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CAMERA ILLUMINATE
ARAB PHOTOGRAPHY POST ARAB REVOLUTIONS

Introduction

The Arab Revolutions were accompanied by a proliferation of different art forms, the most contentious of which was photography. I intend to look at photography as an expressive medium and analyze its potential as a discursive force. Photography's mission is twofold **deconstructive** and **constructive**. The deconstructive role of photography is tightly linked to politics. In the context of political systems with high censorship, photography is considered a dissident act by virtue of its ability for mere documentation let alone the added discursive layer of framing (in the social sciences sense and the rule of thirds). In many ways, "it *shows* truth to power." For example, the Egyptian photo-journalist Mohammed Abu Zayd known as Shawkan has been imprisoned since 2013 while covering the protests in Cairo. Five years later he receives the UNESCO prize for freedom of expression to which Egypt responds by elevating his sentence

to maximum; the death sentence.[1] The government's reaction is obviously greatly disproportionate with Shawkan's actions which are in no way criminal, however, it is telling of photography's power.

On the other hand, fine-Art photography as opposed to war photography or photo-journalism, does *not show* truth to power, but is rather a vernacular. Its aim, subtler and more nuanced, is to make sense of one's identity (through portraits) and one's city (through landscape). In this sense, photography allows for an ordering of things; choice of lighting, color and background is an expression of an ontology. Ironically, the camera is supposed to be the most faithful reflection of reality, however, it seems that the transfer of data happens in the other direction - the photographer projects his ideas on the photograph through his artistic decisions. In this sense, photographs provide an insight into the photographer's subjectivity. In the context of the Arab world, the Arab subjectivity is fraught with contradictions and the Interest in photography which has multiplied in the past decade, filled a need for expression and navigation of this subjectivity.

This paper argues for the potential for photography to be considered a visual discourse on identity. It proceeds by delineating the function of art in post-revolutionary Arab world (with a focus on Egypt) by arguing that even if it is political, it is civil (as opposed to militant) in order to avoid censorship. Egypt is an instance of many Arab countries that are living in the "aftermath" of the revolutions, where the counter revolutionary current is in full swing. This article focuses on Egypt as a response to a clear rise in the interest in photography and it being made much more accessible for amateurs and professionals. The article does not claim that

[1] Middle East Eye. (2018). Jailed Egypt photographer "Shawkan" to receive UN press freedom prize. Retrieved May 31, 2018.

this is case across Arab countries, however it is apparent that photographs are increasingly used be it in artistic projects or politicized acts. The article then proceeds by arguing for photography as methodology since the photograph is not only evidence- gathering but also history-making. Finally, it explains how the practice of photography creates this discourse; through *agency* and *othering*. Agency is defined as a careful selection of experiences, and othering, the inherent act of photography, is commended for its ability to other the self and therefore allow self-criticism.

Revolutionary Art

1. Aesthetic vs. Political

To what extent was it political art as opposed to aestheticized politics? A famous distinction made by Walter Benjamin is useful here. The aesthetic and the political, he argues, are two distinct realms and mixing them was the hallmark of oppressive ideologies; for example, fascism aestheticized the political whereas communism politicized the aesthetic.[2] For Azoulay, however, a visual culture theorist and "a citizen of an occupying state,"[3] this distinction if at first was convenient, it is no longer representative of the politically pervasive reality at hand. She seeks to theorize the artistic medium of photography as a political ontology whereby it is "bound to the manner in which human beings exist—look, talk, act—with one another and with objects. At the same time, these subjects appear as the referents of speech, of the gaze and of the actions of others. [...] and a certain form of human being-with-others

[2] Benjamin, W. (2002). *Benjamin, Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 270.
[3] Azoulay, A. (2015). *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, Verso, 82.

in which the camera or the photograph are implicated."[4] This political ontology of photography aimed to reconcile the aesthetic and the political in order to better examine the status of the photographic document in a post-modern world. The context Azoulay is writing from is that of the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict where existence itself is politicized. In the context of the post-revolutionary Arab world and this paper's particular focus on heavily censored Egyptian intellectual environment, Azoulay's description of photography as a political/cized ontology is highly relevant.

