Contemporary art of Iraqis and categorical assumptions of nationality: an analysis of the art and narratives of Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin and Wafaa Bilal

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CONTEMPORARY ART OF IRAQIS AND CATEGORICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF NATIONALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE ART AND NARRATIVES OF HANA MAL ALLAH, ADEL ABIDIN AND WAFAA BILAL

A Thesis

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in

The School of Art

by
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Abstract

Iraqi art is a field of study that has been marginalized and misrepresented by scholars and western art institutions. Since the American-led occupation of Iraq in 2003, however, scholars and curators have shown an increased amount of interest in exhibiting the works of artists from Iraq. Resulting from both the limited amount of scholarly research on their art and from a western tendency to categorize a people in terms of nationality, Iraqi artists are now being carelessly grouped into easy and inaccurate classifications. To illustrate the fallacies of this new categorical trend, this paper analyzes the art and lives of three Iraqi artists, Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin and Wafaa Bilal.
Chapter 1—The Inadequacies of Identifying Contemporary Iraqi Art with Nationality: An Introduction to Three Iraqi Artists

Since the first modern government of Iraq was created under British mandate in 1920, scholars and Iraqis have debated over concerns like colonial legacies and ethnic identities.¹ These debates, while they are considered crucial to comparative political and Western Asian studies, have rarely been applied to the study of Iraqi cultural production.² In fact, according to art historian Wijdan Ali, the traditional categorization of Iraqi art under the general term, “Islamic Art,” suggests that western scholars have either ignored or misunderstood the field entirely, and the result is its marginalization.³ Since the American-led occupation of Iraq in 2003, however, an increased amount of media and scholarly attention has been focused on Iraqi cultural production. Though the initial concern was limited to looted Mesopotamian antiquities from the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad, the country’s modern and contemporary art eventually became matters of interest to scholars and curators in the West.⁴ Their interest has culminated in various exhibitions in the United States, England, and Germany that have framed modern and contemporary Iraqi art in a range of ways. Now that scholars and curators are concerned

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² Ibid., Yaphe’s chapter provides a comprehensive discussion on the importance of recognizing these competing concepts in Iraqi identity comprehension.
³ Wijdan Ali, “The Status of Islamic Art in the Twentieth Century,” *Muqarnas*, 9 (1992) 186. Wijdan Ali is a painter and art historian at the American University in Cairo. She has published articles and books that question the concept of “Islamic Art,” including *The Arab Contribution to Islamic Art*.
⁴ Nada Shabout, “Historiographic Invisibilities: The Case of Contemporary Iraqi Art,” originally presented at the *Third International Conference on New Directions in Humanities*, University of Cambridge, UK (Aug. 2-5, 2005). Nada Shabout, Associate Professor of Art History at the University of North Texas, was at the forefront of those scholars who vocalized concern for contemporary Iraqi art and artists.
with Iraqi art in particular, it is important to acknowledge the postcolonial debates about Iraq that traditionally have been ignored by art historians. It is time to discard traditional categories and scrutinize the assumptions operative now.

The opinion exists, for example, that national identity provides a categorical framework for contemporary Iraqi art. Unlike the specific debate about Iraqi identity, the overarching debate about whether or not defining national identity is pertinent to the discipline of art history is a relatively new one. Scholars like Edward Said, Fredric Jameson and Homi K. Bhabha introduced new ideas about identity, globalization and marginalization during the beginning of the postmodernist era. Increasingly employed from the 1970s onward, identity politics is based on the contention that broad constructs such as class or a constitutional state do not promote the interests of marginalized groups within a geographical area (groups defined by ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation).\(^5\) This contention is seen by some as a celebration of cultural diversity and by others as essentialism. Regardless of the polarity of opinion regarding identity, the debate about it should not be ignored when Iraqi art is concerned. Now that the western art world and media are giving contemporary Iraqi artists an increasing amount of attention, the identity of this traditionally marginalized group is being generalized. Ultimately, this new attention has led to easy, nationalist-based terminology.

If we look at art exhibition reviews, we find many writers make assumptions about Iraqi identity. Their thinking is flawed in many respects and should be understood as emulations of the western method of approaching nationality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This method was based on nationalism, a concept that grew into

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maturity when Europeans were concerned about defining the national identities of non-European peoples as a necessary consequence of colonialist expansion.\(^6\) Originally a colony of Britain, Iraq is therefore considered by some to be a product of nationalist aspirations. According to western Asian political historian Judith Yaphe, nearly a century has lapsed since arguments began about whether or not modern Iraq originated on the date of the nation’s inception under British mandate in 1920.\(^7\) For many Iraqis and scholars modern Iraqi nationalist unity began much earlier, as the Ottoman Empire slowly collapsed in the nineteenth century. The disagreement should not be understood as a mere dispute about dates. Rooted in more complex dialogues about the colonial influences of England, the impact of Ottoman rule, and even the lineage of Ancient Mesopotamia, the discussion on modern Iraqi identity is far more complicated than a debate about the origin of a modern nation state.\(^8\) As this discourse progresses with time, it becomes clear that any framework that simplifies the question of Iraqi identity to that of nationality is defective.

The framework of this paper, which focuses on three artists from Iraq who currently live in exile, is not one that intends to group artists together because they all come from the same country. On the contrary, it is the goal of this research to show how these artists differ, despite their shared nationality. By looking at artists from Iraq in a manner that highlights their differences, this paper will show that while nationality is an efficient way to categorize the artists, it is not sufficient to stop there. For instance, the commonalities in the art of Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin, and Wafaa Bilal pale in

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\(^7\) Yaphe, 114-116.
\(^8\) Ibid., 114-117.
comparison to their differences. They all live in western environments and are acknowledged by western scholars and Iraqi peers as leading artists from Iraq. However, they do not work for a collective purpose, and they do not strive to meet and collaborate. A common thread in their art seems to be that each of them returns to their homeland through their art. It is more interesting, though, to grasp the vast range of artistic production by artists challenged by the situation of exile and war. While many viewers expect religion and sectarianism to be a concern of artists from Iraq, the artists discussed in this paper focus on neither. The lack of religious difference makes for an intriguing investigation into artistic difference among the artists because of the alternate catalysts that become important to comprehending their art. It is by avoiding the framework of nationalism and, instead, by understanding their work as representative of individual narratives that the variances in their art become understood.

The matrix of questions about Iraqi identity becomes evident when individual Iraqi artists are considered in an art historical context. Contemporary Iraqi artists like painter Hana Mal Allah, video and installation artist Adel Abidin, and multi-media artist Wafaa Bilal vary in age and experience. Though their backgrounds reveal diverging paths of influence and differing historical circumstances, each of these artists has been categorized in restricting terms of national identity.

Hana Mal Allah is a painter who, until 2007, lived and worked as a professor of graphic design in Baghdad. She trained under the so-called Pioneer generation of Iraqi artists who have been credited with bringing western modernism to Iraq and adapting it to

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9 Nada Shabout, interview by the author, 13 March 2008.
their country’s history and culture.\(^{10}\) Widely regarded as a leading female artist from Iraq, Mal Allah considers her work to be a testament to the survival of Iraqi culture during the current period of war.\(^{11}\) Her canvases and book art have appeared in exhibitions in London as well as the United States. After a 2006 exhibition at the Pomegranate Gallery in New York, entitled “Ashes to Art: The Iraqi Phoenix,” in which Mal Allah was one of sixteen artists and ten painters, the press categorically tried to define what they saw. For example, Ben Davis, a reviewer from \textit{Artnet Magazine}, said that the exhibition provided “the first American glimpse of contemporary art from war-torn Iraq. It paints a picture of a national school in formation.”\(^{12}\) Since the exhibit limited the ten Iraqi artists to the topic of responding to the American occupation and current violence in Iraq, the notion that their work represented a “national school” is inaccurate. In fact, the ten painters who comprised this “national school,” which Davis calls “The Phoenix Group,” did not reflect the ranges in age, geographical placement, or aesthetic spectrum of Iraqi artists as a whole.

To designate a national school of art from an impression of a gallery exhibition not only calls into question the validity of the claim, but it also references a western tradition of modernist thinking. The Fauves, for example, received their name after the critic Louis Vauxcelles unintentionally gave it to them by describing a bronze statue in

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\(^{11}\) Hadani Ditmars, “A Culture in Exile: Baghdad’s artistic exodus,” \textit{The Walrus} (March 2008), 77. In this article Ditmars asserts Hana Mal Allah’s reputation as a leading Iraqi female artist and interviews her about how she thinks about her art.

the 1905 Salon d’Automne exhibition as, “Donatello au milieu des Fauves” (“Donatello in the middle of the wild beasts”). However, unlike the 1905 Salon d’Automne exhibition, in “Ashes to Art: The Iraqi Phoenix” the ten Iraqi artists were intentionally framed as a cohesive national group.  

In this case, a western curator asked Iraqi painters to respond to a specific question, grouped their work under a symbolic heading, and encouraged viewers to identify contemporary Iraqi art with the meaning of the metaphorical phoenix rising up from ashes. The title of the exhibition, according to curator and art historian Peter Hastings Falk, signifies the “irrepressible spirit of rebirth and the resilience of the creative spirit.” The western art news media embraced Falk’s conception of the phoenix as a suitable metaphor for these artists’ works and referred to the ten Iraqi artists as the Phoenix Group in subsequent reviews. Moreover, by asserting that these artists comprise a distinctly Iraqi school of art, reviewers like Davis were able to compartmentalize an entire culture’s contemporary artistic production within the predetermined framework conceived by a western scholar. However appealing this compartmentalization may have been for viewers, such reportage created a narrow conception of Iraqi art.

14 Ibid.
The work of two internationally recognized Iraqi artists who create video and internet installations demonstrates, for instance, that a “national school” of Iraqi *painters* does not coincide with what these artists do. Adel Abidin is an Iraqi artist who lives in Helsinki and experiments with video and installation in his art. Wafaa Bilal, who has lived in Chicago since 1992, encourages viewer participation in his work in installations accessed on the internet. These two artists are from separate generations of Iraqi artists and are both younger than Hana Mal Allah. Stylistically different from each other as well, the work of Bilal and Abidin attest to the futility of lumping the cultural production of a people into national categories. As art historian Martin Powers states in an essay on national and cultural identity, much of twentieth-century art history stressed the “national” element in style, a situation that allowed for projected identities of Others that respond to Western concerns of nationalism. Whether or not the media and curators know it now, their characterizations of Iraqi art are producing more generalizing, projected identities.

