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**The Irreversible Line:**  
**Adornian *Contribution* and *Communication* Through the Influence of Arabic  
Calligraphy in the Video Works of Mona Hatoum and Kutluğ Ataman**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

**The Irreversible Line:**

**Adornian Contribution and Communication Through the Use of the Arabic Script in the Videos of Mona Hatoum and Kutluğ Ataman**

by

**Oylun Albayrak**

**Master of Arts**

in

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This project analyzes the use of the Arabic script in Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988) and Kutluğ Ataman's *Animated Words* (2003) to understand the variety of interpretations made possible to audiences familiar and unfamiliar to Arabic. These artists' roles as Middle Eastern artists working/exhibiting in diaspora is a central issue that defines the variety and distinction between their potential audiences. Some interpretations of these works, in turn, are evaluated through the notions of *contribution* and *over-intentional communication* proposed by Theodor Adorno in his brief essay, "Questions on Intellectual Emigration."

In effect, Hatoum and Ataman's works circumvent the expectations of the Western art market by creating different dimensions of "meaning" inside and outside of language, and, hence, dislocating both the "Eastern" and the "Western" audiences.

To my mother and my father who support me wherever I may roam.

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## Theodor Adorno's *Intellectual Emigrant and the Artists in Diaspora*

Mona Hatoum and Kutluğ Ataman's respective video works *Measures of Distance* (1988) and *Animated Words* (2003) both use the Arabic script as a signifier of their collective and personal memories. This project will try to analyze the use of Arabic as a historically rich cultural motif by these Middle Eastern artists, whose work, is arguably exhibited to mostly a Western audience. The aesthetic, political and theoretical factors that bring about the popularity and notoriety of the adoption of Arabic, within the Western art market, will be studied through the concepts of *contribution* and *communication* that Theodor Adorno proposes in his brief essay, "Questions on Intellectual Emigration."<sup>1</sup>

In "Questions on Intellectual Emigration", Theodor Adorno warns the intellectual migrant against the dangers of *contribution*<sup>2</sup>, a feeling of obligation which may invoke in the emigrant the necessity to conform to the mainstream ideals of their sheltering culture, a sense that "presupposes the merit of the existing order."<sup>3</sup>The assimilating power of a local culture for a diasporic community is a primary factor in the binary tension of the experience of exile<sup>4</sup>; Adorno then encourages the intellectual to maintain their existent critical stance within this new environment, and to avoid delusions of "new beginnings" and "blank slates."<sup>5</sup> In this essay, he also advises the intellectual migrant to express themselves "purely and without ends" without the pressure of *over-intentional communication*.<sup>6</sup> These concepts of *contribution* and *communication* in Adorno's essay will be used here to demonstrate the variables of artistic execution, exhibition and appreciation that face intellectual migrants, in

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<sup>1</sup> Hatoum and Ataman will more often than not be referred to as artists of diaspora insofar as their work is exhibited, viewed and critiqued outside their home countries, of Palestine and Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Questions on Intellectual Emigration," p.159

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 161 The term "sheltering culture" is used in this essay to demonstrate the dominating culture within which an artist is diaspora practices and exhibits their art.

<sup>4</sup> Said names this a *contrapuntal* awareness particular to the state of the exile in "Reflections on Exile."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.160, 164

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

this case as applied to artists of Middle Eastern descent whose “Western” audience may not necessarily be familiar with the artists’ cultures of origin.

The Adornian notion of *Contribution* as a secondary act performed by the “grateful” migrant artist, brings about the question of to whom these artists are contributing to; is it “Western” art of art in general?<sup>7</sup> Contribution is a universal concern in the art world, which catalyzes the search for the authentic and the original work. Unlike local craftsmen devoted to perfecting their trade according to the guidelines of tradition, artists seek out ways to create original works of art. These works are sometimes the result of a truly innovative and/or striking form and philosophy; or the inevitable outcome of a sensation, a controversy. Whatever the reason, the will to contribute to worldwide originality is presupposed in the dissemination of the work on an international level, even though it may be received as unnecessary or inessential within a local market. In the case of the artist in diaspora, reference to ancient cultural traditions, however, can become a means to originality in both form, and subject matter.<sup>8</sup>

In a questioning of the possibility of a global history of art, James Elkins emphasizes the differences between what goes as art history in different countries.<sup>9</sup> These differences can also easily be extended to the discussion of what goes as art in different cultures in the world, by asking the question: “Is art global?” The very need to utilize the term “Global Art” assumes that the notion of “Art” by itself does not necessarily include all art; hence “Global Art” curiously becomes a subcategory of a specific understanding of art, which is defined by usually a Euro-centric and, thus, Orientalist ability to render “art from elsewhere” as

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<sup>7</sup> Following the same logic as feminist art exhibitions signaling utterly un-feminist agendas, the exhibition of the work of artists from countries in the “Islamic” or “Middle Eastern” category which claim at erasing “boundaries” seem to contribute to the same segregationist attitude that sabotages the visibility and the relevance of all minority groups in the art world: blacks, women, homosexuals, immigrants etc. Hence, a discussion of “Male Art” or “White Art” is never the case.

<sup>8</sup> “...For the idea of contribution implies the claim of deliberateness: that one originally feels attracted by a sphere of life and that one wants to prove to oneself and others the right to be accepted into the new circle on account of one’s accomplishment...” Adorno, p.160

<sup>9</sup> “In smaller and developing countries, newspaper art criticism normally serves as art history, so that reviews and exhibition brochures compose the written self-description of the country’s art...” Elkins, p. 5

unequivocally local and lacking in universality. This cultural bias is further fueled by the frequent misuse and abuse of some terms like “post-colonialism”, “trans-nationality” and “multiculturalism” to explain the areas of interest other than Western art practices.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the discussion of an artist of non-Western origin in the Western art market calls for a heavy reliance of the artist’s role as “the other” bridging the gap, translating and, hence, rendering a strange culture relevant by taking part in “Western” art practices. This assumption and labeling of locality and cultural tradition within all non-White Art results from a range of inclinations on the part of the artist, the art market and the audience/critic.<sup>11</sup>

Artists everywhere are affected by their cultural traditions in one way or another; however, the way traditional elements are reinterpreted in contemporary art within “Western” and non-Western contexts differ, as well as the manner in which these elements are conceived and received by their respective audiences.<sup>12</sup> While “Western” artists are expected to divert from or outdo certain aspects of cultural and aesthetic tradition such as religion and narrativity; non-Western artists’ adoption of such elements oftentimes can result in their popularity within the Western art market because of those same traditions. There are several variables that ascertain this Orientalization of non-Western contemporary art that range from contemporary politics to the art economy which control an artist’s popularity, price and theoretical relevance. Indeed, it is unrealistic to consider art as existing outside of time, and, thus, political, financial and theoretical trends that affect its inspiration, execution , and exhibition. These trends consequentially and particularly in the case of the non-Western artist

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.9 additionally, the very same phenomenon results in the devaluation of decorative arts, and the notion of craft.

