Lara Baladi: On Tahrir, Memory, and Archiving the Revolution

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Egypt is creative chaos. It is orderly disorder. It is men selling tamarind juice out of giant silver jugs on their backs, roasted corn on the cob, and lovers along the corniche. It is more cabs than you

can count going the opposite direction on a one-way street. It is stray dogs that walk you home and strangers that feel like family; microbuses bursting at the seams, motorcycles delivering fast food, donkeys pulling cartfuls of guava and mangoes and children wiping your windshield for some spare change or a kind glance, all at once. It is human lives colliding and disintegrating and clinging to one another for reassurance, for a reminder that together, we once created something remarkable.

Photographer and multimedia artist Lara Baladi understands that there is method to the madness. As a fellow at MIT's OpenDocLab (http://opendoclab.mit.edu), Baladi has undertaken what she refers to as a "transmedia painting," bringing together fragments of audio, video, visuals and text, and demonstrating the boundless creative potential of mayhem. Entitled *Vox Populi: Archiving a Revolution in the Digital Age*, the

project is a tribute to Tahrir Square and the Egyptian Revolution, the most digitally documented and disseminated event in modern history.

On December 11th, the Egyptian-Lebanese artist unveiled her project-in-progress with the first in a series of events that will be presented at Harvard University's DocShop during the 2014-15 academic year, "Notes from #Elsaniyya." Composed of an arsenal of articles, images, and YouTube videos the artist has compiled since January 25th, 2011, "Notes from #Elsaniyya" (Arabic for traffic circle, where demonstrators first gathered to protest Mubarak's regime) instantly bombards the viewer with an influx of stimuli.

Intended to recreate the exhilarating commotion of Tahrir Square in the early days of the revolution, the small room is filled with sounds of chanting protesters accompanying scenes from black-

and-white films, images of graffiti and the smell of fresh popcorn, blocks of text projected onto walls and trays of pastries set upon traditional Egyptian carpets where attendees sit cross-legged on the floor. Floating headlines travel from unseen projectors to land, briefly, on faces and bodies occupying the space. Small handouts encourage the visitor to "ponder the experience of memory spatialized, shared, and embodied," urging the public to participate in a daring, innovative new process of archiving and interpreting history.

Notes from El Saniyya Time-lapse (http://vimeo.com/114354457) from metaLAB(at)Harvard (http://vimeo.com/metalabharvard) on Vimeo (https://vimeo.com).

After circling the room and attempting to absorb the different components of this multimedia documentary, attendees eventually settle on the ground for a discussion with the artist. I remain distracted by the array of seemingly unrelated videos playing on large screens lining the walls: an old black-and-white Betty Boop cartoon in which Betty is harassed by a frightening, overbearing male figure; footage of Malcolm X delivering a speech; the viral "Tiananmen-Cairo" YouTube video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1m4_q_HP5o) of Egyptian protesters mowed down by water cannons and army tanks; Charlie Chaplin's "The Dictator"; the news broadcast of Omar Suleyman announcing the ouster of Hosni Mubarak; Prince William and Kate Middleton dancing; clips of Marilyn Monroe, Salvador Dali, and Alice in Wonderland.

They all factor into Baladi's vision and memory of Tahrir, something she has been trying to preserve and document since the beginning of the uprising. In 2011, she co-founded two media initiatives – Radio Tahrir (http://www.radio-tahrir.org) and Tahrir Cinema (http://www.egyptindependent.-com/news/tahrir-cinema-displays-revolutionary-power-archives) – to keep the memory of the revolution alive in the midst of overwhelming confusion, propaganda and media manipulation. To Baladi, the urgency of documenting lived experiences was palpable:

> *Not for the purpose of making art, but just for me, to survive, I had to make sense of what had happened. I had been completely overwhelmed, like I think a lot of us. So I was more interested in the archetypal aspects of history and how, incredibly so,*

> *because of the nature of the world we live in, how this moment in time was also very much showing us how, something would happen in Cairo and then suddenly you'd have people talking about the exact same event that was happening in India, that was happening in different countries, either months later or during the same period. So this sort of resonance between places and time was really what I was interested in, and collecting this material was my main focus.*

> *I think the way to resist what is happening politically, it's not going to be to demonstrate. It doesn't work right now, that's not the way things are going to change. So*

> *maybe…I think it's a very important time because I see it as an act of resistance, and I see it as a moment of retrieving from the actual action and just collecting and making sure that this doesn't get diluted in time and in space.*

Audience members commented on the screenshots of photos and articles pinned to the walls, clearly displaying the artist's computer desktop, bookmarks, and personalized ads. In trying to relay the experience of Tahrir to an audience so far removed from it, Baladi was careful to emphasize the subjectivity of her narrative, and the importance of embracing that subjectivity, as well as the air of uncertainty and unpredictability that characterized the time:

> *I think archiving and keeping history alive at this moment is very important, and I'm trying*

> *to find ways of doing this while keeping the discourse open and the conversation open. So I'm not saying this IS the revolution, in no case is that the revolution. That's not the revolution. That's just my collection of what I've experienced, of what I was attracted by in the revolution in terms of creative output. As an artist what I did was to really focus on what people were producing visually, and what kinds of creative voices were coming out of the revolution. So this is very much a Vox Populi, which is what the title of this piece is...*

> *This was a place of happening that was very organic. You ask me if we knew why we were in*

> *the streets and what we were about to experience – I think after the 18 days, a few months after, and now even more so, when you ask people "What were you thinking when you came down on the 25th or the 28th of January?" And you realize that no one had a clue. People just… people actually didn't have telephones and internet. So what do you do when you don't have telephones and internet in the days we live in? You're like, craving to talk to someone. So the first thing you do is go to the streets. But in the streets, suddenly you realize there's all these demonstrations. So you follow and you try to see what's going on.*

> *There was precedent events that lead to what happened, of course. This didn't happen out of the blue at all. But no one really knew how this was going to happen and when. So when it actually did, we had no idea. It could have stopped two days later. We weren't sure where this would go... It really was a day to day, minute to minute, standing there and figuring thing out, and figuring out who's who and who's doing what...The social landscape completely changed over the course of half a day. It was incredible.*

As we sat there engulfed in a cacophony of sensory input, we were forced to reflect on personal memories and how they shape our realities, both past and present. How

can a single event be remembered and narrated in such radically and fundamentally different ways? And what bearing does this have our understandings of the past and our hopes for the future? To attempt to pin down memory, something that continues to change even as you narrate it, is impossible. Instead, Baladi is interested in how these individualized experiences can be brought into the archival process.

> *We all do it everyday. We talk about what happened to us when we were ten years old or twelve years old. And then, five years later we talk about that same time, but we hear ourselves say it in a very different way, remember it in a very different way, narrate it in a very different way. And I think this is why, I'm interested in archive in that*

> *sense. It's not a static kind of language. What's going to be left of this revolution? It's already being kind of put in a drawer...*

> *Something extraordinary happened. It was that moment we call conviviality. There was a moment where you had the sense of the possibility of a completely different world. And I think that's what kind of went through the screens. That sense, that sensuality of the revolution, is what interests me more, and that if I can recreate this in a kind of spatial manner where people can feel that sense and get this possibility, that there is another way of being together and there is another way of being in*

> *this world...it may take centuries to happen again, to actually start happening in a way that it becomes the norm. But, I think it's that moment that I can't forget. That I would like to share and manifest in one way or another.*

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