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Mehdi Moutashar: one-dimensional artist

The world in which Mehdi Moutashar's works develop is more one of angles, folds and interstices than one of pedestals, frames and curtains. To put it more bluntly, the artist is more concerned with voids than with solids and, even more specifically, he shows a preference for the points where the visible is *afoot*, woven on the visible itself. Far from being hermetically confined to the space into which his works invite themselves, invariably with elegant modesty, his works may even reveal certain unsuspected qualities of the surrounding space. But the spatial laws most scrupulously observed by Mehdi Moutashar's works remain their own laws, their clock and inner compass. Laws resulting neither from an alchemical secret, nor from esoteric mathematics, but much more from a mental gymnastics whose rationale is to be found in a *one-dimensional* ethics of the work of art.

Some works are *arranged* over the existing space—works which “surround” us—such as *Par 18 (By 18)*, which can cover as many walls as required, like a second skin over the architecture of the place occupied. Other works are *grafted* onto it, two such pieces being *Deux cubes et une ligne (Two Cubes and One Line)* and *Deux carrés dont un encadré (Two Squares, One Framed)*—works from which we may derive a mental *drawing*. But Mehdi Moutashar never broaches the work of geometry like an arbitrary possession of territory, or as a simply projective grid (that of the Renaissance-style *disegno*).

Moutashar's line or geometric *writing* seems keen to present us with the *uniqueness of movement*, turning empirical and rectilinear space into a speculative and *total* space—symbolized by a continuous *broken line*. But precisely where a draughtsman like M.C. Escher, for example, glorifies this line for the purposes of optical illusion, by way of the increased number of planes and trompe-l'oeil techniques, Moutashar for his part re-situates the broken line outside of the *true and false* paradigm. The sole truth that is worth anything, as

he himself puts it, is to “find in each space the doorway which opens onto the host of other possible spaces in it.”¹

Whereas Escher appropriates the arabesque as an image formed in the manner of a crystal, using the infinite repetition of the same motif, Moutashar appropriates it much more like a musical note in a score, i.e. like pure spatial rhythm. For example, for the piece *Par 18* Moutashar stresses the uniqueness of the experience created between the minimalist arrangement and the tangible but natural interplay of light and shadow which almost turns the wall into a mirror--and the spectator into a fragment of the experience itself. The one-dimensional work is mathematical, without being empirical or positivist, it is speculative without being illusionistic, it is a *literary* work (calling on the sacred letter and its forms of existence in the tradition of the Islamic and Sufi book) without being literal. It does not prohibit itself from “absorbing” the spectator, at the risk of dizziness.

The space ultimately dreamed of by Moutashar’s works might well resemble the cities with three or four “heads” imagined by Escher in his wood engravings titled *Tetrahedral Planetoid* (1954)—or, let’s say, an exhibition room in which every surface has more than one function, with each surface acting simultaneously as floor, wall and ceiling. A city where the ground is a wall like the others. A city which is no longer divided into four cardinal points, but one where each cardinal point condenses within it the entirety of the city’s structures and dimensions. Otherwise put, a *one-dimensional* city.

If the north, south, east and west references remain at the origin of any desire to *make space* or think about a territory, they are in a way diffracted in a network of intersecting and inset lines, as in *Trois angles à 135°* (*Three Angles at 135°*), nicknamed “L’Araignée”/”The Spider”—one of the two large-scale works in this Bahrain show. In it, it does not take long to observe that every parallel and perpendicular element is done away with in favour of a *bifurcation* of lines, where there is a play on the right rhythm, the fertile rhythm, capable of bringing out the invisible axis which *atmospherically* governs this bifurcation--which gives to these three “tentacles” their expansion breath. *Trois angles à 135°* intrigues us by its both finite and open-ended structure, at a standstill and in motion, like a spiral that has derailed in a phenomenon of random growth; a *deviant spiral*, or a proliferating one. Or quite simply the lines drawn without any human intervention by the cracks created on a stone object after it falls to the ground.

