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The American University in Cairo  
School of Global Affairs and Public Policy

**Visualizing the Unfamiliar:  
Ethnography of an Emerging Moment in Cairo**

A Thesis submitted to  
the Cynthia Nelson Institute for Gender and Women's Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts (M.A.) in Gender and Women's Studies  
in the Middle East / North Africa

Specialization in Gendered Political Economies

by Alexandra Schindler

under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

May 2012

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## **Abstract**

### Visualizing the Unfamiliar: Ethnography of an Emerging Moment in Cairo

Alexandra Schindler

The American University in Cairo  
under the supervision of Dr. Martina Rieker

This thesis explores the artwork and practices of visual artists as they negotiate the current political and historical moment in Cairo. This project tries to disrupt the binary of state versus market that has often been used as an analytical lens through which to understand Egyptian contemporary art. Instead, this thesis argues that, through a politics of the everyday, artists are exploring and challenging categories of revolution and the political. Nonetheless, regulatory frameworks, such as the language of neoliberal governance, continue to be reproduced within these subversive spaces and moments. This project considers what sorts of questions can be asked in an emerging moment, in which the language of the familiar and the unfamiliar is constantly shifting through changing processes and events.

By theorizing an emerging moment, the purpose of this thesis is not to map any possible futures, but instead, to recognize the experimental processes and practices through which the interlocutors try to imagine an alternative future. This project considers what these practices mean for the gallery as an art space as well as alternative forms of organizing that emerge outside the gallery. Furthermore, this thesis explores the relationship between visual production and revolution. In a moment of “visual surplus,” artists struggle to negotiate their own visual art practices with the containing desires that emerge when revolution is imagined as a fixed and static category.

In using the analytical lens of the everyday, this thesis questions what becomes legible as the political and what sorts of practices are thus rendered illegible by hegemonic language. This project also explores art spaces of community and collectivity as possible sites for artists to critically engage with the question of revolution as containment and to challenge hegemonic notions of art, the political and revolution. It serves primarily as an analytical space in which to explore this emerging moment and the different sites of resistance that artists traverse. The methodology of the thesis is meant to permit not only a flexibility in the theoretical framework but also to allow the initial questions of the project to fluctuate along with the interlocutors’.

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## Chapter One: A Moment for Introductions

### Introduction

In mid-October of 2011, an employee of the non-profit art gallery Townhouse, in downtown Cairo, received a phone call. When she picked up the phone, she heard a familiar voice on the other end. For many years, the same man from Egyptian State Security had monitored Townhouse Gallery, attending exhibition openings and reporting any transgressions against the Egyptian state or cultural norms back to the ruling regime. Possible transgressions included anything from inappropriate representations of Islam and the use of nudity in artworks, to negative depictions of the state. After a popular uprising in January 2011, Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down from his position as president of Egypt—a position he had held since 1981. In the weeks after Mubarak’s ouster, Townhouse stopped hearing from State Security; the familiar voice at the other end of the phone was silent. Townhouse moved ahead uncertainly, but with a growing confidence that the gallery had never had in its 13-year history, daring to offer its space to collectives, workshops and exhibitions that would have been unimaginable in the past.

For many at the gallery, it was an exciting but increasingly confusing time, as they felt uncertain as to what sorts of institutions and regulations they were now negotiating. Less than nine months had passed since the January uprising when the Townhouse employee picked up the phone and heard the familiar voice mutter only two words: “I’m back.” She was reminded, along with the rest of Townhouse, and many other Egyptians, that while Mubarak had relinquished his position, the regime had not fallen with him. These two words were an eerie reminder that artists in Cairo were still in the process of negotiating a moment that continues to emerge, with

complex histories and manifold desires for a different kind of future.

This thesis project engages critically with a community of artists in Cairo as they formulate and reformulate practices of the everyday through the current political and historical moment. Contemporary art spaces in Egypt are made legible in relation to either the state or global financial markets, producing a narrative of autonomy that is related *a priori* to one or both. I argue that in order to think through the more complicated relationships of artists and their art to diverse political, financial, and social factors, an alternative framework is needed. While recent literature on conceptual understandings of citizenship and rights has generally moved away from a privileging of the state, literature on contemporary Egyptian art and artists still relies heavily on the state as the structure through which to understand these communities, their art, and the means of production. My interlocutors, however, identify a more nuanced and complicated understanding of how their own practices and work relate to state institutions.

In addition, this thesis will seek to provide a more critical understanding of what artists' engagement with global art markets means for both their artwork and their own artistic practices. The financialization of the art market and the emergence of profitable commercial galleries and auctions, primarily in the United Arab Emirates, have fostered an emerging narrative of "freedom" and "autonomy" among some artists and art critics in Egypt as a reaction to an increasing accessibility to these global art markets. These narratives have reaffirmed artists in Egypt as necessarily negotiating the terms of their art's production in relation to the state or, alternatively, working in a freer or more autonomous space than that of the state sponsored cultural institutions. While some authors (see Winegar, 2006), have acknowledged that this neoliberal space is not "free" in all senses, and that autonomy is a more complex

terminology than simply state-influenced or not, I argue in this thesis that the dichotomy of state versus free markets precludes a more nuanced understanding of the sorts of negotiations artists participate in as an inseparable part of their everyday.

Primarily, this thesis asks whether visual art can engage with possibilities of alternative histories or meaning-making processes. As particular histories are told and retold, they reproduce a narrative of political, economic, and social realities that become immutable. I propose that, through visual art, the ways in which we understand Egypt's revolutionary process can be further complicated in conversation with the shifting borders of social, political, and economic categories. When language is the familiar, can images provide a site for engaging with the unfamiliar? What happens when the visual is contained by the hegemonic category of art? Can visual artists and their work push past boundaries into the unfamiliar, or are they contained within a framework that insists upon the familiar?

While this thesis names the familiar and the unfamiliar, these categories necessarily each emerge out of the other, and therefore can only ever be understood through their relationship. Rendering the familiar as strange is predicated on the existence, in the first place, of the familiar, and for this reason, there are no absolutes. Nonetheless, I have chosen this terminology for my project because of its ability to recognize how processes and events are constantly reformed around notions of the familiar and unfamiliar.

Charles Taylor (2002) argues that there is a particularity to the modern moral order or the modern social imaginary, a set of expectations and codes that dictate how individuals live and act, and how they expect other individuals around them to live and act. This social imaginary, Taylor argues, is the one in which we are embedded and, therefore, "it seems the only possible one, the only one that makes sense" (p. 98).

I draw on Taylor because he makes a compelling argument for how ideas, acts, and processes come to seem familiar or unfamiliar. The familiar, in this case, is that which exists within the modern social imaginary, and the unfamiliar, that which exists without. The power of the social imaginary is that it exists not in the practices of the few or the elite, but rather in the “images, stories and legends” (p. 106) of a society. It is this sense of commonness in understanding that then makes common practice possible. Because the “background” to these practices is inherently complex, familiar and unfamiliar do not always have the same meaning for the individual, but nonetheless, as a society or a community, this social imaginary produces the idea of a common or related understanding of processes, events, and norms. It is these common practices, however complex and diverse that produce a common understanding of what is—or ought to be—familiar and unfamiliar.

In this thesis, I build on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1993) who critically engages with the role of art as a category. Bourdieu argues that the sociology of art, the field of study he interrogates, has taken both the material production of art, as well as the production of its value, as its desired object. His theory, therefore, recognizes not only artists themselves, but also “the producers of the meaning and value of the work” (p. 37), for example, critics, curators, and gallery directors, as producers of both the consumed, that which is recognized as art, and the consumers, those who recognize and purchase art. I use Bourdieu’s theories to recognize the production of images as art and non-art through his analytical work on “recognition” as the determinant factor in delineating the borders of the category of art. Bourdieu argues that images, objects, and performances are art only when they become familiar to audiences (who, in turn, must be recognized themselves as appropriate in their socioeconomic positioning). As Bourdieu argues, “Works of art exist as symbolic

objects only if they are known and recognized, i.e. socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognizing them as such” (1993, p. 37). It follows therefore, that artists are those who produce works of art and are recognized as artists. In this project, my interlocutors fall into this category, a methodological decision that reflects a desire to understand the sorts of practices and decisions artists make around their own work. In particular, I use Bourdieu’s notion of the “field” (1993) to theorize the way in which art is produced and fields structured.

As for my own intervention around the visual, I also draw on W.J.T. Mitchell’s (2002) work on visual studies and the questions raised by this emerging field. His aim, Mitchell says, “has been to overcome the veil of familiarity and self-evidence that surrounds the experience of seeing, and to turn it into a problem for analysis” (p. 166). Mitchell argues that “seeing” itself is determined by discursive practices that must be examined critically in order to understand how the boundaries of the category of art form. I take this challenge very seriously in my own project, trying to understand the desires of those who struggle to re-imagine the visual as a site of the unfamiliar. At the same time, this thesis also aims to understand when the actualization of these desires for the unfamiliar is not possible within a visual framework and what this means for visual artists. The artists, with whom I spoke—filmmakers, painters, graphic novelists, and digital media artists, as well as curators and art critics—are all involved in visual practices. This involvement puts their projects in conversation with a larger cultural sphere; at the same time, their projects are also set apart by from that larger sphere by their location within the so-called domain of art.

This project takes place against the complicated background of an ongoing

process, widely referred to as the Egyptian revolution. The revolution is commonly understood to have begun on January 25, 2011, when mass protests converged on downtown Cairo in Tahrir Square, although organizing and a politics of dissent had begun years earlier. 18 days later, after mass pressure from both the popular uprising and an anxious military regime, Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down from his position as president of Egypt. These 18 days were memorialized almost instantly by popular media, as books and movies quickly moved into production and the revolution was celebrated as ‘complete’. For many, this project of archiving the physical and visual materials of the 18 days served to further memorialize the revolution as a complete and successful event, as opposed to an ongoing process.

In addition, many Egyptian artists whose work had always been part of a critical engagement with the everyday suddenly found their work legible only as part of the larger framework of “Egyptian Revolution.” Artists’ work was suddenly classified as “pre-revolution” or “post-revolution,” a timeline that, not surprisingly, some artists found inadequate or undesirable. In addition, the influx of images inundated both physical and virtual spaces. Multiple organizations formed in order to document and archive this “event.”<sup>1</sup> For some artists, this was a moment to reconsider their own practices and the conditions of production of the visual, or to engage directly in political and community organizing. For others, it was a moment in which only a politics of refusal or a complete disengagement with any sort of revolutionary practices provided relief from the feelings of despair or exhaustion from the violence.

It is important here to note that I use Michel de Certeau’s theory of “the

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<sup>1</sup> One notable exception is Mosireen, a non-profit media center in downtown Cairo that offers a collective space for citizen journalism and cultural activism, providing technical support, equipment, a library, screenings, discussions and events. Mosireen’s archival project acknowledges the revolution as “ongoing.” (<http://mosireen.org/>)



everyday” in order to take seriously the possibilities of a politics of the everyday among my interlocutors. De Certeau (1984) argues for a theoretical practice that considers “ways of operating” not as “obscure background of social activity” (p. xi) but rather as a serious site of methodological and theoretical intervention. In doing this, de Certeau offers the possibility of making visible these everyday practices and shedding light on their potentiality for subversion. De Certeau also refers to what he calls “casual time,” a terminology that is useful here in making sense of the everyday. Casual time, argues de Certeau, is “what is narrated in the actual discourse of the city: an indeterminate fable” (p. 203). I use this terminology in this project because it best conveys the sense of actions, practices and decisions of my interlocutors that did not fall in the realm of specific modes of production, but rather were part of an everyday negotiation with their own communities, networks and social spheres. This analytical lens of “casual time” is one that I will use in this thesis to explore the everyday practices of my interlocutors.

While my project began as a visual one, my fieldwork demonstrated that, throughout this emerging moment, some artists have chosen to resist participating in any production of the visual. The visual has been engulfed by mediatized representations of a glorified and romanticized version of “revolution,” a narrative that memorializes the 18 days as a perfect moment of unity that ended with the deposal of the corrupt regime. Many artists with whom I spoke felt that those who had chosen to represent this revolution in their art were playing into the hands of the art markets’ voracious appetite for these superficially uplifting representations of the revolution. For this reason, some of my interlocutors have continued on their own “pre-revolution” projects; some stopped producing altogether in order to participate in collective practices; finally, some even left Cairo for extended periods of time, often

for residencies in Dubai or Europe.

The artists with whom I spoke continue to recognize the visual as a possible site of imagining the unfamiliar; however, in the actual moment of emergence, many of my interlocutors expressed a desire for “art spaces” outside of the gallery. The refusal of the gallery represents a resistance to the containment of both art and revolution. But this refusal also represents a different imagination around neoliberal governance. In both cases, a sort of temporal imagination has emerged, an insistence that there is actually the possibility of the “new”—again actualized mostly in relationships between artists and in informal spaces in which artists can gather, practice, and imagine the unfamiliar.

Above all, this project, in both its interventions and methodologies, is experimental, an attempt to recognize and adapt to an ongoing process. This project is not linear in the sense that it does not ask questions that can be answered concisely or even coherently, but it instead tries to understand what kinds of questions visual artists are asking, and how those questions evolve throughout this process. This process is full of attempts and failures, always around the re-imagining of an everyday politics and desired futures. The thesis aims to reflect this process that emerges around the many events that have made up this past year, and to critically engage with a moment in which social imaginaries come to be re-imagined.

### **The Art Scene in Cairo**

Much of the available literature on the contemporary art scene in Egypt reaffirms a state-centric, nation-based narrative (see Winegar, 2006 and Karnouk, 2005). Egyptian art is primarily theorized in a postcolonial, nationalist framework. The backdrop is a succession of presidents who are often the temporal markers by

which the chronology is structured, and who are understood through the particular ideologies and historical moments they are typically seen to represent. The state's regime and its rulers are given enormous privilege in the history of Egyptian contemporary art. It is my hope, in this project, to complicate this story and resist such a normalized framework by presenting an alternative narrative.

In order to historicize the various art institutions through which artists in Egypt can produce, practice, and show their art, I will try to paint a picture of contemporary art in the past twenty years in Cairo. This contextualization is not meant to be reductive or to be read as a mapping but instead as an overview that will help to make sense of the contemporary moment for artists in Cairo. With the examples that I will explore in the following pages, I try to offer a sense of the different sorts of spaces, actors, and practices available to artists and audiences. These first examples are of cultural institutions and galleries, in order to give a sense of the kinds of formal spaces in which artists have been able to practice. Later on in the thesis, I will explore the idea of alternative spaces to the gallery that I argue have become increasingly visible in the past year (2012). The three spaces that I will explore are state-run cultural institutions, such as the Young Artists Salon; commercial art galleries, such as Safar Khan Gallery; and non-profit art galleries, such as Townhouse Gallery.

The Young Artists Salon (also called *Salon al-Shabab*) began in Cairo in 1989. The Salon is sponsored and funded by the Egyptian state and foreign institutions. Since its founding, the Salon has held an annual competition for Egyptian artists under 35 to submit their work to be considered for display at the Salon's gallery show. The Supreme Council for Culture and the National Center for Fine Arts select professors, art critics, and government arts leaders (mostly artists

themselves) to judge 1,000 artworks, about 200 of which are then shown in Cairo (Winegar, 2006, p. 158-159). The most recent Salon al-Shabab, in the fall of 2011, awarded a much larger group of those who applied in an effort to recognize the large number of works of “revolutionary art” submitted to the competition.

The Salon has become a much anticipated event for Egyptian youth hoping to establish careers as artists, and is widely discussed every year within that community. The Salon is most often criticized for its tendency to favor artists who have studied in Europe and whose art reflects this artistic background. To many artists whose art does not reflect the style of European contemporary art, this trend in the judges’ decisions is very significant. They feel that it is a judgment on the artistic “value” of the art that many feel is unfair to artists who do not have the opportunity to travel to Europe. Others express frustration that the art that is more “authentically Egyptian” is not being represented or encouraged (see Winegar, 2006). The Salon, for many artists, determines the expectations and demands around notions of authenticity and “Egyptian-ness.”

Safar Khan Gallery was one of first private art galleries to open in Cairo and is run by the well-known art collector Sherwet Shafei. Shafei has been in charge of the collection at Safar Khan since the 1980s. In *Twentieth Century Egyptian Art: The Private Collection of Sherwet Shafei* (2011), Mona Abaza details Shafei’s influential position as an art collector and gallery owner. Shafei is believed to have been one of the first to establish such an extensive practice of art collection in Egypt, and is also known for her work with foreign collectors to create a market for modern and contemporary Egyptian art abroad. Specifically, Shafei has been adviser to the Christie’s auction house in Dubai, participating actively in what she sees as the positive aspects of the free market policies of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak,

which initially allowed Egyptian artists to be exposed to foreign art markets.

Safar Khan is located in Zamalek, an affluent neighborhood on an island between downtown Cairo and Giza. The neighborhood is full of upscale restaurants and stores, as well as a plethora of commercial art galleries. While the opening of these numerous galleries has been hailed as the arrival of art (or an art scene) to Cairo, it is, above all, art for the wealthy elite. Some of the galleries are owned by well-established collectors such as Shafei, while others are owned by young graduates of the American University in Cairo, whose families are able to support their artistic excursions into the gallery.

