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Hassan Khan

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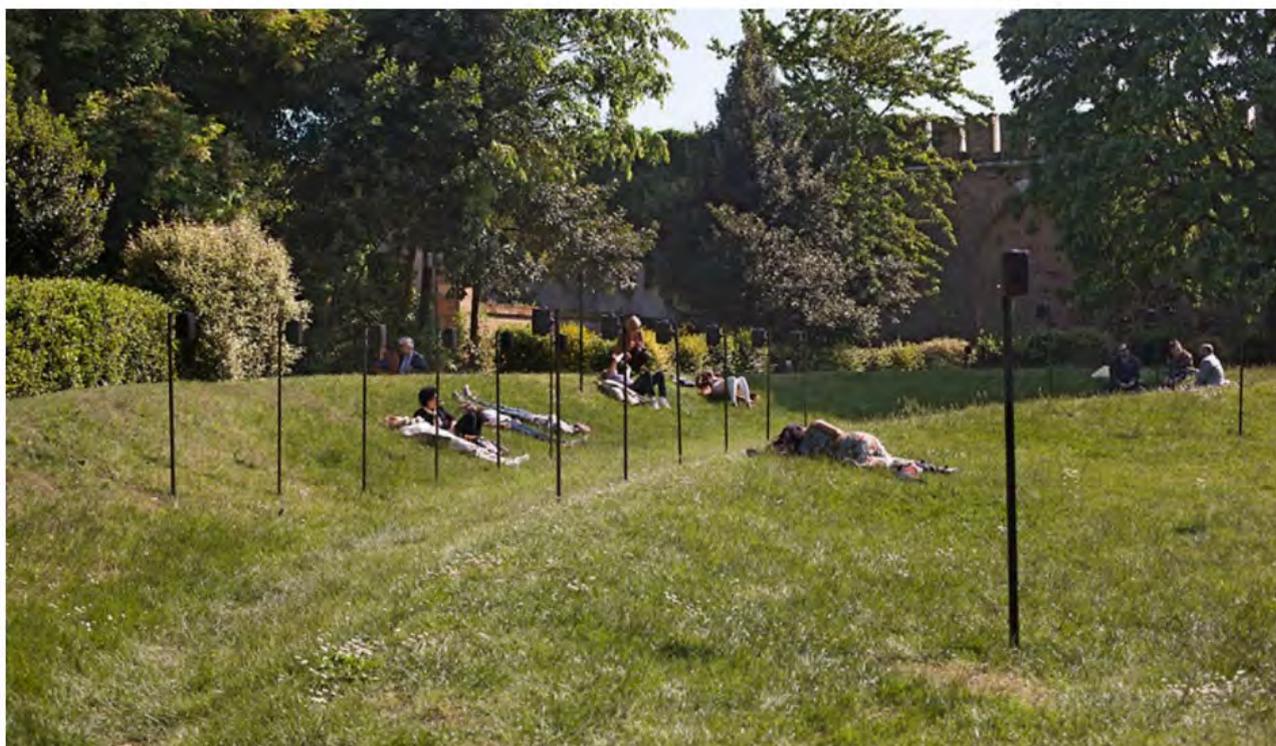
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Q and A: Hassan Khan's Sublime Venice Biennale Soundscape

BY NICHOLAS FORREST | MAY 30, 2017



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Composition for a Public Park

This year's Venice Biennale is particularly notable for the number of sound works included in both the National Presentations as well as Christine Macel's "VIVA ARTE VIVA" exhibition. But there's one in particular that deserves particular attention and that's Egyptian artist, musician, and writer Hassan Khan's "Composition for a Public Park" 2013/2017 – the fabulous work that deservedly won Khan this year's Silver Lion for a Promising Young Artist.

As the title suggests, "Composition for a Public Park" is a three-movement multichannel music and text piece designed for public parks. It won Khan the Silver Lion "for the special and intimate relationship that his work establishes with the spectator, to whom he suggests a connection between voice, sound, and the horizon." According to the Jury, "His 'Composition for a Public Park' creates an immersive experience which beautifully intertwines the political and the poetic."

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Located in the walled garden of the Giardino delle Vergini (the Garden of the Virgins) at the end of the Arsenale, "Composition for a Public Park" is the last work (no. 93 on the map) of the "Viva Arte Viva" exhibition. There, marked by a series of black speakers mounted on poles, the work divides the garden into three zones, each corresponding to one of the three musical movements. At the heart of each is a voice that only the attentive visitor can perceive.

To find out more about "Composition for a Public Park," BLOUIN ARTINFO's Nicholas Forrest spoke to the artist and asked him a few questions.

What are you showing in Venice during the 2017 Venice Biennale?

"Composition for a Public Park" (2013-2017) is a multichannel music and text installation designed specifically for public parks and gardens. It is composed of three different movements: "Stasis and Majesty," "The Revolving Jewel," and "No Political Romanticism." Each movement is accompanied by a text that has been recorded in a male and female voice. The text (a sort of libretto) for each movement focuses on a different aspect of an emotional landscape that is public and intimate. It attempts to access a subjectivity that is vague enough to be recognizable by a large amount of people while precise enough to be also strange and different.

The idea is that a visitor can recognize something in what they hear but never feel like they own it completely: it remains yours but also against the grain. The music is informed by the source of this subjectivity and uses it as fuel to produce what we maybe cannot control. I imagine the piece to be an invisible garden slightly hovering above the actual physical garden. A walk through the park or the garden means a walk through the composition itself – from different vantage points you can also experience the three movements synchronously as they are all happening at the same time but located in different geographical areas of the park. The visitor can explore the composition and the space at the same time.

What is the inspiration and motivation behind your 2017 Venice Biennale presentation?

I was invited in 2013 to participate in the Nuit Blanche Festival in Paris and while doing site visits I came across the Parc du Belleville and rather rashly (as there was so little time for such a large production) proposed, on the spot, to produce a composition that became the park, rather than taking place in the park. I guess the nature of urban gardens and parks – their slight distance from the daily, the way they become islands or brackets for our collective urban experiences where our affinities can tremble for a moment – compelled me to produce this work.

What do you want people to experience and see when they see what you are presenting in Venice?

I hope the visitor has time to walk around, listen, lie down, sit, spend some time in one section, and maybe a bit more in another section – to wonder and wander and when they feel like it to leave, maybe with a moment's hesitation. You can also just walk through it and leave.

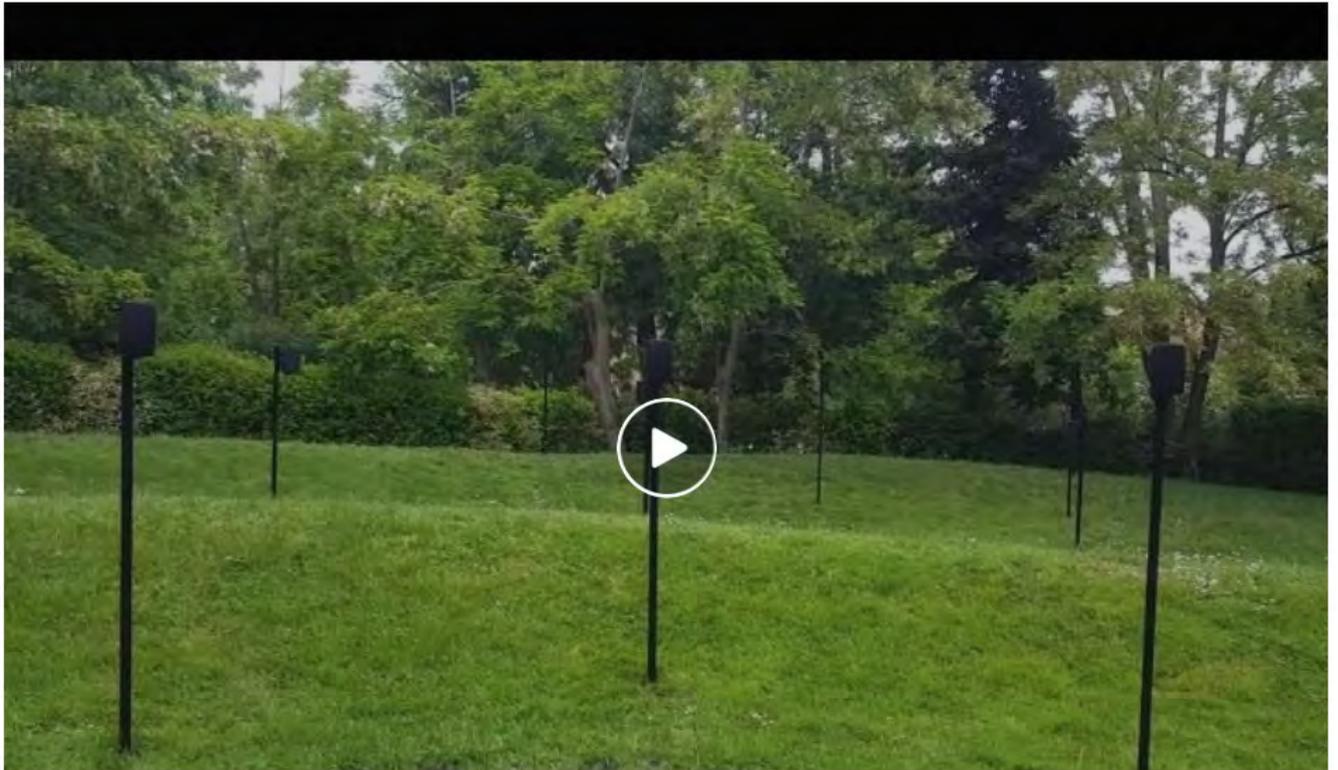
How does your Venice Biennale presentation reflect and connect with your overall artistic practice?

