INTRODUCTION
WHITHER THE SPIRITUAL? RETHINKING SECULARISM'S LEGACY IN POST-OTTOMAN ART

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This dossier seeks to pinpoint hazards emerging on the globally redrawn map of art and culture. It was conceived to expose and navigate the mines laid when the ostensibly methodologically secular discourse of art history turns to art made outside Euro-American cultural centers and thought to be out of sync with Euro-American modernity.[1] As commonly approached, the pinnacle of *that* modernity indexes a period roughly coincident with what one of us has referred to as the "decades of decolonization" to avoid reaffirming the Eurocentrism inherent to terming the period 'post-war'.[2] Spatially, our map focuses on territories that labored (and are still laboring) to decolonize from European interventions. Simultaneously, the populations on this map have rebuilt lives and networks in the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate, and, amidst administration by new military-economic-religious complexes. An anecdote from a conference in which one of us participated in the weeks prior to this dossier's finalization testifies to the timeliness, if not urgency, of our project.

Titled "Concrete Global!" by its German-speaking curators, Anke Kempkes and Luisa Hesse, the conference (and exhibition which it accompanied) meant to identify a body of globally dispersed art practices characterized by a predilection for geometric form and logic, known in its most famous iteration in Latin America as *concretismo*.[3] It was an interesting gambit: to take a form most concretely—

1- This dossier takes inspiration as well from Wendy Shaw's noting the falsity of art history's secularism, in that the latter draws heavily—as do most of the Humanist disciplines—from European Christian norms. Wendy Shaw M. K, "The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse," *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 1–34. P. 6. Accessed June 21, 2021. https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2. See also, Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1993).

2- Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945-1962* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press), 3.

3- Anke Kempkes, untitled curatorial statement for *Concrete Global!* exhibition at the Museum im Kulturspeicher, Würzburg, Germany, (10/25-26/2022), citing Mari Carmen Ramirez, "The Necessity of Concreteness: A View from the (Global?) South," in *Postwar: Art between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945-1965,* eds., Okwui Enwezor, Katy Seigel, and Ulrich Wilmes (Munich: Haus der Kunst and Prestel, 2016), 490-495.

no pun intended—identified with the South to reorganize global production outside of the normative networks of northern primacy. The curators enjoined participants to ground their interventions in the "necessity of concreteness," the better to confront unwarranted Hegelian legacies in the historiography and theorizing of late mid-20th century art. Boldly, Kempkes and Hesse also compelled participants to acknowledge, in the same concreteness, a spirit of "awakening" that energized newly post-colonial or decolonial societies across the world.[4] In doing so, their project proffered a radical framework to conceptualize form and spirit. And yet, we can't help but notice, it also surfaced some familiar flattenings. Given our goal of learning from art how to understand our world, we recount the following anecdote as merely a most recent example among many small but cumulative hesitations in scholarship to which we have contributed and see as still growing.

For example, Iftikhar Dadi, an artist and a widely respected scholar of Pakistani modernism, argued that artists in the *Concrete Global!* exhibition, including especially Anwar Jalal Shemza and Rasheed Araeen, laboured against hierarchy, distinction, and perfection as "symbol(s) of absolute power." Against "absolute" symbols, their artwork provided formalist vehicles for equality, humility, and unification that could be both aesthetic and social. Yet Dadi emphasized that the inspirational source for their strongly identity-asserting art practice was neither Cartesian-based abstraction nor so-called Islamic art; for, while they rejected the former with the patterning of the latter, nothing about the latter indicated or compelled any spiritual embrace. Shemza and Araeen's work, no matter its form or formal antecedents (laden with a hefty heritage), evidenced "not an art that is religious," but "emerged from people living in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa," without channelling cosmologies or attendant commitments.[5] Dadi explicitly countered the examples he shared to the misnomer of "Islamic art," which takes objects not made towards a category of art and allows them into museums as "art" because they come from Islamic communities or patrons or practices. Likewise, these pieces made by people of Muslim upbringing were more than art and not well summarized by the adjective, "Islamic." Nor were they mimics of Western modernisms. Speaking dispassionately, he established at once such art's independence from *and* correspondence to Mondrian, Malevich, and other like-minded peers on the 20th century train to secularity and civic responsibility: In other words, exactly what the aforementioned methodologically secular approaches to the study of modernity describe (or prescribe?) as the condition of being modern.

