



process  
of the  
record-

philip-  
denunciation.  
Phil-  
lipik / ɪˈlɪpɪk / bitter verbal attack

Philistine / fɪlɪˈstɪn, -stɪn, fɪlɪˈstɪn, -tɪn /  
1 member of a people opposing  
Israelites in ancient Palestine. 2 (u  
philistine) person who is hostile or indif-

ferent to culture. • adj. hostile or indif-  
ferent to culture. • phil'is-tin-ism n.  
1 vulgarian, barbarian, ignoramus, Babbitt,  
materialist, barbarian, boor, yahoo. • adj.  
uncultured, uncultivated, unenlightened,  
unenlightened, uneducated, unrefined, un-

read, unrefined, unrefined, unrefined, unrefined,  
Philistine, philistine, philistine, philistine,  
materialistic.

phil

phil-  
gag-  
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sophy

# Contemporary Book Art in the Middle East: The Book as Document in Iraq

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Contemporary book art in the Middle East is manifold. This article examines only one possible perspective on book art: the book as document, a term borrowed from Johanna Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* (2004).<sup>1</sup> Drucker derives the notion of the book as document from a Western context.<sup>2</sup> Adapted to the Middle East, in particular Iraq, it acquires a meaning of its own. Less personal statement than testimony of everyday life, the book as document steps into the void left by war and occupation in Iraq: namely the destruction of public and private records of Iraq's modern history. Contemporary book art in Iraq stems from and is marked by this political urgency. It draws inspiration from the Arabic-Islamic heritage but is part and parcel of contemporary artistic practices.

A large number of Iraqi artists of the so-called 'nineties generation' work in book art – among them Kareem Risan, Hana Malallah, Himat Mohammad Ali, and Nazar Yahya, each of whom is discussed in this article. Not all their books are of documentary character, but a striking number are. Before exploring these books further, it may be helpful to turn to the larger field of contemporary art in the Middle East and to place book art in its cultural and commercial context.

## Contemporary Art in the Middle East

Contemporary art in the Middle East constitutes an emerging field of academic research. Since the mid-1990s, new art festivals, associations and exhibition venues committed to promoting contemporary art in the region have opened their doors.<sup>3</sup> They are accompanied by a number of new magazines and databases as well as by an increase of academic publications.<sup>4</sup> It is a highly heterogeneous field that is subsumed under the problematic geo-political category 'Middle East', as Nat Muller points out in *Contemporary Art in the Middle East* (2009).<sup>5</sup> It spans a vast area when the very term 'area' is undergoing new readings due to transformations in the field of Area Studies and when more attention is being paid to the notion of 'crossing borders' – between areas as well as between disciplines.<sup>6</sup> Contemporary art in the Middle East is very much impacted by new developments in the global art market, and by the power dynamics between West and East described so well in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978),<sup>7</sup> all of which foster myriad preconceptions, stereotypes, and expectations.

Just like other cultural disciplines, art history has debated its own parameters and revised its Eurocentric outlook and origins, challenged by contemporary artistic practices worldwide. As Hans Belting explains in *Art History after Modernism* (2003), this 'does not mean that art or art history is over but that, both in art and in the discourse

**Detail from Khalil Rabah,  
*Dictionary Work*, 1997  
(plate 19).**

DOI:  
10.1111/j.1467-8365.2012.00901.x  
Art History | ISSN 0141-6790  
35 | 4 | September 2012 | pages  
816-839

of art history, we can foresee on the horizon the end of a tradition whose familiar shape had become, in the era of modernism, canonical.<sup>8</sup> ‘Staging the modern has always required the non-modern, the space of colonial difference’, says Timothy Mitchell.<sup>9</sup> Primitivism and exoticism have played crucial roles in modern art in Europe, especially in 1920s avant-garde Paris.<sup>10</sup> But only in recent years has the Western art market opened up to modern and contemporary art from non-Western countries. The exhibition *Les Magiciens de la terre* (Magicians of the earth) organized by the Centre George Pompidou and La Vilette in Paris in 1989, is regarded a landmark in this respect.<sup>11</sup> The recent trend to include cultural difference or otherness in Western collections of modern and contemporary art has not only changed Western art markets, it has also brought a new dynamic into the art markets of the Third World. What reads like a story of progress and shared humanity in the field of culture has had far-reaching, at times fateful, consequences for artistic production in non-Western countries.<sup>12</sup> Far from the ‘free exchange of symbolic goods’,<sup>13</sup> Western culture seems to hold tightly to its powerful position. As Hans Belting says, ‘Western culture, which once felt up to the task of representing all ethnic cultures via exploration as collection, is now proclaiming the future of a world culture in which it again claims the leading position.’<sup>14</sup>

Since 11 September 2001 and the Iraq War of 2003, the art market’s interest in the Middle East has greatly increased. The expansion of foreign funding in the region’s cultural production and the new interest of auction houses in the region, beginning with Sotheby’s and Christie’s, and followed by Bonhams and Phillips De Pury, is remarkable. Last but not least, the advancement of the Gulf as a powerful centre and broker for the arts has significantly changed the art market and hence the contexts and conditions in which artists produce their work.<sup>15</sup>

Art in the Middle East has subsequently been burdened with a representative function. It has turned into an instrument of cultural diplomacy, as Jessica Winegar points out.<sup>16</sup> Some artists have found themselves ‘sought-after commodities’, ‘regional or cultural emissaries’ rather than ‘individual artists’,<sup>17</sup> objectified and classified in the collective designated as the Middle East by the dominant Western subject. As Olu Oguibe says in *The Culture Game*, this is true of much non-Western contemporary art ushered by cultural agents into the global market – art institutions, curators, critics, academics, dealers and gallerists who, whether consciously or not, retain firmly entrenched predispositions within Western society.<sup>18</sup> It is important to return to the word ‘some’ at the beginning of this paragraph: some artists, not all, have been granted such interest. The art market is preoccupied with a small if growing number of artists: primarily those who engage in Western media art, such as installation and video.<sup>19</sup> ‘The alliance of non-Western art with Western media culture’<sup>20</sup> has brought to the fore artistic practices heralded as postmodern and postcolonial. But its close ties to the politics of foreign funding, their aesthetic tastes, and neo-liberal agendas, which have led to a de-politicization and commercialization in contemporary art, are usually ignored,<sup>21</sup> especially when it comes to the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Youssef Abdelké’s timely article in the Lebanese daily *al-Safīr* entitled ‘Aqd min al-qarn al-jadīd fī thaqāfatīnā: Fann bilā hudūd’ (A decade of the new century in our culture: Art without borders) offers a critique. Abdelké, a well-known Syrian painter who has paid a high price for his political engagement (including prison and exile), gives credit to Arab artists for having resisted ‘the power of dictatorship’ but questions their capacity to withstand ‘the power of capital.’<sup>23</sup>

نحن اليوم أمام خارطة جديدة لم يعرفها الفن العربي طوال عقود آاملة، خارطة يحل فيها التماهي مع الغرب محل الغرف من المنهل المحلي والتاريخي للمنطقة، ويقتحم مفاهيمها السوق، محتلاً مكان رعاية الدولة الذي انتهى منذ عقدين. وإذا استطاع الفنانون وقتذاك الحفاظ على استقلاليتهم في مواجهة سلطة الديكتاتوريات (مصر، سورية، العراق، الجزائر... الخ)، فليس مؤاداً أنهم سينجحون في مواجهة سلطة المال.

Today we are in front of a new map that Arab art has not known for decades, a map in which identification with the West replaces the scooping out of local and historical sources. Its concepts are invaded by the market, which has taken the place of state subvention that ended two decades ago. If the artists of that epoch managed to keep their independence in the face of the power of dictatorships (Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, etc.), it is not sure that they will succeed in facing the power of capital.<sup>24</sup>

What sells and what does not sell, what can be shown in international biennales and what cannot, is a major issue not limited to the Middle East. For a large number of artists remain excluded from the market, artists whose practices are deemed inferior, lagging behind, or nationalistic. This is 'a telling misconception', says Belting.<sup>25</sup> 'While Western culture fosters its global ideas', he explains, non-Western cultures, on the other hand, 'are retreating in a kind of countermovement into their own histories in order to rescue a part of their identity.'<sup>26</sup> Contemporary book art in the Middle East can be considered part of this countermovement.

### Book Art

Contemporary book art does share a significant characteristic with media art. Similar to film and video, its form is relatively new; it does not precede the twentieth century. However, it builds more directly upon a traditional form, namely illustrated manuscripts, and may thus seem to be more closely linked to the past than to the present.<sup>27</sup> Its relative neglect by the art market may also have to do with the very nature of the book. Book art cannot be exhibited easily. It is usually displayed in show cases which allow a look at the title page or the page onto which the book is opened, but books cannot be read or flipped through. However, the interactive nature of books demands engagement.<sup>28</sup> This engagement can be very rewarding. Tentative to an 'intimate discovery', explains Drucker, 'the process of looking and reading leads us into the labyrinthine web of associations', it provides us with 'a private space for communication and exchange across vast spaces of time and geography'.<sup>29</sup>

The beginnings of book art are closely linked to the illustrated book, the *livre d'artiste*, which emerged as a publishing enterprise initiated by art dealers such as Ambroise Vollard and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler in *fin-de-siècle* France as a reaction to the mass-produced book.<sup>30</sup> The definition of book art has changed significantly, first with the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century, then in the 1960s and 1970s, when new forms of book art started to proliferate worldwide in the general context of socio-political activism. Next to signed limited editions with illustrations, we now also find inexpensive multiples or one-of-a-kind objects.<sup>31</sup>

Book art brings together a number of different media. Not only does it lend itself to merging text and image, verbal and visual expression; it can become part of installation or performance art, or delve into more popular forms of visual culture, such as the worldwide web. Highly intermedia in character, it defies clear-cut definitions and ideas of purity in art, as put forward by modernist theorists such as Clement Greenberg in his remaking of Lessing's *Laokoon*.<sup>32</sup> Instead it goes well with

an understanding of art in which ‘all arts are “composite” arts (both text and image); all media are mixed media’, as W. J. T. Mitchell claims.<sup>33</sup> What makes book art stand out then is not its media but its emphasis on ‘objectness’. Book art transforms the condition of the book. It complicates the relation between content and form, word and image. What was considered secondary turns into the primary object.<sup>34</sup> No longer subordinated to a privileged text, it reverses the ideological underpinnings of word and image and becomes the centre of attention. It becomes the sole artefact to be considered.