I have been working publicly for almost twenty two years and I feel a great consistency in what I do that is perfectly aligned with the diversity in approaches and mediums that I practice. "Composition for a Public Park" is concerned with the double subjectivity of engagement and distance that is a constant in most of my works; it is invested in attempting to discover meaning rather than claiming it; it is focused on finding a formal solution for a set of conditions. The piece, like a lot of my work, is deeply interested in what makes a subject a subject: how are we able to possess a name, to function as a collective and as individuals. It is also, like some other works, is interested in the sheer power of musical form, in its ability to communicate without gravity.

My informal education was an intense love affair with so many sources that I came across in my teenage years – the great north Indian classical ragas, the droning voice of William Burroughs, the quasi-surrealism of Egyptian painter Abd El Hady El Gazzar, the formally explosive feedbacking guitar of Jimi Hendrix, the casual cruel beauty of Un Chien Andalou, the formal rigor of 13th Century poet Ibn Al Farid, the phantasmagorias of Hieronymus Bosch, the infernal etchings of William Blake as well as his convoluted poetry, the radical modernism of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Beckett, Tarkovsky's metaphysical weight, Cassavettes' hysterical subjects and subjective camera, Bergman's bleeding psyche's, the sheer insanity of popular Egyptian Comedy, Yassin El Tuhamy's perfectly focused weapon of a voice, and much more. I believe this lack of hierarchy in medium, content, location and time in what one loved and believed was important invariably prepared me for a practice that never took the idea of developing an easily recognizable signature as an artist's aim. Rather the necessity to always explore and challenge one's own conceptions, one's own tools, to find a space beyond the easy intentions of a message and its deciphering. To be true to a process without fetishizing it.

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Venice Biennale 2017

Hassan Khan wins Silver Lion of the Venice Biennale

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Hassan Khan, *Composition for a Public Park* (2013/2017). Courtesy of the artist.

The Silver Lion for the most promising young artist of this year's Venice Biennale went to Hassan Khan, who works and lives in Cairo. Khan presented *Composition for a Public Park*, a multilayered sound piece on a series of speakers in the gardens at the north end of the Arsenale.

The jury for the prizes was made up of Francesca Alfano Miglietti, a Milan-based curator; Manuel J. Borja-Villel, the director of the Reina Sofia in Madrid; Amy Cheng, a Taipei-based curator; Ntone Edjabe, a journalist and DJ from Cameroon; and Mark Godfrey, the senior curator of international art at Tate Modern in London.

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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.

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 LISTEN 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



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”



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.

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

Copyright the artist.



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.

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

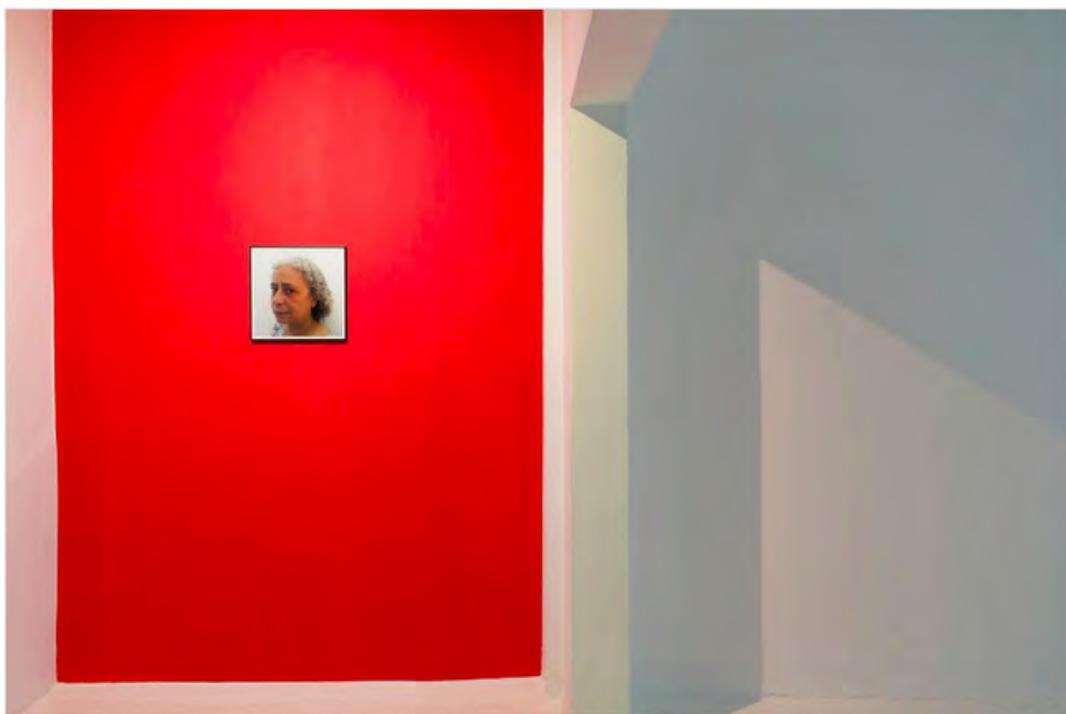
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Playing on a big black boxy monitor, *sometime/somewhere else* is a triptych of sorts, and almost the only Khan work with a direct self-portrait. There are two in fact: at the top of the screen is a horizontal strip in which an earnest 15-year-old 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.

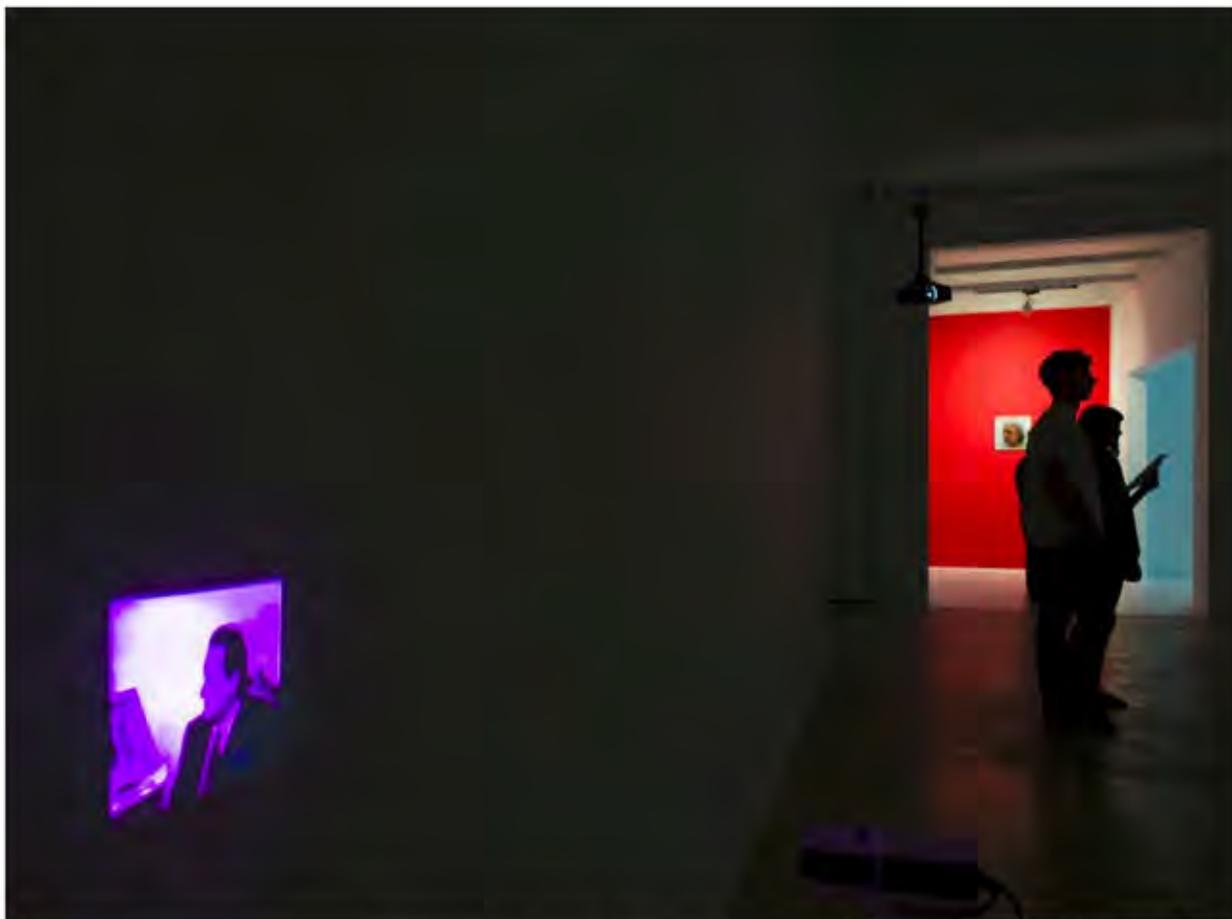
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At the far side of the tunnel in which RANT was screened, a red glow in the whiteness came from a red-painted wall on which hung *My Mother* (2013): a photograph of Khan's mother photographed against a white wall, looking at him and us with the same 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*.



