

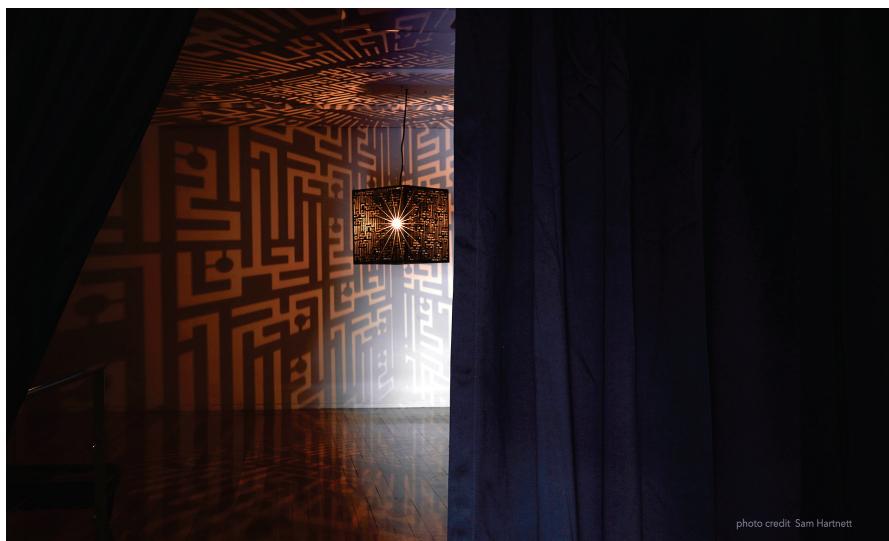


PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## TA'WIL: IN PRACTICES OF LIGHT

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*Image 1: Narjis Mirza, Light Installation 2018 (photo credit Sam Hartnett)*

Light in its unqualified sense bears many meanings according to the multitude, some meanings are equivocal, some literal and some metaphorical, such as light of the sun, light of the moon, light of the lamp, the light of intellect, the light of faith, the light of piety, the light of a ruby, the light of gold, the light of turquoise. (Sadra 2004, 35)

It is through light that we are able to reach out to the not-yet known, to the indistinct potential and the unrealised. Artist Derek Ventling suggests that light is a source for “continuous negotiation with our surroundings” (Ventling 2017, 19). The ephemeral force of light contours our perception and defines our physical and spatial surroundings. Light is significant for both art practice and philosophy. In the book *The Practice of Light*, Sean Cubitt ruminates on the performance of light and the “potential that lies curled up inside.” Light begins in the invisible black and performs as a mediation between the known and unknown world (2).

Sadr-ud-Din Muhammad Shirazi, famously known as Mulla Sadra, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Persian Muslim philosopher, begins his exegesis on the “light verse”<sup>1</sup> of the Quran by contemplating the multitude of meanings of light. Sadra draws light away from its physical temporal meanings towards a divine spiritual entity (*al Munawwir*) “that realizes all existence” (Sadra 2004, 43). Sadra equates existence with light by saying “the reality of light and existence is the same thing” (21).

There is a long history for the use of light to present God’s presence towards creation. Cubitt tracks a genealogy of such a light in early artworks dating as far back as the 1400s. He writes, “Light was a perfect symbol of God illuminating everything yet itself invisible” (Cubitt 2014, 46). As a contemporary artist, I use light as a research tool to trace the resonance of the unseen. For me, light is a medium of immense potential, that structures our perception of the visual world. Light is in constant movement, transient and transcendental.

