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ARTASIAPACIFIC

Hassan Khan's "Blind Ambition"

Installation view of **HASSAN KHAN**'s The Infinite Hip-Hop Song (wall version), 2019, music-generating algorithm: duration variable, at "Blind Ambition," Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2022. Photo by Helene Mauri. Courtesy the artist and Centre Pompidou.

A giant stuffed pig with a creepy grin; an ever-evolving hip-hop song dictated by an algorithm; the aspirations and demises of various characters living in Egypt: these are some of the impressions retained from a visit to Hassan Khan's solo exhibition at Centre Pompidou. Titled "Blind Ambition," Khan's first major institutional presentation in France gathered 36 artworks from the past 20 years.

Informed by Khan's double practice as a visual artist and a musician, the exhibition's scenography was theatrical, with a wooden stage marked by podiums of varying levels occupying most of the room. Accessible through ramps, the platforms brought together works created years apart with little formal resemblance, thus creating heterogenous groups of sculptures, prints, and videos. The visitor was not guided by a chronological nor thematic trajectory, but rather was invited to wander in a space shaped by visual and sonic associations, contrasts, and "remixes" of artworks in Khan's words, with several installations having been reformulated for this context.

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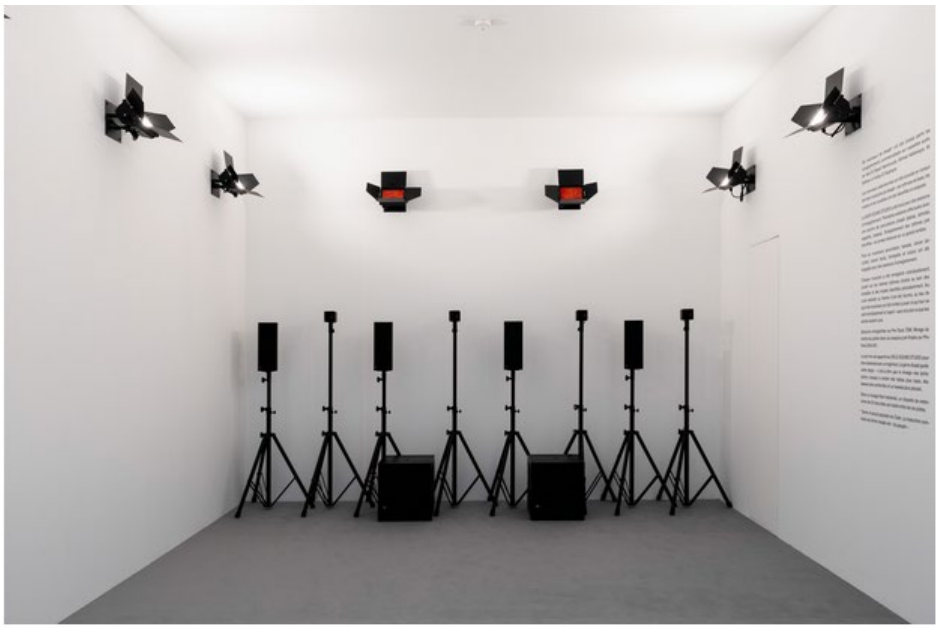
At the exhibition's entrance, a small iteration of The Infinite Hip-Hop Song (wall version) (2019) stood apart from the stage. Four speakers blasted combinations of hundreds of compositions and ten songs written in English by Khan. The music was the result of a layered process: 11 rappers had been guided by Khan to perform the songs, and their recordings were combined with the melodies through an algorithm, thus producing myriads of tracks. The rappers' individual flows clash with and resist the homogenizing effect of computerized production. Moreover, with the combinations constantly renewed and the songs played continuously, no track could be heard twice. Remarkably gripping, the installation set the tone for the exhibition: it introduced Khan's inclination toward collaboration, his obsessive engagement with automation, and his use of popular music to highlight the potential of (sub)cultures to counter hegemonic modes of production.



Installation view of **HASSAN KHAN's** DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK, 2005, mixer, amplifier, speakers, light program, show controller, and vinyl text, dimensions variable, at "Blind Ambition," Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2022. Photo by Helene Mauri. Courtesy the artist and Centre Pompidou.

In a room at the opposing end of the gallery was the installation DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK (2005). It centered on shaabi music: literally meaning "of the people" and originating from the streets of 1970s Egypt, this genre features the piercing double reed (mizmar) and the rhythmic goblet drum (darbuka). In an effort to deconstruct shaabi, Khan led individual studio sessions with six musicians, each improvising on an instrument, before combining the results against standard percussion recordings to produce new compositions. Titled after the darbuka's distinctive smack and marked by the rhythm of a metronome and blinking lights, the work associates the spontaneity of improvisation with the intentionality of studio-recording. In contrast with The Infinite Hip-Hop Song where Khan forsakes decision-making in favor of an algorithm, here, he assumes the position of the orchestrator.

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HASSAN KHAN, The Hidden Location, 2004, still from four synchronized projections with sound: 52 min. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

A similar methodology is used when Khan collaborates with actors: he alternates between giving them scores and letting them lead the way. Comprised of 16 narratives recounted on four screens, The Hidden Location (2004) plays on actors' interpretations of stories unfolding in Egypt. We listen to a smart aleck dissect the bourgeois aspirations of a certain Mo, then follow a couple's spat during a walk around the city. The installation owes as much to urban anthropology as to the sociological analysis underlying Egyptian drama series.

HASSAN KHAN, Transmission, 2002, stills from three-channel video installation with sound: 4 min 12 sec. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

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But Khan's ambiguous relationship with his own agency is most palpable in Transmission (2002), a three-channel video installation made using a MiniDV camera that he gave to three people. Each one shot themselves spiraling around Cairo's empty streets at night, simultaneously creating a portrait of themselves and the city. Placed at eye-level against the gallery's glass panels, Transmission created an uncanny dialogue with Paris' bustling district of Châtelet.

Other works embedded within the gallery's windows were visible from the outside, including aluminum panels explaining "the police function" (Purity Machine, 2021), and cushions shaped like cartoonish eyes resting on a glass plinth (W, 2021). This display ironically exposed the commodification of grotesque, systemic violence in late capitalism.

In an exhibition that avoided didacticism and surveyed a practice characterized by formal dissonance, the visitor often felt as if grappling with a riddle. In fact, what ties Khan's practice together is his methodology: a simultaneous inquiry in and escape from the homogenizing forces of contemporary society.

Hassan Khan's "Blind Ambition" was on view at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, from February 23 to April 25, 2022.

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ArtReview

Hassan Khan *Blind Ambition*

Centre Pompidou, Paris 23 February – 25 April

A sense of topsy-turvy begins even before reaching Hassan Khan's dedicated exhibition space at the Centre Pompidou. *PIGGIE PIGGIE LONGHANDS GROWL GROWL* (2019), installed in the venue's vast lobby, presents a cartoonishly oversized pig's head paired with a stretched-out-yet-shrunken body, its face dotted with black eyes and digitally printed pasted-on fangs. The grotesque creature is at once jarring and a little alarming, a peculiar mix of plush harmlessness and unexpected menace. This rogue slant from the norm provides the theme of *Blind Ambition*, a major presentation of new and old works in which recognisable signifiers are rendered unfamiliar.

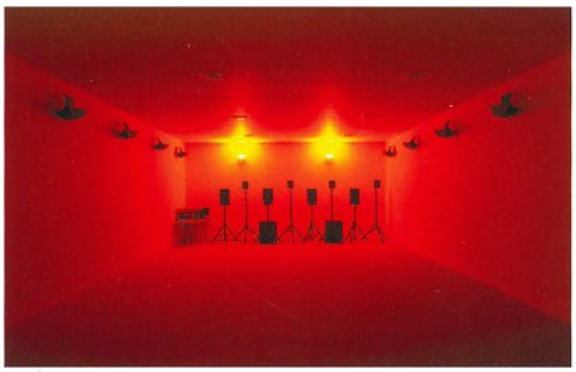
The exhibition landscape of modulated light-wood platforms provides a scenographic device uniting some 40 formally diverse pieces – many shown in France for the first time – as one vast experience. From glass sculptures to prints on aluminium to a photographic portrait of the artist's mother, the experimental nature of Khan's practice is expressed in a wide range of contours and scales: a variety that's playful but also ultimately defiant, as if refusing to participate in any one framework. A sound installation, *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song* (2019), ushers the visitor into the space with unending algorithmic remixes: a rolling sonic experience created from material provided by 11 Egyptian rappers. It sets in motion Khan's view that seemingly anything can mutate.

Khan came to art having studied English and Comparative Literature at the American University in Cairo. After his studies he worked as a teacher, translator, magazine editor and video producer, while also playing with various bands and producing soundtracks for theatre. Given this trajectory, it's perhaps unsurprising that language so often permeates his works, be it his video *The Dead Dog Speaks* (2010) – in which language is rendered as an absurdist back-and-forth patter – or *2013 Curtain Remix* (2021), in which text messages pulled from an exchange with a virtual AI chatbot festoon a bright orange curtain ('You never know what it's like to be someone, or what they really go through,' one text bubble states). In both these works, communication appears slippery and shifty.

The Agreement (2011), a series of short-form narratives printed on the wall, highlights the incomplete nature of storytelling by virtue of what is occluded. Each story abruptly cuts off right at the brink of what its narrative builds up to: two schoolboys digging for something unknown, five informers contending with an officer, a smoking man running late to meet an acquaintance he looks down upon. A slew of peculiar novelty items are lined below the vignettes. Pairing the stories with these miscellaneous and elusive objects – like the hindquarters of a horse, or a photographic image of a fountain printed on loose-leaf and anchored by four miniature paperweights – adds perplexity as to what innuendos they draw out of already truncated stories, especially since none are cited in or obviously resonant with the texts. The spectator-turned-reader is likely more confounded than enlightened by the ensemble.

But perhaps that's precisely the point of Khan's exhibition, which seems, at each turn, to refute the possibility of a 'revelation', or even cogent codification. *The Alphabet Book* (2006), which pairs nonillustrative images alongside the 26 letters as a kind of randomised abecedarium, highlights how linguistic associations could be reimagined to be equated with almost anything: such associations and parameters are malleable.

In Khan's series *Sentences for a New Order* (2018), he customised electricity boxes with LED lights blinking warnings of 'SUDDEN CHOLERA' and 'TREMBLING WORLDS', rendering a pragmatic appliance one of existential panic. Similarly, the brass sculpture *Banque Bannister* (2010) – an untethered handrail that anchors nothing and leads to nowhere – turns a banal architectural detail into a folly with a splash of Dada humour. The cumulative effect of these pieces, reinvesting and twisting reality, is jest mixed with malaise. Blind ambition prevents people from seeing what's happening around them. In Khan's survey, it seems to point to our own inability to realise what's happening around us – the sinister impact of technology, the loss of meaningful connections with others and the looming of ecological horror – until it's already too late. *Sarah Moroz*



DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK, 2005, light and sound installation (mixer, amplifier, speakers, light program, show controller, vinyl text on wall)
© the artist. Photo: Serkan Taycan. Courtesy SALT, Istanbul

Sentences for a New Order: SUDDEN CHOLERA, 2018,
LED lights on Gewiss GW68003N electricity box, 44 × 22 × 10 cm.
© the artist. Photo: Martin Argyroglo. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

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OCULA

Hassan Khan's Systems of Associations at Centre Pompidou

In Conversation with
Stephanie Bailey
Paris, 16 February 2022

Stephanie Bailey
Hassan Khan's Systems of Associations at Centre Pompidou
Ocula Magazine, February 16, 2022
https://cutt.ly/tPvxv1T

Hassan Khan would underline that he is an artist, musician, and writer in no particular order. 'My medium is not the medium itself' he has said. 'My medium is how I approach these mediums'.[1]

That approach, in which the medium becomes the subject, is most evident in Khan's work with music, for which he has explored the genres of Shaabi—a popular Egyptian musical genre whose name translates to 'of the people'—the Indigenous Javanese and Balinese orchestral music known as Gamelan, and hip-hop.

Hassan Khan, *SUPERSTRUCTURE EP* (2019). Two track EP pressed on 180g heavyweight vinyl. Edition of 500. Cover design by Engy Aly. Photo: Pauline Assathiany.

For the 2005 light and music installation *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*, six recordings are the product of Khan's analysis of six Shaabi standards. First, he studied the generic rhythms of each song, isolating and rerecording them with a percussion section. Then he hired session musicians to each play within set keys and over each of the recorded beats without hearing one another.

These recordings were then mixed and mastered into six instrumental tracks that combine the algorithmic nature of popular music, in which codes and methods are transmitted as programmed memory, with deviations of individual interpretation from within this programmatic culture.

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Hassan Khan, *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* (2005). Exhibition view: *Hassan Khan*, SALT, Istanbul (2012). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Serkan Taycan.

That hybridity extends to Khan's system of taking elements that he pre-records in order to transform them into live situations using a feedbacking mixer, which Khan notes produces a certain amount of chaos.

When introducing *Club Gamelan* in 2015, which filters elements of a computer programmed gamelan orchestra through the language of minimal club music, Khan described a dialogue between chaos and disorder in the live filtering of pre-composed music with the 'breakdown' of a live feedbacking mixer.[2]

The result in the case of *Club Gamelan*, is a hypnotic, transcendent, and unrelenting composition with ebbs that echo Philip Glass and Steve Reich, and flows that blend spheres of techno, microhouse, and psychedelia across the ages.

In a way, Khan's engagement with musical forms is about pushing genres to their edges to find out what happens after the breach—an engagement that always results out of a collaboration between Khan as the composer and the musicians he works with.

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Performance of *tainted* (2018), a composition by Khan for five voices in front of his sculpture, *tainted* (2018) at the Kunstverein Braunshweig.

The Infinite Hip-Hop Song (2019), conceived as a never-ending hip-hop track that never loops, follows this same logic. Pre-recorded elements based on Khan's beats, baselines, melodies, and lyrics combined with rapping sessions produced from ten days working in the studio with 11 rappers resulted in over 800 vocal samples.

At once bound and displaced by its programming, exports of *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song* function as sessions that always manifest differently whenever the program is run.

Hassan Khan, *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song* (2019). Exhibition view: *Liquid Love & Sound Meridians*, The Cube Project Space | MoCA Taipei, Taipei, Taiwan (2020). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Chen You-Wei.

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The Infinite Hip-Hop Song was first shown as part of *The Keys to the Kingdom*, a solo exhibition organised by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia at the Crystal Palace in Madrid (18 October 2019–1 March 2020), which presented a new body of work that responded to a former World's Fair location.

Among the interventions were a series of brightly coloured banners that hung from metal poles of different heights, each featuring an icon designed by the artist that draws connections to cultural symbols, such as Boris Johnson's unmistakable Trump-adjacent blonde hair.

Exhibition view: Hassan Khan, *The Keys to the Kingdom*, Palacio de Cristal, Parque del Retiro, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid (2019). © Román Lores / Joaquín Cortés. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Palacio de Cristal, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 2019. © Hassan Khan.

The Infinite Hip-Hop Song was then included in the group shows *Soft Power* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2020 and *Liquid Love* at MoCA Taipei (14 November 2020–24 January 2021), and forms part of the artist's selective survey at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, *Blind Ambition* (23 February–25 April 2022).

In this conversation, Khan introduces *Blind Ambition* and the remixes of old and new works that take place in an exhibition conceived as a landscape. What emerges is a logic that runs through the artist's practice, in which culture—both its instruments and its instrumentalisation—is the object of study: a score that never finishes.

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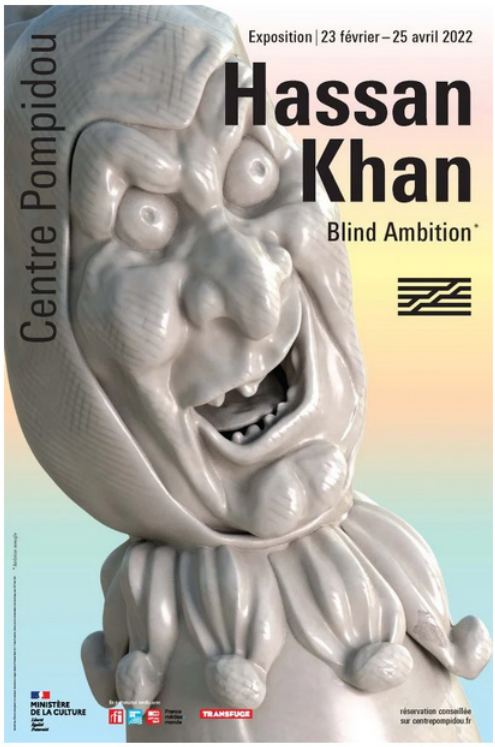

Poster for the exhibition *Hassan Khan: Blind Ambition*, curated by Marcella Lista at Centre Pompidou, Paris (23 February–25 April 2022). A computer generated element from *2013* (2018) and 2013 *Curtain Remix* (2021) appears on the poster.

SB **Could you introduce your survey at the Centre Pompidou?**

HK Though *Blind Ambition* falls within the framework of a selective survey, I imagine it more as a shifting landscape. The entire exhibition is installed on a series of wood platforms of different sizes and heights connected by ramps. Every platform hosts a constellation of works.

When you first enter the exhibition, you are offered a panoramic view of these different constellations. Something that deceptively might seem to be reducible to one totalised whole, but is actually a tapestry or network of different impulses. A sort of a snapshot of my practice.

It's a bit like the exhibition trailer, where disparate details from the exhibition are engaged in a hysterical neurotic interplay yet are held together by the insistent driving beat of a 2005 piece titled...wait for it...*Blind Ambition*.

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Blind Ambition (2005) (still). Single-channel video with music produced by the artist. 2 minutes 11 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

But then as you, the fantasised audiences of my imagination, begin to traverse this landscape, you may experience each constellation as a discrete unit, an island within an archipelago, with its own logic, set of relations, and impact. You may be caught in the details of each stage but hopefully you may also be able to zoom out and engage in placing these sets in relation to each other. To see how these groupings of very different types of work echo, resonate, contradict, and clash.

At the heart of this play with association and juxtaposition is an inner dialogue between the pieces: multiple threads running through over 20 years of production and a basic understanding of the work as something beyond meaning.

Hopefully this allows for a sensitivity to these multiple registers. The work is content, it is dynamics, texture, narrative, implication, and affect amongst many other things. My ambition is to be able to play with all of this—to have my cake and eat it. My ambition is to offer enough for viewers to invest themselves in the process without giving up what I, in any case, have no control over.

I must also mention Marcella Lista, the curator of the exhibition who was instrumental in supporting and discussing how this approach works in relation to a survey that tries to frame an artist's practice to audiences that might not be very knowledgeable about the artist's work.

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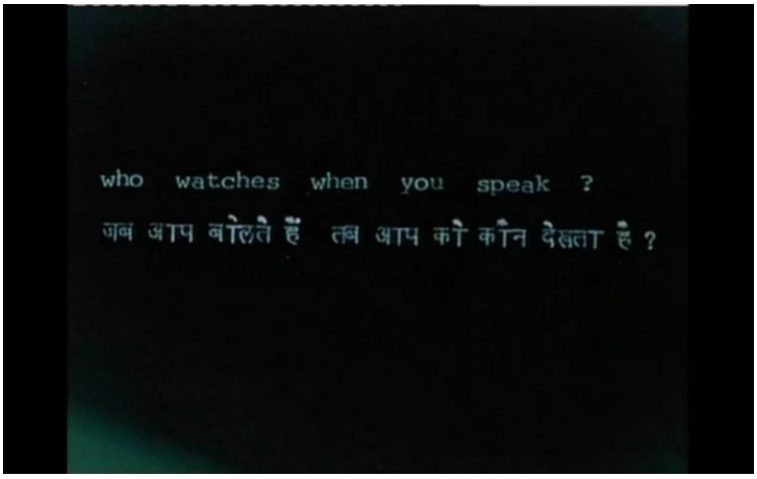
Lista's deep and profound understanding of art history coupled with her hands-on experience of contemporary art has helped this conversation grow and deepen and for these propositions to be be transformed into an actual exhibition.



Hassan Khan, *Modi/Nagar* (2000) (still). Single-channel video. 2 minutes 26 seconds. Courtesy the artist.

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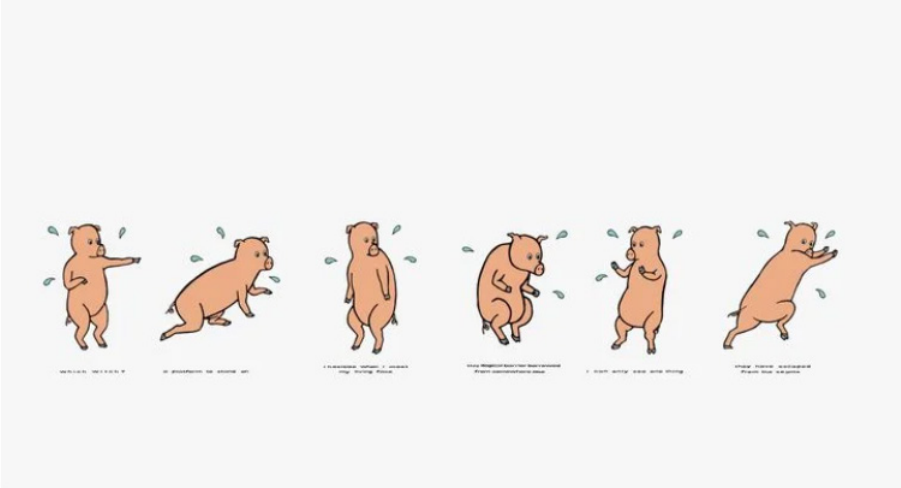
SB **Could you describe a constellation of works that appears on one of the exhibition's platforms?**

HK The second platform, which is quite dense, includes seven works: *I am not what I am (diagram)* (2007); *stuffedpigfollies remix* (2007–2021); *Purple Stuffed Creature with Bleeding Eye* (2019); *Evidence of Evidence II* (2010); *My Mother* (2013); *The Self is Fragile and Vicious* (2021); and *SUDDEN CHOLERA* (2018).

These seven works on this platform try to put two contradictory impulses in dialogue. There is the strange haunting anthropomorphism represented by *stuffedpigffollies*—six large cut-out vinyl prints of basic computer-drawn Disney-like pigs in a state of anxious contortions applied to the wall—and *Purple Stuffed Creature with Bleeding Eye*, a large creature that looks like its title. Both produce a sense of identification and distance—both want to be loved yet allow for more complex emotions than solace.



Hassan Khan, *stuffedpigfollies remix* (2007-2021). Digital file. Courtesy the artist

Projected on a suspended screen in the space is *I am not what I am (diagram)*, an animated grid; a structuralist work that translates an algorithmic logic into a diagram that demonstrates itself and a simple illustration of the mechanisms of self-consciousness. Though the mess of emotional identification is contrasted to the cold logic of the algorithmic and what it produces, these works are very much about the impulse to produce an image of the self.

Then you have *My Mother*, which is a cell phone portrait of my mother that I took after six years of hesitation. I believe the portrait is both hostile and intimate in a way that reflects how those closest to us can be our harshest mirrors. That, to use old fashioned words, love and alienation are intertwined.

Evidence of Evidence II changes gears and introduces the historical as well as a sense of materialist objectivity into this conversation; a found damaged generic oil still life of geraniums has been transformed into something that flirts with the sublime.

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Hassan Khan, *My Mother* (2013). Colour photograph. Edition 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

Finally, in *SUDDEN CHOLERA*, one of four of the modified electricity distribution boxes of *Sentences for a New Order* that are on show in the exhibition, automated LED lights flash in a way that echoes *I am not what I am* and call forth the infrastructure of the world as we know it.

SUDDEN CHOLERA resonates with the forensic impulse of *Evidence of Evidence II*, and presents the possibility of collapse endemic to our construction of self that is latent in the rest of the works.

Hassan Khan, *Sentences for a New Order: SUDDEN CHOLERA* (2018). LED lights on Gewiss GW68003N electricity box. 43.5 x 22 x 9.6 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo.

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I am, of course, making things up and explaining fictions, but my own private investment into the constellation is necessary for the work to exist in this form and to be presented. I believe this investment is what allows audiences to discover a position for themselves in relation to the work.

Maybe we are all caught in some kind of transaction, even if it is not the same one for all of us. For me, realising that and working with it is a proposition, and ultimately, a politics.

SB **How does this relate to the way you normally stage your solo exhibitions?**

HK I usually put exhibitions together very carefully, but also very intuitively. I never build scale models and almost rarely use computer models.

I visit the space, take photos, look at the floorplan, and imagine how things could be arranged. I work with designer Engy Aly on the plans using a tape measure and the scale of the room I am in, usually her studio in Cairo, to extrapolate the scale of the work. Then I work out the rest during installation. For *Blind Ambition* we used computer models because the complexity of designing the landscape necessitated it.

However, there is something quite exciting in this kind of jump. The fear of complete failure and the pleasure of trusting something that has been accumulating for years. It would be easy to call it experience so I won't. 🙂

Intuition is not mysterious but rather an automated inner voice that has been absorbing everything I have ever experienced, and transforms this material (anthropomorphically no less) into a sort of fluid inner character that 'I' am in dialogue with. A bit like the 27 voices that speak through the three avatars of *The Dead Dog Speaks* (2010), which is also on show in this exhibition. That is a productive fiction.

I'm also treating this show like a music album, but not metaphorically. There are opening tracks, hits and codas, epic blowouts, and short lyrical songs. There are works that I'm thinking of as remixes, and of course there is a very conscious rhythm to the whole exhibition.

In the remixes, I have taken elements from older works and put them together in new formats, while sometimes older works have mutated into something new, like an old track being revisited.

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SB **Do you have examples of how these remixes manifest in *Blind Ambition*?**

HK *Stuffedpigfollies*, which was first produced in 2007 as simple 20-centimetre computer prints on Canson paper, have been blown up into large vinyl prints directly attached to the wall. So now you have these one-metre-tall raw cartoon pig characters sort of anxiously dancing in the space.

The Alphabet Book (2006), which was originally a book, is here displayed on a structure where 52 images and letters are shown side by side. It is now both an actual object in space as well as a display structure.

Hassan Khan, *The Alphabet Book* (2006) (detail). Exhibition view: *Kompressor*, Festival d'Automne à Paris / Le Plateau – Fonds Régional d'Art Contemporain d'Île-de-France, Paris (2007). Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. Photo: Martin Argyroglo.

I'm also literally remixing the icons I designed for the banners I made for *The Keys to the Kingdom*, the show I staged at the Reina Sofia in 2019. I've isolated these icons from their original context and recomposed them into new figurations and had those printed on large aluminium plates alongside authored song lyrics, headlines, slogans, and quasi-journalistic reports from the frontlines of what I call the police function.

I see these pieces as 'object broadcasts'. There are three of them with three headlines, slogans, or titles—*Purity Machine*, *Harvest of Guilt*, and *The Self is Fragile & Vicious*—each one includes a different sort of text. One has a song, the other is written in the style of a newspaper investigation, but it's sort of a psychic investigation, while the other is a kind of rhyming riddle.

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Hassan Khan, *Purity Machine* (2021). Two prints on aluminium. 150 x 150 cm each. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel. Photo by Aurélien Mole.

SB **Could you talk about the banners for *The Keys to the Kingdom* that you have extracted symbols from?**

HK Yes, in *The Keys to the Kingdom* there were 16 banners in total, 12 are double-sided in the sense that they have different icons on both sides, and four in the middle have the same signs on both sides.

Part of the formal aspect of those designs was site specific and had to do with inhabiting the space they were in. The Crystal Palace is a large airy glass and steel structure in the middle of a public park. The banners are big, colourful with clear bold emblems so people could actually see them from quite a distance outside the Crystal Palace.

They're broadcasting from the space to the world, and they draw people in. When people come and enter the space and walk through them, they become a bit like a labyrinth of signs. Each flag and its icon were designed in relation to each other so that you see it as a network of associations, depending on which side you look at, and how you walk through the space.

> ‘I’m also treating this show like a music album, but not metaphorically. There are opening tracks, hits and codas, epic blowouts, and short lyrical songs. There are works that I’m thinking of as remixes...’

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There's that formal aspect, but from a conceptual perspective the idea was to create icons that are accumulations of contemporary emotional landscapes: desires, fears, projections. They are sublimations, not symbols. I don't think they stand for what they refer to as such, but they emanate the emotional landscapes they arose from. They are symptoms of symptoms.

The 12 figurative icons of *The Keys to the Kingdom* isolated on solid colours for use on instagram. © Hassan Khan 2019.

So, we have gestures that express emotions like the raised hand, which of course comes from both protest and surrender or the clasped hand of supplication or thanks. We have elements like Boris Johnson's hair, a grotesque sign bearer of how power can accumulate in the 21st century, or bear claws exuding latent violence.

We also have magical objects like blank coins and keys, a wooden mask, chrome finished car headlights, and composite mechanisms like the bleeding eye, which also appears in *Purple Stuffed Creature with Bleeding Eye*.

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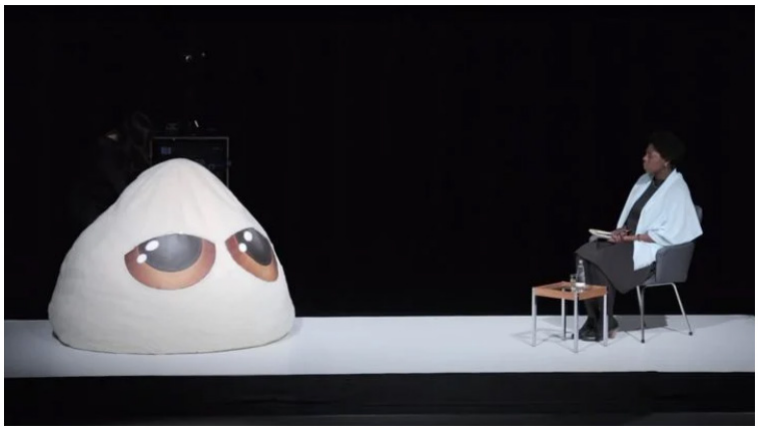
Hassan Khan, *Purple Stuffed Creature with Bleeding Eye* (2019). Exhibition view, *Hassan Khan — HOST*, Kestnergesellschaft, Hannover (2019). Courtesy the artist. Collection Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris. Photo: China Hopson.

SB **Speaking of symptoms of symptoms, it is interesting to see Pepe the Frog among the icons.**

HK But it's not just Pepe. It's Pepe hybridised with Crazy Frog, the computer generated character who marketed popular mobile phone ringtones in the mid 1990s. I was totally fascinated by Crazy Frog when it came out because of its strangely banal yet haunting anthropomorphism, the power of animation, that crazy dance and tune. All these made that gesture potent.

The anthropomorphic gesture is one of the threads that run through the whole show, as with our childhood teddy bears, it is about how and what we invest in them.



Dela Dabulamanzi and *Stuffed Creature with Digitally Printed Eyes* in the performance *Stuffed Creatures also have a life*, performed in 2018 at Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin. Written and Directed by Hassan Khan. Courtesy the artist.

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Whatever it is, we definitely invest something into these inanimate things and are thus able to grant them the inner life that we project into them. As a teenager I once spent a whole night tripping out on Parkinol and chatting with my childhood teddy bear.

That's what really struck me about Crazy Frog when it came out—how it was centred on this zany character, but it was really about marketing ringtones. It became a clear symptom of this specific financial turn—the idea that a ringtone could be an expression of some kind of emotional self that is connected to others. Mind you, this is not a critique—it is an observation.

Pepe the Frog was also interesting in that sense, because of how it was immediately appropriated by hatred. But also, I don't want to use the word appropriated merely negatively. I think appropriation is a real and basic constantly ongoing cultural operation, and in any appropriation, there's always something that makes it potent and makes it able to function as a glue for political capital.

We need to understand this if we are interested in producing works that do not merely parrot the doxa of the day; that also offer actual propositions that are not fantasies of what is constructed as 'correct' but rather conflicted and living engagements with the real.

SB **What you said brings to mind the concept of meme magic, which became associated with Pepe the Frog, and this belief that the meme was responsible for bringing Donald Trump into office.**

HK Yes, exactly. That was part of the thinking behind the emblems of *The Keys to the Kingdom*. In this case specifically, I am using a composite of two related yet different images—metonyms of two different regimes of political economy—something I feel is relevant to how the political is articulated today.

So you have Crazy Frog—this sort of straightforward symptom of market capitalism of the early 2000s—then you have the figure of Pepe, whose image became the location of an emotionally charged, right-wing, mostly white supremacist political movement. The icons are different, but they share this idea of being symptoms of symptoms.

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It's an interesting kind of turn, because in the Pompidou show I have a work titled *Evidence of Evidence II* (2010), and though formally it is a totally different kind of work, there is some kind of relation to this idea of Pepe and Crazy Frog being symptoms of symptoms.

SB **Can you expand on that relation?**

HK *Evidence of Evidence II* is based on an image of a very amateur and damaged painting of geraniums that I found in a Cairo apartment where they were selling all kinds of things. It was in a basket of stuff you could take for free, so it was literally trash. I scanned the object at an extremely high resolution and blew it up to three metres and a half, and in this enlargement, you can see the details of the object.

Hassan Khan, *Evidence of Evidence II* (2010). © Hassan Khan. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

The painting is composited onto a background gradient made by exposing large-format film to light so it's not a solid, monochromatic colour. There is a natural and very subtle yet perceivable gradient. It produces a very important relationship to the painting which is distinct to using a monochromatic background of solid colour. It suspends it.

> ‘I think appropriation is a real and basic constantly ongoing cultural operation...’

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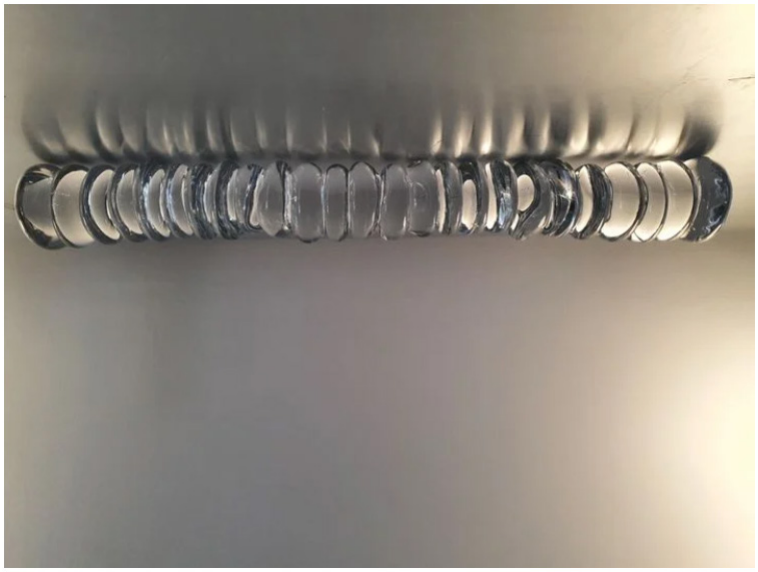
So this small amateur painting has now become a large suspended image. In one way, it's a forensic exercise because the 'evidence' is blown up. You can inspect it and see how its constituted by painterly gestures like how the brush struck the canvas. You can also see the painting as a historical object in time. It has been damaged—you see the cracks in the paint, the torn bits of canvas, and so on. You can decipher its aesthetics because they're so magnified. So there's that forensic aspect to it.



Hassan Khan, *Liquid Battery* (2021). Poured glass. 50 cm x approx. 5.5 cm. Poured glass. Private Collection. Photo: Hassan Khan.

But then there's also another equally important operation that is taking place in the background, where this painting, which had been discarded and had literally become trash, has been rehabilitated as a work of art. Now it has value, it is being shown in museums, being collected, it has entered this economy of the art world.

This brings up questions that are important to me. What is the artwork? Where is the artwork? How is value produced? What ideologies are latent in forms? And what in forms escapes these ideologies? The painting itself is clearly generic but I've hijacked it.

I'm using the word evidence because it offers different ways of seeing. But then it is evidence *of* evidence because I'm thinking of the cultural operation as a never-ending chain, where there isn't any moment to rest. We can never find the cause of the symptom. Maybe because there is no one cause, no root; there is no origin and there is no purity.

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> ‘Maybe because there is no one cause, no root; there is no origin and there is no purity.’

Things are always elusive and always one step ahead of us. I might be incorrect, but I feel like this is a more accurate way of approaching culture. If you want to look at it in political terms, it takes us away from the concept of essentialism. It's basically the opposite. It might be old-fashioned, but I'm still involved in this struggle with essentialism. I find it to be a very dangerous instinct, but I recognise it's a real one. It's there and it operates.

I still haven't worked out how essentialism can be generative. Maybe I'm trapped in something, but you know I"m continuously struggling with the concept. I think using the phrases 'evidence of evidence' or 'symptom of a symptom' opens up the possibility of thinking about essentialism in other ways and maybe it offers a way out.

SB **This idea of finding ways out of essentialism comes through in your work with music. You mentioned *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* was almost algorithmic in how you worked to arrive at the essence of a Shaabi composition.**

HK It's not really the essence of the composition, it is the surface of the form. The algorithmic is of course very important for me. Not as sign of the technological but rather as a basic function of how we're constructed.

The question for me—and it's an old question—is where is the line? Where is the line between what activates us as a conglomeration of chemical reactions and electric nerve impulses and our consciousness of self? Where is that line and how do we navigate it?

This has to do with what is called popular culture and its collectively produced forms, whether a joke, a song, a shop banner, or a way of shaking hands. In orthodox Marxist analysis, this is supposed to ultimately be a reflection of power structures, and though that's an important and generative idea, I don't think it's really sufficient.

Because how are these collectively produced things, whatever they are, able to offer the formal radicalism one finds in a street wedding song or in a secret joke a teenager tells his friend after school?