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



Twice as much tarab in Taraban

Hassan Khan's solo performance brings Beirut Art Center show to Rue Sursock

By Jim Quilty
The Daily Star

BEIRUT: If you know nothing about the work of Hassan Khan, and your hearing aid is off, you'll be tempted to think he's flown into town to DJ.

Bent over a bank of machines, form tinted blue by the lighting, the Egyptian multimedia artist is tightly focused on the minute adjustments he's making to the array of knobs and dials before him.

A quiet dialogue issues from the speakers. A single sustained note arises from a rababa or violin. A staggering, tentative rhythm is plucked from the strings of an oud. Any number of tarab tunes begins this way but this piece, called "Taraban" (presumably "two tarabs"), is unlike most pieces of Arabic classical music.

The piece was performed Wednesday evening in the gradually cooling garden of the Cochrane Sursock villa, the occasion being a special one-off fundraising event for the Beirut Art Center. More obviously the performance complements "Esma'," the ongoing exhibition of sound art now up at the art space, which has spawned several parallel events.

While introducing "Taraban" to the audience, Khan said the piece has been inspired by the oeuvre of Egyptian composer Youssef El Manialawy, which has been hugely influential on him. "Taraban" is based on a pair of tunes the composer wrote in the early 20th century, performed by a quartet – oud, qanoun, violin and riqq (tambourine) – and a male chorus.

Throughout the first half of the show, it's the first of Manialawy's two works that is most obvious to listeners, but there are subtle hints that Khan's not just playing one of his favorite records.

The performance actually began with a muffled roar – not unlike the sound you hear when seated in a commercial airliner at cruising alti-



The Daily Star/ asan Shuaib

Khan performs his “Taraban” in the garden of the Cochrane Surssock villa.

tude – arising from the speakers just before oud and violin tentatively begin their conversation.

Audience members accustomed to the vagaries of Lebanon’s electricity regime – and the havoc it can wreak on high-fidelity sound reproduction – might assume this is just a species of feedback. You must listen past the strains of the ensemble of beautifully complementary sounds to notice that there’s something else going on here as well.

In the first half of this 30-odd minute performance that something else is discrete. Much easier to hear in a second listening is the occasional report of sounds that could not have been made by these instruments.

Many things make the Arabic classical music tradition – which reverberates throughout many parts of the non-Arabic speaking Muslim world – unlike its European counterpart.

It’s not just the languages in

which lyrics are likely to be sung. Tarab’s core instrumentation is also distinct from that of the European tradition – the takht ensemble of oud, nay, qanoun, percussion (dominated by variations on a theme of tabla and frame drums) complemented by vocal ensembles and secondary instruments.

The performance sees Khan perform alongside pre-recorded music

The different instruments reflect the nature of the music itself. Tarab evolved differently than European classical music and consequently has a distinct temperament and modalities. The most frequently cited difference is tarab’s use of quarter-tones, which can vary from piece to piece. This requires that western

stringed instruments be tuned differently when performing tarab.

“Taraban” has been designed as a conversation. One voice is provided by the professionally rendered recordings of two of Manialawy’s tunes. The counterpoint to that performance is comprised of melodic patterns, which Khan (with the help of professional musicians familiar with the tunes) has distilled from the modes and transitions used in the original songs.

Both voices of this musical dialogue are streamed into a multi-tracked structure, and mixed like a live performance from which Khan can improvise. His battery of feedback mixers, filters, processors and so forth allows the performer to manipulate his synthesized sounds in tandem with the recordings of Manialawy’s compositions.

For some in Wednesday evening’s audience, carried away by the gor-

geous melodies and improvisations of Manialawy’s music, the first sign of Khan’s contribution to the evening may have been the interjection of a wall of synthesized sound that effectively separates the two tarab tunes that sandwich it.

Khan’s created a more nuanced sonic canvas than this, though it’s more obvious when you listen to the performance a second time.

“Taraban” happens to have fallen during Ramadan month, a time of year when residents of this town are particularly surrounded by tarab. The work provided a thoughtful, unpredictable, complement to this sonic landscape. It that might even rival an evening sitting in front of the TV, watching seasonal soap operas.

For more information on the BAC’s ongoing program of events, see <http://www.beirutartcenter.org/parallel-events.php?exhibitid=600&statusid=3>



Egypt's cinematic gems: Blind Ambition A loaf of Cairo

Friday, March 25, 2016 - 18:27

By: Andeel

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When I hear the expression “blind ambition” I think of a clichéd shot of New York’s skyscrapers that I’ve seen so many times in Hollywood romcoms.

For this repeatedly memorized shot with a repetitive making process, the camera is on a tripod doing a 45-degree rotation horizontally or vertically directed at the sky, with an ultra convex lens that over-emphasizes the buildings’ curve to make it seem like their tops are miles away, the grey concrete coldly splitting the sky’s blue to a soundtrack full of optimism. It’s a visual transcription of a fantasy, which visits us all, of what success looks like. Success is to be hard, tall, shiny, grey, silent and of a complicated geometric composition. Either projected on us or reflected from inside us, the image touches — if the conditions are right — a feeling, and we become happy, regardless of how close or far this success and its eminent skyscrapers are.

Blind Ambition (2012) was the first video work I saw by Hassan Khan. I was starting to develop an interest in Cairo’s contemporary art scene at the time. Before Blind Ambition I had seen images of artworks Khan had showed in other places in the world — writings, sculptures, photographs and complex physical installations — that drew my attention to an extremely dense and genuine visual language. I was astonished at how embedded it is in details that cannot be called anything other than “Egyptian,” without any orientalism or exploitation. I admired how Khan spoke this language without falling into the trap of either bourgeois-artist-fascinated-by-the-poor or self-orientalizing-third-world-artist. So when

Andeel. «Egypt's cinematic gems: Blind Ambition. A loaf of Cairo», *Mada Masr*, Friday, March 25, 2016.
<http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/egypt%E2%80%99s-cinematic-gems-blind-ambition>



the chance came to watch a 45-minute film he had shot entirely on two Samsung phones in Cairo, I was excited to see it.

The truth is that I met the film with an open mind and no sinister intentions. Having previously sometimes failed to understand things or felt unwelcome looking at contemporary art in Cairene art spaces, I was prepared to watch what I might not understand or like. But this experience was different.

I don't want to give too much away, but you realize immediately that *Blind Ambition* deliberately put itself in the predicament of relying on very limited yet flexible technology and resources. The mobile phone, as a device made for basic personal use, contains a camera that produces a dramatic image that has certain limitations that mean it can never compete with a camera made for cinematic production. It's also a device that can exist anywhere and move smoothly in convoluted contexts, like Ramses Square at rush hour or a busy shopping mall or public transport. What can its camera do when it conspires with a cast of actors planted in such contexts pretending to be normal?