The one-dimensional work is thus closely conversant with the science of morphogenesis, studying the phenomena of the growth and bifurcation of forms. In this respect, the shell, the plant and the hurricane can be used for diverse symbolizations in the world of the one-dimensional work. As the artist himself sums it up: “The logic of my work does not stem from the notion of combination, but rather from a poetics, where uniqueness is the basic notion. It is the very structure of the work which creates its development”.² The network of crystallized lines in Moutashar’s “Spider” is in fact as radical and unpredictable as figures captured by dust particles set in motion when you hit a table in one precise point or in several.

Moutashar’s broken line (blue, black or invisible) thus points in many different directions in his works which zigzag more than once upon themselves: cosmic labyrinths which derive their source in a cosmopolitan visual imagination. Just like the career of the artist, who grew up on the outskirts of the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon, in the city of Hillah in Iraq, and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad, before going to Paris in 1967, at that time a fertile hive of abstract and geometric art. There he studied in particular at the National School of Fine Arts, before settling in 1974 in Arles, France’s Rome, where Moutashar still lives and works. As if, by going to an ancient Mediterranean city from the South, his trajectory was concerned with maintaining an at once oceanic and tenuous dialogue with the Euphrates, and his early love for the forces of wind, sand, air and water—all the *Babylonian cosmologies* of his childhood. But across the boundaries forming his path of life, and his philosophical and artistic repertory, Moutashar does not seem to have tried to resolve a self-centered identity quest, associated with his twofold culture. He seems rather to have sought to transcend himself on the boundary between traditional, artisanal knowledge, and post-industrial knowledge where the computer has once and for all taken over from the encyclopaedia—we might also say the boundary between the world of ornament and the world of algorithms. In this respect he offers a plunge into the heart of a third space where the aestheticism, not to say the fetishism of the “work of art” is considerably relativized in favour of a more inclusive and more artefact-related notion of human creativity, which is at the same time more “connected”.

The broken line, a formal matrix or *symbolic form*, consequently leads us to different legacies: the architecture of the al-Moustanseria university in Baghdad (one of the world’s most ancient universities) where, in his youth, Mehdi

Moutashar recognized the purely physical and cosmological art of the play of light on carved bricks. A place both societal and mystical, real and imaginary, where the four cardinal points clearly defined by the orientation of the quadrilateral plan correspond to an atomic shower of sculpted motifs on the imposing and yet monochrome façades of the building: an oft-repeated host of squares, triangles pivoting on themselves to the point of producing heptagons, octagons, and decagons... forming so many “starred polygons” (called *Shamsa*, sun) in Arabic, and other “stalactite”³-like structures, which seem to be geometrically “reflected” in the gridding on the ground of the University’s courtyard.

Paul Klee, that great theoretician if not of the broken line then at least of the powers of the non-linear, represents an admittedly distant but favourite alter-ego for Moustashar. It is possibly in his Indian ink *Croquis (Sketches)* produced in 1968 and 1969 that the artist most obviously dialogues with Klee, by way of more or less saturated constellations, in which it is no longer the lines which connect the points, but the points which display their linear development. Moutashar and Klee share in particular the same effort to create the conditions of a visual rhythm and other systems of growth and gravitation of forms. In the notes and theorems brought together in his *Infinite Natural History*, the Bauhaus artist posits that the notion of the infinite must not be conceived solely as based on time, but also in a spatial perspective, as “telluro-cosmic tension”⁴; with the cosmos being defined as a regulated or stabilized state of the original chaos (where things move and wander, without any directional law or morphogenetic design). Even if, as it happens, this means re-situating the fascinating regularity of nature at the centre of the chaos, in the ordeal of drift. A conception thoroughly contrasting, for example, with that of Mondrian who did not even make sacrifices in order to include a single diagonal in his picture, for fear of getting rid of this latter’s autonomy. It was in fact about diagonals that Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg parted company in 1923, when the latter was in sharp contrast with the former by being quicker to explore the dynamic potential of the diagonal⁵; and thereby quicker to incorporate painting in a much larger system including architecture and design... Exorcising the cult of the right-angle, the grid and the obsession with ornament in western thinking, in order to evolve freely on the *infinite chequerboard* criss-crossed by Paul Klee, M.C. Escher, and Theo van Doesburg. So many European artists celebrating the “rhythmic song of the mind”, as Frantisek Kupka, one of the first to pay his debt to the Islamic arabesque, called the power of this latter. So Mehdi Moutashar not only acts as a

link or go-between, between East and West. He is more like a special catalyst, not to say the natural culmination of this “Islamic” genealogy of transnational modern art. We should in fact add to the list a name which this time around crosses paths with Moutashar’s trajectory, that of François Morellet.

