decontextualized the work of the artists with regards to political statements. Even artists represented in the show, such as Shirin Neshat and Emily Jacir, publicly criticized this decision. Carol Duncan argues that this suppression of politics is characteristic of the modern art museum. By emphasizing formal characteristics and downplaying controversial

elements of the work, the MoMA reinforced their dominant narrative of modernist conceptions of art while also responding to societal and political pressures inherent in being a public institution in the United States after September 11, 2001. *Without Boundary's* focus on minimizing politics ironically foregrounds essentialist notions of a singular Middle Eastern 'Islamic' identity. The rhetoric of the exhibition thereby suppresses the voices of the artists, implicating them in both the "culture" and "humanity" games, and even bearing marks of Orientalist discourse as described by Edward Said.

INTERLUDE:

Shahzia Sikander, *Perilous Order* (1997)

Shahzia Sikander was born in Lahore, Pakistan in 1969 and now lives and works in New York City. Trained in Pakistan and at the Rhode Island School of Design, Sikander specializes in miniature painting, in both Indian and Persian styles. Her pieces are widely collected, and along with being featured in the *Without Boundary* exhibition, have been purchased by institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art. Her work explores the medium of miniatures, painting contemporary motifs and expanding the form into new media, through video installations and the enlargement of traditionally tiny images to wall-size, creating intricate multimedia murals. Sikander was one of the most-lauded artists in *Without Boundary. Perilous Order* (1997), not only graced the cover of the catalogue, but eight other pieces including miniatures such as *Pillars of Pleasure* (2001), works from the abstract series *51 Ways of Looking* (2004) and the animated film *Dissonance to Detour* (2005) featured in the exhibition. Homi Bhabha's catalogue essay "Another Country" also devotes space to Sikander's works and artistic practice.

Perilous Order embodies many of the concerns that appear to arise from Sikander's work. In the centre of the piece is a miniature portrait of a figure who appears to be a Mughal royal, inside an oval frame. Emerging from the frame, which is surrounded by intricate floral and geometric patterns reminiscent of traditional Islamic decoration, are four nude female figures who interact with the male figure through gaze and touch. The female figures extend beyond the confines of the space that contains the male, reaching into the green marbled surface surrounding the frame. A regular series of dots covers the surface of the entire painting, and in the centre, a vaguely human silhouette, a chimera of the roots of a tree, the lower half of a female body, and hair-like tendrils, translucently covers the central figures.

Sikander's miniatures engage in a process of bringing a stereotypically traditional art form into dialogue with the contemporary. According to Jessica Hough, Sikander's "exploration and engagement with these works honors the tradition and impacts the way in which we see the history of miniature painting and the world it depicts."⁴⁶⁴ The male figure in the centre of *Perilous Order* is a portrait of a friend of Sikander's,⁴⁶⁵ while the silhouette, in its abstraction, refers to the detailed miniatures underneath while remaining completely separate. In his essay "On Global Memory," Homi Bhabha writes that the shadowy abstraction alters the viewer's interpretation of the centre portrait, as the presence of the Mughal prince "now develops an ambiguous layered profile and appears uncannily feminised...Sikander's spectral female free-form blurs the spatial geometry and disrupts the decorative design that frames the miniature."⁴⁶⁶ This disrupting of traditional forms of the miniature is an integral part of Sikander's artistic practice. In an interview with Ian Berry for a 2004 exhibition catalogue entitled *Nemesis*, the artist states that: "My interest was and still is to create a dialogue with a traditional form – how to use tradition while engaging in a transformative task."⁴⁶⁷ Bhabha argues that this engagement with tradition is characteristic of much post-colonial contemporary art, stating that, "[in] an age in which the global world picture is increasingly identified with the digital impulse of acceleration and immediacy.... many artists today resort to slower traditions of manufacture.... Meanwhile, some combine these traditions with more contemporary processes."⁴⁶⁸ *Perilous Order* also makes reference to Modernism in the form of the repeating series of dots that cover the entire painting. Sean Kissane argues that "Sikander's application is full of pathos as these

⁴⁶⁴ Jessica Hough, "Nemesis" in *Nemesis*, ed. Ian Berry (Saratoga Springs: Tang Teaching and Art Museum, 2004), 69

⁴⁶⁵⁴⁶⁵ Sean Kissane, "Shahzia Sikander," in *Shahzia Sikander*, ed. Sean Kissane (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007), 30

⁴⁶⁶ Bhabha, "On Global Memory," 56

⁴⁶⁷ Berry, *Nemesis* 6

⁴⁶⁸ Bhabha, "On Global Memory," 50

modernist dots ruin the painstakingly constructed paintings underneath and obliterate the scenes depicted within them; and by extension, the very tradition of miniature painting itself. Sikander presents the viewer with two apparently binary or conflicting artistic movements – Modernism versus the Traditional.”⁴⁶⁹ However, I argue that the tension between Modernism and miniature painting in *Perilous Order* is not necessarily ruinous; rather, it contemporizes the form by drawing in references from multiple cultures and time periods. Homi Bhabha’s suggestion that the interaction between the two is rather a “conversation between the thematic revision of the Mogul form and the polka dot repetitions of late Modernism,” underlines the ongoing communication between formal conventions that appears in Sikander’s work.⁴⁷⁰ Sikander is an example of what Bhabha terms a “diasporic artist,” whose “immersion in the history of the present consists of a deep engagement not only with the mimesis of the global world picture but with the way in which their very materials of manufacture are implicated in the memories of time and the histories of form.”⁴⁷¹ By contrasting apparently disparate formal styles, Sikander creates a dialogue across time and place.