This paper is titled, “*Ta’wil*: in Practices of Light.” Practices of light are my art installations (as part of a practice-led PhD program at Auckland University of Technology) and *ta’wil* is a method I derive from the Quran for my creative discourse. To understand this method, it is important to grasp a few concepts. Firstly, the discussion of *zahir* and *batin*, because *ta’wil* is a movement from *zahir* towards *batin*. I use *ta’wil* in my art-practice to shift light away from its *zahir* (physical appearance) towards *batin* (metaphorical interiors). In the Islamic philosophical paradigm, “all appearance, every exoteric meaning *zahir*, has an esoteric meaning *batin*” (Corbin 1969, 28). Laura Marks presents the discussion of *zahir* and *batin* as two ends of a continuity. *Batin* is from the etymological root word *batn*, which means the inside of the stomach or womb. An Eastern woman might say, “I am carrying a baby in my *batn*,” meaning in my womb. Alongside *batin* is *zahir* related to *zuhr*, the back (Marks 2010, 15). Every existent has a *zahir* and a *batin* of a certain intensity. Marks beautifully describes the embodied meaning of *zahir* and *batin* in this way:

Think of how a fetus develops with its back, the spine curved, protecting the soft interior organs. These organs gradually mature, and the body unfolds, as the fetus develops. Indeed, when we sleep in the fetal position, or in dangerous situations curl our bodies to protect our organs from blows, we are embodying the meanings of *zahir* and *batin*: we make manifest the hardened part of our bodies in order to hide the vulnerable parts. (*Ibid.*)

With this general understanding of *zahir* and *batin*, I would like to open a discussion on *ta’wil*, and how *ta’wil* as a method can be rendered into a visual and creative discourse in my art-practice with light, form and text.

### What is Ta'wil?

Ta'wil is from the Arabic etymological root word *awl* which means "to return" or "lead back" (Al-Tabatabai 1976, 7:30; Corbin 1962, 12). Ta'wil is a method that Mulla Sadra uses for his philosophical writing and commentaries of the Quran. Corbin describes ta'wil as a hermeneutic method, as the "carrying back of anything to its principal, for instance for a symbol, to what it symbolizes" (Corbin 1969, 12)

It is important to acknowledge that there are two views on the meaning of ta'wil: 1) a textual esoteric exegesis; 2) a real event or happening. The former is a general understanding of ta'wil, and the latter is not so common, but it also has a Quranic basis, as I shall explain. In Chapter 3 and verse 7 of the Quran, ta'wil is introduced as a literary exegesis and ta'wil of the Quran is esoteric knowledge that is with Allah and those who receive God's wisdom and are firm in knowledge. This kind of ta'wil is an interpretative method, that returns the *zahir* (apparent meaning) of the verse to its *batin* (hidden meanings). In contrast, when an image in a dream becomes a reality (*al Haq*), as in the story of Joseph (Chapter 12 Verse 100), this transformation is also called a ta'wil. Put another way, the physical manifestation of the image is the ta'wil of that image. It is from the story of Joseph that I infer ta'wil as not only an esoteric/verbal exegesis, but the transformation or material manifestation of an image into a reality. From here I set the basis of art to function as a ta'wil, as I transform an image from a mental form to a physical form. While I acknowledge the traditional association of ta'wil towards the Quran, I suggest that ta'wil can be practiced outside the interpretation of text. It is a unique method of interpretation that performs in both physical and metaphysical worlds.

### Ta'wil is not Tafsir

Henry Corbin, in the *History of Islamic Philosophy*, denies the Western notion that there is nothing philosophical about the Quran, by addressing Muslim philosophers as "*Ahlul Kitab*: a people in possession of a sacred Book, a people whose religion is founded on a Book that came down from Heaven" (Corbin 1962, 1). Islamic philosophy cannot be separated from the Quran, since Quranic hermeneutics is placed alongside philosophical meditations as a guiding path. Corbin defines Islamic philosophy as a philosophy which developed its modalities from an essentially religious text (Quran) and a practice of spirituality. The hermeneutic (as in interpretative) methods used for the Quran also outline a set of stages in the acquisition of knowledge. The methods or stages of knowledge have a hierachal tendency that can be presented in parallel to Henri Bergson's analytic and intuitive methods of knowledge.