<sup>11</sup> Here the term “non-White” is used to describe all diasporic art in the West, as well as works by artists of African American and Hispanic descent. The use of tradition in the works of such artists often becomes an integral part of their voice as minorities and is expected relying on their sometimes solely ethnic differences from the “White” artists.

<sup>12</sup> While figurative painting in the Western context may be criticized for the banality of its choice of medium and aesthetic, a painting such as *Typical Iranian Wedding* (2008) by the Iranian artist Rokni Haerizadeh, who lives and works in Iran, can stand out for a Western audience more for its curious subject matter and the mystery of the Arabic script that dominates the work, than for its supposed formal authenticity or originality. This statement is not aimed at questioning the aesthetic validity of the work within a global context, but rather the dynamics that define its reception by the “Western” audience, as currently represented by the Saatchi Gallery in London.

within the Western art market, result in a two-way agreement between the artist and/or artwork, and the audience and/or the art world: that of a self-exoticization, or, in Mary Louise Pratt's terms, an *autoethnography* on the part of the former versus their exoticization or orientalizing by the latter.<sup>13</sup>

If the *purest* form of contemporary art is mainly the combination of the works of artists born and/or work in European and North American capitals of art, then artists like Hatoum, Ataman, and others born outside of Western capitals of art, are marginalized (sometimes in more than a singular manner) as artists from the Middle East working in/with the West. It is this marginalization that may in time call for desperate measures in conveying a message or simply establishing a "worldly" identity in the eyes of critics and audiences alike. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said emphasizes the centrality of culture in the modern imperial experience and states that "cultures assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, for instance, it is the representation of the notion of veil, which is not a part of contemporary Western culture, in Shirin Neshat's *Women of Allah* (1993) photographs, that attracts more attention and sensation than Hatoum's rendition of the paravent in *Grater Divide* (2002); despite the fact that both works reference a universal human need for privacy. Such an imagery as the latter does not reveal itself as a symbol of backwardness in tradition with regards to its integration in Western culture; on the contrary, privacy is seen as an uncompromising aspect of Western individualism. On the other hand, the politically and culturally charged symbol of the veil is immediately met with a premature distance from the Western subject and is viewed as part of the bizarre tradition of the *Other* and, therefore, a signifier for suspicious anonymity or estrangement.

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<sup>13</sup>"I use these terms ["autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression"] to refer to instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that *engage with* the colonizer's own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations" Pratt, 1992, p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p.15

Regarding the question of Adorno's theory on *Communication*, then the two instances noted above then reveals a pattern of equivalence between the degree of political and cultural narration adopted, and the appreciation received by the artists and their works, within the "Western" context. Thus, a carefully balanced dose of estrangement and familiarity expressed through a translatable language that feeds into the West's concern with the non-Western is a prerequisite for the sensational effect with which Middle Eastern contemporary art is publicized to the Western audience in a fashion that recalls the principles of populist journalism.

Adorno's notion of *Communication* implicates a skepticism directed towards cultural translatability. The diasporic artist immersed within their culture may be in a dangerously inclusive position where little if any perspective on their own culture may be possible; hence, the individual may feel the need to refer to outside references in attempt at self-identification or cultural translation. Yet, these references although appearing as generalizing or reductive representations, are often too convenient to ignore. Adorno also implies that a sense of struggle for self-expression by non-Western cultures cause them to succumb to their critical evaluation by Western values.<sup>15</sup> According to Adorno, purity of expression is essential in maintaining the mental and moral integrity of a migrant intellectual.<sup>16</sup> An intentional strife for communication contaminates this purity resulting in a specter of possibilities from self-censorship to misrepresentation. Of course, it would be too utopic to state that pure expression guarantees perfect transcultural communication or that pure expression would, indeed, receive genuine appreciation.

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<sup>15</sup> In its sincerity about the women's situation in a local context, a non-Western feminist pursuit, thus, may appear as a cry for help from the more superior feminist big sisters of the West. On the other hand, the camp and stereotypically charged representations of a culture (the cultural resource of mainstream touristic market) may become dangerously dominant in its representation to the rest of the world as in the case of the Eiffel Tower representing everything French, on a superficial level of information.

<sup>16</sup> "In a world in which everything is communication, in reality only he or she who is not intent on speaking to people speaks to them." Adorno, p.164

The concepts of *Contribution* and *Communication* can thus be considered as instrumental categories through which the fluctuations of contemporary artistic production originating from non-Western countries, its exhibition, and reception can be viewed: whereby Arabic calligraphy concerning language and, therefore, communication being a central theme as used by Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, and Ataman's *Animated Words* can be viewed as a central theme emphasizing the Adornian concept of *Communication*. It is necessary, however, to also consider briefly here the historical development and significance of Arabic calligraphy, as well as the contemporary context in which it has become a recognizably safe cultural symbol of the "Middle East" as recognized by the "Western" discourses.

### **A Background to Arabic Calligraphy**

Koran is the first and foremost influence, with its emphasis on the written word, when it comes to the spread of Arabic calligraphy. While the Arabic script has been known to exist as an administrative language prior to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D., with the codification of the written form as the language of the state, soon the art of calligraphy developed with multiple and highly stylized scripts. The earliest of these styles is the Kufic script, which can be seen on the interior decorations of the most venerable Islamic monument of Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup> Following the Koran Kufic, many styles formed and the spread of the art among different languages of the Near East richened the variety of scripts that all came to be under the name of "Islamic Calligraphy"<sup>18</sup>. There have been numerous changes in the dominant scripts all developing out of Kufic like Nastaliq, Nakshi and Ottoman, which have either replaced or coexisted with one another; but also, the function of calligraphy within the

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<sup>17</sup> Oleg Grabar, "Umayyad Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem," p.52

<sup>18</sup> "Islamic Calligraphy," p.4

“Islamic World” has been multifaceted and ever-changing.<sup>19</sup> While its history remains crucial for any study, here my emphasis is on Arabic Calligraphy’s “iconographic function,” which can be seen as a purveyor of religious messages, but also as part of a political propaganda or, in the contemporary world, as a generalizing symbol or trope for all things Islamic within non-Islamic cultures.<sup>20</sup> These possibilities can also emphasize the secular use of Arabic calligraphy independent of its historically-based Koranic association. Contrary to the generalizing religious association of Arabic Calligraphy, its script is not limited to the Middle East, and majorly Islamic, cultures; but rather extends to Europe, historically known to have been used in Western languages like such as Spanish, Portuguese, Albanian and Serbia-Croatian.<sup>21</sup> This instance further implicates the possible combinations of form, language and context through which the Arabic script, and thus calligraphy, was and still can be manifested.