2. Gradual vs. Radical

The revolutionary event was a fertile stage for artistic creations to emerge: music, graffiti, theater, among others. Due to their heavily politicized context, this revolutionary art is necessarily political. However, we need to ask, what is the degree of militancy of this type of art? And can it sustain itself in the post-revolutionary period? Kraidy, in *The Naked Blogger of Cairo*, identifies two modes of creative insurgency ('to rise in active revolt' creatively): these are "radical" and "gradual". The radical creative insurgency is often violent with the body gravely at risk. It is "crucial because it is a direct confrontation with the ruler, an open challenge to his sovereign."[5] Whereas the gradual mode is that of subverting the norms of sovereign power by trespassing their "boundaries by launching symbolic attacks at the ruler. [...] The gradual mode is distinctive in the incremental and cumulative ways it chips away at power."[6] If we factor in time, these two modes could correspond to a

[4] Azoulay, *Civil Imagination, 52*

[5] Kraidy, M. M. (2016). *The naked blogger of Cairo : creative insurgency in the Arab world*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 18.

[6] Kraidy, *The naked blogger of Cairo,* 17.

pre-revolutionary (gradual, leading up to) and the revolutionary moment (radical). However, what does this tell us about the post-revolutionary period characterized by crackdown on civil society? Another distinction I would like to introduce beyond the ontology of the work of art (aesthetic and the political) as well as the timeframe of the artwork (radical and the gradual), is that of the role of art (militant and civil).

3. Civil vs. Militant

The artistic insurgency, be it radical or gradual, of the period leading up to and during the revolutionary moment is characterized by a rise in violent revolt, its inherent militancy however gives way to a period where it cannot afford this speaking of truth to power and turns to become a civil expression of art. Under the panopticonic surveillance, self-censorship (added to state censorship) forced art to take on *a more civil role*. The civil artistic expression is a mode that is inherently subversive yet in its politically tame existence does not lose its political role. In fact, we should treat the seeming absence of the political for this period's art as indicative in itself. The move to "civil art" can be seen as a honing of art's revolutionary expression. The excessive politicization of revolutionary art could paradoxically undermine its contestatory potential. Its power lies in the intricate balance expressed by Azoulay between the "political" and the "aesthetic" and it is precisely this faulty emphasis on the political message which Egyptian Art historian Shehab Fakhry Ismail diagnosed:

> The biggest failing of Cairo's revolutionary art is that it fails to see itself as art. It fails to reflect on and experiment with its aesthetic vision as aesthetics. Rather, Egyptian revolutionary artists have succumbed to the temptation of

> seeing their art as subservient to a higher cause […] Instead of the facile aestheticization of the revolutionary moment…artists would do better to revolutionize the vocabulary of their art, which in no way precludes treating political themes in a more radical manner. Perhaps then will art do what it can actually do best.[7]

Photography as Methodology

1. Photography as a *double-actant*

An example of an artistic medium with malleable militancy that maintained its relevance through the revolutionary and post-revolutionary phase is photography. Its malleability stems from its ability to act as a "Double actant". It is a tool of both witnessing and documenting, and the photographer is both a spectator and an actor. The Arab spring was considered an event which unleashed the creativity of the people, a window of endless possibility to create art. This theatrical stage presented itself as an event where documentation also meant participation. Furthermore, photography's malleability is manifested by its accessibility, the documentation of the revolution was not restricted to trained photographers, on the contrary, photography was democratized and available to the lay-revolutionaries with semi smartphone. Documenting was as much an act of protest as chanting. Citizen camera-witnessing presented in this revolt a sort of preemptive evidence for when for a time a court evidence might be[8]. Similarly,

[7] Ismail, S. F. (2013, October 15). Revolutionizing Art. *Mada Masr*.

[8] Andén-Papadopoulos, Kari. "Citizen Camera-Witnessing: Embodied Political Dissent in the Age of 'Mediated Mass Self-Communication.'" *New Media & Society* 16, no. 5 (May 31, 2013): 753–69. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813489863.