Earlier in the same essay, Bhabha writes that “Sikander revives the debased format of the Islamic miniature by interleaving its traditional compositional structure-‘the linear interplay of...various forms on the surface of the painting’-with a palimpsestical layering of other representational surfaces that have a Modernist, Postmodernist or Animationist provenance.”⁴⁷² In the interview for the *Nemesis* catalogue, Sikander states that the practice of layering is foundational to her artistic practice: “...layering is the medium because with every addition it alters perception, every time the process provides another way too look at the same

⁴⁶⁹ Kissane, 31.

⁴⁷⁰ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 56.

⁴⁷¹ Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 50.

⁴⁷² Bhabha, “On Global Memory,” 51.

thing...Conceptual layering is always the focus.”⁴⁷³ By layering the figures, Sikander distorts meaning and shies away from easy interpretation. Indeed, as Fereshteh Daftari states in the *Without Boundary* catalogue, “[for] Sikander these layers of ideas, or thought processes, create “open-ended possibilities.””⁴⁷⁴

As Daftari writes, the figures that surround the Mughal prince are from Hindu mythology, specifically “*gopis*, worshippers of Krishna, derived from a miniature of the Basohli school, which flourished in northern India during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.”⁴⁷⁵ The Mughal era in the Indian subcontinent was one influenced by a variety of cultural traditions, including “Afghans, Persians and Hindu Rajputs.”⁴⁷⁶ Mughal miniatures are synthetic in style, influenced by many parts of the Middle East as well as Europe, and the style and output of the paintings changed with the ruling court.⁴⁷⁷ Indeed, Mughal art and architecture “achieved a unique identity remarkable in both refinement and execution, a synthesis of the indigenous with the traditions of Isfahan and Tabriz.”⁴⁷⁸ Sikander, through her use of imagery that arises from both Muslim and Hindu culture in the Indian subcontinent, addresses these issues of cultural interaction as well as of gender. The *gopis* are a recurring motif in Sikander’s art, appearing not only as realized figures, but also as abstracted figures and in later animated works. Sikander states that, for her, “Symbols, icons, and images are not automatically about one thing or one way of reading.”⁴⁷⁹ As a symbol, the *gopis* function on multiple levels, one of which is,

⁴⁷³ Shahzia Sikander and Ian Berry, “A Dialogue with Shahzia Sikander,” in *Nemesis*, ed Ian Berry (Saratoga Springs: Tang Teaching and Art Museum, 2004), 12.

⁴⁷⁴ Daftari, 15

⁴⁷⁵ Daftari, 14

⁴⁷⁶ Phillipa Vaughan, “Indian Subcontinent From Sultanate to Mughal Empire,” in *Islam Art and Architecture*, ed Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Koenigswinter Tandem, 2004), 460

⁴⁷⁷ Vaughan, 485

⁴⁷⁸ Vaughan, 463.

⁴⁷⁹ Sikander and Berry, 10-11

according to Sikander, “to use humor to address gender and power hierarchies”⁴⁸⁰ Traditionally, the *gopis* are “essentially nameless figures whose identity is defined in relation to Krishna”⁴⁸¹ In *Perilous Order*, the *gopis* are still orbiting around a central male figure – however, in this case it is the figure of a Muslim ruler rather than a Hindu god The Mughal prince does not interact with the *gopis* at all Instead, according to Sean Kissane, “he gazes into the distance unmindful of their beauty He is unheeding, unhearing, rooted in his self-contemplation”⁴⁸² Through these figures, Sikander “teases the boundaries imposed by time, gender, religion, and culture”⁴⁸³ In the *Without Boundary* catalogue, Bhabha argues that Sikander’s paintings “actually interrogate the borders between Islam and Hinduism, whose iconography the artist samples, and between the narrow stereotypes and broad creativity operative here”⁴⁸⁴ Kissane agrees, stating that Sikander expands on the interactions between the *gopis* and the courtier to create a metaphor which “[encompasses] the geopolitical borders of India/Pakistan, religious mores Hindu/Muslim/Christian, or art-historical definitions Traditional/Modernist Here Sikander’s imagery transcends the spiritual or metaphoric and enters the realm of the overtly political”⁴⁸⁵ Through engagement with theories of deconstruction, and involvement in identity politics, specifically those of postcolonial identity and gender relations, Sikander states that she, “began to see my identity as being fluid, something in flux,” which is perhaps reflected in the multiple levels of interpretation available to this work⁴⁸⁶ Sikander states that she uses Derridean deconstruction as a basis for much of her work “I saw my work in connection to notions like west/east, white/black, white/brown, modern/tradition, presence/absence, beginning/end, and

⁴⁸⁰ Sikander and Berry, 15

⁴⁸¹ Hough, 59

⁴⁸² Kissane, 30

⁴⁸³ Sikander and Berry, 5

⁴⁸⁴ Bhabha, “Another Country,” 130

⁴⁸⁵ Kissane, 30

⁴⁸⁶ Sikander and Berry, 8

conscious/unconscious. My desire to question established hierarchies, such as purity and authenticity, was informed by applying the logic of deconstruction.”⁴⁸⁷ Sikander’s interrogative, deconstructive impulse is visible in the interactions of form, figures and metaphors in *Perilous Order*.