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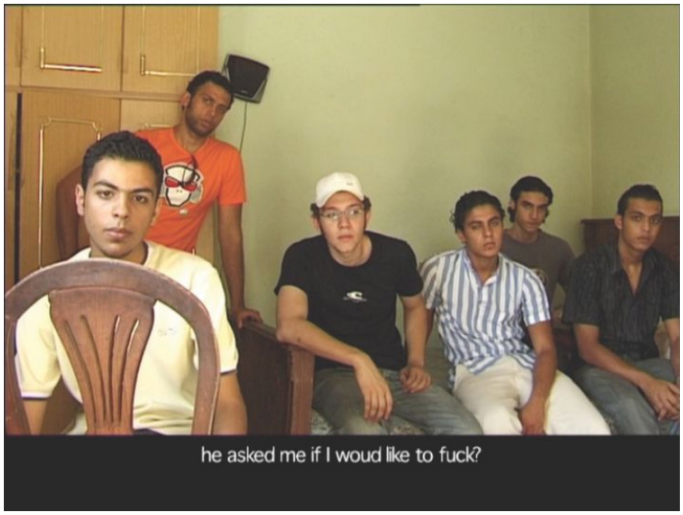
People make things. And these things are infused with their personal experience, but they're also infused with cultural expectations. They carry ideological messages, but at the same time, there's always this extra gap where something else is happening, which can be confusing, exciting, or both.

You can say that most memes fall into that category. They are symptoms but also active elements with agency as well as (sometimes at least) something slightly beyond our grasp. Maybe this is why I have big issues with both cynicism and certain types of irony, but that's a whole other discussion.



Hassan Khan, *The Hidden Location* (2004) (still). Four-channel video installation. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

In the case of *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* and my focus on Shaabi music, there is the algorithmic logic of the piece itself, which was really driven by this much broader question: how is it possible for a cultural form rooted in a patriarchal system to produce something that is much more complex than that system? How can something, for example, be misogynistic yet also formally radical? How is that possible?

But it happens; contradictions exist, and they go way beyond the structures that produce any cultural form.

Shaabi musicians know this music because they have experienced it as a living archive. Culturally, it has a code. So part of *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* was about touching the code—or what I love calling the cold heart of culture—rather than the personal performance or interpretation of it by making them play without listening to each other. So instead of playing with or against other people, they were relying on the memorised codes they're hearing in their heads.

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> “But it happens; contradictions exist, and they go way beyond the structures that produce any cultural form.”

By creating a structure in which the musicians do this, I was hoping to bring the cultural and the generic to the surface. But interestingly enough, because of how I staged this production process and how the work is presented, the result is not musically generic. I find it strangely evocative, because you can hear the genre but actually it's doing something else from what is expected. It's a very strange thing. You're hearing the ghost of the genre but also its latency.

SB **Is that where the surplus value of cultural production comes in?**

HK There is actually a new piece in the show titled *SURPLUS VALUE* (2021), but I shall say no more about it here. To answer your question: yes, but I have no resolution; no answer. I'm always partially very confused, even if I feel driven and engaged.

It's a very important area to stay in, where things are never completely resolved. The concept of surplus value is itself valuable. It motivates how I approach phenomena like the contemporary grotesque, which I find helps to explain in a weird way why and how someone like Donald Trump got to where he is.

I recently did a six-hour seminar with my students about Egyptian popular comedy and the grotesque, and we were discussing through that the possibility of a model of consciousness that is not psychoanalytical—that is not based upon repression, but rather upon looking the other way.

Basically, if we imagine that in a sense, we know everything; that instead of a well of dark unknowns to be conquered—that proto-colonial worldview—we are actually to some degree aware of how we are constructed, what we want, and how to function collectively produced codes. But we just ignore the things that do not fit our specific intentions, ideas, or desires. We, as Barthes put it, basically look the other way.

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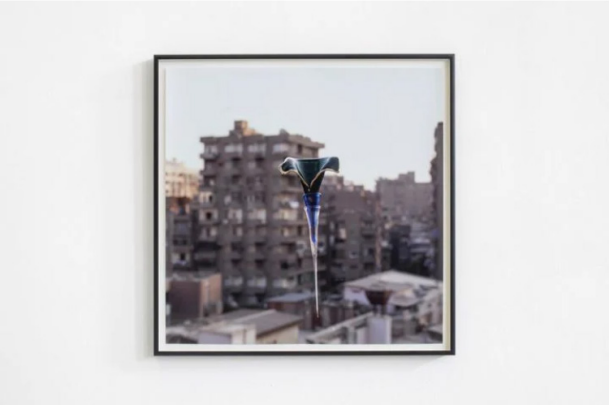

Hassan Khan, *a glass object photographed as a way of collecting the world around it* (2012). Colour photograph. Edition 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

So it's not that the monster is unleashed and you suddenly discover, for example, that you're a racist. The subject knows very well that they are racist. But they choose to think of themselves as otherwise, as well-intentioned and informed inclusive human beings.

Of course, it doesn't have to be as charged as racism. It can be about anything. In this model, the unknown is not really unknown. It's just ignored. It's just this aspect of the self that you choose not to look at.

Hassan Khan, *Happy Empire* (2019). Digitally printed ceramic tiles mounted on support structure. 900 x 315 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

If we think about things in those terms, rather than in terms of repression, the whole perspective changes, including our ideas of the political. Of course, these are quite basic ideas at this point. It's not something I've really developed, but it's something I am thinking about and I feel it is related to a lot of my work and to this exhibition and its model of a landscape.

It is not an accident that the title of the show is also the title of two earlier works, neither of which are included in the show, as well as an element from *The Agreement*, which is in the exhibition.

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> ‘In this model, the unknown is not really unknown. It’s just ignored.’

SB **When you spoke to your students about Egyptian comedy, did you talk to them about *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* (2015)?**

HK Yes. I also spoke to the glass artisans at Berlin Glassworks beforehand, which is a glass workshop in Berlin that I work with, about Egyptian comedy. I'm very attracted to the most vulgar of Egyptian comedy, which is totally incorrect, carnivalesque, and demented.

I decided to look at that with them. I did a little lecture about Egyptian comedy, and I showed them examples from the past 50 years, demonstrating how it has steadily become more and more unhinged. I also screened *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* as an example of how I work with actual existing cultural forms as material. Then we tried to make glass pieces with this logic of craziness, humour,and grotesquery. It was definitively interesting and also kind of fun.

SB **How you describe Egyptian comedy becoming more unhinged somehow speaks to the rise of Donald Trump, and the banners you created for *The Keys to the Kingdom*. Perhaps the surplus value in culture you mention propels this trajectory: the symptom of the symptom.**

HK Absolutely. However, the character holding the slapper in *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* represents an older, more classical figure—the naïve fool in the city.

The actor that character was based on, Ismail Yassin, was the pioneer of the style because he was the first Egyptian comedian to push this archetype in cinema to a new extreme—the first to really emphasise certain things, like being gullible and seemingly not too bright by using facial gestures and bodily postures to channel that. The face becomes contorted, the body is exaggerated, and ways of walking become tools of expressing deep emotions.

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So here, being afraid is not just being afraid—it's extreme trembling. Everything is stylised for the sake of charge, rather than elegance. It's ultimately a violent performance style that is related to a long tradition of—and I hate the word folk, so let's use another term—'marketplace gestures' and street performance.

What's important for me in this is not some romanticised idea of 'the people', but just the idea of a collective and automated form of cultural production that is 'authorless'. How were specific scales and beats developed? Who wrote them? It blows my mind!

My dream project is to invite look-a-like actors to channel the large pantheon of Egyptian comedians from the past 60 years, from the most insane to the more classical, and to create something with that. I have a whole production process planned. Though I have, over the years, proposed this to many different institutions, nothing has worked so far. It's such a massive project that it's not so easy to find the budget for it.

The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility was actually made with this bigger dream project in mind, and it chooses these two classical figures because I also wanted to start with something simple and manageable. They're very iconic, their gestures are very well-known. I could work with this as my raw material.

Hassan Khan, *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* (2015) (still). © Hassan Khan. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

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But that also has to do with this understanding of the cultural I brought up earliergain, returning to evidence of evidence, the cultural itself as an instrument to be performed, rather than something to be spoken about. *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* is not about Egyptian cinema or comedy: it's partially of it, but it is also something else.

Film culture itself is the instrument, the performance of these characters and even the characters themselves—all of these are instruments. Just as the first blurb I wrote for *tabla dubb* (2016) says, I'm interested treating musical culture itself as the instrument.

SB **That's what you said about *Club Gamelan*, that you are looking at this musical form as an instrument, which is why you don't look at your engagement as exoticisation. But is there a difference in how you've treated Shaabi music, which is rooted to your context as an Egyptian, in relation to gamelan and hip hop?**

HK No, I wouldn't. My references have always been multiple both chronologically and geographically. I grew up questioning fixed identities and I have no guilt about my position, as one of the whispered sentences of *Transmission* (2002), another rarely seen work included in this show, puts it: 'to have equal rights on the street like any other pickpocket'.

This attitude came from being aware of systems of power. The advantage of growing up in places where authoritarianism is explicit, is a deep and sensorial understanding of power.

In 2005, when I produced *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*, I thought it proposed a sort of home-made organic algorithmicism. By 2019, when I wanted to do something with *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song*, I was interested in using the power and the logic of machine-driven learning as a compositional and production tool, rather than as a form of reading.

> ‘What's important for me in this is not some romanticised idea of 'the people', but just the idea of a collective and automated form of cultural production that is 'authorless'.’

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A lot of what happens within the field of machine learning is that these tools are used to read what exists, and through that reading to amass, categorise, and analyse data, which is then used to create an algorithmic system that produces something—a replica that resonates or sounds like what already exists. Let's scan all Beatles songs and make a Beatles song—the future as a way of producing the past!

My interest was in developing something different: how could I create an algorithmic structure that can be used as a tool, while still maintaining my position as the author, and refusing to hide that structural fact? I feel this can also have political ramifications, as without authorship there is no real responsibility. But is it possible to do that while also losing control? How could I produce a form that speaks a language akin but not completely coincidental to the genre? How can this be meaningful and yet also speak on other levels?

What I was interested in finding while working with the rappers in the studio, for example, was ways of producing performances that were potent and charged: moments of density where the accumulated power of the collective genre articulates something authored. —[O]

1 Artist Profile: Hassan Khan on Objects, Details, and 'Banque Bannister', Guggenheim Museum, YouTube, 11 April 2017.

2 Hassan Khan, video interview, URSSS, June 2015.

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The Keys to the Kingdom: A conversation with Hassan Khan

Hassan Khan live in concert at L'éveil du printemps Festival d'art de Toulouse, Toulouse, 2014. Photo by Franck Alix - Courtesy: Franck Alix

This conversation was first published in Arabic on Ma3azef

Rami Abadir: You've recently finished a large-scale project titled The Infinite Hip-Hop Song. Before speaking about this in detail, can you give us a basic idea of what that piece was?

Hassan Khan: I had the basic concept for a very long time: a fantasy of a song that keeps going and never ends. The proper context for its production arose when I was preparing for my exhibition *The Keys to the Kingdom* at the Reina Sofia in Madrid. The show revolved around the current populist moment and how symbols and forms were able to coalesce power and transform it into meanings and emotions that resonated with the wider public. While working on the show and as different works were developing, I felt the need for a work that was connected to a collective voice, a work that spoke a slightly different language than the other works in the show. At that moment, several threads intertwined: hip-hop and the image or the sense of a constantly transforming non-looping endlessness, an unstoppable never-ending stream coming forth, popular forms in opposition to populist forms. What was new for me was using hip-hop as a medium, though the idea of an endless non-looping song was an old obsession of mine.

RA: You became interested in hip-hop the past few years. What attracted your attention to the form? And what was your relationship to it before?

HK: I wasn't a hip-hop fan in the 1990s when a lot of my friends were; they listened to 2Pac, Biggie and Snoop Dogg. Yes sure, I am all for *Fuck Tha Police* and all of that but I just wasn't that into the scene. Of course some stuff resonated, but I wasn't hanging out listening to hip-hop. However, specifically around 2016–2017, I saw one of Abyusif's videos that really caught my attention. Though I had heard Abyusif before I hadn't been very impressed. Generally speaking, the Egyptian rap that I had heard much earlier was super basic and soapy — it was like another form of early 2000s Arab pop. I started listening to Abyusif and something sparked, something had changed and been fixed — so I opened the lens a bit wider and started listening to Dama, who later on became Marwan Pablo, Microscope, Dinho, Karika, Marwan Moussa, Molotof, Shahyn, etc. I suddenly had a hunger for rap, especially Egyptian rap. There are two main reasons for this: first the content was in my mother tongue Egyptian Arabic, but actually when I think about it's not just that (English is almost a mother tongue for me) — it was also the context of the city I live in: the language of daily life surrounding me. Secondly, Egyptian rap had really evolved from the days of *Omy Mesafra*, massive changes had taken place. The music and the attitude had become more sophisticated and with these

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developments the form also started to lay down roots and became part of the local popular culture. All of that was very attractive to me. Hip-hop itself as a genre sort of makes sense to me now because it mixes many things that surround us and that have impact, power and influence into a potent concise form. For example, Trump's populist touch is not far from the aesthetics of hip-hop. There is savagery and indulgence in pleasures and vulgarity. There is something that connects these modes together. It is no coincidence that these kinds of emotions and desires are so widespread now; this in itself is significant and has a meaning. I also do not just reject certain aesthetics and claim because they're vulgar therefore they're bad. Actually it might hold a lot of meaning and be very significant; the question is more how we deal with it. Despite (or maybe because) of the machismo and vulgarity of some hip-hop, it possesses a certain energy that is congruent to the world we live in. That is part of what attracted me in the first place. I now wanted to work on this without reproducing the same dominant generic aesthetics of hip-hop. The issue is not just cerebral, it's also emotional. I have a strong response to the form and its connection to the world.

RA: Could you have done a project like this 10 years ago for example?

HK: No! In order for me to do anything I have to have a real interest and attraction to it. For example, *The Big One* from 2009 was born out of the fact that from around 2004 until the revolution, I was listening to shaabiyat. A lot of things attracted me to that form then. I call it s*haabiyat* because the term is wider than any one of the different genres such as mahraganat, moulid, mawwal, nabatshi etc. I produced *The Big One* because I had a real interest, love of, and belief in the form and its ability to present new musical ideas that were relevant to the times and context. Different elements attracted me to the form and I felt it represented an exciting evolution of popular music in Egypt. This maybe changed with time as it became banal, generic and mannered and lost some of its qualities, which is in the end the natural cycle for any popular music style.

Installation shot of The Infinite Hip-Hop Song at MoCa Taipei. The image is courtesy of The Cube Project Space, photographed by Chen-You Wei. The concept, music, lyrics and all content and material generated by and produced through this project are the copyright of Hassan Khan.

RA: How is this project different to your previous musical projects?
HK: There are similarities and differences. A lot of the approach is related to previous works. However, the first major difference is that this project is algorithmic, and potentially generatively infinite. It also allows space for elements that are outside the control of the author and that are shaped by the

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algorithms of the program. This is a big difference for me, in everything I had done before. Even when working with session musicians, my role as the author and composer is very central. This conception though still has an impact on this project. When I started talking with Olivier Pasquet, the computer music designer who wrote the program for the piece, I highlighted that we want to use algorithms as our tool rather than allowing them to impose their logic on the work. The algorithms are seen as compositional tools rather than a way for the author to evade responsibility and for the program to randomly generate parameters. A basic question at the heart of the piece is how to compose with algorithms and use them themselves as musical instruments? Or, similar to how the piece treats the genre of hip-hop as a medium or raw material, how can we treat the algorithm itself as both a medium and raw material. This approach is related to how I have been dealing with music for a very long time. The little blurb I wrote about *tabla dubb* (2001) when I premiered it explicitly states that it uses the musical culture itself as a tool or instrument, on the basis that the tabla is an essential and foundational element of Egyptian musical culture. What we have here is an extension of this idea. Although shapes and patterns change from one project to the next, the conceptual approaches are connected. Another difference is that all of the musical elements, such as bass, beats and melodies are made with MIDI. I rarely work with MIDI. And of course this was the first time I worked with rappers.

RA: How did you work with the rappers? How do you generally work with musicians?

HK: A lot of the time I work with session musicians the way a director works with actors. In a sense I don't deal with a musician as someone coming to play some notes, or you know "do this or that" or "give me a bit more feeling", but rather as a person who has their own complex fears and desires and I indirectly call on this complete image of the musician to become part of the musical performance. For example, in the recording sessions for *The Big One*, there is a Nabatshi at the beginning of the first track who was shouting out a stream of incomprehensible words. In order to produce this performance, I had told him to imagine that the music was aimed at a deaf and mute audience. He was supposed to watch me while I enact movements (stabbing myself, collapsing on the floor, etc.) that he then transforms into vocalization. With the rappers it was a little different; I introduced them to the project and the lyrics, we read them together and I answered any questions they had. Then we began rehearsing using the guide beats that were explicitly made for the studio sessions. When a flow had developed and they felt ready, we began recording. I gave them notes after each take; we'd listen together, discuss and then do more takes. I also let them do some free improvs, as well as completely restricted composed sections. Basically, it's all based on the individual, their abilities and what I feel is possible with them. Some were very limited in their scope and it was better then to focus on their strengths and to bring those out. With Haddie, we just worked on a steady monotonous almost sleepy voice which was the best we could do with her for the project. Infinite Livez, on the other hand, is very agile and flexible with his voice, so I gave him the space and freedom to try many different things out. All the rappers were at first a bit confused by the project because it's not really standard, but to be honest they were quite open-minded and willing to try a lot of things out.

RA: This project is built on collaboration. How are the roles dispersed?

HK: First I had the basic idea and then I started searching for a computer music designer who could help program it because I had no programming skills. I asked around and Timo Kreuser (director of PHØNIX16) recommended Olivier. When we met, we got along very well and decided to work together. We spent a long period of time, months, talking about the idea and architecture of the

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program and slowly we developed the logic of the piece. It was very important for that conversation that Olivier is also a musician and composer. Meanwhile, I began looking for a sort of executive producer. Usually I manage my own sessions, finding and hiring the musicians and negotiating with the studio, but I felt in this case that someone else had to do this and manage the operational side of the project. In Berlin, where I had decided to produce the project, I do not have the connections I have in Cairo. I asked Rabih Beaini, the founder and owner of Morphine Records, if he knew someone who would be responsible for finding the rappers, making a contract with the recording studio, controlling the budget and basically organizing the logistics of the production. He expressed interest himself which was of course fantastic, because he has a lot of experience in the field and lives and works in Berlin. So Rabih joined the group and suggested an appropriate and budget-friendly studio to work in. Though the sound engineer Emanuele "Nene" Baratto usually doesn't record hip-hop, he was a big fan and listener of the genre. So, he was excited and I think maybe impressed by the ambition of the project. Rabih made a call for rappers, posted it around and spoke to many people on the scene. We did some virtual auditions and listened to many demos and in the end we selected 11 rappers.

RA: Tell me about the recording process.

HK: At first, I didn't want to do guide tracks. I wanted to only work with a metronome-like I had done many times before with session musicians. For example, in *Taraban* (2014) everyone was working with a metronome, they don't hear each other and they don't hear the other tracks. There is a reason for this that I will discuss later. Rabih thought it was too tough, too cold for the rappers to only work on a click track. They needed something more, even on the basic human level, something that made them a bit comfortable. I found his argument convincing and he asked me to prepare these guiding tracks, but there was something in me that didn't really want to do them and I wasn't really sure why. At the end I asked him to do them himself. I told him to do whatever would work as long as we stuck to the specified bpms [beats per minute] and keys. I also with time realized what was keeping me from producing these guide tracks. I think I wanted to make a very clear distinction between the content produced in the studio and the content that is afterwards produced for the main session of the piece. Rabih's guide beats were totally different to the beats I produced afterward for the work session. The vocals recorded in the studio on the guide beats are then abstracted and extracted, isolated from what they have been recorded on and acquiring different new emotional content when they enter the system of the piece. It is possible for example that Saba Lou is singing in the studio on a dark trip-hoppy beat produced by Rabih but that these same exact vocals would in the session then be laid on a bright beat with major chords. The end result would give us a completely different feeling. This is deeply related to my production method in general. One of my concerns is how musicians end up playing the *expected* by leaning on each others' tried and tested methods. For example, session musicians in Egypt especially when playing sharqi (oriental) music love to add a lot of color, and to emphasize the quarter-tone in the scale in a sense to produce an emotionality, to celebrate and completely consume these emotions.

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It is also a way of showing virtuosity. I try to find ways to drain this charge and get rid of it. In *Taraban*, I had the session musicians play the same melodic phrase for 20 minutes; the oud player would in a sense forget the mannered touch they are so used to and start performing the melody more as just a series of notes. I want these notes, not an emphatic expression of them. There is a relationship between this approach and the formal act of giving musicians instructions to work with that then gives them information. In this method, the emotional content appears in a way that is related to the logic of the music rather than a mannered preset based on cliched musical gestures.

The Infinite Hip-Hop Song (2019) Algorithmic Hip-Hop generator, musical and lyrical material written and produced by Hassan Khan, recording of vocal performances in the studio with 11 rappers.

RA: What were the steps? How long did it take from writing the lyrics to the beats to the programming and recording?

HK: The first email between Olivier and me was on February 19, 2019. The idea was already percolating in my head way before that, but I guess this is the official start of the project. The exhibition in Madrid opened the same year on October 18 — so eight months of work. I couldn't write any lyrics for a long time, even though I had a precise, clear idea in my head: the rapping voice that enunciates these words is not the commonly positioned voice of the wounded male self or hero that is so present in rap (and other popular forms of music). But I was stuck and unable to write for some time. At one point, things finally started to flow and I began writing on my phone in public places: in parks, on the U-Bahn, while I was walking. I almost wrote nothing at home sitting on a desk behind my computer. I was writing at weird times in suspect places (laughs). When I began, things happened quickly. The very first bars I wrote were written on the U-Bahn on my way to visit a friend of mine and then I read them to her and got some feedback. Even just from the sense of how someone receives the words, that was productive. So I began with the lyrics, and then I spoke to Olivier, and after that Rabih. When Rabih got involved, I set up a meeting between all of us to coordinate between what Rabih and I produced in the studio and what Olivier would need for the system's algorithms. After that we auditioned the rappers, then studio: recording, editing and mastering all the vocals in 10 straight days. I was working in parallel on my beats, but to be honest the beats were not done till the last few days. I think the architecture of the program that Olivier designed was very successful. He decided to choose a

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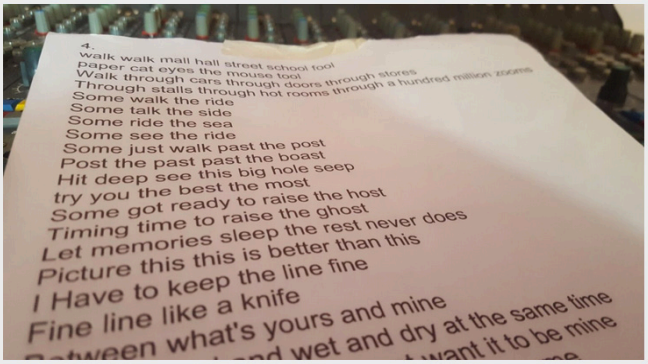
consumer-friendly popular platform, Ableton Live, which I would work on to produce the beats and to use a much more complex system, Max MSP, to control Ableton. Because Ableton is quick and easy, I could work fast and make lots of beats on it which I would send to him to insert into the network that he was designing with Max. If we had tried to do this with a more complex system, itable would have been very difficult to operate at this speed.



Lyrics on the mixing table. Courtesy of Hassan Khan

RA: Exactly, especially as now Ableton is speaking to Max.

HK: Exactly. But Olivier also hacked Ableton in order to allow Max to control the variables in a way that is not usually possible. The limitation that we faced was processor power. We had lots of musical ideas that we did not implement because if we did, we would need a huge processor, and it increases the cost of the work as well as increasing the possibility of the session crashing. So we sacrificed a few ideas, especially at this initial stage. However, we continuously update the project. The project is currently in its fifth generation.

RA: You are interested in writing and have published many texts and books. To what extent did this help you write the lyrics? What are the topics or themes? And how are they different from the usual hip-hop topics, such as ego, patriarchal discourse, the romanticized dream of revolution, disses and other such speech?

HK: Writing has been a major part of what I do since the 1990s, so yes sure it has an effect, but I think what actually had a bigger effect was listening to a lot of hip-hop. I started listening to lots of Egyptian hip-hop a few years ago, and then I slowly shifted to Western hip-hop, mostly Anglo-American. Pusha T, for example, brags all day long "I'm the biggest drug dealer in the world" but there is still a certain lyricism and formal efficacy, even if the content is mostly disses and boasts and the subject ultimately remains the superior male self. There is still a formal power to the use of words and how the bars are put together. This is inspiring; I am not interested in trying to imitate it, but rather to actually utilize it. In my lyrics, I wanted to speak from the position of the voice of a collective self, a voice that is multiple in its gender and class, not merely for the sake of diversity, but rather because we live under common conditions and I am interested in a voice emerging from this common shared condition and reflecting that commonality. This is a condition based on exploitation, the classification of human beings, massive desires, emotional, physical, mental and spiritual desires, great phobias, fear of the future, failure and collapse. It is also based on something that is fluid. I believe that the truth and reality itself are fluid; this is now present in a much more mainstream generalized fashion. All of this together is part of the logic of the lyrics. So, I wanted the subjects' voice to speak from this perspective, not in a theoretical or abstract way. Words can help express the strong emotions that are part of a life lived under these shared common conditions. I was also attracted to hip-hop because I could see

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that it is an important medium in the present time; it is a really emotional medium in which very strong emotions are invested even if that is as basic as shouting out "I am the best in the world." The emotions and drives that underlie and shape the form are real and are part of the structure that we all live in, part of the political and economic systems that we are all part of. They are real and important drives, they are our landscape and we should not ignore them and act as if they do not exist, on the contrary, if there is something that I find exciting about art it is exactly this: to deal with existing drives. The words I wrote want to deal with these drives and to take them seriously. They want to take selfishness, lust, love, fear and hatred seriously, but to treat them as drives not products. There is, at least for me, a huge difference between a drive that becomes a form of energy or comes out of an interior obsession and a motivating drive that is sublimated into a commodity. For example, Trump used these drives to produce a commodity, in this case hatred and racism, and all the emotions that Trump trades in all the time, like the myth that the white man is in a state of historical injustice and that he must avenge his honor. But in order to do this, he uses basic and real existing drives, and he has the ability and an understanding of the media's semiotics to exploit this and transform these drives into products. This is one of the foundations of Trump's populism. I am deeply interested in working on the same set of existing drives, but not as products. In hip-hop, however, drives are also transformed into products. For example, reaching the top and becoming Jay-Z, even in conscious hip-hop a certain product still remains. Kendrick Lamar is interested in a specific product and image, for example in a positive idea of community. That's what he does. I am interested in something else; to let the words create something, but that this thing remains suspended between heaven and earth, a thing that cannot be resolved.

RA: Can you give examples?

HK: Take the ending of the first song for example:

Get ready cause we're on the prowl

Tiger growl let the kids on the corner howl

Piss in the pit if you and them and them will take a hit

They used to speak the truth out

She let the crows out

He spat these words out

They grew horns and burned the house down

Ok so: *They grew horns and burned the house down*

But there is no sense in what comes before that this is their aim or goal, this is just what happened. It is not what they want to achieve. Another probably more significant thing in achieving this state of suspension is the way the lyrics were written so that you can take any line from any song and place it before or after any other line from any other song and they will still make sense. That is very important, the constant reassembly of the material creates a meta-poem that is constantly morphing and changing. Every part of it is like a window through which you can glimpse a specific, important and basic thing. Therefore, because of this state of fluidity, it is very difficult to have a sense of resolution. We are constantly in a suspended state.

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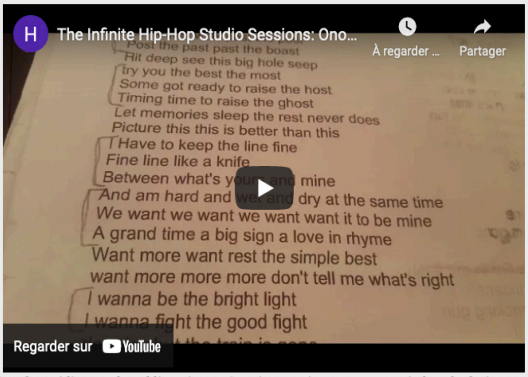

Muting the guiding track and listening to Onosizo rapping unaccompanied to the lyrics to song #4 in the control room.

As for the meaning, it is also in a state of fluidity, but a precise non-ambiguous one. The lyrics convey specific meanings and emotions even as they are constantly being recontextualized. You can feel tangible, sensed things that are not just abstract. The images are 'real', but you cannot connect them to any one fixed thing.

RA: How did you produce the beats? How many beats are there? And what is your inspiration for them?

HK: I worked on Ableton and just very intuitively and smoothly programmed the beats using MIDI, which is different to how I generally do things. The beats are divided into two groups, primary beats and accompanying beats or accessories. The primary beats can cover a segment of the cycle on their own. However accompanying beats function more like ambience, the interaction between the primary and the accompanying beats creates a certain complexity. The kind of beats that usually attract me in hip-hop are edgy like Earl Sweatshirt, Tyler the Creator or Shabazz Palaces. I made over 200 and something beats- a lot! You end up sitting like a machine spewing them out. In my first conversations with Olivier we discussed the idea of putting certain filters using probabilities on the beats but to achieve that you need immense processing power so we dropped it. What I insisted on though is that there must be ways to mute and unmute the different elements of one beat — like the snare, the cymbals, the hi-hats, etc. That was super important as it gives the rhythm a certain variation that is engaging to the ear. If the beats are poor and lack this variation, especially since they run for hours, then after a while, it will be too grating and difficult for the listener. I was trying to not copy any specific style as well as I could. And by the way, I also think that Kanye is a very good producer [laughs].

RA: That's true

HK: I listened a lot to him and think he's a genius [laughs].

RA: I want to know more about the program that Olivier designed, the logic used to produce the music and what were the inputs into the program.

HK: So it is a system that works with possibilities and probabilities, and like most algorithms, it is composed of T-branches. Every branch has another T-branch within it. The probabilities are weighed between choosing which branch to follow. If you choose the right branch, something happens and if you choose the left branch, another thing happens. Let's begin with the vocal samples or units because they are the key to the whole system, or that's how we decided to design this, which I think makes sense since the vocal sample is the variable element. When we recorded the vocals, we encoded information in the title of each sample: the name of the rapper, the key they are singing on, and

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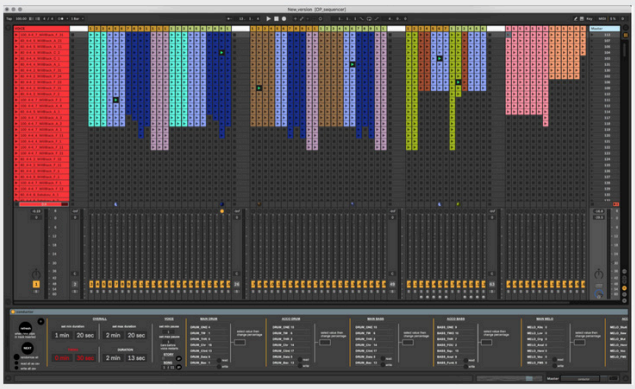
the BPM they are using. Max then randomly selects one of these vocal units and converts the whole of the Ableton session to its coordinates. For example, if the vocal sample was recorded on 80 BPM, the tempo of the Ableton session would switch to 80 BPM when that sample is used. The second thing that happens is that the vocal sample based on probabilities chooses its own accompaniment. For example, a high-pitched melody has a probability rate of 6 out of 10, while a melody revolving around a medium pitch has a probability rate of 3 out of 10, and the one with a low pitch is 1 out of 10. This is a hypothetical example but it gives you a sense of how the system works. Of course, the 6 out of 10 melody has a higher chance of accompanying this vocal sample than the other two (though that, crucially, does not mean that the 1 out of 10 probability does not sometimes happen). As long as the program is running, the options and the possibilities change with time. What this allows for us is to design a general shape to the material even if it is not completely fixed and continues to change with time. That general shape is still fragile though, because intentionally built into it there is always a possibility that surprise elements can break that form. These were important decisions to help create a non-rigid 'living' system that has a certain level of flexibility. Though this is the basic structure, within each element there are always different possible choices. So for example, if we return to the beats we would find that it is possible for two accompanying beats to play together, for one accompanying beat to play with a primary beat, for a primary beat to play alone, and for all three to play together, but never for two primary beats to coexist. This already gives us a certain form. It gives us a musical system that is complex enough to allow listeners a sense of organic diversity and change yet simple enough to have a general form and shape. The same structure is followed with the melodies; there are melodies that are combinable and others that are not. Bass is generally simpler, but there are also bass lines that can be combined.



Screenshot from the Ableton session of The Infinite Hip-Hop Song. Courtesy of Hassan Khan

RA: So how do you move from one section with its own tempo and key to a different one smoothly? How long are the sections? How do they produce variations in such an organic form, especially as no beat is assigned to any specific vocal unit and all the elements are intertwined?

HK: The variables I have talked about do not change arbitrarily; they have a structure. This structure is the structure of the work itself, which is divided into cycles. Each cycle consists of 12 segments and one song. The song is also a segment but I call it a song for aesthetic reasons. Each segment has its own probabilities as well; the minimum length is about two minutes. First, the vocal unit is selected; it formats the session and assembles the rest of the musical material according to its encoded data and this runs for at least two minutes but also possibly longer. It is important to point out that the vocal unit is not

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the whole segment; a vocal unit could be anything from 20 seconds to five, six minutes. If the selected vocal unit is longer than the minimum time, the section continues till the vocal unit is played to its end and then we move on to another section and the music will change. But if it's shorter than two minutes, another unit with the same data set is chosen. For example, if the unit we are working with is 80 BPM in the key of A, the next sample to be chosen would have these same specifications. Each vocal unit is edited so that it slots in exactly on the beat. As mentioned earlier, the minimum length of a section is two minutes and the maximum length is determined by the remaining duration of the last vocal unit selected before the two-minute mark. So for example, if a vocal unit ends at the one minute and 50-second mark of the segment and pulls out a second unit to continue the segment that is six minutes long, the whole of the six minutes would be played and all of it would be considered part of the same section (which is now seven minutes and 50 seconds long). When a beat changes, it usually means that the section has changed, however (just to add a bit more confusion), it is possible for the beat to change without actually changing. Because of the complex nature of the beats, there is so much possible variation between muting and unmuting elements as well as constructing complex beats on top of each other. After the 12 sections run, the section I call a song is played.

Saba Lou Khan sings lyrics #2 in song form rather than rapping — this is one complete vocal unit. Accompaniment muted outtake from studio sessions. Courtesy of Hassan Khan.

In the studio, while we were working, I decided to experiment with a few of the rappers singing. We recorded some of the lyrics as songs. This section is considered a complete and independent sub-routine with its own atmosphere; and its own set of beats, melodies, and bass lines that are different from the rest.

RA: How many lines of lyrics?
HK: 351 lines.

RA: What is the probability of any segment being repeated exactly? And how long would it take before this happens?
HK: It is a very very low probability. One in 20 duodecillion, that is 20 followed by 40 zeroes.

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Dynamic MaxforLive devices including probabilities of occurrence for each specific instrument. They are controlled by a main conductor providing tempi, durations and other high-level decisions. Courtesy of Hassan Khan.

RA: Where has the piece been shown so far?

HK: First in Madrid, in a solo exhibition called *The Keys to the Kingdom* at the Reina Sofía Museum. Then it opened a week later in a group exhibition called Soft Power at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It showed end of 2020 in Taipei as part of Liquid Love, and is scheduled next year to be installed at the Centre Pompidou in Paris as part of my solo survey exhibition titled 'Automatic Is the Voice that Speaks'. I am also working on a performable live version, and have already begun discussing with Olivier developing a system so that I can perform it live as a concert.

RA: A lot of artists and musicians now turn to algorithmic and self-generated music, each has their own style. Possibly the Algorave project is one of the more vivid examples of this approach. What is your relationship to generative art and what are your previous experiences in this?

HK: There is no one definite thing that will resolve everything. It is all, in the end, a series of propositions and attempts, which is something I think is very good. We need more people sitting around and trying things out without claiming that any one thing is the solution to everything. In terms of my own personal relationship to the algorithmic, this is my first usage of algorithmic technology but there are many works that I have produced in the past that use a related logic, such as in *Taraban*, and even *tabla dubb*. Let's take 'Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak' (2005) which is not an algorithmic work but is also not a linear piece. The piece is basically a long rectangular white room with lighting from above. In this room you can listen to six tracks of music played on two sub-woofers, four mid-high speakers, and four tweeters. The work was produced in 2005; I took six commercially distributed tracks of popular shaabi music in various styles at the time including a Mawwal by Ahmed Addawwiya, the song *If you play me I play you* by Ali Salheen, a song by Araby al-Soghayer, and of course Abdel Baset Hammouda; basically all the major stars of classic shaabi. I chose six tracks that I personally loved, that were different to each other and that represented different trends in shaabi music at the time and used them as a starting point. Next I sat with a shaabi kawala player who helped analyze the songs for me, identifying which Maqams and rhythms were being used, till I sort of had a blueprint for these six songs. I then took this equation and worked with it in the studio sessions with shaabi session musicians. I used the blueprint to give them instruction as to what each of them should do; for example you play a Karatch rhythm, and now you play such and such rhythm.

