



THE SOCIAL IMPULSE: POLITICS, MEDIA AND ART AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

Omar Kholeif

2 May 2012

In the wake of the uprisings that swept the Middle East since December 2010, a spotlight has, for better or worse, fallen on artists from the region. In this essay, Egypt-born, UK-based writer and curator Omar Kholeif looks at some of the problems attending this increased interest in art from the region and the pressure on artists to create works that not only respond to revolution but answer to 'Arab Spring'-themed exhibitions. More specifically, he discusses the work of artists who had been developing new media and digital art practices before the revolutions, practices that became not only televised but distributed across an array of online platforms and networks. Kholeif also examines the ways in which these artists are channelling their energies into grass-roots, artist-led initiatives that allow them a measure of independence both from the art market and its requirement that they comment on the political situation – and, ultimately, from the political situation itself. Could, Kholeif asks, the relationship between the 'open source' ideology in recent new media history and the proliferating 'share' culture of revolutionary dissidence have created a grey area whereby artists from Egypt, to name but one country, who work with new media as a resource are being asked to comment or subscribe to an artistic interpretation of the Arab uprisings?

This essay is accompanied by an interview by the author with Sarah Rifky, curator at the Townhouse Gallery in Cairo.

THE SOCIAL IMPULSE: POLITICS, MEDIA AND ART AFTER THE ARAB UPRISINGS

The relationship between politics, media and the visual arts for cultural practitioners living in the 'Arab world' has never been as urgent a topic for debate as it is now. At the present time, there isn't so much a discussion among visual arts practitioners but rather a rampant desire by cultural brokers to create unsophisticated forums for so-called discussion of the Arab Spring. The 'debate', or lack thereof, can be construed as forming a one-dimensional history that is being written by groups, who, it has been argued, are attempting to capitalise on market and cultural interest. Writers, curators and editors are trying to capture, for better or for worse, the genesis of 'revolutionary art' through canon-forming curatorial frames. These include private institutions such as Mona Said's gallery in Cairo, the entire curatorial framing around the Shubbak festival in London and, of course, the numerous international film festivals from Rotterdam to Berlin which curated large film festival seasons around the theme of the Spring.

At this point, I feel it is essential to divulge the elements of my identity that inform this particular reading of the situation. I am an Egyptian writer, film and media curator living in Britain. Raised and educated in the USA, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UK, a sense of plurality has never been alien to me. I have spent the last few years writing about film and visual arts from Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine, not because of any nationalistic impetus, but because I felt that many of the artists connected to these places were (and indeed still are) addressing meaningful theoretical questions through innovative strategies of execution that resonated in a way I was not finding elsewhere. The result of this personal interest has been that I am often asked to comment on cultural conditions not only in Egypt, but for the entire Arab world, and not merely from a visual arts or film perspective either. This expectation that I hold an identity – an 'Arab' identity that as a curator and writer I have to perform – has been in equal measure flattering and discomfoting. Since the beginning of the Egyptian uprising, dozens of individuals and cultural producers that I have met have felt compelled to ask me not about my political feelings towards the uprisings, but rather, what effect I believe it will have on the visual arts of the Arab world, almost as if both issues could be theorised hand in hand.

It is an impossible question to answer, but it is one that I feel obliged to grapple with. What I am laying out here are my discursive thoughts, or sketches towards a discourse. But what I am most interested in discussing is the social impulse generated by the interplay of politics, media and the visual arts in the contemporary Arab world, and Egypt in particular. With this in mind, my aim is to discuss how technology's socialising qualities might be able to shift generalising cultural forms of categorisation as it continues to advance, and set inter-disciplinary educational fields in motion.

I should begin by quoting Hassan Khan, one of the leading artists from Egypt to promote the use of new media technologies. In the autumn 2011 issue of *Index* journal, published by MACBA Barcelona, Khan precedes a short story of his with some weighted words. He begins his narrative for 'The first lesson I remember learning is that humiliation exists', with:

'A question lies behind the choice of title used here ... The question is ironically the one that may be most expected at this moment – the one that, at this point in time, critics, curators and editors will ask artists who come from Egypt. The question has, of course, to do with how an artist, operating at a historical moment, deals with an event whose proportions and form defy all expectations. The question is usually followed by enquiries about whether your practice has changed following such events, if you feel that you have a new responsibility as an artist, if your understanding of art has changed.'^[1]



Hassan Khan, *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*, 2005, light & sound installation (mixer, amplifier, speakers, light program, show controller, vinyl text on the wall), 340 x 1470 x 570 cm, edition of 3. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