Book art in the Middle East participates in these developments. Its earliest examples date back to the beginnings of modern art in the region which was marked by the colonial encounter of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the introduction of new art forms, materials, and techniques.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, it builds on a traditional form of its own. Contemporary book art in the Middle East is manifold. Its practitioners are engaged in different artistic practices, be it painting, photography, or conceptual art. In its capacity of establishing a ‘continuity with other times and cultures’,<sup>36</sup> book art has become a powerful means of expression for a growing number of artists in the region, especially since the *hazima*, the Arab defeat in the 1967 June War (also known as the Six-Day War) which triggered a profound identity crisis among intellectuals and a reorientation of cultural production.<sup>37</sup> Already before 1967 artists challenged the dominant Western models. In 1951, the Baghdad Group for Modern Art (*jamā‘at Baghdād lil-fann al-ḥadīth*) founded by Jawad Salim (1919–61), Shakir Hassan Al Said (1925–2004) and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra (1920–94) attempted to bridge the tensions between heritage (*turāth*) and modernity (*ḥadātha*) by producing art that stemmed from its locality and was part of contemporary artistic practices worldwide at the time, as is stated in the group’s art manifesto.<sup>38</sup> But in the 1960s and 1970s, the quest for cultural authenticity (*aṣāla*) now linked to political activism increased.<sup>39</sup> Issues of identity were at the forefront of intellectual and artistic debate. This may have made many artists appear nationalistic – in Belting’s words quoted above ‘a telling misconception’, as they were actually involved in rescuing ‘part of their own identity’. In 1971, Shakir Hassan, who had a major impact on modern art in the region as an artist and art critic,<sup>40</sup> founded the One Dimension Group (*tajammu‘ al-bu‘d al-waḥīd*). It follows the Baghdad Group for Modern Art in its aim to produce art rooted in local traditions but focused on the use of writing in contemporary art, an artistic trend generally described as *al-ḥurūfiyya – ḥarf* (plural: *ḥurūf*), which in Arabic means letter.<sup>41</sup> As Shakir Hassan makes clear in the group’s manifesto, emphasis is on the art of writing (*fann al-kitāba*) not on calligraphy (*al-khaṭṭ*); the word ‘*al-khaṭṭ*’ is used only to designate the ‘line’.<sup>42</sup> The One Dimension Group did not aim at reinvigorating the glorious past of Islamic calligraphy. Rather, it was part and parcel of contemporary artistic practices, namely abstract art which was given a more local character by means of quoting the Arabic-Islamic heritage, often referring to Sufism, Islamic mysticism, which ascribes special meaning to Arabic letters and numbers.<sup>43</sup> Shakir Hassan in particular was interested in the here and now, not only contemporary elite art but also contemporary popular culture, such as graffiti, and thus voicing political concerns. A prolific painter, he also produced a number of books. His book art

**I Shakir Hassan Al Said,**  
*Tajrib (Improvisations), 1996.*  
London: Private Collection.  
Photo: Azzawi.



brings to the fore its objectness, as 'Improvisations' (*Tajrīb*), a mixed media one-of-a-kind volume dated 1996, shows (plate 1). The form of the book reminds us of a newspaper, and newspaper cuttings are used as collage, suggesting the idea of media coverage. But apart from the newspaper cuttings, the book is devoid of words. Burned holes make visible its materiality and, at the same time, document the destruction of Baghdad in the 1991 Gulf War, as well as the American and British military strikes which continued throughout the 1990s.

Book art in the Middle East is usually studied in the context of *al-ḥurūfiyya*. However, book art differs significantly in relation to the written word. Challenging the very condition of 'bookness', it foregrounds its 'objectness', with, at times, little or no significance accorded to the written word. There is no publication that deals explicitly with book art in the Middle East. Like a number of other leading museums in the West, the British Museum has expanded its collection of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, focusing on works on paper. The exhibition *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, curated by Venetia Porter and accompanied by two substantial publications, which took place at the British Museum in London (2006) and the Dubai International Finance Centre in Dubai (2008), also included examples of book art. Examples from this part of the world are missing in surveys, such as Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books*.

Book art in the Middle East lends itself easily to the idea of a 'countermovement' because it can build on a long and very elaborate tradition in Arabic-Islamic culture.<sup>44</sup> This has to do not only with the primary importance of the Qur'an, but also with the high esteem of education, be it religious or secular, and, thus, of books. Like the Qur'an, many books were meant to be read aloud, recited, word and image in the service of calling a given text back into memory. Books and other objects associated with their production and reception – such as calligraphy, miniature painting, book binding, and the artisans' tools, ranging from inkwells, pens, and pen boxes to scissors and paper – are important elements of Islamic art.<sup>45</sup> The Arabic-Islamic heritage is a source of inspiration for many contemporary artists, but to speak of modern or contemporary Islamic art is misleading.<sup>46</sup> It would overemphasize the link to the traditional form, value the past over the present, and be reductive and orientalizing. Rather the question arises: what is it in the present that makes artists in the Middle East choose to open a dialogue with Islamic art and to work in book art form?<sup>47</sup> As this article argues, it is not only the quest for authenticity through re-connecting with past traditions that has been of much importance in the region's modern art history, as the manifestos by the Baghdad Group for Modern Art as well as of the One Dimension Group attest. It is also, for a number of books, which I group under 'the book as document' – a term borrowed from Drucker's *The Century of Artists' Books* that acquires a different meaning once adapted to Iraq – the political urgency in which they were produced. By political urgency I mean a pressing political condition which has urged many artists to leave traces, a record, a document, a personal testimony, or witness, as long as this documentation is still possible, given that it is threatened by war and occupation.

### **The Book as Document in Iraq**

The term document has long been associated with the written word only. The notion of what constitutes a document, historical material, has changed significantly since the so-called archival turn in Western academia.<sup>48</sup> Not only written material, considered previously as marginal, such as private papers, letters and diaries, but



2 Kareem Risan, *Shi'ārāt al-judrān ba'd al-ihtilāl al-amrīkī* (Wall Graffiti after the American Invasion), 2004. Book cover. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.

also audiovisual material, has since gained interest.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the definition of the archive itself has undergone much scrutiny and reappraisal. 'Not the question of a concept dealing with the past that might already be at our disposal or not at our disposal' but 'a question of the future', as Jacques Derrida suggests in *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, the archive turns into an agent in narrative production.<sup>50</sup> Just like the museum, which has undergone similar inquiry, an archive impacts how we approach, visualize, narrate, and interpret the past, and thus partakes in shaping conceptions of identity.<sup>51</sup>

The interest in the archive has also increased significantly in contemporary artistic practices. The exhibition entitled, after Derrida's book, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, which took place at the International Center of Photography in New York in 2008, organized by Okwui Enwezor, a renowned scholar and adjunct curator there, gives compelling examples, among them works by artists from the Middle East.<sup>52</sup> Regarding the Middle East, Suzanne Cotter even speaks of a 'documentary turn',<sup>53</sup> examining the work of Lebanese artists Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari, artists who are also included in *The Archive* edited by Charles Merewether in 2006 for the *Documents of Contemporary Art* series. All three publications focus on photography and film-based installations, Western media art that, as pointed out above, has provided non-Western artists with a warm welcome into the Western dominated global art market. Why does book art lend itself so well to the idea of the archive? And what kind of document does contemporary book art in Iraq provide?

As Drucker points out, 'the idea of the book as a document is hardly an artistic invention ... the standard format of the book serves very well as a place in which an experience, account, or testimonial can be produced.'<sup>54</sup> What distinguishes book art from a standard book, consequently, is the documentary character of the object itself. In book art, the book no longer serves as the form privileging content but

becomes the sole artefact to be considered. It is not 'a place in which an experience, account, or testimonial can be produced'; rather, it can itself produce such a narrative, going beyond the dichotomy of form and content. Holding on to the form of the book, contemporary book art in Iraq lays claim to the undeniable authority of the book but detaches it from the quasi sacred character of the word in Arabic-Islamic culture. Verbal narration turns into visual narration, and, accordingly, book art into an artistic storehouse of verbal and visual fragments to be viewed and read together. Wall Graffiti after the American Invasion (*Shi'ārāt al-judrān ba'd al-iḥtilāl al-amrīkī*, 2004) by the Iraqi artist Kareem Risan (b. 1960) is a good example (plate 2). In our modern world, documents are sought-after commodities which, 'like persons, have social lives'.<sup>55</sup> A document may have been a personal letter, a hotel bill, or flyer of political or commercial content considered trash by many, before it came to qualify as a document, and it may, in another context, turn into a work of art. Unlike the traditional *livre d'artiste*, Risan's hand-made one-of-a-kind volume does not relate to any literary text. The only words used in the book are far from the calligraphic tradition. Similar to graffiti on a background that, as the pages of the book unfold, reproduces the walls of Baghdad, they range from clearly legible to hardly visible and include political slogans, personal statements, and insults. The opening page here voices a clear political protest: 'no to the occupation' ('lā lil-iḥtilāl') (plate 3). As Risan explains:

كنت كل يوم أتجول في شوارع بغداد وجدرانها المليئة بالشعارات الغير مألوفة سابقا لدى البغداديين. حيث كانت تتضمن العديد من الشعارات للأحزاب الجديدة الوافدة التي تندد بالنظام السابق وشعارات أخرى تشيد به وشعارات أخرى غير سياسية تطالب بتوفير مستلزمات الفردية (توفير المشروبات الروحية) وأخرى سب وشتائم والكثير من ذلك. ويصاحب تلك العملية (الكتابة) أيضا عمليات مسح وإزاحة لكثير من الشعارات التي قد تكون غير مرضية لكثير من الأطراف بالرغم من وجود مساحة أخرى للكتابة. لقد أثارت انتباهي هذه العملية الجديدة والغير مألوفة لكثير من العراقيين منذ زمن بعيد باستثناء شعارات الحزب الحاكم طبعاً.

