

DOI 10.51558/2490-3647.2022.7.1.267

UDK 929 Breton J.  
7.033.3:003.077

Primljeno: 30. 09. 2021.

Pregledni rad  
Review paper

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## **JULIEN BRETON: MAESTRO OF LIGHT CALLIGRAPHY**

This paper presents the artistic work of the French artist Julien Breton, known by the nickname Kaalam. In the beginnings he was influenced by graffiti art and Islamic calligraphy. Breton did not follow classical calligraphic styles but sought to find his own calligraphic expression that mirrored diwani, thuluth, and kufi script. The biggest leap in his aesthetics happened when he replaced pen and paper with light calligraphy, and a change of medium made him one of the protagonists of this art. In addition to exploring the possibilities of light calligraphy, Breton collaborates with other artists where the most interesting projects are with dance groups.

**Keywords:** Julien Breton; Kaalam; light calligraphy; light graffiti; Islamic calligraphy; Islamic art; contemporary art

### **INTRODUCTION**

When Khalil Gibran moved from Lebanon to the United States as a twelve-year-old boy in the late 19th century, he could not have imagined that he would become a bridge between East and West. Although Said's Orientalism is still present, it seems that individuals like Gibran opened positive dialogue between the two worlds, which refutes the clash of civilizations thesis. Gibran was not only a writer and poet but also a painter who brought the East closer to the West. He was inspired by the Orient, while his artistic expression was interwoven with the Occident.

French artist Julien Breton, known under the pseudonym Kaalam, was and still is inspired by Gibran. They are both driven by the same desire – the rapprochement of seemingly different worlds. Like Gibran, Breton clothed the Orient with the aesthetics of the Occident.

Breton began as a calligrapher inspired by graffiti, showing the new possibilities of generating new forms in Islamic art (Khoury 2015). Although he was inspired by traditional calligraphy, Julien Breton is not a traditional calligrapher. His work fits better into the category of contemporary art and that is the reason why he is to be considered as a contemporary calligrapher.

## **BEGINNINGS, CALLIGRAPHY ON PAPER**

Julien Breton was born in 1979 in Nantes (Lenon 2013), which lies on the deltas of three rivers– Loire, Erdre, and Sevre, and is the city often compared to Venice. It is not only the view that connects the two cities, but also multiculturalism because Nantes is one of the largest ports in France which makes it a meeting place for different traditions. It is important to understand Breton's hometown because he grew up with Moroccans, Algerians, and Iranians, *id est* with their culture (Islamic Arts Magazine 2009).

Breton does not deal with art theory and criticism, but his art could be defined as “perennial art” in which *philosophia perennis* is embodied. Like René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon, Anand Coomaraswamy, and Martin Lings, he seeks a common bearer within different cultures. Proof of this is the form of his calligraphy which arose from two seeds – the Arabic and Latin script, which are the main features of Breton's works. The bipolar relationship of calligraphy is also found in the choice of his pseudonym Kaalam (Arabic pen) and his surname Breton. His surname connects him with Brittany, part of his native France, while his stage name Kaalam connects him with the Middle East. It is the union of the incompatible, visible in all his work.

Quite by chance he began the career as calligrapher. That moment is tied to a book about the French calligrapher of Iraqi origin, Hassan Massoudy, which he received as a gift from a friend.



**Figure 1.** *Hassan Massoudy. When love beckons to you, follow him, Though his ways are hard and steep.*

– Khalil Gibran



**Figure 2.** *Julien Breton. Le savoir élève ceux qui ne possèdent rien – Khalil Gibran, 2006.*

From that moment on, Hassan Massoudy's impact on Julien Breton is undeniable, and Breton himself does not dispute that. There is a key difference, though. Massoudy's aesthetics is based on the Arabic script, while Julien Breton (in his beginnings) translated the aesthetics of the Arabic alphabet into Latin, and developed his aesthetic style. Massoudy studied classical Islamic calligraphy in his native Iraq and then continued studies at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris where he began to explore new possibilities of calligraphy. Although Massoudy establishes an almost entirely new calligraphic style (Massoudy 2017a), he relies on the classical styles of Islamic calligraphy, namely kufi, thuluth, and diwani (Figure 1).

