

INTERNATIONAL

Mohammed Hammad *Call Centre* Video. 18 minutes. 2006, Arabic with English subtitlesDina Gamaleldeen *The Body*Karim Fanous *Clean Hands, Dirty Soap*, 25 minutes. 2007Karim Fanous *Clean Hands, Dirty Soap*, 25 minutes. 2007

Fortifying Dialogue

AN INTERVIEW WITH EGYPTIAN CURATOR, BROADCASTER, EDITOR AND CRITIC SHERIF AWAD, WHO CONTRIBUTED TO THE SOLUS COLLECTIVE'S IRISH / ARABIAN AVANT-GARDE FILM TOUR.

Jason Oakley: How did your connection to the Solus Irish / Arabian Avant-Garde Film Tour⁽¹⁾ come about?

Sherif Awad: I was introduced to Alan Lambert of the Solus Collective through a mutual friend – Egyptian novelist Mahmoud Kassem. Mahmoud and myself were working in Alexandria Film Festival for Mediterranean Countries last year. I asked Alan to put us into contact with Irish film companies and to nominate Irish features for the festival. When Alan attended the festival, I showed him some of the other selections I was curating inside and outside of Egypt – film and video, experimental narratives and documentary shorts. We kept in contact; and he invited me to present a selection of works in Dublin, to complement Solus's presentation of Irish films at Alexandria Bibliotheca.

JO: Could you talk me through some of the works you selected for this screening?

SA: They are short narrative films from Egypt and the Middle East, funded independently by the filmmakers themselves – who are either film or art students. They are shot in what might be described as an 'urban underground' style. The topics are those not tackled in mainstream theatrical releases. They reflect contemporary turmoil, generational conflict and other social issues. My criteria is to always select films with a strong visual texture, creative narratives and of a topical nature. I'm always conscious when touring with these films, that I have responsibility to present a realistic image of my society. I also like to shed some light on promising new filmmakers.

Call Centre, by Mohammed Hammad is a short narrative about a middleclass veiled Egyptian girl who works in a call centre in an urban neighbourhood. To overcome her sexual oppression, she starts to eavesdrop on the customers' calls. It is a modern take on voyeurism, a new Peeping Tom, about hidden secrets and people who don't practice what they preach. The oppression of a male character is explored in the award-winning *Clean Hands, Dirty Soap* by Karim Fanous – in which a young handsome musician has to accept to work as a toilet cleaner in a luxury nightclub, because his talents have not been recognized. Through his eyes we see the contrast between this reality and living at home with a sick mother, and the dream world he is part of at night. Dina Gamaleldeen's *The Body* reflects on beauty and femininity in her short documentary debut, which explores the ups and downs of contemporary dancers in Cairo. It is really a departure from the urban noir-ish approach of the other films.

JO: How did the Irish audiences respond to the screenings?

SA: In European cities closer to Egypt, I usually get more of an audience from Arab origins. But in Dublin, they were mostly Dublin-based with only one journalist who used to be based in Egypt and another young half Irish / half Egyptian artist whom I know in Cairo. And of course, because of the lack of coverage of Egyptian and Arab film and art in Ireland, the films prompted a lot of interesting questions from the audiences about Middle Eastern society, creativity and politics.

JO: Are you doing any other similar events elsewhere in Europe?

SA: Yes, I am travelling to Turin, Italy and Orebro, Sweden. I also hope to set up an Arab video channel as part of the next Loop Video Art Festival in Barcelona. I am also coordinating the 25th edition of Alexandria Biennial for Mediterranean countries this December. I hope to return to Dublin, with not only with a film show but also an exhibition.

JO: Could you tell me a bit more about your background and involvement in Egyptian contemporary art and film?

SA: Since 1993 I've been the communications manager in Egypt for United International Pictures, Fox and Warner. Around that time I also started to work as a programmer for the Cairo and Alexandria Film Festivals. I've contributed to many magazines, and I am the art and film editor for Egypt Today Magazine – which is the leading English language monthly magazine in Egypt. I handle three other publications – The Ticket Entertainment Magazine, Scope CD Magazine and Contemporary Practices. I currently present film focuses in both the Cervantes and Italian Cultural Centres in Cairo. In addition I am the film and video curator of contemporary art gallery called Darb 1718, which opened in the middle of Fustat in old Cairo in 2008. I write teleplays for film / art TV shows on satellite channels that broadcasting in the Middle East. This includes the weekly program Cinemascope on Dream TV. In print and on TV I have covered international film festivals like Berlin, Cannes, Istanbul, Taormina, Rome, Dubai, Oran and Tribeca; and art events such as the Guangzhou Triennial, along with the Cairo and Sharjah Biennials.

