Quis Custodiet Ipsos Custodes:  
Who Watches the Watchers?

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Keywords  
Art; Islam; Identity; Spectatorship; September 11; Curation

In 2006 from February 26th to May 22nd the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City put together an exhibit entitled ‘Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking’. The museum described the exhibit as ‘an exhibition that focuses on recent works by 17 artists of diverse nationalities who explore contemporary responses to Islamic art while also posing questions about issues of identity and spirituality’.  

In an internal memorandum, the authorities of the newly renovated MoMa in Midtown Manhattan further clarified that the artists selected for this exhibition ‘represent a range of heritage, including Algerian, Egyptian, Indian, Iraqi, Iranian, Lebanese, Pakistani, Palestinian, Turkish, and American’. These artists were all ‘Muslim’ in a wide and generic sense. On the surface, the exhibition seemed to raise the question of what it means to be a ‘Muslim’ artist—or by extension, the question of what is art that comes from an Islamic provenance, even if created by artists who are not Muslim—through performing a variation on the theme of ‘Islamic art’. ‘Without Boundary’, according to the museum officials, ‘approaches its subject from a variety of perspectives, one of which involves the contemporary reinterpretation of classical traditions of Islamic art—such as calligraphy, miniature painting, and the design

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1 This according to MoMA catalogue: MoMA EXHIBITION PRESENTS WORK BY 17 ARTISTS WHO EXPLORE CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO ISLAMIC ART: Without Boundary: Seventeen Ways of Looking Special exhibitions gallery (third floor), The Yoshiko and Akio Morita Media Gallery (second floor)—February 26–May 22, 2006.

2 Ibid: 1.
of carpets and textiles. The artists in *Without Boundary* work outside the expectations suggested by the term ‘Islamic art’. The internal memorandum then proceeded to emphasize that according to Ms. Daftari, curator of the show, ‘The exhibition reveals what the artists share: a tie based not in ethnicity or religion, but in their way of revising, subverting, and challenging all aesthetic traditions they deal with, and revealing the idiosyncrasies of their personal approaches’. It further adds that according to Homi Bhabha, a (Parsi) professor of English literature who had contributed an essay to this exhibition on Muslim artists, ‘These artists reinvent tradition while revising the cultural history of the present moment’. All the indications (perhaps minus the Occidentalism of a Parsi professor of English—or Chinese or Australian—literature theorizing about ‘modern Islamic art’) pointed to the common denominator of these artists in one way or another: the thing called ‘Islam’. By far the loudest screamer in this exhibition seemed to be the fact that it was about Islamic art, but insisted that it was not about Islamic art—the Muslim and/or Arab identity, background, or origin of these artists, they seemed to insist, was not the issue, but the fact that they were breaking away from a tradition, which for lack of a better term, happens to be the Islamic art. So this exhibition was (not) about Islamic art—and perhaps that would explain the essay contributed by the Parsi Professor.

*Identity*—and identity politics: Recently this seems to be the trend in art exhibits in New York: Forcing the disciplinary and theoretical tonalities of a scholar (and the aesthetic universe of an artist) reduced, by the curators themselves, to where they happen first to have appeared as a joyous flickering in their parents’ eyes.

Whatever the purpose of the curators of this exhibition might have been, paramount in the exhibition itself was the overbearing anxiety of a curatorial trauma whereby the curators expose far more of their own anxieties than they reveal about an entirely arbitrary and confused collection of odds and ends with no evident relationship to each other. This exhibition, as a result, is best considered as a case study of curatorial decisions as an act of collective therapy. My suggestion here is that such shows (and curatorial decisions they exhibit along with the exhibited items) reveal far more about the post-9/11 anxieties at the heart of the metropolis than about the subject of their exhibition—a subject increasingly fragmented along conflicting conflagrations of identity (national, regional, civilization, and above all a distinction presumed and practiced between who is the sovereign—civilized—spectator and what is the subservient—violent—spectacle.

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3 Ibid: 1.
5 Ibid: 1–2.