By choosing the colors, the ratio of the masses, and the arrangement of the text, Breton follows the Iraqi-French master, so that his works, although Latin, resemble a combination of diwani, thuluth, and kufi script (Figure 2). The playfulness of the diwani script, the striving for the height of the thuluth, and the horizontal emphasis of the kufi are just some of the possible readings of the first works of Julien Breton. Although Hassan Massoudy had a big influence on him, it must be said that the works

of Lassaâd Métoui, Mehdi Saeedi, and El Seed also played a part in the formation of Julien Breton's style (Zoghby, Stone, Hawley 2011; Lenon 2013).

## LIGHT CALLIGRAPHY

Starting from the first encounter with Islamic calligraphy through the search for personal expression, five years had passed until Breton encountered a completely new medium – light calligraphy. He described the shift in his style by saying that “the ink becomes light, the paper becomes photography and the calligraphy itself becomes choreography” (Behiery 2012).

The light calligraphy belongs to the light painting techniques (Keimig 2017). The process is based on a long exposure of a camera that captures a certain scene within which the artist uses a moving light source.

Beginning in 2006 when he became acquainted with the possibilities of light graffiti, Julien Breton directed almost all of his artistic talent into the exploratory adventures of this technique. Unlike classical calligraphy, light calligraphy is not limited by paper space – on the contrary, the space is unlimited.

Although light calligraphy originated from calligraphy on paper, the former does not allow mistakes – every move made by an artist is recorded by the photograph. For this reason, Julien Breton has to sketch his light graffiti on paper. This is followed by a rehearsal of the choreography, which resembles the movements of Tai Chi (Behiery 2012).



**Figure 3.** *Preparations for Light Calligraphy (left)*

**Figure 4.** *Julien Breton. Lumiere (Light) (right)*

The forms present in Julien Breton's light calligraphy are a continuation of his calligraphy works on paper. In the performance of the imagined form, the body of

the artist becomes a pen, which not only needs to meet the aesthetic criteria of calligraphic rules but is necessary to adapt to the given environment – physical space. Of course, the artist feels free because of the unlimited space, but at the same time, the environment indirectly imposes the final look of the work. It is noticeable that Breton uses the Arabic alphabet somewhat more in light calligraphy.

Making a departure from Breton and his art, a seemingly interesting question will be pointed out here. Three artists who are almost necessary to participate in the process of creating a traditional Islamic manuscript are a calligrapher, an illuminator, and a bookbinder (Ždralović 1988), and they all put the same effort in creating the book. How to connect the past and the present? In addition to the undoubted merit of Julien Breton for the excellent works of light calligraphy, photographer David Gallard is also credited (Lenon 2013). Therefore, it can be said that Breton is a modern calligrapher and illuminator, while Gallard is the bookbinder of today. The process of creating light calligraphy originates primarily in Breton's studio, where the artist sketches a light graffiti and then practices the movements (Figure 3). This is followed by a joint tour of Julien Breton and David Gallard of the places where they could take photos. After the preparations, the process of light calligraphy takes place throughout the night, because light calligraphy is conditioned by darkness. To perform light calligraphy, Breton uses lamps of different colors. His ritual is recorded by Gallard with exposure photographs ranging from 30 seconds to a few minutes (Figure 4).

As the creation of light calligraphy takes place in public which is attended by masses it is therefore classified as street art. The credit for promoting calligraphy in this way should certainly be sought in Breton's inspiration with graffiti. In addition to this, light calligraphy is not only street art but also performance because the movements the artist performs in front of the camera lens have all the characteristics of performative art. This is supported by the words of the artist who says that in his works calligraphy becomes choreography (Behiery 2012).

Breton's calligraphic expression, formed mostly on the works of Hassan Masoudy, Mehdi Saeedi, and El Seed, merged with the influence of the French light graffiti artist Marko 93. In the end, Julien Breton offered his own artistic expression – light calligraphy. It could be summed up and said that his greatest step forward, and contribution to the art of the visual is a successful blend of light, calligraphy, and graffiti (Zehra 2011). Although the form found by Julien Breton is recent, it has found echoes in the younger generations, so its influence is evident in the works of Pakistani artist JZ Aamir (Islamic Arts Magazine 2013), and many others.