August 1967: just arrived in Paris from Baghdad, a wide-eyed Moutashar discovered the key exhibition of geometric and kinetic abstraction: *Lumière et Mouvement* at the Musée d’art moderne de la ville de Paris, where Morellet and the GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel) played a major part.⁶ The young Iraqi artist suffered an aesthetic shock. He could not help wondering why his teachers at the Baghdad School of Fine Arts had not told him about such experiments being undertaken in European museums—teachers who nevertheless regularly visited the great capital cities of Paris, London and Rome. Over and above the works, defying the museum’s seriousness and the rules admitted by it, it was possible to observe a meaningful alliance between European and South American artists which provided the exhibition with its historical stuff (despite the notable absence of Hélio Oiticica). Moutashar’s presence at that show, which was less due to chance than might appear, not as an artist but as a spectator (who visited it almost daily until the last day) thus assumed the nature of a clue for a missed appointment: between the European artists and those from the Arab-Muslim world, where plenty of those spatial tendencies called “kinetic” and “optical” nevertheless seemed to find their source.

But Morellet was the exception to the rule, acknowledging back then the significance of the shock he experienced when he discovered the Alhambra in Granada in 1952⁷ (i.e. thirty years after Escher and seventeen before Moutashar who visited the Alhambra for the first time in 1969). This was the selfsame François Morellet who would recommend Moutashar’s work to the Denise René gallery, with whose owner, in the end, Moutashar only decided to become involved many years after that gesture of support, in the late 1980s. It is consequently all the more remarkable that the missed appointment between Paris and Babylon did in fact take place, but on the sidelines of canonical art history (and of French art criticism), just like Moutashar in front of the evidence in the exhibition *Lumière et Mouvement*: he had been wallowing since his boyhood in some of the “sources” in which artists involved in kinetic and similar tendencies seemed to be steeped. Let us bear in mind, for example, the fact that the artist attended primary school in the stables of the palaces of Nebuchadnezzar II, and

has retained indelible memories of the walls of the north palace. Walls decorated with especially fine bas-relief griffons, to such a degree that the sun's crude rays striking the bricks might give the impression that the griffons are disappearing, by refraction, as if they were merging with the wall, on the edge of the visible—in return lending a particular vibration to that *haptic*⁸ surface, where the optical and the tactile are in a state of shared jubilation.

The whole subtlety of one-dimensional art resides in the way it makes broken line and haptic sense become joined together in all forms of depth of field and *elastic spaces*. One thinks of the pieces produced precisely with the help of stretched elastic, an elastic which physically “extends” the work's territory while seeming to us to be fixed. From yet another angle, one-dimensional art is that art which consists in networking different surfaces (most of the maquettes presented in this show eloquently display this). Otherwise put, so many ways which thwart the common and fixed notion of geometry.

Plenty of other seemingly marginal elements in Moutashar's structures illustrate this interest in *fluid-images*, more discreetly than the light vibrations of a whole wall: the use of blue as the only colour other than black and white; the artist makes a distant reference to the ultramarine blue used in ancient Mesopotamia to seal the bricks of buildings by enamelling them. And above all the black oil deposited like a liquid mirror at the top of the four rectangular volumes forming the 1989 *Cube*. Responding to the phenomena of the broken line, haptic space and, in a definitive way, *specular spaces*, the oil here tells us explicitly that there is more to see than what we think we are seeing. On the face of it well removed from Frank Stella's *What you see is what you see*, and from American abstraction, and more in favor of something like *What you see should be reconstituted mentally* (unless Stella meant exactly the same thing?), the “ink mirror” which Moutashar presents for us to feel functions like the inner mirror of the whole installation. As if the four rectangles forming a square could be virtually multiplied in the moving reflection of the black oil. And this liquid might become the allegory of a *life of forms* which precedes the formal existence of things and which even precedes the formation of images. So it is especially significant that this should lie at the very heart of the *square* figure—a space at once perfectly proportional and somewhat esoteric, calculable and infinite—that Moutashar gets this pre-imaginal world of the fluid-image to hatch out. While the “abstraction” of the Constructivist and Futurist avant-gardes, and, to some extent, of kinetic art, is nurtured on the *images* of the industrial revolution,

thermodynamics and even astrophysics,⁹ Moutashar's abstraction displays an impressive restraint in the face of any temptation involving symbolization; it keeps its poetic and mathematical uniqueness (the one never taking the other as a pretext or counterpart) radically in motion.