To such pronouncements, we—an art historian and a cultural anthropologist—take notice. Look how non-western aesthetic and intellectual legacies come to produce artists who engage merely in matters of form, style, and perhaps

4- Kempkes, op. cit.
5- Notes taken during conference.

even content, regardless of sect or piety, or other local cultural concerns. In heralding his points and the proof to evidence them, Dadi mobilized the vocabulary of pragmatic materialism: "logical," "non-affective," "non-symbolic" "commonalities," to describe an art "already abstract" by its erudite, arid nature. If for some, the same forms derive from Islamic ontologies of matter or with reference to traditions of mapping, seeing, and imagining not manifest in Western epistemologies or linguistic formulations, in the Concrete conference they became gridded structures and interlocking lines *tout court*. Peer, yet independent, art conjoins in a kind of secularity that belongs to—in such associative comparisons—Johannes Fabian's category of "mundane time." That is to say, defined not chronologically but by virtue of its periodicity.[6] And as Fabian has noted of anthropology that engages its subjects through periods such as "primitive," "classical," or "traditional," the standard (i.e. western, metropolitan definition) always prevails in such comparisons. Herein lies the long-held logic Avinoam Shalem espies requiring Islamic Art Historians to define Islamic art as traditional, folklorist, religious: essentially a non-art that, by virtue of its periodicity, cannot exist coevally in the modern or contemporary moments.[7]

(WESTERN) MODERNITY'S (NON-WESTERN) MIRRORS

Is this the cost of globalizing modernity? Of creating aesthetic categories like the 'global modern'? Must we inevitably erase place and faith, or for that matter the capaciousness of different vocabularies to describe aesthetic experiences, so as to ensure that the 'pre-modern' and 'provincial' not sully such a (presumably desirable) category as 'the modern'? When pressed to reconsider whether even an inkling of the spiritual infused the body of geometrically inspired abstraction he discussed, Dadi noted that the "artist makes from experience, what shaped you growing up, [what you] study." Still, he also signalled the "multiple genealogies" that end up corralling such influences, thereby reasserting the primacy of worldly factors — from art styles to host country racism — for appreciating Araeen and Shemza's art. Regarding Araeen specifically, Dadi averred that the artist's turn to the formal language of abstraction in order to advance ideals of equality and social justice spoke equally to Islamic virtues. In other words, as he thought out loud in our small conference setting, he prioritized Araeen's political ambitions in relationship to the demands of contemporary sociality and the expectation

6- Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 22-23. It is in this light that we view repeated assertions that Arabic mis-defines "modernity" with its "loose," "vague" use of *hadatha* and *al-hadith*. See, by way of example, Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 4, 203n4. While we appreciate the clarity such moves seek, we cannot overlook the differences between words, suggestive of categories but ambiguously defining them, and human thought processes. C.f. The discussion of *hadatha* and *al-hadith* by Tarek El-Ariss, *Trials of Modernity: Literary Affects and the New Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

7- Avinoam Shalem, "What Do We Mean When We Say 'Islamic Art'? A Plea for a Critical Rewriting of the History of the Arts of Islam." *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 1–18. Accessed June 15, 2021. https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/. 17.

that arts be "advanced," or invested in heralding "the new." Summarizing why cosmology or spirituality were probably not at play, Dadi observed that Araeen has consistently refused to identified as a "Muslim artist." Good enough. But how to leave room, for example, for the same artist approaching the matter of faith-derived forms in a fall 2022 exhibition of his own work (including earlier ones such as his 1972 geometric *Red Structure* and a series of 2021 paintings titled *Allah*) at Aicon Gallery in New York under the banner, "Islam and Modernism"? Certainly, Dadi agreed, we should allow the venerable artist to change his mind, as a kind of death-bed conversion. Or, is the artist now inviting us to resee what we (and he?) might not have seen before?

Describing the above anecdote only to characterize the thrust of conversations we have both participated in and contributed to, we face the question of the space our scholarship allows religion, spirituality, and cosmology in modern art. We certainly agree that it is within artists' (or anyone's) rights to refuse to be identified by religion, gender, place of birth, residence, sexuality (or any other number of identities). Yet, it is certainly not within our scholarly rights to insist that such disavowals line up neatly with secularity or any western-given opposite to spirituality. Is being not a "Muslim artist" comparable to asserting that one's work inherently by-steps engagement in or learning from approaches to form forged through social and aesthetic forces that include piety? Is art ever limited to the intentions of its makers and, for that matter, are subjects anywhere, ever, in complete control of the complex lineages that inform their thinking, language, and manners of seeing?[8] Sarah Sabban's discussion in this dossier of the reception incurred by Lebanon's Sursock Museum's display of a letter attributed to the Prophet exemplifies the problems ensuing from such elisions. If we assent to labelling global concrete art of Pakistani diaspora as neither 'art,' in the canonical sense, nor really 'Islamic,' as Dadi asserted, are we, scholars of art and its histories, tidying up, in this instance chronologically, the myriad coeval lives of art objects and, furthermore, foreclosing alternative access points to divergence and locality?

