

# Manazir مناظر Journal

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**Art, Abstraction & Activism in the Middle East**

**edited by Silvia Naef & Nadia Radwan**

# Impressum

*Manazir Journal* is a peer-reviewed academic Platinum Open Access journal dedicated to visual arts, architecture and cultural heritage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Created in 2019, the journal is linked to *Manazir – Swiss Platform for the Study of Visual Arts, Architecture and Heritage in the MENA Region*, a platform of exchange that aims to connect researchers interested in these themes. The term “Manazir” refers to landscapes, perspectives and points of view in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. Thus, *Manazir Journal* is oriented towards a diversity of transcultural and transdisciplinary “landscapes” and “points of views” and open to a multiplicity of themes, epochs and geographical areas.

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Manazir  
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**Cover image:** Etel Adnan (1925), *Untitled* (detail), 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg/Beirut.

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## Curator's note

Fabienne Eggelhöfer<sup>1</sup>

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### Etel Adnan Meets Paul Klee

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#### Abstract

In comparing the works of Etel Adnan and Paul Klee, their shared interest in the relationship between writing and images became clear. Etel Adnan's great admiration for Klee's art was an additional reason for holding an exhibition at the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern. The following note examines the extent to which the artists' engagement with (Arabic) calligraphy was an integral part of their practices.

**Keywords:** Etel Adnan, Paul Klee, Zentrum Paul Klee, Abstraction

When I started painting in the early 1960s, the painter who struck me the most was Paul Klee. I was instantly captivated. I would look for his paintings, in books mostly, and in museums whenever possible. I would follow each line with my eyes, noticing how he would frame his paintings within the canvas so as to make them look larger, something that was distinctively his. This kind of addiction gave way to a fascination and a learning process. I would love everything I saw and constantly made new discoveries. Like with any first love, this passion created a sharpness of observation that I remember as a continuous revelation. It was as if each line was being drawn before my eyes. The world he depicted was both intimate and foreign. The diversity of that world brought surprises.

Etel Adnan not only holds Paul Klee in high regard, as shown by the above quotation, but she also considers him a soulmate. Reading his diaries, which were first published in English translation in California at the beginning of the 1960s, provided Adnan with new insights into the thoughts of an artist who never dictated a specific style, but rather addressed approaches and processes. For Adnan, the directness and variety of Klee's work was a revelation. Klee and Adnan share a profound interest in different forms of artistic expression, including poetry, music, and painting. For Adnan, abstract painting is a means to express her ideas, thoughts, and emotions. To use Klee's words, her art "does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible."<sup>2</sup>

It therefore made sense for the Zentrum Paul Klee to plan an exhibition with Etel Adnan. She selected some works from our collection and we then collaborated with the curator Sébastien Delot to display them alongside her abstract paintings, leporellos, and tapestries. The parallel to Klee's artistic process is particularly evident in Adnan's leporellos, in which she synthesizes drawing and writing. Like Klee, she is fascinated by the close relationship between writing and drawing,

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Klee, "Creative Confession," in *Creative Confession and Other Writings*, edited by Matthew Gale, trans. by Thames & Hudson (London: Tate, 2013), 7-14. First published as "Schöpferische Konfession," in *Tribüne der Kunst und Zeit XIII*, edited by Kasimir Edschmid (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920), 28-40.

which he described as "rooted together as one."<sup>3</sup> The tradition of calligraphy in Asia and the Middle East informs the artists' thoughts on this relationship. For Adnan in particular, the reference to Arabic calligraphy, which does not make a stark differentiation between writing and painting, is central.

