without boundary
seventeen ways of looking
The core group of artists represented in *Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking* come from the Islamic world but live for the most part in Europe and the United States. The exhibition addresses the application of the unexamined rubric “Islamic” to these artists—Mona Hatoum, Shirin Neshat, and Shahrzad Sikan- der, for example, who are of Palestinian, Iranian, and Pakistani origin respectively but who have studied in Europe and the United States, live and work in London and New York, and share neither nationality nor religion. The application of a term without clear definition to artists exhibiting in the global mainstream needs closer scrutiny. One might for instance ask: should a work be considered Islamic because it refers to an aesthetic practice such as the craft of carpet-making, or because it is infused with the thinking of the thirteenth-century Persian mystic poet Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi? When the artist is Mike Kelley or Bill Viola, the answer would seem to be in the negative—but what if the artist was born in Beirut or Tehran? In picking and choosing their references, whether inherited, acquired, or absorbed, the artists in *Without Boundary* present such complex and faceted personalities that a polarized mode of thinking—-Islamic or not, Western or not—becomes simplistic.

To make this argument, *Without Boundary* approaches its subject from a variety of perspectives, the first of them formal. One of the classic traditions of Islamic art that have become well-known in the West, for example, is calligraphy; accordingly the show explores works that use text in an attempt to measure their degree of continuity or rupture, revision or subversion, in relation to the calligraphic tradition. It does the same with miniature painting and carpets. In addition to these aesthetic categories associated with Islamic art, the exhibition tunes in to what the artists themselves have to say about identity—and since some would claim that in the context of Islam, one of the world’s major religions, expressions of identity are linked to faith, the final area of investigation is spirituality.

Text versus Calligraphy

Instead of Islamic calligraphy—the aesthetized writing of Arabic script according to certain stylistic canons—the contemporary artists in *Without Boundary* offer us a variety of different kinds of text. Through repetition and erasure, Shahrzad Sikanider’s paintings (front cover) transform a word that she writes on the canvas with a pencil into marks that dissolve into formless abstractions. The script, she tells us, is Arabic, but the identity of the text is not divulged. The kind of thinking in which form or outer appearance is understood as a veil hiding a deeper reality is something Sikanider shares with mystics such as Rumi. Discussion of this artist is incomplete, however, unless it also acknowledges a tradition of abstract painting with mystical aspects, explored by Western artists such as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Agnes Martin. Rachid Koraichi’s playing similarly with ideas of veiling and revealing; the invented script in Salome (fig. 1) hides a coded text about passionate personal relationships, but is set in gold embroidery on a large banner as if it were a public statement. (Only the signature and date are written in the conventional Arabic alphabet and numerals, and these are in reverse.) Public and private come together. Formally the work bears affinities with the Islamic banners of North Africa, which display religious content, but Koraichi’s narrative is secular—even though, in a naming that both refers to a veil and is one, it is named after the Bible story of Salome and her infamous dance. Christian and Islamic references and personal autobiography are inextricably woven in this silk embroidery.

When Ghada Amer was studying at the École des Beaux-Arts in Nice, this Egyptian-born artist defined a teacher’s expectation that she might use Islamic calligraphy in her work. Instead she turned to Roman letters and to French, the language she grew up speaking after moving to France at the age of eleven. The Definition of Love according to Le Petit Robert (fig. 2) spells out in embroidered letters a French dictionary’s definition of love. The choice of the medium of embroidery valorizes what is traditionally considered women’s work, while the thread simulates the drip painting of Abstract Expressionism, feminizing that allegedly male territory.

Both Kutlug Ataman and Shirin Neshat remove writing from its traditional habitat. Ataman’s animations set calligraphy in motion, so that the image and therefore the meaning constantly shift. Also, unlike the tradition he draws from, his text, consisting in these three works of the Turkish words for “beautiful” and “world,” is fully secularized. In this unfolding narrative, a marginal Islamic tradition of calligraphy that morphs into image turns into a metaphor for the moving image, or cinema.