Calligraphy, as argued by Carl Ernst, is “an art deriving from the [Koranic] revelation as a visual theophany of the divine word,”<sup>22</sup> while others see its emphasis on the written word as characterizing the art of “beautiful writing.”<sup>23</sup> The bond between the word and its visual representation become unbreakable, rendering a solely formal analysis of the image of Arabic calligraphy, the aspect of Arabic calligraphy as used by modern and contemporary artists from the Middle East, irrelevant to the building principles of this aesthetic tradition. The abstraction of Arabic calligraphy renders the “sound image” into a mere image, a line.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This progression is further explained in Yasser Tabaa’s article, “The Transformation of Arabic Writing ...”

<sup>20</sup> Tabaa states in his article that “secular and Qur’anic scripts were subject to totally different calligraphic rules,” p.120

<sup>21</sup> This phenomenon manifests itself in what is called “Aljamiado” as described by O. Hegyi in “Minority and Restricted Uses of the Arabic Alphabet...” as a means of cryptography devised to prevent the content, mostly religious or political but always confidential, from Christian communities by means using the Arabic script to write Spanish.

<sup>22</sup> Ernst. “The Spirit of Islamic Calligraphy,” p.279. Ernst’s article deals with the didactic book by Baba Shah explaining the nature of calligraphy. Baba Shah, a painter and a calligrapher, dwells on the spiritual/symbolic aspect of calligraphy which has a potential of not being interpreted as a strictly Islamic spirituality. (Ernst, p.282) Shah’s vision of calligraphy bears an inevitably ethical dimension, similar to the way Western philosophy has always attached an ethics to art from Plato to Heidegger; whether as an insufficient means of finding truth or as the only representation of Truth.

<sup>23</sup> “Tessalations in Islamic Calligraphy,” p.41

<sup>24</sup> This is demonstrated in such works as, Mediha Umar’s *At the Concert* (1948) and Shirazeh Houshiary’s *Fine Frenzy* (2004). A memorable statement by Ferdinand de Saussure embedded in the minds of philologists reads:

Hence, to the outsider Arabic calligraphy gains the potential to cease to be an art of language but merely an art of abstract lines through which any text or concept is interpretable. To the familiar eye, however, the synesthesia involved in the cognitive aspect of Arabic calligraphy ties thoughts to feelings and content to form. This discourse now has become divided, where one hand, the dominance of the written word over the aesthetic line in this field is emphasized by many scholars; on the other, the contest between form and content in Arabic calligraphy becomes a dominant trope in the majority of musings over its nature by modern and contemporary artists like Umar, Houshiary, Hatoum and Ataman.<sup>25</sup>

On a formal basis, Arabic script and thus calligraphy moves further away from two-dimensional sound imagery in the Saussurian sense by way of the intersecting lines, very similar to the Latin calligraphy. The tracing of the Arabic script moving from right-to-left (forward) and left-to-right (in reverse), in the case of the audience familiar with the Latin-script, and the result of such a fluidity of direction and space almost makes an image of the word in question. And just like an image, the word exists on a plane that creates a third dimension, whether or not that dimension can be experienced by its audience. This phenomenon explains why some scholars who compare Latin typography with Arabic calligraphy find that respectively the two display solidity versus motion.<sup>26</sup> However, this possible formal reading of the image of the Arabic script requires an abandonment of subject matter; otherwise it is harder for the audience familiar with Arabic to read the image in reverse.

The concerns of legibility, a crucial part of the history of Arabic Calligraphy are seen as more dominant in the case of Latin typography, which relies firmly on its spread through

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“The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.” According to Ferdinand de Saussure, “the linguistic sign unites a concept and a sound image” and a sound image, though not fully material but definitely sensory, is more material than a concept. (Saussure in “Nature of the Linguistic Sign”)

<sup>25</sup> John Milner states on the use of words in cubist collages: “The recognition of the object is achieved through a verbal hint that the eye, trained to give words priority, is unable to resist.” “On the Fusion of Verbal and Visual Media,” p.8

<sup>26</sup> Sherry Blankenship, “Cultural Considerations...” p.61

technologies that also shape its script.<sup>27</sup> This binary distinction between the two forms of writing can also be easily dismissed as a Euro-centric instance of “otherization” whereby Arabic Calligraphy comes off as a cryptic script depending on its position, ultimately to its non-reader, as strange. The claim of Arabic calligraphy’s tendency as an aesthetic meditation over legibility thus is only relevant within the “Western” context where a lack of familiarity with Arabic and its history exists.

With this brief introduction, it is now important to turn to the reception of Arabic-Calligraphy-based works of art within an art market dominated by Western audiences which brings into question both *legibility* and *translatability* within visual arts. The variety of the experiences made possible by a work of art are made even more tangible with the introduction of the element of language in a work of art, automatically creating a variety of experiences, which are ultimately based on its prescription of two distinguished types of audience: illiterate vs. literate. These two notions can also easily form various sub-dimensions that are decided by the level of knowledge held by an audience, which provide even more possibilities of expression and experience by a work of art. Surprisingly, in these works, the literary interpretations do not necessarily narrow the possible “meanings” which may be borne from the work; indeed, it allows for a whole new array of experiences for politically, socially or phenomenologically varied audiences. Hence, the question extends the struggle between form and content or aesthetics, and a possible “message” that may be read from the work, to the reciprocity between the work and the audience.

The complexity of the line that complements or attaches itself to the word does not, linguistically speaking, alter its meaning, and this further complicates the competition between form and content, when considering the Arabic script.<sup>28</sup> It is only by assuming that

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<sup>27</sup> According to Yasser Tabaa’s article, the development of Arabic calligraphy shows a tendency towards better legibility.

<sup>28</sup> “Over the course of time they began to plait the long letters and wove them into knot patterns so intricate that one sometimes has the impression that the knots were designed before the text was written” Shimmel, p.7

any written form of a script utilizes form to display its content and, therefore, an immediate dominance of meaning over image occurs. It is only then possible to compare calligraphy to script on the grounds of its seemingly equal treatment of line and sound image.