On the route of *nomadic modernities*, capable of linking calligraphy with fractal mathematics, and the bas-relief with morphogenesis, Moutashar enjoys the considerable merit of demonstrating to us that they are in no way anachronistic, but rather synchronistic. Babylon thus found its way to Paris, but without uttering its name. From “modern “ architectures to “Islamic” architectures, categories are blurred and experiences are exchanged: it was not until the late 1960s—in 1969 to be precise—that Moutashar first visited the Alhambra in Granada and the dizzy-making *Muquarnas* of its celestial vault. One of the most “sacred” refuges of one-dimensional art with the self-appointed basic task of resolving the contradictory appearances between image and form, idea and matter, and once and for all between being and movement.

Houé, the centerpiece of the Bahrain show, provides us in the most intimate way with what we have hitherto called *one-dimensional art*. If *Trois angles à 135°* and *Houé* cultivate the same dynamic and expansive concern, *Houé* is closer to the experience of the Alhambra, inasmuch as it calls upon a sort of internalization of form rather than a pure optical exploration. Let us first of all note the isomorphic relation between work and body sought by the artist, who has based the dimensions of *Houé* on the territorial area of his own body. The spiral motion itself seems to invite the spectator to stroll, ready to “measure” himself no longer so much with a *deviant spiral* (as noted for *Trois angles à 135°*) but with the honeycomb-like grid which seems to underpin *Houé*.

But even more noteworthy is the mooring of this inter-subjective relation to form in a metaphysics of the Arabic letter. Starting with the phonetic and sonic resonance of the letter suggested by the honeycomb construction: the word *Houé* is formed by two letters, an aerial letter, the aspirate *h*, which is developed based on a twofold concentric then eccentric movement, and the *waw* which follows a spiral line. The dovetailing of these two letters—the first as breath, the second as instrument—gives rise to a back-and-forth motion, like a breath. The brief of *Houé* is thus to make us enter a world where sculpture relies as much, if not more, on the fluctuating music of words than on that of the form or layout which are seemingly objective. The plasticity of letter and language, faithful to the Arab-Islamic or Arab-Andalusian culture, strives for “self-

ecstasy” and the “unveiling of truth”. So many typical expressions of a Sufi way of thinking connected to this plasticity (uniqueness) of the letter, to be re-understood, in its most “modern” accepted sense, under the pen of the Iraqi artist and art theoretician, Shakir Hassan al-Said.¹⁰

This latter, who preceded Moutashar on the Baghdad-Paris route, studying in the City of Light between 1955 and 1959, both at the School of Fine Arts and at the School of Decorative Arts (where Moutashar taught between 1974 and 2008), is still one of the great masters when it comes to thinking about the use of the letter in the visual arts.¹¹ It was al-Said, Moutashar’s mentor, who still recalls their long conversations during his youth, who was the first to use the expression “one-dimensional art”, “the One dimension”. In his 1971 manifesto of the same title, al-Said gave material form to the intuitions of artists hailing from Lebanon (Saloua Raouda Choucair), Iran (Hossein Zenderoudi), Egypt (Hamed Abdalla) and Morocco (Mohammed Melehi), by promoting the no longer simply aesthetic but also civilizational and metaphysical virtues of calligraphy. For him, the art of the letter surpasses the pure operation of the mind, or the technical operation, and is understood as relation to space; to the spaces which calligraphy crisscrosses and transcends, from architecture to pottery by way of paper, needless to say, and in a unitary way, from the floor to the ceiling by way of the walls. By merging the logic of the brick and the layout of the writing (precisely where, traditionally, writing is laid *over* the brick wall), *Houé* pushes still further al-Said’s preliminary theories (which Moutashar has never studied for themselves but which have accompanied him, the way you cultivate the memory of a life-long friend). In fact, if it is easy to imagine calligraphic lines decorating the walls of a mosque making us giddy, or the impression that they give of *revolving around us*, what is henceforth involved, thanks to *Houé*, is our capacity to revolve around them, and envisage the body-letter relation in a *total* and inter-subjective way.