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From the first frame, *Blind Ambition* plays a game with you that depends heavily on contrasts, as reflected through many of its components.

It pretends that it's about to give you a traditional, captivating dramatic plot and shows you seeds of a conflict worthy of your attention. Conflicts occur between groups of characters and stories that have nothing in common other than a psychological ground we'll talk about later, but everything looks like it's shot on a phone just like yours — a medium-quality cinematography associated in your subconscious



with events unworthy of the cinematic glorification or sophisticated artistic treatment you're watching now. It's confusing.

The camera alternately swings closer to and further away from the characters and events, convinces you for a second that it's extremely interested in what's going on, then drifts away and loses interest and the dialogue fades with it. Then it jumps back into the center of things, full of enthusiasm, with no obvious explanation other than an enigmatic mood swing that fits — despite its ambiguity — with all the vicissitudes surrounding the situation.

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The actors argue. The dialogue is rich in detail and references that make it sound real. The characters are cleverly designed and the differences between them are loud and clear. The conversation is steered firmly. But the speech was recorded separately in a studio then added to the video, in a way that insists that what you see and what you hear don't perfectly sync. The total absence of surrounding noise in scenes shot in a city that never stops producing it makes the film feel like an uncomfortable dream during a nap on public transport or in a room full of talkers.

The people get heavily involved in their conversation and their feelings swing around the center of it, from explosive passion (as if winning in this moment is of utmost importance) to sudden loss of interest in which they drift to a point far away from the moment they are in.

The movie splinters sometimes violently and other times softly into nine main moments or scenes. In each, there is a dynamic between two or more human beings. If we try to find a common pattern between



these nine moments — other than the absurdity of them all being completely normal, like transparent documentation of standard moments your ears overhear every day in Cairo — we find a recurrent conflict over some sort of domination. In each scene, parties fight to triumph over each other using physical strength, emotional blackmail, deception or stalling and exhaustion. *Blind Ambition* doesn't judge these attempts, nor try to make you empathize with any party. It actually feeds your confusion by shuffling its presentation of the characters between glorification and contempt.

The camera orbits the events the same way the people orbit each other in their tiring, looping conversations. Each moment of tension ends with nothing, just like the cycle of biological functions, as if people's verbal wrestling is nothing more than human consumption of stress and slow death. The movie seems to have a strong opinion about each event and its surroundings, more than it cares about judging humans. Here lies the importance of the city in the story.

Just as the camera moves closer and further from the actors' faces and bodies, it also shifts its relationship with them or the way it perceives them as beings and organisms. Sometimes an actor appears as a universal embodiment of the one and only, the protagonist and the hero, other times he or she seems like one of many blind insects multiplying and running around the corners and cracks of their weird colony. The movie feels the surface of this colony/city, sees how people impose themselves on it and how it imposes itself on people. The lens smells the metal of the vehicles, meandering, then jumps to a 40-year-old man's face blowing out cigarette smoke like an old engine. The human is mashed with the mechanical, the hard with the soft, and everything melts into a gigantic multi-fabric sooty mass of detail and accumulations.

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Between each chapter of *Blind Ambition* there is a scene of a traffic jam through which the movie streams across the city's congested veins. These segments remind you that there's a current much bigger than that which the protagonists of each scene are going through, and this current leads to every moment and is fed by every moment. Before each event we see a segment of temporary clinical death inside some metal body crawling slowly under heat, dust, boredom and nothingness. The motion from and toward the ambitions around which the obsessions of the humans in the film revolve is covered and woven with hours of blind paralysis.

Writing that last sentence changed my relationship with the expression "blind ambition." For the first time I don't think of blind ambition as a selfish, harsh, American evil, but as an evolutionary failure coming out of the limited collective sensibility of humans stuck in their colonies like worms under forgotten rocks, looking every day for meaning in survival.

The final scene — in which the camera follows a man in an elegant suit swinging a keychain from his fingertips in a coquettish manner as he crosses the famous Ramses Square in the middle of the city until he reaches a casino on top of the square's highest building to look down on everything — encapsulates all the meanings of power and ambition that the movie has been prodding at. The whole film will stick to your memory like everything you saw in and on the edges of it. It will be difficult for you to drive along 6th of October Bridge above Ramses Square in the future without thinking you're flying over the center of this city's misery, the monument of its gloriously obsolescent glory, at an elevation that is exactly in the middle between a bottom and a top, and not remember *Blind Ambition*.

This is an edited translation of a text originally commissioned by Cairoobserver.

Nour El Safoury. «On Hassan Khan's 'Alexandria marathon,' translation and control», *Mada Masr*,
Wednesday, March 9, 2016.

<http://www.madamasr.com/sections/culture/hassan-khan%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%98alexandria-marathon%E2%80%99-translation-and-control>



On Hassan Khan's 'Alexandria marathon,' translation and control

Wednesday, March 9, 2016 - 17:07

By: Nour El Safoury

Galerie
Chantal Crousel



Why do we need to get closer to Hassan Khan, and what sort of encounter awaits those who come in contact with his work? Between February 25 and 29, Gudran For Art and Development hosted "Three Attempts to Get Closer to Hassan Khan" and the Alexandria Fine Arts Museum hosted a discussion titled "An Encounter with Three Works By Hassan Khan."

In side talks at the end of the five days, I heard some attendees say to their friends that these titles were off-putting, implying a hierarchy between Khan and the public that had to be bridged. I did not feel the same way, but it got me thinking — was a hierarchy implied, or was this a false assumption resulting from Khan's relationship to Egypt's art canon and institutions?

Khan is an artist, writer and musician who navigates a wide geography across media from writing and video to music and sculpture. There's a formal flexibility in his practice and thinking that can make his artworks evasive. The objects and ideas he presents often slip away, refusing our control — there is constant movement and searching in the relationship to his works.

The February 26 discussion on the "corrupt intellectual" raised questions I found myself returning to during the following days. The fact that the idea of the "corrupt intellectual" has developed across multiple essays, talks and translations is inescapable. One attendee even told Khan during the Q&A that for her the Arabic version of the 2014 essay "A Monster Was Born: Notes on the Rebirth of the 'Corrupt Intellectual'," published on October 2015 on Mada Masr, felt inaccessible because "it read like a text that has been translated."

Since a panel at Art Dubai in 2010 followed by a now well-known essay, "In Defense of the Corrupt Intellectual," Khan has been expanding on this concept. In "A Monster Was Born," he writes:

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In the late nineteenth century, a monster was born. This monster did not know what it was exactly. It knew that it needed to articulate, describe, prescribe, and communicate. It knew it was supposed to play a public role in the birth of a new historical order. It knew it had a precise function in the articulation of power within the transforming social order. This monster was a speculator of knowledge, a peddler of identities, a fantasist, a cunning operator, an extrovert with a bloated ego, a necessary structural regulator.

This monster is the corrupt intellectual. If dreams of a “great nation,” a “great people” or “stability” are familiar and bring escapist comfort, the corrupt intellectual gives them out in well-crafted prose. (S)he exploits familiar symbols that have accumulated meaning through shared historical experience to pacify the crowd. Following moments of rupture like 2011 in Egypt, for example, when all that was solid melted into air, the corrupt intellectual, Khan says, worked in alliance with the state and its institutions to turn the air back to solids. (S)he performs and embodies the language of the “official discourse backed by, and expressing, existing power structures,” as Khan puts it.

In essays, artworks and discussions produced around this idea, the discursive space created through its initial introduction has repeatedly reconfigured. Even beyond the corrupt intellectual, however, Khan's ideas as they manifest themselves in his artworks often go through many negotiations of meaning as they travel through various media, from music to sculpture. Perhaps this is why translation became a conceptual tool I went back to again and again during the four days in Alexandria.

Invisibility (2015), one of the three works Khan showed during the February 28 museum talk, he approaches the language of narrative cinema through the formal and conceptual language of experimental cinema, within the space of art. In it, two actors interact in an empty room. They re-enact scenes from old Egyptian slapstick comedies but go off-script into new territories. One actor behaves, gestures and speaks like Ismail Yassin, the most famous of Egyptian slapstick comedians. The other re-presents the gestures, tone and persona of actor Tawfiq al-Daqqn, who was always given the role of villain.

Set in what appears like a vacuum chamber, this video explores the function of collectively recognized “symbols” from Egyptian pop culture in creating a shared space of communication. Because this happens in an abstracted space, it cannot be thought of as re-appropriating symbols in a new context with different power dynamics. It just exposes the skeleton of a common visual language.