Azoulay argues that photography is "deeply embedded in the active life (vita active); it attests to action and continues to take part in it, always engaged in an ongoing present that challenges the very distinction between contemplation and action."[9]

Photography is placed "unapologetically within the bounds of knowledge production and social exchange."[10] Egyptian photographers of the revolution, by witnessing, documenting and acting were engaging in no less than a visual auto-ethnography. A great example of this is the archive of the revolution[11], where a website with the name where "Egyptians" (*Masryyin*) is manipulated to mean "insisting" (*Mosirreen* [on freedom]), safeguarded 858 hours of footage throughout the revolutionary period. The archive is organized according to the date and location, and with topics such as "marches" "concerts" "clashes" and "testimonies". The archive of images and videos safeguarded the memory of the revolution by recreating this digital space. Once we acknowledged the potential for photography as spectator and commentator, there is a case to be made for photography as methodology. One which treats photographs not only as evidence of a history but also as history themselves.

2. Photographs as History

Pierre Nora's discussion of "Lieux de Mémoire"[12] can help us conceptualize photography as history. A site of memory is one which

& Desta, Tedla, Mike FitzGibbon, and Noreen Byrne. "Exploring the Role of Citizen Journalism in Slum Improvement: The Case of Voice of Kibera." *IFAC Proceedings Volumes* 45, no. 10 (January 1, 2012): 44–49. https://doi.org/10.3182/20120611-3-IE-4029.00011.

[9] Azoulay, A. (2009). *Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone books, 94

[10] Roberts, J. (2014). *Photography and its violations*. New York: Columbia Univesity Press, 8.

[11] URL: https://858.ma/, Accessed 25 May 2018

[12] Nora, P. (1996). *Realms of memory : rethinking the French Past*. (L. D. Kritzman, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.

becomes a symbol for the community which shares it, be it a flag, a monument or a museum, and photographs lend themselves to this accumulation of meaning very well. For example, one of the emblematic sites of memory of the Egyptian revolution is the picture of the woman who was aggressed by the police. She was beaten until her clothes tore and blue bra showed. This photograph become a part of the community narrative, a collective experience which many of the viewers could relate to – police brutality.

[Fig 1.] Reuters. 2011. https://www.rt.com/news/egyptian-military-cruelty-beating-079/

[Fig 2.] Bahia Shehab. 2012. 'Blue Bra'. https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/designandviolence/blue-bra-graffiti-bahia-shehab/

Its meaning was abstracted further by turning it into stencil form with a caption that reads "no to making the people naked" referencing the preservation of dignity and civil rights. This is one of the many ways the photographic document becomes not only an evidence but also a history.[13] In fact, in the reading of the photograph according to visual discourse analysis, there are layers of meaning one can identity

[13] Visual art theorist and specialist of photography wrote a poem regarding the status of the image as history "I want a new kind of history. I want a history that looks at photography, not just art photographs, a history that can speak to the complexity of the everyday (a history that is true to life I want a history that makes me think and could make me cry. [. . .] I want a history that traces the journey of an image, as well as its origin. I want a history that doesn't presume to know what photography is (and isn't afraid of the contradiction.)" Batchen, G. (2002). Proem. *Afterimage 29*, *26*(6), 3.

denotative (the naked woman) and connotative (dignity of the People).[14] However, pictures like these operate on a level perhaps even higher (in the abstraction ladder), they become a visual narrative. A vernacular where, through visual semiotics, we can read photographs like we read stories.[15]

Furthermore, its potential discursive power is acknowledged in the way anthropological studies used photographs to co-author the ethnography with their subjects. Researchers would show their subjects photographs of them and ask them to comment on them. The combination of text and image created a layered discourse which helps expands this thick description & Visual Anthropology). Lucie Ryzova, a modern Egypt historian writes on the inclusion of photographs as offering insight into not only the visual but also the interaction between different agents of history: "Looking at ethnographically informed histories (or historically informed ethnographies) of photography thus signals a particular methodological framework that engages not only with debates on the visual, but rather, and more widely, on the production of the social—on historically constituted forms of personhood, identity and community—and on the relationship between persons, objects and practices."[16]