Shafei has a very particular vision of what is good art and what is Egyptian art, and her opinions and standards as a collector have a significant influence on the art scene in Cairo. In an interview with AUC Press (2012), the publisher of Abaza's recent book, Shafei said, "Before [previous to the contemporary moment], every artist had a message. Your art must carry a message. What is it you want to talk about? The history, the beauty, the Egyptians, the farmers." In this statement, Shafei clearly delineates her expectations of art that is worthy of her collection, which she argues must tell certain stories and participate in a narrative of meaning-making that reproduces particular histories of authenticity and aesthetic pleasure. Commercial galleries were the primary alternative to state-sponsored cultural institutions such as the Youth Salon until William Wells, a Canadian curator, opened a new art space in downtown Cairo a decade later.

When Wells opened his non-profit Townhouse Gallery in 1998, he had in mind an art space that would be very different from those that existed in Cairo at the time. Many artists and critics widely credit him with creating the first space that offered an alternative to both art as nation-building projects of the state and the

considerable number of commercial galleries that had opened in Cairo in the 1990s. Whether or not Wells deserves this level of praise, almost every artist I spoke with mentioned Townhouse—both positively and negatively—and every text on contemporary Egyptian art includes some discussion of Townhouse. For these reasons, the space retains a sort of collective memory of a moment when the art scene changed considerably.

When I spoke with Wells, he emphasized repeatedly that his role was primarily to provide a space in which artists could safely experiment with less familiar themes and ideas. The gallery is in downtown Cairo, surrounded by mechanical shops and street cafes. Those involved with Townhouse feel that the physical setting of the space is one of the most important aspects of the gallery. Because the gallery has gained recognition both inside and outside of Egypt, it has earned a reputation as an important space in the Cairo art scene. Townhouse offers residencies to local and international artists and have, over the years, provided diverse kinds of programming, such as artist workshops, community outreach, and micro-grant fundraising events. While Townhouse imagines its space as fundamentally different than that of cultural institutions such as Salon al-Shabab and commercial galleries such as Safar Khan, they are all, nonetheless, spaces that produce expectations and form discourses around art and the gallery in Cairo.

While these three spaces offer a sketch of three different kinds of formal art institutions, they are meant to provide only a context to the contemporary moment for artists—not an exhaustive list. These three spaces constitute the boundaries of common practice or the familiar for many people participating in Cairo's art scene. Hopefully with the Youth Salon, Safar Khan Gallery, and Townhouse Gallery, the reader can begin to understand the sorts of spaces through which visual artists have

moved in the past few decades in Cairo.

## **Conceptual Framework**

### *Sociology of an Emergence*

As the title of this thesis indicates, I take from Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2003) his terminology, “sociology of emergences,” that de Sousa Santos argues, “aims to identify and enlarge the signs of possible future experiences, under the guise of tendencies and latencies, that are actively ignored by hegemonic rationality and knowledge” (2003). It is helpful to explain the sort of project that de Sousa Santos and the World Social Forum (WSF) imagine in order to situate “the sociology of emergences” in relation to contemporary processes in Egypt. De Sousa Santos dismisses science as the epistemology to make legible counter-hegemonic alternatives to the dominant neoliberal narrative. Instead, he proposes an epistemology of “sociologies” that he argues is capable of recognizing and theoretically engaging with “practices of resistance and production of counter-hegemonic alternatives” such as the WSF (p. 238). The two sociologies he presents are sociology of absences and sociology of emergences; however, for the theoretical purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the latter.

The primary purpose of the sociology of emergences is to recognize that there are future possibilities and experiences that are ignored by “hegemonic rationality and knowledge” (p. 241). The sociology of emergences operates entirely on the premise of possibility, and provides a framework through which to imagine the unfamiliar. It is for this reason that I choose this epistemology, for the possibility of alternative futures, in art spaces as well as many others, remains systematically ignored by the

hegemonic language of those in power, and de Sousa Santos' "sociology of emergences" makes these alternative imaginations intelligible.

To put this in slightly different terms, Paul Rabinow (2008), writes of the future as a combination of the "probable" and the "improbable," which he argues are contained within the possible. Rabinow contends that contemporary modernity produces a future that is always being re-imagined around these terms, and therefore is negotiated and re-negotiated in order to frame new questions. It is for these reasons that predictions of the future can seem "implausible" and "unconvincing" as they try to imagine what is within the realms of the probable and the improbable.

De Sousa Santos also uses the language of the "Not Yet," which he argues is both capacity and possibility, hope and frustration. The intersection of the present with the future presents the opportunity to constantly imagine opportunities; to recognize that which is probable while, at the same time, hoping for that which is possible. De Sousa Santos argues that by recognizing these opportunities in the present, there is a greater chance that individuals and communities can both understand the "conditions of the possibility of hope" and also "define principles of action to promote the fulfillment of those conditions" (p. 241). This sort of conceptual space, a site that is always emerging around presents and futures, is the one in which I propose this project.

In this thesis, I refer to the processes of this past year (2011) as "an emerging moment," in acknowledgment of de Sousa Santos' own epistemologies. This terminology recognizes the sense among all my interlocutors that regardless of their particular socio-economic and political contexts, this moment offers possibilities and alternative futures. By using the language of the "emerging," I both align my own political project with "counter-hegemonic alternatives" to a neoliberal narrative, as



well as try to make my project open to the possibility that my interlocutors also participate in projects that seek to imagine the capacities and possibilities of the “Not Yet.”

### *Art and Revolution*

The question of art and revolution is primarily a question of containment. Can “revolution” as a category resist acting as a container, and can art resist being contained by revolution and its regulatory schemas? Can both art and revolution be contained as moments or spaces that render containment conditions possible? In this project, I ask whether art is capable not only of asking meaningful questions but also of making radical disruptions to a prevailing order. Can visual projects of resistance penetrate the everyday, making meaningful interventions in our daily lives, or are they ultimately contained by the category of art?

These questions assume the categories of art and revolution, both of which draw on a diverse body of literature. As mentioned in the introduction, I draw on Bourdieu’s (1993) definition of the category of art as products or performances that are “known and recognized” as such. However, in my own thesis, I deliberately avoid what has already been recognized as “revolutionary art.” This category has been assigned primarily to the murals painted on the walls of downtown Cairo in the past year. While I do not dispute that there are artists engaged in disrupting the prevailing order who paint on the walls and streets, often risking arrest, the questions of my thesis are more interested in the domain of “known and recognized” art, and its possible containment and non-containment by “revolution.” In chapter five, as I draw my own conclusions, I will offer some observations and comparisons between the work in my thesis and the developments around notions of street art as revolutionary

art.

Susan Buck-Morss (1997) asserts that the question of how revolutionary politics and art interact is potentially unanswerable. That does not however, she argues, preclude the author or the reader from the responsibility to try to understand what exactly these categories mean, or how they function and travel as categories. It is useful to think through them historically in order to make sense of their meanings in the contemporary moment. The question, which Buck-Morss poses, is: what is political art? What does it mean for art to be revolutionary? And, I would add, how is art contained by revolution?

The "art world," however global it has become, is capable of being encapsulated. Against a background of political violence, the art scene leads its own life, one that provides contrasts and indicates potentials, but without modifying that background of political violence one iota. Even if we concede that the politics of art is always indirect—indeed, especially if we concede this point—we are left with the question: What is political art? (p. 17)

I quote Buck-Morss at length because this is precisely the question that motivates this thesis project. Can art as a category intervene in the political? Can art be revolutionary? The meanings and definitions of political art are, above all, dependent on historical context. What is considered political art in one context was often considered its antithesis in another. The question then, for this thesis, is really whether that which is recognized as art can be political in this contemporary moment in Cairo. Has revolution become a container, and if so, for whom and in which ways? Or has it perhaps always been a container for something called “revolutionary art?” Is there a site through which art can participate in the revolutionary process of this emerging moment and if so, in what form?

### *The Autonomous Artist*

One aspect of the discourse on autonomy for Egyptian artists that has emerged

in the past year centers around the question of funding. Beginning with the 18 days of revolution in January and February 2011, institutional funding emerged as a central topic of debate among artists in Egypt. Funding from both international and local institutions became available for those willing to produce art around the topic of “revolution.” Kaelen Wilson-Goldie (2012, paragraph one) argues that “art in Egypt has been placed in the service of revolutionary rhetoric” since the 1952 revolution, in which a military coup removed the Egyptian monarchy, occupying British troops were forced out of the country, and Gamal Abdel Nasser became president. Since then, Wilson-Goldie contends, artists in Egypt had been negotiating their role as the expected narrators of a nationalist ideology until the emergence of an independent art scene in the 1990s. This scene, however, quickly became murky with the entrance of commercial art galleries and private funding. This historical context has influenced the contemporary moment, when, once again, Egyptian artists are asked to produce around the topic of the “Egyptian Revolution.”

Funding has poured in from international organizations, including civil society and democracy-building NGOs, as well as galleries, museums, and art foundations, to encourage the production of “revolution” as a category. Artists’ insistence on their own autonomy, before, during, and after this “18 Day Revolution” has become invisible next to the great number of “revolutionary grants,” which induce the “art world’s hazy complicity with a kind of privatizing, neoliberal agenda” (Wilson-Goldie, 2012 paragraph nine). This privatizing, neoliberal agenda is one that some of my interlocutors argue, through the desires of the global art market, has produced the category of revolution as containment.

Within the context of this thesis, the concept of autonomy was raised many times in conversations with my interlocutors. Autonomy, however, draws on a

genealogy that focuses primarily on neoliberal notions of independence and individual liberties. This kind of autonomy, I argue, is better understood in the context of the financialization of art markets and the neoliberal freedom story. Under Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak (1970-2011), neoliberal open-door policies led to Egyptian artists' exposure to global art markets. This exposure coincided with the emergence of a neoliberal narrative of free markets and personal autonomy that dictated a new relationship between artists and the state. This relationship was distinguished from the prior one, which was considered comparatively to be completely lacking in autonomy. Autonomy in these global art markets meant the "freedom" for Egyptian artists to sell their artwork in Dubai, the epicenter of these emerging markets. Autonomy was seen as an impossibility in relation to the state and inevitable in relation to global art markets. Jessica Winegar (2006) argues that autonomy must be re-imagined as neither an impossibility nor a reality in relation to the Egyptian state or global art markets, but instead a more complex negotiation of both by artists. For some artists, however, ideals of "freedom" and "individualism" have become the only terminology around which to understand autonomy and how it affects their own notions of artistic practices.

## **Literature Review**

Using the analytical tools from the previous section, I work through a genealogy of the political and aesthetics with the texts that I have chosen to build on in my own project. In order to contextualize the positions and experiences of my interlocutors, there are three bodies of literature with which I will engage. The first is the literature on contemporary Egyptian art, written by art historians, anthropologists, and practitioners. The second is the body of literature on the gallery as an art space.

Finally, I will look at the emerging field of visual culture and its intersections with art and social change.

### *Egyptian Contemporary Art*

The literature on contemporary Egyptian art is surprisingly small, and for this reason, certain texts have achieved canonical status and thereby travel through the field as the primary references. In particular, Jessica Winegar's *Creative Reckonings* (2006) and Liliane Karnouk's *Modern Egyptian Art (1910-2003)* (2005), which both address a large number of contemporary artists in Egypt, have come to be seen as the primary sources on the topic.

Winegar's text takes an anthropological approach, drawing upon her own ethnographic work with artists in Egypt in the late 1990s. Her work focuses primarily on the transition from cultural spaces and projects supported and sponsored by the Egyptian state to a burgeoning commercial art market that becomes part of a larger global art market. Winegar focuses on autonomy in direct relation to a dichotomy of the state and the financialization of art markets. While she argues for a more nuanced understanding of autonomy for Egyptian artists, one that takes into account the artists' negotiations with both forces, her text situates autonomy in relation to either the state or global art markets. Winegar's text draws a genealogy of Egyptian art in the past sixty years and maps out the different art spaces in Egypt (her book also covers cities outside of Cairo). In this sense, it is a very useful text; however, as the lone canonical text on the subject, Winegar's work lacks critical engagement with other sources, and has not been re-engaged with in a serious manner since its publication.

Liliane Karnouk's text is, even more so than Winegar's, a mapping or overview of contemporary Egyptian artists since 1910. While there has been more

outspoken criticism of Karnouk's text (most of my interlocutors recommended I look at it, but most thought it was useless as anything more than a source for names and images), it remains one of only a few sources to attempt such a project. However, Karnouk's intervention, much more so than Winegar's, inscribes those whom she includes in the book as "important" Egyptian artists, while rendering those who do not match up to her standards invisible and forgotten. Both texts privilege well-known artists and treat the gallery as the primary site of production and visibility for artists in Egypt.

The two texts referred to above argue that the production of art, for much of the second half of the twentieth century, was largely tied to state-sponsored narratives of culture, and that artists were primarily supported by state funding. As a result, artists were expected by the Ministry of Culture to enframe their work within certain narratives of "tradition" and Egyptian (i.e. Pharonic, Coptic, and Islamic) history. Both Karnouk and Winegar understand contemporary artists through two periods of recent history. The first is a post-colonial, socialist moment in Egypt that engaged in a nationalist project that supported and encouraged art that reflected that project. The second is the financialization of the art markets that brought Egyptian artists into the networks of the global circulation of art. However, by reinforcing these two stories as distinct and separate, both authors represent art produced for state-sponsored cultural institutions as necessarily "worse" art, lacking in autonomous production, whereas art produced under the conditions of global art markets is autonomous, and therefore "better." Furthermore, these narratives present the state and market as absolute powers that render artists as necessarily submissive and passive subjects, a binary that I will argue my interlocutors are often working to dispute. My own project will aim to disrupt these notions of these two histories as distinct and separate, and also to

contest the experience of artists today as “free” or “autonomous” based solely on their ability to engage with global art markets.

### *The Gallery*

Even with the gallery’s increasing presence as the space for both production and display of contemporary art, Brian O’Doherty’s classic essay, *Inside the White Cube*, originally published in 1976, has remained one of the primary texts used to theorize the particular conditions of this space for contemporary art. O’Doherty argues that the gallery space has become the very space in which images become art. The gallery space and art have become so entangled in each other that they become legible only through one’s relation to the other. The gallery, O’Doherty argues, is designed “along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white” (p. 15). The gallery is not a by-product of the art, but instead, the two are designed for each other, representative of a certain imagination of whom art is for and what purposes it serves.

Furthermore, by art’s very selection and placement away from the everyday, it is enshrined already in a project of archiving and history-writing, producing a narrative of what art is and which art can stand alone as representative of its historical context. This project, it should be noted, is very similar to Sherwet Shafei’s work as a curator and collector mentioned earlier in the chapter, and it is, if anything, much more deliberate as a practice of producing particular historical narratives. The gallery is not a space of the everyday, not a space to be lived in; it is instead a space in which to tiptoe and speak in hushed voices. As spectators, we become only what we see (“the Eye”), detached from our own lived experiences outside the gallery space and

unable to engage through any other kind of participation. In Cairo, the gallery has become the most familiar space in which to experience visual art, and even art that expands beyond the traditional parameters of walls or picture frames nonetheless continues to be produced and designed for the “white cube.” For artists, curators, and collectors, the gallery remains the space of the familiar—not only the container for art, but part of the art itself.

### *Visual Culture and Social Change*

In the past 20 years, visual culture has emerged as a new and exciting—although highly contested—field of study. The literature on visual culture has called first and foremost for a recognition of its particular and specific interventions around the social and political implications of seeing and the visual. As Buck-Morss (2004) argues, we must first acknowledge that “its effect is the production of new knowledge and its first challenge is to be aware of this” (p. 1). Furthermore, with the field of visual culture, it is possible not only to rephrase or re-articulate what is already said in other fields, but also to offer an “experimental zone where new possibilities and new identities are forged” (Pinney, 2004, p. 8). In a contemporary moment that is so often experimental, the field of visual culture offers a framework within which to pose these questions of possibility and the unfamiliar.

Many interventions around “the image” have emerged from this field of visual culture. Images, these scholars argue, have their own historical context and possibly provide alternative methods of storytelling. Authors such as W.J.T. Mitchell (2002), David Freedberg (1989), and Chris Pinney (2004) have demonstrated that while there is something called a history of art, there is also a history that can be told through, or by means of, art. All three authors focus particularly on the visual image as a space



that must be understood in its own historical context. This is what Pinney calls “a history made by art” (2004, p. 8). In W.J.T. Mitchell’s (2002) now seminal text on the question of visual culture as a field of study, he does not make a claim for visual studies’ spot among the disciplines, but instead calls for a critical engagement with “visuality” and a recognition of the “familiarity” with which we theorize the visual. Visual studies, or the study of visual culture, recognizes the visual as a social construction, formed and re-formed through cultural practices.

In David Freedberg’s (1989) substantial text, he proposes writing a history not of art but instead of “the relations between images and people in history.” This text, therefore, rests on the powerful assertion that there is in fact a way to write about art through visual culture and images that both acknowledges an imagined domain of “art” while at the same time recognizing a larger sphere of the visual and its effects on our ways of seeing and understanding.

Finally, W.J.T. Mitchell poses an interesting hypothesis in “What Do Pictures Really Want?” (1996). Images, he claims, also have “wants” or “needs” that are produced through historical contexts and cultural practices. Does the contemporary and emerging moment in Egypt produce needs and desires for images? And in the same moment, do these images dictate the needs and desires of artists’ communities and networks? As Mitchell proposes in the same article above: “We as critics may want pictures to be stronger than they actually are in order to give ourselves a sense of power in opposing, exposing, or praising them” (1996, p. 74). I carry this statement with me throughout this thesis in order to recognize both the powerful interventions of the image as well as the possibility of insignificance.