### 3D calligraphy

Although three-dimensional calligraphy or three-dimensional sculpture does not occupy much of Julien Breton's opus, it seems worth mentioning. This artist seems to use the possibilities of multimedia in all its capacities to express traditional Islamic calligraphy. Using digital technology and computer graphics, Breton created a virtual model of calligraphic printing in *Le Respect – Calligraphie Arabe* (Pascal, Stone and Hawley 2011: 120). Translating Islamic calligraphy into sculpture is nothing new (as Perviz Tanavoli does) (Blair 2008), but an attempt to do so in a virtual environment is indeed new (Figure 5). The three-dimensional sculpture in the case of Julien Breton cannot be called a phase, perhaps more an experiment and research, thus it is more essential for understanding this artist, who is constantly turning new pages in his art.



**Figure 5.** *Julien Breton. Le Respect – Calligraphie Arabe, 2010.*

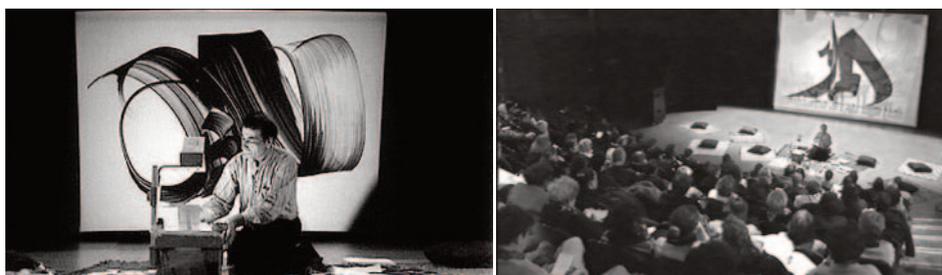
### VIRTUAL CALLIGRAPHY

Julien Breton tried one more technique, virtual calligraphy. Unlike light calligraphy, where the canvas is the “air” in virtual calligraphy the canvas is any “physical surface”. Thanks to digital technology, the artist uses a lamp to make graffiti that is projected on the walls of buildings or projection screens. An example of this is *Virtual Calligraphy v0.1 / Virtual Graffiti* (Figure 6). With this, Julien Breton opens the doors of his studio and transforms the whole world in his atelier – the intimacy of the calligraphic work is revealed (instead of a photographer, this time Julien Breton had help from a multidisciplinary group of artists called Digital Slaves).



**Figure 6.** *Julien Breton and Digital Slaves. Virtual calligraphy v0.1 / Virtual graffiti, video, 2009.*

Virtual calligraphy as a new art form was not possible half a century ago, but it does not mean that Julien Breton's role models cannot be found. It can be said that it is Hassan Massoudy again. Within the limits of time and possibilities, Massoudy tried a similar experiment when he used an overhead projector and foils to make calligraphic works projected on a canvas (Figure 7). The aesthetics, geometry, rhythm, and movement of the calligraphic text, written by Massoudy, took place in the presence of the audience.



**Figure 7.** *Hassan Massoudy. Calligraphie d'ombre et de lumière.*

It is worth mentioning several other projects in which Hassan Massoudy participated, and which are important for understanding the opus of Breton. The first was called *Arabesque*, in which, along with Massoudy, French actor Guy Jacquet, and Massoudy's compatriot, Iraqi oud musician Fawzy Al-Aiedy took part. The work of *Arabesque* can be characterized as a performance in which each artist gave the best part of himself: Al-Aiedy music, Jacquet acting, and Massoudy calligraphy. The project's significant success was shown by the fact that starting in 1972, it had been continuously presented throughout France and Europe for thirteen years (Figure 8).