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We first recorded the rhythm section: dohola, tabla, finger cymbals and a riqq. Then we recorded the rest of the instruments; a trumpet, two keyboards, the kawala, accordion, violin and an electric bass; basically the standard setup of older style shaabi. I recorded each musician on their own without listening to any other musician, and without knowing the original song the blueprint was based on. They only worked with that blueprint I gave them, and the pre-recorded rhythm section. Afterward, I mixed and mastered the six tracks and finally they were broadcast in the room I described earlier. For each song, there was a different light set-up. For example, the Mawwal begins and the lighting immediately moves to 20 percent, the song ends and the lighting moves to 100 percent for 30 seconds and then another song begins and the lighting changes again and so forth. Each song is followed by a 30-second break at 100 percent before another song begins with another light set up. A vinyl text was attached to the wall describing the different steps of the project. I find the logic of Dom Tak to be algorithmic but as applied to human beings. My interest is not technology for the sake of technology. I worked on *Dom Tak Tak Dom Tak* because I was interested in breaking down a collective cultural product and analyzing it back to its constitutive elements; in this case shaabi music is the collective cultural product being engaged with. At the same time, this produces something new and different from the generic form, but it still, I would argue, contains the obsessions and emotions that exist In this cultural form though it is not ruled by the specific rules of that form. In a sense, I am trying to abstract the cultural form itself, not to reach any kind of essence, but rather to touch the cold structure underlying the piece. In order to come to proximity to a moment that I find of great significance for aesthetics in general, this is the coldest of places and yet, at the same time the most passionate and full of emotionality. In this case the mediated experience is cold because the room is automated and the music is made in a semi-artificial proscribed fashion. The musicians do not listen to each other, and everyone plays alone and so on. But also because of the interference of the author, the insistence (through mixing) to produce an aesthetic and emotional experience. This is the strange thing about this project; it has a very intimate side, but at the same time it is a very cold thing.

RA: The past few years controversy has arisen over the relationship of technology to the arts and music in particular, as well as the role of artists and their possible marginalization through the massive increase in the power of programming and artificial intelligence. Do you have any concerns about that on the music scene in our region and abroad? What are the possibilities offered by technologically advanced projects?

HK: Well — honestly I do not think of technology in those terms. Technology is a tool that offers possibilities; we can use them in both successful and unsuccessful ways. The marginalization of musicians is more of a political issue than a technological one. In Egypt, many musicians are marginalized because the scene is not healthy and is not able to give musicians a suitable sustainable life, nor to have the opportunity to build a deep and productive relationship with the public. They don't have the chance to perform in a place on a regular basis, so people can listen and critically respond. This, in my opinion, is something that marginalizes musicians more than technology. This is political of course, not that it is necessarily a political decision taken by a specific governing body, but rather political in the sense that it is connected to how the public order is organized, how the market operates, how the socio-economic sphere is built, what kind of margin of freedom is allowed in a society. These are the things that marginalize musicians. I know that some things have declined because of technology, for example the 'clap'. When I was doing the recording sessions for 'Live Ammunition' I searched for clappers and

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discovered that they had disappeared because the clap is now part of any keyboard or sample library. So yes technology eliminates some things but at the same time it produces new things.

Excerpt from a performance of "Live Ammunition! Music for Clapping, String Quartet and Live Electronics" at SAVVY Berlin 2017.

RA: What is the best way to show and hear the project?
HK: So far, it has been installed in several different ways. In Madrid, it was on loudspeakers and a subwoofer, but it was part of a larger exhibition with various other works and a very special architectural context. The sound had to be contained and couldn't be too dominant. In San Francisco, it was on headphones accompanied by a text written on the wall explaining the steps of the project as well as a custom-designed logo that is part of the work. In the Pompidou, it will be shown with the logo and on loudspeakers, but it will still be part of a show with other works. The perfect way to display it for me is on its own kind of like in Taipei. Ideally, I want to place it in a large space, a garage for example in which a large sound system can be set up and the logo painted on the wall. One could also design some simple but effective lighting for it. In both Madrid and at the forthcoming show at the Pompidou, a sculptural piece composed of five 50 centimeters long glass rods was presented. They are produced by directly shaping them under high heat; a kind of violence is apparent in the form in which the glass is shaped. I think of *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song* as a work that is both an artwork and a piece of music, a bit like *Composition for a Public Park*. *Taraban* and *The Big One* I consider just as music pieces.

Excerpt from the premiere of "The Big One" at the first 100 Live Festival at Rawabet, Cairo 2009.

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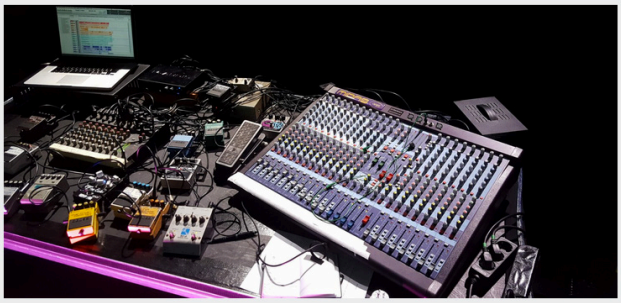
RA: Your previous music work, as you mentioned earlier, is radically different to *The Infinite Hip-Hop Song*; not just the style but also the sound as well. Let's talk about your works that have a Shaabi or popular character. You began with *tabla dubb* and developed with time till you reached *Superstructure* and *Taraban*. How did you work on that music? Please explain in detail the style and the different workflow of such projects, and what attracted you to shaabi and how do you relate to it?

HK: I can first talk about *tabla dubb*. In 2001, I was living in Abdeen, working on Pro Tools on an Apple G4. I just came back from a trip to the US with severe jet lag; I couldn't sleep so I basically worked all night long. I took a few drum samples from CDs or something like that and started playing with them, chopping them up and micro-editing them into new beats. When I finished the first track I did like that — I liked it very much — so I decided that I would make an entire album. I worked very quickly; just a few days and I was done. Afterward, I started thinking about how to perform it live. The premiere was in Beirut, at the very first edition of HomeWorks. Christine Tohme had come to Egypt because she was preparing HomeWorks, and she asked me to do something, so I played her *tabla dubb* and she loved it, and I decided to go to Beirut to do a concert there. I started thinking practically about how to perform it live. I set it up like a DJ, using two CD-DJ players and a mixer; it also included a live video mix that was done using over 20 VHS tapes with loops that I had shot and edited, two VCRs and a video mixer. My interest at the time was how to use musical culture itself as an instrument and that the work would be able to transcend the generic (and corrupt!) binary of contemporaneity and authenticity. I was always totally against this attitude; *tabla dubb* doesn't want to be fusion, nor do I want to be both "old and new." I am just interested in working with musical culture as an instrument. Then in 2004/2005, I worked with Mahmoud Refat on *Ya Leil Ya Basha*; in my opinion, a project that had great potential, but I think we didn't at the time have enough experience to tackle it. Mahmoud and I had been playing together for a couple of years and were doing completely different stuff to *Ya Leil Ya Basha*. When I first heard Addawiya's song *Ya Leil Ya Basha*, I fell in love with it. It was captivating. I spoke with Mahmoud and told him let's remake this song in our own way. So we did; we had all the melodies of the piece arranged for strings and then recorded them, and we started working with two singers selected via auditions. I guess what we were doing with the singers must have been totally crazy for them. We did not realize what was happening, and they did not understand what we were doing, and when we came to perform live, one of the singers got totally paranoid and stood on stage refusing to sing. Thankfully the other singer stepped up. We performed a concert at the New Arizona Oriental Nightclub in Orabi, downtown. We spoke to the owner Hossam Ali Baba and made a deal with him and managed to bring together a huge crowd. But then the singer did not sing. Unfortunately, this concert was not recorded. We managed to record the second concert at El Geneina Theater with one singer only. The music was strange to them, and I think when the singer found herself singing in a sleazy cabaret, she freaked out. I think we were not aware that this was not "normal" for these singers. We didn't have the experience to recognize this. If I did this project now, I would do it very differently.



Hassan Khan's live work table in preparation for his concert at the 2017 edition of the Intonal Music Festival in Malmö – the pre-composed and pre-recorded material from the studio with the small feedbacking mixer. Most of Khan's concerts are based on a conversation between order and collapse through this relationship. Courtesy of Hassan Khan..

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RA: And then you produced *DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK*?

HK: Yes in 2005. I think this is a very successful piece, and I am still showing it till now. Also The Big One in 2009, and of course a lot of other music in between that is not related to popular music. We started working on Ya Leil Ya Basha in 2004, and when we went to meet Hossam Ali Baba in New Arizona, the first thing I heard as I entered the club was *Heysa* by Emad Barour. There was something slightly different about it that caught my attention, and I started from that moment onwards listening to many different things under the rubric of shaabiyat — the range is wide from almost folklore to the beats of the market MCs; all these elements which afterwards became what is now known as 'Mahraganat' were in a state of free flow. This was the period of the moulid style which now someone like Ahmed Yunis is returning to. Moulid was so popular in 2005, 2006 and 2007. MCs and producers like Nasser al-Sakran, Abdo al-Rewesh, Ashraf el-Prince, and Sha'ban al-Baghbghan (though both are now much more traditional — El-Prince works with Hakim and Sha'ban is doing more mainstream shaabi stuff). Ashraf El-Prince's production was of a very high quality; the mastering was well balanced and the texture of the sound was always exciting. All of this attracted my attention to shaabi during that period and I was convinced that as a cultural form in Egypt, it played the role that almost no other format in the Egyptian cultural context did at the time. Official culture in Egypt deeply fears anger. It is as if anger does not exist. There is romanticism, machismo in various forms, and jealousy but no real anger. There is also a social fear of any threat to power and its values, a fear of vulgarity that is not ashamed of itself. Basically all these things were not really allowed in official culture at the time. In my opinion, it had been pushed to the side and repressed since the 1920s. The Mubarak and Gamal Mubarak era of neoliberalism and all of that didn't really allow for these uncouth emotions to appear. These repressed emotions managed to manifest publicly in two things, in the Friday sermons blasted out of loudspeakers across the whole city, in which anger was expressed very strongly, and in musical styles like moulid, souq, etc. These were two very culturally important forms in that period. The Big One emerged out of that context. I worked in Studio El Araby in Shubra. I had gotten to know the sound engineer, Bassem Shaheen, to whom I explained what I wanted to do, and he told me that he would find me the session musicians. I recorded with them in the same way that I later on did in *Taraban*. They play the same melody for a very long time, because we can record a single melody being played for 20 minutes, I collect all these recordings and start building and composing them in my own way. Then there was the period of *Superstructure*, the session from which the two tracks that were released on the EP by the Vinyl Factory came out. These tracks came from the same sessions as the soundtrack to the 2010 piece *Jewel*. I worked on a mozmar and keyboards. The music was grafted from elements present at the time in the style of *El Mouled*, it was popular at the time to record the solo instruments from a synthesizer but though the beats were partially inspired by some of the rhythms instead of using keyboards, I used a live mozmar. I produced the beat with a shaabi arranger. We did one long 12-hour session. He had the samples library of oriental percussion instruments that was commercially popular at the time. That was important.

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"Superstructure", 2012 at the Louvre, Paris 2012.

RA: You also worked on music from completely different cultures, the Gamelan in your piece *Club Gamelan*. How do you deal with other cultures without falling into the trap of exoticism?

HK: *Club Gamelan* is connected to the Gamelan orchestra as an instrument, but I am not interested in or claim the Gamelan in terms of it being a musical culture from Bali and Java. I mean, I love the Gamelan as a music and a group of instruments, and I listen a little bit to it, but I do not have any deep knowledge of the subject. I did not use the instrument so that it could give me a tropical feel or a sense of place. I used it because I love the sound of this instrument. It therefore made sense to me to use it as an instrument and to specifically use it to make club music (or to be more accurate my own idiosyncratic idea of club music). I mean it is also club music but it has a specific character related to my sensibility- it's not just slamming four to the floor beats down. It's Gamelan and all but I don't think it feels exotic because it is not interested in this idea. It just uses the specificities of the instrument to produce something I am interested in.
RA: And you worked on pieces based on classic instruments. What are the most important works you produced in this context?

HK: The first piece was *Twelve Pieces for Piano and Electronica* in 2007. I used QuickScribe, which is a computer compositional tool based on writing a musical score. I then recorded the piece with a Montenegrin pianist who read and played that score, while I adjusted his playing which then was rewritten into the score itself. There it is again! That same relationship between the musician and the composer that I am interested in. This situation is produced because I don't have a formal musical education so I am always forced into the position of trying to reach something that I don't have the necessary tools to reach, which means I have to begin from scratch every single time, and find a way to be able to access this thing. These obstacles can actually be very generative because when you begin from scratch, even if you make many mistakes and it takes much longer, you are constantly discovering new things. You are not tied to the presumptions and stereotypes and rules, because you just don't know them. So contrary to what is usually said to young artists and musicians about the importance of first learning the rules and then breaking them, I would just say do whatever the fuck you want, and then let's find out what we discover. That's how I learned music. Actually that's almost how I learned anything. Afterward there was *Composition for a Public Park* and *Live Ammunition* both in 2013 and performing at New Music festivals like Maerz Musik in Berlin and the Ruhr Triennale in Essen. Later on I began working the

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human voice in *Tainted* and *I saw the world collapse and it was only a word* both from 2018. This was when I began working with PHØNIX16 who are an excellent vocal group for contemporary music. In both cases, there was no ready composed music, so I worked with the singers and wrote the piece using specially developed graphic scores while I was working with them. There is also *No to nostalgia no to symbols no to icons* from 2016. I was commissioned by the European-Egyptian Contemporary Music Ensemble to produce a piece for them. They were putting together an event that celebrated Ahmed Fouad Negm, and I frankly do not care about this figure or this issue or am actually quite critical, hence the name of the piece. It was composed for bassoon, viola, violin, cello, flute, and contrabass. The graphic score in this case gave the musicians a structure, basically to move from note to note using sustain and glissando. Each section has a specific order and a specific duration. I engaged in long conversations with all the musicians about their personal experiences with musical education. We spoke about power and authority in that education and the type of oppression that classical musicians endure within the institution. While the glissando is being performed between each movement and the next, one of the performers stand up and tell their story to the audience- this is repeated three times. In a sense the piece was partially a composition and partially a performance. The interesting thing is that they are classically trained musicians, and so improvisation is not necessarily their biggest strength, but I worked with them on that; how do they hear each other? How to transform the sonic texture in relation to what they are hearing, how to work with suspense, expectation and drama in order to give shape to the whole piece.

RA: One of the most common topics that we deal with is nostalgia which has become a dominant trope, just as is in the title of your composition. How do you deal with the past?

HK: The past in itself is important. The idea is not to just cancel the past. However, the problem is with nostalgic emotions, which is about your *relationship* to that past. I do have a big problem with the idea of a vague nostalgia for some ambiguous, constructed past. These emotions are usually involved in rewriting the past in order to confirm the dominant values in the present, a dynamic that is constantly used to justify the context in which we are living. So it either justifies the present or it offers an imagined image of the future we aspire to. This is a feature of fascist thinking: the kind of thinking that always brings us back to the tired dichotomy of origins and endings. It is a form of thinking that only offers, whether politically or personally, a closed horizon. It can only imagine human beings caught in a vicious circle between fantastical great origins and a theoretically great telos. This imaginary is unable to conceive of human beings as an open project or as something contradictory. Therefore, from a purely political point of view, it is the kind of logic that is always used to consolidate power in general, regardless of its form or direction — whether political, social or religious. That is why my relationship with nostalgia was always troubled, on the intellectual level, but even on the emotional level. I never really had such strong nostalgic emotions. Perhaps as a teenager, I had a little nostalgia for the 1960s, drugs and hippies, but I don't think that it was a real nostalgia more a desire for loss. I feel that the nostalgia that wants us to return to the past conceals the most important thing which is the reality that we are actually experiencing.

RA: Do you think there are possibilities latent in the past that can help create art that addresses the present while looking to the future without the problematics of falling into the nostalgic?

HK: Yes of course, not only in the past, but like in everything, in the past in the future, up, down, wherever. As long as the relationship remains real, one does not fall into nostalgia. I am not into canceling the past. That's stupid. The problem is in the relationship to things. This is the heart of the matter.

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/HASSAN KHAN

Text: Michael Stoeber

Auf der 57. Biennale in Venedig erhielt Hassan Khan für »Composition for a Public Park« den silbernen Löwen. Das Werk des 1975 in London geborenen Künstlers sei, so lobte die Jury, »poetisch und politisch«. Man mag das eigentlich gar nicht wiederholen, so abgegriffen sind die alliterierenden Adjektive, die in jeder zweiten Kunstkritik die Arbeiten eines drittklassigen Künstlers preisen. Im Falle von Khan aber passen sie. Umso mehr er nie »politisch« mit »propagandistisch« verwechselt. Das Politische zieht in seine Werke, um mit Nietzsche zu sprechen, stets »auf Taubenfüßen« ein. Zart, unaufdringlich, unmerklich und doch stark, konsequent und unabweisbar. In dem Sinne, in dem Aristoteles den Menschen als Zoon politikon, als gesellschaftliches Wesen, bestimmt hat. Dazu kommt, um sein Werk zu charakterisieren, noch ein weiteres Epitheton, das in der heutigen Kunstbetrachtung ebenfalls fragwürdig geworden ist: das Moralische. Nicht, dass Khan es in seiner Kunst auch nur im Mindesten anstreben würde. Aber es grundiert sein Werk in geradezu klassischer Weise, weil dessen Wahrheit uns zu einsichtigeren und damit im Idealfall auch zu besseren, sprich widerständigeren Menschen macht.

Hassan Khan, Vater und Mutter Ägypter, wuchs in einer weltoffenen Familie auf. Als er vier Jahre alt war, zogen die Eltern mit ihm zurück nach Kairo, wo er heute noch lebt und arbeitet. Sie machten ihn früh mit Kunst und Kultur bekannt. Dabei wussten sie seine Neugier in viele unterschiedliche Richtungen zu lenken, ohne irgendetwas auszuschließen. Seiner toleranten ästhetischen und intellektuellen Sozialisation schreibt er selbst seine weit gespannten Interessen zu. Khan ist nicht nur Künstler, sondern ebenfalls Musiker und Schriftsteller. Das wird auch in seiner Arbeit »Composition For a Public Park« (2013/2017) deutlich. Ursprünglich hatte er das Werk für Paris konzipiert. Dort war auch seine Premiere in einem Park in Belleville, einem Stadtteil, der durch seine multinationale Bevölkerung geprägt ist. Die Hardware der Komposition besteht aus einer Armada von mannshohen Lautsprechern, die für sich schon eine skulpturale Installation sind. Aus ihnen ertönt ein konzertantes Hörspiel in drei Sätzen, für das Khan die Musik komponiert und die Libretti geschrieben hat. Jeder dieser Sätze ist unterschiedlich lang. Wandert der Interessierte in der Installation herum, hört er das Werk polyphon aus mehreren Lautsprechern zugleich. Bleibt er vor einem Lautsprecher stehen, folgt er dem Hörstück in seiner linearen Entwicklung. Mit jedem Standortwechsel ändert sich der Eindruck, den er von dem Werk gewinnt. In ihm breitet Hassan Khan ein Panorama der zeitgenössischen Condition humaine aus, die zugleich überzeitlich ist. In ihr ist, wie die Existenzialisten einst schrieben, der Mensch ins Leben »geworfen«. Was er daraus macht, hängt ganz davon ab, wie er sich dazu verhält.

Poetisch und politisch ist auch der Satz von Walter Benjamin, den sich Khan 2016 für seine Ausstellung im New Yorker Guggenheim-Museum als Titel auslieh: »But a Storm Blew From Paradise«. Im Deutschen: »Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her.« Zu finden ist er in Benjamins »Geschichtsphilosophischer These IX«, die der Denker anlässlich seiner Betrachtung des Bildes »Angelus Novus« von Paul Klee schrieb. In der Guggenheim-Ausstellung war auch Khans »Bank Bannister« (2010) zu sehen, inzwischen in der Sammlung des Museums. Ein denkwürdiges Werk! Es zeigt eine Skulptur, die von einem Handlauf inspiriert wurde. Dieser Handlauf aus Messing begrenzt rechts und links einen Treppenaufgang, der in die Misr-Bank in Kairo führt, die erste ausschließlich in ägyptischer Hand befindliche Bank der Stadt. Auch wenn Khans Skulptur von einem realen Objekt inspiriert wurde, ist sie kein Readymade im Sinne von Marcel Duchamp. Es ist eine Skulptur aus eigenem Recht, die symbolhaft deutlich macht, worum es dem Geldinstitut mit ihren kostbar wirkenden Handläufen eigentlich geht. Ihr goldener Glanz soll den Kunden Vertrauen in die Solidität und Kompetenz des Unternehmens vermitteln. Diesen Subtext legt die Intervention von Hassan Khan in sensationeller Weise offen, nachdem der Künstler den Handlauf abgeformt und ohne die Treppenstufen in den White Cube gebracht hat. Dort wirkt er, frei im Raum stehend, wie ein surreales Objekt. Aber zugleich auch so, als habe er alle Schwerkraft abgeschüttelt. Eine abstrakte Ikone, hochsteigend wie das Pferd des Kaisers auf dem Gemälde »Napoleon am Großen St. Bernhard« (1801) von Jacques-Louis David. In dieser Form eignet ihm ein imperialer Zug, der das anmaßende und für ihre Kunden oft ruinöse Selbstverständnis der Banken als »Master of the Universe« in genialer Weise in die Groteske treibt. Mit diesem Ausdruck ist ein Wort im Spiel, das für den Künstler zu einem Schlüsselbegriff seines Werks geworden ist.

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/ Stuffedpigfollies, 2007, Inkjet-Druck auf Canson-Papier, gezeichnetes und computerbearbeitetes Bild, Edition 3, Courtesy der Künstler und Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

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Installationsansicht, »HOST«, 2019, Kestner Gesellschaft Hannover, Foto: Raimund Zakowski

Eine Anregung aus der Wirklichkeit, eine Art motivisches Readymade, so ließe sich in Anlehnung an Marcel Duchamp sagen, bestimmte auch Khans Beitrag für die dOCUMENTA (13). Für »The Knot« (2012) hatte er sich von einem Knoten in Form einer liegenden Acht anregen lassen. Ein Unendlichkeitszeichen, das er in schimmerndem weißem Glas nacharbeiten ließ. Von zwei schlanken, schwarzen Stützen in die Höhe gehoben, bot sich der Knoten den Augen der Betrachter in Kassel als ebenso kostbares wie zerbrechliches Artefakt dar. Ist es bei »Bank Bannister« die Translozierung des nachgebauten und in den Status makelloser Unberührtheit erhobenen Objektes, die das Werk in die Sphäre des Symbolischen erhebt, so ist es bei »The Knot« die Materialwahl. Bar seiner ursprünglichen Bestimmung lädt der Knoten den Betrachter ein, das Werk im übertragenen Sinn zu lesen. Als einen Reflex auf menschliche und gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse, die zugleich fragil und komplex sind. Oft verwirrend und nur schwer zu lösen. Weshalb der große Alexander angesichts eines vielfach verschlungenen gordischen Knotens sich gar nicht erst bemühte, diesen aufzubinden, sondern ihn gleich mit dem Schwert durchschlug, sozusagen kurzen Prozess machte. Was nicht immer und unter allen Umständen zur Nachahmung empfohlen ist. Gerade, weil die menschlichen Verhältnisse und Einrichtungen, um mit Thomas Bernhard zu sprechen, »einfach kompliziert« sind, empfiehlt es sich, sie vorsichtig und rücksichtsvoll zu behandeln. Wie ein rohes Ei oder einen wertvollen, leicht zerbrechlichen Gegenstand trotz des ganzen Horrors, den das Leben mit ihnen oft für uns bereithält.

Mit »The Knot« hat Khan, man bedenke noch einmal die Form des Knotens, einen Kommentar zu unserer Wirklichkeit gestern, heute und morgen geschaffen. Er ähnelt essentiell einer Beobachtung von Samuel Beckett in »Ceiling«, dessen Protagonist an der Schwelle zum Tod beim Blick auf das Leben von »Dread Darling Sight« spricht. Das wird unmittelbar klar, wenn wir auf Khans Skulptur in Nachbarschaft zu seiner, von Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev kommissionierten Videoarbeit »Blind Ambition« schauen, die auf der dOCUMENTA (13) zusammen zu sehen waren. Der 47 Minuten lange, schwarzweiße Film wurde in den Straßen und Cafés Kairos mit den Kameras zweier Mobiltelefone im Stil des Cinéma vérité aufgenommen und auf einen einzigen Monitor projiziert. Er ist stumm bis auf die Momente, in denen Khans Akteure sprechen. Und wenn sie das tun, sind sie ebenso aufgeregt und emotional wie die Kamera, die ihnen folgt. Khan zeigt neun Episoden, in denen Frauen, Männer und Kinder agieren. Sie spielen, streiten und diskutieren miteinander, reden über sich und andere. Es geht um Hoffnungen und Erwartungen sowie um Werte wie Fairness und Pflichtgefühl, Verantwortung und Brüderlichkeit. Dabei werden wir zu Zeugen, wie leicht die Dinge aus dem Ruder laufen können. Das zeigt sich im Fußballspiel der Kinder, das im Vandalismus endet wie im heftigen Streit junger Männer über eine Geldschuld oder in der leidenschaftlichen Diskussion zweier Freundinnen über Liebe, Treue und Verrat. Khan hat sein Werk im Jahr der ägyptischen Revolution geschaffen. Von ihr ist in seinem Film nicht einmal die Rede. Und doch ist sie in jeder Episode präsent. Das Private ist das Politische.

Hassan Khans Ausstellung in der hannoverschen Kestner Gesellschaft heißt »Host«. Es ist seine zweite große Einzelausstellung in Deutschland nach einer ersten Ausstellung 2015 im MMK in Frankfurt am Main. »Host« lesen wir nicht nur an der Fassade des Kunstinstituts, sondern auch auf großen Farbtafeln im Inneren. Zu Recht, ist die Kestner Gesellschaft doch Gastgeber (host) für die Werke des Künstlers. Aber host ist ein ambivalenter Begriff. Im biologischen Sinne meint er den Wirt, der einen artfremdem Organismus mit Ressourcen versorgt. Wie schön, wenn das eine Symbiose ist, ein Geben und Nehmen, doch wird es sehr problematisch, wenn der Gast sich als Parasit herausstellt. »Host« (2007) heißt auch das zentrale Videowerk der Schau. Seine schwarzweißen Bildsequenzen sind schon 1997 entstanden, als der 22jährige Student Khan mit Kommilitonen eine improvisierte Performance aufnahm, bei der er jeden von ihnen getrennt zu einer spezifischen Körpersprache und Rollenübernahme

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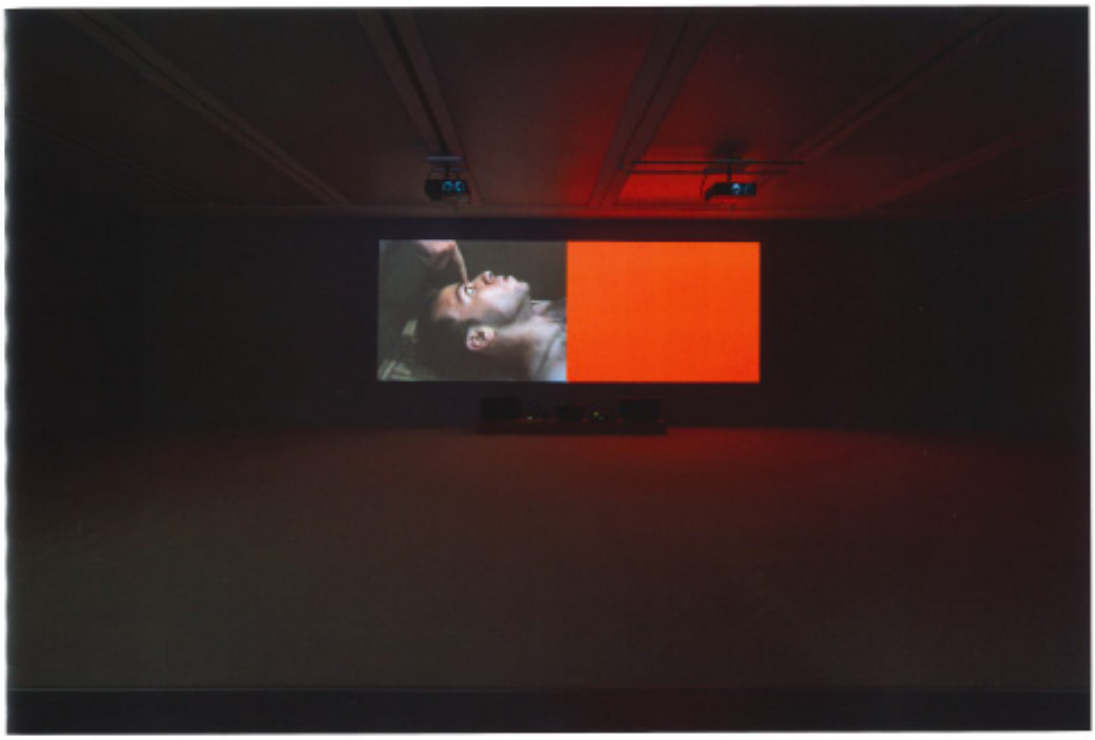

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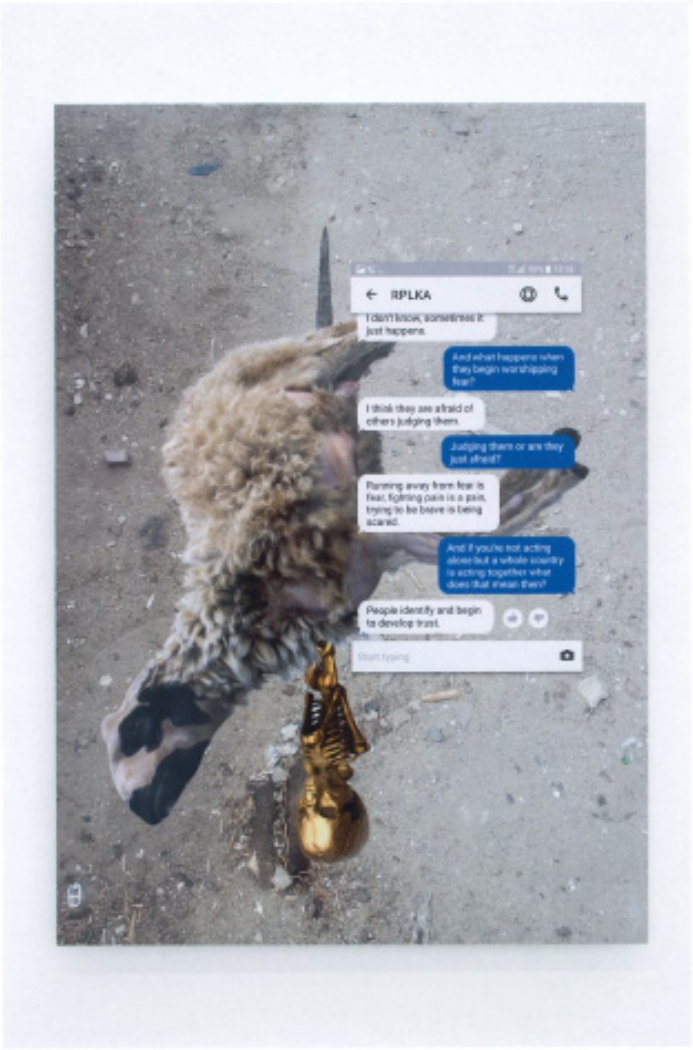
animierte. Herausgekommen ist eine wilde, anarchische Szene, die zwischen Drama und Burleske, Lachen und Leiden angesiedelt ist. Eine Groteske, die von Macht und Ohnmacht, Unterdrückung und Ausbeutung handelt. Dabei verschiebt sich die Wirkung der Bilder immer ein wenig, weil sie mit einer formatidentischen, etwas länger dauernden Sequenz roter Monochrome verbunden sind, die fast unmerklich ihre Farbe wechseln. Außerdem wird das Videowerk von einer noch längeren, von Khan komponierten Tonspur begleitet. All das macht, dass die Bilder bei jeder neuen Projektion und jedem neuen Sehen immer etwas anders wirken. Wir kennen das in anderer Form aus der Filmgeschichte von dem berühmten Kuleschow-Effekt. Bei kombinierten Einstellungen ändern sich die Wahrnehmungen der Betrachter. Der Kontext schafft die Bedeutung. Und damit den Blick, den wir auf die Dinge werfen. Auch dies eine Einsicht, die von nicht geringer politischer Tragweite ist.

Auf »Host« als Zentrum der Schau läuft, streng symmetrisch, ein Prolog aus vier Werken zu, dem ein Epilog aus weiteren vier Werken folgt. Den Auftakt macht »Live Ammunition!« (2015), vier anthropomorph anmutende Lautsprecher, aus denen rhythmisches, gleichfalls vom Künstler komponiertes Klatschen dringt. Es ist dynamisch, voller Adrenalin und Aggression. Die Installation ruft, obwohl nicht ein einziges Wort fällt, Reden ins Gedächtnis, die wie Waffen sind, von der berühmten Leichenrede des Marc Anton in Shakespeares »Julius Cesar« über die tödlichen Plädoyers Dantons, Robespierres und St. Justs während des »Terreur«-Regimes der Französischen Revolution bis hin zu den berüchtigten Hetzreden eines Joseph Goebbels und Adolf Hitler. Gleich daneben in »Light Shift« (2015) ein Scheinwerfer, dessen Licht permanent die Farbe wechselt. Steht der Betrachter in seinem Fokus, sieht er für sich wie für die ihn Betrachtenden immer wieder unterschiedlich aus. Arthur Rimbauds berühmter Befund, dass Ich ein anderer ist, das Spiel mit einer fluiden Identität, die nicht immer leicht zu ertragen ist, wird hier mit leichter Hand inszeniert. Ebenso wird der Besucher in Hassan Khans »Sentences for a New Order« (2017) zum Koautor des Künstlers. Auf sieben Stromverteilern tauchen bruchstückhaft LED-Sätze auf. Sie fügt der Leser zu einem Ganzen zusammen, etwa »Like« und »Try« oder »Like« und »Die«. Die libidinöse Versuchung, Eros, verführt zum Ausprobieren und Auskosten, mag aber nach Freud ebenso gut in die Destruido und den frühzeitigen Tod, Thanatos, führen. Man kann die Satzfragmente paradigmatisch und syntagmatisch, auf der persönlichen und gesellschaftlichen Ebene betrachten. Stets führen sie uns dabei Brüche, Verwerfungen, Diskrepanzen vor Augen.

Die konzentrieren sich auch in dem Stofftier, »Purple Stuffed Creature with Bleeding Eye«, aus 2019, das blutige Tränen weint. Seine cartooneske Gegenwart, die uns eher an Kinderzimmer und Kindheitsszenen als an Ausstellung und White Cube denken lässt, wirkt befremdlich und irritierend. Vor allem im Verhältnis zu den strengen, minimalistisch konturierten Werken in seiner Nachbarschaft, die an mehr oder weniger eindeutigen Narrativen orientiert sind. Die Kreatur wirkt in sich gebrochen und grotesk, weil sich in ihm das Niedliche mit dem Abschreckenden und das Vertraute mit dem Befremdlichen verknüpfen. Das Disparate erstreckt sich ebenso auf seine Form und Farbe wie auf seine Stofflichkeit, in welcher der textile Korpus und das gezeichnete Plastikauge eine eher unglückliche Verbindung eingehen. Noch stärker prägt sich das Groteske in einem weiteren Stofftier aus, dem »Piggie Piggie Longhands Growl Growl« (2019), am Ende der Ausstellung. Es zeigt ein bizarres rosiges Schwein mit einem riesigen Kopf, dunklen Knopfaugen aus Glas und langen Armen, die sich dem Betrachter entgegenstrecken. Einerseits wirkt es lieb und vertraut, aber zugleich besitzt es auch die furchteinflößenden Reißzähne eines Raubtieres. Die Hybridisierung macht deutlich, wie wenig dem zu trauen ist, was uns umgibt. Das gilt natürlich ebenso für eine Wirklichkeit, in der ein nordamerikanischer Präsident nicht davor zurückschreckt, sich mittels einer Fotomontage den Körper eines Athleten auszuleihen, um seine Potenz zu demonstrieren.

Michael Stoeber
« Hassan Khan »
Artist Kunstmagazin, N° 122, February - April 2020, p. 22.



/2013 II, 2019, Papier auf Dibond, digitale Handyfotos, digital zusammengesetzte Bilder, computergenerierte 3D-Digitalrendering, Vektorillustrationen, 128 x 90,5 cm, Edition 5 + 1 AP, Courtesy der Künstler und Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, Foto: Martin Argyroglo

Michael Stoeber
« Hassan Khan »
Artist Kunstmagazin, N° 122, February - April 2020, p. 22.

/ HOST, 2007, Zweikanal-Videoarbeit und Sound, Courtesy der Künstler und Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris

Daraus ist zu folgern: Wenn die Kunst heute die Groteske nutzt, um uns die Wirklichkeit deutlicher vor Augen zu führen, nutzt sie ein Dispositiv, das die Wirklichkeit bereits vielfach für sich vereinnahmt hat. Was Bertolt Brecht einst über die Fotografie schrieb, dass nämlich die einfache Wiedergabe der Wirklichkeit nichts mehr über sie aussage, weil »die eigentliche Realität in die Funktionale gerutscht« sei, ließe sich heute auch über die Groteske sagen. Was bitterer nicht sein könnte! Kunst und Wirklichkeit scheinen inzwischen oft genug darin zu wetteifern, welcher Bereich des Lebens grotesker ist. Auch diese Einsicht grundiert die Werke von Hassan Khan. »2013«, der Titel seines in 2019 gefertigten Triptychons, nennt das Jahr, in dem eine Militärregierung unter Abdel Fatah El-Sisi die Hoffnungen des arabischen Frühlings in Ägypten gewaltsam zerbrach und begrub. Die grotesken, am Computer gefertigten Collagen des Künstlers zeigen die ohne jede Achtung behandelten Kadaver von Hund, Schaf und Katze, auf unwirtlichen und verkommenen Straßen liegend. Begleitet wird ihr erbarmungswürdiger Auftritt von kulturellen Artefakten aus Museen, die der Stolz ihrer Länder sind oder es einmal waren. Sie verweisen in Form und Inhalt auf eine Humanität, die von den Tierkadavern sternenweit entfernt ist. Begleitet werden die Bilder aber auch von Texten der Computer-App, »RPLKA«, ausgeschrieben Replika, also Replik wie Antwort. Mit Hilfe eines Algorithmus beantwortet sie unsere Fragen, wobei sie uns durch jede unserer Fragen ein bisschen besser kennenlernt. Eine künstliche Intelligenz, die vorgibt, uns freundlich gesinnt zu sein, aber auch jederzeit zum »Big Brother« werden könnte.