We apologize for absconding with Dadi's words, rendering them out of context. In fact, we want to point out the hesitation to bring in cosmologies and spirituality, in which we have also participated. It stems, we suggest, from an insistence on the presumably 'faithless' aspects of these artists' work—i.e., devoid of religious purpose, understanding, or outcome— and reminds us of the

8- This approach to thinking about artists' intentionality underlies Dadi's essay "Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism," in which he offers many historical reasons that artists of the region might have wanted (and by implication why contemporary scholars such as himself might follow suit) to avoid associations with religion. Chief amongst them looms the return of strong-arm governments that employed religious tools for oppression after the 'heroic' period of decolonization. Here, religion becomes *anti-decolonial* in a properly understood "decolonial" context. Iftikhar Dadi, "Rethinking Calligraphic Modernism," in *Discrepant Abstraction*, ed. Kobena Mercer (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press and London: InIVA, 2006): 103-107, passim.

ways in which the study of the visual repeatedly, even if unintentionally, upholds the Western exempla of secular, progressive, and individualistic/agentive as necessary qualifiers of a *global* aesthetic modernism, even as these same studies promise to culminate their history of modernity with a West to East thrust.[9] For instance, recent work on icons made in Jerusalem shows that scholarship which treats photography as the secular, modern replacement of iconography overlooks both a local understanding of photography as "copying," thus akin to icon-making, and a contemporary medium of print icons that involved cropping, story-boarding, and, essentially, photo-shopping.[10]

Faith-based, faith-oriented, or spiritual art more broadly has run out of *time* in the 20th century, it seems, just as art produced towards the parameters of Islamic society appears to have run out of *space* in the globe. It has been modernized out, and moreover, had to be. The very definitions of 'modernity,' especially, colonial modernity, required and require a there/then-ness. Historical, at best, it can only be what is past. And to be modern, it cannot have old blood running in its veins. Or so the story repeatedly goes, from the 1980s "affinities" exhibition joining "the primitive" and "the modern," to the 2017 'Muslim-solidarity art' exhibition that protested Trump's executive order by finding, for example, Iranian, Iraqi, and Sudanese artists enough like Matisse, le Douanier Rousseau, and Picasso to sneak seats in the MoMA's definitive collection of "the modern."[11] Similarly, at *Concrete Global!*, the colorful installations by Araeen, the calligraphically – and often Sufi – inspired street displays of the Casablanca School, and the domestic appurtenances crafted by Saloua Raouda Choucair may come to be appreciated as deserving entrants to 21st century institutions enshrining global modern art, but only upon being flattened, smoothed over, and polished until they shine back reflections of both non-Western *modernity* and aesthetically (i.e. universally) *modern* being. Or, put differently, these artists

9- Such moves aim to reverse the imperial move that has collapsed Islamic world aesthetic production into an appendix for the story of Western Art, even as they perpetuate this very same pattern. See Shalem, *passim*. For an overview of the bundle-approach to defining "art" in non - Western contexts, see also Richard Anderson, *Art in Small-Scale Societies* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 10; and in Western contexts, see Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 3-27.

10- See Nisa Ari, "Spiritual Capital and the Copy," *Arab Studies Journal* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 60-99. Sary Zananiri, "Orthodox Aesthetics: Christianity, Solidarity, and the Secularization of Palestinian Religious Art," lecture for "Art History in Palestine from the 19th century until the late 20th century (1990s) and Its Discourses" conference held at the Palestinian Museum and Birzeit University. Nov. 9, 2022.

11- Both of the exhibitions alluded to here occurred at The MoMA (New York): the one under the title, 'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" September 27, 1984–January 15, 1985; the second, an untitled curatorial intervention into The Alfred H. Barr Painting and Sculpture Galleries initiated on February 3, 2017. For discussion of the two events, see James Clifford. "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 189-214; and Kirsten Scheid, "The MoMA Visa: Modern Art after the Trump Ban," Review of Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Installation Following the Executive Order of January 27, 2017*, posted at H-AMCA: https://networks.h-net.org/node/3444/reviews/192655/scheid-museum-modern-art-installation-following-executive-order. Accessed October 25, 2022.

may enter Post-Ottoman lands and Western cultural institutions as 'makers of art' but not as makers of worldviews.

