

In Retrospect

Lara Baladi

When I assess my artistic production both in the last decade of the Mubarak regime, and in the face of seismic change in Egypt, it becomes clear that my work, and that of many artists of my generation, was on many levels dictated and informed by the rigid, stagnant political context of the last 30 years.

My memory of Cairo as a child is of an image of the pyramids in the distance, pointing to the sky. As we drove towards them on occasional family excursions along the Pyramids Road, the landscape unfolded, forever flat and green. This is a visual cliché of Egypt's countryside, almost biblical. By contrast, urban Egypt is growing so fast today that some experts predict its original agricultural land is well on the way to disappearance.

My sound and construction work in-situ, Borg El Amal (The Tower of Hope, 2008-2009), was a response to an invitation to participate as an Egyptian artist in the 11th International Cairo Biennale. The subject of the Biennale was "The Others". In this official governmental context, it clearly appeared to me that "The Others" were those long forgotten by the state.

Borg El Amal was directly inspired by Cairo's 'ashwa'iyat (literally "haphazard things"), commonly translated in this context as 'informal housing'. These illegally built neighborhoods, comprising 60 percent of construction in Cairo, expand relentlessly in and around the capital like mushrooms after the rain, suffocating the fertile soil beneath them. "The Red City," as some architects call it, consists of endless rows of almost identical brick and cement buildings, long stretches of sometimes windowless towers, informal constructions lacking in many public amenities. Often referred to as slums, they are broadly regarded as dangerous and crime-ridden spaces. Since the Revolution, the collapse of law and order has allowed them to multiply faster than ever.

Watching Cairo expand and spread over the last decades has brought me to ask what lies in store for its people. It seems to me that these 'ashwa'iyat represent a false promise – the promise of a heavenly new way of life amidst green pastures, a vain hope for a better tomorrow. The stark reality is that these Towers of Babel are rarely finished and that the green fields in which they are planted are now subject to urban sprawl and refuse.

The accompanying images of the 'ashwa'iyat were taken in 2009, a stone's throw from the Cairo ring road. Al-Da'iri, as this highway is called, is the new road to the pyramids. Its flyovers soar above the ocean of red bricks and cement, beyond which the pyramids rise up in all their majesty.

Borg El Amal was a three-story tower built on the grounds of the Cairo Opera House, an official governmental space and military base and most probably one of the most expensive pieces of real estate in Egypt. The tower was made from the same materials (cement foundation and steel reinforced frame, holding red brick walls) as the Red City, and constructed in the same 'informal' way. As people living in the 'ashwa'iyat do, I "borrowed" the state's electricity and water available on the ground to build it. The visitor could isolate him or herself and go inside while listening to the sound component of Borg El Amal, the Donkey Symphony, in collaboration with Nathan Robin Mann, specially composed for this work. The symphony echoed the voice of the city, the cry of the Red City.

Along with millions of fallahin, or peasant farmers, the donkey has made the transition from the cliché of a biblical landscape into this new reality of the 'ashwa'iyat. The donkey's braying has always broken the silence of the Egyptian countryside, and now it breaks through the noise of the Red City in an agonizing cry – is it in ecstasy or in despair? This fine line between heaven and hell resonates in all of my experiences of the 'ashwa'iyat. In popular belief, the donkey represents submission, stupidity, stubbornness and even evil. In urban Cairo it is the garbage collectors' mode of transportation, the beast of burden that connects Egypt to its past – humble, patient and wise. All of these associations inspired me to instigate the creation of the Donkey Symphony: a sort of requiem, a hymn to the beauty that lies in horror, a hymn to hope in the midst of misery.

During the construction of the tower, the director of the Palace of Arts, where the Biennale was hosted, called me in a panic and asked me to hide the 'horrific' site. Suzanne Mubarak, the wife of the then President Mubarak, was opening the Cairo International Film Festival the next day. To my surprise,

the builders obscured the tower with material traditionally used for funerals or wedding tents. At the end of the Biennale, the authorities demanded that I destroy the tower, vandalizing my sound installation, tearing and cutting the electrical wires. This act, commonly practiced by state Security in the 'ashwa'iyat, ultimately completed my work.

Although Borg El Amal would have the same relevance now given the ongoing sociopolitical issues raised by the 'ashwa'iyat, to make such a work in that context would not be strategically appropriate today since the Revolution freed speech and opened all spaces as potential spaces for art. Its location in the grounds of the Opera House constituted, in the Mubarak days, a blatant defiance of the rules of censorship and confronted the state in its front garden.

Even for the Middle East, with all its upheavals, the Arab Revolutions of 2011 are the most significant and therefore pivotal episodes of its recent history. An artist is not necessarily a revolutionary, but art can be revolutionary. Borg El Amal, along with other works, created around the same time by artists, such as Amal Kenawy's public performance Silence of the Lambs (2009), pinpointed pressing issues afflicting Egyptian society at the end of the Mubarak era; in the case of Kenawy's work, this was servile social apathy from years of police brutality and humiliation. Such works highlighted the emergency of the situation and the tension that was escalating in Egypt prior to January 25th 2011.

Furthermore, during the final ten years of the old regime, many artists created works that were both heavy in content and/or physically heavy and large in scale – Wael Shawky's installation, The Green Land Circus (2005) is a case in point. As William Wells, Director of The Townhouse Gallery in Cairo has noted:

In his work, Shawky uses the context of the circus, in particular its role as a container of 'abnormal activity' and exhibitor of physical irregularities, to animate the symbolic role of freak-show entertainment used to attract and repel spectators while also compelling their voyeurism. The video becomes an examination of what is and is not acceptable and how these lines and rules are ever-changing according to seemingly random and unregulated shifts in space and time.

These strategies mirrored the leadenness of that regime. The role of art then, was to stir up the silt at the bottom of the stagnant lake and break its calm surface.

Today, and since the beginning of the Revolution, works of art produced for a local audience are almost diametrically opposed to this in nature. A dam broke the very first days, so fast and so forcefully, that it gave way to a deluge of creativity, a massive long-repressed expression of the self that finally burst free. Young artists grabbed the Revolution's momentum and responded, surfing that wave, yes, to the constantly evolving political situation. Graffiti, in the form of political slogans, painted murals and stenciled revolutionary iconography has transformed many public spaces. In the virtual realm too, the artistic gesture, freed and democratized, has become a kind of contemporary digital version of the Polaroid. Artists and citizens alike use photography, video, political satire, and so on in social media and blogs, intending to make an instantaneous impact on political life.

This artistic discourse is not political art as we know it, but a form of art that I call "artivism," born – like collage was between the two World Wars – from the need to confront and reject the political system, and by extension the contemporary art market and scene as well. Art that acts as a weapon against the oppressing state. Similarly to how collage evolved, these new forms of art have become more and more elaborate. Powerful individual voices are continuing to emerge and have already become an inherent part of our daily life and culture.

This text reflects part of a larger presentation by the author as part of the Learning from Cairo conference, which can be viewed at the LFC website at www.learningfromcairo.org



From the series Hope. 'The Red City.' Informal architecture. Cairo, Egypt, 2008-2009.



Borg El Amal (in Arabic, 'The Tower of Hope'). Ephemeral construction and sound installation (Donkey Symphony composed for the project). Red customized bricks and cement. Grand Cobra award winning project at the Cairo International Contemporary Art Biennale 2008-2009.