Die Welt, die Hassan Khan subtil und seismographisch wahrnimmt, ist uns schon längst in grotesker Weise abhanden gekommen. An allen Fronten müssen wir um Autonomie kämpfen. Sinnbildlich dafür steht sein Werk »Studies for Structuralist Film No. 2« (2013). In ihm umkreist eine Kamera in einer zirkulären Bewegung, die Michael Ballhaus zum ersten Mal in dem Fassbinder-Film »Martha« (1974), später auch in Scorsese-Filmen, eindrucksvoll eingesetzt hat, einen Protagonisten. Der wechselt dabei beständig vom Objekt zum Subjekt und vice versa. Er wird angeschaut – Jean-Paul Sartre hat eindringlich beschrieben, wie uns der Blick des Anderen gefangen nimmt – und schaut zurück. Ein Schwanken zwischen Autonomie und Abhängigkeit, wie sie konstitutiv für jedes Leben ist. Dass einem dabei der Angstschweiß ausbrechen kann, zeigen die humorvollen »stuffedpigfollies« (2007). Die vom Künstler am Computer entwickelten Fantasien eines menschenähnlichen Schweins – es steht auf zwei Beinen, gestikuliert und spricht – bezeichnet Hassan Khan als Selbstporträts. Auf jeder Zeichnung schwitzt dieses Schwein in wechselnden Choreographien Blut und Wasser, als wolle es H. W. Audens epochales Moderne-Werk »Age of Anxiety« beglaubigen. Durch das Private und Persönliche wird es nicht weniger in Panik getrieben als durch das Öffentliche und Soziale. »Which Witch« fragt es in lautmalerischem Dadaismus und meint doch sehr präzise die Hexenjagden, die sich heute vor allem in den Shitstorms der sozialen Netzwerke austoben. Oder ihm wird das eigene Bild im Spiegel zum Alptraum: »I hesitate when I meet my living face.« Man denkt an den Exorzismus, den Heiner Müller beim morgendlichen Blick in den Spiegel betrieb: »Kenn' ich nicht. Rasier' ich nicht.« Oder es sucht – und mit ihm sein Schöpfer – »A platform to stand on«. Nicht nur für die beiden, für jeden von uns: »Ein Ziel aufs Innigste zu wünschen.«

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/Sentences for a New Order: now changes, 2018, LED auf Stromkasten Gewiss, 43,5 x 22 x 9,6 cm. Edition 1 + 1 AP, Courtesy der Künstler und Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris, Foto: Martin Argyroglo

Michael Stoeber
« Hassan Khan »
Artist Kunstmagazin, N° 122, February - April 2020, p. 22.

An Aesthetics of Survival

Hassan Khan, *Jewel*, 2010. 35MM film transferred to Full HD video, original music by the artist, suspended screen, projector, audio system, room painted according to certain specifications; 6min30s; edition of 6 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris. © Hassan Khan

Hassan Khan's *Jewel* is often said to be an enigma. The video begins with darting spots of icy blue light against a black background. An anglerfish emerges, bioluminescent and grotesque, swimming in deep, dark water to a mournful, simple soundtrack. A beat is added as the fish propels itself forward at closer range, all glowing fins, spines, teeth, and lure. The creature transforms into an icon of itself, points of light stamped into a rotating loudspeaker. As the music builds in complexity and momentum, the speaker is revealed to be at the center of a room, very much like the one in which the viewer is standing. Two men dance in front of the speaker, their dynamic at once private and communal, symbiotic yet awkward. At times they seem determined to engage directly yet often they look past each other. The older, heavier man wears a leather jacket; his movements are curved and fluid, almost sinuous. The other wears a button up shirt and gestures in straighter lines. They don't seem to be expressing anger, joy, or even pleasure. They dance with great concentration. The viewer is presented with a charged situation but not invited in. The dancing continues for a few minutes, as the camera zooms out. And that is all.

Deena Chalabi
« An Aesthetics of Survival »
Openspace, January 27, 2020
https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2020/01/an-aesthetics-of-survival/

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I was among the first to see the finished piece, in December 2010. Khan was one of twenty-three artists commissioned to make new work for a large contemporary exhibition called *Told/Untold/Retold*, part of the opening for Mathaf: Arab Museum of Modern Art in Doha, Qatar, where I worked at the time. I had visited Cairo for the first time the previous October, a trip which included listening to Khan and others talk about the injustice and unsustainability of existing systems. Perhaps because of this, I read *Jewel* as a heightened and distilled exploration of the fluid and complex relationship between Cairo as a metropolis — the constant barrage of images, sounds, encounters, histories, as well as palpable political tensions — and its inhabitants. Both the fish's determined swimming and the men's earnest, persistent dancing seemed to me to contain a certain urgency, a potential for transformation. While the work was not about Cairo, it was certainly born from it.

Khan aimed to produce a particular representation of Egyptian visual culture at the end of the twentieth century. His annotated process images for the *Told/Untold/Retold* catalogue include: screenshots of YouTube clips depicting groups of young men dancing in the Cairo streets; a leather jacket "made popular with taxi drivers in the 80s"; "the cheapest 'decent' belt the artist could find"; a cassette tape cover of shaabi music (the urban genre he had heard from the speaker); and a photograph of undercover police beating up citizens on the street. "This image," Khan wrote in the notes, "acts as a diagram indicating how a power structure manages to replicate itself. Thus all characters: victims and aggressors seem identical. [...] If we were able to abstract some of these violent movements they would look a lot like a dance."

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Khan worked with his two actors separately at first, developing with each a fluid language of physical gestures before introducing them to the music. He then began a collaborative process of choreographing their conversation through movement. "What was important was that these gestures were always anchored to a sense of communication," Khan stated in a 2012 interview, "that they were haunted by the world around them even if they were not completely of that world."

It was also important that the music drive the communicative act. Khan composed and arranged the score, layer by layer, instrument by instrument, using shaabi as his basic vocabulary and forging something new. Shaabi, which combines electronic and traditional elements and literally means "of the people," refers to a musical genre that emerged from the Egyptian working class urban context of the 1970s. Khan has worked with shaabi in several ways in his practice and (in the same interview as above) has called it an open, generative, and subversive form, "a place of decoys and sublimation [...] a place that is not easily reducible."

I remember walking in to see *Jewel* for the first time, between installation and the opening, and finding two South Asian construction workers (who had been part of the crew that was finishing the building where the work was housed) in the space, dancing quietly but intently to the music. There was a mop and bucket on the floor between them, a visual echo of the speaker between the two men on the screen.

Actually, I don't know if this memory is real, or if it is someone else's experience that I heard about and absorbed. But I see the uncanny double image clearly in my mind's eye, a testament to the power of the music and the mesmeric quality of the piece, its oblique commentaries on class, labor, and belonging. Doha is a very different city from Cairo, but in that moment, through the artwork, the subjects of two separate, complex systems of (homo-) social control encountered one another; a carefully calibrated dance inspired a spontaneous dance of physical and emotional release.

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Seeing *Jewel* in San Francisco, I am once again enthralled by its strangeness and curious about its melancholic machismo. The anglerfish, alien and ancient, swimming in the cold, deep sea and then fixed into the speaker, is a reminder that extreme conditions produce fierce adaptations. I have read that female anglerfish are the ones with the lure, the luminescent bait to attract both food and mates — each species of fish has her own elaborate structure of filaments and pattern of light flashes, like fireflies, to communicate with her own kind. The females have gaping mouths, expandable stomachs, and teeth like needles, to catch the very little prey that appears that far down in the water. The males are smaller and less fierce. In several species they attach themselves to the female's body, atrophying except for gills and sperm. Khan has described the connection between the fish stamped into the speaker and the music that plays from it as being about survival in context, but was he thinking about anglerfish sexual behavior as he crafted *Jewel*? What was his interest in gender and public space? I cannot quite tell.

The men dance forever around the speaker but remain in place, in the same relation to one another. Today they remind me of a Cairene version of Estragon and Vladimir, the main characters from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Their perseverance is touching. I cannot help but think that it is almost exactly nine years since the Egyptian revolution began, and from what I understand, that political context continues to shift as much as it remains immovable, closed; existential survival has become a form of resistance. As ever, *Jewel* provides no explanations — its meanings remain indefinite and unknown. As the camera zooms out, I seem to move further and further away, just as Khan did in the taxi. I too am left with a form in my mind that I turn over and over, a gem that catches a flickering light.

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Cornwell, Tim. « 57th Venice Bienale. Editor's pick: Rising stars », *Canvas*, Summer 2017, pp.124-125.

canvas

HASSAN KHAN

Birth date: 1975
Nationality: British-Egyptian
Pavilion: Main show

Photography by Ali Chandtschi

Leaving the last of the national pavilions at the Arsenale on that frantic first day, I had just missed the ferry for the Giardini and was aiming for the walking route back when I found myself on a winding path through a small walled garden with grass mounds on either side. There, I heard a haunting and complex piece of symphonic music, rising from small black speakers on low poles arranged on the grass. It changed as a wanderer walked through; discordant yet in harmony, catching the visitor unaware, modest in its volume and physical appearance. I turned back and off the path to walk through again, in order to catch the snippets of voices and sound.

Hassan Khan's *Composition for a Public Park* (2013-2017) is a multichannel installation of music composition and spoken libretto, designed for public parks and gardens that are open and free and where the libretto is recorded in the language (or languages) of the country or city in which the work is installed. It comprises different movements – *Stasis and Majesty, The Revolving Jewel,* and *No Political Romanticism* – that are designated to specific spaces. In an interview, Khan (b. 1975) said they are designed so a "visitor can recognise something in what they hear but never feel like they own it completely," and that is exactly what his work has achieved. "The three movements explore shared emotional landscapes, the strange place where the intimate and the public touch each other," he says. "Each movement carries a voice with it that is ambiguous and vague enough to be recognisable by a large amount of people yet at the same time particular and specific enough to also be alien and not easily assimilable by the visitor."

The piece clearly worked its magic, for the judges of the prestigious Silver Lion award for the most promising young artist of this year's Biennale chose to confer it on Khan. On a sensory level, his work reads like a delicate mixed hors d'oeuvre of music: a plate scattered with spots of dark balsamic vinegar, green pesto, pomegranate seeds. He weaves in snatches of text and the music and instruments of West and East, flavours to be tasted individually, and together. The first movement includes a brass ensemble, mizmars and piano; the second a small classical Arab music ensemble and electronics; and the third contrabass, string quartet and clapping.

Cornwell, Tim. « 57th Venice Bienale. Editor's pick: Rising stars », *Canvas*, Summer 2017, pp.124-125.

Hassan Khan. *Composition for a Public Park*. 2013 - 2017. Sound installation. 57th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia *Viva Arte Viva*. Image courtesy of the artist, Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris and La Biennale di Venezia. Photography by Sebastiano Pellion di Persano. © Hassan Khan

"I imagine two gardens or parks," Khan tells me, "The visible one the visitor walks through, as well as an invisible garden that hovers slightly above the physical one and that is produced by the content of the piece. As the visitors walk through the park or the garden, they are also walking through the composition itself."

His short, beautifully constructed texts begin when the first movement opens, assuming the voice of a stooped, thin old man, "who strives for the euphoria that our urban life promises but falls short". "If you are an angry person, well, I will show you how that anger only breaks things and nothing else," is one line in *No Political Romanticism,* which, as Khan notes, speaks through a collective subjectivity, rather than an individual one, tragically demonstrating how power forces us to love the things that make us angry, for anger that is simply contained breaks out in sudden hatred. "For burning needs do not disappear, they only mutate."

London-born Hassan Khan is a household name in the Middle East. He lives and works in Cairo (to where his Egyptian parents returned when he was five) and his work is held in different public (and private) collections across the region, including Mathaf in Doha, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi and the Sharjah Art Foundation. "Ironically enough, not a single work of mine has ever been acquired in my own home country, Egypt, where I have been showing publicly since 1995," he quips. He is also very much an international player as a musician, having performed all over the world, a widely-published writer and an artist boasting solo exhibitions from New York and São Paulo to Switzerland and the UK.

"I do not have a studio," he explains. "I work all the time, everywhere, and wherever I am in the world. I work while walking through Korba, my comfortably bourgeois neighborhood in Cairo, or the hectic popular flea markets of Seoul; I work while lazing around at home doing nothing, while overhearing fascistic ex-army officers and their wives gossiping at the Heliopolis club, while slowly dissolving in a hundred and one museums everywhere; I work while sipping a drink in a cafe, in a bar, in a tavern, in a pub, in a club, in the backstage of a theatre; I work while riding a tuk-tuk in Delhi, on the bus in London, on the subway in NYC, on a train in Sweden, in a limousine in Dubai; I work while sitting at the public notary waiting for papers to be processed, while buying a book in a downtown bookstore, while politically disagreeing with taxi drivers, with accountants, with tea shop boys. I of course also work while literally, working: with actors, with film crews, with craftsmen, with musicians, at the printers, in a workshop, in a factory, at a car mechanic, or maybe just alone on my laptop or in one of my many notebooks."

"As a musician I believe in music, and as an artist I believe in art. For me the category 'sound art' does not make any sense," he continues. "I believe one can work in any medium that one sees fit to work in. In a sense, the work always demands its own medium. I think this kind of art practice will continue into the foreseeable future. Specificity is important of course, but maybe we can think of specificity in terms of the work rather than the medium."

Khan says that for his next major project, he has been dreaming of a big-budget feature film produced with lookalike actors channeling a specially chosen pantheon of Egyptian comedians from the past century of film. *The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility* (2015), which was shown at the Sharjah Biennale in 2015, is a sort of preparatory step towards this work." Multidisciplinary, versatile and critical, we cannot wait to see what Hassan Khan will come up with next.

Wilson-Golden, Kaelen. « Hassan Khan, Beirut Art Center », *ArtForum*, *VOL 55*, *N°6*, February 2017, p.236.

ARTFORUM

BEIRUT

Hassan Khan

BEIRUT ART CENTER

Of the many organizing principles through which to present the work of Hassan Khan—moving chronologically from early to recent work, for example, or arranging disparate mediums into thematic clusters related to recurring ideas of power or dreams—portraiture would appear the least obvious. Since the late 1990s, the Egyptian artist has made a slew of videos, photographs, installations, animations, sculptures, and performances that deliberately resist—even defy—categorization. He is a musician who pays close attention to the vicissitudes of *shaabi*, literally "of the people," a genre of gritty urban dance music that is forever reinventing itself in working-class Cairo. He is also a keen observer of the political and intellectual dramas of urban life, noting the choreography of police brutality, the cruel details of socioeconomic class, and the tiny acts of aggression that zigzag among friends and other social groupings. In his twenties, Khan ran theater workshops for the influential playwright Ahmed al-Attar, edited a magazine called *Alive*, and penned a winning manifesto known as "The Violent Editor." He recently published his first novel, *Twelve Clues*, bending multiple genre conventions (police procedural, nouveau noir, thriller) into a singular conceptual exercise. Khan considers *Read Fanon You Fucking Bastards*, a digital/graphic collage of images, text boxes, and diagrammatic signs whose first iteration appeared in 2003, a work in perennial progress, always ready to be mobilized and reconfigured whenever a curatorial or editorial process veers into what he considers neocolonial terrain.

Hassan Khan, *The Portrait is an Address*, 2016, mixed media. Installation view. Photo: Walid Rashid.

Yet for his first solo exhibition in Beirut, Khan took the notion of the portrait and effectively turned it inside out, or more accurately, enlarged it from a static image to an active sentence, thereby articulating something new about his practice. "The Portrait Is an Address" presented thirteen works in three distinct spaces. The first was a darkened room bounded by a wall of soft white curtains—very uncharacteristic for an artist who otherwise tends toward hard edges, right angles, and total control. Inside were three video screens cutting diagonally across the space: *G.R.A.H.A.M.*, 2008; *GBRL*, 2010; and *Studies for Structuralist Film No. 2*, 2013. Running the full length of a long wall was *Insecure*, 2002, a series of vinyl text instructions such as LIST TEN STRATEGIES YOU USE TO SEDUCE OTHERS; WONDER WHAT THE CLOSEST PERSON TO YOU REALLY WANTS FROM YOU; WONDER WHAT YOU REALLY WANT FROM THE CLOSEST PERSON TO YOU. In another corner, *Technicolor Mubarak*, from 2001, showed a flickering portrait of the former Egyptian president sitting next to a photo of himself, the whole scene awash in colored lights. In the next room, a portrait of the artist's mother, which Khan took with his mobile phone, hung high in a corner on a wall painted red. *Rant*, from 2008, a memorable black-and-white video of an actress agonizing in an empty room, split the second space in half. The third jutted up against the Beirut Art Center's glass facade, which Khan had dolled up in a grid of colored gels, along with a found photograph of a young, over-accessorized woman, whom the artist described on an exhibition tour as fashionable but also sad and tragic. Close by was a framed photograph—extracted from a larger work, *The Alphabet Book*, 2006—placed on a bright yellow wall, showing a little boy, fists up in a boxer's stance; Khan described it as "a self-portrait through the actions of a child actor."

Mixing old and new work and shuffling through both well-known and totally forgotten projects, the exhibition made an impressively surgical cut into the artist's oeuvre, not only proving Khan's abiding interest in portraiture—rendered as wry text, a slowed-down video of a friend refusing to speak, found footage of a dictator, or a group of ink-jet prints of cartoons depicting an anxious pig (*Stuffedpigfollies*, 2007)—but turning the genre on its head. Works such as *G.R.A.H.A.M.* and *GBRL* are studies in how personas are constructed, how people brand and project and communicate and convey themselves to others, how friendships are formed around or through the tension between intense self-assertion and dramatic self-doubt. Contrary to convention, the portrait here was always doubled, often haunted, and never alone.

—*Kaelen Wilson-Goldie*

Evans, Jenifer. « The Portrait is an Address Hassan Khan at Beirut Art Center », *Art Addict.net*, November 29, 2016.
http://www.ibraaz.org/reviews/117

The Portrait is an Address
Hassan Khan at Beirut Art Center

Jenifer Evans

010_06 / 29 November 2016

View author information

Slightly askew, on one of the brightly coloured gels stuck to the panes of Beirut Art Center's window front, was a transparency of an image Hassan Khan has used before: what appears to be a promotional image of a young woman with exuberant hair ornamentation. This new work, *The Portrait is an Address* (2016), coloured the world outside; from inside the space, you could see cranes, building tops and the sky through her and the colors around her. The effect was cinematic, but up close I saw imperfections at the edges of each gel – traces of glue or scratches.

Installation view, Hassan Khan, *The Portrait is an Address*, 2016, at Beirut Art Center, Beirut.

The whole exhibition, a selection of 13 works by Khan, was also called *The Portrait is an Address*. It was filled by a melancholic, repeatedly swelling droning noise – a deliberate leak from the central work, *RANT* (2008), a black-and-white video projected on a screen suspended in the show's central white tunnel, which connected the two other exhibition spaces. At the centre of the screen sits a black-T-shirted woman at a white desk. The image veers between over and under-exposed, but tends toward the former, stylizing her surfaces. The woman seems pensive, and becomes increasingly worked up and shaky. The film itself is mostly silent except for the swelling soundtrack, but as we watch, she makes interjections in Arabic (subtitled in English): 'How could they do this to me?' and: 'I am the one who is stupid'. Her porous skin glistens and intermittent close-ups focus on a hand, or the lighter she brings out to fiddle with; the camera's gaze objectifies her. But her words are barely not internal – the opposite of surface – and don't make much sense. It feels uncomfortable and familiar.

Like *RANT*, the show itself was stark, mostly monochrome. Much of the floor was painted glossy white, highlighting lumps and picking up scuff-marks from people's shoes. In the first gallery space were six works in different media and four languages. The sound piece *Three Solos (Excerpt from Composition for a Public Park)* (2013) could only be experienced fully in French, although a English translation was stuck on the wall. The large wall text *Mahmoud El Ansari* (2010) needed Arabic, although a label offered an English translation. The six drawings of *stuffedpigfollies* (2007), displayed on a slightly jerry-built table, and the video *sometime/somewhere else* (2001) would be ungraspable without English.

Installation view, Hassan Khan, *The Portrait is an Address*, 2016, at Beirut Art Center, Beirut.

Playing on a big black boxy monitor, *sometime/somewhere else* is a triptych of sorts, and almost the only Khan work with a direct self-portrait. There are two in fact: at the top of the screen is a horizontal strip in which an earnest 15-year-old Khan talks to a Swedish TV station about reviving heavy industry in Egypt, and at the bottom, a strip in which a 17-year-old version dramatically plays electric guitar. In between, 32 lines appear one after the other as of a poem: 'this is a text / this is a cipher / this is a message / this is a code / this is an insanely brief memory / this is a frame / this is an example / this is a drama / this is a language / this is a politics / this is a trail', and so on. Introductory inter-titles speak of fantasies of transmission and playing games with the outside world.

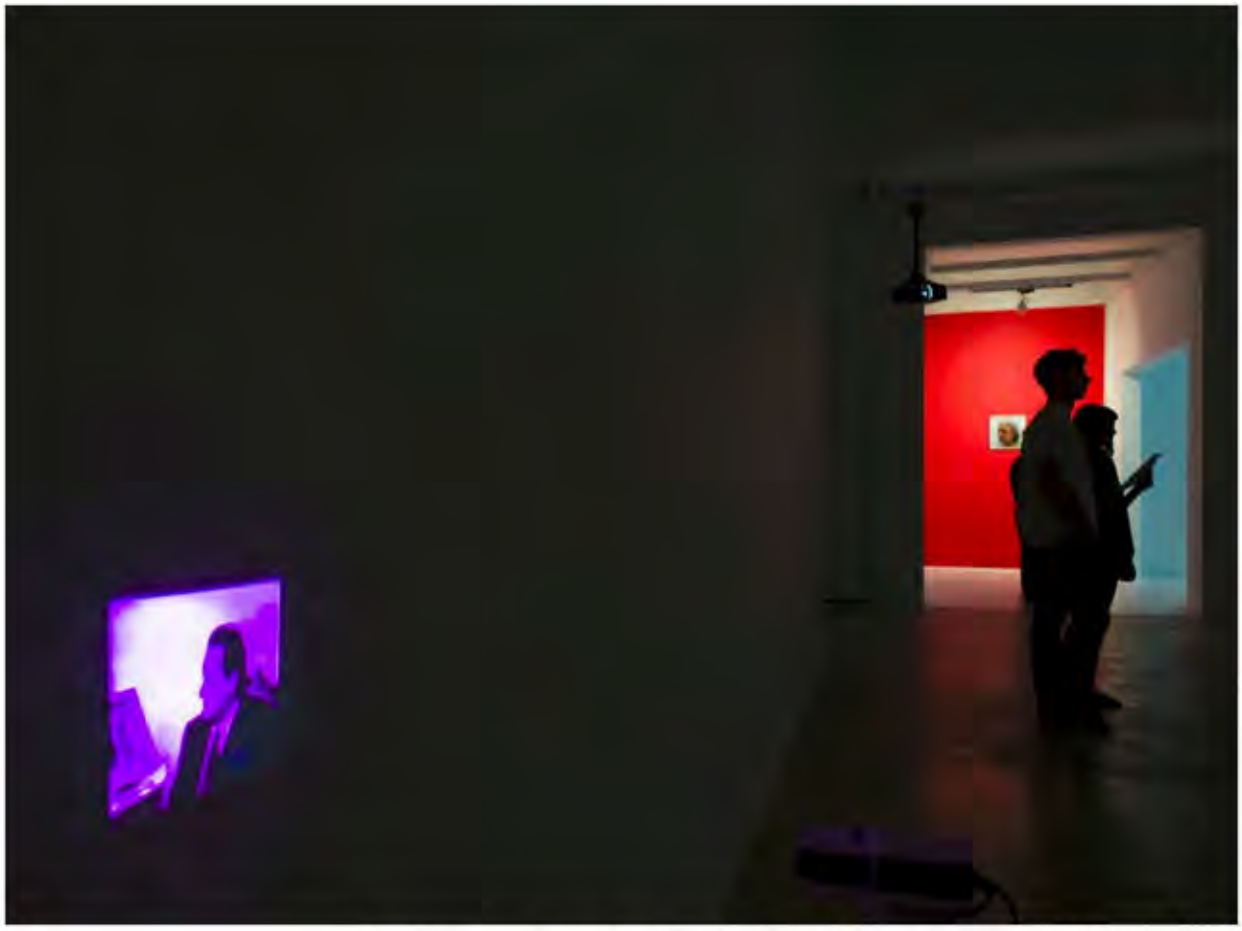
The aesthetic is VHS and the vibe is awkward embarrassment mixed with audacious exhibitionism. Alongside *RANT*'s soundtrack, *Sometime/somewhere else* set the tone for the exhibition. Its nineties look was shared by the visuals of the whole show: black-and-white, rough-and-ready, video-heavy. Throughout, Khan would self-consciously direct our gaze back to the artist himself, through the eyes of his subjects or through stand-ins such as a little boy in fighting pose in the nearby photograph *Untitled, Alphabet Book C* (2006) or worried pigs (*stuffedpigsfollies*). And the 32 statements of *sometime/somewhere else* seem revealing of Khan's systematically intuitive and coded approach to art-making in general.

Language difficulties, as encountered by non-trilingual viewers in that first space, accentuate the impossibility of knowing what's going on inside other people. Likewise, Khan's works are generally a bit sealed off, emitting clues about the rules behind their construction. We can never really get in other people's heads, but there are moments maybe when barriers break down. These moments were constructed through the form in the works in *The Portrait is an Address* – to create a discomfort, an embarrassment, a worry, a look in the mirror – but also in how the artworks encroached on each other, rather than standing isolated and alone.

Hassan Khan, *My Mother*, 2013. Installation view at Beirut Art Center, Beirut.
Copyright the artist.

At the far side of the tunnel in which RANT was screened, a red glow in the whiteness came from a red-painted wall on which hung *My Mother* (2013): a photograph of Khan's mother photographed against a white wall, looking at him and us with the same wary ambivalence as each subject who looked at the camera in this show. Around the corner was the final space in the exhibition, where three hanging rectangular projection screens hung, on which three almost completely silent videos observed people's surfaces very carefully. In *Studies for Structuralist Film no. 2* (2013), Khan does this by running repeatedly around them with a camera, zooming in and out as they sit and occasionally make eye contact. In *GBRL* (2010), he follows the protagonist around her flat as she makes her coffee and waits for it to brew, with all sound turned off save for two exclamations: 'Yes!' and 'I will do it!'. The first screen to confront viewers upon entry to this space contained a man, Graham Waite, who is no longer alive (*G.R.A.H.A.M.*, 2008). His eyes glisten and have a similar wary, vulnerable yet obliging look as Khan's mother. The video is slowed down slightly, so we see Graham's body breathing very clearly, but we can't hear the internal monologue that the exhibition handout told us he's giving.

On the wall in that space was *Insecure* (2002): head-height printed vinyl instructions that can be used to sound out wobbly definitions of yourself and the not very porous dividing lines between yourself and other people. 'Whisper your name over and over to yourself till it doesn't make sense', for example, or: 'In the morning act out something embarrassing you did the night before in front of the mirror'. Amid all this intimate, familial defining and undefining of borders between self and others was a tiny video projected low on a wall: *Technicolor Mubarak* (2011), showing the ousted dictator sitting, bizarrely, next to a photo himself. It flashes in the bright base colours of analogue video, which echoed precisely the colours of the work this exhibition began with: *The Portrait is an Address*.



Installation view, Hassan Khan, *The Portrait is an Address*, 2016, at Beirut Art Center, Beirut.
Copyright the artist.

Khan has often tended to look backwards, at past works or moments, but the retro look of this exhibition combined with the sad, droning soundtrack coming from *RANT* seemed to speak of loss. We know that Graham Waite is gone, so is Khan's audacious youth. Mubarak is ousted. There is no more VHS. We feel the intense regret of the protagonist in *RANT*. This sense of loss made the deliberately impermeable aspect of Khan's works gentler, more relatable. There was also something softer about this exhibition, when compared to Khan's previous, slicker shows. Through the 13 portraits presented, the cryptic nature of his work was shifted onto his subjects, with works themselves less hermetically sealed by looser and leakier display choices.

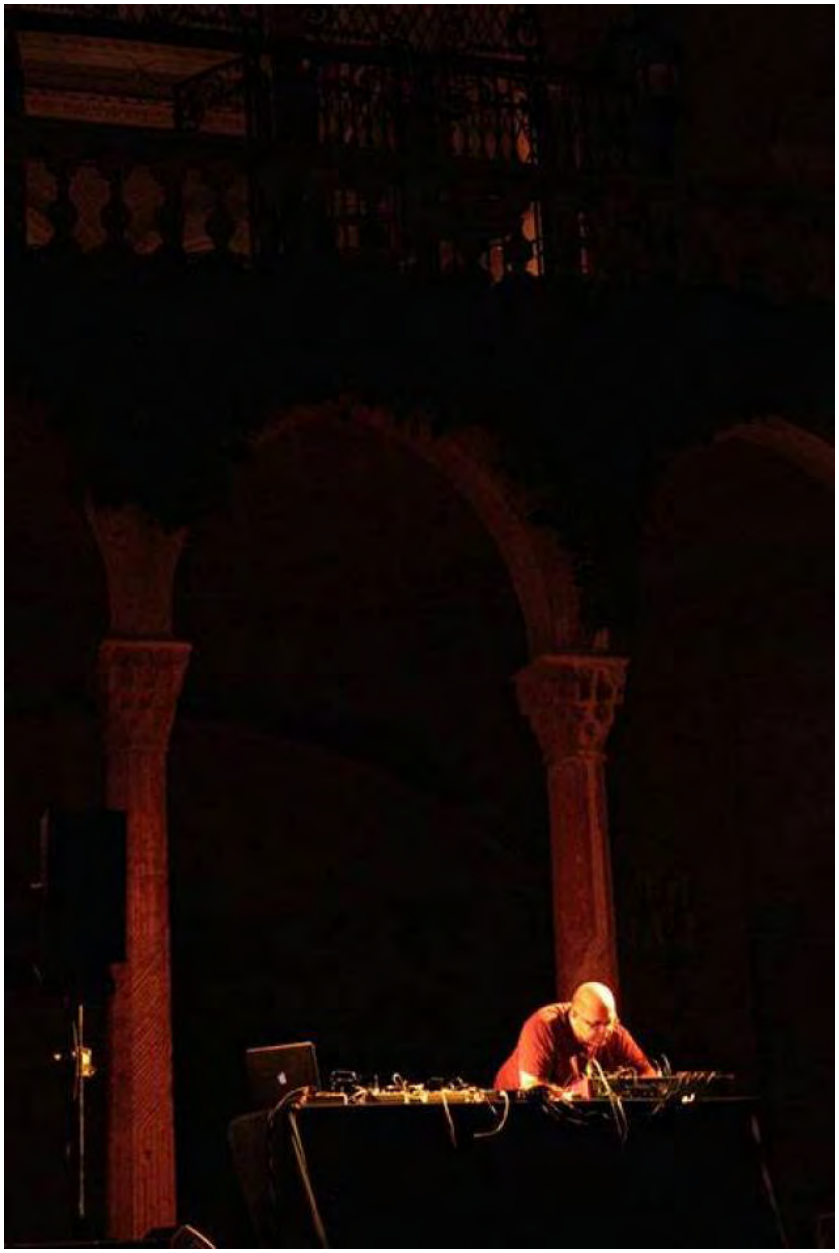
Doublings and mirror images recurred throughout *The Portrait is an Address*, whether it was the two Khans in *sometime/somewhere else*, the protagonist looking at herself in the bathroom mirror in *GBRL*, the sentence 'Look at yourself in the mirror and try to imagine you are someone you're meeting for the first time' in *Insecure*, the two Mubaraks, or one of the six panicking pigs of *stuffedpigfollies* saying: 'I hesitate when I meet my living face.' The pigs are sweaty, and so is the protagonist in *RANT*; everyone is trapped in a rectangle.

The Portrait is an Address was on show at Beirut Art Center from 7 September to 13 November 2016. For more information, follow this link.

Tfaily, Mira. «Les fantômes dansent autour de Hassan Khan», *L'Orient le Jour*, July 1, 2016.
http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/994181/les-fantomes-dansent-autour-de-hassan-khan.html

L'Orient
LE JOUR

Les fantômes dansent autour de Hassan Khan



PERFORMANCE

Le musicien égyptien a présenté son morceau « Taraban » dans les jardins du palais Sursock. Il dépasse, dans son œuvre, le dialogue aporétique entre tradition entêtante et modernité chaotique en entremêlant instruments classiques et accords électriques.

Mira TFAILY | OLJ
01/07/2016

Tfaily, Mira. «Les fantômes dansent autour de Hassan Khan», *L'Orient le Jour*, July 1, 2016.
http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/994181/les-fantomes-dansent-autour-de-hassan-khan.html

L'Orient LE JOUR

Hassan Khan, seul sur scène, est en conversation permanente et exaltée. Il travaille avec des enregistrements d'instruments traditionnels, des voix enregistrées et des accords chaotiques qu'il mixe et délivre à des foules interdites. Son œuvre Taraban est le fruit de la découverte, alors qu'il est encore adolescent, d'une chanson égyptienne faite de poèmes, interprétée respectivement à des années d'intervalle par Yassin al-Tuhamy et Youssef el-Manialawy. « Au moment où j'ai entendu Youssef el-Menialawy chanter ce même poème, j'ai eu un étrange moment de frisson. J'ai senti que je voulais faire quelque chose de ces langages musicaux mais je n'étais pas encore prêt », confie-t-il. Son désir mature dans les sons et les rues et donne naissance à Taraban vingt ans plus tard. Le tarab est la condition lors de l'écoute de la musique ou de l'écho. « Il s'agit d'un état d'attention totale, de sensibilité exacerbée, presque d'intoxication », explique-t-il. Son morceau est composé et mixé à partir de sons enregistrés par lui en studio, avec des musiciens de oud, violon, riqq et qanoun, entre répétitions entêtantes et variations audacieuses. « Il m'arrive de leur faire répéter une même mélodie encore et encore, parce que j'essaye de briser leurs motifs établis, de faire tomber les ornements inutiles, afin de pouvoir apercevoir la structure brute. Je compose en utilisant les musiciens eux-mêmes comme instruments. » Le résultat est une catalepsie hypnotisante qui plonge le public dans un vertige conscient et délicat.

Dépendance toxique

Hassan Khan a présenté son morceau, qu'il joue depuis deux ans, dans les jardins de la villa Sursock, lors d'une soirée organisée par le Beirut Art Center. Dans cette nuit d'été éclairée par le halo des bougies et les flammes tremblantes de la lune, les cordes des ouds vibrent, les voix des poètes égyptiens résonnent et Hassan Khan plaque des séquences angoissantes de bruits sourds. À cet instant, le public est dans une dépendance totale, incapable de deviner quels sons toxiques ou envoûtants vont sortir des boîtiers électriques de l'artiste. « Je crois que la musique est précisément ce moment où le chaos devient langage ; ce point entre la structure organisée et la perte définitive de tout contrôle. »

Tfaily, Mira. «Les fantômes dansent autour de Hassan Khan», *L'Orient le Jour*, July 1, 2016.
http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/994181/les-fantomes-dansent-autour-de-hassan-khan.html

L'Orient
LE JOUR

L'homme-instrument

Les vibrations des mélodies troubles traversent le musicien qui devient à son tour un médium. « Je ne crois ni aux traditions ni à la modernité. Pour moi, ce ne sont que de simples constructions, et une partie de ce que je fais a pour visée de briser cette dichotomie. Les choses sont bien plus flexibles, et j'aime détacher mon monde de ces polarités. » Hassan Khan est en équilibre virtuose sur un fil fait d'attention et de conscience. Sur scène, la structure de ses morceaux est composée, mais il reste entièrement libre d'improviser, tant que le moment n'est pas terminé. Celui qui décrit son œuvre comme une sculpture sonore exposera « The portrait is an address » en septembre, au Beirut Art Center.

L'ivresse Taraban

Taraban est finalement une invitation à la pleine conscience qui s'abandonne, exacerbée par la volupté et l'angoisse. Dans les paroles des poèmes incantés, la beauté toxique, l'acte de création et de consommation se mêlent à des questionnements sur la condition humaine. « L'un des poèmes explore plus particulièrement la condition d'attente patiente pour quelque chose d'inatteignable, et le fait de traverser son existence avec grâce », explique Hassan Khan. Il fait répéter comme un leitmotiv un vers, qui nous révèle que le tarab dépasse la musique. L'expérience Taraban, c'est simplement la foule disparate réunie dans les jardins de Sursock, enivrée par les effluves électroniques de oud et de gardénias, qui ferme les yeux dans un instant d'extase. C'est le musicien, seul sur scène, entouré des fantômes des voix et des instruments qu'il fait danser. C'est, juste avant de devoir tout ranger, la dernière convulsion sonore et orgasmique. Puis le silence, et ce qu'il reste des particules de frénésie encore suspendues dans l'air.

Olga Stefan. «Hassan Khan, Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said. Museum für Modern Kunst, Frankfurt, 30 January - 12 April», *Art Review*, May, 2015, p. 142.