**Figure 8.** *Hassan Massoudy, Guy Jacquet and Fawzy Al-Aiedy. Arabesque.*

In 1995, Hassan Massoudy was invited to participate in creating the stage for the ballet *Selim*, along with a dancer Kader Belarbi, and singer Houria Aichi, choreographed by Michel Kelemenis. An unobtrusive calligraphic work of the name *Selim* adorned the background of the ballet scene, showing Massoudy the versatility of calligraphy, as it adapts to everything with its inner beauty, and yet ultimately retains its aesthetic values. He repeated a similar endeavor in 2005 when he joined forces with choreographer Carolyn Carlson and a renowned Turkish ney musician Kudsi Ergüner in the *Metaphore* project, in which acting, sounds of ney and subtle calligraphic work merged.

If one looks again at Breton's beginnings in calligraphy, then his light and virtual calligraphy, the similarities with Massoudy are obvious. This is not the end, as projects like *Arabesque*, *Selim*, and *Metaphore* are easy to be read in a particular Breton cycle. An example of this is a joint project of Julien Breton, dancer Malik Le Nost and several other participants in a performance at the 2010 Abu Dhabi Awards. The performance can be described as a harmonious blend of Malik Le Nost's dance and Julien Breton's virtual calligraphy (Figure 9). The music that accompanies the performance completes the concept of the work and creates the final impression, which could be called music (Blair 2008).

Prior to the project in Abu Dhabi, Julien Breton was a guest at the "Ilm Day" ceremony organized by Islam Channel in London in 2010. In addition to Breton, the famous percussionist and def musician Hussein Zahawy contributed to the performance (Figure 10). It does not take long to notice the resemblance to the performance of Hassan Massoudy and Fawzy Al-Aiedy in the early '70s. The driving force for Julien Breton and Hussein Zahawy is art – during the performance, Zahawy creates a rhythm by hitting the def, which inspires Breton, so that the calligrapher can symbolically write the word *al-Fan* (Arabic for Art) on a piece of paper.



**Figure 9.** *Abu Dhabi Awards - Virtual calligraphy live performance, 2010.*



**Figure 10.** Julien Breton and Hussein Zahawy. *Ilm Day, Islam Channel, 2010.*

## PERFORMANCE

Choreographer Benjamin Midonet, graffiti painter Saïd Boucenna, and a group of hip-hop dancers founded an art group in 2007 called *Compagnie Cortex*, a kind of project combining dance, graffiti, choreography, and DJing. Julien Breton collaborated with the group several times, giving the entire performance a completely different expression with his calligraphy (Pascal, Stone and Hawley 2011).



**Figure 11.** *Compagnie Cortex and Julien Breton, photography: David Gallard, 2010.*

The movements of the hip-hop dancers under the direction of the choreographer, the rhythms created by the DJs, completely merged with the light calligraphy of Julien Breton, and it seemed that man had become a pen, and the whole world a paper (Figure 11). Although an esoteric interpretation should not be sought in Breton's calligraphy, the Sufi view of his performative projects would certainly be interesting. If we look again at the joint work of Compagnie Cortex and Julien Breton, it seems that man is the pen of the world of destiny (qadr) in which God rules. The process of the creation of photography, as the only witness to the performance, is similar to light calligraphy. The dancers search for the harmony of their bodies with the sounds of hip-hop, in order to ultimately harmonize the rhythm of the music with the dance. After the dancer performs a certain figure, Breton completes the space with light calligraphy, which is recorded with a camera by David Gallard in an exposure of a few seconds.

This project was followed by others with the same goal of combining light, photography, calligraphy, choreography, and dance. Among the most prominent is the project *Turn off the light* (Jadikan 2019), performed on stage with dramatic elements. Julien Breton worked on the *Turn off the light* project in collaboration with Pick Up Production and Stereolux (Figure 12).



**Figure 12.** *Turn off the Light*, 2012.

Worth noting is Julien Breton's guest appearance at the *World Sufi Spirit Festival* during January 2013, where the calligrapher came at the invitation of Alain Weber, a French composer. During his short stay in India, Julien collaborated with kathak dancers. The word kathak is derived from the Sanskrit word for story, storytelling, so a kathak dancer would be the one who speaks and narrates with his dance (Walker 2014). The collaboration aimed at connecting different traditional arts, kathak and, calligraphy, through performance. Before the performance, every movement of the kathak dancers was carefully analyzed by Breton during practice. (Figure 13)



**Figure 13.** *Kathak-Kaalam, 2013.*

Although it was his first encounter with this type of dance, Julien Breton absorbed every movement of the dancers, resulting in the fermentation of feelings from which light calligraphy was born. The result of working together was a blend of kathak dance, calligraphy, traditional music, and photography. The performance was symbolically called Kathak-Kaalam. It could be said that kathak found its form in calligraphy (Keimig 2017). In addition to the project with kathak dancers, Breton used every free moment to make his light calligraphy work in the mysterious ambiance of India. Of course, David Gallard was also responsible for the photos this time.