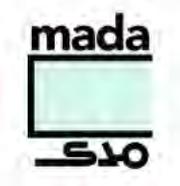
The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility crafts its own discursive space within the supposedly decentered, global space of contemporary art, yet being avowedly “local” in its symbols it is inseparable from a history and collective experience that has not been exported into contemporary art networks. The video exists thus on multiple planes and refuses as a result to be merely a spectacle in a gallery that can be fetishized or instrumentalized in a grand narrative.

Familiar contemporary art terms like re-appropriation or recycling tend to emphasize the position of the gallery as a pristine space for commentary on the world. In contrast, translation allows for coexistence, messiness even, and it refuses to assume that one symbolic system can be fully subsumed into another. Translation as conceptual tool acknowledges the importance of in-between space and continuous unfolding.

On the reception side, works like The Slapper and the Cap of Invisibility require the spectator to cross borders from one imagined space to another. In this case, we move between cinema and slapstick to the conceptual vacuum chamber and the gallery. What is risked in this move is a sense of being lost or confused. As a result, the artwork

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might appear inaccessible. I'd like to defend inaccessibility and the virtues of getting lost.

Toward the end of "In Defense of the Corrupt Intellectual," Khan writes:

[I]n the case of art history, the same consensual if outdated canon is evoked to provide support and meaning for aesthetic practices. The local is always deemed insufficient without some kind of proof and validation provided by the accepted and so-called international canons of art history.

Inaccessibility can mean a work does not lend itself easily to the canon and the tools it provides us with. And by not conforming to the familiar language of each medium, it can throw off expectations and habitual modes of engagement with film, sculpture or writing. A work that feels inaccessible can be one that exposes our reliance on dominant knowledge paradigms. It asks us to enter uncharted territory and find our way through it unaided.

In the mid-1990s, when Khan was starting to produce art, there was a resurgence of contemporary art in Egypt. Khan and others from his generation were key to that flurry of activity. Through stories shared publically during the Alexandria events or in side talks, I learned that in the 1990s the old guard invited Khan to present works of "new media" in the government-run Cairo Atelier. The inaccessibility of Khan's works has to be understood within this context. What we understand art to do and our ways of relating to artworks are a result of a particular history dominated by the Ministry of Culture, its spaces and its patriarchal approach. For years, artists were presented as part of the intelligentsia who were supposed to "enlighten" the public. Khan refuses to be part of that. Trying to approach him through accumulated assumptions about the edifying role of art and artist doesn't work.

In the 1990s Egypt was increasingly being thrown into the webs of globalization and the ensuing sense of hyper-spectacles and consumerism. A challenge was being mounted against Ministry of Culture hegemony and the possibilities for interaction with art that it created. Khan's discussion with writer Ali al-Adawy on February 29, titled "The 1990s: A New Perspective," touched on that. Institutional critique, performance, spectacle and the 1990s image as monument underlie Khan's discussion of works from that period. He talked about the multimedia work *Lungfan* (1995), which got booed at the Cairo Atelier during a discussion with Khan and collaborator Amr Hosny and was not shown again publically for years. He also screened his rebellious 4-minute video *Fuck This Film* (1998), which features him and Sherif El Azama talking about the moving image.

To go back to the question of why we need to get closer to Khan and what encounter awaits if we try, it appears that the process is horizontal rather than vertical. It's not about hierarchy, but about a particular relationship between the spectator, the artworks and by extension the artist. Khan presents works that do not give us the sense of playful freedom that comes with being completely absorbed into a tableau or a musical composition. We have no option but to be uncomfortably refused closeness by the artwork.

Overall the Alexandria events were well-attended. Rooms did not overflow with anxious crowds, but those present listened attentively. I looked around during one of the discussions and found an audience of men and women spanning many age groups, a guy with tattoos and a punk leather jacket, some hipsters, and a man I discovered was a doctor. There's something about Khan and his works that invite such heterogeneity in a crowd. I take this to be a mark of great success.

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

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Interview

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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 intertwining 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?

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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.

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

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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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.

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

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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 come 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?

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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.

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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 think 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 activity. 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.

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/>



JH: Live Ammunition is directly connected to Flow my tears, the policemen said which is totally current since February 130 Egypt 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. Lots 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.



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*

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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.



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.



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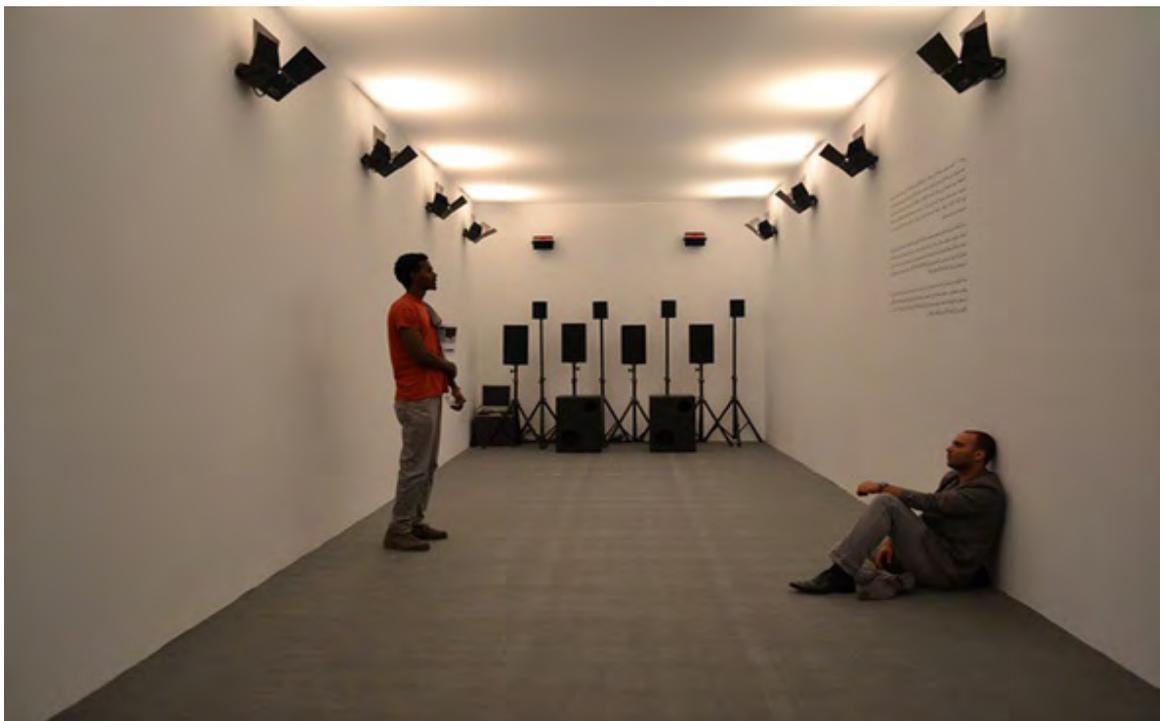
Khan's approach to creating *The Agreement* was somewhat collaborative. In several of his projects, he works with craftsmen and performers, gradually developing the artwork over time. This kind of collaboration was perhaps more organic in the case of Khan's much-celebrated *Jewel* (2010), where all the 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.





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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.

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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.