Hassan Khan *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*

Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt 30 January – 12 April

The title of Egyptian artist, writer and musician Hassan Khan's first institutional solo show in Germany is borrowed from that of Philip K. Dick's 1974 dystopic novel, which describes the United States of America of the then near-future, in 1988. A police state where black people are eliminated or sterilised, the population is kept compliant through mind-numbing entertainment, drugs and material rewards, and surveillance systems monitor citizens' every action and gesture, this futuristic society no longer seems so implausible. Khan's exhibition features six works, four commissioned especially for the show, while an earlier video, *Studies for Structuralist Film no. 2* (2013, all other works 2015), is conceptually integrated. The multimedia works also reflect the artist's own preoccupations: sound, text and visual forms. Much like in Dick's novel, whose chapters are connected with a lyrical transition – stanzas from the sorrowful sixteenth-century lute song *Flow My Tears*, by John Dowland, from which the book's title derives – the objects in the show are also connected by poetic and obscure relations hinting at grief and dissatisfaction.

In the lobby, there are two works: a window drawing shows two colourful, rather gesturally rendered forlorn male faces looking in opposite directions, while the title of the show (also that of the work) is handwritten across the top; and in *Live Ammunition!* a polyrhythmic clapping emanates from four loudspeakers. The faces allude to Dick's main characters, the policeman Buckman and the pop singer Taverner, a celebrity who one day wakes up a complete unknown, thus losing his identity, and embarks on a soul-searching journey to rediscover himself literally and symbolically. Metaphors for two pillars of power in society, these opposing and mirroring individuals are like the double-faced Janus. This work can also be read, thanks to the interpretation offered in a poetic accompanying text by the artist (which can be considered the seventh work in the show), as a comment on the social situation in Egypt, where the police and the people are in conflict and yet suffer the same pains, while *Live Ammunition!*'s tempo evokes hope and its demise, and also alludes to those brief moments of triumph experienced during the democratic protests in Tahrir Square.

In the main hall, a large cube-shaped, brick-lined space accessible via stairs, physically transitioning us from one state to another, we find three additional works, while *LightShift*, changing coloured light on the stairs, underlines this transition but also creates an autonomous environment. A folding screen, on the left, meaningfully titled *The Double Face of Power* and neither hiding nor dividing the space, shows on its three differently coloured surfaces various geometric designs that, through the magic of lighting, create subtle shadows on the floor. In the middle of the space, on a large wooden platform, are carefully arranged globular 'stacked glass forms' (to quote Khan's text) of various heights. Titled *Abstract Music*, this mysterious landscape might allude, the artist writes, to the 'logic of systems', but as with the screen, nothing is very clear.

Behind this work is the 2013 video, projected on a rectangular piece of frosted glass suspended between two metal lines attached to the columns enclosing *Abstract Music*. While the other works lack aesthetic and formal force, fail to engage and are cryptic in their connection to each other and to the theme of the show, instead taking refuge in veiled meanings revealed only through the artist's own written guide, the film establishes itself as the show's cornerstone and clearly relates to the theme of power and oppression. In one of the several similarly shot segments of different individuals, a woman sits on a centrally placed chair in an empty white room. The camera circles her repeatedly, her eyes in turn following its movement – a dance of perspectives. Moreover, given the pervasiveness of surveillance, abusive police tactics and increasing oppression in both the democratic world and that considered to be in transition, the video's dance between watcher and watched creates new levels of meaning and association and also alludes to the duality portrayed in the window drawing. Dick might have envisioned a future America, but our contemporary reality shows that there are no longer clear distinctions between worlds and that we all live in a dystopic dream from which there is no real exit.

Olga Stefan

Working sketch for detail from *Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said*, 2015, cut and printed light filters, vinyl lettering directly applied to the window. Courtesy the artist

Julia Haecker. «Hassan Khan: On Science Fiction, Music and Clapping...», *Contemporary And*, March 31, 2015.
http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/hassan-khan-on-science-fiction-music-and-clapping/

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Interview

Hassan Khan, Abstract Music, 2015, Courtesy Hassan Khan. Photo: Axel Schneider

Hassan Khan: On Science Fiction, Music and Clapping...

Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said at the MMK 3 of the MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst Frankfurt am Main is Hassan Khan's first institutional solo exhibition in Germany. The title quotes that of a science-fiction novel of 1974 by Philip K. Dick. The exhibition does not want to retell the story but rather makes reference to its inherent themes. The close intertwinement between human complexity and power is one motif that can be encountered in the works on display. Julia Haecker talked to Hassan Khan about his artistic approach and above all about the exhibition, which will be on view at the MMK 3 until 12 April 2015.

Julie Haecker: Among others you work as a composer, author, director. Do you even think in categories like that? How would you describe yourself your own role?

Julia Haecker. «Hassan Khan: On Science Fiction, Music and Clapping...», *Contemporary And*, March 31, 2015.
http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/hassan-khan-on-science-fiction-music-and-clapping/

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Hassan Khan: Well I use the words musician, writer and artist rather than composer and author which might first sound like a small difference. But I think it says much about what I'm doing because the terms are wider. A composer is more related to a practice which is based on learning, skills and the craft of composing music in a certain tradition. But as a musician I work with the music itself and I can approach it in many different ways including more standard compositional tools. It's the same with author. It's a more restricted word related to the literally establishment. But a writer is a person who is just writing language. I think I have a relationship to all these various establishments but I don't completely identify with them. That's why I use these words that I feel are wider in their implications.

JH: The stunning variety and the quantity of your works point out that you seem to live in a continuous stream of thoughts. Is there a special way how you channel your ideas? Are there issues which you process in different ways?

HK: This is a good question. I think it has a lot to do with how I first began as a teenager – so a long time ago. I entered University when I was fifteen. University is for the most people a place where a lot of things happen. But when you are really young things are very powerful. It's like an explosion of 'things'. In this period I went through a phase of processing all what I could learn of what 'humanity' in general produces in terms of music, literature or painting or arts from all around the world and from all different times. It was all one big mix. I also started playing music at that time. I finished university when I was 19, 20 years old and at that time I already had a kind of intuition or a sense of what I'm doing. It didn't have anything to do with mediums specifically. Each work demands a form which is specific to it. These ideas are not really interchangeable. And if there is a sort of translation then something important happens.

Hassan Khan, Live Ammunition!, 2015, Courtesy Hassan Khan, Foto / photo: Axel Schneider

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In 2006 for my exhibition Kompressor – I allowed myself for the first time to explore many different mediums and forms together. I found the synergy produced to be very interesting and productive. It was the first time that someone commented that this was a solo show that looked like a really good group show. I have heard similar comments quite a lot since. This moment is for me when forms are able to possess their own space and thus the ability to co-exist together. When that happens a real – a harmonious and dissonant – dialogue can take place. I'm very interested in exhibition formats that are able to produce this sort of dialogue and resonance.

JH: Of course, to realize all this different kind of works you collaborate with a lot of other people, like actors, musicians, performers, theater directors. What's your interest in this crossover? And to what extent to you let the participants realize their own ideas?

HK: It really depends on the work and varies quite a lot. For example I always begin working with actors by having a totally confidential conversation. None of what happen between us is revealed. In this process I try to deal with the actor not just as an actor but actually as someone who possesses the sum of total of human experience. In the process of the work we attempt find ways to re-access and to re-discover their own experiences and to understand that in a way that can be relevant to the performance we are developing. It is partially from their knowledge that I produce a performance, even if usually I have a structure and facets already in mind. This is just one example, there are many others. Working with musicians is sometimes a bit similar. But again there are different approaches. In some pieces and with some musicians I go in like a composer. We work with session musicians, go to the studio and record these sessions. It's a sort of normal situation for producing music.
But in other situations I work with musicians based on their understanding of their musical culture. For example I have a melody that comes from a genre they work in and I ask them to play this melody over and over again maybe without stopping, almost like a machine. This time the human factor has been mechanized. While he or she is playing I can start telling them to change this note or add this note.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0vGwV525sg

Julia Haecker. «Hassan Khan: On Science Fiction, Music and Clapping...», *Contemporary And*, March 31, 2015.
http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/hassan-khan-on-science-fiction-music-and-clapping/

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JH: Your works in the exhibition are in a very strong dialogue as you mentioned before. Most of the works in the exhibition are new productions. Did your ideas came up one after another or were the works supposed to show them together to produce this dialogue?

HK: At an early point I walked through the exhibition space with the curators Philippe and Klaus (Philippe Pirotte – director Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste – Städelschule Frankfurt am Main – and Klaus Görner, curator at MMK Museum für Moderne Kunst – A/N) and I described the works and where they will be placed in one go. So the show was imagined in the space in like five minutes. But before that for a long time it was not clear what I will do and I also had deep reservations about the space itself. When there was no way out I found that I had to respond. That doesn't mean that the works have just been worked out for this space. All of them had their own little histories. So for example the paravene (The Double Face of Power, 2015 – A/N) – for several years I have been trying to produce something that is not exactly like that but related to it, using car finish, the surface sheen, as a medium as a form of density and embedding things in that display. So this paravene is a continuation of another dialogue that I'm having with works which I want to produce. Some things are very calculated, other things are totally accidental. It's a strange balance between both. But this is how I work a lot of times. I'm very very precise in some ways and in some ways I'm incredible messy. Mistakes become part of the works, almost because I could not deal with some of them. Not because I'm too lazy it's almost more like the world has crashed and I cannot deal with that. A moment where I fear the mistake but am excited by it. I take risks then. I cannot explain it. In any case there is no one way to produce.

JH: The exhibition at MMK 3 is your first solo show in Germany. Was it difficult to choose respectively to produce a relatively small selection from your huge Oeuvre?

Hassan Khan, Studies for Structuralist Film no. 2 Silent Black and White HD Video, 23 minutes 42 seconds, 2013, Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel

Julia Haecker. «Hassan Khan: On Science Fiction, Music and Clapping...», *Contemporary And*, March 31, 2015.
http://www.contemporaryand.com/blog/magazines/hassan-khan-on-science-fiction-music-and-clapping/

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HK: Actually it's not the first solo show in Germany, it's the first institutional one, I already had an exhibition in a very small non-profit space in Berlin called Uqbar. But this is my first museum exhibition in Germany. I didn't have a problem with showing a small selection. In the beginning Philippe said I didn't have to produce new works, that I could also select older ones. The first thing I knew about the exhibition was that there is one older work – the film Studies for Structuralist Film no. 2 – which I wanted to show. Beside this I really wanted to produce new works. I had recently in 2012 and 2014 two big survey shows in Istanbul and Cairo. They were great experiences for me. "

JH: Abstract Music is probably the most apparent work in the exhibition. With this work you try to materialize music by showing huge glass cylinders which don't make any sounds. What's the connection to music?

HK: Yes, the piece obviously has a connection to music. But my reference is not just music. My reference is primary abstraction which is about measurement, value and exchange. I think of the piece as a composition – it's abstract music – because the system is based on regular identified units that are also different, they have different values. The way you do in a composition but it's also what you might have in an economic system. There is a way of marking accumulation in this piece. For me accumulation is the moment in which a system comes into place. Without accumulation there is no excess, there is no possibility of exchange. I find that these paradigms are at the foundations of human 'civilization' – it's really based upon primary gestures like that. Another primary is the basic fact of having a name.

Hassan Khan, "Flow My Tears, The Policeman Said", 2015, Courtesy Hassan Khan, Foto / photo: Axel Schneider

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This piece is therefore for me a sublimation of a system that I feel is at the origins of a lot of what we have (as humans) produced together. And I say 'civilisation' not culture because I mean this in a really wide inclusive sense. There are some very distinct small tribal cultures that are different in this regard but the majority of humanity has lived under the same system of primary abstraction.
The film Studies for Structuralist Film no. 2, the piece Live Ammunition! – these are very concrete works while pieces like the paravene and the glass pieces deal with abstraction. These two things come together for me. We are materially present but we produce abstraction.
My aim is not for people to see the work and necessarily think of these ideas because these in the end are just ideas that I have thought of, nothing more than that. But there is something else that is valuable in having them which is that they allow the work to possess a density of meaning that is then open to the audience. This is then a process in which the audience could engage with the work by projecting their own emotional landscape onto it. Ideally that moment of engagement allows for something unknown to happen. Also for me I don't this that this necessarily means that the audience is projecting ideas or interpreting something, but rather that an engagement and conversation with the 'real' might take place.

JH: In musical language abstract music means that music doesn't follow any intention. So e.g. political or any other meanings are excluded from this idea of music. It just exist for its own sake. Did this work refers to the point that you prefer to exclude explicit political contents like many people suggest in your work?

HK: Actually it's the opposite. First the piece Abstract Music is about a system. It's about abstraction but abstraction is very systematic. And the piece itself is a system of thought. The work is constituted in a world in which politics is also constituted. It's not about talking about politics but it's made up out of the stuff which politics rules and is ruled by. Systems are a political thing. I do make a lot of arguments about the necessity of thinking of the work rather than having ready–made–interpretations whether they are political or cultural. For example if someone says that this work is against capitalism what else can the work ever tell then? By the way, while on the subject, I don't think capitalism exists. I think no system actually really exists as such. These are just our messy descriptions of something that is partially there. But nothing is really total.

JH: Compared with your dense electronic compositions Live Ammunition! is a very reduced kind of music. You hear clapping hands producing a special rhythm. The piece was also produced before in certain ways. Why did you decide to produce another version? And is here a reason why you take this one for this exhibition?

HK: Live Ammunition exists in three forms. The very first was a composition in four movements for a live concert and titled Live Ammunition!! with two exclamation marks (not one) for strings, clapping and live electronics. The word ammunition is very loaded and in this case it's directly connected with clapping as a collective percussive human activitiy. And then there was another iteration of the piece as one movement of Composition for a Public Park a three movement multi-channel music installation which premiered at the Nuit blanche Festival 2013 in Paris. The clapping in the different pieces is not all the same. Although they are all sourced from the same recording sessions I did with percussionists where I recorded different patterns that I had composed – I think there were 16 patterns in total. They are similar because the building blocks are the same but I'm configuring them in different ways. And that's why the title Live Ammunition is sort of the same but changes slightly. Here it has one exclamation marks not two.

C&

JH: Live Ammunition is directly connected to Flow my tears, the policemen said which is totally current since February 130 Egypts were sentenced to death at once by a judge who is illustrated on this work.

HK: Right now there are a lot of people doing little photoshop things. In the last weeks the judge became very popular, in a negative sense, as material for different kind of iterations on the internet. It's a form of popular culture. Lot's of people are just using this judge as material which is kind of what I'm doing too. It's interesting that everybody is doing that by using basically the same aesthetic choice. Everybody has decided to portray him, the icon of authority, in a non- realistic fashion. It might be the intuited sense that if you represent this formal authority you need to desacralize it somehow and move it beyond a realistic rendition. A step has to be taken. That was a funny moment where I felt, and this is not my goal, that I was aligned with something happening in popular culture.

HG Masters. «Field Trip: Sharjah Biennial 12», *Artasiapacific*, Vol. X, March 9, 2015.
http://artasiapacific.com/Blog/FieldTripSharjahBiennial12

Curated by Eungie Joo, Sharjah Biennial 12, "The Past, the Present, the Possible," featured a compact lineup of 50-plus artists and groups from 25 countries, with many newly commissioned projects and the use of several new sites around the Gulf emirate. Eschewing the grab-bag presentation and heavy polemical themes commonly deployed in biennials, Joo instead showcased artists' practices in depth or created opportunities for ambitious, site-specific solo projects. The result was more of an exhibition than a festival, as Joo nudged the biennial format away from wide-angled superficiality that make them akin to displays at today's art fairs. Here's a look at a handful of the memorable projects from "The Past, the Present, the Possible," before a full review is published in the May/June issue of ArtAsiaPacific

HASSAN KHAN was given the honor of being the first artist to work in SAF's newest space, the so-called Flying Saucer building, designed by Sheikh Sultan al-Qasimi himself in the 1970s, and until recently a fried-chicken restaurant. Khan added brightly colored filters to the walls, and worked with Andeel, one of Egypt's most prolific cartoonists on a series of billboards for the roof. His black-and-white film depicts an absurdist, existential comedy about two men arguing over a hand slapper and a cap of invisibility, in what read as a possibly a dark, political allegory. Photo by HG Masters for ArtAsiaPacific.

Sharjah Biennial 12: "The Past, the Present, the Possible" can be seen from now until June 5, 2015, at various venues in Sharjah.

Mai Elwakil. «Hassan Khan in Cairo», *Ibraaz*, June 26, 2014.
http://www.ibraaz.org/reviews/66

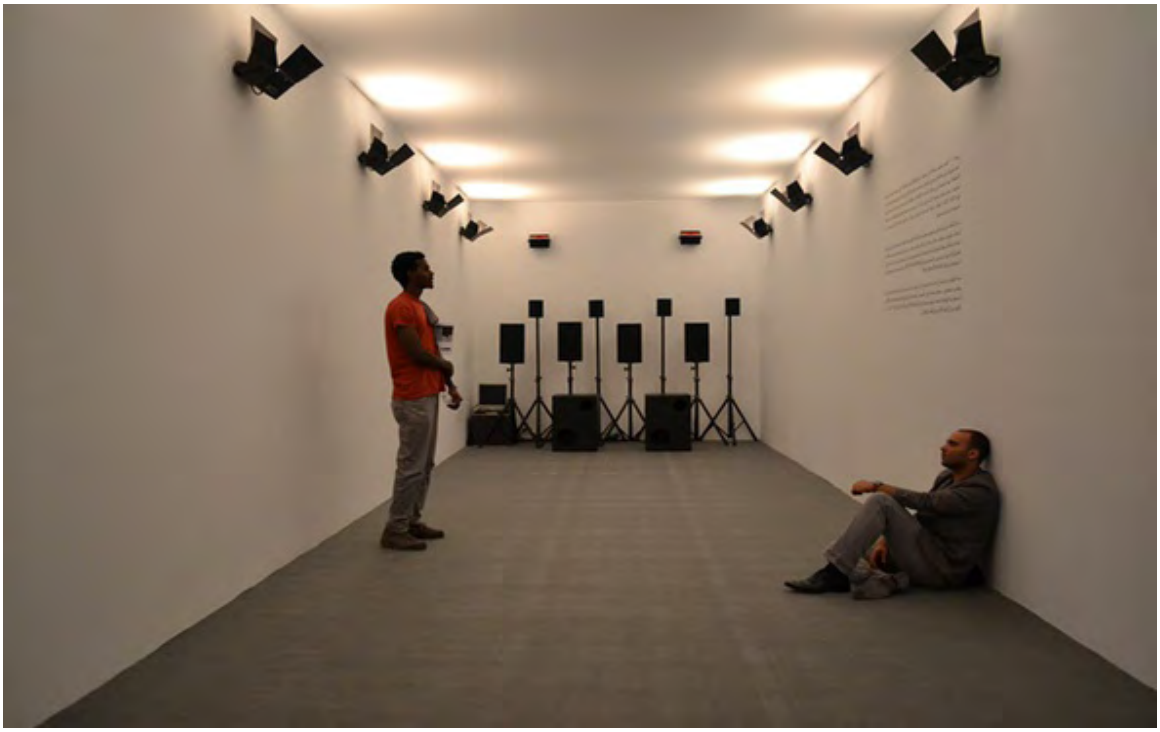
In developing The Agreement (2011), Hassan Khan worked with a group of local craftsmen to manufacture ten home accessories of his design. The objects, a plate decorated with colourfully painted vegetables, a pink and blue glass sculpture with leafy branches and a range of ceramic and silicon statues, were all crafted like low-budget household objects common in Egyptian homes. Khan designed the pieces to go with five short stories he had penned, inspired by his hometown. Each story presents a single scene from the lives of the ultra rich, an aspiring social climber, and two police informers; one story is about school children. Together they offer nuanced rather than comprehensive impressions of life in Cairo, and when exhibited, the stories are printed on the wall above a shelf holding the objects, while a bilingual book with the same title is also available for visitors to take home.

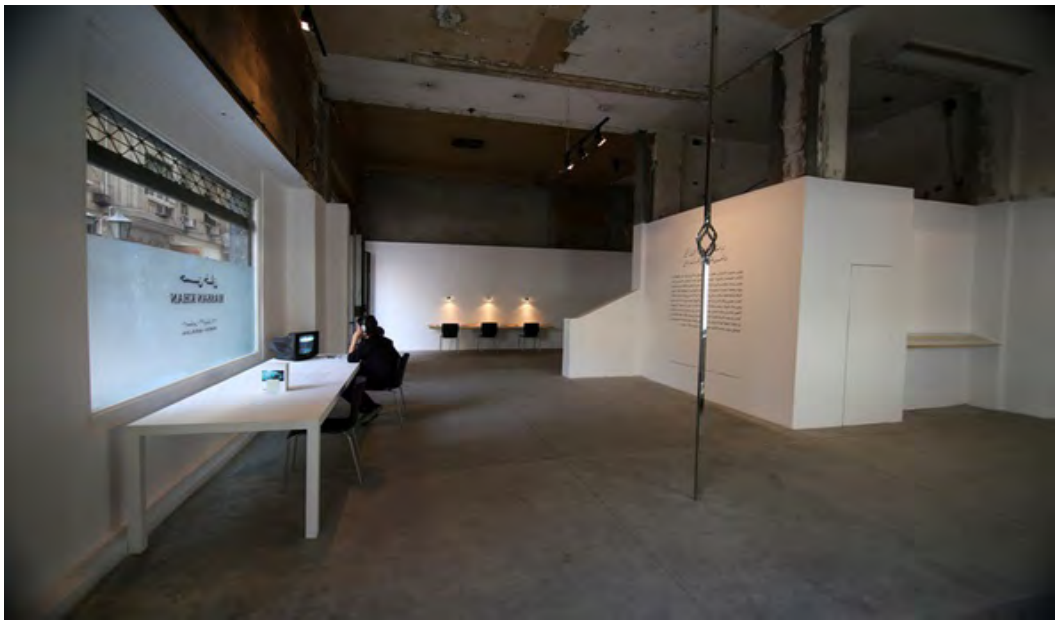
Khan's approach to creating The Agreement was somewhat collaborative. In several of his projects, he works with craftsmen and performers, gradually developing the artwork over time. This kind of collaboration was perhaps more organic in the case of Khan's much-celebrated Jewel (2010), where all the moves were choreographed with the two 'actors'. Jewel is a six-minute film, commissioned by the Arab Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf) in Doha for its inaugural group exhibition, Told/Untold/Retold, in late 2010. It transforms a glowing anglerfish into an emblem around which two men perform a dance ritual. It is captivating, almost hypnotizing, even though a scene that is quite common on Cairo's streets inspires it. In its making, Khan composed the music and worked with each actor for an entire month to design gestures that are simultaneously personal and recognizable, to develop a language which made sense to them without being completely decipherable by audience members encountering the final video installation. Much of the choreography was inspired by the actors' backgrounds; some moves came from street dance; others were simply made up in collaboration with the performers.

Khan compares his role in such projects to that of a film or theatre director, building on the agency of his crew with the hope that the final results might surprise him. For him, the artwork is more important than a standard process. It needs to intrigue him. For viewers, learning about his process is at times essential to access the work. And so, on the opening night of his latest Cairo exhibition, one writer commented that the show needed a manual to navigate. Many agreed that the survey show was somewhat cryptic although underlying themes and interests become clearer with multiple visits.

The exhibition, simply titled Hassan Khan, constituted the entire visual arts program of the Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF) this year. In its third iteration, the multidisciplinary festival partnered with the Cairo Laboratory for Urban Studies, Training and Environmental Research (CLUSTER) to organize the show, presenting 21 works by Khan from 1997 to the present – most of which were being shown in Egypt for the first time. A number of related talks and a concert were organized in the downtown area as footnotes to the event.

Khan started his public career as an artist in 1995 in Cairo. But over the past decade he gave talks, lecture performances, concerts and engaged in discussions locally as opposed to exhibiting his work. He occasionally took part in major group shows such as the biannual arts festival, PhotoCairo. In its 2012 edition, Khan showed Insecure (2002), a vinyl lettering piece through which he directs viewers toward their deepest vulnerabilities. In 2013, he screened the Blind Ambition (2012) video as part of D-CAF's second edition. Still, local artists and audiences only got to see glimpses of Khan's work although they regularly heard or read about it. Hence, while the decision to devote the art component of the city's major arts festival to a single artist raised some debate, the Hassan Khan exhibition was highly anticipated.





Hassan Khan, The Twist, 2012, and The Alphabet Book, 2006, installation view, D-CAF 2014, Hassan Khan.
Photo: Mostafa Abdel Aty.

The location chosen to host the blockbuster show added to the excitement. With a special interest in reactivating downtown venues and connecting the art circuit with the public, CLUSTER curator and co-founder Beth Stryker decided to turn the Kodak Passageway into an exhibition venue for the first time. The Kodak Passageway connects two very busy, central streets: Adly and Abdel Khaliq Tharwat. It also overlooks the heavily guarded Shaar Hashomayim Synagogue. The passageway is, nevertheless, among the quieter pedestrian walkthroughs in downtown Cairo, as its old stores had shut down years back. CLUSTER worked on renovating four of the rundown storefronts to host the show, with several artworks made visible from the street.

Jewel was exhibited in a closed pitch-black store down the passageway. But, the Shaabi beats of Khan's music blared outside, luring pedestrians in. The open shop next door perfectly hosted Dom-Tak-Tak-Dom-Tak (2005); the sound and light installation being completely accessible from the passageway. The two remaining shop fronts acted more like standalone exhibitions, showing multiple sculpture, photography, video and text-based works. Much of the work stems from Khan's experience with his surroundings – he has worked in the downtown area for over a decade – making the exhibition almost site-specific in how it connects with its context. And although Khan refuses to peg his work to a specific geography, the references he uses as starting points for his art are relatable to local audiences in many cases. These references go through a long process, making the final artwork surpass being a mere representation or translation of a context.

Take for instance Banque Bannister (2010), which was shown in the second gallery. The sculptural piece is a recreation of an architectural detail: the outdoor bannister of Egypt's first national bank, located only a few streets away. Khan re-produced an immaculate version of the handrail; only he decontextualized it, suspending it in mid air like a supernatural creature – the only obvious reference to its origin being the work's title.

Other sculptural pieces on display such as The Twist, produced in 2012, also have a strong presence due to form. The Twist is a polished copy of an ornament from a balcony rail Khan saw in Alexandria, elongated to extend from floor to ceiling. Khan describes his interest in the ornamental detail as a reflection of the moment of the 'birth of civilization' through this simple act of creation and design – a reference which could be highly opaque to the audience.

A similarly internal logic is followed in The Alphabet Book (2006), which matches each letter of the alphabet with a photograph. Copies of the book available for viewing are engaging in terms of the unexpected relationships viewers can draw between a single letter and a seemingly familiar image. But the process through which Khan devised the publications, if and when shared with the exhibition visitors, adds multiple layers to explore. The Alphabet Book draws on the artist's dreams, only he developed it by creating images to match texts which he wrote inspired by his dreams rather than being a direct literal translation of them. Khan seems to be offering through the publications a retracted trip into his psyche.

he Alphabet Book is one direct example of how the artist shares his personal vision with the audience. His long and diverse practice includes many more. The source of most of Khan's work is his personal observations, particularly in Cairo, a city that is overcrowded and dense, physically and emotionally. For years now, Khan has been working on these observations and borrowing languages that intrigue him from popular culture. He does not describe his approach as appropriation because he does not feel the need to fulfill the expectations from such literary, musical or visual culture formats. Khan also does not try to comment on these languages. His Shaabi music pieces, like the composition of Jewel, are meant as original music. His 1997 video work, Do you want to fight? – produced in collaboration with artist-filmmaker Sherif El Azma – is another example. It combines footage of two boxers, similar to an old Hollywood production, with a minimal sound track re-iterating the phrase, 'Do you want to fight?' in Arabic. The descriptive literary style of average fiction, which Khan deploys in text-based works such as Mahmoud El Ansari (2010), Mystery (2011) and The Agreement, is another. In the latter cases, these seemingly familiar languages are used to very different ends. Khan seems to use them to underpin existing social relationships and mobility in the city, the insecurities and paranoia, which Cairo might build within people. At times, they are quite obvious, if not totally acceptable, to onlookers. At others, like in the case of Mystery, an interesting spin can push the stories further. Printed on blank pages which Khan tore out of the 80s teen fiction series titled The Five Adventurers, he presents a fictional account of a man encountering the memoirs of another only to be taken back to his own child years with the same series.

Many of the works in Hassan Khan contain a circular nature. In fact, some works reference the logic behind the creation of other works. And it is this trip back and forth between the artist's references and the works themselves, spanning almost two decades that makes artist survey shows such a necessary eye-opener.

Michelle Kuo. “Trusted Sources: A project by Hassan Khan”, *Artforum*, October 2013.

trusted sources

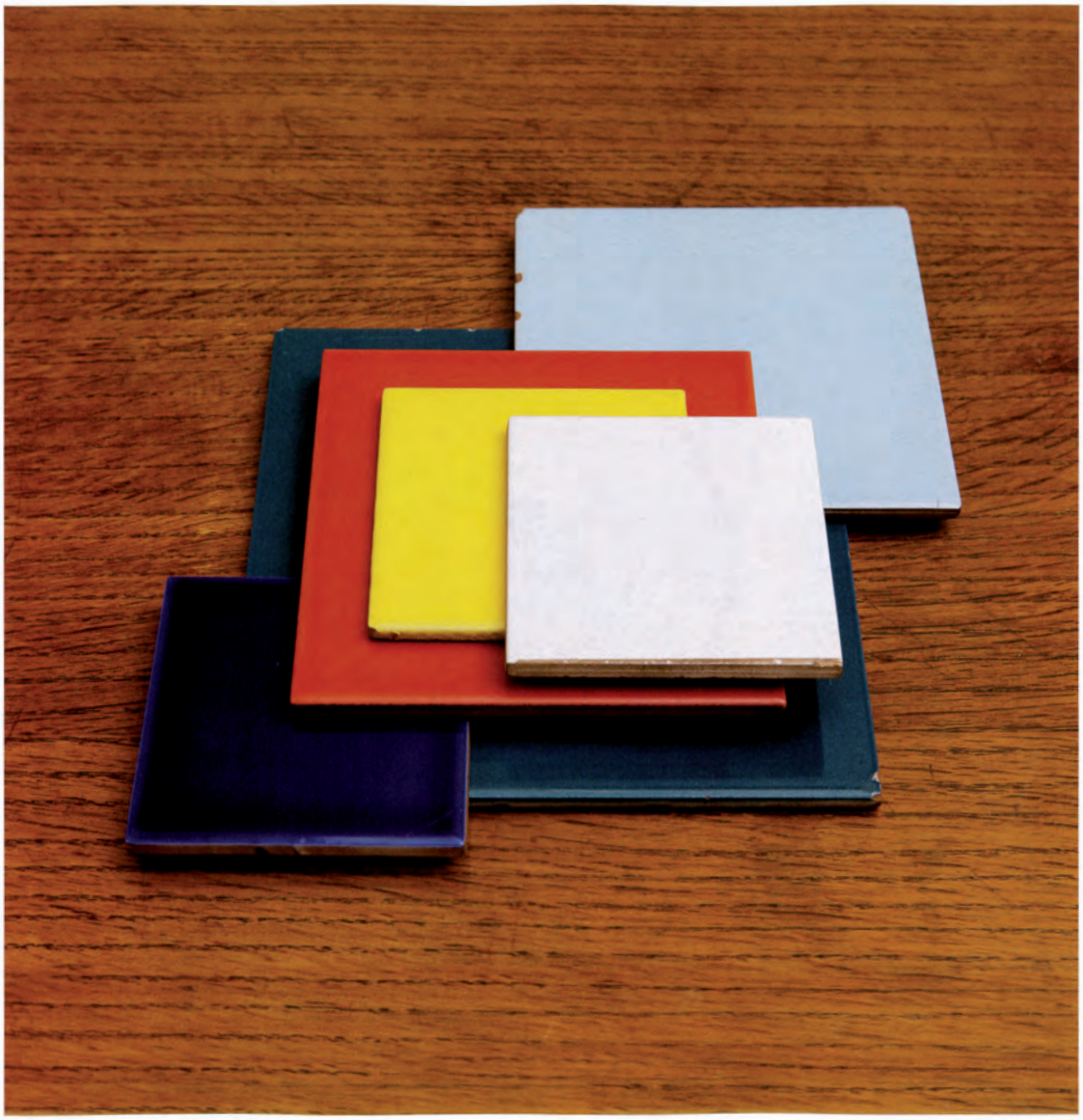
A PROJECT BY HASSAN KHAN

PHOTOGRAPHY: HASSAN KHAN, KARIM OMRAN. LAYOUT: ENGY ALY.
OBJECTS PRODUCED BY ZEINAB KHALIFA WORKSHOPS, CAIRO.

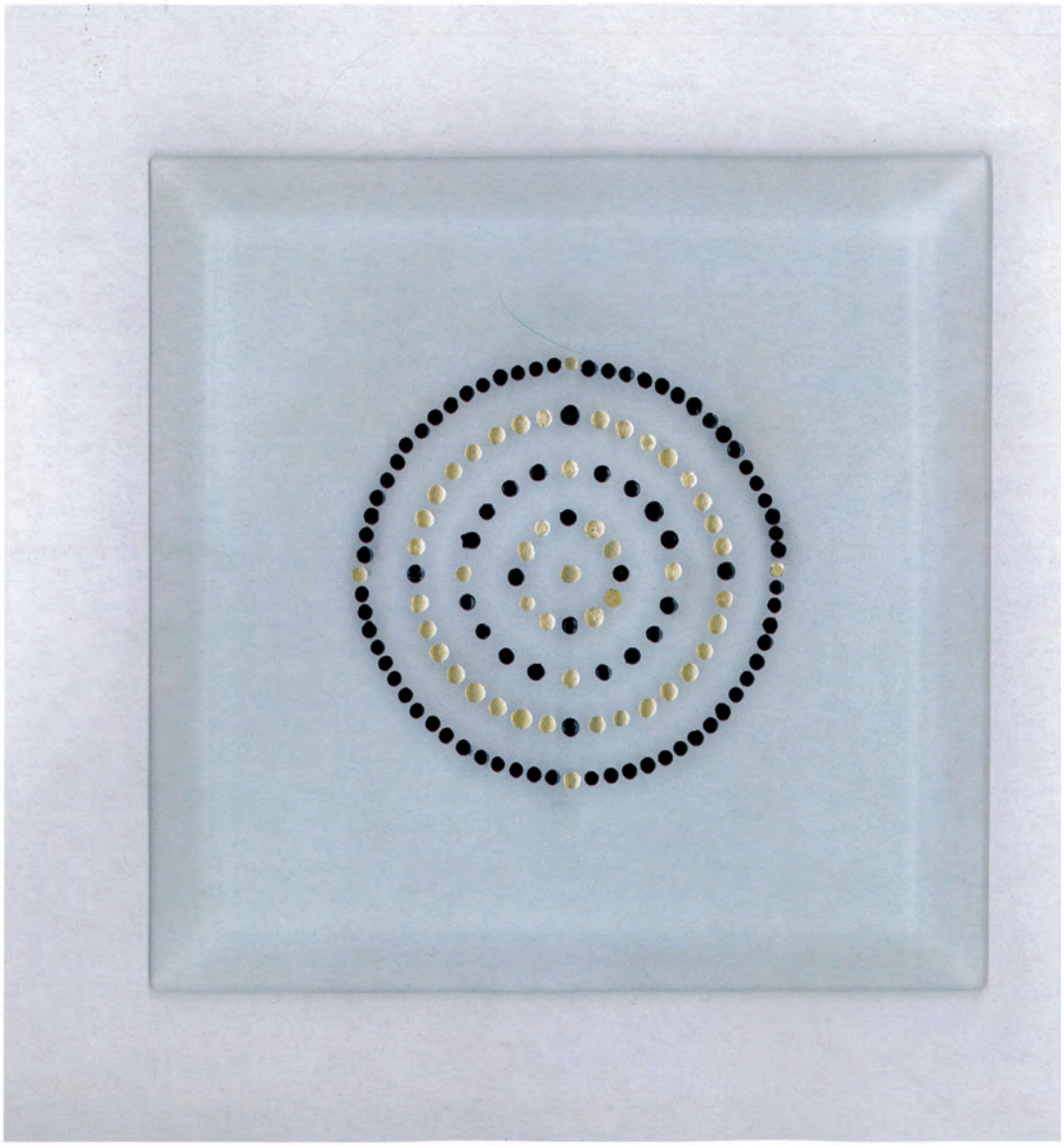
The sources I am referring to here are several things at once. The reasons they are trusted also vary. On the one hand, these are the sources of the work. And that could be almost anything: the way you dash across the road, the exact distance between two shelves in a run-down café, the hysterical ranting of an obsessed writer, a moment of embarrassment suddenly remembered while washing the dishes, the fantasy of an incredible victory, a burning ambition, a deep sadness, a half smile, a simple song that every time it's listened to reveals something new, a mistake taken absolutely seriously. They are also the sources that I imagine lie behind every gesture of the world, the hidden agreement that allows a transaction between two individuals to take place, to have a name and to remember that it's yours. To know, to believe, to be. To believe or not in love, friendship, and family. To believe or not in punishment and rewards, in wanting and striving, in giving up, in accepting and rejecting. It is what allows a collective to exist, to organize itself into a form, and to communicate this order to all its members. It is what allows us to realize that we are conscious, we are one, and we are many. These are the sources that allow us to recognize that everyone else is similar to us, yet not us, exactly. And even if with every uncontrolled tic, every moment we forget, every time a king is beheaded our trust in these sources trembles. As long as we are here and still know that we are here, these sources will remain, outside our control yet absolutely trusted.