In the same vein, there is a link to be made, albeit a bit contrived, between the historiography of contemporary Arab thought and photography. There is an increasing preoccupation with the detachment of Arab thinkers from the sociopolitical reality which hosts them. Tarek Sabry,

[14] Barthes, R. (2004). Rhetoric of the Image. In *The Photography Reader*. London: Routledge Publishing.
[15] Dean, A. V. (2015). *Framing the Photographer: Discourse and Performance in Portrait Photography*. Dissertation: Simon Fraser University.
[16] Ryzova, L. (2015). The Image sans Orientalism Local Histories of Photography in the Middle East. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, *160.*

like al-Jabri, is aware that Arab thought needs to be restructured according to modern technology in order to advance, however, Sabry elevates this critique and takes it a step further. He argues that all of Arab thought misses the mark since it looks at the "whatness" of modernity rather than its "howness." He argues that we must look at the cultural present through ontologising Arab thought, that is confronting it with the daily reality of the Arab world by "attempting to reconcile thought and being in the Arab cultural repertoire."[17]

Civil photography - A visual discourse on identity

Following the discussion of photography as a methodology, now we turn our focus to the practice of photography as a visual discourse under censorship. It does this in two ways (1) by allowing agency (2) by othering the self therefore allowing self-criticism.

1. Photography as Agency

While "agency" was a key word during the Arab spring, it is rarely used in the context of the arts. In fact, the revolutionary art which sprung in different squares was framed in the context of "self-expression", however, the agentive aspect of art was rarely mentioned. This paper aims to theorize the practice of photography as a vehicle for agency in the context of the post Arab spring. Due to the nature of photography as "an ostensive medium", the agentive aspect is passive: it acts as filter of sensory data and in that process of filtering, the photographer carves out

[17] Sabry, T. (2010). *Cultural Encounters in the Arab World: On Media, the Modern and the Everyday*. London: I. B. Tauris, 26.

a space to practice one's subjectivity within (a) experience, (b) spaces, and (c) memory.

a. Photography turns the passive sense of sight into an active act of gazing; a careful selection of moments. As Barthes renounced that the field of semiotics which he spent a large part of his life elaborating was in fact incapable of expressing everything, it is enough to point to the ineffable and hope the viewer engages in what is being communicated. Similarly, Wittgenstein in his Magnum Opus the *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus* dedicates the whole last chapter to explain one simple idea "Whereof man cannot speak, thereof man must stay silent."[18] The last sentence/chapter of his book acknowledges that some things man cannot talk about (in this context the mystic). The 7th chapter can be considered an antithesis of phenomenological enquiry, after all he was also the one to write that we all live on epistemological islands with little hope for perfect understanding.[19] Nevertheless, and not unwittingly, Wittgenstein is calling for exactly that through pointing out that the speaker, using a common reality (epistemological island), selects aspects of it, reorganizes it and shows it to his interlocutor in hope that his vision is shared. The speaker shares his subjectivity through a visual phenomenological discourse – through photography. "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*"(as quoted in Prosser).[20] The act of pointing

[18] Wittgenstein, L. (1971). *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*. (O. Ramsey, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 111.
[19] Wittgenstein, L. (1972). *On Certainty*. (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Harper & Row, §41.
[20] Prosser, J. (2004). Budda Barthes: What Barthes saw in Photography (That he didn't see in Literature). *Literature and Theology*, *18*(2), 211–222, 213.