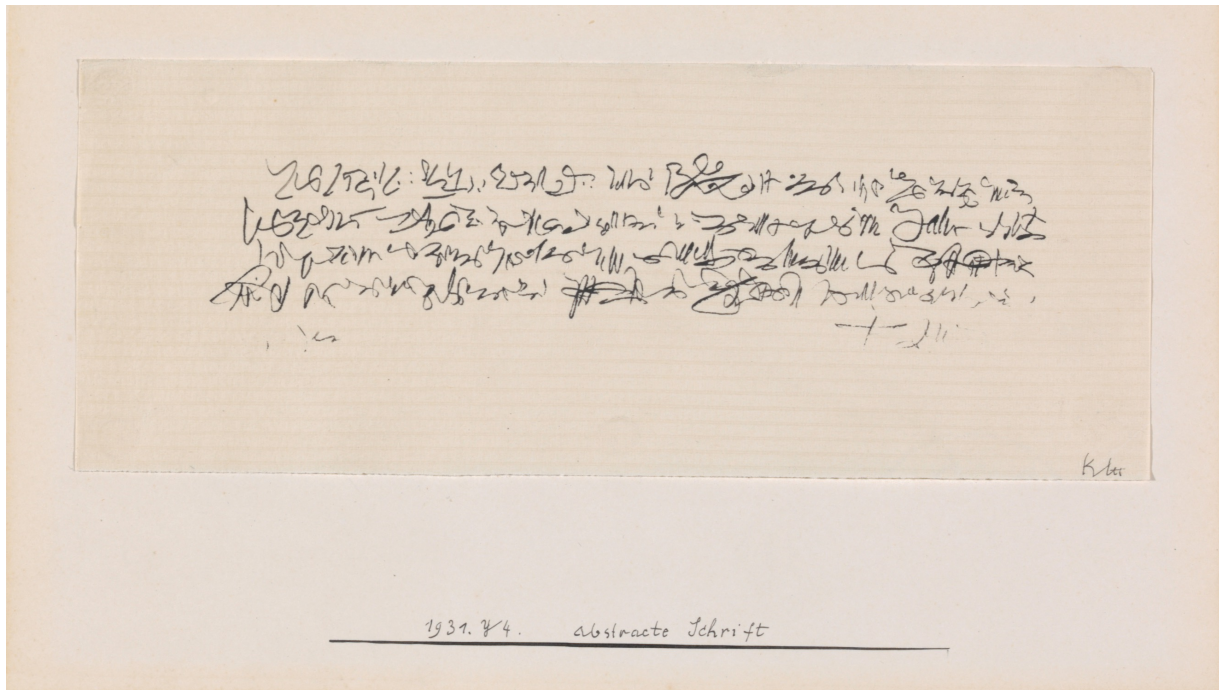


Figure 1: Paul Klee, *abstracte Schrift* (Abstract Writing) 1931, 284, pen on paper on cardboard, 8,4 x 21,9 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

A point setting itself in motion comprises the beginning of any composition. The resulting line can unfold in either a free or controlled manner across the picture plane. Paul Klee used both methods to develop his linear pictorial language. The best artistic approach, according to Klee, combined spontaneity and control, unconscious and conscious action. To the students at the Düsseldorf Academy of Art, where he taught from 1931 until 1933, Klee recommended Chinese calligraphy as a prime example of an expressive script, as Petra Petitpierre's transcription recounts: "According to Chinese concepts, the essence of calligraphy does not lie in the orderliness and uniformity of the handwriting, which can easily lead to stasis, but in what is to be expressed, being represented in the most perfect manner possible, yet entailing the least expenditure of resources. The calligraphic characteristic of manifesting itself and developing, in graphic and painterly relations, is a means, that is, a component of artistic composition."<sup>4</sup> The subject seemed to preoccupy Klee in his artistic work of the period, as the drawing *Abstract Writing, 1931, 284*, demonstrates.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Paul Klee, *Bildnerische Gestaltungslehre: I.1. Gestaltungslehre als Begriff* (Theory of Pictorial Configuration: I.1. Theory of Pictorial Configuration as Concept) (MS, Archiv ZPK, inv. no. BG I.1/5). Available on [www.kleegestaltungslehre.zpk.org](http://www.kleegestaltungslehre.zpk.org).