While this equality works well with the secular realm of Arabic script, it does clash with it when applied to the religious sphere. As such, the Koran, as a central source for the aesthetic and historical development of calligraphy clearly prescribes a dominance and reliability of the written word over the image. This dominance has shaped the development of aesthetics in and of Islamic cultures and it is at this point, that contemporary artists of the Middle East begin to challenge this struggle between form and meaning. After all, if the word of God is the ultimate message, encrypting this message is at once heresy both against religion and this centuries-long tradition.

### **Mona Hatoum and *Measures of Distance***

*Measures of Distance*, a video, is significant as a culmination point of Mona Hatoum's earlier work and as a defining step towards a more abstract and minimal language, both with reference to the representation of the human body, and the choice of medium.<sup>29</sup> The work marks the imaginary line between Hatoum's earlier performance and video works laden with a political and/or personal narrativity, and her later sculptural works and installations, which are deriving from household objects with a growing sensitivity towards a minimalist and surrealist aesthetic. *Measures of Distance* is also significant as it references, for the first time in her oeuvre, Hatoum's familial history. It uses visual and audio footage that are collaged with direct reproductions of private correspondences both in visual and auricular form

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<sup>29</sup> "...for me, it was not only the culmination of all the issue based work I had done up to that point but also the most narrative and the most complex work I have ever made." Hatoum, Interview with Spinelli, p. 138.

between her mother and her. In this way, *Measures of Distance* makes a literal use of the artist's personal documents and, therefore, history, for an audience in the West.<sup>30</sup>

The video, therefore, opens up as a literal and figurative superimposition of Hatoum's personal data. The initial image one sees is a visual excerpt from her correspondences with her mother, which is layered onto a hazy background. The viewer sees this correspondence as lines of a script, which can immediately be recognized as non-Latin, and, which, written on a now transparent but squared paper, fades in and out. But the script, also doubly serves as a curtain between the viewer and what will turn out to be nude photographs of the artist's mother taken while showering in the presence of her daughter. As the initial image in the background and the script on the foreground fade into one another, slowly the silhouette of Hatoum's mother behind the writings becomes discernible. As the images and writings keep changing, the sound-recording of a conversation between the artist and her mother fades in, decipherable as Arabic by the familiar listener. This is followed by Hatoum's calm and collective voice, where she recites a letter from her mother, in English.

This multi-media collage, hence, is constituted by four different layers of information, most of them unavailable to the standard viewer unfamiliar to Arabic, both in its form, and content, because of what can simply be seen as a language barrier. Chronologically, first appears the layer of written words in Arabic over an almost abstract mash of colors in the background. This is followed by the image in the background becoming perceptible as the figure of a woman, and more particularly that of a mother in the shower. At this point, Hatoum introduces the recording their conversation with her mother in Arabic to the work. Finally, Hatoum's voice is heard reciting, in accented English, the letters that appear in front of the viewer. In this video, therefore, multiple stimuli and languages are applied by the artist, which signal the complexity of the artist's multi-lingual and multi-cultural existence. Such a

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<sup>30</sup> As implied, on an immediate level, by the artist's recitation of the letters in English.

multi-lingual voice is achieved thanks to both, the literal co-existence or overlay of the Arabic and English languages, and the variety of simultaneous ways in which language is represented within the video.

*Measures of Distance* is certainly not the only work of Hatoum where there is a reference to Arabic. *Waiting is forbidden* (2006-2008), like *Measures of Distance*, provides the viewer again with a secular use of the Arabic script. The work here consists of a metal sign that reads “Waiting is forbidden” inscribed in both Arabic and its English translation. Hence, two different languages but also two different scripts are juxtaposed to create one image. Additionally, the concept of a sign, also, calls for a sense of law, a rule to follow, or otherwise suffer the consequences. The message is intended and supposed to be as direct as possible. An Anglophone viewer reads: “Waiting is forbidden” and assumes that the Arabic script on top makes the same warning, or vice versa. The viewer is presented with a secular and, yet, fascistic warning that one, surprisingly, could come across anywhere in the world. Yet, with regards to the Palestinian situation, this arresting image is a highly politicized comment by the artist on the territorial interdictions executed by Israeli forces which limit and consider all Palestinian action a potential threat. It is important to note that Hatoum’s own background as one that is marked by multi cultures and languages, such as Arabic, French, and English. Both *Measures of Distance* and *Waiting is forbidden* prescribe the fragmented existence particular to the exile’s condition in the mind of the viewer, through the juxtaposition of two languages belonging to completely different language families, written in scripts that are completely dissimilar; whereby, even the top and bottom parts of the work have to be “read” in opposite directions, due to the nature of these languages.

The secular manner in which the Arabic script is represented by Hatoum is noteworthy, given that the script in question, to an audience unfamiliar with her work, has become the symbolizing element of a totality of the cultures deemed “Islamic.”

Consequentially, one without knowledge of its vast cultural significance may immediately assume the adoption of Arabic script as a sign of reference to Islam, and, therefore, the Koran. The artist's family background, however, born and raised as a Christian Palestinian further questions the cultural biases concerning the representation of the Arabic script. While there is no religious or even Islamic element in *Measures of Distance*; the work, however, accomplishes a representation of the artist's historical and cultural heritage, through the symbolic references between language and identity. What it also succeeds in doing, for the unfamiliar audiences, is the secularization of the representation of the Arabic script, which has become the symbol of the jumbled notion of a "Middle Eastern" culture; and, therefore divorcing its role as solely a religious signifier. With this work Hatoum also manages to touch on social and political conditions that both define her existence and background; also to reflect her mindset, at the time of the work's creation, as a Palestinian artist working in diaspora under the looming reality of the civil war in Lebanon concerned both with local and universal issues, represented in the discussion of gender relations within her family.

Another important point to note in *Measures of Distance*, is that the written text does not necessarily inhabit the realm of calligraphy in its technique and form; yet, it involves an aesthetic quality not only for those audiences that cannot read the script, but also, through its superimposition over the image of the nude mother, for those who can. In this regard, the text forms a veil or, more literally, a shower curtain- an element of obstruction that creates a binary between the public and the private spheres. It is an image that separates us from the private conversation between a mother and her daughter, while it also allows for some form of privacy to a mother whose very act of a private daily ritual has, in this work, become public. It is also noteworthy here that the Arabic script serves to hide the image, controlling its visibility, given the word's precedence over the image in Middle Eastern cultures; however, the fact that the photographs are visible through the veil of the script reveals the agreement of

such an ancient cultural hierarchy within a contemporary aesthetic.<sup>31</sup> This is a compromise balancing the power struggle of the word and the image. The audience is aware that the photographs alone would solely constitute a visual, and, with the help of an explanatory text, could be described as having a biographical significance. On the contrary, simply seeing and hearing the correspondences between the two would also entrap the work as biographical information or documentary. The compromise of the visual and the literary through the layering of information, therefore, provides a complex, and yet, sophisticated collage, latent with a multiplicity of interpretations.