Sikander affirms that personal experience and politics are vital to her work, stating: “My work has always been in response to my lived experience, providing me with a space of concern, or a space of expression...I try to engage with very specific issues that may resonate with others, and thus exist in our larger social consciousness, without suggesting answers. I am never interested in providing a conclusion.”⁴⁸⁸ For Sikander, the personal aspect of her art is important to its interpretation, especially as it interacts with formal and contemporary concerns. She says:

My works are a combination of overlapping commentaries on lived experiences, art history and pop culture. When art is used as a tool for transgression, it can become material for questioning – more than material for mere contemplation. Art for me is mostly experience; it is not necessarily about politics, feminism or religion. I think that boundaries do exist, be they physical, emotional, geographical, cultural or psychological. My role as an artist is not about being political, but to point at the shifting nature of such boundaries.⁴⁸⁹

It is these shifting boundaries, in discourses of religion, gender and art practice that *Perilous Order* confronts and aestheticises.

⁴⁸⁷ Sikander and Berry, 7.

⁴⁸⁸ Sikander and Berry, 19.

⁴⁸⁹ Sikander and Berry, 17.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how contemporary Middle Eastern art is exhibited in major Western art institutions. Taking as its material of study two exhibitions staged in 2006--*Word Into Art: New Art from the Middle East*, which was organized by the British Museum, and *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*, which ran at the Museum of Modern Art (New York)--my study explores contemporary art, contemporaneity and postcolonialism in the art institution. As described in the introductory chapter, sales and exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art have increased exponentially over the last decade. Situating the two exhibitions that form the basis of my study within the context of the market and larger exhibitionary trends, I also introduced various caveats to the discussion, particularly concerning the use of the terms "Middle Eastern" and "Islamic" arts. Throughout my thesis I have used both of these terms, while acknowledging their problematic nature and the many implications and interpretations implied through their use.

I have drawn on three areas as a framework for this research. I looked at the implications of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and postcolonial theory arising in the aftermath of this seminal text, most especially the work of Homi K. Bhabha. Then, I explored the interaction between postcolonial theory and contemporary art theory. Terry Smith's concept of contemporaneity was provided the foundation for this discussion, and a section of his article "Contemporary Art and Contemporaneity," gives this thesis its title. "Passages Between Cultures," the aforementioned section, introduces the concept of the postcolonial turn, an idea that Smith expands on in his book *What Is Contemporary Art?* Pulling these areas of scholarship together, I looked at how other scholars addressed the intersection between postcolonial reality and contemporary art, focusing especially on the work of Olu Oguibe. His 2004 collection of essays, *The Culture*

Game, introduces an important theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of the exhibitions performed in Chapters Two and Three. My first chapter, wherein I described how my project would pull on these theoretical concepts, also drew on the work of Jessica Winegar, one of the few scholars to directly engage with contemporary Middle Eastern art and its political implications. Her concept of the “humanity game,” a notion that parallels Oguibe’s, was also integral to my analyses. In order to provide grounding for my study of *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* as exhibitions, I drew on scholarship concerning the “New Museology,” including that of Carol Duncan. My main focus, however, was Bruce W. Ferguson’s idea of “exhibition rhetoric,” in which he discusses how one can look at exhibitions in order to determine who is ‘speaking’ through them, and parse out what ‘voice’ they represent.

In Chapter Two, I engaged directly with the first exhibition. *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East* was held at the British Museum in 2006. Curated by Venetia Porter, this exhibition drew on the Department of the Middle East’s collection of contemporary and modern works from the region, primarily on paper, that dealt with the interpretation of the written word. The exhibition, divided into four main themes, “A Sacred Script,” “Literature and Art,” “Deconstructing the Word,” and “History, Identity and Politics,” featured the works of artists from around the region. I divided my analysis of *Word Into Art* into four sections (General Information, Layout and Events, Reception and Analysis). I drew on various primary and secondary source material, including interviews with Venetia Porter and Stuart Frost, Director of Interpretation at the British Museum, floor plans, visitor response reports, installation photographs, the catalogue, and reviews of the exhibition. My research found that critical and visitor response to the exhibition was positive, due in large part to the preponderance of contextual information that added insight into the lives and works of the artists. My subsequent

analysis, which applied the theoretical models delineated in my first chapter, found that the British Museum's emphasis on description and information (a characteristic of Universal museums) engendered a productive multivocality in the exhibition. The staging of the exhibition in an institution associated with Britain's colonial past represented an incorporation of performative aspects of society into the pedagogical apparatus of the British Museum. Indeed, the voices of the artists were extremely well-represented in the exhibition, which allowed another perspective of the Middle East, different from that generally represented in the media of war and destruction, to play out, acting on the British Museum's mandate of civic responsibility and engagement.