Moral Activism

In a set of interviews conducted for this dossier, *khatt* artist Samir Sayegh locates his 1970s "return" to calligraphy—a skill he learned as a grade-schooler at a nunnery—in relation to a plastic and literary project of "Arab Modernism" that he experienced as failed. At that time, he felt calligraphy might substantively demonstrate the "unity of authenticity and modernity" that the project of the "Arabs" had otherwise missed. In an effort to escape the Ottoman Sultanate's legacy of "dead-end rules and styles" for lettering, "where at best one might become a master craftsman," Sayegh practices Sufic meditation, knowledge of which he attributes to popular acceptance of Sufi lodges in Beirut. In this practice, he learned to define the artist as "witness and fighter."[12] This nomenclature in turn defines his art as a pious process of prayer *and* also progressive action. It culminates in a "surrender to the reed," to yield control in exchange for the blessing of a higher authenticity and connection with God.[13] This, despite the fact that his work neither privileges spiritual "content" nor allows him to make claims about his own faith. Sayegh's practice complicates Albert Hourani's explanation of Arab nationalism as a linguistic project crafted primarily by Christian Arabs seeking a social position for themselves in the Muslim-majority nations that arose from the ashes of Ottoman society.[14] With Sayegh, we touch on the investment of Christians in a spiritual commonality and not only a linguistic one. Accordingly, might we grapple with a visual *moral activism* in place of our unidimensional canvas-bound thought about art and spirituality? And, for that matter, how might we reconsider the unease with a spiritual motivation for art as politics that Dadi's remarks about Araeen's oeuvre evidenced?

The phrase, "moral activism," comes to us from Pamela G. Smart's work on the Menil Collection as a post-WWII Catholic "affect battery" of sorts.[15] Collecting and staging art that could substantiate and inspire a *sacred modern* infused the Menil collector-couple until the 1970s and their Collection until now with the energies of searching and challenging necessary to accomplish a rapprochement between

12- See Kirsten Scheid, Hala Schoukair and Salah Barakat (this issue) "Interview with Samir Sayegh," in Arabic (October 11, 2022, Beirut), this volume, 117. In the Arabic interview, Sayegh states his preference for '*khatt*'—the Arabic term for 'line', 'font' or 'orthography', but also used interchangeably with 'calligraphy'—since it does not fall into the binary of art/craft which he finds Arab modernists and modernizers fell into by relying too heavily on the notion of 'fine art'.

13- Similarly, see Kirsten Scheid's discussion of Sufic modern artists active in newly independent Lebanon in Kirsten Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects: Art and Sociality from Lebanon, 1920-1950* (Bloomington, IN: Indian University Press, 2022), esp. chapter 4.

14- Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 263-64.

15- Pamela Smart G., *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010).

the sacred and profane.[16] Their storage and emission project counters standard museum practices, which Smart suggests "have surprisingly little interest in aesthetics, [given] their attention [is] focused instead on art as history."[17] Smart similarly indicts anthropology of art, following Alfred Gell, for postulating an artistic agency reliant entirely on its formal ability to secure rational human viewers' compliance within a web of intentionalities.[18] In other words, as with Dadi's handling of form in the art of Araeen and Shemza, anthropologists have sacrificed aesthetics, affect, and belief for the sake of denoting social or institutional processes that become practically interchangeable with their makers.

We appreciate Smart's careful attention to salvaging what anthropology affords art analysis above and beyond taking the facts of lives on the ground seriously. Intensely Christian, actively part of the interwar *renouveau catholique*, the spirituality she identifies at the Menil collection opposed Pope Pius IX's pitting religion "over and against modernity."[19] The Menils, in her view, enacted "progressivist enthusiasm," and not, in fact, Lukacsian "romantic anti-capitalism."[20] (Indeed, how could it be otherwise?) Such complexities register the sensorially activated position of openness that Smart inhabits vis à vis the Menils' present-focused, problem-solving spirituality. We dwell on Smart's study, however, for its *methodological* positioning. Taking spirituality seriously entails plunging into it, as Paul Stoller has argued.[21] The position of academic faith-examiners has generally been antagonistic (even 'impious' in Gell's formulation) to faith, whether Middle Eastern or metropolitan, yet Smart attends to form, practice, and the desire for moral being in her own research experience. We find such collectively-oriented self-repositioning particularly fruitful for modernity's ultimate faith-based Other: the project of *being* Islamic.[22] This is to note the ways that living ethically often, in civic contexts no less, makes reference to a divine regime of truth.