The problem of how to study non-European cultures responsibly has concerned a range of scholars and media commentators in modern history. As Edward Said states, “we have not yet produced an effective national style that is premised on something more equitable and noncoercive than a theory of fateful superiority, which to some degree all cultural ideologies emphasize.” However, according to Powers, there are possibilities transcending Said’s observation. Looking for difference and plurality, for example, has become more prevalent when considering non-western cultures. Styles and influences

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16 Powers, 184.
18 Powers, 184.
should not be inherently compared to those of the West and should not be forcibly grouped together under a national flag. It should be noted, for example, that the aesthetic decisions of artists like Abidin and Bilal, unlike those of the painters of the “Phoenix group,” do not suggest the influence of modernist expressionism and do not share similarities between each other. The disparate influences and backgrounds of these three artists attest to the need to research contemporary Iraqi art within multicultural and post-colonial frameworks as opposed to ones of national identity.

One retarding influence in this situation is the lack of art historical scholarship in the field of Iraqi art. According to Nada Shabout, this exclusion from the tradition of art history is rooted in the discourse of Orientalism and globalization. In short, according to Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism*, Western ethnic stereotyping and marginalization of the East as the Other have resulted in misrepresentative and inadequate historical scholarship regarding those cultures. Said’s arguments apply to Iraqi art historical scholarship in more ways than one. One could argue, in fact, that the absence of a reasonable classification system within which Iraqi contemporary art can be considered is evidence of western marginalization. Art historian Robert Nelson gives the traditional classifications of art history as: Ancient Egyptian, and Near Eastern and Classical Art; Early Christian, Byzantine, and Medieval Art; The Renaissance; Baroque and Eighteenth-Century European Art; Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century European Art; Photography and Film; Art of the United States and Canada; Native American, Pre-Columbian, and Latin American Art; Asian Art; Islamic Art; African Art; African

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19 Davis. See his article for his interpretation of the Western influences that this group of painters all had in common.
20 Shabout, “Historiographic Invisibilities.”
Diaspora; and Art Criticism and Theory. Nelson points out that these are neither natural, consistent, nor logical according to our (western) cultural categories, much less those of other societies. The fact that Iraqi art has traditionally been placed under the classification of Islamic art—a categorization that implies religious affinity—is misleading and unrepresentative of the plurality that has existed since the formation of the modern nation in 1920.

Not only must past scholarship be evaluated, but the historical situation of exile for Iraqis must also be considered in Iraqi art historical research. The exodus has increased dramatically since the American occupation, but this trend should not be considered as new. Scholars and journalists have written about the trend of Iraqis to leave their country since the 1920s. According to professor of politics Charles Tripp, Iraqis have fled their homeland because of loss of autonomy, fear of repercussions for disobedience, and more recently, because of an increase in sectarian violence. Among the varieties of Iraqis that have left their country, intellectuals and artists comprise a particularly substantial group of exiles that was motivated to leave because of threatening censorship by the government. It is by considering their experiences of exile that one finds a more comprehensive account of artistic production of Iraqi artists.

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22 Robert S. Nelson, “The Map of Art History,” The Art Bulletin, 79, no. 1 (March 1997), 29. In this essay, Nelson argues that the traditional “map” of art history is flawed in the traditional sense because of its narrowly drawn categories like the ones mentioned above. Nelson mentions the specific concentrations that the Art Bulletin lists as the specific categories from which Art History doctoral candidates must choose.

23 Yaphe, 114.


25 Ibid.
Said has said that the concept of a national identity is shattered once exile factors into identity. So why then, now that Iraqi cultural production has been relegated mainly to geographical locations that are outside the traditional boundaries of Iraq, are Westerners trying to make national identity an exclusive issue? Interestingly enough, Said answers this question by stating that “Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense, exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation . . . . What is there worth saving and holding onto between the extremes of exile on the one hand, and the often bloody affirmations of nationalism on the other?” Though Said asserts that nationality and exile are intrinsically linked, he also questions what lies between the two. The challenge of research then becomes to remain aware of the two poles, while investigating the variations of identities that lie between them. For the purposes of this paper, the study of contemporary Iraqi art will be made by factoring both concepts of nationality and exile into an analysis of Iraqi historical contexts, personal narratives, and artistic differences.

Regardless of the increased popularity of the ideas of Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Michael Hardt and, Antonio Negri which tend to cast identity out of the debate on contemporary art history altogether, it is important to incorporate a multi-faceted discussion on identity when considering Iraqis in exile. By comparison, when looking

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27 Shabout, “Historiographic Invisibilities” mentions specifically that known Iraqi artists are now mostly residing outside of Iraq.
at the diaspora of African artists, historian Oscar Ho has argued that the cultural identity of any people is most important at the historical moment when that population needs to strengthen and protect itself from becoming overwhelmed.\textsuperscript{30} If applied to the current exodus of Iraqis, it is precisely because Iraqi people are fleeing their homeland and fighting to stay alive that, according to Ho’s thesis, their cultural identity becomes one of their critical concerns and also a possible source of security. Nada Shabout has spoken directly about Iraqi exile and has stated that the cultural production of Iraq has traditionally been a touchstone for Iraqis. According to Shabout “Iraqi art and its Mesopotamian heritage has always provided Iraqis with a sense of pride and strength. It reflects the culture’s resilience regardless of war, dictatorship, and exile.”\textsuperscript{31} All three of the artists considered in this study return to the topic of their homeland and their cultural heritage through their art and, in doing so, question matters of identity, including ethnicity, stereotyping, marginalization and alienation.

Though this analysis has shown the tendency of curators and the media to disregard historical debates about Iraqi identity and, instead, to categorize Iraqi artists under one encompassing national terminology, it is important to acknowledge that not everyone is doing this. In fact, recent exhibitions, including the Montalvo Arts Center’s “Iraq: Reframe” project in Saratoga, California, suggest a more thought-provoking and indeterminate concept of Iraqi art.\textsuperscript{32} Curated by Dr. Nada Shabout, this exhibition

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{Ho} Oscar Ho, “Hong Kong: A Curatorial Journey for an Identity,” \textit{Art Journal}, 47, n. 4 (Winter, 1998) 42.
\bibitem{Shabout} Shabout, interview by author, 13 March 2008, telephone.
\bibitem{Montalvo} This exhibition will be discussed further in chapter three. According to the Montalvo Arts Center Website, the project included lectures, open panel discussions, and a variety of artworks by Iraqi and non-Iraqi artists; \url{http://www.montalvoarts.org/iraq/} (accessed 10 January 2008).
\end{thebibliography}
incorporated art by Adel Abidin (*Abidin Travels*, 2006) and Wafaa Bilal (*Al Dar Al Iraq [Iraqi Home]*, 2007). According to Shabout, one goal of the exhibition was to highlight the differences among Iraqi art and artists. She states: “By attending to individual life histories, experiences, and artistic practices, we will explore questions that emerge as we consider what the enormous losses of life, culture and humanity in Iraq mean for the world as a whole.” This exhibition is only one of the many promising exhibitions and public forums that address differences in artistic production in the hopes of clarification and understanding.

Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin and Wafaa Bilal do not comprise a national Iraqi contemporary art school. If they represent anything, it is the pluralism that has existed in the Iraqi social and historical contexts. According to Edward Said, “cultures are always made up of mixed, heterogeneous, and even contradictory discourses.” The histories and artistic production of these three artists represent a diversity of discourses that have affected the Iraqi people for more than half of a century. The narratives and art of these three Iraqi artists are individual, yet representative. They are stories that should be told.

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33 Ibid.
Chapter 2—Hana Mal Allah’s Canvases and Books: Representations of an Artist’s Struggle to Reconstruct Her Iraqi Culture

Despite the physical destruction of Iraq and the massive loss of life in the region, Hana Mal Allah has not given up hope for the Iraqi people’s sense of cultural identity. By continuing to produce art in London, Mal Allah endeavors to demonstrate that Iraqi culture can survive despite the geographical dispersion of its people. To this end, her canvases, book art, and mixed media compositions are saturated with symbolic references to the ancient history of the region, but they also represent the nation’s contemporary struggles to exist peacefully. The analysis of her art, more than the works of Adel Abidin and Wafaa Bilal, provides a good foundation for the comprehension of the overall evolution of modern art produced by artists from Iraq. Because of her age, her art can represent both the beginning of modernism in Iraq and more contemporary trends of the region. While it can easily be pinned to “national” stereotypes and generalities, the art of Hana Mal Allah should not be restricted as such.

Mal Allah is widely regarded as a leading female artist from Iraq. She was born in Thee Qar in 1958 and eventually moved to Baghdad to pursue an education in painting and graphic design. From the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad she received her B.A. in Graphics in 1978, a B.A. in Painting in 1988, an M.FA. in Painting in 2000, and her Ph.D. in the Philosophy of Painting in 2001. Today she is respected as much for her art as she is for her writing and research, much of which was done under the guidance of

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Shakir Hassan Al Said, one of the “groundbreaking” artists of the 1950s and 60s and Mal Allah’s most influential teacher.\footnote{Kaelen Wilson-Goldie, “Paying tribute to Iraqi master Shakir Hassan al-Said before his legacy disappears,” \textit{The Daily Star} (Lebanon), March 21, 2005, \url{http://www.peacecorps.org}, (accessed 13 January 2008).}


By considering Mal Allah’s experiences as student and teacher of art in Baghdad and taking into account the contextual circumstances of Iraq during her lifetime, one can better appreciate her work’s evolution and its importance for contemporary artistic discourse. Mal Allah’s art produced since the occupation, and increasingly since her self-imposed exile in the summer of 2007, suggests the struggles of a people and the artist’s own concerns for cultural identity. Though she has spoken out strongly in favor of preserving Iraqi cultural heritage, it is crucial to note that Mal Allah’s ties to the nation state of Iraq are unclear. Her struggles to accept exile and to adapt to a new western setting are implied by what she has said in interviews and essays. What we see in her art
though, are ancient Mesopotamian symbols, reflections of modern movements, and conceptions about current events in Iraq.