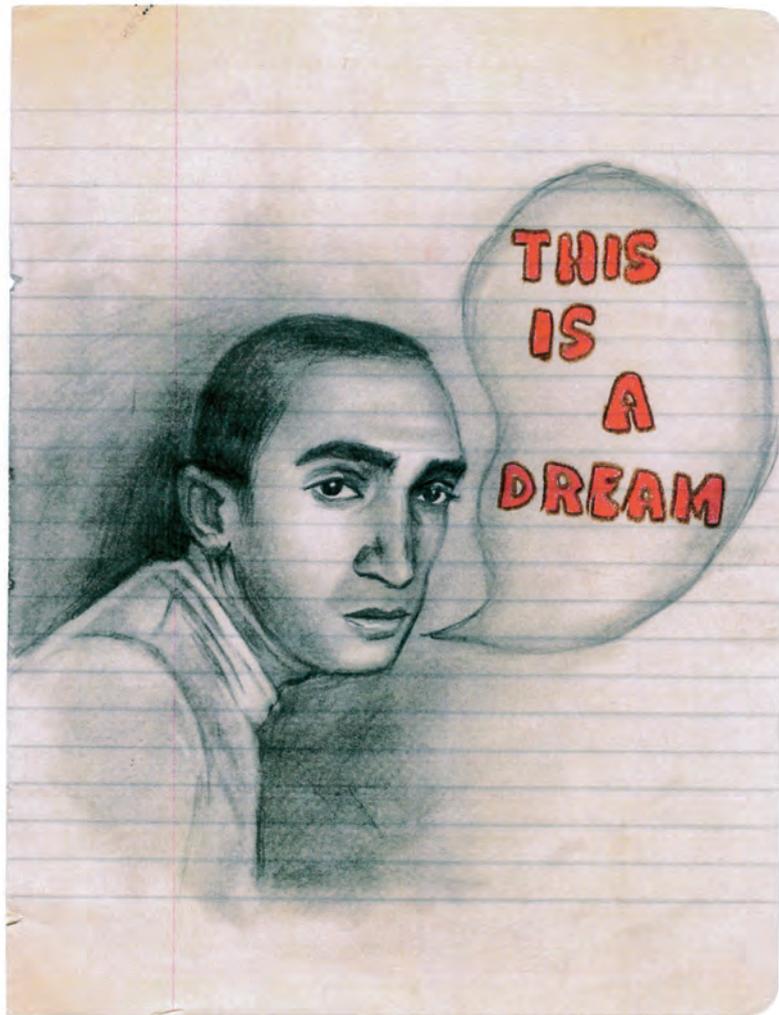
Michelle Kuo. "Trusted Sources: A project by Hassan Khan", *Artforum*, October 2013.

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 2013 I N T E R N A T I O N A L

THEASTER GATES AND EBONY
LOUISE LAWLER
THIERRY DE DUVE
HASSAN KHAN

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

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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.

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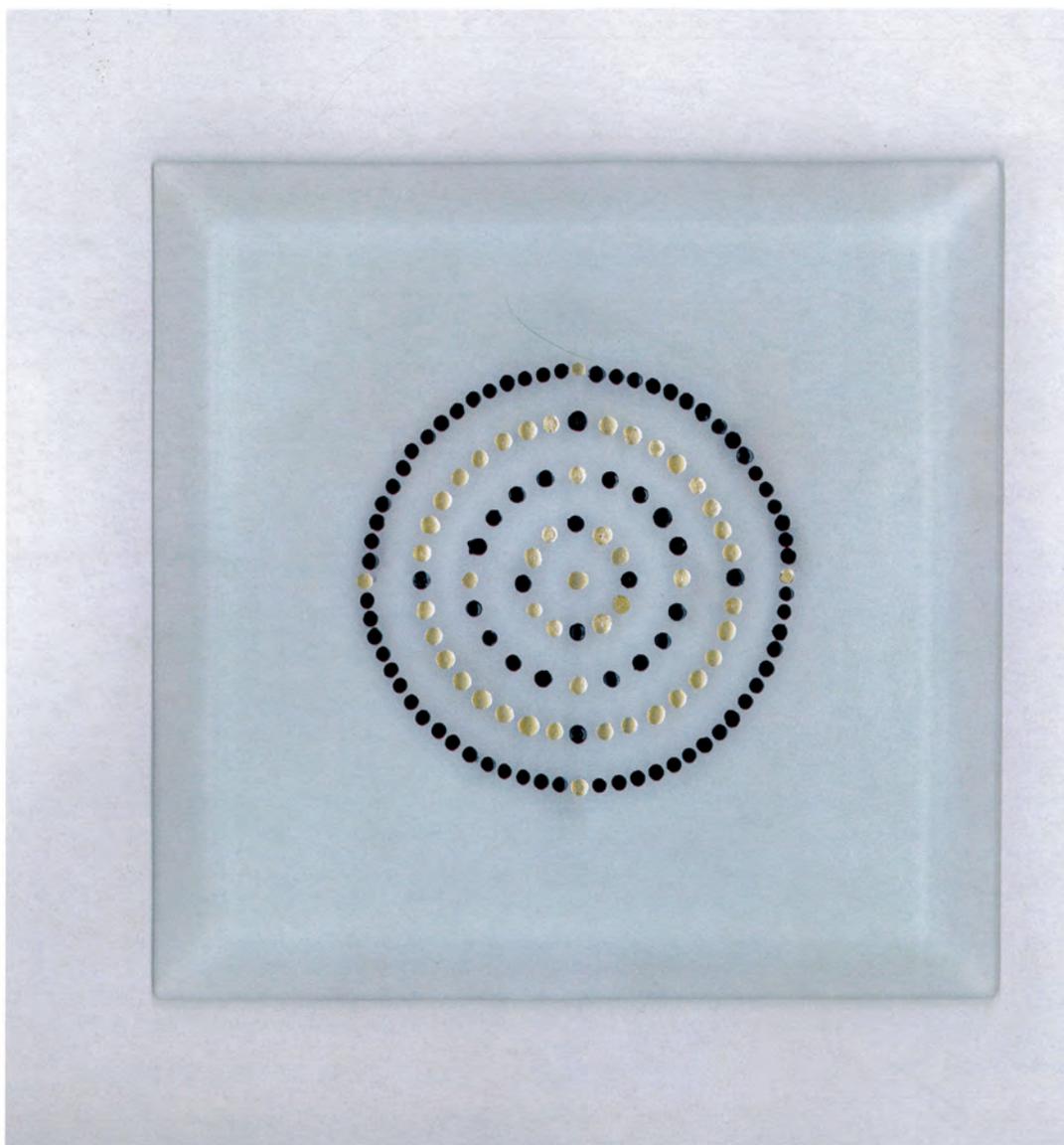


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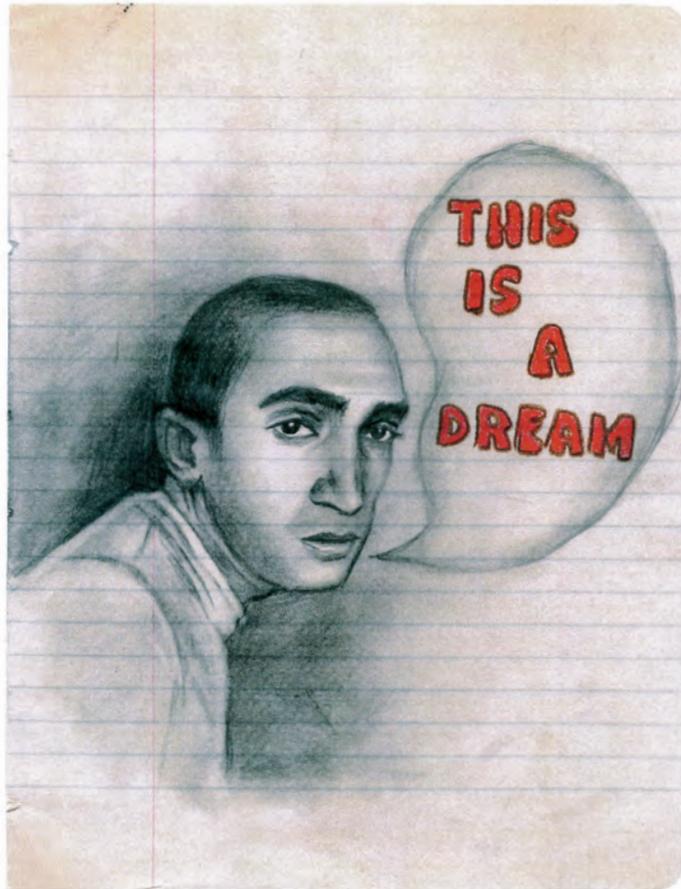
PHOTOGRAPH OF DAMAGED CERAMIC TILES ARRANGED ON TOP OF EACH OTHER BECAUSE THAT'S HOW BATTERIES WORK

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

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

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

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

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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

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

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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

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 predestinated 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.



in, *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



Jeremy DeCristo. "The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture", *Harper's Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7, May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.

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THE SEDIMENTATION OF AESTHETIC GESTURE

INTRODUCING THE WORKS OF HASSAN KHAN

By Jeremy 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 performing
'Superstructure' at Kunst
Werke Berlin 2012 (photo
by Ron Davidson)

Jeremy DeCristo. "The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture", *Harper's Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7, May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.

Galerie Chantal Crousel

HASSAN KHAN



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)

HASSAN KHAN

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 Electronics' (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 installation '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' (2009). 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...

Jeremy DeCristo. "The sedimentation of aesthetic gesture", *Harper's Bazar Art Arabia*, N° 7, May-June 2013, p 64 - 69.