CONTENT EXCERPTED FROM A PRESS RELEASE I WROTE ON DECEMBER 12, 2011, IN KITAKYUSHU, JAPAN

PHOTOGRAPH OF AN OLD WOODEN BEAM THAT I FOUND ON THE STREET, SPRAYED WITH WATER AND PLACED IN A PUBLIC GARDEN

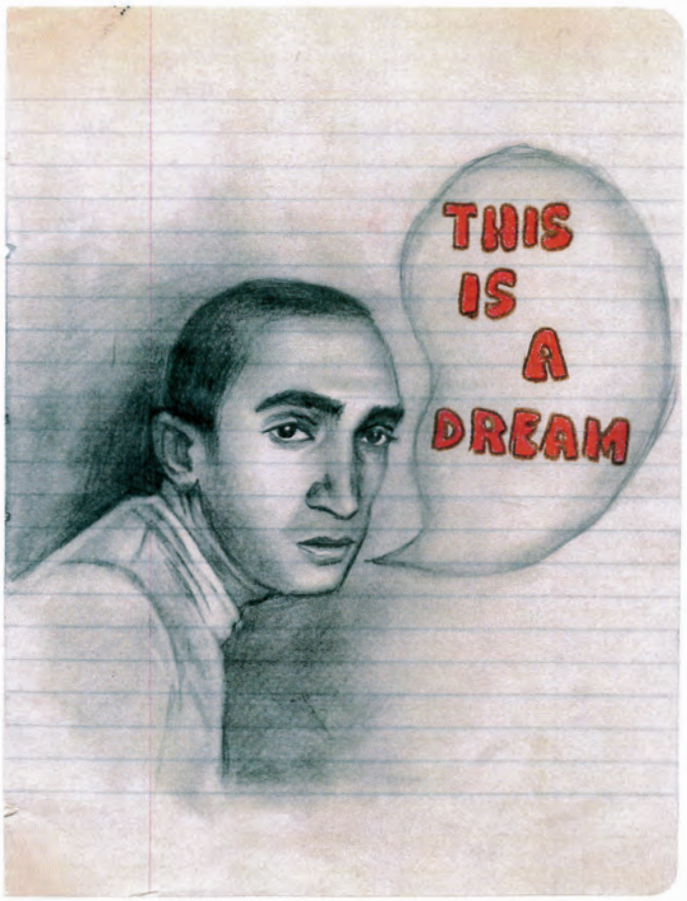


PHOTOGRAPH OF DAMAGED CERAMIC TILES ARRANGED ON TOP OF EACH OTHER BECAUSE THAT'S HOW BATTERIES WORK



EMBLEM FOR AN ASSOCIATIVE SYSTEM PAINTED IN GOLD AND BLACK DOTS ON A CUSTOM-MADE GLASS TILE

Michelle Kuo. “Trusted Sources: A project by Hassan Khan”, *Artforum*, October 2013.



DRAWING BASED ON A GESTURE SEEN IN A DREAM AND COMMISSIONED FROM MOHAMED NOUR, A COMMERCIAL ARTIST BASED IN MIDAN EL ABBASSIA

Michelle Kuo. “Trusted Sources: A project by Hassan Khan”, *Artforum*, October 2013.

A PHOTOGRAPH OF MY MOTHER SHOT ON MY CELL PHONE ON AUGUST 4, 2013, AFTER SIX YEARS OF THINKING ABOUT IT AND HESITATING

PHOTOGRAPH OF A CUSTOM-MADE GLASS OBJECT IMAGINED AS A WAY OF COLLECTING THE WORLD AROUND IT

PHOTOGRAPH OF A CUSTOM-MADE "DENSE" OBJECT CONSISTING OF ALUMINUM, BRONZE, IRON, COPPER, AND STAINLESS STEEL

like host
like time
like sublimated
like passion in a room

like teenage anger
like pressure
like forces trying to find a shape
like networks and stares
like moments of loss
like knowing someone is watching

like process

like violent flare
like dreamtime
like camera moving
like waking up in the middle of the night

like trust
like imagination

like not knowing
like wanting something
like to try to find
like modulate
like move from one point to the other
like ritual story
like story story
like engaged
like involved
like lost
like flow
like surprise
like fear

like golden times
like reflex
like the only way to find out
like having two faces
like shivering and laughing
like gaining an advantage
like splendid tribe
like automatic
like mirror image
like view
like double bind

like spastic
like nerves
like swerve
like tiny spike
like frame
like possess
like respond
like protect
like condense
like what pushes you on
like stream

like friction
like assume
like aspect
like build up
like control
like built machine and system by numbers

like wide eyes
like scratching beard
like bright lights in the old building
like sleeping in their sweat
like figure in the background
like the back must be protected
like flux
like always
like spare them
like

like tense
like moving through command
like using input
like glances
like I am not who I am
like what do they want?
like speaking with movement
like flicker
like trigger
like stepping on hard ground
like breaking a barrier
like waiting
like singing with no knowledge
like layers are always there
like revisiting
like remembering

THE FRONT EDGES OF SEVERAL MAGAZINES SCANNED AND DIGITALLY STITCHED TO CREATE A CONTINUOUS IMAGE

TRUST **IS THE FIRST WORD in HASSAN KHAN's project for these pages—but suspicion is never far behind. It's everywhere in the artist's language, which invokes decoys, conspiracy, hidden locations. Khan is continually drawn to the cover-up and the revelation; to the legerdemain of continuity editing, or to the wresting of objects from their right and proper places. Apparently unrelated vignettes may be strung together in a video, forming a story where there was none; reality-style cell-phone footage turns out to contain half-scripted dialogue performed by professional actors; sound is dubbed after the fact; a brass banister from a bank is ripped out of its context and perfectly replicated in a gallery; photographs of elusive sculptures are meticulously altered, so that the digital aftereffects seem to seep into the things themselves.**

Such displacements blend seamlessly with our everyday, postproduction life, and Khan's work takes this all as given. The London-born, Cairo-based artist doesn't really seem to care about fact/fiction debates or the documentary turn, what's fake or what's real. He never means to convince. Instead, his work dwells on misgivings, reservations, on the recalcitrance of *stuff*. This means a hyperbolic attention to detail: separating the part from the whole, the decoy from the setup, the anomaly from the norm. So patterns—behavioral, linguistic, musical—are made and then broken. The gestures, rhythms, structures, and formats of culture—whether pop standards, street fashion, or Orientalist tropes—are established only to be dismantled, then recombined as phrases or fragments. The microtones of Arabic music flirt with generic four-on-the-floor beats. Tabla samples or session recordings are lifted from their original tracks and braided into new compositions. Men dance in a hypnotic mélange of piecemeal movements. As the artist has said of one of his favorite musical genres, *shaabi*, "it insists on . . . a pattern, and it bleeds that pattern dry."

Khan's work enacts both the instrumentalization of form and its undoing. This is one way to read his installations, which often pit a visual order against a material one. Narrative video faces off against inscrutable sculpture, for example, in *I Am a Hero/You Are a Hero*, 1999, in which screens confront a single hanging hammer; in his presentation at Documenta 13 in 2012, monitors showing his video *Blind Ambition* stood opposite *The Knot*, a length of rope that proved to be made of glass. The knot is, in fact, a topological figure that reappears throughout Khan's oeuvre. The jewel reappears, too—in both the title of Khan's best-known video and in the lapidary sculptures, some made in the workshop of Zeinab Khalifa, a jeweler and designer based in Cairo. These hard gems and crystalline plaits, stubborn and wondrous shapes, point to a morphology that can't be broken down. In an art world that is all too quick to reduce culture to an illustration of this or that economic or political position, Khan insists on the irreducibility of form.

In times of revolution, form and perception are put under extreme pressure. The historical avant-gardes believed that a revolution in perception would beget political revolution. But now radically new perceptual experiences await us at every turn, every swipe, every click. Khan asks us what form can do, what it can be, and how it can change when the dreams of an earlier era have come back down to earth.

—Michelle Kuo

Sarah Neel Smith. "Hassan Khan", *Bidoun*, Issue 28, p158-159, Spring 2013.

Hassan Khan

Istanbul
SALT Beyoğlu
September 21, 2012-January 6, 2013
saltonline.org

At SALT's recent exhibition of nearly two decades of Hassan Khan's work, some thirty-one artworks in a wide range of media — including photos, films, music, and objects — were held in balanced tension across three floors. With formal and thematic relays crisscrossing in every direction, the show dexterously slipped the grasp of linear chronology and the rule of personal beginnings, middles, and ends. This prying loose of the retrospective format from biographical time kept the figure of the artist himself at bay: Khan ended up more of a hazy silhouette on the horizon than a clear-cut figure we might pretend to know or understand well by the end of the show.

In this, the exhibition's structure mirrors one of Khan's signature approaches as an artist (and writer, and musician, and all the many in-between roles that he occupies). Khan doesn't shirk the biographical; in fact, he mines it as one of the most substantial modes through which we produce meaning. And yet, he takes up some of the most cliché-ridden means of expressing the subjective "I" — dreams, first-person narratives, evocations of childhood objects and experiences — precisely in order to channel them elsewhere.

SALT's curatorial team worked closely with the artist during the exhibition's preparation, and I imagine that's a major reason for the strong parallels between the logic of the works and the exhibition's distinctive structure. (The text on the website, for instance, is credited as a collaboration, and the exhibition texts as a whole sometimes read as a defensive effort to avoid anything that could be construed as remotely *explanatory*.) Of course, this raises the question of artists' involvement with institutions in crafting their own backstories for public consumption. But there are some even more basic questions that viewing Khan's work all together makes suddenly pressing — what do we hope, more generally, to get out of taking a retrospective view in the first place? In what unique ways do given artists, and Khan in particular, benefit from being seen retrospectively?

Almost every conversation I had about the exhibition this October involved comments about Khan's enviable ability to move across a wide variety of media while, somewhat miraculously, managing to maintain a deep-seated consistency. The retrospective is framed by two heavily musical works rooted in Khan's own work as a musician. The short film *Jewel* (2010) appears on the first of three floors: the pattern of a deep-sea fish's twinkling path transforms into a glowing lantern of punctured metal, which in turn illuminates two men — one round and jeans-clad, the other rail-thin and in bureaucratic chic — dancing, awkwardly if not enthusiastically, to a pressing shaabi beat. At the culmination of the show is *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* (2005), a project realized in the recording studio: first, the choice of several Egyptian shaabi tracks, a popular genre that at least one critic has described as "as impassioned as it is generic," followed by a collaboration with musicians to suss out commonly used shaabi rhythms, which were then rerecorded, improvised over, mixed, and remixed. A lot of the artist's most essential concerns come together in these two major works — in particular an effort to make elaborately choreographed sequences appear as real time in both music and video — and this may be the Khan with whom most casual followers are familiar. It is certainly the Khan of *The Hidden Location* (2004) and *Muslimgauze R.I.P.* (2010), both films that hinge on similar temporal acts of improvisation, narrative setting, and editing.

It is possible that his work is singularly well served by the retrospective format at least in part because there always seems to be a missing key to one artwork lodged within another, even across decades. There are, too, plenty of instances of plain cross-reference. *Evidence of Evidence I* (2010) is probably the most straightforward: the artist reproduces fragments of previous works (originally photographs, printed pages, performance documents) as etchings, twenty-six small prints with the atmospheric blurring of intaglio and the palpable involvement of a hand. As in much of his work, it's easy to sense the deliberateness of Khan's formal choice — here, one calibrated to make the reproduced fragments something profoundly new while triggering a process of half-recollections and connections on the part of the viewer.

Other times, links between artworks are not predesignated but lie in the common ways they encourage the viewer to feel their way along. For example, one might need the linguistic lessons of the video *The Dead Dog Speaks* (2010) to feel at home with a text-based piece like *Insecure* (2002). Language is a major preoccupation for Khan. It's often the socialness of language, its implication within and creation of an implied social world, that he presses. *The Dead Dog Speaks* is a four-minute video in which three computer-generated figures float and bounce gently on a red ground — a woman in a full-length coat, the disembodied head of a mustached man, a long-haired lapdog. The trio emit a rapid-fire series of words and short phrases in Arabic, but the voices we hear are often mismatched. "Me," "You," "Who," they begin, as English subtitles scroll quickly and the figures bounce and slide gently into new positions on the screen, triggered by the force of their exclamations. One feels, suddenly, the extraordinary capacity of even the most minimal fragments of language to plot out an entire situation: individuals, their relative positions, a social space within which we are also implicated as thinking viewers. Not unlike *The Dead Dog Speaks*, the admonitions of *Insecure* prod us into an awareness of how we project ourselves, often through the simple social cipher of a gesture. A series of instructions are printed on the wall: "list 10 strategies you use to seduce others"; "whisper your name over and over until it doesn't make sense"; "while in conversation closely watch the person you're speaking with and start to assign meanings to their gestures."

What would these artworks look like outside of a retrospective? It may seem wildly obvious to note that works function differently when they stand alone or travel to different contexts, but the shape of Khan's oeuvre — as deeply systematic in its own right as it is concerned with the systematic ways we ourselves communicate, narrate, and produce — provides us with an opportunity to take this question seriously.

ın, *The Agreement*, 2011. Photo by Serkan Taycan

About halfway through, for example, there's a sequence where the exhibition doesn't quite hold together; one too many photos, collages, text-based works, performance documents, and drawings are marched down a wall. And when the tension lapses, one feels how tightly Khan's formal and conceptual ethos functions elsewhere, in individual works and in the curatorial framing alike.

Khan strikes a new note with a handful of object-based works from the past three years, distributed relatively evenly across the exhibition. (It would be interesting to know if Khan did any object-based work earlier than 2010.) *Twist* (2012), a metal rod with a single curve in the middle, is intended to pinpoint a "non-functional moment when human civilization distinguishes itself." *Banque Bannister* (2010) is an exact replica of the original bannister of the Banque Misr in downtown Cairo. A third, *The Agreement* (2011), pairs five short stories of Khan's invention with ten enigmatic objects that he had manufactured — a half-crystal, half-clay vessel, a pencil-thin metal rod sharpened to a point at either end, a smooth white ceramic capsule. Perhaps more than any of his other output, these three pieces carry with them the risk of being viewed as manifestations of a regional material vernacular, something particularly valued by a contemporary biennial culture hungry for easy signifiers of cultural specificity. This isn't a criticism, or to say that this is Khan's motivation, but just that, as manufactured objects with material heft, this strain of his oeuvre confronts a set of debates about authenticity in a palpably different mode than his films or photographs.

In fact, one of the major revelations for me was Khan the photographer. The medium's "natural" engagement with personal memory, its implication of an implied archive beyond its bounds, its modes of fragmentation and formal manipulation, all movingly intersect with Khan's broader concerns, where his objects left me cold. *Lust* (2008) was a standout: a series of fifty crepuscular, framed cellphone photographs, cropped scenes of anonymous room interiors, a hand on a mirror, figures pressing forward out of a crowd. Triangulating *Lust* with *Alphabet Book* (2006), where Khan created blurred, visceral images sourced from his own dreams, and *Photographs of statues owned by the artist* (2010), three large prints of small souvenir figurines, had me wishing there were a sustained essay on this aspect of his work.

In the end, Khan's strategies of ambiguation can be discomfiting, and probably because of his close involvement in the retrospective's organization, the viewer isn't always offered an alternate angle from which to apprehend his work. The artist hands a lot of responsibility over to the viewer — a gesture that could be read alternately as generous or obscurantist. Either way, it constitutes a particular way of taking seriously the dictum that the task of the artist is to function publicly in some way. Khan's retrospective is not traveling, nor is there a catalog, and it's regretful that SALT missed an opportunity to show the work beyond Istanbul, or to produce some sustained critical writing in and around it. The simple act of moving these objects elsewhere, adjusted to a different physical space, or into alternate formats such as a catalog, could only continue to pressure that question of the diverse lives artworks may have.

— Sarah-Neel Smith

Jeramy DeCristo. “The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture”, *Harper’s Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7,
May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.

THE SEDIMENTATION OF AESTHETIC GESTURE

INTRODUCING THE WORKS OF HASSAN KHAN

By Jeramy DeCristo

I’ll warn you: Hassan Khan is a liar. Sure, art is illusory, but this only partially explains why Khan refuses to offer us a novel referentiality in his work. Neither the suspension of a banque banister in mid-air (‘Banque Banister’ 2010), nor the subtle twisting of a steel pole (‘The Twist’ 2012), nor the documentation of an imagined boy’s domestic banality (‘Muslimgauze RIP’ 2010) can be reduced to the familiar symbolic order that we brought with us to SALT...’

Hassan Khan peforming ‘Superstructure’ at Kunst Werke Berlin 2012 (photo by Ruan Davidson)

Jeramy DeCristo. “The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture”, *Harper’s Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7, May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.

'The Twist' (Detail) 2012 (Photo by Serkan Taycan)

Lying in its most basic sense perhaps has nothing to do with truth, but simply the gesture of substitution; the substitution of one system of meaning for another or, as is often the case in Khan's work, the displacement of one ideological system with something else. Contemplating that something else in his sculpture 'The Twist' (2012), a sculpted metal pole with a decorative twist in the middle, Khan queries, 'What makes it possible for this to happen; what makes it possible for architecture to communicate that [decorative gesture] in the first place, not what it's actually communicating? I think that dynamic, I think that is what is inherent in our understanding of the world.'

The recognition or mis-recognition of the lie - or what might also be experienced as a kind of corruption of our ideological context - occurs for witnesses of Khan's work when they find themselves letting go of their inherited set of references and slipping into the energy of Khan's aesthetic gestures. We are not effectively bedazzled by the ornament of 'the Twist,' but brought to question and think through its gesture. Then the spectator's engagement with Khan's use of sound, text and image, might accomplish something like Khan's goal of creating a new language; a new language of form. I would not go so far as to call this Khan's modernism, because neither he nor his work is this naive or romantic; nor is it this forceful in its approach or reception. But in pieces where Khan's gestures are most expansive and nuanced, we do see brilliant flitters of modernist abstraction, such as the sculpture pieces 'Banque Banister' and 'the Twist,' or the sound and video installation 'Jewel' (2010).

'Jewel' 35 mm transferred to HD, accompanied by music composed by the artist (2010)

So while Khan's almost-anthropological fascination with the Angler Fish that swims through 'Jewel' and his interest in the primordial origins of artistic gesture might flirt with the notions of the evolutionary and the biological that influenced 20th century modernist artists, these romantic ideals are put into tension by Khan's aesthetic movements. If there is any confusion as to Khan's position toward the inherent fetishism of these evolutionary discourses, he offers us beautifully and subtly scored piano tones in '12 Pieces for Piano and Electronica' (2007), the soundtrack to Ahmed El Attar's theatre piece: 'F*** Darwin or How I Learned to Love Socialism.' Khan's work does not undertake this 'f***' then as a naive disavowal, but as the strategic attempt of an artist to brush off the authority of the prescribed, the inherited, and the hegemonic and open up a new language and context; the potential for a new form.

The search for a new language of form; a new form that is irreducibly in tension with the ideological sediments of history drives Khan's persistent engagement with culture. In a multi-year international performance piece entitled 'READ FANON YOU F***ING B****D' Khan frequently invokes the anti-colonial legacy of Frantz Fanon in order to call attention to and reject the art world's fetishistic engagement with his work and its (still) colonial occupation with its collectable 'cultural' Other. In fact, the most persistent structure of referentiality that Khan's work tries to reject is perhaps that of the fetish; whether that be the attempted exoticist framing of the work itself, or the fetish form of the mass produced commodity which Khan's work conjures and reconfigures. About his 1997 single channel video instillation 'انت عاوز تتخانق؟' ('Do You Want to Fight?' 1997), which reproduces and troubles the form of advertisement, Khan muses 'I think this is a thread that runs through my practice from the beginning to the end; there is a relationship to the generic, but it's not this more common one: pastiche, irony or parody.'

The generic, the familiar and the recognizable are never submitted to irony or parody, but are rather used as raw material: sound, text, image, for the production of form. Khan's sound and musical performances directly engage this aesthetic of the generic, or what Khan might also call the aesthetics of the programmed or automated. It is in Khan's sound and musical works where the most damning lies of Khan's experimentations occur; that point when we are forced to make this uncomfortable substitution of our self. 'The conditioned self' Khan once called this back in 1997, 'Maybe I would differ with that now; I think it's too restrictive a reading… I don't think in that way anymore, but at the same time I don't think those terms are completely irrelevant. And of course music is a big part of that piece ['انت عاوز تتخانق؟' ('Do You Want to Fight?' 1997)].'

Perhaps Khan's most powerful attempt to inhabit the self-effacing and self-producing effect of automation arrives in the 'programmed environment' of 'Dom Tak Dom Tak' (2005). While the automated controls of 'Dom Tak' respond to our presence the anthropomorphic speakers spraying forth Shaa'bi music (produced by Khan) seem to be playing at us with a kind of indifference that forces us to develop an organic relationship with them; that is if we ever hope to be recognised by them. Khan's latest film work 'Blind Ambition' (2012) rather brilliantly illustrates the automated nature of self through and against which people work to produce their realities. The feature-length video, shot entirely on Khan's smart phone and dubbed in post-production, follows a set of character-centred vignettes in contemporary Cairo. Carefully and subtly-crafted local realities reveal only partial images of desire, greed, humour, intimacy and political alienation that are sliced through and juxtaposed against one another with the cutting movements of the film. Neither the characters' dialogues nor the larger arch of the film produce a programmatic political statement about Egypt or Cairo's post-revolution. The sonic and visual effect of chatter, automated speech and movement are more central to the political reality the film occupies and tries to imagine. 'Ultimately they're both about conversation; it's about conversation at the edge of automation and intention. So people are talking and things come automatically, the way language works, partially like that, but they have intentions with this automated thing. That's why it's not contemplative talk.' The sound of conversation probably says something about the inheritance of a f****d-up political reality, at least as much as it offers an alternative to that f****d up political reality. But Khan does not reduce the images or words of the characters to message or sentiment, but instead produces a kind of musical and filmic materiality.

Video still from 'Blind Ambition' (adjusted) (2012)

'The generic, the familiar and the recognizable are never submitted to irony or parody, but are rather used as raw material...'

Jeramy DeCristo. “The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture”, *Harper’s Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7,
May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.

Hassan Khan performing Superstructure at Kunst Werke Berlin 2012 (photo by Rian Davidson)

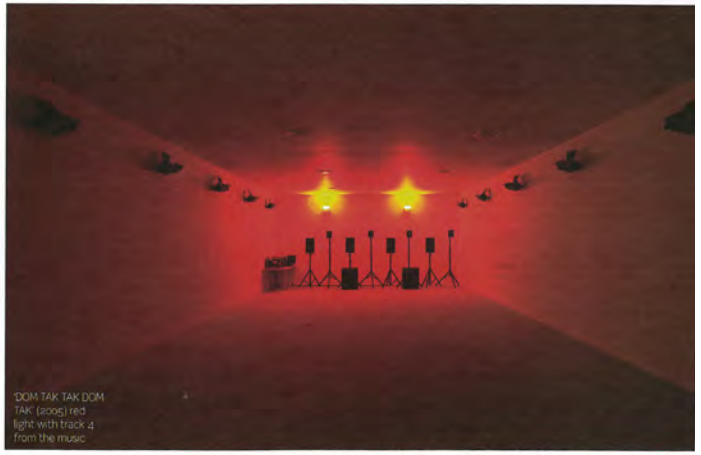
Who does Hassan Khan think we are? He seems to have no programmatic sense of this, but he means to disrupt it. I would call this a noise aesthetic. To be clear, Khan does not work extensively with dense, dissonant sound clusters like the work of a Karlheinz Stockhausen or a Tarek Atoui. In fact, much of his sonic practice in performance is about the careful management of feedback. In recent concerts in London, Istanbul and Berlin, we experienced this noise aesthetic of Khan's work in general and his sound work in particular. What is so noisy about Khan's musical aesthetic is its proclivity towards interruption and disruption of that programmed signal that flows through many of us. In 'الوحدة الكبيرة' 'The Big One' (2009) the dramatic juxtaposition of banging New Wave Egyptian Shaa'bi beats, and music produced by the artist in the studio and arranged live in front of the audience, with sparse avant-garde tones produces a jarring effect. For Khan, whose music and relationship to sound is significantly influenced by both contexts, the juxtaposition might represent a more remote thought experiment to think through different forms. But neither Khan's personal experience nor the local reference of either context are essential here. 'I am not interested in synthesis or fusion - which is a dirtier word.' Khan's musical performances seem to closely mirror his compositional practices in which the organic relationship to sound is closely tied to the immediacy of the experience of sound. In concert performances 'Superstructure' (2011) and 'Superstructure II' (2012), silence yokes together and separates booming Shaa'bi beats and abstract arrhythmic tones and finally classical Arabic Tarab. What is Khan alluding to in both this performance and this title? The larger work consists of two unique parts: the one section made up of four distinct compositions and productions Khan has made over the last five years: 'Jewel' (2010), a short story based on a distant memory with a long musical interlude, and 'Superstructure I and II' (the ammunition of the nation 2011, 2012) both based on the same studio sessions used for the production of the Jewel soundtrack in 2010, 'the Big One' (2009), which was based on the sessions used for the production of the soundtrack of Ahmed El Attar's performance 'The Importance of Being an Arab' (2009), and finally an earlier abstract work '12 Pieces for Piano and Electronica' (2007).

The second set of sections or moments of the piece are derived from

'Banque Bannister' (2010) Photo by Serkan Taycan

'WHO DOES HASSAN KHAN THINK WE ARE? HE SEEMS TO HAVE NO PROGRAMMATIC SENSE OF THIS, BUT HE MEANS TO DISRUPT IT'

'DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK' (2005) white light with metronome click

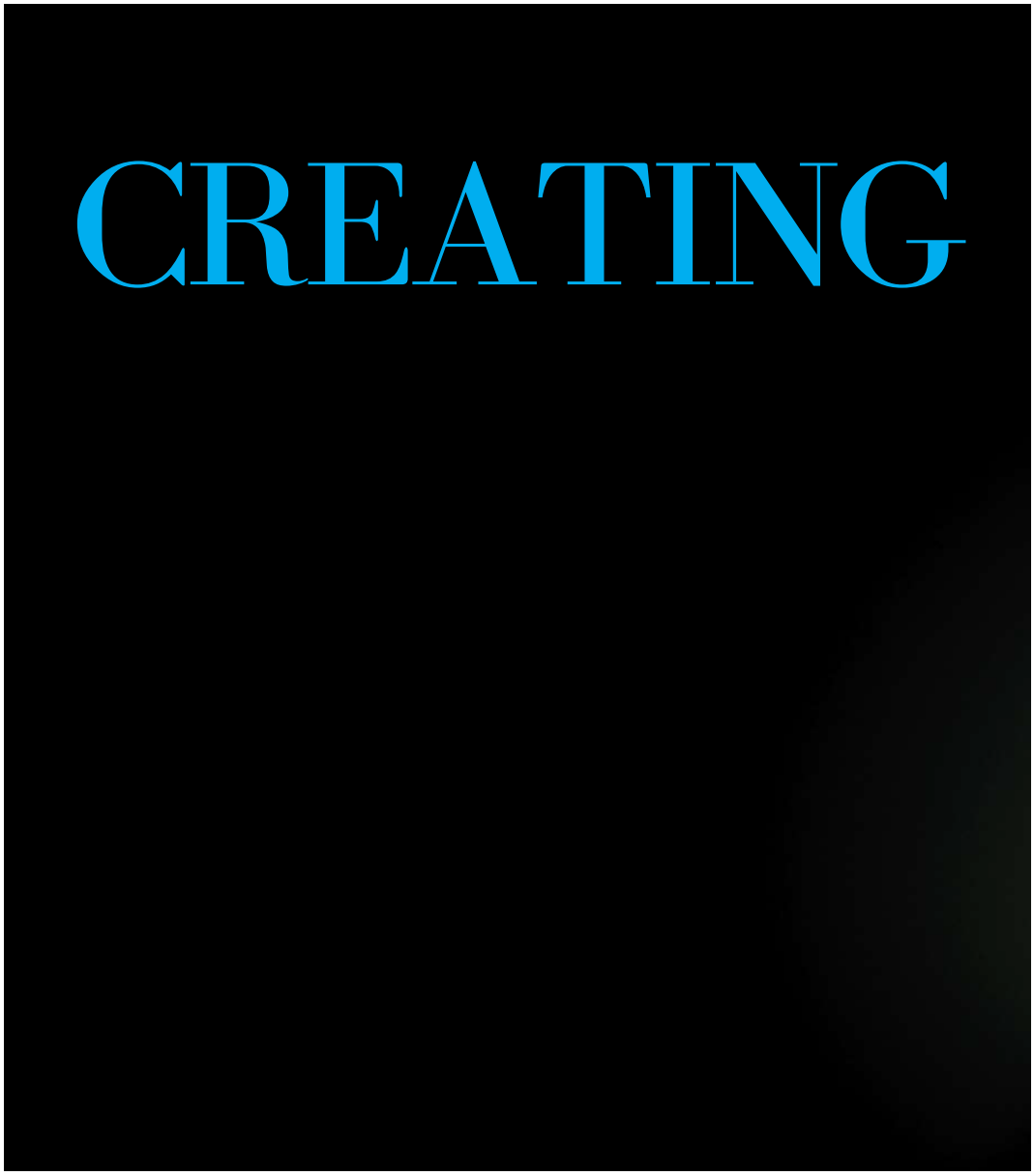


'DOM TAK TAK DOM TAK' (2005) red light with track 4 from the music

largely improvised abstract electronic pieces which Khan has been fashioning with an old Mackie 1204 mixer for the last decade. The feedback from this analogue mixer is then routed through several filters, processors and, on occasion, an analogue-modelling synthesizer. The centrality of juxtaposition in Khan's sound and musical performances recalls a similar aesthetic in the works of John Cage, whom Khan cites, along with Sun Ra, as a notable musical influence. The dramatic shifts in musical genre, colouring, and dynamics are hardly interested in bringing the audience toward some recognition of homage or novel reference of these artists though. Rather as the title of the piece suggests, Khan seems to be using sound as the raw material through which to think the superstructural, the ideological, the cultural as equally the architect of and the alibi for form. We maybe don't sense this coming together of form when we are listening to the music, when we are in it; Khan's attempt to substitute the recognition of it for the experience of it might be what feels so deceitful at first. When the form has dried and congealed we might cobble something together, though this retrospection, this substitution, is us merely trying to keep our culture in place. HBA

Sohrab Mohebbi. “Creating, Decoys, Hassan Khan”,
Canvas, September / October 2012, P. 88-95.

CREATING



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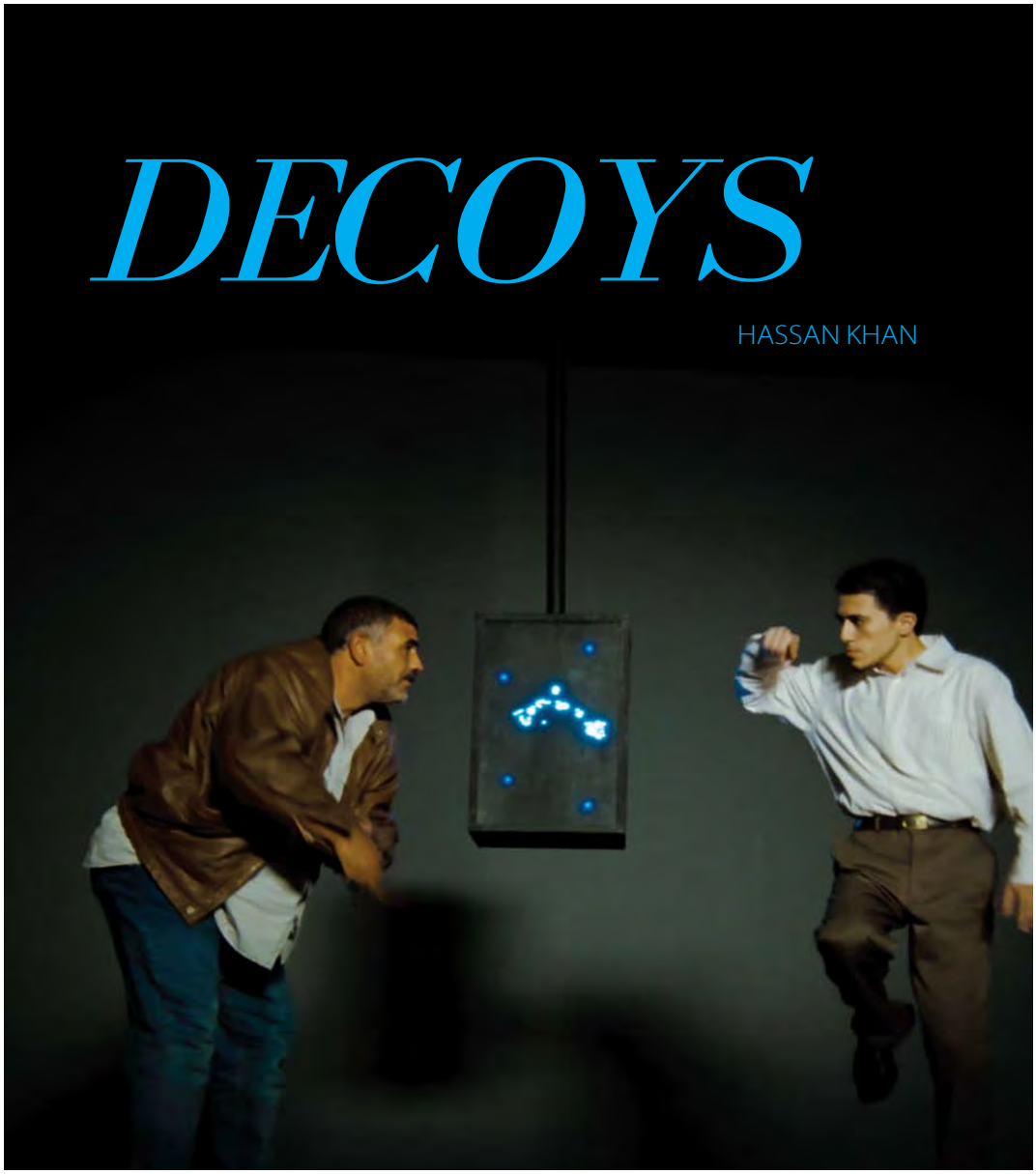


His practice spans varied media, from film and video to installation, text, sound, music and photography. **Sohrab Mohebbi** speaks with Hassan Khan, who believes that the perfect medium is one that lends itself best to the work.

When I had the chance to work with Hassan Khan on an exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art in 2011 and broke the news to some of my colleagues, they warned me: "Hassan Khan is very difficult to work with." So, I opened my conversation with Khan by asking his opinion on this. "Difficult to work with?" he exclaimed, "I think I am a difficult person to live with!" He went on to explain that he did not say this as a joke, as there are times that all that matters is the work, and everything else just orbits around it. Most often he creates new work for each exhibition, and until recently, it was rare that he would even exhibit older pieces.

I spoke with Khan upon his return to Cairo – where he lives and works – from the dOCUMENTA (13) sessions in Alexandria. For the 100-day mega-exhibition in Kassel, he produced two new works, *Blind Ambition* (2012) a 45-minute video made with a cell phone camera and *The Knot*, a glass sculpture of the eight-knot figure, facing one another at the lower level of the Neue Galerie. Khan's works are also the subject of his forthcoming retrospective at Istanbul's SALT, and this year, *Jewel* (2010) was featured at Palais de Tokyo's La Triennale, New Museum Triennial in New York and also the Berlin Documentary Forum and was hailed by critics and viewers alike on both sides of the Atlantic.

RED HERRINGS

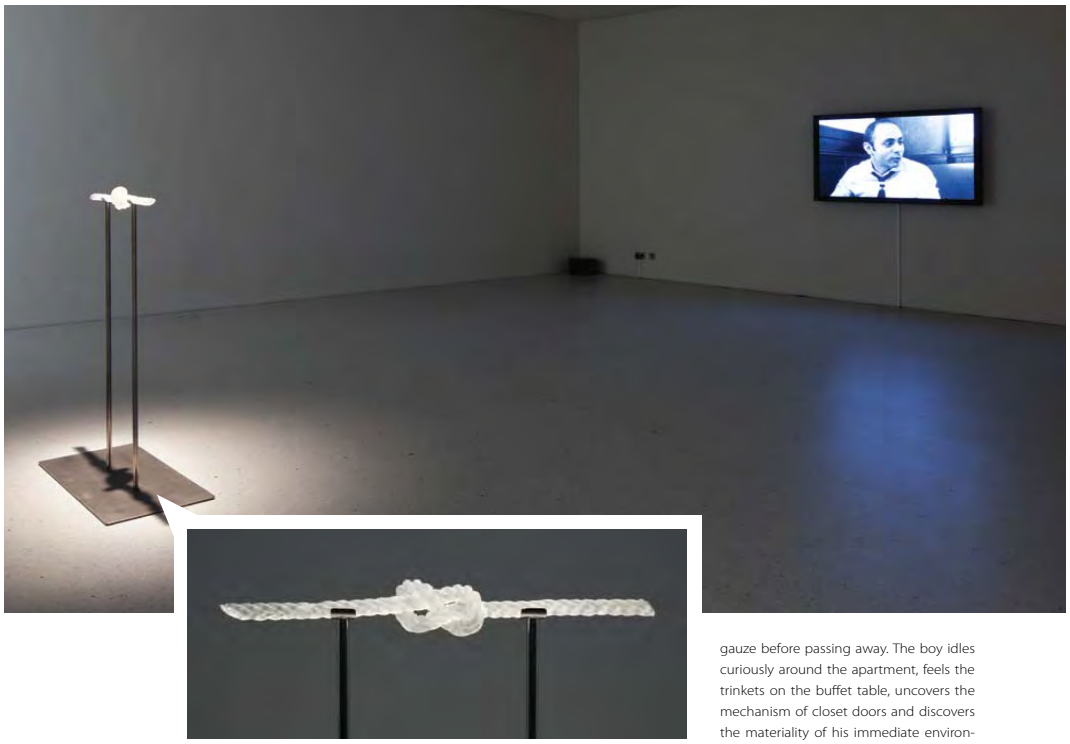
Among the various threads in Khan's work is an investigation of the underlying structures and sources that give form to identifiable appearances and a desire to reach the essence. His work does not aim to essentialise certain geo-political conditions into immediately identifiable representations. "It is not about context," he explains, "because there is, in many cases, an engagement with the conditions under which something is born…under which I am working or living, the world I experience. However, the work is not *about* describing this, and it is definitely not about explaining it." In an earlier work, such as his one-minute-long and fast-paced *This is THE Political Film* (1998), Khan shows a strange-looking man nailing a piece of meat to a desk. In *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*, his 2005 installation at Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea in Turin, Khan selected six tracks of *sha'abi* (popular) Arabic music, analysed them with musicians of the genre and then recorded the basic rhythm

Opening spread: A video still from *Jewels*, 2010. Video installation in colour with sound. 35 minutes.