The first and most general method of interpretation of the Quran is called *Tafsir*. Tafsir is a hermeneutic perspective considering the historical, social and current placement of the verse. Tafsir, is close to Bergson's first form of knowledge—an analysis that is relative to the perspective and the symbols used to express ourselves (Bergson 1999, 1). However, tafsir, when exclusively undertaken for the purpose of accessing the Quran, is a form of analysis and a literal exegesis that is guided by Prophetic tradition and expert knowledge (Corbin 1962, 9; Marks 2010, 244).

The second method used to interpret the Quran, or stage in the process of knowledge acquisition, is ta'wil:

Ta'wil (etymologically speaking means to 'lead back' or to 'bring back' something to its origin, to its *as*/ or archetype) is a science whose pivot is a spiritual direction and a divine inspiration. This is the stage reached by moderately advanced philosophers. (Corbin 1962, 9)

At this stage, I would like to introduce a specific *Mufasir* (someone who does tafsir of the Quran): Allama Al Sayyid Muhammad Hussain Tabatabai (1904–1981). He was a contemporary of Henry Corbin, an expert in the Quran, and author of a celebrated tafsir titled, *Al Mizan* (20 Volumes of literal exegesis of the Quran). In *Al Mizan*, Tabatabai defines ta'wil as not just an esoteric exegesis (like tafsir) but a real fact found outside the imagination:

When we say that this verse has an at-ta'wil, we mean that the verse describes a real fact (past or future) or a real happening, which in its turn points to another reality—and that is its at-ta'wil, or final interpretation. (Al-Tabatabai 1976, 7:39)

Here, ta'wil is more than a literal exegesis; it is described as a real fact, a happening in the past or future. Ta'wil has an affinity to Bergson's discussion of intuition, a philosophical method aiming to "recover contact with real" (Bergson [1896] 1908, 75). Both ta'wil and Bergsonian intuition are methods for recovering the real: the latter suggests "entering into the real" (Bergson 1999, 1) and the former is "returning to the real." At the same time, ta'wil is also at a distance from intuition as it does not lay claim to absolute knowledge. By contrast, Bergson's intuition is the act of placing oneself within the object such that absolute knowledge is acquired (Bergson 1999, 1). I would like to quote Bergson, as he clearly distinguishes intuition from analysis.

By intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it and consequently inexpressible. Analysis, on the contrary, is the operation which reduces the object to elements already known, that is, to elements common both to it and other objects. To analyse, therefore, is to express a thing as a function of something other than itself. All analysis is thus a translation. (Bergson 1993, 2)

Similarly, ta'wil is not tafsir, a translation or a literal exegesis. Ta'wil leads to union with the real event. In my art practice, ta'wil is the method that generates artwork, that unites the image with its object or actual event.

### Ta'wil in my Art Practice

As an artist, I treat text, form and light as a medium to create a ta'wil, for my understanding of reality. My research explores reality beyond what appears in the *zahir*, by transcending towards a *batin*. I play with light and shadow in an attempt to bring into visibility (*shahada*) the invisible (*ghayb*)

concepts that reside in an unseen world. My attempt, understood as practice-oriented research, is to explore the potential of my medium—light—and to ta'wil (as in return) the zahir to the batin.

In my studio practice, I started with writing the word *al-Haq* (the Real—one of the names of Allah), in Kufic Arabic, inspired by Sadra's most celebrated works *al-Hikma al-Muta`aliyya fil Asfar il Arbaa*, translated as *The Sublime Wisdom in the Four Intellectual Journeys* (Ernst 1999). In brief, these four journeys are: *from the Real, towards the Real, with the Real and in the Real*. Sadra says he has structured these journeys in correspondence to the movement of Saints and Sufis, hoping to illustrate a continuous movement *around* the Real through these four journeys (S. H. Rizvi 2009, 30).