HASSAN KHAN

Hassan Khan performing Superstructure at Kunst-Werke Berlin 2012 (photo by Ryan 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 Inayaz

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



HASSAN KHAN

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



DOM-TAK-TAK DOM
TAK' (2006) 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. **MAA**

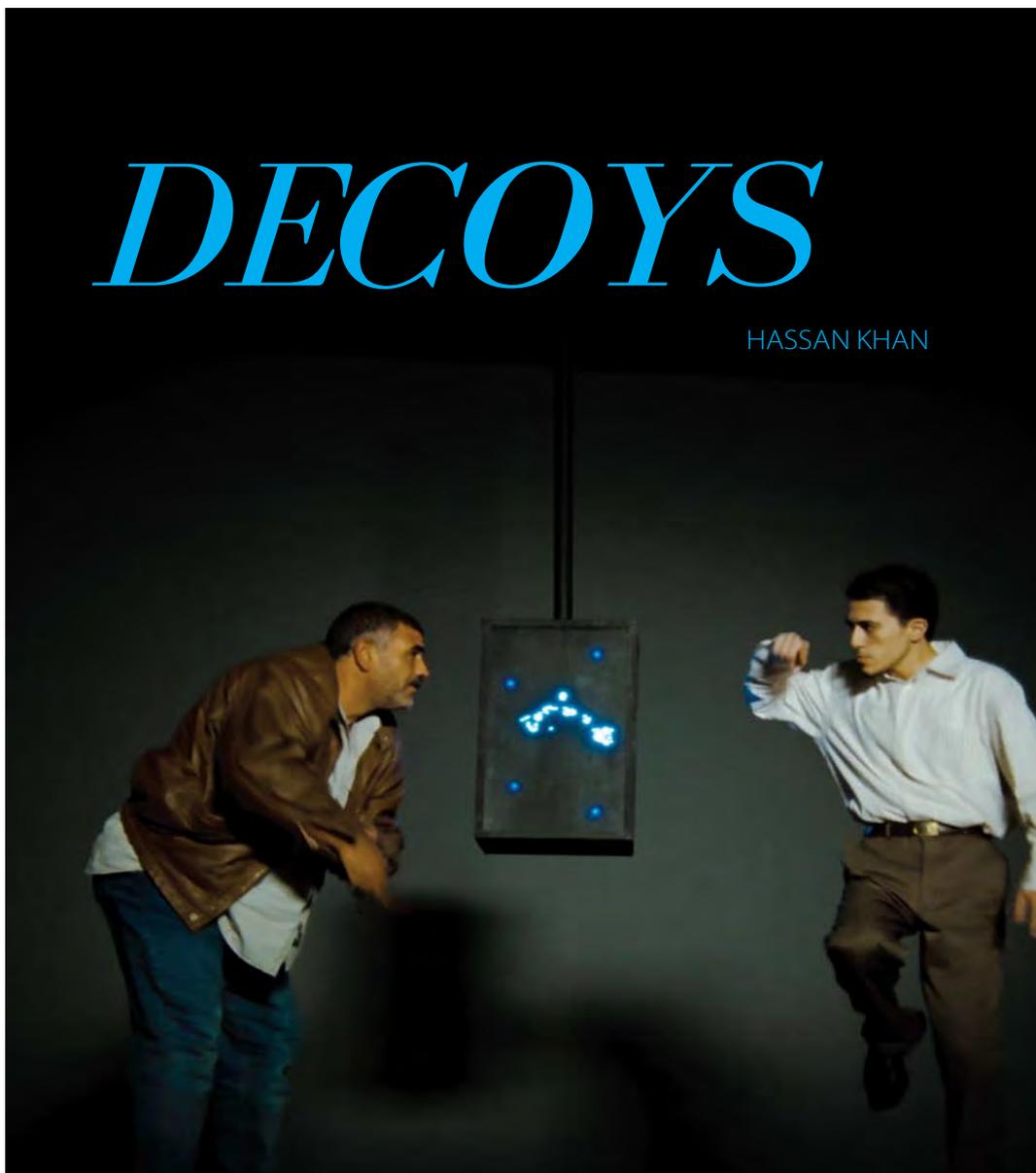
Sohrab Mohebbi. "Creating, Decoys, Hassan Khan",
Canvas, September / October 2012, P. 88-95.

CREATING

Galerie
Chantal Crousel

DECOYS

HASSAN KHAN



Galerie
Chantal Crousel

PROFILE

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.

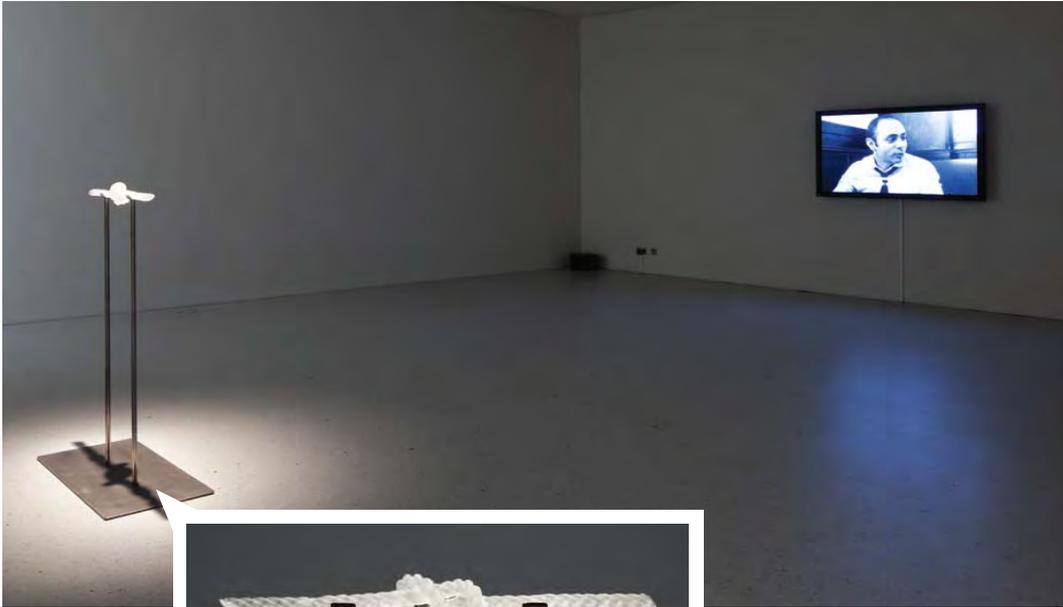
Facing page: *Banque Banister*, 2010. Brass. 209 x 260 x 22 cm. Edition of three. Photography by Florian Kleinfelsen.

Galerie Chantal Crousel



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-



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

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.

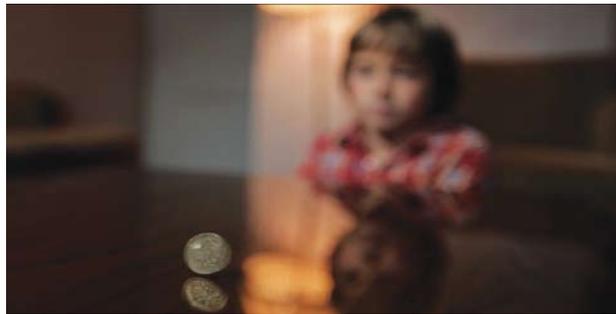
Facing page: Two stills from *Muslimance H.P.P.*, 2010. Full HD video transferred to Blue-Ray with sound. Eight minutes and seven seconds. Edition of six.

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.”



PROFILE

This page, below: An installation view of *The Twist* 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



Hassan Khan at dOCUMENTA (13)

By Kaelen Wilson-Goldie | August 2012

In the summer of 2011, Hassan Khan was halfway through his first solo show in New York, at the Queens Museum, when the curator, Sohrab Mohebbi, organized an evening of video screenings at Alwan for the Arts, in lower Manhattan, followed by a conversation with the artist. Khan lives and works in Cairo, and he travels extensively to execute and exhibit his work. He couldn't be in New York for the event, so he Skyped in from home, groggy in the early morning hours either from sleep or lack thereof.



In the museum, Mohebbi had placed *The Hidden Location* (2004), Khan's magisterial, 52-minute, four-channel video installation, in dialogue with a selection from *Lust* (2008), a series of 50 seemingly incidental, everyday images, described somewhat evocatively as "photographic miniatures," which Khan took using the camera on his mobile phone. After the opening, Khan had also performed *The Big One* (2009), an hour-long concert synthesizing precise elements of new wave shaabi music, a genre he adores, and also records with studio musicians in Cairo, in part for the purposes of interrogating the popularity of a musical style that is at once gritty, rude and excessively sentimental. For the screening program, Mohebbi presented *Transitions* (2002) and a pair of Khan's early video works from the late 1990s, rounding out a picture of his practice without being retrospective about it.