## **Methodology**

Primarily, this project is an attempt to put into conversation the current historical moment in Egypt with that of various artists, their work, and their own engagements (and non-engagements) with the political through revolutionary struggles. It does not, however, intend to map current artists, art spaces, and pieces of art in Cairo. In this sense, it is not an overview but rather an exploration of the imaginations of the familiar and unfamiliar during a revolutionary process in the contemporary moment. I do, nonetheless, try to provide a larger context through which to situate the spaces and artists with whom I work on for the reader. The project considers how this emerging moment is imagined and made possible by individual artists. All aspects of the project, from processes of fieldwork to shifting perceptions and realities of the interlocutors, become part of this continuous moment as well. This sense of “process” or emerging moment is the unsteady foundation on which all other aspects of this project are made, unmade, and remade.

Necessarily, by including a section called “methodology,” I introduce a project that acknowledges a certain kind of epistemology or production of knowledge. Discourses of methodology imply there is a way in which information or data is properly gathered, organized, and shared. This project, however, does not inherently make these assumptions. Methodology here represents instead a proposed organization or vision of the project before it begins. However, due to the nature of my own project and the particular moment during which I conducted the fieldwork, my own methodology aims to recognize that this process is at times unexpected and often unpredictable. My own methodologies, therefore, try to reflect the sorts of experimental processes of my interlocutors and their own spaces, networks, and communities.

I spent time with a number of artists living and working in Cairo, as well as owners and employees of art spaces. These art spaces included both formal galleries and spaces that tried to imagine an alternative to the gallery. I conducted personal interviews with individuals and attended “art events,” which included exhibition openings, screenings, and visits to art spaces. The personal interviews were always approached as open-ended conversations that took on very different meanings with different interlocutors. For some, the conversation focused almost exclusively on their artwork and its trajectory; for others, it moved almost immediately to their own engagement through various practices with ongoing events in Egypt. I preferred to let the conversations take their various courses, as these conversations were by far the most informative for my research.

All the artists that I worked with are visual artists, working in painting, photography, digital media, and film. As explained in the previous sections, I chose to work with visual artists primarily out of an interest for the visual as a specific and meaningful site of intervention for the artists and their audiences. In addition, in a moment in which social media has so entirely captivated our visual senses, I wanted to explore what that meant for artists whose work revolved around their own visual interventions. What became of the artwork of visual artists in a moment in which there was a surplus of the visual?

During the time of my research, several new spaces opened in downtown Cairo, as official or unofficial art spaces, many aiming in particular to disrupt or resist the gallery space as the privileged site of art in Cairo. These spaces were primarily apartments in or near downtown Cairo, in close proximity to Tahrir Square, rented by groups of young artists to provide an informal space for collectivity. The goals of these collectives varied, from archiving to informal performance to the display of

their artwork. As I conducted my fieldwork, I recognized that these spaces were an important and significant site for artists, and I decided to take these spaces into consideration as part of this project.

While this decision initially seemed to take me away from the initial visual goals of this project, I soon recognized that these spaces were directly related to the artists' relationship to the visual. In fact, for many, these spaces were the result of a politics of refusal to produce visual work in this contemporary moment. Artists sought instead, spaces in which networks and communities could be built and sustained and where they could try to escape the powerful and controlling mechanisms of the gallery spaces and global art markets. Throughout my fieldwork, I tried to understand how these artists both refuse certain practices but at the same time, how hegemonic language can remain part of their vocabulary and at times, their practices. I have tried here to emphasize that I offer the kind of methodology that can provide broad brush strokes to my project, but at the same time, can allow for flexibility to accommodate an exceptional process.

### **Chapter Outline**

In the following chapters, I will address how artists have negotiated their everyday practices through a profoundly uncertain and experimental moment. In Chapter One, I have tried to give context to this historical moment and a few of the formal spaces available to visual artists in the last couple decades. In addition, I have outlined the conceptual framework through which I will pose my own questions as well as the literature which I hope to build on in this project.

In Chapter Two, I explore the literature on politics and aesthetics as a lens through which to understand what the political means to my interlocutors in this

contemporary moment. In this chapter, I consider refusal as a politics through an artist who identifies her work as non-political. Through this artist's assertions, I think through the question of autonomy in this historical and political moment. In addition, I use Rancière's work on the politics of aesthetics to engage analytically with an exhibition at Townhouse titled *Politics of Representation*.

In Chapter Three, I look at specific examples of exhibitions in art spaces that use the gallery as a site of expression and resistance during the revolutionary process. Through the spaces themselves as well as a few of the artworks, I consider what it means to work in the gallery in this moment and what sorts of interventions are and are not possible. In this chapter, I also explore what it means for art to be contained, both by the gallery and by something called "revolution." This chapter explores these spaces in the moment of the one year anniversary of ex-President Hosni Mubarak's deposal and in this sense, tries to bring that historical context in conversation with these spaces.

In Chapter Four, I turn to communities and space of collectivity as sites through which to understand desires for an alternative way of practicing art. In particular, I focus on a series of artists' conversations around notions of emerging communities and networks as an alternative form of artistic practice. This chapter analytically engages with what possibilities practices of community and network present in this contemporary moment. I also consider two spaces, 10 Mahmoud Bassiony and Mahatat, which engage with questions of the "alternative." While these spaces offer possibilities of imagining the unfamiliar through the familiar, I also argue that 10 Mahmoud Bassiony also represents a reproduction of the neoliberal subject as individual. Mahatat, a group that performs art in public spaces, also engages with questions of community and provides the analytical space in this thesis through which

to explore art and community as a form of imagination and joy in a moment of uncertainty.

In Chapter Five, I bring together the work of the previous four chapters to try and understand the tensions that I have highlighted throughout the thesis. I use the example of an art's festival in downtown Cairo, D-CAF, which took place in the final weeks of the writing of my thesis, in order to explore these tensions as ongoing and continuous. I argue that these tensions are in fact, a site of subversion themselves, as they allow artists to think through their artistic practices and the spaces they inhabit in the everyday. At the end of Chapter Five, I will offer brief conclusions and pose questions for potential future research that might add to this project.

## **Conclusion**

In theorizing an emerging moment, the purpose of this thesis is not to map any possible futures, but instead, to recognize the processes and practices through which my interlocutors try to imagine an unfamiliar future. I ask what it means for visual artists to practice in a moment of “visual surplus;” how do artists identify “the political” and what does this mean for their own everyday practices as well as the terms of production for their artwork? I consider what these practices mean for the gallery as an art space as well as alternative forms of organizing that emerge outside the gallery. For many of my interlocutors, this moment is one that emerges throughout my own fieldwork and writing, and for that reason, many of their practices and interventions are profoundly experimental. Therefore, there are contradictions and uncertainties, failures and successes and most of all, no conclusions. It is in this emerging moment, one which is exciting and joyful, anxious and full of despair, that I propose my own analytical engagements.

## Chapter Two: Art as politics / Politics as art

### Introduction

In an emerging moment, when the hegemonic discourse of the political is understood through engagement with formal institutions, what happens to artists and their everyday practices? How are artists forced to re-evaluate their relationship with the political, negotiating what it means to be “political?” The political emerges throughout the revolutionary process as a highly contentious space and becomes primarily legible by direct engagement with legitimate political institutions. What does it mean to be politically engaged when the political is only legible through certain categories? As political engagement has become legible only in normalized categories of activism, protests and political parties, what happens to the category of the political itself vis a vis artists and their work? What does this mean for artists and their practices as they are confronted with such choices? What does political engagement mean and do these questions themselves force the political into specific hegemonic categories?

I use Jacques Rancière’s theories of the political as a framework through which to address this question. This chapter, as a whole, draws on Rancière’s theory of politics as aesthetics, and specifically the “distribution of the sensible” (2006) in order to make sense of the relationships between art and the political. The distribution of the sensible is, Rancière contends, “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective part and positions within it” (p. 12). The distribution of the sensible is the framework through which Rancière argues that the political is ultimately a question of visibility. “Politics revolves around what is

seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (p. 13). Because, Rancière argues, there is a perspective that is “common to the community,” artistic practices are made visible by these ‘aesthetic practices.’ It is through Rancière’s theories of the political and aesthetics that I will critically engage with the questions of this chapter.

As mentioned the introductory chapter, the question of political art can only be posed in a historicized context. The question of the political is not stagnant and its meaning is made and re-made throughout diverse temporal and historical moments. Rancière notes that, “there is no criterion for establishing a correspondence between aesthetic virtue and political virtue. There are only choices” (p. 61). It is these choices that represent various alliances between art and the political, choices that are formed through social, political and economic factors. It is by way of Rancière’s theoretical engagements with art and the political that I explore what kinds of engagements and non-engagements artists and galleries experiment with during this emerging moment. These engagements are above all, necessarily experimental, as artists and art spaces try to understand the political and their own practices as artists through an uncertain process.

The negotiations of familiar and unfamiliar makes the “political” in this process an evolving and fluctuating idea. In the following sections, I will use Rancière’s conceptual framework in order to analytically engage with the politics of refusal of a young artist in Cairo, Rania<sup>2</sup>, and an exhibition, *Politics of Representation* at Townhouse Gallery that engaged directly with the question of politics and aesthetics. I spoke with Rania in early November of 2011 and *Politics of*

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<sup>2</sup> All names in this thesis have been changed unless otherwise indicated.



*Representation* was supposed to open November 20<sup>th</sup>, as Egypt's first parliamentary elections since Hosni Mubarak left power were to begin a week later. After large-scale protests and violent street fights broke out on November 19<sup>th</sup>, *Politics of Representation*'s opening was delayed two weeks. The elections, however, went along as planned.

### **Refusal as a Politics**

I sat with Rania at a popular downtown bar, watching as her posture relaxed and her face sighed with relief the longer she was away from New Cairo, one of eight new satellite cities that has been built up over an hour outside of central Cairo, where she had just come from by bus. These cities are made up of largely empty gated communities, malls and facilities for the country's most wealthy, most of which look out over an endless expanse of desert sand. Rania is a student and visual artist at the American University in Cairo (AUC), whose primary campus is also in New Cairo, and she spoke sadly of her family's recent decision to relocate from downtown Cairo to one of the newly built houses in a desolate gated community in New Cairo, near the university. Her family lives surrounded by empty houses, as the demand for such expensive homes was vastly overestimated by the building companies. The centerpiece of the compound is a luxurious club house fully staffed and equipped with every amenity to ensure that members of this community do not have to leave its green, well manicured lawns for the dry dusty air of downtown Cairo. For Rania, however, while her family sees the move as a sign of their economic and social success, she sees a sterile and isolated outpost that was detached, both physically and emotionally, from the rest of the city.

I contacted Rania after I saw her artwork at an exhibition at AUC's Sharjah

Gallery. The gallery was built with a donation from the ruler of the Sharjah emirate in the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Sultan Bin Mohammed Al-Qasimi and it serves as a physical reminder of the UAE's increasingly central position in the regional and global art markets. The gallery sits on AUC's brand new campus that opened in 2008 in New Cairo, moving the majority of its undergraduate and graduate programs out of its downtown campus, which sits right on Tahrir square. The downtown campus remains open, but the primary campus is now out in the middle of the desert, at least an hour by bus or car from central Cairo. While AUC has been seen by some as detached from the everyday, servicing the children of the country's wealthy elite, the physical detachment from the city has only further strengthened these conceptions.

The exhibition featured the artwork, primarily short films and digital media installations, of several senior art majors at AUC. Rania's work, *Conversation above Conversation, loop*, struck me when I walked into the gallery. I was intrigued by her piece, which is a commentary on the everyday gendered experience and the body as a site of resistance depicted with video footage and black tape (image below). Four small screens flashed through the images of different women's faces, black tape appearing, re-appearing and disappearing from their faces. The tape crossed their eyes and mouths and hair flashed in through the bright neon colors of the background, intermittently. Bodies emerge from all sides of the videos, formed from black tape, flailing or dancing, the flexible nature of the tape makes the bodies seem to move in time with the flashing videos.

The work, Rania says, is a process, which constantly evolves and morphs as she continues to add to it. She had originally wanted to film other body parts but she was discouraged for two reasons. Her professor had discouraged her from being so "obvious" with her work and had encouraged her to find a more indirect way to

address sexuality. In addition, she realized the only body she could use would be her own and she didn't feel comfortable using her own body as of yet, especially in this particular setting. For Rania, these restrictions represent the censorships of the her university and the cultural practices and norms of her context in Cairo, which deem Rania's desired form of art practice, in particular, nudity, inappropriate and lacking in artistic value. During our conversations she spoke of a longing to perform and produce art that challenged these norms. In particular, nudity represented the most desired expression for her, a project that she hoped to one day have the courage and support to pursue.

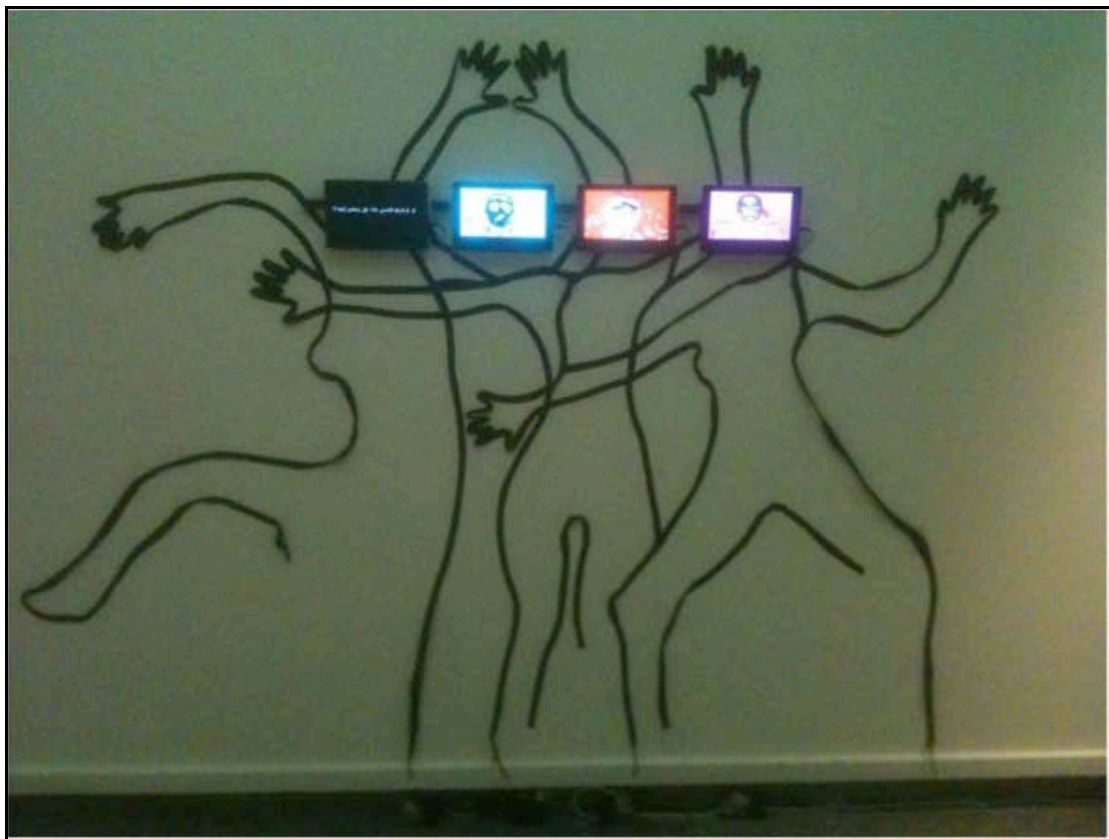


FIGURE 1: *CONVERSATION ABOVE CONVERSATION, LOOP* (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

When we spoke in November of 2011, it was less than a week before parliamentary elections were to begin in Egypt. It was also only days before large-

scale protests and clashes with the security forces erupted downtown, as the regime demonstrated its willingness to violently attack those participating in peaceful demonstrations in Tahrir Square. Rania was tired of the protests, which she saw as “protesting to protest.” She had little interest in the elections, which she saw as bolstering an unfixable system and rather she dreamed of dismantling the system as a whole. How exactly that sort of project might begin, she could not say. The protests had, for Rania, become meaningless and she was critical of those who she identified as “activists” and their methods of communicating and organizing.

Rania’s imagination around something called “the political” did not, however, include her own practices or artwork. She saw herself as staunchly “non-political” in both her artwork and her practices. Rania’s current work focused on themes of the gendered body in Cairo and she spoke extensively about the research she was doing on authors (primarily Egyptian) who wrote on the subject. As Rania’s work did not engage with questions of “revolution” (in her terms) and she did not, for the most part, participate in the ongoing protests around the city, she saw both her practices and her work as “non-political.”

Rania was mostly dismissive of other young visual artists she knew and most of her friends were dancers and musicians. While she alluded to this community of friends and artists with whom she spent time and discussed her projects, she was also cautious to imply that she was part of any “group” or “scene.” Rania’s conversations always came back to her desire for individuality as an artist, a desire that ironically was linked to her longing to return to the city, leaving the desolate Cairo suburbs for the crowded and congested streets of downtown. Community, I would argue, had become for Rania, inseparable from the projects of the activists she disliked and the gallery spaces she shunned. Rania did not lack a community, in fact she was quite

dependent on and grateful for her group of artist friends, but rather, the idea of community had become, for Rania, tied to a subject-building narrative of which she did not want to take part.