My installation *Asfar* is an interpretation—a ta'wil—of Sadra's sequence of journeys around the Real (*al Haq*). This light installation is in the form of a cube that has one journey written on each side of the cube, and the word "Al Haq" repeated on the top and bottom panel. For this installation, I write in Kufic calligraphy and laser cut the patterns. Experiments with various Islamic aesthetic forms in studio quickly led me to Kufic calligraphy, a writing form that takes its name from Kufa, a city in Iraq. Kufic is the first canonized form of writing, primarily performed as a sacred act of copying the Quran to bring God's speech into the phenomenal world, into a body without flesh and blood (González 2015). There are many variations in Kufic writing, and I chose to write in Square Kufic (*Kufi murabba'*), which is also known as *banna'i*, a masonry script (Medlej 2015). This form of Kufic can be seen on the exterior of buildings, interiors, coins and objects for decoration. Square Kufic can also be seen as a precursor to the computer pixel, as argued by Azadeh Emadi (Emadi 2014). Mamoun Sakkal also writes extensively on the renaissance of Square Kufic in the last century, particularly with the rise of computer generated images (Sakkal 2010, 3–4). Square Kufic style does not demand legibility to admire its beauty and purity of form. Although Kufic aesthetics are austere, they offer endless possibilities for creative exploration of geometric relationships in my installation practice.

Laura Marks, in her book *Enfoldment and Infinity*, presents the genealogy of new media art, rooted in Islamic Art and philosophy. Marks highlights the "aniconic" qualities of Islamic Art, i.e., "when the image shows us that what we do not see is more significant than what we do" (Marks 2006, 4). Aniconism is practiced throughout the long history of Islamic art-making, where the zahir (as in calligraphy and ceramic tiles of mosques) suggests the presence of a batin (the hidden meaning beyond the objective forms of calligraphy and ceramic tiles). Abstraction in Islamic art is an invitation to go beyond what is shown, to ta'wil (interpret) the unseen and unknown.

I encode my interpretation of the journey around the Real in Square Kufic calligraphy. I choose this abstraction so that my audience is not tempted to comprehend the Arabic words. Kufic calligraphy needs ta'wil—an interpretation that leads us to the batin—because not every Arabic speaking person can interpret Square Kufic; for many the abstraction is useful to see beyond the text.



*Image 2: Panel of Square Kufic with the word Al Haq, The Real*

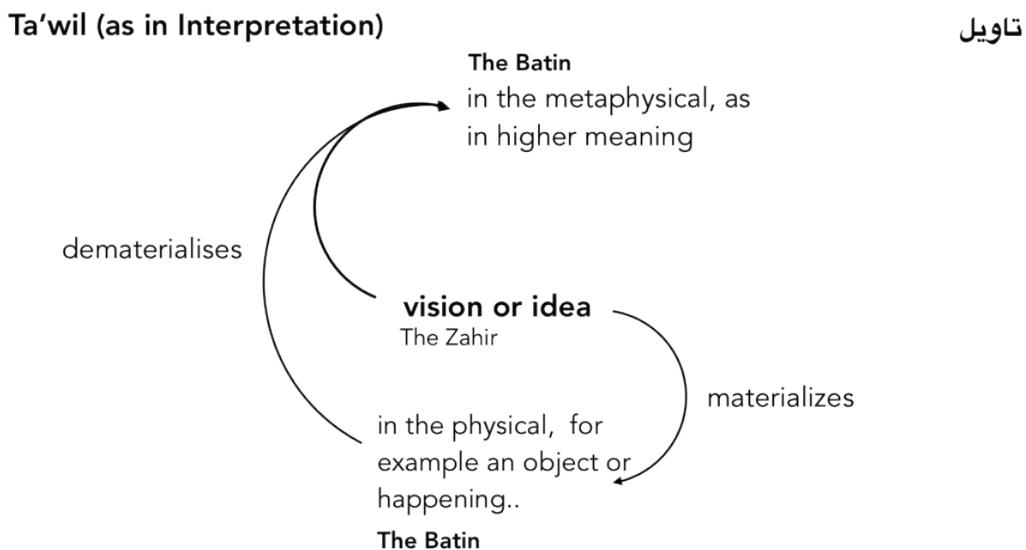
This abstract quality of Square Kufic helped me create multiple layers of interpretation in my installations. Square Kufic enfolds in its batin (interior) higher meaning, and in its zahir (exterior) it is a labyrinth of words and letters that emerge as images and designs. Square Kufic invites the viewer to interpret and decipher the austere construction of lines. In an attempt to soften the austerity of square Kufic—and to invite movement—I incorporate light into my installation. Light mediates between zahir and batin and generates a visual multiplicity through the fall of shadow.