Khan insists that nothing has changed directly in terms of his conceptual, aesthetic and theoretical preoccupations or indeed in his choice of subjects. This is significant coming from an artist whose work has often revolved around issues of social communication, re-articulation and transformation through media, as

evidenced in sound works such as DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK (2005). This is pertinent to my argument, because Khan's processes of appropriation and re-inscription echo some of the common qualities of media appropriation that began in January 2011. As the curator Rasha Salti stated recently at a conversation during the 4th Marrakech Biennale, media has been the primary tool within the recent political revolts.[2] Spectators of public dissidence, who may have begun their journey through the upheaval by watching mediated images, subsequently became involved with the movement through their own processes of media capturing – documenting photographs and fashioning them into posters that they would re-present and distribute on both online and physical social networks.

The issue of media technology is crucial to this understanding; as Gilles Deleuze asserts, technology is a socialising force before it is a technical one.[3] In terms of the visual arts and the Egyptian uprising, this created a grey area because one of the most famous early casualties of the struggle was the new media artist, Ahmed Basiony, who was shot by snipers on Tahrir Square. This brings me to a pivotal point in my argument, which is about the role of new media art in Egypt and the region. While political activism and the impetus behind new media art are mutually exclusive, they are indeed bound by the idea of 'open' flows of democratisation via digital communication technologies. For media-based art this is derived from an art historical trajectory that has developed since the 1970s, potentially evolving from the mid-1990s through to the millennium, and which saw the artist's role transformed into that of a tinkerer or hacker, capable of cracking open the confines of insular capitalist hegemony and educational hierarchies. Media and .net artists from the likes of Electronic Disturbance Theater and Critical Art Ensemble to Heath Bunting, Zach Blas and JODI, have all in some way or other practiced civil disobedience either in real life or online.

From a political perspective, it is deeply poignant and significant that Basiony – the artist that subsequently represented Egypt at the 54th Venice Biennale – was known in Egypt for having utilised open source software not only in his own artwork, but also in his teaching, in public workshops, and through postgraduate study. This leads me to the question: Could the relationship between the open source ideology in recent new media history and the proliferating 'share' culture of revolutionary dissidence have created this grey area whereby artists who work with new media as a resource from Egypt and indeed the region are being asked to comment or subscribe to an artistic interpretation of the Arab uprisings?



Ahmed Basiony, *30 Days of Running in the Place*, 2011, installation detail, Egyptian Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale, five-screen video installation.

This is not to say that artists in Egypt or the region aren't interested in engaging explicitly with the subject matter, or that it can't be presented in an intellectually engaging or interesting artistic capacity. In 2011, Hamza Serafi created a video art project entitled, *The People Want...*, an allegory of civil unrest in Egypt that was represented by popcorn kernels. Here, Serafi asserts that a certain 'combination proved explosive, as

people (kernel) who had to endure injustice (heat) committed over time, and their plight further expressed by the media (oil), ... reached a point of no return (popcorn).'

The work was inspired by one of the artist's friends, a protester who dubbed the pro-Mubarak regime 'Hooligans ... [being] fed Kentucky Fried Chicken Meals laced with 100 dollar bills'. Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) operates on a number of different metaphorical levels here – an imperial one (American power and investment in the Mubarak regime), a geographic one (in that protestors used to meet at the KFC in Tahrir Square), and a literal one (in that KFC serves up popcorn-style chicken). I personally find the implicit humour in the work refreshing, but this isn't to say that all artists from the region should be expected to construct works of art that either literally or figuratively engage with the theme of revolution.



Hamza Serafi, *The People Want...*, 2011, still from video installation. Courtesy of the artist and Traffic, Dubai.

In the opening article to the October 2011 issue of the UAE-based journal *Contemporary Practices*, the French-Tunisian scholar Khadija Hamdi starts by suggesting that post-revolutionary art in Tunisia is an 'engaged' form of creative practice.^[4] Before long, she begins to suggest that the term 'engaged art' is an essential and responsive movement to the oppressive former political regime. For me, this language of 'the new dawn' or 'the new day' is a dangerous one. It suggests that as artists, writers, curators, and ultimately citizens, all of our thinking and all of our belief systems should function in opposition to or in response to a fallen regime. What does this language or framing ask of artists? That revolution should be a unifying thematic device, akin to the Palestinian conflict or the Lebanese Civil War? Without hesitation, one can argue that this would be counter-intuitive if, indeed, the uprising was meant to unshackle artists from the binds of conforming to government regulation or censorship.