**The Eighties Generation: Historical Circumstances and Critical Decisions**

Born in 1958—the same year that the British-backed monarchy was ousted and supplanted by a socialist government—Mal Allah experienced four changes of militaristic regimes during the first ten years of her life.\(^{37}\) Once freed from any tie to colonialism, military factions within Iraq soon created a façade of civilian government, while taking control of the nation and placing officers in the most important political positions. The “republican period” lasted until 1968 and can be characterized not only by bloodshed and instability, but also by genuine progressive reforms and socialist-inspired ideals. However, by the time the Ba’th Party took control for the second time in ten years, all the idealism of those who had been truly interested in social reform was outweighed by fears of chaos and personal vendetta. Fueled by these fears, the powerful Ba’th Party took control and adopted tactics to ensure the party’s absolute authority and power.

Surprisingly, during this decade of political unrest marked by violence and upheaval, some of the most influential Iraqi artists, many of whom had taken advantage of scholarships to study abroad in Europe in the 1940s and 50s, actively produced art, formed artistic collectives, and taught those who were unable to experience the western world.\(^{38}\) In an essay describing Iraqi artists of the 1980s and 90s, artist and scholar

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\(^{37}\) See Yaphe, 115-152, for a comprehensive reading of the very complex history of Iraq since the Revolution of 14 July 1958.

Rashad Selim reflects on what he calls “an extremely complex panorama” of contemporary Iraqi art and asserts that the preceding generations’ experiences and teachings significantly influenced later Iraqi artistic production. Collectively known as *Al-Ruwad* or the *Pioneers*, this group included the highly revered Jewad Selim, Faiq Hassan and Shakir Hassan Al Said, all of whom have been credited with bringing western modernism to Iraq and adapting it to Iraqi history and culture.

Like so many burgeoning artists during the middle of the twentieth century, the *Pioneers* were influenced by a plurality of modernist movements including impressionism, expressionism, cubism, and abstraction. For example, Shakir Hassan Al Said, a student of Jewad Selim, continued his mentor’s method of assimilating trends of western art within the iconographic traditions of his Iraqi heritage. However, instead of embracing a modern, yet figurative approach as Jewad Selim had, Shakir Hassan infused Europe’s New Realist techniques and mystic underpinnings with cryptic iconography that referred to his culture’s unique history. Many years later he became a major influence for Hana Mal Allah in her conceptual and aesthetic approach to art.

Iraqi artists’ ideas of incorporating western modernity with Iraqi tradition found political encouragement after Iraq’s final revolution of the 1960s. In 1968 the Ba’thist Party took control of the Iraqi government and brought with it a party line that saw the promotion of art as an integral part of its revolutionary philosophy. The party’s interest in promoting art, as Ulrike al-Khamis, a West Asian art historian and curator, has noted, resulted in considerable government-sponsored artistic activity that fostered society’s

39 Ibid., 47-61.
40 Ibid., 51.
41 Ibid., 52.
42 Ibid.
appreciation and embrace of cultural production. In addition to the new governmental support for the arts, a new art discipline of graphic design garnered favor in Iraq during the 1970s. This led to its inclusion in academic curricula and contributed to Mal Allah’s education and her artistic aesthetic.

Though from a domestic vantage point, the 1970s was a time for peace and cultural enjoyment in Iraq, from a political perspective it was a period in which the foundations for the future war with Iran and the persecution of the Kurds were laid. Just as the 1970s were coming to an end, Saddam Hussein took control of the nation and, shortly thereafter, entered into a mutually disastrous war with Iran that would last a decade and cost the lives of nearly 150,000 Iraqis. Furthermore, as Samir al-Khalil, a historian of this period, has pointed out, the freedoms and creative encouragement that artists experienced in the previous decade were stifled immediately as the government became more interested in controlling artistic production than fostering it. Many artists responded to this by moving abroad, but others continued to pursue their own artistic interests in Iraq and also to teach the younger generation—a generation that included Mal Allah.

During the 1980s Mal Allah joined other young Iraqi artists and, from the remaining older artists, learned modern techniques and theoretical frameworks that eventually helped inform their culturally introspective aesthetic. Shakir Hassan Al Said was instrumental in influencing this younger group of artists to conceptualize their art as

44 Yaphe, 123-126.
mystical and representative of their cultural heritage. Born in 1925, Shakir Hassan Al Said studied painting at the Baghdad Institute of Fine Art in the 1950s and attended the Académie Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris until 1959. He eventually established a group called “The One Dimension,” which had as its foundation the theory that art was about an approach to God.\(^4^6\) In his art, he explored Sufism and Islam’s religious texts and extracted from them words and symbols.\(^4^7\) The solitary units represent whole texts and encourage viewers to remember specific teachings from them. All of this, he taught to the young Iraqi artists who stayed in Baghdad during the 1980s.

Hana Mal Allah credits Shakir Hassan Al Said with inspiring mysticism in her art. The formal qualities of her canvases and books also indicate that Mal Allah, like her teacher, physically destroys parts of her works. Conceptually, Shakir Hassan Al Said’s interest in Sufism, the medieval practice of studying the numerical and symbolic value of Arabic letters, can also be seen in Mal Allah’s attention to pattern and grid systems (see figs. 5 and 6). Shakir Hassan Al Said’s influence on Mal Allah’s work can also be seen when considering his methods of burning and tearing into canvases that he had begun to use in the early 1980s. Finding precedent in mid-twentieth-century canvases of European artists, Lucio Fontana and Yves Klein, this type of destruction art has historically represented the artist’s desire to go beyond traditional methods of artistic production and to find new ways of expressing difficult concepts such as the infinity of space.\(^4^8\) In his later panel paintings, such as *Wall Strip no. 4* (1992) (fig. 1), Shakir Hassan Al Said

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\(^4^7\) Ibid.

similarly utilizes destructive methods of piercing and burning, producing holes which, at first, directly reference bullet holes of war, but later transform into geometrical circles, symbolizing infinity. In the canvases and books of Mal Allah, the same destructive methods of burning and slashing can be traced back to European precedents, yet these methods maintain more powerful connections to the present due to their political context.

Figure 1: Shakir Hassan Al Said, *Wall Strip no. 4*, mixed media on wood, 122 x 122 cm, 1992, Jordan National Gallery of Fine Arts

Another of Mal Allah’s artistic determinants was the isolation that surfaced during the 1990s as a result of the United Nations’ punishment of an overly ambitious dictator. On August 2, 1990, not even three full years after the Iraq-Iran ceasefire, Saddam Hussein invaded oil-rich Kuwait with the goal of expanding his source of funds for military programs. Afterwards, the United States, operating through the United Nations, organized a coalition to reverse the action, and eventually began Operation

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49 Wilson-Goldie.
50 Yaphe, 128.
Desert Storm on January 16, 1991. One hundred hours after the coalition forces began a
ground war on February 23, Iraq retreated from Kuwait, thereby signaling defeat. This
war was more devastating for Iraq than the preceding Iran war because Iraq’s middle
class was virtually wiped out due to economic sanctions mandated by the United Nations,
which devastated small businesses and crippled Iraq’s economy.\textsuperscript{51}

The sanctions brought about an intense isolation that, though detrimental in a
variety of ways, inspired artists to reflect inwardly and focus on the ancient art of
Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{52} According to Mal Allah, the artists of the 1980s generation who did not
opt for exile when confronted with the isolation of the 1990s became inspired by their
own ancient cultural heritage, in which symbols and language create a powerful and
enriched aesthetic.\textsuperscript{53} Mesopotamian heritage also, asserts Mal Allah, provided an
alternative to the “precarious realities that continued to bear on every aspect of their
lives.”\textsuperscript{54}

The symbols and media of Hana Mal Allah’s works during the 1990s, exemplified
in a painting like \textit{Codes and Signs} (1998) (fig. 2), indicate her generation’s struggle with
reconciling styles and techniques of the western art of previous decades with their own
deeper cultural heritage. Symbols and codes resembling calligraphy recall Iraq’s rich
historical precedents, while the flat abstract planes and formal use of geometry constitute
traces of the western abstraction. However, while abstract art from the West was
important for Iraqi modernism, the Islamic faith and its historical guidelines pertaining to

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{52} Hana Mal Allah, “Consciousness of Isolation,” in \textit{Strokes of Genius: Contemporary
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid. 64.
art were also determining factors. Shakir Hassan Al Said has remarked that, while the West played an influential part in shaping modern Iraqi art, the idea that Iraq’s own cultural heritage played no part in its evolution is preposterous.\textsuperscript{55} Abstraction is historically grounded in Islamic and Iraqi art because, for those who practice Islam, figurative painting has always been prohibited and considered sacrilegious.\textsuperscript{56} Shakir Hassan Al Said was one among many Iraqi artists who, until his death in 2001, practiced Islam faithfully and accordingly did not include figurative painting in his work.

Just as in all her works, \textit{Codes and Signs} conveys a variety of complex symbols that also stem from her imagination as she embarks on her daily life, which, she says, in the case of that painting, represents a walk through the city of Baghdad. The black color used for the symbols has been attributed to her training in graphic design, but Mal Allah asserts that her fondness for black stems from the grief and trauma of Iraqi history.\textsuperscript{57} The symbols she draws were clearly inspired by the Sumerian artifacts she regularly admired in the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, similar to those on cylinder seals found in the images illustrated in figures 3 and 4.

In her specific situation, Mesopotamian heritage, Islamic artistic foundations, a mentor’s guidance, and western influences all played important roles in determining the aesthetic and method of Mal Allah’s art. However, as Nada Shabout, an authority on contemporary Iraqi art, said in a panel discussion in 2007, one cannot discuss Iraqi art

\begin{itemize}
\item Wilson-Goldie, paraphrasing Shakir Hassan al Said’s sentiments regarding this issue, \textsuperscript{55}
\item Ibid. \textsuperscript{56}
\item Hana Mal Allah, 66. \textsuperscript{57}
\end{itemize}
Figure 2: Hana Mal Allah, *Codes and Signs*, mixed media on canvas, 77 x 77 cm, 1998, private collection

Figure 3: Cylinder seal with god of agriculture and two others plowing, black steatite, 32 x 19 mm, Early Sumerian Dynastic Period, c. 2700-2500 B.C.E., private collection

apart from events in Iraq and the current situation of disaster and cultural erasure that is happening in the country.\textsuperscript{58} As the situation in Iraq evolved from isolation to occupation by the spring of 2003, Hana’s work became more reactionary and overtly political. Hana Mal Allah currently produces art that reflects her motivations for the cultural reconstruction of Baghdad.\textsuperscript{59} The influence of mysticism and her love for the ancient heritage of Iraq are still seen in her work, but her comments on the contemporary situation of occupation and destruction are added layers to her aesthetic.