Art Acts

At the time of our call, we suggested, in language that has now been incorporated in the introduction to one of our books, that "critical art historians, inspired by Edward Said's study of Orientalism, have identified the idiosyncratic tropes and criteria by which a certain epistemology of 'Islamic art' operated as the

16- Ibid., 8.
17- Ibid., 12.
18- Ibid., 7.
19- Ibid., 9.
20- Ibid., 7.
21- Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
22- Phrase borrowed from Shahab Ahmed's analysis of Islam as a life-project rather than an institutionalized, rule-based religion. Shahab Ahmed *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). C.f., Asad, Genealogies.

foundational outsider for establishing Western, modern art."[23] While this history is well known, and carefully delineated in Hamed Yousefi's grappling with Oleg Grabar and other historians of Islamic art in the dossier, we also wanted to note that, in this body of thought, two trends have developed: One uses art to produce "an appropriate model of Islam itself."[24] The other, in line with what Nassar Rabbat has analyzed as Christianity's rejection of Islam as a "failed religion," pursues a "decidedly not religious" study that has "shunned religion as an ontological category" entirely.[25] Concurrent with historians laying these two paths for dealing with Islamic art (as the epitome of religious rigidity vis à vis art), decolonizing artistic explorations heralded new ways of being for artists now (intermittently) recognized for their contributions to *global* modernism, including, for example, Saloua Rouada Choucair, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Choukri Mesli, Fateh Moudarres, Jewad Selim, Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian, Shakir Hassan al-Said, Behjat Sadr, Omar Onsi, Kamela Ishaq, Charles Hossein Zenderoudi, Safeya Binzagr, to name *just a few*. Yet the spiritual concerns their work evinces and propagates either soar in our histories to wave authenticity's flag or diverge and submerge from view, lest they pull art out of alignment with modernity's norms. Both historiographical strategies prevent spirituality from spilling notions of 'global modernism'.

As a counter-balance, the dossier we introduce here looks carefully at claims and experiments in modern and contemporary practices of religion—Islam chief amongst them—as they are conducted through, mediated by, or organized in terms of what we are calling *art acts*, by which we denote the intersectional, durational interactions between art works, their material supports, their circulation, their makers (and their makers' biographies), their installation, and their reception.[26] Such interactions, we argue, all trigger new imaginations and productions, be they of self, society, space, or spirit. Regardless of whether or not the art is, in and of itself, Islamic or religious, we cannot divorce it from the milieu in which it is produced even if this does not mean reading it *exclusively* that way.

Here, returning to anthropology might be helpful, despite the above-expressed concerns regarding implied desacralization. If the modern embraces the religious, as per the anthropologist Noah Salomon's writings on the Sudan in this volume, and if it does so, in part, as he argues, in an effort to delineate a political claim of nationalism, does that mean that, as Valerie Gonzalez notes in her commentary essay, that "religion and culture have always fused in this vast part of the

23- Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, 13.

24- Ibid., 14. Quoting, Finbarr Barry Flood, "From the Prophet to Postmodernism: New World Orders and the Ends of Islamic Art," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, edited by Elizabeth Mansfield (New York: Routledge, 2007), 31–53. 43.

25- Nasser Rabbat, "What Is Islamic Architecture Anyway?" *Journal of Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 1–15. Accessed June 15, 2021. https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/. 4

26- Scheid *Fantasmic Objects*, 7, 48, 70-71, *passim*.

world."[27] Or, does art in fact not parse into categories of use or type as much as it encompasses an entire system of concepts, practices, and institutions—what Marcel Mauss famously termed a *total social fact*?[28] Encountering such indivisibility—evidenced in the writings of artists trying to delineate a "new" art or a specifically "Arab" way of understanding art in the 1950s and 60s, such as, for example, in the writings of Choukri Mesli, Saloua Rouda Choucair, or Shakir Hassan al-Said—can we sit with it, be coeval, or fully present to it, and adopt new epistemological norms as we move forward? The distinctions outlined by these authors, amongst others, to describe or prescribe Middle Eastern modernisms ask us to confront the deep coloniality of moves that *include* 'new discoveries' in *the* Canon and attribute their novelty to their being discovered rather than to the different epistemological bedrocks from which they emerge. New times demand new methods, as Salomon (this issue) realizes upon dusting off Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl's revolutionary painting.

We take for example, divergent approaches to the copy (as hinted above), which might be seen as the pinnacle 'other' of modernist originality and its corresponding 'newness'. In true modernist thought, copying or reproducing is the very mechanism by which aura is destroyed.[29] How might the copy in post-Ottoman practices of Palestinian painting come to appear as not just a reproduction (the sum representation of derivativeness) but as a production unto itself were we to allow space for a non-secular or, indeed, a spiritual approach to the study of art? Art historian Nisa Ari argues that Nicola Saig's practice of copying photos from the American Colony, exemplified in his painting, *Nativity* (c. 1920), was committed to an icon-based tradition of honoring divine presence through precise duplication.[30] If photographs embody secularity and scientific rationalism derived from the indexical capture of the "real," and if halo-bearing saints belong to Saig's training with Armenian icon traditions, then what do we make of Saig's photograph-copying, icon-informed paintings from his mature, Interwar period? Onto which parts of the picture do we attach the hashtags "secular," "heritage-preserving," "ecumenical," "national," "modern," etc.? If the biblical scenes copied by Saig also stem from his training in icon painting, might we re- imagine the photographs upon which Saig chose to base them as themselves different kinds of *imaginal* practices: impressions or godly imprints

27- Valerie Gonzalez, "Theorizing the Spiritual-Secular Binary in Modern and Contemporary Art of- and by Artists from- the SWANA Region," this dossier, 142.

28- Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tran. by W. D. Halls, (New York: Norton, 1990), 100-02.

29- Notably, in his argument about the dispersal of art's aura through mechanical means of reproduction and commodification, Benjamin seems to speak in terms of exchange value, not something we could call "experience value." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217-251.

30- ARI "Spiritual Capital," 90-91.

rather than traces of a real world.[31] Did the new, painted work lose or gain spiritual value in the new Palestinian markets? Did a convergence of Byzantine, European, and Levantine traditions of piety pertain? Ironically, when arguing emphatically for the teleological modernity of the Palestinian nation decades later, artist and critic Kamal Boullata took the painting's little lamb (Saig's only major departure from the photographic source) for an index of a purely national (i.e., political and secular) sacrifice, despite Boullata's very own access to Greek-Orthodox iconology which would make the lamb herald a moral rebirth on Palestinians' horizon.[32] In Boullata's reading, there is neither loss nor gain to be made for spirituality.

Being Coeval with Spirituality

Amidst the onslaught of contemporary 'discoveries', we advocate for a reconsideration of dominant art history's secular underpinnings. Both of the commentaries to this dossier face this challenge head on. Still, we owe a brief expansion of what we meant by the 'secular' and secularization above and beyond our call for papers' references to Talal Asad's thought. We asked of ourselves and our contributors, whether or not, given that colonization was an important spur to the thinking about modernity as 'new' and a sign of 'progress', we might cease using categorical novelty in discussions of the modern on non-metropolitan maps. While this would of course entirely eradicate the happily almost-retired arguments about priority and hybridity, we wondered if removing the temporal markers of the 'modern' as equivalent to the 'new' would facilitate our understanding the ways in which religion, as not only practice but also tradition, mode of thought (philosophy), way of life (ontology), and organizer of language (glossary), impacted or fed into conceptualizations of the aesthetic in a specifically decolonial context. We have a hunch that doing so might allow us to sit coevally with the kinds of life forms we easily identify as un-modern (since 'given over to sublimation' and 'mysticism'). For in fact, it is only by sitting on a shared, un-periodized plane, without cordoning off what the modern looks like, that we can open our thinking to the material of our study.

In her commentary, Gonzalez briefly points to a particular kind of secularism that she finds manifest in the work of the Islamicist art historian Wendy Shaw, one of the thinkers we cited in our call for papers. For Gonzalez, Shaw's pointing to

31- On the idea of a "photography in Arabic," see Hannah Feldman, "Not Salt, Light," in Omar Kholeif and Theodor Ringborg, eds., *The Other Side of Silence* Hrair Sarkissian (Stockholm: Bonniers Konstall, and Milan: Lenz, 2021), 135-136. Choucair, mentioned above, wrote in 1951 of this 'real' as superficial, primitive, childish. See Salwa Rawda Shuqayr, "*Kayfa Fahima al-ʿArabī Fann al-Taṣwīr," al-Abḥāth 4, no. 2 (June 1951):* 190–201. A translation, including annotations, was published as "How the Arab Understood Visual Art," *ArtMargins* 4, no. 1 (February 2015): 102–18.

32- The lamb locates the real nativity in Jesus's rebirth, celebrated at Easter. We owe this insight to Elizabeth Hanna who enrolled in "MENA Modern via Art," at the American University of Beirut, spring semester, 2022.

the presumably Christian underpinnings of art historical categories of aesthetics and form evidences its own kind of secular underpinnings, which Gonzalez articulates as an 'anti-Christian' stance, proven for her not only by Shaw's wish to move away from *these specific* secular underpinnings, but also in the violence and horror Shaw attributes to Christian iconology and iconography. So, in Gonzalez's account, even anti-secularist accounts remain circumscribed within the biases of secularist faith and an anti-religious tilt in contemporary thought. From Gonzalez's perspective, such a tilt aligns with an improperly decolonial effort to cleanse Middle Eastern modernity of the kinds of faith-based rule that were, in fact, historical facts.