Chapter Three addressed the 2006 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*. This loan show, curated by Fereshteh Daftari, brought together works of some of the best known contemporary Middle Eastern artists, and explored them in terms of their relationship or non-relationship to an "Islamic" identity. Along with fifteen artists of Middle Eastern background, the exhibition also featured two American artists working with traditionally Islamic materials and motifs in order to interrogate what makes contemporary art practice "Islamic." My analysis drew on the wide body of press response to the exhibition, as well as archival material including sound recordings and installation photographs. The Museum of Modern Art's tendency to subvert political implications in artworks in order to fit them into formalist conceptions which make up the backbone of the institution's theoretical model are clearly evident in *Without Boundary*. The material speech and rhetoric of the MoMA are implicitly underlined by the curatorial choices in the exhibition, fitting the works into the Modernist model of art history favoured by the institution. The choice to play down the political implications of the artists' work ironically threatens to essentialize their practice as tied to

tradition and conventional conceptions of the Middle East. My investigation of the exhibition and the surrounding discourse found that through this disregard for politics and emphasis on formal qualities, *Without Boundary* advanced the Modernist conceptions of art history closely tied to the MoMA, and inadvertently reinforced stereotypical understandings of the Middle East.

Interspersed in between chapters of this thesis are what I have entitled ‘Interludes,’ drawing on a model set out by Jessica Winegar in her book *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*. These interludes, in which I closely study of five works by four artists featured in *Word Into Art* and *Without Boundary* were intended to provide an arena of engagement with artwork not offered by the larger objects of study of my thesis. In analyzing these works, I drew on the same theoretical models outlined in the first chapter, directly applying them to works of art and demonstrating the imbrications of postcolonialism and contemporary art in the works of Shirin Neshat, Emily Jacir, Shahzia Sikander and Laila Shawa.

My analysis of the two exhibitions has led me to several conclusions. The British Museum and the Museum of Modern Art present two very different ways of engaging with contemporary Middle Eastern art. Overall, I believe that the approach taken by the British Museum is more fruitful in the long run. By engaging directly with the artist and with contemporary political issues, it not only provides important background information for Western viewers not necessarily familiar with the cultural paradigms evident in the work, but also promotes cross-cultural understanding, vital in this continuing atmosphere of mistrust and tension. By avoiding political references both in the exhibition and in discursive material surrounding *Without Boundary*, the MoMA failed to acknowledge key aspects of the works, futilely attempting to remove the presence that political realities have in postcolonial contemporary art.

In order to engage with these two exhibitions, my research necessarily drew on the three discrete theoretical models outlined above. This thesis underlines the importance of interdisciplinarity in studies of contemporary art exhibitions. Throughout my project, I have sought to demonstrate the benefits of using multiple theoretical models in analyzing exhibitions. My interdisciplinary model, informed by discussions of contemporaneity, the “new museology” and postcolonial theories, has helped me in reframing discussions of exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art at major institutions in the West. I argue that exhibitions as an area of study are particularly important for contemporary art. They are not only the arena in which artists and curators engage the public. Following Terry Smith’s notion of the “postcolonial turn” in contemporary art, exhibitions act as a vital place to consider the politics of representation.

My study also underlines the continuing legacy of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In addition to the many works of postcolonial theory that draw on and critique Said’s work, his analysis of Western constructions of the Middle East outlined in *Orientalism* remains in many ways key to dissecting contemporary representations of contemporary Middle Eastern art. Curators actively work to challenge stereotypical notions of the region, responding to many of the tropes outlined by Said in *Orientalism*. Yet, the pervasive nature of these constructions can lead to their inadvertent and implicit reiteration.

The groundwork laid by this study leads to several areas of further research, including analyses of the other types of exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art described in the Introduction, as well as a focused exploration of the role auctions and the market play in increasing the demand for contemporary Middle Eastern art and how this, in turn, affects exhibitions. There is particular need for further studies focusing more deeply than I was able to do so in the space afforded by this thesis on the political implications of exhibitions and their

place in society. It is vitally important to consider these exhibitions in terms of their context. As ideological entities, exhibitions reflect and perpetrate certain political messages of the institution and of the larger cultural framework, and it is important to expand and explicate these meanings.

In addition, it is my hope that the research performed for this thesis can prove practically useful for institutions seeking to stage exhibitions of contemporary Middle Eastern art. I consciously chose to critique the MoMA and the British Museum, as these major institutions act as vanguards for curatorial practice in many other museums and galleries worldwide. The institutions are influential in their choice of subject matter and style of exhibition, giving validity to the content they display and providing models of exhibitionary practices. The MoMA and the British Museum also receive huge numbers of visitors, and the messages of their exhibitions are transmitted to large sectors of the museum-going public. As it is important for institutions maintain a conscious awareness of the post-colonial implications of the discourse surrounding contemporary Middle Eastern art, it is my hope that my study underlines how vital it is that institutions consider the real-life implications of ostensibly theoretical issues relating to postcolonialism, contemporary art and museology in their exhibitionary practice.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. The Grand Hall of the British Museum, with sculptures installed for *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*
Courtesy of the Department of Exhibitions, British Museum