Throughout our conversations, Rania also spoke of the desire to travel and live in other countries, something she has the privilege of doing as a wealthy Egyptian woman. While at times, Rania appeared deeply passionate about imagining an alternative future in Egypt, at other times, she appeared deeply invested in a personal project, a “non-political” project that allowed her to pursue her own individual desires as an artist, which involved disengaging with the “public” or visual artist communities. I argue that these apparently opposing desires are in fact, not so surprising upon a closer look.

There are two points around which I want to engage with Rania’s “non-political” assertions. The first is something I will call “refusal as a politics” and the second is Rania’s own subjectivity in a larger neoliberal narrative of autonomy. The first I will address in this section and the second in the following section.

Rania’s disinterest in the political is, I would argue, a politics in itself, or in other words, refusal as a politics. In this revolutionary process, the political has been produced through public discourse as specific practices, including both electoral institutions as well as the act of protest or demonstration. For Rania, being engaged with the political means attending protests that are legible to a larger narrative of “revolutionary” events. Being political means adapting her everyday practices as well as the production of her own artwork to something that looks like and feels like “revolution.” Rania’s piece, (Figure 1), is a commentary on her experiences and observations of gendered (and classed) subjectivity in Cairo. As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, Rancière claims that there is no “criterion” for

understanding the relationship between the aesthetic and the political, but there are however, “choices” (p. 61). Rania’s installation piece, in its embodied fragmentation and ephemeral quality, speaks to Rania’s politics of the individual and the gendered body. However, because it does not deal with “revolution” as imagined through the practices and discourses that emerged after the 18 days, a complex and diverse site, it is for her, non-political.

This refusal is linked to two desires that emerge through both the events of the past year as well as Rania’s own socio-economic positioning in her parents’ move to a gated community. These desires, which I initially understood as distinct and separate, are actually related to one another. The first desire is for something that Rania calls “independence” and she resists intelligibility through any sort of artist movement, community or collective organizing, which she identified as contrary to her goals of artistic autonomy. She resists what she sees as a very specific moment in which something called “revolutionary art” emerges. This revolutionary art is for Rania, a container in which she refuses to be placed. She sees revolution as a category that has come to define the contemporary work of visual artists, distilling complexity into singularity. However, I would argue that Rania also participates in this “revolution as container” by re-producing the category as singular in her own language. This resistance precludes her from acting or participating in anything called “the political” for she believes this relegates both her practices and her artwork, as intelligible only through something called revolution. This also raises the problem space of revolution as containment, in which the political can no longer be imagined outside of the revolution and becomes intelligible only through specific spaces and actions.

This other desire is what Rania calls “integrity,” an everyday struggle for the autonomous artistic practice. This desire is however, deeply linked to her own

parents' struggle to participate in a kind of neoliberal "freedom story" that New Cairo represents for wealthy Egyptians. While Rania was unhappy with her parents' decision to move to a gated community in New Cairo, her own disdain for "politics" mirrors her parents' struggle for individual freedoms (see Harvey, 2007). Rania's desires for independence and artistic integrity in her everyday practices and artistic projects, I argue, are related to her family's desire for individualism through their own lifestyle decisions.

### **The Question of Autonomy**

As I suggested in the previous section, Rania's desires for independence and integrity materialize in a politics of refusal. Rania's everyday practices are linked very closely to a larger discourse around autonomy and art. This conceptual framework is one through which, not only to understand Rania's "non-political" assertions, but also to understand the everyday practices of artists in this contemporary moment. This framework is based in the question of autonomy and how notions of the individual intersect with something called the political. The narrative of autonomy is also, I argue, has become entangled in this case, with a neoliberal discourse of "freedom" and the "individual."

In order to understand Rania's vigilant opposition to the political as the commodification of revolutionary art, we must first engage the question of autonomy. I will focus my own discussion around questions of autonomy that have emerged in the contemporary moment in Cairo, specifically for Rania. These questions, I argue, revolve primarily around diverse understandings of an autonomous artistic practice. Grant Kester (2006) draws connections between the debates on autonomy and sources of institutional support and funding. He notes the tendency of art critics today to

dismiss funding from non-arts organizations as necessarily linked to alternative motives, while at the same time, accepting the private art market as somehow “unburdened by the compromises and conflicts entailed by public support” (p. 108). He attributes this development to the normalization of the market and the hegemony of neoliberalism. Kester also notes what he refers to as “unrelenting purism” by art critics who insists that so-called “autonomous” art is complex and ambiguous while activist or “engaged” art is necessarily banal and predictable.

It is for precisely these reasons, that Rania sees “political” art as uninspired and lacking in originality and prides herself most of all, on her ability to practice art in a space “outside” the political. Rania’s unwillingness to recognize the “compromises” or “conflicts” of her own practices speaks to her socio-economic position, in a family who themselves privilege markets and language of neoliberalism. While, as Kester argues, autonomy can have a very different set of practices for artists, my conversations with Rania indicated that for some artists, autonomy has captured a certain imagination that often resonates with the free markets and individual liberties of neoliberal discourse.

The crux of neoliberalism is its denial of anything outside of the system, an insistence on the lack of an “alternative,” so that, as in Rania’s case, her framework for her artistic practices often exist within the framework of the language of neoliberalism, although there are also important moments in which her language challenges this framework. The trick is that the “seductions of belonging,” as Katz (2005, p. 631) calls them, to this neoliberal language, are powerful but often invisible. The subjects of neoliberalism, Katz argues, are contained within its narrative of “various forms of individualism,” which limits, but does not preclude, the possibility of collectivism. It is this terminology of neoliberal governance, which I argue both



Rania and her parents are seduced by in different contexts, that often dissuades Rania from further exploring the notion of community in her practices and artwork.

### **Politics of Representation**

In December, 2011, I walked down the narrow, poorly lit street that leads to Townhouse Gallery and past the outdoor cafe tables, packed with both the familiar faces of the “gallery crowd,”<sup>3</sup> and local workers and residents. The cafe, like many in downtown Cairo, is an assortment of plastic tables and chairs, with young men rushing through the packed tables, taking orders for tea and sheesha. That night was the opening of an exhibition at Townhouse called *Politics of Representation*. The gallery had been struggling to find a meaningful use for their space that was relevant to artists and audiences in a moment that was full of despair and violence. Clashes between protesters and security forces had broken out the day before the show had been scheduled to open (on November 19, 2011), and the gallery had been forced to close after tear gas and rubber bullets reached their front door.

They opened two weeks later, after parliamentary elections had already begun. The elections were the first since the ex-President Hosni Mubarak had been forced to step down nine months prior. The email advertising the show claimed the exhibit featured the display of “posters, stickers, banner, fliers, photographs and other ephemera,” which were to be “organized chronologically, and by party.” Visitors and audiences were welcome to bring in materials themselves as well. Townhouse wanted the audience to explore the “visual strategies” that parties were using to convey their message, in order to “witness the definition of these diverse visual

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<sup>3</sup> I use this terminology to describe the group that frequents so many of Cairo’s exhibition openings and gallery events. My interlocutors often commented on this crowd that seemed to move from one event to the next, forever in this circulation. After only a few weeks of fieldwork, I found that many of these faces started to look familiar to me as well.

identities.” In addition, they wanted the exhibit to “function as a tangible witness to the construction of this key moment in Egypt’s history, and assemble an archive of political ephemera” (Townhouse Cairo, 2011). This project of “witnessing” and “archiving” sat uncomfortably next to my conversations with the gallery director a few weeks prior as he had claimed Townhouse as a space with a strong politics of the everyday, which I had taken to imply a disinterest in projects that would re-produce the borders between the gallery and the streets outside. *Politics of Representation*, however, seemed to do nothing other than exactly this.

Townhouse, above all else, is most proud of their location. Nestled in between the busy streets of downtown Cairo, they are surrounded by both mechanic shops and longtime residents. This is a point of pride for the founder and current director, William Wells<sup>4</sup> and the Townhouse employees; a location that they all strongly believe gives legitimacy to their space. William told me that when he first opened Townhouse, he recognized that the relationship with those working and living around Townhouse was of the utmost importance and he has spent considerable time and energy working to give their neighbors a sense of inclusion. This sense of legitimacy stemmed from Townhouse’s gesture towards a class politics, however, the distance of engagement was highlighted by another point William emphasized in our conversation. He explained that those working at the cafe or in the mechanic shops next door often find themselves as subjects of the art displayed in the gallery. This is often a result of artists in residence who seem to find the men laboring around them as particularly inspiring artistic material, resonating around a discourse of the “real” or “authentic.”

Townhouse has, since its founding in 1998, represented a particular moment in

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<sup>4</sup> William Wells is his actual name.

contemporary art in Egypt, and it was frequently cited by all my interlocutors as not only the first non-profit private gallery in Cairo, but also as a transitional moment when the art scene shifted away from the state sponsored cultural institution. For this reason, it has continued to stand out, for both critics and supporters, as a foundational space. Today, Townhouse imagines itself as a space for gathering, for reflection, for creativity and for interactive art projects. This development of the space has been particularly focused in the past year. In my conversations with William, he noted that for the first time in the history of Townhouse, the audience seemed to playing a larger role in dictating the projects of the space than the artists themselves. Their goal, he says, is to provide their audience with a space to think through this moment and William believes that because most artists are not currently interested in producing physical artworks and are more eager to explore collaborative projects, their space is best used for interactive exhibits, workshops and even meetings for both political parties as well as revolutionary organizing.

I walked up the creaky, well-worn stairs to the first-floor gallery, where the exhibit *Politics of Representation* was being shown. I stepped inside the gallery which was nearly empty (the cafe outside, in contrast, was full to the brim), and saw campaign poster after poster, neatly organized across the white walls, the faces of many Egyptian men and the occasional woman staring down at me. It had been obvious from walking around the city in the weeks prior that campaign posters that were hung all over the city, did not vary immensely in style, however, all lined up next to one another, they were startlingly similar. As I walked through the mostly empty rooms, I wondered who exactly this exhibit was for and why Townhouse had decided to contain these images on their walls. It was starkly reminiscent of O'Doherty's (1976) "white cube," the posters removed from their everyday context

and remade as “art.” Townhouse called for the exhibit to “function as a tangible witness to the construction of this key moment in Egypt’s history, and assemble an archive of political ephemera.” But Townhouse was not only serving to “witness” these events but also to participate in a project of “museumification,” writing these elections into collective memory as “a key moment in Egypt’s history.” Moreover, it was a project of collection, a desire to bring together and catalogue items as meaningful and worthy of preservation.



FIGURE 2: *POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION* (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

A young man, who I later learned was a college graduate, unemployed and a full time protester in Tahrir Square, approached me and asked me what I thought of the exhibit. Before I could respond at all, he began berating Townhouse for appropriating this campaign material within their walls, hung symbolically in a gallery. He had been living in Tahrir for weeks and had witnessed the violent clashes between protesters and security forces in the past few weeks. He was deeply unsettled by the political materials representing an election he, and those he currently lived with, recognized as a farce. As he walked through the rooms of the gallery,

looking at the many campaign posters pinned on the walls, he wondered out loud as to what they were doing there. The disparity between the everyday lived experience and the gallery had never seemed so great.

For this man, the gallery space had appropriated the everyday, trying to sort through and catalogue the images and visuals of the street, the posters that those who walked the streets of Cairo saw. What was fluid and changing was suddenly fixed and stagnant, the everyday once memorialized in the walls of the gallery is *a priori* no longer the everyday. The everyday can be a significant and powerful site of the political and this act, by Townhouse, to put these campaign posters on the white walls of their gallery, was a performativity that to the young man above, was unwelcome.

When I walked back outside, I ran into Ahmed, an artist whose work engages the relationship between sound and space with digital installations, and asked him what he thought of the exhibit.

It didn't really do anything for me. It was for you, we know that, it was for people to see this that don't see it -- so that's good. And it's for the gallery to be able to say, we're in touch with the people, with politics. This is for sure, this is not for us but there's something else. It's for the picture so they can send it to funders and get more funding.

While I did not disagree with his own critique of the show, I was surprised by his honest and straightforward words in front of the curator, who is also his close friend. In Townhouse's effort to conform their space to the assumed needs and desires of their audience, they also turned away those who desired the space for entirely different sorts of projects and engagements. Furthermore, with this show, they legitimized the narrative of elections as the "key moment in history" in November 2011, effectively silencing the other struggles and interventions around the political during that same time period.

## The Politics of Aesthetics

How then, can we understand Townhouse's decision to use their space for a show such as *Politics of Representation*? The choice seemed contradictory to the sorts of projects that William and other Townhouse employees had claimed as their intentions in my conversations with them. The exhibition asked the audience to reflect on the "visual strategies" of a campaign effort, a direct engagement with Rancière's "politics of aesthetics" (2006). Rancière argues that art can and will reproduce hierarchies of power and capital, and the positioning by Townhouse of campaign material in the gallery space echoes aspects of these theories. When I spoke with William about the show, he imagined the space as a site to gather and engage "politically" or "organize" further. However, in reality, the space never succeeded in serving as such due to the perception by its audiences that the show moved both physically and conceptually away from a politics of the everyday. Nonetheless, this exhibition represents one of Rancière's "choices", an attempt to establish a relationship between "aesthetic virtue and political virtue" (p. 61).

What is most striking about these purported goals of the show is its disinterest in an aesthetic politics in the way that Rancière defines it, as a "reconfiguration of the given perceptual forms" (p. 63). This exhibition is instead an exact reproduction, a relocating of the everyday into the "white cube" (1976). Rancière argues, "the dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the "speakable", and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as the vehicle" (p. 63). Why then, does Townhouse, in a moment of such anxiety, tension and despair (these sentiments were articulated by William himself), choose to put together an exhibit that ultimately discourages any sort of imaginative and subversive thinking and organizing by reinforcing the boundaries

between the gallery space and the everyday?

I highlight this example of *Politics of Representation* to demonstrate a very different kind of “political” engagement than Rania’s refusal. This is an emerging moment in which artists and curators, struggle to understand their roles, practices and interventions in a revolutionary process. These struggles result in outcomes that are often unpredictable and only weeks later, those efforts seem misinformed or unimaginable. While this exhibition did not perhaps achieve the sort “political” space that William and others at Townhouse had imagined, it is also representative of an ongoing struggle to understand what exactly the political means in this emerging moment.

## **Conclusion**

Both Rania’s politics of refusal and *Politics as Representation*’s archival project suggest the significance the category of the political holds in the contemporary moment for artists and their practices. The process of the past year has forced many artists, as well as art spaces, to put their own artwork as well as their everyday practices, into conversation with something called the political. For Rania, she recognizes the revolution as already a form of containment, and she refuses to participate in any project that contains in this way. In Rania’s case, her notion of the political is *a priori* entangled in something called revolution, and therefore, she refuses both. Townhouse imagines “witnessing” and “archiving” as projects their audience can participate in, drawing lines and connections between the everyday and their own gallery space. However, these lines become impassable borders when the exhibition imagined Townhouse as a space in which the political can be both defined and codified into history.

In the following chapter, I will move to several attempts by visual artists to engage with a process called revolution through the visual and the gallery and what that engagement looks like in different spaces. In exploring these images and spaces, I try to demonstrate the visual's constructive and destructive powers in this emerging moment. I begin in a space that tries to reduce revolution to nothing more than its most joyful moments and I follow with two different attempts by artists to create a space in which to critically think through the revolution and the visual. I put these spaces into productive conversation with the work on art and the political in this chapter.



## Chapter 3: Visualizing the Political Present

### Introduction

As I walked through the rooms of Al Masar Gallery, a privately owned gallery in the wealthy neighborhood of Zamalek, one year after the 18 revolutionary days of Tahrir, I felt the past year's events mysteriously melt away; the continued clashes with the police, the desperation of a revolution lost, the reality of the military regime that continued to rule Egypt. These moments were made invisible by large and colorful renditions of the protests, splashes of red, orange and yellow erasing *process* and replacing with *event*. The gallery was filled with images of Tahrir Square, where the protests began, hundreds of Egyptian flags, depictions of the military extending their hands from their tanks to the protesters, cheering faces, waving arms and, most of all, camels. The images were full of camels.

The Battle of the Camel, as it is now known, took place on February 2, 2011, when government hired *baltagiyya* (thugs) rode into Tahrir Square on camels and horses, violently attacking the protesters. Photos and videos from that day show a battle between protesters and the regime's hired thugs who attacked from above on camels and horses. The moment was arguably the most desperate and hopeless of the 18 days and demonstrated how quickly the largely peaceful protests could turn violent at the discretion of the regime. In these paintings however, the camels fight alongside the protesters and there is no death or violence, but instead joy and camaraderie. Furthermore, there is no sign of the images of the martyrs, whose images are painted on walls across the city, whose faces hang from many rear-view mirrors in taxis, in these paintings.