Every day I used to walk the streets of Baghdad, its walls filled with graffiti previously unfamiliar to Baghdadis. It included many slogans of the new parties that had just arrived, denouncing the old regime, other slogans



3 Kareem Risan, *Shi'ārāt al-judrān ba'd al-iḥtilāl al-amrīkī* (Wall Graffiti after the American Invasion), 2004. Page with reproduced wall. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.



hailing it, slogans of apolitical character calling for individual claims (such as allowing alcohol), and yet other slogans expressing insults and many other things. This act of writing (graffiti) was accompanied by a different act of wiping out what was not satisfactory to many sides although there was still place for writing. This new phenomenon caught my attention, unusual for many Iraqis since long ago with the exception of course of the ruling Ba’th party’s slogans.<sup>56</sup>

More words figure in the flyer attached to one of the book’s pages (plate 4). The flyer is addressed to the Iraqi people in the aftermath of the Iraq War of 2003. Entitled ‘Declaration to the Iraqi People’ (‘*Bayān ilā al-sha’b al-‘irāqī*’), dated 29 November 2003, and signed by Paul Bremer, then head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and Jalal Talabani, then member of the Interim Iraq Governing Council which served under the CPA and President of Iraq since 2005, it proclaims a new constitution and elections. The flyer is an *objet trouvé* – some copies were thrown away, others were destroyed by angry hands, sun, storm, and rain, or simply withered with time, some were glued onto walls, and some may one day find their way into archives and acquire the status of historical material. One has become part of a work of art that itself acts as a chronicle of Iraq’s recent past. Documentation here takes place through reproduction (of the walls and the graffiti they bear) and collage (of the flyer on the reproduced walls). When it comes to art, the notion of ‘document’ is complicated by the troubled relation between fact and fiction. Is Risan’s book a ‘real’ document, or is it ‘only’ reproduced, a work of the imagination even? What is real, historical truth anyway? Does not the flyer have an unreal touch to it, detached from the lived reality in Baghdad? How can we access this lived reality with its many layers of subjective histories? Opening Risan’s book may bring us a step closer.

Two recent exhibitions have drawn attention to contemporary book art in Iraq. The first, *Celebrating the Creativity of the Collaboration between Iraqi Art and Literature*, held at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2004, was organized by Dia Azzawi (b. 1939), an internationally renowned Iraqi artist based in London, and constituted his private



4 Kareem Risan, *Shi'ārāt al-judrān ba'd al-iḥtilāl al-amrīkī* (Wall Graffiti after the American Invasion), 2004. Page with attached flyer. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.



5 Satta Hashem, *Gulf War Diary*, 1991. Artist's Collection. Photo: The British Museum (Porter, *Word into Art*, 2006, 111).

collection. *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art* was also based on Azzawi's collection. Curated by Nada Shabout, it travelled the United States, starting at the University of North Texas in 2006. The latter links book art closely to contemporary artistic practices. *Dafatir* refers to the artist's contemporary world; the Arabic word 'dafātīr' translates as notebooks or sketchbooks. These, at times, take the form of visual diaries, perhaps the most intimate kind of personal testimony. The Gulf War diaries by Iraqi artists Satta Hashem (b. 1959) and Dia Azzawi, who followed the events of the 1991 Gulf War on a daily basis from their respective exiles in Sweden and the UK, are captivating examples (plate 5 and plate 6). Whereas Hashem's book includes verbal expression separated from the drawings – here flying creatures which evoke both mythical beasts and the American planes, marking the beginning of the aerial bombardment of Iraq on 17 January 1991,<sup>57</sup> Azzawi's three volume diary is devoid of the written word. However, the black and white drawings of anguished people do recall words, not written but screamed and unheeded in the face of destruction. The book brings to mind the impotence of the word given the experience of modern history.<sup>58</sup> Its title *Daftar al-sawād* translates as 'book of plenty', celebrating Iraq's prosperity as the fertile crescent between the Euphrates and the Tigris, but the title also means 'book of darkness', referring to Iraq's dark recent past blotted by years of dictatorial

rule, economic sanctions, war, and occupation.

Part of the so-called sixties generation<sup>59</sup> in Iraq and a founding member of the New Vision Group (*al-ru'yā al-jadīda*), Azzawi can look back on a long experience of working in book art. An internationally acclaimed painter, he has also worked in sculpture and installation as well as graphic design. These artistic practices often come together in his book art which consists of one-of-a-kind volumes, valuable limited editions (close to the traditional *livre d'artiste*), and offset multiples. His offset multiples, produced in the 1970s, are closely linked to political activism, namely the Palestinian cause.<sup>60</sup> Unlike his Gulf War diary, Azzawi's books usually incorporate the written word, taken from classical Arabic literature, such as the *Mu'allaqāt* or *Alflayla wa-layla*, as well as modern Arabic literature authored by such celebrated writers as Adonis, Ghassan Kanafani, Mahmoud Darwish, or Abd al-Rahman Munif. To render the Arabic-Islamic heritage of book-making and painting more visible, Azzawi published a facsimile of the 1237 manuscript of the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, copied and illustrated by the thirteenth-century Baghdadi calligrapher cum miniature painter al-Wasiti, who has been a source of inspiration and a reference point for many Iraqi artists starting with the late Jawad Salim.<sup>61</sup> Azzawi is not only one of the foremost practitioners of contemporary book art in the Middle East, he also is an important art patron and collector. Promoting contemporary art in Iraq from his exile in London, he has encouraged many Iraqi artists to work in book art, buying their works at a time of little support and sponsorship due to the long years of embargo and war in the country. His collection includes books by artists of

6 Dia Azzawi, *Daftar al-sawād* (Book of Plenty/Book of Darkness), 1991. London: Private Collection. Photo: Azzawi.

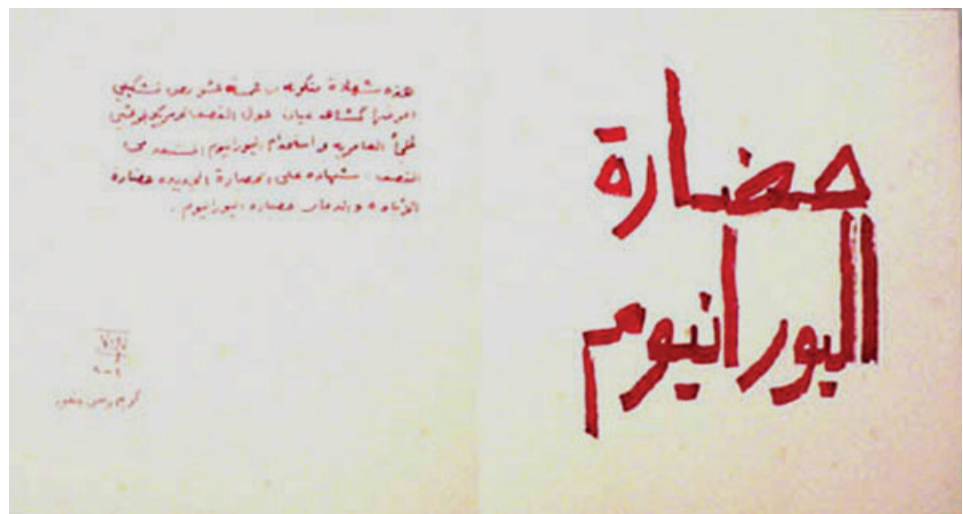


the so-called sixties generation, such as Shakir Hassan Al Said, Rafa' al-Nasiri, and Azzawi himself, as well as by a younger generation of artists usually referred to as the nineties generation, among them Kareem Risan, Nazar Yahya, Hana Malallah, Ghassan Gha'eb, Nedem al-Kufi, Muhamed al-Shammarey, Mahmoud al-Obaidi, Amar Dawod, Moaid Nama, Sadiq Kwaish Alfraji, Samar Usama, Fakher Mohammad, and Ibrahim Rashid.

Whereas Iraqi art was at the forefront of artistic developments in the Middle East from the 1950s to 1970s, with a number of art academies, museums, and artistic groups in place, it lost much of its experimental zeal in the 1980s mainly due to political repression, the omnipresence of the Ba'th party, the establishment of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule, and the Iraq–Iran War (1980–88).<sup>62</sup> The Gulf War of 1991 marked a turning point although no significant changes took place in Iraqi politics.<sup>63</sup> Despite the Ba'th regime's ongoing attempt to control cultural production and the country's international isolation during the years of the United Nations Security Council's imposed sanctions and continuous US and British military strikes, a 'shadow culture' ('thaqāfat al-zill')<sup>64</sup> was able to emerge in the margins. Finding ways around the regime's control, many books – here I speak of books in the common sense not of book art – were produced and circulated in the form of photocopies. Many Iraqi artists and intellectuals had already left Iraq prior to the 1991 Gulf War, but the brain drain has increased significantly since. This set-back has led to a disjunction in cultural production. As Shabout explains, there are three spaces to be distinguished: inside Iraq, in exile, and in between – that is Jordan, which for a long time functioned as Iraq's portal to the world and where artists who are physically in exile have remained closer to Iraq in many ways.<sup>65</sup> Since the Iraq War of 2003 and the 'fall' of Saddam Hussein symbolized by the highly mediatized of his monumental statue in Fardous Square in downtown Baghdad on 9 April 2003, the situation has changed even more drastically. The euphoria expected by some was meagre from the outset and was soon dashed by the reality of war, destruction, and violence which continues to take its toll on everyday life in Baghdad as well as other parts of the country. Despite these difficulties, Iraqi artists – inside as well as outside Iraq and in between – have developed artistic practices in which they hold on to their very own lives, histories, memories, and identities, as Kareem Risan's book art demonstrates.<sup>66</sup>

Having produced books in homage to his teachers Shakir Hassan Al Said, Ismail

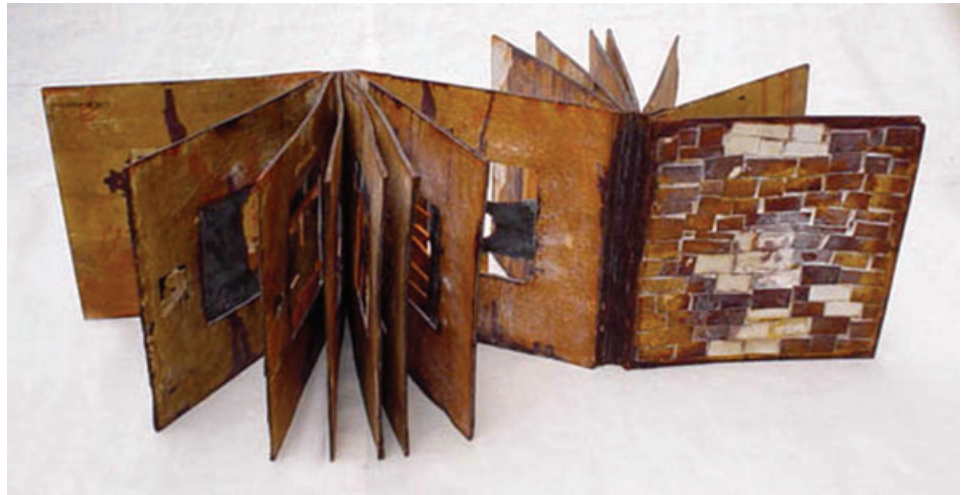
Fattah, and Saad Shakir, Risan does not proclaim a rupture between the generations but draws on the experience of the sixties generation to add to the experience of his own time. Risan graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad in 1988. He has mainly worked in abstract painting but has also produced a significant number of books. His book art is very much concerned with Iraq's recent history and the destructive impact of war and occupation. Risan continued to live and work in Iraq until 2005. When everyday violence threatened his life, he left first for Jordan and Syria, then for Canada in 2008. Living in exile has given him the opportunity to explore new media. His video *Ditched Certification* (*Shahāda mamsūḥa*), which literally translates as erased testimony, produced in 2007, brings to the fore the failings of verbal expression in leaving a testimony. It shows a young man writing his testimony on a blackboard: his name which he crosses out again, his date and place of birth, then a sentence that says that he and his family were threatened by militiamen. When the man sits down to tell his story, the testimony is wiped off. He starts speaking where the written testimony ended, repeating that he and his family were threatened by militiamen. But then the voice is cut. The spectator sees him talking but cannot



7 Kareem Risan, *Ḥaḍārat al-yūrāniyūm* (Uranium Civilization), 2001. Bookcase with loose leaves. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.