If we are to learn anything from the mobilising rationale of the uprising it is that technology is a force that can break down hierarchical boundaries. Socialising media works against forms of categorisation that we have so often become accustomed to in the international art world, with collective ethnic terminology such as Arab Art, Chinese Art or Indonesian Art frequently used. In his essay *Geo-coding Contemporary Art?*, also for *Contemporary Practices*, Timo Kaabi-Linke criticises these common labels as ideologically reductive catch-alls that deprive art of its universality.^[5] He then goes on to draw a potent correlation between this and our current socio-political condition, arguing that protestors from the Arab uprisings to the Occupy Wall Street movement (many of whom have come together initially through social media) are bound by no particular agenda or manifesto beyond the fact that they no longer wish to tolerate exploitation. He goes on to argue that none of the protestors represents a particular sector (i.e., workers or students). This picture of differences that Kaabi-Linke is attempting to draw is one that could be appropriated to our benefit – to break down geo-political systems, which attempt to set out a prescriptive schema for artists.

This is easier said than done, of course. The contemporary visual arts operate within a hierarchical structure of artists, art schools, academicians, curators, writers, and ultimately, collectors and philanthropists. Historical processes of selection even from a post-colonial position continue to require that artists be framed within a curatorial context that is easily digestible and one that often accentuates difference. And while the act of fetishising Orientalist stereotypes is no longer as unsophisticated as it used to be, a common set of rigid principles continues to be put forward. Namely, one can argue that both cinema and the visual arts in the Arab world continue to emphasise work that bears an Oriental aesthetic quality, coupled with both a critical and documentary sense of introspection from the artist, to illustrate that they are aware of their socio-political condition – an example of which could be found in some of the large-scale paintings of Khaled Hafez and in the early work of Ghada Amer.

The resulting reality of this is that many of the artists who live in Egypt and indeed the Arab world end up being included in exhibitions with titles such as *Tawasir – Pictorial Mapping of Islam and Modernity* (2009), a show that pioneering artist and educator Shady El Noshokaty occupied in Berlin at the Martin-Gropius-Bau, or *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East* (2009) at the Saatchi Gallery in London, which many writers (myself included) have criticised at great length for its generic categorisation, from its title, its lead imagery – Kader Attia's *Ghost* (2007), which comprised aluminium sculptures of veiled women kneeling – its geographic expanse, and its lack of interpretation or material for further engagement. This is a persistent problem, and the question is: Who bears the burden? The artist can choose to refrain from participating in such exhibitions, but they subsequently risk fading into obscurity. With these issues still at the core of our intellectual processes of 'curating' so-called art from the Arab world, I believe that now is a critical moment for us to consider how the social impulses that have provoked such international interest in these artists are theorised, curated, exhibited, and re-appropriated for the world.

The most positive counter-activities are the grass-roots, artist-led movements, educational and visual arts institutions, which exist locally and extend beyond such didacticism. Historically, this may not have been possible because contemporary art institutions in Egypt in particular have been shielded from public view and have been short of the visibility or the platforms that music, cinema or literature have held. Moreover, as Shady El Noshokaty noted when he co-founded The Media Art Workshop programme at Helwan University



Ghada Amer and Ladan Sharok Naderi, *I ♥ Paris*, 1991, three chromogenic prints from a series of six. Courtesy of Cheim & Reid, New York.



more than a decade ago, higher art education often lacked an infrastructure, both in terms of technical apparatus and, perhaps most importantly, because curriculums were never fluid.[6] Students were forced to study in what he dubbed 'totalitarian' systems, whereby they were unable to specialise in a particular media and were only awarded places at art colleges based on their grades, as opposed to artistic potential. Greater awareness, however, is growing with the rise of social networks (virtual and physical) throughout the entire region. Artists have now become agents in the ecology in which they operate, allowing a new generation free tools of access, as has been evidenced by the forthcoming launch of Shady El Noshokaty's ASCII Foundation, Wael Shawky's MASS Alexandria, and the ambitious Home Workspace programme led by Ashkal Alwan's Christine Tohme in Beirut, Lebanon.