\textbf{A New Meaning: Hana’s Response to Iraq’s Destruction after Occupation} 

From the beginning of the US-led Coalition Forces occupation of Iraq in 2003 until the spring of 2007, Hana Mal Allah adamantly opposed the idea of leaving her homeland and, instead, worked both within and outside of the country, trying to demonstrate that Iraqi culture could remain a viable source of strength for its people in difficult times.\textsuperscript{60} In contrast to the situation before the occupation, when Mal Allah walked through the streets of Baghdad to feel inspired, after 2003 her work bears direct relationships to specific events and tragedies in the city. For instance, \textit{The Looting of the Museum of Art} (fig. 5) is her emotional response to the assaults on her beloved National Iraqi Museum in Baghdad that took place during the initial weeks of the occupation.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{59} Christine Garabedian, dir., \textit{Stolen Dreams}, 22 min. (Al Jazeera.net: Witness program, Sept. 6, 2007), documentary following artists Hana Mal Allah and Rashad Selim, and curator/gallery owner Maysaloun Faraj, as they prepared for the \textit{Sophisticated Ways: Destruction of an Ancient City} exhibition at the Aya Gallery in London.
\bibitem{60} Ibid., 76-77.
\end{thebibliography}
Mal Allah has said that this type of work—which reflects her general aesthetic in regard to color choice and the incorporation of burning—should “appear as ruins,” like “the cycle of destruction visited on my city of Baghdad. It is desecration and humiliation.”  

Like many works of Mal Allah, *The Looting of the Museum of Baghdad* has an underlying grid-like pattern. In this case, one of her “signature grids” of triangles recalls the Islamic ceramic tiles that decorate many of the ancient walls in Baghdad. This reflects the artist’s continued reference to the Mesopotamian cultural heritage, while

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it also serves as a reminder of the type of art that was looted from the museum she references in her title.

She continued to make large paintings on wood throughout her residency in occupied Iraq. The patterns are all derived from ancient tile designs or other Mesopotamian artistic sources that the artist came to admire during her visits to the National Iraqi Museum in Baghdad before 2003. The black color in so many of them is produced by paint, tar or burn marks in most of her later work, and the wood is typically scarred by gashes and what appear to be bullet holes, all of which suggest the enduring influence of Shakir Hassad Al Said. However, unlike Said’s mystical focus, Hana Mal Allah seems to be moved more by current events than anything else in her later work.

Two final works by Mal Allah were completed in 2006 and represent an even greater symbolic concern for Iraq as a nation and a culture. Mal Allah says of her recent work that it “is based on geometry and meticulous order, which, once completed, is deliberately shattered in an expression of chaos on order and perhaps the contrary.”63 In this interpretation, her attention to geometry and order, though difficult to see at first, manifests itself as the primary level or baseline of her work. In Baghdad City Map (fig. 7) the map of the city of Baghdad, drawn in pen and ink on very thin paper, creates the backdrop for the tearing and burning that Mal Allah eventually inflicts on the composition. The ancient Mesopotamian-inspired symbols inserted sporadically throughout the work were applied with paint and tar. These ancient symbols are juxtaposed with contemporary star images, symbolizing the national flag of Iraq.

Figure 6: Hana Mal Allah, *Baghdad City Map*, mixed media on paper and canvas, 180 x 180 cm, 2007, private collection.

Figure 7: Hana Mal Allah, *Omen of the Burning City*, Book art, mixed media on paper and canvas, 50 x 50 cm, 2007.
This juxtaposition reinforces the artist’s preoccupation with the notion of Baghdad as a city of overlapping meanings, vexed with destruction but perpetually recreating itself.\textsuperscript{64}

Physically burning and tearing the paper and canvas of her work, Mal Allah produces an expressionistic, distressed effect in her compositions. In both \textit{Baghdad City Map} and her book \textit{Omen of the Burning City}, she uses smoke and fire to create blemishes on the canvases and paper, which also symbolize bombings and disasters taking place in Iraq. Elaborating on the cathartic impact of her methodology, the artist says, “My work is about catastrophe—even the colors. I don’t really feel it, but I know it relieves me. I can’t imagine \textit{not} tearing the paper. I can’t imagine \textit{not} burning it.”\textsuperscript{65} In this way she describes the therapeutic element of her creative process that is transferred to the viewer in a strictly visual and sometimes tactile manner, as in \textit{Omen of the Burning City}.

Books, illuminated and manually inscribed, hold a place of honor in Iraqi/Arabic art because of their connection with sacred teachings. This place of honor is reflected in the affinity for and development of book art shared by contemporary Iraqi artists, including Shakir Hassan Al Said.\textsuperscript{66} Recognized for its high level of craft and its particular reference to political events and cultural identity, Iraqi book art distinguishes itself from the overall genre.\textsuperscript{67} For Mal Allah, following in this tradition coincides with her other choices concerning traditional media and her reverence for cultural heritage.

The tactile element of \textit{Omen of the Burning City} heightens the viewer’s capacity to immediately comprehend the underlying historical message of Baghdad’s perpetual

\textsuperscript{64} Garabedian, \textit{Stolen Dreams}, 2007.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{66} Janet Tyson, “Dafitir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art,” essay produced for the exhibition at the University of North Texas, October 2005, \url{http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/gallery/dafiter/essay}.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid.
and layered destruction. The question then arises: what does this history mean in today’s context? As the viewer flips through the book, however, a new meaning—or new questions—arise. The map represents the repetitive destruction and rebirth of the city throughout history. Therefore, once the viewer grasps the historical implications of the work, she has the option of thinking about the city’s past, present or future. Because of Baghdad’s current state of destruction, the viewer may be inspired to think optimistically about its future reconstruction or, pragmatically, about its present condition of tumult.

As the viewer turns the pages of the book, different maps appear with unique patterns of destruction metaphorically burned or torn through each one. Much like her mentor, Mal Allah has the gift of evoking dynamism. Creating a map that now conveys the contemporary disaster of a city in a perpetual state of destruction, the artist also gives the audience a historical reference or, if one is more optimistic, a prophecy of re-birth and reconstruction. Hana says, “These pages have no end, every time you turn them, you read something different. That’s the game of life and it can’t be captured. It’s mad like the life we are living. And it has no rules, or it has rules that we don’t understand, and will never understand.”

Hana Mal Allah’s description of her book and its continuous evolution of meaning is an interesting one because it pertains also to a way of understanding cultural production at any given point in history. For contemporary Iraqi art, especially, the task of comprehending its implications and importance for an overarching discourse about culture or politics is a daunting one. The limited state of scholarly research in the field of contemporary Iraqi art alone testifies to the difficulty of representing the art of a modern

68 Ibid.
or contemporary artist. However, by considering even a loose historical framework, such as the one represented here, the art of Mal Allah takes on meanings and implications that are multi-faceted, questioning dichotomies of western versus Eastern influence, ancient versus contemporary content, and present circumstances versus future goals.

Still, even after these questions arise, more concerns emerge about the daunting situation of exile in which Mal Allah reluctantly lives. Her aspiration to defy those who claimed that Iraqi culture was doomed, now appears to be in jeopardy. When reflecting on exile, Edward Said asserted that “Exile is predicated on the existence of, and love for one’s native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.” 69 Hana Mal Allah, unlike other Iraqi artists who did not share her unique history, embodies the exile discussed in many of Said’s writings. Just what that means for her art, and therefore the history of contemporary Iraqi art, is a topic that should be addressed in critical discourse for years to come.

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Chapter 3—Adel Abidin’s Videos and Installations:  
Irony and Critique from Helsinki

Adel Abidin is an artist from Iraq who has lived in Helsinki for nearly a decade. His art does not reflect the traditions of painting or calligraphy that “Iraqi art” is known for. In fact, Abidin’s use of video is an aesthetic that is just being explored in Iraq as a source for documentary. In short, this artist does not fit as easily into generic stereotypes of “Iraqi” as do artists like Hana Mal Allah. Though they differ in geographic location and artistic aesthetic, Abidin and Hana are similar in terms of the content of their work. Adel Abidin’s recent videos and video installations encourage viewers to re-examine their conceptions of the situation in Iraq. But unlike Hana, Abidin uses irony and interaction to engage the viewer, instead of formal abstraction and ancient references.

Born in Baghdad in 1973, Abidin is an artist displaced from his homeland who returns to it repeatedly through his art—a common thread among Abidin, Hana and Wafaa Bilal. Two of Abidin’s video installations, Abidin Travels and Construction Site, both completed in 2006, utilize sensory-charged environments that lead viewers to videos in which the Occupation of Iraq by American forces is the subject of consideration. While these installations differ in a variety of ways—Abidin Travels is an environment laced with irony, while Construction Site provides a more somber and meditative atmosphere—both of them encourage audiences to reflect on issues that center on the artist’s native land.

Though he grew up during a decade-long war between Iraq and Iran, Abidin was able to go to school in Baghdad and pursue his artistic goals. After earning his B.A. in Painting from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1994, according to Abidin, he met and fell in love with a woman who lived in Helsinki, so he moved there to be with her in 2000. Five years later he earned his M.F.A. at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki and began to exhibit there. It was in Helsinki that Adel Abidin switched from making paintings to video, a change he credits to a greater access to western technology in Finland compared to what he had had in Iraq. Throughout his artistic career, Adel Abidin has had eleven solo exhibitions in Baghdad and Helsinki, and is scheduled to exhibit in Salzburg, Paris, Istanbul, Lisbon and New York during 2008 and 2009. In 2007, Abidin Travels was included in the Nordic Pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennial, and many of his films were shown at film festivals in Berlin and Madrid. Currently, he is fulfilling a two-month residency at the Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, located in Vitry-sur-Seine, in the suburbs of Paris.

Unlike fellow Iraqi artist Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin does not claim to create art in order to perpetuate Iraqi culture or to save it. According to Abidin, most people attribute his artworks’ subject matter to his ethnicity, but his art is principally political, not Iraqi. He says it is pure coincidence that his homeland is at the center of today’s political stage. While he says that he is proud of Iraq’s cultural heritage and ancient traditions, he also contends that art is universal, saying, “art is from everywhere for

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71 Adel Abidin, interview by author, 7 April 2008, e-mail.
72 Ibid.
73 Adel Abidin, artist’s statement, 7 May 2005, http://www.galeriahuuto.net/adl_abidin_uudennm_fi.html (accessed 10 February 2008), Galleria Huuto is a gallery in Helsinki in which Abidin exhibited from April to May of 2006. His exhibition was entitled, “About Me.”
everyone.” Artists and writers have historically argued for their work to be viewed in this way. In fact, writer Salman Rushdie has hypothesized that some non-western writers reject their ethnic labels in an effort to place themselves in other, better-understood literary contexts. In the case of Iraqis, however, the contextual implications of the label “Iraqi artist” are in a state of flux, a situation that reflects the displaced condition of the Iraqi people and the continuing debate over their national identity. But according to Adel Abidin, his nationality means nothing compared to his personal experience.