*Image 3: Experiments with light, through laser cut panel of Square Kufic*

I believe ta'wil is a twofold methodology for the embodiment of concepts into material forms and for the enfoldment of forms back into the spiritual realm. My art practice is informed by the crossover of ta'wil in material and immaterial modes. According to the author of *Tafsir al Mizan*,

"at-ta'wil (interpretation) is the reality that is allegorically represented by words or expressions; those words or expressions must be 'returned' to the realities which they represent, if one wants to know their true significance" (Al-Tabatabai 1976, 7:38). In the diagram below, I draw a circular wave for the process of ta'wil—that is essentially—heading towards the batin.



*Image 4: Ta'wil Diagram*

If the key feature of studio-based enquiry is to produce knowledge "with the action of making art," as Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt propose (2010, 7), ta'wil returns a vision to its actual reality, enabling the artist to discover hidden meanings, by going beyond the zahir (as in exterior). Ta'wil is an invitation to reach beyond the concrete form of an artwork towards layered philosophical interpretations; the journey from the seen to the unseen, and vice versa. The determining factor and objective is to reach the batin (as in interior reality). This creative and hermeneutic approach of travelling from zahir towards batin tilts my artistic practice toward a concern with the spectrum of realities we engage with, in our everyday lives.

### Ta'wil as a creative method

Ta'wil comes into my practice when I choose to create my interpretation of reality with light. The creative outcome is in the form of an object or a light installation. Taking the object into a gallery space and inviting a community to interact, question and have conversations, opens a conceptual engagement with the object, *a collective ta'wil*. In turn, this form of collective ta'wil leads towards a collective understanding. The artwork becomes a catalyst for conversations, affects, thoughts and experiences. I am interested in how the audience forms a reciprocal relationship—collective ta'wil—with the artwork, through their own understanding of reality. I embark on this practice-

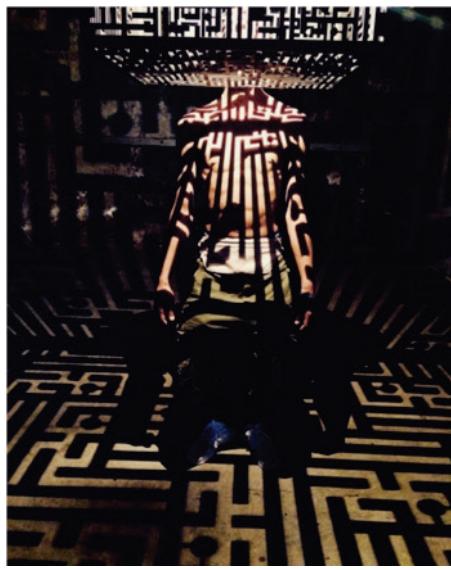
oriented and philosophically informed research, to share an Islamic understanding of the world by tracing movements of light, with an open spirit of reciprocity.

The experience for the viewer is important for me and my work. Art historian Rosalind Krauss's theory of passage (Krauss 1981, 29) provides an insight into what I aim to achieve through my installation work. She presents passage as "a catalyst for a collective memory, an echo in the background, a metaphor for the faith in art to change people's perception" (Krauss 1981, 141). Passage for Krauss is not a spatial material structure; it is a bodily, epistemological and temporal movement of the viewer. Krauss does not refer to the artwork as an object but links it to the viewer's experience. As such, the theory of passage is about the "the performative participation with the artwork that is integral to the idea of passage" (Petersen 2015, 29). While the shift in attention from the artwork towards the participation of the viewer happened (for Krauss) in the 1960's when sculpture was seen as "a medium peculiarly located at the juncture of motion and stillness, time arrested and time passing" (Petersen 2015, 29), I believe this notion is still important in the present.