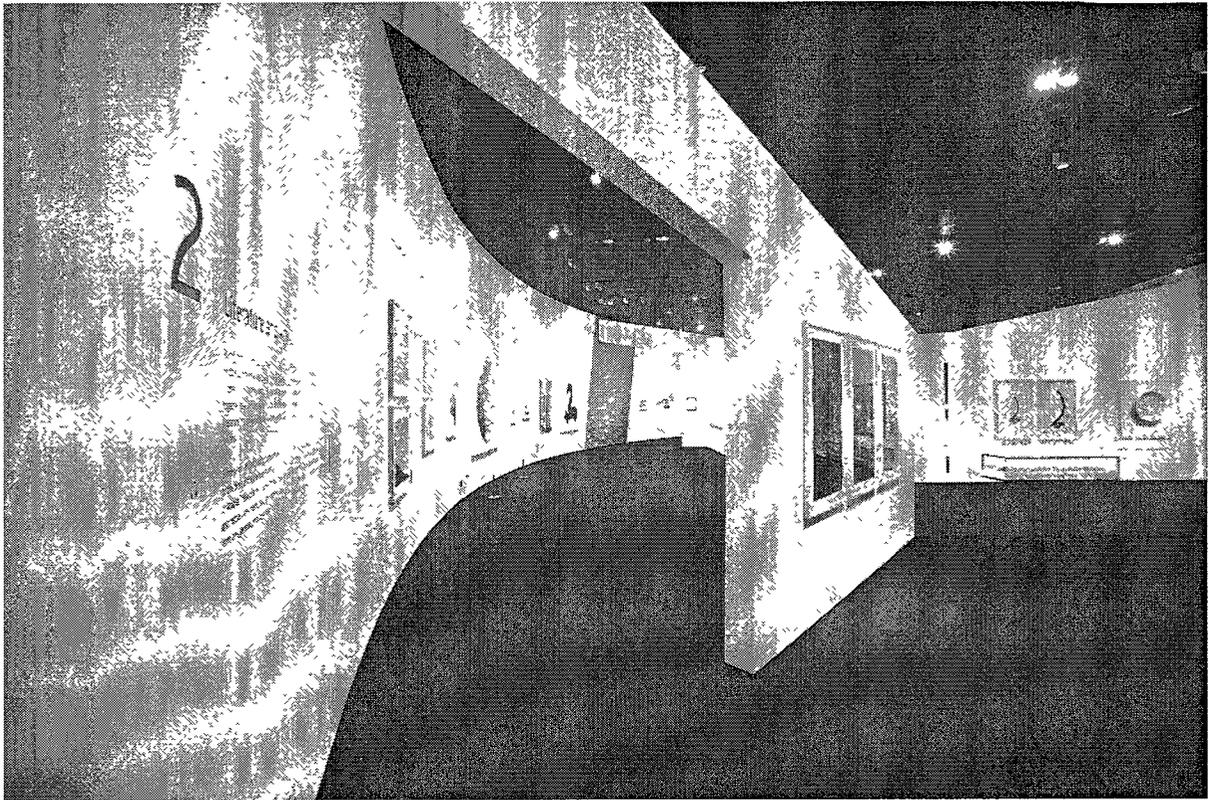


Figure 2. Installation photograph, *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*
Courtesy of the Department of Exhibitions, British Museum

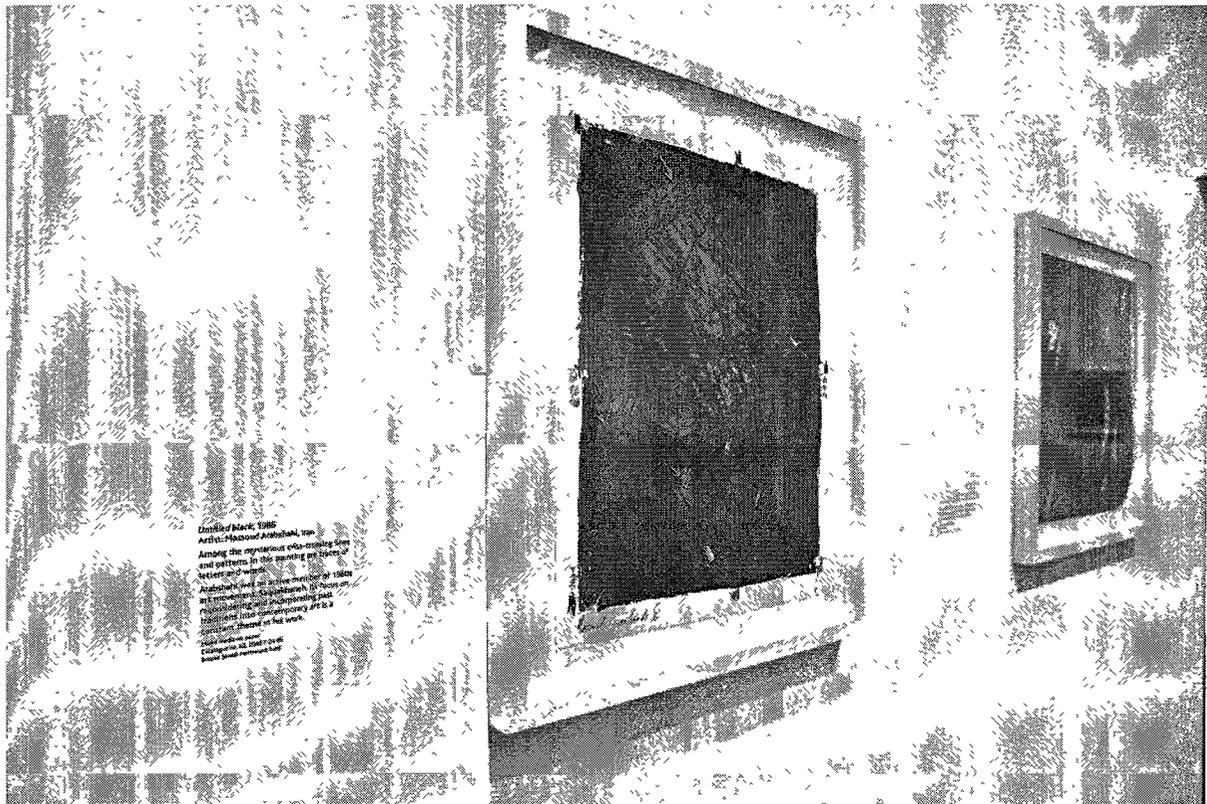


Figure 3. Artworks displayed with accompanying text panels, *Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*
Courtesy of the Department of Exhibitions, British Museum



