

Spiritual Affects against a Secularist Grid: Rethinking Modernism and Islam/ic Art

Full conference day programme and practical information can also be found at:

[**Spiritual Affects against a Secularist Grid: Rethinking modernism and Islam/ic art | Research Center for Material Culture**](#)

10 — 11 February 2023

Referencing the title of Wendy K. M. Shaw's essay 'Islamic Geometries: Spiritual Affects Against a Secularist Grid', this seminar engages with the field and notion of 'Islamic art' in the context of the 20th and 21st centuries to address key issues facing us today, including secularism, decolonisation and approaches to diversity. It foregrounds the museum as a public site in which these issues play out and examines the meanings of the 'Islamic' in a contemporary context. By exploring the entangled legacies of orientalism and nationalism in art history, the event also raises questions around the secularity of the museum space. The seminar critically considers whether new approaches and new kinds of literacy and visibility are needed in the museum space. The discussions take a transnational approach to look at the way 'the Islamic' and 'Islamic art' as a subfield have been framed and evoked in contexts ranging from Western Europe, West Asia, Central Asia and North Africa. The seminar brings together a diverse range of practitioners and thinkers, including artists, academics and curators, to share their different frameworks, strategies and experiences.

PROGRAMME

Day 1- Friday 10 February

10:30-11:00 Entrance: Subtropa conference room

11:00-11:10 Welcome remarks

11:10-11:40 **Leeza Ahmady (Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts)**

Revelation in Tongues: Learning to Speak Spirituality & Religion in Contemporary Art

Is our disenchantment with museums, galleries, and university departments' neglect of communities of faith in their programming justified? Why don't more artists, exhibitions, collections, and art-history discourses speak directly and sincerely about a belief in god or affiliation with religion? Will a significant era marked by "inclusion" policies be directed by the same erroneous Modernist ideologies that perpetrated "exclusivity" all these years? When exactly did the spirituality of faith-based traditions, or "organized religion," become divorced from culture? Is secularism genuinely responsible for Modernism's alienation from religion and vice versa? Or could it be the case of missing a language, never having developed a tongue to tell such concurrent intermingling of ideas from both sides of the aisle? Can we make a new lexicon of glorious intersectionality that links the space between these two assumed opposing arenas where our spirits roam? Suppose we are ready for such a middle-ground tongue to reveal itself. Can we vocalize without our baggage of suspicion steeped in decades worth of identity politics and East-West superiority inferiority complexes to sufficiently think, speak, and make



art related to faith, religion, and spiritual transcendence? In light of these concerns, the widely perceived gulf between the two realms, and the profound reality that religion and spirituality have been the greatest of wellsprings for the artistic imagination for centuries across world history, this presentation references the efforts of the **Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts (FSA)** to open dialogues; developing deep connections between contemporary artists, communities of faith, and sacred spaces in the United States and elsewhere while filling the gap of context and information about the history of their connectivity in the recent and distant past.

11:40-12:00 Q&A moderated by Sarah Johnson (Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen)

Panel: Histories

12:00-12:20 **Nur Sobers Khan (Independent Researcher)**

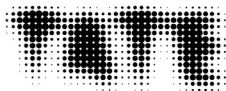
Transregional Muslim Subjectivities: Visual and Haptic Devotional Practices from the 19th-century Ottoman Empire to South Asia

Fundamental questions of what constitutes 'The Islamic' (Shahab Ahmed, Thomas Bauer) and 'Islamic Art' (Wendy Shaw) have been addressed to great effect in recent scholarship. One aspect that recent analyses share is their insistence on the diverse and flexible nature of Muslim identity and subjectivity and the capacious nature of 'Islam' as a term that captures multifold intellectual and visual practices across a range of transregional geographies, both real and imaginary. In this paper, I will focus on common threads of transregional visual and haptic practices of Islamic devotion between the nineteenth-century South Asia and the Ottoman Empire, as evidenced in illustrated manuscripts and lithographs. Extending this comparison from the visual materials to the institutional structures that house them, I will discuss disciplinary and hermeneutic barriers in the field of museology and philology (in the case of manuscript studies) that stand in the way of fruitful transregional comparisons to arrive at a more capacious (and striving toward the 'emic') notion of Islamic visual culture.