In her own handwriting Neshat inscribes poetry over the surface of photographs, a medium of mechanical reproduction. Having left her native Iran in 1974, as a teenager, Neshat created these works after a return visit there in 1990, sixteen years later—a period in which a revolution had drastically changed the society’s dominant values and norms. In one of the works, Neshat notes the social class newly empowered by the revolution through the image of a veiled woman wearing a gun barrel as an ornament (fig. 3). She inscribes on this photograph a eulogy to martyrdom by the fervently religious contemporary poet Tahereh Saffarzadeh (born 1936). In the other photograph she quotes a poem by a woman of a very different persuasion, the free-spirited Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967), who on the contrary laments people’s lack of care and concern for life. Together these images reflect a diaporic artist’s perception of contradictory forces at work in her native country.

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3. Shirin Neshat. *Born in Quums, Iran. Lives and works in New York, foreachgallery. 1990, RC print and silk x 52 1/2 x 33 1/2 in. (133 x 85 cm), Courtesy the artist and foreachgallery, New York © Shirin Neshat, Photograph: Larry Bell, Courtesy foreachgallery, New York


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from mural painting to carpet weaving. This kind of border-crossing also appears in a carpet by the American artist Mike Kelley (fig. 7), a work that at first glance appears to be the most conventionally Islamic-looking object in the show, and for good reason. It is based on a carpet Kelley found illustrated in the Bulletin of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, which identified it as coming from the Crimean Turkey of the late sixteenth century. Kelly had his version of the carpet handwoven in Iran, but tampered with the original design by changing the background color from red to green of his own Irish background, and by replacing the motifs in the central medallion with Pennsylvania Dutch hex signs. The juxtaposition of Shabbaz and Kelley begs the question why any of these cross-pollinated works should be considered examples of Islamic art.

Just as Kelley personalizes a reference to the Islamic world, Mona Hatoum turns her Prayer Mat (1995) into a meditation on exile. In this mat, a hostile terrain made of pins, is embedded a compass, such as Muslims sometimes use to orient themselves toward Mecca. In the context of Hatoum’s biography—a Palestinian Christian born in Beirut, Lebanon, and living in exile in Europe—the compass poignantly conveys a search for or loss of orientation. On a formal level, in that this geometric floor piece is made of readymade objects, it suggests a critique of Minimalism, a system-based movement that embraced abstract geometry and proscribed referential content. In this respect Hatoum’s approach is close to that of Kelley, whose use of an ornamental handmade object similarly distances him from Minimalism.

Identity in Question

When the artists in Without Boundary tackle identity, they recalibrate the perception of the world with which they are identified. Untitled 1 and II (1996), a photographic installation by the London-based, half-Irish, half-Iraqi artist Jananne Al-Ai, shows five women—herself, her three sisters, and her Irish mother—performing for the camera (fig. 8). For Al-Ai this enactment points out orientalist photography’s dependence on performance, and its inability to convey any truths about the subjects it portrayed. Emily Jacir also reflects the popular perception of Palestinians with a twin installation of scenes from Ramallah and New York that negates the difference between the two cultures commonly asserted by the media (fig. 9).

Amir’s portraits of women contradict expectations as well, rejecting conformity to any dress code. In her embroideries, figure and ground often vie for attention, and the women, even when they disappear into the overall pattern of threads, remain present through the association of this technique with feminine labor. Hatoum exploits the same association in her Kiffah (back cover), in which long strands of women’s hair are embroidered into a kind of scarf worn by Arab men. Among the many layers of meaning
historical motifs. His influence extends to various spiritual masters and poets. In the grand themes they pursue, all three hint at a reality beyond the world of appearances. They proceed with an eye turned inward.

Kami’s compositions of an ordinary man and woman (fig. 12) engaged in meditation treat his subjects with the reverence that old masters painted for saints and sages. He photographed these “quotidian mystics,” as Homi Bhabha calls them, at a mediation center in Vermont. One figure in clear focus and the other slightly blurred, as if to announce his withdrawal, the two together encourage meditation on the flow between presence and absence, impermanence and change.