8 Kareem Risan, *Ḥaḍārat al-yūrāniyūm* (Uranium Civilization), 2001. Title page. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.

9 Kareem Risan, *Kitāb al-awfāq*  
(Book of Magic Squares),  
2003. London: Private  
Collection. Photo: Risan.



actually hear him. The video ends with a caption that informs the spectator 'that the man left Baghdad with his family for a neighbouring country, after being sure that the threat was real and dangerous, and that he left behind his house, extended family, friends, and memory.'<sup>67</sup> As this example shows, Risan is preoccupied with documenting Iraq's recent history, be it in video or book art. Like Wall Graffiti after the American Invasion discussed above, his books are hand-made one-of-a-kind objects; even the paper is often hand-made. In the *Word into Art* exhibition in London, the British Museum showed two of his books: his 2001 'Uranium Civilization' (*Ḥaḍārat al-yūrāniyūm*) and his 2003 'Book of Magic Squares' (*Kitāb al-awfāq*).

'Uranium Civilization' is an unbound mixed media work on paper issued in a box (plate 7). The title page provides the reader/spectator with the following information (plate 8):

هذه شهادة منكوّبة من خمس عشر نص تشكيلي الموضوع كشاهد عيان حول القصف الأميركي  
لملجأ العامرية وإستخدام اليورانيوم المشع في القصف. شهادة على الحضارة الجديدة حضارة الإثارة  
والدمار. حضارة اليورانيوم.

This is a devastating testimony of fifteen artistic texts. The subject is the eye witness of the bombardment of the Amiriyah shelter and the use of depleted uranium, a witness of the new civilization, the civilization of action and destruction, the uranium civilization.<sup>68</sup>

Both title and text are written in blood-like red. The same red colour in addition to yellow and black recurs in bold brushstrokes or as if spilled out onto the pages of the book. Not writing but lines and dots are discernable. They delineate the extent of the destruction left by depleted uranium in anti-tank shells used by US and British forces during the 1991 Gulf War, the destruction of urban space as well as of the bodies of Iraqi civilians. The use of depleted uranium has not only been criticized internationally but also inside Iraq in artistic practices. The Iraqi poet and novelist Nidal al-Qadi, for example, describes life in Baghdad as 'a mix of bread with numbers, petrol with milk, foetuses with depleted uranium' and evokes the 'smell of apples' left by the toxic clouds.<sup>69</sup> Throughout her acclaimed *Baghdad Diaries 1991–2002*, the Iraqi artist and writer Nuha al-Radi refers to the long-term environmental and health problems caused by the use of depleted uranium in Iraq which was even increased in the Iraq War of 2003. It is a legacy that 'has

turned Iraq into a cancer-infested country’, she writes, ‘for hundreds of years to come, the effects of the uranium will continue to wreak havoc on Iraq and its surrounding areas.’<sup>70</sup> Al-Radi died of leukemia in 2004, an illness she traced back to the use of depleted uranium in the 1991 Gulf War. Artistic practices, such as al-Qadi’s and al-Radi’s writings and Risan’s ‘Uranium Civilization’, point to the political urgency out of which they were produced and which, at the same time, they set out to document and resist: Iraq’s dark recent past – dark as in the title of Azzawi’s visual diary discussed above – that threatens to overshadow its present and future.<sup>71</sup>

‘The Book of Magic Squares’ refers to the Sufi tradition of magic squares. It is a mixed media book with double bindings, a folder on each side of the book. In its centre, the middle spine has an open square. Repeated in the book’s pages but with strips crossing the square in different ways, the book allows multiple readings as the reader/spectator unfolds it (plate 9). Unlike the blood-red which is forceful in ‘Uranium Civilization’, a yellowish-red of fire, burnt bricks and paper dominates the book. ‘The Book of Magic Squares’ is ‘a response to the burning and destruction of a number of libraries in Baghdad and elsewhere, which took place soon after American forces captured Baghdad in April 2003’, explains Porter in *Word into Art*. She adds that ‘for many people the burning of the books symbolized the annihilation of their history.’<sup>72</sup> Little attention has been paid to the destruction of Iraq’s modern history, the looting and destruction of public archives, libraries, or museums of modern art.<sup>73</sup> Concern in the West was primarily voiced for Iraq’s ancient history, namely as a result of the looting of the Iraq museum.<sup>74</sup> ‘The world seems to forget that the ‘cradle of civilization’ is the land of a ‘contemporary country with a thriving culture’, concludes Shabout.<sup>75</sup> As others suggest when speaking of cultural cleansing in Iraq, the Bush administration deliberately created conditions in Iraq that ‘enabled the cultural destruction of Iraq.’<sup>76</sup> How can Iraq’s modern history be preserved when the very historical material that documents it, material accumulated over many years in public as well as private collections, is lost?

In ‘My Home was Here’ (*Baytī kān hunā*) (2007), Risan comes back to this question. While living in exile in Damascus, Risan learned from his parents that



10 Kareem Risan, *Baytī kān hunā* (My Home was Here), 2007. London: Private Collection. Photo: Risan.

his house in Baghdad was hit by a bomb.<sup>77</sup> He does not try to reconstruct what was there, his personal history. Rather, as in the books discussed above, he shows the destruction – derelict walls filled with graffiti, burned holes, and white places – that threatens to take hold of his very memory and identity as it erases all points of contact and orientation. Similar to ‘The Book of Magic Squares’, the book unfolds from different points, making it unclear where to start reading, as if one is picking up the rubble left by war (plate 10).

Risan’s book art carries the imprint of the very destruction it documents. Being the sole artefact to be considered, the object itself acquires documentary character. Hana Malallah (b. 1958) likewise deliberately ‘destroyed’ ‘Conference of the Birds’ (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*), a book created in 2007 and shown in the British Museum’s *Word into Art* exhibition (plate 11 and plate 12). A hand-made bound volume issued in a box, it incorporates fragments from the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Farid al-Din Attar’s allegorical story of a group of birds searching for their king (i.e. God) whom in the end they see as their very own reflections. As Malallah explains, incising and burning paper surfaces allowed her not only to facilitate ‘the possibility of multiple interpretations of a single surface’ but also to recall ‘scenes of ravaged manuscripts in Baghdad which took place during the war on Iraq in 2003 and subsequent occupation.’<sup>78</sup> The result is a beautiful but highly fragile book that gives its reader/spectator an idea about the preciousness of manuscripts as well as about the destruction of Iraq’s cultural heritage. Malallah studied and worked with Shakir Hassan Al Said at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad. She remained in her country until 2007, and lives in London today. She has produced a number of books that are informed by Iraq’s past, the Arabic-Islamic as well as the ancient Mesopotamian. They open dialogues with and provide new readings of Iraq’s past, recuperating it for the present. A fascinating example is ‘The God Marduk’ (*al-Ilāh Mardūk*) from 2008, which allows for a number of different readings, as its pages unfold in myriad ways (plate 13), which was on display at the British Museum’s *Iraq’s Past Speaks to the Present* exhibition in 2008. Himat Mohammad Ali (b. 1960), who has been living in Paris since 1991 and has produced a large number of artist books,

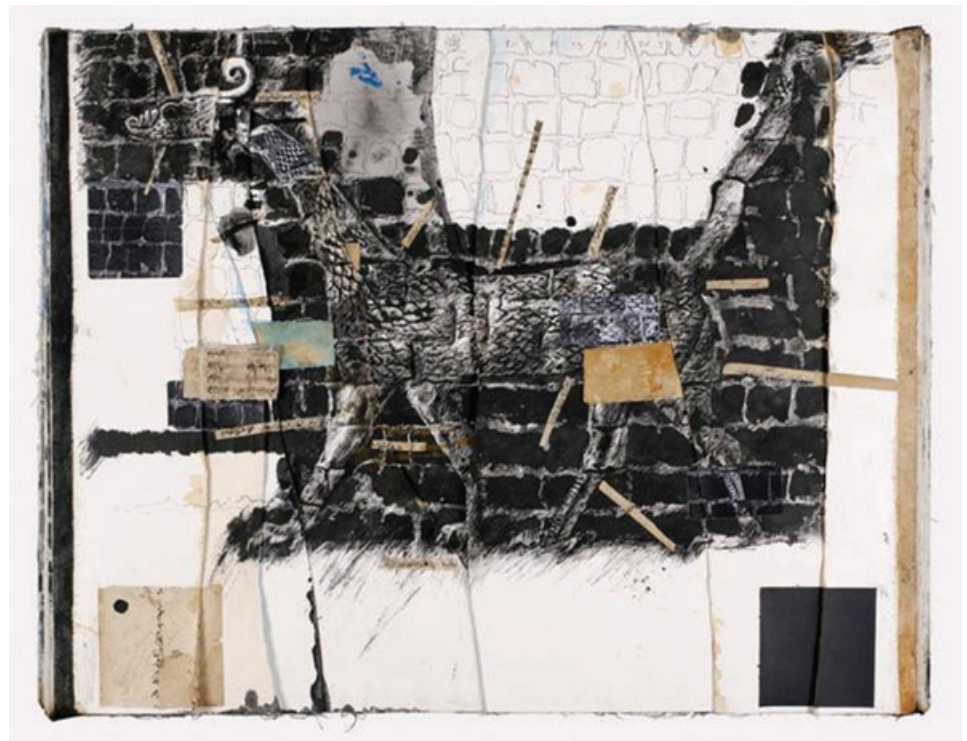
also draws inspiration from Iraq’s past, namely the tradition of Arabic manuscripts. At the same time, he documents Iraq’s recent past, as in *AlMutanabi Street Baghdad* (*Shārī’ al-Mutanabbī Baghdād*) which consists of twelve hand-made books issued in a box (plate 14). Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad was at the hub of Baghdad’s cultural life and housed numerous printing presses and bookshops. Himat makes use of images cut from magazines and newspapers as well as ravaged manuscripts and books, painted over, tinted, and covered with black and red spots, his books refer to the destruction of al-Mutanabbi Street on 5 March 2007, when a car bomb killed more than thirty people and burnt printing presses and book shops (plate 15 and plate 16). In Nazar Yahya’s 2003 ‘Baghdad Day of Destruction’ (*Yawm damār Baghdād*) all that remains of Baghdad as well as of the book is blackness and a heap of broken images in a box (plate 17). Yahya (b. 1963) also studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad but today lives in Jordan from where he followed the Iraq War of 2003

11 Hana Malallah, *Manṭiq al-ṭayr* (Conference of the Birds), 2007. Box with open book. London: The British Museum. Photo: The British Museum (Porter, *Word into Art*, 2008, 132–3).