12:20-12:40 **Alex Dika Seggerman (Rutgers University-Newark)**

Formerly Mutually Exclusive: Modernism and Islam in Art History

My two recent books, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (UNC Press, 2019) and *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Indiana University Press, 2022), present in-depth archival research on nineteenth and twentieth century art of North Africa and West Asia. Both aim to break free from modernist art history's Eurocentrism as well as rectify Islamic art history's refusal to engage with the modern period. For example, I analyze the work of Egyptian painter, Abdel Hadi El-Gazzar (1925-1966), who deftly wove post-surrealist painterly techniques with references to mystical Islam in works like *The Green Man* (1951) and *Story of Zulaikha* (1948). My books are part of a larger shift in both subfields towards a more diverse and inclusive future in which Islam and modernism are not antonyms. Even though "modern Islamic art" has become institutionalized in scholarship, teaching, and museums, the methodological vestiges of last century's art history remain and continue to present challenges to specialists in the field. In this talk, I will discuss the two books briefly and then raise new, pressing questions to be addressed in the second quarter of the twenty-first century.



12:40-13.15 Discussion moderated by Nabila Abdel Nabi (Tate)

13.15-14.20 **Break**

Panel: Museologies

14.20-14.40 **Mirjam Shatanawi (Reinwardt Academy, Amsterdam University of the Arts)**

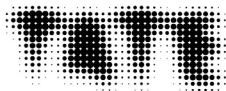
All the way from Mecca: The Place of Indonesia in the Field of Islamic Art

In the last decades, there has been a repeated call to expand the field of Islamic art to include hitherto excluded geographical areas, such as Southeast Asia. Often these appeals depart from the assumption that expanding the canon will confirm its underlying thesis of the spread of a particular visual culture through the Islamic religion. Some scholars have nonetheless argued that geographical expansion will substantially challenge the conceptual parameters underpinning the canon. This paper will investigate the historical reasons behind the exclusion of Indonesia from the field of Islamic art and what they tell us about the various meanings attached to Islam as a religion, culture, and a type of art. The focus of this talk will be Dutch colonial conceptions of Indonesian antiquities, and how these histories impact the current reception of Indonesian Islamic art in museums. What are the structural patterns inherited from colonialism that result in silences today? The paper will discuss what these embedded structures imply for our current understandings of Islamic art, as the absence of Indonesia from the canon of Islamic art raises the urgent question: what makes Islamic art 'Islamic'?

14.40-15.00 **Mollie Arbuthnot (University of Cambridge)**

The Soviet Lives of Sacred Things: Restitution, Religion, and Museums in Soviet Central Asia

Soviet discourse about Islamic art was highly contradictory. On the one hand, traditions were conceptualised as archaic, un-modern, the product of a feudal class system and religious stagnation, obsolete in the revolutionary age of machines and mass production. On the other, official Soviet policy in the 1920s–30s promoted the “national cultures” of marginalised ethnic groups, and, famously, Stalin proclaimed that national forms were needed to express socialist content. In this context, conservation, museumification, and craft revivalism gained a new political dimension: Islamic objects attracted attention as potential bearers of national culture and, therefore, the building blocks of a new socialist art. This paper focuses on museums in Soviet Uzbekistan, and examines the theorisation, display, production, and restitution of Islamic and Central Asian objects in this context. Many innovations in Soviet museology aimed to disrupt the Eurocentric values of the imperial museum, with a strikingly contemporary understanding of the museum as a multivalent site of knowledge production. Some high-profile objects, such as the Osman Quran manuscript, were removed from the imperial metropolises and restored, with much ceremony, to Central Asia. Museums in Tashkent and Samarqand established workshops to bring indigenous expertise into museum space, while others discarded categories that divided (local) “craft” from (European) “art.” We can see here a nascent politics of decolonisation clashing with other political and practical demands, and the anti-imperial strands of socialist ideology conflicting with the profound Eurocentrism of Soviet cultural projects. The Soviet Union was an extreme example of a twentieth-century modernising regime, where pan-European and transnational/transimperial discourses about Islamic art and modernism were thrown into sharper relief. The case of Soviet Uzbekistan therefore highlights the entangled issues of secularity, orientalism, and modernity in the museum.