## CONCLUSION

In one of his interviews, Julien Breton says about himself “I am bicultural in that while I am a westerner of European descent, I grew up in a predominantly Arab neighborhood of the city of Nantes where I was in fact steeped in Arab-Muslim culture” (Behiery 2012). At first, it would be expected that Breton would only remain within the framework of examining the relationship between two civilizations, Western European and Middle Eastern. On the contrary, his art is like a fluid, it takes the form of a vessel, which is proven in several projects he participated in. For this reason, Julien Breton’s light calligraphy should not be considered “site-specific art” (Kwon 2003), because it is adaptable to any place and time. This is best seen in Breton’s collaboration with various artists, in which one can only speak of a homogeneous whole in which the different arts merge.

The initial factor in turning to calligraphy for Breton was the encounter with the works of the famous Iraqi-French calligrapher Hassan Massoudy, after whose example Julien Breton formed his own style. What has been seen in recent years in Julien

Breton's oeuvre is easy to compare with the works of Hassan Massoudy, starting with light calligraphy, visual calligraphy, and performance. In addition to Massoudy, the influence of the French-Tunisian graffiti artist El Seed, and the Iranian designer and artist Mehdi Saeedi is noticeable. Breton's own artistic talent also contributed to all this, interpreting all of the above through his own artistic expression. His calligraphy cannot be characterized as socially engaged, but Breton's works certainly carry a message both by choosing quotations from individual thinkers (Khalil Gibran, Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll) and by writing just one word (Light, Revolt, Solitude).

When he replaced calligraphy on paper with light calligraphy, Breton shared the intimate moments of calligrapher with the public. This way, calligraphy becomes part of street art. The question is whether Julien Breton dematerialized Islamic calligraphy (Lippard, Chandler 1999). In addition to the fact that his art can be said to be conceptual, Julien Breton's body play while performing light calligraphy certainly has all the qualities of a performance. Projects that deserve special attention are Julien Breton's collaborations with dancers, musicians, photographers, and other artists. Among them, *Turn off the Light* stands out as a combination of music, dance, drama, calligraphy, and photography. *Turn off the Light* can freely be called multi-layered performance (Goldberg 2004).

Julien Breton's work consists of five cycles: calligraphy on paper, light calligraphy, 3D calligraphy, virtual calligraphy, and performance. So far, it indicates that Breton is successfully coping with each new medium, from which a new form emerges over and over again. Although his work has been summarized in five phases, what is yet to come seems most interesting.

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## JULIEN BRETON: MAESTRO SVJETLOSNE KALIGRAFIJE

### Sažetak:

U ovom radu predstavljen je umjetnički opus francuskog umjetnika Juliena Bretona, poznatog pod nadimkom Kaalam. Na početku svoga djelovanja bio je pod utjecajem umjetnosti grafita i islamske kaligrafije. Breton nije slijedio klasične kaligrafske stilove već je nastojao pronaći vlastiti kaligrafski izraz u kojem se zrcali diwani, thuluth i kufi pismo. Najveći skok u njegovoj estetici desio se se kada je zamijenio olovku i papir sa svjetlosnom kaligrafijom (light calligraphy), a promjena medija učinila ga je jednim od protagonista ove umjetnosti. Pored toga što istražuje mogućnosti svjetlosne kaligrafije, Breton saraduje s drugim umjetnicima gdje su najzanimljiviji projekti s plesnim skupinama.

**Ključne riječi:** Julien Breton; Kaalam; svjetlosna kaligrafija; svjetlosni graffiti; islamska kaligrafija; islamska umjetnost; savremena umjetnost

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