Mona Hatoum's body of work, as the product of an Adornian intellectual emigrant, defies the notion of *contribution*, before, in, and, after *Measures of Distance*. This is evident in Hatoum's earlier performance works such as *The Negotiating Table* (1983) which the artist describes as a "tableau vivant."<sup>32</sup> Here Hatoum, in a body bag with her feet peeking out is tied up in an immobile mass, lying on top of a large table, reminiscent of a morgue table. This "tableau" is accompanied by the recordings of speeches of Western politicians referring to peace.<sup>33</sup> This work provides a vivid reaction to world politics and refers to the reality of the metaphor of "covering", as a universal phenomenon, rather than, as a local tragedy that defines any culture in particular. This work defies the notion of *Contribution* in both its form which defies the exoticized representation of the body of the Middle Eastern woman for a realistically violated one; and its subject matter. The recordings of the voices of the politicians further reveal the source of this violence and turn the feminist arguments used to justify Western forces' intervention in the Middle East against themselves.

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<sup>31</sup> "Regardless of its precise origin, the depiction of the human face or form as comprised of letters is a fascinating artistic phenomenon. The cabalistic faces comprised of the names of 'All, Muhammad, and Allah testify to a fundamental conviction that the human being is essentially composed of spiritual elements. This seemingly abstract concept is a graphic representation of an intuition of the intelligibility of the world. Everything is made of the word." Ernst, p. 285

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Sara Diamond, 1987, p. 126-127.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 127

In *Measures*, what can be interpreted as a critique of Western values is manifested through the veiling of the nude images of Hatoum's mother. By blocking the penetrating gaze of the viewer and the haphazard manner in which this curtain is created, has a critical implication since both sides (the artist as well as the viewer) are aware that the images of the mother are as veiled as they are exposed. Furthermore, the artist herself admits to the driving influence of the human condition within Western establishments in her work; hence, it is clear that Hatoum is not driven by a blindfolded admiration of her sheltering culture but has established a critical standpoint towards it, owing to her perspective as an outsider.<sup>34</sup> Neither is the artist, as a representative of her local culture, trying to exoticize or politicize her unfamiliar subject matter. The universal language adopted by Hatoum is, thus, indifferent towards all expectations of exotic *contribution* and skeptical towards both her sheltering and original cultures.<sup>35</sup>

On the Adornian question of *over-intentional communication*, Hatoum's art distances itself from the autoethographic and self-orientalizing waves while sufficiently avoids feeding into these discourses. Through her deliberate use of English for her letters' recitations, Hatoum implies the very lack of sensational agenda behind the choice of representing the Arabic language, despite its central significance in the work. Thus, the language becomes an aspect of the form and the medium of the work of art, instead of representing a specifically local and/or personal incident.

Additionally, by creating a visual and informational challenge between the viewer and her work, Hatoum manages to divide the audience into at least two different groups, those who can read and understand Arabic, and, those who cannot. As such, *Measures of Distance*,

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<sup>34</sup> "...in general my work is about my experience of living in the West as a person from the Third World, about being an outsider, about occupying a marginal position..." Ibid, 127

<sup>35</sup> "It seems to me that this is what the emigrant intellectuals are to blame for. In general, they are satisfied with making contributions (be it actual ones or those to the cultural bustle), elude any uncomfortable reflection, and deny themselves any seriously deviating productivity. Some form sectarian schools of philosophy that are just as specialized and limited as their German models. Most of the time, however, philosophical thought is left to kitsch and noncommittal worldview literature...whose ideals are already roughly tailored to the standards of Hollywood..." Adorno, p.161

places the Western viewer in the seat of the foreigner by prioritizing the artist's native language as the source language, and prohibiting, the viewers who are unfamiliar with Arabic, the content of her recorded conversations with her mother. This prohibition demonstrates Hatoum's disinterest and maybe skepticism in establishing a thorough communication with her sheltering culture, preventing her from *over-intentional communication* in the Adornian sense.

### **Kutluğ Ataman and *Animated Words***

Like Mona Hatoum, the Turkish artist and director Kutluğ Ataman uses Arabic Calligraphy in his video animations. Ataman's use of Arabic calligraphy, however, is a deliberately inauthentic choice of cultural heritage. Unlike in Hatoum's cultural history, the Arabic script used by Ataman was used in Turkey under the Ottoman rule until its replacement with the initiative of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the introduction of the new Turkish Alphabet by the Language Commission. Hence, for the generations following the 1928 reformation of the Turkish alphabet<sup>36</sup>, Ataman's native tongue neither required the knowledge of the Arabic script, nor encouraged it. Today only those Turks participating in a Koran recitation course, a purely religious project, that is limited to the acquirement of the skills for the recitation of Koran, are required to read Arabic.<sup>37</sup> These lessons, however made available to everyone interested, are typically more frequently attended in rural areas, and confined to practicing and conservative religious families.

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<sup>36</sup> An alphabet that includes letters that allow for and serve the phonology of authentic Turkish derived from the Latin alphabet.

<sup>37</sup> The image of Atatürk teaching the first lesson of the new Turkish alphabet has become an icon of the leader, the reformations and the Westernization of the Turkish Republic in the efforts of "modernization." This image is more tangibly evoked by Turkish contemporary artist Aydan Murtezaoglu in her sculptural work *Blackboard* (1992-2009)

The adoption and the rejection of Arabic script in the Turkish culture, however, has created a multiplicity in the understanding of different languages within. This multiplicity, despite the dominating preference of Latin script, is due to the endurance of Arabic script through the Ottoman heritage, and the religious practices. Whereby, the vivid existence of Arabic calligraphy in Turkey, on historic monuments and documents, mosques and, naturally, copies of Koran is juxtaposed by the Latin alphabet dominating every other aspect of contemporary life including education, law and media. However, the people's relation to Arabic calligraphy is unique in its in-between quality from total strangeness (as in the case of Western countries) to total familiarity (as in the rest of the Middle Eastern countries) This relation is symbolic of a nationwide paradox of belonging to the rest of the Middle Eastern sphere, but also being separated from it; both by choice and by global political assignment. The rupture in the cultural memory of contemporary Turkey caused by the strict distinction of the Ottoman Imperial and post-1923 Republic periods, thus, puts Arabic calligraphy in a cultural limbo, both inside and outside of the local traditions, legible and illegible at the same time.