Figure 4. Installation view, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*
The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

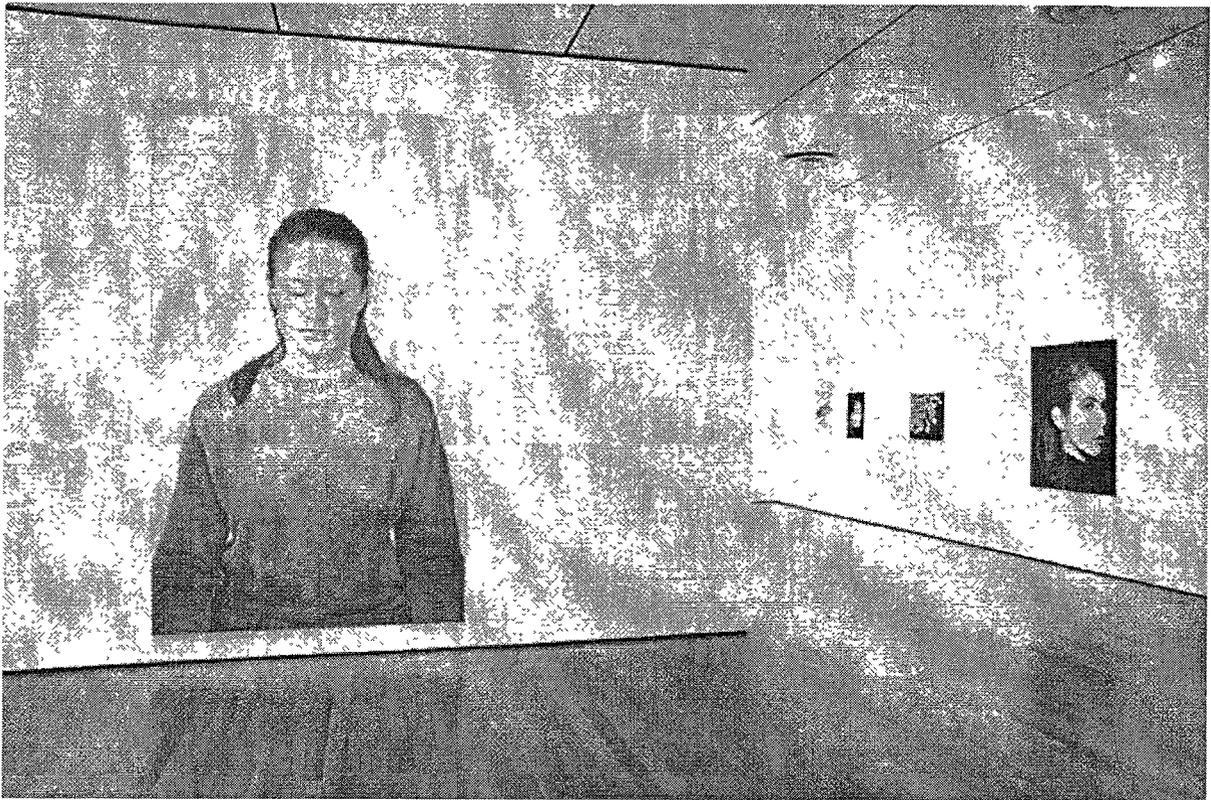


Figure 5. Installation view, *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking*
The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

APPENDIX : List of Works in Exhibitions

Word Into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East **British Museum, London, May 18 – September 2 2006**