<sup>4</sup> Petra Petitpierre, *Aus der Malklasse von Paul Klee* (Bern: Benteli, 1957), 14.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the significance of writing as an allegory for artistic creation, see Fabienne Eggelhöfer, "The Art of Merging Control and Spontaneity," in *Taking a Line for a Walk*, ed. by Fabienne Eggelhöfer (Cologne: Snoeck for ZPK, Bern, 2014), 12-23.

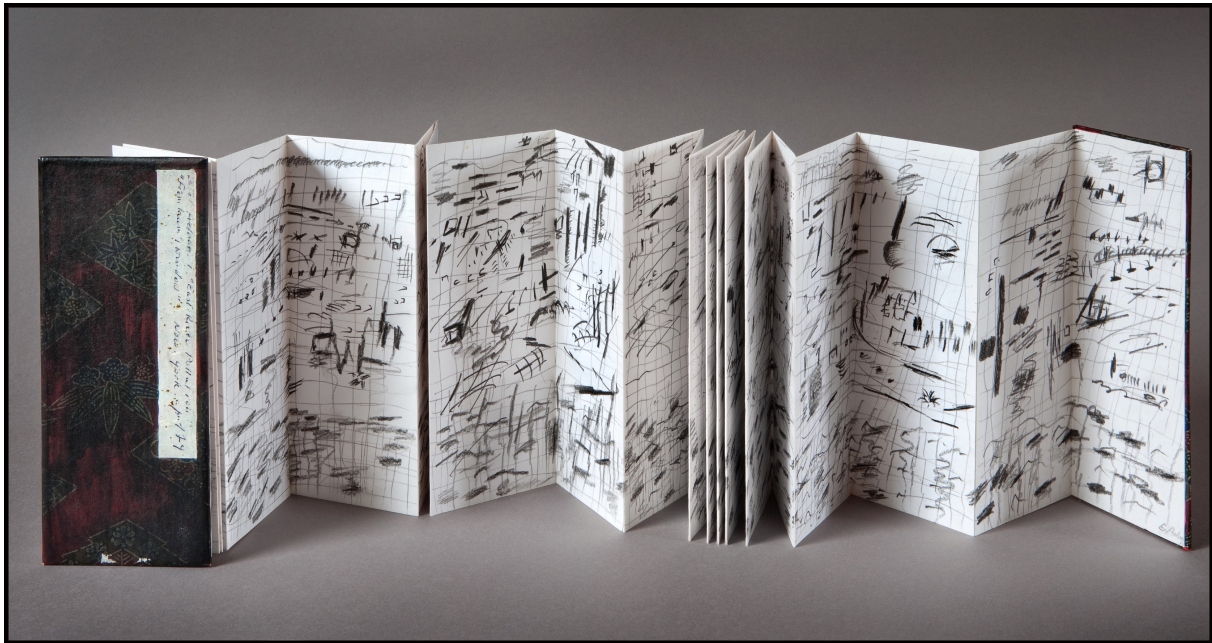


Figure 2: Etel Adnan, *East River Pollution "From Laura's Window"*, New York, April 79, 1979, leporello, colored pencil, pencil, 30 pages, 20.5 x 8, max. 240 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Hamburg / Beirut.

Klee considered the work of art primarily as a form of genesis and, like the process of writing, a fitting allegory for movement. The line unfolds across the pictorial surface for its own sake, without depicting anything specific. In Adnan's leporello *East River Pollution from Laura's Window, New York, April 79*, which she created during a stay in New York in 1979, lines also convey the movement and rhythm of the city.

However, in Adnan's work, movement is not as central as the relationship between art and language. On the one hand, this emphasis stems from her multi-cultural heritage. On the other, it reflects her life in varied cultural contexts: Lebanon, France, and the United States. In her literary work, Adnan frequently addresses the devastation of war in the Arab world and beyond. For instance, in protest of France's suppression of the Algerian Revolution, Adnan renounced the French language: "I didn't need to write in French anymore, I was going to paint in Arabic." Through her engagement with Arabic poetry, which is of special significance to Adnan, the artist first addressed the symbolic nature of writing. She did so in part because of her personal history, which is rooted in the Arab world. However, she was also captivated by the specific approach to text and image, writing and drawing in pre-modern Arab culture, where they are not seen as separate practices. Although she barely understood and spoke Arabic and never mastered Arabic writing, Adnan transcribed poems by Arab authors in her leporellos in Arabic – as in *'Awdat Lilith* (2004), the transposition of a poem by Joumana Haddad. In Adnan's work, Arabic letters become symbols and ultimately pictorial elements that are charged with meaning.