to is an active selection and careful framing of a messy reality that is urban environment in Arab cities. The choice of photographic subject through a portrait or a landscape of a carefully staged photo is telling of the intentions of the photographer and "by pointing to, or some other ostensive act, the communicator implies that his or her action is significant enough to be worth the attention of his or her interlocutor. In this setting, the ostensive act focuses the intentions of the communicator, and therefore involves the construction and presentation of conceptual representations."[21]

b. Similarly, photography allows for agency as operating within different spaces. The distinction between the public and the private sphere is of particular interest since it allows for a spatial understanding of photography. With the move to digital photography and with social media as a platform for easy distribution, the photographic document is no longer a private physical object which resides in family albums, but it is a publicly available document. Under censorship the spheres of public and private are blurred and the space for being public is increasingly disappearing. It can even be argued that the Arab public space is an extension of the private.[22] The act of photography and its distribution offers a way of being public without breaking the sanctity of the private sphere. It allows for "interiority without intimacy" where "the private is consumed as such publicly."[23]

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21 Roberts, *Photography and its violations*, 153.

22 Zubaida, S. (2011). *Beyond Islam : a new understanding of the Middle East*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.

23 Lury, C. (1998). *Prosthetic Culture - Photography, Memory and Identity*. International Library of Sociology, 80.

c. The agentive aspect of photography is also applied to the selection and thus formation of memory. Herein lies an interesting paradox which is at the heart of photography's agency. On the one hand, photographs lost their truth-value (read indexicality) due to their malleability and potential manipulation, on the other hand, they are important tools and sites of memory reconstruction. Faithful replicability is no longer the raison d'être of the photograph. Indexicality as theorized by C.S. Peirce is compromised. Indexicality being "Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the objects that they represent."[24] In the digital age where image manipulation is the standard and the distrust of photographs is understandable, indexicality refers not to the subject matter of the image but rather the digital imprint.[25] Postmodern photograph can even be described as an "empty signifier."[26] In this sense, the photograph does not refer to an exact replica outside of it but rather, a socially constructed meaning historically contingent and is the result of the articulation between photographer, photographed and the product that is a photo document. Similarly, the preservation of memory, not only its formation are acts performed by photographers in subversive ways. The notion of archiving of the everyday as a practice of power is particularly relevant in a post-revolution Egypt. Within the Arab world a recent debate is

[24] Peirce, C. S. (1955). Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs. In J. Buchler (Ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Dover Publications, 106.
[25] Schwartz, J. (2017). Is a Photograph Still an Index If It's on the Internet? Retrieved May 31, 2018, from http://dismagazine.com/discussion/41736/a-discursive-mask/
[26] Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (2014th ed.). Verso Books.

emerging about what to archive and who are the agents of these archive;[27] it reflects an anxiety of young researchers who are failing to locate a physical space for their history. Derrida writes about the elusiveness and arbitrariness of the archive; "there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."[28] This is particularly relevant in the context of the authoritarian regimes where the state has had monopoly of the archiving process and access to the documents is to this day limited. The ability to photograph is thus a way to assert one's individuality and practice one's agency.

Photography as Othering

The answer to the question whether photography is inherently violent or, on the contrary, allowing emancipative representation follows the historical transformation of the role of the photographic document in the Arab world. During the colonial era, it was the site of the manifestation of power of the colonial rule.[29] Photography was not only used a tool for scientific documentation and classification (e.g. l'Expedition de l'Egypte) but the resulting photographs (in the same vein as painting of the 18th century) embodied an orientalist aesthetic focusing on "holy land" landscapes, studio-staged "local types" and, most famously perhaps, the

[27] Elnozahy, M. (2018). 52 Questions About the Archive. Retrieved May 29, 2018, from https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/05/22/opinion/culture/52-questions-about-the-archive/

[28] Derrida, J. (1995). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. (E. Prenowitz, Trans.). Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, p. 4, note 1.