Dia al-Azzawi, *Blessed Tigris*, 2006, sculpture
Wasma'a Chorbachi, *Untitled*, 1991, porcelain dish
Charles-Hossein Zenderoudi, *Untitled*, 1986, silkscreen on paper
Ghani Alani, *Untitled*, c. 1990, blue and red inks on hand-coloured paper
Osman Waqialla, *Kaf ha ya ayn sad*, 1980, ink and gold on vellum laid down on cream-coloured paper
Nassar Mansour, *Kun*, 2002, ink and gold on paper
Fou'ad Kouichi Honda, *Untitled*, 2004, three calligraphies, black ink on coloured grounds
Ahmed Moustafa, *The heart of sincerity*, 1978, silkscreen on paper
Ahmed Moustafa, *The attributes of divine perfection*, 2000, oil and watercolour on paper
Haji Noor Deen Mi Guanjiang, *Ya rahim*, 2000, ink on paper
Kamal Boullata, *Nur 'ala nur*, 1982, silkscreen on paper
Samir al-Sayegn, *Allah*, 1996, silkscreen on paper
Mounceer al-Shaarani, *By their fruits you shall know them*, 1993, Gouache and ink on paper
Suad al-Attar, *Inspiration from a poem*, 1999, hand-coloured soft-ground etching and aquatint
Ghani Alani, *Untitled*, 1990s, black ink on paper
Hassan Massoudy, *Untitled*, 1995, coloured pigments on paper
Hassan Massoudy, *Untitled*, 1982, etching
Ali Omar Ermes, *Harf al-kaf (Brushwork in Maghribi)*, 1991, black ink on paper
Ali Omar Ermes, *Shadda*, 1980, watercolour and old on paper
Jila Peacock, *Ten Poems from Hafez*, 2004, hand-made book
Farhad Moshiri, *Drunken lover*, 2003, oil on canvas
Shirin Neshat, *Offered Eyes*, 1993, black and white gelatine print with ink
Etel Adnan, *Nahar Mubarak (Blessed day)*, 1990, Japanese fold-out book
Kamal Boullata, *Beginnings*, 1992, hand-made book
Dia al-Azzawi, *Adonis*, 1990, original gouache and hand coloured lithographs
Ghassan Ghaib, *Al-Mumis al-'amya*, 2000, bound book
Rachid Koraichi, *L'enfant jazz*, 1998, unbound book
Abdullah Benanteur, *Birds die in Galilee*, 2001, unbound book
Mohammed al-Shammarey, *Mural*, 2006, book
Shafic Abboud, Dia al-Azzawi and Mohammed Omar Khalil, *Homage to Tawfiq Sayegh, Khalil Hawi and Salah Abd al-Sabour*, 1988, set of 3 lithographs and poems
Sina Atta, *The Grey Years*, 2002, oil on paper
Satta Hashem, *O misfortunate land*, 2001, ink and white pigment on parchment
Wijdan, *Rashm I*, 2003, watercolour, china inks and liquid gold on paper
Hassan Massoudy, *Untitled*, 2003, coloured pigments on paper
Nazar Yahya, *Al-Waqfa*, 2005, hand-made book
Shirazeh Houshiary, *Round dance*, 1992, etching on paper
Mustafa Ja'far, *Ya kulla kulli*, 2005, ink on paper
Kamal Boullata, *Ana al-haqq*, 1983, silkscreen on paper
Sabiha al Khemir, *The birds choose their spokesman*, 1993-4, ink on paper

Nja Mahdaoui, *La volupte d'en mourir: conte d'Ali ibn Bakkar et de Shams al-Nahar*, 1992, silkscreens

Mahida Omar, *Untitled*, 1978, mixed media on board

Shakir Hassan al-Said, *Al-Hasud la yasud (The envious shall not prevail)*, 1979, acrylic on wood

Mohammed Muhridin, *Untitled*, 1990, gouache and collage on paper

Dia al-Azzawi, *Oriental scene*, 1986, mixed media, acrylic and foam board

Rafa al-Nasiri, *Untitled*, 1989, etching with aquatint on paper

Rashad Selim, *Ayn and om tonalities, Marsh eye series*, 1988, 5 monotype offset prints

Mahmoud Hammad, *Untitled*, 1985, oil on canvas

Fateh al-Moudarres, *Untitled*, 1966 (?), 2 gouaches on wooden board

Hussein Madi, *Alphabet*, 1994, lithograph on paper

Lassaad Metoui, *Untitled*, 2005, black ink on paper

Muhammed Ehsai, *Untitled*, c. 1990s, coloured paints on board

Abdul Quadir al-Raes, *Untitled*, 2004, watercolour on paper

Parviz Tanavoli, *Heech in a cage*, 2005, bronze

Salah Faisal al-Ali, *Untitled*, 1981, silkscreen on paper

Siah Armajani, *Letter 1960*, 1960, ink and sealing wax on cloth

Farhad Moshiri, *3Y19D*, 2004, oil on canvas

Wijdan, *Calligraphic abstraction*, 1993, mixed media on paper

Jacob El-Hanani, *Three kav*, 1997, ink on paper

Malihch Afnan, *Not Pahlavi*, c. 1990, mixed media on paper

Malilch Afnan, *Veiled threats*, 2005, ink on paper overlaid with gauze

Mahmoud Hamadani, *Untitled*, 1999, ink on paper

Michal Rovner, *Notebook 2*, 2004, video installation

Golnaz Fathi, *Untitled*, no date, oil on canvas

Massoud Arabshahi, *Untitled black*, 1986, mixed media on black

Nja Mahdaoui, *Untitled*, 1984, gold and ink on parchment

Farid Belkahia, *Le regard du Soufi (The glance of the Sufi)*, 1994, wood and parchment painted with natural pigments

Farid Belkahia, *Procession*, 1995, wood and parchment painted with natural pigments

Khaled Ben Slimane, *Untitled*, 1988, ceramic plates painted and glazed

Rachid Koraichi, *Untitled*, 1988, painted silk banner

Iman Abdullah Mahmud, *Ritual signs II*, 1999, coloured pigments on paper mounted on card

Faisal Samra, *Text-body*, 2002, oil, pigments, henna and gold leaf, dry clay and wire-mesh

Khosrow Hassanzadeh, *I'm in love*, 1990, watercolour and pastel on paper

Aneh Mohammed Tatari, *Husayn, the martyr par excellence*, 1998, mixed media on paper

