

Egyptian Video Art and the Performance of Identity

DAN JAKUBOWSKI

My research explores the recent proliferation of video art in Egypt during the past decade and its special relationship with the changing political realities that shaped Egyptian identity during the 20th and 21st centuries. I believe video as an artistic medium is uniquely suited to charting the social constellations that make up modern Egypt's fraught relationship with nationalist politics, revolution, and modernity as it has unfolded in the country throughout the past century. Since Egypt sought independence from British colonial control in the early 20th century, different conceptions of nationalist, religious, and politically radical identities have been innovated as powerful tools of ontological self-formulation and political expression. These notions of identity have been put to use toward both progressive and reactionary political ends, and their legacies are still felt today as the various movements that compose the popular rebellion of the Arab Spring shift from dismantling the Mubarak regime toward articulating their own program of institutional organization and action.

During the past decade, video artists working in Egypt and abroad used digital technology and new media to represent and critique the momentous transformations in identity that have shaped the nation's present political moment, a moment that has emerged during a period of draconian neo-liberal economic reforms, variegated reactions to an uneven globalization of both culture and capital, and new communications technologies that have radically altered personal subjectivity, social formation, and political organization within Egypt

and across the world.

While I was unable to travel to Egypt during the past summer due to travel restrictions arising from political unrest, the opportunity to study Arabic in Morocco provided me with direct access to another regional manifestation of the Arab Spring. Protests in both Casablanca and Rabat occurred during my time abroad, demanding greater popular representation in government activities and a loosening of power held by the monarchy and its most visible representative, King Mohammed VI. As is to be expected, the conceptions of political, ethnic, gender, and sexual identity that composed Morocco's popular movement differed in both magnitude and internal make-up from those of contemporary Egypt. But both nationally bound movements held a shared investment in the concept of liberal democracy and its necessity at this moment in the history of Arab peoples. Exposure to Morocco's protests provided a dimensionality to my perspective of these political transformations that I would otherwise lack.

In the coming years, I hope to develop these research interests into a dissertation project that places Egyptian video art within the broader, global history of the medium while also investigating different formulations of contemporary Egyptian identity and how each plays into or resists the political project of democracy in Egypt and the Arab world as a whole. Artists such as Doa Aly, Lara Baladi, Hala Elkoussy, Wael Shawky, and Ahmed Basiony have each used video to access and represent the politics of Egyptian identity. And in a critical turn, these artists have also problematized the

notion of identity itself, focusing upon its limitations as an apparatus for political change and suggesting ways forward toward a renewed universal politics. But rather than discard identity altogether as myopic, exclusive, and incommunicable as a resonant basis for action, these artists emphasize the concept's fluid instability. To them, Egyptian identity is an essentially performative process that constantly renews and transforms itself when confronted with new historical realities. I believe that it is within this shared performative mutability that new forms of totality are imagined within the differences of identity politics. Video has been a versatile and easily accessible artistic medium uniquely suited to exploring the temporality of performative identity in contemporary Egypt.



Dan Jakubowski is a Ph.D. candidate in art history and a former FLAS fellow (Arabic, summer 2011).