Facing page: *Banque Banuister*. 2010. Brass. 209 x 260 x 22 cm. Edition of three. Photography by Florian Kleinefeen.

section of each piece. Later, he invited session musicians to individually improvise on the beats – without hearing the work of one another – and thus created what he calls the "ghost of the genre…you're listening to music that still retains a certain amount of elegance, beauty, complexity…yet it's not what it's really supposed to be, it's a shadow." In his epic piece from 2004, *Hidden Location*, a 52-minute synchronised four-channel video installation, Khan adds yet another dimension to the work and unsettles the position of the viewer by at once giving him/her the possibility to choose how to interact with the piece – which screen to watch, which threads to follow – while at the same time making it impossible to experience the work thoroughly, as one can never follow the four screens simultaneously.

In Khan's work, the set of references are not always clear and he often makes use of decoys, "producing something that looks like something but is actually something else". Take *Muslimgauze R.I.P* (2010) where Khan developed a scenario about a boy living in Thatcherite England in an apartment building next to the prolific British experimental and electronic musician Bryn Jones, who produced a number of records as Muslim-



This page: An installation view of the Neue Galerie at dOCUMENTA (13). Left: *The Knot*. 70 x 6.5 x 3 cm. 2012. Glass sculpture. Right: *Blind Ambition*. 2012. Single-channel video, dubbed with synchronised voices. The HD video was shot on a Samsung Galaxy SII cell phone. Photography by Anders Sune Berg.

Facing page: Two stills from *Muslimgauze R.I.P.* 2010. Full HD video transferred to Blu-Ray with sound. Eight minutes and seven seconds. Edition of six.

gauze before passing away. The boy idles curiously around the apartment, feels the trinkets on the buffet table, uncovers the mechanism of closet doors and discovers the materiality of his immediate environment; while next door, the musician who had never been to the Middle East, starts producing records in solidarity with the Arab cause after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

Khan's piece *Blind Ambition* (currently on view at Neue Galerie, Kassel), is a 45-minute single-channel video all shot on a Samsung Galaxy cell phone with dubbed and synchronised voices. I asked Khan about the choice of a cell phone camera, and he mentioned how it is different from video cameras, both in how one is treated and understood and the kind of atmosphere in the street, as well as in the way that the actors respond to it, which is also twofold. They either ignore it, which is not desirable, or it becomes completely invisible, which is what Khan wanted to achieve. "The fact that it's shot on the cell phone gives the audience a clue of what it is," he explains. Khan had imagined the piece a few years ago as a work taking place in public spaces all over the city, "completely silent except for when people spoke."

A 35mm film transferred to digital format, *Jewel* has been extremely successful at living up to its name. In this piece, a deep-sea luminous angelfish suddenly freezes and turns into a set of lights on a speaker; the bass kicks in and as the camera pans out, two men dance to the beat of *sha'abi* music composed by Khan. The men, one in seemingly official bureaucrat attire and the other dressed like the man-on-the-street, dance facing one another without ever taking their eyes off of each other. At first, the location of this performance is unclear, but as the camera zooms out, we see the two men move inside an empty white room. Triggered by an episode that caught Khan's eye in a cab ride back

home – where two men danced to a blasting speaker decorated with light bulbs synchronised to the beat – he imagined the work throughout by the time he arrived home. Constituted out of the power of the collective, the relationship that *Jewel* holds with its subjects is, in a way "an amplification and condensation... but other works don't necessarily hold the same relationships with their sources. You can find another work that deals with the same source in a completely different way, that is more discreet, or more subtle, or more quiet, or maybe by definition, much more cold, it's not a value in itself, it's just what the work is. In the case of *Jewel*, that happens to align itself with what people go for."

MULTIMEDIA APPROACHES

In his video works, Khan almost never makes an appearance, except for the piece *Sometime/ Somewhere Else* (2001), where he juxtaposes footage of himself as a 17 year-old blasting an electric guitar next to recordings of himself at the age of 15 being interviewed by a Swedish crew, making a documentary about "young adults around the world or something like that". It was a few days before he enrolled at university, and yet Khan categorically denies being a child prodigy; he was nevertheless a year or two younger than many of his classmates. He received both his BA (1995) and MA (2004) in Comparative Literature from the American University in Cairo. A bookworm even before entering college, Khan notes – perhaps ironically – that one of the only books that he read cover-to-cover during his university years was John Cage's *Silence*. Even with all his competence in critical theory (as is clear in his writings), he explains how he "reads

"[Khan] often makes use of decoys, "producing something that looks like something but is actually something else."

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This page, below: An installation view of *The Tirist* at Objective Exhibitions, Antwerp, 2011. Five narrative texts and one shelf with 10 objects. Variable dimensions.

Facing page, from left to right: Three installation views of *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK*. 2005. Music, light and text. Variable dimensions.

All images courtesy the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

"When I am working on a project, I am in complete incommunicado."

selectively, irrationally – skimming through the text, consuming certain segments and ignoring others, allowing this to become a way of thinking through the books".

After graduation, Khan held several jobs: as a teacher, working at a publishing house, and also as a translator for a belly dancer, a task that proved to be a disappointment: "I thought that I would manage to get in with the belly dancers and have a great time, but they treated me like a servant!" He held his first solo exhibition in 1999 at the Gezira Art Centre, a show that featured five monitors on one side, juxtaposed with a suspended hammer at the other end of the gallery as a counterpart, curiously not dissimilar to his recent installation in Kassel.

This September, for his retrospective at SALT in Istanbul, Khan is presenting some of his larger aforementioned works together with pieces such as the bronze sculpture *Banque Bannister* (2010), his text piece *The Agreement* (2011) and a wall of smaller pieces. Even so, he remarks that in October he can "make another retrospective with a different set of works that might seem to come from a totally different artist."

Working on several exhibitions (in addition to SALT, Khan also has a solo exhibition at Haus der Kunst in Munich and Marseille Capital of Culture in 2013 and is making new work for all three), I was curious to hear about Khan's daily routine. "When I am working on a project, I am in complete incommunicado, even while working on, let's say, rendering a video file which will take a couple of hours, I still cannot go out for drinks after that," he explains. "And yet, there are times that I don't do anything at all. I go to a café for instance and read all the morning newspapers, I go for walks, I stare at the ceiling etc, but to me in a way, that is amongst the most significant parts of my work. And sometimes in this state, I imagine a work in its completion, but I do not pursue it, I simply let it go."

For more information visit www.hassankhan.com and www.crousel.com

Sohrab Mohebbi. Interview Hassan Khan.
Shifter18, April 2012, p.81-84.

HASSAN KHAN AND SOHRAB MOHEBBI

Sohrab Mohebbi: To start with, we can talk about the idea or the attempt to move away from subjectivity, something that you have mentioned in other discussions and we have also talked about before, because it actually provides a way to discuss the notion of intention. It somehow suggests the idea of the author bracketing himself from the work, and I am not sure if that is your intention, but this notion (the move from one's own subjectivity) could be taken as a starting point for an investigation of the process of thought and intentionality.

Hassan Khan: This idea was born out of something very practical, and very concrete – a sensation. In the early 2000's I felt that my work was too pre-determined, I was dissatisfied. I kept feeling that the work should be somewhere else, that it should go beyond the idea of being a message from the artist, a substitute for my own voice that is then deciphered by the audience. This relationship seemed poor and reductive. A transmission from point A to point B of a set and defined body of information- that was just not satisfactory.

SM: So in a way it is a sort of attempt to open up, meaning that this notion of moving away from your own subjectivity is an impossibility, but this is sort of an attempt to create many more possibilities, an obsessive attempt to open up your work, beyond expression, by going in reverse from the starting point instead of forward, going back and opening up space.

HK: But you are not getting rid of your subjectivity, that's different; you are just not treating the work as an expression of your subjectivity. Your subjectivity is deeply involved in producing the work, even if the work is not an expression of it, the relationship between subjectivity and the product, or whatever you want to call it, is not one of expression. However subjectivity is one of the tools of production. Actually it's a very important tool. Subjectivity is also not really interpretable and therefore working in order to express your subjectivity is another way of reducing it, and reducing how you produce to modes that are pre-determined.

SM: So are you somehow omitting traces of the self as you go along, do you at some point go back with some sort of editorial process?

HK: I don't think it works in that way, and also it's difficult to talk about it because it changes all the time. We need a clear historical point to discuss what was happening then. But traces of the self are there, it is not a matter of erasing the traces of the self, it's a matter of how you deal with these traces, how you understand them, what you could do with them, and in the end, what is produced. I think here, bringing in a discussion of *form* and *formalism* is useful, because its not a matter of cleaning, or censoring, or taking out or anything, it's a matter of what you are working with, what motivates that, what provides its impetus, and all possible outcomes here are completely fine. What you do with it is the critical issue. This is an important distinction, because it leads us to an engagement with what *labor* is, and how a self is produced through labor.

Sohrab Mohebbi. Interview Hassan Khan.
Shifter18, April 2012, p.81-84.

SM: Do you think that what is called *subjectivity* is the will to create? I am asking this as I am interested to know about how the work begins, if it is not fulfilling a desire in the economic sense.

HK: Maybe subjectivity is that which needs to, in part, be sublimated to be knowable and identifiable. It is visible yet it by necessity is also unknown and imperceptible. To be itself, both conditions have to coexist, and both conditions have to be understood as facets of the same thing. I hope I am being clear enough. It's a bit difficult to explain what one means here, but to give a concrete example of what I am trying to say, sometimes you look at a work of art and it's not clear what makes it a work, yet it is exactly this shift, or modulation, that makes it a work in the first place.

SM: There is something here that makes me think of a detective story, or let's say a crime investigation, where the criminal commits a crime not for personal gain, This makes the most difficult case to solve usually.

HK: It's funny that you bring up detective stories- I have over the past year been writing stories that are, happily so, suspenseful in tenor. Although the subject matter varies, I have always found myself writing in that tone.

SM. I think an example of that tone is present your exhibition Kompressor,. It is related to the notion of a dream, which in the contemporary world is seen as something deeply personal and deeply associated with a person's subjectivity. But in that work you take the idea of the dream not as something deeply personal, but rather as something very commonplace.

HK: I dealt with *Kompressor* in two ways that are sort of contradictory. On one level, the reason I wanted to work on my dreams was because they were very important to me, sometimes traumatic, or beautiful, or incredibly moving. They have a deep impact on me at least in some aspects of my life. So my interest in working with dreams was not abstract, it was motivated by the mess that is anyone, any person. However, the way I wanted to work with these dreams was very defined and very cold. The subtitle of *Kompressor* is "an exhibition based on translating a set of dreams into different forms by the dreamer" – the crucial word here is "forms." The way I approached my dreams was as a step towards the discovery of forms. Not as a way of expressing my subjectivity, nor as a way of describing the dreams, both possible approaches to the same content, but rather as a way of describing forms. The dreams became material, and this material is both internal and external. On one level it's the most interior thing I have access to and on another level, it's also my absolute other, because I have no control over it. It is an experience of myself in which there is no ability to control or know what will happen. Every moment is a complete surprise.

This approach proved very useful because my search for form using this material means that these forms are not just random, nor are they simply examples of a type. They are forms that are infused with something that gives them meaning. However this meaning is not determined. My work as an artist in this case is not to explain these meanings, but rather to use this content, to engage with this content, and to allow that relationship, that form of labour to discover something that I am unaware of and might not know. By doing so a new form is born. What I mean by form is the object, the work, whatever that is. It doesn't matter what medium or format it is in. When that form is born I myself am surprised, I myself am

bewildered, I myself do not know what that form is doing exactly. However I trust that it is relevant, and trust that it is doing something, and I trust that it has a profound connection to human experience. Yet it's one that is not reducible to a formula, to an intention that is coded by the artist and then decoded by an audience. It is therefore also one that is not easily reducible to predetermined viewing categories and is thus hard for example to sentimentalize, or even to find cathartic. This is also why audiences can sometimes find it difficult to access. The response, also in a subtle and quiet way, needs to be discovered by the audience. The labor is shared without the disingenuous pathos of claims of "communication" or "interactivity." In this case one hopefully avoids reproducing the comfortable relationship of mutual satisfaction, the contract in which both sides pander to each other to fulfill a simple need. I would like to claim that what an artist does is ultimately something a bit more complex and engaging than that.

SM. In relation to that, I wanted to ask you about this notion that instead of articulating something, the work creates conditions for articulation. I think that in what you do, the work creates the grounds for itself to exist. I want to bring up the notion of context when the work is usually being analyzed as the product of a context or an expression of subjectivity.

HK: There was a continuously changing artist talk that I gave over a period of five years, called *I am not what I am*. It had a very specific format in which I used a time code that ran from 0 to 60 minutes on the screen while at different moments different works appeared. I worked with a script, which consisted of lots of texts that were taken from notes, previously published essays, things I had intentionally written for the talk, as well as the time code running down the script. However the texts available were always more than what I could read in the time allocated. I was therefore constantly forced to edit my talk live. I had to try and fit selections from the text while attempting to be on time, in relation to what was happening on the screen. It was an intentionally difficult situation to put myself in, one that was then displayed to the audience in the form of a talk. I am referring to this talk because of what you were saying about context. I would like to quote something from it. Here I am here discussing *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK,* and I speak about a conflict: "What interests me in it is to touch, on one hand the totally material condition, for example categories such as class or power or race are important here" and so context in the traditional sense is important, "yet on another level there is a less visible condition that has to do with the structure, behind all of that, an invisible emotion, speaking that condition, engaging that moment, necessitates a production that constantly shifts, a betrayal of one's self, a moment of seduction, a cerebral exploration or whatever". That dichotomy is related to what you were saying although it still needs a discussion about the work itself to be a bit more clear. It's not *about* context, because there is in many cases an engagement with the conditions under which something is born, with the conditions under which I am working or living, the conditions of the world I experience. All of that becomes relevant in the work. And that in a way can be called context. However, the work is not about describing that, and it is definitely not about explaining it.

I am interested in both sides, in how the work is inhabited by the world and yet can retain a complete unknown within it. It is maybe partially why I am so much in love with juxtapositions that are not about comparison - for example in Gasworks in 2006 I showed *Kompressor* and *The Hidden Location*, two totally different approaches of mine, both very clear and articulated, placed next to each other.

Sohrab Mohebbi. Interview Hassan Khan.
Shifter18, April 2012, p.81-84.

SM: Hassan, here I would like to ask you a question to somehow connect the two parts of our discussion, and I think this points to a place that I think your work situates itself in, and that is the unidentifiable space between subjectivity and representation, expression and explanation. It's where marketplace and intimacy coincide to the point that it creates an almost singular entity of *a commerce of the self*. Could you elaborate a bit on this, or am I getting it completely wrong?

HK: My answer simple and short – is to remind you that the title of the artist talk I mentioned earlier is "I AM NOT WHAT I AM"!

Alanna Martinez. "Daily pick: Hassan Khan's Hypnotic Film at the New Museum Triennial," *artinfo.com*, in the air column, February 15, 2012.

Hassan Khan may have the most engaging piece at the New Museum's Triennial. "Jewel" (2010) is housed in a custom built room that divides the 2nd floor gallery, and is accessible through a narrow back-alley of a hallway. Like a number of tucked away installations, there is no "See Here" sign, but the escaping bass of the muffled music playing within is an irresistible lure. It has the same envy-inducing effect one might experience standing outside a nightclub or raucous house party: an overwhelming sense something exciting is going on inside and you may be missing out on all the fun.

While I have to admit, my introduction to the work was not ideal, (standing crammed in between inebriated guests for the Triennial's opening reception), this was the one work I felt drawn to before even seeing. The room built for Khan's film is dark with a large screen in the center flanked by two amplifiers, which ultimately mirrors the room featured in the film. There is enough room to dance if you want, which I hope guests eventually took advantage of given the scene last night. The piece opens with fast shimmers of blue light, complimented by chiming musical accompaniment. The opener of the angler fish is a bit perplexing, but in an exotic way it flows in to the primary scene. As the fish dematerializes into a series of abstracted blue hanging lights, the camera zooms out to capture two men engulfed in a rapid choreographed duet.

The film is a rhythmically hypnotic single frame worth getting lost in. Amidst the chaos of the opening party, I was unexpectedly held in Khan's room for the entire duration of the film, completely lost in the two men's dance. While on one hand there is a serious element to their focused gyrating, there is also humor in the unbalanced composition of the young, slender man combining some popping and locking with the repeated steps of his counterpart, who is himself lost in the music and swaying steadily but precariously to the floor and twirling about. All the while, the minimal blue angler fish rotates between them, and in Khan's mysterious room they make up a dance party of two. Khan has also composed the music, which is mostly closely categorized as Shaabi, a popular form of Cairene dance music fusing traditional sounds and electronica.

It's a lot to take in, and Khan doesn't let you forget; as the camera steadily fades out, he illuminates his subjects over and again, continuing to hold the frame just as we think it's about to end. The music, thankfully, stayed with me the rest of the night.

See a still from Hassan Khan's featured piece, "Jewel" (2010) from "The Ungovernables" below:

"The Ungovernables: 2012 New Museum Triennial" at the New Museum, 235 Bowery, New York, Wednesday & Friday-Saturday 11:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., Thursday 11:00 a.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Hassan Khan

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART
New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park
May 22–August 14

The Hidden Location, 2004, a fifty-two-minute, synchronized four-channel video installation at the heart of Hassan Khan's solo exhibition, is a portrait of his hometown, Cairo. A vociferous critic of contemporary art from the Middle East that panders to and deals in Western stereotypes of the region, Khan rigorously and successfully resists the powerful lure of the exotic and formulaic.

Hassan Khan, *The Hidden Location*, 2004, still from a four-channel video installation, 52 minutes.

The installation consists of sixteen distinct sections that vary thematically and stylistically. Documentary-style segments—some silent, some not—of passing container ships and car traffic both jammed and moving, and slow pans and zooms of trees, parked cars, and endless shelves of electronic appliances, are interspersed with short narrative sketches featuring Cairene actors. Playing out scenarios developed through improvisation exercises devised by the artist, these sequences reveal tensions between genders and classes: A woman confides in a less than sympathetic friend about how her married lover disrespects her; a young couple meeting after work bicker about money; a group of young men robotically recite an account of a failed sexual escapade. Khan effectively varies how he uses the multiple channels; in a segment that follows an insurance salesman —who flips tones, somewhat jarringly, from obsequious interactions with potential clients to a misogynistic tirade in a tea shop—one of the screens shows him looking into the camera while rattling off the names of political, judicial, and religious authorities in Egypt, implicating them as the cause—and possibly co-sufferers—of his peculiar schizophrenia.

Other segments foreground various staging devices like sets and green screens—the latter used, interestingly, not to introduce fake settings but to envelope figures in black voids, their bodies outlined with the slightest of green auras—reminding us that all representations are constructed and all figures are spectral. Buried in the disjunctive gaps between the various screens and segments, an unexpected sense of the city, always fragmented, partial, and subjective, gradually reveals itself to the viewer.

— *Murtaza Vali*

Fattouh, Mayssa. “Interview with Hassan Khan”. artterritoires.net, January 13 2011.

005.01 HASSAN KHAN

INTERVIEW WITH HASSAN KHAN BY MAYSSA FATTOUH

Hassan Khan, Jewel (2010), video still, 35mm film transferred to Full HD video, accompanied by music composed by the artist 6 minutes 28 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

Artist, writer and musician, Hassan Khan’s complex and accurate method of addressing contentious subjects inevitably leaves the audience dwelling on the impact of his works and challenged by the crucial questions he raises. Reading his booklet Nine Lessons learned from Sherif Al Azma, made me want to have an insight into his personal approach to the multi-dimensional concept of identity and other aspects of his art practice.

Mayssa: The context in which an artwork is shown obviously affects its form and the way it is perceived by the public, is the gallery space your preferred choice for showing your work and how would you treat your work if it were outside the art space context?

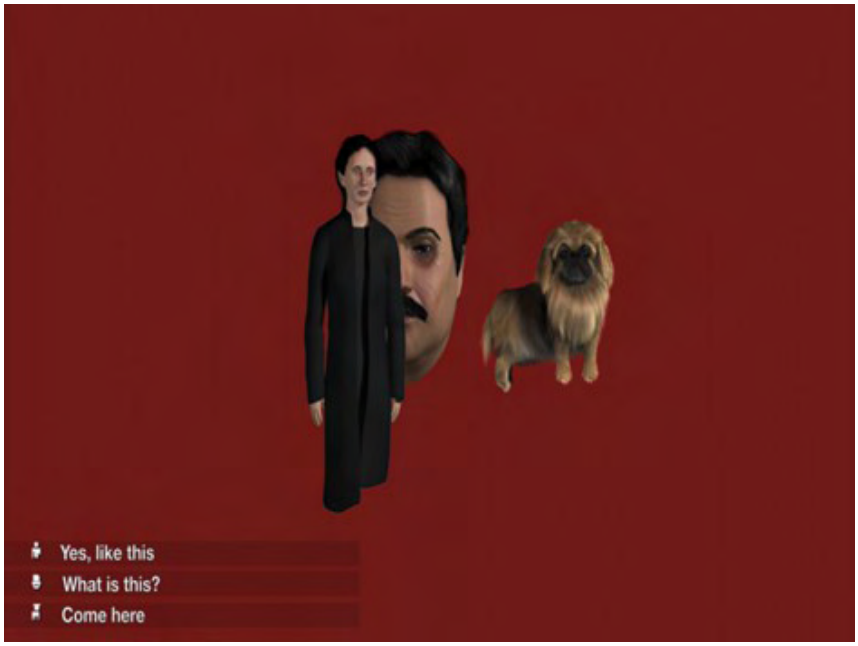
Hassan Khan: These days I am not so interested in placing the work outside the art space; I find the art space very useful because it’s a framed space that allows for clarity about what you’re doing and why. What I mean is that there is no pretension to things beyond the intentions of the artwork. When placed outside, claims are implicitly made, that it will, for example, positively impact on the environment it is placed in. I am not interested in instrumentalizing my work in this manner.

Mayssa: The work nevertheless is instrumentalized by the market, how do you read the type of consumption that takes place within the gallery context?

Hassan: I think it is more useful to understand the market in a much more expanded sense than just the selling and buying of art. The market is for me the net total of understandings and perceptions of art operational at any one point. These understandings give the work value and meaning in more than merely financial terms. Thus the attitude towards the work you’re experiencing is informed by what we can call the “market” but that is operational everywhere, inside and outside the art space. That’s why I believe it’s important to stop laying the blame on the cycle of commerce but rather find a way of analyzing how works appear and why. This is an art historical project of the utmost importance. It’s not the artist’s job to do that. We can only resist our instrumentalization and try to as much as possible use every opportunity presented to us, as long as we can do so on our own terms.

Mayssa: Would you prefer that your works be understood independently from political readings and do you think it would be possible to do that?

Hassan: Well I do not resist politics or the possibility of political action as such. I believe as individuals, citizens, as practicing professionals or inspired “idiots” (as some would see us) from whatever position we inhabit, we can always act from our positions in a political fashion, no matter how restricted. I just like to keep it away from being used as a category to understand, judge or analyze art works. My demand is extreme and would seem, to many, incredibly conservative. My experience, however, shows that actually the most radical position, the one that allows for the greatest openness (not the multitude of choice but rather the very quality and nature of the relationship to choice) in the relation between the work and the audience, has been the insistence on the work. The work. The work.



Hassan Khan, The Dead Dog Speaks (2010). Animation with dubbed dialogue recorded in 28 voices, 4 minutes 2 seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

Mayssa: I would like to refer to a statement – in an earlier conversation we had – whereby you said that art doesn’t need to play a role and that you refuse to reduce art to the function of promoting an identity, representing a place or an idea, wouldn’t you agree however that art attempts to play a role of changing mainstream systems and perceptions in a socio-political context?

Hassan: Art is practice, and that anyways always has an impact. It is an industry, it has a political economy as well as direct cultural impact, it’s discussed, it’s present in the media, and it is a space within public discourse. It has a role and it exists within a socio-political, economical context, it circulates. It plays a role regardless of the desires of purist. I am, however, not saying it has a responsibility; I am just trying to describe the contours of its presence through its various appearances and functions. Besides, it’s a form of investment for money launderers; it helps transform radical ideas into consumable things that are assimilated into mainstream culture, which is in my opinion a highly problematic aspect to the art industry.

Art performs a normalizing role, it normalizes what might not be otherwise so acceptable to the mainstream, it is also deeply involved in how class plays itself out in society. My answer is, I will not demand that art play a more palatable role, for I refuse to normalize the normalizer. You will always have art works that don’t fit the system but in the end, even outsiders are inextricably linked to it.

I however insist, I cannot make the claim that art should play any other role than it does, whether positive or negative. That claim is in itself very destructive for the practice of art, what it does is to superficialize and instrumentalize the whole field.

Mayssa: Knowing that art is stuck between an industry and a non-commodifiable space, do you feel that it is necessary to explain all elements that form an artwork?

Hassan: What I find interesting in art is the fact that there is always a “surplus of the unexplainable” that is absolutely necessary for it to function in the first place, in a sense the market itself needs to become something that is not 100% commodifiable. To resist total commodification, it is necessary to never make the claim of resistance and instead just allow a condition to occur in spite of itself.

Hassan Khan, Evidence of Evidence II (2010). 350 cm x 298 cm, vinyl print directly attached to the wall, found oil painting (34.5 x 25 cm) scanned at high resolution and printed at roughly ten times its original size. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

Mayssa: From theory to practice, a couple of examples of your work come to my mind, mainly after having read your booklet Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma – which was the main trigger to this interview – I got particularly interested in how you discuss the self through the antagonist who’s also in reality one of your best friends and fellow artist/film maker, could you explain more what lies behind the idea of the antagonist here.

Hassan: You will notice that Sherif is always referred to throughout the text as “Sherif El-Azma”. In a sense I’m intentionally and consciously treating him as an object, an entity or a force that is not merely a person or a character. This force is defined as “the antagonist”. The antagonist is many things here; on one level he is the opposite of the protagonist, which in this case is “the self”, even if he is its biggest ally. In trying to speak about a friendship I was interested in understanding how difference is an integral part of producing a relationship as well as an understanding of ones own self. On the other hand, these comments relate to the wider social sphere, where Sherif El-Azma acts as a lens that allows us to see the bloody mess underneath everything, the mess that makes everything possible.

In the end the text plays with my persona as the writer. It’s an attempt at reconstructing the process of thinking while producing a portrait of someone I know. It is also a self-portrait. The idea of discussing the antagonist, in this case Sherif, is useful because it puts him in an active role in a relation to things outside of him. So the antagonist isn’t someone alone floating in the universe but rather a point that is always in relation to someone or something else, in this case that could be sometimes hostile or tense but it helps describe a relationship.

Mayssa: You’ve mentioned your project 17 and in AUC in your book, would you consider the latter (Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma) a continuation of this project because of the approach of the self through the antagonist.

Hassan: I think 17 and in AUC is a totally different type of project than Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma. 17 and in AUC was a performative act that was both physical and durational, it took 14 days to utter. The text was produced under certain conditions that were not related to the act of writing, they were related to a situation, an actual physical architecture and a relationship with an audience. Through that a text was produced and then transcribed. The text in this case has the act of remembering as its raw material. However, Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma is a much more writerly text, an essay. The impulse behind it is very measured, it’s written in a semi-analytical contemplative fashion. In 17 and in AUC there is analysis but everything is pushed through a stream of consciousness, so the text itself possesses an identity outside the act of writing, while Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma is deeply connected to the act of writing itself. So they come from totally different positions, I think they’re totally different types of texts.

Hassan Khan, 17 and in AUC (2003). Performance shot, performative action over the span of 14 days the artist sits for four hours every night in a soundproofed one-way mirrored architectural construction with speakers embedded in glass drinking beer, smoking cigarettes and speaking about his undergraduate years at the American University in Cairo, lights, microphone amplifiers, artist presence, beer and cigarettes.Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

Mayssa: Can you describe the antagonist position in 17 and in AUC in comparison to Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma ?

Hassan: I think the link is, ironically, the figure of the rebel, how that figure is, far from being innocent or admirable, deeply connected to certain social formations, a national and class history. In Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El Azma I am constructing a relationship, by constructing an antagonist that I look at and describe and then deal with. The text builds a conduit through which to arrive to a sense of the self. In 17 and in AUC I am trapped, in an architectural construction, in a very real form, in a physical fashion; I am framed- I have myself become the antagonist. I don’t know how much you know about 17 and in AUC or if you’ve seen the text?

Mayssa: I haven’t read the actual text, only read about the performance.

Hassan: Ok, in 17 and in AUC I can’t see or hear the people outside the room. The audience is however able to see and hear me because the audio is broadcast through the speakers and the glass walls are one-way mirrored. Through this kind of construction the audience experiences a form of communication that is not part of their daily life. For example they’re able to look at me straight in the eyes without me registering their presence, this is impossible in daily life. When you look into someone’s eyes he or she also sees you; something crucial happens in that moment. This is not the case in 17 and in AUC. Here I’m changing a very simple element in the rules of communication and by doing this I’m able to allow a portrait of the self that is grounded in difference as well as recognition to become possible; a sort of parallel universe where the self becomes totally alien, because people are able to look at it but unable to witness the reciprocal recognition. I thus become totally external to them, which means that I become something that they can observe with great detachment. This is, in this case, I believe greatly productive. So I become the antagonist, even in a technical sense I become the antagonist. I become the figure of the antagonist behind the glass. That’s useful for me as a subject-position in exploring my own memories, and it’s useful for the audience watching this because it’s a way of returning that look (I refuse to use the word gaze here) back at their own self without falling into the replication of a self-image based upon the generic hero. If this were ‘standard’ theatre for example, the act would have been heroic. The self would be on stage performing its heroism, presenting it to the audience to consume and make it theirs, and everybody can have their moment of a secretly unsatisfying and tired catharsis. We would have been in the hall of mirrors, of “self-image”. However the architectural form, as well as this strategy of framing the antagonist, makes that type of relationship not possible anymore. We are thus in the space of production, the production of positions.

Mayssa: In many ways this performance is a form of mimesis, the hero is the group that reflects back its self-image and by saying catharsis there appears to be a violent desire on your behalf to create awareness for the need of social change.

Hassan: Mimesis is present as a layer in the work of course. But I think it’s rougher and rawer than a perfect mirror. What we have instead is projections, fantasies and disagreement. I remember on the fourteenth day when the piece was finally finished, coming out of this room and discovering a massive crowd. A sort of grotesque party (that hadn’t been there before in previous days) a celebration that was totally misguided. But it thrilled me in a perverse way. Even as it demonstrated how easy it is to recuperate everything. Beware utopia.

Mayssa: I would like to go back to the question of art production with a function of promoting an identity; I understand that you refuse to discuss art in a reductive form but can you say more about this specific subject?

Hassan: The function of promoting an identity is a very interesting question. After the Youth Salon in Cairo I traveled to Alexandria and spent a week with Bassam El Baroni looking at all the material we had gone through in the jury again. We looked at more than a thousand works of art over the period of one week for one more time; these works were submitted from all around Egypt by artists under the age of 30. We were trying to understand what the problems were, why there were so many works that we found to be uninteresting. One useful tool we came up with was to analyze the artwork by what it tells us about the artist’s self identity, the artist portrait it proposes.

What we noticed in a lot of works, especially those we were critical of, is that the work encodes the artist’s self image and then demands that the audience decodes that image and communes with it through an easy form of pathos. We saw the artist as tormented and romantic, as the political activist, as a responsible and conscious member of society, a sensitive observer of the world, a concerned nationalist who is there to help present a vibrant and positive image of the nation, as trend setter and avant-garde hero, and the list goes on: a series of models of what the artist is. These models have a history, of course. A history that is locally sensitive even if a lot of the tropes are globally shared. These models become easy to pick, regardless of their histories. Artists pick a model that best suits their sensibility and they work through it only to be left with a work whose sole function is to notate this idea. It basically means that it’s completely narcissistic; we end up with an image of the artist as a hero. We experience the artist’s drama and recognize it, and with that moment of recognition comes an easy form of satisfaction. I think I will interview Bassam El-Baroni to continue this trail.

Hassan Khan, installation shot from I am a hero/You are a hero (1999). Five channel video installation, suspended hammer. Courtesy of the artist.

Mayssa: I look forward to it. On the subject of audiences, from your description of 17 and in AUC it feels like it occupies a big space in your work, how did your method come to this integration of the public in your process?

Hassan: My working method has developed quite organically over the years. In the early 90s, as an undergraduate university student, I became involved in many things some of which can possibly be seen in retrospect as a form of art practice. There wasn’t much consciousness about putting it within the art context, it was experienced as a form of excitement and energy, and being young of course.

My interests intersected with some other highly inspiring people including Sherif El-Azma, Ahmed El Attar and Amr Hosny. There was also an attempt at finding a public driven by a curiosity, and confidence, about what kind of interaction would happen with the audience. This search led to the first instance (of many) of public conflict in 1995.

My very first public presentation of a work, was a collaborative piece called Lungfan produced with Amr Hosny and shown at the Cairo Atelier. We were immediately attacked by almost everyone present, accused of attempting to brainwash the audience, being agents of Israel, destructive elements of society, lost youth, the list goes on. That was my first encounter with a wider public. Over the next 5 years, I pursued with the same kind of energy but in a more formally conscious manner through the use of video. What I appreciate deeply to this very day is the lack of self-consciousness; there was something immediate and direct about the work, which I consider a quality.

Amr Hosny / Hassan Khan, Lungfan (1995). Single channel sequence of images accompanied by sound 13 minutes 30 seconds. Courtesy of Hassan Khan and Amr Hosny.

Mayssa: How did this quality translate for the audience?

Hassan: In that instance you imagine that there’s an audience, but you’re not trying to please that audience, you’re trying to hit it with different things. By the early 2000s I had began working in journalism and was more consciously interested in building an engaged, sometimes surprising interaction with the audience. At that point of time, my work became more directly engaged with the social sphere, there was an attempt to build a conversation in those terms.

Hassan Khan, video still from To the man masturbating in the toilet of the Charles De Gaulle airport (2002). Two channel video installation, suspended screen, vinyl text based on the handwriting of the artist directly attached to the wall. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel.

Mayssa: A final question with regards to your practice, can you describe how it developed/changed after that?

Hassan: Around 2002-03 I began to feel frustrated, I felt like I was slowly sliding in to the trap of a successful formulaic practice, a signature that one finds and repeats ad nauseam. I believe this is the death of the artist. The moment your formula is identified, and the relationship with the public is set and more or less guaranteed, your role becomes that of a custodian following and servicing that construction. I felt a great desire to break out of the formulas I had created for myself and to try to regain some of the earlier energy. But of course you can never go back. At that point I started to give myself more space and allow the work’s very own enigma to appear. What does that mean exactly? To not limit the work to merely that of an analysis of what we observe. The work here is not about understanding how things operate, but rather the production of a language. A language whose referents are always elusive, because it is a language that one can only strive to grasp yet never completely master. I know that I don’t want the work to end up becoming a message from the artist to the world. At the same time I am not interested in practicing a series of formal art exercises. You have to build a relationship with yourself where you discover what is, for a lack of a better word, “charged” and begin the process of struggling with that- following it, giving it meanings and abandoning them. You have to not in the end wrap it up in cellophane paper and present it, because that’s not the point. So through this relationship I realized while working that I imagine a public, I’m always imagining a public, an invisible public, in my head.

Published January 13, 2011

Molnar, Edit. "A constant state of urgency". Arab Studies Journal vol. XVIII No. 1, Spring 2010.

A CONSTANT STATE OF URGENCY

This conversation between curator Edit Molnár and Cairo-based artist Hassan Khan is a close reading of three of the artist's recent works. In it, they discuss the shifting position of the artist in the contemporary cultural landscape and "the phenomena of amnesia" that operates within cultural scenes. A consideration of the influence of personal histories leads to a conversation regarding the strategic application of mythological structures in talking about oneself in relation to how collectives operate through the subject. The pieces discussed include the black-and-white video *RANT* (2008), a text of the same title, and a book project entitled *Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El-Azma* (2009). The piece uses a rather minimalist form of expression. The subject, an actress, is sitting in front of the camera, behind a table. Over the period of roughly six minutes she utters ten phrases. Her gestures and facial expressions are accompanied by a musical composition. The video is accompanied at a later stage by a text under the same title that was published in the journal *e-flux* (February 2009). *Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El-Azma* (2009) is a book project that was published by *Publishing House*, a temporary publishing unit operating within the framework of the 2008-2009 PhotoCairo4: The Long Shortcut. The book is divided into nine chapters in which Khan elaborates on the lessons he learned, on both the artistic and human levels, from Sherif El-Azma, an artist, video-, and filmmaker who also happens to be one of hisclosest friends.