From surveying the same set of 'facts' regarding faith-based rule, Hamed Yousefi takes a different tack. Drawing from his own research in modern Iranian aesthetics and the historiography of Islamic art as an art historical subfield, Yousefi locates a duality that has pervaded the very concept of what "Islamic art" is since the 1970s. On the one hand, he finds 'Islamic Art', as it is defined by Islamic Art History, which, he notes, assumes the posture of a decidedly secular disciplinarity. On the other hand, Yousefi finds an Islamic Art modeled from within the projects of decolonization and their afterlives *throughout* (and in contradistinction to the periodizing Dadi upholds) the 1970s and into the present. The second concept of Islamic Art corresponds with Islam as a progressive model of an *anti-modernity* that is all the same future-oriented and social (albeit not in a Western framework). In fact, it aims to oppose and counter the oppressive structures of the modern, as imposed by conditions of capital and alienation. Thus, while focused on disciplinary parameters, Yousefi's reading yields necessary space to political realities and aspirations as they came to be defined in postcolonial realities on the ground. Such yielding allows for the common sitting space coevality requires and the undoing of restrictive predetermined theories of what the "modern" is in and of itself.

Our dossier's case studies present just some of the myriad ways in which Islam, Christianity, and the modern might be artfully parsed. In locations ranging from Lebanon to Sudan to Iran, we see Islam and Sufic myth treated as a source material from which wide-ranging practices, studio processes, and exhibitions offer ontologies temporally adrift, neither past nor purely present. Salomon and Sabban alike provoke questions, both historically and methodologically, of the modern nation's reliance upon religious content served to galvanize audiences and ultimately citizens around issues of belonging and relating, in the Sudan and Lebanon respectively. Addressing the Sudanese "School of the One" (Madrasat al-Wāhid) and, in particular, a painting by its founder, Ahmad 'Abd al-'Āl, Saloman argues for the ways in which some artists of the mid-late 1980s approached Islamic theology and tradition as aesthetic objects unto themselves, locating beauty as a means to counter or otherwise redress approaches to Islamic social reconstruction then dominant and, in Saloman's

analysis, "astray." Sabban, in turn, looks to a 1974 exhibition of "Islamic Art," Lebanon's first, at the Nicolas Sursock Museum. Her analysis turns on the ways in which the production of the idea of Islamic Art (as a historical phenomenon) was operationalized in the postcolonial imperative to generate a singular "Lebanese" national identity. Addressing even more contemporary practices in Iran, and the particular aesthetics of art made for gallery exhibition in times of trauma and dislocation, Tromp describes Sufic poetry's fertility for present-day practices of care and community in Rene Saheb's corpus. Here, spiritual tradition lifted from (and perhaps read against) historical and historiographic narrative, as per Yousefi's critique, affords a means to tend to society's broken and discarded detritus, reminding us again of Dadi's concession that Islam professes a way of life and philosophy of ethics, not just a means to be with or of God. Or, Smart's surmisal of a moral activism among art-loving Catholic reformers.

Teaching Unruly Materials

To some degree, the desire to publish thoughts on what we originally described as "the spiritual" in "post-Ottoman" contexts emerged from frustrations we have both experienced while teaching modernism in the Middle East and North Africa, for one of us at Northwestern University, and the other, at the American University of Beirut. For Arabic-reading students in the latter institution, the editorial choices of translation in the primary course textbook, *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, generated heated discussion: Why should the Arabic *al-Sufiyya* translate to "mysticism" (rather than "Sufism"), even if someone had read a bit of László Moholy-Nagy?[33] What kinds of bias and erasure did such motivated translations reveal? Students also questioned the exclusion of a genre, that of Sufic forms based on 'copying' Nature, that they knew to be foundational to practice of modern artistry from having read texts by artist-authors such as Moustapha Farrouk.[34] (And which we hear echoed in Sayegh's discussion of rendering Arabic letters to acknowledge the essential unity of the universe/being.)[35]

At Northwestern University, where art history students and faculty stand theoretically determined to decolonize their research and upend their Eurocentric frameworks, the non-Western forms we encountered in our thinking about a Barjeel exhibition entitled "Arab Abstraction" seemed all-too-quickly and

33- Anneka Lenssen, Sarah Rogers, and Nada Shabout, eds. *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2018), pp. 198, 203-204 (but see 1n202). The issue was initially brought to Scheid's attention at the seminar with English and Art History programs, "Translation and the Syrian Avant-Garde," American University of Beirut, arranged by Hala Auji and featuring Anneka Lenssen. April 28, 2018, Beirut. We also acknowledge Rana Issa's reflections.

34- E.g., Moustapha Farroukh, *"Tali`at al-Fannanin al-Lubnaniyyin"* [The vanguard of Lebanese artists] (lecture, Cénacle Libanais, Beirut, March 28, 1947). Archived material at the American University of Beirut.