Figure 3: Etel Adnan, *Lilith's Return*, 2004, leporello, watercolor and Indian ink on Japan paper, 24 pages. Poem by Joumana Haddad, 33 x 612 cm. Collection Claude & France Lemand, Paris. © Etel Adnan. Courtesy of Galerie Claude Lemand, Paris.

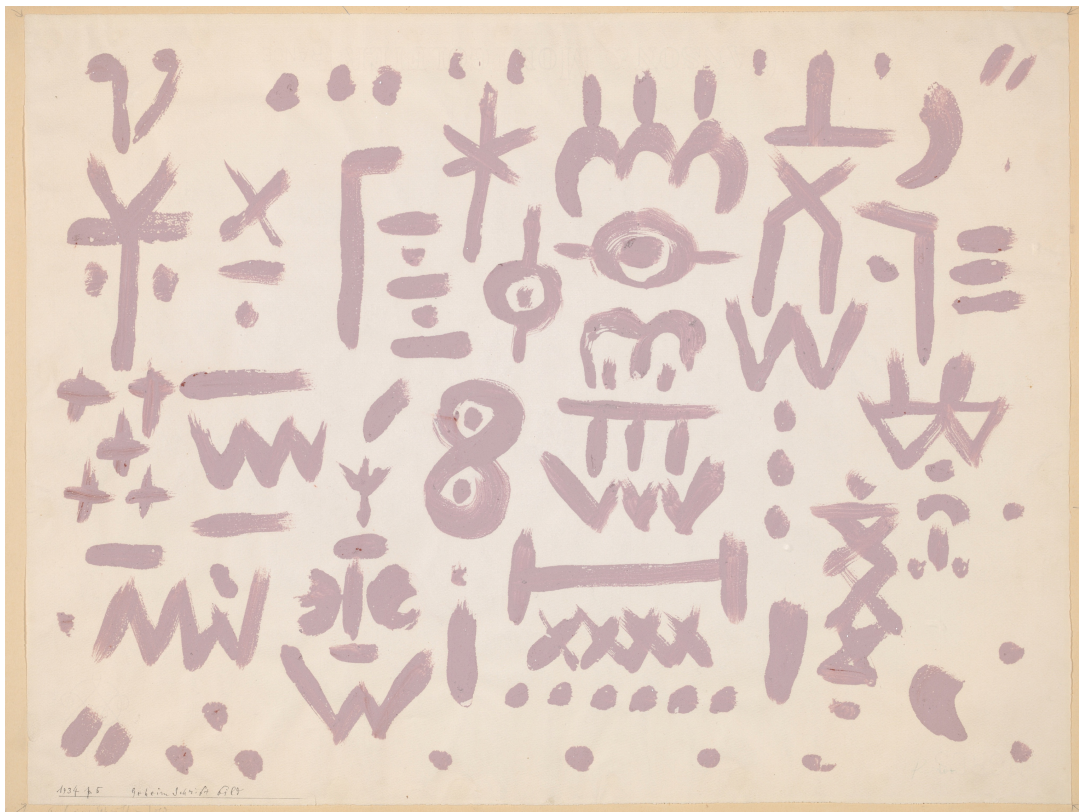


Figure 4: Paul Klee, *Geheim Schrift bild (Secret Typeface)*, 1934, 105, colored paste on paper on cardboard, 48 x 63,5 cm. Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern.