15.00-15.35 Discussion moderated by Dina Akhmadeeva (Tate)

15.35-16.00 Break

16.00-16.30 **Slavs & Tatars — Performance lecture**

Al-Isnad or Chains We Can Believe In

Al-Isnad or Chains We Can Believe In tells the story of mysticism within modernity, namely through the unlikely perspective of Dan Flavin commissions for a Sufi mosque in downtown New York in the early 1980s, via the Dia Art Foundation. From Khlebnikov and the Russian Futurists to Charles de Foucauld and *le renouveau catholique*, the lecture attempts a definition of criticality through hospitality, faith and arts patronage.

16.30-17.00 Q&A

Day 2 - Saturday 11TH February 2023

9.30-10.30 **Tropenmuseum Galleries visit with Sarah Johnson – meet in front of Tropenmuseum main entrance**

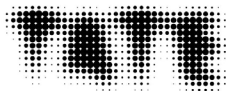
11:00-12.00 **Closed door session over breakfast – Subtropen conference room**

12.30-14.00 **In Conversation with Saodat Ismailova** at Eye Filmmuseum - [In Conversation with Saodat Ismailova | Research Center for Material Culture](#)

Biographies

Nabila Abdel Nabi is Curator, International Art at Tate Modern where she has worked on exhibitions including *The Making of Rodin*, and *Hilma af Klint & Piet Mondrian: Forms of Life* (forthcoming) as well as various displays. She is part of the Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational. She previously worked as Associate Curator at The Power Plant, Toronto, and prior to this as Gallery Manager (Exhibitions), The Third Line, Dubai. Nabila has worked on solo exhibitions and facilitated new commissions by artists including Hajra Waheed, Abbas Akhavan, Kapwani Kiwanga, Kader Attia, Omar Ba and Amalia Pica, among others. Abdel Nabi holds degrees from the Courtauld Institute of Art and University of Chicago.

Leeza Ahmady is currently the Director of programs at the Foundation for Spirituality and the Arts. She is an internationally recognized curator of exhibitions, festivals, and experimental educational forums. She has also led Asia Contemporary Art Week, the premier US platform for artistic dialogues from all regions of Asia since 2005. After studying political science, art history, and philosophy at St. John's University, Ahmady began her career showcasing artists immersed in site-specific installation, sound, performance, and new media works at popular New York nightclubs for compelling



unexpected encounters between art and the public. Next, her groundbreaking research on post-Soviet Central Asia and the region's reorientation to pre-Communist nomadic and Islamic identities earned her an MA from Pratt Institute, with presentations at critical international venues and exhibitions such as the Venice Biennale, Istanbul Biennale, Asia Art Archive Hong Kong, and dOCUMENTA (13) Kassel, Germany and Kabul, Afghanistan. Ahmady's highly distinguished collaborative approach to empowering the arts as a vital source for creating consciousness in society has enabled over 3000 diverse practitioners to present their perspectives at notable local and international institutions, art fairs, and auction houses, including Asia Society, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, MoMA, ICI-Independent Curators International, Queens Museum, Sotheby's, Performa, Alserkal Avenue and many more. She has also contributed writings to prominent publications, such as Flash Art, Ocula, and Manifesta Journal.