**Abidin Travels: Criticism and Irony Re-Frame American Occupation of Iraq**

Adel Abidin’s oeuvre includes mainly videos, video installations and short films that raise questions about marginalization, alienation, and political events. The specific situation of Iraq’s occupation is not the sole subject matter of Abidin’s art, yet his works that address this topic have gained international notoriety above the rest. Two such installations, *Abidin Travels* and *Construction Site*, provide viewers with very different environments but stem from identical concepts: to frame the contemporary situation of Iraq in a unique way that challenges viewers’ common perceptions. In both video installations Abidin creates what art historian Margaret Morse calls, “referent worlds to consciousness raised by the technique of stimulation.” Abidin stimulates the audience by incorporating recognizable objects and images, like the identifiable setting of a travel

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74 Adel Abidin, interview by author, 7 April 2008, e-mail.
76 Adel Abidin, interview by author, 13 March 2008, e-mail.
77 This claim is based on the international attention given to these installations as reflected by their inclusion in biennials and other western exhibitions.
agency in *Abidin Travels*, which make viewers comfortable in their surroundings. This, in turn, results in viewers’ willingness to interact directly with the objects in the room, as they would in a real-life situation. The subsequent interaction leads them to a fuller comprehension of the overall installation.

Installed to look like a travel agency, *Abidin Travels* (fig. 8) creates an environment that criticizes the American occupation of Iraq while offering viewers recorded video of the realities of life there. One of Abidin’s best known works to date, the installation was completed in 2006 and has since appeared in exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei, the Huuto Gallery in Helsinki in 2006, the 52nd Venice Biennial in 2007, and Triple Base Gallery in San Francisco in 2008. It consists of two monitors, two DVD players, posters, one computer, a manufactured Web site and a laser printer and brochures. The ensemble invites viewers to interact with a mock travel agency, which promotes travel solely to Baghdad. Viewers are able to watch video footage of life in Iraq, purchase a fake ticket on the website, and look through informative brochures and other advertisements. Throughout the experience, viewers are confronted with ironies that criticize western consumerism, the media and American understanding of the Iraqi condition.

The video in the installation criticizes Western advertisement techniques by showing images of the harsh realities of Iraq. The sarcastic promotional advertisement includes images of relaxed, alcohol-consuming American soldiers celebrating on the Fourth of July, followed by images of weeping women, destroyed buildings, looters, corpses and a dead child. The video is narrated by a woman with an American accent who enthusiastically describes Baghdad’s tourist attractions.
In an essay entitled “The Art of The Possible,” Barcelona-based artist Francesc Torres writes that “technology-based art” (he includes video, multi-media installations, and photography) “has a key role to play in clarifying the difference in the uses of technology that are harmful and ill-directed and those that are an expression of constructive and humanistic concerns.” In *Abidin Travels* the artist exploits the “harmful and ill-directed” methods of western advertising in a video format. Framed as an advertisement, the video critiques the way that television, according to Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, “represents and perpetuates dominant ideologies.” Hall and Fifer contend that television normally does this by favorably representing the dominant ideology and objectifying the role of the Other. Therefore, Abidin’s video critiques

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western television representations, for example prevalent western depictions of Iraq, by reversing the roles to show Iraqis as represented favorably and Americans as objectified. Ultimately, by showing critical images of American soldiers and by using an American voice to sell and promote lies, Abidin is able to utilize the very strategies of advertising that he criticizes to hold the attention of the viewer.\footnote{Ibid., 23. This characteristic is mentioned as one aspect of the “double existence of video,” the other being its operation as “a marginal and critical form in relation to dominant media by revealing methods of audience manipulation.”}

![Figure 9: Adel Abidin, Inside of brochure for Abidin Travels, 2006, scanned image.](image-url)

The installation also critiques the ideas of Western consumerism and American comprehension of Iraq’s real situation. Within the installation, viewers are bombarded by
images and advertisements depicting the consumerism and commercialization that epitomize what Fredric Jameson has referred ironically to as “the American way of life.” The installation calls into question this “way of life” by incorporating western marketing techniques into the western framework of a tourist agency in order to “sell” the American public on a false idea of Iraq. The pervasiveness of brochures (fig. 9), video, signage, interactive websites, and other advertisements illustrates what Jameson has characterized as the West’s “mode of daily life in which all our mass culture and entertainment industries train us ceaselessly, day after day, in an image and media barrage quite unparalleled in history.” Because Abidin Travels’ concept of Iraqi tourism is framed in an environment of western consumerism, the viewer’s experience is ultimately challenged by the competing concerns of Iraq and the West. The harsh realities of western culture are made just as manifest, as those for Iraqis.

The political concerns that Abidin calls into question in Abidin Travels, including the truth of what is occurring in Iraq under American occupation and how that situation is being represented in western media, are universal and controversial ones that are treated with a subtle wit for which Abidin is becoming known. This wit, coupled with the troubling images shown in the installation, encourages an informal and interactive viewer experience. Abidin’s overt critique of American Occupation of Iraq in this installation

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83 Ibid.
becomes easier for westerners to enjoy because of the artist’s use of irony—a technique not used by the artist in another, more emotional installation.

**Construction Site: Re-Conceptualizing Iraq from the Perspective of a Child**

*Construction Site* (figs. 10 and 11), completed in 2006, is a somber video installation by Abidin that incorporates video imagery of Iraq within a stimulating sensory environment. However, unlike the abrasive visual and audio content of *Abidin Travels*, the space of *Construction Site* is, for the most part, empty and darkened so that the video in the room is the sole focal point. The only light in the room comes from the monitor on the floor in a far corner. Viewers therefore must bend down to view the screen, but not before having to walk through crushed concrete that is scattered on the floor and that suggests continuity between the video’s content and the installation environment.

Adel Abidin visited Baghdad in 2005 and took video of the daily life of Iraqis, including members of his family. According to the artist, one day after a car bombing in the city he walked through the rubble and recorded what he saw. The video in *Construction Site* was taken during his walk, and it shows a little girl singing while she plays with two white plastic spoons and some rocks. She sings a traditional Iraqi children’s song about peace, loosely translated as follows: *Dear moon, why do you appear like a song about loneliness when he has been gone for so long my memories coming back to me like colorful rays of time*. According to Abidin, the girl did not know she was being video taped, and it was not a staged event.\(^85\) The video is one minute and

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thirty seconds in duration and loops over. The content of the video and the installation’s formal design complement each other to produce an eerie, somber and meditative atmosphere in which viewers have to conform to imposed physical limitations and lighting effects.

In his discussion of video installations, art historian Michael Rush states that they extend the experience of the moving image beyond not only the monitor, but also the darkened room. The experience is an immersive one. In Construction Site, the lack of overhead lighting and the angular blue light emanating from the monitor on the floor combine to produce an atmosphere that demands physical readjustments from viewers who must adapt to the minimal illumination. The girl who sings while playing in rubble from an explosion adds a physical aspect to the aural experience in an eerie manner, which is also heightened by the light from the video. Viewers also, after adjusting to the light and to the foreign language, are made aware of the physical rubble that is scattered, conceptualized as broken concrete, around the room. The work immerses viewers in an experience of confusion and curiosity, which is guided by minimal light and a foreign language. Ultimately, Construction Site’s formal aspects provide the framework for understanding its meaning.

Like Abidin Travels, Construction Site reframes the situation in Iraq as occupation and terror continue, but in this case, instead of critiquing the West in an overt manner, the installation invites viewers to be concerned with one Iraqi child. The intimacy provided by the dimmed lighting is heightened by the fact that viewers are forced to stoop down to the level of the monitor in order to see the girl’s hands and feet:

the only parts of her the video focuses on. In doing so, viewers kneel or sit across from the monitor—there, they see the video and have the opportunity to feel as if they are sitting across from the girl as she sings in her playground of destruction.

Here Abidin brings the representation of Iraqis to its most innocent level. This allows the artist to pose questions that do not have to circumvent issues that would arise by showing Iraqi soldiers or bureaucrats in the same circumstance. The innocent, unimposing child provides Abidin with the perfect conduit through which to ask universal questions like: “Why are we still at war?”; “How far have we come?”; “How many more children have to die?”; and “How can we allow this little girl to grow up in an environment of destruction?” These types of questions are not as inflammatory or as critical of the West as those inspired by Abidin Travels. Instead they suggest more universal concerns of an artist whose work does not only address the subject matter of Iraq as a nation. In all, from critiques of consumerist characteristics of the West to more humanitarian concerns of Iraqi children, Adel Abidin’s recent installations reframe political catastrophe by deconstructing it and focusing on concerns that have been ignored by mainstream Western media.

Artist Ilya Kabakov has said that installation, as a genre, aspires to anonymity—that the thought of authorship should never occur to the viewer. Though Kabakov’s statement can apply to installation artists of any background, it is not the best way to approach installations by artists from Iraq. The fact that the installations of Adel Abidin fall under any “national” tradition of “Iraqi art” does not mean that the artist’s origin should be ignored. In fact, viewing installations by artists whose Iraqi heritage is known

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actually enhances the experience. In the case of Abidin’s work, for example, a level of emotion is added to the critiques of Abidin Travels once viewers learn that the artist has lived in the West and the East. Furthermore, the videos in both Abidin Travels and Construction Site show images from Iraq. Knowledge of Abidin’s background may increase or decrease the level of a viewer’s trust when looking at the monitors, but regardless, the artist’s past informs his installations in a crucial way. For those who have been traditionally marginalized by the West, like artists from Iraq, the concept of anonymity would hinder what is slowly emerging as a cultural and self-referential body of art created by those who are redefining how the West understands modern and contemporary Iraqi art.  

