

## ANNABEL DAOU: *CONSTITUTION* (2004)

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This text is an edited version of the audio commentary recorded by Charles Häberl as part of the Zimmerli Art Museum's audio guide for the exhibition *Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists* (September 4, 2012 – January 6, 2013). No passage of this text may be reprinted or quoted without permission from the author. To obtain permission, please contact Marilyn Symmes at the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey: [msymmes@zimmerli.rutgers.edu](mailto:msymmes@zimmerli.rutgers.edu).

Annabel Daou's *Constitution* (2004) is one in a series of drawings into which the artist has incorporated English texts written phonetically in the Arabic script. Exhibition literature surrounding this series has described it as an "ongoing investigation into the intersection of language, politics, and desire." Daou herself characterizes the text in this piece as a kind of paint, and overtly it is so. Note the dramatic contrast the artist devised in this image: she has confined the drawing—that is, the calligraphic writing—to the upper portion of the sheet, and this darker area is juxtaposed against the unusually large blank in the lower portion, creating a stark domino effect.

Much like the medieval domino, a loose-fitting black cloak and white mask ensemble donned for masquerades, Daou's *Constitution* absolutely conceals the identity of its subject. To monolingual speakers of either English or Arabic, the text is unintelligible gibberish and can only be appreciated as an "object," as Daou has declared. This domino can, however, be pierced, and its text read and appreciated, but only by those who have crossed the boundaries of initiation into the two separate worlds it represents.

The average American is no stranger to the Arabic script, which is immediately identifiable thanks to its sinuous, organic contours, as opposed to the clean, isolated, architectural forms of the Roman script. Most of us have seen snatches of Arabic script in films or on TV—often on the news, where it appears most frequently alongside scenes of war, unrest, and terrorism. For many Americans, the sight of the Arabic script can conjure up these very scenes, providing yet another kind of contrast. To American eyes this is what Arabic script often signifies, but to the eyes of Middle Easterners the script signifies something quite different.

In the Middle East, up until quite recently, the religion you professed—not the language you spoke—determined the script you used in daily life. The Arabic script was the vehicle through which the Qur'an was recorded and Islam presented to the world. As such Muslims across the globe have adopted it to write their speech, regardless of their native tongue. By contrast, non-Muslims who spoke Arabic would use different scripts: Arabic-speaking Christians would use their own script, just as Arabic-speaking Jews would use the Hebrew script. This continues to be the case even in places like the Brooklyn neighborhood of Williamsburg, where Hassidic Jews use the Hebrew script to render Yiddish—which, like English, is a Germanic language just as ill-suited to Hebrew as English is to Arabic. Ultimately these numerous scripts serve two purposes to their users: they function as visible markers of religious identity, and at the same time they conceal that which they communicate from the gaze of outsiders.

In Daou's drawing, the message thus encrypted is the Constitution, with a capital C: the text upon which America's democratic society was built. As the very first of its kind, the United States Constitution is quintessentially American in a way that no other text is. Daou's reinscribing and transcribing of this fundamental American text into the Arabic script—the vehicle of the fundamental Islamic text—makes a very powerful statement about identity. For those who have been initiated, Daou's drawing is a testament to cultural hybridity. Thus the text in some way ceases to function simply as an object, "threatening and useless," as the artist describes it, and acquires new meaning through the juxtaposition of its parts.

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