[29] Ryzova, L. (2015). The Image sans Orientalism Local Histories of Photography in the Middle East. *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 160.

lure of its women.[30] The study of Arab photography has often been carried out not as photography by the Arabs but photography of the Arabs, and the histories of Arab photography for a long time have been reminiscent of "a diffusionist model characteristic of colonial knowledge production."[31] As such the practice and study of photography has contributed with a perpetual othering of the Arab subject**.** However, beyond the more immediate subjugation of the Arab population in the past through the photographic gaze, the tendency to view Arab photography only through that light in the modern times persists still: "The colonial and imperious ability to compose the Oriental object and its locale within a changing pictorial syntax of Orientalism constituted a visual act of power. It persists even in well-meaning art history and curatorial discourses that continue to ask "how is Arab photography *really* different?"[32]

There are of course exceptions to this narrative and hence the argument of the paper. The shift of focus in scholarship from Arab as photographed to Arab as photographer is a recent phenomenon, even though it is not a recent practice. New elaborate volumes include Maria Golia's "Photography and Egypt"[33] and Stephen Sheehi's "Arab Imago". Both of these works study photography in the Ottoman age and aim to "decenter" and "provincialize" photography by moving away from the European master narratives. There is however limited scholarly work on the contemporary Arab photography in comparison to the growing number of curatorial works. Collections such as Rose Issa's "Arab

[30] *Ibid*, 158.
[31] *Ibid*, 158.
[32] Sheehi, S. (2016). *The Arab Imago A Social History of Portrait Photography, 1860–1910*. Princeton University Press, xxi.
[33] Golia, M. (2004). *Photography and Egypt*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.

Photography Now,"[34] magazines such as *Tribe*, conferences, and different artistic collectives such as *Contemporary Image Collective*, *Photopia*, *Beit ElSoura* are representative examples. These platforms aim to give voice to the burgeoning Arab photographers who are engaging in a horizontal conversation (peer to peer) as opposed to a vertical (colonial rule). Local photographers are representing themselves through representing their fellow Egyptians; their everyday life, immediate communities which they are imbedded in. In the same way, their *weltanschauung* reflects the "Post-Orientalism era"[35] where these post revolution/post-modern photographers are not represented by the West nor are speaking to the West, but rather they are contemplating their own identity. As mentioned above, they are engaging in a *horizontal artistic ontology.* The unbearable lightness of the everyday is itself a way a counterweight of the hegemonic Orientalist narrative.[36]

Horizontal may it be, and regardless of who is the subject of the image, a power differential is inherent in photography and the process of othering has not disappeared. In fact, othering is inherent in photography due to the unilateral direction of the gaze. The photographic subject can hardly fight back at the moment or historically[37]. However, the othering of photography has a strong critical potential, what if the photographer others himself? This reversal of roles of photographer and photographed is a fertile ground for what I would like to theorize as self-criticism.

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[34] Issa, R., & Krifa, M. (2012). *Arab Photography Now*. Kehrer Verlag.

[35] Dabashi, H. (2012). The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism - an interview with the author. Retrieved March 15, 2018, from https://www.opendemocracy.net/hamid-dabashi/arab-spring-end-of-postcolonialism-interview-with-author.

[36] Vali, M. (2005). Uncovering the Arab World: Photography and Self-Representation. *The Arab Studies Journal*, *2*(1).

[37] Azoulay, A. (2009). *Civil Contract of Photography*. New York: Zone books, 68.

The discursive power of photography, in my view, lies in this othering process, since the camera refracts the position of the photographer in society, and forces him, through the many artistic decisions he has to make to distance himself from the photographic event and become an outsider looking in. It is worth to bring to mind Walzer's description of the position of the self while it engages in self-criticism: "the self is better imagined as a circle, with me in the center surrounded by my self-critics who stand at different temporal and spatial removes."[38] In the quest for examining while representing that self, the photographer begins to see himself not as others see him but as he sees himself – what I would like to term the looking-glass-self corrected. It rings of a tautology, but it is in fact not quite since it has not been historically evident/given to be the case. The photographic projects of Heba Khalifa emerge as a great example of this. Her recent project "Homemade" consists of 20 images, each recounts the story of a woman "dealing with their relationship to their bodies, their homes and their childhoods and with their view of themselves and society."[39] The process of setting up these photographs are equally important for the photographic event. With her subjects, she engages in conversations about what it means to be a woman in Egypt and the way in which they perceive themselves in society as well as the difficulties they face. Being a single mother in Egypt herself, she is in a way personally implicated in this discourse and is representative of that group. "Homemade" is thus an example of this self-critical discourse through photography and its results present a visual discourse on identity.