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88 Nada Shabout, interview by author, 13 March 2008, telephone. Dr. Shabout mentioned the self-referential and cultural reflection aspects of modern and contemporary Iraqi art. She insinuated, too, that both characteristics will probably be present in future Iraqi artistic production.
Chapter 4—Wafaa Bilal: Controversial Art in an American Setting

Since 2006 Wafaa Bilal has produced two controversial, interactive, and politically activist artworks. He is an American citizen from Najaf, Iraq, who moved to the United States in 1991 because of political persecution under Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian regime. Bilal’s interactive, online, first-person shooter installation entitled *Domestic Tension* (2007) and a video game installation called *Virtual Jihadi* (2008) represent the artist’s method of interactively communicating with the viewer on a political level. Both works use participation in a way that encourages viewers to consider their own roles in respect to those of Iraqis, and challenges the audience to evaluate its concepts of Iraqi identity. All of this is informed by Bilal’s traumatic history in Iraq, his personal experiences in America, and the recent hardships of his immediate family who are still in Iraq. By considering these contexts and approaching Wafaa Bilal’s recent artworks as intentionally political, one can better understand Bilal’s overall importance for the discourse of contemporary art produced by artists from Iraq.

Born in Iraq in 1966, Wafaa Bilal grew up during the same tumultuous and historical times that Hana Mal Allah endured. Though eight years younger than Mal

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89 Christiane Paul, *Digital Art* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2003), 198. Paul defines “first-person shooter” as a video gaming term that is a “classic category” of a player experiencing the world of the game from her own position. “Shooter” refers to the game’s premise of shooting to win.

Allah, Bilal was a strongly opinionated young man by the end of the decade-long war that began with the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein on September 23, 1980. He witnessed first-hand the repressive power of the authoritarian regime that denied him the opportunity to study art because a member of his family had been accused of disloyalty to Iraq. Saddam Hussein’s regime, for reasons unknown to Wafaa Bilal, dictated that he study geography at the University of Baghdad instead of art. (The state policies that officially affected art and artists under Saddam Hussein’s regime are currently little known and inaccessible to the general public.) Even though he accepted the state’s mandate and enrolled in the geography studies program, Bilal still produced artwork—mostly posters and paintings—during this period. However, in 1986, because of his art’s political critique aimed at Saddam Hussein, Bilal was arrested and tortured. After his release, Bilal looked outside his country for inspiration.

The Gulf War that began with Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 ended after the international coalition forces joined the United States in Operation Desert Storm and pushed Iraqi forces back to Iraq in 1991. Right after the invasion of Kuwait, Bilal says that he was “inspired by President [George H. W.] Bush’s message to the Iraqi citizens that if they attempted to overthrow Saddam, the US would stand behind them.” He then helped organize opposition to the government, but, after learning that he was scheduled to be executed, he fled to Kuwait. After escaping, Bilal was accused of being a spy, but his student ID convinced Kuwaiti officials otherwise, and he was sent to a refugee camp on their border. He stayed there for two years, during which time, rather

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92 Ibid.
than sleeping in a tent, he built a mud-brick shelter to thwart Kuwaiti attempts to kidnap and sell him to Iraqi soldiers (as they did with many young Iraqis who fled in 1990-91, according to Bilal). He also helped children with their art and continued his own work until 1992, when Bilal was able to move to the United States.

In five year’s time, Bilal learned English and earned a B.F.A. from the University of New Mexico. He received his M.F.A. in the fall of 2003 from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he is now an instructor of photography, art and technology. Bilal’s art is currently represented in three U.S. galleries: the Dean Jensen Gallery in Milwaukee and the Midwest Photographers Project at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and Flatfile Galleries, both in Chicago. He had two solo shows in Baghdad during the final years of his time there but since coming to the United States, he has shown his work frequently. While studying in New Mexico until 1999, Bilal had four shows in Albuquerque. After earning his M.F.A. he worked on an exhibition in Tempe, Arizona in 2004, a photography exhibition entitled “The Human Condition” in the Flatfile Galleries in 2005, and “Casting Bread” at the Dean Jensen Gallery in Milwaukee in 2006. In 2007 Bilal’s work was shown in three exhibitions: “Interior Landscapes” in Dallas, “Domestic Tension” at Flatfile Galleries, and “Al dar Al-Iraqi” at the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, California. His work has also been included in 34 group exhibitions since 1996 and in six performance and video screenings since 2001.

Bilal has worked in various media, including photography, video and digital art. The two works discussed here, Domestic Tension (figs. 12 and 13) and Virtual Jihadi

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93 Ibid.
(fig. 14), completed in 2007 and 2008 respectively, represent Bilal’s exploration of the simultaneous usage of various technological methods of artistic production. Though recent Iraqi art is in its very early stages of being researched and catalogued, it appears that Wafaa Bilal is one of few Iraqi artists to incorporate digital media other than video and photography in his work. Regardless of whether Bilal is the only artist from Iraq utilizing new technologies or one of many yet to be known, the fact that he uses the internet and other technologies accessible to westerners implies a correlation between his American setting and his artistic choices. It also encourages the discourse about the national artistic production of artists from Iraq to evolve into an international contemporary discourses that speculate about the power of new forms of technological art. Through interactivity, viewers of Bilal’s works may experience art that provokes political discourse about the war, Iraqi people, and ethnic stereotypes.

**Internet Art, Politics and Intervention**

One of the most significant aspects of the internet, according to Christiane Paul, is “that it has created a global platform for exchange.”\(^{95}\) Wafaa Bilal’s installation and online performance, *Domestic Tension* (2007) (figs. 12 and 13), exploits this quality by limiting viewers to an online experience and by encouraging them to comment after viewing the work in a format that would allow others to read what the viewers wrote. Ultimately stimulating the “global exchange” that Paul mentions, *Domestic Tension* challenged people across the world to question the reasons and the motivations behind

\(^{95}\) Paul, 120.
the artist’s invitation to them to assault him. This interactive artwork earned Bilal the award for “Artist of the Year” in 2007 from the Chicago Tribune.


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96 Alan G. Artner, “WAFAA BILAL: Interactive performance piece is altering perspectives on war, one paintball at a time,” *Chicago Tribune*, 30 December 2007, [http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/newspaper/printedition/sunday/art/chi-1230_coty_artnerdec30,0,5311902.story](http://www.chicagotribune.com/services/newspaper/printedition/sunday/art/chi-1230_coty_artnerdec30,0,5311902.story) (accessed 13 March 2008). Alan Artner, an art critic for the *Tribune*, stated in this article that the sites logged more than 80 million hits and that 2,000 pages of anonymous comments were written by viewer-shooters from 132 countries.
The images in figures 12 and 13 show the physical environment in which Bilal lived for 24 hours a day from May 4 to June 4, 2007. A web camera affixed to a rifle-sized paintball gun transferred the live image of the artist in the Flatfile Galleries room in Chicago to two sites on the internet (crudeoils.us and flatfilegalleries.com) that allowed any person with internet access to view the setting in real time, as if they were playing a first-person shooter video game. The viewer, seeing the scene as if she were looking down the barrel of a gun, then had the option to control and/or shoot a paintball at Bilal or at another object in the gallery room. The gun was designed to enable multiple users to engage with it at any point, and the program prevented the monopolization of the gun by any one user. According to the Flatfile Galleries media release, the web-cam continued to record the “tattered remnants” of the empty room from June 5 until June 16, 2007, during which time the gun was de-activated “as a memorial to all those who lost their lives in the War in Iraq.”

Wafaa Bilal’s installation is nothing if not political. It raises questions about the roles of Iraqis as victims, his own role as an artist, the actions or inaction of the viewer, and what it all means in a world where Iraq is occupied by the United States. And, in using digital technology and the internet as conduits for representation, interaction and communication, Bilal fulfilled art historian Paul Von Blum’s prediction that the “future” technological advances in computers and telecommunications would “ensure that political commentary in art will unite effectively with state-of-the-art technology to reach

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even larger audiences in an increasingly global society.” In fact, it has been determined that Bilal’s *Domestic Tension* in fact reached 132 countries and was viewed over 80 million times.

More important than the quantitative data, however, is qualitative evidence. About reference to *Domestic Tension*, Bilal said in a recent interview, “I didn’t expect it to be a battleground for so many different things.” As evidence of the complexity Bilal speaks of, two thousand pages of comments were written on the website, ranging from racial slurs to words of encouragement. Within this limited scope of viewer commentary, a particular dialogue about the war arose, revealing a striking polarity between pro- and anti-war viewers concerning the current occupation of Iraq by the United States. By considering this documented example of wartime debate and the viewers’ action or non-action—shooting or not shooting at an *Iraqi* during this time of political unrest—it is clear that Bilal successfully engaged with one tradition of twentieth-century western political art: to encourage viewers to think about the role of war as a means to settle human disputes.

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99 Every time a person viewed the website it was automatically counted for Bilal’s records. Also, if they chose to comment on the work, viewers were asked to identify where they were located. This information was also catalogued and counted by the artist.

100 Bose, 8.

101 Artner, “WAFAA BILAL: Interactive Performance Piece.”

102 Bose, 8.

103 Von Blum, 460.
Not only did *Domestic Tension* stimulate war and anti-war discourse regarding the current US occupation of Iraq, but it also provoked the technologically savvy, who may or may not have any political agenda to hack into the work. As the result of a “bot flood” hack, Bilal was continuously targeted and shot without any viewer gaining control over the gun. Technical adjustments were made, however, as many viewers were so affected by the onslaught caused by the hack that, by the last week of the project, they formed a “virtual human shield.” By staying online 24 hours a day and preventing anyone else from gaining control over the gun, this group stopped any shots from being fired at all for seven days.

This collective response by viewers, while a successful result of Bilal’s conceptual goal of participation, also raises intriguing questions about virtual intervention and international protest. Artistically, *Domestic Tension* confirms Christiane Paul’s assertion that the internet is an ideal platform for staging interventions and protests. However, according to Bilal, the objective was to convey the conditions of bombardment felt by citizens of Iraq. So the question becomes, if people are moved to act symbolically on behalf of one Iraqi artist, are similar actions being made to protect those Iraqi citizens still living Iraq? Can the successful and spontaneous “virtual human shield” created by an international group of Web viewers be an inspiration for protective action in the physical world? These types of questions not only attest to the success of this installation

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104 Galloway, 213-214, describes the difference between hacking and tactile media as a difference in politics. According to Galloway, hacking in its depoliticized form is “simply curious exploration.” He goes on to say that its libertarian philosophy is, “Freedom for all information, down with bureaucratic control, and get the cops/teachers/parents off our backs.” Tactile media, on the other hand, is driven by progressive politics.