The paintings were all by Georges Baghory, an Egyptian artist, born in 1932

who left for Paris years ago to “be free to express himself.”<sup>5</sup> In the pamphlet available at the exhibit (Baghory, 2012), Baghory writes of his urge to paint during and after the 18 days, “it was as if my arms had turned to a brush after the first [revolutionary] call and subsequent ones, and as if my five fingers have turned hot red, orange and yellow colors; mirroring the flames around me [on the street] and inside my own chest.” In the weeks and months after the 18 days, Baghory had felt compelled to use his art to depict the events he had witnessed in Tahrir Square. In that same moment, books with images of the protests filled the AUC press shelves, commercial art galleries eagerly advertised “revolutionary” shows and documentaries and movies were made, less than a year later. Baghory has been particularly prolific on the subject, as he managed to fill the rooms of Al Masar Gallery with these revolutionary reflections and paintings.

The lack of martyrs in Baghory’s reflections, images that had been printed and sold in hundreds of different forms in the last year, contrasted with his continued trope of the military and the people “as one hand” (a familiar chant of the 18 days that had long since lost its cachet), is unsettling. However, if seen in its context, a commercial art gallery in Zamalek, an exhibition titled *Baghory on the Revolution*, unabashed in its use of both the name and imagery of the commodified revolution, it is hardly surprising. I pause in this space, however, because it is a useful site to try to think through both the potentials of visual art in this process and the possibilities of it being reduced to a project of selective history writing.

Images have the ability to shock and disrupt the everyday, to imagine alternatives and different futures, but they can also reinforce the production of societal values and systems of inequality. Art that insists on disruption, historically referred to

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<sup>5</sup> According to his eponymous website, <http://www.baghory.com/index.htm>.

as “avant-garde,” is classified as such, first and foremost, when historically situated. Therefore, what is avant-garde in one time period is mundane in another. As Buck-Morss argues in “What is Political Art?”

If it shocks us in the midst of our mundane existence and breaks the routine of living even for a second (the enemy within ourselves is this routine of living), then it is allied with our better side, our bodily side that senses the order of things is not as it should be, or as it could be. (1998, p. 22)

Buck-Morss goes on to give examples of cultural avant-garde and successful “shocking” art, but she never includes the gallery as a potential *site* of rupture or disruption. The site itself, she says, can be disrupted, but the gallery is not disruptive in and of itself. We see, in the examples of *Baghory on the Revolution*, how the gallery is capable of enshrining and reducing historical and contemporary processes into ideological narratives. Does Buck-Morss’ claim hold true that there can be no political art if it exists only within the four walls of the gallery?

Furthermore, does the gallery, or other art spaces, all enclosed within privately owned walls, preclude the politics as the everyday? Can visual artists who insist on the gallery for their display of art succeed in “avant-garde” disruptions or subversions? Has the discourse of the counter-revolution been so successful as to relegate the visual forever to the production of a historical narrative of a familiar past and future?

It is relevant here to mention the burgeoning field of “street art” or graffiti art that has received the attention of the media, art critics and artists themselves in the past year. This is not to say that these artists who paint on the walls and streets of Cairo did not exist before, but only that their work has become increasingly visible in the past year. This art has been called “revolutionary art” and many see it as the art of the everyday, as it exists not on the inaccessible walls of the gallery, but instead on the streets people walk through every day. While I do not dispute the possibilities of

public art (this is a topic I will expand on in the following chapters), the containment of street art and graffiti by yet another version of the category of revolution has resulted in limits and restrictions on these artworks, remarkably similar to those within the gallery space.

In order to explore these questions, I will look at two other sites where visual artists try to engage the contemporary moment. The first site is the Saad Zaghloul cultural centre and an exhibit titled *Shift Delete 30*, and the second is a project titled *Cairo Documenta II*, in an old abandoned hotel in downtown Cairo, where a group of young artists exhibit their work, insisting on non-curation and “autonomy” outside of the gallery space. Both projects took place in January 2012, in the moment of “anniversary,” one year after the 18 day uprising. In exploring these sites, I will think through the visual and its ability (and inability) to engage critically with the debates around the emerging moment.

### **Cairo Documenta (II)**

In January 2012, two shows opened in downtown Cairo that garnered considerable media response from art critics and artists in Cairo. While perhaps the connection between the two was simply that they opened in the same month, the lines drawn between the two in the media reflected both an effort by audiences and the artists to engage critically in the contemporary moment through art. In addition, it was an attempt to grapple with a troubled moment of fulfillment as many felt the desperation of a revolutionary moment slipping away. While parliamentary elections took place from November 2011 through January 2012, it had become obvious to wide swaths of the Egyptian population that the process, which had been passed off as the first “fair and free elections” in Egypt, was carried out by the ruling military

council to maintain their oppressive regime.

In both November and December, protesters had once again taken to the streets of downtown Cairo to protest the ruling regime, facing the violent tactics of the militarized police, which included tear gas, rubber bullets and bird pellet shots. The euphoria of the 18 day revolution, only ten months earlier, had long disappeared, and was now overtaken by exhaustion, despair and desperation. Both exhibitions were planned to coincide with the one year anniversary of the beginning of the revolution on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011. The first show was called *Cairo Documenta (II)*, which, as the name indicates, was the second iteration of the project, *Cairo Documenta*, which had taken place a year prior in December 2010. The second show, *Shift Delete 30*, I will address later in the chapter.

The idea of *Cairo Documenta (II)* is based upon a project called *Documenta*, which originated in 1955 in Kassel, Germany. Since then, the original *Documenta* has continued to open an exhibition every five years which features contemporary, avant-garde artists; the show is well-known for challenging the dominant discourses of contemporary art and curatorial and exhibition practices. The name “*Documenta*” also demonstrates its approach of “documenting” the practices and styles of contemporary artists. In 2010, a group of young artists in Cairo decided to use this concept in putting together their own exhibition space, and the show had a memorable impact on Cairo’s art scene. Critics and audiences noted “the rough exhibition space in an abandoned hotel; the DIY aesthetic of the hanging; the youth of the participants... and the generally defiant attitude of the organizers towards Egyptian art institutions and galleries” (Davies, 2012). Over a year later, as the city was in the midst of a very different moment than for this first show, a similar group of young artists decided to put together another *Cairo Documenta*. The show, like the year

before, took place in the abandoned Hotel Venossoise with similar intentions that the artists would defy the boundaries and limitations of Egyptian art institutions and galleries.

One of the artists whose art had been featured in *Cairo Documenta* in 2010 (and had been a driving force behind the project itself), Ahmed Bassiony, had been killed by the police during protests on January 28, 2011. His loss was felt deeply by many artists as he was an inspiring and active member of the Cairo art scene and the show was, informally, dedicated to Bassiony. It was rumored that the show closed on January 28, 2012 in commemoration of his death. While this commemoration was not notated anywhere on the official materials of the show, it seemed to hang over the entire show, as a heavy reminder of the past years' losses and the current moment of despair. This decision by the artists to memorialize Bassiony had the effect of containing the exhibition around pre-determined notions of revolution and martyrs and left *Cairo Documenta (II)* with less discursive space for the artists and audiences to critically engage with these categories.

The artists wrote that the show was not "curated," although, as the art was still displayed on the walls of several rooms in the hotel, for the audience the experience of entering the space was similar to that of entering a downtown Cairo gallery. Decisions were made by a small group of self-selected artists of who to include and how to arrange the work. It is notable that with such freedom, every single artist hung their art on the walls, at eye-level. The artists focused primarily on the concept of the private gallery space as the primary restrictive pressure. However, the artists of *Cairo Documenta (II)* did not acknowledge that institutional pressures in private or commercial gallery spaces are not the only discursive practices that artists and audiences negotiate. Furthermore, the very project of "documenting" implies that

there are artists to be documented and others who remain invisible. While this is the project of many galleries and museums, *Cairo Documenta (II)* makes the claim that their own decisions can be distinguished from those of private and state owned art institutions based on their lack of affiliation with any particular gallery or organization.

The different artists in *Cairo Documenta (II)* took various approaches, but most pieces addressed the revolution — some relying on the more iconic imagery of the past year while others were subtler with their engagement. The show included sculptures, paintings, video installations, interactive computer games and a music installation. The pieces were placed throughout the large space and often rooms had several doors which gave the audience the feeling of walking through a maze. The work ranged from the subtle, such as the re-imagined works on discarded commercial cardboard boxes by Hosam Elsawah to the more pointed work of Ahmed El Shaer and his camel computer game “Nekh,” (the command used by camel owners to subdue their animals). The game allowed the audience to play a never-ending “Camel Battle” on the installed computer and whether the player chose to play the man or camel, no one ever won. The piece was a reference to February 2, 2011 when Mubarak’s government sent horses and camels into the square to attack the protesters.

While there were a wide variety of pieces in the show, I will touch on two more extensively here. The first is a piece by Ahmed Shawky (*Accusative Case*, 2012), which featured three paintings that evoked a feeling of pop art with their bright colors and simple forms. The three items were a spray bottle, a blender and a lighter, all images that evoke memories of the past year’s violence. The spray bottle, filled with various substances was used to combat the effects of tear gas and the lighter a tribute to the Molotov cocktails thrown by the protesters as well as the suspicious

burning of incriminating evidence in the Ministry of Interior, not long after the 18 days. The blender is a slightly less obvious symbol but is reminiscent of the confusion and chaos that have dominated the discourse in Egypt in the past year.



FIGURE 3: *ACCUSATIVE CASE* BY AHMED SHAWKY (PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAIRE DAVIES)

The second piece, *Life Hammer* (2012), by Ahmed Badry, was an oversized, painted sculpture of an emergency glass breaker. Although there is no text with the piece, it seemed to draw on the increasing anxiety and containment that Egyptians experienced as the one year anniversary of the 18 days approached. Badry's sculpture was a reminder that new lines are being drawn and old lines re-drawn in this moment, lines that often produce the desire to break boundaries and refuse this containment.





FIGURE 4: *LIFE HAMMER* BY AHMED BADRY (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

*Cairo Documenta II*, for all its claims of distinction from the private gallery space, was similar in form and experience to many of the other gallery shows in downtown Cairo. The containment or enframing of the “white cube” that they so desperately sought to avoid or counteract, was its reality. This containment can be seen in its “documenting” project, its claims to memorialize, its white walls and empty rooms and the artworks that fail to move beyond the imagery and symbolism of “revolution.” In the following section, I will look at another exhibition, which opened the same month, in the Saad Zaghloul cultural center, titled *Shift Delete 30*.

### **Shift Delete 30**

As one emerges from the metro stop at Saad Zaghloul, one stop south of Tahrir Square, one might notice a massive and daunting structure, dark gray and surrounded by a tall, black gate. There is one small sign, easily missed, that reads *DareeH* (mausoleum). Inside the mausoleum, it is dark and impressive, and the tomb

of the Egyptian historical figure Saad Zaghloul sits forebodingly in the center. The man sitting outside selling tickets directed me to the *Beit Al-Umma* (House of the Nation) across the street, a large and sprawling yellow villa that had once belonged to Zaghloul, a well-known revolutionary and nationalist figure during the British Occupation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some portion of Zaghloul's house has been preserved as a museum, the rooms seemingly untouched since his death. In the basement of the house, there is the Saad Zaghloul cultural centre. Both the museum and the centre are controlled and funded by the Egyptian government.

In January 2012, Ibrahim Saad decided to use the resources of the cultural centre to put together a show of young artists critically engaging with the government and the political moment in Egypt. The show was different from *Cairo Documenta (II)* in that it was curated, almost forcefully, with a theme and a very particular (and stated) purpose. Even the name alludes to the ex-president, Hosni Mubarak, and his thirty year reign over Egypt. The show itself explores the possibilities of re-imagining both pasts and futures, playing with the perspectives on the past thirty years and the hopes and desires of the coming years.

The center, which was in the basement of the villa, felt almost as dusty and forgotten as the museum above. Security forces had recently erected concrete walls throughout downtown Cairo, claiming to protect government buildings such as the Parliament and the Ministry of Interior. These walls made it nearly impossible to walk through downtown without taking extended detours and it would have taken over half an hour to walk from Tahrir Square to the cultural centre, instead of the usual ten minutes. While the name of the show, *Shift Delete 30* – implying the erasing of 30 years of unforgettable history – had suggested one kind of project, I found instead a complex engagement with questions of pasts and future and a politics

of erasure.

While the show avoided the more familiar tropes of “revolutionary art” like the bright, animated and uplifting pictures in *Baghory on Revolution*, the majority of the pieces in *Shift Delete 30* used symbolism and references to the “revolution” as their point of engagement. In the months after the 18 days, the state and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) had adopted the language of the revolution, re-writing the term and its context and history in Egypt in their own favor. Suddenly, the very regime that the revolution had risen up against was also “pro-revolution.”

Many of the artworks in the exhibition used imagery and symbolism of the revolution and it felt very much like a rehearsal of this “popular” revolution. The show was comprised of one smaller room and one larger room. The pieces included photos, paintings and video installations. In the center of the larger room, there was a glass case that enclosed a piece, *Dominant*, by Ahmed Abd El-Fattah, which featured cloth wrapped in the form of a body with the head of the donkey, lying as if buried in a grave. Down the hallway, there was a large installation of a calendar entitled *Spring Project without a Leader* (anonymous) which tracked various events in Egyptian history by month and year and culminated in a question mark on the spot where January and 2012, the month of the exhibition, met .

The show, like *Cairo Documenta (II)*, recorded the material symbols of the protests, with two of the larger projects in the gallery once again focusing on the bottles and containers of the protests. One piece, *Vinegar... Solider... Coke*, by Mohamed Ezz, featured three large black and white prints lined up next to one another. The first was the familiar figure of a riot policeman, his shield down, his eyes gazing to the right towards the two other images; one, a Coca Cola bottle and the second, a vinegar bottle, which seemed at first glance, like simple reproductions, but

revealed, on second glance, an alternative to where the ingredients usually go. The Coca Cola bottle read “Cola helps in diminishing the effects of the gas on the face and its impact on the skin” while the vinegar bottle read, “use after inhaling gas to eliminate suffocation.” Both alluded to the alternate uses of these ordinary household liquids in the protests.



FIGURE 5: *VINEGAR...SOLIDER...COKE* BY MOHAMED EZZ (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

The second piece, by Amr Amer was titled *Find Definition* and featured four bright yellow signs, each with an unmarked symbol, the first a spray bottle, the second a bearded (featureless) man, the third a gun and the final one, which seemed to be a featureless face under a niqab, or full face veil. Amer writes about his piece:

Find definition is a project about reconnaissance of opinion aiming to reach a specific definition about new phenomena that emerged in the Egyptian society, through the public definition of a group of symbols that was unknown and become regular things now. All the definitions will be submitted in a booklet to be a reference for these “symbols.”



FIGURE 6: *FIND DEFINITION* BY AMR AMER (PHOTOGRAPH BY AUTHOR)

Under each image, there was a box full of blank papers that read “Find Definition” at the top with a reprinted picture of the image. The expectation was that visitors to the gallery would fill out their definitions of each image and put them in the collection boxes below. One can assume that Amer chose these different symbols for their relevance to the current moment as his project aspires to reclaim these objects and their assumed associations through definition. While the project assumed power and understanding come through definition and recognition, it also encouraged these images to be redefined along the lines of a familiar language. In the following section, I will work through these images and the space using the analytic work of Patricia Hayes (2005) and Chris Pinney (2006).

### **(In)Visible Histories**

There are two aspects of *Shift Delete 30* that are useful to think through, one is the space in which the visual is presented and two, the implied goals of the show to erase or delete the past thirty years of Egyptian history. Patricia Hayes (2005)

theorizes how people, things and moments are made visible (or not). In light of this question, how can we think through this particular project and what it intends to make visible and conversely, invisible. As the name of the show *Shift Delete 30* implies, the exhibition desires to erase, or make invisible the past thirty years. This re-imagining or re-visualizing of the past thirty years demonstrated by the artworks at the exhibition, such as the ones in the previous section, attempt to re-imagine the uses of daily household items or common stereotypes and to resist the state's project of conformity of the past thirty years.

But perhaps the larger question of *Shift Delete 30* is what it made visible at all in a city of millions. While those involved in the Cairo art scene made the show visible in articles and reviews, in the end, it was hidden in the basement of a decrepit old villa. As I searched for the location when I visited, not a single person I asked on the streets nearby was familiar with the exhibit. What audience did this show desire and to whom did they want to make their art visible? What does it mean when the exhibition sits under the noses of those who work and live right outside the center, and no one goes inside?

To approach this question differently, what might we understand from the desire to “delete” the past thirty years. What sort of visual history making project does this entail and what does it aim to achieve? In Pinney's work on the visual and the political in India (2006), he calls this the “performative reunification of the fragmented signs of the nation” (p.11) and that is what it was like to wander the dark low-ceilinged rooms of the centre. *Shift Delete 30* tries to erase this past and dismantle the past structures of power. There were gestures towards a re-building but not quite a re-imagination, an attempt to reconstruct the history of the past thirty years, but somehow without the fragments of the past. What then are these politics of

erasure and how can imaginations of alternative futures take place without the ruins of the past? A moment, no matter how revolutionary, cannot erase all the subjectivities of the past in an instant, and this show asks what then can be done with these artifacts around which these new imaginations take place?

Notions of the familiar and the unfamiliar are categories that necessarily emerge from one another, understood only through their mutual relationship. It is in this sense that the future can only be imagined by acknowledging the past and furthermore, the ways in which we read the past are always shaped and formed by the present. These temporal categories, the past, present and future, always understood in relation to one another, are further entangled in the shifting categories of the familiar and the unfamiliar.