12 Hana Malallah, *Manṭiq al-ḥayr* (Conference of the Birds), 2007. Page with incised and burnt paper. London: The British Museum. Photo: The British Museum (Porter, *Word into Art*, 2008, 132–3).

13 Hana Malallah, *al-Ilāh Mardūk* (The God Marduk), 2008. London: The British Museum. Photo: The British Museum.



and its aftermath closely. The blackish pages attached to the box evoke Iraq's dark recent past – dark as in the title of Azzawi's visual diary discussed above. The box itself stands for 'a bombed-out hiding place littered with dust, and shards of glass and pottery'.<sup>79</sup> The book speaks of human suffering and loss and brings to the front the urgency to document life in Iraq before it is too late, and emphasizes the need for something to remain – even if only broken images – to face the sheer violence and destruction caused by the war in Iraq.

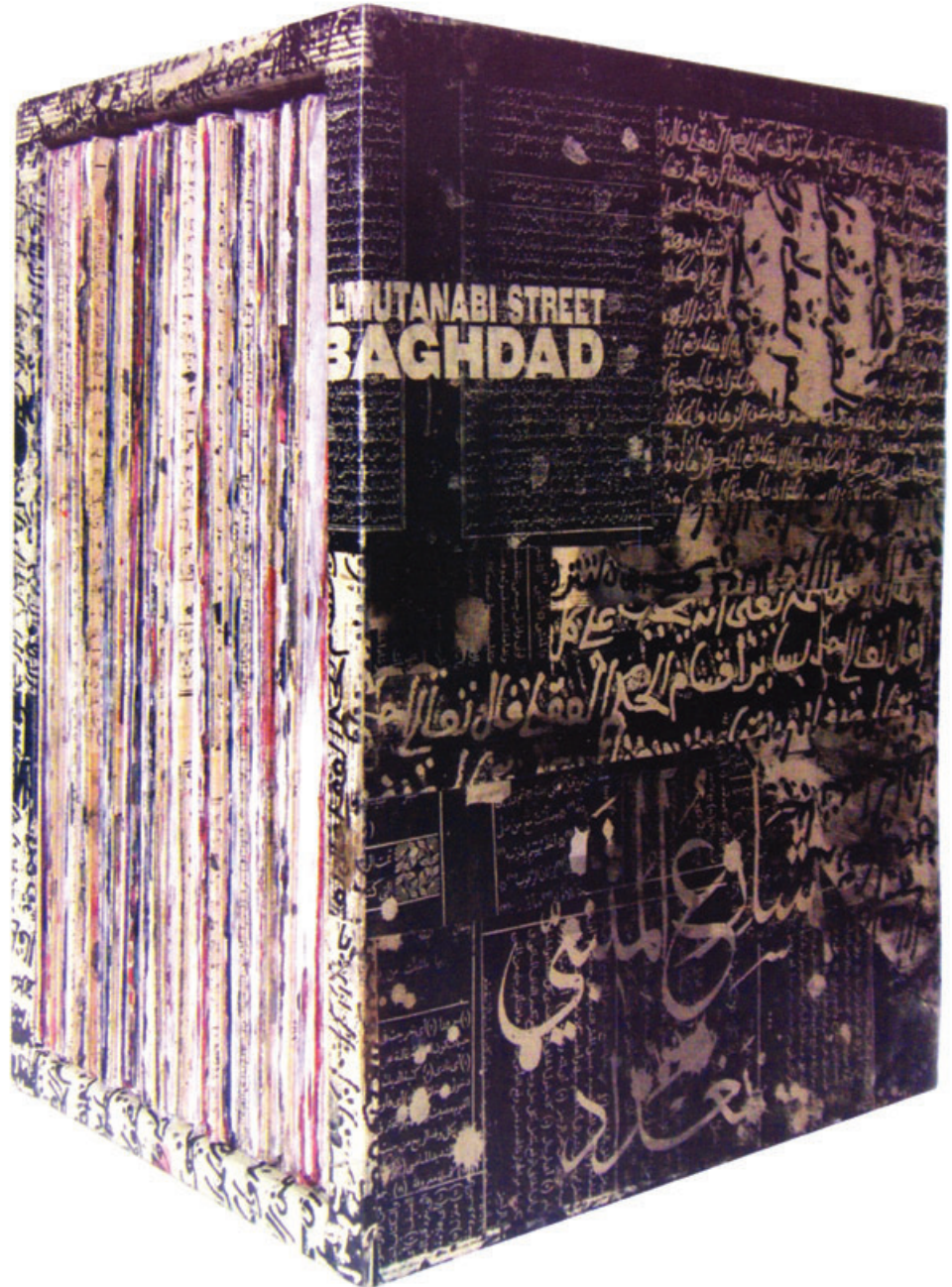
As Risan explains, book art is such a compelling means for artistic expression in Iraq, different from painting, as it enables the artist to build a scenario.

In the mid-nineties, I felt the urgent need to express a lot of artistic and human problems that the traditional painting in most cases fails to meet,



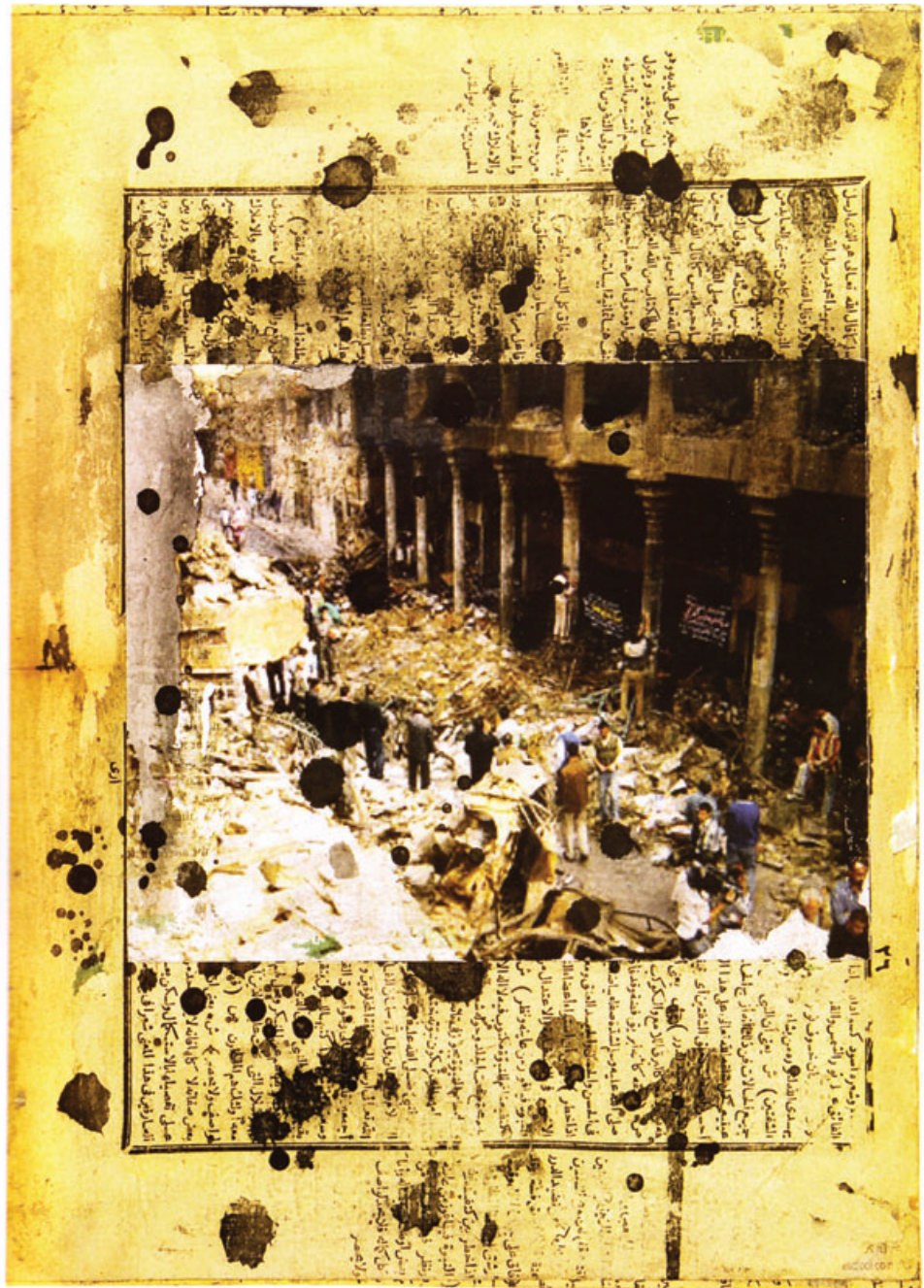
في منتصف فترة التسعينيات كانت لدي حاجات ملحة للتعبير عن الكثير من المشكلات الفنية والإنسانية، وإن اللوحة التقليدية لا تلي تلك الحاجات في كثير من الأحيان، سيما وأن هناك الكثير من المشاكل والضغوطات التي كنت أعيشها داخل بغداد، منها الحصار الاقتصادي وتبعاته ووصول البلاد إلى الهاوية السياسية (...). فالدفتار من الممكن أن يصمم وفق فكرة ما أو موضوع، وبطياته يمكن عمل سيناريو أو صفحات متتالية لموضوع لا يمكن للوحة التقليدية أن توصله للمتلقي.

especially since I lived through a lot of problems and pressures in Baghdad, like the economic embargo, its consequences, and the country's arrival into a political abyss ... The book (daftar) can be designed according to an idea or theme, inside it a scenario or successive pages on a theme can be built that the traditional painting cannot convey to the recipient.<sup>80</sup>



14 Himat Mohammad Ali, *Shāri' al-Mutanabbī Baghdād (AlMutanabi Street Baghdad)*, 2007. Box with twelve art books. London: Private Collection. Photo: Himat, *AlMutanabi Street Baghdad*, 2008, 30.