Kutluğ Ataman's *Animated Words* which was part of the 2006 exhibition "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking" at Museum of Modern Art in New York, turned Arabic calligraphy into forms that become universally recognizable such as a butterfly or a tulip. The title, *Animated Words*, encapsulates a set of animations produced from different words in Turkish, written in the Arabic script, which are, then, displayed on six separate screens. The convoluted character of these images paralleled by their cryptic quality, in turn, initiated by their double mirroring and the circular movement of these mirrored scripts which are hidden within the moving images. The words within the forms, therefore, are caught in a legible position only at certain moments in the animation, when the correct alignment of the two rotating sides allow for their decipherment.

Ataman's approach derives from a particular habit within the calligraphic tradition: that of the word concealed within, or making up the image as mostly seen in zoomorphic imagery. Ataman's words, however, morph into a random group of images such as the face of a bearded man, a butterfly, a tulip, to both female and male genitalia. In this case, the doubled image of the penises remain as the only animation where symmetry is created by multiplying a singular image; and thus, writing. The rest of the animated images however, remain symmetrical in their singularity, divided by an imaginary line. The existence of symmetry in Ataman's work is much more than a quality of the image, but a defining quality that controls the rotational movement of these images.

Ataman's approach is complex and, while his renditions play on abstraction, yet, are not complete abstractions of calligraphy: he makes use of a Turkish word that is revealed in English through their respective titles such as: *Beautiful* and *Love*. For the Western audience unfamiliar with Arabic, and maybe even more unaware of Ottoman Turkish; these animations provide a visual satisfaction solely through their formal qualities. The script, here, can be dismissed as the signifier of an "other" or a commonplace reference to Islamic art. Yet, this tension of strangeness and illegibility is not resolved in the presence of the Turkish audience. Indeed, given the standard Turkish audience's potential unfamiliarity with the Arabic alphabet, however, these words are placed outside the realm of language, culture or understanding. This is the result of Ataman's deliberate use of an alphabet, Arabic, which has been disconnected from a language, Turkish, whereby a majority of audiences that possess the linguistic skills to understand the signified words are, ironically, incapable of reading the script. On the other hand, an audience literate in Arabic, an alphabet and a language that has survived to this day, would have to know Ottoman Turkish in order to be able to discern the words in question. Through the use of Arabic calligraphy, thus, Ataman's work deliberately

recalls and plays with this requirement and creates an argument laden with both theoretical and political aspects.

In Ataman's videos, the manipulation of the images, firstly, is addressed at the entirety of the audience whether familiar or unfamiliar to the Arabic alphabet. With the exception of the doubled penises, the rotational movements of the scripts cause the cyclical deconstruction and reconstruction, and, as a result, destabilize the focal points of the images. While the images are stuck in this vicious cycle of deformation and restoration, the traveling lines of the scripts, on the other hand, provide the potential for a variety of images to be created or for negative space to emerge as a result of their constant reaching, intersecting, and overlying with one another. These playful movements mock the viewer's urge to solidify "meaning," on both figurative and representational levels. For instance, the pair of the symmetrical image of the profile of a penis at times has the potential to resemble the shape of a pair of scissors, while at other times appearing like the shape of a heart depending on different moments in the rotational movement of these lines.

For the audience familiar with the Arabic alphabet but who does not read Turkish, these forms create an even more puzzling movement. As their eyes try to trace the moving script, not only right becomes left and top becomes bottom, but also the signified Turkish words and their definitions remain cryptic, as does the relationship between these words and the images. The mystery behind the untranslatable words, however, take on a different role when *Animated Words* is exhibited in a "Western" country where the majority of the audience is familiar neither with the Arabic alphabet nor with the Turkish language, as it occurred within "Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking."

The premise of the art of calligraphy requires the existence of a narrative or content within the aesthetic form, which in turn is dominated by this narrativity. Hence, in this regard, an abstracted calligraphic line becomes a mere line, devoid of signified subject matter and

prone to semantic exhaustion and/or symbolism. The symbolism, then, becomes a hastily generalized combination of cultural, historical and political labels attached to an immense and diverse people coming from different areas and cultural backgrounds in the Middle East, whose only shared connection apart from their religion, is the adoption of the Arabic alphabet for their distinct languages. The aesthetization of calligraphic writing feeds into creating an exoticized “image,” amalgamating the different languages involved in the practice, into one indistinct whole.<sup>38</sup>

In the case of Ataman’s *Animated Words*’ exhibition within the Western art market, therefore, the combination of Arabic script with figuration may be interpreted as an aesthetic compromise that straddles between Eastern and Western influences. Whereby, the tradition of the icon and the man-made image represents Western culture, and the priority of the word, both verbal and written, represents Eastern cultures. Hence, the juxtaposition of the traditional medium of calligraphy with computer generated animation, a medium dominated by Western technologies, results in a transitory aesthetic between the literary East, and, the figurative West. Therefore it is no surprise that Ataman’s work might attract some postcolonial argument laden with motifs such as “in-betweenness” or “the lack of boundaries.” However, Ataman’s project endeavors to establish a communication deeper, more versatile and authentic than the *Communication* of the “Eastern” artist with the “Western” audience. In this respect, Ataman’s work speaks to and takes its cue from its local and, therefore, Turkish audience.

A political interpretation of *Animated Words* may prove helpful in understanding the work’s versatility as well as the controversial message behind it which exceeds the problem of representing Middle Eastern artists within the Western art market. Kutluğ Ataman’s personal history can shed light into the perspective through which the artist has created a unique

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<sup>38</sup> This inadvertent amalgamation of different languages sharing similar aesthetic values is as much of an issue for the East Asian and South Asian calligraphies, as it is for Arabic calligraphy.

experience for- or better against- the Turkish speaking audience. As a member of the Leftist groups, Ataman's only choice to avoid arrest was to leave Turkey at the face of a military coup.<sup>39</sup> Hence, as a political refugee Ataman went on to receive his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the US.<sup>40</sup> After studying and working internationally, he was later able to return to Turkey where he currently works and resides. This impact of the Turkish Military, in Ataman's personal history, is significant in the institution's relation to the heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who was not only a champion of Westernization under the guise of modernization but also an experienced military official who became the commander that led the state of Turkey to its independence after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Even though the six decades dividing these two historical milestones has altered the position, control and political power of the Military, the Turkish Military has always claimed extreme loyalty to modern Turkey's founder.