JO: Could you briefly outline some key elements of the contemporary Egyptian Art Scene?

SA: The roots of the Egyptian contemporary art go back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the westerners who came and began teaching visual art in local schools and colleges. Most of the western movements including impressionism, realism and their evolutions were absorbed, until the 'Egyptianization' of creativity became an aim among artists and scholars alike. From the late 60s until the 80s, Egyptian artists started to take other directions, exploring themes of more personal self-discovery. By the 1980s and 1990s a new generations of artist practices began to reflect freer and more diverse paths – informed by information technology, globalization and mobility – along with an interest in collaborative projects, especially amongst younger artists. Practices like video art, performance, photography and installation also came to prominence. Younger artists also started to have more exposure to what is happening in the West, Also and also in Africa.

But the art scene is still in its inception. There is a lack of sponsors and only a relatively small number of professionally run contemporary private art galleries and spaces. Darb 1718 and The Townhouse Gallery are two such important venues – which offer artists residencies. The

support from public venues of contemporary art is quite limited. A multiplicity of art institutions and exhibition halls need to be established. It is a challenge for artists to devote themselves solely to their practice – there are very few teaching opportunities for example. And private funding often comes with strings attached – agendas and conditions, favouring certain mediums or themes specific prizes, contests and grants. On the other hand, the public spaces run by the minister of Culture are modernizing their management structures and are beginning to stage collaborative and curatorial exhibitions, examples including the recent editions of the Cairo and Alexandria Biennials.

And we still in need more art publications – as the current ones only cover certain events and certain artists in favour of others. And overall, we need stronger Arab language publishing. Bidoun for example is published in NYC; while Canvas and Contemporary Practices. Produced in Dubai, are written in English.

JO: Do you find the notion of Middle Eastern Art helpful or frustrating?

SO: It is a useful enough categorizing term – it can encourage curatorial work and the support of the art of coming from this vast, colourful and invigorating region. Of course, particular artists in particular areas and Diasporas all have their own preoccupations, themes and visual languages that need to be considered. It is important to note that 'Middle Eastern Art' also observes and reflects on the 'European' cultural scene and issues.

JO: Have you encountered stereotypes or preconceptions around notions of Middle Eastern Art in your travels?

SA: Throughout my experiences in Europe and the United States, stereotyping is eternal – not by the layman but also amongst curators and other art professionals. I try to challenge these rigid blocks of thought and ideas through my writings, screening and art shows. Ladies in veils, harems, bearded men with four wives, terrorists, and anti-feminism are few of the ideas that need to be thoroughly challenged.

JO: Have there been any recent European exhibitions of Middle Eastern Contemporary Art that you have thought were particularly good?

SO: Two come to mind. The first being 'The Present out of the Past Millennia – Contemporary Art from Egypt' held at Kunstmuseum Bonn, Germany (2007), which featured thirteen Egyptian artists, who all took a very contemporary approach through a range of media exploring contrasting contexts of the occident and the orient. The second was 'Exile' at the Art Centre SilkeBorg Bad, Denmark (2009) where the theme was explored in philosophical and political terms were interpreted by 35 international artists including Egyptians and Arabs.

JO: Do you think it is a significant time for the visibility of contemporary art and culture from the region?

SA: Particularly in Egypt there are positive changes in art management through the Sector of Fine Art – an initiative of the Minister of the Culture associated with the organization of the Cairo and Alexandria Biennials. The Sector of Fine Art comprises a project assigning artists to curate a range of public spaces. The large-scale exhibition 'Salon Elshabab' (Youth Salon) offers an important platform to art students and emerging artists. Palace of Art, a huge public venue, directed by the painter Mohamed Talaat is one of the most important spaces in Egypt. It has featured some key exhibitions considering contemporary issues such as, 'What Happens Now?' (2007) and the upcoming 'Why Not?' 'Curated by Talaat. Recently some important new private spaces have been founded like Darb 1718; and the soon to be opened Bayan, set up by Alexandrian artist Wael Shawky in his home city. In United Arab Emirates, the art fairs in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are fast becoming important meeting points for curators and scholars. In terms of sales, we now must wait and see the fate of the economy in Dubai.

Generally, since 9/11 the interest in Arab art and culture has been exponentially elevated. Westerners have started to open their hearts and minds in order to try understand more about the heritage of 'the other side of the world'. I think the Arab image has started to change. Even in American action films we are seeing the moderate dramatization of Arab characters. Art and film offer platform for a dialogue between continents – it's a great responsibility; artists and curator I hope will continue and fortify this dialogue into the future.

Notes
1. www.soluscollective.org