15 Himat Mohammad Ali, *Shārī' al-Mutanabbī Baghdād* (AlMutanabi Street Baghdad), 2007. Book number 2, inside cover. London: Private Collection. Photo: Himat, AlMutanabi Street Baghdad, 2008, 9.



Across successive pages, it offers insights into Iraq's recent past, provided that we open the books and lend them the engagement they require. Their stories are usually overshadowed by the dominant media coverage on Iraq that focuses on events, blasts, and numbers but rarely pays attention to everyday life in Iraq where the real tragedy unfolds.<sup>81</sup> In his dialogue with Hans Haacke, Pierre Bourdieu defines the artist in opposition to the TV journalist as follows:

The artist is the one who is capable of making a sensation, which does not mean being sensational, like television acrobats, but rather, in the strong sense of the term, putting across on the level of sensation – that is, touching the sensibility, moving people – analyses which would leave the reader

or spectator indifferent if expressed in the cold rigour of concept and demonstration.<sup>82</sup>

As the examples discussed above show, contemporary Iraqi artists are capable of making a sensation in Bourdieu's terms, touching and moving the reader/spectator with their book art which documents Iraq's dark recent past. But, at the same time, it shows beauty as an artistic practice – in Sinan Antoon's words, it 'crystallize[s] so well the sorrow of death and destruction, but also of the inexplicable beauty of art'.<sup>83</sup>

Both the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War of 2003 have been widely criticized, vehemently even, as demonstrations around the world showed. The criticism has also found its way into Western book art, such as Brad Freeman's *Sim War* (1991), included in Drucker's *A Century of Artists' Books* (plate 18). A printed multiple, *Sim War* juxtaposes images of video war games and the 1991 Gulf War as they were regularly broadcast on television, with an autobiographical narrative dating back to the 1960s, when the artist stayed as a teenager in a military hospital that was treating American soldiers wounded in Vietnam. But the view from within Iraq, as documented in the examples given above, remains neglected in the West. Book art in Iraq has flourished with the nineties generation. The relatively small format and easily portable and storable character of the book certainly correspond to the work and life situation of many contemporary Iraqi artists who, living through war and occupation or in exile, have not had the means to work on large-scale projects. For many living in Iraq, the use of media such as print, photography, and video was out of the question as it was simply not available – even paper was scarce during the long years of the embargo. This fact somewhat explains the choice of hand-made one-of-a-kind volumes, partly because it also allows a link to the rich Arabic-Islamic heritage. Due to the inaccessibility of outside sources of inspiration in the years of the embargo, the Arabic-Islamic heritage, and beyond it the ancient Mesopotamian past, may have increased in importance for artists who stayed in Iraq. However, they have also informed Iraqi artists in exile, a prominent example being Azzawi. As art patron and collector, he has played an important role in drawing attention to contemporary book art in Iraq, namely through the two exhibitions mentioned above. In particular *Dafatir*, curated by Shabout, has rendered the book as document in Iraq accessible to a larger public, an artistic documentation of Iraq's recent past that, otherwise, would have remained in the 'dark', as it is usually hidden in private collections. *Dafatir* has successfully helped to 'represent a place, an accumulation of circumstances summed up by the name "Iraq"',<sup>84</sup> as was its objective, and to challenge powerful preconceptions about Iraq abroad. At the same time, it has reframed the book as

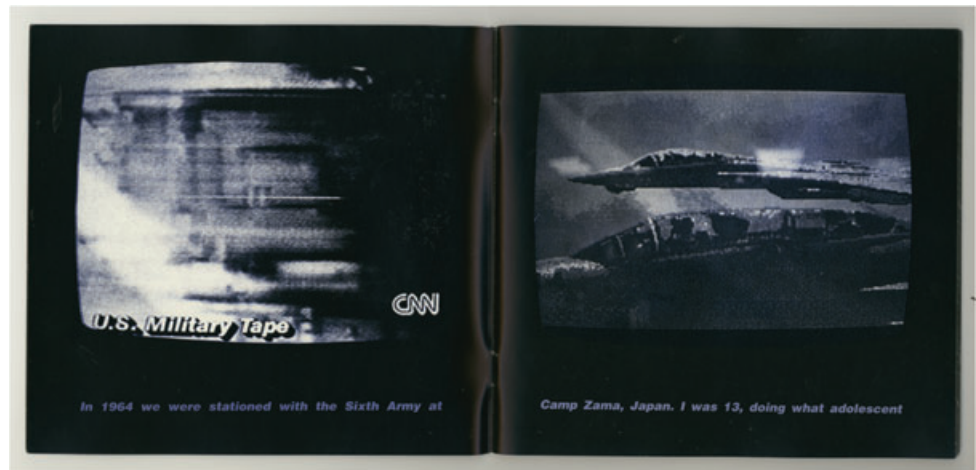
document as art and introduced it to the art market whose interest in Iraq, and more broadly the Middle East, has been conditioned by political concerns or limited to artists who live abroad and engage in Western media art.<sup>85</sup> The book as document in Iraq can be regarded as a countermovement, as described by Belting, as it builds more closely on a traditional form and is concerned with rescuing part of the nation's very memories, histories, and identities. It developed on the margins of the market because of the difficult political conditions in which it was produced and because of its very form – the book. As pointed out above, it demands an engagement different from

**16 Himat Mohammad Ali, *Shāri' al-Mutanabbī Baghdād* (AlMutanabi Street Baghdad), 2007. Book number 12, 7–8. London: Private Collection. Photo: Himat, AlMutanabi Street Baghdad, 2008, 29.**



17 Nazar Yahya, *Yawm damār Baghdād* (Baghdad Day of Destruction), 2003. London: Private Collection. Photo: Azzawi.

18 Brad Freeman, *Sim War*, 1991. Artist's Collection. Photo: Freeman.



that usually shown by the art market due to its interactive nature. The question is how to engage with contemporary book art in the Middle East, not only abroad but also within the region. The British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibition did bring some of the books discussed in this article (back) to the Middle East, namely to the Dubai International Finance Center. It is telling that Dubai Holdings was the only sponsor ready to support the exhibition.<sup>86</sup> Whereas cities such as Cairo, Beirut, and Baghdad were known as cultural hubs in the twentieth century and continue to bring forth new artistic practices, the Gulf has taken over as a powerful centre and broker of the arts at the beginning of the twentieth-first century.

### Conclusion

I hope that this article has triggered interest to further engage with contemporary book art in the Middle East. I may have created the impression that book art is a uniquely Iraqi phenomenon, whereas book art in its different manifestations is in fact found all over the Middle East. However, as I have shown in this article, the idea of the book as document has gathered momentum in Iraq due to the political urgency

19 Khalil Rabah, *Dictionary Work*, 1997. London: The British Museum. Photo: The British Museum (Porter, *Word into Art*, 2008, 123).



in which book art was produced. This urgency is comparable to other places in the Middle East, such as Palestine and Lebanon. In Palestine, the attempt of colonial powers to efface and negate modern history has been particularly strong.<sup>87</sup> This is aptly expressed in Khalil Rabah's *Dictionary Work* (1997) (plate 19). Rabah, who studied fine arts and architecture in the United States and usually works in installation, makes use of a ready-made, a copy of the American dictionary *The New Merriam Webster*. The opening page is covered with nails, leaving out only the entry 'Philistine' defined as 'member of a people opposing the Israelites in ancient Palestine' and 'person who is hostile or indifferent to culture'.<sup>88</sup> This brings us back to Said and the preconceptions, stereotypes, and expectations that confront artists in the Middle East. The sheer violence and terror that accompany the fabrication of these preconceptions is aptly expressed in Rabah's book by the nails penetrating the dictionary, glistening 'with perceiving shine'.<sup>89</sup> In Lebanon, modern history has been highly contested and fought over.<sup>90</sup> A recent exhibition in Beirut curated by Saleh Barakat, *The Road to Peace: Painting in Times of War 1975–1991*, included book art that is clearly of documentary character.<sup>91</sup> As many of the conflicts that led to the civil war in Lebanon have remained in place and evolved into new conflicts – some even speak of a continuation of the war – it is not surprising that the documentary character of book art also features prominently in works by artists of the post-war generation. However, their artistic practices come as more of a rupture, due not only to the civil war but also to the introduction and spread of Western media art in Lebanon.<sup>92</sup>

From the above we can conclude that contemporary book art in the Middle East continues to thrive in manifold ways, despite being at the margin of 'the new map' of Arab art that Abdelké critically assesses in his article quoted above. This success certainly has to do with book art's highly intermedia character and its capacity to establish a link with different places and times, bringing together diverse cultural traditions in contemporary artistic practices. As I have argued in the case of the book as document in Iraq, it also has to do with the political urgency in which book art has been produced, pressing artists to bear witness to Iraq's modern history, before it is lost, and to document Iraq's dark recent past in ways that touch us through their fragile but striking beauty.

## Notes

**I thank the artists for their generous help in acquiring the images, in particular Dia Azzawi and Kareem Risan. My sincere thanks also go to Venetia Porter, John Pedro Schwartz, Marius Kwint, Henri Franses, Mohammad Ali Atassi, and *Art History's* editors for their feedback.**