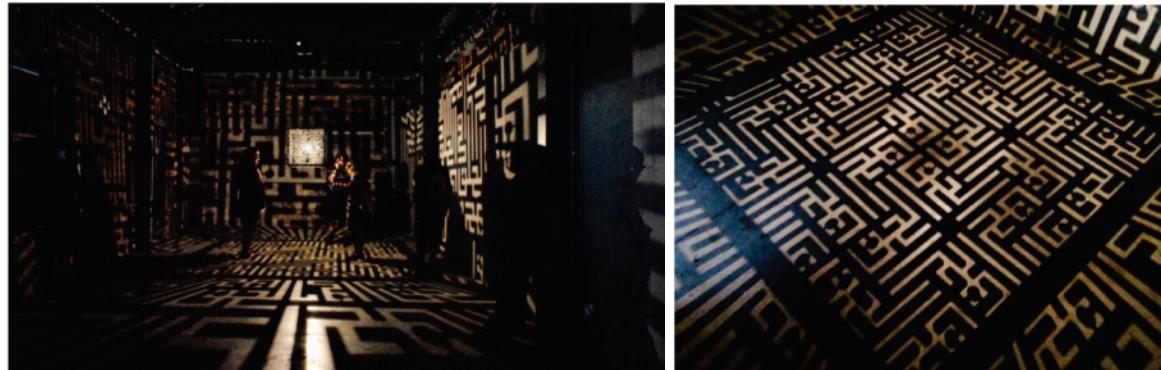
My installation *Asfar* also has a sculptural feature, that invites the viewer to have a performative view. I chose to install my work in the dark narrow barrel store of a gallery. The organic feel of the tunnel-like space, and the darkness that occupied it, tempted me to light my lamp here. The cube form of this installation created its own space, the shadows drew new corners and the light highlighted the texture of the brick and concrete walls. Infinity, geometry and repetition, three elements I created for this installation, all show themselves through the sculptural quality of the work. The spill of light through the laser cut was so strong that it enveloped every surface it touched. *Asfar* is enfolding the viewer in the labyrinth of light and shade and imprinting itself on the textured walls and ceiling. The physical movement of light when the cube was nudged created the illusion of movement all around. The contrast of light and dark created a sense of mysticism and sacredness. The barrel vault would occasionally vibrate with sounds of a nearby train that crossed the tracks on the road above the site; this unintentional addition of sound also added movement to this installation.

Video link: *Asfar*

 <https://vimeo.com/267344644>



*Image 5: A young boy walked into the barrel and was excited by the sharp casting of shadows on his body, almost like a tattoo.  
Photo by Narjis Mirza.*



*Image 6: Asfar, 2017 at Corban Estates Arts Center, photo by Narjis Mirza*

### **Islamic Art: Ta'wil of the Ghayb (Unseen)**

Islamic art is an invitation to return an image to its actual reality. For example, I see geometric tile-work in mosques as a ta'wil (a material form) to divine concepts. Calligraphy and geometry in Islamic art are not for the compensation of figurative art but act, rather, as the only means to manifest a logocentric faith. The repetitive tile work has an underlying purpose to mark the infinite. This is why Marks generates a parallel between the abstraction of Islamic art and computer-based art: "Islamic art, abstract and computer based art are especially concerned with showing through the image how information tells us something about the infinite" (Marks 2010, 10).