With education comes knowledge and the vernacular of artistic independence, which will hopefully allow younger artists the artistic mobility to more clearly delineate their career trajectory. The so-called Arab Spring has come to play a dual role in this grand scheme. It has shed a light on art spaces, with venues such as Townhouse Gallery in Cairo becoming a meeting space for individuals from many different walks of life to congregate, study and debate through their residencies and Independent Study Programme; yet at the same time, it has given international cultural brokers a knee-jerk position from which they can respond, theorise and canonise art from the Arab world. Sarah Rifky, Curator at Townhouse, when asked how she would advise artists to navigate the temptation of succumbing to this schema propagated by revolutionary dissidence, noted that:

'I think engaging other people's curiosity is fine, so long as it's not co-opting the current state of fluidity and attempts at conjugating a new political reality into a fixed form of spectacle. I can't prescribe how anyone should 'deal' with this; perhaps the most important thing is a matter of questioning the impetus of questions, asking why people might want to engage [with artists], and how. Being critical, scrutinising, but also open and sincere.' [7]

The arts scene in the Arab world itself, however, continues to remain generative in different ways and extends beyond engaging with the curiosity of international cultural brokers, who are interested more often than not in being part of 'a conversation' about endless hope and change. If anything positive has come from this, it is the socialising quality of the media utilised both by artists and practitioners who collectively are able to 'share' the multiplicity of voices, narratives, and histories existent within the region. Still, the goal of cultural brokers should be to ensure that the narrative of revolution does not encroach on the numerous narratives that exist on the fringes. Local art scenes often rely on international exposure and funding to flourish, and as such we must continue to ensure that the narratives that we cling to or decide to develop are not ones that reduce artists to a further categorical specificity, but which allow for a more meaningful dialogue to come to fruition.



INTERVIEW WITH OMAR KHOLEIF AND SARAH RIFKY

Omar Kholeif discusses Townhouse's role as an incubator and generator of meaningful discourse with writer, curator and educator Sarah Rifky.

Omar Kholeif: I have always found Townhouse to be a significant cultural space, ever since its opening in the late 1990s. From some of its controversial early exhibitions to the engaging 'Tweet nadwas' in 2011, there has always been a buzz about the gallery. What role do you believe the Townhouse gallery has played in shaping the contemporary culture of Cairo and Egypt? How has it been different from other institutions in the region and elsewhere?

Sarah Rifky: Since Townhouse's founding, it has played a significant role in providing a platform for artists in Egypt and the region, particularly up-and-coming artists. It is pertinent to mention that it has both acted as an incubator for various initiatives, collectives and organisations over the last decade. It is definitely a large contributor to the ecology of Egypt's artscape. Townhouse has grown quite organically over the years, and is both context-responsive and site-specific. It is an institution that does not conform to the traditional understanding of what an institution is or does. Who would have thought that a space tucked away in a back alley of mechanics in the heart of Cairo would become one of the most central art platforms in the city? Periodically, it is an institution that surprises itself and its public. And in recent years, it has been a great platform for art education initiatives, and has expanded quite laterally beyond the visual arts. It is home to an integral cultural community, spanning art, music, theatre and design.

OK: Townhouse has been renowned for its international residency programme – creating and fostering a discursive space for artists, writers, curators, and thinkers. Do you believe that there is something specifically generative about this particular residency process?

SR: The residency programme has evolved organically in tandem with the gallery itself, and in collaboration with our many regional and international partners. Residencies have also taken many forms over the years, from hosting Open Studios to group residencies. We have learnt over time that the most generative way to host artists is to invite them to simply live and engage with the city, the space and the surroundings. Townhouse makes no demands of visiting artists; we don't ask them to produce a work or hold a show at the end of their residency. On occasion, artists will start developing work and subsequently return to Townhouse to show a work that was started while they were doing their residency. We do encourage artists to give presentations, hold talks, and sometimes workshops with our outreach programmes as a means of getting to know the public and to give them an opportunity to present their work to a new audience. Perhaps the most interesting thing is that no two residencies are alike. There is no pre-set or established scheme; we tailor ourselves to the nature of the artist's work and offer support where necessary.

OK: In terms of your work with artists, do you think that there are any formal, aesthetic or conceptual issues that are appearing in the work of visual artists from the region?



SR: I hesitate to describe synergies or overlaps amongst artworks but I would say that what does distinguish Cairo from other cities in the region is the heterogeneity of artistic languages and the forms that artists create. For a long time, one could say that it was a side effect of the diverse languages and vocabularies that are already pre-existing in the city, and the absence of a single unifying issue - say, for example, the equivalent of the Civil War in Lebanon. Now, with the uprising and the shift in the political climate, there are of course subtle – if you want to call them – trends that are evident as a means of trying to understand the relationship between politics, current events and art. Of course, the generational question must also be posed; I feel that more and more, there are nuances of a shared language amongst young or emerging artists that are starting to evolve, and perhaps they all stem from a shared 'sentiment' but also condition, as well as a shared education and reality.