- 1 Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, New York, 2nd edn, 2004, 335–56.
- 2 Her examples include prominent Western artists such as Sol Lewitt, Joan Lyons, Ed Ruschka, and Hanne Darboven.
- 3 Studies so far have focused on Cairo and Beirut which emerged as burgeoning centres of contemporary art since the mid-1990s for a variety of reasons. On Cairo, see Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, Palo Alto, CA, 2006, and 'Cultural sovereignty in a global art economy: Egyptian cultural policy and the new Western interest in art from the Middle East', *Cultural Anthropology*, 21: 2, 2006, 173–204. On Beirut, see Sarah Rogers, *Post-war Art and the Historical Roots of Beirut's Cosmopolitanism*, Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008.
- 4 New magazines, such as *Canvas* (since 2004), *Bidoun* (since 2004) and *Contemporary Practices* (since 2007) published in English and *Min Wa Ila* (since 2007) published in Arabic, focus on both contemporary art and visual culture in the Middle East. *Artasiapacific* (since 1994) has significantly expanded its coverage of the Middle East. Organizations devoted to promoting contemporary art in the Middle East have increased in number as well as scope. New books provide overviews of modern and contemporary art from the region, such as Saeb Eigner, ed., *Art of the Middle East: Modern and Contemporary Art of the Arab World and Iran*, London and New York, 2010; Hossein Amirsadeghi, Salwa Mikdadi and Nada Shabout, eds, *New Vision: Arab Contemporary Art in the 21st Century*, London, 2009; and Paul Sloman, ed., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, London, 2009. Academic publications have emerged out of the increasing number of PhD theses on modern and contemporary art in the Middle East and a number of journals have compiled special issues on the topic, such as *al-Adab*, 52: 1–2, 2004; *Art Journal*, 66: 2, 2007; *MESA Bulletin*, 42: 1–2, forthcoming, and *Arab Studies Journal*, 18: 1, 2010.
- 5 Nat Muller, 'Contemporary art in the Middle East', in Paul Sloman, ed., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, London, 2009, 12.
- 6 See, for instance, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York, 2003; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, 1994; Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, CA, 1987.
- 7 Said's book has triggered an international scholarly debate. By Orientalism, Said means a number of separate things: the academic tradition that set out to study the Orient, a style of thought based on the distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident', and a Western preference for having authority over the Orient. Drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, Said argues that Western dealings with the Orient are never innocent; rather Orientalism as a discourse is at play, when 'that peculiar entity "the Orient" is in question'. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London and Henley, 2nd edn, 1980, 2–3.
- 8 Hans Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, Chicago, IL and London, 2003, 7. Belting's book is based on his earlier *The End of the History of Art* (Chicago, IL, 1987), first appeared in German in 1983, at about the same time that Arthur C. Danto published his ideas about the end of art history which later formed the basis of *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*, Princeton, NJ, 1998. See also James Elkins ed., *Is Art History Global?*, London, 2007.
- 9 Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity*, Minneapolis, MN and London, 2000, xxvi.
- 10 See James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography*, Cambridge, MA, 1988, 189–251.
- 11 In the catalogue's preface, Jean-Hubert Martin explicitly criticizes the Eurocentric outlook that has dominated the art market. However, as others suggest, the exhibition remained embedded in the same Eurocentric outlook it set out to criticize, its title referring to magicians rather than artists, a term that carries strong ethnic connotations and recalls Europe's previous fascination with primitivism and exoticism. This criticism was included in the catalogue. See Jean-Hubert Martin, 'Préface', and Thomas McEvilley, 'Ouverture du piège: L'exposition postmoderne et "Magiciens de la Terre"', *Les Magiciens de la terre*, Paris, 1989, 8 and 22.
- 12 See Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, Minneapolis, MN, 2004; Shelly Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Culture and Other Tales of Progress*, Berkeley, CA, 1998.
- 13 Reference here is to Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke's *Free Exchange*, Cambridge, 1995, 55–68. In their dialogue, Haacke points to the political character of the debate over multiculturalism and discusses his controversial 1989 proposal for the Court d'Honneur of the Palais Bourbon in Paris entitled *Calligraphy*. It spelled out the motto of the French revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, not in Roman letters but in Arabic. Haacke wanted to pay tribute to the multicultural society of France today, and to highlight that liberty, equality, and fraternity are yet to be achieved, as discrimination against minorities, particularly of Arab origin, prevails.
- 14 Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 70.
- 15 The Gulf has seen a boom in new museums in recent years. Saadiyat island, off the coast of Abu Dhabi whose cultural district houses four major museums, is noteworthy not only for its scope and attachment to the world's foremost museums, such as the Louvre and the Guggenheim, but also the architects involved in its design, such as Frank Gehry, Jean Nouvel, and Zahah Hadid. Qatar's Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, opened in 2010, is particularly bound to impact artistic production in the region, as it is devoted to modern and contemporary art from the Arab world. The Sharjah Biennale (since 1993) and its commercial counterparts the Dubai Art Fair (since 2007) and Abu Dhabi Art (since 2009) have also contributed to the Gulf's self-assigned role as 'cultural magnet of art aficionados'. See [www.saadiyat.ae/en/Content/](http://www.saadiyat.ae/en/Content/). See also Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John Pedro Schwartz, eds, *Archives, Museums and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World*, Farnham, 2012.
- 16 Jessica Winegar, 'The humanity game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 81: 3, 2008, 651–81.
- 17 Dina Ramadan, 'Regional Emissaries: Geographical Platforms and the Challenges in Contemporary Egyptian Art', conference paper 2004. See [www.apexart.org/conference/ramadan.htm](http://www.apexart.org/conference/ramadan.htm).
- 18 Oguibe, *The Culture Game*, xii–xiii and 33–44.
- 19 See the references in note 3 in addition to Hanan Toukan, 'On being "the Other" in post-civil war Lebanon: Aid and the politics of art in processes of contemporary cultural production', *Arab Studies Journal*, 18: 1, 2010, 118–60, and Sarah Rogers, 'Out of history: Postwar art in Beirut', *Art Journal*, 66: 22, 2007, 8–20.
- 20 Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 69.
- 21 On the de-politicization and commercialization of contemporary art, see Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated: The Story of Modern Art*, Oxford, 2004.
- 22 Exceptions are Winegar's and Toukan's articles mentioned above. In 2002, while doing research for the House of World Cultures' *DisORIENTation* exhibition, I travelled with one of the exhibition's organizers to Beirut and Damascus. On seeing the amount of paintings in Damascene galleries, and after having seen installation and video works in art festivals in Beirut, he explained to me that he could not show these paintings in Berlin. From the outset of his journey, he had set his mind on looking for the same artistic practices that were then dominant abroad, without opening his eyes to what there really was. As I told Toukan, this stance, in my point of view, is symptomatic of much of the curatorial work in the region. The criteria are set by the market; what we actually see is often irrelevant, remains neglected, and thus misunderstood.
- 23 Abdelké does not make use of his art for political expression (except at the beginning of his artistic career and in his caricatures) but was involved in politics in very direct ways as a member of a forbidden leftist party in Syria in the 1980s. His work explores in basic media, such as paper and charcoal, dimensions of painting that have been obliterated with the introduction of Western techniques into the Middle East, such as the one dimension, the flat surface.
- 24 Youssef Abdelké, 'Aqd min al-qarn al-jadid fi thaqafatinā: Fann bilā ḥudūd', *al-Safir*, 11480, 29 December 2009. Abdelké has since triggered a heated debate in the Arabic press about contemporary art

- in the Middle East and the global art market, notably in *al-Safīr*. See also Yves Gonzales, 'Un art sans frontières? L'art arabe face au marché global', <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/2037>, and <http://cpa.hypotheses.org/2052>. Author's translation.
- 25 Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 70.
  - 26 Belting, *Art History after Modernism*, 70.
  - 27 See Drucker, *The Century of Artist's Books*, 362.
  - 28 Holland Cotter, 'Introduction', Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, xv.
  - 29 Drucker, *The Century of Artist's Books*, 357, 360.
  - 30 See Drucker, *The Century of Artist's Books*, 21–44, and W. J. Strachan, *The Artist and the Book in Franc: The 20th Century Livre d'Artiste*, London, 1969.
  - 31 See Renée Riese Hubert and Judd D. Hubert, *The Cutting Edge of Reading: Artists' Books*, New York, 1999.
  - 32 See Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist paintings (1960)', in John O'Brian, ed., *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Chicago, IL and London, 1986.
  - 33 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, Chicago, IL, 1994, 95–6.
  - 34 See Cotter, 'Introduction', Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, xi.
  - 35 The famous *mahjar* (émigré) poet cum painter Jibrān Khalīl Jibrān (1883–1931), for example, was hailed as a 'new Blake'. See Nadeem Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York*, Beirut, 1985.
  - 36 Dick Higgins, preface to Joan Lyons, ed., *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Source Book*, Layton, UT, 1985, 12.
  - 37 On the impact of the *hazima*, see for instance Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, New York, 2010; Albert Hourani, 'A disturbance of spirits (since 1967)', *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London, 1991, 434–58; Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, *al-Naqd al-dhātī ba'd al-hazīma*, Beirut, 1968.
  - 38 Shakir Hassan Al Said, *al-Bayānāt al-fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq*, Baghdad, 1973, 27.
  - 39 On *aṣāla*, see especially Silvia Naef, 'L'expression iconographique de l'authenticité (asāla) dans la peinture arabe moderne', in Gilbert Beaugé and Jean-François Clément, eds, *L'image dans le monde arabe*, Paris, 1995, 139–49.
  - 40 Unfortunately, not much has been written on this very prolific artist and art critic. Born in Samawa, Iraq, in 1925, Shakir Hassan studied at the Higher Institute of Teachers and the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad from 1946 to 1954, and then in 1959 for one year at the Academie Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris. After his return, he taught at the Institute of Fine Arts. He died in Baghdad in 2004.
  - 41 See Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville, FL, 2007; Silvia Naef, *L'art de l'écriture arabe: Passé et présent*, Geneva, 1992; Sharbil Dagher, *al-Ḥurūfiyya al-ʿarabiyya: al-Fann wal-huwiyya*, Beirut, 1990.
  - 42 Shakir Hassan Al Said, *al-Bayānāt al-fanniyya fī al-ʿIrāq*, 38–40.
  - 43 I take the idea of the Arabic-Islamic heritage as a quote in contemporary art in the Middle East from Silvia Naef, "'Moderne islamische Kunst' – Überlegungen zu einem problematischen Begriff", in Almut S. Bruckstein and Hendrik Budde, eds, *Taswir: Islamische Bildwelten der Moderne*, Berlin, 2009, 28.
  - 44 See Oleg Grabar, *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th to the 17th Century*, Munich, 2009; Marie-Geneviève Guesdon and Annie Vernay-Nouri, eds, *L'art du livre arabe: Du manuscrit au livre d'artiste*, Paris, 2002; Robert Hillenbrand, 'Literature and the visual arts', in Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, eds, *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, London and New York, 1998, 2: 475–7; George Atiyeh, ed., *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, Albany, NY, 1995; Johannes Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, Princeton, NJ, 1984.
  - 45 See David J. Roxburgh and Mary McWilliams, *Traces of the Calligrapher*, London and New Haven, 2007.
  - 46 The term modern Islamic art is used by some, namely by the Jordanian artist and critic Wijdan Ali in *Modern Islamic Art: Development and Continuity*, Gainesville, FL, 1997. Ali argues that Islamic art continues to thrive in what she describes as a calligraphic school. For a critical discussion of the term, see Naef, 'Moderne islamische Kunst', 26–30.
  - 47 The dialogue between contemporary artistic practices and Islamic art has been a guiding principle in the British Museum's collection of contemporary art from the Middle East (see Venetia Porter, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, London, 2006, 14). It figured prominently in its *Word into Art* exhibition as well as the much smaller in scope *Iraq's Past Speaks to the Present* exhibition which took place in 2008–09. As the latter exhibition made clear, the dialogue is not limited to the Islamic past but reaches out to the ancient in the case of Iraq Mesopotamian past. The Jameel Prize, inaugurated in 2008 at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, explicitly advocates 'a contemporary practice inspired by Islamic visual culture from the past'. See Charles Merewether, 'The Jameel Prize: A shift of alternate worlds', *Contemporary Practices*, 5. 2009, 82–91.
  - 48 The archival turn is rooted in the new cultural history and owes much to its fusion of anthropological and historical approaches. The term itself was coined by Ann Laura Stoler in 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance: On the content in the form', in Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds, *Refiguring the Archive*, London, 2002, 83–100. See also Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton, NJ, 2008; Caroline Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, New Brunswick, NJ, 2002. As Kate Eichhorn points out, the archival turn is a multidisciplinary phenomenon which has involved researchers from 'across the humanities and social sciences', notably anthropologists, such as Stoler, and historians, such as Steedman. See Kate Eichhorn, 'Archival genres: Gathering texts and reading spaces', *Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture*, 12. 2008, <http://www.rochester.edu/in-visible-culture>.
  - 49 On how this has impacted the historiography of the modern Middle East, see, for instance, Walter Armbrust, 'Audiovisual media and history of the Arab Middle East', in Israel Gershoni, Amy Singer and Y. Hakan Erdem, eds, *Middle East Historiographies: Narrating the Twentieth Century*, Seattle, WA and London, 2006, 288–313.
  - 50 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago, IL and London, 1996, 36. The archive's power to generate narrative production had already been pointed out by Foucault in *The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge*. But in redefining the archive as 'a question of the future', it becomes central in Derrida's *Archive Fever*. See Eichhorn, 'Archival genres', 2.
  - 51 See, for instance, Claire Farago and Donald Prezioso, eds, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, Aldershot, 2004.
  - 52 Namely by Eyal Sivan, Fazel Sheikh, Walid Raad, and Lamia Joreige. Only Joreige lives and works in the region.
  - 53 Suzanne Cotter, 'The documentary turn: Surpassing tradition in the work of Walid Raad and Akram Zaatari', in Paul Sloman, ed., *Contemporary Art in the Middle East*, London, 50–1.
  - 54 Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*, 335.
  - 55 Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the politics of value', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge, 1986, 3.
  - 56 In email correspondence with the author, 16 October 2009. Author's translation.
  - 57 Hashem's book was on display in the British Museum's *Word into Art* exhibition in London and also figures in the exhibition's catalogue. The text reads in English translation: '17 January 1991 ... A quarter past two after mid-night. The war against Iraq erupted three hours ago or more; the air-strikes continue, Baghdad has been destroyed, the Iraqi forces in Kuwait destroyed. By the morning there will be just earth. This is what they say. Half past eleven in the morning. I didn't sleep all night. I saw all the news reports, I phoned all the Iraqis I know. None of them knew that the war had started ... All the news so far has come from the West; America and the Coalition ... There is nothing from Iraq about any military action ... but the war will continue for more days ... and there will be new preparations for a new American air-strike ... today' (quoted in Porter, *Word into Art*, 2006, 111).
  - 58 Recorded in such classic texts as Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller' (1936) or Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1956).
  - 59 The expression 'sixties generation' was used by the Iraqi writer Abdul Kader El Janabi to refer to 'une génération perdue ... qui allait décevoir bien des familles en sacrifiant tout à la publication d'un poème, d'une nouvelle ou d'un article. Une génération qui désertait les villes d'Irak pour grossir les cafés de la capitale, au cœur de Bagdad, et qu'on évoquerait sous le nom de "génération des années soixante".' El Janabi, Abdul Kader El Janabi, *Horizon vertical*, Paris, 1998.
  - 60 *Shahīd min ḥādā al-ʿaṣr* (Witness of Our Times, Baghdad, 1972) takes