Islamic art played an important role in bringing the *ghayb* (unseen) concepts into *shahada* (seen) art forms (Ogunnaike 2013). In Islam, text has significance; it is the chosen medium of communication by God. Revelation, in its original oral form—as speech—was exclusive for the Prophet and text was given to everyone else. The text in the form of a book still holds precedence as the medium most equipped to inform others about the reality of creation and its purpose. In this respect, the Quran is the highest form of art (Ogunnaike 2017) and a *ta'wil*—a physical form—of God's speech. The writing in the Quran exhibits the image of God, the purpose of creation and the secrets of unseen worlds. Alongside commentaries and philosophical writings on the Quran, Muslims over the years worked on advancing the scriptures with beautiful calligraphies that unfolded as abstract images coalescing with geometry and countless repetitions. Islamic art resides in the house of God, on domes and minarets of mosques, as a veil of appearance over the world of *ghayb*, hinting at the presence of the unseen. A veil that has that double effect, while it intends to hide that which it veils, is also *ta'wil*-ing the hidden.

To see the unseen, the invisible, you put something over it, thereby outlining its contours. A similar effect happens in the case of calligraphy in the Islamic world. Writing and calligraphy is an effort to make the unseen (*ghayb*) *ta'wil* into the world of the seen (*shahada*). *Shahada* also means “to witness” and *shahid* is “the witness.” The oral recitation of a sacred text is called *shahada*, a witnessing. The repetitive tile work with geometrical and floral mosaics and fluid calligraphy, are in themselves a *shahada*, a witnessing in chorus as a *zikr* (remembrance of the Divine). It is said in hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), “God is beautiful and loves beauty.”<sup>2</sup> Mosques, the houses of God, reveal the calligraphy and geometry that illustrate the beauty of the *ghayb* in *shahada* (Ogunnaike 2017), functioning as a *zikr* for remembrance.

Islamic art in *zahir* (i.e., its visual expression) is an intricate repetition of patterns, but stored in its *batin* (i.e., its spiritual interior) are signs of infinite contemplation. In their discussion of Islamic calligraphy, Abdelkebir Khatibi and Mohammed Sijelmassi describe the function of Arabic calligraphy in this way: “The written word inscribes the estranged ephemeral symbolism of the separated being whose double nature Arabic calligraphy expresses” (Khatibi and Sijelmassi 2001).

Christopher Vitale explains the transition of Quranic speech into writing, also suggesting the potential of recitation, its performative nature, and the agency of writing. He also connects this with an analogy of digital coding in a productive way for my practice of *ta'wil*:

Text can be seen as both information and interface, an enfolding of the virtual potentials which are emanations of God's eternal creative power. The Quran (literally, ‘The Reciting’), as God's active word, literally then functions as an algorithm, a code that makes things happen, for it is not merely a writing, but a doing. And for a human to recite the Quran is then to participate in him and his work, to sync with it, in a sense, even if the agency for it and yourself all comes from God in the first place. The Quran is therefore, a sort of master code for actualizing in the world. (Vitale 2011)

In this sense, Islamic art is a ta'wil, an echo of the infinite, in repetitive display of tile work. On a much smaller scale, my art practice—which takes its inspiration from the Quran and philosophical texts—is ta'wil in a visual and spatial medium.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 24 verse 35, is the only verse where the Quran presents an allegory for God, "Allah is the light of the heavens and the earth..." This is to draw the minds closer to the image of God, and to tempt philosophers to speculate. Mulla Sadra Shirazi wrote an entire book of esoteric exegesis on this verse called On the Hermeneutics of the Light Verse of the Quran

<sup>2</sup> This is a famous tradition from Prophet Muhammad—peace be upon him—that has many sources, to quote one source: Moujam al Ausat Al Tibrani, Volume 7, page 78

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## Biography

Narjis Mirza is an installation artist and a PhD candidate at Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand. Her practice-led research brings together philosophy and spatial experiments of light, highlighting the transcendent philosophy of a Persian Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra Shirazi. Narjis plans to expand the dialogue through concept films and light installations. Narjis completed her masters' degree in media and design from Bilkent University, Turkey. She also received distinction for her Bachelors in Fine Arts at the National College of Arts in Pakistan. Narjis lives and works in Sydney and Auckland.

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