Paul Klee also transposed whole poems into textual images, as in *Once Emerged from the Gray of Night...1918*, 17. Over the course of his career, he paid special attention to individual letters and characters, drawing upon their full symbolic and associative power. At the same time, since the 1910s, Klee devised his own cryptic forms, which serve as symbolic, mysterious hieroglyphics. Arabic and Asian calligraphy, as well as prehistoric drawings and Egyptian hieroglyphs, were inspirations to Klee, especially in the last decade of his career, in the development his own scriptive imagery, as in *Secret Type-Face, 1934*, 105.<sup>6</sup> Klee was not concerned with copying existing signs but rather with abstracting and transforming them. His indecipherable characters are simultaneously graphic figures. He employed them in an attempt to return to archetypal origins and achieve universal expression.<sup>7</sup>

In her poetry and prose, Etel Adnan addresses specific political and social conditions, especially with respect to the Middle East. However, like Klee, she seeks a universal form of expression in her paintings and drawings, striving for a fragile balance between largely abstract color-field paintings and rhythmically animated drawings. Although they are abstract, her works express the mind and soul, life's unsteady equilibrium. Klee, too, sought a lively balance in his art; stable constructions did not interest him. Rather, his endeavor was to achieve dynamic configuration.

As these brief examples demonstrate, the goal of the *Etel Adnan* exhibition, which was held at the Zentrum Paul Klee from June 15 through October 7, 2018, was not to identify a particular influence nor to establish visual parallels between Adnan and Klee. Instead, it juxtaposed two artists who were concerned with similar questions about composition and artistic expression. Both cultivated a fascination for Arabic calligraphy, albeit from different perspectives. Etel Adnan has ties to Arab culture through her family heritage, whereas Klee encountered the Arab world through his travels to Tunisia in 1914 and Egypt in the winter of 1929–30, as well as through publications. The exhibition revealed how artists from different periods and backgrounds responded to similar issues. Such dialogues with contemporary artists allow us to bring to the fore new questions about Klee's work and to approach it from a different perspective. In this respect, Etel Adnan is a truly serendipitous example: not only is she an enthusiastic fan of Klee, but she also understands Klee's artistic approach and has adapted it to her own pictorial language. And this was always Klee's goal: showing the way without prescribing the result. That is why, for many artists of subsequent generations, he stands as an "inciter to invention," as Clement Greenberg described him in 1950.<sup>8</sup> To what extent Klee opened doors for other artists in the Arab world remains a desideratum in Klee scholarship.

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<sup>6</sup> For Egyptian hieroglyphs inspiring Klee, see Otto Pöggeler, *Bild und Technik: Heidegger, Klee und die Moderne Kunst* (Munich: Fink, 2002), 204; and Kathryn Porter Aichele, *Paul Klee's Pictorial Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 132–33, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Dörte Zbikowsky, "Zeichen der Erinnerung: Zur Bedeutung der altägyptischen Schriftkultur im Werk Paul Klees," in *Paul Klee: Reisen in den Süden: Reise fieber präzisiert* (Ostfildern: G. Hatje for Gustav-Lübcke Museum, Hamm, 1997), 170.

<sup>8</sup> On the reception of Klee in the United States, see Fabienne Eggelhöfer, "'Inciter to Invention': Paul Klee and a New Path for Abstract Art in America," in *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee* (Bern: Zentrum Paul Klee; Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 2018; Munich, London, New York: Prestel), 17–34.

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### Biography

In 2017 **Fabienne Eggelhöfer** has been appointed chief curator and director of collection, exhibitions and research at the Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern, where she had served as curator for modern and contemporary art since 2007. In 2012 she completed a research project on Paul Klee's teaching at the Bauhaus that culminated in an online database of Klee's teaching notes and an exhibition. In addition, she also analyzed the meaning of nature in Klee's teaching in a dissertation leading to a PhD degree. In several exhibitions she focused her interest on the continuities and discontinuities in the development of art since the beginning of the 20th century. The Zentrum Paul Klee granted her a curatorial leave in 2015 and 2016 in order to research the impact of Paul Klee on the American artists of the mid-20th century which culminated in the exhibition *Ten Americans: After Paul Klee*.

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