Bahman Jalali, *Image of imaginations*, 2002, photograph

Malekeh Nayiny, *Three uncles; and Mom and Hamoush*, 1997-98, digital images

Shadi Ghadirian, *Untitled*, 1998, photograph, silver bromide print

Nasser Palangi, *Untitled*, 1999 collage

Dia al-Azzawi, *Homage to Baghdad*, 1982, boxed set of 10 lithographs

Maysaloun Faraj, *History in ruins*, 2005, earthstone and oxides with raffia

Walid Siti, *Moonlight*, 1988, woodcut on Japanese rice paper

Satta Hashem, *Gulf war diary*, 1991, book, ink on paper

Kareem Risan, *Uranium civilization*, 2001, unbound book

Salam Khedher, *Intahat al-harb (The war is over)*, 1992, silkscreen on paper

Said Farhan, *Uncle Najib's suitcase*, 1999, mixed media on canvas
 Kareem Risan, *Untitled*, 2002, folding book
 Chant Avedissian, *Umm Kulthum's greatest hits*, 1990s, recycled board, pigments and gum Arabic
 Chant Avedissian, *King Farouk and Queen Nazli*, 1990s, 2 stencils, pigments and gum Arabic on recycled cardboard
 Sabah Naim, *Cairo Faces*, 2005, painted photograph on canvas and newspaper
 Mohammed Abla, *No More Killing*, 2004, oil on canvas
 Youssef Nabil, *Self-portrait, Madrid*, 2002, photograph, hand-coloured gelatine silver print
 Aref el-Rayyess, *The road to peace: images of the Lebanese civil war*, 1979, bound book
 Muhammed Rawas, *Beirut revisited*, 1989, lithograph on paper
 Walid Raad, *The truth will be known when the last witness is dead*, 2004, printed book, Atlas Group vol. 1, the Fakhouri file
 Youssef Abdelke, *Untitled*, 1992, pastels and collage on paper
 Laila Shawa, *Children of war, children of peace*, 1995, silkscreen on canvas on two parts
 Ahmed Mater al-Ziad, *X-ray*, 2003, mixed media and x-ray film
 Laila Shawa, *Hands of Fatima*, 1989, oil and acrylic on canvas

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking

The Museum of Modern Art, New York, February 26 – May 22, 2006

Shirazeh Houshiary, *Fine Frenzy*, 2004, black and white Aquacryl, white pencil and ink on canvas
 Shirin Neshat, *Untitled*, 1996, RC print and ink
 Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996, RC print and ink
 Kutlug Ataman, *World (no.1)*, 2003, video installation
 Kutlug Ataman, *Beautiful (no. 2)*, 2003, video installation
 Rachid Koraichi, *Salome*, 1993, gold and indigo handwoven silk
 Ghada Amer, *The Definition of Love according to Le Petit Robert*, 1993, embroidery and gel on canvas
 Shahzia Sikander, *Dissonance to Detour*, 2005, animation
 Shahzia Sikander, *Perilous Order*, 1997, vegetable pigment, dry pigment, watercolour and tea water on paper
 Shahzia Sikander, *Pleasure Pillars*, 2001, watercolour, dry pigment, vegetable colour, tea and ink on wasli paper
 Shahzia Sikander, *Web*, 2002, watercolour, tea and ink on wasli paper
 Shahzia Sikander, #2 from the series 51 Ways of Looking, 2004, graphite on paper
 Shahzia Sikander, #3 from the series 51 Ways of Looking, 2004, graphite on paper
 Shahzia Sikander, #12 from the series 51 Ways of Looking, 2004, graphite on paper
 Shahzia Sikander, #24 from the series 51 Ways of Looking, 2004, graphite on paper
 Raqib Shaw, *The Garden of Earthly Delights III*, 2003, mixed media on board, three panels
 Mike Kelley, *Untitled*, 1996-97, hand-woven silk
 Mona Hatoum, *Prayer Mat*, 1995, brass pins, brass compass, canvas and glue
 Shirana Shahbazi, [*Woman-02-2003*], 2003, c-print on aluminum
 Shirana Shahbazi, [*Farsh-01-2004*], 2004, hand-knotted wool and silk carpet
 Shirana Shahbazi, [*Farsh-08-2004*], 2004, hand-knotted wool and silk carpet

Shirana Shahbazi, *[Farsh-11-2005]*, 2005, hand-knotted wool and silk carpet
Jananne Al-Ani, *Untitled I and II*, 1996, two gelatin silver prints
Mona Hatoum, *Keffieh*, 1993-99, human hair on cotton
Ghada Amer, *Eight Women in Black and White*, 2004, acrylic, embroidery and gel medium on canvas
Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, 2001, ink on paper
Emily Jacir, *Ramallah/New York*, 2004-2005, two-channel video installation on DVD
Shirin Neshat, *The Last Word*, 2003, gelatin silver print
The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, *Civilizationally, We Do Not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves*, 2003, twenty-four framed archival ink-jet prints with accompanying wall text
Kutlug Ataman, *99 Names*, 2002, five-screen video installation
Y.Z. Kami, *Untitled*, 2004-2005, oil on linen
Y.Z. Kami, *Untitled*, 2004-2005, oil on linen
Bill Viola, *Surrender*, 2001, colour video diptych on two plasma displays mounted vertically on wall
Shirazeh Houshiary and Pip Horne, *White Shadow*, 2005, anodized aluminum