EM: In early 2009 you were working on a video, a book, and a shorter text, which share a similar intensity of expression and a certain emotional intensity. Each describes "hyper-expressive conditions. There is a strong autobiographical sensibility, a striking self-confessional tone through which you try to grasp basic strategies of the construction of self through a friendship (in the case of the book *Nine Lessons learned from Sherif El-Azma*) with Sherif El-Azma, and through the struggle for a voice (i.e., in picturing the miseries of the author in the *RANT* text). Most interesting, however, is the emphasis these investigations place on the question of how individuals position themselves within a specific social group, or within a scene. What makes these various concerns so urgent, so real? Why now; what is this moment of need for self-examination and confession as an author?

HK: I am at a point in my practice where the interest and the ability to engage with oneself and the conditions under which that self is born and operates are quite central. The relationship between subjectivity (maybe the author's or the artist's) and its socio-economic and cultural context is an integral part of this interest. However, my interest is no longer analytical (at least in the classical sense of a logical breakdown of a unity into its constitutive elements). I am not trying to explain away these "socio-economic and cultural contexts" and build causal relations between elements and their "result." In a sense, what I am searching for are "aesthetic facts," but more on that later.

The emotional intensity, or "hyper-expressive conditions," you notice in all three pieces is neither accidental nor a mannerism but rather a part of my professional biography. Both texts are in some ways investigations into the very materiality of what an artist is. I find that attempting to understand what an artist is an integral part of the artist's work.

Urgency is a direct reflection of one understanding of what that engagement is. Again, it is not an urgency that has declared for itself a set of objectives that it then tries to achieve. It is thus not an urgency that is decided upon prior to the work; it is one that is produced *through* the work. This engagement with one's conditions leads to a production of forms. Forms are the material of the artist's labor.

Molnar, Edit. "A constant state of urgency". Arab Studies Journal vol. XVIII No. 1, Spring 2010.

So what we have is an urgency that is produced through the labor invested in the work, i.e., an urgency that is a product of the engagement we are talking about. Simultaneously, and because this process I have just described is one in which results are suspended rather than predetermined, urgency is come upon, discovered. There is a slight yet crucial difference between what is produced and discovered; we are therefore dealing with a contradiction in which the same conditions produce two mutually exclusive statements.

EM: For me, this feeling of urgency was informed by a very simple fact: not just by your will to produce this urgency but also because these works were all created in a very short time span. It seems that the relevance of the issues discussed have a time element. Why now the discovery? If this is not a calculated urgency, were there any special accidents, events, or influences that turned your attention to the ontology of the artist?

HK: Maybe there is a connection between urgency and this turn to ontology, although I am not sure if this is a real turn to ontology. The ontological is present of course, but it is being used in itself as a decoy for something else. Maybe I am interested in emphasizing the very *discussion* around conditions and contexts in *terms* of the artist's experience. These conditions, are economic, social, political, and cultural. They are the constitutive elements of a context, the context is therefore significant, i.e., I am not interested in building a hermetic introverted metaphysical diagram. However, there is something potentially very interesting and productive if we are able to tackle these conditions in a way that takes into account the artist's perspective as a subject, in both meanings of the word, the artist as the subject of our discussion and the artist as that which possesses subjectivity. How can we tackle this while avoiding empty and tired humanisms that posit the artist as an ethical arbitrator, or some kind of abstraction like mankind's consciousness? Can we avoid the self-serving liberalism rampant in art scenes where the artist is expected to play a part in the process of the liberalization of society, or yet again a romantic narcissism in which the artist becomes the prototype of the human spirit? What is important to note here is that these are all primarily questions of form.

To return to urgency, it is because I am an artist who has been consciously attempting to sidestep my own patterns and preferences, one's predeliction to a predetermined form, I have found myself in the condition of a constant state of urgency—this is an urgency I do not claim or wish to "express" in my works, it is rather there behind the works. Practically it means that I tend to intensely focus on an approach for a period of time and therefore works from any one period seem connected. I am sure there is a connection between the word ontology and the fact that you detect some type of urgency—but maybe I need to think about that a bit more.

EM: The video work *RANT* (2008) functions through a direct, charged, and formally defined address from the subject to the audience, while *Nine Lessons Learned from Sherif El-Azma* (2009) is like an educational book in which you elaborate on the lessons you learned from one of your closest friends the artist and filmmaker Sherif El-Azma.

There are numerous connections between *RANT* and *Nine Lessons*: the attempt to reread personal histories, a slight mythologization of oneself, the similarity of dealing with the protagonist (e.g., staging him/her, framing), changing the narrator from a single person to a representative of a group (a slightly authoritarian voice). What we experience here is a very strong artistic strategy, and these pieces are all manifestations of it.

HK: First I agree there are many connections and I begin by commenting on each one of them.

Personal histories are integral element of different works (from the early videos in the 1990s to *17 and in AUC* of 2003). That is partially because they are raw material, evidence of the conditions of the artist, as well as constitutive elements of ones experience. When I abandoned the project of speaking *about* things roughly seven years ago, that interest in personal history gained a new significance. However, because I had spent roughly seven years prior being highly suspicious and critical of "narcissistic practices and the way they present personal histories," my engagement with that material has always been, I believe, framed through rigorous stylistic choices that ensure that some kind of transformation or translation from material into aesthetic fact or form is happening.

Molnar, Edit. "A constant state of urgency". Arab Studies Journal vol. XVIII No. 1, Spring 2010.

The mythologization of the author is a *strategic choice* that has calculated effects; it delivers the voice through an authoritarian shell that helps articulate the content in terms of mythical structures. As a discursive formation, the mythological allows us to investigate the highly charged extreme experiences of the subject without falling into the traps of narcissism or melodrama.

Framing the subject (rather than protagonist) is an integral element of all of the above; it is part of the process through which the transformation into an aesthetic fact is enacted, the mythologized voice can only be heard through a process of framing, a ritualized language that builds a protocol between the reader and the text. The text for me, in this case, can become the trace of the subject. It is thus something to be encountered: obstinate and hard because it acts like a discrete object and passionate because it is connected to the will of the subject.

The narrator, however, is not a representative of the group but rather a member of that group. The relationship is thus metonymic or indexical rather than symbolic. Paradoxically, the authoritarian voice can actually be seen to be quite useful in demystifying the relationship between text and reader, i.e., useful in producing relationships based upon coming to terms with the labor of reading and the positions one encounters in that very act. Each element of the relationship by necessity possesses a stake in the terms of the contract. This is a tone that is maybe on one level an attempt at coming to terms with the implicit guilt that is structurally inherent to the act of producing a text. What is important here is both the fact that something implicit exists in the act or writing, and because of that we are immediately in a situation of secrets and revelations. Guilt is perhaps structural to the conditions of normalization themselves that the production of explanations is immediately a part of.

EM: Although *RANT* takes on both a simplification of form and a situational clarity—lacking the anecdotal tone of the *Nine Lessons*—there is a certain cruelty, even brutality, in both pieces toward both the speaking self and its subject.

HK: This might have to do with the attempt at producing a drama without relying on the structure of catharsis (tension and release). I am here more interested in suspension. For the speaking self to find out

what makes it unique and alone, i.e. what can define it and delineate it, it might be necessary to subject it to the full brunt of certain trials and tribulations (the act of suspension demands a level of violence through which the material can be moved beyond its normal and safe sets of references). The subject by extension is not safe from these attacks. Through that, the text starts to define its own limits. There might still be a place for catharsis in all of this but maybe that is at a later stage in a different kind of work and text. Maybe.

EM: But *RANT* in particular seems like a portrait of a traumatic mental space. What kind of aftermath are we experiencing here? There is an obvious presence of emergency and restlessness without fully grasping the nature of the traumatic event. The *RANT* text directly refers to this condition in note 3B, without fully revealing its sourCE:

> 3B. The actions of the ruthlessly ambitious demand a price that not all are willing to pay. However, in such a space choices are limited. Performed gestures of bonhomie and camaraderie go hand-in-hand with the well-placed whisper, the sidelong glance, and the half smile. The emotional mess of raised voices, boasts, half-truthful claims around the post-opening dinner table is only one more thing to get through. But more importantly, what kind of aesthetic choices do these conditions lead to? Something must be fetishized, and in this case the easiest target is the softest one. Thus the downtown cosmopolitanism of the hustler, the obsession with the nostalgic chandelier, the superficial binaries of contemporary and authentic, and most of all the insistence that contradictions exist—these are all maladies related to this condition.

HK: I would like to strongly question the use here of terms like crisis and trauma and rather emphasize that although all three works engage with an immanent material reality, they do so by dealing with its emotional economy. Therefore there is something charged, but at the same time there is a critical distance from the source material. Maybe it is necessary to find other terms on which to build this discussion. The connection between structural conditions and formal choices is what is important here.

EM: I am using the words trauma and crisis to point to the intensity of

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the three works but you seem to strongly oppose the use of these terms. I just want to understand why at a certain point of time these works, which were very close to each other and triggered a similar interest in shared issues, appeared?

HK: This intense scrutiny of the relationship between the artist and the scene is, as I earlier pointed out, part of my own biography, and thus there is a personal interest in these issues. However, the problem with using the word "crisis" in this context is that carries too many connotations of time, as well as the position of the subjects. It implies that the subject inhabits an apocalyptic universe where temporality is cyclical, with a peak that is cathartic in which all tensions are resolved and then the whole situation can begin all over again. It also implies that everything under discussion is suspended and bracketed. If one is trying to engage with real conditions (conditions that leave traces upon the subject) it is important to come to terms with their historical materiality. Crisis and trauma are sexy words, but I believe they can mystify and distract rather than help us tackle the conditions at hand.

EM: Does the "brutal/aggressive" tone one might experience while watching *RANT* or even while reading the *Nine Lessons* have something to do with the way you staged the subjects? Is it a form of torture or self-torture?

HK: Maybe this is most relevant to *RANT* the video where the subject is caught in a discursive format that is based upon some kind of self-abuse. I actually think it is discussed in the *RANT* text. Maybe we can talk about the relevant sections themselves.

EM: In the *RANT* text you define the subject of your work (with its socio/political/economic background) as belonging to a certain scene in opposition to another. I think this is important as you do not approach this issue from an abstract vacuum but refer to a condition that can be defined pretty sharply.

HK: This is why I speak about touching a shell rather than attempting to find ways of expressing depth. To touch a condition it is necessary to begin with a texture or a surface. Yes, my starting point is a specific art scene—the conditions under which a lot of artists operate in the

contemporary context. I don't want to be too self-referential but I believe that the artist engaging with his or her conditions is a necessary step at one point in finding forms: forms in an expanded sense, of course.

EM: I will have to quote you here from the *RANT* text: "We might recognize that introverted scenes produce bile and hysterical defensiveness, yet we remain unable to discover alternatives—this is not that alternative, but only the chance to go into free fall."

HK: Yes, I do not want to claim the ability to provide answers or, to be more precise, solutions. I am highly suspicious of the idea of alternatives. It is not an accident that it is a word very close to another fashionable favorite bandied around the art world: utopia. It's a placative, a tranquilizer, and it's fashionable because the idea of a better world and revolutions and romanticisim are all very alluring to everyone. Everyone can become a hero.

EM: But this phrasing implies that you are conscious of another scene next to the introverted one you refer to. What is this scene that the "introverted" scene is defining itself against or in relation to?

HK: In this case, I am consciously grounding it against a figure rather than a scene: the figure of the artist. What I am trying to imply is that it might be possible for the artist to consider their position as also one of power, even if it is also ultimately a lonely one, and to start from that point. Maybe, I am not really sure here, the idea of an alternative scene is only another red herring, another decoy.

EM: The tone of the text plays on the conversational strategy of speaking to an enemy or complaining because some sort of enemy is in operation: uncontrolled forces, paranoia, etc.

HK: This is part and parcel of the very materiality of the content. It is content produced through friction. Maybe in the video this can be sensed in the actor's performance. I worked with her very consciously on formalizing a performed utterance to be always conscious of an implicit audience that shapes her performance and the meaning of her utterances, an invisible audience that she listens to in her head. In a way, that is linguistically what a rant is. It is the moment the speaking subject is so

يجب عليك أن تعي طريقة حبك لنفسك. حسن خان وشريف العظمة في فيلم "كس أم الفيلم ده" (١٩٩٨) من إخراج حسن خان.

You have to be conscious of the way you love yourself. Hassan Khan and Sherif El-Azma in *fuck this film* (1998) by Hassan Khan.

Page no. 37 From nine lessons learned from Sherif El-Azma
2009, published by the Contemporary Image Collective, the page includes a videostill from Hassan Khan's 1998 Fuck this film and a caption related to one of the lessons in the text
Courtesy of the author

Videostill from Rant
2008, single channel video accompanied by music composed by the artist, 6'42"
Courtesy of the artist

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self-consumed that the audience ceases to exist, although their whole performance is based upon that audience, the meaning of their outburst is based upon the existence of that audience in the first place. This is the moment that the audience and the performer become one, when the self is completely consumed by its context. The ultimate success of any social order. In *RANT*, the video I attempted to take the mechanisms of this moment and to slow it down so that what could be a twenty-second, spontaneous outburst is transformed into a seven-minute stylized choreography.

EM: But although it is directed to that audience, the subject is always referring to a third party, an enemy, in this situation either a "them" or just toward something else (this outside force) that further highlight the loneliness of the subject. The key to the subject's own misery is the presence of the third party. There is therefore a condition being expressed, a disease of the scene (let's say the international art scene) that is being addressed.

HK: I don't really want to pathologize scenes. I am looking at the individual who has to cope with these conditions and in a sense becomes pathological because of them. Also both the international and local scenes are structurally connected together, they mutually influence each other—in a sense they make each other. The international scene is an aspiration for members of local scenes, while local scenes are a pool of resources for that international scene.

EM: Disease is a strong term, I know, but this uncomfortable condition in which the subject feels and expresses him/herself (the artist who is here not representing the group but is an integral element of it) is pretty accurately described in *Decoy* (2008). It seems to me that the problem is the scene itself that mediates the individual's production and highly influences its strategies. In relation to the text of *Nine Lessons* the subject there in his constant feelings of being misunderstood is operating in that same scene.

Thinking about *Decoy* at this point helped me. In *Decoy*—a performative piece commissioned for the "Lapdogs of the Bourgeoisie" exhibition project curated by Nav Haq and Tirdad Zolghadr—you staged a quasi-theatrical performance that described the deeply claustrophobic

nature of the global art scene. The audience, having been misled and without knowing their role in the work, took part in a dinner in which four of the other guests were actors working according to your script. This piece can be seen as an extremely harsh critique of the art world, reducing its actors into their fictitious caricatures (the Swedish collector, the London-based curator, the vegan/activist art student, etc.) but also placed you, as an author, into a very schizophrenic position. In the created situation you yourself also could be associated with two different author/personas at once with the minimalist sculptor with his enthusiasm toward form and the autonomy of the art object and its simplicity and at the same time with the analytical attempt of a "manipulative" institutional critic.

Each of these pieces comment in many ways on the malfunctions of the institutions and the art scene. Shall we analyze these questions as they appear in *Nine Lessons* and *Decoy* and *RANT*?

HK: First, it is important to mention that installed in the restaurant, and ostensibly the *raison d'etre* of that dinner, was a minimalist sculpture that was announced as my work. So the audience assumed that this was the piece of art they had come to see and proceeded with their dinner after having "consumed" it. In *Decoy* the very nature of the piece is to allow members of the scene to engage with their very own "sceneness" while at the same time witnessing, or at least registering, a very profound thing happening at the margins which is a work of art disappearing and ceasing to be a work of art. What started as the focus—the minimalist sculpture—lost its status once the actors were revealed to be actors at the end of the performance and became just another table that the dinner guests left their coats and wine glasses on. The work of art is the residue of value, the real capital of this scene (in a very concrete sense it is what definded this event), i.e., it is the object (regardless of all the statements that have been made about its dematerialization, art still operates within an economy and it is therefore still an object) around which the scene operates. So we bring together social enactments and ritual with the unnoticed disappearance of capital. I secretly find this extemely moving. My persona as a minimalist sculptor is real, my sculpture a stack of plywood cut to the same dimensions as one of the tables in the restaurant,

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is a presence that brings the question of material, density, and form to the fore. I am not interested in critique, I am interested in investigation, engagement, and experience.

In *Nine Lessons* the relation to the scene is a bit different there is a discussion of the relationship between a scene and one of its members but because the text is polemical it deals more with the scene's actions toward the subject, rather than the subject's emotions about the scene. Because *Nine Lessons* is also about how collectives operate through the subject it is therefore, among other things, a form of cultural politics. By hinting at the tension, conflict, misunderstanding, or indeed "amnesia" that is operational within cultural scenes and then engaging in an act of labor (either mine in terms of textual analysis, or Sherif's through his being the author of the works being analyzed) a demonstration is being made, a situation is historicized (because it is registered discursively) as an argument rather than a narrative. It is the attempt at avoiding the registering of arguments that produces amnesia.

On the other hand, in *RANT* the subject's emotional conditions are tackled. By analyzing the speaking subject through a polemic—a discourse that assigns blame—the position of the writer, the subject of the discourse and the character are all framed as positions that are connected to each other within one network. The subject's position is clearly a symptom of the conditions under which it operates and thus the pathology is not presented as mysterious or inherent to some kind of identity (or ontology in that case) but rather a condition related to actual material events. This important distinction ensures that the pathology is a formal proposition of sorts and the text is therefore a counter-proposition.

In all three, an interest in producing historical arguments as emotional conditions is latent.

EM: Is this specific condition the destructive illusion that, for example, "we are together deeply involved in some collective humanist project" and that one applies while working in an art scene?

HK: This is an example; there are others. The collective humanist project is an especially powerful and destructive one.

Decoy
2008, Opening dinner 3 meal course for 500 SEK, stacked plywood sculpture installed instead of one of the dinner tables at TheaterGrillen Restaurant in Stockholm, unannounced actor's performance. The actors on top of the sculpture
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel

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EM: Although you are opposed to the idea of providing alternatives, the *RANT* text somehow can be read as a manifesto that proposes a program of action—not in the tone or ambition, but it tries to provide an alternative. See note 6b in the *RANT* text:

> 6B. The question of the artist's agency—how the artist can act and what the artist can do—becomes important here. We do not prescribe organized political action (that's what curators or artists who think they are curators would by necessity do), but rather we call for a reactionary focus upon one's own work mixed with the dangerous possibility of a brutal yet fully disclosed self-interest as one possible path. Maybe what one romantically yearns for is a return to the work.

HK: Yes. The answer is self-interest and a return to the work.

EM: But what do you mean by a "return to the work"? A pure formalist interest in someone's production, a new interpretation of the Kantian authenticity of art?

HK: I mean the return of the focus to the work—in all aspects: in exhibitions where the work rather than a theme is the starting point; in the artist's approach by which the work becomes a defining element rather than instrumentalizing it to, for example, serve agendas of development or arguments about the third world. Kantian authenticity is not what I mean here, because the way I understand the work is quite similar to how I use the word form; it is meant in a totally expanded sense. It includes process and context and intention. It includes an understanding that it is born out of some kind of imagining of an audience, which is in itself a composite of the social other. The audience is thus an internalized echo or a response (depending on each individual artist's proclivity of course) from an external alterity. It is an understanding that fully grounds the work in the material lived reality while insisting on its independence and refusing its instrumentalization. This refusal has something to do with the possibilities that become open to the work then, i.e., for example the possibility of building relationships with the audience that are not based upon the daily perception of a self and other.

EM: In the case of *Nine Lessons* you have said that it was an act that can be defined as a form of cultural policy.

HK: I mean the text, its very existence and its publication, is an act of cultural politics because of the way it refers to a collective (a scene) and a lived contemporary history (the past fifteen years) yet does so without becoming a narrative of events. It does so by demonstrating another form of labor; of the author's analysis (text production) and the artist's productions (Sherif's actual work). It is a text that offers a form. In my opinion, it is important that it does not delve into details of what happened, doesn't get bogged down in ranting. It hints at them but does not explain them away. In a way, it addresses an audience and thus reminds them that they are an audience, without exactly describing what that audience is. It does not tell the audience who they are but rather proceeds to describe something else which allows that audience to form an image of itself. Everybody is responsible for what image they produce then.

EM: So does it then rewrite a canon? The way it provides a set of clues to understand the strategies Sherif El-Azma uses, or explains the importance of professional and personal influences that appears later in both oeuvres has the hint of providing a new canon. Initiating a new reading, putting things "in their place," rehabilitation. I don't know whether these are rhetorical tools or the intention behind the text. Also, highlighting the birth of an inspiring important and powerful "generation."

HK: I guess that was part of the intention somehow. In the introduction it says it's a response to amnesia. The "generation" thing is definitely not the point, though. It is important to keep in mind that the text is also highly personal so I don't want to speak in generalized platitudes.

Let's move on to *RANT*, the video, because I just remembered something. Although it is a piece that is so closely connected to being in an art scene, I was told by a former heroin addict who has no connection to the art scene that it was for him deeply connected to the experience of being an addict. I thought that was interesting as a side note.

EM: Yes, and this point, the notion of guilt, came back to me. You obviously felt uncomfortable writing about Sherif. Although you knew that he was someone who seriously hates being written about you went

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for it and also claimed to be making cultural politics with the gesture. That's a very strong statement. As a strategy, that's very confrontational.

HK: I did not feel uncomfortable writing about Sherif. I was of course concerned with how he would react to the text, but I never felt uncomfortable. I think this implicit guilt is related to how I earlier described audiences being formulated for the text. Yes. It is also very risky on both personal and professional sides. But they are statements and positions I stand behind 100 percent.

EM: I am intrigued by several elements that appear in the *Nine Lessons* text:

1. The way you describe the usage of lies.
2. When you quote Sherif who speaks about his body being "a body that is his by mistake."
3. The question of epiphanies that you refer to several times in the text.

HK: The text basically attempts to produce images of the self, and it does that by creating a situation where an antagonist is pitted against the protagonist, to test these images of the self, to inspect how they function. This form of testing is something that is at the heart of my practice.

1. When discussing the lie, I was interested in trying to analyze it as a symptom of the self rather than as an abstract unethical act. It becomes a response to a relationship, a strategy at avoiding one of the pathologies of the self—namely, for Sherif El-Azma, an embarrassing narcissism.
2. Sherif's description of possessing "a body by mistake" shouldn't be seen as a sign of alienation but rather the opposite. I think of it as a politicized refusal of the bourgeoisie tendency to "iconocize" oneself, to treat oneself as a form of capital to be preserved. El-Azma opts for experience rather than the preservation and production of reified images. That is part of the pathology discussed. This is his way of indicating stepping out of the accepted social order, if only and paradoxically here on the level of the image.
3. The text tries to understand epiphanies as a *techne* (a product of labor that is not connected to suspended aims and ends), rather than a mystical truth. It is, therefore, produced by *how* we engage with the material at hand.

EM: You have a certain seductive, claustrophobic, even melodramatic tone in the three works we are referring to. How do you relate to these aesthetic forms?

HK: The spoken text in *RANT*, the video, is quite banal because it comes out of the limited emotional terrain of someone who is obsessively consumed by one thing the object of their gaze. However, the utterances are made in a context that is highly stylized. I wanted to tap into the intensity that was behind these utterances, the almost infinite, ultimately destructive, emotional energy of an obsessive personality but was at the same time hoping for it not to be an expression of a state of mind or a character. I do not aim for descriptions. It seems that this is a mark of my practice—many times the work—seems to be about something while it is actually about something else.

However, in *RANT*, the video, this type of melodrama was very important. The melodrama frames the subject, while refusing to allow it to become a character with personality. It forces the subject to remain on the surface of the "address" (as a verb). Therefore the subject (the actor we see on the screen), which is pure surface, performs her totality keeping nothing back, becoming a machine for the transmitting (what we hear) and receiving (what's going on in her mind) of accented and charged words. During the process of preparing for this piece with actress Roba El Shamy we produced much longer texts which were steadily minimized as I asked her to listen to most of it in her mind before uttering one or two phrases.

On the other hand in terms of my relation as an artist to the material I believed that melodrama was absolutely necessary. It is a sign of a certain level of engagement, the willingness by the artist to open themselves up to critique. Melodrama is here my hubris, it is my rejection of clever and safe irony. Melodrama is the risk, the investment, the claim.

EM: Yes, you are an artist who creates pretty uncomfortable situations for the audience.

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HK: I honestly do not intend to create uncomfortable situations. I am also very much interested in beauty.

EM: And in this situation empathy should be the link that could create the character but it is not possible here.

HK: There is no space for empathy when we are dealing with a condition and its appearance as language. Empathy would be distracting—it would be a promise, a false one. Empathy would be the humanist project all over again. So maybe the important question in this case is, what do I want from the audience then?

Maybe to encounter the work as if it is an object and to therefore encounter a set of things: culture itself as a collection (an archive although I don't want to use that word) of a priori assumptions and statements; the subject, or one's own sense of self, one's own position in relation to that culture, how he/she constitutes it and is constituted by it; and the automated moment where our ideas and statements are propelled beyond our will, that moment right before an utterance, right before we hear our voice as a physical reality disembodied out there in the world. For me to witness all of these things, to crash into them if you will, are part of what my practice is.

EM: Why the obsession with numbering, which is a dominant structural element in both texts? Does the rupture of the constant flow of thought by the paragraphs stands for a contradiction between the poetic notion and the need for systematic analysis of the persona and the conditions?

HK: Numbering produces a series, and series always produce their own context (as Jung mentioned in relation to dreams). The series juxtaposes all elements to each other without necessarily building a hierarchy (the numbers here are points). There is also a sense that each point is part of a greater whole, the trace or evidence of another latent total condition, rising to the surface, like a rash or an allergy. And most importantly I find the structure of a series especially fitting to an engagement with the source material for the three works we are discussing, all of them deal with the fallout, the dysfunction that surrounds the pristine image of an efficient normalized world.

Even *RANT*, the video, is broken up into a group of sentences, with each sentence a carefully formulated and stylized performance. Each sentence is thus a condition, an object within itself. This is also because I was not so interested in producing the mimetic image of a consciousness or a character as much as touching the shell of something. It is a touch that transmits a lot of information though.

EM: There are recurrent tropes that come back when you discuss Sherif's personality. Why does his navigation through the world intrigue you so much, the suddenness and unexpectedness? You describe him as "an uncomfortable diagram, a nervous twitch." At the very end of the book you compress this enigmatic quality into your final image when Sherif skips and jumps and then looks back at you. I'm not so sure whether this image is really about the unexpected or is it about revealing your own interest in control? Is it utilized to draw out these oppositions? I feel while reading the text as if there is a dance or a fighting game between both of you. Tell me if I'm wrong or unclear.

HK: What the text does is that it recognizes the stranger in Sherif El-Azma (the full quote from *Nine Lessons from Sherif El-Azma* is: "an uncomfortable diagram, a nervous twitch, the glazed over eyes of the alien" [I have added the emphasis here though]) and in this, of course, there is a sense of the unexpected. I am not sure if this is really being put in relation to my own of control or power; I doubt it. However, what you say is true. There is choreography between the figure of Sherif El-Azma and the author in the text. Of course this choreography is, in the end, bracketed by the narrator's voice. So actually what is happening is that an image of the stranger is being constructed but it is, inevitably, the product of the voice of the self.

Everything is actually part of the wider architecture of the text. However, it is important to note that I am not really a planner. I wrote the text quite spontaneously over a short period of time, and I didn't have an outline or anything like that, just the number of lessons. I do trust my instincts, and to refer to Jung one more time: the series we lay down produces its own context that gives it meaning and cohesion. The argument is produced and discovered as mentioned in the beginning of this dialogue.

Regine, Basha."Hassan Khan'n transmission fixation". Art Papers, november-december 2006.

HASSAN KHAN'S TRANSMISSION FIXATION

TEXT / REGINE BASHA

My conversation with Hassan Khan began with a studio visit in Cairo, where he lives. It continued in London where he was doing a residency at Gasworks this past spring. In a London café, we discussed remedies for writer's block, since Hassan also writes. "I like to write in really busy, noisy places" he stated, which seemed to characterize more than just a preference.[1] It's as if the very energy of the metropolis fueled his output of images and sound. Khan works from, with, and in the face of, the physical and mental demands of Cairo, a city teeming with a speculated population of twenty-five million. While his practice—which encompasses video, photography, sound installation, music production, and performance—is not necessarily about Cairo, it is undeniably caught up in its strong undertow. Processing, editing, and distributing condensed moments of urban life, Khan positions himself as both canny observer and mediator.

Boundaries between public and private spaces are porous in Cairo. Domestic lives overflow into the streets and rooftops. Engaging with the city's street life, its characters, and its material and sonic excess, Khan's work operates between a document, a stage, and an operating table. Because of this, we are never quite sure where he positions himself in the mix—fabulist or truth-seeker? "I am interested in the leap, the shift, the gap—the space where one meaning is born....where we are both forgotten and found." While Khan's disjunctive narratives and fragmentary images give a lot to the viewer, they say very little. Attempting to further the work, you enter it as an active reader. Here, as you are about to form causal judgments, you may encounter strands that elicit identification. You may also lose yourself in the rabbit holes, dissolving in the work's content. Questions about individuality and anonymity arise. In this sense—on some inverted level—you may be

PAGE 1: **Hassan Khan**, *Enginepie*, 2006, vinyl print attached directly to the wall, 105 x 135 cm, a component of the exhibition *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, at Gasworks Gallery, London / ABOVE: performance view of *17 and in AUC*, 2003, performance in old downtown apartment in Cairo, soundproofed one-way mirrored glass room, microphones, amplifiers, speakers embedded in the glass / OPPOSITE: a component of the exhibition *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, at Gasworks Gallery, London (all images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris)

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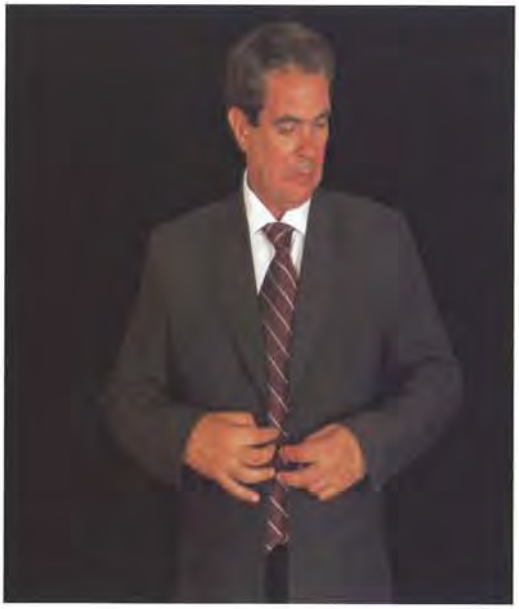
experiencing Cairo itself. How do you articulate yourself when you are connected to millions? Where are the synaptic points?

17 and in AUC, 2003, one of Khan's most striking works, fearlessly tackles this question of individuation within a context. On one level, it's the self-portrait of a person, time, and place. On another level, it's a performative act of sado-masochistic proportions, calling to mind the early work of Vito Acconci or Bruce Nauman. For the two-weeks' duration of *17 and in AUC* Khan confined himself to a glass chamber where he ate, slept, smoked, drank, and talked incessantly while a video camera recorded him. The glass was a soundproofed, one-way mirror so that Khan could only see and hear himself, while the outside world could survey him with guilty pleasure. During this time in isolation, he recounted his uneasy experience at the American University of Cairo (AUC), which he entered at the age of fifteen in 1990 and from which he graduated at twenty. He called this act a "technology of communication" tracking "a personal investigation of the construction of memory and persona in relation to a specific institution and the context it is in."[2] His fifty-six-hour monologue was then transcribed into an unpunctuated text, which reads like one run-on sentence. The book looks like a bound ocean of text, revealing deeply personal accounts of Hassan's teenage life at AUC, along with ranting and critical reflections about the privileged place that AUC and its student body occupy in greater Cairo. In narcissistic isolation, Khan enacted the institution's own blindness and detachment from the rest of the city. Viewers, who had often heard of this act by word of mouth, uncomfortably became complicit with Khan's voyeuristic game in order to gain the power of the gaze and of anonymity.

DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK, 2005, divides and conquers in a similar way. This sonic work's title refers to a dumbek sequence found in *shaabi*, a popular musical genre that rose out of Cairo's poorest districts. Unlike Western music, traditional Middle Eastern music usually follows standards or templates that both allow musicians to easily play together and simultaneously enable a range of individual interpretation and expression. This arena of collaborative performance where degrees of personal expression are delicately negotiated is particularly compelling to Khan. *DOM-TAK-TAK-DOM-TAK* started with his re-recording and mixing of six found *shaabi* standards. This remix then served as a backdrop for individual, live street musicians to play over and improvise with—each performing in isolation. The independently performed sequences were then mixed together, producing six hybrid master instrumentals, each in some way resembling standard *shaabi* fare. The resulting compositions of disjointed performances are significantly less dissonant than one would imagine. Ultimately, the piece amplifies the musicians' performative aspirations and the vague familiarity of a misreading in the making. Once again, the listener is the site of confluence, and authorship is endlessly distributed.

Most recently, London's Gasworks welcomed Khan as artist-in-residence, giving him the opportunity to realize an ambitious *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Named after a car, his installation *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, brought together various new and existing works, including video, photographic elements, sound works, an off-site



audio-visual performance, a radio broadcast, and a "speculative approach to exhibition-making." In the gallery, a device serving as both an additive sculpture and a functional structure unified various elements. A simple carpeted platform, it brought the floor closer to the ceiling, creating a cozier—albeit slightly claustrophobic—space in, and from, which to view the works. The logic of the compilation of imagery was revealed in a wall text: "An exhibition based on translating sets of dreams into different forms by the dreamer." In the land of dreams, images run amok, narrative is intuitive, time is non-linear and comprehension mostly elusive. The statement thus set the stage for the impossibility of knowing the true nature of the image selection, which seemed both random and contiguous.

Placed on a shelf was *The Alphabet Book*, 2006, a large magazine-like publication in which Khan set luscious, penetrating photos—a close-up of meat, a lavish interior, a boy posing, a fragment of a gilt chair—next to a single letter. Isolated, the floating images acquire obtuse meaning by means of proximity to their letter. Barthes once defined the obtuse as a form of disguise: "I believe that the obtuse meaning carries a certain *emotion*. Caught up in disguise, such emotion is never sticky, it is an emotion which simply designates what one loves, what one wants to defend: an emotion-value, an evaluation."[1] There can be no obtuse image, Barthes further maintains. Obtuse meaning has no structural stability. Its reading "remains suspended between the image and its description, between definition and approximation." While *KOMPRESSOR* promises to deliver the real, subjective self—what could be more subjective than one's dreams?—it rearranges, and displaces, our assumptions of what subjectivity might be. All that is left is a notion of our own subjectivity, to which a contingent web of associative triggers guides us.

Gasworks facilitated the citywide spread of Khan's tentative web of associations, partnering with other venues for two performative works: "a lecture that tries to speak about images but ends up being concerned with something else," in which a photo archive meets a voice and a text, was presented at Camden Arts Centre and *Tabla Dubb*, which I saw, at Whitechapel's café. As much as Khan values the moment of reception, I believe that the premise of his work—and its place in culture—resides in his selection of processes, vehicles, and economies of transmis-

TOP: two single pages from *The Alphabet Book*, 2006, installation: constructed stage, three fifty-two-page handmade books, desk, and chairs, variable dimensions, page: 80 x 40 cm, a component of the exhibition *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, at Gasworks Gallery, London; MIDDLE: partial view of the exhibition *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, with *The Alphabet Book*, 2006; BOTTOM: open, two page spread from *The Alphabet Book*, 2006, 80 x 80 cm

sion. An evening performance, *Tabla Dubb* was more of an informal DJ/VJ session mixing vernacular and politicized images of Cairo in a way that seemed to re-frame the media's attitudes towards the Middle East. What was remarkable here was Khan's physical engagement with the process. Sustaining a measured yet laborious set of actions, he deftly switched videotapes in and out of the player while mixing sound, giving the audience a very physical, direct engagement with the process. VHS, he insisted, was the support of choice here because he preferred the tapes' material, reference, and economy. In this sense, they function like actual containers or boxes of imagery more than DVDs would. In addition, the work's decidedly old-school, homeboy ethos may or may not invoke Cairo's own industry of vernacular image production. We might also think of London's ethnic video rental shops, or other such immigrant neighborhood economies delivering Egyptian soap operas or Bollywood favorites to their familial clientele.

In Cairo, Khan regularly presents these kinds of performances, inserting his art practice into the domain of popular street and nightlife culture, sometimes in collaboration with other sound/electronic artists like Mahmoud Refat. His participation in Cairo's growing art and electronic music scene has, in fact, been quite explicit: Khan has organized events and conferences, he has collaborated with other artists, and written on art for *Bidoun* magazine. Acutely aware of his agency as an artist and a content producer, Khan has resisted partaking of strategies, curatorial and otherwise, to represent Arabness or the Middle East. He famously refused to show in *Africa Remix* at the Pompidou Center and openly speaks out against Western institutions and media's insatiable desire to instrumentalize artists in simplistic terms—as if artists were responsible guides to "exotic" and "dangerous" cultures. In this, he reminds me of Gabriel Orozco, who early on also managed to bypass the route of national representation for Mexico. For Orozco, this meant rarely showing in Mexico City or in group shows of Mexican art abroad. Working towards the same ends, Khan expresses his active refusal by his insistent presence, rather than absence, in his own city. This presence defines its own territory, its own version on its own terms, of what it means to be from a specific place.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from the author's interview with the artist, London, July 25, 2006.
2. Yasmeen Siddiqui, "An Online Interview with Hassan Khan," *Independent Video in Egypt*, Cairo, 2006.
3. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, tr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1977, 59.

Regine Basha is a curator and writer based in Austin, Texas. Her most recent exhibition is *Daniel Bozhkov: Recent Works* at Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin. Her review of the last Istanbul Biennial was published in ART PAPERS 30:1 (January/February 2006).

ABOVE: three stills from *Kompressor Videos*, 2006, looped single-channel video, 11:09 minutes, a component of the exhibition *KOMPRESSOR*, 2006, at Gasworks Gallery, London