Houshiary evokes the state of flux through abstraction. White Shadow (fig. 13), a tall tower executed with the British architect Pip Horne, exists between being and not being. The form soars into space only to seem to remove itself and melt into the background as a ghost. This skeletal structure, whose shape recalls the double helix of human genetics, appears to whirl around its axis as if engaged in the same, the mystical Sufi dance. It fuses not only science and spirituality but formal confluences, evoking both modernist sculpture such as Constantin Brancusi’s Endless Column (1917) in Romania and the ninth-century minaret of the Great Mosque in Samarra, Iraq.

Mystical thinking has influenced the American artist Bill Viola as profoundly as it has Kami and Houshiary. Viola considers the poet Rumi a “supreme source of inspiration.” The two figures in his video duplex Surrender (fig 14) bow in each other’s direction until they finally seem to touch—at which point the images dissolve in ripples, allowing us to realize that we have been looking at reflections in water. As Rumi wrote, “He who sees only his own reflection in the water is not a lover.” Viola too searches beyond the reflection.

The exhibition continues in the gallery media on the second floor with a dramatic video installation reconfigured by Ataman for this space. An uncharacteristic work for this Turkish artist, whose documentary-style videos generally record logistics interviews, 99 Names (fig 15) presents a panting, speechless protagonist in a state of self-induced trance. The work, a visceral response to 9/11, is best left open to the viewer’s interpretation.

A widespread, disparate group, the artists in Without Boundary come from Algeria, Egypt, India, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, Palestine, and Turkey. They belong to no school or movement, share no ethnicity or religion. Their commonality lies in their way of revising, subverting, and challenging the aesthetic traditions they deal with and especially in bringing preconceived notions of cultural homogeneity to ruin. Without Boundary highlights personal approaches and idiosyncrasies rather than a single collective difference. Maintaining the freedom to criticize as well as to celebrate, these artists bear the mentality of division and the binary oppositions of present-day politics.

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Department of Painting and Sculpture

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Adult and Academic Programs

Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking
Work by artists who come from the Islamic world raises complex questions, especially when examined within a postcolonial and Western context. In two panels, Home and Away and Meditations on Truths, writers, cultural theorists, and select artists from the exhibition discuss how they review, revise, and subvert received understandings of the Islamic world as well as other experiences that inform their work.

Please check www.moma.org/thinkmodern for an updated list of artists on the panels.

Home and Away
Wednesday, March 8
6:00 p.m.
Titus Theater 2
This panel examines reactions to “home,” diaspora, and the effects of exile. Panelists include: Homi Bhabha, Chair of the Program in History and Literature, Harvard University; Shirin Houshiary, artist; and Shahzia Sikander, artist.

Meditations on Truths
Thursday, May 4
6:00 p.m.
Titus Theater 2
This panel focuses on diverse interpretations of truth. Panelists include the artists Shirin Neshat, Kutlug Ataman, and Walid Raad, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities, Columbia University.

Brown Bag Lunch Lectures
Join us for informal lectures on modern and contemporary art. You may bring your own lunch.
April 3 & 6
12:30-1:15 p.m.
Education Classroom B
Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking
Fereshteh Daftari

*On April 6, sign language interpretation is provided. FM headsets and neck loops for sound amplification are available for all lectures.

Tickets are available at the Information Desk in the Main Lobby of the Museum, and at the Film and Media Desk. Tickets are also available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

MoMAudio: Special Exhibitions
Hear contemporary artists including Jananne Al-Ari, Shirin Neshat, Walid Raad, Raqib Shaw, and Shahzia Sikander speak about aesthetics, identity, and spirituality in relation to their works in the exhibition.

MoMAudio is offered free of charge, courtesy of Bloomberg. MoMAudio is also available for download at www.moma.org/audio.

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