The fact is that *Houé* literally means “the Other”, him, the person who returns my image to me. It is also the root of the word which means “identity”. Beyond this primary meaning, *Houé*, “him”, is the word used by mystics to signify God. If we take this term in its specular accepted sense (the other as mirror of my humanity), then it will not be unimportant to remember that certain calligraphic compositions (be they of Ottoman or Persian origin) are based precisely on effects of symmetry and linkage regarded as specular. In deambulation or in (outer) fixation, our carnal relation with this *talking body*, which overhangs us

just enough to let us guess—without revealing it—its impenetrable (inner) part, re-merges with our mental relation to the territory of *Houé*: potential architecture where the performance (choreography) of a *Qalam* (reed pen) in action is drawn.

We shall, to be sure, beware of perfectly overlaying the attitude adopted by Moutashar, for whom architecture, painting and sculpture are in reality just *one*, on that of al-Said, who remained reliant on the pictorial space, or picture, in spite of his theoretical innovations. On the other hand, we can speculate about the fact that Moutashar has achieved al-Said's crazy dream, beyond the image and the visual field. Al-Said, who presented one-dimensional art as the *cosmic* union between the artist and everything surrounding him, a state of mind linked to the letter as an “expressive” unit (Moutashar would prefer the word constructive) in which the word becomes “*an art of space in a temporal form*”.¹²

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1. An unpublished conversation between Morad Montazami and Mehdi Moutashar, 4 July 2017.
2. Conversation between Pierre Manuel and Mehdi Moutashar, *Mehdi Moutashar*, Arles, Acte Sud, 2014, pp. 45-46.
3. We are borrowing the vocabulary of Alexandre Papadopoulos, *L'Islam et l'art musulman*, Paris, Lucien Mazenod, 1976.
4. Paul Klee, *Ecrits sur l'art II. Histoire naturelle infinie*, Paris, Dessain et Tolra, 1977, page. 13.
5. See “Tapis volants. Entretien avec Philippe-Aain Michaud”, *Zamân (Textes, images et documents)*, no.5, summer 2012, pp. 194-195.
6. Among the artists in that exhibition, which was curated by Frank Popper, were: Pol Bury, Narciso Debou, Hugo Demarco, Carlos Cruz-Diez, the GRAV—Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, Piotr Kowalski, Bernard Lassus, Julio Le Parc, François Morellet, Nicholas Schöffer, Jesus Rafael Soto, Joël Stein, Takis, Jean Tinguely, and Victor Vasarely...
7. ‘For me this is the most intelligent, precise, refined and systematic art there has ever been. An art which has managed to get rid of naturalist reminders, the sensibility of style and composition, all those, for me, primordial qualities, which I had not managed to find in western art’. François Morellet, “About twenty years ago, I discovered Muslim linear art”, *Mais commen taire mes commentaries*, Beaux-Arts de Paris, 2011, p. 63.
8. A notion taken up by Gilles Deleuze in the wake of Aloïs Riegl trying to describe a space seeking something beyond the two- and three-dimensional. Attesting to this, for these authors, is the bas-relief experience, especially in Egypt. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: logique de la sensation*, Paris, La Différence, 1981, in particular chapter 14.
9. See Christoph Asendorf, *Super Constellation. L'influence de l'aéronautique sur les arts et la culture*, Paris, Macula, 2013 (1997).
10. We refer to the English translation by Samir Mahmoud of the manifesto of Shakir Hassan al-Said, written in Arabic and dated 1971. Published in Charbel Dagher, *Arabic Hurufiyyah. Art and Identity*, Milan, Skira, 2016, p. 130. Most Anglo-Saxon comments referring to the manifesto translate the title as *The One Dimension*.
11. In the non-official artistic tendency, disseminated throughout the Arab world, but to which we should add Klee, Kupka... often called *al-hurufiyyah* (or “Arab lettrism”).