Dina Akhmadeeva is Assistant Curator, International Art at Tate Modern where she works across exhibitions, displays and acquisitions into the collection. Her current projects include the recently opened exhibitions *Maria Bartuszo* and *Magdalena Abakanowicz: Every Tangle of Rope and Thread*, alongside the forthcoming 2023 Hyundai Commission for Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. Her independent projects include Baltic Triennial 13 (Vilnius, Tallinn, Riga, 2018), the exhibition *Avoidance* at Futura, Prague (2021), and the programme *In the mouths of others* within the exhibition *EURASIA: a Landscape of Mutability* at M HKA Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp (2021-22), a research project which connects to her ongoing work on the artistic mobilisation of the somatic, the communal and the ancestral through sonic practices. She holds a BA and Master's in History of Art and Visual Culture from the University of Oxford, where she was awarded the Arts and Humanities Research Council Master's Scholarship and the Association for Art History Postgraduate Dissertation Prize.

Mollie Arbuthnot is an historian specialising in the visual and material cultures of the Soviet Union. She is a Junior Research Fellow at Jesus College, University of Cambridge, currently researching Islamic and Central Asian art in Soviet museums. She received her PhD from the University of Manchester and taught at Durham University before joining Cambridge in 2021.

Alex Dika Seggerman is assistant professor of Islamic art history at Rutgers University-Newark. Her scholarship investigates the intersection of Islam and modernism in art history. She is author of *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019) and co-editor of *Making Modernity in the Islamic Mediterranean* (Indiana University Press, 2022.) She received her doctorate in the history of art from Yale University in 2014. Prior to joining the Rutgers-Newark faculty in 2018, she held postdoctoral fellowships at Smith College, Hampshire College, and Yale University. In 2022, she was the Leonard A. Lauder Visiting Senior Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts in Washington, D.C. Her next book project will cover the art history of American Islam.

Saodat Ismailova (1981, Uzbekistan) is based in Tashkent and Paris. She studied film and has made fiction films and documentaries, which have won awards at various international festivals. In 2013, she presented her first video installation, *Zukhra*, at the Venice Biennale. Since then she has focussed on the intersection of cinema and visual art. Successfully: in 2022 her work was selected for both the Venice Biennale and Documenta.

Sarah Johnson is curator of the Middle East and North Africa collections at Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Her research centres on modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, with a particular focus on Iraq, as well as on early Islamic objects. Previously, she was a curator of Islamic



collections at the British Museum in London, where she worked on the modern and contemporary collections from the Middle East. She also worked as a researcher in the curatorial department at the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C., where she helped to organize the permanent galleries of ancient Iran and the travelling exhibition, *Roads of Arabia*.

Nur Sobers-Khan has curated Islamic art, manuscript and archival collections from the Middle East and South Asia at the British Library London, Aga Khan Documentation Center MIT, Museum of Islamic Art Doha, and the Ministry of Culture KSA. She received her PhD (2012) and BA (2006) from the University of Cambridge. Her research interests include devotional practices and visual culture in South Asia and the Ottoman Empire.

Mirjam Shatanawi is a lecturer of Heritage Theory at the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts). She is the author of [Islam at the Tropenmuseum](#) (2014) and co-editor of [Islam and heritage in Europe: Pasts, Presents and Future Possibilities](#) (Routledge, 2021). Her PhD thesis [Making and unmaking Indonesian Islam: legacies of colonialism in museums](#) discusses the silences surrounding Indonesian Islam in Dutch museums.

Slavs and Tatars is an internationally renowned art collective devoted to an area East of the former Berlin Wall and West of the Great Wall of China known as Eurasia. Since its inception in 2006, the collective has shown a keen grasp of polemical issues in society, clearing new paths for contemporary discourse via a wholly idiosyncratic form of knowledge production: including popular culture, spiritual and esoteric traditions, oral histories, modern myths, as well as scholarly research. Their work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at several institutions, including the Vienna Secession; MoMA, New York; Salt, Istanbul; Albertinum Dresden, amongst others. The collective's practice is based on three activities: exhibitions, publications, and lecture-performances. The collective has published more than twelve books to date, including most recently *Лук Бук* (Look Book) with Distanz Verlag. In addition to launching a [residency and mentorship program](#) for young professionals from their region, Slavs and Tatars opened [Pickle Bar](#), a slavic aperitivo bar-cum-project space a few doors down from their studio in Berlin-Moabit, as well as an online merchandising store: [MERCZbau](#).