OK: The politics of post-revolutionary Egypt, and/or Arab Spring has been used as catch-all for international cultural brokers, proliferating unparalleled interest that is at times misleading and fetishistic. Do you have any advice for artists and institutions on how to deal with this?

SR: Though I wouldn't term the situation as post-revolutionary, it is true that the never-ending season of hope is attracting a lot of interest. I think engaging others' curiosity is fine, so long as it's not co-opting the current state of fluidity and attempts at conjugating a new political reality into a fixed form of spectacle. I can't prescribe how anyone should 'deal' with this; perhaps the most important thing is a matter of questioning the impetus of questions, asking why people might want to engage, and how. Being critical and scrutinising, but also open and sincere. To me, personally, some of the most interesting things that have evolved are still discursive, and within an educational setting, though there are many other artists and institutions that are thematically trying to set the theme of revolution into a series of exhibitions. I am less interested in the first layer or re-presenting the currents of events but rather more interested in the sedimentary questions that may be explored at this moment.

OK: Who are the cultural producers, artists and creatives in the region who you think are currently doing something different, and/or significant?

SR: There are many! I am interested in the wider scoping of the region and in learning from other initiatives in Africa as well. I can tell you about artist-run initiatives, or educational platforms I find intriguing and would like to start or continue working with: in Lebanon, there is 98 Weeks Research/ Project Space, run by artist-collective Mirene and Marwa Arsanios. There is also The Home Works Academy, founded by Ashkal Alwan/ Christine Tohme, which is an unprecedented school of this scale, aspiration and nature; in Alexandria, there is MASS Alexandria, a school founded in 2010 by artist Wael Shawky; the Alexandria Contemporary Arts Forum; and Bassam el Baroni's contribution to the contemporary art discourse in (and on) Egypt. I find Koyo Kouoh and Raw Material in Dakar, and Gabi Ngcobo's Center for Historical Reenactments in Johannesburg quite inspiring. There are many more.



Sarah Rifky lives and works in Cairo and elsewhere. She has been curator of the Townhouse Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo since 2009 and has taught at the American University in Cairo and MASS Alexandria since 2010. She studied visual art and mass communication at the American University in Cairo and received her MFA in Critical Studies from the Malmö Art Academy, Lund University in Sweden. She co-edited the artist book *Damascus: Tourists, Artists, Secret Agents* and her projects include *Invisible Publics* (Cairo, 2010), *The Popular Show* (Cairo, 2011), *An accord is first and foremost a proposition* (New York, 2011) and *The Bergen Accords* (Bergen, 2011). She is a curatorial agent for Documenta (13) and is founding director of CIRCA, the Cairo International Resource Center for Art.

About the author

Omar Kholeif is a writer and curator at FACT, Foundation for Art and Creative Technology, Liverpool, Visiting Curator at Cornerhouse, Manchester and Associate Curator at the Arab British Centre, London. He is also the founding Director of the UK's only recurring Arab Film Festival, currently based in Liverpool, as well as a curator for Abandon Normal Devices, and a contributing curator to the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art. He currently serves as Reviews and Critique Editor of *Portal 9*, a new bi-lingual cultural journal published in Beirut, and is co-editor of *Vision, Memory and Media* (Liverpool University Press 2010), *Far and Wide: Nam June Paik* (LEA, 2012), and is working on a book that focuses on new media art practices in the 'Arab' region.

[1] *The first lesson I remember learning is that humiliation exists*, Hassan Khan, Index (MACBA, Barcelona). Volume: 2, 2011.

[2] From a panel conversation with Rasha Salti entitled, 'A Spring of Images' on the 29th of February 2012, at the Marrakech Biennale.

[3] *Deleuzian Intersections in Science, Technology and Anthropology*, Caspar Bruun Jensen and Kjetil Rodje, Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books (2009).

[4] 'On the path of Contemporary Tunisian art', Khadija Hamdi, *Contemporary Practices Journal*, Vol. IX, 2011.

[5] *Geo Coding Contemporary Art?*, Timo Kaabi-Linke, <http://www.contemporarypractices.net/essays/VolumelXgeocodingcontemporaryart.pdf>, accessed the 10th of February 2012.

[6] From a personal interview with Shady El Noshokaty in Liverpool on the 27th of September, 2011.

[7] From a personal interview with Sarah Rifky conducted on the 10th of February, 2012.