The question-and-answer session that followed ran through queries about Khan's interests in music, film, narrative, and fragmentation. And then came the question that was perhaps inevitable some six months after the start of the demonstrations on Tahrir Square, which ultimately toppled the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak, or at least, displaced the dictator if not the rest of his regime.



What were Khan's thoughts on the revolution and how was he dealing with it in his work? At least, that seemed to have been the question, which was so politely phrased by the young woman asking it that she left us a little room to wonder if that was really what she meant by the relationship between his work, a recent event and the context where he was based. Khan, for his part, was unperturbed, seemed to have been anticipating the question, and had an answer ready.



His work was there "before the event, and after the event," he said. "I'm not interested in what the event is or was but in how you engage with it. That's not to deny its content. But as an artist, I am not rethinking my practice because of the event. As a human being, I feel a great need to be publicly engaged, but that was always the case. Anyway," he added, in lieu of a more effusive response, "I'm working on a film called *Blind Ambition*, which may have that vibe."



Skip ahead to the summer of 2012, and *Blind Ambition* is now complete. Shot on the cameras of two mobile phones, the 47-minute video is black and white, dubbed, silent except when its subjects speak, and projected onto a single screen. Commissioned by the curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev for dOCUMENTA (13), it is currently being shown in a gallery on the lower floor of the Neue Galerie in Kassel. In that darkened room, *Blind Ambition* faces another, very different work by Khan, titled *The Knot* (2012), a sculpture made of frosted glass in the form of a rope tied into a figure eight.



"I wanted these two pieces together because they speak completely different languages," says Khan. "They are separate works. I wanted to put them in a





relationship with one another. *Blind Ambition* is about the conditions of material culture. *The Knot* is quite distant from these conditions and is about form. In my work I'm always interested in these two poles and how they relate to one another."

In many ways, *Blind Ambition* builds on the concerns of three earlier works: *Conspiracy (dialogue/diatrabe)*, from 2006, which treats conversation as an artistic material, a medium, in and of itself; *Muslimgauze R.I.P.* (2010), which captures a specific moment in time and suspends it; and *The Hidden Location*, with its meticulous structure of sixteen chapters playing across four screens arranged in a perfect cube.

Blind Ambition features nine sequences, each a social situation in a public place. Four employees from an advertising agency hold a meeting in a chic café. Two friends dissect obligations in the food court of a shopping mall. Another two men appear catatonic in a traffic jam. Yet another two men fool around in a kitchen. Two girls hash out the intricacies of friendship, loyalty and betrayal while walking along a shopping arcade. Six boys play football on a strip of grass between train tracks and the street, until their interest turns to an abandoned car, which they nearly destroy. Another six boys, slightly older, circle around a parking lot, discussing a debt that threatens to become an explosive issue among them all. A shopkeeper steps onto the street to take a phone call and shoulder the weight of an unspecified burden.

In between the situations are interludes involving forms of public transport – trains, trams, subways, shared taxis, minivans, microbuses, the works. What Khan refers to as "blink cuts" carry the viewer from one scene to the next, breaking the rhythm of each sequence and clearing the proverbial slate. "I want it to be so many things," he says, "but I don't want it to be stories around the city," a cliché among the denizens of Cairo's contemporary art scene.

While the interludes were shot on the second camera, all of the footage used in the nine sequences was shot on the first. The editing, as such, is in many ways deceptive. "[It] creates the illusion of real time, while it is actually culled from many different moments over a much longer duration," says Khan. "We experience a sense of time that seems to be continuous [but is actually] produced by cuts, or jumps and gaps. This paradox suspends the action in front of you and produces a parallel economy that we, as the audience, can engage with rather than just observe."

The piece has an improvisational feel, but in fact it was made with 27 actors who auditioned, rehearsed, followed carefully scripted scenarios, and were paid for their time. The situations, says Khan, "are absolutely fictional." The details, however, are more than that. "I see the details as history. I can't escape that feeling." And what the details speak of – a phone, a watch, clothing, an accent, body language, a reference to a book, an anecdote about an absent friend, an image on a laptop screen, biting a cigarette directly from a pack before lighting it, a low-slung car seat, eyes rolling, singing an old song under one's breath – are the striated landscapes and emotional ups and downs of class.

Blind Ambition trades in various forms of idle talk – gossip, invective, rumor, innuendo, conjecture, speculation, boasting, posturing, badmouthing your friends and colleagues to their faces or behind their backs – of the kind that good manners advises you to avoid. But these are also patterns of vernacular speech, the stuff of social bonds, and for Khan, they are the very substance of the piece. Speaking of his actors, he says: "It's as if they make the world every time they speak. But this world possesses them, too."

A few days after the opening of dOCUMENTA (13), Khan was part of another conversation, this time in person, with Sarah Rifky, one of Christov-Bakargiev's eighteen curatorial agents. Again came the inevitable question, this time a bit more explicit. How does this work relate to that conflict? "It's not a conflict," Khan replied. "It's a revolution."

When pressed about why he always refused to divulge the contexts, background stories, and personal motivations that drove his own ambition, he laughed and said: "Because I believe in the artwork. That is my utopian dream that fails. Even if these things are true and important, and I believe they are, they are not there to produce the artwork. The revolution is never mentioned in *Blind Ambition*. It's as if it never happened. It could be before, or it could be after, only a few details would be different. Anyway, people talk about revolution all the f----- time."

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.

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.



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

— 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.

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.

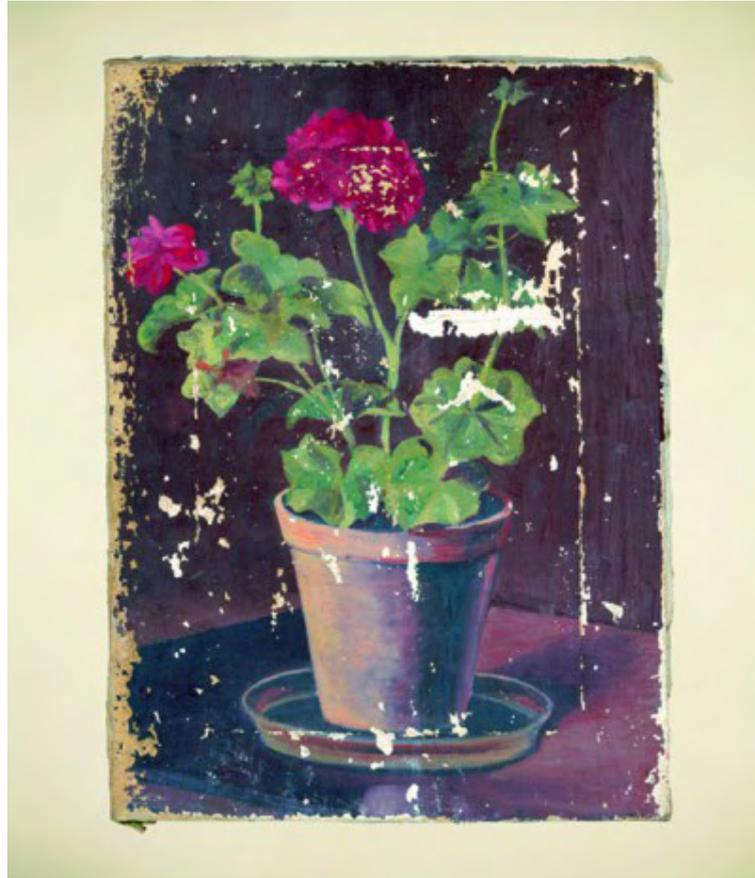
Art performs a normalizing role, it normalizes what might not be otherwise so acceptable to the mainstream, it is also deeply involved in how class plays itself out in society. My answer is, I will not demand that art play a more palatable role, for I refuse to normalize the normalizer. You will always 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.

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

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.

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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.

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

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.

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



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

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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.

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



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.

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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.

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

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.

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 his closest friends.

A Constant State of Urgency

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.

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 predilection 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 one's 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.

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

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 romanticism 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 تعلم شريكك جيداً لنفسك. حسن خان وشريف العظيمة في فيلم كفى أم العليم بدأ
(1998) 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

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'être* 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 extremely 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,

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

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

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 "iconicize" 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 *techné* (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.

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.