When the reformations of 1920's are taken into consideration, Ataman's video can clearly be viewed as a nostalgic creation, a play with the lost realm of the once Arabic-scripted Ottoman Turkish language, and, fails to appear as solely as the product of an aesthetic choice. The abrupt break that occurs with the overnight change of an alphabet is more likely than not a traumatic experience. Yet, political and cultural reforms remain distinct in essence and in their relation to the human psyche. This sudden, inorganic change forces the already literate individuals to learn a new alphabet, and, altogether banish the former, in order to fully communicate, causing a cultural rupture. Ataman, thus, leaves it to the Turkish

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<sup>39</sup> "(Translation by the author) [Question:] so you had to go abroad in the September 12<sup>th</sup> period? Kutluğ Ataman: Afterwards, naturally. I was obligated to escape. But I don't really want to talk about that period in detail. It happened to everybody, so it's not a particular experience. After all, following September 12<sup>th</sup>, three thousand people got in jail. To be honest, I wasn't in a great shock. The torture was awful of course, but I was mostly devastated that my films were lost..." MAFC conversation with the artist, p. 5

<sup>40</sup> "[Question:] You lived in the US for many years, right? Kutluğ Ataman: I lived there for fifteen years. But I was going back and forth for trials...After I graduated from Galatasaray [University], I got accepted into and began my studies at what was then named the State Academy of Fine Arts – now Mimar Sinan [University]...Then came September 12<sup>th</sup> and I went to the US...I always planned to get into UCLA." Ibid, 6

audience to remember and contemplate on this rupture, to question its legitimacy as a reformative act.

Political concerns and the manner in which these concerns may define the works of artists originating from the Middle East can provide two possible categories of communication. The popularity of Arabic calligraphy for the Western audiences is also apparent in the success of the *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) series of photographs by the Iranian born, Shirin Neshat, whose *Speechless* (1996) was featured in “Without Boundary,” along with the works of Hatoum and Ataman. A work from the *Women of Allah* series that demonstrates a focus on Arabic calligraphy is Neshat’s *Offered Eyes* (1994) which appears almost Baroque in its stillness. This is the familiar image of a non-Western woman in despair, an image that is heavily influenced by the popular media coverage of the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> The viewer is also told by the explanatory text that the calligraphy is of a poem in Farsi by the late Iranian poet Forough Farokhzad.<sup>42</sup> However, prior to the realization of the narrative, the calligraphy is experienced through an aesthetic perspective.<sup>43</sup> These lines which the viewer assumes are signifiers of words are also symbolically placed on the surface of the eyeball. The fluidity of the lines parallels the ocular fluid so that from a distance it looks as if it is the remains of floating eye make-up that does not block the subject’s vision. Hence, it is not only the imagining of words written on the white of one’s eyes that evoke the feeling of physical pain but also the confrontational proximity of the viewer to the object revealing the smudgy make-up and the tear-filled eyes that was caused by such deep pain. Upon closer examination, the writing becomes more than a repetitive sequence of hypnotizing lines, but appears as a semi-transparent entity that can easily be extricated with the help of a few teardrops.

Therefore, this subtle action taking place within the subject’s eye, through its magnified

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<sup>41</sup> Steve McCurry’s portrait of the Afghan girl is embedded in our minds and is probably the most known cover of National Geographic magazine.

<sup>42</sup> *Word into Art*, p. 46

<sup>43</sup> Let us put aside the possible associations that come with the image of Arabic script in Western culture post-9/11 and focus on the formal features of this image.

exposure to the viewer, becomes the symbol of an act of disposing of grief, one that . It is ironic how this interpretation can serve as an imagining of sensibility with which Neshat as an Iranian woman in diaspora looking back at her culture, or any other individual of Western origin, can empathize with and comment on the grief of “the other” for a limited period of time or artistic practice, and then move on to a territory completely unaffected by it.<sup>44</sup> In regards to the question of over-intentional communication, Neshat’s photograph fails the test when the way in which the subject is made to look “other,” depending on the stereotypes of the image of the “Middle Eastern woman.” While, given Neshat’s in-between status, this perspective may be inevitable; the monotonous lack of versatility in the representation of this “woman” in the *Women of Allah* series affirms Neshat’s dominating interest in *communicating* with her sheltering culture, and, hence, unable to avoid *self-exoticization*. Unlike, Ataman’s use of Arabic, however, Neshat’s use of the Arabic script does not provide her local audience with any exclusive “meanings” or experiences; instead, the *Women of Allah* series is designed to speak to a Western point-of-view.<sup>45</sup>

The chances of Ataman’s nostalgia of the Arabic script being a result of a similar self-orientalization are, in fact, supported by the artist’s own admission to a kind of autoethnography especially in his videos and films.<sup>46</sup> Ataman, more often than not, refers to himself as a filmmaker than an artist in interviews.<sup>47</sup> This clear distinction between Ataman’s two different roles is further encouraged by the alternative versions of some of his works both as multiple screen video installations and single screen films; providing the viewer with both

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<sup>44</sup> This is not to say that Neshat, in her later work, has abandoned this perspective.

<sup>45</sup> The most apparent evidence of this disregard of the local audience is in the (possibly deliberate) lack of elaboration and aesthetic value in the script, the quality of the photographs, and the accuracy in the props and costumes used within the *Women of Allah* series.

<sup>46</sup> Talking about the film he directed as a graduation project in UCLA Ataman states: “...Also, because I lived abroad for a long time maybe I was a little estranged, I might have had a foreigner’s perspective, I don’t know. I might have had an Orientalist stance...” Conversation with the artist, p. 10

<sup>47</sup> “The language of art is quite an intellectual one, it is not a language that cinema can bear. Maybe if Godard cinema had continued, it could. But ‘multiscreen’ works are or flying screens are impossible to execute in cinema. Because these are sculptures, video-sculptures...” Ibid, 16

phenomenological and narrative experiences. The reasons behind the differences in the acknowledgement of Kutluğ Ataman within the Turkish art and film markets, and the international art market, are many and complex depending on the dynamics that catalyze the respective scenes. However, Ataman's different roles within the international art market and inside Turkish cultural scene, or his self-exoticization, do not prevent the authentic manner of his communication with either. Rather, these roles are symbolic of a duality in identity and place, an adaptive and diasporic point-of-view that longs to look back, but also questions current phenomena relevant universally; as well as, locally.