## **Conclusion**

One question that has been raised by the past two chapters is the question of “the audience.” My fieldwork has taken me into numerous gallery spaces, the great majority of them empty or with small audiences, especially compared with the bustling streets of urban Cairo outside the gallery’s door. This raises questions about what an audience means for art, especially art within the walls of a gallery. As I will discuss in the following chapter, practices of gathering, talking and thinking are meaningful and productive interventions in the everyday for artists. What then, makes the exhibition the “event” (Badiou, 2005) and does it even matter if there is an “audience” at the event and for whom does it matter? If art is imagined through the “white cube” (O’Doherty, 1976), then the desire for the audience in and of itself, becomes a form of containment. Exhibitions are often recognized as successful through their audiences and not by the terms of their production. Within the gallery

walls, the visual becomes the limit of what we see, and the gathering and talking and thinking is made invisible. As I will show in the next chapter, some artists are exploring notions of community, dialogue and collectivity as sites that refuse the containment of both the gallery as well as the audience.

The purpose of this project is to explore particular moments within a larger process, drawing a new kind of geography that does not map or condense. January 2012 was a particularly anxious moment in Cairo as euphoria had been worn down by continued clashes, political factions and structural violence. Many who had kept their hopes up for months sunk into despair at a revolutionary moment that they believed had come and gone. My interlocutors whose anxiety had been tinged with energy and hope in the fall now seemed disillusioned and exhausted.

But this was also an anniversary moment, which meant there was a renewal of the energy around the commodification of the revolution. *Baghory on the Revolution* represented such an energy as one year later, the revolution was re-memorialized as the 18 days. A year of continued struggle and dissatisfaction was made invisible by these images. *Cairo Documenta (II)* and *Shift Delete 30* were imagined as interventions in this fetishization of revolution, spaces in which memory, historical narrative and imagined futures could be visualized and re-visualized, formed and reformed. The artworks however, were produced for the gallery and became, from their very conception, part of the gallery space (O'Doherty, 1976). While the counter-hegemonic project cannot be categorized as it is always changing and reforming, the lack of engagement of these exhibitions with the possibility of the everyday as a counter-hegemonic politics made the very question of their ability to imagine the unfamiliar an impossibility.



## Chapter Four: Collectivity as an Imagination

### Introduction

As I conducted my fieldwork, I began to notice an increasing number of alternative sites emerging outside of the gallery. This moment began most obviously with the multiplying number of artists painting the walls of Cairo's streets, an art form that was named as "revolutionary art" from the very beginning of its manifestation throughout Cairo. The production of this street art as the "purest" or most "authentic" form of revolutionary art by journalists, art critics and academics, made the terms of production of this imagery almost as fraught with contradictions as the art within the gallery walls that I have explored in this thesis.

Another alternative, which crept slowly into my fieldwork, was the notion of community or collectivity. As the terminology and form of the space appeared differently among my interlocutors, it took a while before I pieced together the fragments. These ideas or spaces were not necessarily absent in previous years but as the issue of containment became more and more apparent, a sort of *informalization* and *formalization* took place. The informalization is an effort to disentangle the terms of art's production away from the gallery walls, and to rework the formal gallery space to accommodate the growing number of artists who find the gallery inaccessible and irrelevant. The formalization is a simultaneous desire to recognize and name the networks and communities that these artists have been forming and re-forming both in the past year and previously. The central tension between the desire to formalize and informalize demonstrates the sorts of negotiations artists are making in this revolutionary process. However I recognize that the lines between the formal and the informal are in no way rigid boundaries, but rather flexible and mobile. I use this

analytical lens as it most succinctly reflects the negotiations of my interlocutors with what they identified as structured institutions of power and the more flexible notions of community organizing.

Community, as theorized by Nancy (1991) and later Kester (2004), recognizes the potential of dialogue and conversation among individuals. As Nancy argues, community became a contested category through modern world history (i.e. twentieth-century totalitarianism) and by the theories of poststructuralist thinkers such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze. Community was imagined by the former around ideas of a “mass identity” while for the latter, it maintained the myth of a “coherent self” (as cited in Kester, 2004, p. 154). This understanding of community has made it a challenging notion around which to imagine art and the political. However, as Nancy and Kester argue, by recognizing identities and experiences as necessarily fragmented and always multiple, there can be a counter-hegemonic project called community. Community, as Kester argues, “is produced through our recognition that we have no “substantial identity” (and our consequent realization that this lack of identity must be in fact shared by others)” (Kester, 2004, p. 155). In this chapter, I will consider how community is imagined among artists through emerging and fractured notions of revolution.

Along similar lines, “collectivity” also raises questions about the artist as an individual. The traditional notion of the “artist as author” (Enwezor, 2007) stands in direct contradiction with the collective idea of artistic production. Perhaps for this reason, Enwezor argues that collectivity’s current “fashionability” ignores its historical genealogy, one which is situated as far back as the Paris Commune of the 1860s and the socialist collectives of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and continued up to the Situationist International and other activist-based practices in the 1960s.

This notion of collectivity can also be traced to the liberation movements of the mid-twentieth century and contemporary antiglobalization movements (p. 224-225).

Collectives, argues Enwezor, are common in “periods of crisis, in moments of social upheaval and political uncertainty within society” (p. 225). Due to such crises, artists are often forced to reevaluate their positions in relation to societal institutions, their own artistic work, and the very conditions of production. The criticality of the collective, therefore, lies in its ability to participate in “the social production of the public sphere” (p. 239) and to acknowledge and negotiate the political as complex.

I argue that in this emerging moment in Cairo, projects of network and community building represent these sorts of collectives, grappling with “periods of crisis.” In this chapter, I will consider both the community-based practices of one filmmaker, Amira, who focuses her energy on her artist networks. Amira discovered a community of artists eager to organize and share ideas after the 18 days in Tahrir, a desire that Amira said was absent in the years before. The formation (and reformation) of these communities demonstrates the desire of some artists to renegotiate their relationship to the political. These networks are an attempt to recognize (and often reject) the conditions of the production of the visual in this emerging moment. This rejection has now become a project through which artists can practice a criticality and resistance to the powerful discourses of containment.

At the same time, as these informal networks and communities have formed throughout the city and across various social groups, some artists have seen this moment as an opportunity to develop art spaces that are more directly engaged with a project of *informalization* and collective building. In this chapter, I will look at two projects, 10 Mahmoud Bassiony and the Mahatat Collective, which were both founded in the past year, since January 25, 2011. 10 Mahmoud Bassiony is an

apartment that a young artist, Iman, rented and turned into a space for artists to gather and practice, offering an alternative to the gallery for the development of projects and ideas. However, Iman's top priority has been what she calls, "transparency," a term that I argue comes directly from the language of neoliberal governance.

The second project is the Mahatat Collective, founded by five artists, who, dissatisfied with the gallery space as an expression of the contemporary moment's revolutionary desires, were determined to bring art into public spaces. While the interventions of Mahatat are small for the moment, they offer great possibility in bringing the practice of art into the everyday. These projects imagine themselves along community and collectivity lines, but, as this chapter will argue, the desires of these artists and their projects represent a complex negotiation of the individual, the collective and the everyday.

### **Community and Conversation as Artistic Practice**

*After Jan 25, people started appearing out of the woodwork, people who had never wanted to talk were suddenly sharing stories and information. All these communities that had never been there before started forming.*

- Amira, independent filmmaker

As a filmmaker without a professional training, Amira had struggled to pave her own path in Egypt's film industry. Before January 25, 2011, she had felt that her communities and networks of support within the art world were small and unreliable. When she made her first feature length documentary, after ten years as the assistant to a well-known Egyptian filmmaker, she went to him to ask his approval (and support). He refused immediately citing various logistical reasons but Amira told me that she knew the real reason; he was unwilling to share the networks and contacts he had built up for himself over the years. While she made the film, which took over six years,

she had to fight for the support necessary to finish the project and she often ended up doing the majority of the work on her own.

When I sat down with Amira in her apartment in mid-November of 2011, it was a hopeful moment for her. It was a moment in which some, tired from months of uncertainty and further violence (such as the “Maspero massacre” of Coptic Christian protesters the previous month), felt optimistic that the upcoming parliamentary elections could offer some positive change or challenge to the ruling regime, however small. The moment turned out however, to be the calm before the storm. Only a few days later, shortly before the parliamentary elections were to take place, violent clashes broke out in downtown Cairo, as riot police attacked protesters gathered in Tahrir square, who were calling for the Supreme Council of Armed Forces to step down from power. Nonetheless, when I spoke with Amira, she retained a piece of hope, her words reflecting this optimism.

Amira spoke of the 18 days in Tahrir and the following weeks with fondness, remembering the communities and friendships that had formed along these activist lines, both in the square and outside. In the past, Amira said, she had found little support from her fellow artists and they often guarded their own networks fiercely, unwilling to share information that might sacrifice their own individual success. This is a sentiment that was echoed among most of my interlocutors and is also highlighted by the artists that Jessica Winegar worked with in *Creative Reckonings* (2006).

Amira felt that this revolutionary moment had shown artists that their political and social power, manifest in their ability to practice resistance, was not only in the work that they produced, but also through their networks and communities. At first, during the 18 days, these networks materialized through necessity, in order to keep large groups aware of ongoing events and possible dangers. This was especially true

when the government cut the mobile phone services and the Internet. (The former returned after a few days and the Internet after a week). In the months afterwards, similar networks were maintained as mechanisms for continued organizing as well as this emerging notion of community that Amira articulated to me.

Amira's story illustrates that this moment was extraordinary and full of possibility to some artists who felt they had the opportunity to collaborate or form communities in new ways. When I spoke to Amira, I realized that the 18 days, did not, for her, represent a moment of possibility through the visual. In fact, she refused to bring her video camera to the protests. When I asked her if she thought of making a film on the topic or thought it was even possible to make a movie so soon after the event, she replied, "I lived with my family for 45 years and only then did I make a movie about them." Instead, for Amira, it has been a moment to explore new sites of resistance through these networks and communities and strategies for sustaining this revolutionary process. This conversation was an important moment in my own research, as Amira made me aware of community as both a political and artistic practice.

In Kester's article (2005), he draws on various examples, varying from prostitutes in Zurich, Switzerland to high school students of color in California, to illustrate when conversation and community building actually *becomes* the artistic practice as opposed to a conversation about a finished product. In reformulating conversation and dialogue as the artistic practice, Kester argues, "it is re-framed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse" (p. 2). These sorts of projects that are based in processes of conversation and dialogue through community offer a very different relationship between art and the political.

Furthermore, Kester argues that the visual is inherently captured in a moment by the viewer, even if that moment is extended for the length of a film or that moment occurs many times, the reaction is nonetheless, immediate. Kester argues that conversational and “dialogical art practice” are on the other hand, “durational.” This durational aspect of projects of conversation and dialogue make them particularly appealing in a moment in which artists resist the collapse of the processes of the political into an “event” (Badiou, 2005). The dominant discourse after the 18 days of protests in Tahrir encapsulated that moment as “the event” and often disregarded ongoing revolutionary processes and projects. The visual, defined by its immediacy, was used by the state, international media and commercial art galleries to reinforce this notion of the event. However, the durational practice that Amira has been a part of, one which resists immediacy, and therefore completeness, allows for a constant and critical re-negotiation with this emerging moment. The question, Kester argues, with which dialogical art struggles, is whether or not these conversational practices can retain the criticality of the aesthetic practice while also resisting the violent avant-garde tradition of shocking the viewer.

I met with Amira again in December, in a very different moment from our first meeting only a few weeks prior. Riot police had attacked protesters in Tahrir and downtown Cairo had been engulfed in violent clashes on the streets leading to the Ministry of Interior. As suddenly as it had begun, the physical violence had subsided and parliamentary elections, which many had speculated would be postponed, went ahead as planned. Amira, who had only a couple weeks prior, spoken optimistically of the elections, said dismissively, “we were a herd heading to the slaughter.” The moment of hope had quickly dissipated into disillusion and despair. However, as we sat in her mother’s apartment, whose shelves were full to the brim with newspapers

narrating a history of the last fifty years, our conversation stretched over many hours as she took call after call from friends, eager to share news and opinions of ongoing events. She took every call and made some of her own as well. At one point she turned to me and said, “I don’t know how long this space will remain.” On this evening, even as it was filled with uncertainty and disappointment, this practice of community and dialogue seemed particularly urgent. These networks still offered the possibility of challenging discursive practices and negotiating a space through which to imagine an alternative to the prevailing order.

### **10 Mahmoud Bassiony**

While I had noticed informal communities and gatherings forming among artists from the very beginning of my field research, 10 Mahmoud Bassiony was the first attempt that I found at both a *formalization* of community through physical space and an *informalization* of the gallery. Iman, a young graduate of the American University in Cairo (AUC), initially opened her own space with a friend in Zamalek after graduation. But she found that it was too much like a gallery, which she was quickly dissatisfied with, and after only a year or so, she and her friend closed the gallery.

In October 2011, after a long search, she found an apartment in downtown Cairo, only five minutes from Tahrir square, that she thought could be renovated to fit her new vision. This vision was of a space where artists could gather to share, collaborate, rehearse, and work without the restrictive structures of a gallery or formal exhibition space. Iman keeps a simple blog, the only publicity for the space, in which she documents events, shares videos, pictures and information on future events and offers the space to any who are interested. In the informational page of the blog, she



emphasizes that the space is “NOT a gallery” and that it is a space for “anyone interested.” She poses the question: “How is it different?” to which she replies, “No fancy publicity. No solo shows. No dress code. No minimum charge. No commercial attractions. No propaganda. Casual events. Informal.”

As I sat with Iman on a late afternoon in February 2012, I could see immediately that she had taken great care in ensuring that this space appeared open and accessible. People came and went casually from the apartment as we sat and talked, passing through to greet Iman. Some were preparing for meetings while other rooms were set up as studios for various artists who had asked Iman to use the space. Iman had put up the money for the monthly rent, a fact that she danced around delicately in our conversation. However, the finances of the space are public on the blog and it is asked that those who use the space and can contribute, will do so. Her biggest goal for the space, something she said was “underlined and circled over and over” in the planning, is transparency. Transparency, for Iman, means that all aspects of the organization, primarily financial records and artistic decisions, are public and mutable according to popular demand.

She spoke strongly of her desire to provide an alternative space to the gallery for artists in Cairo. She spoke negatively of the commercial galleries in Zamalek and Townhouse, but she quickly added that she did not want to sound overly critical or dismissive of these spaces as she recognized her relative newness to the art scene in Cairo. She saw these galleries as possibly productive as well, but only when there were other sorts of art spaces, such as 10 Mahmoud Bassiony, to counterbalance them. When you go to a gallery in Cairo, Iman said, “it’s the same circles, it can be very hard to break in, that’s not the kind of space I wanted to be part of.” Her hope, in creating a space like 10 Mahmoud Bassiony was to create a sort of balancing affect.

This search for an “outside” community was an important theme in my conversations with both Rania and Iman, although how they managed to secure and nurture these communities varied. For Rania, whose politics of refusal I discussed in chapter two, the community was more informal and the networks that she had established among young artists, musicians and dancers, were purposely disengaged from any formal art spaces. Iman on the other hand, upon graduation from AUC (several years before Rania), spent the majority of her energy and time working to find and create a physical space in which to develop and support these communities.

The space itself is largely unfurnished, allowing for the apartment to shift and accommodate different sorts of events, projects and processes. Iman has used her own resources to renovate the space and make it inhabitable. She worked with the help of friends to design the space, and once all the repairs had been made, the space opened. However, 10 Mahmoud Bassiony makes no attempt to challenge class politics or make art available to those excluded. The space instead offers a site for informal collectives and communities of artists to gather. While the structures of recognition in this space are, I would argue, less rigid than in the gallery, there is still the sense that “artists” must enact a certain performativity to be recognized as such within this space.

Iman believes that gallery spaces, by their very framework, are limited in potential. The formal boards and administrative structures lead to a lack of transparency that Iman finds irreconcilable with the practice of art. For Iman, her focus on transparency is a product of her distrust of galleries, which she believes keep the majority of their decision-making processes behind closed doors. Her desire is to provide a space that does not function at the whims of international funding and private board members’ decisions and does not privilege one artist’s work at the

expense of many others. With 10 Mahmoud Bassiony, she is trying to provide a space that both contradicts and balances the gallery.

Near the end of our conversation, Iman made a comment that I think demonstrates what a lot of the artists organizing networks among themselves and forming collectives are imagining. She remarked, “I’m glad that they don’t notice these cultural spaces, because this is where big change is going to happen and it’s really going to surprise them. They are so focused on political parties and NGOs and they don’t realize what’s happening in these other spaces.” There is nothing about 10 Mahmoud Bassiony that makes one imagine that the conversations in this apartment are necessarily focused on the “political” or the ongoing resistance. There was no mention, for instance, of the recent massacre of soccer fans in the city of Port Said, and the recent violence by the police in downtown Cairo earlier that month. There was no mention of the general strike that many had called for on the one-year anniversary of the ex-President Hosni Mubarak’s removal from power. But nonetheless, Iman recognized and believed in the organizational and political power of these “cultural spaces” to challenge the ruling regime.