35- See the interview with Sayegh in this dossier.

uniformly available to students through categories and vocabularies made available to them by study of art in Euro-American traditions. But when we tried to push beyond these considerations, for example, to consider how principles of 'flatness', or 'purity' failed to account for abstract-appearing paintings from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Morocco, and Iraq, students were frustrated. The secondary literature offered few entry-points to see these images within different formulations of, for example, the real and the imaginary, such as we found in primary sources written by the authors themselves. In short, we found scant models to approach forms that in and of themselves could be *seen* the same way, but which were not always, in fact, so easily rendered universal considering the different symbolic and faith-based understandings of the visual, the god-given, and the real from which they emerged. Chronologies of evolution were similarly rendered undone, and teleologies about discovery and 'newness' fell apart. From the insights we found provided in primary sources, we wondered how questions might be articulated that were less about *pointing to* 'abstraction' per se (as in: confirming the non-representational nature of marks, colors, and forms) then about pondering localized theories of representation that rendered questions of mimesis and allusion null and void. The 'faux amis,' so to speak, of pigment arranged on canvas in what 'look' to be similar compositional strategies might have revealed different ontologies and epistemologies, and yet this possibility was the hardest thing to communicate from outside of a local system of belief or language schema which remains notably absent in the emerging secondary literature about this work, which, for its part, seems more concerned with fitting work into the museums and canons in North America and Europe.

Living Art

We turn to an exception in this discourse: the analyses of the Sudanese artist Ibrahim El Salahi's canvases that art historian Sarah Adams advances.[36] Adams encourages us not to limit our analytic to the formal development of El Salahi's works but, instead, to take on the embodiment his works call upon in their appeal to somatic affect as performative, so as to allow ourselves and a historiographic record to come to "consider the artistic physical experience or creation in both the phenomenological and spiritual sense." In her analysis, Adams focuses on El Salahi's own practice, and the place of prayer within it, as a ritual of passage, noting that El Salahi does ablutions to come to paint, needing to make himself a clean being with and in front of God in his endeavors because, as Adams notes

36- This is not to say there aren't others. Anneka Lenssen's *Beautiful Agitation: Modern Painting and Politics in Syria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020) marks a notable ambition to think about pictorial surface in a strictly local idiom, yet also manages to gloss the significance of spiritualism and other faith-based approaches in applying a formalist social art history that does not depart from canonical method. Kirsten Scheid, "An Art History to Emerge," *Art Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 2021): 118-121.
Sarah Adams, "In my Garment there Is nothing but God: Recent Work by Ibrahim el Salahi," *African Arts* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2006) At link.gale.com/apps/doc/A151046794/AONE?u=anon~2ca97bec&sid=googleScholar&xid=c3a63697. Accessed 5 January 2022. 1.

from her own interviews with the artist, for him and for the co-evals he describes as "us as Muslims, *any* action we do is supposed to be in the name of Allah."[37] For El Salahi, an established star in the expanded canon of mid-century "global modern" art, Adams argues that painting is the "establishment and maintenance of a direct connection between creator and created; even to eliminate the divide between them." In such a model, *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect human) is made through the art, which returns the individual, or the "particle to the whole."[38] This imagining of art as a non-creative but rather divinely originated art challenges western modern ideas of the artist as a singular creator, in charge of his subjectivity (to the degree that it is also formed by sociality and convention). In this model, the artworks themselves are treated as "a living entity," a nucleus or heart that compels the material work's growth and "directs the construction of its own body," much like Choucair's understanding of hers as *living* sculptures, being born and growing continually to reform the whole from which they emerge.[39] These seem to be artworks that demand coevally lingering with them — Artworks, in other words, which may be less *concrete* than the curators of *Concrete Global!* had intended to address! Or, which may direct us towards other ontologies of the concrete and maps of its connectivity.

Thus, we circle back to Dadi and the conference on Concretism across the globe. We have argued that reopening production in the Middle East and North Africa—for example—to avenues provided by the spiritual even as these come into conflict with dominant norms of the modernism to which everyone still wants to lay claim, allows us to appreciate differently the work produced in this time. We have made this argument first from a hunch and then in line with the essays our call for papers summoned. What would it mean now to open the idea of the spiritual to other regions, other religious practices, other ways of locating locality in the precise terms denied it by an ongoing discursive coloniality of the disciplines?

37- Emphasis ours.
38- Adams, 2., *passim*. The same concept is cited by Sayegh in this volume, 114.
39- Adams., 3., Scheid, *Fantasmic Objects*, chap. 6.