[38] Walzer, M. (1987). Notes on Self-Criticism. *Social Research*, *54*(1), 33–43, 42.

[39] Anwar, I. (2017). Egyptian photographer Heba Khalifa in interview: "A space for confronting our fears." Retrieved May 30, 2018, from https://en.qantara.de/content/egyptian-photographer-heba-khalifa-in-interview-a-space-for-confronting-our-fears

[Fig 3.] Heba Khalifa. 2017. 'Homemade'. https://en.qantara.de/content/egyptian-photographer-heba-khalifa-in-interview-a-space-for-confronting-our-fears

Whereas Khalifa crafts a carefully reconstructed narrative, Eman Hilal engages in a snapshot (as opposed to staged) photography and with a more journalistic style she "points to" elements in Egyptian society which are to be critiqued. Her photography project "Just stop" sheds light on sexual harassment in the streets of Cairo and the poignancy of her project is the way in which she creates a visual standpoint, "a stadium" (what the photographer sees through his viewfinder) in the Barthian sense,[40] which the viewer instantly adopts and through that is able to stand above the situation and see what he otherwise would not.

[40] Barthes, R. (1980). *Camera Lucida*. (R. Howard, Trans.). London: Vintage.

[Fig 4.] Eman Hilal . 2010. 'Just Stop'.
http://arabdocphotography.org/project/just-stop

For example, the photograph with the woman standing in front of the metro, a passerby could see either the woman or the men looking in a direction but the photograph combines three points of views and through them creates a photographic event which "bears the traces of the meeting between the photographed persons and the photographer, neither of whom can, on their own, determine how this meeting will be inscribed in the resulting image. The photograph exceeds any presumption of the ownership of monopoly and any attempt at being exhaustive".[41] For this reason, the eloquence of these pictures resides in their capacity to tell a full narrative not only through the *stadium*, but also through the *punctum*, what the photographer leaves out. Sheehi likens the photograph to "a *point de capiton* through which multiple vectors of political economy, subjectivity, signification systems, and

[41] Azoulay, *Civil Contract of Photography*, 12.

social discourses meet in order to create a legible surface and an object of trenchant social value."[42]

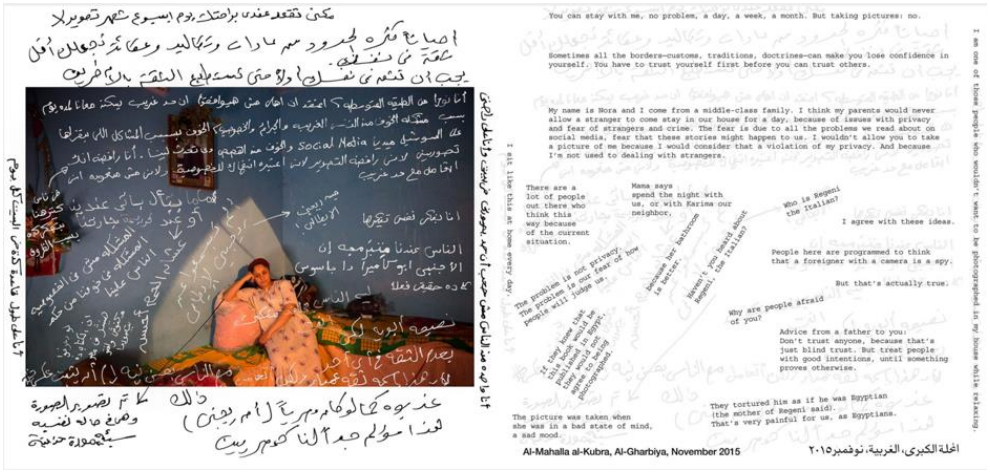
The inherent othering process of photography is not always positive. A dimension of class is an equally important aspect to address. Photography is a costly activity, the cost of the technology in comparison to its material reward makes it an upper-class activity, and often the documenting is of working-class people. This is clearly expressed in Bourdieu's book *Photography - A Middle-Brow Art.*[43] He argues that Photography is a mainly admired by a petty bourgeoisie as a tool for self-actualization and that a judgment of photography as art or not is informed by social classes as oppose to education or other factors.