For these reasons, Iman’s comment struck me as slightly contradictory. What made this space political in the way that she imagined? While this comment illustrates the sorts of imagined possibilities around spaces like 10 Mahmoud Bassiony, it also presents questions of how the language of neoliberal governance, such as “transparency,” travels. Iman argued passionately in our conversations that this moment marked an important possibility for artists to organize outside of spaces monitored and controlled by the state such as political parties and NGOs. Iman recognized that 10 Mahmoud Bassiony presented the possibility of a collectivism that might challenge these dominant power structures, both in Cairo’s art scene as well as

beyond. At the same time, Iman seemed primarily familiar with the language of “transparency” which closely echoed the language of the political parties and NGOs which she had dismissed. The events at 10 Mahmoud Bassiony include movie screenings, art therapy sessions and open mic nights, but when Iman speaks of the project, she imagines that the space also has the potential to make subversive political statements. However, I argue that due to her own socio-economic positioning, she struggles to articulate her project beyond the familiar language of the very organizations she tries to challenge.

### **Politics of the Self**

When I first discovered 10 Mahmoud Bassiony’s website online, I eagerly got in touch with Iman, excited to have found a project that took the informal networks and communities of artists like Amira and created a physical space to support them. However, when I met with Iman, I found a somewhat different sort of imagination around collectivity and community. Iman’s different attempts to carve out a space for herself in the Cairo art scene reflect her own desires to articulate her independence and freedom in relation to both the state and the commercial gallery. These efforts were made possible, most of all, by her position as the daughter of wealthy parents. She went to the expensive, private American University in Cairo and after graduation, she was able to take the risk of pursuing a career as an artist with the knowledge that her parents could support her financially. Her first effort at creating her own art space was a gallery in the neighborhood of Zamalek, an effort that is not uncommon among the artistic children of the wealthy in Cairo, as demonstrated by the many small and often unsuccessful galleries scattered throughout the neighborhood. The revolution, she said, inspired her to try opening another space, an idea she had been working on

for several years. She wanted to offer a space without the perceived pretension and inaccessibility of a gallery, a space that offered a larger group of young artists a way in which to enter Cairo's art scene. While the narrative of the kind of project Iman imagines offers the possibility of collectivity, it also remains connected to neoliberal notions of class politics and business practices.

As illustrated in chapter one, until the 1990s, Egypt's art scene was primarily dominated, at least in popular discourse, by the state's cultural institutions. As various political and financial actors struggled to find a solution to capitalism's fading global power from the late 1960s until the 1990s, neoliberalism spread unevenly, eventually growing to share an uneasy relationship in Egypt with these existing institutions (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism, Harvey argues, offered a mechanism by which a nervous ruling class regained their political power. But neoliberalism came packaged with a story of freedom and the "individual" which made it widely appealing and marketable by those who benefited to those who ultimately suffered. This so called "freedom story" traveled through the spaces and discourses of Egyptian artists starting in the 1990s, a story that is the focal point of Jessica Winegar's *Creative Reckonings* (2006, see chapter one). The freedom story of neoliberalism produced the narrative that the state controlled cultural institutions in Egypt denied artists the autonomy to produce art that was not inherently nationalist propaganda for the state. Of course, this language asserted that neoliberalism and access to global art markets necessarily guaranteed artists the political, social and economic "freedoms" to perform and produce whenever and however they wanted. This narrative of the Egyptian art scene offers insight into Iman's desire to create a "transparent" and "autonomous" art space in her "post-revolution" moment.

Iman desires to create an open and collective space for herself and her

community. The networks she imagines in this space are in direct opposition to the gallery. However, social structures remain unquestioned and they reaffirm the reproduction of a certain class politics. Harvey claims the “more clearly oppositional movements recognize that their central objective must be to confront the class power that has been so effectively restored under neoliberalism, the more they will be likely to cohere” (2007, p. 43). The project’s disinterest in addressing 10 Mahmoud Bassiony’s class politics contrasts with Iman’s statement in the previous section, in which she suggests the potentiality of these “cultural spaces” as sites of resistance. This contrast highlights the ways in which the language of neoliberal governance, in particular “transparency,” travels and retains such power. In the case of Iman and 10 Mahmoud Bassiony, this contrast is particularly stark as Iman also makes claims to this space as a potential site of resistance.

10 Mahmoud Bassiony as an alternative art space also reflects a reproduction or version of the global art markets as freedom story. Iman perceives the cultural institutions and commercial galleries in Cairo as unreceptive to the kind of autonomy and transparency that artistic practices (and production spaces) demand. However, this terminology is reproduced from the sorts of neoliberal governance from which her project claims autonomy. 10 Mahmoud Bassiony is a useful site to think through these questions because this space represents a formalization of the networks and communities while at the same time, reproducing the language of neoliberal governance that so many artists struggle to resist. While various social, political and economic factors distinguish Amira from Iman, nonetheless, it is worthwhile to think through what these sorts of formalizations might mean for possibilities of artists’ networks and communities.

Iman’s project, a community art space, represents a different kind of politics

that we might call, a politics of the self. This project is about exploring notions of “freedom” in a moment in Egypt during which many are exploring the different meanings of this language. For Iman, this language of freedom revolves almost entirely around her own ability to explore her growth and development as an artist in her community, without pressure to adhere to any particular political or cultural project. This sense of “outsideness” is, I would argue, an illusion, that at times reproduces the narrative of autonomy as part of a neoliberal imagination. Iman insists on “freedom” from political, cultural and financial constraints, situating her independence and “self” as a politics, in and of itself. This contrast between a desire to resist hegemonic projects and at the same time, a reproduction of the language of neoliberal governance, is representative of the tensions that I have argued are emerging in this moment around the familiar and the unfamiliar.

### **Mahatat for Contemporary Art**

In a series of Youtube videos posted online, a young man dressed in a traditional pantomime outfit boards the Cairo metro at various stations and performs for those on the car. He mimics the actions of those around him (reading a newspaper, talking on a cell phone or sleeping), shakes the hands of children and adults, inserts himself (silently) into conversations and pretends to play music for a car. Some view him warily and avoid his eyes, children for the most part laugh and play along and one young man even indulges him in an imagined shared cup of tea.

In the women’s car (Cairo has several cars in the metro reserved for women and children only), women who are part of a project called *Bussy* (translated as the command “look!” to a woman), also perform. No one tapes this, however, due to the very different nature of the performance. The actors in *Bussy*, which is modeled

loosely off of the Vagina Monologues, recount personal stories from everyday life, meant to show diverse women's experiences. While the project was born at the American University in Cairo, it has since traveled to other locations in downtown Cairo, its newest location being the women's car of the metro. As the stories often contain narratives that are considered by some to be private or personal, and therefore not to be shared on the public metro in front of strangers, some reacted negatively, and even, in one instance, violently. But for the most part the project was received with curiosity, interest and often excitement. Some women, who found the stories relatable to their own experiences even approached the performers after the monologues had finished.

For both the pantomimes and Bussy, the audiences were most distrustful when they were not aware that the event was a performance. Dance or music performance is rare on the Cairo metro and those riding the metro who encountered these performances did not have this context to draw upon in trying to make sense or meaning of the actors. In addition, especially in the women's car, vendors come through constantly, selling anything from socks to gum to children's books, weaving through the crowds shouting out their merchandise and its price. It is unexpected, and for the most part unprecedented, for anyone to perform. For this reason, in one instance, when the pantomime handed out paper cut-outs of smiley faces to the commuters, the majority ignored him, assuming that he was trying to sell the silly pieces of paper to them.

These performances in the metro are part of a project called *Art of Transit*, which is one portion of a larger project, *Shaware3na* (our streets). They are the first public performances by the Mahatat Collective, an organization founded after January 25, 2011. In Mahatat's written material, the founders describe the collective as a



“mobile art initiative” which was created by “five individuals from different national and professional backgrounds.” Mahatat’s primary goal is to bring art into public space, a vision they say was encouraged by “the spirit that unified many old and young Egyptians from very diverse backgrounds during the revolution.”

I spoke with Andrea, a German curator and one of the five founders, in February 2012. Andrea and the four others imagined a new kind of art space that stepped outside of the walls of the gallery and into public space. While Andrea spoke often of the idea of revolution as containment and she was extremely critical of the artists, academics, journalists and funding organizations that had in her words, “taken advantage” of the revolution to profit, the material quoted above nonetheless suggests a certain inspiration by the “revolution.”

From my conversations with Andrea, I came away with the strong impression that all five of the founders had had a long and sustained investment in this vision of public art in Cairo, which they believe is in strong contrast to those who used the notion of “revolution” for profitable endeavors. As an example of this, Andrea mentioned an informal stand in Tahrir square in which Mia Grondahl (author of *Gaza Graffiti*) was selling her photos of the revolution for anywhere from 300 to 500 Egyptian pounds, a sizable portion of an average monthly income for a working-class Egyptian family. Andrea used this example to illustrate the sorts of projects that claimed and contained the revolution and to distinguish Mahatat as aware of these troublesome categories. While Mahatat material recognizes the emerging moment and the people, processes and projects with which their own organization interacts, it also speaks to a desire to situate their work within the revolutionary process.

In addition to the metro project mentioned above there are four other projects that are part of *Shaware3na*. One, called *Cinema Sky*, screens short Egyptian films in

downtown Cairo squares, another is called *Stop and Dance*, which brings together professional and non-professional contemporary dancers to perform on Cairo metro platforms and the last is *The Tree Project*, which brings together artists and residents of a Cairo neighborhood to design installation pieces (from paint, cloth, light and sound) for the trees in the neighborhood, ending with a tree festival. These four projects, all part of *Shaware3na*, are part of a larger effort to deconstruct the gallery walls as the necessary framework for art and performance. While the interventions of this first project are small, they are significant in their desire to bring art into the politics of the everyday.

Mahatat is housed in a small and pleasant apartment for which Andrea said they searched much longer than they would have liked. Their project has limited funds and it had been challenging, Andrea said, to find a space suitable for the organizers to gather. Many of these new art spaces that have opened in the last year are in downtown, in close proximity to Tahrir square, retaining a sort of imagination of revolutions as directly linked to “downtown.” Mahatat’s location, however, is in a neighborhood, Doqqi, across the Nile from downtown. There is something exciting about an art space not insistent on an “authentic” that exists only in downtown.

Mahatat’s apartment is not the epicenter of their work but it is instead a planning and organizing space for their projects that take place on the streets, in neighborhoods and in metro cars. Mahatat is for the moment, receiving funding from the Danish Egyptian Dialogue Institute, the British Council and the German Embassy. They are currently working on plans to develop a business model that would allow them to be financially independent. Andrea expressed very little concern with the idea that their project was in any way formed or shaped by their funders. She also saw this business model, essentially selling merchandise, as a mechanism through

which to achieve what she called “financial independence.”

During our conversations, Andrea outlined Mahatat’s three goals, the first is to bring art into public spaces in Cairo, the second is to support young artists exploring creative and artistic projects, and the last is to provide a more formal network for artists working in public spaces. Mahatat’s founders see both reclamation of public spaces and access to art for a larger public, as well as a formalization of artists’ networks, as projects of possibility in this revolutionary process. The Mahatat collective represents a different sort of community building than 10 Mahmoud Bassiony, but I argue that their desires are not so different from one another. Iman and Andrea are artists who have taken the processes and the events of the last year as a moment through which to imagine more formal structures, the building of networks and communities among artists and their audiences. In practice, however, their projects appear very differently.

### **Art and Public Space**

While 10 Mahmoud Bassiony’s project is based on creating an art space that is contained physically and therefore locatable and familiar to a visitor used to a gallery space, Mahatat resists the familiar or formal art space. Their idea, instead, is to bring art into spaces that are familiar to the inhabitants of the city – public squares, metro stations and neighborhood trees. The idea of bringing art into public space is a project that must be historicized in order to make sense of its place in this contemporary moment in Cairo. In order to do this, I will use Claire Bishop’s introduction to *Participation* (2006), to situate Mahatat’s organization within a contemporary history of public art.

Bishop locates the precursors of participatory art with Dada artists’

performances in Paris in 1921 and its political status with the theories of the left-wing German theorist Walter Benjamin in 1934. Benjamin, argues Bishop, saw the involvement of the audience in both production and performance as a “better” model that allowed art’s interventions to be the products of both artists and audiences. However, Bishop argues that in the contemporary moment, collective production and participation are no longer necessarily political or oppositional. Participation, in and of itself, does not indicate a certain kind of political project and has become as recognizable to a contemporary audience as any other art form. While I agree that participation in and of itself does not imply an oppositional politics, Mahatat’s interventions in public spaces that engage the audience along very different lines than the confined space of the gallery represent the possibilities in a politics of the everyday through art.

Bishop attributes the “art of participation” generally to one or all of three agendas that she calls “activation; authorship; and community.” Activation refers to an active subject who is inspired by the participatory nature of the artistic project. The second agenda, authorship, gives the audience or viewer some role or part in the project. This “collaborative creativity” is viewed as more democratic and non-hierarchical when compared to a work created by a single artist. And finally, community refers to the idea that through a “collective elaboration of meaning,” the project aims to restore a “social bond” among the artists and their audiences, in direct opposition to the alienating effects of capitalism. Bishop argues that almost all descriptions of participation in art since the 1960s include these three agendas mentioned above.

Mahatat’s projects, I argue, can be understood along the lines of these three agendas. As mentioned in the previous section, *Art of Transit* sends a pantomime

onto the metro cars in Cairo to perform. The entire project is essentially an engagement with an audience who is fluid and dynamic as people move through the cars on their everyday commutes. The project, which is filmed, is contingent upon an engagement with an audience, without which there is no performance. Unlike a stage performance in which the audience is largely invisible, the audience shapes and forms the performance just as much as the pantomime. *Art of Transit* brings together the subway car in a performance, reflecting the “social bond” to which Bishop refers. Since the performance takes place on a moving metro car, the end of the performance does not mean the end of the interaction between the performers and the audience. Instead, Mahatat performers and their audiences often continue their conversations as fellow passengers on a metro car, effectively challenging the borders between the two categories.

While Mahatat emerges from a very different historical context than the Situationist International, it is nonetheless productive to think through the situationist project and its intersections with a politics of the everyday. Mahatat and its interventions in public space, desire to bring the pleasure, joy and excitement, of artistic practices to the everyday. The situationist project was “the final push towards the transformation of everyday life from a realm of bland consumption to free creation” (Plant, 1992, p. 4). And this, I would argue, is the desire of Mahatat, a desire to transform the everyday and engage with the joy and pleasure of “free creation.” Under Mubarak’s regime, no projects in public space, whether artistic or not, were allowed without a permit. Since Mubarak stepped down on February 11 2011, the ability to perform and create on the streets of Cairo has become, if not easy, at least a possibility. The streets of downtown Cairo full with graffiti and projects like *Art of Transit* imagine public space as a site of possibility and transformation. It is for

this reason that Mahatat's small but meaningful interventions into public space represent an exciting moment for a politics of the everyday.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to draw on emerging notions of community and collectivity through the experiences and projects of three different interlocutors to illustrate how these desires are formed along various political, social and economic lines with different levels of formalization and informalization. While all three interlocutors imagined their projects around alternative spaces to the gallery, the shape that these projects took varied enormously. This is a moment in which boundaries are pushed and re-imagined and these different spaces represent a struggle with the familiar and the unfamiliar, making visible the tensions and contradictions of this revolutionary process.

These projects are all about a politics of the everyday and exploring the possibilities of new and alternative spaces, and, in the case of Mahatat, pushing the boundaries of what constitutes the visual through performance. While all three projects appear in different forms, they reflect a desire to take advantage of a moment in which the unfamiliar suddenly feels possible. These projects are an attempt to push boundaries in a temporal space that feels both limitless and limited. Amira recognizes this sense of the limited and worries that this space, or possibility, will cease to exist. This sense of urgency appears to drive Amira, Iman and Andrea to explore this temporal space, struggling with the contradictions and uncertainties as they make a politics of their everyday practices.

In the following final chapter, I will tie together the questions initially posed in chapter one with the rest of the chapters in this thesis. By exploring the central

tension in my project as both profoundly visual and non-visual, I argue that this tension is in fact, the very site upon which a possibility of subversion may exist. This constant forming and re-forming of communities and networks represents an emerging moment that is constantly shifting and therefore, full of potentiality. In situating my own fieldwork and thesis on the site of this tension, I argue that the possibility for imagining alternative futures through artistic practices remains.

## Chapter Five: A Moment of Tensions

### Introduction

In this final chapter, I attempt to bring together the various ethnographic and analytical work of this thesis in order to think through what this moment means for future imaginations of practicing art in Cairo. I argue that the tensions that I have explored in my thesis, and which I will further explore in this chapter, are not contradictions but rather possible sites of rupture through which artists are exploring alternative spaces and practices. As an emerging moment, it means necessarily that these tensions are constantly being renegotiated and reinterpreted and for this reason, artists must also constantly re-imagine how their practices relate and interact with these tensions.

However, before I turn to these questions through which I would like to focus the concluding thoughts of my project, I will share a short vignette of an event that took place as I was writing my thesis. Although I had concluded my fieldwork at this point, this event was an exciting moment in a larger and ongoing process. On March 29, 2012, a large audience gathered outside the door of the factory space at Townhouse Gallery. While prior to January 25, 2011, there may have been crowds like this for an opening downtown, since the 18 days, galleries and art spaces downtown had noticed significant drops in attendance. In the recent months, the security forces had built several walls that had severed downtown into disconnected pieces, making it difficult to move throughout the neighborhood. In addition, the regime had capitalized on narratives of increasing violence and crime in order to paint Tahrir Square and its surrounding areas as teeming with criminals and thugs. As violent clashes had erupted, often suddenly, several times over the past year, audience



numbers had dwindled at Townhouse and other downtown galleries.