105 Artner, “WAFAA BILAL: Interactive Performance Piece.”

106 Paul, 207.
to provoke conversation, they also illustrate a shift from a limiting nationalist framework to a more global one.

**Hacking and Censorship in 2008**

Wafaa Bilal completed another political work that raises questions about stereotyping and identity in 2008, and it proved to be even more controversial than *Domestic Tension*. *Virtual Jihadi* (fig. 14) is a video installation that, even after having been preemptively closed down at two different venues, has still generated debate about freedom of speech, censorship and ethnic stereotypes. As with *Domestic Tension*, Bilal says that the main motivation behind *Virtual Jihadi*’s conception is that it begins a discourse about the stereotyping that occurs between Americans and Iraqis. According to Bilal, “In these difficult times, when we are at war with another nation, it is our duty as artists and citizens to improvise strategies of engagement for dialogue . . . We Americans have become desensitized to the violence of war. We are disconnected, disengaged while many others do the suffering. The game holds up a mirror that reveals our own propensities for violence, racism and propaganda.” Including himself in this generalization of “Americans,” Bilal sets himself up as a collaborator with the American viewers, who may learn something from the experience.

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109 Ibid.
Virtual Jihadi is a video game installation that invites individual gallery viewers to play a first-person shooter video game called “A Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi.” In the game the viewer takes the role of an al-Qaeda suicide bomber who looks like Bilal and has a narrative that is based on the artist himself: an Iraqi who learns that his brother has been killed during the Occupation. The narrative continues as the

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character is recruited by al-Qaeda as a suicide bomber to kill President George W. Bush by igniting his bomb. In order to complete the mission, he must shoot and kill identical American soldier avatars.

The video game itself is a hacked version of Night of Bush Capturing, which was created by the Global Islamic Media Front, the media branch of al-Qaeda, in 2006. Furthermore, the al-Qaeda version is actually a hacked version of the original game called Quest for Saddam, produced in May 2003 by an American group, Petrilla Entertainment. Originally gaining interest because of its topicality (in May of 2003, President Bush declared victory in Iraq after invading the country two months before), Quest for Saddam is a first-person shooter game in which the player assumes the role of an American soldier whose goal it is to kill Iraqi soldiers in the desert in order to find and kill Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi soldiers appear identical with one another (see fig. 15).

In 2006 Global Islamic Media Front hacked Petrilla Entertainment’s version and changed the “skin” of the original by replacing the Iraqi soldier images with those of identical American soldiers, and by replacing the image of Saddam Hussein with that of President Bush (see fig. 16). Finally, in 2008, Bilal produced his hacked version of

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virtual-jihadi/ (accessed 2 April 2008). Biographical information found at the latter site and many interviews given by the artist verify the death of his brother in their hometown of Kufa, Iraq, in 2007 by the impact of a missile dropped by an American drone plane.


113 Paul, 203. In her discussion of Feng Mengbo’s artwork, Q4U (2002), Paul states that he inserted a “skin”—a visual representation of himself—into a game that he hacked into.
Islamic Media’s game and titled it *A Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi*. In this game Bilal replaces the player’s persona with that of himself and adds the narrative mentioned earlier, leaving the American soldiers and the image of Bush as it appeared in *Night of Bush Capturing*, (see fig. 17). Bilal critiques the original game itself by adding suicide bomber imagery and a personal narrative to the Islamic Media version and setting it up as an installation.\(^{114}\) He therefore takes what Alexander Galloway has termed the “radical action” that separates conventional video gaming and “countergaming.”\(^{115}\)

“Countergames,” according to Galloway, are video games that have been “modified or otherwise hacked by a user or group of users” and are approached by artists on the level of visual design, the underlying game engine, or, though very rarely, at the level of the gameplay itself.\(^{116}\)

In his essay about countergaming, Galloway, a leading gaming theorist, contends that the conventional video game-as-art (otherwise known as countergaming) is missing a key progressive element: radical action.\(^{117}\) Radical action, according to Galloway, is a critique of gameplay itself and requires artists to “create new grammars of action, not simply new grammars of visuality.” In this view, gamers should create alternative algorithms within the games they modify.\(^{118}\) In Bilal’s *Virtual Jihadi* the artist introduces

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The Global Islamic Media Front and Wafaa Bilal used the same type of hacking method to produce their versions of “Quest for Saddam.”

\(^{114}\) Alexander Galloway, “Countergaming,” in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 108-124. Galloway describes in this essay how “traditional” contemporary gaming artists modify merely the visual component of the game or the game engine itself. They typically do not modify narratives or gameplay.

\(^{115}\) Ibid., 123-125.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.

\(^{117}\) Ibid., 108-124.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., 125.
a narrative into an already modified game, thereby bringing it closer to Galloway’s domain of radical action, but, as we shall see, not necessarily within it.

Figure 15: Screenshot for “Quest for Saddam,” www.unitedamericancommittee.org/guest_game.htm; accessed 22 April 2008

Figure 16: Screenshot from “Quest for Bush, The Night of Bush Capturing,” released by an organization with ties to al-Qaeda, Site Institute, September 2006
Though Bilal does not introduce a new strategy of game play, he does apply narrative and the new skin as a way of critiquing the game itself.\textsuperscript{119} His choice to modify a game that, through its previous modifications, has an encoded history of special interests and their prejudices, works to critically invoke an ongoing discourse about racial stereotypes, war, and the outcomes that can arise from both. Ultimately, Galloway asserts that countergaming is an unrealized project that can only be achieved when an artistic gaming movement aspires to a greater potential as a political and cultural avant-garde.\textsuperscript{120} Though “unrealized,” countergaming is a project that works in a way that Bilal’s games are approaching. Bilal’s modified game does not deploy a new form of gameplay into the game, but it does use a unique narrative and the game’s turbulent history to critically engage the viewer with contemporary political and cultural discourse.

Moreover, an additional discourse arises when the facts of this artwork’s censorship emerge. Originally scheduled to be exhibited at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, on March 9, 2008, \textit{Virtual Jihadi} was shown once, and then

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 125-126.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 126.
permanently removed the following morning. Bilal himself was pulled out of a lecture he was giving to a media arts course by RPI campus security and was informed that administrators were reviewing the piece because of its use of al-Qaeda material and because it shows the virtual assassination of the president.121 Responding to this action taken by the RPI, in an interview in the Washington Post, Bilal said, “It’s an art show that is trying to solicit a conversation among people, and when you shut it down, you say you don’t have any right to say your point of view.”122 The artwork was also prohibited from being exhibited at the Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, which had extended an invitation to Bilal the same day that Virtual Jihadi was pulled from the RPI. It was shut down amidst free artistic expression protests because of a purported building code violation before it was ever shown.123

The multi-faceted debates surrounding Virtual Jihadi and its repeated censorship range from politically motivated contentions about terrorism, to social concerns about freedom of artistic expression.124 This heightened discourse, though frustrating to an artist who is taken aback by the actions of the RPI and the City of Troy, has also succeeded in doing exactly what he says his goal is: to incite conversations that have

121 Schulman, A03.
122 Ibid.
124 Many Internet sites and publications have kept track of the issues surrounding this work. Two of these are the artist’s website, found at www.crudeoils.com/wafaabilal, and a site that has created a timeline of the events from the exhibition’s original opening date to today, http://www.dicianno.org/blog/2008/03/11/city-of-troy-ny-joins-in-censorship-of-american-iraqi-artist/.
previously not been addressed about racial stereotyping, war and pacification. Though this installation has yet to be experienced by a large audience, it has already contributed to social and political dialogues aimed at a better understanding of, and empathy for, Iraqis living in both Baghdad and the United States.

Though Wafaa Bilal characterizes himself as an American, his Iraqi heritage and personal history inform his art in the same ways that Hana Mal Allah’s works illustrate her love for her culture, and in the ways that Adel Abidin’s video installations show his obvious concern for the contemporary situation there. The history of Iraq and the challenges artists from Iraq have had to face since their displacements play critical roles in determining their art. However, the analysis must not circumvent concerns of Iraq. For artists like Bilal, Western environments do not merely stand in opposition to their Iraqi homeland. They have offered opportunity, freedom from persecution, and access to technologies that, for Bilal in particular, allow for concepts to be disseminated globally. Inherent in his artistic techniques, such as Domestic Tension’s internet framework and the overtly provocative format of Virtual Jihadi, is a call for discourse. To frame Bilal’s work in nationalist terminology as “Iraqi” for the ease of curatorial or scholarly organization, would effectively stifle the more important dialogue about global concerns.

\[125\] Schulman, A03.
Chapter 5—A Comparative Analysis and New Approaches to Research

The challenge of discussing contemporary Iraqi cultural production requires historical reflection and critical analysis. By confronting this challenge, one can engage with this traditionally marginalized and misrepresented segment of artistic production and also ascertain that defining “Iraqi art” exclusively in terms of nationality is historically inaccurate and theoretically outdated. An effective way to illustrate this conclusion is to compare the work of different contemporary artists who are from Iraq. First, by focusing on their personal narratives, one is able to grasp differentiating motivations behind their art. Next, when their art is analyzed critically, one can discover an array of influences for each artist that helped to establish his or her aesthetic and subject choices. Finally, by refraining from categorical determinations about the artists and their art, one is able to comprehend the pluralist differences among them. In short, it is the very research on Iraqi artists Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin and Wafaa Bilal that, when analyzed comparatively, supports the thesis that Iraqi art is not a national phenomenon.

The three personal narratives of these artists span more than fifty years and multiple nations around the world. Their exile to western environments plays an important role in each of their stories and is typically the counterpoint to nationality in categorical references to artists from Iraq. But to determine that either of these polarities is categorically representative of Iraqi art would exclude the personal experiences and international influences that inform it. For example, though Hana Mal Allah, Adel Abidin, and Wafaa Bilal are all currently living away from Iraq, their choices to leave resulted from extremely different circumstances in their respective pasts. The length of time that each has spent away from Iraq has also influenced changes in the aesthetic
choices of Abidin and Bilal, while Mal Allah’s work has changed only in subject matter. Once in Helsinki, Abidin’s affinity for painting changed to that of video installation, and Bilal began with digital photography and then started to explore the internet with his art only after he moved to the United States. Mal Allah, the last of the three to move away from Iraq and the oldest of the group, has always painted and used mixed media with her art. Since she has moved to London, her work has not yet changed significantly. While exile has affected them all, it has done so in such different ways and, for some, in such a short amount of time, that it would seem shortsighted and inaccurate to assert that Iraqi artists are, first and foremost, exiles.