- the form of a personal journal of a *fidāʿī*, Palestinian resistance fighter, killed in the 'Black September' of 1970 which saw the expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its fedayeen from Jordan by the Jordanian army. *Rusūm lil-arḍ al-burtuqāl* (Drawings for the Land of Oranges, Beirut, 1973) brings together a number of drawings inspired by the short stories of Ghassan Kanafani, a Palestinian writer and the spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine who was assassinated in Beirut in 1972 in a car bomb planted by the Israeli Mossad. *al-Nashīd al-jasad* (The Body's Anthem, Beirut, 1980) pays tribute to the Palestinian civilians killed in the massacre of Tell al-Zataar refugee camp in Beirut in 1976 by Christian militia with the support of the Syrian Army.
- 61 The facsimile exemplifies the beauty of books in the Arabic-Islamic heritage and shows that painting, also figural, was an integral part of Islamic art. It was published with an introduction by Oleg Grabar by TouchArt in London in 1994. The alleged prohibition of figural painting in Islam, upheld by public opinion and Islamic extremists alike, has triggered much academic debate. See especially Oleg Grabar, *Masterpieces of Islamic Art*, and *The Formation of Islamic Art*, revised and enlarged edition of 1973, New Haven and London, 1987; Silvia Naef, *Ya-t-il une "question de l'image" en Islam?*, Paris, 2004.
- 62 On the history of modern art in Iraq, see especially Zainab Bahrani and Nada Shabout, eds, *Modernism and Iraq*, New York, 2009; Nada Shabout, *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, Gainesville, FL, 2007; Maysaloun Faraj, ed., *Strokes of Genius: Contemporary Iraqi Art*, London, 2003; Silvia Naef, *À la recherche d'une modernité arabe: L'évolution des arts plastiques en Egypte, au Liban et en Iraq*, Geneva, 1996; Shakir Hassan Al Said, *al-Fann al-tashkīlī al-'irāqī al-mu'āṣir*, Beirut, 1992, and *Fuṣūl min tārīkh al-haraka al-tashkīliyya fī al-'irāq*, vols 1 and 2, Baghdad, 1983 and 1988. On the impact of the Ba'th party and Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule on cultural production, see Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Era, 1968–89*, Oxford, 1991; Samir al-Khalil, *The Monument: Art, Vulgarity and Responsibility in Iraq*, Berkeley, CA, 1991.
- 63 See Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, Cambridge, 2002.
- 64 I borrow this term from Loulouwa Al Rachid, 'Peut-on encore écrire de la poésie en Irak?', *Tumultes*, 19, 2003, 109–14. See also Inaam Kachachi, *Paroles d'Irakiennes. Le drame irakien écrit par des femmes*, Paris, 2003; Hana Malallah, 'Consciousness of isolation', in Maysaloun Faraj, ed., *Strokes of Genius*, 63–6.
- 65 Nada Shabout, 'Presenting Iraqi visual culture', in Nada Shabout, ed., *Dafatir. Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, Denton, TX, 2007, 17.
- 66 On Iraq's cultural production despite all odds, see Nadje al-Ali et al., eds, *Resisting Despair: Iraqi Cultural Production*, Syracuse, NY, forthcoming.
- 67 Risan's work, organized in paintings, book art, objects, and video art, can be viewed in the gallery on his website: [www.kareemrisan.com](http://www.kareemrisan.com).
- 68 The Amiriya shelter was hit by two laser guided smart bombs killing more than 300 civilians on 13 February 1991. The US claimed that the shelter was also used for military purposes, but no evidence was found to support this claim. Author's translation.
- 69 Quoted in Kachachi, *Paroles d'Irakiennes*, 36.
- 70 Nuha Radi, *Baghdad Diaries 1991–2002*, London, 2003, 66.
- 71 On Risan's 'Uranium Civilization', see also Maymaneh Farhat's review of the *Word into Art* exhibition, *artasiapacific*, 52, 2007, 108; and Nada Shabout, 'The "free" art of occupation: Images for a "new" Iraq', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 28: 4, 2006, 41–55.
- 72 Venetia Porter, *Word into Art: Artists of the Modern Middle East*, Dubai, 2008, 115.
- 73 On the Saddam Center for the Arts now renamed the Iraqi Museum of Modern Art, see Nada Shabout, 'The Iraqi Museum of Modern Art: Ethical implication', *Journal for Museum and Archives Professionals from the Practical to the Philosophical*, 2: 4, 2006, 285–98.
- 74 On the looting of the Iraq Museum and the destruction of the ancient Mesopotamian past, see especially Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum*, Chicago, IL, 2009.
- 75 Nada Shabout, 'The forgotten era: Modern and contemporary Iraqi art', in Jocelyne Dakhlia, ed., *Créations artistiques contemporaines en pays d'Islam: Des arts en tensions*, Paris, 2006, 281.
- 76 Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismael, eds, *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*, New York, 2010, xi.
- 77 In email correspondence with the author, 16 October 2009.
- 78 Quoted in Porter, *Word into Art*, 2008, 132.
- 79 Nada Shabout, 'Presenting Iraqi visual culture', 61.
- 80 In email correspondence with the author, 16 October 2009. Author's translation.
- 81 See Julian Stallabrass, 'The power and impotence of images', *Memory of Fire: The War of Images and Images of War*, Brighton, 2008, 4–9.
- 82 Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*, 23–8.
- 83 Sinan Antoon, 'Haunting beauty: On Iraqi art and collateral damage', in Nada Shabout, *Dafatir*, 40.
- 84 Janet Tyson at <http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/gallery/dafatir>.
- 85 In her introduction to *Dafatir*, Shabout criticizes some of these exhibitions, in particular Catherine David's *Contemporary Arab Representations #3: The Iraqi Equation* (2006). It is worthwhile pointing out that David has pursued the same focus on Western media art in her previous exhibitions *Contemporary Arab Representations # 1: Beirut* (2002) and *#2: Cairo/Egypt* (2004) which were accompanied by the publications *Tamass 1 & 2*.
- 86 I thank Venetia Porter, curator at the British Museum and of the *Word into Art* exhibition, for this information in a conversation with the author, London 27 January 2010.
- 87 Since the 1980s, it has been the objective not only of Palestinian but also of the so-called new Israeli historians, such as Ilan Pappé, Avi Shlaim, and Tom Segev, to bring this negated part of history to the fore.
- 88 See Porter, *Word into Art*, 2008, 123.
- 89 See the description given in Porter, *Word into Art*, 2006, 123.
- 90 See especially Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*, Berkeley, CA, 1988.
- 91 See Saleh Barakat, *The Road to Peace: Painting in Times of War 1975–1991*, Beirut, 2009. The catalogue includes artists' books by Aref Rayess, Jamil Molaeb, Ginane Basho, Laure Ghorayyeb, and Ghada Jamal.
- 92 Of special interest here are Walid Sadeq's publications, at times in collaboration with other artists of the so-called post-war generation in Lebanon. See Sonja Mejcher-Atassi, 'Word and image in contemporary book art in Lebanon: Walid Sadeq's *Fi annani akbar min Picasso [bigger than picasso]* (Beirut 1999)', lecture given at the conference of the Association of Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran, and Turkey (AMCA) at Mathaf. Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, 16–17 December 2010.