However, this night was supposed to be different. When I spoke to one of the curators at Townhouse earlier that day, she told me it felt like the “whole city was coming that night.” It was the opening of *I’m Not There*, an exhibition that represented the visual arts program of D-CAF, an international multi-disciplinary contemporary arts festival in Cairo. The exhibition, following a surrealist and conceptualist tradition, was one “of absent artworks” as an intervention around the issue of censorship. While there were many artists involved in the exhibition, the space was full of words and stories — but none of the artworks themselves. The objective was to show the audience what sorts of images and artworks are censored and for what reasons, everything from “practical, economic, political, [and] cultural reasons” to “bad luck.” This show, as the opening night of D-CAF, represented a different kind of moment for the gallery, its audiences and downtown Cairo as a whole. Similarly to the Mahatat Collective from the previous chapter, D-CAF was centered around the notion of claiming public space in Cairo for art and performance. *I’m Not There* represented not only narratives and histories of censorship in an authoritarian regime but also, a moment in which the relationships between public space and art seemed distinctly new and exciting.

The show was supposed to open at 6pm but the garage door of the converted factory space did not open until 7pm. During this time, a considerable crowd gathered in the alley, mingling among one another outside the mechanic shops and garages directly across from the space. A verbal argument broke out between a couple of the mechanics and the audience waiting outside the gallery shuffled back nervously. There was nothing remarkable about the crowd; they were the same audiences that attend most gallery openings in Cairo and over the course of my

fieldwork, and I had begun to even recognize familiar faces from event to event. As I walked from the metro in Tahrir to Townhouse, only five minutes away, I could easily pick out those in the crowd headed to the opening by their dress and their Arabic, which was a blend of Egyptian dialect and English.

The audience, notably larger than most I had seen, fueled excitement for the evening and the upcoming festival. However, as I have noted in other chapters, the question of the audience is fraught with the contradiction of exhibition as “event.” This opening was representative of what I would argue is a larger desire to push boundaries and test the limits of this moment. D-CAF, as an event, represents one of the biggest efforts on the part of artists in Cairo to explore public spaces as sites of dissent and an engagement with the political. This project, nonetheless, also relies on the familiar site of the gallery as a point of “recognition” for its audiences. As I have discussed throughout this thesis, many of the events and projects that I think through, must wrestle with notions of the familiar and unfamiliar emerging as complex and intertwined categories. It is for this reason, while there was a sense of familiarity among the common faces in the crowd that I also argue that this exhibition constituted an exciting moment.

Finally, an hour after the scheduled opening, the garage door was flung open and the crowd outside entered the factory, spreading to fill the space as house music played from the speakers. While I had known that the exhibition comprised of stories of censorship, I had not considered how it would appear visually. The walls were covered with writing, every story written in both English and Arabic. Both scripts were large and took up entire walls. The stories were told in various fashions, from formal to informal (even email format). In the center of the space, a video played, flashing short sentences in Arabic and English, commenting on artists and their

works' philosophical place as individuals in a large and complex world. After almost a year of images, whether in exhibitions, social media or street art on the walls of downtown Cairo, it was mesmerizing to step into a room that was filled from floor to ceiling with words.

Most of the stories had to do with well-established artists whose work had been censored, primarily by the government. A couple of the stories referred to Egypt's well-known difficulty with getting art through airport government security, while another indicated the seemingly random cruelty of the police towards both people and animals on the streets. Far more so than any other exhibition I had seen during my fieldwork, there was an engagement and excitement around this show, which came from two factors. One was its relationship to the larger festival, Downtown Cairo Arts Festival (D-CAF) and this festival's interest in public space interventions, a new and exciting challenge to many artists in the city. The second was its direct engagement with censorship as a problem space for both artists and their audiences. This total "lack" in terms of the artworks themselves was, after months and months of visual overload, almost like a sigh of relief.

The moment appears fleeting because the rest of the April 2012 schedule at Townhouse was full of the visual and "revolution," with shows such as "We were there too..." a children's depiction of the revolution through paintings and movie screenings such as, "Tracks of Cairo," a film on the music scene of Cairo during the revolutionary year and "Reporting...a revolution" a film about journalists who reported the events of the 18 days. I argue, therefore, that this particular show represented a moment in which the lack of the visual was a powerful intervention in an ongoing struggle to determine the conditions of production for visual artists.

The show however, also had a memorializing aspect that once again, set up a

dichotomy of state funded art and “independent” art (in other words, art subject to the market). While the advertisements for the show spoke of the various reasons for censorship, including practical, economic, political and cultural, as well as “plain bad luck,” all the incidents mentioned in the exhibition were of state censorship. This exhibition memorialized Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian regime as a dictatorship, a regime now widely recognizable by its practices of censorship (not only in art spaces). So what does it mean for this gallery and the artists’ who tell their stories to participate in writing the narrative of the past (and present), shaping collective memory and memorializing the regime as both and forever shaped by its censorship practices? This moment reproduced the narrative of the state as the censor, and the alternative, the market, as the keeper of “free” and “autonomous” art.

I use the example of the exhibition mentioned above “I’m Not There,” and D-CAF, in the following section, to demonstrate the kinds of tensions that artists, curators and audiences navigate and to which I have alluded throughout this thesis. This tension I argue, is the very basis, both in a temporal and physical sense, through which artists have begun to recognize the possibility for alternative ways of organizing, practicing and producing art.

### **D-CAF: Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival**

In the first two weeks of April 2012, an arts festival called Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), took place in a number of public spaces and art venues in downtown Cairo. The festival included theater, dance and music performances, installations, exhibitions and lectures. The two weeks represented an unprecedented event in its size and diversity and there was considerable excitement among the many involved. D-CAF situated itself distinctly in relation to questions of

revolutionary processes and necessarily, a “post” January 25<sup>th</sup> moment. The festival itself was dedicated to those who were killed “for freedom” since January 25<sup>th</sup>, commemorating or memorializing now a familiar practice.

As I argued previously, the notion that artistic engagement with public space could even be possible is a new and exciting development for many artists in Cairo. D-CAF’s “ground-breaking” presence in “non-traditional sites such as historical buildings, storefronts, alleyways, and rooftops as sites for performance, events, and installations” garnered attention and excitement as the first large scale attempt to engage art and the public in Cairo since January 25. The D-CAF written material (D-CAF & El-Attar, 2012) claims that the largest amount of energy went into this “re-appropriation” of public spaces that represents a reinvigorated spirit among artists to attempt these sorts of projects. I argue that this “reclaiming” of public space is directly related to Mahatat’s efforts to find joy and excitement in the simplicity of performing in spaces that were once closed with the legal red tape of elusive permits.

The artistic director of D-CAF is Ahmed El-Attar, an Egyptian theater director and playwright who envisions D-CAF as an energizing force for actors, musicians, visual artists and filmmakers who lack the kind of diversity of art scenes he sees in other countries. He received his master’s degree in France, where he was able to attend many performances and develop as an artist through this exposure. He understands this formative experience as a source of his legitimacy with which to criticize Egypt’s art scene and the lack of exciting or diverse performances.

In an interview with the Egyptian English-language paper Ahram Online, El-Attar notes that, “all traditional Egyptian sponsors, without exception, refused to subsidize us. It’s a shame because I think this festival comes at a very historic moment. It’s now time to safeguard against obscurantism. We wish to show how

Egyptians after the revolution are capable of initiating an event that reaches international standards” (El-Batraoui, 2012). El-Attar imagines this festival as part of a “historic” moment in which, he notes, the Egyptian sponsors (namely the government) have no interest in participating. This festival desires to bring not only artworks into public spaces but also the conversations, dialogue and community that come with it.

The festival, however, according to El-Attar, also aims to prove that they are capable of producing an event of “international standards.” International standards is, arguably, a different terminology for global art markets, a terminology that I have highlighted throughout this thesis as synonymous for some artists with neoliberal notions of the “individual,” “freedom” and “autonomy.” The moment in which art in public spaces becomes a possibility is also yet again, intertwined with desires for a space within the circulation of global art markets. El-Attar’s choice of words reveals dynamics of power and hegemonic projects of the “international,” which are for El-Attar, in reference to Europe, the United States and more recently, Dubai. These “standards” preclude the possibility of D-CAF determining its own frameworks and practices, instead aspiring to the hegemonic project of “international standards.”

The art world, says El-Attar “has always been the vanguard of change” and there is an undeniable excitement surrounding this festival. It attracts artists from many fields, appealing to a large number with a diversity of performances in music, dance, theater and visual art. But this excitement is also connected to a moment of possibilities that has emerged, as I discussed with Mahatat in the previous chapter, in which limits can be tested and re-imagined. Public space, always controlled by elusive permits, is, at least for a moment, more accessible and open to artistic projects. This festival offers the possibility, for both artists and audiences, to push the

boundaries of performance and the conditions and the terms of its production. This festival represents a desire by many artist communities to make public space a platform through which to express the various emotions of the past year and by claiming unfamiliar space, to offer their audiences a space to do the same.

### **Tensions of Possibility**

Throughout this thesis, I have tried to show the various tensions that run through this emerging moment and how they produce notions of the political and artistic practices. These tensions, I have argued, are in fact, sites of possibility through which to imagine an alternative future. These sites are also contradictory and uncertain, but they form a flexible framework through which artists can make and re-make their practices, making powerful networks of collectivity, community and dialogue.

This process allows both artists and audiences to raise questions that challenge what signifies the political and how this category is formed and re-formed around many moments. In this thesis, I worked with artists who are struggling with these questions, confronting the meanings of their own daily practices. My interlocutors raise questions of the everyday as a political practice and struggle to resist revolution as containment. For Rania and Iman, they reaffirm the neoliberal narrative of the individual and freedom through their politics of refusal and politics of the self. They recognize the revolutionary container that seeks to swallow their art and they do everything possible to avoid this containment. However, it raises the question of what happens when revolution becomes necessarily about the community over the individual? For Amira, community has become the framework through which to be part of this revolutionary project and the political becomes the forming and re-

forming of networks, as the individual and the production of the visual become, for the moment, hegemonic projects.

A great portion of my thesis is situated in the physical spaces of galleries and collective art spaces. The purpose of this choice has been to engage with the questions I posed at the beginning of this project and to explore the role “familiar” art spaces play in artists’ efforts to imagine an alternative or “unfamiliar” space. As I have discussed in previous chapters, imaginations of alternative futures always emerge out of the past and the present. Efforts to write the past year into historical narrative have marked the 18 days of protests in Tahrir Square as the “event.” This rendering makes an erasure of the past thirty years of Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian regime, seem like a necessity or a possibility, but as my thesis has tried to show, imaginations of the unfamiliar always rest uncomfortably surrounded by the ruins of the past. Revolutions do not erase the past, or the present, and the ability to re-imagine is a complex process that always emerges from the familiarity of the past.

### **Further Questions and Conclusions**

In posing these questions in an emerging moment, a moment that is constantly contested, refigured and re-imagined, it is invariable that further questions will also emerge and form throughout this process. This thesis has tried to explore the sorts of questions, possibilities and practices with which a few Egyptian artists are engaging throughout the past year. As the moment continues to evolve, there is no doubt that new questions and interventions will continue to emerge. Before offering concluding statements and contributions, I would like to identify further questions that could build upon my own work and offer new points of analysis.

In my own thesis, my initial site for intervention was the visual. While there



are certainly many visual artists who continue to produce, many of the artists with whom I spoke still felt invested in the visual, which I argue has also come to include the performative in instances such as Mahatat, but were also aware of the visual projects in which they did not want to participate. For some artists, this has meant a continuation of “pre-revolution” projects, a refusal to engage with what they understand as a containing called revolution. While for others this process has meant a refusal of the visual on any terms. While artists spoke of this strong refusal to participate in a certain hegemonic depiction of the revolution, they continuously tried to renegotiate what sorts of projects allowed them to disrupt this “container,” and re-imagine what artistic projects might mean in this moment. However, as I ask these questions, at what point in this process does the visual become a viable and subversive possibility? If the category of revolution is produced as a container through which the visual is understood, what sorts of visual interventions and projects can challenge a hegemonic discourse?

The potentiality of collectives lies in their flexible nature through which to negotiate their projects alongside constantly evolving and changing processes and events. What then, does it mean for a collective to grow and fluctuate with a more fluid notion of revolutionary process? What sorts of projects allow for collectives to critically engage with and challenge these events and at the same time, to adapt and re-organize based on the emerging moment?

In chapter four, we see the emergence of the neoliberal freedom story in Iman’s desire for “transparency” at 10 Mahmoud Bassiony. This desire for a certain kind of independence and “freedom” in a neoliberal framework, represents a very particular relationship with the past year. The various discourses emerging around notions of freedom and justice reveal diverse understandings of what this process

means for different communities. If the language of freedom as transparency travels through different structures of neoliberal governance, such as the NGO, to an art space or collective, how will this language (and others) continue to travel? What does this mean for future discourses if language of governance can travel into spaces that are conceived of as subversive to both cultural and state institutions, such as 10 Mahmoud Bassiony?

The intention behind raising these questions is to offer both a space in which to situate my own research and to recognize my project itself as part of an emerging moment. This thesis, like its interlocutors, must also continue to negotiate with a process that evolves and changes in the everyday. These further questions can hopefully be explored on the foundation of this thesis' preliminary interventions.

Mohamed Mahmoud, a street that runs directly from Tahrir Square to within a block of the Ministry of Interior, has been the site of considerable violence in 2011 and 2012 as Egyptian security forces tried to prevent protesters from entering the streets surrounding the Ministry. This is part of a larger effort to contain the protests, and thus revolution, to Tahrir Square. Over the course of the year, artists have painted the walls on Mohamed Mahmoud with a stunning number of images and the walls have become the most recognized example of "revolutionary art." The images are of subjects too numerous to recount but are comprised of the many symbols of the revolution; martyrs, some with angel's wings, cartoon-like depictions of the regime (body parts often morphing into vicious animals), and more recently, neo-Pharaonic imagery. The images are stunning and the vibrant colors stand out amidst the city's sandy-gray walls and buildings.

In the same week that D-CAF began, I received an email from the American University in Cairo with the subject line "Preserving the Mohamed Mahmoud

Murals.” The email called upon AUC students to turn out in groups to paint the university’s exterior walls with varnish in order to preserve the images. Notably, at around the same time as this preservation project began, graffiti painted on the dusty, yellow walls of a nearby street that spoke out against the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF, the military regime that has been ruling Egypt since February 2011), were quickly and quietly painted over with large swaths of black paint, presumably by the state. The images on Mohamed Mahmoud, argues Mona Abaza (2012), offer a record or “memorial space” of the revolution that mimics its “dynamic process.”

However, this preservation project, a “museumification” of the streets, also reveals that this ‘preservation as activism’ desire makes visible certain kinds of revolutionary imagery and makes others invisible. The scribbles of anti-SCAF graffiti, painted over in the night, unrecognized and unrecorded as art, are never preserved by small armies of AUC students, and are forgotten, painted over and erased. In particular, murals of neo-Pharaonic imagery and the martyrs, designed and painted by Alaa Awad,<sup>6</sup> an Egyptian artist and professor at Luxor’s Faculty of Fine Arts in Upper Egypt, drew much attention to the walls. Awad arrived after the Port Said massacre in which 74 were killed at a football match, widely believed to have been orchestrated by the regime to retaliate against the Ultras, or football fans, who are well-known for their anti-SCAF stance. In a despondent and depressed moment for the city, Awad filled the walls with colorful pictures of the martyrs of Port Said and positive imagery of Egyptians, depicted in Pharaonic themes, walking together and supplicating towards the sky, climbing ladders that represent the revolution and women mourning the deceased who enter heaven with the goddess of the sky, Nut.

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<sup>6</sup> The artists Ammar Abu Bakr and Hanaa El Deighem are also working on these murals with Alaa Awad.

Awad has made it widely known that he works with cheap paint, acknowledging that the murals could disappear tomorrow, in which case he would repaint, thus respecting the dynamic process of revolution (Awad, 2012).

Nonetheless, these acts or desires for preservation, whether through varnish, photography or journalism (even a book, which is suggested in the online comments to Abaza's article quoted above), demonstrate how notions of art as a category and revolution as containment come to dictate how a politics of dissent is recorded. While in this instance, there is no "white cube" or gallery walls, I would argue that this preservation of the murals acts performs a similar sort of entrapment as argued by O'Doherty (1976). In the same moment that D-CAF tries to claim public space for art and performance that resist containment, the preservation of these murals re-contains the images as the dominant and appropriate expression of revolution and dissent.

This juxtaposition of the two events highlights the continuing tensions that artists are negotiating in this emerging moment. The questions that this thesis grapples with, often along with my interlocutors, are shifting and re-forming around changing conditions of production, for both art and the visual. For this reason, this project has tried to create a theoretical and analytical space in which to ask these questions, recognizing that both my own project and my interlocutors' are often experimental. Sites of resistance move across diverse spaces, the unfamiliar emerges out of the familiar and as my project comes to a close, there are no conclusions. But that is of course, the very point. These categories emerge around changing notions of political and artistic practices and for this reason, conclusions have always been fleeting. What this thesis offers rather, is an analytical space in which to ask these questions and to think through an emerging moment and its often frustrating stories along lines of art, revolution and the political.

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