Furthermore, the exile of Mal Allah, Abidin, and Bilal is not representative of a larger “national” exodus because of the artists’ residences in western cities. With the goal of highlighting differences among artists from Iraq, the framework of this argument focuses on three artists who are in a non-representative position in terms of nationality. The majority of exiles from Iraq actually live in Jordan or Syria. So while exile for Mal Allah, Abidin, and Bilal informs their artistic production on individual levels, their displacement, like their nationality, should not be a sole factor that unifies them into a national Iraqi artistic school. Instead, what should be researched when considering those in exile are, as Edward Said puts it, the “alternative communities that have emerged from the experience of exile with a great deal of their memory and their private subjectivity still preserved.”126 Further research into this topic may in fact suggest that Mal Allah, Abidin and Bilal participate in different alternative communities that have emerged from exile.

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126 Edward Said, Reflections on Exile and Other Essays, introduction, xxxiii-xxxiv.
By comparing these three artists’ backgrounds we also see that, much like the overarching debate that pertains to Iraqi nationalism, a specific argument might be made as to the nationality of these artists’ works. While Hana Mal Allah stayed in Iraq for the majority of her career, Wafaa Bilal and Adel Abidin are best known for the work they have produced since leaving Iraq as young men in the early 1990s. Although they left for entirely different reasons—Bilal escaped persecution from Saddam Hussein’s regime, while Abidin says he left because he was in love—both artists made significant changes in their artistic production once living in western environments. Furthermore, because Wafaa Bilal is an Iraqi-American and Adel Abidin holds citizenship in Finland, the question for some has become: To what nation does the art belong? Both Abidin and Bilal have personally answered this question in essays and interviews by asserting that their art is not meant to belong to any nation. Contemporary art discourse has sometimes agreed with them. In a 1998 issue of Art Journal dedicated to a discussion of globalization, for instance, the editor observed that recent years had witnessed the emergence of a global art produced “by an international band of cultural nomads who travel widely to create and exhibit their work, much of which derives from their experience of homeland, displacement, migration, and exile.” By learning about the individual narratives of artists who are now in exile from Iraq, one can better understand why it is inappropriate to frame art produced by Iraqis as one based on nationality.

127 Adel Abidin, interview by author, 10 March 2008, e-mail.
Finally, learning the narratives of artists who are from Iraq helps to inform a modern and contemporary art historical record that has traditionally been marginalized by western scholars. Hana Mal Allah’s story gives us insight into the histories of her generation and the preceding one. To know the story of her mentor, Shakir Hassan Al Said, is to understand a facet of the broader 1950s generation of Iraqi artists known as the Pioneer group. This group, which has been credited with bringing western art to Iraq, is a starting point for any contemporary study of Iraqi art. Not only do scholars learn about specific historical persons from the narratives of artists, but they also become privy to the way in which revolution, war, and dictatorship affect artistic production. The tumultuous backdrop of Iraq is one of the reasons why art historical research relevant to the country is sketchy. However, by personalizing research to focus on individuals, scholars have the chance to fill in the gaps in that research. Wafaa Bilal’s experiences in Iraq before the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein, for example, vividly reflect how the artist was at first encouraged and then devastated by international events. His exile in Kuwait also provides a harsh personalized account of what conditions were like for the average refugee inside and outside of Iraq. The historical events and artistic movements that scholars can learn about by concentrating on the lives of individual artists from Iraq are invaluable to the overall field of study. They inform us of uncharted histories and remind us that even the very recent history of the Iraqi people is a rich and multi-faceted one.

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130 Shabout, “Historiographic Invisibilities,” mentions that the Iran-Iraq war, the dictatorship of Saddam, and the sanctions by the United Nations all helped to limit the scholarship on Iraqi contemporary art because of violence and isolation.
Speculations and Other Possibilities in Research

The individual differences among the artists raise a variety of questions. “Is it possible to attribute the vast artistic gulf that separates Wafaa Bilal and Hana Mal Allah to their Western and Eastern settings?” “Do Mal Allah and the other nine painters of what some have called the “Phoenix Group” actually represent the majority of Iraqi artists who stayed in Iraq until after the country’s 2003 occupation?” “Does the work of artists like Abidin and Bilal really conform to Western categories of art?” Questions such as these, however, establish an idea of categorization from which many art historians and curators are now trying to distance themselves. Interestingly enough, though the work of Mal Allah, Abidin, and Bilal was influenced by a variety of Western and native ideas and technologies, since the occupation it has, for the most part, referred back to Iraq. Each critical analysis done here of the work of these artists—from Hana Mal Allah’s Baghdad City Map, to Adel Abidin’s Construction Site, to Wafaa Bilal’s Domestic Tension—has taken the current situation in Iraq as its target concern. Therefore, instead of asking questions about the West versus East, would it not be better to ask questions about individual artists and their communities? Because each of these artists creates art independently of the others, it might benefit research to reflect on Said’s reference to “alternative communities” as an interesting framework for discussion.

These questions lead to a final and speculative set of conclusions regarding the research and analysis of the work of Mal Allah, Abidin, and Bilal. The following speculation about future studies of contemporary Iraqi art takes into account the words of

132 “Liminalities: Discussions on the Global and the Local,” 28. The editor here asserts that trends for curators to re-think traditional categorical frameworks for international biennials are trickling down to even local museum and gallery curators and scholars.
contemporary Iraqi artist Rashad Selim: “The categorization of art forms is secondary to forging a new direction in the way we perceive the contemporary.”

One idea that seems to “forge a new direction” is art historian Keith Moxey’s notion of a “motivated history.” According to Moxey, instead of using history to buttress the existence of a traditional canon, a motivated history might destabilize and call into question received assumptions and prejudices by insisting on their contingency and relativity.

By “motivated,” Moxey refers to the motivations of the historians themselves. He contends that “rather than legitimating a pre-established canon of artists and works following the principle of ‘objectivity,’ historians might pursue their own agendas and articulate their own motives for engaging in the process of finding cultural meaning in the art of the past.”

Though Moxey’s idea seems to allow the historian a considerable amount of subjectivity, one cannot help but consider that, whether transparent about their motives are not, historians have always had specific reasons for their choices of, and approaches to, research topics.

This idea also seems timely because of a growing interest among scholars in cross-referencing their research along different fields of study—to connect the previously unconnected. In the specific case of contemporary Iraqi art, Moxey’s “motivated history” may encourage historians to think outside the traditional framework of West versus East, national versus international, or us versus Other. In the specific cases of Mal Allah, Abidin, and Bilal, this approach to research could encourage dialogues about each artist

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135 Ibid.
independent of the others. For instance, a “motivated history” of the art of Wafaa Bilal might focus on the issues of the censorship of non-western artists in the United States. In the case of Adel Abidin, this type of research might take on the challenge of discussing how the artist’s works have become more critical of the West since having moved to Helsinki. One might also investigate whether Hana Mal Allah’s goals of safeguarding Iraqi culture stand a chance in a time when the country is in disarray. Each of these approaches would avoid trying to categorize and more likely work toward simple investigation. If scholars were to incorporate Moxey’s ideas about transparency and openness, they could explore controversial topics such as those that immediately arise when considering artists from Iraq.

A second option when approaching the art of contemporary Iraqis is based on the postcolonial theory of hybridity that was originally posited by Homi K. Bhabha in 1994.136 The term hybridity is used in postcolonial theory to describe the newness of the many different forms of minority discourses that flourish in the diasporas of the modern and postmodern periods. For Bhabha, hybridity is the “margin where cultural differences come into contact and conflict, and unsettle all the stable identities that are constructed around oppositions such as past and present, inside and outside, or inclusion or exclusion.”137 Applying the ideas of Bhabha’s hybridity to the study of Mal Allah, Abidin and Bilal would, therefore, acknowledge and examine the differences among artists whose ages, ethnicities and religions play a more important role in their overall

137 Ibid., 127.
analysis. Plurality within Iraqi society becomes more important than global concerns of national identity.

By applying Bhabha’s ideas about hybridity to the research on the three artists in this paper, one sees a multitude of margins where cultural differences among the three conflict. The western settings that Abidin and Bilal have lived in for years influenced them so, that both claim to be artists first and Iraqis second. They have both garnered citizenship in their new homes and reflect on their duality through artistic production. Bhabha’s assertion that we should study the areas where conflicts result the in unsettling stable identities, therefore, seems to apply directly to the current situation of exile in which these artists find themselves. All three artists, in fact, address concerns of identity in their art, illustrating the importance of subject matter. Represented as questions of marginality for Abidin, encouragement of dialogue for Bilal, and depictions of historical reminders for Mal Allah, concerns over their own identity and the identity of Iraqis on the whole manifest repeatedly through these artists’ works. Ultimately, it is along Bhabha’s “margins” of conflicts that we see interesting concerns that work to unify different groups of artists along lines other than those of nationality and exile.

Finally, a third method of analyzing the art of Iraqi artists is to cast the personal, ethnic, and national identities aside and to apply the rhizomatic model of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari and, furthermore, the ideas of the multitude from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. The rhizome and the multitude are both terms in the school of critical theory that rejects the traditional hierarchical system of society in favor of a less
structured and interconnected organization based on difference instead of identity.\(^{138}\)

According to Deleuze and Guattari, traditional concepts of identity should not be of concern any longer. Instead, they say it is important “to reach not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. Where we are no longer ourselves. Each will know his own. We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.”\(^{139}\) By adhering to these relatively new ideas of difference and identity, an approach to comprehending the art of Iraqi artists would not focus on their identity as such. Instead, as Hardt and Negri have asserted, the rifts that result from the local struggles around the world—like exile in the case of the American occupation in Iraq—would take precedent over identity in an artistic analysis.

However radical these ideas are to western art historical scholarship, in the case of Iraq it is clear that individual artists and their stories should remain the focal point of any analysis. A “motivated history” that did not address or highlight specific artists from Iraq would lose a great deal of context. As in the theoretical approaches of Deleuze, Guattari, Hardt and Negri, this type of “motivated history” would not be able to show the truth—that the stories of these artists are just as important as their art. As shown in this paper, their lives and the tumultuous events that helped to inform them are of great importance in understanding their artistic production. While it is necessary to look further into the artistic and personal differences between the artists and their work, it would be


\(^{139}\) Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.
detrimental to scholarship on art by Iraqi artists if we were to exclude narrative and context and concentrate solely on categorical terms like exile and nationality.
Bibliography


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Vita

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