Photography as othering is the flipside of the coin of photography as discursive practice, and this is the main paradox which makes photography a powerful yet precarious mode of representation. The question becomes what does it mean for an Egyptian middle-class photographer to photograph a working-class Egyptian subject? This is a crucial self-reflexive aspect to analyze since many of the collectives of photographers mentioned above are not aware of it. As in Ethnographic ethics, an argument for photography as methodology must include a conversation on the rights of the subjects. On a more theoretical level however, can we postulate that this photographic practice could potentially be self-reflective, meaning these photographers are aware of their privilege and by documenting class differentials, they are commenting on their society on a larger scale? The immediate answer to this lies in a careful reconsideration of the photographic subject through

[42] Sheehi, *The Arab Imago, xxiii.*

[43] Bourdieu, P. (1990). *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. (L. Boltanski, R. Castel, J.-C. Chamboredon, & D. Schnapper, Eds., S. Whiteside, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

a more elaborate research methodology which will equally take into account the experience of being photographed. This was to a certain extent done by photographer Bieke Depoorter in her photo series “as it may be” in impoverished slums of Cairo. Being foreign to the culture, she is particularly conscious of her status as an outsider and to counter this she returned to Egypt and allowed viewers of her photographs to write comments on them in the same method used in visual anthropology.



[Fig 5.] Bieke de Poorter. 2015. ‘As it may be’.

Example of comments and replies to them by different people shown below are a testament of the power of the photograph as vernacular by telling a story and a site of social interaction by creating dialogue. All the while it being a technology of othering by offering these photographs to be commented and thus creating a double *recul* from the subject.

Conclusion

This paper took photography as an example of an intellectual activity which produces a visual discourse on identity. As an ostensive, malleable medium it lends itself to this discursive potential through the agency it allows its users. There is no doubt that political oppression, human rights

violations and crackdown on free speech in all domains are pervasive practices in today's Arab world. And a camera, no matter how daring it is, cannot alone reverse it or restore civil rights to Arab citizens. The focus of this paper however is to argue that in Egypt, after the Arab spring, photography became a practice of agency on a personal level. It has the power to create sites for social interactions, through talks, photography trips and conferences and is eloquent enough to be read as a story, when photography is used as auto-ethnography. If photojournalism is dying out due to the lack of protests to be covered and lack of outlets to publish these photos, photographers are turning to "civil art" and channel their critique inwards and engage in self-reflection by othering themselves.

Similarly, the paper argued, in a more general context, for considering photography as methodology precisely in order to look for these processes of self-reflection in uncommon places. First, the paper explored the notion of "revolutionary art" and offered several distinctions between the aesthetic and the political aspect of art, its time frame be it a gradual development or a radical/abrupt expression and the degree of militancy of this art. Photography in this context, proved to combine many aspects of revolutionary art and can very easily be subversive, escaping censorship. Next, the paper made the case for photography as methodology by arguing that the photography becomes a "double-actant", both a witness and an agent of documentation, a witness of history and an actor in it. Similarly, photographs are "lieux de mémoire" which allow viewers to engage with a common narrative that extends beyond the photographer and subject and forms a cite for collective memory. Finally, the article unpacks the arguments by explaining how photography allows for an agency (to choose, to frame, to capture) which can be easily communicated with audiences.

Furthermore, the choice of subjects can be seen as a self- reflective visual discourse on identity, since photography necessarily entail an othering of the subject and the position of the photographer vis à vis his own gaze.

The Case for photography as methodology follows an increasing preoccupation with the adequacy of social sciences to account for the novel ways Arab subjectivities are being studied. The need to *ontologise* Arab cultural studies as argued by Sabry is indeed a manifestation of this methodological lacking. Photography can instruct us in ways which will greatly enrich our understanding of the condition of Arab youth and their interactions with a social reality which is increasingly difficult to navigate.

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