Through an Adornian perspective, on the other hand, Ataman's *Animated Words* work against a more profound conformity to the mainstream of a Western culture. On a political level, the work is a critique of the Westernization projects that changed the cultural destiny of the Republic of Turkey. On an aesthetic level, Ataman's choice of the media as video denies the clichés of the Orientalist aesthetic to the viewer by not resorting to the sensational narrative approach to social and political debates, as in the work of Neshat. *Animated Words* avoid *over-intentional communication* as well as the burden of *contribution* by referring to the national history of Turkey, and concerning itself with problems of the artist's own people; yet, it refrains from creating a scandal-inducing show. The mysterious referents of the animations further prevent an over-intention to *communicate*. It is possible to trace both personal and national memory, and universal concerns with the relation between politics and aesthetics within *Animated Words*; hence, Ataman's use of Arabic calligraphy in these videos is far from an effort to *contribute* to a "sheltering" aesthetic through self-exoticizing; but rather is a means to creating a phenomenological experiment through the experience of which different audiences are encouraged to question ideas of form, language and identity.

## Conclusion

The notions of *over-intentional communication* and *contribution*, proposed by Theodor Adorno in “Questions on Intellectual Emigration” has provided a theoretical ground for the consideration of the respective videos *Measures of Distance* and *Animated words*, of Mona Hatoum and Kutluğ Ataman. Since these notions constituted the outcome of certain cultural behavior on the part of the intellectual emigrant, in this case these two artists working in diaspora; the respective works were here analyzed to consider their relation to local and international audiences.

Hatoum and Ataman are both internationally-acknowledged artists who have studied and resided outside of their countries of birth. Despite the differences in their personal histories, both artists’ careers are marked by different manners of departure and inability to return to their respective homelands. Hence, working in diaspora, both Hatoum and Ataman artists heavily rely on their memory as a stabilizing compass. This project has analyzed only a sample of these two artists’ oeuvres and through their use of the Arabic script as a way to explore the ways in which personal and collective memory along with political history manifest in their visual works in questionable layers of fact vs. fiction. Such a focus on the artists’ personal memories inevitably also questions the role of biography and intentionality in the experience of the selected works of art. This is made so true to the art of artists originating from the highly historicized and politicized but seldom theorized area of the Middle East, where both artists are coming from.

It is interesting to state that while both artists are clearly working with personal memory as subject matter, their mutual interest in the representation of this memory through the medium of video is noteworthy. Furthermore, their common interest in language in the form of Arabic script reveals a similar phenomenological aspect in the reception of both artists’ works by different audiences. On a primary level, both *Measures of Distance* and

*Aniamted Words* divide the audience into those who know the language versus those unfamiliar to it. While in the case of Hatoum, Arabic is the natural choice of language in the representation of her correspondences and conversations with her mother; in Ataman's case, the Arabic script becomes meta-critical of the role of language in cultural memory. Both artists also play with the idea of communication and cultural translatability through a third dimension. While the former elucidates the contents of her memory to the international audiences through the letters' translation to English, Ataman takes advantage of the nowhere land which Ottoman Turkish occupies as a dead language, hence, denying full "meaning" to all audiences of the West and the East. It is in this paradoxical way that Hatoum and Ataman control the audience, and relieve them from the burdens of communication at the same time.

A common feature of *Measures* and Ataman's calligraphic animations can be interpreted as the lack of a moving recorded image as such. Even though Ataman's animations, dynamizes the script with symmetrical movements that morph the image on the screen, they do this in a cyclical repetition that enforces a geometric movement that becomes iconic and less dynamic, through its repetitive quality. *Measures*, on the other hand, makes use of photographs of Hatoum's mother taking a shower and their personal correspondences semi-transparently layered onto these images fading in and out of screen. Hatoum's voice recites these letters shown in their original Arabic script in English and this overlies the recording of the mother and daughter's conversation in Arabic. These multiple layers of information give *Measures* complex weight of oral, scribed, and translated language, as well as creating a voyeuristically charged icon of the artist's mother.

Other parallels between Hatoum's *Measures* and Ataman's *Animated Words* are the reference to the human body, which, in the case of Hatoum, she has been concerned with

throughout her career through various media.<sup>48</sup> While in *Measures* the viewer watches the nude images of the artist's mother showering behind a curtain of Arabic script, in a number of Ataman's animations Arabic script rotates on a central axis in a two-way mirror-image symmetry forming different figural shapes. The human body has become a common theme in the works of artists originating from the Middle East as both a political and personal territory, as the formal representation or symbol of an identity, and also a vehicle of memory.<sup>49</sup>

Adorno's notion of *Communication* can be traced through the workings of language within both *Measures of Distance* and *Animated Words*. The centrality of language in both works emphasizes its role as a marker of cultural difference, and ideology. Both works' use of a mysterious dimension that defies translation for or communication with the audience implies a reaction to *over-intentional communication* executed by Middle Eastern artists working in the West. The notion of *contribution* is, hence, denied through this disinterest in self-explication. Both Hatoum and Ataman tap into cultural tradition through their own memories. Their subjective points-of-view contribute to a variety of discourses concerning the state of the contemporary individuals; instead of carrying with them the roles of contributors of exotic material to the diversification of "Western" art.

Overall, the aesthetic and theoretical concerns within both Hatoum's and Ataman's works are at once universal and local, and, allow for a plethora of interpretations and perspectives prioritizing neither the home, nor the perspective of what Adorno deems as the sheltering culture. A postcolonial interpretation of said works is only one of the many potential points-of view through which *Measures of Distance* and *Animated Words* may be

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<sup>48</sup> E.g. *Corps Etranger* (1994); *Van Gogh's Back* (1995); *Mouli-julienne* (2000)

<sup>49</sup> Within the group of contemporary artists of Middle Eastern origin, practicing or showing their work in the Western art market, as well as Hatoum and Ataman's, a wide range of artworks including Shirin Neshat's photographs, Ghada Amer's embroideries of pornographic images have made use of the image of the human body as a recurrent motif, charged with issues of gender, identity and morality.

experienced by the audience. *Measures* touches upon many topics in narrative including family relationships, the gender hierarchies and moral concerns dominating them, the experience of puberty, the separation of the members of the family by distances, the longing for home; international politics in the looming reality of the Lebanon war over the correspondences; formally, it evokes issues of veiling and privacy, cultural tradition, translatability of culture and language, the duality of the state of the individual in diaspora. *Animated Words*, on the other hand, recalls socio-political and cultural memory of the Turkish Republic, questioning the loss of a language, and at a formal level, the relation between calligraphy and figuration, as well as references to the struggle between hetero-normativity versus homosexuality, and beauty.

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